

# Developing a Shared Identity

Yalee Azani

*Through examining a project in Angola, the writer discusses the potential of shared interests to promote both development and reconciliation.*

## PULL QUOTE

"We used to fight each other with weapons, today our shared weapon is **the hoe** and the enemy is hunger."

In the global era in which we live, there are efforts to improve the lives of poor people through various development programs. In this work, the ability to overcome cultural barriers in order to engage with different stakeholders is critical, especially if practitioners wish to promote reconciliation in an area affected by a conflict and where feelings of hate between groups are widespread and contagious, with severe consequences. This article presents a summary of a research I have done through the Glocal program, where I discussed the potential of agricultural development program to break the symbolic boundaries between different ethnic groups through the Contact Hypothesis.

To meet the challenge, I've crossed through interdisciplinary work, theory and research methods from social psychology and sociology. The first theoretical pillar comes from the discipline of international development, which is considered a relatively young field of research. In recent years, the discourse has focused on violent disputes as a fundamental obstacle to the development of Africa, pointing to the need for peace as a precondition for development. The links between culture and conflicts have been seen from the local and international perspective and include the following: deep distrust and hostility caused by cultural differences, which hinder effective communication and a collective identity suppressed under different forces group relations.

The second pillar comes from the field of sociology and helps to explain the concept of "Symbolic Boundaries". According to Michele Lamont, these boundaries are the patterns of "likes" and "dislikes" that are used to make conceptual distinctions for categorizing objects, people, beliefs and even time and space. Symbolic boundaries segregate people into groups, building cognitive restructuring that separates "us" from "them". This is an essential tool by which people acquire status, often allowing them to build a monopoly on resources. Accordingly, we can say that a major role of symbolic boundaries is to impose, maintain, and normalize social boundaries, as well as the power to challenge and reformulate the meaning of social boundaries. Thus, social boundaries are objective forms of the social differences that are expressed in inequality of access and the unequal distribution of both material and non-material resources, as well as social opportunities.

In order to best understand how boundaries emerge through relationships, I have combined the contact hypothesis with social psychology. Gordon Allport argues that a person's beliefs can change should that person come in contact with a member of a separate cultural category, allowing them to extend to the same individual the beliefs on the entire category. The main argument of this theory is that with the creation of appropriate conditions, the best way to reduce hostility between groups in conflict is to bring friends together. Though contact between groups and a mixed lifestyle, people are able to understand and appreciate different perspectives of opinions.

My field research was in Angola. The civil war in this country started immediately after the Portuguese left in 1975, and is often characterized as part of the global Cold War. However, in reality, mainly two political groups based on ethnic lines fought each other for thirty years. The MPLA Party, supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, drew their support from the ethnic Kimbundu tribe and intellectuals in Luanda, whereas UNITA was supported by the United States and South Africa, with their base located in the center of the country inhabited by the Umbundu tribe. Under this division, the accepted cultural narratives were that UNITA supporters were "members of the bushes", implying that they were "uncivilized". On the other hand, supporters of the MPLA were perceived as more educated and richer.

The war ended in 2002 with the death of Savimbi, head of the UNITA party. After the war, there was a broad understanding amongst government officials and development practitioners that there was a need to respond to the needs of the soldiers that had just stopped fighting. The two groups joined a development project that aimed to build diverse programs at the local level, operating in the rehabilitation and development of family farms, the resettlement of former soldiers and their families from the two rival parties, and investments in physical and human infrastructure.

The unique contribution of the paper was the examination of the relevance of the different theories of the intercultural research fields of social sciences and psychology to the area of international development, via their contribution to the understanding of the breaking of cultural boundaries in the social context of the construction of building ethnic reconciliation programs.

The findings showed that a number of elements were required to break the symbolic boundaries between the two groups. The first was the early selection of people to take part in the project. This initial selection was perhaps the most critical because although the participants were suspicious and held outdated concepts about the other, they did not declare any feelings of hatred and thus were more flexible to change their perception. Living together in mixed houses with daily contact between sides was also an important element, as people came to know their neighbors from the other group on a personal level and acknowledged that they are similar and have a lot in common. This connects with the contact hypothesis that says that to be effective in reducing prejudice, the necessary conditions that must exist are equal status of the groups, frequent and continuous contact, the existence of a common goal, a mutual desire to obtain the goal and institutional support for the meetings. In addition, an element of equality was

significant as well; all participants received similar houses with identical contents. Furthermore, the two groups were represented equally in all professional roles, from farmers, through assistants to the management level.

Despite initial difficulties at the beginning of the project, such as insults between the two groups, social guidance by the professional staff helped to overcome obstacles in the personal level while creating a sense of solidarity between the groups. This was very clear in one of my interviews as one of the participants said: "Our understanding is that we are all equal and are fighting for the same things. No one wants problems. We used to fight each other with weapons, today our shared weapon is the hoe and the enemy is hunger."

This quote gives an example of the new identity that emerged through this project. The cooperation on shared interests promoted a shared identity as well, this time Angolan, which is shared by both parties. This finding is striking as it shows that the process of building partnerships focused on development, can break the symbolic boundaries between rival groups and enable the construction of a new identity that can promote conflict resolution.