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What happened

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Lessons Learnt

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Recommendations

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In January 2020 the Digital Action team committed to scoping a project for the May 2020 Burundi election which would scrutinise the online information environment and its impact on the electoral process. However, due to the growing Covid-19 crisis the Digital Action team agreed to terminate the Burundi project at the end of March. Before the project was closed down the Digital Action team were preparing to shift the focus of the project away from the mould of previous election projects, our experience during this shift provided some important lessons which we thought useful to share.

Digital Action was founded to support civil society in their mission to strengthen democratic rights in a digital age. In 2019 this included aiding organisations undertaking scrutiny of the online information environments during elections in the UK and EU. These two projects followed a process of threat detection, scrutiny and then escalation. While in recent years there has been significant discussion about the impact of the online ecosystem in Western elections, too little has been said about elections taking place in the Global South. Digital Action is committed to rebalancing this and ensuring the voice and concerns of Global South civil society is heard during discussions of platform accountability.

The potential threats to the May 2020 Burundi election were first raised with Digital Action at the Paris Peace Forum in November 2019. The UN issued several warnings that the election risked not being free, that there is a climate of fear and intimidation against opponents and journalists, and that there is a risk of atrocities. Based on further examination it became clear to Digital Action that while traditional election and human rights monitoring would be carried out, questions remained about the need to scrutinise the online information environment and its impact on the electoral process. Therefore, in January 2020 the Digital Action team committed to scoping a project for the Burundi election which would:

- 1 Detect the potential threats of the online information environment to the election process.
- 2 Scrutinise those threats and, where appropriate, escalate any emergent cases of online disruption to channels appropriate for the most helpful response: media, election bodies, international observers and platforms.
- 3 Build an understanding of what digital disruption looks like in a context like Burundi, so that this understanding - and credible local and/or expert voices - could inform policy making processes in Europe and North America on platform accountability.
- 4 Build knowledge to support the work of our partners and the development of Digital Action's understanding of coordinating election projects.

Ethnic tensions have plagued Burundi ever since it attained independence in 1966. The country of 11 million consists of a majority Hutu population and 14% Tutsis. Burundi's civil war began in 1993 and led to the death of nearly 300,000 people.

The Burundi government has long been criticised for silencing dissent. Local and international civil society and media are unable to work independently and have been banned, forced to close down, or are unable to criticize the government. Reporters Without Borders ranks Burundi 159th out of 180 in its 2019 World Press Freedom Index.

New and digital media have had a slow start in Burundi, but internet penetration has tripled since 2012 (although still low at 5.3% in December 2018) and mobile phone usage is high (56.3%).

According to Reporters Without Borders social media networks are used as a reporting tool by journalists and at the same time serve as news sources for the public, replacing the gagged radio stations.

Elections for both the president and National Assembly were held on the 20th May 2020.

The scoping process included undertaking desk research and holding meetings with key organisations engaged in either the Burundi context or election scrutiny projects. By March, based on discussions with these experts and the learnings highlighted below, the Digital Action team were preparing to shift the focus of the project away from the mould of previous election projects. Instead the plan was for a project which would focus on internal learning and would allow the organisation to determine if it was even possible to undertake election scrutiny in a context like Burundi. To this end Digital Action's ability to take risks and undertake work that others in the sector are not able to was seen as an advantage.

However, due to the growing Covid-19 crisis the Digital Action team agreed to terminate the Burundi project at the end of March. This decision was reached in part because it was no longer clear if the Burundi election would take place and if election monitors, who would be helpful contact points on the ground, would be able to travel to the country. In addition it allowed capacity to be freed up for the team to undertake a Covid-19 specific project which would offer similar learning opportunities. Finally, the possibility of gaining European and American media and policymaker interest in the Burundi election was significantly reduced by the Covid-19 crisis.

### Lessons Learnt

#### 1. Digging For Gold Takes Time

Central to the success of the project was the need to build strong collaborative relationships with organisations who could provide the contextual understanding of Burundi to support already existing Digital Action partners undertake threat detection and scrutiny. While the Digital Action team were able to speak to those with broad regional understanding and those with experience with the online information environment in fragile contexts, we were unable to connect with the right organisation or individual in the timeframe given to the project scoping. While not a guarantee of success, more time would have allowed for a deeper search.

