International Peace Institute

Women- and Youth-Focused Peacebuilding Networks in Burundi

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Introduction and Context

The period from late 2014 to early 2015 was one of the most challenging in Burundi's recent history.[2] The country found itself experiencing an interlocking political and security crisis due to the political contestations that emerged prior to the 2015 election, when the incumbent President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for reelection despite a constitutional term limit.[3] This decision, supported by the ruling party and approved by the country's highest court, raised the ire of a number of civil society groups, opposition political leaders, and a few leaders from within the ruling party. These opponents criticized the move as a signal that the ruling party was bent on undermining the constitution, as well as the spirit and letter of the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement.[4]

Nkurunziza's decision contributed to a dangerous rift in opinions within the country, leading to widespread pro- and anti-government protests, with youth and women at the forefront. Violence became the order of the day, whether perpetrated by the state or by protesters in the name of self-defense.[5] As a result of the conflict, tens of thousands of citizens were internally displaced or forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries.[6]

This political debacle undid much of the country's previous progress (especially gains made since 2005) to advance and consolidate peace and reconciliation. Further, the events of 2015 brought about uncertainty about the future political trajectory of the country that is still evident today and continues to cripple the dividends of previous efforts to achieve peaceful coexistence. Signs of escalating tension—including hate speech, growing hostility between different identity groups, mistrust, social discord, and fear (perceived or real) of large-scale massacres—have taken hold over aspirations for a better future.[7]

In order to find solutions to the root causes of this political instability, the government, non-state actors, and subregional organizations have undertaken dialogue initiatives in Burundi. Key among these was the East African Community's dialogue initiative, led by the former president of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa. However, despite these efforts, the dialogues have not yet resolved the impasse.[8] Indeed, efforts to find a durable solution may have been thwarted by perceptions that the current political impasse is not close to being overcome. These perceptions were reinforced by the outcome of the referendum on May 17, 2018, which amended the constitution of Burundi to allow the incumbent president to run

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2 The current political situation in Burundi—but more specifically the events that emerged in the lead-up to the 2015 general elections—adds to the series of crises that the country has experienced since its independence and whose paroxysm was reached in 1993 following the assassination of the first democratically elected president and the ensuing intense violence.

3 International Crisis Group, "Burundi: A Dangerous Third Term," May 20, 2016, available at www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/burundi/burundi-dangerous-third-term .

4 For the constitution of Burundi and details about the election of the president, see www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Burundi_2005.pdf . For the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement see https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/accord/arusha-peace-and-reconciliation-agreement-burundi .

5 See, for instance, Human Rights Watch, "Burundi's Human Rights Crisis," 2016, available at www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/burundi_compendium_2016_web_version_4.pdf .

6 Thijs Van Laer, "Why Burundians Continue to Flee," *African Arguments*, August 24, 2017, available at http://africanarguments.org/2017/08/24/why-burundians-continue-to-flee/ .

7 Anna Dubuis, "Burundi's Last Civil War Killed 300,000. A New One Is Coming," GlobalPost, March 28, 2016, available at www.pri.org/stories/2016-03-28/burundi-s-last-civil-war-killed-300000-new-one-coming .

8 The dialogues were marred by various concerns, especially from opposition political parties claiming that they were not inclusive enough. The dialogues were also impacted by a lack of participation of some stakeholders who were living in exile. Many of these individuals expressed fears and concerns that some of their leaders were still facing arrest warrants for allegedly orchestrating the attempted coup to oust President Nkurunziza in May 2015.

again in 2020 and 2027.[9] Ultimately, those taking part in political dialogue were unable to move away from the abyss given the varying views they hold about the genesis of the current crisis (if they even agree there is a crisis) and how to resolve it.

The post-2015 political debacle has also strained Burundi's relations with some of its regional and international partners, including the AU, UN, and European Union.[10] The AU Peace and Security Council, for instance, decided to deploy a peace support operation to Burundi, though this was not endorsed by the January 2016 summit of heads of state and government.[11] Instead, the AU deployed a human rights observation mission with a mandate to document and report on violations of such rights.[12] Another sign of strained relations with the international community was the government's announcement of its withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC) on October 27, 2017, thus complicating any future legal processes related to human rights violations within the ambit of international law.

