



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report compares the results of parallel research projects carried out among impoverished, nonelite youth in post-conflict Rwanda and Burundi. Arguing that the plight and priorities of nonelite youth should be of serious national and international concern, particularly in countries that have unusually youthful populations that are overwhelmingly poor and undereducated, it finds striking differences between the groups, with a significantly bleaker picture for youth in Rwanda.

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*Marc Sommers and Peter Uvin*

## Youth in Rwanda and Burundi

### Contrasting Visions

#### Summary

- Extensive research with nonelite youth in postwar Rwanda and Burundi revealed stark and startling contrasts between the lives of poor Rwandan and Burundian youth, particularly concerning issues of masculinity, education, urban migration, and social mobility.
- Severe manhood pressures and the threat of failure for male and female youth emerged as the dominant research theme in Rwanda. In Burundi, severe economic pressure surfaced as the dominant research theme. Yet many youth there believe that the future holds promise if they can work hard, remain flexible, and have some luck.
- Although youth in Burundi contend that educational accomplishment directly influences social mobility and survival strategies, the Rwanda research points to low demand for education and training among the lesser-educated youth majority.
- For Burundian youth, especially male youth, urban migration was a risky but nonetheless desirable option. Meanwhile, Rwandan youth mainly viewed rural-urban migration as an escape from humiliation in rural areas.
- Whereas many Burundian youth held out the hope of improving their lot and perhaps even ascending socially, the commanding imprint of risk aversion led many Rwandan youth to focus on minimizing prospects of collapse.
- Most Burundian youth believe that they have options and possibilities while most Rwandan youth do not. While Rwandan youth face constraining adulthood mandates and government regulations, as well as a severe housing crisis, Burundian youth perceive a range of options for making plans and then implementing them.
- Weak governance and adaptable cultures appear to provide nonelite youth populations in postwar contexts with opportunities for creative advancement. Strong and restrictive governments and cultures, while capable of implementing policies that are favorable to economic growth, may also create calamitous results for many youth.

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- Boosting Rwandan youth prospects calls for reforming or perhaps eliminating housing and informal economy regulations that undermine their aims. Aiding Burundian youth necessitates an enhanced focus on jobs and job training. Qualitative research on marginalized youth perspectives should be carried out before youth work begins.

## Introduction

Rwanda and Burundi have long been considered practically identical. They were once part of the same Rwanda-Urundi colony, ruled first by the Germans and then by the Belgians. They share roughly the same ethnic composition and demographic proportions of majority Hutu and minority Tutsi and Twa. Their languages are closely related, as are the landscapes, farming practices, and cultures of the two countries. They also have two of the youngest populations in the world.<sup>1</sup> Finally, both countries have also experienced spasms of extreme violence, including genocide.

Recently, Rwanda and Burundi have embarked on strikingly different trajectories. Rwanda has become a “donor darling”—a sparkling example, in the eyes of many, of the sort of sociopolitical progress that strong domestic leadership and good management can inspire. Burundi’s profile, in contrast, is that of a shaky, corrupt, postwar nation going nowhere fast. Yet many of the results from our research among poor, nonelite young Rwandans and Burundians, which was undertaken with World Bank support in 2006–07, were virtually the reverse of what we had anticipated in light of these trends.

Our research aimed to find out how Rwandan and Burundian youth—defined here as males and females between fifteen and thirty-five years of age—are faring after the massive violence that shook the two countries.<sup>2</sup> A key analytical concept in this research was the impact of masculinity on youth lives: how a male youth gains social recognition as “a man” in a society and what happens when he cannot gain such recognition. What we found was that the nature of governance, in addition to the flexibility of culture and society about achieving manhood, significantly influence male and female youth lives in Central Africa.

It turns out that generally weak governance and social tolerance toward manhood mandates in Burundi provide space for many youth to generate trajectories of their own. A dramatically different situation in Rwanda left many youth risk averse and tied to a future where public failure appears likely. The implications of this research for other postwar contexts are potentially significant. Frequently, the international community is exhorted to first invest in strengthening the state and/or to build on local “traditional” culture. While both these suggestions are not without interest, the comparison here underscores how too much state strength and cultural rigidity can create prisons of despair for youth. Weak governance and adaptable cultures appear to provide massive, nonelite youth populations in most postwar nations with opportunities for creative advancement, while strong and restrictive governments and cultures may create calamitous results for many young citizens.

