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Subject: Report on AVP in the Congo
From: John Wilmerding <[\[log in to unmask\]](#)>
Reply-To: International Justice Watch Discussion List <[\[log in to unmask\]](#)>
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AVP -- the Alternatives to Violence Project, is one of several peacemaking methods that I have used. This is a follow-up to earlier reports that AVP was about to be used in Congo for the first time.

I met a Rwandan AVP facilitator recently who is helping to plan for Truth & Reconciliation Commissions dealing with the genocide there.

-- John Wilmerding

Alternatives to Violence Program - Bukavu, Congo
 Workshop Narratives, July 2005

Comments by AVP facilitators as Recorded by Mary Kay Jou

First AVP Basic in Bukavu

The Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) workshops in Bukavu began on July 9, 2005. A Representative from the Mayor's Office was present and facilitated the official opening of AVP in Bukavu. This workshop was facilitated by a diverse team of AVP facilitators from around the world: Pierre Damien Byumvuhore from Rwanda, Bindu Runiga Delphin, a native of Congo from Rwanda, and Mary Kay Jou from the USA. This team was carefully chosen for their language skills: French and Swahili. We had to consider who from Rwanda would be accepted in Congo in this time of instability. It was very powerful for the Congolese to see a team this diverse work so well together.

The first workshop, an AVP Basic, ran from July 9 through July 11 with a group of 20 participants, who were also very diverse. Quakers, Methodists, Anglicans, Catholics and Pentecostals all came together to discover the Transforming Power of AVP. The Representative from the Mayor's Office, who had been invited as the official to open the workshop, was so touched with what he saw that he stayed on all three days as a workshop participant.

On the morning of the second day, our theme was, "How can I use AVP in my life?" The Representative responded, "never in my life did I think that I could ever find a way to forgive a Rwandan, but with AVP I see that everything is possible." While saying that, he and Pierre Damien from AVP Rwanda shook hands and hugged each other in front of the whole group. It was a moment of transformation for all the participants.

Many participants expressed their interest in bringing AVP to their local communities to work with indigenous peoples, refugees, Rwandan rebels and Congolese soldiers to transform the tension so present in Congo today. One participant who is currently studying law at university spoke of the hazing that occurs on campus with incoming freshmen. Through AVP he realized the violence in this and hopes to bring this awareness to his school community.

The participants were very moved by the concept of "Transforming Power" which is revealed in AVP workshops. One remarked, "I have seen myself use this power before without knowing what it was." They were so happy to know that this same power exists in everybody. Through our discussions of violence and non-violence, the group got very clear on how deeply their country is rooted in violence and they became determined to make a difference.

All of the activities enlightened the participants who illustrated exactly how much they had learned on the third day when they presented their role plays. Each role play scenario was based on particular situations faced in the Congo today. For example, participants chose the conflict between Rwandan refugees, immigrants and natives of the Congo. All of the role-plays were extremely timely and interesting, and each demonstrated the use of "Transforming Power" to resolve the conflict presented.

Through their AVP experience they were reminded of exactly what is really important -- of how much of what we think we need to hang to that really can be let go. In our group there were several Pastors and Directors. Many of them came to realize that all the titles, which make us feel important, really are not important at all. We are all simply workers for peace. It was a wonderful beginning for AVP Bukavu.

In their evaluations, group members expressed many concerns regarding how meals had been served. Facilitators were given a table of honor and served different food from the other participants. We facilitators, two of us being foreigners, presumed this was Congolese culture, and although we felt much discomfort, we did not want to be disrespectful. Our own "Transforming Power" did not come through. After reading the evaluations, we knew that it was time for a change.

Second AVP Basic in Bukavu

For the second AVP Basic, July 13-15, we placed the lunch tables in a square so that we all faced each other while we ate. All of the food was placed on a table in the middle of the square. This made a great beginning for the workshop.