The current situation in Burundi calls into question some international efforts to support, advance, and contribute to peacebuilding in countries coming out of conflict. In 2005, Burundi was one of the first countries to receive international support through the UN Peacebuilding Fund.[13] Over a period of about ten years, Burundi was allocated $65 million from the fund, which was intended to support programs in such areas as security sector reform, rule of law, human rights, and reconciliation.[14] Additionally, the country's

mediated transition enjoyed the support of the AU through the African Union Mission in Burundi, deployed in 2003.[15] This was "re-hatted" as the UN Operation in Burundi in 2004.[16] As the country navigates a complex political situation, the question is what the international community may have gotten "wrong" in Burundi that could have contributed to some of the challenges being experienced today.

This case study focuses on the experiences of two local networks in Burundi that are undertaking work in the areas of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These networks focus on two stakeholders considered critical during a country's post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding phases: women and youth. Whether it is the United Nations with its renewed focus on conflict prevention through "sustaining peace" or the AU's governance architecture, the international community seems to largely agree that any process to advance peacebuilding requires specific engagement of women and youth.[17]

The networks chosen for this case study are the Réseau des organisations des Jeunes en Action pour la paix, la réconciliation et le développement (the Network of Youth Organizations Working for Peace, Reconciliation, and Development, or REJA), a network of organizations dealing with issues affecting youth, and the Association Dushirehamwe, a women's network. Their programs focus largely on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, human rights, development, and social cohesion. Both networks seek to reposition their

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9   "Burundi Approves Referendum Extending Nkurunziza's Rule until 2034," IOL, May 21, 2018, available at www.iol.co.za/news/africa/burundi-approves-referendum-extending-nkurunzizas-rule-until-2034-15091860 . While the amendments make the current president eligible to stand again, should he so choose, after the referendum media reported President Nkurunziza's indication that he would not run in 2020. See, for instance, "Burundi's President Says He Won't Seek Another Term," New York Times, June 7, 2018, available at www.nytimes.com/2018/06/07/world/africa/burundi-president-pierre-nkurunziza.html .

10 The UN's latest concern over the situation in Burundi was communicated through a Security Council presidential statement on April 5, 2018, available at www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13278.doc.htm . On the EU, see, for instance, Council of Europe, "Burundi: EU Closes Consultations under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement," March 14, 2016, available at www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/14/burundi-eu-closes-consultations-cotonou-agreement/ .

11 "African Union Decides against Peacekeepers for Burundi," Al Jazeera, February 1, 2016, available at www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/african-union-decides-peacekeepers-burundi-160131102052278.html .

12 "Burundi Agrees to Accept African Union Human Rights Monitors," Deutsche Welle, February, 27, 2016, available at www.dw.com/en/burundi-agrees-to-accept-african-union-human-rights-monitors/a-19079345 .

13 In 2005 the first post-transition election was held in Burundi following the protracted mediation that led to the signing of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, as well as subsequent cease-fire negotiations with several armed groups in the country.

14 For a detailed account of this support, see www.unpbf.org/countries/burundi/ .

15 See, for instance, Henri Boshoff, "Burundi: African Union's First Mission," Institute for Security Studies, June 10, 2003, available at https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/5841/3103.pdf;sequence=1 .

16 For a detailed account of UN peacekeeping missions in Burundi, see UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "The United Nations in Burundi: Peacekeeping Mission Completes Its Mandate," December 2006, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/past/onub/photos.pdf .

17 For example, UN Resolutions 1325 (on women, peace, and security) and 2250 (on youth, peace, and security) serve to confirm the international community's focus on the role of these two stakeholder groups on issues relating to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, among others.

respective target groups—women and youth—as drivers and agents of change in Burundi, thus enabling them to find solutions to their own challenges rather than being led by external actors.

