Chapter 5

Truth-Seeking at a Distance: Engaging Diaspora Populations in Transitional Justice Processes

Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm

Florida State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (LTRC) was established by the Liberian government in 2005 to “promote national peace, security, unity, and reconciliation.” The LTRC thought it essential to allow Liberians who had fled the conflict to participate in the truth and reconciliation process. As a result, it partnered with a US-based non-governmental organization, The Advocates for Human Rights, to conduct the Diaspora Project. This chapter provides an overview of the Diaspora Project, which enabled Liberians on three continents to give statements to the LTRC. Given the wide dispersion of the Liberian diaspora, the author of this chapter demonstrates how information communication technologies were essential in the success of the Diaspora Project.

INTRODUCTION

The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (LTRC) Diaspora Project was a path-breaking attempt to consciously incorporate a diaspora community into a transitional justice process. Diaspora populations had contributed to some previous truth commission investigations, but earlier commissions had not made concerted systematic efforts to engage diasporas in their truth-seeking exercise. With displacement such a common feature of the Liberian conflict, the LTRC deemed it essential to involve the diaspora in its work. Hundreds of thousands of Liberians had fled the country during...
the country’s fourteen-year civil war. Through a partnership with The Advocates for Human Rights (The Advocates), a Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA-based non-government organization, the Diaspora Project was undertaken. Over a three-year period between mid-2006 and mid-2009, the Diaspora Project collected statements from over 1,600 Liberians in the United States, the United Kingdom, and at the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana. Information communication technologies were instrumental in making this possible.

This chapter examines the role of information communication technologies in giving Liberians around the world an opportunity to contribute to their native country’s reconciliation process. I begin by providing an overview of Liberia’s civil war and the decision to establish the LTRC to address the numerous human rights violations that occurred during the conflict. After providing a brief overview of the LTRC and its relationship with other truth commissions around the world, I examine the Diaspora Project and its attempts to incorporate Liberians in the United States and elsewhere into the truth and reconciliation process. I focus in particular on how information communication technologies enabled the Diaspora Project to train volunteers, raise awareness and collect statements from the far-flung Liberian population. I conclude by offering suggestions on how future truth commissions can learn from Liberia’s experiment in engaging its diaspora.

THE ORIGINS OF THE DIASPORA PROJECT

The LTRC was established to examine fourteen years of Liberian history, from 1979 to 2003, that were characterized by violence and brutality. Although more proximate causes were important, the origins of the conflict can be traced back to the origins of Liberia itself. Returned slaves and free African Americans founded the country in the early 1800s. This group, known as America-Liberians, economically and politically dominated the indigenous populations who were living in the area since Liberia’s founding. Although tensions existed for much of Liberia’s history, they reached their peak in the 1970s as Liberians became increasingly desperate in the face of a deteriorating economy. In 1979, Rice Riots broke out in Monrovia, Liberia’s capital, when rumors spread that President William Tolbert was going to raise the price of rice to feather his own pocket. Events culminated in the 1980 military coup, which resulted in the murder of President Tolbert and brought army master sergeant Samuel Doe to power. Thirteen government ministers were summarily executed shortly afterward.

Doe ruled Liberia for the next decade, a period in which government brutality escalated. Doe’s regime was known for murdering, imprisoning, and suppressing opposition (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2009: 9-10). Other groups in Liberia perceived the government’s policies as favoring Doe’s own tribe, the Krahn, and the Mandingo, which created further tensions. Unsurprisingly, an anti-government resistance soon emerged. Thomas Quiwonkpa led a failed coup against Doe in 1985. Four years later, Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded from Côte d’Ivoire. When the conflict began in December 1989, many Liberians initially saw Taylor as a savior. However, Taylor set off a period of civil war that lasted for more than a decade and embroiled the entire West African region.

Historians often distinguish the First Liberian Civil War (1989-1997) and the Second Liberian Civil War (1997-2003). After Doe made tribe a salient division in Liberia, subsequent fighting occurred largely along tribal lines. Although Taylor was himself America-Liborian, he played upon tribal tensions, particularly feelings of victimization among the Gio-Mano. The NPFL fought its way across the country to surround Monrovia. As the NPFL disintegrated and other groups formed to resist it, the fighting dissolved into a chaotic contest among several warring factions,