This group was mainly young university students. From the start, we could see that they had great interest and curiosity about AVP. Throughout the workshop, participants were very active and continued to ask meaningful questions, which took us deeper into the concepts of AVP. Each time a question was posed many hands were raised with eagerness to share experiences and ideas. There were so many hands raised that sometimes we had to limit the number of responses to ensure that we would be able to include all of the exercises.

One participant commented about an exercise as follows: "We started by talking to two people, then to four people, and this time to many different people. It shows us that we shouldn't be afraid of people we don't know. We just need to take the time to get to know them instead of judging them by how they look." In response to the questions the facilitators asked he went on to say, "It makes us want to do something good, and reminds us that we can."

This great energy for exchange and cooperation continued on the second day as the group grappled with an exercise called "Broken Squares" [Small groups are given pieces of squares to fit together]. Workshop participants disperse into small groups; each receives minimal instructions for the task they are to complete together. Success requires cooperation and the laying aside of competitiveness. One person formed a square which prevented the others in the small group from being able to complete their squares. Unfortunately, this group was not open to breaking that person's square or looking for another way to resolve the situation, so they were unable to successfully finish the exercise. They received a great lesson about observing what we possess, and what we think we possess, and how sometimes we need to give something up for the greater good of the larger group.

In another small group, there were members who were satisfied with their own square and did not lift a finger to help the other members complete their squares. They learned that even when times are good, we need to be looking out for the needs of others. Another small group learned that they need to find new ways to look at their problem if they are to find a solution. In one group a member had all the pieces he needed to complete his square, yet he could only see one way to place the pieces together, which did not create a square. He placed the pieces in the same incorrect way over and over again. How many times do we find ourselves doing the same thing over and over even when we know that it does not work? In another small group, one member finished her own square and had some pieces left over. She never gave these pieces to her group members so they were unable to complete their squares. She had the solution to their problem but was unwilling to share the resources.

Ma
ny lessons were learned from this exercise.

The second day also included the introduction to "Transforming Power". Participants were keenly interested in this concept, and open to understanding the essence of it within AVP. The group was introduced to an ancient art form, Mandala, which is used by Buddhist monks as a way of meditation.

All of the role-plays were very interesting; one in particular bears mentioning. One of the groups took on the very real problem of rape in the Congo. Soldiers use rape as a weapon, which leaves the raped women traumatized and rejected by their husbands and families. The participants asked the following question, "Is it possible to for women to accept being raped in order to save her life, and is it possible to refuse being raped?" A guideline that became a central focus of this discussion was -- "be willing to suffer for what is important". A range of experiences was shared; from a woman who escaped rape by fighting back, to a woman who was killed when she tried to fight back. There followed an intense discussion of where Transforming Power fits in these two scenarios.

Advanced Workshop in Bukavu

The Advanced Workshop began on July 19 and finished on July 21. We included twenty participants, ten from each of the two Basic courses; 10 men and 10 women. The facilitation team of Pierre Damien and Mary Kay lost Delphin, who needed to return to his work in Kigali. While we gained Habimana Elie, from AVP Rwanda, we no longer had a Congolese facilitator on the team, meaning that while Mary Kay and Elie facilitated in French, only Pierre was able to facilitate in Swahili. Despite these changes we did not notice a change in the participants' reactions. It seems they had come to fully accept the Rwandan facilitators.

The AVP activities brought out many issues facing the Congo right now, particularly around the question of identity. The group discussed how difficult it is to approach people they don't know with simple introductory questions when they are living in such traumatic times. Simple questions such as "Where are you from?" can lead to great conflict when there is so much tribalism in the country. We discussed how to counteract that, and how to ask questions in a way that is not intimidating to another person. In our exercises and discussions on leadership, they experienced first hand how egocentrism, lack of communication, selfishness, and the use of force are just not effective. This led to our exploration of consensus as an alternative model. The group had difficulty comprehending consensus and how it fits into the democratic model that they are currently trying to construct in The Congo. They had such a difficult time with the consensus process that they asked the facilitators to leave the room, thinking that it was the facilitators who were causing the difficulties. On their own, they were finally able to come to consensus and chose the focus topic of Anger, with two people standing aside (not in unity with the choice).