These networks, like others currently operational in Burundi, find themselves working in a sociopolitical context that is both challenging and unpredictable. The relationship between the government, some of its international partners, and internal stakeholders, in particular some of the opposition political parties, is vexed. The two networks were selected as case studies on the basis of their ongoing engagement with youth and women from different political, social, and economic backgrounds who are actively contributing to peacebuilding and development at the local and national levels. The information on their organizational structure and activities was collected through desk research and key informant interviews conducted with the networks' leaders and field staff.[18]

The case study outlines the genesis of these two networks, including their working modalities, programs, activities, and engagements, but without aiming to compare their work. It concludes with some recommendations for networks operating in Burundi, directed to other network organizations, as well as to international actors, including donors.

Mapping Local Networks for Peace[19]

NETWORK OF YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS WORKING FOR PEACE, RECONCILIATION, AND DEVELOPMENT (REJA)

The Réseau des organisations des Jeunes en Action pour la paix, la réconciliation et le développement (Network of Youth Organizations Working for Peace, Reconciliation, and Development, or REJA) was created in 2001, subsequent to the signing of the 2000 Arusha Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, as a network intent on serving the needs of young people. It was officially recognized by the government on July 11, 2003.

During the years immediately after its formation, the network comprised 164 community-based organizations that operated in different parts of the country. However, this changed following the promulgation of Law No. 1/02 on the Organic Framework of Non-profit Making Associations on January 27, 2017, which went into effect in October of that year.[20] This law reduced the number of REJA's members to only thirteen. This was because most of its member associations had yet to fully comply with and fulfill all the statutory requirements that arose from the new law.

At the national level, REJA has a National General Assembly, and at the regional level it has provincial general assemblies. The National General Assembly is composed of the presidents of the provincial executive committees, which elect the members of the executive committee at the national level. The members of the provincial executive committees are elected by the provincial general assemblies, whose members are the leaders or focal points of the associations in all the provinces and communes. This elaborate organizational structure affirms the national as well as the community-based reach and character of REJA. REJA has received funding primarily from international donors, including the UN Peacebuilding Fund, UNESCO, and the EU.

REJA seeks to mobilize and support youth organizations to work collaboratively, to build and strengthen their capacities, and to raise funding for their projects. It works to build these organizations' capacity through projects such as the Responsible Youth Citizenship project and Youth Employability and Advocacy project. These projects have provided platforms for local and national authorities and political actors and young people to debate issues such as job creation, quality education, and participation in political and peacebuilding processes. In this regard, REJA focuses on building a "new society" in Burundi by reinforcing mutual respect and the well-being of all

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18 Due to the security sensitivities in the country, some interviewees have requested to remain anonymous.

19 This section of the paper draws from interviews (written and verbal) conducted with representatives of REJA and Dushirehamwe. It also draws from other sources (including websites and various reports) that the authors managed to access during the information-gathering stage of this paper.

20 Law No. 1/02 of January 27, 2017, on the Organic Framework of Non-profit Associations repealed Legislative Decree No. 1/11 of April 8, 1992, on the same subject. Compared to the 1992 decree, the new law is perceived to be quite restrictive on the operations of NGOs. Article 82, for example, stipulates that all activities of nonprofit associations must be endorsed by the Ministry of Home Affairs or Ministry of Security, without which they risk a penalty.

citizens, and youth in particular.

Furthermore, as part of its contribution to peacebuilding through the prevention of violence, REJA focuses on raising awareness among young people about the sources of violence. It mostly does this during important political periods such as the run-up to elections, because it is at such times that young people are most susceptible to being coerced into violent action.

REJA regularly conducts advocacy activities to better inform decision makers and political actors on the needs of young people. For example, it undertook a study and produced a report with a view to sensitizing candidates on the priorities and needs of young people in the lead-up to the 2015 elections. It was hoped that candidates would develop social projects that addressed the specific needs of youth. To be more effective, REJA has begun to improve its advocacy strategy by building the capacity of its member organizations to carry out advocacy actions under their own leadership.

