



## DEBATING PEACE

### Fostering peace through youth debate

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#### Project Context

This Independent Study Project is the culmination of a semester of study with the School for International Training (SIT) in Kigali, Rwanda. SIT's Rwanda program, titled "Post-Genocide Reconciliation and Peacebuilding," seeks to critically examine the social, cultural, and political factors of the Rwandan genocide and how these factors have simultaneously promoted and challenged efforts to build sustainable peace. Through this program I was able to hear lectures from Rwandan scholars, genocide survivors, and local government officials, as well as participate in a variety of field visits to non-government organizations and peace centers. During this process, I was struck by the number of speakers who advocated youth debate clubs as a tool for ensuring the future stability of Rwanda by raising a new generation of critically aware, peace-minded Rwandan citizens. I was simultaneously struck by the number of Western scholars who had published works criticizing the lack of debate and the closed political space

of post-genocide Rwanda. The incongruent presence of debate in Rwanda's educational and political spheres prompted me use SIT's Independent Study Project component to further explore the role of debate in Rwanda. The findings presented in this essay are based on four weeks of independent research, including interviews with three secondary school students, four university students, and three NGO representatives.

### History of Rwanda's Political Space

To understand the role of debate in fostering peace, we must first understand the relationship between debate and political space. Political space is a social arena that recognizes and enables discourse, action, and expression in state matters and governing processes. Combining multiple definitions, civil society can be understood as:

An arena where individuals, by means of social movements, civic organizations, and other platforms existing outside of formal state structures, collaborate to express themselves and advance common interests through engagement, contestation, and affirmation of the state.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, civil society functions as a medium of exchange between citizens and the state. Michael Bratton describes the influence of civil society by suggesting that civil society can exist in a relationship of conflict or congruence with the state. While congruence may seem to indicate a state whose governing processes blend harmoniously with the demands of civil society, congruence may also serve to mask deeper, hidden tensions. Therefore, the degree to which civil society is willing to engage the state on issues of conflict—through venues like debate—speaks not

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1 Stepan (1988) defines civil society as “an arena where manifold social movements... and civic organizations from all classes... attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests.” Chandhoke (2007) defines civil society as “a project whereby individuals can realize their self through engagement, contestation, and affirmation.” Woods (1992) defines civil society as “the emergence of new patterns of political participation outside of formal state structures and one-party systems.”

only for the level of conflict or congruence within a political space, but also for society's perception of agency and safety within this political space.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, Rwanda has fostered a narrow political space tolerating only a single, state-imposed, view. This is true of Rwanda's political space both during the years leading up to and immediately following the 1994 genocide. Prior to the genocide, ethnicized state politics dominated Rwanda's political space, with radio, newspaper, and other common venues for civic engagement existing only as pawns to a Hutu-controlled government. Hutu supremacists prevented any who opposed "Hutu politics" from speaking out through the use of scare tactics that instilled a fear of shaming, torture, and even death. By creating a political space that did not encompass civic actors, by redirecting traditional methods of civic engagement to exist only in state favor, and by frightening civic actors into submission, Rwanda's pre-genocide political space rendered civil society virtually non-existent.

Rwanda's political space immediately following the 1994 genocide was similarly narrow, self-serving, and oppressive.<sup>3</sup> Under the lead of President Paul Kagame, new leaders—members of the Tutsi rebel group known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—coined terms like "divisionism," "revisionism," and "genocide ideology" to criminalize and remove opposition from Rwanda's political space. This new legislation effectively silenced all criticisms of the new government: free and open discourse was allowed only so far as it furthered the aims of the RPF. In addition to these new legislative methods, the RPF used "shadow methods" to cultivate a fear of dissent. By scaring away and even physically removing competition, the new Tutsi government could consolidate its domination of political space.<sup>4</sup> These practices were all too reminiscent of the Hutu scare tactics which preceded the Rwandan genocide. In this way, Rwanda's post-genocide government only continued a legacy of state-dominated political space. Therefore, not until very recently has debate been a part of Rwanda's reconciliation model.

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2 See Beswick (2010).

3 See Beswick (2010), Hintjens (2004), Lemarchand (1998), and Reyntjens (2006).

4 See Beswick (2010).

Although there is an abundance of information on the progress of Rwanda immediately following the genocide, little scholarly research has been published on the state of Rwanda since. As we approach two decades since the genocide's end, it is important to reassess Rwanda's political space in light of new changes. Has Rwanda's political space opened within the past decade, or do generations of fearful state-controlled politics continue to persist? If Rwanda's political space has opened greater civil engagement, by what means was this accomplished? What implications does the state of Rwanda's political space hold for the potential of sustainable peace? In this paper, I will contend that a greater emphasis on instilling a value of debate within Rwandan youth is one means by which Rwanda has the potential to change its history of state domination.

### Debate as Means of Cultivating Youth Engagement

Since the Rwandan Patriotic Front took power, ending the hundred-day genocide, Rwanda has faced the challenge of reconciling a deeply divided society. In order to prevent a legacy of fear and self-censorship from continuing to limit political engagement, humanitarian organizations—Rwandan and international alike—have redirected their efforts toward the youth population. Recognizing the passion with which youth approach debate, youth organizations have embraced debate as a means of connecting with youth on sensitive issues. This new trend toward engaging youth through debate holds powerful implications for the future of Rwanda, both in terms of continuing peace efforts and creating a more inclusive political space. Neera Chandhoke argues that state power “has to be monitored, engaged with, and rendered accountable through intentional and engaged citizens.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is the role of civil society to balance state power, and debate is one means by which civil society is able to perform this function. By hosting student debates, Rwandan educators expose students to the political arena.

