

Kamenge Youth Centre

An antidote to civil war

Also known as the “alternative Nobel prize”, the Right Livelihood Award for 2002 was presented to the Kamenge Youth Centre (KYC) at the annual December prize-giving ceremony in Stockholm. KYC, a youth centre in Burundi, is a strong contrast to the surrounding devastation created by the civil war that has torn the country apart since 1993. At KYC, Hutus and Tutsis take part in shared activities and spend time together. The Centre now has over 20,000 members and works to counteract the effects of ethnic conflict.

Dorothy Morrissey

The Right Livelihood Award was established in 1980 to award “outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people”. Throughout the world, there are people who do inspiring and remarkable work, but which defies standard classification. Their work can involve great personal sacrifice, even danger, and they are often opposed by powerful forces around them. The award’s purpose is to strengthen the positive social forces that its recipients represent and provide support and inspiration to make them a model for the future. According to Frank Schwalba, Member of the European Parliament (MEP), “A hundred years ago Nobel had the idea of rewarding innovation. I imagine that if he were alive today he wouldn’t be too happy. The categories of the Nobel prize are now so specialised that to be a laureate, apart from in literature or for peace, you have to come from Princeton, or Japan, or the US, etc. This is why Jakob von Uexkull, a Swedish writer, lecturer, professional philatelist and former Member of the European Parliament, decided to create an ‘alternative Nobel prize’ to pay homage to those who work in the name of civil society and/or for sustainable development”.

Scars

Burundi’s history has been marked by cyclical ethnic conflicts. Nine years of the most recent civil war – from 1993 to 2002 – brought ethnic hatred, upheaval and many deaths. The capital, Bujumbura, has not been spared. Its neighbourhoods have experienced their share of atrocities, plus other problems particularly common to rampant urbanisation: alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, criminality and general hopelessness. Created against this backdrop in 1991, the Kamenge Youth Centre is the dream of three Italian missionaries, Marino Bettinsoli, Victor Ghirardi and Claudio Marano. Their aim was to find a place where the youth of the

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“Our aim is not to get people to love one another – it is far more ambitious than that”, says Claudio Marano, one of the founders of the centre, here with volunteer teacher Guillaume Harushimana.

neighbourhoods could come and take part in activities together. “We work in north Bujumbura, the town’s largest quarter where about 200,000 out of the capital’s population of 350,000 live,” explains Claudio Marano. “Overall there are 40 per cent Hutus and 40 per cent Tutsis, with the rest being a mix of people from the Democratic Republic of the

KYC

Between 1,000 and 1,500 young people attend the Centre each day, and take part in a broad range of activities.

Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania. The aim of the centre is not to get people to love one another – it is far more ambitious than that. People need to learn how to respect one another in their everyday lives. We have adopted a group work approach. Every day young people can take part in their choice of some thirty activities, rather than spending all day looking at the sky and the clouds or waiting for the shooting to end. We want to push them to lead an active life and find work. In this way they meet others, taking classes together once or twice a week for four to six months. One day they'll say hello, another day ask 'Where are you from?', the third start to talk a bit and by the fourth day they will have struck up a friendship. People begin to respect one another. And that's the beginning of a greater Burundi."

Claudio Marano jokes that Burundi is just one big village where everyone knows everyone else, what region they are from, to which family they belong. The work of the centre is founded on diversity and its mission is to convert this diversity into the foundations of democracy. "We work not only with ethnic differences but also with differences between nationals and non-nationals, with religious differences – we have three main religions, Catholic, Protestant and Islam – differences between rich and poor, political differences. We are trying to learn, in a country that has barely known democracy, what democracy is. We are trying to build a new society."

Range of activities

Between 1,000 and 1,500 young people attend the centre each day. Membership is free. They take part in discussions and seminars, study days, sports and cultural activities, and use the library's 14,000 books, attend remedial classes, and so on. Courses are offered in a broad range of subjects; computing, sewing, typing, language classes (English, French, Spanish, Arabic, German, Italian), mathematics, science, accountancy, the highway code, human rights, etc. All are taught by volunteers. The centre is also involved with local schools. As one teacher, Guillaume Harushimana, explains, "We mainly organise sports and cultural activities in the schools, but we are also working to raise HIV/AIDS awareness. According to the latest UNAIDS figures, 13 per cent of the population aged between 15 and 49 is now infected with

KYC

the virus. In Bujumbura's northern neighbourhoods, some 20-25 per cent of people are infected".

