Burundi
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Abstract

Burundi is a nation riddled with problems. A brutal civil war between the Hutus and the Tutsi throughout the 1990's devastated the country's people, land and government. From the beginning of the war, there have been attempts at economic reform, which would allow for an ideal distribution of food. However, this seems to be far from the reality as this country continues to barely avoid complete famine. The people of Burundi must now cope with a new government (as of the end of the war in 2005) which, while trying to get on its feet, is too busy trying to maintain peace between the rival factions to provide the people with all the things they need, particularly food, so food insecurity is a great threat to the Burundian people. Since meat is both scarce and regarded as a status symbol rather than a means of eating, malnutrition is a tremendous threat to the health of the average Burundi citizen. As a result, over 50% of children born in Burundi will die before reaching age one. To make the situation worse, Burundi farmers must deal with deforestation and soil erosion as they attempt to plant their crops, to say nothing of the excessive overcrowding. The population is continuing to grow, while the land and space no longer seems to be able to sustain Burundi’s -rather -sizable population. Unfortunately for these impoverished people, the Burundians will need to overcome obstacles on many different fronts if they ever hope to achieve food security.

Politics

A significant factor in Burundi’s political history has been the divide between the ethnic groups of the Hutus and the Tutsis. The tensions between the two ethnic groups have not always existed. The hatred was instilled by Belgian imperialists, who used a divide et impera strategy to rule Burundi (Remarchand 686). The Hutus make up the bulk of the population at 85%. However, the minority Tutsi’s (~14%) held control of the government, military, and the economy (Ndikumana 1998) until the early 2000’s. This divide has manifested itself both in ethnic violence and in the form of prebendalism (ethnic based patron-client relationship). Ethnic violence is no longer the chronic affliction that it was from the 1960’s to early 2000’s. Peace talks and efforts at rapprochement have been quite successful. A transitional government came into power in 2001, followed by the writing of a new constitution and the establishment of a new government in 2005 (Brittania.com).

The current government is structured around maintaining this peace. Burundi is a federal republic with a president, an incongruent bicameral legislature, and a judicial branch (CIA). Much of the government has characteristics which make it conducive to reducing ethnic tension and influence. The president, regardless of their own ethnicity, appoints two vice presidents, one Hutu and one Tutsi. The National Assembly branch of the legislature has a requirement that 60% of its members are Hutus, and the remaining 40% must be Tutsi. In addition, the minority Twa ethnic group is guaranteed 3 seats, and 30% of both houses must be women.

The result of these practices has been fairly positive. Burundi is ranked by the non-government organization Freedom House as “Partly Free”, with a Political Rights Score of 4 out of 7, and a Civil Liberties Score of 5 out of 7. The country’s primary difficulties now are corruption and hunger. While ethnic involvement has been reduced by the previously discussed government reforms, corruption is still prevalent in the government, especially the judicial system. In 2009, the head of Burundi’s Anticorruption and Economic Malpractice Observatory was assassinated, and it was suspected that high ranking members of the government were complicit. The judicial system is overwhelmed by cases, many of which are politically charged. It does not help matters that Burundi’s prison conditions have been called sub-human by Amnesty International (Freedom House).
Health Care and Hunger

The citizens of Burundi face many obstacles concerning health. The CIA World Factbook indicates diseases like HIV/AIDS, Measles, and Malaria as well as undernutrition affects almost every household. There is a fifty-two percent chance that a child under one year old will die from starvation. Forty-five percent of children are moderately to severely underweight. Since 1992 the percent of people suffering from undernourishment has increased over twenty percent. Huge contributions to the poor quality of life in Burundi are the lack of accessible health care, governmental and socioeconomic instability.

The majority of people living in Burundi receive health care from witchdoctors. Although it is extremely important to maintain cultural traditions, the custom of consulting witchdoctors is not suffice in providing citizens with modern medicinal care. The availability of quality health care in Burundi is very scarce which is why the people rely on archaic methods of health care. In 2003 “there was one doctor for 38,461 people, one hospital for 200,000 people and one health center for 12,820 people.” (Vogel, 1993, 64.) Women have an especially hard time receiving quality care due to their low social statues. Also people living in rural areas are particularly unable to go to a health center due to the country’s under developed infrastructure.

