

# ‘We cannot reconcile until the past has been acknowledged’: Perspectives on *Gukurahundi* from Matabeleland, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Since the Matabeleland massacres in the early 1980s, reconciliation remains unattainable in this region of Zimbabwe. Reasons for this include the fact that survivors of these atrocities have not received the acknowledgement they require from the government. As a result, their perception is that the government has continued to repress them by failing to provide for their needs. More so, the preceding episodes of violence in the region have engendered fear, anxiety and distress among a population that is battling to deal with its past. This article explores the attempts by the government and civil society representatives in the region to facilitate reconciliation and seeks to determine their ability to establish durable peace at the community level. Drawing from fieldwork undertaken in Matabeleland in April 2014, this article describes what the community identifies as central requirements for reconciliation to occur, as against what is provided by the national framework for reconciliation implemented by the government.

**Keywords:** *Gukurahundi*, acknowledgement, reconciliation, durable peace, Matabeleland

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## Introduction

Reconciliation is a concept that falls under peacebuilding discourses, which refer to processes that facilitate the establishment of durable peace in times of democratic transition or gross human rights violations. Lederach (1997:26) argues that reconciliation is a peacebuilding process that assists conflicting groups in engaging with each other as humans-in-relationship. This is based on the view that when community members have a positive working relationship, they are likely to seek non-violent means to resolve any disputes that arise among them. Karen Brounéus (2003:20) defines reconciliation as ‘a societal process that involves the mutual acknowledgement of past sufferings and the changing of destructive attitudes and behaviour into constructive relationships towards sustainable peace’. These processes can be official (government sanctioned), for example the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, or unofficial (community-based), for example the *magama* spirits rituals in Mozambique.

Reconciliation is a helpful tool for peacebuilding because it encompasses both official and unofficial processes that serve to build a community (people in a particular territory) with mutual respect for each other's co-existence. Brounéus' definition is adopted in this article because it emphasises the importance of a mutual acknowledgement of the past and the transforming of destructive behaviours and attitudes into constructive relationships. Such a perspective can help to guide the government, the civil society organisations (CSOs)<sup>1</sup> and the local community towards what ought to happen for reconciliation to occur in Matabeleland. Incidents of violence included for discussion are the independence struggle from 1965 to 1979, the *Gukurahundi* massacres (1980–1987) and the post-2000 electoral violence, which subjected various communities in the region to mass human rights violations (Eppel 2008:2–4).

Various scholars who have written about *Gukurahundi* and reconciliation in Matabeleland, such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in

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1 CSOs operate in the context of the ‘supranational sphere of social and political participation, which involves various population groups who engage in dialogue, deliberation, confrontation and negotiation with each other and with the government and the business world’ (Salamon 2010:168).

Zimbabwe and the Legal Resources Foundation (CCJPZ 1997), Eppel (2006; 2008), Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru (2013) and Mashingaidze (2010), argue that the government has been reluctant to address the past injustices for fear of being implicated in the process. The unique contribution of this article is its focus on very recent expressions and perspectives elicited from community members, which show that after all this time, and with all the recent political changes in the country, the Matabeleland region continues to struggle with the violent conflict that occurred more than 30 years ago. Uniquely, it also brings attention to the effects of more recent conflict, such as the 2008 election-related violence, as well as to initiatives from recent institutions and policies aimed at reconciliation in these particular communities. Drawing from the narratives shared by the 36 participants in the study, this article argues that reconciliation in Matabeleland can only begin when the government acknowledges the past and puts in place effective measures to address the injustices incurred.

After the introduction, the article is divided into six sections. Firstly, it gives a brief account of the violence that has occurred in Matabeleland, followed by a description of the research techniques used to conduct the study. Thirdly, it describes how participants in the study perceived the manifestations of violence in the region in order to better understand their experiences. It then explores the efforts of the government and CSOs in facilitating reconciliation, followed by an account of what the participants shared about the processes that would facilitate reconciliation in their communities and region. Finally, it offers possibilities on a way forward as suggested by participants.

## **1. The Matabeleland violence**

The history of violence in present day Matabeleland can be traced back to the pre-colonial era, but this article will focus on three episodes, namely, the Second *Chimurenga*, *Gukurahundi* and the election-related violence since 2000. This article acknowledges that violence in Zimbabwe has not been limited to the Matabeleland region, but focuses on this one region in an effort to understand the underlying issues that fuel the mistrust between the Matabeleland community (particularly victims of *Gukurahundi*) and the government (CCJPZ 1997:11).

The article serves as a reference point to exploring the effects of these periods of violent conflict on reconciliation in Matabeleland.

