

## Search for Common Ground - Burundi Key Findings Media Mapping Survey, September 2008

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international NGO with programmes in 18 countries whose mission is to transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches towards cooperative solutions.

Shortly following the genocide in Rwanda and in the midst of increasing ethnic tensions and violence in Burundi, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) launched a series of media and community projects in Burundi focusing on the following key objectives:

- Foster effective participation among women and men, both youth and adults, within the democratic governance framework;
- Facilitate the reintegration and inclusion of marginalized social groups, namely demobilized combatants, returnees, displaced persons, victims, ex-prisoners, and members of the Batwa ethnicity;
- Encourage effective and responsible freedom of expression in all aspects of Burundian society;
- Reduce the instances of violence in response to land conflicts linked to the crises in 1972 and 1993; and
- Promote ownership of the transitional justice process among all Burundians.



SFCG's Community Outreach Coordinator facilitating a session during a March 2008 conflict resolution training in the neighborhood of Kamenge (Bujumbura)

For this specific project, SFCG has conducted a media mapping survey with the support of the Finnish government in order to better the exchange of information between the government, civil society and the media.

### EVALUATION SCOPE

The overall objective of this study was to inform SFCG, the government, the media and civil society on the way information on governmental policies is being circulated and how to improve this process in the future. The specific objectives of this study were:

- To identify and analyze how the government and the media inform the public, how they select the information and target their audiences and;
- To identify and analyze how the public has access to the information and how it values its credibility.

## PLAN AND METHODOLOGY

The research centered on the nature and the quality of the different communications channels existing between the government and civil society, the government and its representatives and, the government and the media. Following this the study asked who had access to this information and through which means. In addition, the mapping scrutinized the degree of understanding and the trust the population had of the information they received.

While a literature review was used to map out the context, the core of the research took the form of interviews and collection of data with key actors in government, the media and, civil society.

The final narrative report was the work of an external consultant, Innocent Nsabimana.



Participants during the live monthly transitional justice panel in March 2008 in Bujumbura.

## CONTEXT

In post conflict Burundi, the quality and the way communication takes place between the government, civil society and the media plays a key role in the process of political normalization and national reconstruction.

Since 1992, Burundi has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of private media should they be television, radio or written press. In stark contrast with the previous state monopoly, this proliferation does not guarantee better quality nor greater thematic (on topics relevant to the population) or geographical coverage (outside of the capital).

If theoretically radio pluralism is acknowledged, in practice it is constricted by the poor economic situation, and the high cost of information gathering and licenses for private media.

True radio pluralism would be a strong guarantee for socio-economic development in a country where half of the population is illiterate. Thanks to its capacity to multiply information, radio is the means *par excellence* to spread information in Burundi.

This study has particularly focused on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for Growth and Poverty Reduction (CSLP), on the mechanisms of Transitional Justice, on the free health coverage for children under five and child birth as well as the relation between the media and the government.

### KEY FINDINGS

The study shows that communication on governmental priorities occurs through various channels, the main ones are the media in general and radio in particular.

A member of civil society mentioned that: ***“overall, governmental priorities are not brought to the public eye aside from the rare occasions when the president will make a public announcement stating “I will conduct such and such a policy”. The priorities remain unknown from the public and even from members of the government.***

It also reveals that the information received by the population on governmental priorities is insufficient, not always reliable and have to be verified.

The study reveals the population’s lack of knowledge and the poor quality of the information relayed by the media on key issues such as the CLSP and Transitional Justice Mechanisms.

Furthermore the study shows that even state officials know very little about the implementation of the CSLP or the evolution of transitional justice mechanisms. This suggests that the government does not have any communication strategy.

While the population considers itself well informed on issues related to free health care for children or child birth, the overall feeling is that it is hardly ever consulted, let alone, informed of its governments policy orientations.

This communication discrepancy deprives the population from actively participating in the policy-making process and hampers the information flow for the media.

In the context, the relationship between the government and the media resembles more a counter productive competition rather than fruitful collaboration.

In order to overcome the information deficiency surrounding a number of governmental policies and improve the flow of information between the government, the media and civil society this study has come up with the following recommendations:

- For the government – establish a communication policy in agreement with the Constitution and guaranteeing the freedom and good functioning of the press.

A member of the civil society:  
« *The only thing we should reflect upon is that in times of crisis, one should learn how to transmit information. It's the case for crises between the government and the media, where the information was solely focused on negative issues, as if there were no positive ones. One should not allow the problems one might have with the government to transcend into ones work, especially when one deals with a population like ours that is « yahahamutse / traumatized ».* »

- For the media – strengthen their professionalism internally and their coverage externally to reach remote populations.
- For the population – develop a critical distance vis-à-vis the media and not take every piece of information relayed by the press or radio for granted, thereby avoiding the “yabivuze / the radio said it” trap.

## CONCLUSION

The study shows that the communication of governmental priorities is taking place, but insufficiently. Topics covering facts and events are abundant, whereas themes such as the CLSP and mechanisms of transitional justice are not popularized enough.

This deficiency is ascribable to the fact that the information holders, mainly the government, are either unpracticed in communicating with the media or have not fully mastered the topics at hand. This profoundly affects the media's capacity to produce effective news given their near permanent lack of financial resources. This is compounded by the fact that reforms passed in 2007 expanding the freedom of the press, have yet to be implemented.

The problems identified in this report should be addressed in order to increase active participation from the population in the political development of its country. For that purpose, better use of the media's potential to link governmental and civil society should be pursued and policies pursued favoring the decentralization of communication by developing community radios and local newspapers.

*This document is a summary of a September 2008 Media Mapping Survey in Burundi. A full copy of this report can be acquired by contacting Roy Schlieben [rschlieben@sfcg.org](mailto:rschlieben@sfcg.org).*

SFCG is grateful to the following partner for their support:

