

Society's unsung heroes

Dr Patrick Lagadec talks to Michel Séguier, who deals with societal breakdowns in his new book – *Pratiques émancipatrices: Actualités de Paulo Freire* – and stresses that those who have been affected should be the ones taking the initiative for change

MICHEL SÉQUIER HAS NOT ONLY spent many years studying the fragmentation of entire societies, but also in accompanying groups of people in the re-conquest of their environment, so what does his experience teach us?

Michel Séguier works in the Congo and the Great Lakes region. This is a death-ridden environment ravaged by internal upheaval. We know a little about the 1.5 million killed in the genocide of 1994, but even less about the estimated four million additional deaths since 1995 as a result of wars and endemic conflicts. Other elements include the infrastructure which has been destroyed, three per cent of the population that are suffering from AIDS, an almost non-existent state and outside interests that are particularly present in pillaging the country's resources.

The first lesson to learn is that such situations are not placed on the list of things to be acted upon: they are simply 'not on the agenda'.

The second is that, as the usual ways of intervening are ineffective, the situation is classed as 'unmanageable'.

However, what we have found is that action is indeed possible, but only on condition that it comes from the people and victims directly concerned. This is achieved by initiatives aimed at raising awareness and action at a local level.

CHILD SOLDIERS

Bunia, a town in the north linked to Lake Victoria, is menaced by hunger as the roads are made unsafe by around 55,000 child-soldiers. Improving the security of the area therefore was of utmost importance. This was initiated by meeting all the war-lords and the ethnic leaders. After two years of discussion, each ethnic group is now responsible for the maintenance and security of the road in their sector.

The children are in groups of 45 and each group is paid to maintain the road for a period of two months. With the help of this money, one-third are able to become involved in the economy once again.

Goma is a town with a population of 350,000, rife with AIDS. A costly initiative to organise a major campaign brought in from outside proved



Michel Séguier works as an 'accompanist' in a number of areas prey to major social breakdown. With the support of UNESCO, he has just co-ordinated a publication dealing with these concerns: *Séguier, M & Garibay, F, et al, Pratiques émancipatrices: Actualités de Paulo Freire, Paris, Syllèpse, 2009*

ineffective. The solution could only come from the population itself (whose average age is only 23 years). In the end, deliverance came from the local hairdressers. Around 1,500 hairdressers realised that they were the best placed to talk about AIDS since their salons were situated at the crossroads. They called themselves the 'citizen-hairdressers' or the 'peer educators'. Given their street credibility, this group is now the crucial focal point of meaningful and successful information and prevention.

Bukavu is another area permanently at war and marked by sexual violence. Around 35 per cent of women are victims of aggravated sexual aggression. One group of women came together – not at all easy in a culture where admitting to having been raped means losing one's identity. Yet the group took the initiative, recognising themselves not only as victims but also as actors. They succeeded in actively involving some members of the military, the

FROM THE UNKNOWN

Spearheaded by Dr Patrick Lagadec, this series is devoted to exploring the challenging issues characterised by 21st Century crises. The aim is to go beyond our usual mindsets, helping to clarify pitfalls, redesigning the new landscapes that must be considered and showcasing creative moves that will help to feed positive dynamics. The goal is not to find ready-made solutions, but to stimulate and feed new ideas, new approaches and new methods of thinking

principal instigators of sexual violence. For the first time, there has been a public trial and a high graded officer condemned, which means that impunity is not an everlasting law.

We have learnt that those most affected should organise themselves and invent solutions. These cannot come from the outside. There needs to be a fundamental change in perception. These groups of people have real – although unconventional – potential. They have a resilience born of daily conflict, a capacity of resistance and a cultural self-defence that enables them to reflect and to organise themselves.

Basically, there are three dimensions on which we have to work: Economic; political, where the actors become aware they can influence the situation and get recognition for themselves; and cultural, based essentially on the idea of human dignity. This last dimension is crucial because it touches every aspect of societal breakdown.

Our approach to intervention should be based on certain new convictions: that people are capable of reflection and of finding common interests, enabling them to invent and achieve responses adapted to their situation. The 'micro' level can have an astonishing pivotal effect of refocusing perspectives. **CRJ**

AUTHOR

Patrick Lagadec is Director of Research at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris and is CRJ's Editorial Advisory Panel advisor on unconventional crises. He has extensive experience of direct involvement with critical infrastructures and vital networks operators internationally

