

Netherlands Institute for
Multiparty Democracy

OUR STORIES: WORKING IN FCAS

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Democracy starts with dialogue.

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

Fabien Nsengimana is the Executive Director of the Burundi Leadership Training Program (BLTP), NIMD's implementing partner based in Bujumbura, Burundi. BLTP has trained over 7000 people in Burundi in negotiation and conflict resolution skills, and has been closely involved in many dialogue processes in Burundi since its launch in 2003.

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.

“ We met on a regular basis to align our activities and evaluate the evolving political situation. ”

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

Fabien Nsengimana is the Executive Director of the Burundi Leadership Training Program (BLTP), NIMD's implementing partner based in Bujumbura, Burundi. BLTP has trained over 7000 people in Burundi in negotiation and conflict resolution skills, and has been closely involved in many dialogue processes in Burundi since its launch in 2003.

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.

“ 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. ”

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.

Drawing lessons from the past in Colombia

Andrés Navas Quintero has been a Programme Officer for NIMD Colombia since 2015. NIMD Colombia has had its country office in Bogotá, Colombia since 2014. In Colombia, NIMD promotes multiparty discussions on the political and electoral reforms needed in the context of the peace process between the Government and the guerrillas.

When I first met María, she was emphatically denouncing how her party's members had been the object of systematic annihilation during the 1980s and 1990s. María's party, 'Unión Patriótica' (UP) had been created in 1985 in the midst of a peace negotiation between the Government and FARC (Guerrilla group), as a civil platform for promoting peace and social justice. The peace talks stalled. Nonetheless, the UP continued to grow as an independent actor. After achieving good electoral results at the local and national level, the Party began to promote social and economic reforms but was soon targeted by paramilitaries, state armed forces and drug-trafficking cartels interested in preserving their vested interest. This resulted in thousands of its members being massacred or forced into exile.

Leaving behind a legacy of loss

By 2002, María's party's membership had been decimated so badly that it lost its legal status. It was not until 2013, after years of struggles by the survivors at both the national and international levels, that this status was restored through a judicial providence that recognized the party's 'serious survival crisis, due to the extermination of its leaders, activists and candidates'.

Given this history, since the beginning of the latest peace talks between the Colombian Government and FARC-EP in 2012 (one of the biggest guerrillas in the country), I had been concerned about how the integration of members of these groups into the political system would be conducted. I was convinced that in the absence of appropriate democratic mechanisms to channel their demands, these groups would continue to resort to violence for achieving their goals. For this reason, I began to explore different ways in which, we as NIMD, could contribute towards supporting these new political actors that would represent the demands historically defended by the guerrillas.

At the meeting, organized by NIMD, where I first met

María, she also expressed her party's need for support. So after she had finished speaking I approached her.

“ By 2002, María's party's membership had been decimated so badly that it lost its legal status.”

Shortly thereafter, my colleagues and I were invited for a meeting with María and two other members of the Party to discuss possible forms of collaboration. As we entered the Party's facilities, we noticed the precarious conditions in which they had been working: they shared an old house with various other organizations and had very few staff members. We were guided up a shaky stairway to a meeting room where the attendants were already waiting. At the meeting I expressed our interest in helping them to improve the Party's capacities for strategic planning, communication, inclusion of under-represented groups and transparency.

However, the party wanted our support to create a think tank for the organization. At first I was hesitant about this request, since there seemed to be more pressing issues for the survival of the Party. Then María explained that the think tank was vital to reconstructing the organizational memory of the Party and to defend its juridical existence.

Refreshing collective memories

Such history, María stressed, needed to be reflected on and taught to the party's new members and the rest of society, as a way to avoid repeating history. I remembered that, as a child, I had constantly heard news about the killing of left-wing politicians, including two presidential candidates from the UP, and recalled the generalized perception of impunity and hopelessness that pervaded the atmosphere at the time. By listening to her, a victim in this process, I realized how valuable it would be to help the Party's think tank reconstruct their memories. Not just as a symbolic gesture for the victims, but also to

draw lessons for the upcoming integration of FARC members to the political system.

From that first encounter, we began working together on implementing the memory-building activities the party had outlined. These included conducting an international seminar on experiences of political violence and republishing a book on the extermination of UP members called “Unión Patriótica, expedientes contra el olvido”. However, we faced several challenges because of UP’s low organizational capacity, such as the party’s reliance on volunteers. I realized that these limitations were because the party was a minority party, which affected its electoral results and its access to public funding and institutional capacity. This made NIMD’s assistance more meaningful and necessary.

In light of this, I tried a different approach to improve coordination. We created a joint task force for the development of the proposed activities. With these changes in place we were able to commit to particular responsibilities and deadlines, establish better communication mechanisms and quicken the pace of the process.

Consequently, both the international seminar and the new edition of the book on the UP extermination were completed successfully with enormous gains for the party. Some of the party members told me later that it was an interesting opportunity for them to rediscover the history of their organization and to share it with their supporters as a means to build a stronger sense of belonging. It also helped the party gain more recognition. They were able to connect with a broader audience to generate the awareness needed to mitigate the risks of political violence for left-wing movements trying to integrate into the political system in a context of armed conflict.

