

“We Heal Together”, an exceptional protective practice inspired by ancestral African heritage where responsibility towards oneself and others was inseparable

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Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

Professor Kamuzinzi, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this special issue of Global Africa on protective practices and their impacts in the fight against Gender-Based Violence (GBV). To begin, we would like to revisit your academic background, your areas of expertise, and your longstanding engagement with communities in their healing processes from conflict-related trauma in the Great Lakes region. Could you introduce yourself briefly?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

My name is Masengesho Kamuzinzi, and I am the Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Governance at the University of Rwanda. Alongside my administrative duties, I am a full professor of public policy at the same university, where I have been teaching and conducting research for over twenty-five years. Early on, I was confronted with the limitations of imported models of thought and action, whose adaptability to the African context remains weak. This led me to explore practices deeply “rooted” in the cultural heritage shared by the people of the Great Lakes region, a region marked by longstanding and multiple conflicts. I am particularly interested in ancestral practices that help create spaces for sharing experiences, mediation, and community engagement in processes

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of collective healing. Within this framework, I have been involved in promoting the community-based psychosocial approach called “We Heal Together” through our association “Guérir les blessures de la vie” (AGBV) – Life Wounds Healing Association (LIWOHA). This approach, inspired by ancestral conflict resolution practices, has been tested in the three countries of the Great Lakes region most affected by political conflict and related violence. I will elaborate more on the philosophy behind this approach and its implementation strategies.

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

How do you transition from the analysis of public policy to “care” policies?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

I became very early interested in how African actors appropriate and translate into practices the patterns of thought and models of action developed in other cultures and contexts. This curiosity stems from the fact that I grew up in a time when everything that mattered in Africa seemed to come from elsewhere. Academically, until the 1990s, it was almost accepted that theories – at least in psychology, sociology, and social sciences in general – were developed and tested in the West, and that other regions of the world had no choice but to adopt these conclusions. This same trend was observed in diverse fields such as public policy design, state governance, or conflict mediation approaches. Even when they operate in volatile and highly dynamic contexts, public policy experts continue to elaborate strategic plans based on highly rationalized calculations and long-term projections, mirroring Western approaches. Regarding state governance, the institutionalization of democracy as a legitimate mode of accessing power, the promotion of the rule of law, and the defense of fundamental rights also seemed to draw inspiration from Western models, often without truly taking into account their contextual adaptation. The same could be said for the forms of mediation proposed by various actors involved in the peaceful resolution of the conflicts that have been ravaging the Great Lakes region for over three decades. For example, the Western idea that all political parties have a political agenda that must be taken into consideration in conflict mediation led General [Romeo Dallaire](#), then commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda during the genocide, to invite militia leaders who were openly carrying out the genocide in front of international television cameras, to the negotiation table. The judgment errors that resulted from adhering to such an out-of-context model of thought and action are clearly evident in his book *J'ai serré la main du diable* (*Shake Hands with the Devil*), as well as in the mea culpa he expressed to survivors of that horrific tragedy.

In closely examining the conception of models for fighting against gender-based violence (GBV), whether in international conventions or in expert documents, it is clear that they too fall into this same logic of thinking. One only needs to consider the number of projects exclusively dedicated to raising awareness among populations and enforcing laws fighting against GBV, as if only knowing these laws was enough to ensure a change in behavior among perpetrators or to spark a sense of “agency” among victims.

These observations led me to look more closely at alternative models of thought and action, rooted in African cultural heritage and thus better suited to the local contexts. Among the models explored, the community-based psychosocial approach “*We Heal Together*” occupies a central place in this search for an alternative.

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

As someone who has lived in the most conflict-affected countries of the Great Lakes region, how do you analyze this conflict and the multiple dynamics contributing to its perpetuation?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

The conflict raging in the Great Lakes region is among the most emotionally charged in Africa. Yet, it remains one of the least understood. Expert reports often simply list a series of events without connecting them to their broader context. As a result, these experts often mistake the consequences of the conflict for its causes, which only adds to the confusion.

This conflict is also marked by many clichés, due to an insufficient understanding of the strategies deployed by the protagonists to impose their narratives. Finally, the Great Lakes conflict stands out because its actors fiercely defend ideological or political stances that have been frozen for decades, even when historical facts prove the contrary.

However, a closer examination reveals that this is not a single conflict, but rather a complex dispute where several wars overlap. What many experts fail to grasp is that this conflict actually contains several levels of conflict, each carrying its own political agenda.

