

“I CANNOT BE A LEADER OF THE FAMISHED”:

Implications for Peace, Reconciliation, and Justice in Burundi

Peter Uvin, *Life After Violence: A People's Story of Burundi* (Zed Books, 2009)

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In the aftermath of a 12-year internecine civil war and decades of structural violence motivated by ethnic and symbolic politics, Burundi has finally reached a transitional period. A fragile peace has held since the 2005 elections, and Burundians' hopes for their futures are high. The international community widely considers Burundi a success story; it poured in millions of dollars to the peace process, infrastructure and relief. But this view that what goes down must eventually come up could all be wishful thinking.

Peter Uvin's *Life after Violence: A People's Story of Burundi* is an illuminating population-based survey on conceptions of peace, masculinity, youth, ethnicity and identity in Burundi. He does what few others have: he allows the voices of ordinary Burundians to be heard. Uvin's open-ended interview design aimed to capture how those living in towns, cities, internal displacement camps, and the ghettos of Burundi perceived their lives.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. Over and over, the international community has adopted a standardized approach to conflict resolution, peacebuilding and development, one which often undermines the complexities and narratives of states and their populations. From the specificity of Uvin's research, academics, practitioners, and civil society can draw broader lessons regarding the impact of humanitarian aid on societies recovering from conflict, and how societies can move away from conflict.

Population-based surveys such as Uvin's are notable for when they do occur, and when they do not. Studies on attitudes and perceptions of those in the midst of transition are rare. Ignoring these testaments means that we do not hear the extreme resilience, coping mechanisms, and survival skills of those who quite literally have the most to lose, and who must transcend cycles of violence while still living in them. The thoughtful analyses contribute to providing the reader with multiple overlapping lenses with which to view Burundi, and Uvin uses much of the same language as Burundians do themselves—an important decision, as language and diction can say so little, but convey so much.

Not to be skipped is Uvin's chapter devoted to methodology and location, which provides a useful framework for the basis of decisions made and their efficacy, and the value of social science research more generally. Interviews are posed as being unstructured, open-ended, and flexible—the “interview guide approach”—and were conducted by Uvin and his team by walking around a *colline* to create a random sample survey. Though this no doubt contributed to spontaneity in answers and emphasized individual agency, there are areas in which this approach could have been disadvantageous. Differences in the structure of the interviews and the way questions were framed between individuals could have denied critical intersubjective answers.

As Uvin notes, Kirundi is a language of allusion and proverb. Linguistically, many elements are not directly expressed, but hinted.¹ Uvin's Burundian research team and translators were cognizant of the crucial messages of implicit pain, exposure to violence, and dramatic poverty that Burundians often conveyed just below the surface. Where much of the development regime has failed to recognize many

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¹ Peter Uvin, LIFE AFTER VIOLENCE: A PEOPLE'S STORY OF BURUNDI 28 (2009).

of these facets, Uvin is wise enough to see that responses often occur at a variety of levels, many of which require an intimate knowledge of the workings and values of Burundian society.

A shortcoming of the book's focus on gender, particularly masculinity, is one that Uvin recognizes himself. Questions did not probe issues of gender-based and domestic violence during and after the conflict. Although many women alluded to gender-based violence, the research team—composed of Burundians and Uvin—did not belabor the point. This was a principled stance that the team took, as they had no tangible counseling or support that they could offer to survivors. Uvin's ethics are admirable and refreshingly human. However, examining gender-based violence is a dynamic that cannot be ignored when studying changing notions of gender following war.