The insufficient infrastructure also contributes to the prevalence of undernourished Burundians. There are little means of transporting food to the numerous isolated communities. This has caused food prices to skyrocket. Vogel posits that sixty percent of citizen’s income is spent on food. Mean while, these villages can not produce an adequate food supply due to soil erosion and the poor allocation of water.

Those who are able to see a physician and receive treatment will have to bear the burden of paying all medical expenses. This is because Burundi has a Cost Health Recovery Plan. This policy was recently implemented because not enough of the national budget had been allocated to health care. According to Philips, what this essentially means is that the patient must pay out of pocket. The fiscal sacrifice is, for most, as much of a yoke as the health problem.

To improve the dismal quality of life in Burundi the public must be educationally liberated. The public must be enlightened on safe sex practices and modern approaches of treating illnesses. One way to increase public education is by improving the means of communication and transportation (Bundervoet, et al, 2008.) This would also greatly diminish the rate of hunger. Redistributing the national budget would result in environmental preservation and a better infrastructural system, and health care system. Also empowerment of the female community would help decrease the number of unwanted pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and better the lives of their children. However, none of these solutions could be implemented without government cooperation. The ultimate solution to Burundi’s health care crisis is government stability.

Geography

Many people fail to consider the importance of geography and how it influences the way a nation can turn out. Burundi is a landlocked country located in central Africa. It is bordered to the north by Rwanda, to the west by Zaire, and to the east and south by Tanzania. Because Burundi is located in central Africa, the country has been used to transport illegal items such as ivory, gold, diamonds, and coltan from eastern Congo to various other locations. Burundi is located in Sub-Saharan Africa and is therefore a tropical location. Generally speaking, tropical regions tend to be farther behind in economic development when compared to regions with a temperate climate. Many issues arise with climate, soils, topography, and disease ecology with this type of environment. For example, Africa as a whole has low agricultural productivity, high disease burdens, and very little international trade which all result from its geography. (Bloom, Sachs et. al. 1998) Geography also influences how societies interact with one another as well as with the rest of the world, and in this case geography seems to really work against Burundi rather than for it.

Burundi’s landscape consists of many hills and water sources including, the Ruvyironza River, the Kagera River and Lake Tanganyika. The Nile River begins in Burundi and the country is also connected to Lake Victoria. Lake Tanganyika, the world’s second deepest lake, is used in Burundi for fishing both by Burundians as well as some outsiders like the Greeks. These water sources are quite important because Burundi is largely an agricultural and pastoral state. Herding is quite common because the land geographically fit for it, and it is economically and culturally important. (Ndayishimiye and Knight 2005)
Because of the high population in the country, the land suffers from deforestation, over exploitation of certain species, and soil erosion. Due to the intense cultivation of food, the country has wiped out many of its natural landscapes. Foods that are cultivated include rice, beans, corns, bananas, and coffee in lowland areas, while corn, beans, and sweet potatoes are common on the central plateau. (Ndayishimiye and Knight 2005) There is quite a bit of ecological diversity within Burundi— which greatly influences the agriculture and where it occurs because Burundians are forced to plan around the different ecological zones in their environments.

One of the great geographical problems in Burundi is that of land accessibility. Many believe that the rebellions amongst the Hutu peasants, which occur mainly in the rural areas, are caused by land conflicts. Though it is home to both Tutsis and Hutus, the land does not associate certain areas as being that of just one ethnic group, despite the fact that the idea of dividing the country into ethnic groups has been discussed. (Daley 2006)

Today, 3% of Burundi’s land is occupied by national parks and reserves. These parks and reserves are meant to protect the wildlife that the country has left.

The annual population growth is about 2.6% (Ndayishimiye and Knight 2005), which continues to be a problem for Burundi because the country is having difficulty creating enough basic foods for the growing population.

![Burundi woman examining crop](http://mcc.org/stories/galleries/beauty-and-hope-burundi)

**Economy**

Burundi does not have many natural resources. Despite this, over 90% of the population is employed in agriculture, which makes up for about 35% of its Gross Domestic Product. In 2010, the GDP was estimated to be $3.418 billion (CIA, 2011). Because of the fact that it is landlocked and does not have adequate resources, the crops often fail, be it because of bad weather, bad pest infestations, or just bad luck. This means that many of the agricultural workers are consistently living in a state of poverty. In fact, “most Burundians live on less than US $1 a day” (Wakabi, 2007: 1847).