The Second *Chimurenga* of 1965–1979 was a war of liberation fought by liberation movements against the ruling white minority government to abolish the illegal occupation and control of the Zimbabwean territory by the former (Mlambo 2014:160). This war was brought to an end with the signing of the Lancaster House Agreement in 1979, which paved the way for democratic elections that formed a new government of Zimbabwe: made up of the minority Rhodesian Front (RF) Party, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the United African National Council (UNAC) (Chitiyo and Rupiya 2005:337). Reconciliation efforts of this new government emphasised building a healthy relationship between the former repressive white regime and the nationalist movements, but were not extended to address the tribal tensions within the black community (Mashingaidze 2010:22). The then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe in his 1980 inaugural speech proclaimed that all parties should 'let bygones be bygones' (Mashingaidze 2010:22). This proclamation substantiated the Amnesty Ordinances of 1979 and 1980 which gave amnesty without trial to both the Rhodesian government and the liberation movements (Mashingaidze 2010:21). As a result, it precluded the opportunity for the victimised community to share their experiences and collectively acknowledge a past that claimed the lives of over 30 000 people (CCJPZ 1997:1). It also prevented the community from addressing the underlying issues amongst the black community that caused them to harbour a propensity for conflict amongst each other.

Mlambo (2014:147) points out that the black community in Zimbabwe was not integrated because during the liberation struggle there were many ethnic, personality and class differences within the liberation movement, which ultimately led to the split of ZAPU in 1963. The emerging parties, ZAPU led by Joshua Nkomo and ZANU-PF led by Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, the former deputy president of ZAPU, subjected the nationalist movements to a period of intense rivalry. Political intolerance turned the parties against each other and presaged a cycle of political violence between the two movements during the liberation struggle and after independence (Mlambo 2014:148).

*Gukurahundi* became the inevitable conflict ensuing from the lack of deep rooted reconciliation amongst the former liberation movements.

*Gukurahundi* is a Shona term referring to 'the first rain that washes away chaff before the spring' (Eppel 2008:1). *Gukurahundi* was a code name for the Fifth Brigade<sup>2</sup> soldiers, an army that was sanctioned by Prime Minister Mugabe to dismantle ZAPU and the defected military wing Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) officials (CCJPZ 1997:45). The term has been simultaneously adopted to refer to the massacres of over 20 000 people and dehumanising acts against thousands by government-sanctioned security forces in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions between 1980 and 1987. The massacres were initiated by clashes in 1980 at Entumbane demobilisation camp in Bulawayo between the former ZANLA, the military wing of ZANU, and ex-combatants of ZIPRA. These two army groups were elements of the newly integrated army, the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) (CCJPZ 1997:6).

Widespread conflict in the region ensued after the discovery of arms caches in Matabeleland at ZAPU-owned properties in 1982. An altercation in parliament between ZANU-PF and ZAPU, which led to the expulsion of ZAPU officials, exacerbated tensions leading to the defection of ex-ZIPRA combatants into the bush in Matabeleland and Midlands (Chitiyo and Rupiya 2005:340). The defected ex-ZIPRA combatants, who were mostly comprised of Ndebele speaking people, easily blended with the population in the two regions, as they are largely Ndebele speaking. The terms 'dissidents', 'bandits' and 'Super-ZAPU' were therefore used by the government to depoliticise all defected ex-ZIPRA combatants (CCJPZ 1997:34). Suspicions of the government that 'dissidents' were receiving undercover support from South Africa under the code name 'Operation Drama' further destabilised the already volatile security situation in the region (CCJPZ 1997:29). The government regarded the 'bandits' as terrorists because during the liberation struggle the insurgent group ZIPRA had been trained by Russia and had operational tank and air units, which made it possible for the 'dissidents' to

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2 Fifth Brigade was a special army mainly comprised of ex-Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) combatants who were trained by North Korean commanders in response to the Entumbane clashes (Eppel 2008:4).

cause widespread terror (Mlambo 2014:161). A government official among the research participants shared that:

ZIPRA was a credible threat to the ZANU government because during the liberation struggle the Russians and Cubans had trained the former in guerrilla warfare methods. Therefore, ZAPU members were always associated with their military wing ZIPRA and whenever disagreements occurred in the new government, ZANU felt threatened that ZAPU would end up using its military wing. *Gukurahundi* was an opportunity to diminish ZAPU and its military wing, and the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade and Police Intelligence did its best to ensure that the threat was eliminated.

This seemingly warranted the government to declare a state of emergency in 1982 and to deploy security forces to uproot the so-called 'dissidents', but the witch hunt exercise was extended to unarmed civilians who were suspected of having links with the 'dissidents'. Eppel (2008:2–3) challenges the actions of the government by arguing that the motive of the government to repress the so-called dissidents was misguided because it emanated from Mugabe's interest to create a de facto one-party state. She recalls that arms caches were also discovered across the country, including the territories controlled by ZANLA, but ZANU-PF used the discovery of arms in Matabeleland as a reference point to unleash a long-held political agenda. Eppel (2008:4) observes that the amount of force (about 5 000 armed footmen) used by the government was not proportional to the claimed threat of 'dissidents' (about 400 people). More so, the actions of the Fifth Brigade (who were predominantly Shona speaking) were unjustified because they associated being Ndebele with being a ZAPU supporter and a sympathiser of the 'dissidents' (CCJPZ 1997:44).