The real issue lies in the fact that the various actors involved in resolving this conflict work in a fragmented way. Their strategies, often contradictory, remain disconnected from the local context and, paradoxically, contribute to intensifying tensions. Unlike many external experts who focus on the macro dimension, the Great Lakes conflict cannot be understood without acknowledging the different forms of local conflict that constitute its root causes and fuel its persistence. These local conflicts explain why thousands of young people so easily join militias. Why, in fact, are there so many militias in this region? According to various reports, their number exceeds 120. Why don't they converge into two, three, or four major militias?

External experts often ignore that these militias are not randomly scattered across the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They are precisely located in areas of high ethnic tension, where different groups that have coexisted for a long time still struggle to accept the idea that their traditional homelands are now part of a modern state. In Ituri, these militias are primarily concentrated around Mahagi, Irumu, and Bunia. In North Kivu, they are active in certain areas of Rutshuru, Masisi, Walikale, and Lubero. In South Kivu, they can be found in the regions of Kalehe, Uvira, and Fizi. In the republican framework, all citizens should have the right to settle wherever they wish and benefit from the same rights, including access to land.

An analysis of the settlement patterns in these areas during the 1990s shows that some communities were forced to leave their ancestral lands due to systematic attacks by militias created by local politicians from rival ethnic groups.

Even though these areas were among those with the most advanced and long-standing ethnic coexistence, they are still plagued by what might be called the “first-occupier syndrome”. This syndrome leads the original inhabitants to see themselves as the only legitimate citizens and to label others as “perpetual foreigners”, regardless of whether they lived together and shared the land long before the creation of the state inherited from colonialism.

The targeted attacks against members of rival communities, the destruction of their property, and most significantly, the refusal to allow them to return to their lands even after peace is restored, suggest that the aspiration of these so-called “autochthonous” militias is ethnic cleansing on lands they view as belonging only to their ancestors. Since displaced community members only know these same lands, having lived there for centuries, it is not uncommon for them to form their own militias explicitly to defend themselves. However, over time, these new militias end up committing similar atrocities. It becomes a cycle, where the creation of one militia seems to provoke the rise of a rival militia, and vice versa.

This particular dynamic, in which violence begets violence, has contributed to the proliferation of hundreds of armed groups in the eastern DRC. Even though the creation of these militias is primarily fueled by local rivalries, their leaders often receive tacit support from political leaders who control spheres of state power but continue to adhere to localized and often exclusive ethnic identities. Many may not realize this, but the creation of militias defending identity-based or territorial agendas dates back to the 1990s, long before the conflict escalated to the inter-state level. With the early, poorly managed experiments in democratization, some politicians saw ethnic mobilization as a perfect means to build a loyal base of supporters who could easily guarantee them a victory in elections that had the form, but not the substance, of true democracy as they displayed a curious hybridization of democratic and tribal logic!

Since that period, local militias are formed, dissolved, and reconstituted into new coalitions, depending on how the conflict evolve. As we can see, this first level of conflict originates in the failure of the postcolonial state to establish in the collective mindset a unified republican identity that guarantees all citizens the right to settle freely within national borders and enjoy the same rights, including the right to own land.

When access to land and power is at stake, local identities, often underpinned by ethnic aspirations, are reactivated to eliminate rivals perceived as threats. Associating a local identity, ethnically inspired and inherently exclusive, with a republican identity that is supposed to be inclusive and reassuring for all citizens is simply untenable. It is only by seriously addressing this first level of conflict that we can hope to cut off the sources of militia recruitment, which, as we will see later, have been appropriated by other spheres of influence as the conflict expanded.

Indeed, the involvement of actors operating at other levels of conflict and pursuing “non-local” agendas has further complicated the situation.

In addition to militias created locally, this region also hosts foreign militias that defend diverse ideologies. Among them, we can mention, among others: the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), of Ugandan origin, which promotes an essentially jihadist agenda; the Red Tabara militia, of Burundian origin; and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), of Rwandan origin, which defends an ethnic, negation and revisionist agenda.

While the DRC and Burundi have found a common ground in the fight against Red Tabara, and the DRC and Uganda eventually agreed on the need to eradicate the ADF, the FDLR, on the other hand, continues to poison relations between the DRC and Rwanda. This militia complicates the conflict in two ways. First, it is involved in ethnic cleansing practices primarily targeting the Tutsi community living in eastern DRC, in coalition with local militias. Secondly, being led by former political leaders and officers from the former Rwandan army, who took refuge in eastern DRC after the 1994 genocide, it also carries a national agenda: according to its manifesto, its main aspiration is to reconquer Rwanda.

