

Chapter 13

The Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society in Peacebuilding: Lessons from the Matabeleland Collective, Zimbabwe



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Abstract *Gukurahundi*, (the rain that washes away the dirt the after harvest) is one of the darkest chapters of the history of violence in Zimbabwe. Between 1983 and 1987, the government of Zimbabwe carried out a pogrom against the people of Matabeleland and some parts of the Midlands provinces which left some 20 000 people dead, many more disappeared or maimed. For the duration of the late president Mugabe’s rule, almost 37 years, no acknowledgement or healing programme was ever initiated. Any talk about this era was strongly suppressed by the government and the environment was generally hostile against any efforts to engage publicly on *Gukurahundi*. Although much was done by a number of CSOs and churches, it was always without much cooperation from the state. The advent of the so-called new dispensation, which saw President Mnangagwa come to power in November 2017, brought with it a slight glimmer of hope and a corresponding change of attitude by some CSOs in Matabeleland. A number of prominent Matabele organisations came together under the banner of Matabeleland Collective, to find an alternative way of addressing the violence and pain of *Gukurahundi* by seeking to engage directly with government and the president in particular, in a non-confrontational way. For the first time in the history of Zimbabwe, the president was able to come down to Bulawayo to engage openly on *Gukurahundi*. This was an historic occasion which resulted in government making certain commitments to address some of the concerns raised by the group. At the same time a considerable amount of opposition from people in the diaspora, politicians in the ruling party and opposition movements in Matabeleland, arose and there was serious backlash and accusations of “selling out”. This chapter seeks to narrate and analyse the process that led to the formation of Matabeleland Collective, its achievements and challenges it faced, and the lessons that can be learnt from it.

Keywords *Gukurahundi* · Civil society · Matabeleland collective · Healing · Devolution · Mnangagwa

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13.1 Introduction

The history of the struggle for Zimbabwe's independence is a contested one. This is mainly because the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), one of the two main nationalist parties (led by Robert Mugabe) which fought the struggle has consistently attempted to diminish the contribution of Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) out of the history of the struggle (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017, p. 6) up until 1963, Joshua Nkomo had led the various big nationalist party formations starting with the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress (SRANC) in the 1950s to ZAPU. In 1963 there was a split in ZAPU which resulted in the formation of the Zimbabwe African National Union, led by the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, with Robert Mugabe as its Secretary General (Ngwenya 2018; Sibanda 2017). ZANU later deposed Sithole and eventually made Mugabe its leader.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to delve much into the reasons for the split save to say that it was a result of a lot of internal strife and differences – largely based on policy direction, but also on ethnicity – between Nkomo and some of the leaders in ZAPU. The end result of this split was that it widened the tribal rift between the Ndebele-speaking and Shona-speaking people in the country. While ZAPU's leadership was well representative of the country's ethnic demographics, it came to draw its support mainly from the Matabeleland and Midlands regions, while ZANU drew theirs almost entirely from the Mashonaland regions. The split also led to the flaring of inter-tribal violence between the supporters of the two parties in the major cities, particularly Harare and Bulawayo.

After the 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain by the Rhodesian Prime Minister, Ian Smith, the race to recruit for the armed struggle increased the tensions between the two nationalist parties (Ngwenya 2018, p. 20). ZAPU's armed wing was the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZPRA) and ZANU's, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA).

The tensions between the parties naturally spilt into their fighting forces and there was no love lost between the two. The relationships were so bad that sometimes when the two met in Rhodesia, they would exchange gunfire (Abrams 2006; Alexander et al. 2000). Several efforts were made by the Frontline States¹ to unite the two fighting forces. One such attempt ended up very badly. In an effort to integrate the two armies into one army called the Zimbabwe People's Army (ZIPA), in June 1976 some ZPRA cadres were sent to the training camps of Mgagao and Morogoro (which were training camps for ZANLA) in Tanzania. Fighting broke out one morning, over the use of a kitchen, and ZANLA with the assistance of their Chinese instructors quickly armed themselves and fired at the unarmed ZPRA counterparts, some of whom managed to escape. It was a similar story with the ZPRA group sent to Mozambique; they were tortured and forced to denounce ZAPU. These incidents only served to harden the antagonistic attitudes between the two armies (Ngwenya 2018, p. 20).

¹ These included among others, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Angola, etc.

The political wings, ZAPU and ZANU, managed to unite, somewhat, for the 1979 Lancaster House negotiations. This unity, however, only lasted for the duration of the negotiations. The two parties went into the negotiations as the Patriotic Front. However, soon after the end of the conference, Mugabe announced that ZANU would contest the then upcoming elections on its own. As a sign to its commitment to the unitary approach, ZAPU incorporated Patriotic Front into its name, becoming PF-ZAPU. The move, by Mugabe, contributed further to inter-party suspicions and antagonism that were already high. Mugabe won the February 1980 elections, garnering 57 of the 100 seats, while Nkomo won 20 (mostly in Matabeleland and the Midlands), three went to Bishop Abel Muzorewa's United African Congress Party (UANC) and the 20 other seats were reserved for the whites (this arrangement would fall away after 10 years). Although Nkomo's ZAPU were given some Cabinet posts, it was not long before they were kicked out by Mugabe. One of Mugabe's desires was for a one party state, and ZAPU stood in the way of that dream (Meredith 2008; Ngwenya 2018).

