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Building Sustainable Peace through the Arts in Zimbabwe: *Policy Options in the Post-Gukurahundi Era*

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Grant artists full responsibility for their works**, including how they present them. It should also adopt a bottom-up, grassroots approach rather than a top-down approach when addressing the issue of peace and reconciliation processes in Gukurahundi.
- **Promote and fund the arts** (visual arts, music, theater, literature) to catalyze its role in fostering peace and reconciliation, as well as representing the experiences of victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of Gukurahundi. Support should be given to local artists dealing with the effects of Gukurahundi on victims and survivors in Matabeleland North.
- **Support holding commemorative events, construction of memorials, and the painting of murals** to contribute to the cultural identities of the affected communities in Matabeleland and Midlands Provinces.
- **Support arts' education programs** that use creative expression to help younger generations process difficult histories and envision peaceful futures.

In 2024, the Government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa launched a new initiative called the Gukurahundi Community Outreach Programme, led by the National Chiefs Council, to address the Gukurahundi issue.¹ This policy brief urges the government to expand its engagement by focusing on the role of the arts in fostering reconciliation. Drawing on interviews and focus group discussions in affected communities in Lupane and Tsholotsho, it explores the potential impact of artworks on Gukurahundi in promoting healing, reconciliation, and peace. This brief suggests ways of including Gukurahundi-related artwork in cultural and educational curricula and institutions. By promoting the arts' contributions to policy, the government can demonstrate a commitment towards fully confronting this difficult past in a constructive and societal-healing manner.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

There have been various peacebuilding initiatives and efforts aimed at facilitating reconciliation in Zimbabwe, such as the Lancaster House Agreement (1979), the Dumbutshena Commission of Enquiry (1981), the Chihambakwe Commission of Enquiry (1983), the Unity Accord (1987), the Global Political Agreement GPA (2008), and the establishment of the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI) (2009).² The Commissions of Enquiry and ONHRI were established to investigate the Gukurahundi massacres which took place in Matabeleland between 1983 and 1987. Their purpose was to address various issues, such as the legacy of Gukurahundi, promote accountability and justice, and facilitate peace, reconciliation, and healing.

Since 2021, the government of Zimbabwe has been consulting with the Council of Chiefs on how to address the painful legacies of Gukurahundi.³ Traditional chiefs

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can play an important role in addressing the legacy of the Gukurahundi massacres in Zimbabwe since they possess cultural and moral authority within communities. It is important to ensure that traditional leaders approach this responsibility with care, and legitimately represent affected communities.

ROLE OF THE ARTS IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES

The arts have played a significant role in post-conflict societies, such as Rwanda, South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.⁴ After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, artistic works, including visual and performing arts, literature, memorial sites, and museums, have been powerful tools for fostering dialogue, understanding of, and promoting, peace and reconciliation.⁵

PEACE THROUGH ART IN ZIMBABWE

Artistic works depicting the Gukurahundi massacres have faced accessibility and dissemination challenges in Zimbabwe due to government censorship and suppression. Many artists have been apprehensive about openly producing works on Gukurahundi due to fear of potential reprisals from authorities or powerful entities connected to the massacres, given the highly sensitive nature of the topic. Zimbabwe has limited distribution channels for the arts, with few galleries, publishing houses, and theaters, particularly outside major cities. Financial constraints have also limited the marketing and distribution of art works dealing with Gukurahundi, which have mostly been self-funded or funded by small grants/organizations.

However, the situation has recently improved through open dialogue, especially after President Mugabe's ouster in 2017.⁶ Some works have reached audiences through independent gallery exhibitions, festivals, and online dissemination of films, music, and literature. Musicians and playwrights also go on international tours.⁷ Academic and NGO distribution channels are very active in sharing artistic works. However, accessibility within Zimbabwe, particularly in rural areas where some massacres occurred, remains limited.

Drawing from the results of fieldwork research conducted in 2023 in Lupane and Tsholotsho, the victims and survivors of Gukurahundi believe that art plays an important role in fostering peace and reconciliation amongst people of different ethnic backgrounds. However, interviewees argue that art alone cannot heal, or prompt the fostering of peace and reconciliation. They also want the government to remove censorship laws to allow artists to exhibit or publish their works freely, including in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

Artists should not only be seen as content creators, but as representatives of victims and survivors. They should also be seen as partners in the transformative justice process, providing creative outlets for truth and reconciliation, healing, and envisioning peaceful change after a violent past. Government support and integration of the arts would make the reconciliation process more participatory and impactful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Zimbabwe should:

- Grant artists full responsibility for their works, including how they present them. It should also adopt a bottom-up, grassroots approach rather than a top-down approach when addressing the issue of peace and reconciliation processes in Gukurahundi.
- Promote and fund the arts (visual arts, music, theater, literature) to catalyze its role in fostering peace and reconciliation, as well as representing the experiences of victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of Gukurahundi. Support should be given to local artists dealing with the effects of Gukurahundi on victims and survivors in Matabeleland North.
- Support holding commemorative events, construction of memorials, and the painting of murals to contribute to the cultural identities of the affected communities in Matabeleland and Midlands Provinces.
- Support arts' education programs that use creative expression to help younger generations process difficult histories and envision peaceful futures.

¹ Gukurahundi Community Outreach Programme, *The Chronicle*, 19 January, 2024

² Murambadoro, R., & Wielenga, C. (2015). Reconciliation in Zimbabwe: the conflict between a state-centered and people-centered approach. *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 37(1).

³ <https://www.infomin.org.zw/he-president-mnangagwa-met-matabeleland-chiefs-over-gukurahundi/>

⁴ Awoh, E. L., & Nkwi, W. G. (2017). South Africa and Rwanda: Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, Peacebuilding, Religious and Local African Authorities in conflict situations. *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, (20)

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Mhandara, L. (2020). Community-based reconciliation in practice and lessons for the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission of Zimbabwe. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 20(1), 35-58.

⁷ Mpofu, S., Ndlovu, M., & Tshuma, L. (2021). The artist and filmmaker as activists, archivists and the work of memory: A case of the Zimbabwean genocide. *African Journal of Rhetoric*, 13(1), 46-76.