



Cross-border Dialogue for Peace in the Great Lakes Region

An initiative of Interpeace and its partners in the Great Lakes Region.

Informational Note



– Rwanda –

Why a regional peacebuilding programme with cross-border dialogue at its core?

The Great Lakes region of Africa, which includes the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi, has gradually become known, not for its progress but rather for deadly conflicts that have claimed millions of lives and have caused indescribable suffering for the population of the region. Over the past two decades, the three countries of the region have been marked by violent conflict. **The regionalization of these conflicts has progressively demonstrated that peace or conflict in one of the three countries in the region has a significant impact (positive or**

negative) on its neighbours. Therefore, any solution for sustainable peace must inextricably be envisioned not only at the local but also at the regional level.

Sustainable peace requires a long-term process that is gradual and progressive. Consequently, it necessitates two complementary conditions: the absence of armed conflict, as well as the existence of mechanisms to prevent, manage and resolve conflict without resorting to violence. This hence suggests that while all initiatives geared towards ending armed conflicts are important and commendable, not all will automatically engender sustainable peace. This much coveted sustainable peace must transcend borders and can only be attained through the

restoration of trust, mutual respect, cooperation between communities, and win-win economic relations as well as a reduction of the identity based manipulations and the hatred that has progressively developed between communities in the Great Lakes region. Hate and mistrust have been among the main drivers of new conflicts in the region. Thus, it is of utmost importance to engage in open dialogue at the local, national and regional levels. **Attaining sustainable peace requires an inclusive process rooted in the local context and supported at the national, regional and international levels.**

To foster sustainable peace, the Cross-border Dialogue for Peace in the Great Lakes Programme aims to establish a framework for permanent dialogue which provides a channel for citizens to freely express themselves, without the limitations of taboos, on issues related to peace. Thoughts expressed by citizens are then channelled to key actors and decision makers through discussions in various dialogue spaces established as part of the programme.

The dialogue process can progressively contribute to the restoration of trust and collaboration between the communities and other stakeholders and to the reduction of the vertical space between decision makers and citizens. If well managed, this process serves as a foundation for re-establishing sustainable peace in the region.

The added value of this programme

This programme has been designed on the premise that no one understands the stakes and challenges for peace in the Great Lakes region better than those who have been most affected by its conflicts. Outside of any preconceived notion, **this program seeks to base its actions on collective citizen analysis of the root causes of conflicts in the region and joint identification of solutions to resolve these issues.** Programme actions will be based on facts and results, sought and obtained through



A collective analysis done by citizens of the region on the profound causes of conflicts is key

the Participatory Action Research (PAR) process. PAR is therefore the foundation of the programme. It is indeed a process, as the iterative action of the program takes place over a long period of time. Thus, PAR is not an isolated action within the framework of a project, but an initiative aimed at ensuring that the actors involved in the process ultimately become change agents for peace. This program therefore concentrates on citizens of the region who play a central role throughout the process: during the analysis of the conflict, in the determination of the programme's strategic focus, as well as in the subsequent identification of sustainable solutions for peace and their implementation.

This programme specifically combines research, dialogue and advocacy to pursue sustainable peace. Research engages the citizens in the identification of challenges to peace, and through cross-border dialogue, the space between citizens in the region is minimized. Out of this process emerge recommendations for fostering sustainable peace, whose implementation is

subsequently advocated for vis-à-vis governments and other decision makers.

This program therefore aims to establish an infrastructure to catalyse change among a critical mass of citizens in the Great Lakes Region, particularly those in local communities, civil society organizations, key decision making positions or in regional institutions. It enables these key actors to engage in a process of collaborative research and inclusive and participatory dialogue to understand the factors underpinning conflict and division in the Great Lakes region and to identify and propose collective solutions. Additionally, **the programme aims to encourage governments of the region to develop peacebuilding programmes that reflect collective recommendations stemming from this PAR process.**

Interpeace's approach and experience has demonstrated that local actors are central to the success of any sustainable peacebuilding programme. Accordingly, this programme will be implemented in

collaboration with civil society actors who have on the ground experience, legitimacy and invaluable expertise to ensure the success of this intervention. Partner organizations in the DRC include: Pole Institute and the Centre d'Etudes Juridiques Appliquées (CEJA) in North Kivu province, as well as Action pour la Paix et la Concorde (APC) and the Réseau d'Innovation Organisationnelle (RIO) in the province of South Kivu. The Centre d'Alerte et de Prévention des Conflits (CENAP) and Never Again Rwanda will serve as program partners in Burundi and Rwanda respectively.