Renewing the call for peace built on democracy

Party members also recognized that the coordination methods and mechanisms that were put in place to develop the activities, allowed them to strengthen their internal organization. On the basis of these results, the party leaders expressed an interest in continuing to work with NIMD to improve their institutional capacity and promote reflection on their history.

This experience allowed me to better understand the challenges that the UP faced, and continues to face. This understanding has been the key towards formulating an integral approach for NIMD to support the expected creation of new political parties after the ratification of the Peace Accord with FARC. Such an approach starts with the recognition of the vulnerabilities that the new organizations face in terms of protecting the very safety of their members. It integrates the newly-created parties’ need for institutional support to comply with legal requirements and effectively organize their internal procedures.

This approach also highlights the need for political and electoral reforms that provide guarantees for the inclusion and participation of minority and opposition parties, in particular those created under extraordinary circumstances like peace negotiations and the demobilization of armed groups. These reforms have to be accompanied by the promotion of democratic values in society, which allow citizens to recognize the value of diversity in the political system and remove the prevalence of violence as a means of dealing with social conflicts and demands. The memory of the extermination of the UP that we attempted to reconstruct, has to serve as a permanent reminder of our shared responsibility to protect and include those who have chosen the democratic path to achieve their political goals, as a pre-condition to build a lasting peace in Colombia.

“ This understanding has been the key towards formulating an integral approach for NIMD to support the expected creation of new political parties after the ratification of the Peace Accord with FARC. ”

NIMD works with a large number of political parties in all its programme countries, with different organizational structures and historical backgrounds. In FCAS countries, many parties are former armed movements and, as this story shows, the transition to a civilian political party can be challenging. NIMD assists political parties in adapting to the changes that come with the peace process.

Building an Inclusive Society in Georgia

Salome Mukhuradze is the Programme Officer for NIMD's Eastern European Neighbourhood Office. Within this region, NIMD works with politicians from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Throughout her career, Salome Mukhuradze has actively promoted the expansion and implementation of successful democratic models for civil society in Georgia.

While preparing for a multiparty dialogue platform on the inclusion of minority communities, I met with different party leaders to explain the importance of participating in this dialogue. Convincing them of the significance of this initiative was not easy. A politician at one such meeting relentlessly questioned NIMD's interest in promoting the issue. "Why do we need NIMD to help us with this?" he asked. "If we do decide to tackle this problem, we can do it ourselves," he said dismissively. This reflected that it was not just a lack of resources that was causing the inactivity of the Georgian political parties, but there also seemed to be a general disinterest on this issue.

Addressing taboos

In Georgia, a small country with huge political and socio-economic problems, the integration of national minorities, mostly Armenians and Azeris, is a sensitive issue. Although, at the time of writing this article, they represented around 16 percent of the population, these minorities have been relatively uninvolved in public and political life. National minorities vote regularly but the level of their political participation is not reflected in the turnout of the elections. A combination of different factors is responsible for this: until very recently, poor infrastructure, especially roads, has impeded regular contact between the rest of Georgia and its capital. And the inability of many national minority citizens to speak the Georgian language has limited their educational opportunities.

Furthermore, prejudices and mutual distrust run high between the majority and minority groups in the country. An example of this was when the results of a study found that between 1990 and 2010 some 25,000 girls had been aborted because of their sex. The general opinion in Georgia was that the minority groups caused the high abortion rate. Georgians were usually regarded as tolerant but when faced with these statistics the blame was cast on the 'non-Georgian' groups for seemingly 'non-Georgian' results.

NIMD opens new pathways for dialogue

Consequently in 2014, in cooperation with the OSCE

High Commissioner on National Minorities office, we created a multiparty platform on national minorities, which brought together both ruling and opposition parties. In the beginning, my colleagues and I were faced with disinterest and resistance. Yet, we continued to explore strategies to increase national minority representation within political parties and the Parliament and generate more inclusive policies.

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Despite encountering many problems along the way in the fall of 2014 we successfully launched a multiparty dialogue platform, with eight political parties, on the issue of the inclusion of minority communities in politics. We decided to hold the discussions in the respective regions, as opposed to working on them remotely from Georgia's capital, Tbilisi. We wanted the political parties to visit the regions and meet the national minority representatives so that they could get a first-hand understanding of the challenges they were facing. Since establishing this multiparty platform, we have facilitated several meetings in the national minority regions, including a breakthrough meeting in the remote town of Akhalkalaki. It is a meeting I will not forget.

For this particular meeting in Akhalkalaki, the national minority representatives arrived an hour early. As my colleague explained, the reason behind their early arrival was that they had to take a van from a neighbouring village that only made two trips daily. That is when I realized just how eager people were to voice their concerns and discuss possible solutions with the leaders of political parties.

Joining forces

Once these representatives settled into the dialogue,

instead of being angry at their circumstances, they were enthusiastic and positively engaged with the politicians. I could see that the political leaders were also very eager and open to listening to them. The representatives expressed their concerns regarding the education system, access to information and the socio-economic situation in the regions. Most participants on both sides agreed that the major challenge to the integration of national minorities, particularly those living together in their own insulated communities, was their poor command of the Georgian language. Inability to speak Georgian also limited their access to public services and isolated them from other citizens. They also touched upon their lack of access to information and media: they often had to rely on foreign news sources for information, such as those from neighbouring Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This eager and animated participation by the leaders of the minority groups made the politicians aware that the prevalent belief that national minorities were not motivated enough to fully integrate with the rest of society was incorrect.

