

Rebuilding Peace and State Capacity in War-torn Burundi

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ABSTRACT Burundi is a small country, no larger than the state of Maryland, with a population numbering just over six million. But the dimensions of its human tragedy are anything but diminutive: a genocide in 1972; repeated episodes of intercommunal violence. Since its independence in 1962, Burundi has witnessed an estimated 300 000 killed, some 800 000 forced to flee the country, over 700 000 more internally displaced. In November 2003 37 military commanders from the Burundian army and rebel groups took part in a leadership workshop designed to create a newly unified national army. The workshop was one aspect of the Burundi Leadership Training Program, which aims to build capacity by offering training in collaborative decision making for Burundian leaders drawn from all social and institutional sectors.

KEY WORDS: capacity-building, Burundi, conflict resolution, peace-building, post-war reconstruction, reconciliation

Introduction

A gathering of military commanders from the Burundian army and rebel groups in Nairobi in November 2003 was remarkable. Thirty-seven military commanders who, only a few days earlier, were confronting each other on the battlefield had agreed to participate in a leadership workshop designed to strengthen their

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ability to work together to fashion a newly unified national army. Subsequently, the Burundi Army Chief of Staff asked that the same training be extended to both the Joint Cease-Fire Commission and the newly integrated military command, and that a “training of trainers” programme be established to institutionalize this mode of leadership training within the army’s military academy.

The Nairobi workshop, underwritten by the European Commission and by the British government (Department for International Development), was a direct spin-off of a novel capacity-building initiative, the Burundi Leadership Training Program (BLTP), launched a year earlier by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The BLTP provides training in collaborative decision making (negotiations, communications, visioning, strategic planning, group problem solving, the management of organizational change) to a strategically selected group of Burundian leaders drawn from all social and institutional sectors.

Funded by the World Bank’s Post Conflict Fund with additional support from the Office of Transition Initiatives of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the BLTP has a two-fold objective: first, to help build a socially cohesive, sustainable network of 100 key leaders capable of working across the lines of ethnic and political division in Burundi’s highly polarized society; second, to advance the country’s postwar economic reconstruction.

According to both participants and observers, what has become known as the ‘Ngozi Process’ (named after the venue where much of the initial training occurred) has had remarkable impact—breaking down ethnic and political barriers, and building social cohesion among the participating leaders. Today these leaders are meeting together, socializing together, using an internet group site to facilitate communications even with those of their number still living outside Burundi, and collaborating on the development of concrete projects of economic recovery.

While the BLTP has been in effect for only a year, and an assessment of its long-term impact on Burundi will have to await the passage of time, the enthusiastic response of Burundian civilian and military leaders to this capacity-building initiative is noteworthy—and cause for cautious optimism. Moreover, the approach that is being taken to leadership development in war-torn Burundi may well have application to other conflict and post-conflict settings.

Rethinking Postwar Reconstruction: A Conceptual Framework

Conventional democracy and good governance programmes in Africa emphasize the importance of political pluralism, and the benefits that flow from a competitive political system. Thus, the principal funding beneficiaries of the Washington-based National Endowment for Democracy encourage multipartyism, work at civil society capacity building, support trade unionism and the development of a private business sector, and encourage human rights advocacy.

The common denominator of all these activities is that they are predicated on a competitive, adversarial political paradigm that takes as an article of faith that the best public policy will flow from open political discourse and the vigorous exchange of conflicting opinions and perspectives.

Yet the strength and stability of Western democratic societies rests not only on the maintenance of structural pluralism and open political competition, but

also on an underlying agreement that all citizens are part of the same national political community whose members have equal worth; on the existence of a modicum of trust among key leaders; and on an acceptance by the key components of the society of the 'rules of the game' by which conflicting interests are managed. Western democracy, in short, depends as much upon cooperation as it does upon competition; it rests not only on the articulation of diverse interests and identities, but also upon the recognition of the common ground that unites all the members of the national community.

In war-torn societies, however, the very definition of the 'nation' may be contested. Typically, the belligerent parties have come to see one another as hostile adversaries that hail from distinct communities, that have fundamentally opposed interests, and that are engaged in a life and death struggle.

