

# Rebuilding societies in post-conflict countries: A peaceworker's personal story

**Sarah Jackson** is supporting local peacebuilding work as programme officer with the American Friends Service Committee in Bujumbura.



I was brought up with an awareness of the inequalities of wealth and power at home and abroad, coupled with the part we can each play in making the world a fairer place. I learnt from my father's work as a trade union leader that people are stronger when they speak with one voice. I knew from my mother's work as a teacher in inner-city London that poverty is often caused not by a failure to work hard, but by inequality of opportunity.

As a child, my eyes were opened to conflicts elsewhere in the world following the shocking images on television of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian war. I read Zlata's Diary, the story of a Bosnian girl the same age as me living through the siege of Sarajevo, and was struck by the differences in our lives. My first international solidarity work was a bake-sale that I organised to support humanitarian assistance for victims of the Rwandan genocide – a small gesture in the face of international inaction, but we put pictures in our local paper to try to raise awareness within our community.

Several years later, as a student, I was surrounded by a community of politically engaged people and became part of a peace movement at the start of the 2003 Iraq War. It was during my studies in Comparative Politics that the twin threads of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda reappeared. Following an internship with a human rights organisation, I was keen to learn

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as much as I could about Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I also went to Bosnia to interview people for my thesis on the relationship between Bosnian and international non-governmental organisations since the war. It gave me ideas for how to work in partnership for justice and peace.

I was lucky enough to land a job at Human Rights Watch. This gave me the opportunity to learn from experts on Rwanda,

Burundi and Congo and to see investigative research and advocacy in action. I had the opportunity to travel to the region and I saw how human rights activists there were strengthened by the work of international groups. I came to see human rights as a powerful language to advocate for change.

The QPSW placement in Burundi with American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) allows me to put my studies and previous work into action on the ground. I wanted to work at the grassroots, and was drawn to this placement because of the values that underpin Quaker work. Belief in equality compels us to put grassroots Burundian organisations and people at the forefront of our work and Quaker simplicity helps us develop strong, genuine partnerships with these groups. This sustained sharing of experiences allows me to strengthen the capacity of Burundian peace activists and organisations, whilst learning from their experience to develop my expertise and ethics as a peaceworker and human rights activist.

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