

**DISCUSSION PAPER / 2013.02**

ISSN 2033-7329

# Adolescents and Violence Lessons from Burundi



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# **Adolescents and Violence: Lessons from Burundi**

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May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Burundi has one of the youngest and poorest populations in the world. Known as a rural-based nation, its urban growth rate is among the world's highest. These defining characteristics of contemporary Burundi shaped field research on the state of Burundian adolescents and the role of violence in their lives. The research, undertaken in late 2012, found a profusion of young Burundians threatened by deprivation and domestic and sexual violence. Most receive limited social and state protection and have difficulty remaining in school, finding work or securing adulthood. In the countryside, strong cultural traditions and a weak state facilitate the mistreatment of orphans and girls who become unmarried mothers. In Bujumbura, many adolescents arrive alone and are vulnerable to exploitation. Their condition is underscored by girl prostitutes called *Toto Show* and the *Manjema* men who "eat" them.

*Adolescents and Violence* contrasts factors and specific populations that might fuel violent conflict with countervailing factors that have the potential to promote peace. The discussion paper ends by highlighting twelve lessons, drawn from the field research in Burundi, that promise to powerfully impact post-war development and reconstruction work in other countries.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The first interview question that I asked adolescents, youth and adults in Burundi invited them to detail the situation of adolescents (male and female) in their area. Their answers collectively illustrate the sort of hardships and limited opportunities that most Burundian adolescents face. The most upbeat response from any adolescent came from an 18 year-old boy in rural Burundi, who said that adolescents in his area “have a good life except for poverty.” “We have good lessons at school,” he continued. He also noted that “some schools are not in good shape.” He has to share textbooks with other students and is in a classroom with 62 others. The emphasis on schooling as a way out of farming was a central theme in rural areas. Yet dropping out of school proved to be much more pervasive. A 22 year-old female youth characterized the situation for adolescent girls and female youth in her area in the following way:

Our life is digging every day. Most of us girls are at home. Some try to attend school, but few girls can finish because their families cannot afford to pay for school. Most drop out to go back to the family land to dig. It’s a hard situation because sometimes you don’t even have enough money for soap.

The issue of soap proved to be no small concern, and regular mention of it by adolescent boys and girls was but one example of the widespread focus on somehow finding enough money to pay for basic items. As the female youth continued, “For girls, soap is very important, but also food and body oil, because when a girl is dirty, it’s shameful.” Not being clean shames entire families, many adolescents and adults explained, because it implies that the family is destitute and disrespectful of others. A dirty person also cannot attend church on Sundays, which is of great importance to many Burundians. In addition, girls (and women) are expected to wash their bodies and clothes with soap before using body oil. This makes them attractive, and it seems to be widely believed that regularly using soap and body oil will help an unmarried girl attract boys and young men. Just perhaps, one might ask the girl to marry him.

Girls and boys in rural areas who are not in school can dig for others for small amounts of money – in Gitega, the most common daily rate was 800 francs (USD \$0.53),<sup>1</sup> while in Makamba, the most customary reported wage was nearly one dollar a day (1,500 francs). Yet even the comparatively grand Makamba wage is a paltry amount of money, considering rising costs for basic foodstuffs and other necessities. Adolescent workers typically must also pay parents or guardians some of the money that they earn. The high demand on tiny earnings makes saving to construct a house – a crucial prerequisite that adolescent boys and male youth must undertake before they can marry and be considered men – difficult if not virtually impossible.

What about adolescents in urban Burundi? The situation that adolescents and adults described in Bwiza, a commune (or neighborhood) in Bujumbura, was generally dire. A 25 year-old male youth, for example, observed that most adolescent girls in Bwiza “are prostitutes. Some are students during the day. Then they work as prostitutes to pay for school.” An adolescent boy of 16 commented that, although some adolescents “are well-off, those who are doing badly come from poor families. They do things because of poverty, like robbery and smoking marijuana and cigarettes. They don’t go to school.”

Struggling and usually failing to remain in school, working difficult and sometimes dangerous jobs while saving little, thinking about food and soap, aiming for marriage and adult-

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[1] For most of the field research period, the exchange rate was 1,505 Burundian francs = 1 U.S. dollar.

hood that may be out of reach – these characteristics of life for many if not most adolescents in Burundi shed light on the challenges they face and the stunted vistas they foresee. The purpose of this paper is to probe their world, to draw on field research from late 2012 to detail and analyze the situation of adolescents in Burundi and examine how violence, and the threat of violence, impact their lives. The paper concludes by examining the reverse: how general factors and specific groups may trigger future violence. It also considers factors that promise to help build peace. A final assessment draws lessons from the lives of young Burundians that very likely impact other post-war contexts as well.<sup>2</sup>

A central aim of this paper is to shed light on development and governance challenges that might increase chances of a return to violent conflict in Burundi. Although this is an unquestionably vital concern, it is also the case that the findings detailed in this paper shed light on truly desperate straits for many if not most adolescents and youth in Burundi – nearly all of whom are peaceful or mostly peaceful. Accordingly, while the prospects of young people contributing to future conflicts, in Burundi and elsewhere, are important to highlight, it is essential to place their situations in context. This is particularly important because of a pronounced tendency to be alarmist about male youth – particularly those in Africa and the Middle East – in countries where youth bulge demographics exist. A “bulge” of youth refers to an unusually high proportion of youth in an adult population (e.g., Eguavoen 2010).<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is widely thought to correlate with violent conflict (e.g., Cincotta 2008).<sup>4</sup>

However, the correlation has many weaknesses. For one thing, it’s oddly one-dimensional. To be sure, many African nations, such as Angola, Burundi, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, have endured civil wars and have large youth populations. Yet the fact that most recent civil wars in Africa have ended – including in all of these nations – suggests that the correlation between youth bulge demographics and peace building is under examined. In addition, even when wars do break out, most male youth refuse to join in. Highlighting the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone, Barker and Ricardo note that “the vast majority of young men, even those unemployed and out of school, were not involved in conflicts” in those countries (2006: 181). Parallel observations have been made about African male youth in cities. McGovern, for example, draws on his research in Côte d’Ivoire to note how the high concentration of marginalized young men in urban Africa today is similar to “the considerable tumult in the European cities of the nineteenth century.” Why, then, is there tendency to see Africa’s urban youth as fomenting violence instead of helping to consolidate democracy and vibrant economies, as was the case for young men in nineteenth century European cities (2011: 202)?

Some youth in impoverished, war-torn nations such as Burundi, in short, may be enticed into joining or even promoting violent conflict. Accordingly, this paper will highlight those development and governance deficits that might drive some young people toward violence. But it will do so with the awareness that most young Burundians today display high degrees of patience, endurance and resilience in the face of tremendous difficulty.

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[2] This paper draws from research carried out for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Burundi in 2012. I would like to thank UNICEF, particularly Johannes Wedenig, Natascha Paddison, Joyce Patricia Bheeka, Lucia Soleti and Nadine Kaze, for their generous assistance. The views expressed in this paper are solely mine and do not reflect UNICEF’s positions.

[3] Eguavoen explains that, “In many sub-Saharan African countries, young people already represent the majority share of the population pyramid, which is referred to as the ‘youth bulge’” (2010: 268).

[4] Cincotta asserts that “As one might expect, and as numerous studies have shown, populations with excessive numbers of young people invite a higher risk of political violence and civil strife than others” (2008: 80–81).

## 2. METHODS

Prior to traveling to Burundi in late 2012, I interviewed a series of international experts and veteran researchers of Burundi. I then integrated relevant commentary into the following section, which sets the issues of adolescents and violence in Burundi into context. The remainder of this paper mainly draws on five weeks of qualitative field research in Burundi in November–December 2012. I interviewed officials from the colline, commune, provincial and national levels of the Burundian government, Burundian and international non-government organizations, and United Nations agencies. The central information base for this paper, however, is interviews with ordinary Burundians in rural and urban areas. With the assistance of a translator, I interviewed adolescents, youth and adults.<sup>5</sup> The research mainly took place near people's homes and local shops: in valleys, on hillsides and along city streets.

I spent a week and a half in rural areas of Gitega Province, located in the very center of Burundi, a week in rural areas of Makamba Province, which constitutes the southern cone of country, and two and a half weeks in the capital city of Bujumbura (one week setting up the research and conducting briefings, one and a half weeks mainly conducting field research in town). I started in Gitega Province mainly to unearth general themes about adolescents and violence, deciding to work in one commune – Bugendana – known both for extensive violence during the civil war and violence in the post-war era. Since Gitega is one of five provinces that have child protection committees, I interviewed committee members at all three levels (colline, commune and province). Fieldwork in Makamba Province allowed for field research to incorporate both adolescents who are residents and those who are refugee returnees (it is a primary site for the return of as many as 35,000 Burundians from Tanzania in late 2012).<sup>6</sup> I also looked more deeply at education issues there, visiting two primary schools and interviewing the respective school directors.

The two provinces are notably and usefully different. Gitega hosts the city's second-largest city and is densely populated. Much of Makamba, on the other hand, is not. A provincial government official in Makamba shed additional light on the contrast between the two provinces. "Definitely Makamba Province is much richer than Gitega Province," he noted. Makamba borders Tanzania, making it a source of trade opportunities for many enterprising Burundians. Much of province, the official continued, has rich soil. In addition, the official explained that, in the past, "Makamba had a low population density." The province has subsequently attracted many migrants from other Burundian provinces. One such migrant explained why many newcomers settled in particular locations (his version was subsequently corroborated by others). The reasons have everything to do with the extraordinarily violent and significant events of 1972. Ethnic Tutsi of the Bahima clan from nearby Bururi, which for decades produced many of the most influential and powerful people in government and the military,<sup>7</sup> settled near the Bururi border, so that the army could more easily protect them should ethnic violence explode yet again. Meanwhile, many incoming ethnic Hutu migrants settled close to the Tanzanian border,

[5] Adolescents were defined as boys and girls between ages 13 and 18; youth as young people ages 19–29, and adults as everyone age 30 and over. All of these, of course, are mere approximations, including the awkward shift from an adolescent "boy" or "girl" of 18 to a "male youth" or "female youth" of 19.

[6] See IRIN Africa 2012a for background information.

[7] Bururi Province, together with Mwaro Province, constitute a region known as Bututsi, "the only area [in Burundi] with a Tutsi majority" (Watt 2008: 8). The arrival of Lieutenant-Général Michel Micombero, "a Tutsi-Hima from Bururi" to power, in a military coup on 28 November, 1966, "signified the arrival of the military and the Tutsi-Hima as a force within Burundi politics" (Daley 2008: 66). Micombero was the first of three consecutive military presidents (he was overthrown by Lt. Colonel Jean Baptiste Bagaza in 1976, who was overthrown by Major Pierre Buyoya in 1987). All three presidents were "of the Hima clan, from Rutovu commune" in Bururi (Watt 2008: 32). Bahima dominance in politics and the army in Burundi continued into the twenty-first century.

allowing them to flee the army by entering Tanzania if ethnic violence returned. This is precisely what occurred after the civil war began in 1993, and it is these refugees who continue to return mainly to the provinces of Makamba and Bururi.<sup>8</sup>

I also conducted interviews in the Bujumbura neighborhood of Bwiza, which was a center for civil war violence and remains quite violent, particularly at night. It is also an exceptionally popular place, I learned, for city residents of many sorts. As an urban expert explained to me, “Bwiza is the place to go” in Bujumbura. “It’s a really busy area. People go there to enjoy, drink and eat, and to find every level of prostitute. There are also a lot of dancing places, small hotels and recording studios.”

In all three field sites, I employed snowball sampling methods to develop interview data from youth, adults and adolescents who reasonably represent Burundi’s adolescent majority: that is, those between ages 13 and 18 who are both in and not in school. Snowball sampling is grounded in the development of relationships based on trust. Establishing trust is essential when interviewing adolescents, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged and have a low social status. Accordingly, I walked with my translator on the same pathways through the same rural and urban neighborhoods for several days in succession. I interviewed people who were working (such as farmers and traders) and those who were not. I relied on our expanding familiarity with community residents (particularly those whom we interviewed) to proactively identify other people whom we could ask to interview. Over time, these daily visits to the same areas promoted a degree of familiarity and trust between residents and me and my translator. Everyone participated as voluntary respondents who were not, in any way, pressured to engage with us. We interviewed 68 adolescents (39 rural, 29 urban), 87 youth and adults, 9 government officials, 26 non-government officials, 2 primary school directors, 7 members of a colline-level child protection committee, 5 members of a commune-level child protection committee and a high-ranking member of a provincial-level child protection committee.

The questions that I asked adolescents invited them to analyze their own situations and societies, and youth and adults (including officials) to assess the adolescent situation. They were designed to empower respondents to describe the condition and prospects of adolescents in their areas, as well as the adulthood expectations that influence adolescent lives. I also asked adolescents to detail their plans for improving their situations and who, if anyone, might help them achieve their plans. In addition, I integrated questions about preliminary findings into interviews with adolescents, youth, adults and officials of government and non-government institutions. I did this to corroborate the findings and deepen my knowledge about the issues that were emerging as significant. In this way, I was able to reasonably establish that the major findings contained in this paper figure prominently in adolescent lives in Burundi.

One important word and one key phrase could not be translated easily from English into Kirundi. Together, they provide illuminating insights into the Burundian context. No word in Kirundi exists for ‘violence.’ There are, however, a multitude of words for specific acts that can be violent, such as *intureka* (riot), *inryane* (fighting), *ihohoterwa* (oppression) and *akajagari* (demonstrations or public disorder). Nor is there a precise Kirundi equivalent for ‘unmarried mother,’ which refers to a field research finding of colossal significance. My use of the term frequently led to discussions involving my translator and those we interviewed until the underlying idea – females, many of them adolescent girls, who had given birth to children but were not formally or even informally married – was properly understood. Several Burundian adults explained to me that, in Burundian culture, an unmarried girl or woman should never become pregnant. As a result, the concept of ‘unmarried mother’ does not exist in their mother tongue.

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[8] Both “1972” and the civil war are examined in the next section.

### 3. CONTEXT

#### 3.1. Contemporary Burundi

Burundi's population is exceptionally young, overwhelmingly rural and rapidly urbanizing. With a median age of 17 years, only seven countries have younger populations (CIA 2012d).<sup>9</sup> Most Burundians reside in rural areas. Indeed, aside from three tiny island nations in the South Pacific,<sup>10</sup> no nation on earth has a smaller proportion of its population – a mere eleven percent – living in urban areas (CIA 2012a). At the same time, Burundi's estimated annual urbanization rate (4.9%) is the fourth-highest in the world (Ibid.).<sup>11</sup>

A hallmark of post-war Burundi is the way in which ethnicity has been addressed. After a wrenching civil war (1993-2005<sup>12</sup>) that left over 300,000 Burundians dead, 1.2 million displaced (Ngaruko and Nkurunziza 2000; cited in Voors et al. 2012: 944) and featured, for the most part, ethnically-inspired violence, an entirely new political structure came into play. The peace accords of August 2000 and November 2003, followed by the ratified national constitution of 2005, mandated that “the National Assembly must be composed of 60% [ethnic] Hutu and 40% [ethnic] Tutsi MPs, with a minimum of 30% women and three representatives of the Twa ethnic group” (Vandeginste 2011: 321). The political accords and arrangements have allowed Burundians to discuss ethnicity freely. And they do: as a Central Africa expert noted, “Burundians have acknowledged and institutionalized ethnicity. They talk about it in a totally relaxed way.” Given decades of ethnic friction and violence, this is a remarkable achievement. That said, while the demise of ethnic violence in Burundi has been replaced by comparative calm, current political conflicts today mainly involve members of the Hutu majority pitted against each other.

