

**Local Business, Local Peace:  
the Peacebuilding Potential of the  
Domestic Private Sector**

**Case study  
Burundi\***

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## Burundi

# ***Dushirehamwe* Association in Burundi: linking peace and development activities**

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In 1993, the first democratically elected president of Burundi, who belonged to the majority Hutu ethnic group, was assassinated along with his close collaborators. The killing triggered the massacre of innocent Tutsi by members of the president's party. Acts of revenge followed, leading to the creation of militias within both groups, and the ensuing fighting Balkanised entire neighbourhoods. The retaliations escalated into a full-scale civil war and an associated rebellion in Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Civil war resulted in the loss of an estimated 300,000 lives and a massive displacement of people both internally and as refugees. It also destroyed the country's precarious social fabric, leading to extreme suspicion between people of different ethnicity.

### **The role of women in restoring peace**

Since the eruption of the crisis in 1993, Burundian women have established associations to work for peace. International Alert, UNIFEM and Search for Common Ground sought to support their initiatives by providing financial, moral and technical support, including a 'training of trainers' programme in conflict transformation techniques with a specific focus on gender issues. The objective was to strengthen the capacity of the women's organisations so they could participate more effectively in the transformation of Burundi's conflict.

The programme started in 1996 with 25 women from all ethnic groups, who were chosen for their active involvement in mobilising and raising women's awareness on conflict issues. Over 170 women trainers have taken part in programmes on gender and peaceful resolution of conflicts, and social transformation, and a further 210 community leaders have also participated. The leaders are responsible for more than

238 groups of returnees, displaced people and people who ‘remained on their hills’.<sup>1</sup> Activities have reached people in 13 of Burundi’s 17 provinces.

A core of women leaders has been set up in each of the provinces where the training took place. They share a similar vision of Burundi’s conflict and are active in mobilising the population for peace and reconciliation. The women mediate in family conflicts at the community level, advocate and lobby authorities to promote grassroots women’s groups, and provide early warning of threats to their communities. They are known as the *Dushirehamwe* (‘Let’s Reconcile’) network.

The programme has given birth to other activities such as community discussion on the peace process, and advocacy. Women now claim their right to participate in decision making from the bottom to the top of society. This is reflected in the high percentage of women in Burundi’s political institutions: women make up 31 percent of the National Assembly and 35 percent of the Senate. A significant number of women have also been elected to Commune Councils, resulting in enhanced representation of women in local institutions.

### The link between peace and joint economic activities

*Dushirehamwe*’s activities contributed to the creation of 238 groups composed of returnees and displaced people, bringing together individuals who work in the same field, such as agriculture, cattle rearing, arts and crafts, bee-keeping, trading and food production. One such group – *Urunani Abahuza Mitima* (‘Collective of Friends’) – was established in the village of Mutaho, bringing together 250 women, 40 men and 30 young girls. The association started in 1998 when two women leaders who had attended the first *Dushirehamwe* training course on conflict transformation techniques took the initiative to visit displaced camps and villages in the hills to discuss the situations there. After overcoming initial suspicion, they used cultural gatherings of children dancing to bring people together and to talk about the causes of the conflict. The songs touched on the problems brought about by the war. As the children danced, local dignitaries would get up and speak. The two women took the opportunity to express messages of reconciliation.

Each Sunday the group went from hill to hill, and people would come to listen and join in. Seeing the extreme poverty, misery and idleness, especially in the IDP camps, the two women set up a farming cooperative because, as the Burundi saying goes, ‘a hungry stomach has no ears’. The women started income-generating activities by cultivating pineapples on a four-hectare piece of land.

Selling what they grew enabled each member of the group member to buy cloth and soap. This whetted their appetite for working together more, and now they also

grow potatoes and beans. Because the women needed access to credit, they contacted the EU-funded Programme de Relance de l'Economie du Burundi (PREBU) and received a donation of cows and sheep. When the cows and sheep multiplied, the women gave some of the young to other groups that had not been so lucky in their applications to the PREBU. This gesture strengthened the chain of community solidarity.

Today the association is considered a model organisation that satisfies its members' basic needs and also helps the wider area, for example through distribution of seeds. It also serves as a model of how people can come together around activities of common interest. In the past, people had negative stereotypes of each another. Today their common concern is how to improve agricultural production and produce a surplus to pay for school fees, healthcare and clothes, and which one day they could deposit in the local savings and credit cooperative.

A second example is the *Habamahoro* group from Karuzi province, which consists of 30 women. One of them, a female trainer who attended the first gender-sensitive training courses on conflict transformation techniques, was outraged at the behaviour of fellow Tutsis in her community who would incite Tutsi IDPs to kill any Hutu who passed near the camp on their way to hospital or the market. On the other side, Hutus killed Tutsis when they came to the hills to collect whatever they had been growing before they were forced to flee their homes.

The *Dushirehamwe* trainer invited 15 Tutsi women from the IDP camp and 15 Hutus from the hills to her house, in order to discuss the situation. She wanted to share the training she had received and explain to them the negative impact of conflict on women, and women's role in the development of the family and the country.

The women decided to create a structure that would allow them to meet and find joint solutions that could restore peace among them. Hutu women decided to convince their brothers not to harm Tutsis when they came to harvest their fields. Tutsi women met with young Tutsi men to prevent them from killing Hutus and denounced anyone who committed such a crime.