Even where contemporary nation-states do have unifying identities and institutions—such as Burundi and Rwanda whose traditional monarchies provided a unifying point of reference for their national populations—the political structures of the colonial and post-independence eras generated new patterns of political mobilization and competition that ruptured the traditional sense of community.

In sum, in war-torn societies there is none of the perceptual and attitudinal common ground that is a 'given' in Western democratic societies. It is not surprising, therefore, that Western-style democracy promotion initiatives that emphasize the importance of multiparty political competition, the advocacy of human rights, and the aggressive articulation of distinct labour and business interests often have little traction in postwar reconstruction. This does not mean that democratic conceptions and objectives should be abandoned—only that their realization in war-torn societies requires much greater attention to four often neglected political imperatives.

Four Imperatives for Postwar Reconstruction

Postwar reconstruction requires, in the first instance, the abandonment of the zero sum, 'win-lose' paradigm induced by war. The belligerent parties must come to a new understanding that, while some of their interests may be in conflict, the parties have important interests in common and are fundamentally interdependent; as a consequence, they both stand to gain far more by collaboration than by military struggle. Each party must come to see its interests not as fundamentally opposed to, but as inextricably linked with, the interests of even those it regards as adversaries. There must be a new acceptance that all the previously belligerent parties are in fact members of the same community who have equal worth and who share common ground. Only then does non-violent conflict management become possible.

Sometimes it is suggested that the fundamental challenge of postwar political reconstruction is to persuade the belligerent parties to subordinate their parochial interests to the interests of the nation. The problem with this formulation is that, if people perceive their individual or group interests to be in conflict with that of the nation, almost invariably the national interest will lose out. Real political transformation requires not greater altruism or sacrifice on the part of citizens, but rather a new recognition that, in the final analysis, the realization of their self-interests in fact requires collaboration with others.

A second political imperative of postwar reconstruction is the restoration of trust among the leaders of the principal belligerent parties. Trust building, though neither easy nor swift, is essential. Absent some level of mutual trust and confidence among the leaders of a nation's constituent elements, the collaboration required for sustainable political agreements becomes exceedingly difficult. Trust building requires the construction (or reconstruction) of personal relationships among key leaders. In the final analysis, these relationships are the basic material out of which stable and enduring political communities are formed.

Beyond a new political paradigm and the building of relationships, postwar democratic reconstruction also requires a new mode of political discourse. Leaders must learn how to communicate even their differences in ways that do not threaten personal relationships. By developing skills that enable them both to hear accurately the concerns of their interlocutors, and to assert their own views without being abrasive, leaders will be able to move from confrontational blame-throwing to a cooperative form of discourse that can yield solutions which will better serve the interests of all.

The fourth political imperative for successful postwar democratic reconstruction is the need to establish consensual agreement on the 'rules of the game' for the management of conflict. It is far easier to build the requisite consensus—on such issues as power-sharing and appropriate decision-making processes—if the fundamental paradigm shift has already occurred, and if trust has been established among the key leaders. Once people see their own self-interest as linked to that of the nation's other constituent elements, they more easily accept the importance of inclusive, participant-based decision-making processes. From this perspective, democratic institutions—rather than being viewed as the instrument for achieving successful postwar reconstruction—are more helpfully seen as the consequence of successful reconstruction.

The Burundi Case

Burundi offers a graphic illustration of a country whose leaders have, for decades, seen themselves as in the grip of a life and death struggle. The combination of a recent history of intercommunal massacres, including genocide, and post-independence domination of a sub-set of the Tutsi minority over the majority Hutu population, have produced deep-seated suspicions and mistrust among elites. Moreover, the country must contend not only with an ethnically polarized urban leadership class, but also with a huge gulf between the country's 'political class' and a deeply alienated, largely rural, population.¹

Consequently, at the onset of the three-year political transition established by the Arusha Peace Accord of August 2000, all four of the key political imperatives for a sustainable Burundian peace and successful postwar reconstruction—a new interdependence-affirming paradigm, trust among key players, cooperative political rhetoric, and consensus on the rules of the game—were largely absent. While there were plentiful examples of grassroots reconciliation, at the leadership level there was little sense of common ground among Tutsi, Hutu and Twa.² Trusting inter-ethnic relationships were the exception rather than the norm; and, notwithstanding their formal acceptance of power-sharing arrangements negotiated in Arusha and afterwards, the consensus among the principal parties on the rules governing the management of their interactions was exceedingly fragile.