Burundi has had only four elections in its history. The first two were almost immediately followed by high levels of ethnically-driven violence (1965 and 1993). The instability following the last two (2005 and 2010) has been, by comparison, moderate and contained (Vandeginste 2011). Yet the fallout from the 2010 elections increasingly dominates international analyses of Burundi today. One report highlights “a deepening corruption crisis” that is negatively and seriously affecting governance in Burundi and, by extension, “directly jeopardises prospects for stability and development of the country” (International Crisis Group 2012: i, 22). Another mentions government intimidation of civil society activists and journalists and delays in establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine serious crimes committed since 1962 (Human Rights Watch 2012b). A third describes “alarming patterns of political violence” and “blanket impunity” for many of the perpetrators (Human Rights Watch 2012a: 1, 2). While the recent violence differs markedly from the civil war era – mainly taking the form of “individual, targeted assassinations, rather than large-scale massacres” (Ibid.: 4) – the result for ordinary Burundians summons, yet again, an unfortunate yet enduring theme in Burundi: “The population in the affected areas continues to live in fear” (Ibid.). A second theme with roots in the violence of earlier eras is tied directly to young Burundians: the youth wings of political parties. Easily the most influential is the *Imbonerakure* (meaning “those who see far into the dis-

[9] All are nations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Uganda has the world's youngest population (median age: 15.1 years), followed by Niger (15.2), Mali (16.4), Zambia (16.5), Ethiopia and Mozambique (both at 16.8), and Chad (16.9). Burkina Faso also has a median age of 17 years (CIA 2012d).

[10] The Pitcairn Islands, Tokelau and Wallis and Futuna have no urban populations at all (CIA 2012a).

[11] Only Burkina Faso, Malawi and Eritrea have higher urbanization rates (while Laos' rate is the same as Burundi's) (CIA 2012a).

[12] Note that the end of the civil war is debated, as many consider the civil war to have been ended only when the FNL (Forces nationales de liberation, or Forces of National Liberation) agreed to end their violent resistance in 2009.

tance”) of the ruling CNDD-FDD<sup>13</sup> party. Human Rights Watch observed that they “demonstrate a striking confidence in targeting perceived opponents of the ruling party, and they have been consistently be shielded from justice” (Ibid.: 18). The influence of the shadowy *Imbonerakure* will be revisited near the end of this paper.

The connection between fear and “youth wingers” dates back, at the very least, to the civil war era. One veteran Burundi expert recalled how, in the early years of the civil war, the expert saw politically-affiliated youth groups (comprised of male youth) “out in the mornings, jogging in shorts” through Bujumbura. Then, during their morning runs, the groups “would turn and head into neighborhoods” to commence violent attacks on civilians. Even in 2002, near the end of the war, “you’d see the youth groups jogging and singing and heading into neighborhoods.” The expert contended that civilian fears “that youth militias will lead future violence” remains in Burundi today. It is a view that other researchers supported. One explained that the “youth divisions” of political parties “commonly use violence for different purposes,” including “intimidating other parties” and conducting “purely criminal activities.” The researcher added that “The potential source of mass violence in Burundi is youth movements which are aligned with political parties.” In addition to party-affiliated youth, the researcher highlighted “patron-client relationships” contributing to “a reservoir of violence” in Burundi today. The researcher explained that certain elites grant some male youth “small favors and small jobs every now and then. These elites could mobilize these youth when it seems to be necessary,” in order to “protect their investments and promote their political agendas.”

Burundi continues to be plagued by punishing poverty and bleak development prospects. Its rank on the UNDP’s Human Development Index for 2011 is third from the bottom (185th out of 187 countries) (UNDP 2011: 2). The country’s poverty situation has been called “clearly one of the most extreme in the world, with 93% [of Burundians] living below a poverty line of \$2 a day” (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012: 17) and nearly two in three Burundians (61.9%) enduring severe poverty (UNDP 2011: 5). Burundi’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was estimated at \$600 a year for 2011, which left them tied with Somalia and with only Liberia, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ranked below them (CIA 2012c). The appalling state of annual income for Burundians is underscored by the following statistic: over a twenty-one year period (1990–2010), the average annual growth rate of the per capita GDP was negative 1.6 percent (UNICEF 2012: 112). As will be examined later in this paper, severe and advancing population pressure on land,<sup>14</sup> declines in soil fertility, difficulties in securing viable off-farm employment and persistently high consumer price inflation (EIU 2012: 12) contribute to conditions that leave many children and adolescents undernourished, unable to remain in school and facing narrow future options.<sup>15</sup>

Bertelsmann Stiftung sums up Burundi’s economic situation as having “one of the least developed and most vulnerable economies in the world” (2012: 22). A glance at the state of electricity and child malnutrition in the country illuminates how such extreme underdevelopment and impoverishment impacts the lives of ordinary Burundians. A tiny proportion of citizens – less than 2 percent – have access to electricity. Even though the average level of electricity

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[13] National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (Conseil national pour la defense de la democratie-Forces pour la defense de la democratie).

[14] The prominence of clashes over land holdings is illustrated in the government’s assessment that “Land conflicts alone represented 56 percent of the disputes filed in 2008, despite the creation of the National Land and Property Commission to arbitrate this type of dispute” (Government of Burundi 2012: 22).

[15] International Crisis Group shares some examples of alarming rises in basic food commodities. It reports that between October 2011 and January 2012, rice rose by 12 percent, wheat flour went up by 20 percent and cassava flour increased by 18.6 percent (2012: 14).

consumption is among Africa's lowest, Burundi's power supply still cannot meet the domestic demand for electric power (EIU 2012: 20). Indeed, the World Bank's 2012 *Doing Business* report notes that 72% of Burundian businesses "cite unreliable electricity supply as an impediment" to growth (cited in EIU 2012: 20). The impact of child malnutrition is still more alarming: nearly six in ten (58 percent) are chronically malnourished, which means that "their physical and intellectual development is seriously threatened" (IRIN Africa 2012b). Undernourished children are "more vulnerable to illness," have an increased risk of early death, and, should they reach adulthood, "will attain a lower physical stature" and end up with compromised cognitive skills (Verwimp 2012: 230, 221). Prospects for improvement are limited by the fact that many households farm on plots no larger than a quarter hectare (IRIN Africa 2012b).

While the dire straits that Burundi faces these days dominate assessments of its current circumstances, there many promising dimensions of Burundi today. For example, Burundians are living longer and children are spending more time in school. Life expectancy between 1980 and 2011 increased by 3.4 years while the expected years that children would spend in school grew by 8.8 years (UNDP 2011: 2). The latter result is not surprising when the following fact is noted: only nine countries in the world invest a greater percentage of national GDP in education (8.3%; CIA 2012b). Additionally, the government's second Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSP II) paper touts significant post-war progress, including reductions in the country's armed forces and dramatic increases in mining production, enrollment into primary and secondary schools and access to health care services (Government of Burundi 2012: 21, 22, 23, 24).

### **3.2. Ethnic and Communal Violence**

Burundi has been engulfed by spasms of extreme violence many times. The strongest shock waves reach back to a fateful year in Burundian history: 1972. Beginning in April of that year, an ethnic Hutu revolt was followed by the mostly Tutsi government's thunderous response, mainly against ethnic Hutu with at least a year of secondary education. Indeed, the class of 'educated' Burundian Hutu – "the entire membership of what was perceived as the Hutu elite" (Sommers 2001: 37) – was virtually wiped out: they were either killed or they became refugees. The events, which left perhaps 200,000 Burundians dead and another 300,000 as refugees (mainly in Tanzania), also created a legacy that lasts to this day. As Watt explains, "The venom created in 1972 is the background to all the subsequent history of the country" (2008: 34).

"1972" is reported to have left two psychological imprints in the minds of many Burundians. The first is fear. Explaining the mass violence that ignited in 1993 following the assassination of Burundi's President Ndadaye, Uvin argues that "the most prevalent motive for violence is fear" (1999: 263). Uvin then describes the second imprint: the transformation of ethnic violence into acts of self-defense. "People in both ethnic groups are deeply afraid of being attacked and attack first, in 'defensive attack,' to avoid the fate they think is awaiting them" (1999: 263).

This fear of extermination by ethnic adversaries was found even to run through second generation Hutu refugees from the 1972 massacres: "Burundi refugees were raised to believe that the Tutsi, or their accomplices, could be anywhere at any time, planning to eliminate Hutu people" (Sommers 2001: 183). Writing in the midst of civil war in 1999, Uvin noted that, for ethnic Tutsi, "Since 1993 most Tutsi similarly fear that, if they do not use force to maintain order, they will lose their lives in massive Hutu-led violence" (Uvin 1999: 263). For Hutu and Tutsi alike, a researcher of the civil war recalled that "Everyone had a reconstructed view of what happened

in 1972.” Accordingly, Burundian civilians were able to validate violent attacks against members of the opposite ethnic group by considering them proactive measures to prevent a return to 1972-style violence. One result of this activity was that neighborhoods in Bujumbura were, in the words of one veteran researcher, “ethnically cleansed. This action had a significant degree of civilian involvement.” Another Central Africa expert noted that while civilians “were often sparked by leaders, there were communities moving against communities” as well.

Politically-inspired violence has been a featured component of much of the violence in Burundi over the years. Yet as the comments just above indicate, communal violence – the direct involvement of ordinary people in violence – has played a major role, too. In 1972, 1988 and 1993 (among other years), violence first emerged at the communal level, carried out by ordinary citizens. In fact, one Burundi expert noted that “Communal violence goes back to independence: Burundi’s cycles of violence were mainly community-led. Communal violence is the model for violence in Burundi.” To be sure, national armies and rebel militaries unquestionably have been central players in violence as well. But the contributions of ordinary Burundians to violence cannot be underestimated. In the view of a Central Africa expert, civilians used violence to attack not just perceived ethnic adversaries but, in addition, to address personal “grievances, frustrations and conflicts (like land conflicts).” As a result, when opportunities arose, “people settled scores, which placed everyone against everyone.” A reported example of score-settling in the current era, one Burundi expert asserted, is the incidence of lynching in rural Burundi.

It is this communal violence that makes wartime violence in Burundi different from most recent civil wars. While communal violence was also present in conflicts in Rwanda and Kosovo, it was not, for the most part, a major contributor to a great many internal wars. In conflicts in Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique and so many more, military outfits carried out nearly all of the violence, mainly attacking civilians and occasionally attacking each other.

### **3.3. Sexual and Criminal Violence**

There are at least three ways in which Burundi’s 1972 violence differs from the civil war that began in 1993. The first concerns those who were killed. “In 1972, women and children were mostly off limits,” one researcher explained. “The men were mainly targeted.”<sup>16</sup> Two other reported differences between violence in 1972 and the civil war that began in 1993 concern criminal and sexual violence. They seem to be linked. One researcher explained that “In 1972, there wasn’t much sexual violence against women. But in the civil war, it was more common. When the rebels turned criminal [in the latter stages of the war] – that is when sexual violence really took off. Women said that all taboos had finally been broken. They were talking about rape.” Another researcher related that much of the violence that took place during the civil war “had nothing to do with civil war issues. Did the war mask the criminality during the war, that people were profiting from the war?” The researcher contended that this was indeed the case. Many researchers reported that criminal and sexual violence remains strong in post-war Burundi.

While actions in times of war may establish or exacerbate sexual violence against children, there appear to be, relatively speaking, limits to the predation. The 2012 Human Security Report found that, in wartime contexts, “Children seem to be partially protected from sexual violence simply because they are children.” The study asserted that violations against children tend to be perpetrated by those close by: in this case, “family acquaintances – not strangers or combatants” (Human Security Report Project 2012: 2). Even though the study im-

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[16] Makinson’s research supports this finding (1993: 170).

plies that things could be much worse for young victims of sexual violence, many researchers nonetheless have argued that sexual violence in Burundi today is significant and negatively impacting the lives of adolescent girls and female youth. “Sexual violence is really widespread,” one researcher stated. As a result, “young women are trying to protect themselves.” One way to do this is to “Look smart – with clean clothing and braided hair. Even if you have little money, young women have to try to show that they have family members who care for them” – even when they don’t. The rationale for “looking smart” is to communicate that “if someone violates me, there will be repercussions” from relatives. The threat of rape can be so great that many girls and young women “never go to the bathroom alone. Otherwise, they’ll be violated.” Hoofnagle and Rothe support this assessment with the comment that women in Burundi “retain a position more closely aligned with property.” As a result, raping a woman is “akin to taking or vandalizing a man’s property without any real fear of reprisal or legal punishment” (2010: 184).

A researcher with extensive experience in Burundi raised a related issue that has surfaced in post-war Burundi. Adolescents, the researcher explained, “are probably more sexually active than ever before. When you get pregnant and have a child, you have narrowed your options for the future. This issue is not talked about openly very often, but there are a lot of young pregnant girls and very young mothers.” Adolescent girls who become young mothers challenge cultural norms. “When they become a mother, they’re no longer [considered] youth or children. The cultural container that used to hold in adolescent girls no longer exists” for those who those who get pregnant. As I will detail, field research found that the expanse of unmarried adolescent mothers, including those who got pregnant due to rape, is profoundly and negatively impacting adolescents and their families in Burundi.

### 3.4- Young Burundians Today: One Assessment

Peter Uvin has produced, by far, the most comprehensive research on young Burundians. His book, *Life after Violence: A People’s Story of Burundi*, provides useful background on the situation of Burundi generally and youth in particular. Uvin, like so many other observers of post-war Burundi, highlights massive difficulties in the country:

A decline in mutual help is occurring. Structural changes of growing destitution, population growth, pervasive violence, and the systemic uprooting of communities have made life far harder than it ever used to be. The war is at the heart of many of these negative trends, but it is by no means the only factor. People also see – and discuss – how social and political connections, corruption and outright criminality allow some individuals to advance greatly, and make others lose.” [2009: 120]

Uvin adds that the most significant result of the decline in mutual help is that young Burundians today are on their own, with less assistance from families and communities than ever before (few Burundians have any expectation, Uvin reports, that their government can or will support them). Uvin further finds the view that most young Burundians have limited or no parental or community support to be widespread among youth and adults alike.