The fact that such atrocities occurred and that the government did not take adequate measures to prevent them, renders the government responsible for committing crimes against humanity. The *Gukurahundi* massacres were not part of a just war because the government used excessive force before it had exhausted negotiations with ZAPU officials who it accused of instigating its military wing to destabilise the country (Eppel 2008:4). *Gukurahundi* destabilised the

region and created a negative impression amongst victims and survivors that the government had a vendetta against the non-Shona speaking population. The Matabeleland massacres officially ended with the signing of the negotiated Unity Accord on 22 December 1987 between ZANU-PF led by Robert Mugabe and ZAPU led by Joshua Nkomo, which led to the amalgamation of the two parties into a de facto one-party state under Robert Mugabe's party (Mlambo 2014:199).

Minimal efforts have been made by the government to address the atrocities that occurred, including the Dumbutshena and Chihambakwe Commissions of Enquiry in 1981 and 1983 respectively, and the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI)<sup>3</sup> established in 2009 (Mashingaidze 2010:23). The reports of the two commissions regarding the clashes at Entumbane and *Gukurahundi* were never made public and in its work, ONHRI encountered many obstacles, particularly relating to the lack of political will from parties involved in coming up with a national framework for reconciliation. In spite of the gravity of the Matabeleland massacres, the government seemingly did not make provisions to prevent the use of excessive force by security agents and ZANU-PF militias against civilians in successive conflicts such as the food riots in 1998, fast-tracked land reform since 2000, electoral violence against opposition parties since 2000 and Operation *Murambatsvina*<sup>4</sup> in 2005. The atrocities that occurred during these episodes remain unaccounted for and much of the work to address the past is being driven by community leaders and CSOs, with little support from the government (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 2013:91).

## 2. Research design

This article draws on fieldwork in Nkayi District (see map insert) in April 2014, examining the scope and limits of reconciliation processes in Matabeleland.

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3 ONHRI was established in 2009 to investigate ways to address past injustices in the country, following the procedures set by the 2008 Southern African Development Community (SADC)-mediated Global Political Agreement (GPA) (Mashingaidze 2010:25)

4 Operation *Murambatsvina* refers to the militarised uprooting of informal settlements in the urban areas across the country, which resulted in the displacement of over 600 000 people and a direct loss of sources of income for 1.7 million people (Sokwanele 2005).

The fieldwork involved 36 participants drawn from government officials who served in the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC)<sup>5</sup> and ONHRI, civil society representatives, community members in Nkayi and academics.



Map of Zimbabwe, adopted from Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2012.

The Nkayi District has a population of 109 135 people. It was selected as the site for this qualitative research project because of the plurality of its population (for example Kalanga, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sotho and Tsonga speaking communities live there, among others) (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2012), which made it possible for the researcher to capture a diversity of

5 JOMIC was established in 2009 to supervise the implementation of the GPA, which, in the process, led it to facilitate peacebuilding programs that included creating an atmosphere for mutual trust and open dialogue among the political parties (*Zimbabwe Independent* 2013).



perceptions on reconciliation. Empirical data were collected, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations (micro level) and archival documents (macro level). Additionally, snowball and stratified purposive sampling methods were used.

The researcher was accompanied by an interpreter and co-researcher, and this small team faced several challenges, especially related to travelling, because the area is very remote. It has poor road networks and a large amount of time was lost to travelling, which included a 15 km trip on a donkey drawn cart on a route without regular conventional transport services. Upon arriving in the Nkayi District further challenges were encountered related to undertaking research in a rural setting and in a context in which security is a significant concern: an encounter with the police intelligence unit was one such challenge. These obstacles became part of the rich data that were collected as the research team experienced first-hand some of the realities experienced by these violence-stricken communities in Matabeleland.

### **3. Local perspectives of violence**

The violence participants described in the Matabeleland region (including the Nkayi District) can be arranged into three categories, namely: physical (injuries on the human self), cultural (cultural actions used to legitimise the oppression of community groupings), and structural (institutionalised practices of society that harm or disadvantage individuals). These forms of violence are intertwined but minor distinctions can be made as discussed below.