13.2 The Dawn of the *Gukurahundi* Era

During the war of liberation in Zimbabwe, South Africa's ANC worked very closely with ZAPU. Their armed wing, Umkonto WeSizwe (MK), fought side by side with ZPRA in then Rhodesia. So, when the ceasefire was effected in Rhodesia and the guerrilla armies sent to the assembly points for disarmament, demobilisation and creation of a new Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA), some of the MK fighters went into the assembly point with their ZPRA counterparts (interviews with ex-ZPRA combatants). In addition, the ANC had hoped they could use Zimbabwe as a base to launch attacks into South Africa, so some of their arms had been brought into the country and cached in some of the ZAPU properties (Nkomo 1983). Furthermore, because of their distrust of the Smith regime, both ZANLA and ZPRA had left some of their fighters outside the assembly points and had also cached arms in case Smith reneged and they needed to resume the war.

This information was known to both parties; however, the cached arms on the ZAPU/ZPRA side later provided Mugabe with a perfect excuse to accuse his adversaries of being disgruntled with the outcome of the election and planning to topple his government. Furthermore, the mistreatment, humiliation and harassment of the ex-ZPRA fighters already integrated into the ZNA, led to disaffection of those still in assembly points. In addition, a series of provocative statements by ZANU politicians resulted in gun fights between ZPRA and ZANLA combatants who had been placed at camps close to each other in Entumbane suburb in Bulawayo. The fighting eventually spilt to other camps at Connemara in Gweru, Ntabazinduna about 45km outside Bulawayo and Chitungwiza township near Harare (see Ngwenya 2018 for a fuller history of this period).

The ex-ZPRA combatants now attested into the national army continued to face harassment and, in some instances, certain death. They were overlooked for high posts

which were given predominantly to the former ZANLA cadres. This riled the ZPRAs who felt they were better trained and better fighters than their ZANLA compatriots. These frustrations and a sure fear for their lives drove some of the ZPRAs to desert the army; some went back to their rural homes and families, while others sought refuge in Botswana, South Africa and overseas. A few decided to pick up arms and became a nuisance to the communities and farmlands owned by the white farmers. All these situations worked perfectly in Mugabe's favour, who by early 1982, felt he was in control enough to make his move to destroy Nkomo and ZAPU. In February of 1982, he announced that arms caches had been found in ZAPU properties and that this was clear proof that Nkomo and ZAPU had been planning to topple his government and that ZPRA 'dissidents' had become a menace which needed to be dealt with. ZAPU was expelled from Mugabe's government and some of the top ZPRA commanders arrested; Nkomo himself was fired as Minister of Home Affairs and had to flee to Britain. The most high-profile arrestees being general Lookout Masuku and Dumiso Dabengwa, who after a lengthy trial were found not guilty and acquitted only to be rearrested as they left court and detained, until 1986, under the Smith regime Law and Public Order Maintenance Act (LOMA), the very act that had been used to detain the nationalists arbitrarily, including Nkomo and Mugabe himself. Nkomo and ZAPU vehemently denied supporting the 'dissidents' and former 'dissidents' interviewed later confirmed they got no support from their party. In the midst of this confusion, South Africa, recruited some of these disgruntled ZPRA fighters and armed them, and were known as Super ZAPU and were better armed than the ordinary 'dissidents' (Alexander et al. 2000; Ngwenya 2018, pp. 23–24; Nkomo 1983).

In October 1980, Mugabe had apparently entered into a secret agreement with the North Koreans to train a new brigade which was to deal with 'internal security'. The deal, however, was only announced in 1982 upon the arrival of the North Korean instructors. This brigade was to be responsible directly to Mugabe and it operated outside the normal national army chain of command (Todd 2007, p. 37). The 5th Brigade officially known as *Gukurahundi*, a chiShona word meaning "the rain that drives away chaff before the spring rains," caused great havoc in Matabeleland and some parts of the Midlands provinces. It was responsible for the vast majority of the human rights violations and war crimes committed against the people in these provinces, who were perceived to be associated with Ndebele and ZAPU. It is estimated that about 20 000 civilians were murdered by the *Gukurahundi*, countless others were disappeared, tortured and raped in the most brutal manner. Villagers were exposed to the most inhumane treatment they had ever experienced. Pregnant women had their stomachs ripped open to show 'baby dissidents' (Overseas NGOs dossier), relatives were made to have sex with each other while everyone watched. Men would be made to climb trees, barking like baboons and told to jump down, many limbs were broken. People were burnt alive in huts, made to dig their own shallow graves and shot while piled up inside. Survivors were then made to sing and dance on top of these graves, and no one was allowed to cry.