The result of this decline has been the rise in what Uvin calls Burundi’s “capitalist ethos.” To be sure, it is one driven by the necessity to move ahead on your own and by your own wits.<sup>17</sup> The downside of this state of affairs is clear. “Burundi’s capitalist ethos,” Uvin explains,

[17] Verisch and Titeca support this finding. They state that “Burundian people have little experience in voluntary, bridging associational life at [the] grass-roots level. Instead, they have generally negative feelings towards the forced (cooperatives, villagisation), suppressed (conflict with the church), or dark (ethnic youth militias) character of associational or collective action experiments” (2010: 492).

“feeds on fear and desperation – the knowledge that destitution and death lurk around every corner, that nobody is there to help you, and that you can only count on your own actions to survive, day by day, month by month” (Ibid.: 120). The flip side is that it has wrought a strikingly proactive response. “Talking to ordinary people, one is struck by the constant repetition of the themes of hard work, perseverance, good planning and foresight, and, increasingly, innovation and dynamism” (Ibid.: 186).

Six findings in Uvin’s book are directly relevant to the subject of this study:

- First, many Burundians have a strong urge to leave farming forever. “Farming is a prison to most Burundians,” Uvin states. “In the countryside, especially in the north and center, people desperately want to reduce their dependence on land. The three big ways for young people to escape poverty are education, migration, and hard work” (Ibid.: 185).
- Second, the circumstances that adolescent girls and female youth face are unusually difficult. “The war created not only a surplus of young, single women, but also a substantial number of widows,” Uvin notes. “In the face of competition, and with young men struggling to come up with enough resources to marry, women may be more willing than previously to enter into unofficial marriages or even polygamy to avoid remaining single” (Ibid.: 131).
- Third, male urban youth are widely regarded “as having failed to live by the values of perseverance, hard work, and resilience that Burundians value. Many people fear them” (Ibid.: 118).
- Fourth, Burundi has a relatively flexible and accepting culture when it comes to the difficulties of reaching manhood. “Burundi seems more able to adapt to young men’s inability to achieve normative manhood than other societies,” Uvin finds. As a consequence, “young men’s frustration and marginalization may be less severe than elsewhere” (Ibid.: 183).
- Fifth, Uvin argues that the international aid community is out of step with young Burundians. In his view, the most significant development gap “is the surprising neglect of the urban slums. Especially from a conflict perspective, one imagines that tens of thousands of underemployed urban youth – many of them with first-hand experience of violence – would constitute a major [development] priority, but nothing could be farther from reality” (Ibid.: 121).
- Finally, and significantly, Uvin found that most young people – female and male, rural and urban – share one, crystal-clear goal: “to have a steady job” (Ibid.: 121).

All six trends that Uvin found – the drive to reduce dependence on land, severe stresses on adolescent girls and female youth, views of young urban males as threats, flexible approaches in helping young Burundians marry, the neglect of urban areas and strong interest among adolescents and youth in off-farm employment – resonated powerfully in field research for this paper, the findings from which I will now examine. But before I do, a note on tone. Readers of Uvin’s book will no doubt find that the state and outlook of young Burundians, as described in this paper, seem to have descended since the time of Uvin’s 2006 field research. In general, those interviewed for this paper proved to be less optimistic about their lives and prospects than those whom Uvin interviewed six years earlier.

What has happened to young Burundians since the time of Uvin's field research? The short answer is that a lot of worrying trends appear to have become much worse. As the subsequent sections of this paper will detail, Burundians young and old relate how basic aspects of life are deteriorating. Prices for essential commodities are rising alongside concerns about food, the size and quality of farmland, staying in school, getting married, finding a job, and much more. But a second issue, I think, is also important. Uvin conducted his research soon after the 2005 elections. It was a time when post-war Burundi was finding its feet and establishing itself – for the first time – as a democracy. It was, in many respects, an exciting, even transcendent period. Uvin, in other words, carried out his research during a time when a sense of possibility was most definitely in the air. The aftermath of the 2010 elections, as noted earlier, has yielded no such result. Indeed, if the balloon of optimism has not been punctured, the sense that air is steadily leaking out was present in many if not most interviews undertaken for this paper. As a result, while factors that promote stability and peace in Burundi are featured near the end of this paper, it was the weathering of very tough times, with the promise of little respite in the future, that characterized everyday life for most Burundians.

## 4. FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS

Analysis of findings from the 2012 field research divides into three sections. The first contains seven general themes, which describe findings of significance in both rural and urban Burundi. The second features the two primary findings that were particularly prevalent in rural areas. The final section contains two sets of findings about adolescent life in Bujumbura.

### 4.1. General Themes

#### 4.1.1. “Because of Poverty”: Focusing on Survival

*We are dying of poverty  
We are always full of sorrow  
There is too much pain in your heart  
You always lose, you don't know why  
Maybe it's because you stopped praying to God.*

– Church song, sung by adolescent girls and women while digging together, Makamba Province.<sup>18</sup>

Many adults who were interviewed emphasized the fact that life during the civil war was difficult in the extreme. As one adult man recalled, “During the war, things were the worst. Now we can sleep peacefully. We have peace now.” Yet the improvement of basic security conditions must be set alongside the following fact: impoverishment framed and underscored the general condition that most adolescents and other Burundians detailed during interviews. That Burundi is among the poorest countries on the planet was manifest in these discussions. Many respondents resorted to the same phrase to explain their condition: “because of poverty.”

Hardship proved to be a central characteristic of everyday life for most Burundians in rural and urban areas. “Children can spend a year with no tea,” one father explained. “We can't afford tea or sugar.” The impact of inflation and ascending prices was a regular subject of discussion. Even in Makamba, which is thought to have more fertile land than other, more thickly populated and heavily farmed parts of Burundi (such as Gitega Province), the need for fertilizer surfaced as a major concern. “We have a bad life because we dig all the time,” a mother of fifty remarked. “Since we don't have fertilizer, we work hard to produce little.” A boy of 14, also from Makamba, connected the high cost of fertilizer to his own situation. “Sometimes after school, I find that there's no food at home,” he explained. “So then when I return to school” in the afternoon, “I'm hungry and I can't perform well.” If an international agency could provide fertilizer, “then we could grow more food and have more to eat. Because our land these days doesn't produce much food.”<sup>19</sup>

As the boy's remarks highlight, discussions about life routinely returned to the issue of food. Digging for a day wage on the farmland of others is widely thought to be a means to saving money for non-food items (like soap) and materials for a house (like roofing). But a discussion with adolescents in Gitega illuminated how the purpose of “digging” is changing. Food is scarce in the households of a great many adolescents in rural and urban Burundi, and

[18] Translated from Kirundi. In Kirundi, the words are: *Twishwe n'ubukene, Twamana amaganya, Intimba ni nyinshi mu mutima wawe, Wama ubona, utsindwa ntuzi ico bivako, Kuko wahevye gusenga Imana.*

[19] The fact that the boy sought assistance from international organizations, and not the Burundian government, is an issue that will be addressed in the sub-section on governance.

the pay one receives for day's work in the field might only cover the cost of basic foodstuffs. As a consequence, an 18 year-old adolescent boy explained that, in his area, "You can't dig for other people if you have food at home. You only go dig if you are hungry." Adolescent boys and girls, and their youth counterparts, regularly reported that the main reason they worked the fields of farmers who could afford to hire them was to get something to eat. For most, accumulating savings seemed to be out of the question. Adolescents and adults in Bujumbura reported similar conditions. An 18 year-old male adolescent living in the capital, for example, explained that "There are no jobs [in town]; I mean really good jobs with contracts and a salary at the end of the month. So if you are fortunate enough to have a small part-time job, [the money you make] will only pay for food." A 23 year-old male youth in the capital explained that he had been largely hungry since the civil war period, when he was a child. That was "when we started eating once a day. And when you eat once a day, you're still hungry. It's like you haven't eaten." An international agency official shared the following finding from survey research her agency had conducted: many Burundians "eat once a day or once every two days."

Severe and protracted limits on food and income do not only result in hunger. It also forces adolescents and adults to make difficult decisions. Many reported that some combination of rising prices, dwindling harvests on small amounts of farmland, limited off-farm work and large numbers of children in households forced many adolescents to drop out of school or migrate to a city in search of work. Many Burundians related stories of hungry adolescent girls who accepted food in exchange for having sex with a man. Stories of boys drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana were also common, including a colline-level government official, who surmised that "Maybe 90 out of 100 ordinary male youth [including adolescent boys] drink banana beer. Many also smoke marijuana." The official added that, "Many girls drink banana beer, too, almost as many as boys." Several people noted that drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana (and, for boys in town, sniffing glue) helps ward off feelings of hunger. Fights at bars are unsurprising, regular occurrences. Theft of food and property in rural and urban Burundi appears to be extremely common.

The desperate poverty that afflicts so many Burundian families, moreover, has reportedly altered styles of parenting. A Burundian official at a non-government organization summed up the situation by remarking that "Poverty makes parents too busy to handle their children. Poverty also changed parents. Some send their girls out to find money. It's like they are sending them out to become prostitutes." It was a perspective that many ordinary Burundian adolescents and adults shared: adolescent girls may turn to prostitution while boys sought many kinds of work (becoming a houseboy was especially common) in large part because their parents (or, if they were orphans, their siblings) required support.<sup>20</sup>

Without question, the pervasive emphasis on survival instead of advancement is one of the most significant findings emerging from this research. It is summed up by two assessments of life's prospects. A 19 year-old female youth in rural Makamba Province described what "a better life" meant to her: "A better life is when you can get enough food in a peaceful way, and there's no one around to scare you. Then you can wake up with peace." An 18 year-old adolescent male from rural Gitega Province explained that, "If you have a job, you can plan your next step. But with no job, you're like a dead man. You're just there." Enough food and some sort of job: these comments illustrate a sentiment common to adolescent respondents. They asked for and expected little from life. Low or no expectations also mean that some young people – even

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[20] The widespread adolescent occupations of prostitute and houseboy, and the situation of orphan adolescents, will be discussed later in this report.

small numbers of them – just might be vulnerable to joining violent uprisings.

#### **4.1.2. Domestic Violence**

Asking questions about domestic violence routinely invited giggles if not outright laughter from children, adolescents, youth and adults. “Yes, we are beaten!” a girl exclaimed while laughing when I raised the question during an interview. A young boy chimed in, “Sometimes, if you don’t want to fetch water, you will be beaten.” A government official succinctly explained that “All parents in Burundi beat their children.” No one whom I interviewed countered this assessment – or the contention that husbands regularly beat their wives. Teachers, in addition, routinely beat their students. As a mother remarked, “If students behave in a bad way, the teachers beat them, just like at home.” The connection between education and violence was frequently explicit. As one father explained, “In Africa, we believe that if you don’t beat your child, your child won’t learn anything. You have to beat knowledge into them.” Another father remarked that “Our children are hard to understand. So we have to beat them.” “We beat children to educate them,” a mother stated. “We need to beat children so they act right.”

Hitting children tends to take place as a response to some form of resistance, such as refusing to carry out a chore or disobeying parental orders. One mother explained her approach to disciplining children in the following way,

You have to beat your child when they make a mistake. When they are fighting, you must beat the older one because he’s cleverer and is supposed to know he should not fight. Sometimes you tell your child to do something. When they refuse, you must beat them.

Mothers are reported to do most of the hitting of children. The reason, one father explained, was “because children are with her more” than their fathers. However, he continued, “Sometimes, if the child continues [to disobey], she can ask her husband to beat the child, too.” It should be noted that it is not just parents who advocate physically disciplining children. For example, an adolescent girl of 18, who was not a parent, shared her view on the subject. “Some kids need to be beaten when they don’t go to fetch water or wander around the streets without permission” she stated. “We don’t call it beating children: we call it educating them.”

Just how hard parents beat their children was a subject of debate. A mother stated that, “I punish my children as I was beaten as a child: I beat them, but without bruises. I’m the mother beating my children. I have to be careful.” She added that fathers beat children in the same way “because they are also their children.” But some children had other views. For example, a boy of perhaps 10 explained that “Sometimes we are beaten, sometimes we are burned. Sometimes parents beat you so hard that you think you’re going to die.” It should be added that I observed a great deal of hitting in places where interviews took place: mothers hitting children and children hitting each other (sometimes fiercely).

Hitting or beating children and women are longstanding practices in Burundi. Whether the violence of the civil war era influenced these practices was difficult to decipher. No one whom I asked seemed to be sure. However, a meeting with eleven Burundian mothers uncovered a related finding: beating children as a response to hunger. A mother aged 24 explained that the civil war impacted the nature of parental discipline. “Before the war,” she recalled, “it was easier to raise children because there was food.” Now, in post-war Burundi, “It’s harder, because children beg for food and there’s no food.”

In measures that other parents said were common, the woman explained how mothers in her community respond to hungry children when there's no food in the house:

Sometimes children beg for food all day and into the night. So we beat them until they get tired of crying. The big problems come at night, before they sleep. When you tell them, "Go to sleep," they again ask for food. So we beat them again until they cry and cry, until they get tired and sleep. We are obliged to beat our children when they ask for something that we don't have [like food].

The mother added that "Fathers beat children, too: when they are angry or when the children cry for food and there's no food."

Indications of a correlation between increased hunger and increased domestic violence is alarming. As hunger in post-war Burundi has proven intractable, Burundian children, given evidently high and growing levels of violence in their homes, may increasingly resort to violence to resolve immediate problems. This is a worrying and potentially destabilizing trend.

#### **4.1.3. Education**

"Here in Makamba Province," a provincial education official related, "school is basically free." "The policy of free primary education," the government of Burundi proclaimed in its PRSP II document, "sparked a spectacular increase in the gross enrollment rate (from 81.6 percent to 130 percent)" between 2005 and 2010 (Government of Burundi 2012: 23). The UN Millennium Development Goals Fact Sheet for "Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education" proudly states that "The abolition of school fees at primary school level has led to a surge in enrolment in a number of countries" – including Burundi (UN Department of Public Information 2010: 1).

The claim that abolishing school fees caused an increase in primary school enrolment was not supported by field interviews. The research revealed several other factors in play. One was the fact that entering primary school is mandatory. At least some government officials apply heavy pressure on parents to send their children to school. Another is a generally high parental value on education. But in addition, even after the government of Burundi had dropped the school fee requirement in 2005, primary school is nowhere near free. There are, in fact, a number of other required payments that eventually force many children to drop out. There were stories of families making tremendous financial sacrifices to keep their children to school – including selling parcels of precious farmland. Despite such sacrifices, the costs of school remained so high for many families that education officials, school directors, parents and adolescents all related that many children dropped out of school because they could not afford to remain. The comments of one father illustrate this reality. "The president [Pierre Nkurunziza] used to say, 'School is free,'" he explained. "But the schools charge money. That's why children leave school – because it's not free." Orphan children were among those who were particularly unlikely to remain in primary school.

