

Unprotected

YOUNG PEOPLE IN POST-CONFLICT BURUNDI

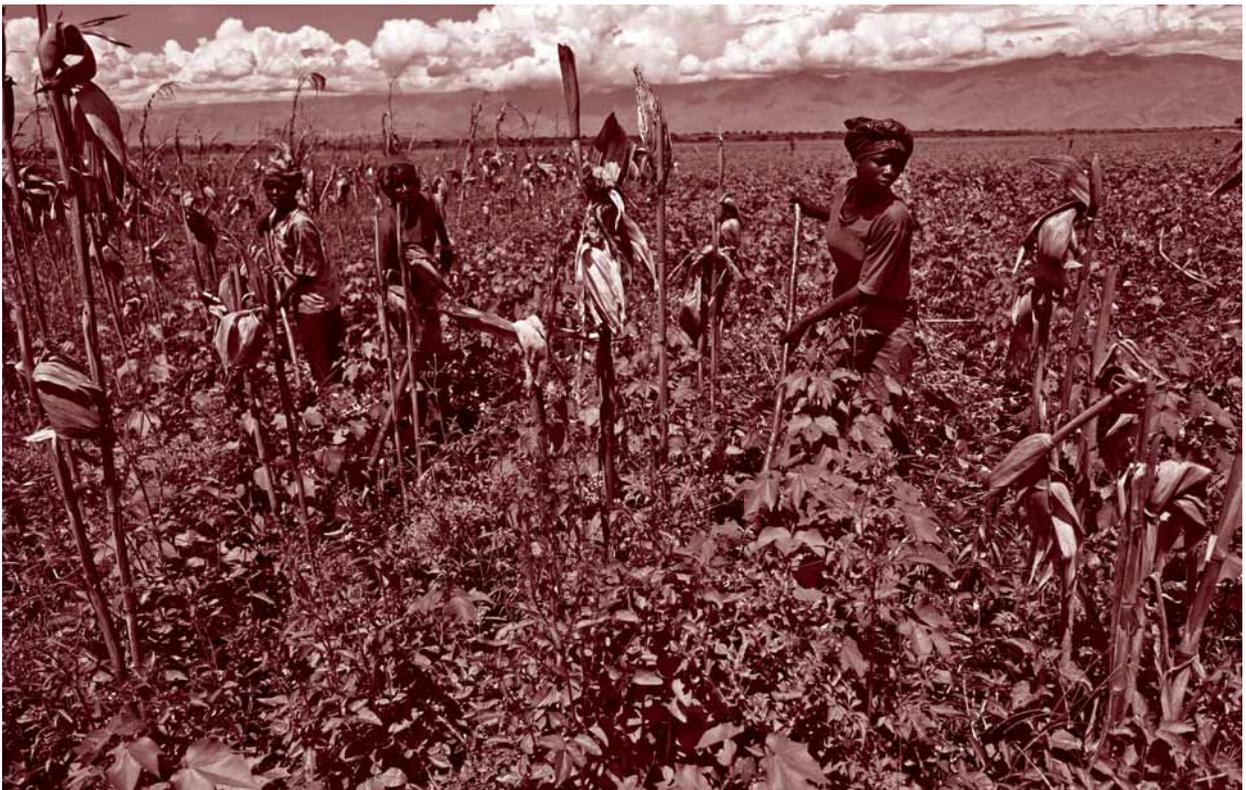
Burundi has long been afflicted by successive waves of extreme violence. Having gained its independence from Belgium in 1962, the country witnessed cyclical outbreaks of mass violence in 1965, 1972, 1988, 1991, and 1993, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, the displacement of millions of others, and the perpetuation of a climate of distrust, fear, and extreme underdevelopment. All of these episodes were rooted in unresolved grievances and contestations for control of power and resources; they also reflected a political landscape in which deep ethnic divides were used to mobilize the population to engage in extreme violence.

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Although civil war in Burundi ended more than a decade ago, the country remains deeply affected by insecurity. Many of the underlying conditions that led to the outbreak of armed conflict persist, including poverty, unemployment, a lack of access to basic social services, and a narrowing political space. These structural weaknesses persist despite the heavy investment of international aid and development actors in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and security sector reform over the last two decades.

Young people in particular are confronted with the challenges of insecurity. Having lived much of their lives in a situation of violent conflict, they have experienced extreme loss and hardships: the death of parents and other close family members, frequent displacement, loss of land and looting of property, illness, and disrupted access to school and other basic services. In the post-conflict period, young Burundians continue to suffer from a persistent lack of access to education and health care, food insecurity, and seemingly insurmountable challenges to obtaining gainful employment.

In the face of such adversity, young Burundians are doing their best to cope, with varying degrees of effectiveness. As this chapter shows, young people use a variety of coping tactics to improve their access to resources and to ensure their immediate short-term survival. In the longer term, however, these strategies may increase their exposure to risks. Indeed, many young people seek to access material support or protection through political patronage; given the historic precedent of political elites recruiting youths to carry out acts of violence and intimidation in Burundi, the current mobilization of large numbers of young people to government and opposition party youth wings presents heightened risks for an upsurge in armed violence.



Young women work in the fields in the province of Cibitoke, northern Burundi, March 2010. © Thierry Bresillon/Godong/Corbis



Imbonerakure members march in the stadium of Gitega, Burundi, September 2014. © Damien Roulette

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This chapter reviews the circumstances and capacities of young people in Burundi, and the deleterious effects of years of violence and poverty on the protective factors that would have otherwise safeguarded them from involvement in violent activities. It examines the relationship between armed violence and material adversity and the ways in which young people experience and cope with the daily challenges of survival. It is based on original fieldwork conducted with almost 500 young Burundians between 2012 and 2014. The chapter's main findings include the following:

- The threats posed by young people's involvement in armed violence remain significant in Burundi, influenced by widespread poverty, land disputes, manipulation by political parties, and the availability of arms from the civil war era.
- In the absence of family support, young Burundians adopt high-risk coping strategies, including those that lead to involvement in armed violence.
- Major international assistance projects in Burundi in the post-conflict period have tended to neglect the provision of support to young people, who are most at risk of becoming involved in violent activities.
- Local and national party-based politics play a significant role in provoking and sustaining youth violence in Burundi. For many young Burundians, joining youth wings of political parties represents one of the most easily accessible and effective short-term coping tactics, but one with long-term risks.
- Providing young people with opportunities to earn an income and ensure their own livelihood is likely to improve their prospects significantly, while also reducing their chances of adopting high-risk coping tactics.

Examining how young people cope with pervasive violence requires both short- and long-term perspectives, with an appreciation for the complexity of coping processes whose outcomes might not be measurable for many years. To avert, or at least mitigate, the damage of armed violence, government leaders, policy-makers, and practitioners need to place a higher priority on improving the opportunities available to young people. Despite the profound challenges, advances can be made. Yet to truly make a difference in the lives of young Burundians, concerted attention, political will, and an efficient use of existing funds are required. Burundi is not unique in its developmental challenges, but the country's particular history makes addressing the dire conditions of its youth particularly urgent. ❏