



AFRICA

PROGRAM

Issue Briefing

"It Always Rains in the Same Place First" Geographic Favoritism in Rural Burundi

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Executive Summary

Field research in rural Burundi underscores a potential danger in reconstructing post-war countries. The findings suggest that rebuilding damaged buildings, institutions, and authority systems without consideration of their geographic distribution runs the risk of simultaneously reinforcing structural inequities that were a root cause of civil war.

In the two provinces studied, 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. Three courses of action are provided to address this situation. This case contains cautionary lessons that are likely applicable to many other post-war settings as well.

This article does not seek to assign blame, but to identify an issue of concern for Burundi's reconstruction and to suggest remedial measures that promise to help rectify the situation.

Background

This paper is based on the findings of a report of a field evaluation trip to Burundi in November 2004. This evaluation was the third field trip to

Burundi in a series of evaluative missions over the previous eight months commissioned by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWICS). The field research was intended to evaluate community perspectives on the WWICS' Community Based Leadership Program (CBLP) and assess the program's impact.

The WWICS receives support from the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI) to implement the CBLP in Gitega and Ruyigi provinces. The CBLP is part of a larger training program instituted with OTI funding.

The CBLP selected and trained Burundian Master Trainers in a specific curriculum designed to teach community leaders in each zone within Gitega and Ruyigi provinces how to manage conflict situations resulting from the reintegration of refugees, displaced persons, and demobilized combatants returning to their communities. Community members identified and selected these leaders, who have been attending trainings and follow-up sessions on conflict resolution and leadership in an effort to strengthen their communities' peace-building capacity.

The field evaluations were conducted to gauge community members' perceptions of the CBLP and its impact. Qualitative research techniques

were used. Interviews were conducted with a majority of the twenty Master Trainers and participants in seven focus groups of program trainees, as well as with representatives from OTI and its implementing partners. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with members of two marginalized ethnic Twa communities and a range of humanitarian and political actors, including representatives from the Provincial, Communal, Zonal, and Sectoral levels of government.

Pronounced Geographic Favoritism: Favored and Neglected Zones

1. Scene Setter

Field research suggests that there are dramatic differences, historical and current, in local government and international investment policies and practices between geographic zones in Gitega and Ruyigi Provinces that have been reinforcing inequalities along geographic, class, and ethnic lines. While many local, national and international efforts are positively impacting the development of peace and security in Burundi, growing inequity between zones is a potentially destabilizing factor that could help fuel a return to violent conflict. It appears that some zones are being systematically advantaged, while others are being neglected. Although there may be exceptions to the trend, there can be little doubt about the general pattern.

Burundians in both favored and neglected zones are keenly aware of the dramatically uneven distribution of assistance between them. A CBLP trainee in a neglected zone told the author, “Every Commune is like this. One zone is always favored. The Commune Administrators really lead their zones of origin and favor their native zones.” Reasons for this disproportional development can be found in Burundi’s colonial history, cultural traditions, displacement trends, government practices, and the subsequent unequal distribution of international humanitarian support.

2. The Emergence of Geographic Discrimination

To understand the implications of favored and neglected zones within Communes, it is important to reflect on the evolution of the phenomenon of geographic discrimination. The development of “favored” areas of rural Burundi undoubtedly began in the colonial era, when religious missionaries selected certain locations to build their parishes, which were often followed by the establishment of the first formal schools nearby. Commune Administration buildings and markets frequently were established in the same vicinity, helping to develop a sense of centrality in these areas that often promoted further development including dependable road access. At the same time, concentrating quality services in one location limited the wider population’s access to them.

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an Associate Research Professor of Humanitarian Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a Research Fellow with Boston University’s African Studies Center. Dr. Sommers has consulted for a wide array of organizations, including the World Bank, UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, the U.S. Department of Defense, CARE, Save the Children, and the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children. He regularly writes on youth, education, peace education, conflict negotiation, child soldier, urbanization, human rights, and security issues in war and post-war contexts, and has carried out research in twenty war-affected countries. Dr. Sommers received the 2003 Margaret Mead Award for his book, *Fear in Bongoland: Burundi Refugees in Urban Tanzania* (2001).