The expenses required to keep a child in primary school were numerous and prohibitive. School "notebooks" – exercise books which cost somewhere between 600 (US \$0.40) and 900 francs (US \$0.60) each – are required for school. While the number of notebooks can be minimal in the early primary school years, a student in the sixth and final grade (when students prepare to sit for national examinations to determine whether or not they qualify for secondary school) may need as many as fifteen notebooks (costing the equivalent of nearly nine U.S. dollars). Considering that Burundian families are quite often large, the cost of covering notebooks, by itself, can severely strain family resources.

There are still other costs that must be covered for primary school. A second major primary school expense is paying for a uniform. The requirement that all students must wear uniforms appears to vary from school to school: some schools reportedly “chase” students who don’t wear them, others do not. But even if schools “accept” students who cannot afford to wear a uniform, many adolescents reported that students without uniforms are routinely teased by those who wear them. The most common primary school uniform policy appeared to be a mix of the two: students without uniforms can remain in school for a limited period of time. Then they are chased.

A third kind of expense that primary schools typically require is construction fees. “Burundi’s transition to a nine-year fundamental education system” (that is, expanding primary school education from six primary school years to nine) is underway (UNICEF Burundi 2011: 24). Parents of primary school children are expected to contribute money to pay for the new classrooms that are required. The costs vary by school. “They told us to contribute 2,500 francs (US \$1.66) per child as a contribution to build another classroom,” one mother explained. A father of ten reported that he must pay 10,000 (US \$6.64) for new classrooms at the primary school of some of his children. In addition, “Sometimes [primary school officials] charge us money so they can buy desks for school.” Some primary schools reportedly require “gardening fees” from parents as well, to cover costs for school gardens. Taken together, the school director for one primary school asserted that the overall cost of school was excessive. “It’s too much money,” he said. “You have to buy a uniform and notebooks” for each child in school. “The government used to pay for notebooks” for students, he continued, “but nowadays they don’t provide enough.” In addition, “students need to eat before they go to school. We also ask them to bring fertilizer and a hoe to garden on school land.”

If school was costly and not free, then why are so many primary school-aged children attending school? Field research uncovered two main reasons. First, nearly all parents and children valued education highly. The second reason was state coercion. Parents send their children to school “because the authorities force us,” one father explained. “If you don’t send your children to school, you will have trouble with the authorities. They can put you in jail or not let you have access to this or that. They can really force you.” It was evident that all young Burundian children must at least start primary school. Deciding otherwise was out of the question. One mother related how authorities in her locality were particularly blunt about this issue:

The authorities tell us, “Don’t think that those children are yours. Your children belong to the state. Yes, you gave birth to them. So in some way, they are your children. But now that they are old enough to attend school, they don’t belong to you anymore. You must send them to school.”

Taken together, the evidence points to a situation where public officials pressure parents to send their children to school. Many parents make significant sacrifices to do so. Indeed, for many families, there appeared to be a correlation between hunger and paying for school: money that might be spent on food instead went to cover costs for schooling. As a result, many children are eventually forced to leave school due to the expense, because they are unable to learn much without some food before school or at midday, or because the educational quality and facilities at school are so poor that school becomes a bad family investment. Some combination of these factors may ultimately push students out of school. Most Burundian children begin primary school, in short, but a great many drop out. Being forced to abandon schooling as a means for advancement represents a serious development and security challenge for Burundi and its partners, because, as will be discussed in the next section, education is widely seen as

the main way to get ahead.

When children are in school, they face, together with their teachers, significant problems. One such problem surfaced as particularly significant during the field research. It concerned the teaching of languages: although Kirundi is Burundi's main language, primary schools also teach French, English and Kiswahili. The research found that many teachers are unprepared to teach the three foreign languages, but English and Kiswahili in particular. One primary school director explained that three years earlier (in 2009), he had graduated from secondary school and became a primary school teacher (with no teacher training). Once at his primary school, he was tasked to teach English and Kiswahili – neither of which he could speak. It was entirely clear, in conversations with him, that he still didn't know much of either. Discussing this episode with an international agency official involved with education issues in Burundi, the official said that it was “reflective of the overall situation” in Burundian primary and secondary schools. An official with a Burundian NGO called the situation “demoralizing” for teachers and students alike.

The language issue arose most prominently during fieldwork with Burundian refugees who had recently returned from Tanzania. The Tanzanian government closed primary and secondary schools in the refugee camps in 2009. A refugee father provided his view of the rationale: “The Tanzanian government, in collaboration with the Burundian government, closed the schools and told the refugees to return to Burundi and go to school there.” Refugee agency officials confirmed this version of events. An education official with the Burundian government noted that the arrival of refugee students into schools negatively impacted the learning environments in schools they attended. “As educators,” he explained, “we see that educational quality goes down in the areas where there are refugee returnees.”

Primary schools that refugee returnees attend shed a particularly harsh light on the severe language difficulties that reportedly persist in primary and secondary schools across Burundi. This is because returnee students learned Kiswahili and English in schools in Tanzania, but not French or Kirundi. In refugee camp schools, one refugee returnee boy explained, “We never learned French and we never used Kirundi. We learned English and Kiswahili.” As a result, in their current primary school in Burundi, “When the teacher speaks in French, we just keep quiet.” The opposite occurs in English and Swahili classes. “The teacher doesn't know Kiswahili, so I laugh at the teacher,” said one. “Our English teacher doesn't know English,” said another. Coming from camps where formal education wasn't available for three years, and into schools where they do not know the two main languages of instruction, it is hardly surprising that many refugee returnee students either don't perform well in school or simply drop out forever. The situation is sad and troubling, and the responses to this situation are thus far grossly inadequate.

The dire straits that adolescent returnees face are compounded by the fact that they are so unfamiliar with Burundi. The circumstances appear to negatively impact adolescent boys and male youth in particular. The land parcels that many returnee families received are small, returnees and United Nations officials related. This has created a major impediment for returnee adolescents and youth, as there may not be sufficient family land on which sons can build houses, which they must do before they marry. As a result, many search for work. This usually leads them, inevitably and illegally, back into Tanzania. A refugee returnee father explained that, in his village of returnees (known, curiously, as a “Peace Village”<sup>21</sup>), out-of-school boys and male youth “go to work in Tanzania, because they know Tanzania. They don't know cities

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[21] Falisse and Niyonkuru note that “‘Peace Villages’ are presented not only as a solution to reintegrate returnees but also as a way to reconcile communities and trigger economic development” (2012: 1).

in Burundi, so they don't go." In the Peace Village, stories of boys and male youth returning to Tanzania were commonplace. These factors collectively delineate a disturbing recipe for alienation. However unintentional, the rise of socially isolated males with limited future options calls for a concerted and positive response.

#### 4.1.4. From Education to Employment

UNICEF states that "education – specifically free primary school for all children – is a fundamental right to which governments committed themselves under the 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child" (2013). As detailed above, securing that right for most Burundian children remains a long way off. UNICEF also asserts that "educating children helps reduce poverty," lower mortality rates, and promote gender equity as well as "concern for the environment" (Ibid.). Those benefits serve to validate the considerable efforts of the Burundian government, and its non-government partners, to expand access to education. Using force to secure primary school access, which some government authorities are evidently employing, could make it difficult for Burundian parents and their children to appreciate the many benefits of education. But access isn't everything: the quality of education, as indicated in the discussion of language instruction above, appears to be inadequate, too.

One might conclude, given the pressure and sacrifice that sending children to school entails, and the limited learning prospects that schooling provides, that Burundian parents and their children would set a low value on formal education. While such sentiments were present in the interview data – one father, for example, stated that if the government didn't force him to send his children to school "I wouldn't send any of them because it's too much of a sacrifice" – there was a widely shared belief in the benefits of sending children to school. Notably, however, the central stated purpose of education did not align with the popular set of rationales contained in the UNICEF document. Instead, it highlighted a lack of alternatives. One mother succinctly explained the broadly shared view that "These days, life is hard. There's no more land. So if the child doesn't fail, they must stay at school." She added that, "Even if your son wants to stop going to school, you will beat him until he returns." The rationale she expressed, and many other Burundian adults and adolescents evidently share, is straightforward: the future for children is not in farming. With some exceptions (such as, reportedly, parts of Makamba Province), land shortages and low yields make that impossible. Thus, a great many Burundian children go to school to prepare them for employment.

The accent on schooling as the way ahead for children creates two colossal challenges for children and parents alike. First, schooling only matters if children manage to get through both primary and secondary school. Uvin also found this drive to complete secondary school in his research in Burundi:

Education means you are not stuck anymore in the prison that rural life represents for many people. This means that for people the investment in education is mainly worth it if one gets to the end of the process. The economic benefits of education are much more of an all-or-nothing nature—not a gradual process—than is usually acknowledged... This is why so many people talked to us about education *jusqu'au diplôme*—until the diploma, for that is where education pays off. [2009: 89]

Unfortunately, the odds are stacked heavily against securing a secondary school diploma. The Government of Burundi notes that most children who start primary school do not finish. Of those who do, only a third will continue to secondary school (Government of Burundi

2012: 23). Nonetheless, parents sacrifice hugely to get children through primary and secondary school. “Some parents sell land” to send their children to school, one father related. “Some even sell their roof tiles to pay for school, and put a grass roof” on their home. “One thing that is very painful,” another father said, “is when you sacrifice so much and your child drops out of secondary school.” When that occurs, “it’s a loss of your energy and your resources.” Given the sacrifices that many parents make to send their children to primary and then secondary school, the pressure on children to succeed appears to be extremely high.

Even if a child manages to complete secondary school, a second huge challenge arises: finding a job. Again, Burundians seem to be aware of the fact that finding employment – normally defined as a salaried position with a government or non-government institution, or a private company – is exceedingly difficult. “The problem is no jobs,” a father stated. “Even if you have a secondary school diploma, there are no jobs.” A conversation with two adolescent boys reveals the shared sense of difficulty that lay ahead of them. “You can show your [secondary school] diploma to the Minister of Education,” an 18 year-old in secondary school explained. “But if he doesn’t know you or you’re not his relative, he’ll make sure you don’t get that job. He’ll give it to a friend or relative.” His 14 year-old companion chimed in. “I don’t have any relative who is an elite and is influential. So I’m afraid that I can finish secondary school and not get a job.” He then delivers the crushing possibility of failure: “If I don’t get a job, I will just keep digging.” In other words, even after his family’s sacrifice to sponsor his primary and secondary education, he may end up back home, “digging” on family land. Investing in education may be a popular strategy for advancing children’s fortunes. But poor educational quality, the low probability that most children will complete secondary school, and difficulties in landing a job afterward make it risky.

From rural valleys to city streets, from poor farmers to urban elites, Burundians shared the belief that salaried jobs could only be attained with connections or payments, not qualifications. “No one can get a job of any kind – as a doctor, driver, anything – without knowing someone who works there already,” a man in Bujumbura stated. “If not, you have to pay three months’ salary in advance.” Although the amount that people have to pay to get a job was debated – some mentioned a set amount, others stated an advance payment equal to 1-2 months’ salary – reports of what might be called a “kickback culture” for getting a salaried position were widespread. A high ranking Burundian official at an international NGO, for example, provided three ways of getting a job. “By sleeping with someone who works there [if you are a woman], by paying some months of salary in advance, or by knowing someone who already works there” who can get you the position without paying money or providing sex in return. “It is the reality,” the official emphasized. A male youth of twenty-two gave his sense of how things work. “If you ask for a job, you have to pay first,” he said. “Sometimes, they say, ‘If you want a job, you must bring a goat or money first. You have to pay an entry fee.’” A foreign official with an international agency, and with extensive prior experience working in Burundi, explained that foreigners working in Burundi “rely on Burundian staff to review CVs” for posts. “Often, relatives get the jobs.” The official concluded by stating that “You often have to pay to get a job with international or national organizations” in Burundi. Other Burundian and foreign officials related that the expectation of money in exchange for a job – unless friends or relatives on the inside can secure it – extended from the public to the private sector. The practice appears to impact the informal sector as well: several Bujumbura houseboys stated that they expected a “commission” in exchange for getting another boy a job in town. There are also “commissioners” in Bujumbura whose work includes securing employment for a fee. As one explained, “Commissioners can say

that the first month's salary is mine, since I got you the job.”

While it certainly appeared that a “kickback culture” of some sort existed in Burundi, it was impossible to verify how widespread the practice might be. It must be mentioned, however, that the tradition of favoritism has a long history and deep roots in Burundi. Obura has noted favoritism in dominant institutions in Burundi: “The point is repeated again and again by witnesses of the late 1960s up to today, that since the civil service (including the teaching profession), the army and the [Catholic] Church were the main employers in the country, those who had power over these structures determined recruitment into their ranks” (2008: 59). There is also strong evidence of geographic favoritism in rural Burundi, which is often expressed as a tradition in which one zone in a commune receives most of the attention, influence and development investment (Sommers 2005, Uvin 2009).<sup>22</sup> At the same time, there is room for some overstep, since ferocious competition for salaried positions opens the door to deeply felt suspicions that the person who got a particular job acquired it unfairly – even when he or she did not.

In the end, the field research was able to pinpoint the following: the belief that connections or payments secured employment in Burundi is absolutely pervasive. This widely-held contention that only nepotism and corruption gets you a good job, together with difficulties in finishing secondary school and finding work, would seem only to increase levels of frustration and anger among adolescents, youth and adults alike. And they already seem to be quite high.

#### 4.1.5. Governance

A revealing finding arose from responses to a simple question: “who might help you with your plan, so that you may find success?” Not one adolescent in rural or urban Burundi mentioned their government – or, for that matter, youth associations, which government and international agency officials are known to endorse as a way to assist young Burundians. Most of the responses, instead, were chilling. “There’s no one who comes to this area to bring any kind of support,” a girl of 18 in rural Burundi stated. “There’s no one who can help me with my plan,” a 17 year-old boy in Bujumbura explained. “The ones who can help me are members of my family,” he continued. “But we’re all in the same situation [that is, poor].” Other adolescents in rural and urban Burundi expressed similar sentiments.

There was, indeed, a strong belief – expressed by adolescents, youth and adults – that their government is unable to help most citizens. “The most important thing to be done is to sensitize the youth to be creative and help themselves,” a Burundian NGO official explained, “as it seems like our state is not there [to help them]. Our state is lost.” The corresponding accent on self-reliance was strong in field interviews, and in line with Uvin’s findings:

Individual effort is at the heart of young Burundians’ station in life. It is through intelligence and studying, through hard work, perseverance and good management, that they hope to improve their fate. They expect little to nothing of the state or of the aid system. [2009: 117]

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[22] Geographic favoritism in rural Burundi is summed up in the following way: “In the two provinces studied [in rural Burundi], there was an historic unequal distribution of resources and assets in different geographic zones dating back to the colonial era. These inequalities have been exacerbated by government practices and international agency actions in the post-conflict and reconstruction phase. This has resulted in significant and possibly explosive disparities along geographic, ethnic, and class lines which threaten Burundi’s fragile peace process” (Sommers 2005: 1). Uvin subsequently confirmed that “geographical maldistribution within communes is prevalent.” He also discovered that, in some communes, it was remote zones, not the easily accessible ones, which were receiving the lion’s share of investment and attention (2009: 35).

