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Burundi AVP Phase I Final Report
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1) Why did you want to participate in the project?

After preparing carefully and working hard in last year's Rwanda AVP Phase I, I was very eager to return and to continue to support the work. Also, last year, my intentions to travel to Burundi were unexpectedly cut short, and this left me with a particular desire to work there. I have been very interested in the THARS project since its inception, and I wanted to learn more about what they were doing there. Meeting Charles, Adrien, and Carolyn here in the States further solidified that interest.

As much as I love the workshops, at times I have been a doubter and skeptic when it comes to AVP and especially AVP in a foreign country. I cannot measure empirical effect that the program may have on its participants. However, I am increasingly convinced of how responsive people are to what they experience during a workshop. This responsiveness comes to largely exclude other motives. People may come in part for the food or for the possible money or connection, but people are consistently touched by what they hear from others and what they come to understand for themselves.

2) How can AVP be helpful in the Burundi context?

As in Rwanda people have suffered terrible violence and will continue to be confronted with moments when they must make difficult choices as to how to respond to future threats or aggression and/or the desire for revenge. The wrong choice will only perpetuate the cycle of violence that has raged out of control in this country and that has been manipulated by political elites. AVP puts a crack into the mind of someone who is at present unable to see what the alternative choices can be. Similarly, many people in the workshops described situations when they wanted to intervene in a situation but feared that they would then become a victim - the risk and danger of intervention as a third party. AVP helps people find new and creative ways to intervene and negotiate these dangerous moments. In a society where status and hierarchy run deep, AVP plays a powerful role as it challenges that hierarchy and helps people to realize the power they already have that exists within themselves.

3) Tell two or more stories that occurred

Some of the most compelling moments came when people shared an experience in answering the question about "A conflict that I resolved without violence was . . ." One man told a story about hearing young men beating another young man outside his house. He was afraid to go and intervene, but he then heard a voice inside say, "what, do you only worship me when you are safe?!". He knew he had to go and try. The man being beaten was from a different ethnic group than those of that particular neighborhood. He was lying in the street and the others were beating and kicking him. The participant knew the antagonists, so he approached them and repeatedly, using their name, asked

them “what are you doing?” They soon realized what he was trying to do and then told him to leave, but he persisted. Eventually, he was able to distract these men from their brutality enough to give them pause to think and get more perspective on what they were doing. The story ended with these young men escorting their victim safely out of the neighborhood at our participant’s request.

There was another story told by a soldier who had been unable to return home for two weeks because of regional insecurities. When he finally came home, his son told him that a neighbor had killed his wife. He went to the neighbor’s house with vengeance in his heart, but when he got there he realized how much this other family had also suffered and had lost loved ones during the crisis. He confronted the man, told him what he had intended to do and why he could no longer carry out such revenge. Then he left.

Another story involved a man who came into town to find someone and to kill him in revenge for something he had done. He stopped at a bar and got to talking with another man there. They spent the afternoon talking and drinking and the visitor gradually revealed why he had come to town and who he was looking for. The other man told him where this man could be found and when he would be at home. A few hours later the visitor went to the house he had been directed to, walked inside, and found the very same man who had befriended him at the bar. Trying to overcome his shock, he began to cry, and said he could no longer mete out his revenge. He left.

All of these stories are so powerful in how they revealed to the group the ability that they already have to find nonviolent solutions to potentially explosive situations. In some workshops, we devoted close to two hours of time for people to tell their stories. Only then, did we introduce Transforming Power. In this way, we are only reinforcing and providing a framework for what they already know, rather than seemingly presenting a foreign or unfamiliar model for conflict transformation.

4) Mention 2-3 high points of the trip

After the second day of a workshop, a participant approached me and asked to speak with me after dinner. We met alone later that evening. He told me how excited he was about what he was learning and that even after the first day he had begun to apply it at home. He was recently married, and his wife had lost many family members during the conflict. When he married her, he knew she had been affected by these events, but he realizes now that he had no idea just how much she was still struggling with it. In just the first day of the workshops, he had heard so many ideas and practiced certain activities that he felt would be very helpful for this wife. He wanted to talk about how he could adapt some of what we were doing in the workshop into his interactions with her at home. He was so excited and completely charged up with optimism and enthusiasm that he was discovering new tools that he could really use to help her to heal and to deepen their relationship. In particular, he wanted to focus on affirmations and active listening. The next night, I asked him how it was going, and he said that his wife had said she had noticed something different about him, but that she wasn’t yet sure what it was!! This

man's testimony was so genuine and profound, I told him how much he was making me a believer in the value and power of AVP.

Another high point was the workshop the new facilitators did in the prison in Gitega. These participants had no idea what they were getting into, but it took them only minutes to realize how unusual it was, and to become very moved and excited by it. Our first major activity was the Affirmation Exercise. In the debrief, a few immediately shed tears, and many others commented that they had not felt such joy in all the time that they had been in prison. Whenever we played a Light and Lively or activity involving particular extroversion, the windows of our little room filled with other inmates from the prison yard who wanted to find out what was going on.

Lastly, a high point was watching the trainees in the evening as they worked so hard to prepare their half day of facilitation for the next day. Late into the evening, people were planning, discussing, preparing posters, and reading over activity descriptions. No one was taking it lightly; everyone wanted to do as competent a job as possible. The fruits of their labor were evident the following week, as I watched the glow of satisfaction on their faces as they listened to the response of their participants to the first activities that they had just facilitated.

5) Memorable quotes

"I will keep working for peace until the Transforming Power mandala is on the wall of the President's office."

"I can see how this mandala, this light, can shine from me, and spread throughout Burundi."