At the meeting one politician even said “we realize that the political and socio-economic exclusion of some groups of society can only lead to a separatism that no-one in this country wants to see anymore.” It was then that I understood that my colleagues at NIMD and I had finally broken through to the leadership of the political parties.

We had managed to convince them of the urgency to act. It was a particularly important issue for Georgia given its history of violent conflict often involving identity-related factors and grievances with strong historical roots. The politicians in the room had come to appreciate that failure to address this issue could have dire consequences.

Uprooting prejudices

Historically, deeply rooted prejudices in Georgian society have stymied progress and created additional barriers to the full integration of different groups. Much of the 1990s saw Georgia engulfed by inter-ethnic and intra-national conflicts. Continued exclusion and segregation could easily generate violence in society and push the country back to this terrible political quagmire.

Putting their ideological differences aside, political parties agreed to join forces to overcome marginalization and become more inclusive. Therefore, as facilitators of the process, we successfully accomplished our goal despite the many challenges we had faced along the way.

Reflecting on this experience, it is evident that bringing both the ruling and opposition parties around the table to discuss the issues faced by national minorities, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding laid the foundation for a more transparent and inclusive society. Overcoming the marginalization of underrepresented groups will not only ensure democratic development, but will also strengthen peace and stability in Georgia. Exclusion and discrimination have been recurring threats in Georgia's development in the past few decades, which is why NIMD's work towards a more inclusive political environment is fundamental to ensuring that history does not repeat itself.

“ We realize that the political and socio-economic exclusion of some groups of society can only lead to a separatism that no-one in the country wants to see anymore. ”

Minority representation is highly important for the stability and inclusivity of any democratic system, and political parties have a key role to play in representing their concerns. Therefore, NIMD assists political parties in fostering inclusive political settlements in fragile and conflict affected countries like Georgia.

Improving the Political Participation of Women in Georgia

Salome Mukhuradze is the Programme Officer for NIMD's Eastern European Neighbourhood Office. Within this region, NIMD works with politicians from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Throughout her career, Salome Mukhuradze has actively promoted the expansion and implementation of successful democratic models for civil society in Georgia.

“Women do not belong in politics” is a widely prevalent belief in Georgian politics. Even prominent male politicians, while seeming to defend women's rights, betray their prejudices by dismissively declaring that “women are human beings too”. In addition to these attitudes, the post-conflict socio-economic conditions in the country have largely contributed to the marginalization of women. Due to these hindrances, and prejudices, women in Georgia were unable to fully participate and contribute towards the peace-building efforts and national economic reconstruction that followed the civil war and military conflict that plagued Georgia in the 1990s.

Reforming the political system

Now, despite gender-sensitive legislation, women continue to be underrepresented in public life, and politics in particular. At the time of writing this article, there were only 18 female Members of Parliament (12 percent of all MPs) even though 52 percent of Georgia's population is made up of women. There were even fewer female representatives in local councils.

My colleagues at NIMD and I realised that ensuring the equitable political participation of women was vital to the democratic process. The continued exclusion and marginalisation of women in a conflict-affected setting, such as Georgia, could undermine the stability of the country's democratic development.

Our work on women's empowerment in politics began by assisting partner political parties with the creation of more gender-sensitive political agendas. It took several rounds of meetings, workshops and conferences to convince these parties of the importance of the issue and secure their participation.

The trust that NIMD's team has among political parties in Georgia helped to launch a successful multiparty dialogue on women's political participation

in July 2012. It was the only multiparty platform in the country to enjoy support from both the governing and opposition parties. After months of active collaboration political parties began working jointly on violence against women and gender equality in education, industrial relations, media and budgeting. Moreover, legislative amendments aimed at providing financial incentives for placing more women on party lists were developed for the 2012 parliamentary elections. These legislative amendments were a milestone for political parties and NIMD alike.

“Continued exclusion and marginalisation of women in a conflict-affected setting, such as Georgia, could undermine the stability of the country's democratic development.”

Open and honest dialogue

Despite all these efforts, the actual representation of women in legislatures barely saw an increase and violence against women reached its peak in 2014. Public pressure led politicians to agree that urgent steps had to be taken. But nobody had a specific course of action. We decided to encourage the political parties to take greater ownership of the issue and to develop a joint vision with NIMD for empowering women in politics. In order to facilitate this, in the fall of 2014, we organized an informal high-level meeting.

At the time we did not know that this meeting would go on to be a pivotal moment for women's empowerment in Georgia. To start off, my colleagues and I convinced the leaders of 11 political parties on the urgency for action for the political and public empowerment of Georgian women. To make sure the participants were able to relax and talk in a friendly and supportive atmosphere, we created a confidential space. We were determined to demonstrate both the

urgency and the opportunity to take up the cause of women's empowerment.