Since late 2017, REJA has initiated activities aimed at fostering critical and creative thinking through a methodology called "Think Tank Isôko."[21] This methodology involves multiple facilitated, interactive conversations among REJA member organizations, academics and researchers, the media, representatives from other civil society organizations (CSOs), representatives of different state institutions, and the private sector. These conversations are intended to guide the search for solutions to the problems raised by young people. Think Tank Isôko also contributes to the creation of fora for discussions between young leaders and different state and non-state actors, further providing young people with a creative space to express their aspirations for their future and well-being.

REJA often organizes fora for dialogue between leaders of youth wings of political parties and young leaders in CSOs, particularly those working on youth issues. The fora focus on issues related to democracy, governance, peace, security, political participation, and local development. Through practice and experience, REJA has been able to improve its approach to the dialogue fora by integrating two innovations: first, the dialogue fora are community-based instead of being imposed from outside or from "the top";[22] and second, the debates are conducted and led by the youth themselves. These fora achieve three main outcomes. First, they reinforce in the participants a culture of constructive debate and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Second, they strengthen citizens' understanding of issues affecting youth and how youth can be engaged in their communities. Third, they make youth feel that their voice can be heard. Some fora have resulted in participants setting up joint monitoring and advisory committees comprising youth from both political parties and civil society.

REJA holds oversight trainings for young people to communicate that, during an electoral process, the exercise of citizens' rights is not limited to voting but extends to monitoring and civic oversight of the programs and actions of elected officials. These trainings reinforce young leaders' understanding of and appreciation for the need to hold public representatives accountable.

Instead of imposing top-down messages on training participants, REJA has adopted an approach of "action research" to enrich its various training modules. To advance this approach, it organizes focus groups with young people to involve them in the analysis of the context and the definition of key messages. These are further developed by experienced national trainers, at times with the support of consultants. This approach allows for the development of context-specific messages and promotes ownership of content by current and would-be beneficiaries. Additionally, this approach has enabled REJA to introduce new themes such as the peaceful resolution of conflicts, responding to and dealing with misinformation, and organizational skills in its *Manual on Classical Education for Young People on Civic Education*. However, implementation of these

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21 The information in the following paragraphs is sourced from a report obtained from REJA entitled "Rapport d'activité sur la formation au module 'Nawe Nuze' dans le cadre de la mise en œuvre du projet 'Participation citoyenne des jeunes,'" April 2018. It is also drawn from interviews conducted with members and representatives of the organization.

22 From an interview with one REJA representative, this was understood to mean that, instead of the national-level members (or experts) implementing solutions, participants from local-level communities (including young people) are encouraged to identify, analyze, and engage in dialogue on the issues they face in an attempt to find solutions.

trainings is difficult in the prevailing political and security context in Burundi.

Since 2011, REJA has set up and supervised solidarity groups of young people who have been the beneficiaries of its activities at the community level.[23] Through these groups, young people are organized to adopt savings and credit schemes that allow them to acquire capital to start their own income-generating activity. Additionally, they are taught financial management skills. REJA seeks to initiate activities that connect these young people to financial institutions, thus opening up opportunities for their broader financial inclusion.

REJA has achieved two particularly notable outcomes. First, in 2010, CCFD-Terre Solidaire and the Scouts et Guides de France worked with REJA and the Association of Scouts of Burundi on a project aimed at creating a political climate conducive to a credible electoral process, with funding from the EU. As one its core outcomes, the project was able to ensure that 72,326 Burundian youth between the ages of 18 and 35 exercised their right to vote, and in cases where they needed to voice their concerns, they did so through nonviolent protest during the 2010 electoral process. The project evaluation concluded that "it is unanimous that synergy has worked and has indeed yielded positive results; specifically, it has increased youth resilience and independence, reduced the vulnerability of youth to manipulation, and decreased their involvement in election-related violence."[24]

Second, at the local level, REJA organized a "caravan for peace" campaign, mobilizing young people in the solidarity groups and REJA action clubs from the province of Gitega. The campaign contributed to shifting the local government's perceptions of REJA, evidenced by the fact that it is now classified by the Gitega provincial administration as the second most important civil society partner after the Red Cross. In addition, community development activities by youth participants in the peace campaign have shifted the perceptions of the communities where they reside; instead of seeing young people only as actors in violent conflict, communities shifted to considering them as active agents of peace. REJA has also set up community fora for young citizens in six communes of Gitega and in the three communes of Bujumbura city. These young activists have been facilitating youth mobilization actions for peace at the community level.

