

# Entry Points for Preventing Youth Engagement in Political Violence: Lessons from Burundi's 2015 Elections

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Elections – a core pillar of democratic institutions – “can further democracy, development, human rights, and security, or undermine them” (Global Commission on Elections, Democracy & Security 2012). In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 50 percent of the elections held over the past two decades have experienced some form of electoral violence (Burchard 2015; Fjelde and Höglund, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Youth have been particularly affected by this type of political violence, both as victims and perpetrators.<sup>2</sup> A recent example of this is the 2015 elections in Burundi. Young people, especially un(der)employed political party leaders / members and ex-combatants, found themselves at the core of the violence that took place in the lead up to, during, and after the elections. One of the key explanations for youth engagement in such acts is that of political manipulation.<sup>3</sup>

Political elites, using promises of money, employment (e.g. government / government-affiliated jobs, and future development projects in their communities), and material goods (food, cars, and arms) manipulate youth for harassing, intimidating, and employing physical violence against opponents (AOAV 2015c). While young men and women have increasingly featured on the agenda of the international community for bottom-up conflict prevention strategies and programming in fragile and conflict-affected societies, evidence

*Despite the increasing focus of bottom-up conflict prevention efforts on youth in fragile and conflict-affected societies, empirical data on the motivations for youths' engagement in political violence, and which strategies and programmes work, under what conditions, and for whom, remain limited. As youth today will go on to become the next generation of adults and leaders, it is essential that these gaps in knowledge be addressed.*

<sup>1</sup> Electoral violence – a sub-category of political violence – is “a coercive and deliberate strategy used by political actors...to advance their interests or achieve specific political goals in relation to an electoral contest” (Adolfo et al. 2013, 1). Such violence, which includes physical violence and other coercive means, such as the threat of violence, intimidation and harassment, may occur in the lead up to, during, and after the elections (Adolfo et al. 2013).

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘youth’ can be defined differently depending on the social and cultural context. For this project, youth were defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. Political violence is defined as armed violence or threats of armed violence employed to convey a political message and/or achieve a political goal.

<sup>3</sup> The influence of the manipulator upon another person, inducing them to engage in actions (verbal and /or physical) to serve the political ends of the manipulator – actions which the person would otherwise not intend to carry out.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:



on their engagement in political violence and its prevention remains limited. What motivates youth to become engaged in political violence? Which conflict prevention strategies, under what conditions, and for whom are they likely to work? Research addressing these gaps has the potential to support the development and implementation of efforts that effectively address youth engagement in political violence, particularly around elections.

This paper presents key findings from the project entitled, "*Bumbatira Amahoro – Keeping the Peace: Engaging Youth Leaders to Prevent Conflict in Burundi*," which aimed to reduce the engagement of un(der)employed youth – political party leaders and members, ex-combatants, civil society leaders, and other vulnerable youth – in political violence around the 2015 elections.<sup>4</sup> Using a multidimensional approach, the project prioritized non-violent conflict resolution and conflict management skills, social cohesion, and the economic independence of youth. While each situation is unique, with significant variation existing both between and within countries, important lessons can be drawn in terms of what and how conflict prevention work that targets youth is conducted in different contexts. The recent case of Burundi provides some important insights regarding the activities that performed well, those that did not, and some of the reasons for the outcomes obtained. It is hoped that these insights will inform future projects focusing on the prevention of political violence among youth, especially around elections, in Burundi and beyond.

## **1. Youth, politics, and violence in Burundi**

Following Burundi's independence, youth emerged as a powerful force on the political scene, playing an important role in the political struggles that followed (Korongo 2012; Berckmoes 2015). These events were defined by various forms of politically motivated violence, from ethnic massacres and military coups to riots, state repression, and targeted assassinations (Lemarchand 1994; Uvin 2009). The prevailing political crisis in the country that was sparked by President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for and re-election in the 2015 elections is another catalyst in this long-series of events. During the electoral period, political party youth leaders and members from both the ruling and some of the opposition parties resorted to various intimidation tactics and acts of physical violence against their opponents. Why do these youths engage in politically motivated violence? The following section will explore this question in two parts. First, a brief historical trajectory of youth engagement in politics and political violence in Burundi is provided. This is followed by a discussion of some of the key factors identified through primary and secondary research as facilitating young people's engagement in acts of political violence in Burundi.

### **1.1 The Post-Independence Road to Civil War**

Following independence, Burundi emerged as a one-party state (1966-1993) dominated by the Tutsi-Hima faction from the southern province of Bururi (Lemarchand 1994; Nindorera 2012). During this time, the phenomenon of politically active youth emerged to the fore through the radical youth wing of the sole political party active at the time – *l'Union pour le progrès national* (UPRONA)<sup>5</sup> – known as the *Jeunesse Revolutionnaire Rwagasore* (JRR) (Lemarchand 1994; Berckmoes 2015; Russell 2015). The JRR participated in various acts of political violence, such as the Kamenge riots in 1962 and the killing of Hutu soldiers, police officers, and civilians in

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<sup>4</sup> These included internally displaced persons, returnees, orphans, and sons of unmarried mothers.

<sup>5</sup> This political party led the country to its independence in 1962 and was inclusive of all ethnicities prior to the overthrow of the constitutional monarchy in 1966 by Michel Micombero, after which it became Tutsi-dominated party (Lemarchand 1994; Wittig 2016).

communes and *collines* across the country in 1972 (Lemarchand 1994; Berckmoes 2015; Russell 2015).<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, two Hutu-dominated armed opposition groups emerged to the fore. The first was *le Parti pour la libération du peuple Hutu* (PALIPEHUTU), founded in 1980 in a refugee camp in Tanzania, and its military branch *le Front national de libération* (FNL), founded three years later (Lemarchand 1994; Wittig 2016). The second was *le Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie* (CNDD) and its military branch *les Forces pour la défense de la démocratie* (FDD) that was founded in 1994 in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), following the assassination of the democratically elected president, Melchior Ndadaye, of *le Front pour la démocratie au Burundi* (FRODEBU) in 1993 – the event which triggered the civil war (Lemarchand 1994; Uvin 2007; Nindorera 2012).

