

Burundi's Transition

TRAINING LEADERS FOR PEACE

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One of the most distinctive elements of Burundi's transition—and perhaps its most instructive—is the extent to which national leaders have embraced the importance of leadership training as a key to reconciliation and good governance. Indeed, Burundi may be the first case of a country just emerging from conflict in which key leaders have integrated into their peace process a national training program explicitly designed to rebuild their capacity to work effectively together in advancing their country's postwar reconstruction.

The Burundi Leadership Training Program (BLTP) got underway in late 2002. Under the direction of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and with the support of the World Bank's Post-Conflict Fund and supplementary assistance from USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), the BLTP was meant to aid the fragile peace process then going tenuously forward under the Arusha Accord of 2000. Like many another divided society emerging from a bitter and violent conflict, Burundi faced four basic political challenges.

The first was that of overcoming the pervasive zero-sum, winner-take-all wartime mindset. The key would be persuading leaders to see collaboration with onetime foes not as an abstract ideal but rather as a matter of enlightened self-interest. Democracy becomes possible and peace secure only when leaders of a divided society realize that, whatever their conflicting interests, they share still more important interests in common. Often, sharp inequalities in power and resources fuel violent conflict in culturally plural societies, and sustainable peace and

democracy are attainable only when the underlying social and political inequities are corrected. Yet the resolution of these inequities becomes virtually impossible if there is no recognition of interdependence and common interests. Democratic nation-building is not simply a matter of persuading political leaders to subordinate their parochial interests to those of the nation. Real transformation requires not greater altruism from leaders and citizens, but rather a new recognition that their self-interest can be more effectively advanced through collaboration and inclusive political processes.

Second, while grassroots reconciliation efforts were plentiful, the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa leaderships were still at odds with one another, and this had to change. Somehow, a means had to be identified to restore trust among key leaders and to rebuild their personal relationships so that peace might be sustained.

Third, Burundian leaders had to restore a firm consensus on the ground rules for sharing state power and making public decisions. Seriously compounding this challenge was the continued presence in the field of armed groups.

Fourth and finally, war had seemingly robbed Burundian elites of their communication and negotiating skills. Leaders needed to learn or relearn how to hear others' concerns and how to express their own in ways that would encourage a search for solutions rather than endless blame-throwing. Democracy and stability cannot thrive in a climate of constant accusations and demands.

The BLTP began with these four crucial goals in mind.¹ After months of consultations with a broad cross-section of heads of institutions and organizations, a strategically selected and ethnically diverse group of 95 key Burundian leaders was invited to take part in an 18-month-long capacity-building initiative. The objective was to build a cohesive, sustainable network of leaders who could work together across all ethnic and political divides in order to advance Burundi's reconstruction. BLTP workshops would feature training in interest-based negotiations, communications, mediation, conflict analysis, strategic planning, and the management of organizational change.

Because of the project's intention to address simultaneously both the ethnic divide within the political elite and the wide gulf between the country's political class and the mass of the population, the BLTP participants were drawn in almost equal measure from the political class (the political parties, the army, and the rebel groups) and civil society (churches, women's organizations, academia, the media, business, and youth). In testimony to Burundians' deep yearning for a better future, the leaders of virtually all social and institutional sectors embraced the initiative. Even the National Liberation Front (FNL), the one armed group still outside the peace process, said that it welcomed the BLTP and hoped to join it once security conditions permitted.

In March 2003, the inaugural workshop in the “Ngozi process” (named after the town in northern Burundi that was the BLTP’s initial training venue) went forward for the benefit of the first 35 members of the prospective BLTP leadership network. Participants understood that this was to be not a one-off event but rather part of a process of leadership development and networking that would bring the participants together every two or three months for exercises meant to broaden their leadership skills and deepen their personal relationships. Over time, three groups of participating leaders would merge into a single leadership network.

The “Ngozi process” employs a variety of simulations and other interactive exercises to help transform the way in which participants define their self-interest, so that they can see their long-term security and welfare as being not in opposition to, but directly dependent upon, the larger collectivity of which they are part. This requires understanding the concept of “interest-based negotiations,” in which decision makers distinguish between their “positions” or idealized aspirations, on the one hand, and their underlying “interests” or fundamental needs, on the other. Sustainable decisions are far more likely to result from a decision-making process that turns not on attempts to impose one’s position on others but, instead, on the search for means of accommodating the priority interests of all.

Another principal training objective is to form a climate of mutual trust. This is because sustainable agreements among competing parties require not only a sense of shared interests but also a set of working human relationships. This means seeing each other as individuals and not merely as members of hostile groups, and learning truly to “hear” the other’s point of view and stand in the other’s shoes.