Connected to perceptions of state weakness were strongly felt views about government intent. The sense that life was unequal and unjust was found to be widespread. A widow directly addressed this issue. “A lot of rich people are stealing land,” she stated. “If he’s rich, he’s more powerful than you, so he can take land from you. You’ll always fail.” A Burundian NGO official working with children and youth noted that “We’re afraid to report that the government is corrupt because [officials have] impunity.” Some expressed the view that international aid agencies are routinely duped by devious government officials. “White people never come to this valley,” a 19 year-old female youth stated. “When [international] agencies give support, the money is taken by the government elites. We never receive support.” “If you give the government money for a hospital,” a 25 year-old mother asserted, “the government people will buy cars and houses for themselves with that money. If you give the government shirts for us, they will give some to their children and sell the rest.”

Given such cynical accounts of government behavior, it was unsurprising to find that some people were irate. One of the times that respondents expressed their anger took place near the end of one interview with adolescent boys in a rural valley. As a crowd of onlookers gradually gathered around us, talk turned to violence that took place in the area during the civil war. This discussion evoked strong expressions of outrage, summed up by a male youth of twenty-two, who said that, “We’re so angry here. We elect people and they forget about us. If we complain, they oppress us.” In general, the distance between most government officials and ordinary Burundians appeared not only large but, from the side of ordinary civilians, filled with strong emotions: fear, frustration and, in some cases, fury. It is difficult not to see strong signs of weak governance in Burundi as provocative and a potential force for destabilization.

#### **4.1.6. Orphans**

“Where *can’t* you find orphans?” a woman asked me. It was an apt question. Although no estimates of the size of the orphan population in Burundi could be found, people talked about large numbers of orphans in every rural and urban area I visited. The expanse of the orphan population was partly due to high numbers of civil war deaths (over 300,000). There are also orphans whose parents died early after contracting HIV/AIDS. A third major factor is the local definition of orphan: it included those with no father as well as those with no parents. An NGO official described how the plight of adolescent boys and male youth can be particularly difficult if their mothers are alive but their fathers are not. “This sort of orphan has trouble getting married,” the official explained, “because he has to support his mother and siblings.” Already supporting one family, he is likely to lack the means to provide for a wife and children as well.

The lives and trajectories of orphan adolescents differed significantly from those who were not. First, orphan children typically go to live with relatives: uncles and aunts most commonly, although some said they lived with grandparents or older siblings. A Burundian NGO official who works with orphans summed up what can happen next:

In some cases, when orphan children live with their uncles and aunts, the orphans are beaten and exploited. They often drop out of school. Some are not given food to eat.

Stories of relatives stealing the inheritance of orphan children – land in particular, but other kinds of property as well – were often mentioned. This was an issue of particular concern to many government and non-government officials who were interviewed. In some cases, officials are able to return the orphans’ property and belongings back to them. More often, it

appeared, is what happened to an orphan boy of 15, who explained that “My parents died when I was very young. Then my relatives took my land.” Chased from his sister’s house at 14, the boy found work as a houseboy in Bujumbura. His future plans featured starting his own family. Detached from his family lineage as a boy without parents, he explained that “I must have children because all of my family has perished. I need children to make sure that the name of my family remains.”

Reports of rape and sexual exploitation of orphan girls were widespread. One of the most common scenarios was when an orphan girl moves in with her father’s sister. The orphan girl’s uncle is related not by blood but through marriage. In such situations, a Burundian NGO official with experience working with orphans explained, “It’s expected that the uncle will sleep with the orphan girl.” To prevent this, “her aunt may chase the girl” from the house. There seem to be, in fact, many orphan boys and girls who are live without any adult supervision. Many reportedly end up in the streets. When they do, the girls may be unusually vulnerable to rape. One government official provided context on this situation by explaining that the frequency of rape in Burundi increased during the civil war era, “when the justice system was not functioning and rapists had no fear.” Since the end of the war, rates of rape have remained high. Large numbers of orphan girls living on their own, as well as street children (some are orphans as well) can easily be raped “because there are no consequences. They have no family.” The implication is that such girls are easy pickings, since they would lack the ability to report crimes against them.

Orphan girl scenarios are merely examples of what appear to be disturbingly high levels of sexual violence in Burundi. In some situations, such as uncles with orphan nieces and transactional sex, sexual violence appears to be absorbed as an inescapable component of everyday life – what can one really do about it? In others, the near-impunity for committing rape, particularly when vulnerable girls and female youth are the victims, radically increases the chances that rape takes place often in Burundi. Taken together, these trends support a broader trend: that many forms of violence are on the rise in post-war Burundi, a state with already weak institutions and rule of law. This is not a case of whether or not violence is on the rise. It’s already endemic.

#### **4.1.7. Child Protection Committees**

Child protection committees are new government institutions in Burundi. Organized in 2011 in five of Burundi’s 17 provinces, they have replaced what were, reportedly, ad hoc arrangements created by various NGOs. As a government official recalled, “Before the [government] protection committees, many NGOs had their own child protection committees. There was a great deal of confusion.” The official, who was part of the protection committee for his province, echoed issues that his colleagues on commune and colline-level committees highlighted. First, his committee is overwhelmed by the sheer demand for child protection. “There are too many issues to be addressed,” he said. Second, all committees lack financial support. Child protection committee officials from all communes, he explained, are supposed to meet with their provincial counterparts three times a year. But the meetings rarely occur, he related, because officials from remote communes lack the funds to cover transport to get to them. “They can pay for transport maybe once a year, but not often,” he explained. “All we need is transport money,” he said. There is neither payment for child protection committee members nor to support the work they do. The latter was a recurring concern, since at-risk children, and their parents, often seek financial support from the committees.

Committee members at all levels stated that they have none to give, unless they paid to assist children in need from their own pockets. Sometimes, many members reported, they do.

Colline-level committees are where the action is. “All of the issues come from the colline level,” the provincial official noted. Interviews with members of all three committees found the provincial and commune-level committees to be reactive: they generally wait for reports from the collines and then, to some degree, they follow up. “Sometimes you have abused children, such as those who are raped,” a commune official explained. “The colline committee members are often unsure how they should follow up with the police. So they report the situation to us and we follow up.”

When commune committee members don’t know how to deal with an issue, they ask provincial officials to help out. This happens a lot. The chairman of one commune protection committee explained that “Sometimes, children come to us for different purposes. But we often don’t know which government door to knock on.” Lines of communication and support seem ambiguous: there is the provincial committee and the Ministry of Solidarity, and the chairman said his committee is regularly unsure of who the point of contact would be for particular issues. And so, for issues such as covering school costs for orphans and providing appropriate health care for children with particular needs (or exorbitant hospital costs to pay), it appeared that either there were long delays before the government provided a response – or there was, ultimately, no government response. Most fortunately, there is a process underway to address a promising but what appears to be a weak and poorly functioning child protection committee system on the ground. The Government of Burundi and UNICEF are working to develop tools to formalize the roles of each child protection committee level, the reporting system, and how the child protection committee levels communicate with each other.

One specific function that commune administrations are expected to perform – registering all marriages and all children who are born – is crucial both to child protection and the rights of adults. Marriages that are not formally registered are unrecognized, which may make inheriting land and other property difficult if not impossible. Similarly, if children are not “registered at the commune,” then they do not officially exist. An unregistered child cannot access state services, such as school and the health system.

Registering children is a huge issue because of the prevalence of unmarried mothers. They are supposed to bring their newborns to the commune office to register them. Many do not – just how many, no one knows, but it appears to be a very sizable number. The reason, evidently, is that unmarried mothers are supposed to go to the commune with the father of the child. But fathers of such children almost never come forward, and fathers of the unmarried mothers may refuse to do so (or be too embarrassed and ashamed to go). Government officials did explain that unmarried mothers could go alone to register their children. But this clearly did not occur often, as few unmarried mothers seemed to know that they could register their children on their own. A second reason was also possible: given the shame surrounding the mere fact of being an unmarried mother, going alone to the commune office threatened to become a publicly humiliating experience. Just how many children or marriages are unregistered was impossible to determine. But for children of unmarried mothers in particular, the number appeared to be high.<sup>23</sup>

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[23] See sections on unmarried mothers and orphans.

Beyond child registration as a major protection issue, a meeting with colline-level child protection committee members underscored that such committees have their hands very full with a multitude of other issues. For this particular committee at least (all but one of whom were adult mothers), their work involved a lot of directive “sensitizing” and teaching. They reported that they went out twice weekly to teach children to pray, demonstrate good behavior, perform domestic work, to love and respect each other, not to steal, how to clean their bodies and clothes, to “not make love to anyone because it’s dangerous” and “make them love school.” Committee members reported that they gathered children to instruct them, visited the homes of children who were not in school, and even pooled their own money to pay for school notebooks and hospital fees for children in particular need. One member also detailed how they deal with war trauma. “When our boys get mad because of war [memories],” she explained, “we send people to catch them and tie them up.” The boys are kept tied up either until they settle down or “they untie themselves.”

The presence of enormous populations of children and adolescents in an uncommonly impoverished nation makes child protection committees a potentially vital state institution. A system of committees that are guided, organized and provisioned could help address the immense gap in the provision of protection for children. Presently, the committees are new, poorly coordinated, organized and trained, virtually unsupported and, evidently, use a similar kind of top-down approach to engaging with young people that Burundian authorities normally employ with citizens. Their ability to address massive child protection challenges, at this point, is clearly limited.

Their members are also, of course, affected by some of the same aggression that threatens children and makes violence a normal part of everyday life. While waiting for other members to arrive for our meeting one morning, the woman leader of the colline child protection committee that I met with informed me that the meeting “won’t make us late: our husbands can’t beat us because the meeting is early.” Married women members had plenty of time to return home to cook evening dinner and thus avoid a beating.

## **4.2. Rural Adolescent Issues**

### **4.2.1. Chasing Adulthood**

The adulthood challenge facing young Burundians connects to issues of land, employment, education, fatalism, drug and alcohol abuse, and unmarried mothers. The research found that, while some adolescents and youth from ordinary Burundian backgrounds are likely to marry, many are not. Of those who do, it appears more likely that they will marry later in life – for male youth, in their late 20s or early 30s instead their early 20s, which is the customary marriage age for males. Some females marry in their twenties, later than the customary age, which appears to be the late teens. However, there were stories of young adolescent girls marrying men, particularly in refugee returnee communities. More significant to many more adolescent girls and female youth, however, was whether they would marry at all. Despite the fact that Burundi’s male-female ratio is purported to be 98:100 (CIA 2013), there is a widespread belief in Burundi that there are significantly more females than males in the population, and that this situation had persisted since long before the civil war.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, it appeared that many

[24] Berckmoes’ research with Burundian rural youth in two eastern provinces speculated that the reported presence of “fewer male than female youth in the community... could be true given that many male youth (and adult men) migrate

adolescent girls and female youth may never marry, particularly if they have children out of wedlock. Unmarried mothers, as will be discussed, are having a harder time gaining social acceptance than their unmarried male counterparts and, for that matter, girls who manage to marry. For both adolescent boys and girls, but particularly for girls, the road to adulthood figures to be difficult. Many may not get there.

In rural Burundi, adulthood normally starts when an adolescent boy or male youth builds a house (in cities, renting an apartment can suffice). After that, he's ready to marry, and he's very likely to find a girl or female youth who is prepared to accept his offer: the focus on being fortunate enough to marry was a persistent theme for adolescent girls and female youth (especially for those who had left school), as well as for their parents. Once the match is made, and particularly in the tradition-bound cultural environment of the Burundian countryside, then the husband-to-be, together with his parents and relatives, negotiate a bride price with the family of his future bride. Bride prices appear to have descended as poverty has increased: sometimes, it appears, no bride price payment is even required. Other times, some money and livestock are paid.<sup>25</sup>

Even when weddings take place, the bride and groom have yet to attain adulthood. It is not fully achieved, for either men or for women, until married couples have children. Manhood also requires the husband and father to support his family consistently and over time. In a world where avoiding hunger and finding enough to eat preoccupy so many people, where building a house is likely to be unusually difficult, to say nothing of covering costs for a bride price and a wedding ceremony, and where finding decent work is more often a conversation topic than a reality, one can only imagine how hard it is for adolescent boys and girls in Burundi to contemplate a viable future for themselves. It is here where, again, education came to the fore: remaining in school, for the minority of adolescents who had the chance, provided them with options and hope. A 15 year-old girl illustrated this in her sketch of possible trajectories as she envisaged them. "The ones who succeed at school can get a job, since they have a degree. Then they can help their families. The ones who fail at school come back home and help their parents farm." Her own future depended on success in her studies. "If I fail at school, I'll return home and try to get a job and get married. I have to stay in school to have another future." In her case, schooling did not necessarily equate with marriage.

The overwhelming majority of adolescents who were interviewed were no longer in school. For many of these young people, the future looked dim. Many adolescent boys were clear about what they needed to achieve and how hard it would be to make it happen. "You need too much money to build a house in my area," an adolescent boy of 18 despaired. "It takes 500,000 francs (USD \$332.22) to build a house without doors and windows." A male youth added that "Most male youth fail to build a house. Many can't even afford to start them." These comments inspired an old man to recall earlier days, when "there was enough land, grass [for livestock] and wood," and when soil "was very fertile, so you could produce a lot." But this was before "The Crisis and the poverty, which have destroyed everything." The view that building a house and gaining manhood was entirely out of reach proved to be a common view among adolescent boys and male youth in rural and urban Burundi.

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(temporarily) to Tanzania or towns in Burundi in order to gain income" (2010: 24).

[25] In her research with youth in eastern Burundi, Berckmoes found that dowry standards often remain so high that "poor families can hardly meet" them (2010: 23).

“I’ll never get a good roof because I am trying to get flour and other things to eat,” a male youth of 25 said. “How can I buy roof tiles if I don’t have enough money for food?” If a male youth fails to marry, he becomes an *iciburire*, which means a man who was unable to marry, or had failed to marry.<sup>26</sup>

While prospects for marriage and adulthood were generally poor, some out-of-school adolescent boys and male youth managed to marry. A government official in a rural area insisted that young people can marry if they dedicated themselves to it. “The poorest are more serious” about marriage, he said. “If a very poor boy meets a girl who is ready to follow him, he will get married. The less poor boys like to taste girls [sexually] before they get serious.” The following brief life story, from an male orphan youth of 22, supported the official’s assessment. After dropping out of school as an adolescent, he worked in Gitega as a houseboy for two years. It took him two years to save 20,000 francs (USD \$13.29), which he used to buy a female pig. Eventually, he was able to sell baby pigs for 15,000 francs each (USD \$9.97), build a simple house and marry. He and his wife have two children. When people as poor as this young couple marry, it is likely to be an informal arrangement called *gucikiza*, which the government official defined as “A marriage without rules. No ceremony, no dowry: you just live together and it’s accepted.” The official added that although *gucikiza* is “a humiliation, when the couple gains some funding, they can formalize their marriage with a wedding.”