Alongside this mosaic of actors is the March 23 Movement (M23), whose characteristics place it neither among local militias nor among foreign groups. We cannot truly classify this movement as a militia, because, unlike the local militias described above, it has succeeded in building an army composed of well-trained and disciplined fighters who follow a chain of command and, above all, fighting based on a clearly expressed political agenda. When examining this movement closely, it is clear that it operates on three levels: local, national, and regional.

Locally, its agenda is linked to the uprooting of Tutsi community members in eastern DRC during the years 1993, 1994, and 1996 by local militias, whose strategies have been analyzed previously. One of M23's key priorities, especially among its Tutsi-origin officers, is ensuring the safety of persecuted Tutsi communities and enabling the return of refugees who have been living in camps in neighboring countries for nearly thirty years. On the national level, M23 demonstrates its agenda through alliances with other political-military forces, such as the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), to fight against the Congolese government. Regionally, the movement's agenda is materialized by its desire to eradicate the presence of the FDLR in eastern DRC.

It goes without saying that the local and regional agendas are intertwined in such a way that the return of Tutsi refugees to eastern DRC is contingent on removing the FDLR fighters from those same lands.

The second level of conflict arises from the alliances forged between the militias and politico-military movements described above and interested states, whose leaders often share the same ideologies and common security interests. For example, Rwanda views the presence of the FDLR, whose ideology is openly rooted in ethnic hatred and genocide denial, along its borders as an existential threat. Rwanda has constantly called on the Congolese government to eradicate this movement and repatriate its fighters in Rwanda. However, Congolese leaders instead use the FDLR fighters, some of the most experienced fighters in the region, as auxiliaries for the national army in its fight against the M23 rebellion, as evidenced by the fierce clashes between these two groups during the various battles around the city of Goma.

What matters most to the FDLR is preventing the M23 from taking control of the lands inhabited by their relatives before their uprooting in 1993, 1994, and 1996. In fact, the FDLR supporters now occupy and conduct military training on these same lands. This strategy allows them to remain near the Rwandan borders, hoping that one day they will have the opportunity to retake their homeland by force.

Local militias welcome the FDLR's strategy. Essentially, they see it as a way to prevent the return of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis who would contest their occupation of vast lands where they have established their farms.

On the other side, M23 fighters have a clear goal: to eliminate the FDLR from eastern DRC, which would help pacify the region and pave the way for the return of their relatives, who have been living in miserable conditions in refugee camps across neighboring countries for nearly three decades. Needless to say, Rwanda is particularly interested in the departure of the FDLR from eastern DRC, for the reasons mentioned above.

The DRC's strategy, in contrast, is more difficult to understand, as it seems neither to serve the interests of the local populations, who remain trapped in permanent insecurity, nor those of the political leaders who have lost much of their legitimacy. In fact, when closely observing what has happened in eastern DRC for nearly three decades, one can see that this strategy has fluctuated between tacit tolerance of the FDLR fighters on its territory, sporadic and timid collaboration with Rwanda for their eradication (often observed at the beginning of the first presidential terms), and verbal support for the FDLR, rarely followed by concrete actions. However, a new step was taken in recent years: the FDLR has moved from being simply tolerated to being integrated into the central government's military strategy to fight the M23. This was particularly evident through the multiple battles around the city of Goma. Anyone even slightly familiar with the Great Lakes context knows that including a foreign group like the FDLR among the legitimate forces defending the territorial integrity of DRC, aligning them with local militias responsible for the uprooting of the Tutsi community from the eastern part of the country, and using them to fight against the M23 (a movement whose goal is to allow its members to return to those very lands) is enough to transform this conflict into a real powder keg. This is the true core of the problem, explaining the magnitude of the conflict in recent years. The rest is well-known: each camp seeks to recruit allies based on the financial means and support networks at its disposal. But all of this only adds layers of complexity, introducing new variables that make peace even more difficult and uncertain.

The third level of conflict occurs at the supranational level. It concerns the rivalry between regional blocs, namely the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This competition materializes through the establishment of two parallel peace processes: the Nairobi Process and the Luanda Process. Indeed, the Nairobi Process was supposed to address specifically the issue of armed groups, while the Luanda Process was meant to focus on inter-state conflicts involving the various countries concerned. Yet, as previously mentioned, these two levels of conflict are interwoven and feed into each other. This rivalry is also visible in the deployment of peacekeeping forces to often competing missions. The East African forces opted for an approach focused on easing tensions, successfully persuading M23 fighters to peacefully give up some of

the conquered territories and pull back from around the city of Goma. However, the Congolese government later dismissed this mission and replaced it with troops selected from some SADC countries, who agreed to join the Congolese army in an offensive mandate against M23. As mentioned earlier, the Congolese army has formed a coalition with several local militias, including the FDLR. The fact that a peacekeeping force operates in alliance with militias responsible for the atrocities that caused the conflict only increases the volatility of the situation, as evidenced by the recent battles around Goma involving South African forces alongside the Congolese army and its militia allies. Even though this is often downplayed by international media, the UN peacekeeping contingent faces almost the same dilemma. By Providing logistical and medical support to government forces, it automatically benefits the militias allied with them on the frontlines, which seriously undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of the affected communities.