The first sign that the meeting would be extraordinary was the unusually large number of male leaders I saw shuffling into the hall alongside the usual groups of women politicians. Normally, this meeting would have only aroused the interest of women. As the meeting progressed I was even more surprised to observe a discernible change in the approach and rhetoric of the male politicians. They all seemed to agree that the inequality and discrimination against women generated violence in society and damaged the sustainable development of the country. Finally, the parties were openly addressing the previously-ignored problem that the political exclusion of the largest part of the population posed a threat to pluralism, diversity and political stability in Georgia.

Inclusion of women takes centre stage

We were off to a good start. As the facilitators, we decided that it would be important to hand over the ownership of the process to the political parties themselves. The politicians recognized that it was vital for them to take the lead, or they risked losing connection with their electorate. Consequently, they decided to join their efforts, co-host a series of conferences on gender equality and draft a multiparty resolution. This was a positive development for Georgia's male-dominated political system.

To follow up this crucial meeting, the different political parties came together to organize a multiparty conference on women's participation in politics. It was the first time that such a diverse spectrum of Georgian political parties had agreed to jointly host a conference on this issue. After the conference, political parties, with the support of NIMD's team, developed and adopted a Multiparty Resolution on Necessary Measures to Increase Women's Political Participation in Georgia. The Resolution, signed by ten political parties, called for the consideration of women's representation when implementing the electoral reforms. It also called for the adoption of special measures to increase women's representation in politics in general, including the use of public funds to aid their political empowerment.

Although Georgia still has a long way to go before it achieves full-fledged gender equality, stability and security, it is slowly accepting that intolerance and

the exclusion of women pose a grave challenge towards the inclusive, democratic development of the country. And the work done by NIMD and its partners in Georgia has helped to move the debate from the periphery to the centre stage of politics where it belongs.

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Promoting women's participation is a goal of all NIMD's country programmes. This story demonstrates that women have an exceptional potential to bridge the gap between political parties in polarized environments; and promoting their participation in politics contributes to inclusive and stable democracies.

Women: the key to dealing with the ghosts of coups past in Honduras

Miguel A. Cálix Martínez is the Executive Director for the NIMD's country office in Honduras. In Honduras NIMD currently works on political party assistance, multiparty and multi-sectorial dialogue, political and social empowerment of women, democracy schools for young political and social leaders, as well as the promotion and facilitation of a large national fiscal pact.

At lunch I heaved a sigh of relief. A calm, cordial, atmosphere prevailed at the inaugural seminar of the Academy of Women Parliamentarians. I was pleased that NIMD had played a significant role in securing the attendance of a majority of the recently elected women representatives to Congress. Despite being seated in factions, they had steered clear of the undercurrents of polarization and intolerance that were still strong in Honduran society. They even smiled at each other. So I was looking forward to chairing the next session. Little did I know that this calm was just the proverbial calm before the storm.

Fighting polarization and intolerance to empower women

In the midst of chairing this post-lunch session - a debate between three distinguished women from Bolivia, El Salvador and Honduras - all hell broke loose. The Honduran politician criticized a discriminatory remark made, during the recent elections, by a male candidate of the governing party about the female presidential candidate from an opposing party. A congresswoman from the governing party immediately shot up to object. My heart sank as I witnessed the chain-reaction that followed. A barrage of objections rose from the members of her party as they followed her out of the room in protest. They did not show up for the second day. Without the participation of the governing party the seminar was thrown into complete disarray.

This seminar, held just a few months after the 2013 general elections, was supposed to be the first step toward the ambitious challenge of building a new agenda for the Parliament on gender issues. We were proud that NIMD, together with our partners, had been able to draw the majority of woman Members of Parliament (MPs) to the seminar.

Despite our efforts, the atmosphere of intolerance and polarization in the country had reared its ugly head.

In hindsight, it was not totally unexpected. When we started the NIMD programme in Honduras, one of our main challenges was dealing with the high levels of polarization and intolerance that had resulted from the 2009 coup d'état. I experienced this polarization personally, when NIMD first began bringing political opponents together, some even refused to sit around the same table. This polarization led to most democratic institutions, such as the Congress, lacking inclusiveness. I decided that the most effective way to bridge the gap between these opposing parties and getting them around the same table would be to promote a common goal: the political participation of women and strengthening the capacity of women in the various parties.

“ Despite our efforts, the atmosphere of intolerance and polarization in the country had reared its ugly head. ”

To this end, NIMD and its partners (NDI, UNDP, UN Women, IDEA, National Institute of Women) decided to collaborate on promoting the more equitable and effective political participation of women in the 2013 general elections. We brought together women from the participating political parties to form a multiparty 'Candidate's Academy'. Through this Academy we provided the participants with knowledge about their political rights; strategic tools for their political careers; and the opportunity to share their common expectations and fears as women politicians - notwithstanding their political differences. I was pleased to note that the results of the hard work and lobbying that the academy facilitated, were positive.

In 2012 a 40 percent quota was established for woman in the elections. But I knew that this reform would mean little if the women elected in the elections (due in 2013) lacked a clear and common agenda to promote the exercise and respect of the rights of all

Honduran women.

Making friends in high places

The seminar we had organized aimed to develop such an agenda. And despite how it ended, the investment we had made by cultivating a relationship of mutual trust with the women politicians paid off. Two of them in particular, were to prove pivotal in helping me rescue the process: A Congresswoman who was the chair of the Gender Commission, and a Congresswoman who was the Vice-President of Parliament and President of the governing party.

