



Great Lakes Justice Initiative: Promoting the Rule of Law in Burundi (1999-2006)

Program Overview

Between 2000 and 2003, IFES worked with civil society organizations in Burundi to strengthen their capacity to support the process of reconciliation and a return to the rule of law. IFES led a consortium with the International Human Rights Law Group (now Global Rights), funded through the Great Lakes Justice Initiative.

Program Context

The 2001 Arusha Peace Accords represented a significant, though incremental, step toward reconciliation and democratic rule. As government institutions develop, civil society must also develop the capacity to articulate its interests and constructively participate in the political sphere. Formal NGOs in Burundi are few in number, are primarily focused on constituencies within the capital, and lack the fundamental management, communication, lobbying and advocacy skills needed to build effective civic pressure towards reconciliation and democratic rule.

IFES and the Law Group formed a consortium to merge their strengths in civil society capacity building and human rights advocacy. This complementary approach was intended to enable civil society groups to develop core capacities for articulating their interests and, at the same time, develop awareness and skills in promoting human rights and the rule of law.

Program Activities

IFES was quick to recognize the marginalization of women and youth in the peace process juxtaposed with the tremendous role that they can play in the process of reconciliation and democratic rule. A serious impediment to mobilizing women and youth is the pervasive aura of distrust and hatred between the ethnic groups. To bridge the gulf that exists between the different groups, IFES began its program in Burundi by organizing discussion groups that brought together Hutus and Tutsis in a guided process of sharing experiences and building trust. These groups led to the establishment of a network of women and youth throughout rural Bujumbura who now serve as zone representatives and organize their own follow-on activities. Integral to the success of the groups was the establishment of a network of trainers guided by a formal training-of-trainer process developed within the group activities. During this period, IFES established a small grants program to support local civil society organizations that have the potential to play a substantive role in the reconciliation process.

Building on the initial success of the discussion groups and workshops, IFES worked with the networks to develop communication, lobbying and advocacy skills. IFES also began a series of workshops to educate the networks on rights and issues related to the reconciliation and democratic process. Topics included constitutional governance, human rights, the rights of children, inheritance and land law. IFES also worked with a Gitega-based civil society group to extend its programmatic reach beyond Bujumbura. The Gitega group has become a regional resource for civil society groups and human rights practitioners. IFES provided funds to purchase books, computers and other materials for a documentation center in Gitega that receives an average of 80 visitors per day.

As a subgrantee, the Law Group complemented the objectives of the consortium by building the capacity of human rights organizations, increasing public participation in legal reform activities, and supporting civil society groups involved in the peace process. The Law Group organized training and technical assistance workshops on the substantive and institutional capacity of human rights groups, provided access to international human rights mechanisms and resources, and supported key civil society legal reform initiatives. The Law Group also built on the success thus far by providing support to civil society groups outside of Bujumbura. In addition, the Law Group expanded its thematic scope by building capacity for public oversight of the judicial process and legal reform.