What follows is an overview of a series of important concerns, starting with the issue of masculinity and manhood and continuing with a comparative examination of education, urban migration, and social mobility. In all of these areas and more, we found stark contrasts between the lives of poor Rwandan and Burundian youth. The report ends with a set of policy recommendations on how to better understand and meet the needs of this large and too often unheard but absolutely critical social group.

## Notions of Manhood

In both Rwanda and Burundi, adulthood is defined by marriage and the possibilities of providing for a family. Movement toward manhood and womanhood are linked, and achieving

them relies on the ability of male youth to meet their first challenge. To marry, a male youth must first provide housing for his future wife and children. Severe manhood pressures—and, as a result, the strong chance that many male youth would never be recognized as men in society—emerged as the dominant theme of the research in Rwanda. The threat of failed masculinity in rural areas is having a kind of domino effect on Rwandan society, most particularly on female youth and increasing numbers of rural youth who are migrating to cities, especially Kigali. While many of the same dynamics exist in Burundi as well, they were not as central or as unchangeable in people's lives.

Delayed adulthood for men means delayed adulthood for women. Marriage and giving birth to children are prerequisites of socially acceptable womanhood. As they wait for male youth to complete their houses and prepare for marriage, the pressure on Rwandan female youth is intensified by the report that for every one hundred women in Rwanda there may be as few as eighty-eight men.<sup>3</sup> As a result, as many as 12 percent of female youth will be unable to ever marry (and thus become adult women).<sup>4</sup> Taken together, the female surplus and the limited number of eligible husbands severely constrains female youth opportunities for becoming adults. In addition, entering womanhood is encircled by a narrow chronological window of opportunity. No one can get married officially in Rwanda until age twenty-one. By twenty-four or twenty-five, a female youth in a rural area may be considered too old to marry. Single women much older than that run the risk of being considered spinsters in rural society.

National policies have significantly exacerbated the already intense adulthood pressures on male and female youth. The Rwandan government is in the process of changing the housing of the majority of Rwandans in rural areas. More than 80 percent of all Rwandans currently reside in rural areas, and the government plans to move nearly all rural dwellers into *imidugudu*, or community housing areas, by 2030—a very different situation than the spread-out *rugó* pattern, where people live on their land in family compounds, that has prevailed across Central Africa for centuries. As a government official explained, “[Male] youth who construct new houses will be directed to an *umudugudu*, and by 2030, the government vision is to have 80 percent of the population living on *imidugudu*.”<sup>5</sup>

The Rwandan government's housing regulations are making house building for youth substantially more difficult and frequently, it appears, exceedingly unlikely. Strict government regulations require all new houses to be built on an *umudugudu*, and in a prescribed way. Not only is it very difficult to obtain an *umudugudu* plot on which to build a house, but the government also mandates that all houses on *umudugudu* must be fairly large, with at least two bedrooms. Regulating the standard size of an *umudugudu* house helps make the quest toward completing a house virtually impossible for nearly all poor male youth in rural Rwanda. Deforestation legislation that was in force (for environmental protection reasons) during the 2006–07 fieldwork period, moreover, caused a sharp jump in the price of roof tiles. Meanwhile, in Rwanda's capital, Kigali, 83 percent of the population live in illegal, informal settlements.<sup>6</sup> Many if not most of them are youth. These informal settlements, too, are in the process of being destroyed via government edicts to replace “illegal” housing with legally mandated buildings. Although complaints about the forced evictions, from Rwandan or international sources, are rare, Alain Durand-Lasserve states that “the practice of eviction without fair compensation or without offering resettlement options is creating a population of homeless families” in Kigali.<sup>7</sup> The collective result of these practices and restrictions is a severe housing crisis across Rwanda.

In rural areas, two hundred francs was what most people were paid for a day's work on another person's farm.<sup>8</sup> Our research found that working to save money to buy roofing is the main priority for most male youth in rural Rwanda. This often meant that male youth left primary school early to try to collect as many roof tiles as they could. Many female youth

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did the same: some felt that if they managed to accumulate some savings (by farming for others for two hundred francs a day), they might be able to attract a potential male youth for informal marriage (cohabitation—illegal but widely practiced without sanction in both countries). A male youth might propose to her by saying that if they work together, their collective savings would enable them to buy more roof tiles and then, hopefully, to marry.