In order to assist the process of designing the Agenda, the Congresswoman, through the Gender Commission, facilitated the signing of a formal agreement between the Cabinet and all the organizations supporting the Candidate's Academy.

This agreement was signed at the beginning of a second seminar organized by NIMD and its partners in July 2014. At the seminar gender sensitive budgets, gender violence, economic empowerment of women and political participation rights for women, were among the subjects discussed. Thanks to the efforts of all organizations and the lobbying and interventions of the two congresswomen, many of those who abandoned the first seminar were also present. My colleagues and I worked tirelessly, sometimes late into the night or early in the morning, to convince the congresswomen to attend this important seminar. And to my relief, this time there was a positive outcome: a unanimous agreement on the broad Agenda items. Negotiating this agreement helped in building trust between these politicians.

This trust was further cemented at a later workshop, where NIMD helped the Gender Commission with strategic planning. During the seminar a skilled facilitator helped them recognize that their common goals were more important than their political differences and old prejudices.

In September 2015, the 40 percent quota, approved in 2012 for the 2013 elections, rose to 50 percent for the 2017 electoral process. The effective application forms (one of the four pillars of the Agenda concluded at the July 2014 seminar) was also included in the Commission's strategic plan.

I was present at the signing of this proposal,

and was overcome by gratitude and a sense of achievement. It clearly demonstrates that inter-party dialogue and working together on the activities on the gender Agenda had managed to create trust between disparate women, and impact their political behaviour towards each other for the better.

“ In September 2015, the 40 percent quota approved in the 2013 elections rose to 50 percent for the 2017 electoral process. ”

Undoubtedly, the underlying polarization and intolerance caused by the 2009 coup d'état continues to have an impact on our best-laid plans, and any activity we undertake will have to contend with this.

Working with women in fragile and conflict affected settings

Apart from the value of building trust with political parties, it also made me aware of the importance of investing in building trust between NIMD and our respected 'champions' or strategic individuals within partner parties. Moreover, the strategic importance of engaging in gender issues in a polarized country has become increasingly clearer to me. Women often continue to be discriminated against even after the worst parts of political conflicts have ended. Consequently, they are more inclined to work together to resolve the counter-democratic tendencies or frameworks that inhibit the recognition and enjoyment of their full democratic rights. Their ability to work together on these common challenges generally sets a precedent for political parties. This provided an effective entry point for NIMD to work on other strategic issues in Honduras.

Promoting women's participation is a goal of all NIMD's country programmes. This story demonstrates that women have an exceptional potential to bridge the gaps between political parties in polarized environments; and promoting their participation in politics contributes to inclusive and stable democracies.

Fear and loathing in Honduras: the impact of illicit networks on politics

Miguel A. Cáliz Martínez is the Executive Director for the NIMD's country office in Honduras. In Honduras NIMD currently works on political party assistance, multiparty and multi-sectorial dialogue, political and social empowerment of women, democracy schools for young political and social leaders, as well as the promotion and facilitation of a large national fiscal pact.

“It is not possible to go further with this,” said our researcher, JS¹, in a very low voice. After four months of researching illicit networks in Honduras JS’s research reached a premature end when he called for a meeting with me and said: “I finish here. I will send the preliminary report to you from a different e-mail address, with a different name. I won’t ask for more payments. If you need me to send the first payment back, I will, without any hesitation. I don’t want to know more about this issue.”

Taken aback, I asked him what was happening. “You provided me with good informants and they took me to others who knew more and more” he replied. “I don’t want to give you details”, he said, “but you need to know this: the more I dug, the less I wanted to know”. “I am a researcher - this is what I love to do, but I was not prepared for what I found,” he added, speaking softly throughout the conversation.

Uncovering the virus within

It all started a few months before when I received an email from NIMD’s headquarters, asking if we could contribute to research on the influence and impact of illicit networks in politics in Latin America. Honduras was a suitable case study because of the increased drug trafficking in the region and the evidence of illicit networks in the country.

In Honduras, drug lords and criminal networks had spread their influence over time and started to secretly co-opt political, financial and social institutions. The problem was growing and cases of corrupt politicians, public officials (primarily from the justice and security sectors) and people who had inexplicably become wealthy overnight - allegedly through illegal activities - slowly began to attract public concern.

I realized that the impact of this on politics, and

political parties in particular, would run counter to everything that NIMD was attempting to achieve with Honduran political parties. If this influence were allowed to persist and increase, criminal networks would hold sway in political parties, dictating policy choices favourable to their own networks rather than party members or the citizens. This would decrease the already diminishing trust that citizens had in political parties, driving down participation in them and politics in general. As a result democratic governance itself would come under threat. Hence dealing with the issue was a fundamental challenge for any democracy-support organization and the research that JS was conducting was vital.

Despite operating in the shadows, the influence of these networks had been denounced and discussed in the country by experts on public security and organized crime. According to some foreign investigators and journalists, most of their local sources spoke openly about organized criminal activities. But when the issue of how organized crime had penetrated the political landscape came up, they always asked their interviewers to switch off the recorders and talked only ‘off-the-record’. Such was the fear of punishment for talking about this.

