

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST FOR PEACEFUL ELECTIONS IN BURUNDI

Rene Claude NIYONKURU
Future Generations Graduate School
North Mountain Campus, Franklin, WV 26807

Introduction

Burundi had controversial and tense elections last summer, where the ruling party won the elections after claims of fraud by 7 opposition parties. The latter boycotted the electoral process after the communal elections of May 24th, 2010. This resulted in tensions at all levels among people of different political parties, and more importantly between the government and the opposition leaders. Violence occurred in some urban areas and several clashes between the police and demonstrators from the opposition, leading to massive human rights abuses. This situation led many Burundians and the international community to fear another civil war and unrest, and they were right as Burundi has experienced cycles of violence following the previous elections in 1993 and 2005.

Our project “building relationships and trust for peaceful elections in Burundi” helped two communities in the north of Burundi to keep peace and to resist political manipulation during the elections. We facilitated dialogue sessions, conducted training sessions in conflict management, and stimulated communities to take peace leadership through an initiative called “our *community, our peace*”.

Major activities and achievements

In close collaboration with the association peace and human rights, which I’ve been working with for the last 15 years, and 3 other local NGOs, we first contacted community leaders individually talking about the situation of tensions and post –election violence. This was a good strategy for us as there were new restrictions from the Government preventing anybody else except the electoral elections to work on elections issues.

After many informal contacts, the father-in-law of the incumbent President of the Republic, the single candidate to his succession after the boycott by the opposition, accepted to lead the “our community, our peace community” initiative.

We then organized 32 dialogue sessions and focus group discussions with representatives from both ethnic groups and various social categories (ex-combatants, internally displaced people, repatriates, ex-political prisoners, representatives of political parties, local women and youth associations,...)! People responded timidly in the first days as they were suspecting tensions and no one was willing to break in a context of mistrust and suspicion. We then decided to meet each category separately, train them in communication and conflict management basics, before bringing them together in community meetings and dialogue sessions. This helped to make sure that they would meet others parties with enough openness and empathy to make the dialogue successful. At the same time, we were asking that the categories meet to identify key themes to be covered by the dialogue sessions if they were brought together with other members of the community.

Six keys areas were identified: (1) Social justice and respect of pluralism , (2) Culture of democracy and peace, (3) Justice and the impunity of past massive crimes; (4) Security and human rights protection; (5) Social conflicts management; (6) Community development initiatives to as a strategy to prevent political manipulation.

It’s these six themes identified by local stakeholders that were brought into discussion during more than 30 dialogue sessions held in the districts of BUSIGA and MWUMBA, Northern Province of NGOZI! As stated in the project; these two districts have been differently affected by the 1993 civil war, and the participants in the dialogue sessions have had the chance to look back at what the ingredients/assets were that helped to keep peace during war times in some communities, and what the fueling factors were for violence in the other communes. A total of 642 people attended the project activities, directly and/or indirectly.

Main issues raised and recommendations

There were many issues and recommendations arising from these discussions. These are summarized in bullet points below.

- The population does not know about the constitution and the laws in general
- Judiciary must be independent: executive and legislature interfere in the judiciary sector and has impact at communal level. Executive still holds power and dictate to other sectors like the judiciary.
- Leaders recognize the power of citizens for voting only. Need to realize that citizens are positive agents of change.
- Peace cannot come if the crimes of the past are not judged. Furthermore, the truth on past and recent crimes must be known as way to build a democratic society in Burundi;
- Government has done a lot on security and stability but still observe killings, theft in certain areas. Security is not enough. Security must be reinforced to avoid theft.
- Corruption has become the main hindrance of the development of Burundian society.
- To establish properly the culture of democracy, the elected ones may no longer take decisions without consulting the people.
- Democracy is governing people by the people themselves for the people. The reality is that the power of the citizen does not end at the election or voting. There is a big role to be played after election. There must be education about citizenship to make the people aware of their role to be played for the public management of resources after elections;
- The Government and other stakeholders must support free and fair transparent elections (non interferences in the activities of the National Electoral commission)
- The electoral commission must be given the power and authority to sanction those who will violate election processes in the future;
- The code of conduct on elections must provide rules for conduct before, during and after elections so that there can be justice, fairness between political parties and facilitate the propaganda.
- Abolish the under proportional representation (list system). An individual must be voted on the basis of his individual competences.
- The strict respect of final election results. If political parties want to dispute election results, they must follow the procedures of the electoral commission

Ownership, transparency, sustainability and information sharing

This project developed a unique experience of community participation where, under the coordination of the father-in-law of the President. Local committees elected by the participants worked voluntarily for the project and are even today continuing the work. I was very happy to see that I'm simply working as a facilitator under the request of the coordinating committees. The latter have even been able to protect and defend us (my colleagues and me) as we were obliged to stay underground for security reasons. The experience of the project – referred to as *“an island of hope and peace in a big ocean of fear, mistrust and violence”* by the Chairperson of the initiative has been shared through the local network of community-based radio stations! Other medias, including some international ones (such as BBC) got informed about the project and helped to spread the message worldwide through interviews I gave in my local languages. We are also developing a video on the experience that will be shared at the national TV and posted on YouTube.

I have also had debriefing sessions with my classmates during the US residential and I have had the privilege of sharing the project outcomes with Mrs Kathryn DAVIS in our meeting of 2nd September 2010 in Tarrytown, NY. We learnt through this experience that transparency is a key factor of success! When the government suspected us, in the beginning of the project, of playing a subversive game, transparency helped us to show to everybody that there was no hidden agenda and they joined the movement!

We are also happy to see that the project is still going on and that other NGOs (Impunity watch : www.impunitywatch.org, Centre Ubuntu,...) are investing resources in the continuation and extension of the “our community, our peace initiative. “



Above: community meeting sessions with the facilitator, Rene Claude, encouraging one of the participants to express himself freely. On the left, we can see a text on the wall representing the main theme for that community meeting: *“truth , justice and reconciliation will help us to build a sustainable peace”* © Photo APDH – june 2010



Mr Protais, the father-in-law of the president and chairperson of the « our community, our peace initiative talking to APDH team during the preliminary discussions on the project. He is also the President of Council of elders in his district © Photo APDH – June 2010



A place where Tutsi victims of the 1993 war have been collectively buried in MWUMBA district. This site has been identified by the participants in the dialogue sessions among others to be protected as memorials. © Photo APDH – july 2010