

# Consultancy in conflict:

## A case study from Congo

By Lena Boberg

I knew that this would be a challenging consultancy so I tried to prepare both psychologically and professionally. But it never crossed my mind that I would have to be evacuated from the country after little more than a week. I was grief-stricken. It raised all sorts of questions for me about how appropriate and how possible it is to undertake meaningful consultancy in contexts of conflict. These are my reflections from this particular experience.

In 2013 I was contracted to evaluate two projects in DR Congo working with long-term peace-building efforts, supporting rehabilitation of women who had survived gender-based violence and young men and women who had been associated with armed groups. I was working alongside two experienced Congolese consultants, a woman and a man. When I arrived, we spent our first day together as a team getting to know each other and outlining the details of our program and methodology. We immediately hit some problems:

### **Access and insurance - *am I more important than they are?***

I had found it difficult to get insurance for this trip as the conflict in Eastern Congo had deteriorated the few weeks prior to our assignment. The insurance I eventually found would not let me travel away from the city of Bukavu and into the rural areas. This created a problem for our field visits. After much deliberation, we decided that I should stay in the city and do the data gathering there, while my two team members made field visits into the rural areas. I struggled with this, and felt torn with my loyalties to my team, my assignment and my family. Was I just being a coward? And why should my safety be any more important than anyone else's?

### **Disturbing and distracting - *am I wasting people's time?***

As soon as we started setting up interviews, I was struck by having to ask people to prioritise my visit over their urgent and important work. Working in such a situation of extreme conflict for decades, with the resulting suffering and destruction had put the organisations that were trying to help under extraordinary strain. Was my intervention going to make a positive contribution? How much participation would be appropriate? Why waste time on reflection? Why embark on an internal change process when the external context was changing so rapidly?

### **Conflict erupts - *what is the responsible way forward?***

On the Sunday, after one week in country, I was sitting with one of my team members when she received a phone call. When she put the phone down, she looked at me and said calmly: *'We will not be able to have lunch together. Goma (a major neighbouring city) has fallen into the hands of the rebels and*

*there is a danger that there will be violence here too. It is not safe for us to be out on the street. I will take you home, and then go home to my family.'* I can still feel that sense of doom as we got ready to leave. Nobody spoke. We walked in silence to the car and my colleague drove me to where I was staying.

There had to be a change in plans, so we arranged to meet at the offices of the organisation on Monday morning. By then it appeared that things had calmed down a bit. We decided to continue with our program, which meant me staying in the city and visiting some local organisations, and my two team members making a short trip to a rural area. We did not come to this decision lightly. As team leader I felt responsible for my team. Was I putting them in danger by allowing the field visit? But they, and the project leaders, were adamant. They wanted to go.

But during the day the situation deteriorated. Rebel groups had seized the airport in Goma. Bukavu was in real danger. The atmosphere in the city changed immediately. My colleagues in the field could be at risk. I was worried all afternoon. When they phoned to tell me they were back and all had gone well, I was so, so relieved. Monday evening was a roller-coaster of information from this source and that. It was impossible to know what to think and who to believe. But the Scandinavian embassies were absolutely clear. They told us we had to evacuate immediately.

What to do? I felt I had to listen to the embassy's advice, but I also felt responsible for the task. So the next morning I got together with my team to make an initial analysis of the data we had collected. It felt important for us to hold on to the stability of our task, even though the city was preparing for a possible rebel take-over. We made progress, but it took all our energy to focus on our work. We worked out where we had got to and what was left and said our goodbyes.

On Wednesday morning most of the Scandinavians left the city and crossed the border into Rwanda. My team and I completed our evaluation assignment through email discussions. The city of Bukavu was not taken by the rebels, but Eastern Congo is still filled with armed conflict and violence, and uncertainty for everyone.

### **What did I learn about consultancy in conflict?**

#### *Consultancy can bring hope*

While some might argue that it is a waste of time to try to embark on an evaluation assignment or start an OD process in a situation of conflict, even in such challenging situations (and perhaps especially in such situations) organisations need to function effectively. They need to achieve their desired results and to provide a good working environment for their staff. If handled with wisdom and care, undertaking a reflective change process in a volatile environment may actually be an important action of hope.

### *Strong and clear communication with the client is invaluable*

Because we had established strong and open communication, when things started to get complicated for us our client provided prompt support and guidance. It helped that the client was familiar with the conflict situation and did not have unrealistic expectations of what was possible under the circumstances.

### *It is essential to work alongside local consultants*

It was a strength and a privilege to work alongside experienced local consultants, who knew the context as well as the themes of the evaluation. This meant we could be flexible with our methods and our program. They were able to go where I could not. They could communicate in local languages which helped us to gain access also to the voices of those that did not speak French.

But in working in a team of consultants, I felt uncertain at times about the boundaries of my responsibilities as team leader. How responsible am I for the safety of my team? How should we make decision about the assignment as we carry it out? Perhaps we could have discussed this more before starting out.

### *Engaging with courage and commitment*

I have enormous respect for the project leaders and staff of the organisations we met during the evaluation. As I am writing this I picture one of the project leaders as he describes to us all the issues faces in working with young women and men who have been associated with armed groups. His commitment shines through. He often says, after having described yet another challenge they encounter: “*Ca m’engage!*” That engages me!

As a consultant I take those words with me as I think about support to OD in conflict situations. *Ca m’engage!*