

Search for Common Ground

Situation Update

Approximately 40% of the peacekeeping security forces have been withdrawn from Burundi since April 2006, following an agreement between Burundian government and the United Nations Security Council. The new government, formed after the general elections in the second half of 2005, allocates an important role to women. For instance, women occupy seven of the twenty minister positions (35%) in the cabinet, with portfolios such as Justice, Foreign Affairs, Trade and Industry.

In April, authorities stated that the security situation had improved in most regions and that the decades-long curfew had been lifted in Bujumbura. Nevertheless, check points have been maintained on the main roads linking the capital to the other cities within the country. Moreover, three decrees of the Ministry of Justice allowed for a total of 3287 detainees considered political prisoners to be set free in January, February and March 2006. Burundian NGOs such as FORSC, ITEKA, and OAG complained to the Constitutional Court charging this measure had been taken without consultation, and furthermore, is unconstitutional.

Model Parliaments: Practice is the Best Training

Based on the principle that practice is the best training, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) initiated a unique programme in Burundi. Model Parliaments were created in four schools in order to give students of both sexes the opportunity to experience democratic decision making first hand. The programme is still in its pilot phase and Model Parliaments have been set up in the following high schools: *Notre Dame de la Sagesse* (Gitega); *Don Bosco* (Ngozi); *Vugizo* (Bujumbura); and *Makamba*.

The programme started with a series of exchanges on electoral issues, after which the students chose their favourite electoral system. In partnership with IFES and the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), the young students were then trained in voting techniques and were educated on the duties of voting officials, from assembling ballot boxes to guaranteeing the voting process is open and fair. 'Candidates' were trained in developing electoral programmes, organizing a campaign, formulating slogans, choosing priorities, and defining policy on those priorities. Finally, in a elections simulation students could apply what they had learnt during the training. The students played out their roles seriously and with enthusiasm: 'candidates' campaigned vigorously, 'election officials' were immovable in their impartiality and devo-

tion to regulations and the voters debated long on who the best candidates were.

Three of the four high schools showed an encouraging gender balance in the voting results for the model parliament: at *Notre Dame de la Sagesse* 40% of elected deputies were female; at *Vugizo* and at *Makamba* it even was 50%.

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"...a participative game more motivating than a simple training"
– Véronique Parqué, Independent assessment, February 2006.

Solidarity Visit to Women and Children Detainees in Bujumbura

Within the context of the International Day of Human Rights, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and Isis WICCE organised a solidarity visit to the women in the Mpinda prison (Bujumbura's main prison) with the help of hundreds of women from associations in Bujumbura. The purpose of the visit was to deliver a message of hope to the imprisoned women and children, to encourage them to help each other and find solidarity among them. The visiting association members had collected various goods (rice, flour, and beans) from their friends and neighbours. More gifts such as soap and children's clothing had been gathered by Isis WICCE. Overall, more than 150 women and six men arrived at the prison on November 23rd, with bags and baskets full of gifts. Yet, only 42 people were allowed to enter the prison court yard, the rest staying behind the gate. Detainees treated their visitors to songs, speeches and dances and one woman said, in tears: "We thank you for this spirit of love."



Female prisoners are dancing to thank the visitors for their solidarity.

Visitors were surprised to encounter so many children in prison: more than 50 children between ages eleven and sixteen. Most had been charged for collaboration with armed

opposition group FNL or had been accused of stealing. The latter is all too common when the families employing the children no longer want to pay their wages.

Véronique Parqué, Women and Governance Project Evaluation, 17 January - 17 February 2006. This external evaluation involved individual interviews, discussion groups and written surveys.

- 'The project of reinforcing the political participation of women to the governance process is relevant, and responds to the important need in the field of active citizenship.'
- 'Thanks to the sensitisation that has been carried out, the project has allowed many women [...] to become aware of the importance of the right to vote and to be elected, and of the role of women in the decision-making process.'
- The radio programme 'has contributed to the objective of improving the access of women to one of the aspects of the governance process, which is participation in the elections.'

Dusangire Ikivi n-Ikiyago: a Programme in Support of the DRR Process

The new government started the National Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme (DRR) by setting up the National Commission for DRR (NCDRR). One of its main tasks is to inform the public and the demobilised people in particular on DRR procedures, regulations, rights and responsibilities, as well as general progress of the programme in order to ensure the ex-combatants can reintegrate in communities and return to a normal life in a peaceful climate.