What was striking about this situation was how many male youth in rural Rwanda stated that they knew they might never complete a roof for their house in their lifetime. It can take 600 to 800 roof tiles to make one house roof. Given their current age and rates of accumulation, many youth who were interviewed might not gather much more than half of the required roof tiles in their entire working life. This summons the question: if the situation was so dire for male youth in rural Rwanda, why did they continue striving to buy roof tiles? A common male youth answer to this question was, “We have no choice.” The cultural requirements of manhood (and womanhood) in Rwanda appear to be unyielding and exceptionally difficult for many if not most Rwandan youth to achieve.

Although low- and mid-level Rwandan government officials were well aware that male youth in their areas were unable to construct houses on an umudugudu, reporting this fact to their superiors appeared to be irregular and, when such reports were delivered, they did not inspire much of a response. Indeed, questioning the viability of Rwanda’s national imidugudu policy seems to be difficult. Illustrative of this state of affairs was the recollection of a sector official who asked his superior, the district mayor, how he might address the difficulty that male youth faced in building houses on imidugudu in his sector. The district mayor simply responded, “It’s policy.” That concluded their conversation. The sector official, by implication, had to find a solution on his own. He didn’t have one.

In Burundi, young men and women (and their parents) largely shared the same ideals of normative manhood. For them, building a house, getting married, and starting a family were at the core of their expectations. Many of them, youth and adults alike, explained that the old practice of parents paying for their son’s wedding had declined because of poverty, and that it was difficult for young men to save enough money on their own. Indeed, when describing how hard life is nowadays, Burundians would refer to the fact that young men marry later today than they previously did. Yet, although the definition of normative manhood was the same as in Rwanda, and the combined effect of war and economic decline had made achieving these expectations very hard in Burundi as well, Burundian youth did not present themselves as stuck the same way Rwandan youth did. Somehow, for Burundian youth, their incapacity to build a house and marry in the fashion that tradition mandated merely symbolized the tough times they faced. Unlike their Rwandan counterparts, striving to attain manhood did not constitute the core element of their lives.

Only a small minority of young people in Burundi said they would never marry. It occurred specifically among two particular groups: Tutsi young men in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP), and mainly Hutu ex-combatants who did not participate in the demobilization, demilitarization and reintegration (DDR) program in the city.<sup>9</sup> Both of these groups felt far more alienated from society than any other group that this research studied in Burundi. They seemed to be depressed, with their professed inability ever to marry a main cause or symbol of their despair.

Why did most Burundian youth expect to marry while most Rwandan youth did not? First, Rwandan-style regulations do not exist in Burundi. This made life (for now at least) less difficult for Burundian male youth: they had more freedom to choose to build where and how they wanted, at lower cost. In addition, it seemed as if Burundian society was less attached to the expectation that youth must achieve normative adulthood. It is not that the norm itself had changed, but rather that Burundians widely accepted that it could not be perfectly achieved, and were willing to accommodate alternatives. Thus, Burundians young and old

told us that people nowadays married later than they used to; they engaged in informal marriage that society found acceptable; and instead of building a house, a male youth could simply build a room next to the house of his parents, marry a female youth, and begin married life. Although all three of these alternatives were also found in Rwanda, Rwandan youth and adults considered them embarrassments and signs of social failure. Building any new house or shelter outside of an *umudugudu* in Rwanda was illegal as well.

Cultural adaptation in Burundi, in short, stood in sharp contrast to nonadaptation in Rwanda. Against enormous odds, under pressure from a combination of government and cultural mandates, Rwandan youth desperately tried to stick to traditional ideals of normative adulthood. Some female and, especially, male youth facing dire straits in rural Rwanda migrated to Kigali to escape the shame and humiliation that their inability to marry had created. Some urban youth even reported that they feared returning to their former rural homes until they had married or, at the very least, had some sign of economic success from their urban adventure, even for a visit—a striking sentiment in a country as tiny as Rwanda. In Burundi, the situation was far more relaxed. Youth there considered marrying later. Informal marriage and building onto family structures were second-best solutions, to be sure, but they were also a clearly acceptable part of life. One twenty-one-year-old male youth sums up Burundian attitudes nicely: “Men who stay unmarried long are partly looked upon badly by society. But on the other hand, it is understood because of the great cost.”