Those killed were to be buried immediately, and as a result, many never received proper burials and some families still do not know where their relatives were buried up today. In Matabeleland South, at a place called Bhalagwe, a big concentration style

camp was established by the 5th Brigade. In this camp, people were tortured daily and those who succumbed were thrown down a disused nearby Antelope mine. Smaller camps were found in other parts too (CCJP 2007, pp. 154–160; Ngwenya 2018, pp. 23–27; Scarnecchia 2011, pp. 91–94). Evidence suggests that the sole purpose of the 5th brigade was to deal solely with civilians, for they hardly ever engaged in any fights with the dissidents. Other military units, especially the police support unit dealt directly with the dissidents and committed less human rights abuses, but committed them nonetheless. Members of the 5th brigade, themselves, often told their victims that they had been sent to annihilate all Ndebele people (CCJP 2007, p. 82). On 22 December 1987, a Unity Accord was signed between the two parties after lengthy negotiations. The sum total of the agreement was the merger of the two parties resulting in the one-party state that Mugabe had always wanted. Nkomo became the second Vice President in the new Government of National Unity.

Apart from the cessation of the violence, there was no further peace dividend enjoyed by the ordinary citizens of these provinces. No efforts were made to address issues of justice, healing and reconciliation. Instead, a blanket amnesty was issued to both sides and the unwritten law was that this was never to be mentioned again as the two antagonists had dealt with it. In other words, only a limited political solution, meant to achieve a certain goal and not the needs of healing and nation building was important (Ngwenya 2018, pp. 26–28).

13.2.1 Early Efforts Made by Civil Society to Address Gukurahundi

Several efforts to bring to an end the harm being perpetrated by the 5th brigade were made by a number of groups but with little success. In March 1983, a group of international NGOs working in Matabeleland and calling themselves, the Overseas non-governmental organisations, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Mugabe and presented him with a comprehensive dossier detailing the brutal acts of the 5th Brigade. The dossier included reports and pictures of victims of the violence from doctors working in the rural hospitals. It also included a compilation of the people that had been killed thus far by the *Gukurahundi* and how they had died. The dossier would have been enough to cause Mugabe to want to act but it is not clear what his reaction to this was since this dossier was sent to him in confidence. However, judging from their complaint in the letter about the then Minister of Defence, Sidney Sekeramayi, it would appear that they were viewed as troublemakers. In the letter they stated the following:

On another matter we wish to say that it was with great distress that we read the remarks attributed to Comrade Minister Sekeramayi in which the Herald (newspaper) of 10th March 1983, which reported that he accused some non-governmental organisations of becoming 'front organisations for Nkomo's anti-government, subversive and slanderous statements.' We wish to say that we know of no such non-government organisations. We believe we have acted in the best interests of all Zimbabweans in communicating our deep humanitarian

concerns privately and directly to you, and in responding to your request that we should do so (Overseas NGOs dossier 18th March 1983).

This dossier covers only 2 months but the extent of harm done right through Matabeleland is evident.

The Catholic Church has always been known for their social justice gospel and they have actively intervened or spoken out against injustices, even those perpetrated by states. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference was no different. Concerned with the reports coming in from their mission stations across Matabeleland, a delegation from the Catholic Bishops presented Mugabe with another comprehensive dossier of the evidence of the havoc caused by the *Gukurahundi* and a copy of their pastoral letter they intended to release to their folk. Mugabe did not take kindly to this and refuted these accusations. He accused the bishops of playing to 'the international gallery' and of being 'sanctimonious prelates'. Meredith (2009, pp. 62–63) has this to say about his reaction:

He queried whether they were their own masters or "mere megaphonic agents of their external manipulative masters," adding: "In those circumstances, their allegiance and loyalty to Zimbabwe becomes extremely questionable." He continued: "The Church of Zimbabwe, whatever the denomination, must abandon forever the tendency or temptation to play marionette for foreign so-called parent churches whose interests and perspectives may, and often will be, at variance with the best interests of the people of our country." It should "attune itself to the realities of the new Zimbabwe."

Mugabe did appoint a Commission of Inquiry, led by Judge Simplicious Chihambakwe, which became known as the Chihambakwe Commission, in September 1983 and began gathering evidence in January 1984. However, in November 1986 it was announced that the Commission's report would not be made public (CCJP 1997, p. 9). Up today this report has never been made public and no one seems to know where it is – if it still exists. Even the constitutionally mandated National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), set up by the 2013 Zimbabwe constitution, seems to have failed to access the report thus far.

Nevertheless, in 1997 the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources foundation released to the public a comprehensive compilation of the atrocities committed by the 5th brigade and other armed groups. The reports were aptly titled "Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980 to 1988". It was later published and released internationally in 2007 under the title "Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: a report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980–1988". It went further to quantify some of the losses suffered and some practical recommendations that could be taken to remedy the situation. Mugabe and his government ministers were given copies but there was no official comment forthcoming. In fact this book was unofficially banned from Zimbabwe and having a copy in public exposed one to certain danger from state security operatives. In as far as public information is available these were the major efforts to engage directly with Mugabe and his government, and none were taken seriously. The closest he ever came to an acknowledgement was at the funeral of Joshua Nkomo, in 1999, where he is reported to have said about the *Gukurahundi* atrocities "it was a moment of madness".