DUSHIREHAMWE WOMEN'S NETWORK[25]

Dushirehamwe is an association of women recognized by Burundian law and registered as a nonprofit organization on May 6, 2002. It is a network of 302 member organizations with strong community foundations in fourteen out of eighteen provinces. Dushirehamwe is organized through committees at the provincial and community levels. Through the support of international and local partners, it pursues its main objective of empowering women to play an active and leading role in post-conflict reconciliation, peacebuilding, and development programs. In this regard, its key projects focus on issues such as gender equality and women's rights, mediation, and reconciliation, as well as combating violence against women.

Dushirehamwe has provincial and municipal committees for each of its community-based foundations or associations. This structure is backed by a clear organizational vision with a focus on development outcomes. In order to design effective programs to implement in its aforementioned areas of work, the network continuously conducts participatory, community-based needs assessments to identify local development priorities and local challenges to social cohesion and peace. This method, according to the network, contributes to advancing local ownership of development and peacebuilding projects. Through financial support from local and international actors, as well as technical support from other implementing partners, Dushirehamwe has been able to be flexible in its programming. This allows it to adapt to the country's shifting political context, thereby increasing its relevance and

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23 This program, thus far, is only operational in Gitega Province, although REJA has indicated that it intends to implement it in other provinces as well. Information was not made available as to when this roll-out might be initiated.

24 REJA and EU, "Rapport d'évaluation du projet 'Mobilisation des jeunes pour une culture de la paix au Burundi,'" February 2011.

25 This section draws from interviews conducted with representatives of Dushirehamwe, as well as follow-up written submissions from their intervention on women in mediation.

allowing it to better achieve outcomes.

The network's thematic focus and reach are demonstrated by its 158 trainers in gender and conflict transformation, 390 women leaders specializing in grassroots or community-level reconciliation, and 352 groups with more than 10,000 members operating as an early warning network and reporting on violence against women. As a result of its initiatives relating to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, gender equality, and socioeconomic development targeted at women, in 2009 the organization earned the Best Civil Society Award in Burundi.

In response to the growing need for reconciliation and social cohesion in Burundi after more than two decades of civil war, and particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 elections, Dushirehamwe, through the support of UN Women, initiated an ambitious project aimed at creating a countrywide network of women peace and dialogue activists. Under this project, a community-based network of 420 women mediators and fourteen focal points was established, which has been operating in 129 municipalities across fourteen provinces. In spite of the tense political and security context, the women mediators network has embarked on mitigating political, family, social, and land conflicts at the community level. These women have gained the confidence and practical skills to deal with a growing number of sensitive conflict issues.

Through their interventions, women peace mediators have contributed to violence prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding at the community level. For example, during the 2015 post-election protests and riots, they managed to alleviate tensions and mitigate violence by promoting dialogue and conducting mediation sessions between security forces and protesters. On an ongoing basis, women mediators have been promoting nonviolent methods and dialogue to solve political and social conflicts. Given the national spread of this network, they have been able to verify and transmit accurate and reliable information on the political and security situation

to avoid misinformation and rumors, which often exacerbate intercommunal tension and increase the possibility of violence. In 2015 alone, women mediators dealt with more than 5,000 conflicts at the local level and initiated dialogue with political actors, security forces, and civil society across fourteen provinces.

Analysis[26]

ADVANTAGES OF NETWORKS

The actions of these two networks demonstrate how networks can effectively reach out to a larger group of people by working with and through community-based organizations. The work done by Dushirehamwe on women mediators, for instance, would have been limited in scope had its members not functioned or operated as a network.

Related to this, members of both networks strongly shared the view that networks provide an opportunity for more flexible and rapid responses. This makes them more effective instruments for mobilizing people for peace and integrated development. Often when a crisis emerges, as in Burundi in 2015, it is CSOs operating as networks that either are able to respond rapidly through advocacy or have the capability to address challenges across the country by virtue of having access to timely information.

