Learning Brief: What Works to Address Electoral Violence in Burundi

This brief looks at lessons learned from the implementation of the “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu: Strengthening Trust and Positive Relations Between Youth and Police in Burundi” project. Led by Search for Common Ground (Search) and funded by the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, the project ran from September 2019 to February 2022. An external evaluation was then conducted in the last two months of the project, in order to provide an external assessment with a focus on effectiveness, impact and sustainability. The evaluation allowed the identification of a number of lessons learned, which could be useful for any organization working to promote peacebuilding and prevent violent conflict in Burundi. It is in this spirit that the present brief has been produced.

The brief provides, first, a short context analysis followed by a presentation of the project, and then a description of the lessons learned.

Electoral violence and community policing in Burundi

Burundi was long marked by violent clashes between its two largest ethnic groups and related political factions. In August 2000, then, the signature of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement laid down the basis for a peace process that is still unfolding to this day. The Arusha Agreement made the reform of the country’s security sector one of its priorities, also introducing the concept of community policing. This was based on a new understanding of security that, owing to the equal inclusion of Burundian ethnic groups, aimed at promoting social cohesion after protracted violent clashes. It is on these premises that the new Burundian National Police (Police nationale du Burundi, or PNB) was established in 2004.

In this framework the institution of mixed security committees (comités mixtes de sécurité) was formally recognised and regulated in 2014. Committees include representatives of the local administration, the police, the justice system, the population and civil society organisations (CSOs); they have a wide range of different tasks, some overlapping the duties of local authorities and security forces, such as protecting the population against political and economic threats, promoting human rights and patriotic education, as well as ensuring food security and reinforcing family planning.

Overall, the reform of the security sector and the creation of the committees were supposed to ease tensions between police and communities. Yet, these have remained high. This was most notably the case of the 2015 elections, which were marked by violent confrontations between security forces and young demonstrators. The last electoral cycle, in 2020, took place in a less restrictive environment and brought to power a new president, Évariste Ndayishimiye, who made a commitment to promote the rule of law and fight corruption. Nevertheless, human rights violations continue to be documented, mostly targeting opposition parties and individuals suspected of being involved in armed attacks.

About the project

The “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu” project’s main aim was to strengthen trust and positive relationships between youth and police to prevent violence before, during and after the 2020 electoral cycle. To this effect, the project set out to transform the relationship between the two groups by encouraging constructive and humanizing interactions, and also with other members of the community. The project intended, in particular, to harness the potential of mixed security committees, which, since 2014, have been set up in communities across the country, and to strengthen them to become vehicles where youth, the community, police and local authorities could safely interact and de-escalate tensions.
The project focused on three interconnected objectives: first, to increase the capacity of police officers, mixed security committee and youth to peacefully address tensions and conflict in their communities; secondly, to foster the dialogue between communities and police on sensitive issues, including security and the electoral process; and lastly, to strengthen alternative, positive narratives of collaboration between police forces and youth. In line with these objectives, project activities covered topics of conflict transformation, consensus building, and conflict and gender-sensitive community outreach.

Lessons learned

The evaluation of the “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu” project identified a total of seven lessons learned, which affected the extent to which the project was able to achieve its intended outcomes.

(1) First, projects working with government stakeholders must account for a level of resistance. This may be due to nothing more than the nature of working with complex bureaucracies, but it can also be due to political tensions. Under the “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu” project, collaborating with local authorities was at times difficult, particularly during the electoral period. In some cases, representatives of provincial and municipal administrations tried to interfere with project activities especially when it came to identifying participants in the project’s training sessions and radio programmes. This highlighted the reluctance existing among politicians towards democratisation writ large, but also the existence of an institutional debate, as improvements also took place, in regard, for example, to media and the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.

(2) Youth champions, as defined by the “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu” project, can be counted on to act as multipliers. Compared to other youth, champions can, in fact, be a powerful weapon ready to air their thinking without worrying on who will hear about it. The project was able to select and support these champions in a number of ways, including by providing some small financial support, so that they could effectively continue to mobilize their peers even beyond the training and dialogue sessions organized under the project. As Burundian youth often face challenges related to their status in society, this was a very effective strategy, one worth replicating.

(3) Intervening on local sources of conflict, acknowledging that these may vary, is an effective and quick way to build trust. By localizing activities, the project was able to promote discussions around issues to which community members could easily relate. These were not only related to electoral violence, but also to theft and drug consumption, for example. Yet, this strategy was effective and important in ensuring buy-in from communities, and could still be improved. In some locations in Burundi, in fact, addressing violent conflict means addressing displacement, and in the future this could be a topic of particular resonance for young and old Burundians alike.

(4) Focus on equal gender representation. Working in the security sector means engaging structures that are generally male-dominated. Indeed, among members of mixed security committees, men number far more than women. Search’s experience with the project showed that if one is not strict on equal representation of women and men this may lead the local administrations to mostly target men, as for them security matters still concern mostly men. This bias then limits the contributions of women. In the future, similar projects should give particular attention towards achieving gender balance, and if this is not yet possible, then there should be activities only dedicated to women, to build networks and confidence.

(5) With government institutions it is important to articulate all the changes that are necessary for impact. In engaging representatives from the police force, the “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu” project worked primarily at the individual level, seeking first and foremost to change the way in which each participating officer saw his or her role. The evaluation found that this was an important step in the project’s pathway to impact, but also that it needs to be completed by changes at the institutional level. In highly centralized and hierarchical
structures, in fact, the practices of individual members will only go so far as the rules and regulations that they must obey. Future projects should address this need by incorporating advocacy efforts.

(6) Work with the media is important, but their capacity needs to be strengthened. The collaboration with radio stations that partnered with Search under the project exposed the limited capacity of journalists to cover sensitive issues and chair debates involving speakers addressing topics from opposite standpoints. Yet, this is a crucial skill to have, especially during electoral campaigns, when the mobilization of supporters is at its highest.

(7) Harness the power of volunteerism. In some areas, youth have understood that to cement the social cohesiveness initiated by the project they need to give back to their communities by doing some voluntary actions, like visiting jailed people, buying insurance cards to the most vulnerable, assisting people admitted in hospitals, etc. Creating incentives for volunteerism represents a way to sustain youth participation both within a project (by creating trickled down opportunities for participation) and beyond it (by giving skills and experiences that will influence how people behave as they grow up).

Overall, the evaluation found the “Tubiri Tuvurana Ubupfu” project to have been effective, and the aforementioned seven lessons learned are key to understand why and how. As tensions remain present in the country, the hope is therefore that they can be taken into account by organizations, including Search, that are working to promote peacebuilding and conflict prevention.