Remarkably, despite all the above, with the launching of the transitional institutions a very strong peace dynamic has taken hold. Burundian leaders no less than rural farmers are tired of war. The country, for decades one of the world's poorest, has been economically devastated by the conflict. It has become clear to most that there is no military solution to Burundi's political crisis. Burundians everywhere want to find a way of creating for themselves a peaceful, stable, secure future.

This common yearning has made Burundian leaders receptive to the concept of a national training programme, designed to strengthen the ability of key leaders to work collaboratively—across the lines of ethnic and political division—and to develop a common vision for the nation's postwar economic reconstruction.

The Burundi Leadership Training Programme

Six Organizing Principles

The approach taken in constructing the Burundi Leadership Training Program was informed by six key organizing principles which are discussed below.

Securing a Burundian 'buy-in'. Programme sustainability required that the initiative be 'owned' by the Burundians themselves and that knowledgeable Burundians be involved at the 'take off'.

Two methods were used to obtain the broadest possible Burundian 'buy-in' to the project. First, the project managers held almost 100 meetings over two months with Burundians from all political perspectives—from government and civil society, and from the military and rebel groups. In this connection, the seriousness and credibility of the proposed venture were enhanced in Burundian eyes by the Project Director's five-year involvement with the Burundian peace process as a special envoy, by the World Bank's financial sponsorship of the initiative, and by the neutrality and stature of the implementing partner, the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

These consultative meetings resulted in the endorsement of the BLTP by virtually all Burundian stakeholders. One of the seven rebel groups declined the invitation to participate but its leadership indicated that it hoped to join the programme at some point in the future.

Second, two Burundians were brought into the project management team at the project's inception—both highly respected and trusted individuals who enjoyed the confidence of virtually all Burundian institutions and political factions and lent immediate credibility to the initiative. Independent Consultant Eugene Nindorera, a former Minister of Human Rights, brought to the project not only his considerable personal stature and access to all factional leaders, but also exceptional political instincts and analytic grasp of Burundian political dynamics. Office Manager Fabien Nsengimana, a former teacher and civil servant with extensive experience in the Office of the Presidency is, like Nindorera, one of the rare Burundians who has transcended his society's ethnic polarity and is accepted as an honest and trusted interlocutor by all.

Selecting leaders strategically. To achieve maximum possible impact in the shortest amount of time, the 100 leaders who would be invited to participate in this

initiative had to be strategically selected. The Burundian stakeholders were each requested to draw up their own list of 35 leaders they would most like to see involved in the training programme. They were asked to nominate only persons who, by virtue of the positions they held, or by virtue of the influence they wielded in their respective groups, had the capacity to shape Burundi's future.

Because of the need to address simultaneously not only the ethnic cleavage dividing Burundian elites, but also the huge chasm between these elites and the country's population, half the participants were to be drawn from the 'political class'—the government and the political parties, the Army, and all the rebel organizations—while the other half came from civil society (churches, women's organizations, academia, media, youth, labour unions and the business community).

The stakeholders were assured that their submissions would be treated confidentially, shared only with members of the management team. The final responsibility for participant selection would lie with the project managers, who had to ensure that the composition of every workshop group satisfied the need for ethnic, regional and gender balance, and the need for sectoral inclusivity. But their submissions would serve as an important guide as to who Burundians themselves believed were those most capable of significantly influencing their country's future.