During the first part of the 1990s, both the PALIPEHUTU-FNL and the CNDD-FDD, along with the political party, FRODEBU, created their own youth wings, which became engaged in various forms of political violence, particularly during the civil war (Berckmoes 2015; Wittig 2016). The FRODEBU created *les Jeunes démocratiques du Burundi* (JEDEBU) who were involved in systematically targeting Tutsis following Ndadaye's assassination (Berckmoes 2015). The CNDD-FDD created the youth group, the *Imbonerakure* ("those who see far afar"), to keep an eye on the other armed groups during the war, namely the FNL – whom it perceived as a major political rival – and the Burundian army (Nindorera 2012; Wittig 2016). The FNL created *la jeunesse patriotique Hutu* (JPH), which provided "logistical support and carried out food and money collection" for the group (Human Rights Watch 2009, 2).

## 1.2 The Post-War Period

In 2000, under much international pressure, the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement was signed, except for the two principal armed opposition groups, the CNDD-FDD and the PALIPEHUTU-FNL, marking the official end of the civil war and the instalment of a transitional government (Wolpe 2011). Three years later, the CNDD-FDD signed a ceasefire agreement and transformed itself into a political party, followed by the FNL in 2009 (Uvin 2007; Wolpe 2011). The youth active in these armed groups were afterwards integrated into their respective official party youth wings (Wittig 2016). At the end of the transitional period in 2005, elections were held, during which the leader of the CNDD-FDD, Pierre Nkurunziza, was elected president (de Balzac et al. 2011; CENAP 2008). The enthusiasm that marked the end of the transitional period began to diminish in the years that followed as the country "witnessed an increasing return to authoritarianism" (CENAP 2008; Falch 2009; Wittig 2016). There was also a surge in political violence during this time, especially around the 2010 elections, on the part of the ruling and some of the opposition parties and their respective youth wings (Human Rights Watch 2009; 2010; Bouka 2014).

Although national and international observers considered the 2010 elections free and fair, the opposition claimed fraud and refused to participate (Bouka 2014). After the elections, the political climate in Burundi became increasingly tense, characterized by repeated failed efforts at dialogue between the government and opposition, and an increase in political violence on all sides, as well as harassment and persecution of human rights defenders and the private

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<sup>6</sup> There were a lot of Hutu as well, notably in the countryside, under the command of Tutsi, who went and killed their own brothers (Berckmoes 2015). "They had orders, were afraid of power, and received orders from the local administrator who would say that the others were traitors" (Berckmoes 2015, 10).

media (Human Rights Watch 2012; Bouka 2014; Amnesty International 2014). These trends became accentuated in the lead up to, during, and after the highly contested 2015 elections.

### 1.3 The 2015 Elections

Having already served two terms in office, the announcement by President Nkurunziza to run for re-election in April 2015 was met with strong opposition, protests, and clashes with police, particularly on the part of youth in several neighbourhoods in the capital of Bujumbura. The Constitutional Court's ruling in favour of Nkurunziza's re-election bid led to further protests and an attempted coup on May 13<sup>th</sup>, whose failure gave way to increased political tensions, the closure of several private radio and television stations (*Radio Publique Africaine*, Radio Bonesha FM, Rema FM, Radio-Television Renaissance FM, and Radio Insanganiro), and a deteriorating security situation. Given Nkurunziza's contentious bid for a third term and the climate of fear, intimidation, and violence in which the elections were organized, the opposition refused to participate and Nkurunziza was subsequently re-elected president. Since then, the political, security, and human rights situation has continued to deteriorate, with frequent grenade attacks, gunfire, targeted assassinations, and killings taking place, particularly in Bujumbura Mairie. Among those targeted and engaged in these acts of political violence have been youth affiliated to the ruling and some of the opposition parties, as well as youth part of armed groups, which sprung up in response to the contested 2015 elections.

## 2. Facilitating Factors for Youth Engagement in Political Violence

Although explanations for why individuals engage in political violence have been well-documented, attention to youth has been lacking. The nascent, yet growing literature on youth and political violence has identified several ultimate and proximal factors that facilitate youth engagement in political violence, including: material and non-material incentives (e.g. income, resources, protection or social status); inadequate and unequal education and skills; delayed transition to adulthood; injustice (e.g. socio-economic and political exclusion, and corruption); a legacy of violence; and trigger events (e.g. elections at the societal level and trauma at the individual level) (Hilker and Fraser 2009; OECD 2011; Korongo 2012; Mercy Corps 2011, 2015; Cramer 2015; IANYD – Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding 2016). However, the presence and saliency of such factors vary both within and across contexts. This means that any efforts to prevent youth engagement in political violence require first an understanding of the context in which they are implemented and the factors that facilitate youth engagement in such acts. Additionally, as realities on the ground continuously change, including the drivers of conflict, and the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries and stakeholders, regular assessments and adjustments are essential for conflict prevention efforts to remain relevant and effective. Drawing on both primary and secondary research, the following are some of the key factors that facilitate youth engagement in political violence in Burundi.

