

Concept Paper for Supporting Free, Fair, and Peaceful Elections in Burundi 2008-2011

Introduction

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international organisation dedicated to transforming the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches towards cooperative solutions. Established in 1982, SFCG works in 17 countries around the world, applying a diverse toolkit to target key issues and themes with different stakeholders in a conflict. SFCG established its program in Burundi in 1995 in response to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and similar tensions and violence rising in Burundi. In its 12 years of operation in the country, SFCG has established a strong reputation as a neutral, third-party actor, providing informative, solutions-oriented radio programming complemented by intensive community-based outreach activities. An external evaluator for USAID recognized that over the course of its intervention SFCG has changed journalists' approach within Burundi, creating a more active, investigative media landscape that now dares to question politicians and other decision-makers. SFCG has institutionalised its approach in local structures, establishing the independent radio station Radio Isanganiro, arguably Burundi's most popular radio station

SFCG was active in supporting the 2005 national elections, both during the preparatory phase and on voting day itself. SFCG's radio production studio Studio Ijambo produced hundreds of hours of radio programming on civic and voter education, encouraging Burundians to take part in the process in a thoughtful and non-violent manner. SFCG led the organisation of a Media Synergie that brought together 11 media actors in a partnership to provide accurate and credible information on the elections process. SFCG also facilitated the organisation of a network of women's groups that led a sensitisation campaign mobilising women's participation in the elections, both as voters and as candidates. SFCG's efforts were noted by both election observers and civil society for the role they played in ensuring the transparency of the 2005 elections process.

SFCG's work has supported four recent African elections, including in Burundi, the DRC, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Central to SFCG's strategy during each of these elections has been the engagement of youth to participate peacefully, providing them with inclusive forums and accurate electoral information, both through face-to-face interactions and multimedia campaigns. In a recent evaluation of SFCG's strategy during the Sierra Leone elections, SFCG radio programming was singled out by youth in particular for being informative and praised for putting youth voices on the air.

With preparations beginning for the next round of elections, scheduled for 2010, SFCG staff and partners met in a session to review successes and challenges of previous election efforts and to develop a strategy to support free, fair, and peaceful elections in 2010 in Burundi. This strategy is outlined below.

Context

While the 2005 national elections were confirmed to be free and fair by domestic and international observers, unfortunately they have not led to a period of good governance and development in Burundi. Three years later, the country still faces insecurity with the last rebel group the Front National de Liberation (FNL) only agreeing to join the peace process in the last few months. The elected government has made little progress in moving a reform agenda forward, instead getting sidetracked by political squabbles and power struggles that have resulted in several Cabinet reshuffles. At the local level, confusion and misunderstanding on the distinctions between the roles of the locally elected leaders and the traditional authorities known as Bashingantahe have caused conflicts over resources and power that have blocked local development and governance within communes. These problems have additionally complicated the decentralisation process, which is not being implemented conforming to the provisions in the communal law. Civil society, which should play a role in holding government accountable for adhering to the law, remains too weak and divided to effectively influence decision-makers.

The population is growing frustration by the minimal progress being made by the government, citing the growing insecurity and declining quality of life caused by the rising prices of basic commodities as key elements of their dissatisfaction. The government itself is exacerbating these tensions by making unreasonable promises that cannot be supported with actual developments, or which have not taken into account the possible negative consequences of them. One example was the pronouncement of free health care for pregnant women that coincided with a strike by the health professionals over working conditions.

Other national developments and processes further complicate the context in Burundi. With Tanzania requiring all Burundian refugees to leave the country in the next year, mass population movements are expected while services are not sufficiently available in the areas of return. Additionally, the problems of land availability have not been effectively addressed, and the expected return of large numbers of refugees will only further escalate these conflicts. Similarly the transitional justice process outlined in the Peace Agreement has barely advanced, leaving reconciliation unaddressed in a country with deep wounds between people, communities, and populations. Similar delays and ineffectiveness exist in the disarmament and reintegration process, with ex-combatants still keenly vulnerable to manipulation and potential re-recruitment.

