

# EARLY WARNING, CONFLICT PREVENTION AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

LESSONS FROM BURUNDI

Élise Féron

Policy Briefing Paper 1 – November 2017





Élise Féron  
University Researcher  
Tampere Peace Research Institute

Policy Briefing Paper 1  
November 2017

## EARLY WARNING, CONFLICT PREVENTION AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

LESSONS FROM BURUNDI

### **How can the early warning and conflict prevention work undertaken by women's organizations be effectively supported in protracted conflict situations?**

Women's organizations, especially when they target the grassroots and marginalized groups, often play a central role in conflict prevention and early warning activities. However, their ability to do so can be restrained because of political repression, or of financial cuts caused by international sanctions.

Using the case of Burundi, this briefing paper examines what types of support can be offered to women's groups in situations of tension and in cases of conflict escalation. It highlights the constraints under which peace initiatives can operate in a conflict escalation context, and outlines avenues for effectively supporting these groups' conflict prevention and early warning work without further endangering them.

Suggested measures include an increased attention to local and small-scale activities targeting vulnerable groups, support to information gathering and sharing including IT assistance, back up of versatile training techniques, support to income generating activities and development of civic education.

This briefing paper is one of the outputs of the project "Inclusive Mediation and Conflict Prevention: The Finnish Model", which has been funded by the Office of the Prime Minister.

Picture previous page: *Women-led community dialogue – Dushirehamwe Association*

## Introduction

There is now a widespread recognition, in both academic and policy circles, that peace cannot be achieved by official diplomacy alone, and that civil society actors have to be associated to peacebuilding and post-conflict stabilization, but also to conflict prevention and early warning efforts. Civil society actors can indeed provide a much needed flexibility in peace initiatives, as well as an access to the grassroots and to groups that are traditionally overlooked in official diplomacy, such as youth, or religious or ethnic minorities. Among such groups, women's organizations are often characterized by their resilience and versatility, and can be a key source of continuity and persistence in the peace and/or dialogue processes.

In conflict escalation contexts, the impact of peace initiatives can be bolstered by harnessing women groups' expertise in the field of early warning, and in terms of access to various groups at the grassroots. But including civil society actors and especially women's groups in peace initiatives is fraught with difficulties, as the space dedicated to civil society actors is increasingly limited in conflict-affected countries. Because conflict escalation potentially exposes civil society actors to heightened social and political control and repression, this inclusion has to proceed in a careful and targeted manner.

Using the case of Burundi as an example, this briefing paper seeks to provide suggestions on

how to support the early warning and conflict prevention work undertaken by women's organizations in protracted conflict situations.

## Research material and methods

This briefing paper is based on interviews and observation conducted in Burundi during the month of May 2017, as well as on a monitoring of the evolution of the situation in Burundi for the past two years. Formal interviews were conducted with representatives of 11 women's organizations representing a diversity of profiles, not counting numerous informal discussions with women activists, and with other civil society organizations engaged in conflict prevention, early warning and mediation at the national and local levels in Burundi.

## Women's groups and the prevention of re-emergence of conflict

Women's organizations have long been involved in the setting up and implementation of conflict prevention and early warning mechanisms in Burundi. Some of them have been active for more than 20 years, and have witnessed many conflict phases. Many women's organizations are present both in the main Burundian cities and in the provinces, and this multilevel structure has allowed them to carry on their activities at the local level, even when the political process at the national level is blocked.



*Mediating women and girls exchanging on the prevention of conflicts in the Rugombo Commune – project implemented by APFB and funded by UNWomen*





*Same activity in the Itaba Commune – APFB*

Burundian women's organizations have launched a series of initiatives for peace and dialogue since President Pierre Nkurunziza announced in April 2015 that he would be running for a controversial third term. Even if some of their initiatives have been marginalized, at the national, regional and international levels, there are clear indications that women's organizations' work is making a difference at least at the local level, notably by helping to mediate local conflicts. They have also set up early warning mechanisms using their local branches to pass on information about conflicts emerging at the provinces, and launched public campaigns promoting peace and dialogue.