The fourth level of conflict is the increasingly persistent questioning of the legitimacy of UN bodies and, to some extent, regional blocs. A closer look reveals that the interventions of UN and regional military forces are based on principles disconnected from the local context. Indeed, these peacekeeping forces are primarily tasked with supporting state institutions, leading them to prioritize cooperation with the government in power.

As a result, any political claim from non-state actors is generally dismissed. This rejection is even more categorical when the claim comes from armed movements opposed to the governments in power. But what happens when a legitimate government goes astray and uses state instruments to persecute a part of its population that is perceived as belonging to the enemy camp? For example, in the recent battles around the city of Goma, South African, Tanzanian, and Malawian forces found themselves fighting alongside the Congolese army, which had incorporated FDLR fighters and thousands of local militias involved in ethnic cleansing. It goes without saying that by providing logistical support to the Congolese army, these forces, in effect, indirectly helped groups responsible for serious human rights violations, thus further worsening the situation.

This kind of dilemma is not new. During the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsis in 1994, for example, Canadian General Roméo Dallaire – the commander of the UN Peacekeeping mission – continued to invite the leaders of the government army, who had clearly opted for genocide, and the leaders of the Interahamwe militias, who were actively carrying out the genocide, to the negotiating table with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) that was trying to stop the genocide. By strictly following the principle of UN neutrality, Dallaire sought to include “all the political forces present” in the dialogue, disregarding the reality on the ground. This raises a crucial question: At what point should peacekeeping contingents decide to stop collaborating with a government that is heading down a dangerous path, before it’s too late? This illusion of neutrality, disconnected from the local reality, severely damaged the reputation of UN missions.

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

What about the exploitation of mineral resources in the DRC, which is often presented as one of the main causes of the conflict?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

In reality, the exploitation chain remains fundamentally the same, regardless of the power dynamics on the ground. Apart from a few mines operated by foreign companies under contract with the government, which are able to directly ship their minerals out of the country, most of the mining areas are located in remote forest zones that are difficult to access. In reality, neither government forces nor foreign armed groups are able to maintain a permanent presence in these areas where living conditions are particularly harsh. Control over these mining areas is typically maintained by local militias who supervise miners, often from the area. The small-scale intermediary buyers, who can venture along muddy and dangerous roads leading to the mining sites to transport the minerals to urban sales points, remain largely the same. In fact, the major traffickers, who transport the minerals to the ocean, can do nothing without them! Only the alliances formed along the route

to the oceans can temporarily shift depending on the political situation. However, as we know, it is very easy to convert the big traffickers because they have no identity to defend – only profit matters! Ultimately, as long as the mining economy of the DRC remains limited to artisanal extraction and the export of raw materials, all discussions about the issue will remain nothing more than quarrels between intermediaries.

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

Your analysis of the conflict implies that its core causes can be clearly identified and addressed. So why, then, does the conflict persist despite the interventions of multiple actors?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

First of all, this conflict may be the second, after the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the way it stirs ideological passions and prevents clear-headed reflection on potential solutions. It is also a conflict in which the distortion of historical facts, aimed at validating a favorable narrative, is part of the strategies employed by some actors. However, the boomerang effect of these manipulations exacerbates tensions rather than easing them.

Finally, it is a conflict where media manipulation quickly takes precedence over real facts, sometimes leading certain intervening actors, who are unaware of the context, to make decisions based on false premises. A closer look reveals that the search for common ground and areas of consensus is simply not part of the concerns of involved parties, let alone the belligerents. Each side is concerned with making its narrative triumph by carefully selecting facts that clear its name and incriminate the opposing side, all while desperately trying to win over public opinion at the local, national, and international levels.

Woe to the one who speaks little! Woe to the one who has not recruited the best influencers!

This raises a fundamental question: which “truth” would help us better understand the nature of this conflict and highlight the most appropriate options for its resolution? Our answer is simple: it is the voices of the local communities, the everyday victims, that should draw the attention of those involved. But the reality is quite different, these local voices are rarely heard, and the powerful people of the world do not seem to care!