## Ways Out? Education and Migration

### *Education*

More than any other subject, attitudes toward education and its potential to improve life prospects revealed remarkable differences between the future hopes of Burundian and Rwandan youth. In our research in Burundi, education was “the single issue that came up most in the conversations about how (young) people try to make it in life. It is at the heart of individual social mobility and family strategies for survival.”<sup>10</sup> A whopping 85 percent of those interviewed in Burundi spontaneously brought up education. Men talked about it as much as women, Hutu as much as Tutsi, less poor households as much as poor households, and rural people as much as urban people. There were only minor differences: Tutsi interviewed in an internally displaced persons camp had a strikingly high rate of attachment to education, whereas some of the wealthier rural people were less interested in it—probably because youth had enough work and wealth in helping their parents manage their livestock and lands.

In Rwanda, virtually the opposite situation prevailed: only 12 percent of rural youth respondents to a question about their future plans included education. A mere 4 percent mentioned training. The proportions were even smaller among urban youth, where less than 6 percent of respondents mentioned education or training as a component of their plans. Rwandan youth, regardless of their level of educational accomplishment, generally contended that the educated youth minority live in an entirely separate world from the undereducated youth majority. As a destitute male youth of twenty-four explained, “How could an educated person become uneducated, or an uneducated person become educated? It’s impossible to change your situation.” The Rwanda research strongly suggests that demand for education and training is low among what might be assumed is the primary target group: the lesser-educated youth majority.

This may be viewed as an alarming and tragic finding. However, most Rwandan youth who were interviewed appeared to have taken a different view: to accept one’s fate, including the reality (for them) that entrance into a secondary school, a vocational school, or even

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a training program, was never going to happen. Life became easier to deal with, in other words, if these limitations were simply accepted.

The contrast between the research findings from these two countries was not only dramatic but surprising. After all, it is Rwanda that has by all accounts the better educational system. Better-off people in Burundi dream of sending their children to the National University of Rwanda, for the education there is reputed to be significantly better than in Burundi. Rwanda's education policy is better organized, better executed, and better funded than Burundi's. The Rwandan government has a clear vision for how to use advanced technical education as a motor for economic transformation over the coming decades. In strong contrast, the education system in Burundi is in shambles, and the national government's capacity to formulate and execute a coherent education policy is far lower. Small wonder that the sharp difference between findings on education with similar samples of youth in Burundi and Rwanda startled Rwandan officials at the district and national government levels, in addition to international officials in Kigali with whom the findings were shared. For many, such an outcome was unforeseen in the midst of Rwanda's much-touted and substantial expansion of child and youth access to education.

Why is there a far deeper attachment to education in Burundi than in Rwanda? One compelling explanation arises from the sharply contrasting outlooks of youth on their future. Rwandan youth elicited a strong emphasis on practicality, on not hoping for something—such as a good education—that, in their view, they will never get. The idea for most undereducated Rwandan youth was that you have to first accept your plight, and then sculpt a life as best as you can. It is a life lived within narrow expectations and limited possibilities, where realism dominates and imagination seems to be the reserve of the more fortunate. It is, in short, a life based on regrettable fate: you either have the advantages of education or you do not. Most do not. As a result, while Rwanda's education system may be good and ethnic discrimination does not formally exist, most ordinary Rwandans believe that they have no chance to make it to higher education and the social advancement that it represents. The undereducated Rwandan youth majority were proactive in a very specific way: they reduced the possibility of likely disappointment by not hoping for much education or training in the first place.

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In Burundi, in pointed contrast, even though the education system is poorly equipped and organized, people were more in tune with the opportunities inherent in education: if parents had the luck of having a truly smart child, then they might possess the "lottery ticket" needed to get their family away from farming and out of poverty. That was a dream all Burundian parents shared. To some degree, this may have been an expression of the timing of the field research work: in 2006, the country had just successfully gone through a transition to an elected government dominated by a Hutu party. The first decision of the new president, Pierre Nkurunziza, had been to guarantee free primary education for all. This decision was extremely popular at the time and led to an explosion in enrollment at the beginning of the next school year. Unequal access to secondary and tertiary education had been one of the key tools for the exclusion of the majority of the population under the previous, Tutsi-dominated regimes. This new policy was a strong symbol that change was coming to Burundi. Maybe the Hutu youth interviewed finally felt free to dream of education as a way out after decades where it was a virtual impossibility. Nonetheless, this dream is likely not the only factor that explains the broad importance of education to Burundians, for it occurred equally among Hutu and Tutsi, rich and poor, the children of highly educated parents and the children of undereducated parents, rural and urban, male and female.