There was a big change in the participants on Day 2. They immediately saw on the agenda that we would have lessons on anger all day. They knew we had listened to them, and they opened up much more. We had a lot more laughter in the Advanced class than in the first two Basics. Participants were, in fact, so open that we took a risk and facilitated activities that are not necessarily within the Congolese culture. For example, during an exercise where we model emotions openly in front of other people, one participant was able to demonstrate for the group how he had imagined he must look when he is angry. This led to hysterical laughter and a great learning about anger.

The class also greatly appreciated the exercises, which require participants to demonstrate both sides of a situation. They became able to understand how anger escalates and how forgiveness can diminish anger. In one of our forgiveness exercises, one participant shared how this exercise helped him to forgive his brother-in-law, who had stabbed his sister to death. His example became the role model for other participants and added a whole new dimension to the experience.

Another point of interest was that this group came seeking answers. They filled up more than one page of Unanswered Questions. When we finally reached the point of the workshop where these questions are addressed, they discovered that they were able to answer the questions themselves. This left them all feeling very proud and ready to take on the Training for Facilitators.

Training for Facilitators in Bukavu

Fifteen participants from the Advanced class were chosen to participate in the Training for Facilitators (T4F). On the first day, all participants arrived very early in the morning; ready to learn and ready to take this next step towards becoming an AVP Facilitator. They thought that this workshop would bring them even deeper into the concepts covered in the first two workshops, and expected to continue in the role of participant. They were very surprised to find out that they were expected to serve as facilitators, and to put into practice all that they had learned from the first two workshops. Some expressed the fear that this would be a form of evaluation, which they could either pass or fail. They soon learned that this was not the case.

During the first session, the participants learned about team building: how to build a strong team and to work closely together. By the end of the first session they were divided into three facilitation teams, A, B and C, and began working together to plan their practice facilitation sessions.

During the evening after the first day of the T4F, Pierre received a phone call from David Bucura of AVP-Rwanda stating that there was a problem in AVP-Goma. He had been hit at night by a motorcycle with no light and had to return to Kigali for treatment. This left just one facilitator in Goma and three in Bukavu. David asked that Elie head out to Goma the next morning to facilitate there while Pierre and Mary Kay continue on in Bukavu. Luckily, the following morning before the workshop began, we were able to locate an afternoon boat to Goma which allowed Elie to be present for the morning session which included his team's practice facilitation.

Each of the three teams had their share of struggles as they attempted to facilitate the exercises. They all learned about the extreme importance of a thorough preparation and teambuilding in order to provide a successful workshop. By the end of this workshop we knew that we had 15 very strong facilitators and a great start for AVP-Bukavu.

Apprentice Basic in Bukavu

The first Apprentice Basic training took place July 27 to July 29. Two new facilitators, Mwangya Alenga Leon and Kika Nganwa, joined the team of Pierre and Mary Kay. Twenty-three participants received certificates. Representatives from local and international

NGOs came to visit the workshop and to encourage us and show their appreciation for our work.

Participants came to the workshop unaware that the violence they are suffering through in Congo could ever be transformed. They asked questions like "If you kill someone before they kill you, is that violence?" Through the "Introduction to Transforming Power" they began to see another way.

On the second day, attendees learned about the trees of violence and non-violence and gained a greater understanding of how to transform the violence around them. Throughout the exercises and discussions, they came to understand how much collaboration and cooperation is needed in order for development to take place. It is not enough for one region or one village to succeed; development must come to everyone.

