

# BRIDGES TO PEACE: LESSONS FROM AFRICA

This document was developed based on the results of the study visit of Ukrainian women leaders to Rwanda and to the Republic of South Africa on March 17-31, 2025. During the visit, the experience exchange took place between Ukrainian, Rwandan and South-African women's and human rights organizations on the issues of women's meaningful participation in the processes of post-conflict recovery, reconciliation and strengthening national unity.

The visit was initiated by the Foundation 'The Day After' (Ukraine), was organized in partnership with The Kigali Genocide Memorial (Rwanda) and The Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Center (South Africa), and supported by the Open Society Foundation.

## CONTEXT

African countries – Rwanda and the Republic of South Africa – have the experience of internal conflicts that included the long-lasting injustice, discrimination and the outbreaks of violence.

In 1994, Rwanda has gone through the genocide when in 100 days around 1 mln women, men and children who belonged to the Tutsi ethnicity have been killed. From 250 to 500 thousand of women have been raped during the genocide; many of them have been infected by HIV/AIDS. In turn, in 1948 – 1991, in the Republic of South Africa, an official policy of racial discrimination and segregation (apartheid) was implemented against the black population and immigrants from Asia.

Thirty years after the tragic events, Rwanda and South Africa are in the process of post-conflict settlement and re-consolidation based on a new social contract. The experience of these countries may be useful and relevant for Ukraine in the context of post-war reconstruction.

The situation in Ukraine is different, because in this case an interstate conflict is taking place at the peak of its intensity. Talking about reconciliation with the aggressor and with Russian society, at least prematurely, is a task of a very long perspective. This process will take place in conditions that are impossible to predict from today's perspective.

Ukrainian society, which withstands Russian aggression, is generally consolidated and mostly unanimous in its goals. That is indicated by the results of regular public opinion surveys. Thus, the absolute majority of Ukrainians (70% in the West, 68% in the Center, 62% in the South and 46% in the East) believe that Russia wants to commit physical genocide

or destroy the Ukrainian statehood and nation (Public opinion survey by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) as of February – March 2025). Also, 90% of Ukrainians want to see Ukraine as part of the EU, and 84% want to see Ukraine as part of NATO (Public opinion survey by KIIS as of 2024). Moreover, as of December 2024, 53% of Ukrainians believe that Ukrainian society is gradually overcoming contradictions and moving towards a united political nation (Public opinion survey by KIIS as of December 2024).

However, *within Ukrainian society, the division lines caused by war are emerging – sometimes implicit, but already tangible.* Thus, the national surveys on social cohesion indicate that the key factors that reveal the division lines are corruption (16%), language issue (14%), low competence of the authorities and weak communication of officials with society (13%), and the presence of collaborators (9%). At the same time, Ukrainians also feel injustice due to unequal distribution of the burden

of war in different regions (11%) and lack of mutual understanding and mutual assistance between them (9%) (Public opinion survey KIIS as of May 2024).

Even deeper division lines are between the citizens of Ukraine in the free and temporarily occupied territories. Russian occupation changes informational, political and cultural context in which Ukrainians live, inclines them to forced cooperation with the enemy, and also generates a sense of abandonment and resentment towards the Ukrainian state and society. The liberation of territories by Ukraine – especially those that have been under Russian occupation for a long time – will put on the agenda the challenges of integrating communities and their return to Ukrainian society, as well as the task of overcoming mutual phobias and mistrust.

It is precisely in order to address such challenges that the experience of African countries could be interesting and useful for the Ukrainian context.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. LONG-LASTING AND VALUES-BASED SOLUTIONS ARE THE BASELINE FOR EFFECTIVE POST-CONFLICT RECOVERY.

The experience of African countries shows that three decades after the end of conflicts and confrontations, countries are still providing support to those social groups that have suffered the most from injustice and discrimination. And in this process, Rwanda and the Republic of South Africa are focusing on the needs and demands of their societies, in particular and especially vulnerable groups (for example, survivors of genocide and rape in Rwanda, black and colored people in South Africa), and also defending their own national interests.

