

**‘Am I Twa or HMP?’:
Examining the ‘Historically Marginalized People’
Label and the Acculturation of the Twa in Rwanda**

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About the authors

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

- The majority of Twa do not understand what the official term ‘Historically Marginalized People’ means, why it was created, and how it should be applied.
- The majority of Twa respondents who claimed to know the meaning of the term ‘Historically Marginalized People’ believed the label was either a synonym for Twa or a description of discrimination.
- An overwhelming majority of Twa do not want to be called ‘Historically Marginalized People’, due to the label’s negative connotations, their wariness of wearing yet another official label, and the discrimination that the name has attracted.
- The label hides the historical, cultural and socio-economic narratives of the Twa and prevents development programs from being tailored to the needs of particular communities, resulting in failed interventions.
- The HMP label singles out the Twa, despite the fact that many development organizations interpret the label as an official umbrella term meant for women, the disabled, Muslims, and the Twa. However, all of these groups, except the Twa, do not need the HMP label for development assistance, given that they can publicly identify with their own, specific collective label. The Twa cannot use their identity as a means of public identification.
- Among respondents, there was an overwhelming consensus that while the Twa see themselves as Rwandans and yearn to be seen as equals, they nonetheless prefer to retain both their ‘Twa’ and ‘Rwandan’ identities.
- The HMP label requires immediate revision and re-examination if the Twa are to be fully integrated into the fabric of Rwandan society.

Introduction

The Twa – a traditional hunter-gatherer people found in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo – remain one of the most marginalized and underrepresented populations in East Africa. In Rwanda, the Twa comprise one of the country's three groups along with the Hutu and Tutsi and have long been considered Banyarwanda, or 'people of Rwanda'. Today, it is estimated that the Twa comprise 20,000-35,000 people or about 0.3-0.4% of the total Rwandan population. Throughout European colonialism and subsequent Rwandan regimes, the Twa experienced unprecedented ostracism through forced land removals to enable the creation of national parks. They were also caught in the crosshairs of widespread inter-ethnic violence (according to the Forest Peoples Programme, an estimated one-third of the Twa population was killed during the 1994 genocide), and experienced societal and systemic discrimination across the country.

The decision of the current, post-genocide government to pass anti-discrimination and segregation legislation restored the humanity and status of the Twa as equal members of Rwandan society. However, as ethnic labels cannot be used in ways that may enable segregation or discrimination, the Twa are known officially today as 'Historically Marginalized People' by both the Rwandan government and the broader Rwandan population. Since the ambiguous start of the label's use around 2004, government and non-government organizations have used it as a means of positive discrimination, given that the Twa make up the lowest socio-economic echelon in Rwanda.

Results

The results of this research, based on 15 focus groups with 272 Twa participants and questionnaires with 88 Twa respondents, demonstrate that the Twa do not understand the meaning of the term 'HMP', revealing that the government has implemented the label with insufficient sensitization or consultation with Twa communities. For the Twa, the HMP label causes confusion. Moreover, Twa respondents not only reveal that the label has negative connotation but also that, in the end, they prefer to retain their current 'Twa' identity during the integration process into modern Rwandan society.

Questionnaire Results¹:

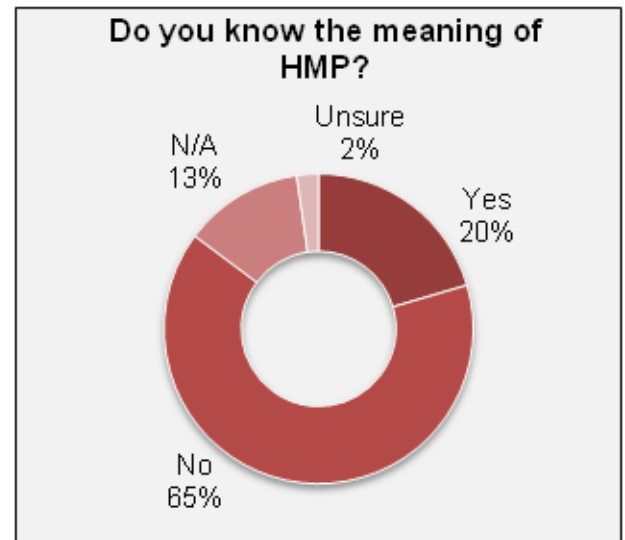


Figure 1

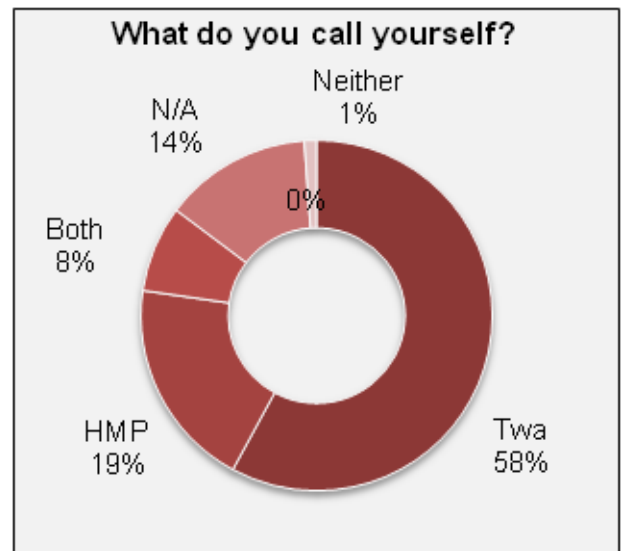


Figure 2

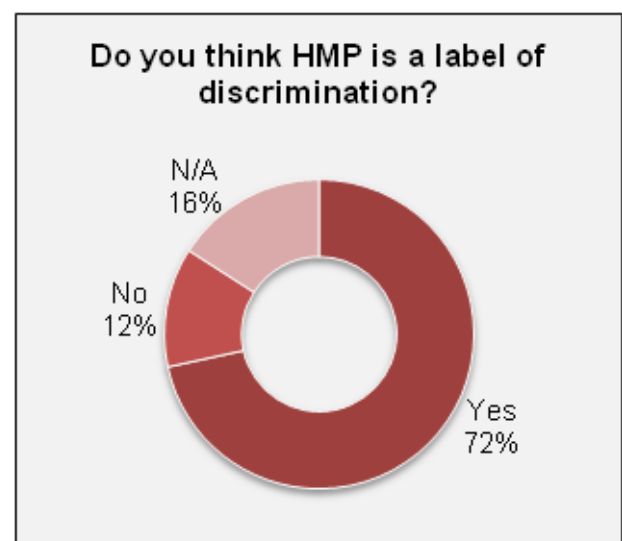


Figure 3

¹ The questionnaires specifically spelled out the label 'Historically Marginalized People' in Kinyarwanda (Abashigajwe inyuma na mateka).