The facilitators observed the initial feelings of doubt about whether such violence as is happening in Congo today could actually be transformed into peace change to clear beliefs that no conflict is ever too big for "Transforming Power". Their level of understanding for "Transforming Power" was demonstrated in their role plays. Each one clearly showed how a conflict could turn into violence and how "Transforming Power" can be used to diffuse it.

At the end of the third day, the participants wanted to know how to continue with the AVP. They expressed a strong willingness to travel, if necessary, to a neighboring country to take the Advanced. They also expressed a great interest in becoming facilitators. The way is paved for a strong AVP in the Congo.

The other two Apprentice Basics took place in two villages outside of Bukavu: Kamanyola and Bunyakiri. These two villages were chosen because of the ethnic clashes that take place on a regular basis. Our goal was to reach the Pygmies community in Kamanyola and the Rwandan refugee community in Bunyakiri.

Apprentice Basic in Bunyakiri

On the morning of the day that we were scheduled to leave for Bunyakiri, we received word that there had been a massacre there recently and six people were dead and many wounded. After much research and a visit to the local hospital where the wounded were brought, we found out that the massacre had taken place a week before and was in a village 12 kilometers away from Bunyakiri. Through consensus, the facilitation team of Mbakwa Malenga, Mawazo wa Mahango and Mary Kay Jou decided to travel to Bunyakiri as planned.

When the team arrived, we were warmly welcomed by a group of people who were very happy to see us. The church choir and the children's choir sang songs for us, and everyone prayed for a successful workshop.

On the first day, we were happy to see the diversity of participants. Included in the group were a Rwandan refugee, a Pygmy, and a former child soldier; as well as representatives from the local human rights committee, the association of women for peace, and the Chief of the village. It soon became clear that this was a group of quick learners, ready to work, and extremely open to the teachings of AVP.

The community-building exercises on the first day gave them the opportunity to get to know each other and broke some of the stereotypes they had about each other.

They found many lessons pertaining to the war and the plight of refugees within the AVP exercises. This led to a great discussion of when people flee for safety and they still don't land in a safe place, and they need to flee again. This was a very important lesson for a community like Bunyakiri, where war has raged for years, and where Rwandan refugees still live.

During our discussions on violence, one participant shared that he had used with his family many of the methods or tactics placed on the brainstorming list without knowing that he was participating in violence. He told the group that he had already decided to stop and was ready to change his ways.

The second day brought the group even deeper into the concepts of Violence and Nonviolence. It opened their eyes to so many things that they had not known before. One participant, who had asked for the definition of Violence and Nonviolence stated, "and with this exercise, you have answered my question, and I am completely satisfied."

For the gathering on the second day, we chose "How I plan to use these teachings in my life". The former child soldier shared with the group that he had a 14 year-old brother who was still in the army, and that he was determined to go and speak to him about all he has learned through AVP in order to help get him out of the army.

Through the various AVP exercises, the participants came to understand how it is possible to have everything you need right in front of you and still not see it. They realized how easy it is to seek help from the outside instead of realizing that the solution you need is there in yourself. This led to a very important discussion of the implications for Africa and the Great Lakes Region in particular as it moves towards peace and development.

The AVP teachings were extremely empowering. As one participant put it, "Even a small person like me can make a difference." One participant shared about his experiences with alcoholism and how he finally came to see how much he was hurting his family. He transformed himself, apologized to the family, and to this day has not had a drink.

We had the chance to watch one participant's transformation take place. She came to the workshop as a shy woman, afraid to speak out loud. She hid her face behind her notebook. By the end of the third day, she was actively participating in the role-play and speaking in a loud voice in front of the whole group. Through AVP she found herself and her voice.

The most moving part of the workshop was the intense dedication that this group showed towards the continuation of AVP in Bunyakiri. One participant stated that AVP workshops need to last for a month and not just three days. They are ready and eager to take the Advanced. This community is ripe for AVP, and is greatly in need of it. The AVP Community around the world needs to find a way to keep AVP alive in Bunyakiri.

