

# CATALYZING THE MEDIA AS A PEACEBUILDING PLATFORM IN BURUNDI

The 2015 electoral season in Burundi saw protests, violence, and open political conflict at the local level, with a particular concentration in Bujumbura. In this volatile context, Search for Common Ground (Search) has worked to maintain constructive channels of information and communication, open space for dialogue, and bridge divides among groups, leveraging the power of media as a powerful platform for conflict prevention, non-violence, and tolerance.

## SUPPORTING THE REOPENING OF THE BURUNDIAN MEDIA SPACE

As a result of violence during the 2015 electoral season, some media outlets were shut down or destroyed, limiting the ability for Burundians to access quality information, and restricting space for engagement and dialogue. Within the Burundian context, media has traditionally played a positive role in bringing people together. During past crises, radio has worked as a positive tool to counter hate speech and bridge divides between communities. The recent crisis has resulted in increasingly biased media and violent speech, making the reopening of the Burundian media space critical to maintain the media's positive role within the country as a tool for violence prevention and social cohesion.

Search played a key role in this process, both by **continuing to produce constructive programming throughout the crisis** and by supporting the **reopening of two Burundian radio stations, Radio Isanganiro and Radio Rema FM**. This engagement contributed to **building platforms for conflict resolution, dialogue, and engagement that promoted social cohesion and reflected a diversity of voices** in a time of increased polarization, and closing democratic space. Search fostered the **rapprochement of the two stations**, which had differing political views that divided them during the height of the crisis, signaling the importance of Search's Common Ground Approach that brings opposing parties together to build on shared interest across dividing lines.

## BRIDGING POLITICAL DIVIDES THROUGH DIALOGUE

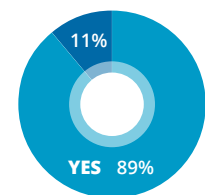
Throughout the crisis, Search continued to support the production of quality and balanced radio programs, bringing high-level stakeholders together and fostering constructive interactions. We worked to **promote non-violent communication, mutual respect, and peaceful conduct**, and foster an environment for **dialogue and positive engagement between politicians from opposite sides of the spectrum**. Our work has had a direct impact on freedom of expression on a higher level, boosting the neutrality of radio programming and elevating examples of non-violent dialogue between members of differing political parties, **breaking down intolerance of other political leaders, and disseminating tolerance and mutual respect for differing opinions**. Search consistently demonstrated that it is possible to address sensitive issues on the airwaves in Burundi, inviting opposition and government interlocutors alike to talk together on common interests.

Search supported the co-production of dozens of programs by *Radio Isanganiro* and *Rema FM* since their reopening, increasing their professionalism while fostering collaboration across dividing lines, and promoting respect for a wide range of opinions. Both stations saw increasing appreciation for their content among listeners. Just a few months after reopening, the increase was +9% for *Rema FM* and +4% for *Radio Isanganiro*.

## EFFECTIVE RADIO FOR EFFECTIVE PEACEBUILDING

Search trained media professionals on conflict-sensitive journalism in order to increase the availability of quality media content that promotes peace, tolerance, and constructive engagement. **Over 89% of the population agrees that listening to radio programming that is neutral and balanced with quality content is essential for consolidating peace at the community level**, highlighting the importance of investing in the media sector. Moreover, within just a few months of Search's support, the percentage of listeners of *Radio Isanganiro* and *Rema FM* who thought that their programs had a high potential to encourage people to be more engaged in peacebuilding at the community level increased by 19%.

- Do you think that listening to the radio reinforces peacebuilding at the community level?



*"My way of thinking has changed. I no longer have the same perception I had before for the other party that considered me anti-democratic. The activities of [Search] are a framework for meeting and exchange, starting from the radicalism of each party towards the constructive and reconciling debate. This is an opportunity not to be missed, especially since my voice is passing over the pro-governmental medium. I'm proud of it."*

An opposition leader who participated in a Search's radio roundtable