Both these organizations were of the view that it is comparatively easier for CSOs organized into networks to advocate and take action within the limited democratic space in the country. Representatives of both REJA and Dushirehamwe believe that democracy is no longer just about citizens casting their votes but about effective and active participation by the citizenry in influencing governance. Their interventions include direct pressure from local CSOs and NGOs on public officials and lobbying of parliamentarians on issues that affect peace, respect for human rights, and development policy. In Burundi, given the many challenges facing the political opposition in the last decade, it was mostly local NGOs and CSOs that emerged as a counterweight to the ruling party. For instance, when CSOs and NGOs (including one of

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26 Although this section of the paper draws from interviews with both networks, care has been taken not to ascribe direct reference to those interviewed. Thus the authors have drawn on their own understanding and experiences of working in Burundi and the Great Lakes region to compile this section.

those interviewed for this paper) took action to publicly denounce the government's violations of human rights, the government and public administration refused to acknowledge the criticism but conceded the important role of non-state actors in peacebuilding.

CHALLENGES FACING NETWORKS

Conversely, it was noted that one of the challenges facing local CSOs is how to nurture, build, and maintain working relations with the government, on the one hand, and the international community (especially donors), on the other. On paper, non-state actors in Burundi are able to operate under the 2017 Law on the Organic Framework of Non-profit Associations. This law further enables recognized local NGOs to work with international NGOs and multilateral partners in Burundi and to benefit from their financing.[27]

However, the prevailing political mood in the country has meant that relations between the government and some CSOs remain strained.[28] For instance, as a result of this law, some of REJA's member organizations have not been able to fulfill all the regulatory requirements to continue operating. Both organizations acknowledge that they have approached their programming carefully in order to support efforts of local CSOs and communities in a manner that would not risk adverse reactions from the government.

These strained relations result from the fact that the government can easily regard the actions of some CSOs as having a political focus or impact and therefore as interfering in the space of political parties. This tension has resulted in the implementation of various measures by the government to restrict meetings, speech, and public demonstrations, most of which violate the civil and political rights of citizens. This has shrunken the space for civil society.

In this context, one of the interlocutors opined that the real value and significance of the campaigns by NGOs operating as networks is overestimated and their influence, if any, depends upon the space the government allows them to occupy. It was observed that the government only acknowledges interventions by CSOs and networks when it is incapable of intervening or unwilling to do so or when it deems activities by such groups to be complementary and therefore not a threat to its own.

Furthermore, the prevailing mood in the country, especially the strained relations between the government and some international partners, has led to a situation whereby some international NGOs are either barred from operating in Burundi or choose not to do so. This has meant that some networks are unable to operate simply because they depend heavily on donor support, which in the current context may be limited. Some networks find themselves undertaking activities that put them in the role of being a government "watchdog," which makes them more likely to attract international funding. However, this has the unintended result of the government seeing them as engaging in political action and thus may take steps to limit their operations. The two networks covered here, however, though they may have less funding than what they require for all their programs, seem to have been able to navigate the pitfalls of being seen as engaging in political action and have been able to continue operating in the country.

One interlocutor noted that some networks in Burundi suffer from weak organizational capabilities due to the "one-man NGO" or "one-man network" syndrome. That is, some networks are "known to exist" in Burundi but in reality have mostly worked off of the initiator's charisma and enthusiasm without any real teamwork, sharing of ideas, and collective decision making. It is questionable whether such networks are sustainable. In the view of one of the members of a network interviewed, this syndrome could be addressed by ensuring that there are proper internal processes of vetting and checking the bona fides of association members, drawing up clear terms of reference for membership, and creating

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27 Within the current political climate in Burundi, this law also enabled the government not to recognize some of the international organizations that had been working in Burundi, and other organizations opted to withdraw from the country as they deemed that the law would not allow them to operate freely. This had an adverse effect on some of the local CSOs that relied on collaboration with international CSOs.