#### **3.1 Physical violence**

Of the 36 participants in the study, 20 indicated that they had endured physical violence in the past 30 years. Most of the incidents of violence described by participants were associated with the *Gukurahundi* era, with a few incidents reported to have occurred after 2000. The participants identified the Fifth Brigade soldiers, the Police Internal Security and Intelligence (PISI), 'dissidents' and ZANU-PF youth militias as the main perpetrators. The tensions that facilitated the *Gukurahundi* massacres were ascribed to the mistrust between ZANU-PF and ZAPU that emanated from the Second *Chimurenga*, whilst the post-2000 violence

was blamed on the rejection of opposition movements by the ruling government. The latter phenomenon characterises the atmosphere of political intolerance that features throughout the country's history. Sachikonye (2011:1–20) observes that the government of Zimbabwe has a long-standing history of intolerance because political leaders have ruled the country for many years based on one-party-leadership models. Both the pre-independence regime (under Ian Smith) and post-independence regime (under Robert Mugabe) have been embroiled in political conflict aimed at destroying legitimate alternative political parties which could compel the incumbent party to account for past injustices.

According to Galtung (1969:168), physical violence is the intentional use of a body part or object to inflict pain, discomfort or injury on another in order to repress the victim. One (82-year-old) participant narrated her *Gukurahundi* encounter: 'I was beaten up by the soldiers, my husband was shot dead, my daughter and granddaughter were abducted and raped'. A similar encounter was shared by another participant (a 73-year-old male) who said, 'The Fifth Brigade soldiers beat me up and left me for dead because they said I was supporting dissidents'.

The researcher observed that some 'dissidents' inflicted physical violence on civilians. One (54-year-old) gentleman shared that:

Dissidents came to our house and gathered us in the kitchen. They beat me, my mother, father and other siblings. When my father was bleeding to death from the wounds, they took out a gun and shot him. They instructed me to get an axe and chop my father into pieces. They told me to put my father's head in a box and take it to the soldiers to inform them that they have dealt with their sell-out/informant. Upon returning from the soldiers' camp I found my mother dead; she had committed suicide by tying herself with a rope in that kitchen.

The violence narrated by these participants corroborated accounts recorded by the civil society organisations, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation (CCJP and LRF), during the 1990s. The CCJPZ 1997 report, *Breaking the Silence*, is the first unofficial document in the public domain that contains detailed information of the atrocities encountered by communities in Matabeleland and Midlands. In the absence of an account

of the incidents from the government, the report has become a source of reference with statistical figures that relate the extent of the atrocities, including an estimated 20000 deaths, torture and displacement of thousands (CCJPZ 1997:6). Nordquist (2007:9) argues that encounters of violence such as narrated above are mostly experienced by civilians, but little attention is given by some governments to address the effects thereof. As such, it can be observed with the Matabeleland massacres that the government of Zimbabwe has ignored calls by victims to address the violence in order to protect its own interests.

### 3.2 Cultural violence

All 36 participants related incidents of cultural violence in Matabeleland. The examples that follow show that pockets of cultural intolerance existed between the Shona and Ndebele speaking people. According to Farmer (1996:277), culture refers to the varying values, norms and practices of the population that are shared by a particular grouping. He adds that cultural tolerance enables a community with diverse groupings to share common modes of life and negotiate the differences. Cultural violence occurs in instances where the distinct features of a particular cultural group are used to suppress the other groupings (Farmer 1996:278). Ten participants in Nkayi emphasised that they were forced to speak Shona during *Gukurahundi* in order to survive the gruesome attacks by government security forces. A 49-year-old woman, who was 18 years old at the time of the attack, related that:

It was a Friday in April 1983. I remember that four men of the Fifth Brigade soldiers arrived at our compound early in the morning and called everyone out. They asked us [a family of eight] in Shona to tell them where the dissidents are hiding but no one could give an answer because we did not understand the language they were speaking [Shona]. They started calling us names; for example '*mapenzi evanhu muchadura kwaari madissidents enyu*' (you rascals you are going to tell us where your dissidents are hiding), and they beat the whole family with the barrel of their guns calling us to tell them about the whereabouts of the dissidents.

The above narrative indicates that the Shona language was used to suppress 'dissidents' and civilians who were suspected of supporting them. During the

massacres, the government security forces who were predominantly Shona, seemingly associated all non-Shona speaking people with the 'dissidents'. That exposed many civilians in the region to violence. *Gukurahundi* dehumanised the Ndebele ethnic group (who are a majority in the region) because if one could not speak Shona one faced torture or death. The CCJPZ report also documented that during *Gukurahundi* the Fifth Brigade soldiers often gathered people to a central point at gunpoint in the evenings, for example at a school (CCJPZ 1997:51). The people would be coerced to sing Shona songs that praised the ZANU-PF government. This trend of using the Shona language and practices to coerce people into committing particular actions seems to have continued even after the *Gukurahundi* massacres. Between March and June 2008, the ruling party is claimed to have used youth militias to terrorise the community after failing to win the March elections (Sachikonye 2011:20). One woman (28 years old) related:

The post-March 2008 contested election period was a difficult time because people felt threatened by the government, especially the ZANU-PF youth militias. They hosted overnight praises '*pungwe*', singing Shona songs and we were being coerced to attend.