“ In Honduras, drug lords and criminal networks had spread their influence over time and started to secretly co-opt political, financial and social institutions. ”

So I needed to find an experienced social investigator, eager to dig carefully into the issue. I found one in JS. “It is an interesting subject,” he had said at our first work meeting, “...and little explored, unfortunately, for reasons we both know” he had said as he winked at me knowingly.

1 Protected source

During the first weeks of the research I helped JS to schedule meetings with sources and find official documentation. And up until our meeting that day I felt like we were making good progress.

A threat to security and governance

Sitting in his office, I found myself surprised at his resignation. JS did not sound paranoid to me - simply honest. He continued: "I visited a source who welcomed me and gave me some good information. I felt that I was getting a great story and wrote page after page, enthusiastically. Before I left, the informant stopped me at the door and asked me to be careful in quoting the information. He then revealed that he had given the same advice to someone who had not heeded his warnings. Taking my arm, he had added: 'Please, don't do what Alfredo did'. Alfredo Landaverde, a local expert on the issue and a well-known public figure, was shot and killed, after exposing the existence of broad networks of local authorities, police and the judiciary involved in illicit activities.

JS finished by saying: "Read the research thoroughly and if you decide to publish it later, please don't quote me". Looking at me, he said: "I no longer feel safe to pursue the research". Later as I sat in my office and read the document JS had sent me, I had to agree with him. The research provided information on drugs and illicit networks, together with names and events. Their influence reached high levels of the Government, Parliament and the Judiciary - very close to the formal economic and political power in Honduras. I closed the document, wishing I had never opened it.

It was not difficult to convince the coordinating team that we could not finish the research. They understood and respected JS' decision. However, the lessons learned from this investigation were included in the final publication because it demonstrated that working with this issue threatens security and lives, and undermines democratic governance and development in Honduras.

“ Taking my arm, he had added: ‘Please, don't do what Alfredo did’. ”

Research on eradicating the scourge

The efforts JS made were not in vain. Six months after the sudden end of the research (August 2013),

JS was invited to share his experience with the other researchers who had conducted similar studies. Here, his experiences were collected for future initiatives in order to avoid the risks in interventions aimed at addressing the influence of illegal networks in politics. And three years after JS quit his research, the United States began prosecuting and requesting the extradition of members of the highest political and financial spheres in Honduras: allegedly for laundering money for drug traffickers. JS would not have been surprised, and neither was I.

As a result of the rising public awareness on this issue, a new law to control transparency on the financing of Honduran political parties and campaigns is expected to be drafted by the end of 2016. NIMD is going to contribute to promoting its implementation.

Furthermore, this issue is more relevant than ever to NIMD's work. The influence of illicit networks on political institutions in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS) cannot be ignored by political party assistance providers like NIMD. It became clear that NIMD needs to tackle this invasive threat to democracy in FCAS states. One way would be for NIMD to invest in more research to map the nature, extent and modus operandi of this influence in politics, in order to facilitate the development of strategies to effectively deal with it.

This research could also form the basis for awareness and education campaigns in political parties, legislatures, the public service and the general public. Support for intra-party democracy would possibly be a good entry point: but it would need to be customized to specifically target this practice. Finally, full transparency on the funders of parties would go a long way toward eradicating this scourge.

The influence of Illicit or criminal networks can be powerful and illusive on politics in fragile and conflict-affected settings. While this story shows just how challenging it is to grasp its precise impact on politics, NIMD is aware of its influence. Promoting inclusive, transparent and programme-based politics contribute towards mitigating their detrimental effects on democratic development.

Fostering inclusive politics to avert a national crisis in Mali

Moumouni Soumano is the Executive Director of the Centre Malien pour le Dialogue Interpartis at la Democratie (CMDID), NIMD's implementing partner in Mali, since January 2007. He specializes in working with political parties on interparty dialogue, election and decentralization support. Mr Soumano also teaches constitutional and administrative law at the University of Bamako.

The most stupid coup in world' is how many observers described the coup of March 2012 in Mali. The coup defeated the national army in the north of the country. It was described as stupid because it was not well prepared and it occurred somewhat spontaneously after a riot by the military. After defeating the army the putschists suspended the constitution and parliament. Consequently, neither the government, nor state institutions were operational. Mali, a fragile state because of its history of war, had a fractured and divided society that could easily be plunged into a civil war.

Edging towards a civil war

After the coup, emotionally charged people filed into the already crowded 'Bourse du Travail', the headquarters of the biggest trade union movement. The teeming crowd, including me, waited in anticipation for the start of the meeting by the Front for the Defense of the Republic (FDR) to protest the coup. From their body language I could see that the leaders, like the audience, were tense and determined to mobilize their supporters. While waiting, I listened to a radio broadcast calling for the people to consider the coup as a window of opportunity for real reform.

At the meeting a group of enraged citizens, clearly opposed to the FDR, began cursing and insulting the leaders, vowing to kill them if they did not stop condemning the coup. For me, this confrontation brought home the potential for violence. At this point I decided that we had to devise a course of action to help calm the situation.