28 As noted in the preceding sections of this paper, the negative impact of this law on REJA was that its membership base was substantially reduced, which in turn negatively impacted the organization's reach. The law also means that some networks (including those interviewed) have to be circumspect about the types of issues they can advocate for and the timing for doing so.

internal structures of accountability such as general assemblies.

Another issue related to organizational capability is coordination. It was observed that there is limited coordination among networks and NGOs conducting activities in the same thematic areas and targeting similar groups. As a result, these organizations often end up being seen as competitors rather than partners. For example, both networks we interacted with noted that there is a multitude of programs for young people and women by several organizations grouped together in networks within the same areas of action. Both networks acknowledged that they are not familiar with the other's programs in the same thematic areas.

Another challenge is the scarcity of well-documented information on the results of the actions of civil society organizations in general and those grouped in networks in particular. These two networks communicated that one of the "recent phenomena in Burundi is that the work being done by non-state actors in areas of peacebuilding, socioeconomic development, etc., is more valued by the international community." This is because non-state actors are often regarded as less bureaucratic than state actors and more effective in dealing with social challenges such as poverty. However, both REJA and Dushirehamwe lamented the fact that there is still a lack of analysis and research that could measure the real impact of the work by non-state actors, especially NGOs and CSOs—whether operating as networks or independently—in certain areas. This situation is partly due to the current tendency of donors to expect concrete, measurable, short-term results, even in a fluid field like peacebuilding, which is even more difficult in a political context such as Burundi's.

Interlocutors noted that some networks in the country struggle to secure their long-term sustainability (or that of their programs) due, among other things, to lack of technical capacity to adequately manage their projects and finances. They observed that while CSOs and NGOs are often critical of the lack of transparency in the activities and decision-making processes of government agencies, many networks and their member organizations also do not operate transparently. One of the interlocutors strongly believed that financial transparency,

coherence of action on the ground, coordination among development actors, and recognition of past mistakes should be expected not only of bilateral government donors but also of CSOs.

Another difficulty is the lack of skills and "know-how" to navigate difficult political situations while preserving the independence of a network. Particularly since 2015, actions by non-state actors, including networks, have been perceived as having significant impact on the lives of people in Burundi and are thus held in high regard, enjoying support from the general public and different stakeholders. Such confidence, however, has sometimes been undermined, for instance when protests organized by Burundian CSOs were hijacked by political party interests and ended in violence. A case in point was the 2015 protests initiated by CSOs that ended up being "appropriated" by political opposition parties, thus negatively affecting some of the CSOs. Both networks interviewed opined that there is a need to avoid the pitfalls of being seen as politically aligned—either with the ruling party or with the opposition. In the face of deteriorating relations between the public authorities and Burundian CSOs, this has made it difficult for most CSOs to freely voice their concerns, as this might cause a harsh government reaction.

Interlocutors from both these organizations also noted that networks in Burundi are often formed on the basis of common themes and target groups. However, with less support from implementing partners and donors, local CSO networks suffer from a glaring shortage of full-time personnel. For these networks to survive and achieve their objectives, they must constantly find ways to make themselves financially sustainable and independent through income-generating activities.

Both these networks, especially REJA, expressed a general concern that there have been insufficient attempts to document and publish each of their experiences and reflect on their challenges. This has meant that there is a limited repository of locally driven knowledge about the experiences and work of CSOs and networks. The default position for most local CSOs and networks has been to rely on reports from the evaluation of their work following the conclusion of a funded project. This knowledge gap was said to be exacerbated by what is perceived as a lack of, or very limited, interest from donors to support projects that are

exclusively research-focused.

Conclusion

This case study shows that there are no easy and straightforward answers about what makes for a sustainable effort to advance peacebuilding. What is clear, however, is that local CSOs, especially those working in peacebuilding, should adopt a network-based approach. This need arises from the reality that funding, geographic reach, and the prevailing political context in a country have an impact on whether the work being done contributes to tangible efforts to sustain peace.

