A Safe Space

How Local Leaders can make Room for Reconciliation

Grabouw, a rural community in the Western Cape, is a portrait of haves and have-nots, and a site of ongoing conflict. Chris Spies and a local team explore the will and the means to reconcile its people...

"Grabouw is the valley of divisions," says Rodney, a human resource manager on one of the big fruit farms. "The conflict is about being too young, too rich and too white on the one hand, and too young, too poor and too black, on the other hand." Somewhere in between is another category of people who say they are old enough, too poor and not black enough. Isn't it significant that where the rich and the poor meet, the poor start fighting each other?

The wealthy in Grabouw - an hour southeast of Cape Town - enjoy a near-colonial lifestyle. Tourists enjoy the scenic drives and landscape of mountains, valleys and orchards, and frequent the well-known farm stalls. Many are totally unaware of what is happening just behind the trees lining the road. There, thousands of homeless and unemployed people who sought a better future in one of the wealthiest districts in the country, ended up in eight overcrowded squatter camps under the most appalling conditions. For them - subject to political infighting and economic deprivation - 'reconciliation' has a somewhat hollow ring.

Local politics has a lot to answer for. The ANC (with a large black and coloured support base) won the local government elections in 1995 by a narrow margin over the PAC, whose support base was the Grabouw Community Organisation (GRACO). In spite of political jousting, both parties pledged to speed up the delivery of land and houses to the homeless. But today, not a single house has been built - and the parties have aggravated the conflict between their constituencies, a conflict that has in fact engulfed the entire community.

At the core of the struggle is the need for subsistence - houses and income - and the perceived 'slicing of the pie'. Approximately 9000 black people, previously denied the right to live in the Western Cape, have moved to Grabouw since 1989. Hundreds of coloureds who had been waiting for houses for more than 30 years began panicking that they would once again be outmanoeuvred by the system. In fear of having to queue for plots behind the 'inkommers' (referring to blacks coming from outside), they illegally occupied 'Melrose Place', a 42-hectare serviced area earmarked for low-cost housing. "We were here first," they claimed.

Fighting under the banner of the PAC against the ANC-dominated local transitional
council, they were subsequently forcibly removed through court interdicts. They now squat on an unserviced open public space in a residential area which they call 'Last Resort'. They are once again under the threat of legal action against them. "We have been chased around in our own hometown," says Tanya. "We can never forget what the so-called leaders of this town did to us."

The people most affected by the destructive handling of this conflict are those who know and understand the least of what is going on. When they come to meetings - if ever meetings are held - they hear how their leaders keep blaming opposition leaders in the name of truth and justice. They hear the leaders warning them not to reach out to the 'skelms', the wicked ones. In the case of the PAC, their leader has warned his supporters not to talk to the press or to 'outsiders'. The leaders claim to represent and amplify the voices of their followers, but do they? Why don't people hear their leaders talk about reconciliation - and mean what they say?

**Leaders can obstruct reconciliation when they:**

- Don't create a safe space for real listening, sharing;
- Listen only to what people say instead of to people's feelings, needs and will;
- Talk on behalf of people without allowing them to speak on their own behalf as well;
- Put their own interests before that of the people they serve;
- Protect their party political power at the cost of finding solutions that serve all the people;
- Politicise bread and butter issues such as water supply, housing, rubbish removal;
- Refuse to admit their mistakes;
- Refuse to apologise when they make mistakes;
- Pretend to consult people while they have already made up their minds;
- Attack and bad-mouth opponents;
- Have an all-or-nothing attitude;
- Manipulate (access to) information;
- Don't recognise and affirm people's basic human rights;
- Rule by fear.

To find out what 'reconciliation' means, or could mean, in Grabouw, the Centre for Conflict Resolution's Saamspan team interviewed 43 local people representing a wide range of opinions, covering the town's demographic spread of roughly 15000 blacks, 9000 coloureds and 5000 whites. Saamspan has trained a local representative team in conflict resolution and development skills over the last two and a half years. The ten residents who have successfully completed the training are now assisting the community in resolving disputes and designing peacebuilding processes. This group is currently trying to help bring about a culture of listening and constructive problem solving in Grabouw. The survey on reconciliation was designed to help them achieve their vision of a "peaceful and prosperous community".

People were asked the following questions:
1. What do you understand by the term 'reconciliation'?  
2. Who needs to be reconciled in Grabouw?  
3. Which issues or people stand in the way of reconciliation?
4. Do you really think reconciliation is possible? Why, or why not?
5. Do you see any signs of reconciliation taking place in Grabouw?
6. What needs to happen in order for people to reconcile with one another?
7. What role can you personally play to work for reconciliation?