Another possible explanation relates to the forceful presence of traditional expectations of masculinity, which will be revisited in the next section. Before that, let us make two remarks here. First, here is a quote from Peter Uvin's 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. It is not as if each year of additional schooling makes Burundians one thirteenth better off. Rather, once one passes the level at which one can read and write there is a long plateau of few increased personal quality-of-life gains, and then a dramatic increase after tenth grade, and especially at completion of high school. This is why so many people talked to us about education *jusqu'au diplôme*—until the diploma, for that is where education pays off.<sup>11</sup>

For poor Burundians to attain that level of education requires extensive sacrifice. Many students have to try multiple times to get their primary and secondary school degrees. A lot of young people lost years of schooling due to civil war and displacement as well as school mismanagement and strikes. As a result, many young men and women will be well into their twenties before they may (or may not) get to the real prize of education—a secondary-school degree, and, even better, a university degree. Second, this contrasts with the expectation that young men must earn money and start a family—something that historically, in Burundi, they were supposed to do between ages eighteen and twenty-one. The difference between how Burundian and Rwandan youth regard education, it turns out, is directly tied to the striking difference between how they grapple with adulthood expectations.

### **Migration**

Another significant difference between the twin research endeavors relates to how youth assessed the prospect of urban migration as a means to improve their lives. Rwandan youth in villages and in Kigali primarily viewed rural–urban migration as an escape from humiliation and failure in rural areas rather than a way out of impoverishment. For them, the push–pull dichotomy so common in urban migration studies is virtually bereft of any kind of “pull.” Rural and urban youth in Rwanda scarcely ever mentioned any wonders of city life and its various attractions. Instead, they viewed Kigali as risky and treacherous. Since Kigali was a place where people went and might never return, it was mainly a destination for the desperate, not the inquisitive or the dynamic. For Burundian youth, especially male youth, on the other hand, urban migration was a desirable option—risky and difficult for sure, but associated with the potential for success. In this way, the views of Burundian youth run much more closely to those of youth in other African nations, where modernity is highly valued,<sup>12</sup> and cities, widely considered as the homeland of urban culture, offer youth an array of possibilities, especially for male youth.<sup>13</sup>

It seemed as if the constraints on urban migration were largely the same in both countries—migrating without money, without knowing someone who can shelter you and help you get a job, is a scary affair for poor rural youth. However, many Burundian youth spoke about it positively. They discussed urban migration as a solution to escaping rural landlessness and joblessness (the push factors), but also as a place for individual advancement and fresh opportunities (pull). It is hard to say if more Burundians actually migrated to cities—Burundi's urban growth rate is the world's highest while Rwanda's runs a close second<sup>14</sup>—or if Burundian youth did substantially better once in town. But certainly their general attitude toward migration was far more upbeat than their Rwandan counterparts.

Urban migrant youth themselves, when interviewed in Bujumbura and Kigali, were far more pleased with their decision in Burundi than in Rwanda. Indeed, in Bujumbura, about half of the people interviewed in the poor neighborhoods (*quartiers populaires*) considered their lives better than their parents'. Nothing of the sort surfaced among urban youth in Rwanda, where most considered Kigali life exceptionally bleak.

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## Prospects and Limits of Social Mobility

Given these differing attitudes toward two important potential vectors of social mobility—education and migration—we found that Burundian youth had a far higher sense of potential social mobility than Rwandan youth did. Note that this does not mean that, objectively or factually, Rwanda has less vertical mobility than Burundi does. Reliable data on this subject simply do not exist. This analysis is based on reported perceptions and the interpretations and ideologies that make sense of these perceived facts.

The overall sense of social mobility, that is, that there was a real possibility to move up in society, via education or migration, differed sharply between male and female youth in Rwanda and Burundi. Throughout the interviews, Burundian youth displayed a far greater belief in potential mobility than their Rwandan counterparts did. While youth in both countries believed that downward social mobility was more likely than upward social mobility, the commanding imprint of risk aversion, so prominent among Rwandan youth, was far less apparent in Burundian youth.