However, while having networks is one thing, having a political environment conducive to their efforts is another. What clearly emerges from the Burundi context is that international efforts are needed not only to work with local CSOs but also to ensure that the government is made a partner in any peacebuilding programs. The lack of a working relationship between the government and other local stakeholders (political parties included) negatively affects progress to consolidate peace. In this context, it is commendable that, in spite of a difficult political climate, there are still CSOs actively undertaking various initiatives in Burundi to drive forward the agenda for peace.

With this in mind, this paper makes the following recommendations in relation to conflict prevention and peacebuilding work being undertaken through network approaches:

FOR LOCAL NETWORKS OPERATING IN BURUNDI

- **Improve coordination among networks:** Although the network approach can avoid duplication, the proliferation of networks in Burundi has resulted in the very problem they sought to mitigate. Accordingly, there is a need to devise ways to improve coordination among existing networks, for instance by having regular interactions to search for synergies and update each other on respective areas of work. This could assist in avoiding a diffusion of efforts and fragmentation of results.

FOR CSOS OPERATING IN NETWORKS

- **Strengthen the organizational capacity of network members:** Networks that operate as umbrella organizations—precisely because they bring together community-based partners with different levels of expertise, organizational knowledge and capacities, ethos, and modus operandi—should invest in institutional support programs. That is, the "main" organization in such a network or the national structure created to manage the operations of the network need to have programs aimed not only at meeting the intended outcomes but also at strengthening the organizational capacity of other associations and members of the network, especially those deeply rooted in communities.

- **Build networks between institutions, not individuals:** There is a need to ensure that networks are built on relations between institutions and not on individual connections. Institutional connections allow network members to share legacy and history, enhance their sustainability, and transfer capacities to each other and toward the beneficiaries of their activities at the grassroots level.

- **Improve coordination within networks:** It is necessary to invest both time and resources in further studies on how best to advance what has been called "networks-within-networks" or coordination of networks. Such studies would help point to the best mechanisms for dealing with one of the issues that emerged from this research: more than one network focusing on the same issue. While this is not a challenge in and of itself, the objective of sustainable peace may not always be met if the efforts of already "networked" organizations are either duplicated or not complementary.

- **Ensure programs are coherent, context-specific, and conflict-sensitive:** Whereas our interlocutors lamented the lack of coordination among actors (i.e., addressing how networks work), networks must also ensure the coherence of their work (i.e., addressing what works). Peacebuilding work can only deliver the desired outcomes if actors deliver their programs in a coherent manner. Further, they must consider the political context in which they are operating and must implement their activities in a conflict-sensitive manner.

- **Deepen interactions among peacebuilding actors in the same region:** There is a need to deepen interactions among peacebuilding actors

in the same subregion or continent. The perception is that there are many interactions between national networks in a developing country like Burundi and international peacebuilding actors. However, the same cannot be said of networks from different developing countries, which need to deepen, streamline, and institutionalize their interactions. As a result, lessons and experiences that can contribute to "peer learning" are not easily shared among peacebuilding actors from within the same region.

FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND DONORS

- **Ensure genuine local ownership:** There is a need to demystify the practice of peacebuilding, and to constantly search for ways to improve its implementation. Some of the interlocutors mentioned their experiences of talk about and commitment in principle to "local ownership" and "local engagement," but with little follow through. In fact, it was communicated that it is common that local actors are "brought in" by international actors and expected to follow their

prescripts. This point is underscored by a study published in 2015 entitled "White Paper on Peacebuilding,"[29] which observed that peacebuilding interventions under the control of external actors are no longer viable, either politically or practically. The failure to deepen local ownership is particularly felt in situations like in Burundi where the international community starts to "withdraw" or become unresponsive to the challenges on the ground, leaving local actors on their own.

- **Create predictable and effective funding models for peacebuilding activities:** The key observable challenge in Burundi is that local CSOs and NGOs may not always possess the technical know-how required to meet the stringent and often inflexible donor-driven demands for proposal writing, accounting, and reporting. This lends itself to a situation where some local networks end up unable to mobilize funding— not because they are not able to deliver, but because they do not meet the expected and often complex donor requirements.

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29 Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, 2015, available at: www.gpplatform.ch/sites/default/files/White%20Paper%20on%20Peacebuilding.pdf .