#### 2. Same But Different

During the attempt to develop a risk assessment via desk research, conversations with experts and Ruth's attendance at the 'Safeguarding Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age' conference in March 2020, it became clear that some of the threats to the Burundi election (and other regional elections) were similar to those experienced in the recent UK and EU elections. For example, there were concerns around foreign interference, mis/disinformation spreading on social media (especially WhatsApp) and online harassment of public figures. However, there were a number of important differences which became apparent over the course of the scoping:

- The possibility of internet shutdowns to dampen the threat of Government opposition and protests.
- The higher risk of violence and civil unrest, especially in the period after polling day but before the election results are announced.
- The low levels and uneven spread of internet connectivity and social media use, especially in rural areas.
- The possibility of Government supported mis/disinformation campaigns and attempted voter suppression.

Another difference noted during the scoping period was that for many regional civil society and human rights organisations security concerns were of higher order than democratic concerns. This was in part due to the higher risk of violence noted above but also raised questions about Digital Action's mandate. Most experts took it as a given that the Burundi elections would not be free or fair and therefore deprioritised democratic rights when analysing the risks presented by the election process. Therefore, the Digital Action team questioned if there is a threshold of a 'functioning democracy' which should be used when determining which elections should be considered for scrutiny in the future.

### 3. Context is Key

As mentioned above, central to the development of a risk assessment for the election was working with organisations who could provide the contextual understanding of Burundi and its online information environment. While Digital Action was able to speak to organisations who had some understanding of the context, the civil society landscape was extremely challenging and other global organisations we connected with also struggled to gain this understanding. Therefore, it was not possible to develop a robust risk assessment with the appropriate levels of understanding about what to scrutinise during the election period. Therefore, Digital Action had to rely on their best guesses for possible disruptions and to refocus the projects objectives to testing if any election scrutiny was possible at all.

In addition, the importance of understanding the civil society context became increasingly important as the scoping progressed. Gaining an understanding of the levels of repression and fear among civil society both in Burundi and in diaspora groups was central to the decision to alter the project's objectives.

### 4. Flexibility

At the beginning of the project scoping, the objectives for the project were similar to previous election projects undertaken by Digital Action in the UK and EU context. However, as the scoping progressed it became clear that these objectives would not be possible in the Burundi context. Therefore, the Digital Action team shifted the focus of the project to one which would help Digital Action - and the wider sector - to better understand if it is possible to scrutinise elections in fragile contexts. In this way the project moved quickly from one with external objectives (such as gaining media) to internal ones (sector wide learning).

The decision to drop the Burundi project came amidst the Covid-19 crisis and was in large part shaped by the ramifications of the crisis on both the Digital Action team and the external context in which we operate. Here flexibility and honesty from the Digital Action team allowed for the difficult decision to drop the project to be made.

## Recommendations

### 1. Time on our side

Given the time needed to engage new networks and to develop trust with civil society organisations, especially those with legitimate security concerns, election projects should be scoped at least 6 months before

the planned election date. This will allow the time needed to dig for the gold that is organisations and individuals with both contextual understanding and online information environment knowledge. In addition, building new connections with Global South networks should not be limited to election projects and proactive action on this should be undertaken year round.

## 2. Gold standard and MVP (Minimum Viable Product)

When undertaking scoping for any project the Digital Action team should clearly outline both the gold standard and MVP aims and objectives. This will allow both ambition and flexibility when undertaking the project scoping while also supporting decision making about if the project should be taken forward.

## 3. If not when

When undertaking any project scoping it should not be assumed the project will go ahead, this decision should be based on the outcomes on the scoping. This decision-making process should be included in the scoping timeline and projects should be discussed internally and externally as possibilities not certainties. The scoping process itself should be seen as valuable to organisational development and learning.

## 4. Champions

Digital Action should continue to proactively develop champions – civil society, funders etc – who can attest to the credibility of the organisation and the work they undertake. These credible voices should be used as entryways to new networks and to help build trust with new organisations.

## 5. Question Zero

When undertaking an election project scoping the following questions should be asked as a prelude to the risk assessment to determine the validity of a possible project:

- Is the risk to democracy the predominant risk in this context?
- To determine civil society capacity and engagement on democratic rights.
- To determine interest from global policymakers and media.
- To determine if the country is a ‘functioning democracy?’
- What is the level of internet use and will the online information environment play a role in the election?
- To determine the reliance on social media in the online information ecosystem.

The answers to these questions will help determine if the threshold has been met to consider undertaking an election project.

## 6. Context as a starter

In an election projects greater priority should be given to gaining contextual understanding. This process will take significant time and resource and therefore should be planned accordingly.

We are always on the lookout for great collaborators. If you are interested in our work, have an idea for work we should be supporting or would like to get involved, please get in touch.

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