Responding to an invitation from the NCDRR, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has been producing radio programmes on Burundi's DRR process since November 2005. One radio programme in particular seeks to sensitise the population and the ex-combatants on the issues and challenges raised by this process: *Dusangire Ikivi n-Ikiyago*. 'Dusangire' explores each week problems ex-combatants encounter in the DRR process, addresses concerns that people have and seeks to diffuse tensions that might arise. The soap opera *Tubiri tuvurana Ubupfu* ("Together, we easily overcome our problems") also gives voice to the various groups of people involved and facilitates the effective reinsertion and reintegration of ex-combatants by addressing the same issues in a dramatized storyline.

"When journalists allow the demobilised to express their concerns and frustrations, it allows us at the NCDRR to answer some of their questions, which reduces the level of tensions"

— Col. Nzabampema, Head of Communications at the Executive Secretariat of the NCDRR

SFCG in DRC is grateful for the support of these donors:

A New Structure for SFCG in Burundi After Democratic Elections

In order to respond appropriately to the changing political situation in Burundi, and taking note of the improving capacities of the local organisations to manage conflicts and foster reconciliation, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is continuously reviewing its role in Burundi. From direct implementing agent, it is shifting to more of a support role, focussing on transferring know-how and building capacities of local organisations and community initiatives that SFCG helped create over the past decade. Thus, SFCG is progressively transferring responsibility for activities to local civil society organizations and has reorganised internally accordingly. Since April 2006 SFCG in Burundi focuses its efforts in two main areas of intervention: Media and Communities.

Media Interventions have been Studio Ijambo's expertise for over a decade. SFCG's media-production studio comprises an ethnically balanced team of journalists producing high-quality radio programmes to promote dialogue, peace, and reconciliation. Its programmes examine all sides of a conflict and highlight the points that unite, rather than divide Burundians. Communications in Burundi are usually – and traditionally – oral. Rumours and misinformation are commonplace and spread at great speed. Thus, the fears and misperceptions of one person are easily transferred to larger groups, reinforcing stereotypes, fears, and divisions. Radio -rooted in the oral tradition- is both the most pervasive and the most cost-effective means for delivering information in the region. As proved true in Rwanda, radio can bring out the absolute worst in people and become a tool for unscrupulous manipulation; or, alternatively, radio can provide, as Studio Ijambo does, non-inflammatory, balanced broadcasts that help break the cycle of violence. The Studio Ijambo slogan, "Dialogue is the future," captures the essence of its mission.

"SFCG didn't hesitate to reconcile the protagonists of the 1995-6 war, the divided political parties, as well as the balkanised neighbouring countries" – the spokesman for the Minister of National Solidarity at SFCG in Burundi's 10th anniversary in November 2005.

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Studio Ijambo produces and co-produces with radio partners eight to ten different programmes each week, providing a broad selection of options that appeal to different sectors of the population. Programmes appear in a wide array of formats, including news, features, soap opera, mediated call-in shows, and roundtables in Kirundi, the local language, and some in French. Subjects covered include human rights, democratisation, governance, refugees, land tenure, ethnic tension, HIV/AIDS, sexual violence, and the peacemaking roles of women, youth, and elders.

Community Interventions are carried out by the Community Outreach Team (COT), in which SFCG's former Women's Peace Centre (WPC) and the Youth Project have been integrated. Thus, the COT preserves the know-how of the WPC and the Youth Project and is more efficiently able to capitalise on the synergy between the outreach to these two as well as other populations.

The COT supports efforts of local people at becoming key players in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process and at benefiting from the possibilities the new constitution offers, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, home region, religion, or age. SFCG was the first organisation to provide a space for Burundian women affected by the violence (both Hutu and Tutsi) to share their experiences and plan joint action. Since then, SFCG has played a key role in developing and supporting a network of hundreds of women's associations that are involved in rebuilding the country, exemplifying positive, inter-ethnic solidarity, and mobilising their constituencies for peace. SFCG has also been a frontrunner in Burundi in bringing together youth from different ethnic and geographic backgrounds.

Through trainings and exchanges, the COT will continue to increase indigenous leadership, particularly among women, youth and other marginalised groups. Its outreach with community dialogues and cultural activities will continue to promote reconciliation among divided communities and foster understanding between estranged neighbours.

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