

PART FOUR

HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN AND STRENGTH OURSELVES IN ORDER TO ASSIST OTHERS?

As the participants in the workshop were themselves survivors of the genocide, they specifically requested that the training consider the question, 'How can we sustain and strengthen ourselves in order to be able to assist others?' The following exercise was used to respond to this question.

In groups of three, participants interviewed each other using the following themes:

- Describe something (a special skill or knowledge of living) that sustains you through difficult times
- Tell a story about this – about a time when this special skill or knowledge made a difference to you or others
- What is the history of this skill or knowledge? How did you learn this? Who did you learn it from?
- Is this in some way linked to familial or cultural traditions? If so, how?

Each group documented the responses. These were translated and the following collective document was then generated.

Living in the shadow of genocide: How we respond to hard times

Stories of sustenance from the workers of Ibuka

We have gathered here stories about what sustains us during times of hardship. As we are living in the shadow of genocide, we have had to find ways to respond to great hardship. We have included here some of what gives us strength. We hope this document may be of assistance to others.

listening and learning from the lives of others

Listening to the stories of others helps some of us get through. In our work, we hear stories from people who are carrying on their lives even though so much has happened to them. I recall listening carefully to one widow in particular who is continuing to live and care for her three children. This idea of listening to people carefully came from my mother. She would always listen to me during my childhood. Listening is also a part of Rwandan culture. We have seen people overcome very difficult problems. Their lives serve as an example that problems can be solved, that many things are possible.

music and song

Music and song is the only thing that gets some of us through the times when memories of the genocide return. One of us described how 'When I'm tired or when I am sad, when I am not talking, when I am alone and the memories come, then the only thing that can sustain me is music. I listen to slow, soft songs'. Others of us join in spiritual songs and gospel music. Some of us listen for hours or we sing mourning songs together. These songs bring comfort. Music has a power, a very good power.

acts of prayer – talking with a strength beyond us

Some of us, whenever we have a problem, we pray. This makes it possible to unchain ourselves from the problems we are facing and come closer to God. One of us described how since he was very young he has believed that there was a strength beyond him. This knowledge brought reassurance. In times of hardship he could pray, talk with this strength. During the genocide, acts of prayer were very significant to many of us. We often turn to prayer and to God when we have troubles. This offers hope and takes away fear. Some of us pray for strength to do our best, so that we can try to do as heroes do. Others of us pray for comfort during times of sorrow. Acts of prayer are a part of Rwandan culture. Many of us talk with a strength beyond us.

new ways of carrying on traditions

There is a tradition in Rwanda that we respect the parents in our families. We see them as capable of everything, and we trust the answers that they give to us. We rely on their advice. Many of us lost our parents in the genocide and so we have to find ways to continue to stay in touch with their advice. One person said, 'When I have hard times, I write. I imagine that it is my father writing to me, giving me answers. I think these answers are the appropriate ones'. Some of us are finding new ways to carry on our tradition of seeking and respecting advice from our parents.

sports

For some of us, sports bring relief and happiness. Using our bodies, exerting ourselves. Whenever I do not feel well, whenever the memories are overcoming me, I turn to sports and they bring happiness.

making family

After losing relatives during the genocide, many of us have taken steps to make new family. These may be families of friends, or families of students, or families with mother, father, and children. Making new families, having people who love us and who will stand with us in front of any problems can be significant.

keeping a distance

For others of us, we make our way with a little distance. There are times when we prefer our own company, prefer to be alone, prefer to keep a distance from the society. We have seen so much and some of us endure hard times at a little distance from others.

tears and then talking

Some of us are sustained by our tears. To cry, to shed tears, to allow them to fall, can make a difference. For some of us, there is a tranquillity that comes after tears that can allow us to sleep. After sleep, we may then take time to talk to someone. One person described that, 'When I am sleeping, the tears that I have cried give me strength. When I sleep after I have cried, I am tranquil. There is no noise, only calmness. This way of sustenance came from my mother. Whenever my mother was in pain, she used to allow herself to cry. After her tears had fallen she would go and talk to her friends'. Some of us are sustained by tears and then talking.

recalling good memories

Sometimes good memories protect us. During the war, I was fighting on the front when we ran short of ammunition. We were left with no options. We had nowhere to flee and no supplies. It was at this time that I started to think about how my life was going to end. I remembered then that my father used to say that a true man, a real man, is strengthened by the good moments in his life. And then good memories started to come into my mind. I started to think about my girlfriend who I had left in my village. And I remembered how my father loved me so much. At this point, I stood up and told the rest of the company to pull back. We did this and even though it was through bullets and fire we made it. We found safety. Sometimes good memories protect us. And some of us learnt this from our families.