Ironically, Burundian youth seemed to have the sort of attunement to new ideas and innovations that Rwandan government officials tried so hard to inculcate in Rwandan youth. Burundian youth were interested in “trying different things,”<sup>15</sup> while Rwandan youth (and adults) largely resisted the new ideas that government officials, in rural areas and Kigali alike, implored them to adapt. More than that, most Burundian youth had a “capitalist ethos”—a can-do ethic of “hard work and perseverance, good management, and dynamism.”<sup>16</sup> While many Burundian youth held out the hope of improving their lot and perhaps even ascending socially, the overwhelming attitude among members of the poor Rwandan youth majority, in words and in actions, was to minimize their chances of collapse.

One possible explanation for this difference lies in divergent attitudes toward the state. In both countries, only the smallest fraction of youth had direct experience with international aid. Young Burundians spoke frequently about their families as sources of support; even in the capital city, where many bemoaned the decline of community aid and family support, they gave examples of its continuing occurrence. Burundian youth also never mentioned the state when they described their plans for the future. There were clearly few expectations that the state would support their progress.

Meanwhile, in Rwanda, most youth had little to no expectation that families could help them all that much. The Rwandan government, on the other hand, was an entirely different story. Regardless of whether the comments referred to youth being “prisoners” of government regulations or that “the government is our parent,” having the government “close to us” was a persistent, recurring Rwandan refrain. To be sure, there seemed to be no one else around to help youth, and expecting the government to help was part of most strategies.<sup>17</sup> Yet these responses support an outlook on life that seeks help and averts risk. It is not adaptive, experimental, or innovative, as the capitalist ethos of many Burundian youth suggests. Instead, it is generally cautious and conservative.

At the same time, the Rwandan government’s general approach to youth challenges is both directive and entirely at odds with the priorities of most Rwandan youth. In interview after interview, Rwandan government officials emphatically asserted that out-of-school youth should work together in associations to achieve mutual gain. Yet in Rwanda as in Burundi, most youth quietly resisted joining associations and viewed their pathway ahead as individuals.

The striking determination of the Rwandan government to sculpt poor youth lives may be explained by the fact that the state has historically been—and still is—far stronger in Rwanda than in Burundi. As all literature on state formation demonstrates, state strength is not only a matter of resources and physical presence—public buildings, civil servants,

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registers, and books—but also of mental expectations.<sup>18</sup> While the two states have long seemed alike, it is widely recognized that the precolonial state was substantially stronger in Rwanda than in Burundi.<sup>19</sup> This difference continued during the postindependence period; indeed, it may well have become accentuated by the fact that the Rwandan regimes until the late 1980s had far more social legitimacy than the Burundian ones. Scott Straus, for example, describes the pregenocidal Rwandan state (that is, Rwanda before April 1994) as “powerful, hierarchical, and quite effective at controlling the population.”<sup>20</sup>

It is a widely held depiction of the current regime as well. The reach of today’s Rwandan state is expansive; its tendency toward pervasive social engineering, which is at least partially in response to the very difficult postgenocidal context with which it has had to contend since coming to power, is illuminated in its approach toward housing, marriage, the informal economy, the environment, and public health. The Rwandan government dominates the social and economic lives of its citizens in ways that far exceed neighboring Burundi. There, most Burundians, during the last decades and culminating with the civil war of 1993–2002, have come to expect less and less of their state. The Burundian state has effectively reciprocated by becoming more illegitimate, inefficient, and, during more than a decade of war, far weaker. As a result, Burundians not only are cynical and distrustful toward their government and its representatives, but they also have learned to work around their government, to avoid it, and to count on their own resources as much as possible.

In short, a strong and controlling state coexists with, and reinforces, a risk-averse and quietly resistant population in Rwanda, whereas in Burundi a weak and easily subverted state coexists with a more dynamic and flexible population. The ultimate irony is that it is the Rwandan state that has smart and well implemented-policies in place for education, health, and economic development, whereas the Burundian state is not capable of supporting the initiative of its own population.

***The Rwandan government dominates the social and economic lives of its citizens in ways that far exceed neighboring Burundi.***

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This report has presented some major differences between Rwandan and Burundian youth regarding their views and perceptions of adulthood and social mobility. Both are important indicators of their faith in the future. In Rwanda, a great many youth seem despondent and disillusioned. In Burundi, youth face many of the same challenges as in Rwanda, yet many Burundian youth believe that the future holds promise if they can work hard, remain flexible, and have some luck.