Framing the invitations to prospective participants. Invitations to participate in the BLTP emphasize three themes:

- The invitee is one of a very select group of around 100 leaders identified by other Burundians as individuals whose influence and stature are such that they can shape the future of their country. Participants report that this framing underlines the importance of the effort and imbues the leaders with a sense of responsibility to commit to the programme.
- Leaders are invited to participate in their personal capacities, not as representatives of their organizations or institutions. This enables them to feel freer and more open with each other within the workshops.
- The training workshops are not negotiating venues; rather, they are to be understood as part of a technical, capacity-building initiative designed to strengthen the individual leadership skills of Burundian leaders. This formulation helps to depoliticize the project, making it easier for persons who have resisted earlier opportunities for inter-group dialogue to participate.

Securing a regional 'buy-in'. Consultations were held with several regional leaders to ensure their full understanding of the objectives of the BLTP and to receive their analyses of evolving peace process dynamics. It was important to assure the regional states spearheading the still on-going peace talks—Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa—that the BLTP workshops would never become an alternative negotiating venue.

The South Africans were particularly enthusiastic about the training initiative, believing that this work with a diverse group of Burundian leaders would complement and strengthen their efforts at facilitating further negotiated agreements. The Tanzanians and Ugandans were similarly receptive.

Ensuring programme sustainability. Burundians have had extensive experience with well-intended training initiatives that lacked any follow-through or sustainability. Project managers emphasized that the BLTP was designed not as a series of discrete training sessions, but as a continuing process directed to the development of a sustainable, cohesive network of Burundian leaders. To ensure that this was a realistic objective, the World Bank's Post Conflict Fund provided adequate start-up funding not for a single workshop, but for a series of workshops that would be organized over an 18-month period. In addition, the project managers received assurances from a number of donors who were involved in Burundi that, as the leader-participants began to develop concrete projects of economic recovery, additional funds would be made available for further training or to meet other project resource requirements.

Ensuring concrete end-results for Burundi. Training must be linked to concrete joint tasks—in this instance, activities related to economic reconstruction. Leadership training and networking are conceived not as ends in themselves, but as means to the ultimate objective of advancing Burundi's postwar reconstruction. This is a critical substantive objective, particularly given the war-devastated Burundian economy. But it is also an important process objective: there is no stronger impetus towards the rebuilding of a sense of community than joint problem-solving initiatives that have people working across the lines of ethnic and political division. The successful accomplishment of joint tasks helps validate both the common ground of previous adversaries and their ability to transcend earlier antagonisms.

Programme Structure

The BLTP involves three workshop groups, each numbering between 30 and 35 leader-participants. Each group begins with a five to six day retreat in which the participants receive the 'core' BLTP training. Shorter follow-on training workshops are held periodically. Between these formal training sessions, many of the participants meet and socialize by themselves—sometimes with the facilitation of local BLTP staff, sometimes entirely on their own initiative—to deepen their relationships, and to develop projects that can contribute to the nation's economic recovery. Because the BLTP seeks to facilitate a cohesive network involving all the participating leaders, all three workshop groups are gradually being linked together—through social events, the sharing of contact information, combined training activities, and their work on economic recovery projects.³

The local BLTP office serves as a meeting-place and reference point for participating leaders. Project Consultant Nindorera and Office Manager Nsenigimana stay in close touch with the leaders—supporting their efforts, following their projects, assessing the impact of the training on their personal and professional lives.

The BLTP has succeeded in attracting an ethnically balanced and diverse group of key leaders from virtually every social and institutional sector, government and non-government, civilian and military.

Workshop participants include a number of high-ranking military and political leaders, such as a Minister, the Army Chief of Staff, a top general, the president of the Constitutional Court, the first vice-president of the Senate, a former vice-president of the country, a provincial governor, and a number of

parliamentarians. Six of the seven rebel groups are represented, as are all the principal political parties.

Roughly half the participants are drawn from civil society. Both the Catholic and Pentecostal Churches are represented. Catholic participants include a bishop, a priest, a nun, and the Secretary-General of the Burundi Catholic Peace and Justice Commission. Other civil society representatives are drawn from academia, the media, the youth, business, labour unions, and several grassroots relief, human rights and women's organizations.

