

As the small plane from Nairobi to Kigali was slowly descending to its final destination I was looking at the lush green hills of the Rwandan countryside. This was yet another trip to Rwanda for me, following over a year of absence in the “Land of Thousand” hills, as Rwanda is often referred to.

Over my previous trips to Rwanda, all of which were related to debate and youth participation trainings, I have developed a special affinity for the country and its people. Despite its tragic recent history, Rwanda is becoming yet again “a warm heart of Africa”- with its hospitable and welcoming people, great climate and amazing nature (rare mountain gorillas!) and the country is on a path to recovery. There are problems of course- the psychological trauma caused by the genocide in 1994 has left deep scars on the entire population – not just the survivors. Close to 100,000 prisoners, charged with participation in mass killings, are still awaiting trial- in appalling conditions of overcrowded prisons, which had been built to accommodate a fraction of that number. Alternative form of justice, the *gacaca*, a form of community tribunals, is moving slowly and is ridden with controversy and allegations of miscarriage of justice. There is very little political space and opposition is almost non-existent. The current government has secured peace and slow development in the country but is considered totalitarian by many. To add to this economy of Rwanda is donor dependent and though the standards of living have improved in cities like Kigali, there is little noticeable change for the better in the countryside, where many families have to survive on less than one dollar a month. The situation uncertain due to the environmental degradation (mostly soil erosion, following the cutting down of trees) and over-population (Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa). IDEA has been involved in promoting debate in Rwanda since 2004, when we came upon to invitation of the GTZ (German Technical Assistance Agency) and Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) to conduct a few introductory debate courses for youth leaders, teachers and NGO workers.

Many researchers who have studied the Rwandan genocide have identified traditional over-reliance on authority as one of the contributing factors. Youth leaders who participated in IDEA introductory debate trainings were optimistic that debate is a methodology which, in Rwandan context, can lead to the development of critical thinking skills, independent thinking and analysis (thus minimizing reliance on authority) and allow young people to question assumptions, stereotypes and ideologies. They also pointed out that participation in debates could lead to *humanization of the Other*, understanding that despite differences, people can and should accept each other’s point of view and recognize that other people’s views can be justified. In this way debate can function as a conflict resolution tool.

Young people I worked with during the first trainings as well as NGO leaders and representatives of donors, also identified another problem facing youth leaders and young people in Rwanda - lack of ownership of local initiatives by the youth in Rwanda and resulting poor participation and involvement in these initiatives. While youth participation ranks high on the list of governments’ priorities, its approach to stimulating youth participation is tokenistic and often leads to curbing the very initiatives it is trying to promote. The young people also pointed out to the lack of skills of youth in organizing themselves and involving other youth in exchange of ideas. Leaders of youth organizations cooperating with IDEA were interested in the model of youth-run, independent debate organizations that would stimulate young people’s participation. They were also interested in the debate as a method of working with young people- particularly in the context of reconciliation and peace initiatives.

What started as a small experiment – a pilot debate project in Rwanda since 2004, has grown into a serious initiative supported and implemented by many youth organizations. Thanks to the support from NPA and OSI, IDEA was able to continue its involvement in Rwanda. Anca Pusca, IDEA trainer, traveled to Rwanda in 2005 and 2006 as conducted more seminars and assisted in organization of the 1st National Rwandan Debate Tournament (featured in the previous issues of the Idebate). The event brought together over 100 debaters from across the country and students debated in three languages: Kinyarwanda, French and English.

In July 2006, IDEA and three partner organizations: AJPRODHO (Rwanda), Conflict Resolution by Youth (CRY) Uganda and Informal Education Debate Center from Lithuania submitted a project proposal to the European Commission (under Youth Support Measures Program) to support a one year long project to support development of debate programs in Rwanda and Uganda. In October last year, we found out that our proposal- *Dialogue Through Debate* Project- was accepted and that IDEA and its partners were awarded 100,000 Euro to implement the project.

The project consists of four components: training in debate (in Rwanda and Uganda), study visits (Rwandan and Ugandan participants visiting Lithuania and the Netherlands), organization of debate events in Rwanda and Uganda (public debates, competitions, etc) and organization of a Regional Youth Debate Forum for Rwandan and Ugandan debaters in December 2007.

Between January 10th and 14th, members of the IDEA team (Jurate Motiejunaite, Sanne de Kieviet and Marcin Zaleski) traveled to the “Land of Thousand Hills” for a planning meeting of the *new* Project and introductory debate training. This meeting in Kigali on the 10-11th of January brought together representatives of IDEA, Cry-Uganda, and Ajprodho. The discussion focused on the following issues: projects’ outputs (trainings, study visits, Regional Youth Forum), budgets, reporting requirements, and communications. Representatives of 3 organizations discussed in detail the planned study visits for Rwandan and Ugandan youth (Netherlands and Lithuania), participation of Rwandan and Ugandan students in IDEA’s summer Forum in the Czech Republic, as well as the organization of the first Regional Youth Debate Forum. The meeting also provided a great opportunity for the members of partner teams to get to know each other.

Following the meeting, IDEA and Ajprodho organized debate training for youth leaders from 15 youth organizations in Rwanda. The training covered introduction to debate and its main components, organization of public debates, and the planning of specific local debate events.

In the time of the writing of this contribution, I am getting ready for another trip and a training- this time to neighbouring Uganda, where with the assistance of CRY-Uganda, I will conduct an introductory debate training for youth leaders. If you would like to learn more about the *Dialogue Through Debate* Project, please visit <http://www.idebate.org/news/article.php?id=81>.

We will be updating the website with new information and reports on the developments of the Project as well as contributions from the Project participants. You will be able to read about the training in Kampala in the next issue of the Idebate!