

## Profile of Harald Hinkel, Sr. Social Development Specialist

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As a three-year old boy growing up in Germany, Harald Hinkel knew that one day he would go to Africa. He wanted to be able to experience first hand the wild animals he'd heard about, especially lions.

He pursued his childhood dream all the way to a doctoral degree in natural science. But he didn't know then that his journey to Africa would have him in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, when more than 800,000 Rwandans were massacred. Or that he would be shot by terrorists in Somaliland. Or that—very recently—he would have to evacuate from Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) amidst renewed fighting between rebel militias and the national army.

### **“Snake Man”**

“The Rwandese and Congolese highland primary forests are amongst the best locations for species preservation,” says Harald, “because the forests are at high enough altitudes in the mountains to prevent the impact of periodical natural climate change. This is simply paradise for a researcher like me.”

Harald first visited Africa in 1984 as a student. He returned regularly thereafter to the forests of Rwanda and eastern Congo, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1994 from Johannes Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz. Instead of lions or gorillas, he focused his research on reptiles and amphibians. That's how he got his moniker: the “snake man.”

### **From Biology to Social Development**

When asked how his path took him from studying snakes and frogs to working alongside generals or rebel leaders for the demobilization of combatants, Harald responds: “This is not a simple story. I was drawn into the war in Rwanda in 1992–94 and all the trouble that surrounded it. But initially I had very little interest in these things.”

In the early 1990s Harald worked for a private company in Ruhengeri, Rwanda as a technical director for industrial wheat milling.



Harald Hinkel holding an African rock python he just captured in Akagera National Park, Rwanda, July 2008

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This is where GTZ, the German technical cooperation agency, found him. GTZ was in desperate need of a project manager, as it couldn't attract any of its staff to the volatile region.

From 1996 to 2000, Harald did disaster relief work, including supervising the construction of villages, schools, and water supply systems. He also managed resettlement projects involving the construction of shelters for returning refugee families.

## Face to Face with Violence

In 2000, Harald moved to Hargeisa, Somaliland, to manage a demobilization project for GTZ. He came face to face with the violence that plagued the region when terrorists shot at his car while he was driving on the road from Hargeisa to Berbera. Unfortunately they fatally wounded his female coworker.

When Harald realized a bullet went through his throat, he remembered his predecessor who had been stabbed to death: "I knew that if I was still conscious after 30 seconds, I wouldn't die. So I tried to run the gunman over with the car and continued driving about 100 km to Berbera. From there I was brought to Nairobi where I checked into a hospital. I stayed only two days. No one could understand how the bullet went through without doing any major damage."

In Somalia, Harald managed a project that put emphasis on the development of culturally-sensitive reintegration and rehabilitation approaches for highly vulnerable groups, such as ex-combatants suffering from war trauma, drug abuse, and khat-psychosis; or female and male caretakers of disabled persons.

This led to a community-based reintegration approach with a high emphasis on gender sensitivity. Another element of the program, which would prove useful for Harald's next position, was the development of a sophisticated electronic system for registration of demobilization data and project management.

## Help for Countries Coming out of Conflict

Having acquired a good understanding of the many complexities of the Great Lakes region when it came to disarmament and demobilization of armed groups and forces, Harald was seconded by GTZ to participate in the design of the Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) in



In Mbwavinywa, Lubero, eastern DRC in June 2008, with the MONUC DDR team and Milobs, GoDRC officials—in preparation for identifying Rwandan armed groups RUD-Urunana and RPR-Inkergutabara, for their disarmament



Hinkel in front of a blackboard in SOTEXKI, Kisangani, DRC, that says, "Peace in Congo please, because Congo's future is for our children."

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2001 and 2002. The program, which gathers the World Bank and 13 other donors in a partnership worth about \$500 million, provides support to 7 central-African countries coming out of conflict.

In 2004 Harald worked in Burundi, and moved to Goma in DRC a year later. He now divides his time between helping with the implementation of the DRC national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program, following up on the voluntary disarmament and repatriation of foreign armed groups still located in eastern DRC, and providing technical assistance to the Rwanda DDR program on special support to the mentally and physically handicapped.

## A Way to Buy Time for Peace

“What we do in these countries is important, but it’s simply buying time for peace: our projects are designed to create operational space and capacity within a limited timeframe for others in the political spheres to address the root causes of the conflicts. If these actors don’t do their job efficiently, conflict will relapse. Unfortunately, we have seen this over and over again.”

When asked if he is ever scared to work in such an unstable region, Harald responds simply, “Why should I be afraid? I’m nobody’s enemy.”

He gladly shares some of the success stories he’s encountered over the years, such as that of Séraphin Bizimungu, better known as “General Amani” or “General Mahoro,” a former FDLR rebel commander who voluntarily disarmed and repatriated to Rwanda in December 2005. Séraphin managed to turn his life around. He is now studying at a private university in Kigali and holds an important position in the government he fought before.

## Always Keep Hoping

In the face of recent fighting in eastern Congo among various rebel groups and the DRC national army, it may be difficult to understand why Harald would want to continue to work in such difficult conditions. His answer is straightforward: “Virunga and Kahuzi-Biega national parks. I have worked there before, and I want to again once the security situation improves.”



“Snake Man” in Akagera National Park, July 2008

Indeed, his wish, like that of many others who love these countries, is that their work will one day make way for true development to take place. Until then, he remains committed to supporting the peace process until he can finally work without fear in these beautiful parks. Harald’s motto could be, “Never lose optimism, and keep a sense of humor!”

*Contributed by Chantal Rigaud, communications associate, AFTCS*

For more information on MDRP, please visit [www.mdrp.org](http://www.mdrp.org) or contact Bruno Donat, Communications Officer, MDRP Secretariat, World Bank at [info@mdrp.org](mailto:info@mdrp.org).