I don't have an exact quote, but I want to relate an experience at the end of the Advanced workshop in Gitega. We had just finished an intense third day that featured such activities as Dots and Masks. The participants were so grateful and so excited, that when we got to the end of the day, they insisted on knowing who had provided funding for these workshops. They then organized a way to thank the funder. People were deeply moved and exhilarated by the workshop. After they received their certificates, they literally danced out of the room.

6) How was AVP received and what are the next steps?

I think I have already expressed how it was received. With the exception of the people in Bujumbura who were really too busy to focus on a three-day workshop, the response was overwhelmingly positive.

I can suggest a few specific next steps. I think that either an audio or video documentation of the workshop could be a powerful tool for fundraising. If it was edited to down to just 10 minutes, it could convey so much of the power and authenticity of

what goes on in a workshop, that cannot be conveyed in summary reports like these. Perhaps you can experiment with this in the July Advanced.

I also think workshops should be done non-residentially. The few factors that lead us to choose a residential format can be addressed, and there would be a significant reduction in costs. I am somewhat concerned that some people in Rwanda and Burundi think this is the norm and is how it must be done.

Of course, the committee needs to meet and to further outline their roles, the guidelines that they will use in their meetings, and a future strategy and schedule for workshops. A contentious issue that is bound to surface soon is whether facilitators should be paid. After the close of phase I, new facilitators understood that their future work would be voluntary. However, with the setting of a different precedent in Rwanda and Uganda, this will have to be revisited.

7) What was the greatest difficulty?

The greatest difficulty is language and the necessity of translation. In both Rwanda and Burundi, people are asking for an AVP manual in their own language. I found it interesting that the Burundians thought the French translation was very well done, while the Rwandans said it was poorly done and confusing. Our translators were excellent this time - even better than last year - yet somehow the process of translation cut into our workshop time and reduced how much we could do - more so than I remember happening last year.

The relative insecurity is an additional difficulty. We had to relocate a workshop on short notice because of the rebels in Ruyigi. The day after we passed through, there was a van attacked and people killed on the road we traveled regularly between Bujumbura and Bugarama. Whereas in Rwanda, we did almost all of our travels by public bus, the Burundians advised us not to do so, so we had the additional costs and the isolation of private transportation.

The cost of residential workshops was also a difficulty in my mind and I hope the committee can strategize as to how to hold more non-residential ones.

Other challenges included: the absence of Jean-Bosco and the uninvolvement of Samson until the last week. This should make us cautious about how well it works to have two foreigners train before the program comes to their country. With or without the presence of JB and Samson, I often found myself wishing we had an experienced Rwandan facilitator as part of our team. I remember suggesting this before the trip, but cannot remember why we decided against it. Having a Rwandan there would have significantly added to AVP's and the facilitator's credibility. It also would have allowed us to continue to assess and refine the skills of someone from Rwandan. A Rwandan would have had more experience and would have increased the percentage of non-white trainers. Sometimes, I felt like the one African, two Americans, nature of our team was less than impressive to someone forming a first impression as to the relevance of this

workshop to their home country. What the requirements are before you facilitate advanced and T4F workshops was raised in both countries during this trip. But, committees will need to set and try to maintain clear standards about when someone is ready to lead advanced or to be training new facilitators.

We were also challenged at times but what seemed to be some class issues amongst our participants. This became clearer during our Advanced workshop when residents of Bujumbura and rural areas came together. In their Basics they had each chosen a different Kirundi word for “violence” and there was some disagreement about which was the better word to use. Eventually, the rurals agreed to use the word chosen by the city folk. I imagine there were other similar dynamics that we were not aware of. Not a bad thing, but it was a challenge I had not encountered before.

An ongoing challenge is the new trainer’s tendency to do too much teaching and not enough facilitation. I think this is the single most important thing to be given as feedback. As insightful and as articulate as they are (and they are !!), the more we teach and tell, the more we have undermined the fundamental belief we are trying to convey in the workshop: that you don’t need us to be able to understand or to know what to do - you already have the answers within you and many of you have already boldly and courageously used that knowledge to diffuse a conflict of potential or actual violence.

8) What experiences did you come away with?

Many of my experiences seemed similar to what I had experienced in Rwanda (to my untrained eye and ear, I’m sure I missed a lot of what makes Burundi and Rwanda different from each other). I definitely learned new things about AVP and came to understand some of its philosophy in deeper ways (e.g. the above paragraph). I also learned more about culture and found myself moving from seeing culture as something to protect and respect to something with which it is appropriate to be somewhat challenging of and irreverent to. This came clear to me as I listened to participants many times simultaneously cautioning us to respect their culture and saying that they wanted to learn new and different ways because they feel that the causes of the violence they have suffered is rooted in some of their cultural norms. This helped me see culture much more as dynamic, always in need of respect and understanding as it exists, but always changing slightly in response to that which it encounters. This was a very valuable lesson for me.

Seeing so many teenage soldiers and witnessing the military presence as it is, was also new and at times, powerful for me.

I continue to appreciate and value the role of Evangelical church. Last year, in Rwanda much of the Evangelical practice was quite unfamiliar to me and incited minor judgments in my thoughts. This year, I felt much more akin to some of the practices and rituals I see in this church. As I continue to hear about the faith and power and hope that church affiliation has provided people during and after some of the most desperate times, I am increasingly appreciate of it. Irregular prayer has entered my life where there was once

no room for it, thanks to two months now of praying before eating and often before making a journey somewhere.

9) Your overall evaluation

The project went very well and quite according to plan. The workshop was extremely well received by its participants. George and I agreed that the team of Burundian facilitators with their enthusiasm and their heart-felt embracing of the program will lead to many more valuable and influential workshops.