Obviously, given the embarrassment attached to it, *gucikiza* was not a popular option for most youth.<sup>27</sup> In the Burundian countryside, many out-of-school adolescent boys and male youth focused on the present and were fatalistic about future prospects. Some worked from time to time. Others reportedly stole to make ends meet. Many drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes and marijuana. Many merely seemed inactive and gloomy. Others realized that severe land shortages and limited options in rural areas made searching for work in town necessary, as the orphan youth did in the story above. This might give them a chance at marriage and manhood. As one woman explained,

It’s a really hard task for boys to become men. They have to go to Bujumbura or some other city to try to find a job and make money to build a house. They also need enough money to pay the bride price and buy some clothes for a future wife. This can take them five or six years.

But urban migration was a risky undertaking. Some adolescents said they would never attempt it, since jobs were hard to come by in town and they lacked contacts there. Others gave it a shot. One boy of 17 shared his urban migration experience:

Since going to town is the only way to make money, I went to town. I found a job for 12,000 (USD \$7.97) a month. I used to spend 300 francs (USD \$0.20) a day on cigarettes. Since what remained was nothing, I decided to return to my father’s home and farm. Sometimes, cigarettes are part of life. I still smoke.

Meanwhile, some parents make huge sacrifices for their sons, such as pulling younger siblings out of school and using the money saved to pay the bride price and wedding expenses. Many out-of-school adolescent girls and female youth, on the other hand, either waited for someone to propose marriage to them or, perhaps, migrated to cities themselves.

[26] The plural in Kirundi is: *ivyiburire*.

[27] Berckmoes, strikingly, found that the terms for the two kinds of marriages that Burundians used were legal (or, formal) and illegal (or, informal). Her research in rural Burundi found that informal/illegal marriages “are a break with tradition, are believed to result in less stable marriages and, leave especially the wives and children in a vulnerable (legal) position” (2010: 23).

Whatever adolescent boys or girls did in their effort to become adults, their worlds were encased in uncertainty. If they managed to complete secondary school, the likelihood of securing a job was low. If they were already out of school, they could look for low-level work in town or dig for others near their rural homes. Or they could simply wait for something to happen, and maybe drink and smoke marijuana with some of their spare time. All of these unsavory scenarios clearly worried parents and local leaders. Yet while frustration and stunted opportunity deliver harsh blows to many young Burundians, it could be worse. Burundian culture, it turns out, is significantly more adaptable to societal changes and the limited future prospects that confronted so many young people than Rwandan culture, where it was far more common for young people who were unable to become adults to endure sustained public humiliation (Sommers 2012, Sommers and Uvin 2011). Helping children gain formal marriages and grudgingly accepting informal marriages in Burundi were two examples of this. But of all options that adolescent boys and girls faced, one has tested cultural tradition and the limits of social acceptance more than any other: the inescapable prominence of unmarried mothers.

#### **4.2.2. Unmarried Mothers**

Condom use is ferociously condemned in mainstream Burundian culture. This trend is reinforced, strongly and frequently, by church leaders. “Using condoms is a huge sin,” a Pentecostal man told me. “Priests talk about not using condoms all the time,” a Catholic man said. “The church doesn’t like condoms,” an elderly man related during an interview in a rural village. “They warn us that the day you use a condom may be the day you conceive the next president of Burundi.” Adolescents, youth and adults all related that abstinence from sex is the prescribed advice that priests, pastors and parents relay to unmarried adolescents and youth. This invites the following question: if adolescents and youth are supposed to wait to have sex until they marry, what happens if they endure years of delay before marriage – *or never marry at all*? One answer is evident across Burundi: there are substantial numbers of unmarried mothers. Many of them are adolescent girls, and many became pregnant due to poverty, coercion, or both.

According to Burundian culture, this situation was never supposed to occur. “In our tradition,” a leading Burundian NGO official explained, “a woman who gives birth without marriage must be punished and put out of society.” Field interviews surfaced regular references to unmarried mothers bringing shame to their families. The shame is so great, one mother explained, that “a girl who is getting older and is still not married would prefer to live with a poor man for free, like a slave, instead of becoming pregnant and having no husband.” A married man of 28 explained that, “An unmarried girl with a child has no future. If she becomes pregnant without a man in the house, she shames her entire family. In former days, the family would prefer to kill her.” In a bygone era (seemingly many decades ago), a senior government official explained, a daughter had to be a virgin at her wedding. To establish this fact, the groom’s family would send the sheets from the couple’s first night to the bride’s parents. “If there was blood on the sheets, it meant that she was a virgin and had good parents,” he said. “But if there was no blood on the sheets, then it meant that her parents sent the husband’s family a prostitute.” The shame that this would bring to the bride’s family, he said, would be immense. While there was strong evidence that some unmarried mothers remained in their family homes, the official stated that, at present, “if a girl has a child before marriage, she is banned” and driven away.

A widely cited option for unmarried mothers is to migrate to cities to become prostitutes. A second veteran government official put the outcome from out of wedlock pregnancies succinctly: “If an adolescent girl gets pregnant, you break her life.”

There were reports that some unmarried girls and female youth who became pregnant reacted with extreme measures. One is infanticide. An international agency official related that police in Burundi may be underreporting the frequency of infanticides in Burundi, which typically involve “mothers between 16 and 24 killing their babies.” Given the shame and humiliation that out-of-wedlock children create, it appears likely that many if not most of the mothers were unmarried. One father shed light on this possibility by explaining that “Sometimes the unmarried girls give birth and put their babies down the toilet. Others give birth and kill the child right away. They do this because they have shamed their families.”

A second extreme response is abortion, which is illegal but apparently does happen. Several parents and government officials explained that there was a traditional plant that, when mothers ingest it, can cause an abortion. However, the plant is so strong that it can also kill the mother. Abortions reportedly take place mainly when girls are in secondary school. A girl getting that far in school, often after years of family sacrifice and investment, and ending up pregnant is a particularly significant family tragedy. As with reports of infanticide, the frequency of abortions could not be confirmed. But some adults related that they do take place. One mother, for example, stated that “There are a lot of abortions in this area. Especially if you are a student: you abort to stay in school. It happens all the time.”

Secret abortions undertaken by girls in secondary school raises the issue of how girls become pregnant in the first place. Adults, school officials and government officials all alleged that some schoolgirls are impregnated by teachers. Generally, school and government officials contended that this is rare. Others hotly disagreed. “A lot of girls become pregnant by their teachers,” one mother stated. It proved to be a popular view. An international agency official, for example, contended that student pregnancies “are often caused by their teachers raping them.” Another reported cause arose when students and their families could not keep up with school expenses. Some girls might remain in school only if they have sex with teachers or school directors, I was told.

While such allegations could not be confirmed, transactional sex involving adolescent girls in and out of school appeared to be unexceptional. “Pregnancy is a question of being tricky,” a father stated. “When a girl is hungry, she will agree to everything you tell her. If you give her a biscuit and some *ugali* [stiff porridge], she will go with a man.” “We never rape girls here,” a male youth of 24 explained, “because most of the time, when you try to trick girls [to get sex], it works.” The deception may involve exchanging sex for food, a beer, or a gift of soap or jewelry. “Girls like to run after boys,” a child protection committee member explained, “because of small, brilliant materials things [like jewelry]. Then they have sex without precautions [that is, without condoms].” A common “trick” reportedly involves the possibility of marriage. One mother explained that “until the girl gets pregnant, she believes the boy’s promise that he will marry her. But when she gets pregnant, he doesn’t love her anymore. He leaves her.”

Many people, including several government officials, asserted that the fathers of children that unmarried mothers give birth to rarely come forward. If they do, they have to provide for the mother and their child, and most cannot. They might be expected to marry the mother, too. Several government authorities reported, with considerable dismay, that there’s nothing they can do about this. In addition to problems arising from the likelihood that children will

remain unregistered with the government, parents of unmarried mothers (if they are still alive) must decide what to do. Many parents insisted that they do not chase unmarried daughters who become pregnant. One mother, for example, explained that, “As a parent, you can’t chase your daughter [from your house]. But she’s started a bad life.” If she remains at home, however, serious difficulties may arise. A male youth of twenty highlighted two particularly significant problems, the second of which only takes place if the child is a boy:

If an unmarried girl has a son, she brings trouble into the family. You don’t have enough food: now there’s another one who needs to eat. That’s the first problem. The second problem is about land. When the boy grows up [and his father never comes forward], he can inherit [some of the family] land.

Since it is rare for the father of out-of-wedlock children to come forward, and if the child is a boy, then the boy is entitled to inherit land from his mother’s family. As family land is precious and typically tiny, the boy’s uncles may not treat their nephew well. Reportedly, they may even drive him away.

I will conclude this discussion by raising three questions. First, do unmarried mothers marry? Responses from the interviews were inconclusive: some said sometimes, others said never. Second, what constitutes sexual violence and acts of rape? This question is difficult to answer because it was not always clear what Burundians considered to be rape. The interview data indicate that some boys and men who impregnate unmarried adolescent girls (or women) may have employed coercion to procure sex. Some girls, in addition, claimed that they were raped, and some rapists are prosecuted. But as a government official remarked, “We only call it sexual violence if the girl becomes pregnant,” since the pregnancy can help prove that a rape had occurred. Government authorities and non-government agency officials reported that the prosecution of those accused of rape is rare.

Finally, if unmarried mothers have become a widespread and alarming phenomenon, why is it not assertively addressed? Simply put, the answer seems to be: because the subject is taboo. It involves illicit sex, it shames families, it implies sinful behavior. “You won’t hear people talk about unmarried mothers because it’s the kind of thing you cannot talk about in public,” a veteran Burundian official explained. It is also an issue for which solutions are hard to come by. As a government official stated, unmarried mothers “is a big issue and a big challenge because we don’t know how to handle it.” In addition, the plight of unmarried mothers has not been an issue of prominent concern for international agencies.

Obviously, a situation as serious and widespread as unmarried mothers and their children cannot be addressed if discussing their plight is so difficult. The coupling of a weak government with cultural embarrassment leaves many adolescent girls and female youth facing exceptionally threatening conditions. This is another sign that violence and impunity constitute rising threats to peace and security in Burundi.

### 4-3. Urban Adolescent Issues

*What kind of jobs, my man?  
 Jobs with lots of shame, bad luck and risk  
 To earn nothing at the end.  
 But when you're hungry with nothing to wear  
 You do it, man.  
 Sometimes we smoke ganja [marijuana].  
 Why do you think we smoke it, man?  
 We just try to forget, man.  
 Shame, sorrows, tears, fears, bluemens [policemen] and pain,  
 All the time, all the time...*

*We have no plan.  
 Find your meal, then you're a champion.*

– Excerpt from “Maisha,” by Fariouz<sup>28</sup>

In a country as rural and tradition-bound as Burundi, life in its burgeoning urban areas creates striking contrasts. The city is awash with adolescents and youth who have migrated from the countryside, searching for money and, perhaps, a new way of life. Cultural expectations and social pressures do not weigh on them as heavily as they do in their rural homes. As a result, condom use appears to be significantly more common in Bujumbura than in the countryside. Many adolescent boys and male youth seem entirely aware that neither marrying nor becoming men is likely. With no family home or farm to rely on, many young people are in town on their own or with a friend or two. It can be a struggle just to find food for the day and pay rent for a room. From such a perspective, gaining the ability ever to support a wife and child borders on the impossible. “I have no chance to marry, no way, ever,” an orphan male youth of 25 said to me, emphatically. It proved to be a common young male perspective on life in Burundi’s sprawling capital city.

Bujumbura is a predatory and exciting place. Much more than upcountry, adolescents are on their own in town. Threat and exploitation are part of everyday life, and young people in town grow up fast. For perhaps 500 francs (USD \$0.33), an adolescent boy or girl can enter a video parlor and watch pornographic videos, a scenario that leaves many Burundian adults aghast. Bujumbura also offered adolescents the potential to make and spend money quickly. Two middle-aged men who grew up in the neighborhood of Bwiza in Bujumbura shared their sketch of life there. Research in town had already indicated that the police were known for extortion. “We all know how the police operate here – they are after money,” one of the men explained. “Normally, the role of the police is to assist and help citizens. But here, they’re the ones who oppress us.” In the depictions from these two men and many more in the neighborhood, thieves and prostitutes were not condemned as much as accepted as people with everyday occupations. The streets of Bwiza, which are fairly relaxed during the day, become dangerous at night. Lacking streetlights, many are pitch black. Armed gangs without names, reportedly fea-

[28] The artist is also known as Big Fariouz and Big Fizo. Translated from Kirundi. In Kirundi, the words are: *Mbe nubuhe buzi ga mugenzi? Ubuzi bw’akagaye, bw’imyaku n’impanuka, Hama kumpera ukahakura ubusa, Ariko iyo ushonje, ataco ufise wambara, uragakora mugenzi, Rimwe na rimwe turanywa urumogi, Wibaza ko turanywa kubera iki ga mugenzi, Tuba du-shaka kwiyibagiza gato mugenzi, Ishavu ry’akagaye, intimba, amarira, ubwoba, aba polici n’umubabaro, Umwanya wose, umwanya wose... Nta migambi dufise, Ronka ikikwiriza uzoba uri igihangange.*

turing ex-combatants, are known to roam and attack. Looting and rape appear to be regular nighttime occurrences. To say that the situation in Burundi's capital city is unstable and a deterrent to post-war development is an understatement. For many Bujumbura residents, the situation already appears to be way out of hand.

#### 4.3.1. **The Utility of Prostitution: Adolescent Girl Options**

Prostitution in Bwiza was reportedly the most common profession, by far, for adolescent girls residing there. Compared to every other available job, it was easily the most lucrative, at least potentially, that a girl could secure. There was money that could be made in bars and on the streets, and many girls and female youth worked as prostitutes either full or part-time. An 18 year-old girl recalled how she used to work as a waitress in Bujumbura, making 60,000 francs (USD \$39.87) a month. That would seem to be a competitive salary in town: it is several times more than a houseboy or housegirl may earn in a month, for example. But the 18 year-old explained that she switched from waitressing to "working at night" because "I can make 20,000 (USD \$13.89), 30,000 (USD \$19.93), or even 50,000 francs (USD \$33.22) in one night." Prostitution can be so profitable that several prostitutes mentioned that they had housegirls who worked for them (mainly to care for their children when they were at work). There were many stories, in addition, of daughters entering the profession to provide desperate families with a means of support. Asking about the situation of adolescent girls in Bwiza, I received many responses similar to the following description from a female youth: "Most girls in Bwiza are prostitutes."

The promise of making significant amounts of money has attracted many adolescent girls to the vocation. A 16 year-old orphan, for example, related that since "I could not find school fees, I started going out with men at age 14 or 15." Working part-time, she saves what she earns in a cash box in her rented room. Her priority at the end of each month, she explained, "is to pay my room rent. Then I pay my school fees." She admitted that "working at night" is a hard way to make ends meet. "I don't like this life of going out at night," she confessed. "I hope my studies will help me escape it. There's no future in prostitution." It was widely reported that many adolescent girls help pay for their secondary school fees, or make money for other purposes, by working weekend nights as prostitutes.