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

What are the major effects of the Great Lakes conflict on ordinary communities and citizens?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

As we can see, the conflict in the Great Lakes region finds its roots in the postcolonial state’s failure to forge a shared national identity that could transcend the many ethnic and local identities to embrace a common vision for society. Building such a unifying identity requires a coherent political project, similar to the one led by Julius Nyerere. He succeeded in making the different peoples, forcibly united under colonial rule to form Tanganyika, understand that their diversity was a wealth rather than a handicap. Later, Nyerere convinced the citizens of Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar to unite around a shared social vision, giving birth to the United Republic of Tanzania. It is therefore no surprise that this country is among the most stable and prosperous countries in Africa, where Nyerere’s legacy continues to cement national unity.

In contrast, in the Great Lakes countries, communities that have been artificially and manipulatively cast as enemy groups by uninspired political leaders engage in mutual violence through militias. As a result, society lives in widespread insecurity from which it cannot escape because it sustains these militias both materially and financially. Originally, these militias were built with the promise to protect members of their own communities, but it has been observed that after committing

atrocities against other groups, they become accustomed to violence and even turn against their own members. This transforms their living environment into a true jungle, where no one feels safe anymore.

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

How has the Great Lakes conflict contributed to the proliferation of GBV (Gender-Based Violence) in the region's countries?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

Apart from fueling ethnic tensions and political intolerance, the Great Lakes conflict has also been distinguished by the massive use of rape as a weapon of war, notably in the DRC, and as a weapon of genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Rape, when used as a weapon of war and as a weapon of genocide, represents the most extreme form of the denial of life and human dignity.

Testimonies gathered during various healing workshops show that by violating “the women of the enemy” or destroying their reproductive organs, the militias aimed to deprive the community they wanted to annihilate of the possibility of regenerating. Since this behavior was, in a way, politically motivated at first, the militias deliberately targeted “the women of the enemy.” But once the taboo of dishonoring girls and mothers, even their own neighbors (as was the case in Rwanda) was broken, these militias eventually turned on the girls and women of their own communities, whom they had once vowed to protect. In doing so, they normalized sexual violence, drawing other offenders into similar acts and turning their communities into spaces where no woman or girl could feel safe.

Moreover, widespread trauma caused by prolonged exposure to mass violence has created a fertile ground for gender-based violence (GBV) within families, communities, schools, and workplaces. As a result, the Great Lakes region has some of the highest rates and most widespread occurrences of GBV in the world. This widespread trauma and the scale of GBV in these countries have made it nearly impossible to offer individualized support to everyone seeking medical, psychological, or social help. Furthermore, Standard individual care models, which focus mainly on intra-individual dimensions, fall short, because the life wounds caused by this conflict also affect relational (widespread mutual mistrust) and social dimensions (destruction of shared social norms that made coexistence possible).

To address this, a new model adapted to the mass violence context was needed, one capable of supporting healing at the individual, relational, and social levels. It is in this context that, under the guidance of Professor Emeritus Simon Gasibirege, members of our association, Life Wounds Healing Association, developed a new model for the care of wounded communities, called the “Psychosocial Community Approach (APC)- We Heal Together Model.

The idea of developing this new model emerged from the shortcomings observed in “imported” Western psychological care models for survivors of extreme violence, especially following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Later, this approach was extended to other countries in the Great Lakes region, affected by repeated wars, in order to support the survivors of rape and address other forms of sexual violence committed during wartime.

Initially, the “We Heal Together” model consisted of a series of workshops focused on raising awareness, about grief and processing the deep emotional wounds left by genocide. Participation in these workshops is very different from the training itself, which essentially aims at the intellect. What matters most is not so much acquiring new knowledge and practices about how to cope, but rather the actual engagement in the healing (transformation) process, in interaction with other participants, which allows them to regain a healthy life and peaceful social relationships. Over time, the model evolved into five workshops sequence: the awareness workshop (3 days), the grief workshop (5 days), the emotional regulation workshop (5 days), the forgiveness and reconciliation workshop (5 days), and the project for renewed life workshop (5 days).

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

What do these workshops consist of, and what changes are they meant to bring about?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

First, it's important to explain why we start the shared healing processes with the awareness-raising workshop. In theory, we assume that adults are well able to distinguish between right from wrong and are clearly aware of the wounds caused by traumatic events they have experienced, their impact on the quality of their lives, and their relationships with others. However, the reality is that the wounds of life, rooted in our painful experiences from the past, often overwhelm us without us being fully aware of them and prevent us from living peacefully. These wounds are even more disturbing when someone has been exposed to events as traumatic as rape used as a weapon of genocide or other forms of mass violence committed during wartime.