Quite possibly one of the most compelling and brave choices Uvin made was in his focus on masculinity to better extrapolate the view from below. Much of the literature on gender in Africa posits young men as ticking time bombs of future rapists and killers drifting aimlessly amongst society. Despite the usual suspects of overwhelming joblessness and incapacity to marry and reach normative manhood, Uvin writes that young men in Burundi “do what most of us do when confronted with major challenges in our lives: they try harder than ever, they seek to innovate, they try to move and find opportunities. . . . But they do not necessarily become murderers. . . . Masculinity is not automatically or even primarily violent.”²

For men, what is at stake is not only survival, but also their very social identity and dignity. Marriage, wealth, masculinity, and manhood are deeply interwoven. Men are responsible for providing for a family, but without jobs, income, and land, this becomes nearly impossible. This interconnection should be taken into account in providing programming at local levels, and not simply as a means of prevention that the current discourse sees as a priority. The international community cannot afford to maintain a lack of vision; indeed, young men interviewed stated that they wished to marry a “dynamic” woman, which reveals changing gender expectations and flexibility in traditional male and female roles in Burundi. This agency and the emphasis on creativity and initiative must be kept in mind.

Uvin's passionate critique of the international development regime often delineates from the international community, which he praises for its support throughout the past turbulent decades. But in many cases, he seems to be praising donors, while blaming those who carry out their work on the ground. Is the international community to be commended for providing financial support, and the development regime to be contemptible for turning words into deeds? This is a question of intention. Uvin's career has seen him transition from a player in developmental consultations to the forefront of the movement to create more conflict-sensitive, rights-based approaches to human security and development. A climate of “bunkerization” and fear by aid agencies and the development regime in Burundi often left obsolete the voices of those to whom the future mattered the most. Uvin's expectations for the development regime seem to hinge on this.

Uvin's writing is highly accessible and includes a review of relevant literature. His seminal work, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*,³ provides a useful backdrop and comparison. Though written about Rwanda, it is equally inspired by Burundi. This research set out to examine what development means when a country that appears to be succeeding at development can descend rapidly into violence. Prior to the genocide, Rwanda was considered a model of development in Africa, and its indicators of economic growth, food availability, and

² *Id.*, at 178-9.

³ Peter Uvin, *AIDING VIOLENCE: THE DEVELOPMENT ENTERPRISE IN RWANDA* (1998).

access by non-governmental organizations were high. Up until the very end, aid packages were being provided, offsetting what would have been huge expenditures for President Habyarimana's government. Almost none of these experts living and working inside Rwanda predicted the genocide and did nothing to stop it.

Does this mean Uvin thinks that we should stop providing aid altogether? Of course not: The repercussions of denying aid would be much more tragic, and would likely accelerate cycles of violence. But developing best practices and endeavoring to streamline more conflict-sensitive approaches will increase individual agency and local capacity. The best form of mass atrocity prevention is rebuilding societies torn and fragmented by conflict. While international aid makes up 89 percent of Burundi's gross domestic product, the aid that Burundians receive is emblematic of the ice cube metaphor: by the time Burundians receive any aid at all, it is only a trickle of what was originally intended for them. It comes as no surprise then that Burundians were resentful of the aid that they did receive and only begrudgingly admitted assistance. Aside from the implicit messages that this sends, it also conveys a sense of bare rights—that Burundians are lucky for what they do get, and have nothing to criticize. Burundians are getting less than what they need. Often, the best intentioned aid is tied up in the hands of elites with already deep pockets, as corruption runs rampant.

Now that Burundi is in transition, the international community and development regimes' agendas are beginning to fragment in ways that neither understand nor incorporate Burundian ideas into programming. Many Burundians, when asked what they would do if they were colonial administrators, had very concrete ideas of how they would address issues of governance, aid, and discrimination. One man stated that he could not be a "leader of the famished,"⁴ while a young, uneducated former child soldier stated that he would "do a lot for the small people and fight corruption."⁵

Uvin states that development funds should be used in ways that reduce the possibility of violence in social dynamics, but not at a loss to other groups. Possible ways to ensure this are enforcing accountability at local levels, stricter law enforcement, and bolstering a free press and vibrant society. The best intentioned aid can do harm, as it did when Burundi's internationally funded school system excluded Hutus for decades. Possibilities for change and progress exist, but they must come from Burundians themselves.

