

‘Build, Build Your Nation’: Children of Perpetrators, Genocide Legacy and National Reconstruction in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

- In the context of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, ‘children of perpetrators’ (CPs) refers to a subgroup within Rwandan youth that comprises emerging and second generation descendants of ‘*génocidaires*’ from the majority Hutu ethnic group.
- As of 2014, youth (0 to 35 years old) represented 70% of the Rwandan population. In light of the ethnic composition of the population, the majority of these young people are Hutu.
- CPs face a particular crisis of socio-political identity as a consequence of the genocide through generational association with the perpetrators of genocide.
- Between parental and governmental protective tendencies on the one hand and their daily lived reality on the other, CPs are developing initiatives to make their voices heard and to participate effectively in national reconstruction. One such initiative is the Youth Connekt Dialogue (YCD) platform.
- For initiatives such as YCD to provide a lasting and liberating impact, they need the appropriate support from national and sub-national levels of Rwandan policymaking agencies.

Introduction

‘Children of perpetrators’ (CPs) is a ‘working concept’ which, in the context of this brief, refers to children, young relatives or descendants of perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The term suffers from the same imprecision and risk of generalisation as the concept of ‘perpetrator’ itself. However it is preferable to ‘children of Hutu’ or ‘children of killers’, which are highly misleading labels. More concretely, the category comprises emerging and second generation ‘children of perpetrators’. The ‘emerging’ and ‘second’ generations refer, respectively, to children who were younger than 14-years-old in 1994 and children born after the genocide.

As of 2014, Rwandan youth (0 to 35 years old) represent between 65% and 70% of the overall population, with slightly above 50% born after the 1994 genocide. Although official statistics are not available, extrapolation from the estimated demographic (ethnic) makeup would suggest that CPs represent at least 50% of the overall youth population. This would put CPs at roughly 35% of the overall Rwandan population; a highly significant proportion whose relevance for research and policy cannot be overemphasised.

In the post-genocide Rwandan context, CPs face a multilevel identity crisis, the resolution of which will critically determine the sustainability of post-genocide policies regarding national reconciliation and reconstruction. The crisis has personal and political dimensions although the lines between can be blurred. Personally, CPs wrestle with the desire to construct their individual identities in the face of severe socio-cultural norms that tarnish them with guilt through transgenerational association. Politically, they express the desire to move away from externally prescribed identities, such as ‘children of killers’, and claim their agency as ‘unblemished’ citizens integral to the government’s vision of national reconstruction.

This policy brief presents a summary of key research findings on genocide legacy, intergenerational transmission of guilt and political responsibility among CPs, as explored specifically through participation in YCD between May and June 2013. It is written for the benefit of government officials and relevant agencies at international, national and decentralised levels.

CPs’ condition: genocide legacy and identity crisis

The social and political condition of CPs is

scarcely represented in the Rwandan public narrative. In the immediate transitional period following the genocide, policy and research have focused on Tutsi victims and Hutu perpetrators. The lives and stories of CPs have been largely overlooked because their political significance in the period concerned was negligible, hence the focus of this research on the socio-political implications of YCD and the emergence of CPs on the national political scene.

It is important to emphasise that ‘children of perpetrators’ is an externally prescribed label. Participants in YCD who fall into this category do not identify themselves – and they certainly do not wish to be known by others – as such. For this reason, the concept is open to controversy and needs further scrutiny. The difficulty arises from the complexities within Rwanda’s post-genocide social context. Categories such as ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ tend to be reduced to simplistic dichotomies at the expense of multilevel complexities. Politically, confining people to easy categories represents a significant challenge after the outlawing of the ethnic identities ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’. In Rwanda, progressive policies still coexist with, and are constantly challenged by, deeply ingrained prejudices.

This context makes it hard for CPs to construct a positive group identity, although the question of whether a collective group identity is possible or necessary remains open. In their particular analysis of the post-genocide context, most CPs voiced the opinion that the categories of ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ are used as substitutes for ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Hutu’. They also observed that this substitution seems to imply that all the ‘*people formerly known as*’ Tutsi are victims, while ‘*people formerly known as*’ Hutu are perpetrators. This in turn has the damaging consequence that the descendants (minors and unborn in 1994) of each category are collectively and indiscriminately absorbed into their respective groups. In this logic, CPs are not only ascribed an undesirable identity as children of *génocidaires*, but they also inherit the collective blame for genocide-related crimes committed by their adult relatives.

