

Advocacy case studies

Seeking church unity in Burundi

Country:

Burundi

Themes:

Corruption; peacebuilding and conflict

Advocacy approaches:

Building relationships; working in alliances and coalitions

As a result of decades of instability, and more recently the disputed re-election of the president and subsequent attempted coup, the situation in Burundi is fragile. New legislation limiting both development and influencing work has seen civil society space shrink, with the church amongst those feeling the effects. The church itself has also suffered internal divisions, along denominational, political and ethnic lines. Moreover, the government has successfully infiltrated the church, forcibly instigating its own leadership, resulting in much resentment, mistrust and fear amongst church leaders in the country. There have been a number of attempts made to bring together and seek collaboration amongst church leaders, but none have been successful due to mutual suspicion and fear hampering discussions.

Whilst acknowledging all these challenges, Tearfund was eager to see the church united and working together, and was ready to attempt to facilitate constructive dialogue amongst the different denominations. Tearfund sought to create a platform at regional level to accomplish this, bringing together all of the regional church bodies in East Africa with influence over the church in Burundi. This was a difficult process, as most of the regional bodies had already aligned themselves with their Burundian counterparts and their hostilities. Tearfund took the time to visit each of these regional church bodies individually, seeking to break down barriers between the different groups. Moreover, Tearfund encouraged them to consider the wider challenges affecting the church and the nation, and the potential of their collective influence to bring about change.

Tearfund's approach of one-to-one conversations to build relationships with regional church leaders was fruitful and led to three successful meetings, where church leaders agreed to work together towards greater unity in the Burundian church. Through these meetings, even those churches considered antagonistic towards working with other denominations slowly shifted their position in favour of collaboration. These steps towards unity provide an important opportunity for churches to lead the way in influencing citizens and the national political leadership towards peace in Burundi.

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