Essential for institutional transformation within Burundi was military integration and demobilization. Restructuring the security forces was pivotal to building security, trust, and intercommunal relations. The newly integrated *Forces de Défense Nationale* is composed of the former Hutu- and Tutsi-dominated militias, in which achievement of ethnic parity for leadership positions has become the basis for recruitment. Both Hutus and Tutsis feel that they can no longer be victimized, as each ethnicity controls respective halves. Without this confidence-building measure, the transitional period would have failed. Despite the late start of Burundi's disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration period, there has been remarkable progress: almost 80,000 former combatants from all different factions have been demobilized. Burundi's transition past ethnic polarization and the integration and demobilization of combatants should be taken as a strong basis for peace. But, as Uvin notes, this also contains many potential spoilers for peace, such as underemployed former combatants and a surplus of small arms in the capital city of Bujumbura.

Uvin cites a FAST International report, which speaks to the "growing loyalty of the army to the new Hutu-dominated government. Even though the NDF [National

⁴ Uvin, *supra* note 1, at 58.

⁵ *Id.*, at 60.

Defense Force] appear to have committed serious human rights abuses in dealing with the NFL [National Liberation Force] rebels, there is no evidence of ethnic prejudice, as was so obviously the case during the 1993 crisis.”⁶ Though Uvin sees this valid point as forming the basis of a new Burundi, it should be taken with a grain of salt. Are we to see this positively, as human rights violations are no longer based on ethnicity?

Like many groups that have a long history of marginalization, Hutus in Burundi have a long way to go before they can even look to compete for jobs and resources. This has powerful implications. The formerly politically dominant group, the Tutsis, has lost its monopoly on political power, but has retained much of its economic power. Quotas within government to mandate Hutu participation may be more inclusive, but may also prevent Tutsis from achieving positions for which they could potentially be excellent candidates. Comparatively, this is a contrast to Rwanda, where discussion of ethnicity is suppressed and Tutsis are dominant politically. Elections scheduled for Rwanda and Burundi in September and August 2010, respectively, could be a potential flashpoint for violence, though Burundi has a much stronger history of consociationalism and flexibility.

Uvin’s conclusions on transitional justice—that Burundians do not want prosecutions and truth-telling commissions—can be problematic.⁷ In the case of Burundi, the international community has prioritized transitional justice, undoubtedly based on western conceptions of punishment, full and fair trials, and the importance of truth-telling. The war was seen by many Burundians as being an area “totally outside the realm of cognizable human experience,”⁸ and “committed out of fear.”⁹ A former internally displaced person from Ruhororo stated that “we simply have to forgive to have peace. . . . We risk punishing the entire population.”¹⁰ However, that does not mean that Burundians do not want justice, just that their priorities do not fit the international community’s agenda. Indeed, Burundians overwhelmingly want to forget. However, forgetting and memory—life after violence—do not mean the same things, and life does not begin anew. As Uvin states, “Ethnic division has not suddenly lost its salience: there is too much pain, too much memory, and humans are not lizards who can overnight shed one skin in favor of another.”¹¹

By and large, Burundians conceptualize peace as multi-faceted: living their lives without fear, having sustainable livelihoods, and being able to sleep in security—these are the things that Burundians want first and foremost. Concomitant to this was that no peace existed without minimum basic standards of well-being. Of his neighbors, a man in Musaga stated, “Peace is foremost having bread. If my children and those of my neighbors don’t cry of hunger at night, I have peace in my heart.”¹² The development regime would do well to remember this, and not just in Burundi.

⁶ *Id.*, at 19-20.

⁷ *Id.*, at 147.

⁸ *Id.*, at 156.

⁹ *Id.*, at 154.

¹⁰ *Id.*, at 147.

¹¹ *Id.*, at 78.

¹² *Id.*, at 47.