Before 1984, the economic system of Burundi was overly complex and nebulous. Due to many factors including government corruption, it did not prioritize the consumer at all. As a result of this, tariffs and overall prices of many items, even basic things, were greatly raised. This includes many food items (Milner, 2004). Therefore, it becomes much more difficult for the average Burundian consumer to purchase quality food, contributing to the hunger problem. The civil war that went on for 13 years had an enormous negative effect on Burundi’s infrastructure and economy. “Income per capita fell from 251 USD in 1993 to 83 USD in 2004, while gross primary school enrolment, which stood at 67.8% before the crisis, decreased to 42% in 1996–97. It was not until 2002 that school enrolment was back at its pre-crisis level” (Bundervoet, 2009: 357).

Burundi has been making attempts to “reform its trade and other macroeconomic policies since the mid-1980s against the background of continuous socio-political tensions and period outbreaks of social conflict” (Milner, 2004: 1363). These reforms have been somewhat successful, leading to the GDP to increase about 4% every year from 2006-2009.

“Political stability and the end of the civil war have improved aid flows and economic activity has increased, but underlying weaknesses - a high poverty rate, poor education rates, a weak legal system, a poor transportation network, overburdened utilities, and low administrative capacity - risk undermining planned economic reforms” (CIA, 2011). However, as long as the citizens and government are careful, the overall economic future of Burundi looks brighter than the past.
This is important because improving the economy could greatly contribute to dealing with hunger in Burundi. Many scholars have identified "[economic] growth as the key to reducing Third World deprivation…. economic growth promotes food consumption" (Wimberley, 1992: 898). It has been proven, and simply makes sense, that in countries with high overall economic growth, individuals have a greater chance of having personal economic growth (the correlation coefficient=0.94) (Wimberley, 1992: 904). Therefore, people will have more money to spend on necessities such as food, and possibly food of better quality. If economic reform in Burundi continues successfully, there is a good chance that it could help to reduce the intensity of hunger issues.

![Figure 4: A United Nations truck delivering food to the people of Burundi. (World Food Programme, http://www.wfp.org/photos/wfp-food-distribution-burundi-wfp-food-distribution-burundi-2006)](image)

People

Burundi is a nation riddled with conflict. The two main factions, the Tutsi and Hutus, divide the country and often clash, resulting conflicts such as a raging civil war lasting from 1993 to 2005. The Tutsis are the richer, more privileged minority of Burundi’s citizens, constituting about 14% of the total population of 8,691,005 (as of 2008). (State Department 2011) The Hutus in contrast, make up approximately 85% of the population, illustrating a clear majority in numbers, but are nevertheless viewed as a “lower breed” of citizen (Deng, Francis M. 1995) and subsequently have far less power than their Tutsi counterparts. Following in these social roles, the Tutsi are mostly cattle-herders, reaping the benefits of the prestige of owning livestock in such an impoverished nation. As a result, cattle is viewed as a status symbol, fairly out of reach of the farming Hutus. (Deng, 1995)

Unfortunately, the cow is then seen only as a means of displaying one’s dominance and stature, rather than as a solution to the nations tremendous hunger problem. Thus, despite their dire need, the people of Burundi, particularly the Hutus, eat meat no more than a few times a month. If they happen to own a cow, they would likely save it in an attempt to gain more favorable social standing. (Citizenship and Immigration to Canada, 1998)

Nonetheless, the largest problem with the people of Burundi seems to be the sheer number of them. As stated earlier, Burundi has 8,691,005 inhabitants, all living in an area of 27,830 square km, or “roughly the size of Maryland.” At 312 persons per sq. km., Burundi has the second-largest population density in Sub-Saharan Africa. (State Department 2011) As most Burundians are subsistence farmers, this poses the problem of overcrowding, preventing every person from getting the farm land, and subsequently food, that is necessary to keep them alive, or at bare minimum, healthy. One solution that has become more popular since its introduction in 1986 is the idea of upwards growth. Farmers in Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire have begun planting “climbing beans” as they are known, which grow vertically up support stakes, allowing for the optimal use of the limited land. (Anonymous 1994) Beans are already a fundamental part of Burundi cuisine, (Citizenship and Immigration to Canada, 1998) and these bean stalks provide nearly double the amount of beans as any equivalent crop would in a bush. (Anonymous 1994)

