

POLICY BRIEF

Locally-Led Peacebuilding in the Central African Republic

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Alliance for Peacebuilding

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Stability in CAR can only happen when those using violence believe there is a better way to advance their interests. Settlement at the level of political leadership is crucial but insufficient to achieve real stability. Stakeholders at the community level must imagine and create their own resolution, or peace will not last. The **CAR Peacebuilding Partnership (CPP)** is a strategic step toward empowering citizens to stabilize and renew their society. Locally-led peacebuilding initiatives have played a pivotal role in other contexts, and can provide models for action in CAR.

ESSENTIAL TO POLITICAL STABILITY

Supporting citizens in their capacity for change will increase social cohesion and political stability at the national level. Peacebuilder and President of the Central African Islamic Community, Imam Omar Kabine Layama, says that by increasing social cohesion at the village level, communities in CAR are able to elect representatives with strong visions. These leaders bridge the provinces to Bangui and fight fragility through inclusive governance.¹



LOCAL PEACEBUILDING TRANSLATES UP

What local communities think and do directly dictates the success or failure of national political settlements. The following examples from Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone and Burundi illustrate how locally-led peacebuilding strengthens the foundation upon which any national stabilization strategy must be built.

The central role of youth: Sri Lanka

"I feel a sense of 'unity' and a responsibility to pass this on to my community."

*- Vivekanadhan,
Young Visionary
from a Tamil
community*

- *Youth Visionaries* began training youth in conflict transformation in 2008, ensuring the next generation of leaders have the skill to bring people together to end hostilities.
- Since the government declared victory over the Tamil Tigers in 2009, ethnic tensions have remained high and peace fragile. *Youth Visionaries* is mitigating mistrust and fear through intercommunal activities like culture festivals and conservation projects.
- Through the intercommunal bridges these activities built, Sinhalese villages have invited neighboring Tamil and Muslim residents to their New Year celebrations, Young Tamil and Muslim populations have helped clean up a Buddhist temple, and all three communities have come together to learn about conserving Sri Lankan beaches.
- For three decades such scenes were unthinkable. But today Sri Lankan youth are crafting a unified vision for the future of their country.²

Connecting peace efforts between civil society and government: Burundi

- The late U.S. Ambassador Howard Wolpe launched the Burundi Leadership Training Program (BLTP) during his tenure at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Civil society, military, and government leaders from Burundi participated together to gain new skill sets in areas such as inclusive decision-making, the dangers of untested assumptions, resource distribution, underlying causes of social discontent, and the mass media's role in conflict.

- These change agents are now working at all levels of society to navigate post-conflict challenges. Ambassador Wolpe pointed to participants' ability to discuss issues more objectively after these experiences, addressing matters less from their own positions and with a broader focus on Burundi's future "with much greater sensitivity to the perspectives and feelings of each other."³

Observers lauded the Burundi Leadership Training Program for "breaking down ethnic and political barriers, and building social cohesion among the participating leaders."

Opening communications channels to promote nonviolent alternatives: Sierra Leone

The radio show "Throw Away the Gun" hosted by two former combatants had such success promoting disarmament and reintegration that within one year the hosts renamed the program, "Let's Rebuild Sierra Leone."

- Between 1991 and 2002 civil war displaced over half the population. Destruction of state infrastructure and a lack of communication between factions led to spreading rumors and misinformation about alleged atrocities on either side.
- One journalist employed by the Freetown radio station founded by *Search for Common Ground* demonstrated that communication networks could foster peace. Ken Ganna Conteh rode his motorbike across "enemy lines" to interview former rebels. He then launched a program about life under rebel control and worked to connect journalists with rebels to more accurately understand rebels' grievances.
- The program drew the government into a dialogue for peace and became a locus for public officials, civilians and rebels to voice concerns and commitments.⁴

METHODS FOR SUCCESS

Based on the experience of INGOs supporting peacebuilding in CAR, the following recommendations will help the U.S. and private donors look for local partners who can build social cohesion and increase national political stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

• Support Youth: Open opportunities for young people

Like the youth of Sri Lanka, young people in CAR are uniquely positioned to build inter-communal bridges, create economic opportunities, provide leadership training and reduce the risk of recruitment to AB and ex-Seleka militias.

• Prepare Good Leadership: Link civil society and government

Peace efforts at the national level must be actively coordinated with civil society-led peacebuilding at the community level. Like the integrated trainings that built links between civil society and government leaders in Burundi, national stabilization strategies in CAR must be actively linked with community-level initiatives.

• Improve Communication: Mobilize the message of peace

Donors can achieve high-value impact by investing in platforms for inter-communal outreach. Such support in Sierra Leone led to collaboration between civilian, rebel and government factions, which facilitated DDR. Because militia affiliation in CAR is driven more by individual experience than by religion, communication support and network-building is more likely to have a strong effect on peace and security.

Sources and Further Reading:

1. Imam Omar Kabine Layama, interviewed by the Alliance for Peacebuilding, Washington, DC, November 10, 2014.
2. Sri Lanka's Youth Visionaries: <http://www.peacedirect.org/us/peacebuilders/sri-lanka/>
3. Burundi Leadership Training Program: <https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/RebuildingPeace.pdf>
4. Sierra Leone's Ken Ganna Konteh: https://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/stories/sfcg_ken.html

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