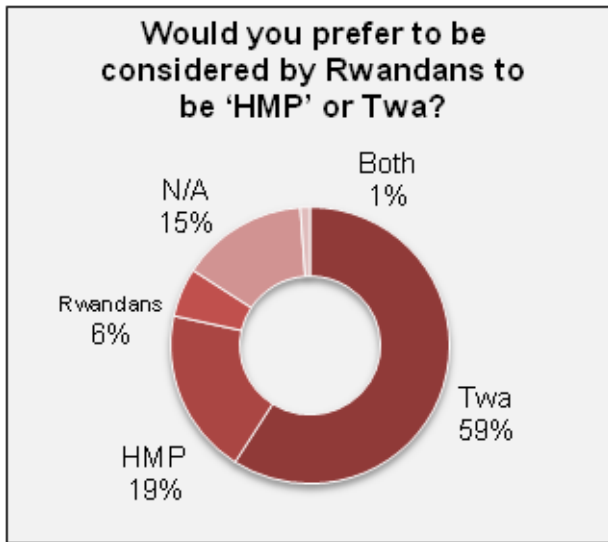


Figure 4

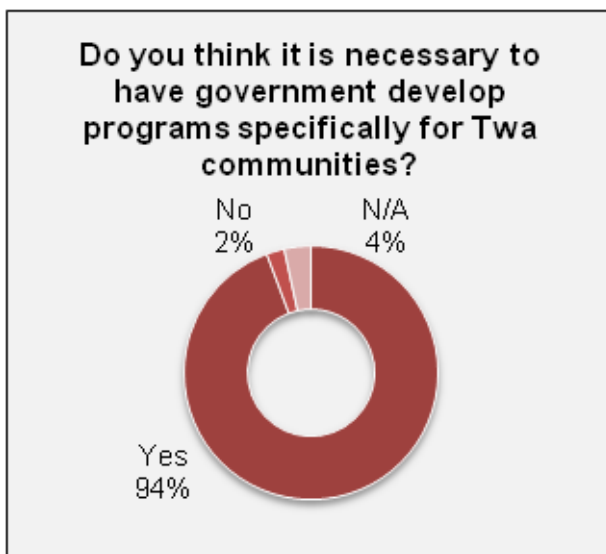


Figure 5

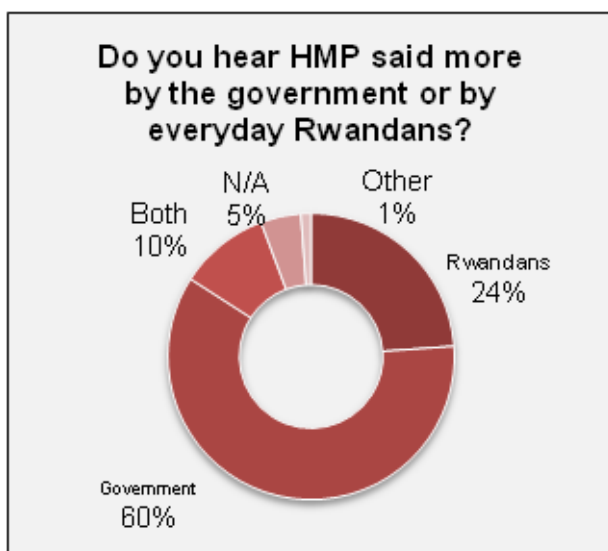


Figure 6

Analysis

65% of questionnaire respondents either did not know the meaning of the 'Historically Marginalized People' label or were unsure of its meaning. Moreover, of the 20% of respondents who claimed to have knowledge of the label, their answers did not suggest a clear and focused understanding. Interview data unearthed similar findings. It is a label that has been imposed on the Twa community rather than adopted by the community or derived through consultation, demonstrating that this process of acculturation is involuntary, and has served only to reinforce marginalization rather than to address it. To summarize, the HMP label, without sensitization as to why the Twa are 'historically marginalized', simply carries the discrimination associated with the 'Twa' label but with different words.

"According to the history that I read, the Twa have never been discriminated against. For me, I have only read that the Tutsi were discriminated against, in education and decision making for example. I cannot confirm whether the Twa have been discriminated against if there are no documents showing this."

- Vice District Mayor for Social Affairs, Eastern Province

Our findings reveal that the vast majority of Twa, even those in former hunter-gatherer communities, had little or no interest in isolating themselves from Rwandan society. In each of the 15 focus groups participants were asked, 'How would you self identify?'. Out of the 235 individuals who participated in these focus groups, 224 (95%) saw themselves as Rwandans. The remaining 11 (5%) saw themselves as Abasangwabutaka or simply chose not to identify as anything. 205 of the participants (87%) clearly expressed the desire to be both 'Twa' and 'Rwandan' simultaneously. 19 (8%) wanted to be 'HMP' and 'Rwandan'. 12 (5%) did not answer or desired to be considered solely as 'Rwandan'.