With over 20,000 members, the centre also prides itself on achieving an ethnic balance between Tutsis and Hutus. However, the number of girls who attend the centre might seem surprisingly low to some. "Five per cent! To a foreigner that is very low, but to an African it is a lot," says Claudio Marano. "Five per cent of 20,000 members means that 1,000 girls leave their houses, leave their work and come to the centre to take part in activities, use the library or study. In the past we tried organising girl-only activities but that did not work. A few years ago we opened all activities to girls. In some competitions girls play right alongside boys, and the same goes for schooling. It is also a victory over another African prejudice; girls on one side, boys on the other, and each in their own world."

The centre is also making waves beyond Africa. In summer, it is not unusual to see Europeans here. “We work on the principle of positive globalisation,” says Claudio Marano. “This means meeting others and understanding the problems and pleasures of other countries. Obviously, it is not with the intention of encouraging Burundians to leave their homeland because it is at war. Many here believe that escaping to another country would mean the end of their problems. When the opportunity arises to go abroad, to study, take part in seminars or international meetings, we encourage the young people at the centre to go. Reciprocally, we welcome young people, students or teachers from other countries who come to stay at the centre for a week or two. They are usually Italians, French or Swiss. They come mainly during the summer when we organise work, construction and training camps.”

In the midst of the centre there is a military station, a ‘gift’ from the army during the war. About 300 soldiers are members of the centre, as are residents of a nearby camp of Bagnamulenge refugees. According to Claudio Marano, “it is an incredible, potentially explosive mix, but it works here. Bagnamulenge refugees, soldiers, rebels, Hutus, Tutsis, Rwandans, Congolese, Tanzanians... all these people can live together. They just need to be given the chance.”

Peace and reconciliation

During the war, the centre was attacked and looted, its workers threatened and many of its members killed. Despite it all, it endured, proving that conflict is survivable. In fact, during the war years the centre helped bury the dead and supported displaced people by distributing food, medicines and emergency materials. In an effort to help the peace-building process, it also organised inter-ethnic meetings, discussion groups and a summer camp for 1,000 young people. Together with two other NGOs, the centre is the principal coordinator of an Office for Community Associations of the Northern District, which now has 300 member groups. The Office provides them with technical support, help with projects and fundraising, financial and other assistance with micro-projects. It works on various programmes of peace, reconciliation

The 2002 Right Livelihood Award

As well as the Kamenge Youth Centre, there were three other laureates this year:

Martin Green (Australia) – Honorary Award – “for his dedication and outstanding success in responding to the key technological challenge and moral imperative of our age: the harnessing of solar energy”;

The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation (Sweden), “for its remarkable successes in healing the wounds of ethnic hatred and war in the Balkans, by helping women, often the prime victims, to be the major agents of reconciliation and peace-building”;

Martín Almada (Paraguay), “for his outstanding courage and persistent efforts to expose and bring to account the torturers and to set his country on a new course of democracy, respect for human rights and sustainable development”.

and reconstruction with the local authorities, the churches, the schools and with departments of the national government. Each month the centre publishes a newsletter, Arc-en-Ciel (Rainbow) where young people can express their ideas.

Financed mainly by the European Community and Austrian, Canadian and American partners, the Kamenge Youth Centre is a full-time operation, employing 50 full-time workers and 40 volunteers. It is attracting more and more visitors, including many ambassadors. “They are brought here to see a place where Burundians live together,” explains Claudio Marano. “They can see with their own eyes what they could not believe existed. They often ask whether they are really in Burundi, seeing Tutsis and Hutus together. To them, it’s a miracle. To us, it is proof that after ten years of war it is possible for the people of Burundi to live in peace, to be able to build a different country.” ■