**Poverty and limited economic opportunities:** In Burundi, 80% of the population lives below the income poverty line of \$1.25 per day (UNDP 2015). In 2015, the country ranked 184<sup>th</sup> out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2015). The economy remains highly dependent on the agricultural sector, occupying close to 90% of the population that lives largely in rural areas (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016). The recent political crisis has accentuated the issue of unemployment, especially among urban youth.<sup>7</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund,

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<sup>7</sup> In 2013 (the most recent year for which unemployment figures are available), 6.9% of the population was unemployed, 10.7% of which were between the ages of 15 and 24 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016; World Bank 2016).

the economy shrank by 7.4% in 2015, making Burundi the poorest country in the world, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$315.20 dollars per inhabitant (AFP 2016). Testimonies by different political party youth leaders and members, such as those included in Box 1, reveal how prevailing poverty and unemployment rates in the country have rendered young people vulnerable to political manipulation by political leaders, especially around elections, in exchange for income and / or future employment.

**Inadequate and unequal education and skills:**

Related to the previous factor is that of inadequate and unequal access to education and skills. In Burundi, approximately 24% of youth have no formal education and 62% have not completed primary education (EPDC 2014). Given that education is “at the heart of individual social mobility and family strategies for survival” in the country, inadequate and unequal access can cause tensions and increase the vulnerability of youth to engage in acts of political violence (Fraser and Hilker 2009; Sommers and Uvin 2011, 5; USAID 2013). The legacy of ethnic discrimination in access to primary and secondary education remains a source of grievance and tension (Lemarchand 1994; UNICEF 2015). Despite the institution of free primary education, implementation of this policy has not improved the quality of education nor abolished school-related fees, and access remains inequitable (UNDP 2015). Furthermore, as secondary school and vocational training are not free, “the pressure on young people to find a ‘sponsor’ to pay for their school fees increases their vulnerability to violence” (UNDP 2015). Many youths also lack the knowledge and skills necessary to prevent and manage political conflicts in their communities, and to avoid being manipulated by political leaders.

**Delayed transition to adulthood:** Another factor increasing the vulnerability of youth to engage in acts of political violence is their delayed transition to adulthood. For example, the inability of young men to fulfil their traditional and socially expected roles may result in their engagement in violence to assert their masculinity (IANYD – Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding 2016). In Burundi, being financially independent plays an important role in being viewed as a respectable adult in society (Berckmoes 2015). In addition to the expectation that men are to be self-sufficient and look after their families, steady employment is becoming “a sign of reputable (urban) womanhood” (Berckmoes 2015). The unattainability of the social and economic statuses required for adulthood has been identified as fostering widespread

**Box 1. Elections & Political Manipulation of Youth**

“As political party leaders, we rely on youth to organize party activities. They help us in the search for new members and to explain our party programs. Sometimes we tell them to use force against those who refuse to join our party. The youth do not engage in these activities for free – we give them money and / or promise them work in the public service or parastatal companies. If activities are organized, they receive a beverage at the end and money to cover their transportation costs.” (Jean-Pierre, Political Party Youth Leader)

“We take advantage of the misery of youth by exploiting them in our favor. For youth to stop being manipulated by political parties they must have jobs and development projects in the areas concerning youth. Experience has shown that some youth micro-projects can succeed with little capital while others fail, despite starting out with sufficient capital.” – Aloys, Political Party Youth Leader

“During the electoral period, we are given ten thousand Burundian francs (about \$6.50) per political activity, such as answering calls and insulting opponents – other things are mere promises that remain largely unfulfilled.” – Alice, Political Party Youth Member

frustration and discontent among young men and women, thereby increasing their vulnerability to political manipulation to engage in acts of political violence in exchange for income, employment or social status (Hilker and Fraser, 2009; Berckmoes 2015).

**Top-down state-society relations:** In Burundi, state-society relations are characterized by a disconnect between the government and its citizens, particularly those from the opposition. This exclusion of the population from decision-making processes – a large segment of which is made up of youth – and the lack of support from government authorities among youth, have been identified as facilitating their engagement in political violence (Berckmoes 2015; Focus Group Discussion Notes, March 2015).

**Strong patron-client networks:** Related to the hierarchical state-society relations are personalized relations whereby being connected to politically powerful individuals plays an important role in social mobility and securing employment (Berckmoes 2015). For example, youth join the *Imbonerakure* because they see the CNDD-FDD as a “reliable path to political and economic power, such as being in business” (Buchanan 2015). During the electoral period, “the usual inaccessibility of political *cadres* make way for opportunities to be noticed by and establish connections with those in powerful positions” in the hope of obtaining a job and moving upwards on the social ladder (Berckmoes 2015). According to one political party youth leader during the 2015 elections, “I cannot say that we give youth money to do this or that, only that they know that if the party wins the elections, it is they who will profit. Even if they are not among the first, some will obtain a job. There are small jobs that are carried out by middle class people that provide them with an income” (AOAV 2015b). Yet, according to some youth interviewed in the lead up to the elections, “political parties give jobs to those who are most aggressive; they don't consider their education level, only who has previously engaged in acts of violence” (Focus Group Discussion Notes, March 2015).

**Low social cohesion:** A final key factor that has been identified through primary and secondary research as facilitating youth engagement in political violence is low levels of social cohesion among the different politico-ethnic groups in society. The recurrent cycles of political violence in Burundi have destroyed the social fabric of communities, creating a climate of fear and hatred among the population. This has facilitated the engagement of youth in various acts of political violence over the years at the behest of political and military leaders, especially in the absence of dialogue among youth and a lack of knowledge about non-violent conflict resolution techniques (Berckmoes 2015; Focus Group Discussion Notes, April & August 2015, April 2016). Related to this is the reintegration of ex-combatants in society and how its failure has resulted in the continued involvement of many youths in acts of political violence (Hilker and Fraser, 2009; Focus Group Discussion Notes, April & August 2015, April 2016).