In practice, the awareness workshop allows participants to become conscious of their wounds, assess the extent of these wounds, and, most importantly, identify the root causes of their distress. It is through understanding the extent of our wounds and their impact on our quality of life that we come to understand why we feel sad without apparent reason, why we are not in good terms with our family members, colleagues, or neighbors, why we are unable to make future plans, why we have become unproductive, why restorative sleep escaped us, etc.

This workshop can be applied to any problem in human existence. Our organization has already implemented it for various mental health-related issues, including:

- The trauma resulting from the genocide against the Tutsi: It is important to understand that individuals and communities were confronted with unprecedented inhumanity that almost resulted in the extermination of an entire human group;
- The trauma resulting from mass and repeated rapes committed in the Great Lakes region, notably by militias and armed men still active in some countries like the DRC: This refers to the degeneration of social norms that structured peaceful coexistence (social deregulation) and a profound violation of women dignity;
- The wounds caused by sexual and domestic violence committed during peacetime;
- The wounds caused by early pregnancies among underage girls: Having a child before reaching adulthood represents a major life crisis. It deprives the young girl of the attributes of childhood, plunges her into existential anxiety, disrupts her physical and emotional development, clouds her future, and complicates her long-term social integration, etc.
- Finally, gender-related dysfunctional behaviors (such toxic masculinity).

But no matter the issue addressed, one might wonder why the awareness workshop lasts as long as three days. What should be kept in mind is that the “We Heal Together” model targets deep wounds, and healing such wounds requires time. It is important to note that even individual therapy can be lengthy, even when the psychotherapist works with only one patient. To trigger a transformation dynamic leading to shared healing, it is essential to guide participants to question their lives, history, behaviors, troubled relationships, and gradually identify the deep causes of their suffering. In the beginning, participants are afraid to explore their own experiences and confront past traumas (a natural defensive response). If accessing one's own heart takes time, it goes without saying that opening it to others requires even more time. Therefore, it is crucial to take time to build a community of participants so they can support and heal one another. It is also worth noting that the method of sharing experiences, which is the foundation of the “We Heal Together” model, requires considerable time. It demands precautions to initiate the process of speech liberation and foster openness to others' suffering.

After a long period of experimentation, we have concluded that a genuine awareness process goes through three key stages:

- Creating a climate of trust: to transform anonymous participants into a cohesive community capable of sharing their experiences and suffering, while supporting each other in the healing process.
- Exploring the notion of life's wounds: initially, we address general life wounds, then focus on the wounds that most affect the members of our communities, and finally the individual wounds affecting each participant. This stage helps identify the causes and consequences of life wounds on the quality of life.
- Setting up healing strategies aimed at finding ways and means to overcome these wounds and regain a peaceful and fulfilling life.

These three stages typically unfold over three days of workshops, one day per stage. Once we have become aware of the origin and deep causes of our distress, a feeling of anxiety may arise, as we wonder if we will ever be able to overcome it.

The awareness workshop is followed by the life wounds healing workshop, which, in the specific case of genocide-related wounds, takes the form of a grief workshop.

The awareness of the void left by death or other profound losses is an important step in reconnecting with life. However, being confronted with death in this manner, especially when it results from genocide, requires deep grief work. Entering such a process is a devastating experience. It induces deep disturbances in the inner life and affects relationships with others and with the environment. During the workshops, participants talk about their grief, and many of them feel guilt and shame for surviving when their brothers and sisters in fate have died. These feelings cause some to lose their sense of identity and self-perception. This is also why they accuse themselves and feel ashamed of crimes they did not commit and of which they are victims.

Similar disturbances are observed among victims, and relatives of survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Becoming aware of these wounds plunges them into deep confusion, which may lead them into a complicated grief process, exacerbating their suffering. To overcome this, the person must engage in grief work aimed at healing the wounds they have just become aware of. In transactional analysis, the grief workshop usually lasts for three days. However, in the case of genocide, these three days are insufficient, as experiencing the deaths of family members (and thousands of innocent people) executed without reason plunges participants into deep suffering. After three days, emotions and suffering remain as intense as before. The goal of these workshops is precisely to help participants emerge with renewed strength, allowing them to live peacefully with this painful past. Additionally, we have observed that in the DRC and Burundi, some participants who were exposed to various forms of atrocities during civil war and political instability took time before entering into a grief process. This resistance was due to either difficulty sharing their experience with people they perceived as being from the "opposing side" or difficulty facing the past.

