

## Intergenerational legacies of genocide perpetration: The case for psychosocial support through youth programs in Rwanda

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### Executive summary

- The criminal past of parents who have been involved in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and its subsequent repercussions invade and overshadow their children's present and potentially future individual and social lives.
- The situation of having *génocidaire* parents weighs on the children's lives in different ways: Because of shame and/or guilt they tend to feel and act like not fitting in society. Being in a situation that draws negative attention and that also affects children's everyday individual and family lives, turns the children angry towards responsible parents.
- A considerable number of *génocidaires* children can be categorized as youth, meaning those who are under 30 years. Therefore they need psychosocial support through youth programs from their own immediate living environment, so that they can manage the effects of inheriting a parental criminal past and intergenerational legacies of genocide perpetration will not linger on across subsequent generations.

## Introduction

The post-genocide Rwandan population is overwhelmingly young; 62% of the population is under 25 years old while as many as 41% is under 15 years old, according to the fourth and most recent national census (2012). Even though most of this population did not consciously experience the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, different studies have demonstrated that they are in one way or the other affected by the consequences of the genocide. For instance, children of survivors may be wounded by being raised by parents who are traumatized, while children of perpetrators whether still in prison or not, may be suffering from carrying the burden of their parents' criminal past.

Understanding what these children go through and subsequently addressing their specific needs requires existing Youth Programs to be sensitive in their policies and intervention to the impact of legacies of the genocide and its aftermath among the youth, while aiming to reach the lowest administrative societal level possible. Our focus here is specifically on the impact of parental genocidal perpetration and its subsequent repercussions on the daily lives of their descendants and the support they may need to manage that particular situation. Our recommendation therefore is not to single out the category of youth that is central in our study from other categories of youth, but rather to consider the integration of an additional dimension in existing support packages, namely psychosocial support in ways that will fit *genocidaires'* offspring's specific individual and social needs.

This policy brief is based on an ethnographic study that was conducted in the south-eastern Rwanda between 2008 and 2013 over a period of in total 40 months. The participants were 21 children whose parents had been convicted, in most of cases to imprisonment, for committing genocide in 1994. The participants included 14 females and seven males,

aged (at the time of research) between 10-42 years, living in two adjacent neighbourhoods. Three of the 21 participants belonged to one family, the others to distinct families. In the following paragraphs we briefly highlight different but intertwined facets of the burden of being a *génocidaire's* descendant, and make the case for youth policy outcome.

## A summary of study findings

“You don't know what it is like to be a child of a killer!”, exclaimed Daria, a 20 year old daughter of a man sentenced to life imprisonment because of rape and killings during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. In the light of Daria's experience, having *génocidaire* parents amounts to a chronic, heavy, and multifaceted burden for the children.

### *Social isolation*

After children have discovered, mainly through *gacaca* courts, that their parents participated in the genocide, they tend to live a life of social withdrawal – mainly self-imposed due to feelings of shame and/or guilt. These children do not feel like fitting in the society; they suffer from psychosocial uprootedness, which is typified among other things by a desire to conceal parents' whereabouts or their own true identity in terms of descent. For instance, being a *génocidaire's* child becomes a reference point in deciding whether to forge a friendship or close relationship, be it at school or in wider society.

### *Children's anger towards responsible parents*

Being in a situation that casts a shadow of shame and uncertainty over one's present life and potentially one's future life makes the children angry at their responsible parents; especially when the children can neither understand why their parents did what they did in 1994 nor avoid the implications and the association with them. The children's anger towards

*génocidaire* parents is exacerbated by the fact that internment of the latter continually interferes with individual as well as family life dynamics, mainly because of prison visits and meeting reparations' obligations.

### *Carrying the burden of a génocidaire's descendant across the generations*

While carrying the label of a *génocidaire's* descendant taints all aspects of the lives of those who find themselves in that situation (the second generation), our study indicates that this taint also extends to the next generation, the third one. Some of the participants in our study are married or are parents themselves, and their children are already sharing with them the experience of being born in a family history tainted by a legacy of genocide perpetration.

## **Relevance and implications of the findings**

The findings of our study directly concern a considerable proportion of the Rwandan youth; meaning those under 30 years of age. Even though up to date figures of *génocidaire's* descendants are not yet formally known, there are nevertheless some factors which support our suggestion of numerical significance of this portion of the population. The majority of people who were involved in the genocide were, according to for instance Straus (2006), men aged between 30-39 years, married, and with more than one child at the time of genocide in April 1994, while many more children were born out of these marriages shortly after the genocide. *Gacaca* courts records show that 1,958,634 cases were tried; 1,003,227 individuals were prosecuted while 84,896 people were sentenced to TIG obligations. Coupling these figures with the average size of a Rwandan family (around 3 children per family) suggests that the number of young people falling into the situation described in this study is significant.

In Rwanda there are already many mechanisms such as Youth Friendly Centers, Unity and Reconciliation Clubs etc., which have been set up to attend to the needs of youth, including *génocidaire's* descendants. These programs support the youth in different areas such as reproductive health, behavior change, Information and Communication Technology, entrepreneurship, cooperative promotion, vocational training, socio-economic development programs, etc. Since we identified psychosocial support, as an element that could be added to the abovementioned youth policies so that both of youth physical and socio- emotional needs are fully addressed, below we highlight why and how this could be done.

## **Why the integration of psychosocial support in existing Youth Policies**

- Psychosocial support would not only be relevant to *génocidaire's* offspring's specific problems of shame, guilt and anger, but it would also contribute to mitigating the self-imposed social isolation, hence contribute to the existing initiatives in Rwanda that aim at unity and reconciliation of all Rwandans.
- Psychosocial support would anyhow be a relevant and effective supplement to existing youth programs and (other) Transitional Justice Mechanisms such as *Ndi Umunyarwanda Program and Itorero*.

## **How to effectively integrate a psychosocial package into Youth Policies**

- Psychosocial services have been available in Rwanda since the nineties. In all District Hospitals one finds psychosocial desks. So far, the tendency has been that these services are mainly offered in the area of HIV/AIDS

counseling or dealing with people showing psychosomatic symptoms. These services can be extended and focus more on psychosocial problems such as chronically carrying the socio-juridical and historical burden of parental genocide perpetration.

- We recommend to further decentralize existing programs such as Youth Centers up to Cell and village levels to reach as many young people as possible, particularly those who are not attending schools or those living far from the existing youth centers at the District or Sector levels. Close collaboration between Health Centers and local youth initiatives would help in reaching out to the youth, not only in terms of identifying those in need of such services but also in terms of encouraging them to take advantages of available facilities that offer psychosocial services.
- Most of psychosocial services are institution based. We would recommend that whenever possible these services become people-owned and community based. In this respect, we recommend the model of Community-Based Sociotherapy Program ([www.sociotherapy.org](http://www.sociotherapy.org)), which in about three years has selected over 540 women and men from different social statuses across the four Provinces, and trained them as sociotherapists or group facilitators. Trained sociotherapists via sociotherapy groups facilitate ordinary people in their own communities to deal with their everyday life issues among which psychosocial difficulties *génocidaires'* descendants are grappling with.
- We would also recommend the training of teachers (primary and secondary level) or other people who spend considerable amount of time with the youth, such as religious

people, in the sociotherapy approach. With these trainings, teachers and pastors would have gained skills and knowledge that would enable them to create besides the usual class or church initiatives, a social framework whereby they can for instance talk to the youth, including *génocidaires'* descendants about their everyday life and possible struggles they might be facing.