Geographic discrimination appears, therefore, to be a longstanding tradition in Burundi; it continues to be an issue of concern during this post-conflict reconstruction period. Continuing zone-based discrimination is evident in the high number of permanent buildings in certain locations, many having been constructed with support from international agencies. These include primary schools with adjacent staff housing, a hospital or dispensary, and often the only secondary and vocational schools in the Commune. Favored zones often enjoy better roads, a Catholic Parish, the largest market in the Commune, and sometimes running water and even electricity. Government civil servant and military offices and housing, and commercial stores, are also usually concentrated in these areas.

In favored zones, residents are more likely to have received training and employment opportunities from local, national and international agencies. Almost all of the primary capital investments and economic, health, educational, and political advantages of the entire Commune tend to be concentrated in this single zone. Even when investments may be divided between two zones, the differences separating such favored zones and the remaining neglected zones are apparent and significant.

Exclusion may not have been intentional; however, the concentration of services and opportunities in a particular geographic location meant that those who did not reside near these areas, and who could not easily travel to them, were disadvantaged, due to the lack of equal access. These geographic inequities appear to be directly correlated with ethnic and class distinctions.

War-induced population displacement during the years of conflict only reinforced these inequities. For example, Tutsi communities were often displaced by Hutu rebel attacks and sought refuge near the Commune Administration and government military camps in the favored zones. Many Hutu, when facing the same displacement by government forces, had to find refuge in camps in other areas of the country or beyond Burundi's borders. Many of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps have been preserved and are still servicing their mainly Tutsi inhabitants in the favored zones, whereas most

of the Hutu IDP camps, including the controversial "Regroupment Camps," have closed.

3. The Impact of Geographic Discrimination on Reconstruction

Evidence of geographic favoritism along class and ethnic lines has important implications for Burundi's peaceful reconstruction. Favored zones enjoy superior political representation through the resident Commune Administrations, further reinforcing the frustrations of residents in the neglected zones. The disparity between zones is further exacerbated by significant variations in class, wealth and education. Many residents in neglected zones express a feeling of alienation from their Chef de Zone; complaints about political representation are markedly lower in the favored zones.

Ethnically, it appears that many in the Tutsi population have greater access to resources and security in these favored zones due to the proximity of IDP camps to opportunities, facilities and information that many would have lacked if they had returned to their former homes. In fact, some IDP camp residents have rebuilt their houses out of brick or cement, signaling that they may not be planning to return home—either out of fear, because local political leaders of IDPs may be urging them not to return, or because they seek to retain their proximity to the many resources available in favored zones.

This phenomenon is supported by the plans of some government officials to create "Model Villages" out of IDP camps. The beneficiaries of these Model Villages would be predominantly Tutsi, and resource distribution would be further skewed in the direction of the already favored zones. The ethnic implications of these plans, while not openly expressed by officials in explicit terms, are nonetheless potentially serious because of the preferential access already attributed to IDP camp residents in comparison to the remainder of the population.

4. International Responsibility

Significantly, international agencies appear to have inadvertently contributed to class and ethnic dis-

crimination by providing assistance to the most accessible areas and placing priority on rebuilding pre-existing infrastructure. This began during the war years, when favored zones, with their concentration of services, government institutions, and permanent buildings, became regular targets of attack. Buildings were often left in ruins. International agencies seeking to provide humanitarian support in rural Burundi often ended up in favored zones as they provided reasonable levels of access and security. In addition, since international agencies often seek to rebuild institutions and buildings that previously existed—in part because this can be done more rapidly—favored zones offered distinct advantages. The need to rehabilitate was manifest, and a population in need (most commonly, Tutsi-dominated IDP camps) was usually nearby. This trend largely continues to the present, resulting in

the unequal distribution of services along class and ethnic lines. Previous inequities have been reinforced, and historically less-developed areas continue to be, for the most part, ignored.

While it may be understandable that Commune Administrators place a priority on reconstructing the Commune's hospitals, schools, and central markets, it must be understood that this priority has the effect of perpetuating a pattern whereby a privileged few disproportionately benefit from international agency assistance. A cultural explanation for this is captured by the Burundian proverb which states that "It always rains in the same place first."¹ (*Imvura iragwa ntikwira hose.*)

It is, therefore, the responsibility of international agencies and programs to question why most major investments and reconstruction activities take place in particular zones that disproportion-

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN BURUNDI

Local Administration in Burundi functions at multiple levels—among the several levels codified into law are provinces, communes, Zones, sectors, *collines* and *sous-collines*, decreasing in order of size. Within each of Burundi's 16 rural provinces, between 5 and 9 communes make up the primary form of local administration. Communal administration is decentralized, and is governed by both by formal laws and precedent. Each communal administration is an independent legal and financial entity and is responsible for all development projects and public service delivery within its territory. Their influence is expected to grow under the recently approved constitution, under which communal councils are elected, rather than appointed by the Minister of the Interior.