There were other efforts from some pressure groups from the Matabeleland region who sought to keep the issue of *Gukurahundi* alive in the national social consciousness. One such group, formed in 1997, was made up of mostly young people and known as *Imbovane Yamahlabezulu*. It was a group of radical young people, some of them being students at university, while others were professionals. Their aim was to open up debate on issues pertinent to Matabeleland, chief among them, *Gukurahundi*. They managed to hold high profile public meetings with some of the ZANUPF and government ministers from Matabeleland, asking them to explain to the people who had given instructions for the atrocities. The group attracted attention from the state security agents who started hounding their leaders. The group eventually dissipated with some of the leaders leaving the country (ikhonaindaba 2013). Others included the Mthwakazi Action Group on Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Matabeleland and Midlands, based in the diaspora (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008, p. 188). These were followed later by current groups like *Ibhetshu Likazulu* (literally, the people's shield), formed in 2005 and has been at the forefront of advocating for government to address the issue of *Gukurahundi*. Every year in January they try to hold a commemoration for the victims of *Gukurahundi* and they have had several run-ins with the state security agents. Then there are organisations who chose to address *Gukurahundi* by working directly with the affected communities such as Ukuthula Trust and Grace To Heal among others.

13.2.2 *The Matabeleland Collective (MC)*

Sometime in 2017, two of the civil society organisations in Bulawayo came together to encourage people to participate in the biometric voter registration exercise that was going on at that moment. By October 2017, a few more organisations had joined in under the banner of the Western Region Envisioning Collective (which was later changed to Matabeleland Collective, at a strategic retreat). In their interactions with members of the public, a number of issues were raised with which people of Matabeleland were concerned. They then decided to convene a public meeting on 2nd December 2017, which was attended by over 500 delegates from civil society organisations (CSOs), community based organisations (CBOs) and church bodies. The key objective was towards promoting participatory citizenship within, healing from *Gukurahundi*; social inclusion and equalisation; compensatory devolution development, and sustainable economic growth while rebuilding the social fabric of Matabeleland (MC report 2019). At this meeting, the leaders were tasked with the mandate to “work on an issue-based construct, mobilising citizens through a consultative approach and national level engagement” (MC compendium n.d).

This was especially so because people felt that they had been accused of being cry-babies, always complaining but with nothing constructive to offer. People from Matabeleland feel that they lost 10 years to *Gukurahundi* and still continue to be marginalised socially, economically and politically (Ngwenya 2018, pp. 28–32). This was a shift in thinking, to present their grievances but to also offer possible

solutions to the same. They were also tasked with making sure that their issues were brought to the highest offices in the land. The issues raised, numbering six key areas of concern, were later synthesised into four themes, namely; healing (the *Gukurahundi* genocide memorialisation and practical amends), economic freedom, social inclusion and equalisation, and devolution of power.

In February 2018, a two-day strategic retreat was held at a local hotel, in Bulawayo, with key church and civil society organisations from Matabeleland North and South and Bulawayo. Experts in the four thematic areas presented papers for each theme followed by intense discussions. The end result was a 111 page comprehensive document, the Matabeleland Collective Compendium, which set out clearly what the issues were and how these could be addressed by government, the international community and CSOs. The setting and tone of this document was *Gukurahundi*, its impact on the people of Matabeleland and how these four areas, if addressed, would result in a healed community and nation. Some of the issues raised within the four areas were as follows:

- **Healing** with two aspects, memorialisation and practical amends, and these were to include acknowledgment and apology, truth-telling, construction of memorials, identification and reburials, easy access to citizenship and identification documents, and reparations.
- **Economic freedom** which included infrastructure development, agrarian support, benefit by communities from their natural resources and minerals, and employment of locals first, especially for non-skilled jobs.
- **Social inclusion and equalisation**, to cover affirmative action capacitation, social services delivery, community level reparations and celebration of ethnic diversity, and
- **Devolution of power**, comprised of expediting implementation of devolution (as set out in the constitution), to be consulted on the devolution bill, compensatory development, and democratisation to encourage citizen self-agency (Compendium n.d. pp. 8–9).

Once the document was produced the idea was to have outreach programmes into as many community stakeholders as possible for buy-in. However, due to funding constraints, this didn't happen as planned. At the beginning of the process the membership of the Collective comprised of 66 community based organisations, civil society organisations and churches.

In May 2018, the group was able to meet the then Vice President, Kembo Mohadi, who was responsible for national healing in the Executive Branch of Government, and were able to discuss at length with him and he agreed with the contents and approach. The idea was to get him to organise a meeting between the group and the President. For a number of reasons, he seems to have been unable to organise this. Next, the group met with the commissioners of the National Peace and Reconciliation commission, who at that point and time were doing outreaches to gather views from the public about how they wanted to see the Commission functioning. They too were impressed and quite excited about the Compendium as it gave them a clear path to possible healing in Matabeleland. In fact, they pointed out that their work in the

Matabeleland region had been made easier since all the pertinent issues were laid out clearly, unlike the other regions whose issues had not yet been crystallised. Up to this point, members of the Collective seemed to be of one purpose and mind and the movement was gaining traction within the people in the region.