*IN POST-WAR RECOVERY, UKRAINE SHOULD DEVELOP STRATEGIC HOME-GROWN SOLUTIONS*

Thus, during the meeting with Ukrainian delegation, Rwandan parliamentarians noted that their policy of strengthening national unity is built on the values of forgiveness and reconciliation, which are a unifying factor for Rwanda. They do not rely on the principles and approaches to reconciliation process from abroad in exchange for external assistance, but choose their own path, which is long but stable.

In turn, at the heart of South Africa's post-apartheid recovery is the *Africana approach*, which emphasizes the importance of African worldviews, draws on the history of South Africa's struggle for freedom, and promotes the unity and self-determination of African peoples. In this way, the Republic of South Africa is attempting to restore a genuine understanding of African history and culture.

Therefore, in post-war recovery, *Ukraine should develop strategic home-grown solutions* that will meet Ukrainian national interests and, in the future, meet the needs of various social groups, including and especially vulnerable ones.

Such approaches will help guarantee just and sustainable peace, dignity and equal access to all opportunities and development in society. At the same time, it is important to conduct a broad awareness campaign to properly implement such solutions at the national, regional and local levels.

In this context, it is important to follow a peacebuilding approach, rather than a conflict resolution one. Such perspective helps to build a positive context, and in that view, the mediation peacebuilding practices could be an efficient tool for national unity and reconciliation of the society on its path to reconstruction and recovery.

## 2. FREEDOM OR SECURITY – WHICH IS THE PRIORITY IN POST-WAR RECOVERY?

The priorities for the Republic of South Africa after the end of apartheid policy were institutional development, as well as open dialogue and freedom. This became the basis for democratization and preventing a return to authoritarianism. In turn, Rwanda relied on the security aspect, which was in line with more centralized governance.

*UKRAINE SHOULD ALREADY THINK ABOUT SOLUTION THAT WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO SEMILITARIZATION OF SOCIETY*

In a long run, such polar concepts and approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, *Ukraine should already think about a solution that would contribute to demilitarization of society and to establishing public security guarantees that would guarantee freedom and create efficient and inclusive institutions.*

## 3. INCLUSIVE NATIONAL DIALOGUE IS A GUARANTY FOR NATIONAL UNITY

Reconciliation policy and practices in Rwanda as well as the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provided for people whose rights have been violated a space to tell the truth about what they have lived through.

They also got a chance that justice will be provided in a proper way and restored in their communities. Participation of ordinary people has made the national reconciliation an inclusive process.

*IT IS IMPORTANT TO ACCEPT DIFFERENT WAR EXPERIENCES AND TO TRANSFORM THEM INTO CONSTRUCTIVE PRACTICES*

During the large scaled war in Ukraine, everyone has gained different experience – in the frontline, in the rear or forcefully abroad. In the post-war recovery, *it is important to accept different war experiences and to transform them into constructive practices* as well as into communities of support. That would become a resource for decision-making and developing national policies for strengthening national unity.



In this process, it is important to ensure active and meaningful participation of civil society in post-war recovery of Ukraine. Especially of those working with vulnerable groups – survivors of sexual violence during the war, internally displaced persons, people with disabilities, as well as youth, veterans and community leaders. Partnership between the state and civil society should become an important baseline for just and sustainable post-war recovery in Ukraine.



## 4. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING IS PRECONDITION FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE.

After genocide in Rwanda, there have been created opportunities for women – for participation in all recovery processes, both on the local and national levels. Today, Rwanda is in the top list globally on the number of women in the government and in elected positions (61%). Rwandan women's organizations continue to provide services and support to those who suffered the most from massive human rights violations. They also continuously advocate for preventing genocides and crimes against humanity in future.

*IT IS IMPORTANT TO ENSURE REAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER EQUALITY PRINCIPLES*

For Ukraine, this means not only the need to keep, but also to strengthen the legislation and to ensure real and practical implementation of gender equality principles. One of the tools here could become implementing gender quotas in the national, regional and local government, as well as in private sector. This would allow integrating women's voices and experiences that they have gained during the war in the decision-making, incl. in security sector, recovery, social and economic policy, a.o.

## 5. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES AS A TOOL OF THE NATIONAL UNITY POLICY.

Today in Rwanda, survivors and perpetrators live together in the same communities. Reconciliation in communities became one of the key tasks for the national unity policy.