CPs offered a shared narrative of being made to feel responsible for genocide crimes along with their parents or other adult relatives. Most CPs agreed that this imputation of blame has no legal or rational grounds; in fact they were well aware of the principle of individual responsibility in criminal matters. Instead, this blame is rooted in traditional socio-cultural norms of generational transmission and group identification. In Rwandan society, collective ascrip-

tion of responsibility or guilt, as well as transmission of liability for wrongs committed, is still pervasive irrespective of legal provisions such as the principle of individual responsibility in criminal matters. Although extreme practices such as vendettas (*guhora* in Kinyarwanda) have disappeared, some CPs felt that in post-genocide Rwanda practices of *guhora* or *kwihorera* have reappeared in the form of false accusations or generational blame. Other CPs stated that they were vicariously blamed because they are 'present' or visible when the blameworthy adult is dead, in prison or has left the country.

CPs experience this inherited blame in various ways. It can be voiced directly when they are called '*abana b'abicanyi*', '*abana b'abatwiciye*' or '*abana b'abatwische*', terms which mean respectively, 'children of killers', 'children of those who killed ours' or 'children of our killers'. In every case, CPs lamented the unquestioning neglect of their innocence and the psychologically damaging association with death or instruments of death. CPs also experience vicarious blame indirectly through exclusion or shunning by their peers and adult survivors. Intergenerational blame is also experienced through being excluded from or overlooked by government policies that provide socio-economic support to vulnerable groups (orphans, widows, the destitute, child heads of households, etc.).

As a consequence of ambiguous socio-political identities and inherited liability, many CPs spoke of lives beset by frustration, guilt and obstacles in fulfilling their potential. They also expressed the concern that their social status bars access to opportunities that are readily available to their peers who are survivors or descendants of survivors.

Attitude of silence, official protective tendencies and a reality of hardship

One of the causes of frustration expressed by CPs is perceived unhelpful attitudes from their adult relatives and government policymakers. Paradoxically, parents and government fail CPs by attempting to shield them from a reality they know all too well. Many parents, for example, adopt attitudes of silence or denial. They feel that in doing so, they are protecting their innocent children who should not be scarred by others' actions. Silence about family narratives during the genocide of 1994 creates ambiguity, doubt and suspicion among CPs, adding to their social insecurity and guilt. Even more damaging is the persistent denial from adult relatives who have been convicted of genocide. This is particularly challenging for CPs

who were born before the genocide and witnessed, or have heard accounts of, their parents' participation in the killings.

The government's protective tendencies also use CPs' innocence as a premise for their public narratives of national unity. In these narratives, CPs are presented as 'the future', the 'Rwanda of tomorrow' whose intrinsic innocence has to be protected. To achieve this, CPs are encouraged to view their lives as separate from their parents' stories of crime, although they are not aware of concrete policies to enable them to do this. In the same vein, the government has expressed a revised version of history which emphasises perennial bonds between Rwandan people and downplays ethnic identities, which are cast as a nefarious legacy of colonialism. As a consequence, traditional identity markers based on ethnicity have to be eliminated and CPs must consider themselves exclusively as 'Rwandan citizens'. This might explain the '*Ndi Umunyarwanda*' ('I am Rwandese') phenomenon which started as a slogan during YCD and has now evolved into a government policy of national identity.

CPs appreciate these narratives of inclusiveness, but they also feel that policies put forward by the central government are not necessarily reflected in concrete actions at the community level. Similarly, they are aware of the limited control that central authorities can exercise in villages, communities and families in the reinforcement of laws and regulations pertaining to national cohesion. CPs also find competing and contradictory versions of history disorientating and suspicious. Finally, CPs feel that parental and governmental 'paternalism' is groundless in as much as it does not take into consideration their stories and lived experiences.

YCD: pact of a generation, path to political responsibility

In light of this socio-political reality, CPs increasingly feel that as an important category of Rwandan youth, their experiences must become an integral part of the mainstream political narrative of reconstruction and reconciliation. Most CPs present at YCD events, for instance, do not consider themselves to be victims, despite their day to day challenges. Similarly, they do not view themselves as a vulnerable category needing protection. Instead, they understand themselves to be a blameless generation that has inherited a burdensome legacy. Their passage from childhood to (young) adulthood, while far from being easy, has afforded them a unique perspective on

the necessity of accountability for genocide as well as the political commitment required to rebuild the Rwandan society. This position imbues them with a sense of responsibility that overcomes crippling feelings of guilt, shame and isolation and contributes to undoing the harm caused by their adult relatives.

One of the concrete steps that CPs have taken to make the transition from guilt to responsibility is the creation of a generational platform, YCD, which allows them to:

- voice their opinions and ask clarifications on Rwanda's recent history of conflict, including conflicts before and after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi;
- put forward a narrative of 'disentanglement of liabilities' as far as the genocide is concerned; that is to say, clarify the extent of their adult relatives' – and their own – guilt;
- decide for themselves how their experiences can concretely contribute to national reconstruction and reconciliation and 'in-group' rehabilitation;
- engage decentralised and central governments in dialogue on how this contribution could be put to better use;
- initiate intragenerational dialogue with emerging and second generation 'victims' on their respective legacies and visions of a constructive political future.