But women's organizations' work in such a tense political and security situation, even at the local level, is extremely complex. In Burundi as in other contexts, women's organizations represent a great diversity of interests and approaches, and do not always manage to speak in a united voice. This problem is all the more acute that the government, as in other similar situations around the world, has created several women's organizations tightly linked to the ruling party, which claim to speak in the name of all Burundian women. In the current situation, the government seems to consider civil society organizations as political opponents that need to be tightly controlled – possibly by banning them and by forbidding them to carry on their work,

by putting them in jail or by forcing them into exile, as in the case of FOCODE (Forum pour la Conscience et le Développement), one of the largest Burundian civil society organizations. Civil society organizations, and women's organizations amongst them, also constantly have to demonstrate their representativeness, in face of political parties that claim to have a democratic mandate, and thus a right to participate in dialogue initiatives.

One of the ways in which these women's groups have managed to have a continued impact in terms of conflict prevention is by taking a lower political profile at the national level, and by increasing their investment in locally driven activities in the field of early warning and mediation, as well as through their international networks.

*It is at these two levels, local and international, that external support is likely to be the most effective.*

### **Taking the tense security context into account**

An ever-increasing tension, and a very tense security climate, characterize the current situation in Burundi. This renders early warning and conflict prevention work both more relevant and more complicated to implement, because activities that are perceived as political, particularly when implemented at the national

level, are likely to be prohibited. And because many women's groups' voices have been hijacked by organizations that have been created by the government or the ruling party, it is important to *be careful of where the money goes, and to rely on independent experts with a good and updated knowledge of what is happening on the ground.*

As many opposition leaders and civil society activists are now in exile, there are good reasons to think about how to support the various Burundian diaspora groups, and to harness them for conflict prevention purposes. *Specific attention should be paid to those who have settled in neighbouring countries and/or are living in refugee camps.* Not only do they need humanitarian support, but they also risk being involved in highly escalating activities such as violent rebellion aimed at overthrowing the current Burundian government.

More generally, the diaspora, especially groups settled in the European Union, have been very active in collecting information on human rights violations, and could provide technical advice on which groups to involve in mediation initiatives. *Organizing meetings between the diaspora and women's groups that have stayed inside Burundi, would help women's organizations setting up relays for their actions outside of Burundi.* It would also increase their chances of being invited in internationally organized dialogue, where women's voices have so far been muted.

*Organizing meetings between women's groups and representatives of the diaspora would also help them coming up with a common agenda.* Research conducted for this policy brief has indeed revealed a wide rift between women's groups still active within Burundi, and women activists in the diaspora. One of the reasons for this is that even if the meeting is held outside of Burundi, it is difficult to speak openly for people who will have to go back home afterwards, and face the potential consequences of their honesty. This points at the *need to offer at least some protection to representatives of civil society organizations participating in internationally organized dialogue, for instance through international mentoring practices.*

### **Favouring targeted and community-based approaches**

Most of the women's groups interviewed in Burundi are present and active in most, if not all, Burundian 18 provinces, and put a lot of stress on the importance of conflict prevention activities beyond the capital city Bujumbura, where most peace initiatives are usually concentrated. At the local level, these groups implement what they call a "community approach" targeting specific groups – for instance female returnees or female former combatants, as in the case of the AFRABU (Association des Femmes Rapatriées du Burundi) – which is generally well accepted because it is seen as apolitical. Targeted and thematic support, for instance judicial support like the one offered to women by the Association



Cattle breeding – APFB



*Initiation to small business – APFB*

des Femmes Juristes, allows them to have a significant impact at the local level, even when their efforts to be heard and influential at the national level are not successful.