People are generally clear on what reconciliation means. Only one person said that reconciliation means to "forgive and forget". The following insights, drawn from the responses, are indicative of their understanding (quotations are generally in italics; it was participants' wish not to have attribution):

- **Reconciliation is about a willingness and commitment to communicate and listen in spite of deep differences.**
- **Reconciliation is to communicate and to listen.**
- **It is like in the community when you have a misunderstanding with someone you try to call her/him and sit down and communicate and make peace with each other.**
- **When people with differences form a bond of trust through experience, they look beyond their differences, they share the knowledge that they have with each other to support each other.**
- **Reconciliation happens when parties that can't get along come to an agreement about how they will resolve their difference of opinion in a peaceful way.**

People in Grabouw cry out because no one seems to be listening. Instead of being listened to, the needy have to listen to bickering leaders who fail to "look beyond the differences". All the people ask for is that leaders "sit down and communicate and make peace". All the people are getting from opposing leaders are justifications for their refusal to cooperate.

People feel incapacitated and believe that reconciliation is being obstructed when leaders don't create a safe space where people can listen, share and become co-creators of what they need. It takes a conscious effort to facilitate such a safe space, and people are looking at their leaders to make that happen. The leaders of the different parties must do some introspection so that they can make reconciliation for their followers so much easier, they say. In the words of conflict resolution theorist and practitioner John Paul Lederach: "Reconciliation must be proactive in seeking to create an encounter where people can focus on their relationship and share their perceptions, feelings, and experiences with one another, with the goal of creating new perceptions and a new shared experience."

- **Reconciliation is about a willingness and commitment to find solutions which will satisfy the needs of the parties in conflict.**
- **Reconciliation happens when differences between people are laid down and a way is worked out that satisfies all parties involved.**
- **Reconciliation is to find solutions for needs on both sides.**

Manfred Max-Neef's ten universal basic human needs are an important framework for understanding why conflict is often driven by unmet needs, needs such as identity, freedom, subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creation, recreation and belief in an Almighty. When a need is not met, people experience a poverty of that need. People who have a poverty of identity, protection, affection, and so on are consciously and unconsciously striving to satisfy those...
needs. Max-Neef distinguishes between needs and the 'satisfiers' of needs. For instance, houses, land and jobs are satisfiers - not needs - of the need for subsistence and protection.

There are at least two reasons why thousands of homeless people are still without houses. Firstly, leaders are focusing on the satisfiers (land and housing) of one of the needs (subsistence), instead of developing a process which will empower people to express and address their own needs. It does not help to allocate plots without simultaneously recognising and addressing people's need for understanding, affection, protection and participation. Secondly, leaders are not committed to finding solutions which will satisfy all the parties in the conflict. Grabouw has a history of putting party political allegiance before the needs of its people. Adversarial politics and an overemphasis on political power have become the trademark of Grabouw's political leaders. It has become more important to score political points than to develop a sustainable process which leads to reconciliation. When elephants fight, the grass(roots people) gets trampled.

"Earlier Grabouw was a much nicer place to live in. People could speak to each other and understand each other. Since politics came on the scene, reconciliation has been pushed to the back," says a coloured worker born and bred in Grabouw.

Ordinary poor people want to get on with their lives and want to reconcile with one another, but they say that the leaders "should stop thinking only about themselves and start thinking about what is good for Grabouw and all its people".

The people of Grabouw say: **True reconciliation happens when people are allowed to discover common human needs and when they develop a deep commitment to serve one another in meeting one another's needs. True leaders need to be models of true reconciliation.**

- **Poor people see the lack of improvement in their living conditions as a sign that reconciliation is not happening.**
  - *Here in Grabouw there is no reconciliation. The municipality does not care for us. People's water taps are closed if they do not pay rent. Rubbish is not removed from the squatter camps.*
  - *Housing is part of reconciliation.*
  - *Job skills are tools for reconciliation.*

People who struggle financially tend to perceive efforts to make them pay for services as an act of hostility. Where there is no mercy, there is no reconciliation.

- **Those who feel wronged demand an apology.**
  - *No person can always be right. What we need is leaders who are willing to admit their mistakes.*
  - *(Reconciliation happens) when people recognise the mistakes they have made, develop a willingness to acknowledge and tell one another about their mistakes so that they can reach out in forgiveness and acceptance towards each other with a hand of peace and not pretence,* says the caretaker of a community hall.

A PAC supporter who cannot forget the humiliation of being forcibly evicted by
the local and provincial governments says: "The two previous (ANC) mayors must apologise, because we are deeply hurt. We were chased around in our own hometown. Hulle het diep in ons harte getrap" (they have trampled us deep in our hearts).

People are not asking for revenge - they are asking for an apology. They need a new beginning, a turning point on the way to reconciliation. In a highly politicised setting, leaders fear that an apology will be seen as a sign of weakness. People affected by the conflict say: *An apology is the first step on the way to reconciliation.*

- **Those accused of causing the conflict are unaware of what the conflict is all about.**
  - *We black people are new in Grabouw. The coloureds accuse us, but we need to trust God to give us a leader and we will be reconciled.*
  - *The people removed from the location called New Town in Grabouw and the so-called 'black' people, who are always being told to go back to Transkei and Ciskei as if they are not South Africans, now need a rest. But racism is still alive in Grabouw.*

Black people who came to Grabouw were not even aware of the land conflict. They came because they wanted to secure an income in a promising environment. Black women participating in a capacity building workshop listened in amazement to the story of a coloured PAC supporter's struggle for land. So when many coloureds question the right of blacks (some of whom have houses elsewhere in the former homelands) to get land and houses in Grabouw, blacks think the coloureds are racist.