Adolescent girls are in such demand as prostitutes in Bujumbura that they have special nicknames. One is *Mwana Douze Ans*, which translates as "twelve year-old child." The other is *Toto Show*, meaning "child show."<sup>29</sup> A 25 year-old male youth described why *Toto Show* were so popular:

Most adult men look for *Toto Show*. The reason is that they have an older woman in their house [that is, their wife]. So they want to have sex with a much younger one. They believe that they can't get AIDS from her. *Toto Show* are also cheaper, and you can force them to have sex without a condom.

This description highlights the extraordinarily high risk facing adolescent girls who work as prostitutes. In addition to making considerable cash, they can get raped, pregnant and acquire AIDS. An 18 year-old girl, who claimed to be a *Toto Show*, defined *Toto Show* as "very young and very fresh, with hot blood. All the men run after them."

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[29] *Toto* is short for *mtoto*, which translates as "child" in Kiswahili.

She also highlighted the belief that having sex with a *Toto Show* is seen as a way to reduce a man's AIDS infection:

Men who have AIDS run after *Toto Show* because they think it will help their health. They think that having sex with her will reduce their level of AIDS infection. Maybe 60 percent of his AIDS will go into the *Toto Show*, and he'll only remain with 40 percent.

The men who seek sex with *Toto Show* also have a nickname: *Mangema*.<sup>30</sup> The word is derived from *manger*; the French verb for "to eat." A group of adolescent girls described the double meaning of the nickname. "We call them *Mangema*," a 17 year-old girl explained,

Because they have something you want to eat, which is money. But when they give you what you want, then they will eat you [that is, have sex with you]. Eat and pay: that's the relationship between *Mangema* and *Toto Show*.

The reference to eating recalls a central research theme for rural and urban Burundi: the persistent focus on finding a way to avoid hunger – even if it means accepting the very real possibility of sexual violence. The apparent frequency of men "eating" girls also points to the disturbing prospect that pedophilia is a serious threat to at least some adolescent girls in Burundi.

Prostitution, so condemned in rural Burundi, proved to be integral to everyday Bujumbura life for many of its citizens. There was never an indication that being a prostitute or going to one was particularly embarrassing. It was, in the words of one prostitute, "ordinary work." Many men and women reported that some prostitutes have boyfriends. "The boyfriends don't care if their girlfriends are prostitutes," one prostitute explained, "because she comes home with money." Some girls and women, reportedly, become prostitutes as a way to get married. A veteran prostitute explained how entering the profession can be seen as an act of empowerment. "You can wait for a husband at home," she explained, "but you won't find the kind of man you want to marry that way." The aim is to go to popular discos "to meet a *mzungu* [white man] or a well-off Burundian man." The girls who aim to marry this sort of man, she continued, "are selective: they have a clear profile of who they want to marry. She will charge for the sex, but she also hopes that at some point the man will fall in love and marry her." Another prostitute explained, however, that some prostitutes "don't find what they had hoped to find and get lost in prostitution forever."

For men, visiting a prostitute in Bujumbura seems to be entirely commonplace. Men can, of course, court women who are not prostitutes. But one prostitute shared her view of the difference between pursuing a woman in town and going to a prostitute:

Finding a girl to have sex with without paying will take a long time. If she's not a prostitute, you have to trick her: you have to pretend that you love her and share food and drinks with her. You need to be patient and wait to ask her for sex. But she may say no. Meanwhile, with a prostitute, you pay money and have sex. So it's more popular.

The description of having to "trick" girls to have sex with them is the same sort of strategy that male youth in rural Burundi mentioned during interviews.

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[30] *Mangema* is the singular version of the word. The plural is *Ibimanjema*.

It is worth contrasting the situation of prostitutes in Bujumbura to those in the Rwandan capital of Kigali. There, prostitutes make paltry amounts: as little as USD \$0.18 for sex with a condom, and perhaps USD \$0.37 more for sex without one (Sommers 2012: 178). It is a profession for desperate girls and women. Together with many of their customers, they are alarmingly fatalistic about contracting AIDS (Ibid.: 179). Using condoms for sex involving prostitutes in Kigali appeared to be rare. Meanwhile, in Bujumbura, the situation was remarkably different. Many men and women, including prostitutes, insisted that condom use was common. Illustrative of this was the following explanation from a prostitute. Although “the poorest girls” will accept extra money from their male customer (usually double the price) for not wearing a condom, other prostitutes “can’t agree, even if the man offers 100,000 francs (USD \$66.44; an extremely significant amount of money for most Burundians) for sex without a condom.” This finding is particularly striking given the strong opposition to condom use in Burundi. It is, in addition, an indication of how life in Bujumbura allowed young Burundians to find their way without the cultural and religious constraints that proved so powerful in rural Burundi. Living as a prostitute in Bujumbura did not appear to entail the social isolation and sense of entrapment that many of their Kigali counterparts endured.

Adolescent girls did have other occupations, such as working as waitresses, selling produce and small items in markets or city streets, and working as housegirls. As mentioned above, none were nearly as lucrative as prostitution could be. While there was not time to investigate the variety of ways that adolescent girls made money in Bujumbura, one description from a man about housegirls is illuminating. “If you have a housegirl, and she’s attractive,” he stated, “you must sleep with her. It’s obligatory.” The comment recalled the scenario that surfaced during research in rural Burundi regarding uncles who have orphan nieces living with uncles who are not their blood relations. In both cases, the reaction was virtually the same: it seems unremarkable to many that male heads of household will have sex with girls who reside in their houses but are not related by blood. Indeed, there seem to be many scenarios where securing sex with an adolescent girl or female youth is easy and carries little or no punishment or condemnation with it. It is easy to see how this situation contributes to Burundi’s violence and impunity.

#### **4.3.2. Houseboy Networks: Adolescent Boy Options**

Adolescent boys were found to carry out a variety of jobs in Bujumbura. Some students mentioned that they worked part-time as porters to get small change. Many adults, youth and adolescents depicted working as a thief as a common occupation for boys and male youth. A 22 year-old male youth from the neighborhood of Bwiza shared what proved to be a common attitude about thieves. “Boys in Bwiza need to get money,” he related. “To get it, we must steal: we are jobless, so we steal.” Selling drugs (marijuana, cocaine and heroin were all mentioned) was widely thought to be a good job for young males in town. “Definitely selling drugs is the best way for boys to make money in Bujumbura,” one businessman in Bwiza explained. “Boys can’t miss making at least 3,000 (USD \$1.99) a day.” One adolescent boy of 15, already in his fourth year of living in Bujumbura, described some of the other jobs that boys perform in Bujumbura:

Some boys sell *mandazi* [a sweet bread]. Others sell fruit. Some are *matatu* boys [that is, they recruit passengers and collect payments for minivan taxis]. Some have small shops on the street. Others wash cars. Some boys are bicycle taxi or motorcycle taxi drivers.

He also stated that “So many boys are houseboys, you can’t count them all.”

Many residents of Bwiza reported that a great many boys worked as houseboys

in their neighborhood. Interviews with a dozen houseboys, all between the ages of 14 and 17, revealed a number of important characteristics about members of this particular vocation. First, a striking number of houseboys came from the province of Kayanza. This was no coincidence: there proved to be an informal network involving impoverished, out-of-school boys from the same location. As a houseboy of 16 explained, “A lot of boys here come from Kayanza. They help others come to Bujumbura. It’s a connection.” Some boys arrived alone in town and only met others from Kayanza after arriving. One explained that he met his friends in town in the following way:

When I first arrived [in town], I didn’t know that the boys I met were from Kayanza. But I discovered they knew my place, and I discovered that I knew their place. So we are friends now.

Desperately poor adolescent boys arriving in the capital city appear to have created a sizable pool of available, and very cheap, labor. Many people have houseboys in Bwiza (and, to a lesser extent, housegirls). The work of a houseboy, many related, entails cleaning, washing and cooking for your boss, in return for food, a place to sleep and a small monthly salary: the lowest reported salary was 4,000 (USD \$2.66) and the highest was 20,000 (USD \$13.29). These rates may not prove to be what houseboys end up receiving, since breaking a plate or not cooking well can lead to salary deductions. The networks that boys have developed can directly help them find better work. “I learn about new work from other houseboys in the neighborhood,” one revealed. “So they can tell you about new jobs.” Everyone is a businessman: if a colleague manages to secure you a new job, he’ll expect a “commission” in return. A common commission is the first month’s salary.

Whether they were from Kayanza or elsewhere, most of the boys had come to Bujumbura in order to save money for family members based in their rural homes. As a houseboy of 14 explained, “When I work, I put money aside. When I have saved 30,000 (USD \$19.93), I return to my family in Kayanza. Then I come back to Bujumbura.” When they return to town, they can only hope to assume the same job they had before. “I’m happy when I come back [to Bujumbura] and find that my job is still there,” a 15 year-old houseboy stated. “Sometimes you return and find that they’ve hired another houseboy.” Some of the boys, however, had distinct future plans. Several mentioned their intention to eventually save enough money to find other work, such as paying the entry fee to become a motorcycle taxi driver or open up a small shop. Only one, a houseboy of 17, stated his intention to eventually return to his family home in the countryside. “I’m saving for seeds and fertilizer,” he explained. “My father is ready to give me a piece of land where I can dig.” The sooner he can save enough money in town, the swifter he can return home. “I plan to marry,” he declared.

The “houseboy network” illustrates how resourceful adolescents can assume considerable family responsibility and create lives for themselves virtually on their own. The life is tough and demanding, and the boys are vulnerable to exploitation. Many seemed intent on eventually establishing themselves in the city. But as Burundians in the countryside explained, working in town is also a way for boys and male youth to secure enough money to ultimately settle on family land in rural Burundi and get married.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Research for this paper found young people enmeshed in lives with limited prospects. They struggled to stay in school (and usually failed). Prospects for a formal, legal marriage seemed bleak for most and improbable for many. The options that lay before adolescents were uninspiring. You could perform farm work for day wages so small that they may only cover the most basic of commodities, like beans and soap. You could migrate to the city and take your chances as a houseboy or housegirl, perhaps, and hope that you managed to save enough to support your family and avoid sleeping on the streets. If you're a boy, you could put off thinking about limited options by drinking, smoking and maybe engaging in theft. Some girls drank and smoked, too. Others might concentrate on domestic duties at home and hope that marriage would one day occur.

The research revealed four factors that figured most prominently in the creation of low horizons for young people. The first is the most comprehensive of them all: the expansive negative impact of poverty and hunger. The research consistently found young Burundians, and adults, haunted by feelings of hunger while facing problems to which there seemed to be no answers: ever-rising prices, dependence on small farm plots while unable to afford fertilizer, the inability to stay in school or secure a reasonable job, fatalistically turning to alcohol and drugs, being “tricked” into sex in exchange for a meal or the promise of marriage, accepting the risk of dangerous occupations like prostitution, thieving and selling drugs. For so many adolescent youth, there seemed to be nowhere to turn for answers: not to a government with a reputation for exploitation and self-interest; not to international aid agencies with a reputation of being “tricked” by government officials and elite leaders; and not to parents, since so many were unable to give their children a boost.

The parents may not even be alive. The second prominent factor in many adolescent lives lay in the fact that a significant proportion appeared to be orphans according to the Burundian definition – that is, having no parents or no father. No one had any real idea what proportion of the population were orphans, by either definition. No accurate statistics about orphans in Burundi appear to exist. But everyone who commented on the subject had virtually the same response: there are many, many. Being an orphan seemed to sharpen the energies and enhance the determination of some. There were stories of orphan boys and male youth who had managed to build a degree of stability for their lives. Far more common was the opposite: orphan children whose property was stolen, who were entirely on their own or suffered extreme exploitation from relatives and others – including rape. Indeed, evidence arising from this research pointed strongly to the extreme vulnerability of adolescent orphan girls to being victims of sexual violence.

The third factor constitutes, for Burundi, a huge but mostly hidden problem: the crisis conditions surrounding unmarried mothers, many of whom are adolescent girls. Often facing hunger, a faint chance of getting married and heavy pressure for sex, unmarried adolescent girls and female youth appear to be exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation and sexual violence. Should they become pregnant, they face terrifying consequences (for themselves and their offspring), including abandonment and squalor. If they are secondary school students when it occurs, the fallout can be doubly devastating, as the pregnancy symbolizes not just family shame but the ruined investment in a daughter's education. To be sure, some girls return to school: government rules reportedly allow it. But it appears to rarely succeed. There is discom-

fort for the girls, other students and the school faculty, many reported. An international NGO official detailed the humiliation that can meet student mothers. “A pregnant secondary school student can come back to school. But she is publicly banned.” Some of these girls may have to attend another school. “The rationale of school directors” for transferring student mothers to new schools, the official continued, “is that they can set a bad example for other girls. They may encourage other girls to get pregnant.” While the frequency of rape by teachers of students was disputed by government officials and parents, no one denied that they occur.

The fourth and final prominent factor that figures to confine future prospects for adolescents is violence. This violence takes many forms: rape and sex gained by coercion, domestic violence, theft, assault and fighting. The incidence of rape and sexual violence appears to be alarmingly high in rural and urban Burundi – so high, in fact, that it is probably an outright emergency.

Rape and other forms of explicit violence are supported by an environment layered with threat: to send children to school, to provide sex, to hide the shame of pregnancy, to steal family property. The field interviews also recorded many reports of impunity: of government officials accused of corruption, of police demanding extortion, of those accused of rape, of illegal acts undertaken by the widely-feared *Imbonerakure*, the ruling party’s youth wing whose presence is reportedly locked into most rural communities (but not, interestingly, all urban neighborhoods). Taken together, reports from rural and urban Burundi strongly suggest that sexual and domestic violence, crime, injustice and impunity encase many if not most adolescent lives in a climate of uncertainty and fear.

While all of this weighs heavily on young lives, it is not as if young Burundians are giving up. To be sure, some are indeed drinking beer and smoking marijuana and trying not to think about the future. But many others are finding ways to move ahead, mainly through schooling or migration. Many adults, youth and adolescents who were interviewed pointed to school as the best way to move ahead. Families often make extreme sacrifices to keep at least some of their children in school. At the same time, many Burundians related that such sacrifice may lead to little. The conviction that salaried employment – what Burundians normally equate as a job – can only be secured by paying a bribe (unless you have a connection on the inside) was found to be widespread.