Sometime early in 2019, the group unexpectedly had a breakthrough in their quest to meet with President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Word had somehow got to him that civil society groups in Matabeleland were willing to engage him. The meeting was set for 21st March at Bulawayo State House (the Presidential Residence). During the group's preparatory meetings for its meeting with the President, they decided to adopt what they called a 'low hanging fruits' strategy. The idea was to look at all the issues in the compendium and start off the engagement with issues that required little effort from government and were non-threatening. The weightier ones were to be left for another time (it was later decided that issues of acknowledgment, apology, reparations, etc. would be handled by the chiefs who, by virtue of being the custodians of the communities and people affected by *Gukurahundi*, were better placed to speak authoritatively on these issues). Nevertheless, the issues to be presented were still very sensitive and the group did not know how the President would react or what might happen to them at or after the meeting, since the issue of *Gukurahundi* had been taboo under President Mugabe. Many had been arrested, harassed and hounded out of the country for being vocal about it. About 150 members of the group attended the open meeting.

In as far as meetings go, this was an extremely successful and historic one. In spite of all the heroic efforts of many men and women in the past, there had never been a meeting where citizens of the country had held a frank discussion with the President on issues of concern (outside their party structures), let alone the emotive and sensitive topic of *Gukurahundi*. Although all the four thematic areas were presented to the president, it was pointed out to him that *Gukurahundi* was the underlining factor in all of them. In its editorial, *The Chronicle* of 22nd March 2019 (a state newspaper), reported glowingly about the meeting, how it had broken the taboo and many years of fear and suspicion, and quoted the President as having said:

I came here with an open mind to listen and I am satisfied that I made the correct decision because non-interaction creates fear, suspicion where there ought to be no fear, where there ought to be no suspicion at all. I go back today knowing that the social groups, non-governmental organisations, civic organisations have their country at heart.

The meeting resulted in an implementation matrix of the issues raised during the meeting, and a presidential directive to various ministries to attend to issues falling under them. It even had a timeframe for report-back. There was co-operation between the President's implementation team and leaders of the Collective in coming up with the final draft of the matrix. Several meetings were held to iron out issues and for feedback. Since not all members and leaders of the Collective could participate in these meetings, they soon became an added source of conflict, as members differed on how they should be held.

Since the meeting was private, the press was allowed to be present for the opening and closing remarks of the meeting. So their reporting was based on those public

speeches. As soon as news of the meeting broke the whole situation went into a tailspin. It must be noted that Zimbabwe is a very polarised environment and almost every aspect of life is viewed in opposites. Both the public and private media push certain angles and agendas. The reporting of the event was very positive from the public media, as exemplified by the Chronicle editorial mentioned above. For a while, the private media was silent as if they were not sure how to report on the event. To make matters worse, one of the Collective members whose organisation deals with media and had been tasked with reporting for the organisation, had been arrested at the gate into State House by overzealous security personnel because he had a spent tear smoke cannister in his vehicle. This became the international story and focus for the private media.

Within a matter of hours, some of the prominent leaders of the Collective began receiving insults on social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook and accusations of having sold-out. Some of vicious comments came from people in the diaspora who spoke as if they had attended the meeting and knew more than those who had organised and attended the meeting. For the next few weeks, pressure from social media and private media escalated, and the attacks were unrelenting. Leaders of the Collective, who had impeccable records as human rights defenders were portrayed as sell-outs and the Collective as a ‘Mnangagwa project’. Unfortunately comments from some of the leaders were taken out of context by the government press and used to show how the President was succeeding in his agenda as the ‘listening president’.

As the pressure took its toll, cracks began to emerge in the Collective as people tried to distance themselves from being associated with the President’s ‘project’ and to redeem their civil society struggle credentials. It became more and more difficult to reconcile the different views about direction, leadership styles and approach, which had existed previously. Details of business meetings and internal communication, began to be leaked to the private media and those opposed to the initiative. The leaks were so rampant and blatant. For instance, in a report by the Southern Eye newspaper, but carried by an online publication Zimeye, of 20 June 2019, titled “Mnangagwa Splits Matabeleland Collective”, the reporter quotes liberally from minutes of the Collective’s June 14th meeting. Communication made to members on their WhatsApp platform also made their rounds and would frequently find their way back to the leaders, coming from people who were not members of the Collective or on the platform.

In the meantime, the Collective continued to function somehow. They held a feedback meeting with a few key chiefs from Matabeleland and Midlands whose areas experienced the brunt of Gukurahundi. The meeting held on the 24th April 2019 was to appraise the chiefs on the meeting with the President and to encourage them to organise to meet with the President as chiefs to present the more serious issues. A meeting with chiefs, by the MC, had previously been held on September 1st 2018 to discuss the Compendium with them and to get their buy-in (MC report 2019, pp. 8–9). According to the same report, the meeting on the 24th April was well received by the chiefs, who supported the engagement efforts. However, they expressed reservations about the goings-on and stressed the need to handle the issue of *Gukurahundi* sensitively.