Here, the key tools became *gacacas* – traditional courts sitting on grass. *Gacacas* have solved around 1,2 mln cases and have forwarded them to the law enforcement system. In Rwanda, there have been so many crimes against humanity that the national law enforcement system itself couldn't manage all of them. Another reconciliation tool in Rwanda are the *reconciliation villages* – the daily practices when survivors and perpetrators have built together the houses in their villages, and in that way have created the communities.

These decisions became home-grown, were the best for Rwandan context and have been

supported by the national government, both through ensuring justice and through educational and mentorship work with former perpetrators.

*IN POST-WAR RECOVERY, IT IS IMPORTANT FOR UKRAINE TO LEAN ON DOMESTIC RESOURCES AND TO DEVELOP TOOLS FOR HEALING*

In Rwandan context, after genocide the *preventing revenge* principle has been implemented in the national reconciliation policy. The key issues for the government became restoring trust in communities, implementing justice and promoting unity that was aimed to break the circle of violence and to build peaceful future.

In Ukraine's post-war recovery, it is *important to lean on domestic resources and to develop the tools for healing, reconstruction and restoring justice* that will be the best for its context. The experience of the countries that have gone through major conflicts is important, but it is first and foremost necessary to count on the strength of own communities.

## 6. WORKING WITH PUBLIC SENTIMENTS WOULD PREVENT NEW CONFLICTS AND TENSIONS.

During and after the conflict, it is important to ensure transforming discontent and anger that the society feels because of injustice in holding the burden of the war into practices and tools for reaching a new social contract.

The experience of the Republic of South Africa demonstrates a trend to showcasing the unprocessed aggression – there is a high level of crimes and domestic violence, and the latest research show also femicide as a serious threat.

*IT IS IMPORTANT TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH*

In Ukraine's post-war recovery, it is *important to raise the awareness about mental health* and to put special attention of society on this issue. It is important to build partnership between state institutions and civil society organizations in order to provide now and in necessary amount mental health services to those social groups, incl. vulnerable, who require such support.

In this context, it is reasonable to provide qualified education services – to conduct additional training on conflict resolution for couples and families, as well as to include the trainings on non-violent behavior for children as a part of school curriculum. It is important to educate kids as future advocates for peace and unity, and to cultivate for them the values of dialogue, tolerance and responsibility.

## 7. OVERCOMING THE WAR TRAUMA SHOULD BE A PRIORITY.

In post-war recovery, it is important to recognize, both in communities and in the whole society, the pain that the country has gone through. One of the tools for acknowledging the pain is storytelling about truth and about experiences people have lived through.



*Working with trauma should be a part of the national unity policy and should start as soon as possible after the war ends. This would decrease the chances in transforming this trauma into transgenerational one, and with all that, the society would get less challenges in this context in coming decades.*

*WORKING WITH TRAUMA SHOULD BE A PART OF THE NATIONAL UNITY POLICY*

Among the tools that could be interesting for Ukraine could be the mental health programs *Heal me, and I will heal you*. Those programs educate on how to listen, to empathize, to understand pain and traumas of others, not to judge, but to accept – and through all of that to heal yourselves. This approach creates the culture of empathy, trust and mutual support in the society.





## 8. REMEMBRANCE ABOUT THE WAR AS OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT EXPERIENCE AND TO BECOME STRONGER.

After genocide, Rwanda developed its own approach to commemorate those who were killed. There are two types of memorials in the country – the museums and burial places, and the places where the mass crimes took place (*killing sites*).

*PLACES OF MEMORIALIZATION  
HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE – FOR  
KEEPING HISTORY AND FOR TRAUMA  
HEALING*

First ones, like *The Kigali Genocide Memorial*, provide a systematic educational and advocacy work – organize trainings for experts, develop educational course for school curriculum about the history of 1994 genocide, as well as conduct study visits for international experts in post-conflict resolution. Another, like *The Ntarama Genocide Memorial Center*, are places where the mass crimes against humanity have been conducted and where the remains of those who have been killed are kept.

*Places of memorialization have an important role – both for keeping the history, and for trauma healing: it is important to have a place where a tragic experience is symbolized and documented. Those spaces also help to preserve memory about the war and provide opportunity to tell the stories about dramatic experience lived through. The stories of ordinary people that have been fixed make the society indifferent and give understanding that war, genocide or other tough developments are not only statistics or pages in history, but there are real people and personal tragedies behind them.*



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