Effective communication is a major focus. Participants learn the role that communication plays in developing or destroying trust (that messages can be meant in one way and received in another), the danger of acting on the basis of untested assumptions, and the ways in which the method of decision-making and the distribution of resources can affect intergroup attitudes. A powerful lesson emerging from simulations to which the leaders are exposed is that durable solutions to issues driving conflict can only be found through inclusive, participant-based processes—that is, through means that are essentially those of democracy.

Extending the Ngozi Process

Within six months, the Ngozi process had had such a remarkable impact on the cohesion and collaborative capacity of the leaders involved that the BLTP participants from the Tutsi army high command and from the six armed rebel groups joined in asking that a workshop be quickly organized for army and rebel military commanders to prepare for the upcoming cease-fire. In the event, 20 armed-group commanders

and 17 army officers traveled—in some cases straight from the battlefield—to Nairobi for a six-day workshop. Breaking the ice took extra effort, yet by week's end the combatants had established the same kind of rapport that had emerged within the BLTP leadership network.

Fresh from this success, the BLTP was asked to mount a workshop for the members of the Joint Cease Fire Commission and for a commission charged with laying the groundwork for a unified army into which the armed-group cadres would be integrated. The army chief of staff then asked for the creation of a two-year cohesion-building program for the newly integrated army high command. Similar requests led to the extension of this training to the top one hundred officers in the new national police force, and to 84 former combatants trained (on the suggestion of the UN-force commander) to work in mixed teams charged with monitoring the demobilization process. In addition, the BLTP was asked to train Burundian trainers, so that Ngozi-style programs could be integrated in the curriculum of the national military academy. Work with the army and police has been funded by the British Department for International Development and the European Commission. All the while, the BLTP has continued its work with the initial group of "key leaders," eventually reaching its full complement of 95 participants.

Ngozi-process training began to have an impact on other sectors as well. Responding to fears that fresh elections would see a reprise of the savage intercommunal violence that had often marked such events, the BLTP joined the Burundi Independent Electoral Commission and the UN mission to stage two workshops for the top leaders of 31 political parties. The response was enthusiastic, and the party leaders cooperated to write an Electoral Code of Conduct; issued a statement assuring the public of their joint determination to work for elections without violence or intimidation; and requested that the BLTP bring them together again periodically in face-to-face settings.

At the grassroots level, with OTI support, twenty Burundian "master trainers," educated in the Ngozi method, have in turn trained over four thousand local leaders in a two-year pilot project designed to assist in the reintegration of thousands of returning refugees, displaced persons, and ex-combatants. This grassroots training is conducted in Kirundi (rather than in French), and with materials accessible to an illiterate population. A smaller initiative, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and inspired by one of the first BLTP participants, aims to build organizational capacity in a single commune (whose example, it is hoped, will spread) by mobilizing local leaders to work in common support of an agricultural-demonstration project that will benefit the entire commune.

After the remarkably successful elections, former rebel leader and president-elect Pierre Nkurunziza asked the BLTP to conduct a week-long Ngozi-process workshop for himself, his two vice-presidents, the

Council of Ministers, and the various chiefs of staff of the executive leadership. The President has asked that this training be continued for the top tier of government and be extended to parliamentary leaders.

According to both those who observed and those who took part, the BLTP has had remarkable success in breaking down ethnic and political barriers, in building social cohesion among training participants, in strengthening collaborative capacities, and in boosting institutional transformation. Nearly four hundred national leaders from the military, the police, civilian government, civil society, and the parties have so far received some form of Ngozi-process training, as have over four thousand local leaders. The members of the original “network of 95” continue to meet and work together, to socialize, and to collaborate on a number of projects and activities. They have begun to apply the lessons that they have learned—and the potent example of their own collaboration—to the institutions with which they are involved as well as to the broader society. One of the most notable things about Burundi’s experience has been a lack of the defensiveness that one sees in many countries from leaders who fear that involvement in “training” programs will diminish their political standing, or who find it unseemly that top leaders might be thought able to benefit from training.

The post-conflict reconstruction of any society involves a wealth of distinct elements—new basic laws, new legislative and judicial systems, the building of civil society capacities, elections, security-sector reform, ex-combatant reintegration, and the like. These will not mean much, however, if leaders of the various camps continue to see themselves as locked in winner-take-all struggles, if they cannot arrange for orderly power sharing, or if they are unable to communicate constructively with one another. What is exciting about the Burundian transition is the emergence of a new political culture reflective of a more inclusive way of doing politics. The enterprise in Burundi is nothing less than the slow but steady transformation of an entire nation’s behavior and attitudes. This is still very much a work in progress, but the news so far is promising.