The chiefs were assisted by the Collective to organise their meeting with the President which was eventually held on 6th June 2019. Although the meeting apparently did not go as planned, due to the interference of the President of the Chiefs' Council (who has always been viewed as being against the idea of addressing *Gukurahundi* issues) they, nevertheless, presented their issues to him. The events leading to this meeting served to give those opposed to the process and doubting the President's sincerity, further ammunition to cast aspersions on the Collective and the engagement process. This was largely due to the insistence by the Chiefs' Council President, who is not from Matabeleland and so had not been invited, to attend and know what the chiefs wanted to talk to the President about. Part of the sensitivity of *Gukurahundi* lies in the fact that the 5th Brigade was Shona speaking and targeted Ndebele speaking areas. So for the local chiefs having a person from Masvingo province (a Shona speaking area) wanting to control proceedings was an insult to them and only confirmed their fears that the government was not serious about addressing the issue. On the day of the meeting, which was also held at Bulawayo State House, a group from the Mthwakazi Republic Party (which is agitating for a separate Ndebele State), gathered at the hotel where the chiefs were staying to demonstrate against the chiefs' president. They later issued a press statement condemning those they saw as not wanting to have the *Gukurahundi* issue addressed (Press statement 28th June 2019).

Activities on the implementation continued to be pursued in the meantime, but things seem to have been happening slowly. Almost a year later, the President returned for a feedback meeting on the 14th February 2020. Once again Matabeleland Collective was thrust into the fore and the noise erupted once again. This time the biggest bone of contention was that Mnangagwa was the wrong person to deal with the issue of *Gukurahundi* as he was one of its chief architects. In a *NewsDay* of 25th February, Silas Nkala interviewed a number of prominent people, including some who had been part of the Collective, and they all had negative views about any involvement by the President.

At about the same time, it came to light that some members of the Matabeleland Collective had broken away and formed another organisation, the Matabeleland Forum, in protest, accusing the organisers of the meeting of having a hidden agenda. According to an article in an online publication, *NewZimbabwe.com* of 13th February 2020, members of the new group accused the leader of the Collective of "unnecessarily showering Mnangagwa with accolades at the previous meeting" and further accused the Collective leadership of "doing things without consulting other members". Newspaper reports from this second meeting indicate that the Collective had not necessarily been compromised despite the accusations to the contrary. In a report carried by the *Standard*, a private weekly paper, under the heading "Apologise for *Gukurahundi*, ED told", the report states that the Collective told the President he needed to implement the matrix, since nothing had been done since the previous meeting a year ago. It also goes on to say that the group told the President that the people in the region were sceptical about his commitment to addressing *Gukurahundi* and that there was a need for him and his government to acknowledge and apologise for the atrocities. It further states that the group demanded the return of ZPRA/ZAPU properties confiscated by the government in 1983.

13.2.3 *The Successes of the Matabeleland Collective*

In spite of the vicious attacks and bad publicity the Collective received, it nevertheless achieved some historic mile stones as the narration above indicates.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the Collective managed to unite, albeit briefly, the varying and often dissenting voices of Matabeleland. For the brief period that the organisation remained united, it commanded respect from many stakeholders, including government, foreign embassies and even among some sections of the security forces. Having 66 organisations agree on the fundamental issues and solutions, each with their own interests and agendas, was no small feat. Approaching the issues from a less emotional and more reflective and academic manner, assisted people to better comprehend the issues and even those who would normally have dismissed the *Gukurahundi* question were able to appreciate the issues. Being able to reduce the issues into a well written and professional document and capturing the essence of the question in a way that resonated with almost everyone concerned with issues from Matabeleland, was a great achievement. Although people disagreed with some issues in the approach, none faulted their Compendium.

Being able to bring the President, one of the chief drivers of *Gukurahundi*, to Matabeleland to listen to people talking about it in the manner in which the Collective did, is an historic achievement of great proportions. Telling the President to his face and publicly, that people were afraid to talk freely about what happened to them because of the security agents, that he needed to tell them that it was not unlawful to talk about *Gukurahundi*, the fact that people needed to heal and bring closure by knowing the truth of what happened and to be able to rebury their loved ones decently, had never been done before. Many people had desired it and fought for it over the years. The President's positive response to these issues, helped to unshackle the fear and oppressive environment of the previous regime (Ngwenya 2018, p. 29). A State owned radio station in Bulawayo was the first to host a discussion live on air soon after this meeting, thereafter, others followed suit. People were also able to feel a little more free to speak publicly about it. Nevertheless, many others, because of the many years of suppression, still felt unsafe talking about *Gukurahundi* in public spaces. The civil and intellectually sound presentations of the four thematic issues, in a non-hostile and respectful manner appears to have made it easier for the President to accept the demands.

This engagement helped to bring *Gukurahundi*, in particular, to the national debate. Whereas, in the past it was viewed as a regional and tribal issue, more and more people from other parts of the country began to embrace it as a national issue. It also helped that, at the same time, the NPRC had started its own processes and the topic of *Gukurahundi*, was at the top of their intentions.

Although the implementation process has moved slowly, there has been a few minor achievements. These centre mostly around issues of water provision. Information from the Collective also indicates that the issues of death, birth and identity documents for the communities affected by *Gukurahundi* were about to be actioned before the onset of COVID-19. Although the virus has slowed many aspects of life,

consultations between the Collective and certain line ministries is on-going as they work towards the implementation of some of the issues in the matrix. This direct access to relevant government officials, even up to the President, is something that has not always been available to the ordinary people of Matabeleland.

13.2.4 Challenges Faced by the Collective

There are many challenges faced by the Collective and those by themselves could form a chapter of their own, however, I will try to focus on the most pertinent ones briefly.

The Collective's success in bringing so **many organisations together** became its Achilles heel. The Collective was an eclectic collection of organisations and individuals with wide ranging interests, agendas and allegiances. There were pressure groups, women's groups, special interest groups, peacebuilding groups, advocacy organisations, community based organisations, cultural groups, youth groups, etc. Although certain actions and approaches were agreed upon, it was never clear what philosophy of engagement undergirded the initiative. Rules of engagement for peacebuilding are different from those of advocacy, as they are different from those of pressure groups. In addition, some of the leaders of these groups had close political ties, while others had actually been political activists, party officials, and victims of violence at the hands of ZANUPF. So, right from the beginning, it was difficult to reconcile these varied interests. Although the Collective was supposed to be coalescing around the four thematic areas, and particularly *Gukurahundi*, it was difficult from the onset for some organisations to focus solely on the issue at hand without bringing in other issues of interest. The previous and perhaps, more abiding allegiances, it seems, were always going to prevail over what some might have seen as a short term goal in their scheme of things. Going through some of the WhatsApp discussions, one notices that people wanted the group to respond to all the other current political issues that kept arising. The group needed to have taken time to discuss and agree the parameters of their focus. This then raises the question of whether, in a country like Zimbabwe, where the tenets of democracy and rule of law are flagrantly flouted and human rights disregarded willy-nilly, it is possible to co-operate with the same government. Or better still, in pursuit of an important issue like the redress of past injustice, people should ignore other violations in order to achieve their ultimate goal?

Another big stumbling block, fostered by years of hostilities, was **lack of trust and the suspicions** that exists between government and civil society organisations. Since *Gukurahundi*, the people of Matabeleland have never trusted government. The deficit of trust has been compounded by years of perceived marginalisation and exclusion (Ngwenya 2018, p. 31). The people seem to trust the current President even less than the previous one. Perhaps he needed to have proactively participated in the trust building by implementing at least some of the more pertinent issues faster. As stated earlier, by his second meeting with the Collective, almost nothing

had been attended to, except the provision of a borehole and discussions about the Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project which the people wanted returned to them, but these are peripheral issues. His pronouncements at the meeting and there after about people being free to ‘debate’ *Gukurahundi*, should have been quickly followed by tangible actions that supported his assertion. People have always doubted government’s sincerity, when it comes to addressing *Gukurahundi*, the non-release of the previous commissions’ reports is one major contributor. Even the NPRC has never really been fully accepted because people in Matabeleland see it as another attempt to go through the motions.

In negotiations, and indeed peacebuilding, the requirement to balance the need for **transparency and confidentiality** is a tricky one, especially when one is dealing with an entity like government. We noted, in the first section above, how some of the members of the breakaway group, Matabeleland Forum, complained that some leaders in the Collective were doing things without consultation. It was, perhaps, important for the members to at least know something about the behind the scenes negotiations. Modern political violence is designed to break the social fabric and community safety nets, the end result being that a community that has experienced traumatic events of this nature finds it difficult to trust each other (Ngwenya 2018, p. 36). So for some people a situation where lack of information about dealings with an entity they have never trusted in the first place, was unacceptable. On the other hand, we spoke earlier about the Collective being riddled with leaks of confidential information and perhaps the people at the forefront of the engagement feared that leaks would compromise progress.

Conflict mapping is one of the tools used in peacebuilding to analyse conflict. One aspect of this tool is the need to factor in the diaspora when mapping conflict. The diaspora compatriots have the potential to disrupt any peacebuilding efforts if they feel they don’t serve their purpose, or are simply unhappy with being left out of the process. Diasporic studies indicate that people who have left or were forced out of their country, especially for political reasons, often maintain strong ties with their home countries, take a great interest in the political developments, and will often support the conflict back home financially or logistically (Missbach 2011). The Zimbabwean **diaspora** is no different. Those that were displaced by the government because of *Gukurahundi* and others forced out by the political events that led to the toppling of Mugabe, still maintain an active interest in political events back home and seem to have great influence among their followers. Twitter – and other social media platforms – has made cross border political activism much easier. They played a huge role in weakening the Collective, because they speak so authoritatively; and what they say is often taken as gospel truth by their constituencies, even though what they say is false or littered with half-truths. Some of them used to be prominent actors in the fight to have the government take responsibility for *Gukurahundi*, so they may feel as if they ought to be at the centre of any efforts in this regard. Perhaps the Collective should have engaged the diasporas, as they sought to do with other local stakeholders.