Males who migrate has a long tradition in Burundi. In colonial times, many Burundian men migrated to Tanganyika, often to raise money for a bride price (Albert 1963; cited in Sommers 2001: 66). Today, adolescent boys and male youth continue to migrate – mostly to towns, but some across borders, including Tanzania – in search of money for marriage as well as a new life. Adolescent girls and female youth are increasingly joining them on their movement into urban areas (but not, reportedly, into nearby countries). The field research shed considerable light on how different urban adolescent and youth lives are. In Bujumbura, girls can shed the condemnation of prostitution as well as condom use. Living without a man, even with children, did not appear to be particularly shameful, either. Adolescent boys and male youth generally found no embarrassment in visiting prostitutes or considering theft or selling drugs as everyday occupations. While the merits of such attitudes can be debated, what cannot be questioned is what they suggest: that cities, much more than villages, present the powerful as corrupt and the authorities as exploiters. In such a world, can theft, selling drugs and prostitution really be so shameful? Or is it really just “ordinary work” in a big city?

## 5.1. Potential Drivers of Conflict

Although Burundi has achieved a great deal in the handful of years since violent conflict subsided, a powerful combination of factors point to an array of potential threats to peace building and post-war development in Burundi. Field research in rural and urban Burundi surfaced two sets of potential conflict drivers. The aim here is not, of course, to be alarmist or predictive – a list of countervailing peace building factors in Burundi follows this discussion. Instead, the purpose is to shed light on general factors and specific groups that might, just possibly, contribute to violent conflict in some way.

### 5.1.1. General Factors

- **Limited Options for Young People** – Many young Burundians face an erosion of possibility and an expansion of threat. The overlapping challenges of failed or severely delayed adulthood and limited access to farmland, quality education and employment collectively point to very uncertain future prospects. There are also alarming trends: toward alcohol and drug abuse, criminality and the difficulties facing victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence (including some unmarried mothers and orphan girls).

In addition, reports of a ‘kickback economy,’ which makes nepotism and corruption the means of accessing a formal sector job, is, by itself, a potential conflict driver. The issue is explosive because it announces to educated adolescents and youth that they have little or no chance at getting the sort of job for which they and their families sacrificed. It also provides a rationale for crime: some youth plainly reported their need to steal money to pay kickbacks to get a formal sector job. The stability and safety in Burundi appears to increasingly rely on the patience and perseverance of its adolescents and youth.

- **Pervasive Violence, Impunity and Hunger** – There is a lot of violence in Burundi today. Field interviews revealed that many government officials as well ordinary citizens are extremely concerned about this. It was during such discussions that the issue of impunity in today’s Burundi arose as significant. There seem to be few viable ways to limit the predations of the police and the *Imbonerakure*, to curb violent crime and rape (an issue that many government officials highlighted as especially serious) or generally confront injustices. Other forms of violence are both common and commonly overlooked, such as domestic violence or forcing or “tricking” girls to have sex. Hunger is catalyzing much of this violence – the beating of children and spouses, transactional sex, turning to prostitution, selling drugs and violent crime, and so on. Hunger is an important potential driver of violent conflict, but so is vigilante violence, which may emerge as an outgrowth of what appears to be an expanding environment of impunity.
- **Anger at Injustice, Inequality, Nepotism and Corruption** – Expressions of anger at the Burundian state proved to a common and provocative research theme. Furor, rage, indignation, explosive outbursts – ordinary Burundian citizens expressed a variety of fevered emotions during interviews. Their comments collectively pointed to widely shared frustration and growing resentment over what many Burundian citizens see as their powerlessness to help promote good governance and the rule of law. When and if citizen anger might fuel violence is difficult to predict. But it is present in Burundi, and at notable levels.

### 5.1.2. **Specific Populations**

The following populations just might help trigger violence in Burundi:

- **Orphan Males** – Theft of property and land from orphans, the exploitation of themselves and their siblings (including sexually), and a helplessness to protect themselves or family members, might create a well of anger in orphan boys and male youth that could be tapped.
- **Sons of Unmarried Mothers** – Those who are hounded out of their mothers' family homes (because they are in line to inherit land) run the risk of becoming angry, restive and desperate young men.
- **Refugee Returnee Boys** – Some adolescent boys and male youth who have returned from Tanzania as refugees appear to struggle to develop a life and new identity in Burundi, particularly if they are already out of school. Their sense of alienation is a worrying trend.
- **Ex-Combatants** – While ex-combatants were not the subject of this research, warning signs of potential violence surfaced during fieldwork. Armed gangs in Bujumbura are reportedly populated with ex-combatants. A researcher with ex-combatants found them to be "more aggressive, and with a political agenda" when compared to other adolescents and youth. Moreover, the sense of exclusion that many adolescent males and females in Bujumbura expressed was notable. Such suggestions of potential trouble are underscored by the following from Uvin:

From a conflict perspective, it is in the city that the conditions for violence are by far the most ripe: the dense concentration of ex-combatants, the deep frustration felt by many as a result of their relative impoverishment when compared to the visible wealth of the new elite, the presence of political entrepreneurs with deep pockets – all these factors facilitate further violence. [2009: 186]

- **Imbonerakure** – The *Imbonerakure* were not a subject of inquiry in this research. But some people raised the issue during interviews. A striking finding was that most of them expressed fear when they did so (except, notably, in Bujumbura). During an interview with an ex-combatant male youth, for example, the youth related that he was an influential member of his *Imbonerakure* group. He did so in a whisper – even though no one was within earshot of us. Experienced researchers, government officials and civilians, moreover, made reference to the fact that they could be fearsome, intimidating and violent (including sexually), and that at least some, reportedly, operated with broad impunity. The *Imbonerakure* are reported to be using violence, or the threat of violence, in their work. They could fuel more violence, either through their own acts or those they incite.
- **Police** – Many Burundian citizens, particularly some of those interviewed in Bujumbura, painted a picture of a state institution that was out of control. While there were stories of policemen who followed up on, for example, allegations of rape, they were countered by tales of police extortion, threatened arrests, and regular sweeps through urban neighborhoods in search of money and goods.

## 5.2. Key Factors that Promote Peace

Whether the groups mentioned above, or other groups, ultimately turn to violence is entirely uncertain. They would all seemingly have to be driven by others to do so.

But in addition, there are many countervailing factors in Burundi that promise to promote peace:

- **War Fatigue** – It was entirely clear, particularly from adults, that Burundians are sick of war. They do not want to live through it again. A return to armed conflict would almost surely promote a strong response for peace by many if not most Burundians.
- **Belief in School** – Many of those with hard lives and bitter emotions, such as orphans whose land was stolen from them, highlighted how completing their studies (usually meaning finishing secondary school) would be a way to improve their lives. Helping such desperate young people accomplish that, and then helping them find a job or develop a stable income, figures to promote peace and undercut prospects for violent conflict. It is entirely clear, however, that creating such conditions will not be easy, since few adolescents and youth ever get into secondary school and fewer still graduate, and since jobs in the formal sector are scarce and apparently difficult to access without connections or money. Addressing these elemental issues are critically important priorities for Burundi. They also shed light on the inevitability that young Burundians will continue to pour into the informal economic sector.
- **Cultural Flexibility and Family Acceptance** – The rigidity of many Burundian traditions and mores – such as attitudes toward formal marriage and adulthood, condom use and unmarried mothers – is counteracted, to some degree, by the fact that condemnation of ‘failed’ young people seems to be waning. In dramatic contrast to what most youth face in nearby Rwanda, adolescents and youth in Burundi who struggle to marry and become adults are far less likely to be publicly humiliated. Similarly, some parents accept their pregnant, unmarried daughters and do not “ban” them from the family compound. The apparent decline of public and family condemnation, however incomplete and uneven, promises to limit feelings of alienation among young Burundians who are unable to gain socially accepted adulthood or become unmarried mothers.
- **Determined Government Personnel** – Over the course of the research, I interviewed a large number of determined, dedicated and concerned government officials. Many were frank about the challenges to and failings of governance in their nation, and they expressed their concern about how to improve the situation of young Burundians. Partnership with such government officials seems both possible and potentially productive.
- **Self-Reliance and Hope** – While some adolescents and youth are mired in truly difficult situations and are despondent or angry, many others expressed an upbeat determination to make a go of it; to try to improve their lives despite the hardship and difficulties they faced and the lack of assistance available to them. Such young people – and there appear to be many in Burundi – are likely to resist engagement in violence and armed conflict.

## 6. LESSONS FROM BURUNDI

Research in Burundi illustrates how war, weak governance and severe hardship can unleash high levels of violence, exploitation and uncertainty on youthful citizens. While this is hardly a unique assessment, the diversity and intensity of violence and difficulty in young Burundian lives points to the strong possibility that certain potent trends in post-war worlds are either overlooked or unseen.

The following dozen lessons, drawn from the 2012 field research in Burundi, promise to powerfully impact post-war development and reconstruction work in this and other countries:

**1. Connections between Hunger and Deprivation to Education, Transactional Sex, Crime and Domestic Violence** – In Burundi, hunger and hardship correlated with a host of pertinent concerns. They either sent them to school hungry or forced children out of school. This made girls vulnerable to sexual manipulation and exploitation to their teachers and other men and male youth, who offered food or a false promise of marriage in exchange for sex. Hunger led some young people to steal for food and other basic necessities. And some parents were driven to hit hungry children until they stopped asking for food. All of these correlations may surface in other situations where people are hungry and desperate.

**2. The Expansion of Alcohol and Drug Abuse** – Beer is an ingrained element of Burundian culture. Sharing beer together is a way to encourage parties in conflict to resolve their differences and live peacefully. Many men and some women also drink even when there is no conflict. It is thus not surprising that some adolescents and youth turn to beer and drugs (particularly marijuana) when difficulties or boredom overtake them.

Alcohol and especially drugs are ubiquitous in many war zones, and offer a response to the diversity of difficulties that civilians and former fighters face after wars end. In Burundi, it is hard for young Burundians to find work or become adults. Turning to drink and drugs may help ease frustrations and a sense of failure. They may also be used as a salve against hunger and weariness.

**3. Diverse Challenges to Achieving Universal Primary Education (United Nations Millennium Development Goal 2)** – The Burundi case sheds harsh light on the tendency to correlate cuts in school fees with rises in school attendance. First, some officials used heavy force to drive children into primary school. Second, the absence of school fees did not mean that school was free, since many expenses remained. Third, hunger may compromise a child's ability to learn. Finally, poor educational quality is a disincentive that can counter school attendance. In short, the case of Burundi tells us that getting children into primary school and then finding ways to enable them to stay there is far more difficult than merely making official fees go away.

**4. The Significance of Corruption, Nepotism and Rage** – Burundian government officials appear to receive low salaries. As corruption in Burundi has deep roots, the reported reliance

on corruption by some officials is unsurprising. Nepotism, symbolized by the belief that connections are usually required to secure a salaried job, fuels much more than cynicism about governance in Burundi. The anger that so many expressed, over being disregarded, manipulated and cheated by government officials, was striking. It is a factor that likely plays a powerful, if latent, role in other post-war contexts.

- 5. The Dramatic Expansion of Orphan Populations Due to War** – In the wake of war, it is likely that orphan populations are sizable proportions of post-war child, adolescent and youth populations, particularly where local definitions of orphan include those lacking only fathers. In Burundi, no one was sure of the size of the orphan population. But many were aware of their vulnerability to exploitation.

Research in Burundi highlights how reliance on local traditions of orphan childcare, such as allowing the aunts and uncles of orphans to assume custody over them, may be a mistake. Aggressive advocacy and support for orphans is most probably required.

- 6. The Influence of Demography on Adulthood** – Huge youth populations in many war-affected states make becoming and remaining an adult ever more difficult. In Burundi, sons must inherit land before they can become adults. The increase in youth populations are helping to make many family land plots miniscule.

In all sorts of ways, unprecedentedly large youth populations take their toll on the quest for adulthood. More youth than ever before are seeking access to land, housing, schooling and jobs. Immersed in environments of intense competition, young people (male youth in particular) may be required to secure some or all of these assets before they can be recognized as adults. For many, this may be impossible, particularly in war-torn countries, where governments and economies are often weak and violent threats are often strong. Even when governance and economic conditions are promising in some respects, such as in post-war and post-genocide Rwanda, youth may be haunted by an inability to gain recognition as men and women. In Burundi, even moreso in Rwanda, and in many other cases, failed adulthood stands as an ominous and potentially volatile security threat.

- 7. The Power of Social Embarrassment and Cultural Taboo** – In rural Burundi, condom use is taboo and unmarried mothers pervade. Yet connections between the two are not often made. What is left are high levels of embarrassment for unmarried mothers and their families. Public admissions of the existence of unmarried mothers and their children, much less discussions about the crisis conditions that envelope them, are infrequent at best. It is a known but mostly avoided problem. International agencies should be on the lookout for similar situations in other war-affected countries.

- 8. The Devastating Consequences of Transactional Sex** – The tendency for desperate adolescent girls and female youth to exchange sex for a meal or simple commodities proved all too common in Burundi. Agreeing to have sex in advance of a promised marriage is an especially cruel “trick,” particularly given the profound consequences that face unmarried mothers (and girls and female youth who contract HIV/AIDS) from such interactions. It

is entirely likely that many desperate girls and female youth are taking similar risks, and risking social condemnation if they become pregnant or contract HIV/AIDS, in other war-affected countries, too.

- 9. The Profound Vulnerability of Adolescents to Sexual Violence and Pedophilia** – It proved impossible to ascertain just how great the rate of rape and sexual violence was in Burundi. But all reports suggested that it was alarmingly high – and that the chances of being prosecuted for committing rape or other acts of sexual violence were low. Moreover, no one seems to take notice of indications that pedophilia may be a potent threat to adolescent girls. Similar threats and conditions of impunity are likely to apply to other war-affected contexts as well.
- 10. The Invisible Lives of Urban Underclass Youth** – Overwhelmingly, development and reconstruction attentions are focused on rural Burundi. In some ways this makes much sense, since Burundi's population is unusually rural-based. But beware backwaters: the state of many adolescents and youth in Bujumbura appears to be a protection nightmare. There seems to be little or no concern paid to the dangerously exploitative situations that *Toto Show* child prostitutes and many housegirls and houseboys face. The violence and impunity which play central roles in city life are similarly disregarded. Overlooking adolescents and youth in war-affected cities in favor of those in rural areas is a mistaken policy, particularly when cities boom and are crucial to the livelihoods and futures of so many young people during and after wars.
- 11. The Towering Importance of the Police** – The police force in Burundi, particularly in Bujumbura, appears to be a largely unchecked institution. This evidently allows members of the police force to act with something close to impunity. While this issue, by itself, is potentially explosive, the threats that police impunity can pose for the protection of children could be immense. When rapes and other crimes are unaddressed or unreported, and extortion runs rampant, the door would seem to be open to many forms of child predation. The behavior of the police and other state security forces is directly connected to the protection of children. During or after wars, when the rule of law and governance generally are weak, this issue promises to be even more important.
- 12. The Influence of Hidden Threat and Surveillance** – Burundi's undercover Imbonerakure signify how latent and concealed forces may pose significant threats to civilians. While direct information about their actions and membership was thin, all signs pointed to the Imbonerakure as an intimidating security and surveillance force that operates with at least some degree of impunity. Uncovering the existence and activities of such institutions is a crucial development and reconstruction activity, as they may jeopardize the protection and rights of ordinary children, youth and adults.

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