The differences between the lives of Burundian and Rwandan youth ultimately boil down to this: most Burundian youth believe that they have options and possibilities while most Rwandan youth do not. Rwandan youth perceive themselves as living in a world dominated by rigid cultural requirements, expansive government regulations, and a risk-averse orientation that resists innovation and new ideas. The only option that most of them seem to have is to try harder than ever and hope for the best. In rural areas, this mainly means striving hard to become an adult, working for others, and trying to save money, while knowing that they will probably fail to attain their goal—the benefits of socially accepted adulthood. In urban areas, it means trying somehow to get enough money to stay afloat and avoid the dreaded fates of becoming a homeless “wanderer” or a prostitute. The Rwandan government is simultaneously progressive and prodevelopment, as well as interventionist and controlling. Both the state and society in Rwanda, then, are felt to combine inflexibility with a strong push to succeed along a preordained path.

While Burundian youth share with Rwandan youth a determination for self-improvement as individuals, their general orientation differs significantly. Burundian youth—female as well as male—think of themselves as possessing a broader range of options, being able to

make plans of various kinds, and then setting out to implement them. Burundians, young and old, are of course aware they may well fail in achieving their plans, and they do not necessarily judge these plans as representing their ideal choices. Surely, for example, they would prefer to build their own house instead of adding a room to their parents' house. But many of them seem willing to try to adapt, innovate, and not judge others too harshly. They generally seem to perceive themselves as having more control over their lives than their Rwandan counterparts, and, dare one say, more happiness. In stark contrast with the Rwandan government, the Burundian government leaves more space for this social flexibility, not because it is deeply committed to free enterprise or the protection of individual rights, but because of its general weakness and incapacity to run peoples' lives.

In Rwanda as in Burundi, centuries-old values prevail in rural and to a large extent urban areas that determine the culturally mandated position of male and female youth. These values remain vital and relevant, for the old as well as the young, for women and for men. However, in Burundi, it seems that, while traditional values have not been discarded, society is generally willing to be flexible about their implementation. The right way of doing things is for a male youth to work the land, save money, build a house near their parents, marry a well-behaved, hard-working local girl, and have many children together—but it is widely understood that this may not be possible today.

Burundians, it seems, are willing to accept a certain amount of flexibility and generosity toward the adulthood challenges that youth face. The situation in Rwanda is strikingly different. There, society seems to provide struggling youth with few or no alternatives to traditional expectations. For youth there, culture is as inflexible to their needs as are government regulations; indeed, one reinforces the other. The result is tragic: a society and its culture locked in a rigid position, encased in an unyielding environment—and youth who strive to conform to adulthood norms that they fear they will fail to achieve.

In both Burundi and Rwanda, rural and urban youth inhabit constrained, impoverished lives. Yet our research unearthed a significant Central African paradox: Rwanda combines a closed, conservative culture with a forcefully progressive government, while Burundi has just the opposite: a weak government and a more open, progressive culture.

In Rwanda, the exacting combination of restrictive cultural tradition and controlling government behavior rarely allows countervailing or creative forces to surface. To be sure, Rwanda's government is unquestionably more efficient than its Burundian counterpart. It is also emphatically committed to long-term national development and has developed innovative policies in a wide range of areas. Quite unlike Burundi, things usually get done in Rwanda once the government decides to do them. Yet the Rwandan government's heavy-handed imposition of change and its orientation toward social engineering have yielded a mix of substantive government-controlled results (in the area of health insurance, for example) alongside the risk aversion and quiet resistance that characterized the actions and rationales of its massive youth cohort. In direct contrast, the Burundian state is inefficient and far less capable of controlling people's behavior on its entire territory. While it lacks the capacity to deliver services effectively to its population, this situation does leave space for Burundian society's capacity to evolve and adapt, slowly and unevenly.

The authors are hardly endorsing weak governance. Instead, what we advocate for are specific responses to strikingly different contexts in Rwanda and Burundi. Both promise to provide space and support for young people to develop their own solutions to the stunning challenges they face. We also strongly encourage renewed interest in the plight and perspectives of marginalized youth populations, who too often play a relatively small role in postwar worlds, despite their considerable populations. What follows are our recommendations:

## ***Enact different kinds of reform in Rwanda and Burundi.***

- The severely constrained environment for male and female youth in rural and urban Rwanda calls for a swift response. What is required, at the very least, is to complement Rwanda's economic growth with an immediate opening of society, an elimination of the strict regulations that undermine the aims of rural and urban youth, and to direct support to youth priorities, beginning with making it possible for male youth to build a house and for urban youth to stabilize their lives with decent housing and work in the informal economy without harassment from authorities. Government regulations that significantly constrain these basic goals must be reformed and perhaps removed. Reforming Rwanda's confining adulthood mandates is a delicate task that first requires open discussion with youth, adults, traditional elders, government officials, and nongovernment leaders before next steps are considered and tested.
- The Burundian context requires a more explicit focus on employment: jobs and job training that allow its cohort of increasingly enterprising youth to advance their entrepreneurial aspirations. Any activity that provides framework conditions for economic dynamism—improved infrastructure, limited state interventionism, opportunities for credit, access to regional markets—will be used by people ready to avail themselves of any opportunity for advancement.

## ***Conduct qualitative, sector-free research with nonelite, marginalized youth majorities.***

- The qualitative approach that our two research endeavors used did not presume the primacy of any particular sector or agenda. Instead, it revealed striking contrasts in the priorities and outlooks of marginalized youth majorities in the countryside and capital cities of two neighboring African nations. We strongly recommend that similar qualitative research on marginalized youth perspectives, together with research on the views of adults and government officials about youth concerns, be carried out elsewhere—and before plans and programs for youth are entertained or implemented.

## **Notes**

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1. The proportions for the two countries are virtually identical. The proportion of the Burundian population that is under age 30 is 74.9 percent while Rwanda's is 75 percent. Neighboring Uganda has the youngest population on the globe, with 78.2 percent of its population between ages 0 and 29. Elizabeth Leahy, with Robert Engelman, Carolyn Gibb Vogel, Sarah Haddock, and Tod Preston, *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World* (Washington, DC: Population Action International, 2007), 87, 90.
2. Our research has ultimately resulted in books on, respectively, youth in Burundi and Rwanda: Peter Uvin's *Life after Violence: A People's Story of Burundi* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2009) and Marc Sommers' *Stuck: Rwandan Youth and the Struggle for Adulthood* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, in association with USIP Press, 2011).
3. Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Sports, *The Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports National Youth Policy* (Kigali: Republic of Rwanda, undated), 9.
4. The Rwandan government is also vigorously enforcing the law that prohibits polygamy.
5. *Imidugudu* is the plural form of *umudugudu* in Kinyarwanda.
6. OZ Architecture, EDAW, Tetra Tech, Sypher, ERA, Geomaps, Engineers without Borders-USA, Water for People, "Kigali Master Plan: Existing Conditions Analysis," draft report prepared for Ministry of Infrastructure, Republic of Rwanda, 2006, 52.
7. Alain Durand-Lasserve, "Market-Driven Eviction Processes in Developing Country Cities: The Cases of Kigali in Rwanda and Phnom Penh in Cambodia," *Global Urban Development* 3, no. 1 (2007): 7.
8. Two hundred Rwandan francs equaled, during the time of research in 2006–07, \$0.37 U.S. cents.
9. Uvin, *Life after Violence*, 126.
10. *Ibid.*, 86.
11. *Ibid.*, 89.

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12. Mats Utas, *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Dissertations in Cultural Anthropology, 2003), 44.
13. Marc Sommers, "Urban Youth in Africa," *Environment & Urbanization* 22, no. 2 (October 2010): 324, 325.
14. Rwanda, which had the highest urban growth rate in the world for several years, now has the second-highest (6.5 percent). Burundi's estimated average annual rate is 6.8 percent. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth* (UNFPA, 2007), 90, [www.unfpa.org/swp/swpmain.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/swpmain.htm). These countries both were recently among the world's least urbanized.
15. Uvin, *Life after Violence*, 117.
16. *Ibid.*, 105, 119.
17. For related insights, see Omar McDoom, *The Micro-Politics of Mass Violence: Authority, Security, and Opportunity in Rwanda's Genocide* (doctoral thesis at the London School of Economics submitted to DESTIN, London, December 2008).
18. Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," in *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology*, ed. Michael Mann (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1988), 1-32.
19. René Lemarchand, *Burundi and Rwanda* (London: Pall Mall, 1970).
20. Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 203.

## Of Related Interest

- *Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan* by Marc Sommers and Stephanie Schwartz (Special Report, November 2011)
- *Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* by Stephanie Schwartz (USIP Press, 2010)
- *Making Peace After Genocide: Anatomy of the Burundi Process* by Howard Wolpe (Peaceworks, March 2011)



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