How do youth debates work? During the planning process for student debates, student representatives meet with debate sponsors to identify political “hot topics” that directly affect and resonate with the youth.

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5 See Chandhoke (2007).

Secondary schools host competitions where students debate in teams of six. Judges send the winning team's argument to policy makers, giving youth a voice in the policy-making process. For debates at institutions of higher learning, students meet to defend their own position on an issue. The debates are recorded and played on the public radio, and listeners may call in to raise questions, comments, or provide their own opinions.

But will fostering debate among students cultivate a more balanced and open political space? Interviews with students and NGO workers suggests the answer is yes. Today's students are the leaders of tomorrow, and they know it. As one student says, "If I become president, if I want to know what people think about something, I will make a debate about this thing." Other students suggest that debate enables people of different backgrounds to exchange views and in some cases even encourages cooperation. NGO representatives place similar hope in the ability of debate to shape the future of Rwanda. The three NGOs interviewed strongly emphasize the critical position of Rwandan youth as the next generation of Rwandan society. As one NGO representative states, youth constitute 70% of Rwanda's population and this youth majority has "the whole of the country in its hands."

Interviews also reflect Rwanda's movement toward an open political space. One NGO official advocates that the purpose of youth debates is "not to prepare people to be politicians, but to be involved in the political aspects of the country." This suggests that youth debates are not just about training new government leaders, but about balancing the powers of future leaders with an active and politically-minded civil society. Another representative describes the benefits of student debate programs: "If you're involved in the policy-making then you're able to identify with the government and hold accountable those who do not effectively do their work." Accountability is key if Rwanda is to prevent future leaders from continuing a legacy of corrupt state domination.

## Findings

So what does this have to do with peace efforts? An examination of primary and secondary research suggests that debate is particularly suited toward cultivating an appreciation for three critical peacebuilding concepts. These concepts are (1) a commitment to truth-seeking, (2) the transcension

of egocentric/sociocentric moral identities, and (3) the development of empathy.

### *Empathy*

A key way in which instructional debate can cultivate empathy is by obligating students to defend positions with which they do not agree.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this empathy even brings students to a newfound understanding which compels them to rethink their prior convictions. One interviewee acknowledges that through debate he has come to understand and accept views other than his own, and multiple interviewees acknowledge having changed their positions entirely as the result of a debate. Even if not all students conclude the debate with a change of heart, students who are forced to defend positions with which they do not agree must engage in self-reflective questioning which forces them to transcend their personal opinions. Therefore, debate has the power to foster tolerance, relativism, and a greater understanding of the forces shaping values and beliefs different from our own. Another student explains that even if a person believes his own position is right, he should still “go to the wrong side and ask them many questions to get to know what [the other side] is thinking.” Here we see that debate teaches students not only *how* to empathize with opposing world views, but that debate teaches students the *value* of empathizing with opposing world views.

### *Moral Identity*

Interviews suggest that debate holds promising benefits in terms of moral identity by encouraging values clarification. All students interviewed indicate that they have defended positions with which they initially opposed, and all students indicate instances where this exercise has changed—as well as instances where this exercise has reinforced—their prior convictions. This phenomenon, where students walk away from debates having had the agency to either redefine or stand true to their convictions, suggests that students really do critically examine both positions presented within a

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6 See Kennedy (2007).

debate. As one student explains, defending a position he does not agree with can change his mind about the issue, but if it does not change his mind then he feels bad lying: “I know that what I am trying to make people understand is wrong.” Seeing this kind of values clarification from Rwandan youth suggests that students who participate in debate have the potential to withstand the sort of corruption and moral manipulation that led to the 1994 genocide.

### *Truth*

In a society where the friends and family of 8 million genocide victims must live alongside community-members and neighbors who participated in the killings, truth is a sensitive issue. Rwandans are deeply committed to the concept of truth, and interviews with students suggest that students do have faith in the ability of debate to expose truth. All students indicate that although some people might approach debate as a competition, the true purpose of debate is not to win, but to discover the truth. Students also agree that although debate has the potential to cause division, it ultimately exposes new ideas and brings people together, doing more good than harm. And as one student tells us, “people who aren’t used to [debate] take it as a competition, but those who are used to it know they are going to learn so [much].”

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the foundation of debate rests upon opposition. Can something as inherently divisive as debate also foster peace and honest politics? Scholarly works suggest yes, and discussions with students and NGO representatives affirm that answer. A clear relationship exists between political space and peace. By enabling citizens to express their grievances within a regulated venue, political space serves as a safe and healthy outlet for opposition. The research presented in this paper is hopeful, suggesting that Rwanda has come a long way since 1994, both in terms of opening political space and sustaining peace. The high level of youth engagement in debate programs, paired with youth endorsement of the principles of debate, suggests that Rwanda will indeed continue to make

strides in opening political space and sustaining peace. Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders, and by embracing the potentials of debate they are enabling the possibilities of today to become the realities of tomorrow. In the words of a Rwandan student, debate allows citizens to “wake up and fight for peace.”



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