

INTRODUCTION

As part of a multi-year transition to majority rule in South Africa, 27 South African organizations committed themselves to reducing politically motivated violence by signing the National Peace Accord (NPA) on September 14, 1991. Violence had plagued South Africa since the 1980s as its apartheid regime--which legalized political and economic domination by white South Africans--began to crumble. Between 1985 and 1990, an estimated 9,000 deaths were attributed to politically motivated violence. By early 1991, the violence was threatening the peaceful transformation of the country's political structures that had gotten under way a year earlier with the unbanning of anti-apartheid organizations and the release of political prisoners. Peace committees, created by the NPA at the national, regional, and local levels, were one of the main vehicles for reducing violence in communities that had been deeply divided along racial lines for many generations.

Although the peace committees received limited external financing, USAID and other international donors did support efforts to promote a peaceful transition in South Africa in a variety of other ways, both prior to and during the 1991-1994 transition period. For example, assistance was channelled to political organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in order to strengthen their capacity to engage in negotiations with the white, minority government. A broad range of non-governmental and community-based organizations also benefited from external financing in order to strengthen the capacity of civil society to address the economic, political, and social legacies of apartheid that confront South African society. Of particular relevance to the work of the peace committees, many non-governmental and community-based organizations were engaged in mediation and dispute resolution, the promotion of tolerance within an ethnically and politically diverse society, and education in alternatives to violence.

Several years after the dissolution of the peace committees in 1994, there have been surprisingly few analyses of their activities. In consequence, in April 1997 USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation commissioned a study on the role of the South African peace committees as a conflict management mechanism as part of its examination of the role of donor organizations in post-conflict transition societies. The terms of reference of this study were to review:

- (1) the origin and composition of the peace committees;
- (2) the activities and range of variation in the operations of the committees;
- (3) factors affecting performance and impacts of the peace committees;
- (4) likely replication of this model in other war-torn societies;
- (5) lessons learned and recommendations for USAID on the promotion of peace committees.

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Information on the operation of peace committees was collected primarily through interviews with South Africans who either had been directly involved with the committees or

were otherwise highly knowledgeable about their activities. Additionally, documentation from the peace committees and other written materials were consulted. Field visits were conducted during April/May 1997 and were supplemented by additional interviews and comments on a first draft of this report in August/September 1997. A complete list of interviewees is found in Appendix 1. Documentation consulted is found in Appendix 5.

This report begins by describing the context in which the peace committees were created. Chapter I provides a brief background on the apartheid system and the negotiation of the National Peace Accord, which laid the basis for the work of the peace committees. In Chapter II, the organizational structure, mandates, and budget of the peace committees established at the national, regional, and local levels are briefly discussed. Six functions identified by former peace committee members and staff as indicators of the degree of success achieved by the peace committees are then assessed. These are:

- (1) open channels of communication;
- (2) legitimize the concept of negotiations;
- (3) create a safe space in which issues not covered by other fora can be discussed;
- (4) strengthen accountability;
- (5) help equalize the power balance; and
- (6) help reduce the incidence of violence.

In Chapter III, eight environmental factors that were particularly important in influencing the relative degree of success experienced by peace committees are reviewed and analyzed. These include:

- (1) political will at the national level to see the peace process through;
- (2) the attitude adopted by the security forces to the work of the peace committees;
- (3) the development of constructive relationships among key actors;
- (4) the capacity of civil society to make a constructive contribution;
- (5) the perceived legitimacy of the peace committees;
- (6) the ability to communicate the objectives of the peace process and provide an objective view of events;
- (7) the financial and structural flexibility of the peace committees; and
- (8) the role of two international actors--international monitors and development cooperation agencies.

The report concludes in Chapter IV with a consideration of five lessons that can be derived from the experiences of the South African peace committees:

(1) Peace committees can be valuable conflict management tools in countries undergoing major political transitions.
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(2) Concept should not be confused with structure. The peace committee concept is transferrable, but the precise form such committees assume should be developed locally.

(3) While peace committees can be a valuable conflict management tool, they are not appropriate in every setting. It is important to evaluate the environment into which peace committees are to be introduced to determine if a sufficient number of key enabling factors

are in place.

(4) Build on what exists locally and take local ownership seriously.

(5) Be prepared to make a long-term commitment to conflict management.

In discussing these lessons, particular attention is given to the lessons for international donors, such as USAID, and to the question of the replicability of peace committees in other war-torn societies.