

# Why work with the international community on peacebuilding and conflict-resolution in Burundi?

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I was somewhat nervous as I was ushered into the room for my first meeting with the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations in Burundi (BINUB). A lot depended on the success of the meeting. It was the breakthrough that we had been working towards and I was still uncertain about what to expect from the international conflict resolution and peacekeeping community. For days before the meeting I had agonised over how the Secretary General would respond to my request for cooperation, especially since BLTP, NIMD's implementing partner in Burundi, was (at that time) relatively unknown by the international community.

## Easing the burden

As it turned out, my concerns were unwarranted. The Secretary General supported the idea of working together with BLTP and NIMD; and to meet regularly to synchronise our activities with the country's political parties as well as evaluate the political situation unfolding in Burundi. The weight of carrying forward our work, fostering interparty dialogue, suddenly seemed lighter knowing that it would now be shared with this powerful international arbitrator.

After that first breakthrough meeting with BINUB, several other international organizations agreed to work with us. Following the initial 'ice-breaker' meetings in their work environments, I met with the representatives in a more social setting so that we could get to know each other better on a personal level. These personal bonds served BLTP well when decisions on cooperating with us were being made.

We met on a regular basis to align our activities and evaluate the evolving political situation. I was pleased with this, because their insights and inputs would be vital in the planning and implementation of our projects in Burundi's fragile political situation. They would also play an important role in supporting any agreements stemming from the dialogue. Moreover, ensuring cooperation and synchronicity with them in our plans and activities was important for our work with Burundi's political parties because the country

was still recovering from genocide and civil war. Burundi was still very vulnerable and could easily slip back into its violent past if the political situation was not carefully managed.

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## If you want to go far...go together

Over time, BLTP convinced the representatives of the various international organizations that if we worked alone we would not be able to have the same impact that a combination of national and international interventions would produce. Furthermore, our goals like supporting the consolidation of the fragile peace process in Burundi by contributing to state-building efforts, including those dedicated to fostering democratic institutions through political dialogue, coincided with those of the international community. Eventually they agreed that we could not afford the luxury of dispersing our efforts and their impacts in our politically volatile society.

As a result BLTP and NIMD formalized their cooperation with the international community through a 'power broker' group, an informal consultation group of people that BLTP had carefully selected. Its participants included BINUB, the European Union and The African Union. Members of the Dutch, Belgian, United States and Swiss Confederation embassies were also part of this international community, because they were considered active frontline actors supporting the peace process in Burundi. Nationally the group included representatives from the two main ethnic groups drawn from civil society and political parties. Working behind the scenes, these representatives acted as a special advisory group, providing strategic counsel to BLTP.

Consequently, our relationship with the international community grew remarkably within a short space of

time and some of the members of this community began consulting us on some of their important initiatives.

### Reconciliation without bias

One such occasion was a reconciliation workshop for political leaders after the 2010 elections. Here, at the request of BINUB and the Government, BLTP was asked to facilitate a session to evaluate the implementation of the Roadmap to the 2015 elections. It was a very tense session because despite adopting the roadmap by consensus, its implementation had encountered many problems. The opposition accused the government and the Electoral Management Body of lacking the political will to implement it. After the workshop some key political leaders of both the ruling party and the opposition said that they appreciated having me, an external unbiased mediator, to calm the potentially volatile situation.

I managed to help the participants to maintain this calm throughout the three day workshop. At the end of which one politician remarked “during the last three days, the devil did not visit us in this room”. This statement boded well for the collaboration on the implementation of the Roadmap. The relationships built between the leaders of the political parties during that workshop became a milestone in the trust-building process that is necessary for a multiparty democracy.

This bolstered my belief that building trust and confidence between political parties in fragile and conflict-affected settings can only be accomplished in synchronicity with both civil society and the international community. The implementation of the Arusha Peace Accord for peace and reconciliation in Burundi, and later on, the Roadmap to the 2015 elections, would not have been possible without the cooperation of and input from civil society and the international community. This is because, while the political parties in our dialogue platform were important actors in the implementation of the Arusha Accord, they still needed the help and support of the international community in order to ensure successful implementation. The community’s unbiased support was needed, as interlocutors, to discreetly convince political protagonists to soften their positions on seemingly intractable issues.

I also recognise that the outcomes of our regular exchanges with our international partners formed the basis for the formulation of joint strategies that have helped facilitate trust-building between the political parties in Burundi. It played a key role in the re-establishment of trust among political leaders through workshops that were jointly organized by the government, the international community and us. From the parties’ perspective, the BLTP-NIMD partnership - supported by the international community – has become a pioneer in the opening up of the political space, political party support, inclusive dialogue, and democracy strengthening.

“ During the last three days, the devil did not visit us in this room... ”

*Working with members of the international community in fragile and conflict-affected countries can be vital to securing sustainable results and assisting political parties effectively. This story illustrates how the NIMD- BLTP partnership, in Burundi, a country recovering from the aftermath of civil war, proactively worked towards synchronizing their own work and that of other organizations.*

# Restoring trust in a country haunted by its violent past

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It was June 2007. The start of the dry season in Burundi, and despite the pleasantness of the day, time seemed to pass very slowly. I was anxious. I had finally managed to secure a meeting with the new Chair of the ruling party in Burundi after more than a year of relentless pursuit. I desperately wanted the meeting to begin because I was afraid that it might be postponed at the last minute like it had been so many times in the past.

