

Peace without borders

Regional peacebuilding in focus

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Three countries. One Vision. One programme. Generation Grands Lacs (GGL). The author traces the creation and implementation of the Great Lakes' one and only live cross-border youth radio programme, GGL, broadcast in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Burundi). Now Chief Programming Officer for Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Lena Slachmuisjlder pioneered this innovative peacebuilding initiative six years ago during her period as Country Director for SFCG in DRC. In this article she reflects on how it has contributed to a new, positive youth identity in the region.

Youth in the Great Lakes region:

The making of a new generation

Lena Slachmuisjlder

"He brought WHAT? Honey? You mean ... Really? No!"

Now why would a Congolese journalist carry a bottle of honey all the way with him from Kinshasa to Kigali? Fearful that he might not find honey in Kigali? Absolutely not. He was bringing the honey to "protect himself" from the witchcraft and poison that all his compatriots had assured him he'd meet as soon as he put his foot over the border into Rwanda. His fear was that palpable.

Reminiscing about this today sparks smiles and nods by the team of the Generation Grands Lacs (GGL) radio programme. Six years running, the GGL team is proud of having surmounted the obstacles of polarisation, trauma and fear in the region, amplifying a positive young voice of confidence, tolerance, and initiative.

How did it all begin?

It was a bold idea. Taking a conversation between youth in one of the world's most polarised regions, and putting it live on-air every week entailed many risks. Technically, we needed to connect radio stations from across the region through the Internet, raise capacities of the journalists and technicians, and take on the challenge and stress of a live regional programme.

But the human hurdles were even more daunting. We were trying to change the way the youth perceived themselves and their peers in the neighbouring countries. The walls of prejudice were high, and the degree

of trauma experienced by the youth in all three countries was profound. A baseline survey revealed that 97 per cent of the Congolese youth had directly experienced violent conflict, half of the youth surveyed in the three countries had lost family members in the conflict, and 17 per cent of the girls said that they had been victims of sexual abuse. The youth had grown up in an environment of hatred and fear of those from the neighbouring countries. People felt that their physical security would be in danger, were they to travel to the neighbouring countries. How were we going to be able to convince journalists and radio station directors to buy into the vision?

How did the programme work?

The programme was designed in a way that had never been done. In the first two years, there were four partner radio stations, with two journalists from each station. In later years, a large private radio station (RTGA) based in Kinshasa with 14 relay stations across Congo, joined on board, making the GGL journalist team 10 in number. The location of the actual live broadcast rotated each week between Bujumbura, Kigali, Bukavu and eventually Kinshasa. Each radio programme was hosted by two journalists, always of different nationalities, and produced by one of the GGL journalists who were based at the station hosting the programme that week. The hosting station would webstream the live radio programme, which enabled

the other stations to pick it up over the Internet and broadcast it over the FM airwaves.

For the first time, listeners across the three countries could phone in to the same live radio programme. Although the programme was in French, the language diversity of the journalists meant that they could engage in discussions with callers in Swahili, Lingala, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda and English. The 60-minute programme included pre-recorded field segments, an interview with an in-studio guest, and interaction with callers and listeners participating by sms.

What was the change that we were intending to make?

We were very conscious of our intentions from Day One. In our first planning session with the journalists, we created our own vision statement: *Through our initiative, the youth of the Great Lakes dialogue sincerely and act for the prevention and transformation of conflicts and to build peace.*

While recognising the need to 'sensitise' youth, GGL needed to support them in shifting their attitudes and widening their perspectives. What the youth needed was a programme that would make them feel differently about themselves and their neighbours, instilling a sense of pride in being from the Great Lakes. The strategic choice of the word 'Generation' resonated with the new-ness of identity, image and role for the youth in the Great Lakes.

PHOTO: LENA SLACHMUIJLDER



A live production of the radio programme *Generation Grands Lacs* in Gisenye, western Rwanda. This production brought youth together from the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi.

We gave attention to setting the right 'tone'. GGL needed to address serious issues, but also be fun and captivating for the youth. A funky theme song was composed. *'Three countries. One Vision. One programme'* was one of the jingles, while another seduced youth with a catch phrase *'Cross the borders every week with GGL – no need for a passport!'*

Did GGL have an outreach and promotion strategy?

The programme was designed with multiple layers to reach out to our listeners. Listener groups were created in partnership with youth organisations for monitoring purposes but also to encourage participation of a consistent group of youth from the three countries in each programme. Secondly, each of the journalists who was not either presenting or producing the programme was sent out with cell phones to facilitate youth calling into the programme during the live broadcast. Thirdly, in universities across the three countries, a regional youth organisation organised listening sessions followed by debate, sometimes with a guest speaker or facilitator. Lastly, competitions were

organised several times to promote entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity amongst the GGL audience.

These outreach strategies were designed for many reasons. Firstly, we wanted to engage youth directly in the 'GGL experience'. Secondly, even though the live nature of the programme meant that we couldn't predict or plan who would be phoning in, we wanted to be deliberate in reaching out to youth around the country who we knew, through our networks, cared about the region, and had positive suggestions to make in addressing the challenges. Thus, while we didn't want to – and couldn't – exclude or censor out the extremist voices, we wanted to encourage more moderate and collaborative voices on the airwaves.

How was GGL coordinated?

The programme required a high degree of planning and coordination. Every two to three months, the core journalists from the five stations would meet for three days of evaluation of the past programmes and planning of the upcoming twelve programmes. Three representa-

tives of the youth outreach partner also participated in the planning sessions. These regular encounters strengthened the bonds between the GGL journalists, as friends and as professionals committed to the GGL vision. They expected high standards of each other, and settled each other's fears and trepidations as they tackled more and more challenging issues over time.

