



Conversations in Burundi:

After civil war, there's dialogue



Trainers in Burundi

Refugees. Displacement. Land inheritance. Civil war. Class system. Political differences. These are realities for Burundi, a country in the Great Lakes region of Africa, which is recovering from extreme violence and a recent civil war.

Could the Public Conversations Project (PCP) help Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa villagers and townspeople have the difficult conversations needed to rebuild community?

Elizabeth (Liz) McClintock, a partner with Conflict Management Partners, had been working with master trainers in Bujumbura, Burundi's capital, for more than three years. The trainers wanted to increase their skills and facilitate deeper conversations.

Burundian participant Jean-Marie Habwintahe said he was well aware that “certain conflicts do not easily find resolution. Taking into consideration the attachment Burundians have to the land, in certain situations dialogue would seem to me the most appropriate method to use.”

Liz approached her long-time colleague and friend, PCP Deputy Director, International and Science Programs Meenakshi Chakraverti with this question: Could PCP's dialogue process help to rebuild trust in post-conflict Burundi, and foster general community and socio-political development?

They submitted a proposal to the United States Institute of Peace and were awarded a grant of nearly \$48,000 in the fall of 2006.

Program Director Dave Joseph, McClintock, and Chakraverti conducted a five-day workshop in March 2007 to teach and collaborate with eighteen Burundians—Hutus and Tutsis between 25 and 40 years old—to design, facilitate, and evaluate six pilot dialogues in small towns and villages in the hills of Burundi. Workshop participants learned to conduct preparatory interviews with potential dialogue participants, identifying their hopes and concerns for upcoming conversations and what they would each need to help them speak and listen deeply.

Burundian master trainer Guerrier Iryabavyeyi says understanding how to conduct preparatory, or “mapping,” interviews was the most significant thing he



- ▶ learned in the workshop. “It taught me to integrate the ideas and perceptions of the participants in preparation for a... conversation.”

When the dozen Burundian master trainers returned from doing interviews in the villages, Chakraverti worked with them to finalize the design of their dialogues, based on prospective participants’ feedback. The master trainers then facilitated six dialogues in which more than one hundred villagers participated.

“I was struck by how capable and sophisticated the Burundian master trainers were regarding conflict resolution process and theory, and how confident they were in debriefs and mini-simulations,” says Chakraverti. “From early on, I could hear and see that they would be very thoughtful and caring about how to adapt and use dialogue in the contexts they know well.” Chakraverti herself learned how to “translate” dialogue work. For example, by embracing the culture’s reverence for proverbs, using local sayings, such as *Buke buke bukomeza igihonyi* or “Little by little, the banana tree matures,” when talking about the value of a slow, careful dialogue process.

But working in rural Burundi was not without challenges. The poverty in the region made organizers worried that people would attend the training motivated by a stipend or meal, not by a desire to discuss issues, so only snacks and drinks were promised and provided.

Joseph and Chakraverti had been forewarned that their commitment to provide equal squeezed opportunity to speak would be challenged by the country’s traditional hierarchy. But PCP’s structure proved effective. “With explicit agreements to share airtime and judicious use of timed speaking and go-round formats, people felt they each were able to speak and be heard, as opposed to traditional meetings where only the dominant voices were heard,” says Chakraverti. “Burundians, both our trainer-facilitators and dialogue participants, expressed appreciation for that.”

Burundian master trainer Emmanuel Ndorimana says at first he did not understand how dialogue could be used in managing conflicts, “but afterwards I was pleasantly surprised by the very, very important role of dialogue.”

“I understand better the way in which a facilitator can bring participants to exchange—squeezed opinions, ideas, contributions on a sensitive topic,” says Guerrier Iryabavyeyi, who facilitated a dialogue in Bugendana—the site of significant violence in the 1990s and current home to many displaced and repatriated people. There, sixteen villagers met twice to discuss community reconciliation, safety, and justice.

In discussing next steps, many of the Burundian master trainers asked for a French translation of PCP’s dialogue guide and several indicated interest in coming to the United States for further training.

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