The Shona language has become a symbol of domination in the region. Its continued use by the ruling party, as narrated above, reinforces the oppression of other ethnic groups, in this case Ndebele people.

### **3.3 Structural violence**

According to Galtung (1969:170), structural violence comprises the subtle and often invisible systemic ways in which the settings of the community deny some individuals access to socio-economic progress.

Structural violence, as described by the research participants, has been instigated by government through policies that deny some people rights and privileges enjoyed by others. Whilst acknowledging that Matabeleland falls under climate region 5, which receives low and erratic rainfall that makes the area naturally uninhabitable, both the Smith and Mugabe regimes have done little to improve the living conditions of the people (Eppel 2008:1). As argued by Eppel (2008:2),

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the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 forced resettlement of the Ndebele people into infertile regions and the subsequent Land Husbandry Act in 1951 resulted in forced destocking and the subjection of many to hunger, poverty and starvation. This pushed the black community led by Joshua Nkomo to organise themselves into liberation movements and fight against the segregation practices of the Smith regime, but they faced further repressive policies, such as the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA) of 1960 (Mlambo 2014:147). LOMA gave the white regime's security forces authority to arrest and detain supporters of the nationalist movements, resulting in the detention and banning of members of ZAPU in 1962. Further repression continued until the ousting of the white regime in 1979.

Even though the nationalist movements fought for the removal of repressive policies such as LOMA, ZANU-PF reinstated the policy during the *Gukurahundi* era, which led to the instigation of curfews and detention of ZAPU officials and defected ex-ZIPRA combatants (Eppel 2008:4). As it was the intention of the Smith regime to dismantle nationalist movements, it appeared that Mugabe's regime employed the same policy to eliminate rivalry from ZAPU and the so-called dissidents.

As documented by the CCJPZ report (1997:48), the food curfews in 1983 and 1984 sanctioned by the government exposed an estimated 400 000 people in Matabeleland to starvation. The ruthless actions of the government made people vulnerable considering that their region receives erratic rains which affect their agricultural outputs. Raftopoulos (2009:220) documents that the government further subjected over two million people in the country (Matabeleland region included) to poverty through its *Operation Murambatsvina* policy in 2005. He argues that the operation was a disguised political plot by ZANU-PF to dismantle the support bases of its long-standing political rival, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai. A participant (a 38-year-old female) narrated that:

When my husband was killed in 2002 for supporting the MDC, I had to step in and look after our three children. I became a cross border trader, buying cheap clothes and selling them in the city. I have had to move back to the village because *Operation Murambatsvina* disrupted the clothing stall

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I owned when I was in Bulawayo in 2005. I have not been able to regain capital to start the business again and I am now struggling to look after my children.

Other features of structural violence that remain pertinent to the region as shared by the participants were inadequate water supply, the shortage of qualified educators and poor infrastructure. One participant (a 49-year-old female) shared that:

The quality of education in the Matabeleland region has been affected by the lack of resources, particularly educators, such that even the throughput rate of children in the region from primary to secondary is low, hence not so many children are making it to tertiary level. For example, NUST, which is a Science and Technology university in Bulawayo, is mostly recruiting students from the other regions and not Matabeleland in spite of the advantage that it is a home university to the region.

The above narrative reveals that the deployment of unqualified educators to the region is affecting the performance of students. According to Dube (2014), Ndebele speaking people living in Matabeleland have raised concern over the deployment in their region of Shona educators who cannot speak Ndebele, compelling their children to learn in a different language. In 2014 the Deputy Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, Professor Paul Mavhima, publicly acknowledged that there is a problem relating to the language of instruction in the Matabeleland region (*The Chronicle* 2014). The Deputy Minister informed the people of Matabeleland that the deployment of non-Ndebele speaking educators to the region was a contingency plan of the government to address the shortage of qualified educators who can teach in Ndebele. The main argument raised by participants to challenge the deployments of the government is that the use of Shona language by non-Ndebele speaking educators is affecting the level of literacy among non-Shona speaking students. In addition, it infringes on the constitutional right of learners to learn in a medium of instruction in which they have proficiency. As stated by the participants, the Shona language serves as a constant reminder to the community of their suffering during *Gukurahundi* and a symbol of oppression that has left survivors of the massacres with lasting negative associations with the language.

