

Burundians use innovative ways to protect the displaced

by Greta Zeender



While the international community is disseminating the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in Burundi, local actors are also taking matters into their own hands to tell people about their rights at a grassroots level.

Developed in 1998, the Guiding Principles consolidate in one document the legal standards relevant for protecting and assisting people forcibly displaced within their own country. These Principles are widely accepted internationally but there is a long way to go until they are followed on the ground.

During my stay in Burundi in October 2002, I was told about several innovative techniques used by local professionals, which may have implications for dissemination efforts in other displacement crises. They use art, participatory education and 'tradition' to disseminate the Principles. I was in Burundi with a Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) team which trains local actors on the Guiding Principles. The training is part of NRC's efforts to build the capacity of

local professionals to monitor the respect of the rights of the displaced and to do advocacy for a better protection of these rights.

Such initiatives and other innovative approaches are crucial in a country where the civil war has so far killed over 250,000 people and displaced another 500,000 people since 1993. The displaced are particularly vulnerable; grave violations, such as rape and torture, have been widely reported during displacement.

Changing reality through art

"When our theatre association performs plays on the Guiding Principles, we show to the displaced the imperfect reality, to spark in them the desire to dream of a better world", says Michel-Ange Nzajibwami, direc-

tor of TUBIYAGE, a theatre association of seven theatre troupes and 40 actors. His association, supported by NRC, has been presenting plays at five IDP camps in the province of Kirundo, and plans to perform in other provinces as well. The plays present five rights of particular relevance to people displaced in camps: the protection of the property of the displaced, the freedom to enter and exit the camps, the need to include women associations in resettlement and return plans, the right of children to education, and the right of IDPs to be informed before being displaced.

The plays usually last an hour and a half and have a participatory approach, explains Michel-Ange. Actors first illustrate the daily life of the displaced, with their frustrations about the violations of the rights mentioned above. The play is very realistic but manages to strike the delicate balance between depicting what IDPs go through and doing it with a sense of humour. The play shows the daily life of simple farmers, who visit their neighbours and rejoice to see each other, until they hear the sound of gunfire and start to flee.

IDPs in Burundi

Then they are brought to a 'site' for displaced people, where they face many problems. Families, for example, receive insufficient food rations. At one point in the play, they are forced to move to another site, without prior notice.

According to Michel-Ange, audiences of displaced people agree that the play accurately portrays what they are living through, and they also understand that it is not right. At this point, they are invited to replace one of the actors and try to redress the situation. In contrast to before the war, women and young people are now the ones who act to remedy the situation. This is not always easy for men, adds Michel-Ange; they are often more reserved and are sometimes uneasy about the new role assumed by women in these participative plays.

Michel-Ange believes that disseminating the Guiding Principles at the

"Children can become real promoters of the Guiding Principles"

grassroots level is important, since people often live without knowing their rights. At the same time, he points out, these principles must be disseminated to authorities and camp managers if the rights of the displaced people are to be effectively protected.

Participatory education

Education is another way to get the Guiding Principles across. "If we want the human rights situation in Burundi to improve, it is important not to neglect the education of children. Children can become real promoters of the Guiding Principles", says Jean-Paul, a teacher originally from the northern province of Kirundo, who also worked with street children in Senegal and Cameroon before returning to his native country.

Now working for NRC, Jean-Paul trains teachers who work with IDP children in an effort to improve their lives. His work is aimed at children who have never been to school but are too old to start at the beginning of the school system. After a year in such a programme, students are usually able to integrate into the formal education system.

Michel-Ange's theatre troupe in Burundi (Michel-Ange, front left).

In Kirundo, schools have been built outside the displaced sites, which are generally mono-ethnic. The schools, unlike the sites, benefit both IDP and resident children, Tutsi and Hutu alike. Children are taught the Guiding Principles through a participatory approach. They play small parts with themes like human rights and obligations in general, and children's rights in particular. They also learn through discussion sessions.

According to Jean-Paul, the Guiding Principles are a way to establish equality between the displaced and the resident population. Because of the displacement and trauma, IDP children are very vulnerable and may feel rejected or left out, especially at school. They are also generally unaware of their rights. It is therefore essential to explain to them that they have the same rights as other children, including the right to learn, even if they have not had the chance to go to school until then, due to war and displacement.

Going to school with other children helps displaced children integrate with those who have not been displaced, and who come from another ethnic background. Tutsi and Hutu children can rediscover each other, learn through games, and study in a spirit of equality, he says.

'Ubuntu' for the displaced?

"Tradition is essential but, to better defend the rights of women and children, we may have to create a new tradition in Burundi", muses Mathilde, who works for an NGO defending the land rights of vulnerable people such as children and widows. Mathilde points out that many aspects of Burundian tradition grant protection

to the vulnerable. She argues that it is important to appeal to traditional solidarity to protect the rights of the displaced and of other vulnerable people. Many internally displaced people have enormous difficulty accessing their land when they return to former homes, especially as there are no land inheritance rights for women.

Traditional holders of authority in Burundi are a group of men called *Bashingantahe*. Generally known for their sense of justice and responsibility for the overall good of the community, they settle disputes peacefully and uphold human rights, says Mathilde. In their ceremony of investiture, the *Bashingantahe* promise to pursue justice and to protect widows and orphans. This appeals to an essential element of the Burundian tradition, *Ubuntu* ('humanity and justice'). Mathilde often refers cases of land disputes to their judgement. She also discusses with them the importance of protecting the rights of displaced people.

While tradition seems the most appropriate means to disseminate the Guiding Principles to the *Bashingantahe* and rural populations, it is also important to empower women and children and to promote self-confidence and dignity, argues Mathilde. Her NGO, Rainbow Center, discusses human rights issues with women's associations. It also runs youth groups, where young people receive food in exchange for the construction of houses for IDPs or for other work. Such work, she says, provides the pretext to discuss human rights and responsibility.

Like Jean-Paul, Mathilde is firm about the importance of children knowing



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their rights. Young people are often surprised to discover that education is not a favour granted to them but a right. They also learn that the administrator of the commune does not have the right to displace people except under exceptional circumstances, and that expropriation should be followed by compensation. In a hierarchical society like Burundi, young people discover that even the head of a community does not have the right to violate the freedoms of the citizens. Such knowledge can be helpful.

Principles must be locally owned

Michel-Ange, Jean-Marie and Mathilde each have their own ways of protecting the rights of displaced people, through theatre, education and dialogue. But their approaches have much in common. All three disseminate the Guiding Principles through participatory approaches and in Kirundi, the national language of Burundi. All three agree on the central role of women and children, who represent the majority of displaced people and who do not traditionally have the same prominence as men.

Fortunately, these efforts are not being made in a vacuum. In Burundi, local initiatives to disseminate the Guiding Principles have been supported by the international community. Since early 2001, international agencies, national authorities and civil society representatives have met regularly to assess concrete IDP situations and to improve the protection of displaced people. NRC, meanwhile, along with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has organised training workshops to disseminate the Principles to the Burundian authorities, international agencies and local groups, including the representatives of displaced people, at national and provincial levels.

Supporting grassroots efforts is crucial to promote the ownership of the Guiding Principles at the local level. Integrating the Principles fully into local culture can give a stronger voice to women and children, and can create 'new traditions' of protection and integration.

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