Each Commune is now led by an elected council, who in turn select a Commune Administrator from among their ranks to direct the commune's daily activities, including the budget, local tax collection, communal programs, relations with provincial and national government, hiring staff, certifying marriages, the use of public land and even issues relating to policing and dispute resolution. Each commune is divided into a number of Zones, and the Commune Administrator nominates a resident of each Zone to serve as *Chef de Zone*, who coordinates all development activities within his Zone and reports directly to the Commune Administrator.

The *Chef de Zone* serves as the representative of the Commune Administrator to the lowest political entity—the *colline*, or hillside. He is assisted in this by *chefs de secteurs*, who are responsible for reporting developments in several *collines* comprising their sector. Each *colline* is led by an elected council and *Chef de Colline*, who are responsible for arbitrating local disputes and liaising between formal and informal authorities, but have little financial authority. Each *colline* is subdivided into *sous-collines*, groups of 10 houses, known as the Nyumba Kumi.

1. This is an addition under the 2005 constitution. Previously, Commune councilmembers were appointed by the minister of the interior

ately benefit one section of the population. The international community should take the time to ponder a question offered in response to the above proverb: “Why does it always rain in the same place first?” (*Kubera iki imvura yama itasurira hamwe igihe cose?*) When asked this question, the Chef of a favored zone in one Commune explained his zone is favored because “All the educated people, all *Abatware* [that is, formal leaders; the most powerful people in the Commune] are from this zone. Many of them are in Bujumbura. These people speak for their zone so that it can be developed.” This response illuminates the political nature of zone-based favoritism and reinforces its continuing relevance in post-conflict Burundi.

In conclusion, the policy of discrimination between favored and neglected zones could further fuel ethnic and class tensions and threaten the fragile peace process. The potential for this type of discrimination to result in widespread discontent and possible violence is made worse by the extreme deprivation Burundi is experiencing. A World Food Program official reported that 84% of the population was either chronically vulnerable or existed on the edge of starvation. When combined with this widespread scarcity and hardship, rising inequalities along geographic, ethnic and class lines pose a significant threat to Burundi’s hard-won and still-emerging peace.

Looking Ahead: Options for the Future

In seeking a more equitable approach to reconstruction in Burundi, there are three courses of action that may help to alleviate the growing disparity between favored and neglected zones within Communes in both Gitega and Ruyigi Provinces, and across the country.

First, politicians and national government representatives must work to equalize the distribution of resources and food aid allocated for reconstruction within the next fiscal year. This should be accomplished through Commune-wide assessments that compare needs between zones. Provincial Administrators and other national and international actors involved in Communal reconstruction and development should use these assessments to equi-

tably distribute assistance between zones, with an eye towards redressing past inequities. Increased attention should be given to outlying areas that historically have not had access to many of the amenities available in the favored zones.

Second, those supporting the Model Village developmental approach should be required to detail what is being done to address the issue of geographic, class and ethnic inequality before the plan is considered at a national level.

Third, international agencies providing assistance to Burundi (and, quite possibly, elsewhere) should reassess the policy of preferentially rebuilding previously existing structures and further explore the opportunities and implications of shifting much more development assistance to less developed areas.

Postscript

Systemic inequality is a common cause of civil conflict. The case of favored and neglected zones in Burundi underscores the need for careful analysis of the historical and political context for selecting reconstruction priorities before agencies and government counterparts develop programs and target their investments. This paper seeks to illuminate how international agency interventions, however well-motivated, may unintentionally exacerbate potentially explosive ethnic and class tensions. It is hoped that assistance agencies working in Burundi, sensitized to the impact of their reconstruction efforts, will take corrective action, and that those working elsewhere will become aware of the ways in which post-conflict assistance may unintentionally reinforce a country’s structural inequities.

Notes

1. Also translated as: “Rain cannot reach everywhere at the same time.”



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