#### **4. The contribution of the government and CSOs to reconciliation in Matabeleland**

The official processes for reconciliation in Matabeleland have been reduced to reconciliation events. Long and Brecke (2003:7) describe reconciliation events as: direct engagements between senior representatives of the warring parties, a public ceremony shown on national media, or symbolic actions that portray peaceful relations between former enemies. Many senior members of the government and the opposition parties in Zimbabwe have superficially rubbed shoulders in public. One participant (a 73-year-old male) said:

In 2012 I attended a workshop at the community hall and benefitted a lot from the open discussions because it [JOMIC] presented a platform to speak openly about the past. As a result I learned to tolerate my fellow community members from the practical exercise where political party representatives [Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T), Movement for Democratic Change-Ncube (MDC-N) and ZANU-PF] were interacting with one another in a friendly manner in public.

These gestures seemingly portrayed the warring parties as friends in a mutual relationship, but the continued fighting between ZANU-PF and MDC-T indicates a lack of reconciliation. This case can be illustrated by public statements of Morgan Tsvangirai and Robert Mugabe. Morgan Tsvangirai (leader of MDC-T) in June 2013 at a rally in Chitungwiza attacked his main rival Mugabe, calling him a puppet of the military. Similarly Mugabe has publicly used demeaning words to refer to Tsvangirai whom he labels a puppet of the Western bloc seeking to topple the ruling party for implementing the controversial land reforms (Chiripasi 2013). The government has even deployed security forces to terrorise MDC-T members resulting in the abduction, murder and torture of hundreds of opposition representatives and supporters since 2000 (Sachikonye 2011:20).

As mentioned earlier, the Lancaster House Agreement in 1979, the Unity Accord in 1987 and the recent GPA in September 2008 are further examples of events that produced cursory reconciliation (Mashingaidze 2010:21–24). The GPA was a mediated political agreement signed in September 2008 to resolve the June 2008 polarised elections between ZANU-PF, led by Mugabe, and the two MDC

formations, namely, MDC-T, led by the then Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, and MDC-N led by Welshman Ncube (Mashingaidze 2010:24). This led to the formation of the 'inclusive government' in which ZANU-PF and the two MDC factions co-governed until the elections of 2013.

Long and Brecke (2003:7) argue that reconciliation should not be limited to an event because it is a process of change the community ought to go through. Reconciliation speaks to the lifestyle of a people previously divided by a gruesome past, by transforming the patterns of destructive behaviours and attitudes between former enemies into constructive relationships that foster sustainable peace. This means that reconciliation should be cultivated through on-going processes that inspire former enemies to live as humans-in-relationship (Lederach 1997:26). As mentioned earlier, the inability of the government to make public the findings of the Chihambakwe and Dumbutshena Commissions (1981 and 1983 respectively) over the years has derailed the deepening of reconciliation processes in Matabeleland. The Dumbutshena Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate the violence that occurred at Entumbane in Bulawayo and other demobilisation camps across the country following the 1981 clashes between ZANLA and ZIPRA ex-combatants. The Chihambakwe Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate the *Gukurahundi* massacres in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions (Mashingaidze 2010:24). The *Clemency Order No. 1 of 18 April 1988* which granted blanket amnesty to all parties who administered violence during the massacres has made the government reluctant to release the findings of the commissions, citing that digging into the past can incite further conflict (CCJPZ 1997:6). Many human rights activists on the contrary, for example the Zimbabwe Victims of Organised Violence Trust (ZIVOVT) and *Ibhetshu LikaZulu*, have been pushing the government to release the findings on the grounds that knowing the truth about the past provides closure and paves the way for healing and reconciliation (Ndou 2012).

The subsequent efforts at reconciliation by the government, namely, JOMIC and ONHRI in 2009, have been abortive, like the preceding initiatives. One participant (a 54-year-old male) said, 'I have attended discussion sessions held by JOMIC and ONHRI but I am disappointed that they have not done any follow-up sessions to assist us on matters of truth and justice we raised.'



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JOMIC was disbanded after the 2013 elections because its mandate to monitor the implementation of the GNU was redundant. The main criticism raised against JOMIC was its failure to address the issues surrounding politically motivated violence destabilising the community (*Zimbabwe Independent* 2013). ONHRI was dissolved in 2013 and is set to be replaced by the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) as stipulated by the new Constitution which was adopted by parliament in February 2013 (*The Zimbabwean* 2014). Regardless of efforts to establish various official processes for reconciliation, the lack of political will on the part of the government over the decades has rendered the processes merely cosmetic gestures designed to safeguard its political hegemony. As of the writing of this article the work of the NPRC had not commenced, but the aspirations of the affected Matabeleland community are for the commission to provide truth, justice, reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Several CSOs were identified by participants in the Nkayi District for their contribution as pillars of support and a voice for the wounded. The Roman Catholic Church, Red Cross International and Counselling Services Unit (CSU) in Zimbabwe have provided shelter, medical, psychological and social support. One lady (58 years old) shared the following:

My son and I received counselling from members of the CSU after we were attacked by ZANU-PF youth militias in 2007. I am grateful for their help because it gave me comfort to know that someone showed concern for my ordeal.