The regional representative of NIMD, and I were at the headquarters of the ruling CNDD-FDD party (the National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Democracy Defense Force). When the meeting finally began, seated directly across the newly appointed party Chair, NIMD's representative started with a friendly exchange about NIMD's plan to set up a multiparty political dialogue platform on issues of importance to the country in general and the parties in particular.

## A wary welcome

At that time, having recently emerged from serious inter-ethnic conflict, Burundi was still a fragile state. Some of the members of the various political parties were the very same people who had fought each other in the trenches. Consequently, they were inclined to see politics as an extension of the war and their political opponents as the enemy. So building trust between them through multiparty dialogue was imperative if Burundi was to move away from the post-conflict polarisation and lingering mistrust that still permeated its politics.

The representative added, almost casually, that the President of Burundi had visited NIMD headquarters in The Netherlands and requested them to assist Burundi in reinforcing its multiparty democracy. This information was important - it suggested that we were there at the request of the head of state - a member of his party. This put him at ease and made him more trusting of our intentions. He was also impressed that NIMD had chosen to work with

BLTP, a local NGO with a reputation for working with politicians, including ruling party leaders and senior ex-combatants.

At the end of the meeting the Chair committed to the party's participation in the multiparty dialogue platform. This crucial development would signal the ruling party's willingness to collaborate with other parties to ensure the proper implementation of the 2000 Arusha Accord for peace and reconciliation in Burundi. The Accord had facilitated the transition to peace. This breakthrough would also allow us to begin to organize the first multiparty meeting.

The ruling party's decision to participate was vital for the trust building and dialogue programme that we intended to establish. Without it, the dialogue would have amounted to a mere conversation between the opposition, and its impact on democratic governance and reform in this still conflict-affected state, would have been negligible. Furthermore the transformation of the ruling party from an armed movement to a political party was still on-going. Its participation was, therefore, important if our intended capacity-strengthening programme was to help change the tendency of former high-ranking combatants in the party and the security forces to centralise power and jealously guard key decision-making positions. Moreover, the implementation of the Arusha Accord was facing many challenges and political parties would play a key role in its implementation.

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## A democratic airing of old grievances

Convinced that in order to start building trust between these parties their leaders would need to begin to engage with each other outside their usual environment, that was pervaded by a constant

competition for power, we organized a two-day workshop outside the capital.

Apart from the formal activities, social activities were planned to provide an opportunity for them to learn about each other as human beings, as well as share concerns about their parties and the country, outside of the public gaze. Many of the leaders, some still suffering from the trauma of decades of ethnic division and war, would be out of their comfort zones. And because of the violence between the armed movements of some of the parties during the war I was very concerned about the dynamics at the workshop.

It would not be easy for them to sit across from each other in an informal setting, without releasing some of their pent-up emotions. Furthermore, the former armed movements that had now become political parties (including the ruling party) were still suspicious of other parties and were closed to dialogue.

Nonetheless, the parties sent high-ranking members to the workshop and it began smoothly. But this only lasted until they began discussing the relationship between the parties. I could feel the mood in the room change dramatically as they started accusing each other of having a hand in the assassination of the late President of the republic in 1993 - an act that led to widespread bloodshed. The accusations became louder and more emotional. I knew that this was happening because some of them had just emerged as armed movements from the bush and it was still early for them to have internalized a democratic way of seeking a consensus. These parties were too accustomed to the militaristic way of doing things.

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While I allowed this expression of emotion from parties who had not been given the space to speak freely with each other for some time, my co-facilitator and I had to intervene and refocus the debate on the major challenges facing the parties and the country.

This helped to centre the conversation on their common challenges rather than their differences.

### Healing the wounds of war

Building trust in a fragile and conflict-affected setting like Burundi is a slow process because some protagonists are slow to convert their attitude and behaviour to that expected of political parties with internal democracy. Yet their involvement in any multiparty dialogue process is essential for an inclusive, and credible, outcome.

Security and stability are preconditions for the development of a democratic political space, and the conversion of former armed movements into political parties. This is important for Burundi because the party that has the most potential to come into power in the future is also a former armed group.

While trust is necessary for meaningful dialogues, the parties' willingness to cooperate in the dialogue itself helps to dispel some of the prejudices that parties' hold of each other. It also helps build the personal relationships that are necessary to the process. In Burundi, a country that still bears the scars of a violent past, this process is slow and laborious. It requires both intense institutional and personal investment, and patience, sometimes at the risk of personal safety. Although we, at BLTP, gained enormous experience, it has not always been easy and there have been many moments where we have faced real personal danger.

Even now as the ethnic and political divides persist, political parties continue to be seriously concerned about the violent past and its continued effects. Although this in itself lends credence to our work, we must continue to deal with the wounds of war daily to reduce their impact. So every activity we organize is inclusive, non-partisan and diverse. This is the only way to facilitate the building of trust between political parties in a country still haunted by its violent past.

*In a country with a recent history of violence, political opponents often regard each other as outright enemies. Based on the trust the political parties have in NIMD as a facilitating organization, NIMD works towards bringing political parties together so they can engage in peaceful and productive multiparty dialogue processes, like in Burundi.*