The central training objective of the BLTP is to address the four political imperatives for the reconstruction of war-torn societies: a shift from a zero-sum paradigm to one that affirms interdependence and common ground; the development of a modicum of trust among the decision makers; moving from confrontational to cooperative rhetoric; and a consensus on how power will be organized and decisions will be made, i.e. on the rules of the game.

All this requires more than 'book learning' and a cognitive understanding of concepts. A paradigm or mind-shift can not be taught; it must be experienced. The same is true of trusting relationships that develop only over time and involve personal emotional investment. Likewise, an appreciation of the importance of process will emerge only through direct experience with others. What the BLTP training provides is an opportunity for experiential learning—through interactive exercises, simulations, and rôle-playing—all designed to enable the participants to learn and build upon their skills, not only through lectures and reading, but also through their own experience.

Workshop exercises are designed both to demonstrate the power of conditioning on perceptions and to strengthen participants' communication skills. They also seek to transform the way in which the participants define and understand their 'self'-interest, such that they come to see their long-term security and welfare as being not in opposition to, but directly dependent upon, the larger society of which they are part. This requires understanding the concept of 'interest-based negotiation', 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.

Simulated Society

Illustrative of the techniques employed, SIMSOC ('simulated society') is an elaborate simulation designed by William Gamson to provide insight into the dynamics of social and political conflict. In brief, SIMSOC consists of a single society comprised of four regions—red, green, blue and yellow—with a very unequal distribution of resources.

Participants spend an entire day coping with the challenge of personal survival while building a viable society. They must do so under conditions that closely parallel those of the real world. These conditions include extreme inequality between individuals and groups, a lack of sufficient subsistence for some individuals, major communication barriers between regions, a lack of shared experience and expectations, and a diversity of personal goals.

The members of SIMSOC must subsist; they must secure employment; and they must decide how to allocate whatever resources they possess—whether to invest in industry, or in public welfare programmes, or in the creation of police forces. Rioting is also an option. All the decisions people make, individually and collectively, determine whether the national indicators rise or fall; and this in turn determines whether the income available to the society's basic institutions increases or declines. If any of the national indicators falls below zero, the society collapses.

The success or failure of SIMSOC turns on the ability of its members to resolve conflicts arising from resource scarcity and the unequal distribution of both power and wealth—and to develop a broad national vision that transcends their regional boundaries and identities. However, this is not easy: there is a tendency for the members of SIMSOC to think and act on the basis of their parochial (regional) interests, and (usually without substantive foundation) to mistrust the intentions of persons from other regions. The fact that the cleavage between the society's 'haves' and 'have-nots' largely corresponds to regional boundaries (the poor Reds vs the rich Greens) only compounds the mistrust and aggravates societal tensions. What matters in SIMSOC is not whether one is a Tutsi or Hutu (though all four regions are populated by both Tutsi and Hutu participants), but whether one is a 'Green' or a 'Red'. Within SIMSOC, as within Burundi, ethnic divisions and conflict are a reflection of the uneven distribution of societal resources, and are the direct consequence of poor inter-group communication and the absence of an inclusive process by which national decisions are made.

The participants invariably become emotionally invested in 'their' society. As a result of the intensity of their experience, the feedback session that follows the playing of SIMSOC yields powerful insights and important lessons on:

- the rôle that communication plays in developing (or destroying) trust;
- the fact that messages are not always received the way they are intended, either because of differences in perception and experience, or because of the message sender's lack of clarity;
- the danger of acting on the basis of untested assumptions;
- the impact of the distribution of resources on inter-group perceptions and conflict;
- the fact that violence often has unintended consequences, leading people to focus on the violence rather than on the underlying issues that give rise to social discontent;
- the impact of the mass media in contributing to or mitigating societal conflict;
- the tendency of regions to 'balkanize', focusing on their own internal needs and losing sight of their linkages with, and dependence upon, the broader society;
- the importance of inclusive decision-making processes in resolving conflict and developing popular support for public policies.

As a result of their common experience in SIMSOC—in which people are divided not on the basis of their ethnic identities but, rather, on the basis of their regional identities and economic interests—the participants are now able to discuss Burundian problems with far greater objectivity and less defensiveness, and with much greater sensitivity to the perspectives and feelings of each other.