A significant cohort also expressed anguish at the 'Twa' label, given its historical and pejorative connotations. In terms of the use of the HMP label for a policy of assimilation, interviews with local officials highlighted government policy and an assumption

that the blanket policies for HMP afford the Twa important opportunities. For example, the national education policy is non-discriminatory, as is the government's 'one cow per poor family' programme. In the end, government officials revealed limited knowledge of the precarious historical, cultural, political, and economic situation of the Twa. This study discovered, however, that longstanding negative stereotypes about the Twa are still prevalent within the general populace and at the government level. It was also found that many non-Twa Rwandans maintain the belief that the Twa will consistently deny receiving government support in order to gain more. This common conception is not borne out by the study findings, however, with 68% of Twa respondents acknowledging government support.

“We don't like to call them 'Historically Marginalized People' but it is the term given from the government and the country. The Twa haven't been the only ones marginalized though - all Rwandans were marginalized due to poor governance in the past. Now the Twa are not marginalized anymore.”

- District Mayor, Kigali Province

Moreover, 94% of the Twa interviewed emphasized the necessity of introducing tailored government development programmes specifically for Twa communities. This was also recognized in an interview with a local government official who noted:

Why doesn't the government give the Twa clay and train them in modern pottery machinery, and then Rwanda could become exemplary in modern pottery across the world? And then Rwanda is known as a country with great pottery!' (Vice District Mayor of Social Affairs, Eastern Province).

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the 'Historically Marginalized People' label at present does not fulfil its purpose as a means of positive discrimination and is widely misunderstood and critiqued by both Twa Rwandans. Instead, the label has catalysed an invol-

untary process best characterized as 'marginalization'. While the government seeks an assimilation of the Twa into Rwandan society and maintains a stance against exceptionalizing a group based on ethnicity, the Twa do not view the HMP label as a means of ending their marginalization; rather they see it as an identifier that carries over the stigmas associated with them as Twa. The Twa participants consulted for this research also expressed an overwhelming desire to integrate into the rest of the Rwandan population, and no desire to separate themselves as a distinct cultural group.

Ultimately, these results lead this study to conclude that the government must revise its use of the HMP label and opt instead for a voluntary integration process that involves the consent of Twa communities. This could include district-wide consultations with Twa community leaders, scholars and experts to develop long- and short-term programs that lift the Twa out of their marginalized state. More specifically, this could include either sensitization programs on the nature of the HMP label or a mutually agreed label that does not contravene discrimination laws. Consultation could potentially lead to greater understanding both of the historical and contemporary marginalization of the Twa and to a recognition of their distinctiveness as an Indigenous People.

Recommendations

1. Consultations with Twa communities must be made regarding the nature and effects of the HMP label. The researchers recognize that the Rwandan policy on ethnicity is a direct response to past violence, culminating in the 1994 genocide, and the desire to de-emphasize ethnicity to create a united Rwanda. However, the marginalization that the Twa communities face is reinforced by a policy that labels them 'marginalized' without sensitizing the Twa and the Rwandan population at large about the nature and causes of this marginalization;
2. There should be a coordinated effort by the development community to ensure consistent and complementary programs tailored to the past and current lived experiences of the Twa. This is significant as the UK Department for International Development (DfID) has maintained a policy 'to enhance the informed participation of ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples at all stages of the project cycle, and take into account their preferences and sensibilities';
3. Sensitization programs need to be developed both

for non-Twa Rwandans to learn about the Twa, and for the Twa to learn about the civic, cultural and social expectations of living in modern Rwandan society;

4. There is a need for more research to be carried out in, and on, Twa communities. The lack of current research, both in terms of wider academic discourse and in terms of the knowledge that the Rwanda government has on Twa communities, clearly affects the lens through which the Twa are seen. The lack of current knowledge means that ongoing perceptions of the Twa as non-distinct and non-marginalized persist, which damages their present and future development and inclusion in Rwandan society;

5. Consideration must be given to socio-economic, cultural, and historical narratives of Twa communities understood and taken into account by international and domestic development programs.

This different policy focus does not violate anti-discrimination or segregation legislation because the goal is ultimately the positive, mutual, and voluntary acculturation of the Twa into Rwandan society. At present, there is a de facto segregation of many communities and the HMP label singles out the Twa for being marginalized without Rwandans and the Twa themselves knowing why and how this marginalization occurred.