**Other** factors that have been found to influence young people's engagement in acts of political violence in Burundi include identity-based ideologies and socio-economic inequalities, which exist both within and between politico-ethnic groups. The testimony in Box 2 is an example of the socio-economic inequalities experienced by some of the ex-combatants of the CNDD-FDD.

**Box 2. An Example of Intra-Party Socio-Economic Inequalities**

“The political party in power does not favor only its own ex-combatants. There are also CNDD-FDD ex-combatants who have yet to receive everything they were promised. I formerly fought for the CNDD-FDD and I am among those victims which still have grenade shrapnel in my body as they could not treat me.” – *Joseph, Bubanza*

### 3. Building resilience and economic independence of youth

Following the 2010 elections, with the political climate becoming increasingly tense, international and national (non-)governmental organizations shifted their focus and efforts to conflict prevention as the country began to prepare for the next round of general elections. For example, between 2012 and 2014, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) implemented two separate projects, one funded by the U.S. Institute for Peace (Youth Inspired: Today and Tomorrow) and the other by the U.S. Agency for International Development (Indivisibles: Mobilizing Youth for Peaceful Elections), both with the objective of strengthening youth resistance to political manipulation and engagement in electoral violence (Andres 2014). This programming shift on the ground resonated with the international community's growing focus on and engagement of youth in peacebuilding and conflict prevention interventions around the same time (IANYD Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding 2016).

Importantly, in 2012, an inter-agency working group on youth and peacebuilding was established under the wider umbrella of the United Nations Inter-Agency Network of Youth Development (IANYD) to "help actors working in the field of youth and peacebuilding advocate for a paradigm shift in supporting young people as a force for peacebuilding" (IANYD Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding 2016, 8). To achieve this, the working group developed the *Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding*, which are informed by four interrelated approaches: 1) human rights-based approach, 2) economic approach (promote access of youth to opportunities important for their development), 3) socio-political approach (provide youth with "opportunities, training and support for their active engagement and participation in public life"), and 4) sociocultural approach (analyse the roles of youth in prevailing structures and support dialogue about these structures) (SFCG 2014, 1). These developments demonstrate the increasing acknowledgment by the international community that "young people are valuable innovators and agents of change, and their contributions should be actively supported, solicited and regarded as essential to building peaceful communities and supporting democratic governance and transition" (SFCG 2014, 1).

It is within this context that the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) approved the *Bumbatira Amahoro* project that sought to increase the resilience and economic independence of youth to reduce their risk of being manipulated by political leaders and engagement in acts of political violence during the 2015 electoral period. According to the local implementing partner, CEDAC, "experience has shown us that unemployed youth are easily manipulated, which is at the centre of their engagement in acts of violence. If the social and political aspects are developed and reinforced, the economic aspect too will be reinforced" (Interview Notes #2, April 2016).

The sections that follow will discuss the *Bumbatira Amahoro* project activities, their outcomes, and lessons learned for the way that conflict prevention work that targets youth is conducted in fragile and conflict-affected societies.

#### 3.1 Training for peace

Building the capacities of youth to prevent and manage local political conflicts constructively and non-violently is integral to supporting good governance and sustainable development, as well as strengthening social cohesion in their communities. At the outset, youth participated in a series of training sessions on how to prevent and manage political conflicts, non-violent

communication, the management of rumours, the electoral code, and electoral observation. Through this training, the youth learned how to manage conflicts non-violently and how not to be the origin of violence, as illustrated by the following message received from one participant during these sessions: “Violence is like a virus, spreading to different generations. Since people do not understand each other on topics that happened in the past, they are transmitting their hate to their children...People need to construct a new vision for our society” (AOAV 2015a).

By April 2016, more than 70% of youth demonstrated a sufficient level of knowledge in managing and preventing local political conflicts (compared to 57% a year before).<sup>8</sup> The key knowledge and skills that youth reported as having acquired through the training sessions were: 1) conflict prevention and non-violent conflict resolution, 2) establishing positive communal and intergroup relations, and 3) preventing political manipulation (Focus Group Discussion Notes, April 2016). For the implementing actors, the strengthened capacity of youth to prevent and resolve conflicts non-violently and their increased ability to resist being manipulated by political leaders during the electoral period were the primary impacts of the project (Interview Notes #1 & #2, April 2016).<sup>9</sup> On a personal level, the training changed how the youth reacted to challenging situations and interacted with other youths in their communities. Whereas many young people initially held an adversarial position towards those from opposing political parties, this position changed to one of welcome, friendship, acceptance, and tolerance through the training (Interview Notes #1, April 2016).

### 3.2 Local conflict prevention and resolution by local actors

As violent conflict weakens social cohesion, youth-led organizations can play an important role in reconnecting communities. These organizations offer youth safe spaces where they “feel they belong, identify with one another, and share understandings of and address common challenges,” enhancing their peacebuilding agency and conflict prevention capacities (IANYD Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding 2016, 30).

The youth-led peace and mediation committees (YPMCs) received an initial two-day training in conflict mediation methodology that promoted “win-win” solutions that focused on the interests, rather than the positions, of parties to a conflict.<sup>10</sup> Despite the security challenges encountered in Bujumbura Mairie at the time of the training (May 2015), the modules were “productive and prepared the peace committees for their work as mediators in their communities” (Interview Notes #2, April 2016). However, given that the baseline knowledge and skillsets of individuals varied, along with the local contexts in which they operated, some of the YPMC members requested that targeted follow-up training sessions be organized to reinforce their capacities in those issue areas they regularly encountered in their work.