Since the multilevel nature of women's organizations seems to play a major role in their resilience, but also in their capacity to reach and maintain dialogue between different types of actors, efforts should be made in order to help these organizations maintain it. Not only do these organizations actively prevent some conflicts from escalating at the local level, but they also open up spaces for people to speak up and vent their frustration. Helping women's groups to *strengthen their targeted approaches, notably by providing support to their locally run programs*, can follow multiples strategies:

- *Encourage micro-initiatives*, such as micro-projects promoting exchange and financial autonomization for youth of different ethnic origins, genders and religions (APFB, Association pour la Promotion de la Fille Burundaise), or the Peace and Development Catalyst Groups that include demobilized, repatriated, but also elected women.
- *Support women organizations' outreach towards other men and boys*, in particular young unemployed men who are targeted for recruitment by various militias and armed groups (APFB). Several women's groups also collaborate with men's organizations such as CHOVIF (Coalition des hommes pour la lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes, Coalition of Men Fighting Violence Against Women).
- *Help women organizations maintaining diverse training tools*, in order to reach out to diverse audiences. Dushirehamwe's program of "training trainers" in conflict prevention and mediation is an example of such low cost and versatile training program that can be implemented in both urban and rural areas.
- *Assist with intergenerational initiatives such as intergenerational meetings* (APFB, Dushirehamwe or Association des Guides du Burundi) in order to mobilize youth for peace, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Older generations carry the memory and experience of the previous episodes of high intensity conflict, and are often more likely to appeal for calm and moderation.



## Help with information gathering and sharing

One of the most crucial activities implemented by some Burundian women's groups is early warning monitoring and data gathering on violent incidents including gender-based violence, as well as monitoring of human rights violations. These activities are of utmost importance, notably for the purposes of conflict prevention and timely action in case of a rapid conflict escalation scenario. Reinforcing and sustaining those activities entails:

- *Supporting women's groups' local relays which function as early warning mechanisms by helping to identify rumours and emerging conflicts.* Some women's groups like AFRABU organize regular exchanges with members of the security forces and relay relevant information from the grassroots to the leadership in Bujumbura. Others like Dushirehamwe implement a monthly monitoring on different types of conflicts and violence happening everywhere in the country, including political, social, economic and gender-based instances of violence.
- *Help with the documentation and dissemination of early warning mechanisms such as the « gender barometer »* (Collectif des ONGs et Associations Féminines du Burundi, CAFOB) that is updated regularly, and which helps to monitor the evolution of gender equality and gender-based violence in the country.
- *Develop early warning mechanisms based on mobile phone networks by facilitating access of women living in the countryside to mobile phones.* This would help passing on information on events occurring in the provinces, and would pave the way for early response.
- *IT support.* Many women's groups do not have the resources and/or the training to build their own website and to update it, but also to use social medias. Providing IT support would help women's groups disseminating information not only about their activities, but also about the evolution of the situation on the ground.
- *Help pooling information on local conflicts and human rights violations.* Interviews with women's organizations also revealed a strident need for information sharing. Pooling information would allow for a better use of resources by helping to avoid redundant interventions, and would enhance the quality of early warning by providing a database of violent incidents collected at local level. *In order to avoid specific information to be linked to specific organizations, and thus potentially jeopardizing their security,*



Soap production by youth – APFB



*Mediating women and girls exchanging on the prevention of conflicts in the Rugombo Commune – project implemented by APFB and funded by UNWomen*

*such pooling could be hosted outside of the country.*

### **Support formal and informal education initiatives**

Most women's groups dedicate a large part of their activities to education, both formal and informal. Some work on values and promote responsible and ethical leadership (MFFPB, Mouvement des Femmes et des Filles pour la Paix au Burundi) or positive masculinity (Réseau Femmes et Paix) as ways to prevent the re-emergence of conflict. Their work has been supported or complemented by international organizations such as UNESCO or UN Women. UNESCO has for instance organized in 2014-2015 capacity building activities for Burundian young civil society leaders. Education for peace and conflict prevention in such a tense situation requires creativity, and some good practices developed by women's groups could be further encouraged:

- *Encourage women's groups' engagement with local medias, and especially radios that are the most popular media in Burundi. Some have trained female journalists who have their own radio shows, during which messages for peace, and against violence, are disseminated (for instance Radio Voix de la Femme à Giheta, supported by*

*Dushirehamwe). The MFFPB broadcasts messages in both French and Kirundi for positive change and for peaceful orientation. Similarly, the Réseau Femmes et Paix has sponsored for three months radio messages against gender-based violence that were broadcasted three times every day on one of the most popular radio channels.*

- *Support initiatives for developing women entrepreneurship and autonomization, and in particular support capacity-building programs for women's groups' members, especially those coming from rural areas. Because many of them are illiterate and have a very limited access to information, they are more likely to be manipulated and to be victims of gender-based violence.*
- *Help with the translation of relevant documents in Kirundi, including national laws. So far most of international and national documents in the field of conflict and peace, but also of gender equality, are not available in the local language. Having them translated would greatly facilitate the work of local civil society groups in rural areas, where proficiency in French or English is limited.*



## Assist with the preparation of the next elections

Considering their specific societal positioning and relative political weakness, and as has been demonstrated in previous conflict cycles, women's organizations have the most capacity of impact during the conflict prevention phase, and especially in the period preceding major elections. Once conflict erupts, women's groups tend to withdraw from the public scene. Unsurprisingly, most Burundian women's groups interviewed are already designing programs and actions for ensuring peaceful elections in 2020, the year set for the next presidential and parliamentary elections. The pre-electoral phase is particularly important for conflict prevention purposes, as dialogue is needed in order to prevent the reescalation of the conflict, at the national and at the local levels. Some targeted initiatives could be encouraged:

- *Civic education* is central to peaceful elections. Some women's groups like the APFB organize awareness raising activities about core democratic principles, and have designed a code of conduct for youth at elections times.
- *Training of election moderators and of observers*, conducted by women's groups such as AFRABU, should also be supported.
- *Activities designed to keep youth occupied before and during elections*, especially uneducated and unemployed youth who are likely to become involved in episodes of violence before and during elections (APFB), should be encouraged.
- Because of the current deadlock, other platforms than diplomatic international or national dialogues are crucial, including locally organized dialogues. *Encouraging and facilitating exchanges between women's and other civil society groups, including with organizations closely associated to the government* (Forum National des Femmes, Plateforme Femmes, Paix et Sécurité) should be a priority in view of the next elections.

## Conclusions

The impact of external support on conflict prevention and early warning activities is likely to be multiplied if it targets areas in which women's groups already have a well established expertise, but also if it takes into account the security context in which they operate: because they are not usually seen as "political", community-based and focused approaches face with less resistance at the national level, and can affect key sections of the population, such as the youth, the unemployed, or the demobilized.

Given that information sharing is crucial for early warning and early response, pooling the data gathered by women's groups is essential, and can be achieved through IT support or through the setting up of mobile phone networks.

But in a country like Burundi, where most episodes of widespread violence either preceded or occurred during elections, conflict prevention cannot be effectively achieved without taking into account the electoral calendar. In this perspective, planning for civic education, for the training of election moderators and observers, as well as for coordination meetings between civil society actors will be of crucial importance during the next two years.

Finally, ways in which to better and safely include women's groups in internationally organized dialogue should be found, notably by setting up relays for their actions outside of Burundi, and by establishing international mentoring mechanisms.

Tampere Peace Research Institute - TAPRI  
Linna building, 6th floor  
FI-33014 University of Tampere, Finland

<http://www.uta.fi/yky/en/research/tapri/>

Tel. +358 (0)3 355 111

ISBN:  
ISSN:

The Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) is a multidisciplinary and international research centre whose mission is to conduct high quality research on the causes of war, on non-violent resolution of conflicts, and on conditions for peace. In accordance with the present research agenda, the focus of TAPRI's research is peaceful change to which all projects are related.