bringing emotions and opinions out into the world

Whenever difficulties are starting to overcome me, I know it is time to make my opinions known. If I keep my emotions and opinions inside they may destroy me, so I bring them out into the world to discuss with others. There is a saying from my grandparents about this. I have remembered this and it helps me now.

realising I am not the only one to have that kind of pain

The experiences we have had are so extreme that we may think we are the only ones to know this kind of pain: the pain of torture, the pain of seeing your loved ones murdered, the pain of surviving when others were killed in your place. Now, though, we realise that others also know this kind of pain. When an old woman came to see me in counselling she told me a terrible story. At first I was not sure what to do, but then an idea came into my head. I decided to talk to some other old ladies and hear what happened to them. I realised that that old woman who came to see me wasn't the only one to have that kind of pain. Once we realise this, it is then possible for people to talk together. Now, whenever I have a problem, I talk to someone else to see if I am the only one to have that kind of problem. That's how some of us sustain ourselves. We consider not only what we went through, but also what others have endured.

respecting ancestors

Our respect for our ancestors enables us to have respect for life. We have learnt this from those who have come before. My father used to really respect his grandmother. My father has now passed away so it is up to me to carry on the respect. By respecting our ancestors we reclaim and honour their lives.

hard work for ourselves and for our loved ones

Some of us decided long ago that that we would work hard not only for ourselves but also for all of our people who have died. This gives our life and our work a special meaning, a special power.

finding ways to rest

During times of pain and fatigue, rest and sleep can be important. But sometimes, with all that has happened, it can be difficult to find rest. We have had to find ways to be able to sleep. Some of us

take a bath, pray, and then go to bed. This is a ritual that we may have learnt from our mothers when we were children. Others of us try to ensure that after we have had a hard day at work that we have enough time to rest, to sleep. We may have watched our fathers do this, taking care to rest. Some of us drink just one bottle of beer and this allows us to relax and to sleep. Others of us turn off the light and the radio and seek tranquility. We all have our different ways of finding rest.

turning to friends to seek company

Many of us seek support from turning to friends. Because we lost so many family members and friends who were dear to us, turning to friends now is all the more significant. We rely on each other. Some of our memories are so awful and they do not go away. Sharing them with others means we are not alone with them. Sharing problems with someone we trust can make a difference. This ability to turn to friends has long histories. It may come from our families, from fathers who always used to turn to neighbours and talk with them. It may come from our mothers who encouraged us to talk even when we were reserved. It is a trait for many Rwandans not to talk openly about our problems. But many of us turn to our friends and seek company in hard times.

There are many other ways in which we also are sustained. Some of us take walks. Some of us share a beer or two with others. Some of us have good knowledge of patience. For some, children are a source of joy and relief. Some of us always try to speak openly with those with whom we have difficulties. For some of us, having an argument or dispute is better than staying silent. And for some of us, our work gives us strength. There are many different ways in which we draw sustenance.

This document is just a starting point in talking about and sharing the ways we are sustained during difficult times. We hope it may be helpful to others who read it. We hope you may add your own stories to it.



This document was ceremonially read back to participants before being translated and made available in the written word.

Generating and sharing this collective document enabled individual participants to:

- hear their own skills and knowledge acknowledged in a collective form
- link their own forms of sustenance to those of others
- learn from the words and stories of others
- recognise how their skills of sustenance can be traced to familial and cultural histories
- experience a sense of company with others in relation to how they are responding to the effects of genocide.

Significantly, the process also involved a collective inter-generational honouring. It demonstrated how the workers of Ibuka are continuing the legacies of those who have come before them.

By enabling the collective of workers to more richly know their own stories of what sustains them, this also provided a foundation for the future. It is hoped that workers may be able to turn to this document during any future difficult times and draw strength from it. It may also be used in their work with others. Workers may choose to read this document with those with whom they are working. They can then ask their clients if any aspects of the document seem relevant to their lives, or if they use similar methods of sustenance. If so, this can be the starting point for further conversations. Alternatively, their clients may then identify different forms of sustenance which can be talked about and collaboratively added to the document. In this way, this document can have a life well beyond the workshop.

Later in the workshop, participants also had the opportunity to practice making their own documents.