According to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 1998 “20 people a day [were] dying of starvation,” with approximately 3,700 people suffering. Hunger is a very real threat to the Burundian people. A tremendous number of Burundians were displaced in efforts to reach safety during the civil war, drawing international attention to its refugees and earning global support. “Burundi received about $300 million per year in international aid, accounting for around 39 percent of its GDP.” (Fairchild, 2010) Yet most of this aid was focused on rebuilding the infrastructure of the nation and simply getting Burundi back on its feet at the lowest level, rather than on securing food for its people.

However, even if enough food is produced for every person in the country, there is no guarantee that it will reach all of the people who truly need it. “Improvement in availability does not necessarily translate into meeting distribution needs, thus challenging the ability of these two theories to comprehensively explain the complexities of food security. Questions therefore remain with regard to future food security concerns.” (Scanlan 2001) This problem seems particularly relevant in the context of Burundi. Though the civil war has been over for about six years now, tensions are still high between the higher-classes Tutsis, and the peasant Hutus. The majority of the violence may now be over, but the distribution of the resources available to the Burundian people will likely reflect the distinct class separations, and this unjust distribution and social stratification will inevitably harm the general people who struggle daily through their food insecurity.
Prospects for Improvement

The government has taken steps to improve food security, with limited success. Burundi’s food problems stem from the civil war, overpopulation, and soil erosion. In 2006, the government set up a food security fund termed the National Solidarity for Food Security. The goal of this is to provide a way for firms and individuals to donate money. The money is then used to feed the hundreds of thousands of Burundian citizens who are starving. The fund also came with a decree requiring Burundian citizens to donate a set amount to it (IRIN). The government has also been undertaking efforts to improve Burundi’s long term self-sufficiency. Agriculturally, the government has attempted to research and develop more efficient farming techniques. This has also included the allocation of seeds to farmers. The government of Burundi has also attempted to enhance the transportation infrastructure. This will have the effect of improving access and food distribution (Mworoha 1986). However, these efforts have been met with only limited success because of the sheer scale of the damages resulting from the civil war and soil erosion. Burundi’s government has a great deal of work ahead if they want to someday break even. To improve the dismal quality of life in Burundi the public must be educationally liberated. One way to increase public education is by improving the means of communication and transportation (Bundervoet, et al, 2008.) This would also greatly diminish the rate of hunger. Redistributing the national budget would result in environmental preservation and a better infrastructural system, and health care system. Also, empowerment of the female community would help decrease the number of unwanted pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and better the lives of their children. In terms of the economy, if the government successfully continues implementing the reforms that it has been, it should aid economic growth greatly. This would increase the ability of the the people to buy food and, in turn, lead to an increase food consumption, reducing the issue of hunger. In order to improve the problems with the geography of Burundi, education about the sustainability of the land is necessary. Burundians need to learn about what type of equipment is best for their land and to combat deforestation they must begin planting new trees. Vis a vis the people, the bean stalks mentioned earlier (Anonymous 1994) seem to be working to produce more food. Despite being a step in the right direction, these are nothing but a fraction of the solution. Other plants and techniques such as these need to be developed in order to maximize the yield that can be turned out from the limited available land. Even more important, the people of Burundi need to work towards ending the social stratification that dictates the way their entire society is run. Once the Hutus and Tutsis are able to co-exist, the Hutus will be more likely to make good use of any cattle they may obtain, rather than saving it in order to show that they too can own livestock like the Tutsis. Conversely, the Tutsis might be more likely to help the more impoverished Hutus, and more willing to provide them with their own cattle, or aid in other ways. Though this seems to be an overly ideal solution, anything resembling social unity would be of great help to the people of Burundi as they face starvation. However, none of these solutions could be implemented without government cooperation. The ultimate solution to Burundi’s health care crisis is government stability.

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This source was provided by a UN affiliated body, and was useful in finding information on recent government actions to enhance food security.