Programme background and objectives

As mentioned above, peacebuilding is a process. In fact, after violent conflicts, communities are torn apart and wounds are slow to heal. This must be taken into consideration for any peacebuilding initiative to be successful. Therefore, to comprehend the magnitude of suffering in respective communities, it is imperative to engage community

members, from the beginning, in the identification of problems and solutions. This already serves as the first step for long-term collective healing. The implementation of this programme commenced with an exploratory phase, conducted in 2011, aimed at identifying factors driving division and those promoting social cohesion.

In October 2012, in agreement with its partners, namely the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Interpeace and its local partners launched the preparatory phase of the regional programme. During this preparatory phase, people in the Great Lakes region (Burundi, Rwanda and North and South Kivu provinces in the DRC) clearly **expressed the need for dialogue for peace within the framework of a regional programme. In addition, they identified the theme on stereotypes and the manipulation of identity as a major concern to be addressed within the context of the cyclic conflicts plaguing Great Lakes**

region. In 2013, Interpeace and its partners used the PAR process to conduct research and promote dialogue in parallel in the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda.

Interpeace and its partners then produced a research report as well as a documentary film which they presented to a regional stakeholders forum held in Nairobi in December 2013, where participants from across the region validated the report and the film. The results of this preparatory phase guided the development of the Cross-border Dialogue for Peace programme document which is structured around actions that the citizens of the Great Lakes region, participants in this process, considered important for peacebuilding.

The primary objectives of the program are to create a bridge between communities and to serve as a catalyst for open dialogue on challenges to peace in the region **by providing spaces for different stakeholders to develop collaborative solutions which transcend national borders and advance sustainable peace in the region.** The programme aims to establish permanent cross-border dialogue spaces bringing together various key stakeholders across the region; to compress the vertical space between citizens and decision makers at the local, provincial, national and regional level; and to establish synergies between civil society organizations in order to maximize the impact. As such, this programme will progressively have a



Group-work during the regional stakeholders' forum

positive impact on collaboration and trust between communities at the cross-border level as well as between citizens and their decision makers in order to positively influence public policies and programmes in the Great Lakes region. To ensure sustainable impact, the programme targets decision makers, civil society organizations, community members and regional organizations as key partners.

Future Prospects

The sections above highlight that any peacebuilding initiative must be seen as a process. The first steps include the restoration of minimum trust between the citizens who should lead this process. Interpeace and its partner organizations are only facilitators of this process.

In the present phase, the programme will establish **structures promoting the implementation of the recommendations emerging from the research and dialogue processes.** It will form spaces for dialogue in each country, including working groups and steering committees, facilitating ownership and legitimacy of interventions.

The program will also initiate other research processes based on thematic priorities that emerged from the aforementioned PAR process.

Key findings of the research on identity-based manipulations and stereotypes

In the research carried out during the preparatory phase on the theme of identity-based stereotypes and manipulations, the primary research question was **“to what extent do stereotypes and the manipulation of identity influence conflicts in the Great Lakes region?”** Information collected in the four research zones demonstrate that the stereotypes and identities do not provoke conflicts, particularly violent conflict, on their own. According to the participants of the discussion groups and individual interviews, the people of the region have, in the past, lived, “harmoniously” with one another. However, the manipulation of identity by a multitude of actors, including politicians, local decision makers, customary chiefs, etc. has transformed stereotypes and identity into some of the most destructive and divisive factors.

The research showed that **identity based stereotypes are a significant obstacle to peace** in the sense that they are profoundly internalized by all communities to the extent that they constitute a serious barrier to any initiative aimed at fostering peace. These stereotypes have amplified successive wars and violent confrontations over the past two decades, have been handed down through generations, and have a tendency to evolve negatively with each armed conflict. **This is how conflicts in the Great Lakes have become identity based in nature, meaning conflicts where one community, rightly or wrongly, suspects another community seeks to dominate or exterminate them.**

The research also generated a certain number of participant recommendations that were subsequently validated at the regional stakeholders’ forum. One recommendation emerged as a priority recommendation: namely, **to establish initiatives and structures for consulting the population as well as key stakeholders at the regional, national and local levels, with the aim of minimizing mistrust and negative perceptions between the communities of the region.** Participants also identified **Peace education** as a key strategy to deal with cyclic conflicts in the Great Lakes region. In the future, the program will establish strategies and mechanisms to facilitate implementation of these recommendations by the citizens of the region through spaces provided by the regional programme.

With the generous support of



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Département fédéral des affaires étrangères