All of these experiences have led us to the conclusion that engaging in grief work requires at least five days. It was necessary to allow enough time for small group discussions to help participants move gradually from the denial phase of loss to negotiation, and then to acceptance. In practice, the grief workshop takes place in five key steps: engaging in grief work requires more than just participation, as it is difficult to share one's suffering with people one doesn't fully trust. To achieve this, the first step is to transform the group of anonymous participants into a sharing community, capable of embracing grief work together and progressing toward healing.

The second step marks the beginning of the grief process. However, to avoid an emotional shock, participants first discuss death associated with natural causes such as illness, accidents, etc. This exercise prepares them to face more tragic losses, such as those caused by genocide, and gradually those within their environment and communities. During this step, they are invited to talk about the lives, stories, and love they had for the deceased, and the kindness they would have wanted to give them if they were still alive. This exercise may take two days, as it forms the basis of the grief process. Its main goal is to help participants construct a symbolic legacy for those who passed. At the end of this exercise, participants feel more at peace and come to realize that their loved ones left a legacy worthy of preserving and transmitting to future generations, to ensure that memory will not

be forgotten. The final step is to help participants gradually move out of the grief process by assisting them in detaching themselves from the pain caused by the memory of their dearly departed, while preserving their legacy. However, it is essential to recognize that the mourning process evokes intense emotions that need to be addressed carefully to regain a sense of serenity. That is why the workshop facilitator must introduce the concept of regulating emotions related to grief, which will be addressed in the following workshop.

The emotion regulation workshop allows the acceptance of what has happened, helps untangle feelings, and lifts guilt and shame. Finally, the life project workshop extends this experience and helps participants redefine themselves and embrace a new life horizon by setting clear short-, medium-, and long-term goals, allowing them to regain a healthy and meaningful life. As with other healing workshops, the emotion regulation workshop lasts five days. The first step consists of building the community of participants or, at the very least, revisiting the issue of group cohesion and the establishment of mutual trust, which allows participants to share their feelings and emotions without hesitation or judgment. The second step involves differentiating between thoughts and emotions. Participants understand that thought is related to conceptualization and elaboration, while emotions (feelings and emotions) are tied to sensation and sensitivity. Once this distinction is made, participants take the time to understand the function and significance of feelings in everyday life. They learn that fear signals a danger to avoid, anger refers to a sense of injustice suggesting a need for change to restore healthy life or relationships, sadness refers to a sense of loss and the need for comfort, and joy and happiness suggest a sense of security, fostering openness to others, sharing, friendship, camaraderie, etc.

Once the notion of feelings and their importance in life is well understood, participants move from intellectual conceptualization to expressing their own feelings. They explore how they were socialized by their parents, educators, and other important people to express or inhibit their natural feelings during childhood and adolescence, and how the permission or prohibition to express their feelings has impacted their adult life. They then explore expressing feelings related to natural losses, such as the death of loved ones caused by illness, and later, feelings related to profound losses, such as those caused by genocide or similar losses. By reflecting on their personal stories at the time of these losses, participants examine whether their family, friends, and other support networks allowed them to express their feelings, whether they welcomed these emotions or tried to inhibit them. The next step is to explore their current feelings related to past losses. Can they now express them freely, unlike before? Does this help them live more serenely with the losses they have suffered? The final step is to develop strategies to properly channel their feelings and emotions so that they no longer negatively affect their lives. But learning to manage the feelings and emotions associated with a painful event like genocide or other deep losses does not necessarily mean that the person can now live in peace with themselves, with their past, and especially not with those who, directly or indirectly, caused their suffering. For this, it is essential to embrace the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, which is the focus of the fourth workshop.

Regarding the forgiveness and reconciliation workshop, it has been observed that if a person has not properly completed their grief process, they will struggle to reconcile with themselves and with others, which may compromise the healing process. The forgiveness and reconciliation workshop aims to continue consolidating this process. By engaging in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, each participant seeks to regain their uniqueness and restore healthy relationships with others and with life itself.

As with other healing workshops, the forgiveness and reconciliation workshop lasts five days. Naturally, the first step is to revisit the consolidation of the community of participants. This exercise is not a simple routine, as it prepares participants' minds to share their experiences regarding forgiveness and reconciliation, including the difficulties they have faced in engaging in this process.

Participants begin by discussing the nature and importance of forgiveness and reconciliation, both with themselves and with others in recovering healthy mental well-being. They focus on the difference between forgiveness and justice, emphasizing that asking for or granting forgiveness does not eliminate the desire for justice. One needs to be forgiven or to forgive oneself and reconcile with

oneself and with others because of the pain caused by what happened. It is an essentially internal and relational process, distinct from the need for justice, which seeks to hold people accountable for the crimes committed. Engaging in forgiveness and reconciliation means seeking to live with the painful memory of the past in a peaceful way and, to the extent possible, without resentment toward the person who caused the suffering, but not toward their crime. Accepting to reconcile with the person who harmed us means that we have agreed to detach their person from their crime, and we can restore peaceful relationships with them without necessarily forgetting what they did to us.