I was convinced that CMDID's (NIMD's implementing partner in Mali) dialogue platform, which had representatives from all major political parties, could reduce the tension and avert the impending confrontation that would flow on to the streets of Mali. Our investment in building trust through inclusive multiparty dialogue on national matters was the only platform that could provide a space for dialogue

between these highly charged and divided political groups.

“ At the meeting a group of enraged citizens, clearly opposed to the FDR, began cursing and insulting the leaders, vowing to kill them if they did not stop condemning the coup. ”

Taking sides

The coup resulted in the spontaneous formation of different political alliances, some against the coup and others in support of it. The FDR was the largest. Their alliance demanded a return to constitutional order; the re-instatement of the deposed president; and a return of the military to barracks. At the same time they refused to negotiate with the putschists.

The second largest group, Movement for the People 22, led by an MP who was a well known representative of the far left, supported the coup. There were several other smaller groups and each group hoped to mobilize the population to support its political position.

To start the much-needed multiparty dialogue, I began planning the meeting with representatives from all the parties. I knew that it was going to be difficult to garner an agreement amongst these parties. Our strategy was to build trust between the different political groups by facilitating an agreement that was grounded in the fact that the country was already in a crisis and we had to avoid making the situation worse by mobilizing the people to take to the streets in mass protest. At the time several other groups attempted similar initiatives, but failed because of a lack of trust in them as facilitator.

Uniting opposing forces

Fortunately most of CMDID's board members were also members of the different political groups formed

consequent to the coup. This placed us in a unique position to foster a dialogue between the different groups. In a speech addressing the board, the Chair of the board said, “I know that you all are members of different political groups, but please force yourself to stay a CMDID board member because we are talking about the survival of our country”. This request set the tone for a constructive and contributive atmosphere among the board members.

We had two important objectives for the interparty meeting we were planning. The first was to begin a dialogue between the different political groups that would facilitate the finding of common ground. Second, to agree on the fact that the country did not need mass street protests because the situation was so fragile.

Instead of sending letters to the leaders of each group we contacted them directly to invite them to participate in the meeting and to explain the goals of the meeting. I remember their responses: “Of course we will participate, the CMDID is our baby and all its initiatives are ours also,” said many of them. We also held meetings with all party leaders at their headquarters in order to set the agenda for the joint meeting. Furthermore, despite dissenting opinions, the media were also invited so that it could bear witness to the political positions of the different groups.

During this time, the ECOWAS leaders (the presidents of Ivory Coast, Benin and Senegal) attempted to come to Bamako to talk with the political actors and the putschists, but they failed because pro-coup political leaders mobilized their supporters to occupy the airport and prevented their plane from landing. They were forced to go back – and they took an important perspective with them.

A historical meeting

Despite these international setbacks, we held the meeting at a neutral location. To signal the importance that they attached to this meeting and the trust that they had in CMDID, each group was represented by their top leaders. In addition to the loud greetings and exchanges in the room we could feel the anxiousness in the air. When I started speaking, everyone became very serious and the room fell silent. Representatives were seated like

athletes waiting for the ‘bang’ of the gun to rush to the finish line. At the start of the meeting, the Chair of CMDID, a respected political figure, made a call for the political representatives to keep in mind the danger the country faced and he encouraged them to be responsible and courageous while dealing with the situation.

The dialogue that followed was passionate and each group made its own demands. I listened to all their arguments and then drafted recommendations that I thought would be acceptable to all. To prevent accusations and counter accusations, I avoided difficult political questions and instead introduced general propositions that I thought would be easier to accept. I also included a crucial paragraph in which they committed to avoid public demonstrations and violence involving the public. After some discussion, this was validated without any major changes. This took the country a step back from the brink of civil war.

Peace: a long-term commitment

The investment we made by building trust between political parties in times of relative peace, paid off when we were perched on the edge of a civil war. I remember with a sense of achievement, how at the end of this process, the representatives of the political parties congratulated our foundation for the initiative and encouraged us to keep going. We had used our dialogue and the trust it had built among the politicians, to prevent public demonstrations and violent confrontations. Even skeptical journalists applauded us on our achievement.

When observers of the Mali context ask: how did you bring all these disparate groups together in a just a few days to reach the agreement that averted the protests? My answer is always the same: “it is a result of our long term commitment to building trust in a way that contributes to the democratic process”.

“ We had used our dialogue and the trust it had built among the politicians, to prevent public demonstrations and violent confrontations. ”

In all its country programmes, NIMD invests heavily in building a sustainable relation of trust between the political parties, and NIMD as a neutral organization. This story shows that the long-term investment in a relationship based on trust paid off when political crisis struck. In fact, while all official democratic institutions stopped functioning, this was the only place that could facilitate interparty dialogue to avoid further escalation.

Dispelling the doubts surrounding international conflict and peace-building interventions in Mali

Moumouni Soumano is the Executive Director of the Centre Malien pour le Dialogue Interpartis at la Democratie (CMDID), NIMD's implementing partner in Mali, since January 2007. He specializes in working with political parties on interparty dialogue, election and decentralization support. Mr Soumano also teaches constitutional and administrative law at the University of Bamako.