Targeted training sessions that address the specific needs and priorities of youth can strengthen their capacities for peace and their sources of resilience (IANYD Working Group on Youth and

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<sup>8</sup> An open-ended question in the survey asked participants to provide three examples of actions that could be taken by youth in their communities to prevent and manage political conflicts. Respondents who provided two or more examples were considered as having sufficient knowledge to resolve such conflicts non-violently.

<sup>9</sup> The ability to resist political manipulation was viewed as having improved when there was an acceptance of diverse political opinions on the part of the youth, as well as if their economic situation was no longer in a vulnerable state.

<sup>10</sup> Each committee was created at the *chef-lieu* level and comprised of seven members: one civil society youth leader and four political party youth leaders and members – selected from among the beneficiaries in the SILC group – one communal police officer, and one communal official, of which one was a woman. In those communes where the police officer did not pass the Leahy Vetting Process, a sixth youth was selected to ensure that each committee would have seven representatives.

Peacebuilding 2016). In this case, the training provided to the YPMCs supported youths' effective engagement in the prevention of political conflicts in their communities, helping save lives, avoid injuries, and prevent further violence from (re)occurring (Interview Notes #2, April 2016). Over the course of the project, the YPMCs conducted over 1,000 interventions, more than 70% of which were successful.<sup>11</sup> Most cases were of a political nature, followed by socio-economic conflicts (e.g. land-related, drunkenness, sorcery, marital, revenge, polygamy, financial, and advocacy on behalf of those wrongfully imprisoned). Of those socio-economic conflicts encountered, many had a political undertone, for example, marital conflicts between couples who belonged to opposing political parties. However, as situations evolve and contexts are dynamic, some of the conflicts reappeared. Among the factors identified by the YPMCs regarding the recurrence of conflicts addressed include the concealment of interests or motivations by conflict actors, unknown conflict actors, long duration of judicial processes, and economic needs (AOAV 2016c).

Engaging with local authorities in the implementation of youth-led conflict prevention efforts can increase their effectiveness and sustainability. When responding to cases of political conflict, most YPMCs collaborated with the local administration, the local police, and the mixed security committees in their respective communes. Given the nature of the conflicts being addressed by the committees, such collaboration ensured members greater personal security when responding to cases. Likewise, those committees with a vetted police officer were characterized by more positive relations, which facilitated their work. In contrast, committees without a police officer, which occurred due to delays in the Leahy Vetting Process, experienced frustrations that accentuated the already tense relations in the communities in which they were operating.<sup>12</sup> Finally, although each YPMC comprised of one woman, this low quota reduced the diversity of the conflict resolution approaches employed in local political conflicts, highlighting the need for greater gender balance on these committees (AOAV 2016b).

The infographic on the following page presents a comparative case study of two YPMCs which operated in two different contexts in Bujumbura Mairie during the 2015 electoral period.

### 3.3 Bridging differences through dialogue

Getting youth across ethno-political divides to meet and get to know each other, establishing positive intergroup relations, and (re)building a minimum level of intergroup trust are essential

before any activities that require them to work together towards a common goal can be implemented. For the *Bumbatira Amahoro* project, it was only after the first six months that

#### **Box 3. Fostering Mutual Understanding Through Dialogue**

"A 30-year old participant, who is president of the *Imbonerakure* in Mutaho, explained that when he was invited to participate in the dialogue he considered it a waste of time. He expressed that he didn't believe in dialogue sessions and felt the opposition youth were all radical and the only solution was force. But, the organizers insisted he should participate so he finally decided to try it. During the dialogue, he felt himself change. He explained, "each time the opposition members gave their points of view, I discovered that they too are worried about peaceful cohabitation and community development and that they were also good people and could be my friends." He described the dialogues as, "a key we were missing for good social cohesion with opponents.""

<sup>11</sup> This should not be interpreted as the remainder of the interventions as having "failed"; rather, most of these cases were either transferred or were still in the progress at the time the project ended.

<sup>12</sup> The problem was exacerbated with the continuous reassignment of police officers to different neighbourhoods in Bujumbura Mairie during the height of the political crisis.

participating youth were able to take part in activities that required them to work together, such as pooling savings and lending each other money through the Saving and Internal Lending Community (SILC) groups, creating group income generating activities (IGAs), and finding shared solutions to political conflicts in their communities.<sup>13</sup>

The regular dialogue sessions, which were organized as part of the weekly SILC group meetings and provided as a safe space for discussion, supported mutual understanding and the establishment of a minimum level of trust, as demonstrated by the anecdote included in Box 3. During the dialogue sessions, youth spoke about their respective needs and motivations, the relations between the different politico-ethnic groups, and the challenges and possible solutions to prevailing political conflicts in their communities. With time, these steps proved to have a positive impact on intergroup relations. According to the local project coordinator, "Before, it was difficult for these youths to sit together and when they did it was according to their political party affiliation, and sometimes even their respective ethnic groups. But, over time...changes have been made."

Nevertheless, these outcomes were not found across all target communities. In those communities that were disproportionately affected by political violence during the elections, the political and security situations remained tense. For example, community members interviewed in the commune of Cibitoke in Bujumbura Mairie reported that "a member from the ruling party cannot enter Cibitoke...There is no problem between ethnic groups, but neither is there love or unity" (Focus Group Discussion Notes, April 2016). Accordingly, as local dynamics vary from one community to the next, so too does the effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts. This highlights the need for actors to regularly monitor the evolving situation on the ground and to continuously adjust activities to reflect the prevailing drivers of conflict, and the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries and stakeholders. However, for these bottom-up conflict prevention efforts to be effective and sustainable beyond the project implementation period, engagement with political elites and institutional reforms are required.

