

Civic education: strengthening peace and democracy in Eastern DRC

CONCEPT NOTE FOR PILOT PHASE

Context

Over the last five years, Eastern DRC has been a backdrop of continued violence, perpetuated in many instances by proxy forces of local, national and regional actors. It is estimated that in Ituri alone more than 50,000 people have been killed since the fighting intensified in 1999, and over 500,000 have been forcibly displaced from their families and communities. Whilst the security situation in Ituri has improved, pockets of ongoing conflict remain, notably due to conflict between Government forces (FARDC) and militia members (some grouped under the name Mouvement Revolutionaire du Congo “MRC”). Within and beyond these areas, there is an urgent need to increase dialogue between local communities and knowledge of the electoral process, to avoid the instrumentalisation of ethnic identity for political gains on a local and a provincial level.

The establishment of state authority and the transition to democracy in the DRC is a multi-faceted process. The Congolese government needs support to establish channels of communication in the Eastern part of the country, to be able to gradually re-build the state, including, *inter alia*, re-establishing the notion of public goods, society, social contract and good governance. A core part of this strategy is increasing the population’s ability to meaningfully participate in the democratic process, which is currently severely undermined by low levels of understanding of democracy.¹ The de facto isolation of a large proportion of Ituri’s population from information flows causes ignorance, which in turn leads to cultural vulnerability, negative manipulation of communities and conflict.

On a local and national level, elections will create additional pressure on the already fragile peace process.² The population’s ability to meaningfully participate in the democratic process is severely undermined by low levels of understanding of democracy and a lack of information and awareness. While the current timeframe before elections is quite short, this project is based in the belief that the democratic process is an ongoing one which begins before elections, and must continue afterwards.

Project purpose

Provide civic education³ to local populations (both men and women), and compliment it with the distribution of self-powered Radios and training in basic civic education. This will enable their meaningful participation in the democratic process both in the short and longer term.

¹ During a workshop facilitated by Africa Initiative Program with women’s groups in Ituri prior to the constitutional referendum, the participants stated that they did not know exactly what a referendum meant, and what the difference was between the elections for candidates and the referendum on the constitution.

² At the displaced persons camp outside of Bunia, residents testified of exactions by militia members to prevent the population from participating in the referendum on the Constitution. (April 2006, Kotoni Camp)

³ The term ‘civic education’ covers specific topics including, *inter alia*, democracy, rule of law, human rights, women’s rights, community development etc.

This project thus responds to an urgent need in Ituri. Large parts of Ituri's population are isolated from the rest of the province and are not in a position to receive information about events and processes underway across the region or country. An initial assessment by FEWER-Africa and AIP reports a critical lack of information beyond Bunia. Even basic information such as the difference between being a candidate for president or parliament and the names of provincial candidates are unknown by almost all of the population of Ituri. These people thus also risk being misled. Where a few individuals retain the monopoly of information and knowledge, their ability to manipulate and eventually mobilise populations through misinformation is high. It is thus essential that communities have access to information, and that this information be as neutral, objective and reliable as possible.

Project Strategy Approach

AIP/FEWER-Africa appreciates the urgent need for increased civic education to start ensuring the participation of Iturians in matters of their own governance from both a local and national perspective. There is an urgent need at the provincial level to provide basic "civic awareness", without which Iturians will remain isolated from on-going governance and democratization processes.⁴

AIP/FEWER-Africa proposes to fast-track a civic education project initiative through the use of radio and the establishment of community level listener groups through which to discuss, practice and share information with others in the community.

The project will draw on **AIP's local knowledge and networks** to ensure effective implementation. AIP has been in Bunia since early 2003 and has established 'Local Capacities for Peace Networks' (LCPN), established in Tchomia, Kasenyi, Aveba, Mahagi, Aru and Bunia. The LCPNs monitor conflict dynamics at grassroots level and sensitize communities on peace building and conflict resolution. AIP will utilize and build on the capacity of the LCPNs to organize regular assemblies of community members through which community level civic education and dialogue can be facilitated.

Project Activities

1. Distributing Radios

The first part of AIPs strategy will be to give people the opportunity to tap into local, regional and national information sources, by provision of **self-powered radios to be distributed** via the Local Capacities for Peace Networks throughout Ituri for communal listening in each locality. The self powered radios are portable, low maintenance (since they require no batteries) and can be used in the remotest parts of Ituri. The distribution of radios will be accompanied by a brief session explaining their functioning, and will draw on lessons learnt from the use of Radios within other contexts. This pilot phase will benefit from collaboration with Ocha-Irin in Nairobi.

⁴ Assessment Mission FEWER-Africa, November 2005, April 2006. One of the reasons for this lack was the current resource and capacity limits of the Independent Electoral Commission, NGOS and local authorities. The project will work on close collaboration with all agencies to ensure coherence and the multiplier effect.

2. Establishment of Community Level Listener groups (Neighbourhood Assemblies)

Neighbourhood Assemblies (NA) will be established in each community as a novel and effective way through which civic capacities can be built, radios distributed for communal listening, information shared and disseminated and intra-community level dialogue promoted.

The NAs will be modelled on a structure similar to that of the National Legislative Assembly (village level parliaments), to provide an **experiential learning** in understanding matters of governance and democracy, debate and consultation on matters affecting the community, conflict resolution and peace building. The particular agenda and rules of debate and assembly of each assembly will be defined in accordance with the needs and agreements of each particular community, and will remain dynamic. It is expected that once established and basic skills and capacities put in place, the LA have capacity to generate their own momentum as communities start to realize tangible measurable benefits resulting from their own initiative. AIP through the LCPN will provide the initial 'training of community level Neighbourhood Assembly Conveners who will have been selected by (as identified by each community) and provide the necessary mentoring and follow up. The local conveners will then conduct community level sensitization and mobilization and facilitate the formation/ convening of Local assemblies and reporting on the same.

3. Contribution to Development of Civic Education Radio Programs

In order to assure coordination with existing initiatives, AIP/FEWER will consult with Radio Okapi, CANDIP, IRIN and Revelation to contribute to make programming adapted to suit the needs of communities in Ituri. Civic Education programming will look not only at the electoral process, but also at peace building issues and the participation of women.

4. Information Gathering Monitoring and Dissemination

AIP/FEWER Africa publishes a monthly Ituri Update Newsletter and other briefings to inform stakeholders on the local, National and Regional peace level of peace and conflict dynamics in the region. In view of the current Civic Education project, AIP wishes to tap into this existing capacity, to inform its programming so that it responds to prevailing need and as an additional information sharing resource that can add to the civic education goals at the community level through which also communities can express themselves.

Outputs & timeframe

Given the current electoral timeframe, it is desirable that radio distribution and basic civic education programming be rolled out as early as possible. Using existing civic education programmes, and a small stock of existing radios, it is possible to start the pilot phase within a very short time-frame.