

SUCCESS STORY

Great Lakes Radio Unites Youth

Peace Building through Communication



“It’s unfortunate that a diversity of identities, which should be seen as a source of wealth in our society, is actually used to divide people. I believe that it is often the fault of politicians who use identity differences to pit communities against one another for their own personal interests.”

– Patrick, a caller from Kigali,

The Great Lakes region, spanning central and eastern Africa, has suffered massive-scale violent conflict in recent decades which has ebbed and flowed across national borders. Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo have all experienced unprecedented conflict and are now in the process of promoting stability and nurturing fragile peace. To support the transition to a lasting peace, USAID, in partnership with Search for Common Ground (SFCG), is using live youth radio to cross borders and combat the negative stereotypes and prejudices amongst youth in the region.

In 2006, SFCG launched a new radio program and named it Generation Great Lakes (GGL), symbolizing the possibility of a new, common, positive identity for youth of these conflict-affected countries. Every Saturday for an hour, radio presenters from the three countries hold an open discussion

on topics relevant to youth in the region: identity, rumor management, displaced and refugee youth, gender, etc. The program is simulcast via web streaming and FM transmission, enabling listeners in all three countries to listen to and phone in to the same program on air on five radio stations in three countries at the same time. The common experience serves to demonstrate that regardless of differing ethnicity or nationality they all face many of the same concerns and issues.

The program cycle is directly linked in with the youth in the three countries via the Great Lakes University and Youth Forum for Peace. These local organizations participate in the planning sessions and then facilitate public listening sessions of GGL in universities in the three countries each week at the time the program is aired.

GGL is also unique in how it is produced. Journalists from the region run the program – from planning to hosting. While SFCG supports the process by offering quality control, it is the journalists who take full responsibility for production.

In a survey in mid-2007, GGL listeners were more open to the possibility of marriage with someone from another group – which is a key indicator of tolerance.

Alyce Akineza, a Rwandan journalist, describes the confidence she gained from working at GGL: “This is my dream coming true. I wish the same to all the young people. You know when one of your dreams come true, you feel so accomplished and it gives you a challenge but also a lot of power. Because you know you can do it.” Ms. Akineza also appreci-

ates the opportunity to interact with fellow young people in the region: “But most of all, I love meeting people from different cultures, different historical backgrounds through this show.”

GGL’s aim is to break down negative prejudices and stereotypes between youth of the region. The impacts of cross-border wars, the presence of rebel and insurgent groups, and the rhetoric of politicians have all contributed to reinforcing notions that “the other” is at fault, whether country, tribe or ethnicity. Research has shown that regular GGL listeners are developing more constructive attitudes toward dealing with conflict, managing misinformation, and they are letting go of their prejudices in favor of a spirit of regional collaboration. In a survey in mid-2007, between 63 and 80 percent of university students listened to GGL in Kigali, Bujumbura and Bukavu. These listeners were more open to the possibility of marriage with someone from another group – which is a key indicator of tolerance.

“Generation Great Lakes continues to remind the youth of the region that by understanding each other, and based on what they have in common, they can build a stronger future together,” commented Lena Slachmuis, country director of SFCG.

In the past, the radio has served to ignite hatred and violence. Now it inspires peace building. Looking toward the future challenges for the region, Ms. Akineza comments, “I hope that young women around the region are going to stand up and we will empower our region, by participating to the development of this wonderful part of the world. I think and I always thought that women are the future. So yes, I will do my best.”



GGL journalist Natasha listens to a caller.

“People from this region are often presented to the world in perpetual conflict. Well, people, let me tell you that on the contrary, our populations are not asking less than discovering each other and finding a way to go over all those [conflicts]. We just have to get the courage to visit our neighbors.”

- Alyce Akineza, journalist with GGL