A few days later, the women organised a meeting with other women from the hills and the IDP camps. The two groups decided to elect representatives who would give an account on the situation in the hills and the camps. They also created an association that would focus on promoting peace through dialogue, but which would not immediately undertake any production activity.

Soon, however, the leaders of *Habamahoro Karuzi* – like those of *Urunani Abahuza Mitima* before them – realised that poverty and misery needed to be addressed, in

particular as they made them vulnerable to the manipulations of politicians who would promise them material goods in exchange for their participation in acts of murder. They decided to start cultivating potatoes and beans with the support of the Provincial Department for Agriculture. Today, thanks to abundant production, the women are able to sell part of their produce and keep the rest for domestic consumption.

Another interesting case is the group of Buganda, where a woman who was forced to flee the hills settled in the town of Gatumba, near Bujumbura. After receiving the training and participating in visits between the displaced and those who remained on their hills, she returned to her own hill to organise similar gender-focused encounters. She discovered that the women in the displaced people's camps had no work and lived like beggars. She decided to form a group, which specialises in the production and commercialisation of soap and manioc. Each of its 45 women members now has a stall in the local market.

The various economic activities carried out by the different groups serve shared interests and reinforce the cohesion between different ethnic groups. The groups also offer forums in which members can freely express their concerns. In this way people are able to see beyond the stereotypes they formerly attached to members of different ethnic groups, leading to greater mutual acceptance. It becomes difficult for external political forces to manipulate and divide people along ethnic lines when they already share a common interest.

However, the general poverty into which Burundi has sunk has impacted on the members of these groups, as it does on the entire population. Lack of organisation and leadership, and scanty knowledge of management are the groups' main challenges. These weaknesses lead some members to become discouraged and seek personal gain, instead of working towards joint solutions to their shared problems. Conflicts of different kinds erupt, which prevent groups from developing and compromise their original mission and purpose.

Because these groups were established on the initiative of the trainers and leaders of *Dushirehamwe*, they feel a sense of responsibility about contributing to finding solutions to the problems they encounter so as to enable them to become cornerstones of peacebuilding at a community level. Capacity building, training and monitoring the groups therefore remain *Dushirehamwe's* highest priority.

### Endnotes

- 1 The key community-level administrative unit in Burundi is the *colline*, or hill, which comprises around five villages. There is often tension between people who 'remained on their hill' and those who were either displaced internally (mainly Tutsis) or fled abroad (mainly Hutus).

## Burundi Enterprise Network

Burundi's recent history has been characterised by sustained structural violence punctuated by violent outbreaks of conflict. The most recent began in 1993 and has resulted in over 200,000<sup>1</sup> deaths and over a million displaced or refugee people.<sup>2</sup> An elected government has been in power since August 2005 and much of the country is now at peace. However, damage to the social and economic fabric has been severe, with total GDP contracting 30 percent since the 1990s<sup>3</sup> and all human development indicators (literacy rates of 59 percent, school enrolment of 57 percent, life expectancy of 42 years and infant mortality rates of 114 per thousand) among the lowest in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Thus far, national and international efforts have focussed on a top-level political solution of the conflict, involving leaders of the various groups. While jobs in the state sector have been created to absorb them, there is pressure on the state from the hundreds of ex-army officers returning to civilian life and the estimated 55,000 regular soldiers and former rebel fighters being demobilised over the next few years.

The state provides the main means of access to employment, power and advancement, and this fuels violent competition for the levers of power. This has had a terrible toll on the economy, blocking private sector growth and reform of the country's outdated and inefficient economic institutions. Sustainable peace will, therefore, depend on rolling back the state's control of the economy, engineering a shift in mindset among elites towards national interests, and generating avenues for popular participation in both political and economic decision-making.

As a first step, there must be greater awareness of the issues, more accessible analysis and opportunities for debate, and sustained lobbying and advocacy of policy-makers. Alert has been working in support of the Burundi Enterprise Network (BEN) since 2004 to achieve this.

BEN was launched in 1999. Its objective is to establish a permanent dialogue between the private sector and government, aimed at improving the business climate. It is made up of some 20 local businessmen and women and organises seminars which bring together leaders of business, the government and donors to discuss issues of mutual interest. BEN claims that 'a deliberate policy of job-

creation in Burundi and the Great Lakes is, economically speaking, the only way to bring long-term growth, and politically the only way to ensure lasting peace’.

BEN has an office in Bujumbura with a full-time coordinator. It produces a monthly newsletter and reports on business matters; lobbies policy-makers (both Burundian and international) to bring about change in the environment and to stimulate commerce; and emphasises the importance of regional business links. Its recommendations emphasise the importance of a stable and more equitable economy that will create employment and help to bring about long-term peace.

### Endnotes

- 1 International Crisis Group (1998) ‘Burundi Under Siege: Lift the Sanctions; Relaunch the Peace Process’ *Africa Report* No. 1.
- 2 International Crisis Group (2003) ‘Refugees and Displaced Persons in Burundi – Defusing the Land Time Bomb’ *Africa Report* No. 70.
- 3 World Bank (2005) ‘Burundi’ *Countries at a Glance*. Available at [http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/bdi\\_aag.pdf](http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/bdi_aag.pdf)
- 3 Ibid.