- **The focus has shifted from a need for reconciliation between perpetrators and victims of apartheid policies to reconciliation between the liberation parties, the PAC and ANC.** *Our leaders must be educated, says a school principal. Reconciliation means to forgive and forget, says a policeman.*

It is significant that the overwhelming majority of people interviewed views reconciliation between the leaders of two liberation parties - the PAC and the ANC - as the most important issue. Nobody mentioned the National Party, whose policies effected the Group Areas Act and the subsequent forced removals. Only one person mentioned reconciliation between the police and the community. When people mentioned whites, they referred to business, and farmers who need to reconcile with the labour unions and the workers.

In response to the question, "Which issues or people stand in the way of reconciliation?", people mentioned power struggles, politics, political aspirations, an inability to handle criticism, racism (*coloured people have no trust in black people and vice versa*), a lack of communication, a lack of empowerment, mistrust, poor leadership abilities, a lack of housing and little development.

Holding leaders of the majority parties responsible for the current conflict and for facilitating the reconciliation process is a healthy sign of democracy. The dilemma, however, is to find the balance between holding leadership...
accountable while at the same time involving the other elements of civil society, such as the economically powerful.

- **Fear incapacitates the will to get involved in reconciliation efforts.** If it were not for the assurance of anonymity, people would not have mentioned any names when they referred to the parties in conflict. Even the police station commander and school principles refused to mention people by name, although it was clear whom they were talking about. *I cannot mention names. I have seen enough threats, intimidation and victimisation. Four punctured tyres are not worth the while,* says another school principal. A prominent non-political leader says: *It’s a matter of 'support me or I hate you.' People are too afraid to speak out.* Who can blame them? They speak from experience. Grabouw has seen houses razed to the ground - some demolished by force, others burnt down by the opposition.

- **Even when people see no or little signs of reconciliation, they still believe reconciliation is possible.**
- *Yes, absolutely. We need time. Reconciliation is not an event. It is a process in which everyone has to play a role.*

  A farm worker says: *I think reconciliation is possible. It is a journey which all of us must walk: the perpetrators and the oppressed. A journey to reconciliation (is about) forgiveness and understanding of the mistakes of the past. Not just for us, but for our children and the generations to come to make a better new South Africa.*

  There is a strong sense that God will make reconciliation possible through ordinary people with brains. We should think and stand together. We will need different strategies.

**Reflections on the TRC process: Why truth alone is not enough**

It was significant that in our quest for reconciliation no coloured or white respondent mentioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The only reference to the TRC came from black women in a capacity building workshop, and a Xhosa-speaking male social worker:

- *There is no one on our behalf at the TRC.*
- *People have no knowledge of reconciliation. We need someone from the TRC to explain reconciliation to us.*
- *We have seen reconciliation on television with the TRC, but here in Grabouw we have not had anything like that.*

The significance of the TRC lies in the fact that it is uncovering the truth in order to assist in the healing process on the one hand, and to hold perpetrators accountable for what they did, on the other hand. In its quest for truth it hopes to contribute to reconciliation. It is dealing with South Africa's past in order to shape the future.

There is no such mechanism at local level. Although there is a need for a process to deal with past experiences, there is a greater need for a process to deal with immediate crisis - to meet people's basic need for subsistence. While people feel powerless to meet these basic needs, they do believe they can contribute to
reconciliation at local level by telling their stories to each other. One black woman in a squatter camp said to her fellow participants in a capacity building workshop for women: *It was difficult for me to speak about my community here. I really need this group to help me deal with the painful issues. I spoke the truth - it is the only thing that can lead to reconciliation.* The implication is that untold stories stand in the way of reconciliation. But how and where do people tell their stories? And who listens to what people are saying?

Local government, ultimately responsible for the development of its community, must make sure that the voices of its people are heard. Probably the single most important task of local government is to manage the inevitable conflict which normally goes hand in hand with development. When local government officials become party to destructive conflict, and even worse, when they put party political power struggles before meeting the needs of their people, they greatly diminish the chances for reconciliation.

Truth is not the only road to reconciliation. The road starts in the safe space where people begin listen to others, say what they need, and commit themselves to serving one another. True leaders will make this happen. They ought to be the first to walk the road.

**The Task:**
The team interviewed 14 women and 1 man in squatter camps, three school principles, the mayor and town clerk, the station commander of the South African Police Services, a minister of religion, two social workers and a community worker, a caretaker, a legal advice office worker, seven farm workers, a human resource person on one of the farms, and seven other residents. Several attempts made to interview the leader of the PAC or his colleague were unsuccessful.

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