

## Search for Common Ground - Burundi

### KEY FINDINGS

### MEDIA MAPPING SURVEY, SEPTEMBER 2008



SFCG's Community Outreach Coordinator facilitates a session during a March 2008 conflict resolution training in Kamenge (Bujumbura)

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international NGO with programs in 18 countries whose mission is to transform the way the world deals with conflict: away from adversarial approaches and towards cooperative solutions. Just after the Rwandan genocide and in the midst of increasing ethnic tensions and violence in Burundi, SFCG launched a series of media and community projects in Burundi to advance the following primary objectives:

- To foster effective participation among women and men, both youth and adults, within the framework of democratic governance;
- To facilitate the reintegration and inclusion of marginalized social groups, namely: demobilized combatants, returnees, displaced persons, victims, ex-prisoners, and members of the Batwa ethnic group;
- To encourage the effective and responsible exercise of the right to freedom of expression in all aspects of Burundian society;
- To reduce the instances of violence related to land conflicts, acknowledging their links to the crises in 1972 and 1993; and
- To promote ownership of the transitional justice process amongst all Burundians.

In pursuit of these objectives, SFCG carried out a media mapping survey with the support of the Finnish government in September 2008. The results of this survey lend themselves to a better understanding of the process of information exchanges between the government, civil society and the media.

### SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The overall objective of this study was to inform SFCG, the government, the media and civil society about the ways in which information on governmental policies is transmitted. These findings suggested means to improve the process of information-sharing in the future. The specific objectives of this study were:

- To identify and analyze how the government and the media inform the public, particularly how each selects the information to circulate and how each targets their audiences and;

- To identify and analyze how the public accesses information on governmental policies and what value it places on the credibility of such information.

## PLAN AND METHODOLOGY

The research focused on the nature and the quality of the different communication channels linking government and civil society, the government and its representatives, and the government and the media. Subsequently, the study sought to determine who had access to this information and through what means. In addition, the survey undertook to evaluate the degree of understanding that the population had of the information they received, and the level of trust that they placed in such information.

While a literature review was used to provide a contextual framework for the survey, the bulk of the research took the form of interviews and data collection carried out with the assistance of key actors from government, the media, and civil society.

An external consultant, Innocent Nsabimana, compiled the final narrative report.

## CONTEXT

In post-conflict Burundi, the quality and the way communication takes place between the government, civil society and the media play a crucial role in shaping the twin processes of political normalization and national reconstruction.



Participants of the live monthly transitional justice panel in March 2008 in Bujumbura

Since 1992, Burundi has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of private media outlets, including: television, radio and written press. Although this represents an important divergence from previous policies ensuring state monopolization of mass media, in and of itself such growth guarantees neither greater thematic coverage (of topics relevant to the population) nor enhanced geographical coverage (in regions outside of the capital).

If Burundi theoretically benefits from a plurality of radio stations, plurality is undermined in practice by an unfavorable economic situation, in which the high costs of information gathering and of obtaining private media licenses frequently become prohibitive.

Nonetheless, true radio pluralism would serve as an important means of advancing socio-economic development in a country where half of the population is illiterate. By virtue of its ability to reach a broad swathe of the population, radio is the means *par excellence* to spread information in Burundi.

The media mapping project focused on information exchanges related to the Strategic Framework for Growth and Poverty Reduction (CSLP), the Transitional Justice Mechanisms, free health coverage for children under five, and child birth. The study also emphasized relations between the media and the government.

## KEY FINDINGS

A member of civil society noted: *"Overall, governmental priorities are not brought to the public eye aside from the rare occasions when the president will make a public announcement stating, "I will conduct such and such a policy". The priorities remain unknown to the public and even to members of the government."*

The study shows that communication on governmental priorities occurs by means of various channels; however, mass media in general and radio in particular are the preferred means of facilitating information exchanges.

The study also reveals that the information received by the population on governmental priorities is insufficient, only sometimes reliable and, consequently, that information must always be verified.

Furthermore, the study points to the poor quality of the information relayed by the media on important governmental undertakings, such as the CLSP and the Transitional Justice Mechanisms. As a result, the population clearly lacks knowledge with respect to these issues.

Moreover, the study shows that even state officials know very little about the implementation of the CSLP or the evolution of Transitional Justice Mechanisms. While the population considers itself to be well-informed about issues related to free health care for children and child birth, the general consensus is that it is rarely consulted, let alone educated, about the government's policy priorities.

These findings suggest that the government does not have a coherent communications strategy.

This lack of strategy hinders the population from actively participating in the policy-making process and obstructs the flow of information to the media. Consequently, the relationship between the government and the media is more readily characterized as a counter-productive competition for information than as a fruitful collaboration.

In order to overcome the information deficiency surrounding certain governmental policies and to improve the flow of information between the government, the media, and civil society; this study advances the following recommendations:

- For the government — establish a communication policy in agreement with the Constitution and guaranteeing the freedom and proper functioning of the press.
- For the media — strengthen professionalism internally and coverage externally to reach remote populations.

- For the population — develop a critical distance vis-à-vis the media. Do not accept every piece of information relayed by the press or radio on faith, thereby avoiding the “yabivuze / the radio said it” trap.

## CONCLUSION

The study shows that, while some communication on governmental priorities is taking place, current levels and types of information exchange are often inadequate. Communication related to facts and events is abundant, whereas topics such as the CLSP and Mechanisms of Transitional Justice are not sufficiently discussed.

This deficiency can be attributed to the fact that important stakeholders, most especially members of government, are either unpracticed in communicating with the media or have not fully mastered the topics at hand. This profoundly affects the media’s ability to produce effective news coverage, particularly when combined with their severe lack of financial resources.

These problems are compounded by the fact that reforms passed in 2007, aiming to expand the freedom of the press, have yet to be implemented.

In order to increase active participation by the people in the political development of their country, the problems identified in this report should be addressed.

In particular, the media’s potential to link governmental and civil society should be more effectively harnessed and policies favoring the further decentralization of lines of communication should be persuaded. Such policies should include incentives for the development of community radios and local newspapers.

A civil society representative:  
*"The only thing we should reflect upon is that in times of crisis, one should learn how to transmit information. This is the case for crises between the government and the media, where the information was solely focused on negative issues, as if there were no positive ones. One should not allow the problems one might have with the government to permeate one's work, especially when one deals with a population like ours that is 'yahahamutse: traumatized'."*

*This document is a summary of a September 2008 Media Mapping Survey in Burundi. A full copy of this report can be acquired by contacting Doreen Chi at [dchi@sfcg.org](mailto:dchi@sfcg.org)*

*SFCG is grateful to the following partner for their support:*