These organisations are sources of information with records of injustices suffered by the community, which can be used to give evidence in the future (as the participants believe they might be able to pursue justice through the courts, should a change of government occur). The government has been conducting strong surveillance on CSOs to prevent community engagements that delve into the past and might unveil truth by which it (the government) would be implicated. One CSO representative said, 'For the past three years our organisation has been stuck in a deadlock with a government official over the reburial of persons that died during the *Gukurahundi* massacres'. The consequence of these encounters is that 'controversial projects' are postponed for fear of victimisation by government security forces.

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) and Solidarity Peace Trust have assisted community members with legal representation for unlawful arrest and detention. The National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO) and Bulawayo Agenda have conducted workshops providing them with voter education, and skills in political tolerance and non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms. Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), Habakkuk Trust and Radio Dialogue have strengthened the community by providing a safe space to share its experiences. One participant (an 82-year-old female) said, 'I attended a public discussion hosted by Radio Dialogue for victims of *Gukurahundi*. I felt liberated to know that I am not the only one who had been humiliated by government security forces'.

This narrative highlights the plea of many participants – that they need a safe environment to share their experiences with an audience that will not condemn or intimidate them. The following section will explore further ways, identified by community members, in which reconciliation might be facilitated in their communities.

## **5. Perspectives of reconciliation in Matabeleland**

As mentioned in the introduction, this article is guided by the definition of Brounéus (2003:20) that reconciliation is a societal process of addressing the past through mutual acknowledgement of the sufferings incurred, and of transforming destructive behaviours and attitudes. The researcher asked participants what processes would facilitate reconciliation for them in their communities. Their responses included the need for acknowledgement of the past, truth-telling and apology among others, which will be discussed here in more detail.

Firstly, participants emphasised that the government needs to acknowledge the gross human rights violations it committed, from *Gukurahundi* to post-2000 electoral violence. President Mugabe superficially acknowledged the Matabeleland massacres in a speech he gave at the funeral of Vice-President Joshua Nkomo in 1999 by labelling the encounter a 'moment of madness' (Mashingaidze 2010:23). One participant (a 54-year-old male)

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said, 'Reconciliation is acknowledgement of past inactions that goes beyond announcing that it was a moment of madness'.

An academic expert among the participants asserted:

To begin reconciliation in Matabeleland we need to acknowledge violence at the executive and legislative level. Currently we have a constitution and a new commission set to address these issues, but what is its use if a Bill in Parliament does not enact it?

Participants have suggested some practical ways to acknowledge the past, including the exhumation and reburial of people in mass graves, the establishment of memorial sites and museums (like Germany's Holocaust Memorial Museum) for people to celebrate their history and collectively honour the past. One (a 49-year-old female) said:

There are many unidentified graves in Matabeleland, the least that the government can do to help survivors ease off the pain they have been holding for the past 30 years is exhuming mass graves, identifying the deceased, and giving bereaved families the opportunity to mourn and rebury their beloved ones in a proper manner.

Eppel (2006:263) concedes that during the *Gukurahundi* massacres many of the people that died were buried in mass graves because the communities were too unstable for people to conduct proper burials. She argues that many of the mass graves have not been exhumed and this has left communities without possession of the remains of their loved ones. In the Zimbabwean African culture, proper burial of the remains of a deceased party is a crucial element in the moral fabric of communities. Giving proper burial to deceased parties is a sign of respect to both the living and spiritual worlds. Eppel (2006:264) adds that to the living world, burial symbolises respect for human dignity. To the spiritual world, burial is a passage rite that allows the spirit of the deceased to reconnect with the ancestral family. The inability of bereaved families to bury victims of *Gukurahundi* and other episodes of violence in Matabeleland remains a contentious issue because of the moral obligation of the African community to respect both the living and spiritual worlds.

Secondly, truth-telling was identified as being important for reconciliation to occur. Thirty-five participants in the study indicated that truth-telling is a key component of reconciliation. One participant (an 82-year-old female) said:

Reconciliation for me means that the perpetrator is prepared to come to the victim with a genuine desire to engage in peaceful dialogue with the victim by giving the victim the opportunity to ask the unanswered questions they hold.

Truth-telling is central for many of the participants because it will allow the community an opportunity to come to terms with its memories of the past. Villa-Vicencio (2000:2011) argues that any mechanism that seeks to provide reconciliation should have an understanding of the past. Truth-telling can assist in creating the space for open dialogue on issues, after which communities can acknowledge or deny realities of what occurred and thus gain more understanding of the past. As mentioned earlier, the report developed by the Catholic Commission for Justice, Peace in Zimbabwe and the Legal Resources Foundation Zimbabwe in 1997 has become a key record (unofficial truth) with accounts of the injustices that occurred during the *Gukurahundi* era.