### 3.4 Strengthening social cohesion through community engagement

Broader community engagement and participation can also increase the effectiveness and sustainability of bottom-up conflict prevention efforts by empowering local actors and supporting locally-driven solutions to local conflicts. In the *Bumbatira Amahoro* project, community events were carried out in the target locations with the dual aim of raising awareness about the project and increasing social cohesion between participating youth and community members.<sup>14</sup> Examples of the types of activities that took place during these events include music concerts, speeches from the local administration promoting peace and dialogue, sketches by youth on conflict prevention and political tolerance, football matches, and interactive discussions with the crowd. For example, in the commune of Kiremba, located in the province of Ngozi, youth acted out sketches that showed the importance of maintaining discipline during the electoral period by eschewing violence. The sketches were followed by a question and answer session with the audience and a testimony from a participant who explained how the project had changed relations between CNDD-FDD and FNL youth.

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<sup>13</sup> A SILC group comprising of 30 members was created in each target *colline* and *chef-lieu*.

<sup>14</sup> The precarious security situation in the communes of Musaga and Cibitoke in Bujumbura Mairie resulted in the reallocation of resources planned for each of community event towards follow-up group dialogues.

# Kamenge vs. Cibitoke

Mirango I - Low political violence

Quartier II - High political violence

## The Youth Peace & Mediation Committees

### Types of Conflicts & Their Resolution

Mirango I

#### Land, Drunkenness & Political Conflicts

**Recurrent conflicts:** drunkenness and bad behaviour of mixed security committee members

**Resolution:** all cases resolved except those outside the scope of the committee that were transferred to the appropriate authorities e.g. grenade attacks

#### Political

**Recurrent conflicts:** those related to security where suspicions of being involved in armed groups resulted in arrests

**Resolution:** most cases resolved - those outside scope of committee were transferred to the appropriate authorities e.g. possession of arms

Quartier II

### Challenges Encountered

Mirango I

**Lack of financial resources** to cover communication and transportation costs  
**Lack of material resources:** no badges to facilitate work and gear for heavy rains

**Insufficient financial resources** to cover communication and transportation costs  
**Lack of material resources:** no badges to facilitate work and no computer to track work  
**Insecurity**  
**Misperception** of the committee being comprised solely of Imbonerakure

Quartier II

### Committee Relations

Mirango I

**Internal:** Good communication and meetings were scheduled to discuss cases as needed  
**External:** Good relations with the local police

**Internal:** Good communication, solidarity  
**External:** Good collaboration with the local administration and police

Quartier II

### Knowledge & Skills Acquired

Mirango I

Conflict resolution  
Oral expression  
Non-violent communication  
Teamwork

Behavior in conflicts  
Types of conflicts and their resolution  
Conflict management  
Social relations  
Development projects

Quartier II

### Sustainability

"We created a code of honor for the committee that is based on ubuntu (humanity). If we do not continue with our work we will have lost this value." YPMC, Cibitoke

Mirango I

Despite a lack of financial resources, committee members reported an interest in continuing to work to resolve political conflicts in their community.  
**Question:** "If we have problems, who do we turn to after the project ends?"

Quartier II

Committee members reported an interest in continuing to work to resolve political conflicts in their community. In order to help out with costs it was proposed that a savings box be created to use as needed.

In the pre-election period, these community events provided participating youth and their communities with a model group of young men and women that worked together, despite belonging to different political parties. This is something which generally does not occur in the lead up to elections, as youth are occupied campaigning, leaving them with few opportunities to work with those from other political

**Box 4. Testimony from the Supervisor of Bubanza**

“After the community event on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the social cohesion between the youth increased considerably. Now when they meet they can debate the current political situation. They can see that certain actions and behaviours lead to violence during the electoral period, and they understand how the youth are manipulated by politicians to engage in violence. They were very satisfied to receive these messages at the community events.”

parties. Primary data collected speaks to the important role that these community events played in resolving local political conflicts, as well as preventing violence and the political manipulation of youth (see Box 4). However, due to the prevailing insecurity and tense relations that characterized some of the target communes in Bujumbura Mairie (e.g. Nyakabiga, Bwiza, Cibitoke, and Musaga), community events were replaced with follow-up dialogues (AOAV 2016b).

### 3.5 Radio peace messages by youth for youth

Awareness-raising efforts using popular communication channels, such as text messages and radio shows, can reinforce conflict prevention efforts in target communities and beyond by communicating, for example, messages of peace by youth for other youth, as well as key strategies for preventing local political conflicts. The *Bumbatira Amahoro* project created a series of interactive radio shows, each one covering a target commune and featuring key activities carried out, including community events, training sessions, the SILC groups, the YPMCs, and success stories (e.g. about improved intergroup relations). Leading up to the elections, participating youth created an additional six radio spots that conveyed different peace messages to keep calm around elections period, reaching the intervention communities and beyond.<sup>15</sup> However, in addition to most radio stations being closed after the attempted coup in May 2015, some participants reported not having access to a radio or money to purchase batteries to listen to the radio broadcasts. Other youth reported being at work or generally not listening to the radio. However, of those youths who listened to the radio broadcasts, the key topics learned about included the prevention and management of political conflicts non-violently and ways to support social cohesion in their communities (Focus Group Discussion Notes, April 2016). This mixed picture in terms of reach and impact of the radio broadcasts highlights the need to identify and use multiple communication channels for awareness-raising efforts.

### 3.6 Fostering economic independence through SILC groups and IGAs

Microfinance interventions and vocational training schemes have become widely used in fragile and conflict-affected societies (Pompa 2014; Mercy Corps 2015; Mallett and Slater 2016). One of the main assumptions underpinning these interventions is that expanding the economic opportunities for un(der)employed youth will reduce their engagement in political violence

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<sup>15</sup> The peace messages covered the following topics: 1) the importance of promoting dialogue between groups with different opinions, 2) how to support social cohesion, 3) working together for the development of the country, 4) being conscious of one's actions during the electoral period, and 5) how to avoid political manipulation.

