

Reconciliation and Social Cohesion: AUTJP Lessons for Sierra Leone

By MRCG

As Sierra Leone recently commemorated its first National Remembrance Day on 18 January, fulfilling a long-standing recommendation of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), it is timely to reflect on how continental frameworks for peace, justice, and reconciliation inform our national efforts. As it continues to consolidate peace more than two decades after the end of its brutal civil war, questions of reconciliation, healing, and social cohesion remain central to national discourse. These questions are not unique to Sierra Leone. Across the African continent, societies emerging from conflict, repression, and mass human rights violations face the challenge of repairing broken relationships and rebuilding trust among citizens and institutions. In this broader continental context, the African Union Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP) provides an important framework for understanding reconciliation and social cohesion as essential pillars of sustainable peace.

Understanding the African Union Transitional Justice Policy

Adopted by the African Union in 2019, the AUTJP is a continental guide to help African states address past human rights abuses, political violence, and systemic injustice. Unlike narrow approaches that focus solely on criminal accountability, the AU policy embraces a holistic vision of justice, combining accountability with truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform, memorialisation, reconciliation, and social cohesion.

The policy is grounded in African realities and values, recognising that justice in post-conflict societies must respond to local histories, cultures, and social structures. Central to this vision is the belief that peace without reconciliation is fragile and that justice without social cohesion is incomplete.

Reconciliation as Both a Process and a Goal

In the AUTJP, reconciliation is not treated as a symbolic gesture or a one-off event. Instead, it is understood as both a long-term process and an outcome. The policy defines reconciliation as the rebuilding of relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions that were fractured by conflict or repression.

According to the AU, reconciliation requires several interlinked elements: acknowledgement of past wrongs, recognition of victims' suffering, accountability where possible, and meaningful efforts to restore dignity and trust. Importantly, the policy recognises that reconciliation cannot be imposed by the state alone. It must be inclusive, participatory, and community-driven, involving victims, survivors, perpetrators, traditional leaders, women, youth, and marginalised groups.

The AUTJP places strong emphasis on truth-seeking mechanisms, such as truth and reconciliation commissions, as vital to reconciliation. Truth-telling helps societies confront painful histories, counter denial and revisionism, and establish a shared understanding of what happened. In this sense, reconciliation is closely linked to memory, documentation, and public acknowledgement—issues that resonate strongly with Sierra Leone’s own Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience.

This vision resonates deeply with Sierra Leone’s own TRC. Established after the civil war that ravaged the country from 1991 to 2002, the TRC was tasked with documenting atrocities, giving voice to survivors, and promoting national unity through truth and mutual understanding. Among its many recommendations was the establishment of a National Reconciliation Day on 18 January—marked to honour victims and to remind Sierra Leoneans of both the horrors of war and the ongoing journey towards peace.

The Role of Traditional and Community-Based Mechanisms

One distinctive feature of the AU policy is its recognition of traditional and indigenous justice mechanisms. The policy acknowledges that many African societies have long-standing methods for resolving conflicts, restoring harmony, and reintegrating offenders into communities.

These mechanisms—when aligned with human rights standards—can play a powerful role in reconciliation by promoting dialogue, confession, forgiveness, and restitution at the community level. For countries such as Sierra Leone, where customary practices remain influential, this aspect of the AUTJP underscores the importance of integrating formal justice institutions with local peacebuilding traditions.

Social Cohesion: Rebuilding the Social Fabric

While reconciliation focuses on repairing relationships damaged by past abuses, social cohesion addresses the broader challenge of rebuilding a sense of belonging, solidarity, and mutual trust within society. The AUTJP defines social cohesion as the degree to which individuals and groups feel connected to the state, despite differences in ethnicity, religion, region, or political affiliation.

The policy recognises that conflict often deepens existing inequalities and social divisions. Therefore, strengthening social cohesion requires more than dialogue; it demands structural transformation. This includes addressing exclusion, marginalisation, unequal access to resources, and governance failures that may have contributed to the conflict in the first place.

In this context, the AUTJP links social cohesion directly to institutional reform, inclusive governance, and socio-economic justice. A society cannot be truly cohesive if large sections of its population feel excluded, silenced, or neglected.

In Sierra Leone, these challenges have been painfully evident. The civil war's legacy extended beyond physical destruction, fracturing community bonds, spreading trauma, and exacerbating regional and ethnic tensions. Initiatives inspired by the AU framework encourage engagement not only with past injustices but also with the social and economic structures that must be transformed to prevent a relapse into conflict. This includes institutional reform that fosters accountability and reinforces citizens' trust in public institutions.

Healing, Memory, and Collective Identity

Another key aspect of the AU's approach to reconciliation and social cohesion is healing—both individual and collective. The policy recognises the long-term psychological and social trauma caused by violence and repression. It encourages states to support psychosocial services, community healing initiatives, and public memorialisation.

Memorialisation, remembrance days, and public education are viewed as tools for promoting a shared national narrative that honours victims, acknowledges suffering, and commits society to “never again.” These measures foster social cohesion by cultivating a collective identity rooted in shared experiences and lessons from the past.

A real example of this contextualised transitional justice is Sierra Leone's declaration of January 18 as National Remembrance Day. This day is more than a ceremonial celebration; it's a time for collective reflection, learning, and reaffirming devotion to the common ideals of inclusivity, peace, and unity. Sierra Leone fosters a culture that resists historical amnesia, apathy, and denial by institutionalising remembrance.

Implications for Sierra Leone

For Sierra Leone, the African Union Transitional Justice Policy offers valuable guidance as the country reflects on its post-war journey. The establishment of National Remembrance Day has reignited conversations about memorialisation, and ongoing debates about inclusion and national unity closely align with the AU's vision. The AU Transitional Justice Policy reminds us that sustainable peace emerges from inclusive, reflective justice rooted in the experiences of ordinary people. Sierra Leone's experience, from the TRC's public hearings to the formalisation of National Remembrance Day, demonstrates the power of confronting painful histories openly and soberly.

The policy reminds us that reconciliation is not achieved merely because guns are silent, and that social cohesion is not guaranteed by the passage of time. Both require continuous commitment, ethical leadership, inclusive policies, and active citizen participation. Media institutions, civil society organisations, traditional authorities, and state actors all play crucial roles.

The African Union Transitional Justice Policy presents reconciliation and social cohesion as foundations for durable peace in Africa. By emphasising truth, healing, inclusion, and structural

reform, the policy moves beyond punitive justice toward a more comprehensive and humane approach. For Sierra Leone, engaging seriously with these principles is not only a matter of aligning with continental standards—it is a moral and historical responsibility to victims, survivors, and future generations. As the nation remembers its past and shapes its future, the AU's transitional justice vision offers a timely reminder: peace is sustained not merely by the absence of conflict but by the presence of justice, trust, and shared belonging.