Thus, forgiving and reconciling with the person who wronged us does not mean erasing the crimes committed or renouncing justice. Once this clarification is made, participants reflect on their past and examine how they were introduced to asking for and granting forgiveness and reconciliation, including how their parents and other adults played a key role in their education and socialization. They then analyze the influence of gender on forgiveness and reconciliation, examining how, within their culture, men and women engage in this process. Through group exercises and plenary discussions, participants take the time to understand the observed differences, seeking their causes in the socialization of girls and boys. They then assess their own engagement in the process of asking for and granting forgiveness and reconciliation, first applying this approach to ordinary life situations, then to serious crimes such as those committed during genocide. They take a closer look at how they manage the strong feelings and emotions associated with such requests. As with the other healing workshops, the forgiveness and reconciliation workshop concludes with a discussion on strategies to improve engagement in healing-oriented processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. The facilitator ends the session by informing the participants that only one final workshop remains: the new life project workshop.

After going through the processes of awareness, grief, emotion regulation, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and once the healing process is properly initiated, the person moves toward the final stage of mourning: detachment. At this stage, the person is theoretically ready to embrace a new life, as he have learned to handle his painful past and the wounds and feelings related to it.

The life project workshop helps participants lay the concrete foundations for this new life. But before making future commitments, they first reflect on their past and carefully examine what it was built upon. It is during this exercise that they discover that, throughout their childhood and adolescence, most of their choices and achievements were largely dependent on their parents, educators, and sometimes what they refer to as the “invisible hand” (God, fate, luck, etc.). They then realize that they must now learn to stand on their own and define a life horizon that they fully embrace. It is also at this point that they understand how much their adult life has been deeply shaped by the psychological suffering caused by the wounds they have been working on throughout the workshops. They then decide to free themselves from these wounds in order to embrace a new life.

The new life project, inspired by the “We Heal Together” model, thus differs from other types of projects, including conventional development projects. It is more about a commitment to one’s own inner transformation rather than a focus on external circumstances. Once this distinction is made, each participant sets clear transformation goals, with measurable achievement indicators. They then define specific deadlines for each goal in the short, medium, and long term. Here, the person must differentiate their own contribution from that of the “invisible hand.” The ultimate goal of this workshop is to help participants be fully aware that the success of their life project depends primarily on their own responsibility and commitment, rather than the “invisible hand.”

Cheikh Sadibou Sakho

Do you think the APC model-“We Heal Together” represents a protective practice that can restore broken bonds between community members?

Masengesho Kamuzinzi

Our field experience, accumulated through initiatives to fight against gender-based violence (GBV) and community healing via our organization Life Wounds Healing Association (LIWOHA), has gradually convinced us that it is impossible to eradicate these violence (in families, schools, communities, or workplaces) without in-depth work on the mindsets rooted in our education, which are the foundation of these violent behaviors. Specifically concerning GBV, change is only possible if we encourage the perpetrators to reflectively revisit their socialization process and deeply question the life wounds that led them to adopt violent or humiliating behaviors towards their partners. It is only after becoming aware of their own wounds and understanding their impact on the quality of relationships with their partners that they agree to engage in a healing process. This process allows them to confront and heal the wounds rooted in their painful past experiences that push them to resort to violence to assert their masculinity. Similarly, it is through healing their wounds that the victims stop tolerating abuse, fully embrace their identity, take control of their lives, and learn to defend themselves.

By seeking to heal wounded minds and rebuild relationships shattered by violence, the community-based psychosocial approach of the “We Heal Together” model constitutes an exceptional protective practice, strongly inspired by the ancestral African heritage, where responsibility towards oneself and others was inseparable. It is this culture of reciprocity that encourages both perpetrators and victims of violence to agree to sit together in healing workshops, where the perpetrators become aware of the painful life wounds they caused to others. Most importantly, these perpetrators learn that their own life wounds rooted in their past painful experiences play a big role in inclining them to resort to violence, where non-psychologically wounded individuals peacefully negotiate their differences. Although this approach has been primarily applied to psychosocial and apolitical issues, we believe it is entirely possible to extend the model to the issues of the politicization of exclusive identities and related political intolerance, which has caused so much suffering in the Great Lakes region. It is only by searching for intersections and common ground that the different actors involved can hope for sustainable peace, beneficial to all.

Prof Kamuzinzi, *Global Africa* sincerely thanks you for your invaluable insights!