AVP Basic in Kamanyola

AVP Congo organized a Basic workshop in Kamanyola that took place from July 31 to August 2. A facilitation team of three people provided the workshop. Two Congolese facilitators, Mukwandja Iluba Felix and Tabina Shekya, were accompanied by Rwandan facilitator Pierre Damien Byumvuhore. The team of three facilitators left Bukavu on July 30th and arrived in Kamanyola later that same day. Everything was fine except that when the bus broke down, the team had to climb on the top of a truck in order to make it to Kamanyola by sundown. This was especially difficult for Pierre, the oldest member of the team. Upon their arrival, the team was warmly welcomed. There was a small problem with Shekya being housed separately from the other two team members, which made team-building among the facilitators impossible. Luckily we had completed team-building in Bukavu, and were already prepared.

We expected a group of 20 participants, but upon our arrival discovered that there actually were 25 participants. Almost all the ethnic groups living in Kamanyola were present except for the Pygmies, who were unable to come. Participants included three teachers, a soldier, members from several churches, farmers, and representatives from various local associations. The workshop took place in a classroom at the Kanshala Catholic Elementary School. Participants were very glad to be a part of the seminar.

Sunday, the first day of the workshop, went very well. All the participants accepted the invitation to attend this formation about peace. However, we ended up starting two hours late, and were only prepared with materials for 20 participants ... and we had 25. The team had to do their best to find extra pens, notebooks, and certificates for the additional participants. In order to get photocopies, they had to travel to Rwanda.

The second day of the workshop went very well, not only in terms of the facilitators, but also for the participants. It was this

day that they gained a great understanding of AVP, which was demonstrated by their keen interest and encouraging participation. It was a wonderful day except for the fact that the soldier did not return.

On Tuesday, the third day, the participants had so many questions that we went over the time limit by one hour.

During these three days the team successfully completed all six sessions of an AVP Basic. The team closed the workshop with 24 participants who were so impressed by the philosophy and the teachings that they are ready and waiting to see us in the future for further training in AVP.

On Wednesday, the team returned to Bukavu for a final meeting with all the new facilitators before the departure of Pierre and Mary Kay to their respective countries. All of the participants, without exception, appreciated the teachings of AVP and proved their interest to the facilitators throughout the workshops. They are hopeful to receive more Basics and even Advanced in Kamanyola. Everything went great throughout the workshops. All six sessions were delivered and facilitators appreciated the active participation of the participants. Everything went according to plan.

Conclusion

In general, it is safe to say that a very strong foundation has been laid for AVP in Bukavu. All of the workshops were wonderful, and all the facilitators did a great job. They worked day and night to ensure the success of the workshops, and to properly prepare for each session. They were especially careful around touchy topics, such as Congo politics, and kept the focus on the teachings of AVP.

We were blessed with amazing participants who asked the hard questions, whether to challenge the facilitators, or due to genuine interest, they forced us to probe even deeper into each concept of AVP. The facilitators all responded perfectly to each difficult question with poise and confidence. There was amazing diversity within each workshop, and within this great diversity our groups found common ground about peace and non-violence.

We learned from each other as facilitators from different cultures, countries and backgrounds. We learned new ways to present the exercises, and new ways to strategize outreach for AVP. For example, the team spent a day meeting with local and international NGOs and invited them to attend the workshop in order to truly understand what we do and how we do it. Having a journalist with us as we travelled to the villages peaked interest in both the participants and the facilitators. The facilitators got to see how they come across in front of a group and the participants felt they were a part of something important.

We learned from the participants as well. They showed new innovations in their brainstorming about the mandala and consistently opened our minds even more.

We also learned from the region. As Pierre put it, "Congo has a lot of foods, but no peace." Taking time to study the region really helped give a local context of AVP for the Congolese people.

There is great hope for AVP Bukavu. A strong team of 15 facilitators have been trained. The committee is formed, and we are already busy planning for next year.

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