Conclusion

During the first few days of the initial BLTP workshop, virtually no reference is made to real-world Burundi or to current 'political' issues. This is intentional. To begin with a discussion of Burundian problems and conflicts would be to invite the participants to see each other in terms of their adversarial identities. That would be counterproductive to the fundamental training objective of enabling the participants to relate to one another as whole individuals, not simply as actors in an ethnically defined political conflict. Everything is done to establish the workshop as a 'safe' environment in which individuals feel comfortable taking certain risks, opening up to each other, exploring new ways of relating to one another.

After a few days of interactive communications and negotiation exercises, including SIMSOC, there is a perceptible lessening of ethnic sensitivities. As participants develop skills in 'active listening' and expand their understanding of the conditioned nature of attitudes and perceptions, they begin to relate to each other as individuals, and to identify common interests and aspirations of which they were previously unaware. They are now able to turn to the real world, and to work collaboratively in analysing common problems and identifying possible solutions. Towards this end a portion of every workshop is devoted to examining analytic tools that can assist leaders develop effective decision-making processes, diagnose problems, and develop and implement group projects.

While participants generally emerge from their initial workshop experience with a very different mind-set, with respect both to their relationships with one another and to the challenges that face Burundi, it takes time for the new insights and understanding to be fully integrated emotionally and behaviourally. The 'learning' of the Ngozi process—like all learning—must be reinforced—by further interaction, by further training and by actual collaborative effort in addressing their common problems. Absent such reinforcement, the impact of their training will almost certainly dissipate with time.

The participants also struggle with how best to deal with persons that have not had this kind of training. As one participant put it: "You provide this wonderful training. People come away from the workshop with new insights, new awareness—and new relationships. But then you put us out in the real world, where no one has had this experience. What are we supposed to do?"

Attempting to transform the status quo in any society is often a lonely undertaking. In a country as torn by violence as Burundi, it can be dangerous as well. Many persons may feel quite threatened by the emergent BLTP vision. Dealing with their resistance will be one of the principal challenges the trained leaders will face. Not only do they need skills to enable them to effectively communicate with those who have not had the BLTP experience, but they also must develop their own social cohesion so that they are able to reinforce and strengthen each other's efforts.

The leaders of the BLTP community will find many obstacles to the realization of their emergent vision of a pan-ethnic, united Burundian nation that is committed both to sustainable peace and economic reconstruction. Yet these leaders have all taken the critical first step. Their risk-taking, their courage, their determination and their creativity have been an inspiration to all of us who

have been privileged to play a rôle in launching the Burundi Leadership Training Program.

Notes

1. It is important to note that, while Hutu and Tutsi were distinct ethnic categories in pre-colonial (and colonial) Burundi, the political mobilization of Burundians on the basis of their 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' ethnic identities is *not* rooted in tradition. Rather, the Hutu/Tutsi political confrontation is a recent phenomenon, born of post-independence elite competition for political position and scarce economic resources.
2. BLTP Consultant Eugene Nindorera observes that the basic problem in Burundi is not ethnicity, but fear: "When the issue of fear is overcome and people realize they can work and live together, then the issue of ethnicity drops away." As an example, he points to the northern Burundian town of Ngozi, which has been stable and economically progressive for several years. Ethnicity there, he notes, is not a problem because the leadership has concentrated on economic development and competent administration regardless of ethnic backgrounds. "When work is done correctly no one asks who is Hutu/Tutsi, who is north/south. People only look at good governance, respect for the rule of law, and building trust."
3. As of this writing, BLTP working-groups have been organized around the following initiatives: 1) a pilot project in two provinces that would provide training in conflict resolution techniques and community development strategies for local leaders; 2) a fisheries cooperative initiative that is seen as a means of reintegrating ex-combatants and of upgrading the technology, skills and capacities of traditional fishing communities; 3) a project to provide essential services to Burundian street children; 4) a programme to strengthen the networking capabilities of BLTP participants; 5) a project directed at making government more transparent and accountable; 6) a project making books and computers available for students and young professionals; 7) an initiative exploring the application of solar energy to rural development.

