



Archbishop Kasanda with the provincial members of Parliament he convened for a social cohesion workshop. [Photo: CRS]

Strengthening Social Cohesion & Governance in the DRC:

A SUCCESS STORY OF CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES AND LOCAL CHURCH COLLABORATION

Introduction

Since 2017, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has empowered communities across the Kasai Oriental Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to talk about what divides them, uphold what unites them, and act together for stronger, healthier, and more just social ties. Witnessing the positive results of integrating social cohesion efforts into the USAID-funded development project, Budikadidi, the Bishop of Mbuji-Mayi (i.e., the capital city of Kasai Oriental) requested CRS' assistance to deliver similar social cohesion support to government officials. In advance of the May 2022 elections, CRS facilitated a workshop with the Provincial Parliament in November 2021. In August 2022, CRS conducted key informant interviews with the Bishop and seven workshop participants to discover the impact of this intervention. This document describes CRS'

approach and demonstrates the transformational effectiveness of social cohesion programming to strengthen governance.

Context

In 2017, prior to the Budikadidi project, violence broke out in the previously stable province of Kasai Central, causing mass violence and displacement. Already facing localized tensions due to resource scarcity and weak governance structures, communities across Kasai Oriental felt the spill-over effects of this conflict, including increased insecurity and distrust. Communities also felt abandoned by their government as political identities became acutely heightened in advance of the May 2022 gubernatorial election. Parliament was divided between two political parties, each claiming a majority with which to elect the new governor.

Animosity rose to the point that Parliament was no longer convened, rendering the institution ineffective. One member of Parliament described the period as “a turbulent time. We understood that cohesion would put an end to the divisions over electing the governor of our province. Without cohesion, no governor, and we risked dissolving Parliament.” Being familiar with a long history of electoral violence, Monsignor Emmanuel Bernard Kasanda, Bishop of Mbuji-Mayi, sought CRS’ assistance to deescalate the political tension by promoting social cohesion at the highest levels in Kasai Oriental.

Approach

In response to Bishop Kasanda’s request, two CRS staff—the social cohesion focal point and a member of the CRS Africa Justice and Peacebuilding Working Group—facilitated a three-day workshop. Twenty-three of the 24 members of Parliament attended. One member of Parliament said he was willing to participate because it offered the chance “to transcend our conflict and put the best interests of the population first. There was no longer trust between us. Someone had to come and help us.” Several others stated they attended because the highly respected Bishop Kasanda invited them, and they viewed this as an opportunity to achieve reconciliation and develop a new reputation amongst voters before seeking reelection in 2023.

The workshop engaged participants in developing a shared vision for their province using CRS’ flexible, multi-purpose social cohesion methodology—the **3Bs/4Ds**—as a facilitation tool. The 3Bs guide a continual process of transformation. The tool begins with *binding* (personal healing, resilience, and agency), advances to *bonding* (intra-group strengthening and preparation), and results in *bridging* (inter-group engagement and collaboration). The 4Ds—*discover*, *dream*, *design* and *deliver*—place an appreciative perspective at the heart of social cohesion programming and focus on achieving common visions rather than dwelling on sources of division. Facilitators adapted this methodology to guide workshop participants through the following sessions:



BINDING: Participants expressed their grievances and offered forgiveness.



BONDING: Political parties defined their aims to bolster development across the province.



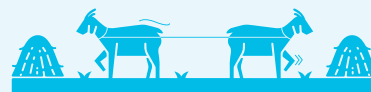
BRIDGING: Parliament renewed its commitment to cooperation across political divides for peace and prosperity.



Bishop Kasanda with members of Parliament, participants of the November 2021 social cohesion workshop. [Photo: CRS]

Members of Parliament who had formally ceased to communicate found themselves around the same table, engaging in workshop activities. Each day, outputs of the workshop were shared via provincial and national media outlets, serving both to bolster accountability and promote social cohesion beyond Parliament toward political party members at local levels.

3Bs/4Ds Metaphor: The Competing Goats



Two goats tied together by a cord are pulling against one another toward two different piles of food. The cord is pulled progressively tighter, causing immense tension until both parties are so tired that they stop fighting altogether. Only then do they look back at one another and realize they are seeking the same goal (food) and can only reach it through compromise. The goats walk together to one pile of food, eat, then walk to the other and eat again. Workshop participants used this analogy to determine what their shared goals were and discussed what they lose when competing versus what they gain when collaborating.

Impact

Participants were particularly struck by the metaphor of the competing goats. They realized that by competing, both parties were failing to achieve their objectives and diminishing their power in the process: “We have understood that we absolutely need cooperation between us. Otherwise, we would all lose the Provincial Assembly and our ranks as deputies, especially since the President of the Republic can dissolve a non-operational Parliamentary Assembly.” On a

personal level, participants recalled beginning to shift their perspective of one another during the workshop, from political adversaries defined by their weaknesses to peers with positive attributes with whom they could work for the good of the public.

Bishop Kasanda describes the intervention as “restoring mutual trust not only between provincial deputies, but also between them and the provincial executive,” resulting in a release of tension between the two institutions that depend on one other to function. More specifically, he attributes social cohesion within Parliament as contributing to peaceful elections. “As proof,” he attests, “the Provincial Assembly of Kasai Oriental is the only one to have voted for the new governor at 100%.”

In addition to peacefully electing a new governor, Parliamentary committees have resumed their work, and four edicts have been passed, including legislation to promote gender equity and protect individuals with disabilities. During the workshop, participants learned that conflict is natural, and as leaders, they must not work to avoid it but instead resolve it peacefully. As a result, Parliament determined to establish a Joint Committee of the Wise, a permanent conflict resolution body, to address internal disputes. Both political parties are represented, and Bishop Kasanda has agreed to serve as a neutral mediator. The committee has been called into session once since the workshop. Bishop Kasanda hopes that Parliament builds upon “this momentum of cohesion and social peace to really contribute to the well-being and development of the population of our dear province.”



Local media capture highlights from the social cohesion workshop shared by Bishop Kasanda. [Photo: CRS]

“When people collaborate towards the same vision, we can avoid unnecessary conflict and prioritize the population’s well-being. Unity is strength.”

—MEMBER OF THE KASAI ORIENTAL PROVINCIAL PARLIAMENT

Discussion

Bishop Kasanda describes the Catholic Church as a critical intermediary between the people and their leaders in the DRC. Participants described the Bishop’s ability to convene Parliament for this intervention as rare, following failed attempts by other local religious leaders. Bishop Kasanda is not content to stop here, however. He sees the importance of reinforcing the effects of this intervention after the new governor takes office and the need to cascade this effort to local governments as well. CRS, with its long-held partnership with the Congolese Catholic Church, is well-placed to scale social cohesion interventions and defuse the underlying, complex social tensions that challenge development across the DRC.

Through the Budikadidi project, CRS continues to work with community leaders to employ social cohesion techniques as local conflicts emerge, resulting in more collaborative communities and a more vibrant civil society. Simultaneously, the social cohesion intervention with Parliament has shown early results in improving governance at the highest levels in the Kasai Oriental Province. Integrating social cohesion into development efforts across the DRC remains critical to continuously working toward bridging people’s aspirations and leaders’ actions.

Kasai Oriental Province of DRC