Rethinking Democracy Promotion

Conventional democracy and good-governance programs are typically rooted in Western liberal-democratic principles that elevate the value of the individual over the state and stress the importance of political pluralism and the benefits of competitive politics. In keeping with the adversarial paradigm that shapes Western democratic thought, democracy and governance assistance tends to go toward strengthening multiparty electoral systems, building the capacity of civil society, encouraging trade unionism and the development of a private business sector, and cultivating respect for human rights.

While these are all important, one should not overlook the strength

and resiliency that Western democracies derive not only from pluralism and competition, but also from an underlying agreement on the definition of the national community, an acceptance by key components of the society of the “rules of the game,” and the existence of a modicum of trust among prominent leaders. Even “adversarial” Western democracy, in short, depends as much upon cooperation as it does upon competition; it rests not only on the jostling of diverse interests, but also on the recognition of the common ground upon which all members of the national community stand.

By contrast, many culturally plural states today have an uncertain concept of nationhood. Contemporary African national identities and institutions, for example, are for the most part colonial impositions. While there may be a nominal acceptance of a common “national” identity, members of different ethnic groups often see each other as hostile, alien entities with fundamentally opposed interests. Given the dire poverty and underdevelopment that grip most African societies, Burundi included, the state is often seen as the most certain avenue to wealth and power, and politics becomes a desperate high-stakes affair. A sense of communal interdependence and trust among group leaders are often notable by their absence.

The problem of African democratization does not primarily lie in the absence of democratic values. Many African societies have traditionally embraced ways of making decisions that call for broad participation and strive for consensus. Rather, the problem is that members of many culturally plural African nation-states simply do not define themselves as “citizens first.” Even in states that once had unifying identities and institutions—such as the traditional monarchies of Rwanda and Burundi—the new modes and orders of colonialism and postcolonialism engendered new patterns of political mobilization and competition that shattered traditional bonds.

Against this backdrop of weak national identities and institutions, a *unidimensional* stress on competitive, adversarial politics can well be counter-productive.. While there remains a role for “conventional” democracy-promotion programs that encourage multipartism, human rights advocacy, and pluralism, greater attention must be paid to such oft-neglected imperatives of sustainable democracy as the recognition of interdependence among society’s constituent parts, a modicum of trust among key leaders, a consensus on “the rules of the game,” and modes of discourse that encourage problem-solving rather than confrontation. If these conditions are present, democracy arises organically; if they are absent, preaching about democracy’s value will be of little avail.

When scholars and experts talk about peace-building and postconflict interventions, the discussion often suffers from an unmediated gap between “micro” and “macro” levels of analysis. Policy makers often speak of the “institutional” prerequisites of transparent, democratic governance:

multiparty electoral competition, a separation of powers, the rule of law, and the like. But institutions must draw in individuals if the institutions are to have any real force. And institutional transformation requires individual transformation—in the way people think, in how they relate to one another, and in how they work together. A key to successful international interventions, therefore, is to reach the critical national leaders. Failing that, institutional transformation will be hollow and fleeting.

On a technical level, the art of building democratic state capacity is well understood. Experts know how to arrange the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of armed belligerents; organize multiparty elections; deploy international peacekeeping troops; train new police forces; and overhaul court systems or macroeconomic policies. But the harder political task—helping the leaders of warring factions to find a way to achieve these objectives, to work collaboratively in avoiding war or supporting postwar reconstruction, and to build democratically accountable links between the governors and the governed—are generally neglected. The too-frequent consequence, sadly, is that negotiated peace accords wither quickly while rickety new democratic institutions wobble and sway badly. We “know” what is required of leaders in a conflict or postconflict situation; even they often “know” what is required. The challenge is to make what is required for durable peace and sustainable democracy politically achievable. This requires a careful examination of the underappreciated “leadership factor” in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.

Burundi’s experience so far suggests that peace-building and international post-conflict interventions can benefit significantly by focusing on the leadership dimensions of institutional transformation and combining the skill-sets of both diplomats and organizational specialists. Neither diplomats nor “trainers” can by themselves implement effective leadership interventions. Diplomats have access to national leaders and usually see the “big picture” fairly clearly, but typically have little training in or understanding of techniques of institutional and conflict transformation. Trainers generally have scant access to national leaders and little knowledge of the larger political and diplomatic dynamics that affect divided societies. Yet diplomats and trainers working together—as they did in Burundi—can add up to more than the sum of their parts and in the process give a badly needed boost to the cause of democracy.

NOTES

1. For a more comprehensive description of the BLTP training strategy and techniques, see Howard Wolpe, et al., “Rebuilding Peace and State Capacity in War-torn Burundi,” *The Roundtable* 93 (July, 2004): 457–67. Partnering in this initiative with the Wilson Center were the ESSEC Institute of Research and Education on Negotiations in Europe and the Conflict Management Group.