This leads us to the next stumbling block, the challenge of doing peacebuilding in the age of **social media**. Social media can contribute immensely to peace efforts but it

can also destroy those efforts. The external pressure exerted by social media activists was complemented by the indiscipline within the users in the group itself. Netiquette is the set of acceptable online behaviour while, on the other hand, online ethics focuses on acceptable use of online resources in an online environment (webroot.com). Such rules assist to induce acceptable behaviour and helps members know what is, and is not appropriate to share publicly. It does not appear as if the group had any agreed way of how to treat confidential information, not only on social media but in general. However, as pointed out above, with such an eclectic collection and great number of people involved, these rules might still not have helped much. This does raise the need for peacebuilders, in this era, to think strategically about how to interact with social media. Apart from irresponsible members, hostile governments could eavesdrop into these conversations.

The final dilemma faced by the Collective is the concept of doing peacebuilding in the context of the perpetrator who is still in power and with the same instruments of violence still at their disposal— what Piccolino (2019) calls the ‘victor’s peace’. Several newspapers, some quoted above, and numerous social media postings all queried the logic of Mnangagwa’s participation in the process of seeking closure. Their main argument was, how could he as one of the persons involved in perpetrating violence, be at the forefront of the healing process? At the time of *Gukurahundi*, he was Minister of State Security, under whom the notorious Central Intelligence Organisation fell. His utterances at the time, were crude and hurtful. There is a very real possibility that the accusations of trying to ‘manage’ the situation for his benefit might very well be true. On the other hand, how do people engage with the issue without involving the perpetrators? Some feel that the issue should be sent to the International Criminal Court, but who knows when that might be or whether it would actually happen? Besides, the government issued two sweeping amnesties for all involved in the violence, including the handful of dissidents who surrendered after the signing of the Unity Accord. At the same time the direct victims of *Gukurahundi* are dying due to old age, many are dying without having buried their loved ones properly, or knowing the truth about the disappeared, among other things. Unfortunately, peacebuilding can be a messy affair at times. It is important to mention here that the MC engagement with the government is on-going but, the initiative has been greatly weakened by the divisions in Matebeleland.

13.3 Drawing Peacebuilding Lessons from the Collective Intervention

Whatever the faults and weaknesses of the Collective and its intervention, there is no doubt that valuable lessons for peacebuilders can be drawn from this.

The intervention has proved, to an extent, that it is possible to engage with perpetrators in a constructive manner and that such an approach is important. That is to say, people can engage on very emotional and sensitive issues in a civil manner

and that this, in some cases, can yield the desired results without being aggressive or insulting. Timing is also of essence. In the early days of Mnangagwa's rule he portrayed himself and his government in democratic terms, and indeed there was a brief period in which it was easy to approach him. By taking advantage of this gap, the Collective was able to bring its agenda to the national platform.

Managing information flow is especially crucial in these times of social media. For coalition groups, agreeing on what can be shared with the large group and what to keep to those actively involved in negotiations makes sense. Diasporas are important in local peacebuilding interventions, and it is important, wherever possible, to engage with the influential ones in order to avoid efforts being torpedoed by them. Strategic thinking and prioritisation are necessary to achieve success. Leading leaders, with their own egos and visions of grandeur is challenging and perhaps the leadership approach needs to be different from leading the masses. The participation in the Collective was mostly at directors' level. These are people used to making decisions in their own right and therefore, are unlikely to want to be excluded from decision making processes. Much of leadership depends largely on the currency of trust and it is one of those things that leaders need to work hard to create.

The Collective broke the actual or perceived sense of regional lethargy and co-operation. The fact that, in the end, it did not work like clockwork cannot be an indictment of the effort.

Lastly, in a large grouping like the Collective, it might be helpful to take stock of organisational biases and strengths, and to agree that not all organisations or their people are suited for the sensitive work of peacebuilding at the level at which it sought to work.

13.4 Conclusion

Although the efforts of the Collective to try to deal with the injustices of the past with the perpetrators still in power might be a unique situation in Southern Africa, it nevertheless offers valuable lessons to all those interested in building peace after mass atrocities. Many questions will probably remain unanswered for now, perhaps some for ever. Was it a good idea to engage with the perpetrators? Should people have waited until they were out of power, and when might that be? Is it a good idea to have a group with such vast interests, allegiances, and areas of focus, involved in trying to deal with issues of healing and reconciliation? Whatever the answer to these questions might be, and whatever the final outcome of the Collective's initiative will be, there is no doubt that a historic milestone was achieved. Moving the *Gukurahundi* conversation from whispers in homes and small gatherings, always playing cat and mouse games with state security agents, to a national and inter-tribal one, conducted without fear of reprisals is in and of itself a life-time achievement. Whatever direction the issue takes now, it is unlikely to go back to where it has been all along.

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