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## AGLI - Report from Kenya - June 17, 2010

### *Cell phones in Burundi*

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Dear All,

Cell Phones in Burundi

Here are two updates on the AGLI sponsored HROC program that is using cell phones to communicate about the Burundian elections. The first is by Jessica Heinzelman who agreed to come to Burundi from Kenya for a week to help set up the computer platform for the program. The second is by Rich Jeong, Andrew Peterson's brother, who is staying longer to try to get the system running properly. As you can see from the reports, the cell phone system in Burundi is elementary and few people are accustomed to using cell phones as they are here in Kenya and elsewhere.

Peace,  
Dave

**New webpage:** [www.aglifpt.org](http://www.aglifpt.org)  
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### ***SMS-Powered Peace in Burundi***

**By Jessica Heinzelman**

14 Jun

I have spent the past week working and learning from the team at Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC), A Quaker organization in Burundi.

HROC's main project has been engaging people from all over Burundi in workshops that help heal trauma and teach conflict resolution/peacebuilding. Each workshop is

conducted with 10 Hutu and 10 Tutsi. More than 2,000 people have completed the training since 2003. Many have gone on to complete additional trainings and become facilitators in their own communities.

With the tense elections approaching, HROC facilitators and participants decided that they wanted to do something to help promote peace. They decided to launch the Burundi Election Violence Protection Program with funding from the US Institute of Peace. All previous HROC workshop participants were invited to join Peace and Democracy Teams and receive additional training specifically geared towards preventing and monitoring election violence. This ranged from how to verify information (or rumors) to working together across communities to deescalate violence. Most of this, you can imagine, comes down to *communication*.

Enter the add-on, the Burundi Friends Observe Initiative that is training 120-130 of the Democracy and Peace Team members to use cell phones to communicate with one another. Only 5% of Burundians have mobile phones. The HROC team has been collecting used phones from around the world to supply to the team member, conducting trainings and setting up a communication system via FrontlineSMS to allow not only the transmission of incidents and updates to the HQ, but also allowing members to broadcast messages to their local group.

One trainer of trainers told me that he thought the SMS was a particularly helpful feature. He said that whenever there is tension between the two ethnic groups that live in his area, he contacts leaders in the other community to try and figure out how to solve the issue. The phone, on its own, will help make communication faster and more efficient, but he also noted that having SMS was key to avoid losing credibility in his community. He said that sometimes when tensions are high, one can't be seen or heard talking to the other side. To him, SMS provided a discrete way of making contact and working issues out.

This was just one example of the mobile benefits offered during the training of trainers last Thursday and Friday. I'm excited to see how these ideas and assumptions that SMS will help the Peace and Democracy Teams actually play out.

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## **Burundians with mobile phones**

**June 12, 2010**

**By Rich Jeong**

Without going nuts and writing a dissertation like I normally seem to get into, I'm going to try and talk about one of the projects what I've been doing for the last several days. As I mentioned, I've got several things going on while I'm here in Burundi, the primary of

which is implementing a mobile phone communication system for the 120 HROC election monitors. We have just spent the last two days training trainers how to train the “citizen reporters” to use phones (of various types), how to text the “Bureau HROC” (Frontline SMS on a laptop) with an update, how to use a private twitter like rebroadcast to a small community group using the Bureau HROC number, when to use what and what the reason for each might be like, and going over again how to use there existing training the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) that HROC incorporates to help defuse the small scale situations that lead to the large scale riots, attacks, and problems.

Overall it was a successful training, but I felt ill prepared for this. Thankfully Andrew [Peterson] was around, and I also had two Jessica's here to help. One Jessica Heinzelman is doing her MA at Fletcher on mobile tech in such situations as we are doing (mostly incorporating the Ushahidi platform) and just happened to be willing to come from her several months in Kenya to help us out for a week. Jessica Brown is here in Burundi for 3 months with HROC as part of her MA in Conflict Resolution. Andrew of course is invaluable for a variety of reason, but briefly the ones that come to mind include the fact that he speaks French and a bit of Kirundi, he is very familiar with the HROC program and it's people, he help write the grant for this election monitoring, and he knows how to deal with me. This is in addition to Florence who's one of the prime movers at HROC and was learning and helping teach.

This confluence of people helped us bounce ideas and form a training that wasn't perfect in the least, but at least conveyed the concepts. I've taught people how to use technology for 10+ years, and I am fairly good at making K.I.S.S. decisions, but none of us has done this. According to Jessica H. few people have integrated such a system of election monitors that leverage previous training in community peace building, election monitoring, and mobile technology.

For most of you, sending a text might be relatively simple, but I don't expect it to be easy for rural Burundian's who desperately want a cellphone (even if they have to walk an hour to get it charged), but haven't the \$12.50 to purchase a phone and the regular (and more expensive) ability to purchase airtime. Consider the first time you were introduced to a cell phone, now add the idea that we need them to send a text which has one piece formatted properly ( an @ symbol followed by a word at the preface of their message) to a specific number. It seems easy, but it's easy to assume it's simple if you've learned it, but it takes patience and time to teach people to use it. It's easy to make mistakes too, as it can't be “@ word” or “subject @word” or “@word+errant character”. You might also remember that most of these people speak some level of French, but mostly they work in Kirundi and donated phones don't work in such a language. (Some local mobiles have been regionalized into Kirundi). The great thing is that they are eager students.

We'll get the 60 cellphones we have out to people and they'll ask people in their village and the trainers how to use them. And they won't want to give them back... but we'll see what happens. We are actually thinking, and even planning on using this in the future to keep in contact with communities and help them talk amongst themselves. To use a non-quaker term, we are looking at it being a force multiplier for peace.

So, what's next? Well I have to get the system to work as optimally as possible in these extremely aggravating mobile phone conditions. SMS'es irregularly take mins, hours, or in some cases weeks to get delivered, the power generally goes out at least once per day here during the dry season, and even inter network calls don't go through sometimes. (Oh and the local provider Leo, formerly Ucom, formerly Telecel-burundi, gave us blank stares and the silent treatment when we asked if we can purchase a Short Code, ARRGGH!) You'd think this idea of immediate feedback via mobile won't work, but it's Burundi and they are used to aggravation and take it in stride (a trait the industrialized world could learn from). This on top of FronlineSMS being a quirky and the least obnoxious localized SMS platform of the choices. (Column sorting doesn't work!) It's not going to be like the Kenyan election a few years ago, but it'll be a step forward.

I digress, I'm also working on getting the parts to make a more redundant power situation for the office (via Solar or Mains, but including batteries), we are moving ahead to build a simpler design on the CAWST Bio-Filter using local materials (clay pots) so locals can build and create filters for under \$12, working with FWA on their wireless and on the new medical records system they want to build, building a clay oven for the house where HROC office/guest housing is, to finish fixing 3 or 4 computers. I'm also teaching HROC how to use FrontlineSMS to broadcast, setup new groups, and harvest information and most importantly writing the training manual for the above mentioned non-phone-using-Burundians first experience with a cellphone (with plenty of input and guidance from Burundians).

So many projects so little of me, my money, and my time...