The government has not commented on the injustices documented in the CCJPZ report, leading the people of Matabeleland to assume that their experiences have been ignored (Mashingaidze 2010:23). These sentiments are exacerbated by the refusal of the government to make public the findings of the Chihambakwe and Dumbutshena Commissions of Inquiry. Other collections of truth about the injustices that occurred over the decades have emerged from academic writing and records made by CSOs, for example, Grace to Heal, Counselling Services Unit and the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR).

Thirdly, participants emphasised the need for the government to offer an apology to the people of Matabeleland, particularly victims of various episodes of violence, in order for the past to be recognised. One participant (a 39-year-old male) said:

The residual hatred in Matabeleland cannot be cured unless there is a deep regret, acknowledgement and apology from the perpetrators of violence. The government should move away from declaring 'let bygones be bygones' or it was a 'moment of madness'.

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A 46-year-old male participant asked, 'If *Gukurahundi* was a moment of madness, the question becomes, has the mad person regained sanity now? Has he atoned for the period of madness, and what should the aggrieved do about it?'

Rosoux (2008:548) points out that an apology is either a written or a spoken expression of one's regret or remorse for committing unkind actions. According to CCJPZ (1997:5), the late Minister of Defence, Mr Moven Mahachi, was the only government official who publicly expressed regret for the *Gukurahundi* massacres. The *Sunday Mail* of 6 September 1992 reported on an interview with the late minister, in which he was apologetic for the *Gukurahundi* atrocities and cautioned that no citizen of the country should repeat such injustices (CCJPZ 1997:5). Mashingaidze (2010:23) argues that if the government offers an apology to victims, this could be an indication that it is willing to acknowledge the past, show respect for the dignity of victims and take responsibility for the lives that were affected. Instead many government officials have publicly denied responsibility, including the newly appointed Vice-President Phelekezela Mphoko, who announced to the press in February 2015 that *Gukurahundi* was a plot of the Western bloc to destabilise the country (*Sunday News Reporter* 2015). The government continues to shift blame for the massacres onto Britain and America who, it alleges, were buying time to distract Mugabe from addressing the land question. Participants, however, feel the need for transparency about the massacres because it was the responsibility of the government to protect its citizens from such inhumane actions.

As participants highlighted the above-mentioned needs, they emphasised that reconciliation is a process. One participant (a 38-year-old female) shared the following:

The government should not assume that the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987 and labelling the *Gukurahundi* era a 'moment of madness' has atoned for the atrocities that occurred. People's lives were disrupted for seven years, they therefore need to be consulted on the processes of reconciliation that will resolve the issues they have and not be constricted [sic] to get over their experiences briskly.

One CSO representative (a 73-year-old male) who was also a victim of violence during the *Gukurahundi* era mentioned that:

Reconciliation requires forgiveness, but forgiveness should occur as a process and not an event. Christianity has helped me to move on at an interpersonal level, because I take from the Lord's Prayer that I must forgive those who trespass against me. I still require truth in order to be at peace with the past.

Hamber (2007:119) describes the forgiveness mentioned above as an act of good will, which means that the victim chooses to forgive in order to stop feeling disempowered by the past. This involves acknowledging that the victim is not a subject under a perpetrator but a survivor of an inevitable past.

Most of the participants did consider the possibility of pursuing justice for *Gukurahundi* violations through the courts, but the government has paralyzed the process. The blanket amnesty offered in 1988 prevented perpetrators from being held accountable as it may, arguably, have implicated government officials (Eppel 2008:4). Participants also cited that security forces have been used by the government to intimidate victims and prevent them from speaking out.

## **6. Conclusion**

Over the past three decades the calls for truth and justice by victims of *Gukurahundi* have been ignored and the grievances of the victims have not been addressed. Current efforts of the government have created amnesties for perpetrators and the political decrees of the government have allowed for a complete avoidance of addressing the past. However, this 'amnesia' is not an option for the people of Matabeleland because, as the fieldwork evidence shows, they have not forgotten the suffering they experienced. To promote genuine reconciliation the participants want: acknowledgement from the government of its responsibility in orchestrating mass violations, an apology, truth-telling, exhumations and reburials, memorial sites or museums to honour those who perished, and a recognition of their collective history. Although CSOs have supported victims by providing shelter, medical, psychological, legal and social

services, they have faced obstacles, particularly in the form of victimisation from security forces sanctioned by the government to prevent CSOs from revealing past injustices.

It is yet to be seen if the needs of the participants will be addressed by the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission that is in the process of being established.

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