When they would return to their newsrooms, they brought a new confidence and perspective. *"After my first visit to Rwanda, my newsroom colleagues didn't believe what I was telling them"*, recalls Francois Kadima, who was part of GGL as a RTGA journalist. *"But after the Burundians and Rwandans came to our station in Kinshasa to present the programme, I could see the attitudes changing. One colleague told me that he could never imagine sitting in the same room with a Rwandan, and now they were working together on GGL"*, recalls Francois.

Was GGL able to tackle important issues?

In our first planning sessions, we knew that the level of mistrust and tensions

between the communities posed a lot of risks. At SFCG, we had consistently avoided doing live programmes for many well-founded reasons. Once you're on air, you can't cut out the hate speech. Callers could attack the journalists themselves; they could insult the various heads of states. Would our young GGL team be able to handle this?

"In the beginning, we tried to get beyond the surface and talk about those underlying fears, rumours, and misunderstandings", remembers Laurent Kasindi, who joined the founding team of GGL in 2006 as a Radio Maendeleo journalist before later becoming the GGL coordinator with SFCG.

"I remember one of our first programmes was 'getting to know the unknown', and it was really simple. We asked questions like, 'Are you ready to try a new food? Are you ready to go somewhere you've never been? Do you believe everything that people tell you about a place, or a person?' From there, we moved on to shows about some key words, like stereotypes. We broke it down, made it simple", recalls Laurent.

GGL rapidly gained credibility, and doors opened when journalists approached guests to be on the show. By engaging with a diversity of perspectives, from those of ex-presidents and parliamentarians to youth leaders, GGL gave voice to youth leaders representing a huge diversity of perspectives: displaced youth, politically-mobilised youth, youth in refugee camps, and youth who had taken up arms as child soldiers. With more than 250 programmes already broadcast, GGL has been able to clarify issues, engage in sincere dialogue and seek solutions. Even the most sensitive of issues were eventually tackled; the programme was never censored or denounced by any government or media regulatory body in any of the three countries.

"We didn't have to jump right away into the very tense relationships between Rwandan and Congolese", explains Nestor Nkurunziza, media coordinator for SFCG at the time of launching GGL. *"We needed to establish first that, as youth in the region, they had a lot in common. That's where we started from – learning from each other, and establishing that trust."*

Did GGL resonate with the audience?

We received consistently positive feedback from youth from all three countries, via sms, via e-mail, and later on,

via the Facebook page. These comments were read on air, and suggestions from listeners were woven into the programme planning sessions.

"GGL brought a new perspective to our listeners around the DRC. Before, we mainly talked about Rwanda or Burundi in light of their role in the war and what they had done to our nation, to our people. Now, there was a chance to hear new voices, the voices of ordinary youth who shared, largely, many of the concerns that Congolese youth did", said RTGA Director of Radio Simon Kabamba.

The youth identified with the style of GGL, according to Audace Machado, a founding member of GGL from Burundi's Radio Isanganiro. *"I have seen many youth clubs created in the spirit of the GGL programme. I felt youth were longing to be able to speak that language of openness and frank dialogue. GGL gave them that opportunity."*

"I was invited by another youth organisation from Lubumbashi who wanted to organise their own cross-border youth event in Lubumbashi", recalls Laurent Kasindi. *"They didn't know me personally, but wanted to invite me as a way of giving credibility to their own initiative."*

How did we measure the impact of GGL?

SFCG used a range of traditional media monitoring tools over the life of the project. This was done in consultation with our donor, USAID, over the first four years of the project. This included audience surveys amongst the general population, as well as amongst key target groups, such as university students in Bukavu, Kigali and Bujumbura. In 2007, after the first phase whereby the outreach sessions had specifically targeted the universities, we found that between 68 and 90 per cent of university students in the three cities knew of the programme and listened to it. Amongst youth in general, nearly 80 per cent had listened several times or listened regularly. On other occasions, we conducted surveys including questions and affirmations, and then were able to compare knowledge and attitudes between GGL listeners and GGL non-listeners. This was revealing and informative.

Among other things, GGL listeners were found to be:

- more likely to reject political stereotypes about other countries or groups;

- more likely to choose dialogue in the face of a conflict, and in general have more options to deal with a conflict; more likely to be open to dialogue on political issues;
- able to see more in common with youth from neighbouring countries;
- more likely to respond more collaboratively to a rumour;
- sharing the belief in the constructive role that youth can play in the region;
- more likely to strongly disagree with the statement 'one group is responsible for the problems in the Great Lakes region'; and
- more likely to disagree with the statement 'If a person criticises their own country to someone else of the Great Lakes, that person is a traitor'.

We had achieved reach into our target audience, and resonance with this audience in terms of GGL's intended shift in knowledge and attitudes. These broader monitoring tools were complemented by countless anecdotes, many of which were collected by the GGL presenters themselves.

GGL continues today, with a new version launching dialogue between Uganda and Rwanda. Recent tensions in eastern Congo have seen the GGL team going into the most sensitive areas of North Kivu, amplifying the voices of Rwandans, Congolese and Burundians who want an end to the violence. The GGL team has incorporated waves of new journalists from new partner radio stations, while still retaining the tone and responsibility of the programme. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation continues to keep us on track. GGL has proven that dialogue through radio, even in the most polarised regions, can strengthen a new generation of peace builders. 🌿

1 Formats ranged from field reports, to interviews, vox pops, testimonies or portraits, depending on the subject.

2 The Inter-University Forum of the Great Lakes was the youth outreach partner, who had a presence on university campuses across the three countries, and whose vision was in alignment with that of GGL.