(Pompa 2014; Mercy Corps 2015; Mallett and Slater 2016). Following a similar logic, the *Bumbatira Amahoro* project trained youth in the SILC methodology and entrepreneurship (e.g. how to create and manage individual and group IGAs, including how to analyze the local market, assess competition, and develop a business plan). Yet, some of the SILC groups encountered difficulties completing the training modules / topics covered, which required in turn additional training to reinforce their knowledge and skills. As the SILC groups started to save money, beneficiaries took out loans at low interest rates and began small IGAs (e.g. selling eggs, peanuts, avocados, and meat), which allowed them to make a small profit and to satisfy their daily needs (see Box 5 for a testimony of a participant's SILC experience). However, in certain cases, youth were unable to save the requisite amount each week, which created frustrations among their peers.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the project, participating youth reported having the knowledge and skills necessary to lift themselves out of poverty, even if there was a lack of jobs – both important factors in reducing their risk of being manipulated by political leaders (Focus Group Discussion Notes, April 2016).

#### **Box 5. A SILC Experience**

"After having learned about entrepreneurship and the SILC methodology, I understood that everyone can find something to do if they try. I organized 15 youths, some of which are hairdressers and others are drivers. We decided to save 2,000 BIF per day. We opened account at Mutec [a micro-finance institution]. We realized that in a year, we will have a sum of 13,800,000 BIF. With this sum, we will probably have 8 mottos because every 2 months we'll buy a moto. Its payment will contribute to buying the second and then the next. Our contributions will continue and there will even be the ability to buy a car or something else that will generate income for us. I had this idea thanks to the training I received. I assure you, these trainings are of great importance for those who want to change their financial life. In the long run, each person will have their own moto and we will be on the road to providing employment to unemployed youth." – *Dieudonné, Gitega*

## **4. Lessons learned**

Despite the growing focus on and engagement of youth in conflict prevention efforts such as through the creation of multi-party SILC groups, vocational training, and intergroup dialogue, there is limited empirical evidence that can speak to whether and how such activities prevent local political conflicts and foster greater social cohesion among youth and their communities. For example, one assumption underpinning SILC groups is that by bringing adversaries together in activities that require them to work towards common goals, these will improve both their economic well-being and lead to reconciliation. However, as acknowledged by Carayannis and colleagues (2014) and evidenced in this project (see point 3 below), the impact of such activities do not necessarily extend to entire groups. Thus, further research is required to substantiate such claims. What are the lessons that can be drawn from the *Bumbatira Amahoro* project in Burundi for the way conflict prevention work that targets youth is conducted today?

**1. Mutual understanding and trust between youth from different politico-ethnic groups are essential ingredients for their engagement in collaborative intergroup activities.** As evidenced in the previous section, young men and women affiliated to different political parties, along with

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<sup>16</sup> The traditional SILC rules stipulate that if a member does not save, they must leave the group. However, given that the SILC approach adopted for the project included a social cohesion component, those beneficiaries who did not save were not removed from their respective groups.

ex-combatants, civil society leaders, and other vulnerable youth, did not understand nor trust each other at the outset. Consequently, the first six months of the project focused on strengthening social cohesion between these youths for them to be able to participate in the remaining project activities that required them to work together.

**2. Bottom-up conflict prevention efforts can be effective, but require engagement with political elites and institutional reforms to be sustainable.** The experience of Burundi demonstrates that bottom-up conflict prevention efforts that target youth can be effective when they reflect and are adapted to the local context, and respond to the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries and stakeholders. However, for such efforts to be sustainable, engagement with political elites and institutional reforms are required. Primary data collected revealed that although the project did not explicitly engage key power holders, efforts were made to address this issue. Key leaders, including the *Bashingantahe* and religious leaders, were engaged in dialogue sessions in the target communities. The influence of these leaders was mentioned as having been essential for bringing youth from different political parties together to explain and engage them in the project (Interview Notes #2, April 2016). In terms of institutional reforms, national-level job-creation strategies and programmes are important for sustaining the progress made by youth through their individual and group IGAs at the local level.

**3. Strengthened relations among beneficiaries do not automatically generalize to entire groups.** Weekly intergroup meetings and the establishment of common goals, for example, through the creation of group IGAs, has the potential to strengthen intergroup relations; however, these changes may not generalize to entire groups. A survey item asked participating youth the extent to which they trusted out-group members. At the outset, 16% reported trusting out-group members, which slightly decreased to 14% by the end of the project. Given the context in which the project was implemented these results are not surprising; however, they do highlight that, despite the increase in mutual understanding and trust among participating youth from different politico-ethnic groups, these impacts did not generalize to the entire groups in question. Further research is required to understand the circumstances under which this is likely to occur, especially since generalization to entire groups would ensure greater sustainability of conflict prevention efforts.

**4. Economic independence is important for reducing the political manipulation of youth.** During the electoral period, participating youth reported that the average amount they could receive from political leaders ranged was between 50,000 BIF (\$32.36) and 60,000 BIF (\$38.83) per month. According to one political leader, to prevent most youth from being manipulated during elections, 5,000 BIF (\$3.25) per day / 150,000 BIF (\$97.09) per month would be sufficient. However, such a threshold varies, at least in part, upon one's family situation, responsibilities, and expected standard of living. Also, it is not automatic that having access to an income will prevent youth from being manipulated. To reduce the risk of this occurring, youth require capacity-building and training to be able to create and sustain IGAs that can provide them with a regular source of income (AOAV 2015b).