It is in this context that the importance of YCD should be understood. YCD represented a platform where CPs from 15 districts met to assess their situation, share their stories on genocide legacy and make a generational pact to build *ejo hazaza harimo amahoro azira imihoro* ('a future of peace, not machetes!') YCD showed the commitment of CPs to the project of post-genocide reconstruction. All events started with warm up *animasiyo* and Masamba's stirring lyrics of '*jenga, jenga taifa lako*' ('build, build your nation!'). More than that, the events were an opportunity for CPs to:

- showcase artistic and literary talents much needed for cultural renewal;
- share stories of post-genocide struggles and successes;
- listen to and critically interrogate official ver-

sions of Rwanda's recent history;

- invite and challenge adult relatives to 'face up' to their responsibility for the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994;
- question the current government's prosecution of the war against *abacengezi* (infiltrators) and its lasting impact on CPs from affected regions;
- express empathy and solidarity toward genocide survivors and share practical ways in which they are already involved in the process of post-gacaca 'reparation';
- encourage a generational 'pact for peace' and a project of partnership with the government through a series of localised '*imihigo*'.

YCD also revealed that CPs, especially those living in remote and rural areas, are among the most underprivileged people in Rwanda. Their economic destitution undermines their social dignity and creates psychological tensions as they feel unable to participate adequately in increasingly ambitious policies such as Agaciro or Vision 2020. On the issue of psychological problems, YCD revealed that CPs are also prone to traumatic crises or *ihahamuka*, which is usually associated with survivors of the genocide. It was a reminder that some CPs were very young children who were exposed to extreme instances of violence, and are in key respects victims themselves. This raises the question of how we should understand CPs' victimhood and its potential risks if left unchecked.

Pact with a nation: opportunities for policymakers

The findings presented above suggest that policymakers have a vital opportunity to interact with CPs. This can take the form of *support* for their individual needs or for their group initiatives. Most importantly, though, it should consist of finding a way to use the many *assets* that CPs can contribute to policies of reconstruction and reconciliation at national and local levels.

At both levels, a government review on the inclusion of CPs – or lack thereof – in national policy-making since the genocide would constitute an important landmark, making it possible to create, adjust or maintain relevant policies. Certainly a review of policies on the mental health and psychological needs of CPs is urgent. In future public events similar to YCD, it would be desirable to ensure that health and pastoral care practitioners are on hand to attend to

cases of trauma or *ihahamuka*.

The organisation of YCD through the combined efforts of Art for Peace, MYICT and Imbuto Foundation showed the benefits of a joint effort among CPs, government and other social entrepreneurs and agencies. However, YCD is still seen as a top-down initiative operating from the capital to the districts. Both the members of Art for Peace and local CPs voiced the desire for small scale YCD events, organised and managed locally – preferably at the sector level. Such a platform would offer local authorities an opportunity to develop more inclusive policies that take into account the ‘need’ and ‘asset’ aspects of CPs’ experiences.

CPs present at YCD events stated that their identity crisis is a clear and present challenge. They established a direct connection between this crisis and contradictory versions of national history from official and non-official sources. In the absence of one agreed version of history, one wonders if it would not be preferable for the government to make concessions for multiple sources of history, rather than attempting to impose a version that generates problematic identities.

One of the most pressing concerns for CPs is undoubtedly the legacy of genocide and the issue of transmissible liability. Despite reassurances from government officials, there is not a clear and authoritative ruling on the legal status of this specific category. A step in this direction would have a tremendous liberating effect by allaying CPs’ moral and social insecurities.

Finally, the organisation of YCD and subsequent discussions of the guilt of the second generation showed that CPs could benefit from the experiences of young people in countries that have experienced similar conflicts and post-conflict dualities. One option is to facilitate study visits to countries where intergenerational dialogues are more developed and researched such as Germany. Another possibility is to equip local libraries with resources on second generation voices and issues concerning the transmissibility of guilt.

Conclusion

Research into the social and political condition of CPs through the participant observation of YCD uncovers a largely unheard yet vital segment of the Rwandan population. It is a group faced with substantial social problems that, for the most part, are a legacy of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Despite this difficult reality, CPs refuse to wear the mantle of victimhood and actively seek constructive solutions. For their part, policymakers and researchers are increasingly coming to terms with the significance of this group, especially in terms of national policies of reconstruction and reconciliation. CPs’ initiatives such as YCD assembled concerned stakeholders for a dialogue on issues of post-genocide identity, genocide legacy and transmissible blame as well as competing versions of history, with the overall objective of national reconstruction. Lessons learnt during YCD, as well as the research findings summarised in this brief, will increase understanding of these young Rwandans’ search for a better future, not just for themselves but for Rwanda as a whole.