This government ineffectiveness has been reflected in their preparations for the upcoming elections. With the 2010 election fixed by the constitution, the government has been slow to mobilise itself into action; however events are now beginning to pick up speed. An essential population and housing census has just begun, and the Commissioners on the National Election Commission have recently been appointed. Much clearly is still left to do, and further delays will challenge elections awareness and mobilisation efforts. A concrete schedule is required to give media, government and civil society adequate targets to aim for and to allow them to begin conveying critical information to the voting population.

Goal and Objectives

SFCG in Burundi has established a goal of **promoting a free, transparent, and inclusive elections process that puts in place responsible institutions as the basis for the rule of law**. The overall objective of its elections-related work is *to promote responsible leadership and good governance involving the effective participation of all of the diverse groups within the country*.

SFCG has established specific objectives for the three distinct phases of the electoral period, pre, during, and post, as follows:

- Pre:** To prepare the different actors (including politicians, local authorities, civil society including the media, and the general population) to participate in the 2010 electoral process.
- During:** To contribute to the conduct of free, transparent, inclusive, and peaceful elections in Burundi.
- Post:** To support democratically elected institutions in establishing good governance; and To support the post-electoral reconciliation process.

Strategy

SFCG in Burundi's strategy involves linking activities targeting key stakeholders such as candidates, local officials, and civil society leaders with broader activities using media and outreach that reach a diverse, general population, including women and youth. This approach targets both the "supply" and "demand" aspects of good governance, strengthening both leaders and individuals in the general public. SFCG in Burundi has developed strong capacity in training and outreach work on governance issues through support from the Belgian Government, and will draw on this expertise for its elections-related work. It will be further informed by experiences and best practices from SFCG's elections programming in other African countries, including Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo. SFCG is

SFCG's Studio Ijambo, with its 6 weekly radio programmes and established credibility with audiences across the country, provides a key leverage point for SFCG's elections approach. With capabilities in a range of formats, including dramas, roundtables, and live call-in programmes, SFCG is able to engage a broad cross-section of the population that includes vulnerable and marginalised groups like women and youth.

committed to promoting learning across its country programmes to ensure effective and efficient initiatives.

SFCG recognises that elections are a process and not an event. For this reason, SFCG's strategy distinctly identifies objectives and tools for the pre, during, and post election phases. Given the highly competitive nature of elections, with their winner-take-all approach, divisions are frequently emphasised and exacerbated,

creating a need for healing and reconciliation in the post-elections phase in order for the country to move forward in the business of governing. SFCG's approach recognises and responds to this challenge, with specific tools and activities targeted to fostering reconciliation at the political and community level. SFCG first piloted this type of political reconciliation in Liberia following the 2005 national elections, and will access this experience for its work in Burundi.

Tools

SFCG will draw on its extensive toolbox to implement its elections strategy. Key tools to be used include:

- Radio programmes (drama, magazines, and interactive formats);
- Participatory theatre;
- Candidate forums with question and answer sessions with the general public;
- Radio spots;
- Roundtable discussions
- Trainings and workshops addressing a variety of themes including civic participation, leadership, rumour management, analysis of information, and responsible media coverage of elections;
- Video clips;
- Support to synergies and networks, both media and civil society;
- Election Day reporting;
- Contests and quizzes; and
- Distribution of radios.

SFCG brings a number of resources to bear, including:

- 12 years of experience working in-country;
- Strong credibility as a neutral, third-party broker;
- Studio Ijambo, a multi-media production studio with a cadre of journalists trained in common ground journalism and a reputation for its high quality, solutions-oriented programming;
- Training capacity on a range of issues, including principles and practices of common ground journalism, advocacy, women's rights, governance concepts, particularly targeting women and youth, conflict resolution, and rumor management, among others;
- Partnerships with radio stations and civil society partners across the country, including Radio Isanganiro that has regional broadcast capacity;
- Relationships with government officials, media actors, local organizations, and other community groups across the country; and
- Highly skilled staff representing the ethnic and geographic diversity of the country.