**5. Capacity-building efforts need to account for varying levels of knowledge and skillsets.** As individuals' knowledge about and skillsets in conflict prevention vary widely, it is important that capacity-building efforts, such as training in non-violent communication and conflict management, are targeted to address the different needs and capacities of beneficiaries.

**6. Sensitivity to gender dynamics is important for effective conflict prevention.** Experiences of young men and women in conflict are often gendered (SFCG 2014). Therefore, for conflict prevention efforts to be effective and sustainable, they need to be sensitive to gender dynamics. For example, ensuring gender balance among youth-led peace and mediation committees can support solutions to local political conflicts that reflect the different experiences of the men and women affected.

**7. Awareness-raising across multiple communication channels can help reach a wider audience.** As evidenced in the previous section, not all participating youth and community members interviewed listened to the radio broadcasts, despite the radio being the main source of information for many Burundians. Accordingly, using multiple communication channels can increase the effectiveness of awareness-raising efforts by reaching a wider audience and conveying messages and information in various formats. For example, in addition to radio broadcasts, messages and information could also be conveyed during town meetings, through posters or a text message campaign.

**8. Psychosocial support is essential for ensuring conflict prevention efforts do no harm.** In general, the needs of participating youth were met, apart from that of psychosocial support – a component whose importance is all too often overlooked. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has been shown to undermine empathic abilities and trust in others, thereby militating against reconciliation and peacebuilding (Nandi et al. 2015). The (re-)traumatization of several beneficiaries over the course of the project rendered some of the project activities challenging, particularly after the violent events that took place in Bujumbura Mairie in December 2015. Although a small number of youth received free bi-weekly trauma counseling sessions from trained Vivo International therapists for a period of four weeks, many others did not have the opportunity to benefit from these sessions (AOAV 2016a).

**9. Youth ownership can prevent local political conflicts and build peaceful communities.** Youth ownership over conflict prevention processes can contribute to the development and implementation of viable, contextually appropriate solutions to local political conflicts in their communities. For example, in the commune of Kanyosha Rural, located in the province of Bujumbura Rural, youth worked together to outline the political conflicts affecting their community (e.g. confrontations between CNDD-FDD and FNL members, and targeted assassinations), their root causes, consequences, and possible solutions. The youth proposed several initiatives to improve the situation in their community from organizing awareness raising campaigns on political tolerance and peaceful coexistence to involving key communal political party leaders in the dialogue process (AOAV 2015a). However, for these local solutions to be implemented both financial resources and political support are required.

**10. Donor flexibility is necessary for ensuring conflict prevention efforts remain relevant.** The donor's flexibility with the project timeline, activities, and budget allowed the implementing partners to make adjustments in response to changing realities on the ground and the needs and expectations of participating youth. This ensured that conflict prevention efforts continued to be appropriate and effective. For instance, in Bujumbura Mairie, community events were replaced with follow-up dialogues in those communities disproportionately affected by political violence, due to a combination of the prevailing insecurity and the needs of participating youth.

## Conclusion

Despite the increasing focus of bottom-up conflict prevention efforts on youth in fragile and conflict-affected societies, empirical data on the motivations for youths' engagement in political violence, and which strategies and programmes work, under what conditions, and for whom remain limited. As youth today will go on to become the next generation of adults and leaders, it is essential that these gaps in knowledge be addressed. The experience of Burundi illustrates the achievements, as well as shortcomings of one bottom-up conflict prevention project carried out with un(der)employed youth from different backgrounds around the 2015 elections.

First, implementing activities that aim to increase the economic independence of youth can be effective in reducing their manipulation by political leaders, especially around elections. Second, local solutions to local political conflicts are likely to be more effective and sustainable when developed by youth and are sensitive to existing gender dynamics. Third, before youth can engage in any collaborative activities, mutual understanding and a minimum level of trust are needed. Fourth, capacity-building activities need to account for varying levels of knowledge and skillsets among youth to be effective. Fifth, for bottom-up conflict prevention efforts to be sustainable, political elites need to be engaged and institutional reforms carried out in parallel to bottom-up efforts. Sixth, given the changing realities on the ground, donors need to be flexible with the project timeline, planned activities, and budget to ensure that conflict prevention efforts continue to be relevant. Seventh, as youth engaged in conflict prevention efforts may experience (re-)traumatization, a psychosocial support component should be incorporated to ensure no harm is done. Finally, multiple communication channels should be employed to reach a wider audience, which may also contribute to the generalization of positive relations among participants to the entire groups.

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## About this paper

This paper is based on the project entitled, "*Bumbatira Amahoro: Keeping the Peace - Engaging Youth Leaders to Prevent Conflict in Burundi*," funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau on Conflict and Stabilization Operations (February 2015 – May 2016). The project was implemented by Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) in partnership *le Centre d'Encadrement et de Developpement des Anciens Combattants* (CEDAC). Initially, 1800 un(der)employed youth – political party leaders and members, ex-combatants, civil society leaders, and other vulnerable youth – participated in the project. These youths were from 40 *collines/quartiers* and 20 *chefs-lieux* in 20 communes across five provinces (Bujumbura Mairie, Bujumbura Rural, Bubanza, Gitega, and Ngozi) that were most at risk of experiencing political violence during 2015 elections and had received few or no related interventions. The project aimed to: 1) strengthen the capacity of youth to peacefully resolve conflicts through training in the prevention and management of conflicts and non-violent communication, and the establishment of local youth peace and mediation committees; 2) strengthen social cohesion between youth through intergroup dialogue sessions and in their communities through community events characterized by interactive activities, such as games, theatre, and music; and 3) strengthen the financial independence of youth through the creation of multi-party saving and internal lending community groups, as well as by supporting the creation of group and individual income generating activities.

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