After the occupation of the northern region of the country by the rebel groups and a subsequent coup d'etat, the government and Tuareg rebel groups had agreed on a roadmap for a peace process that would be negotiated in Algeria, under the mediation of the international community represented by MINUSMA (United Nations Mission for Mali). As a result all political issues became very sensitive and the government was under pressure from MINUSMA and France (both of whom had already put troops on the ground), to resolve the situation quickly. Moreover, the involvement of these international organizations was not entirely welcomed by the Malian people and parties.

The guardians of power

One day, in the midst of this negotiation, I came to work early and was just settling down, when to my surprise I received an unexpected call from the High Representative of the President of the Republic, a high-ranking government official. He was calling to voice his displeasure on a meeting CMDID (NIMD's implementing partner in Mali) was organizing to discuss the roadmap for a peace process. The meeting included all the political parties in the countries. "Why does everybody want to get involved in this issue? This is a state affair, not an issue we can discuss with everyone," he said a little impatiently. "With all due respect, it is the political parties who requested this exchange on the road map because they consider it to be of national interest" I responded. Clearly dissatisfied with my response he suggested a meeting.

Although I was aware that in fragile and conflict affected settings, political matters are very sensitive and the leaders of state tend to guard their power jealously, I was surprised with his reaction. They seemed to believe that the more in control they were, the better they were able to exercise their power and implement their policies. Yet according to me, national issues always have to be debated as part of the democratic construction.

At the meeting with the High Representative of the President, he tried to explain to us why, at that stage, it was necessary for the road map to remain a working document between the government and the armed groups. The dialogue we planned would work better after the agreement was reached between the government and the rebel groups.

I disagreed. It was a highly political document outlining the processes and mechanisms for the continuation of the negotiations and it was, therefore, essential that the perspectives of political parties be incorporated. And because the rebel groups were demanding political independence some important institutional changes would need to be made. In that sense, political parties would be key actors because those in Parliament would need to be part of any decision on such change.

“ Why does everybody want to get involved in this issue? This is a state affair, not an issue we can discuss with everyone ”

Trusting outsiders

Despite the government's resistance, I continued to seek an alternative through MINUSMA. Through them CMDID could make a connection with the international community and create an opportunity for MINUSMA to collaborate with the political parties, enhance its understanding of local political actors, and guarantee the effective implementation and sustainable impact of the political agreement for peace.

MINUSMA's mandate was mainly political, but the international community under the umbrella of the United Nations also charged it with the protection of the civilian population and the facilitation of an intervention. The political class in Mali greeted the presence of MINUSMA with courtesy but also a

measure of scepticism. According to the Malian press a sense of national pride and different experiences with the UN in Africa were some of the reasons for this scepticism.

Furthermore, MINUSMA had not established a strategic connection with the political actors to widen its information sources, and to recognise their role as actors in the construction of peace. Instead its focus lay, perhaps because of the urgency, on state institutions and the rebel groups.

Despite these limitations, MINUSMA was also the main interlocutor for the government in the peace-building process and played a key role in legitimising political action in the country. This pivotal role justified my approach towards them as a strategy to enhance the involvement of political actors in the process. The suggestion to include the input of all political parties on the roadmap was well received by the political adviser of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of United Nations in Mali.

A few days later MINUSMA themselves, in partnership with the Ministry of National Reconciliation, decided to organize a workshop where different political parties could give their input to the peace process. CMDID were also invited.

It starts with a meeting

The workshop on the contribution of political parties to the peace process and national reconciliation was held over two days. I was the facilitator of the group working on the institutional issue. During my facilitation, I was asked to help with drafting a workshop statement.

In drafting the statement, I focused my energy on formulating a proposition recommending the participation of political parties. I also explained to MINUSMA's director of political affairs the importance of political participation in the negotiations (even if only as observers) because they would be key players in the implementation of the outcome of the agreement. He agreed to back the recommendation.

A highlight of this workshop, for us, was when the session Chair asked how the participation of more than one hundred political parties would be possible and one of the political leaders said, "that

is easy for CMDID because all the major political parties are members and they are accustomed to inclusive dialogue". This demonstrated that CMDID was recognised for the impact of its long-term commitment to interparty dialogue for building trust and conflict prevention.

A step in the right direction

Although the government chose not to accept the workshop's recommendation on the participation of political parties, through the two-day workshop the government was able to get feedback from the political parties on the negotiation process - it was one of CMDID's goals.

Furthermore, impressed by the outcome, the director of political affairs of MINUSMA said, "I appreciate the fact that CMDID is an incontestable interlocutor for dealing with political parties". According to him this experience with political parties in Mali, would help them in other countries. And because of MINUSMA's recognition and their confidence in CMDID they formalised a partnership with CMDID to contribute to the dissemination of the political agreement that was signed between the government and the rebel groups. This activity helped CMDID to establish representation in the northern regions of Gao and Timbuktu.

Initially, the intervention of the international organizations under MINUSMA did not sit well with the national pride of Malians. But because of the fragility of the state and the deep political polarisation, they soon realised that participation of the international community was necessary and they were guarantors of the peace settlement.

“ that is easy for CMDID because all the major political parties are members and they are accustomed to inclusive dialogue. ”

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, several different organizations often work towards the same goals, but from different points of departure. This story shows the sustained efforts of CMDID to cooperate with MINUSMA and emphasize the importance of the inclusion of political parties to the formation and implementation of the peace process.