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Peter Uvin¹

Local Institutions for Rural Development in Burundi: Strengths, Weaknesses and Interactions

Introduction

During the last decade or so, Africa has undergone two main processes of reform. One is structural adjustment, brought about by the economic bankruptcy of its governments and the answer devised by the Bretton Woods institutions, leading to a retreat of the sphere of government in favour of private actors, as well as economic liberalization and privatization. The other is an almost universal tendency towards democratization, resulting partly from the political and ideological bankruptcy of African governments and partly from the pressure exerted by foreign donors, leading to decentralization, the abandonment of the one-party state and the organization of elections.

Both these processes have been, and still are, the subject of intense debate; opinions about the causes, desirability and consequences of these two processes vary widely. We will not refer here to these debates: they are known, and concerning our case study no different from all others.

For ordinary citizens, both economic liberalization and political democratization are essentially felt at the local level – yet, neither international policy-makers nor scholars devote much attention to it. For the vast majority of Africa's citizens, democracy is not a one-off election, or the establishment of some newspaper most people cannot read, but a matter of interaction with local officials. It is at the local level that the farmers, the traders or the small artisans interact with the state, receive (or do not receive) advice, credit, support, a possibility for feedback, etc. Similarly, privatization and liberalization are not the sale of the state-owned beer factory to some foreign investor, nor the dismantling of a long powerless marketing board, but local processes in which ordinary citizens take over functions previously exerted by the state: the production of seeds, the commerce of food or fertilizer, the management of the village clinic or of hydraulic infrastructure, etc.

¹ This article is a partial synthesis of the results of a research project on "the role of local government in rural development in Burundi", executed by Paul Sauvin and Peter Uvin, and funded by the Swiss National Funds for Scientific Research (National Research Program 28). I also thank Daniel Fino for his inspiration and advice, as well as my colleagues Jean-Pierre Jacob and François Margot for their help in the development of the research methodology.

This study proposes a case study of local government in Burundi, a country characterized by a decade of structural adjustment and over half a decade of political change. This article will not deal with the macro-level, national processes: there will be but very little discussion of national economic growth rates, election results, or military and political tensions. Instead, we will focus on the "commune," the lowest level of government in Burundi, and, for most citizens, the sole level they ever deal with. We will study in detail its capacities, resources, interaction with its citizens – all of this under conditions of national liberalization and democratization. The field research on which this article is based took place in 1990 – 1992, i.e., just before the elections and their violent aftermath, and during the height of political and economic reform. Presently, everything in Burundi is blocked: no further change is taking place, meaning that, to a large extent, the situation described here still prevails today.

In second place, this article will deal with private local organizations: peasant organizations, users' committees, natives' associations, etc. Increasingly, throughout Africa, NGOs – whether SHOs or SHPOs – are coming into being and Burundi, although a late-comer, is no exception to this. It is widely believed that these local organizations should collaborate with local government to promote sustainable local development. This article, then, will analyze the types of local institutions found in Burundi, the constraints upon their emergence, as well as the nature of their interactions with local government. Clearly, under conditions of structural adjustment and democratization, these relations are subject to change – hence, the two themes of this paper interact.

Finally, as a sub-theme, we will also deal with the attitude of the development aid system towards local organizations: local government as well as peasant organizations. Our aim is to attempt to assess the impact of foreign aid on the nature (strengths and weaknesses) of both public and private local organizations, as well as propose ways for improvement in the future.

The context

Burundi became independent from Belgium in 1962. It is the 8th poorest country in the world, with a per capita income of 210\$. With 200 persons per square km, it is also the second most densely populated country in Africa (after neighbour Rwanda) and one of the 10 most densely populated countries in the world; moreover, population growth rates are high. Agriculture employs 90% of the population; urbanization is only 4% – the world's lowest. It is landlocked, making its exports and imports expensive.

From 1965 to 1993, Burundi was a military-ruled, one party state, characterized by a quasi-monopoly on power of a fraction of Tutsi. The Tutsi

represent approx. 15% of the population, but the power was really in the hands of a sub-group among them – the Tutsi-Hima and more specifically, those from one province, Bururi.

The Hutu, representing 85% of the population, are largely excluded from power: they are almost totally absent from the army and the security forces, and seriously under-represented in the administration, in the development projects, in the university and even in the secondary schools.

Slowly, since a decade, increasing numbers of Hutu managed to enter the system, go to university, get administrative positions, etc. That was part of a strategy to decrease ethnic tension and open up the country followed mainly by the Buyoya regime.

The origins of this situation are hard to know with certainty. What is clear is that the situation is of recent origin: the present Tutsi-Hima monopoly on power has not always existed. Its origins date from the colonial period when Tutsi were systematically favoured and especially the post-independence period when, with extreme violence, groups of them stuck to power and monopolized it. To do so, there have been successive waves of killing, in 1965, and most notoriously in 1972, when every educated Hutu in the country was deliberately killed: more than 100,000 persons died. As a result, mutual fear is a part of daily life in Burundi.

I. The commune

The commune in Burundi is headed by a "communal administrator" (usually called *admicom*). According to the law, he represents both the state and the population. He is nominated by the Minister of the Interior, and controlled by the Provincial Governor. Increasingly, there exists a policy of trying to nominate well-educated people that come from the commune itself, but this is by far not always the case.

The *admicom* is assisted for the administrative part of his job by an accountant, a secretary, and a number of sector and zonal chiefs. These are local people with minimal education (6 years), members of the unique party (as is the *admicom*). It is not clear what the criteria for their selection are. Clientelism and corruption undoubtedly play an important role. In every commune there is also a police corps, as well as agents of the public security; there are teachers in the schools and nurses at the health centres. All these people are paid by their different technical ministries.

By far the largest number of state officials in the commune are the so-called "communal technical services". These are agricultural, livestock, fishery, agents, foresters, etc. These are detached from their ministry, and paid either by the state or by development projects.

According to the law, the *admicom* is the hierarchical superior of all these people – the “chef d'orchestre”, conductor of the orchestra, who co-ordinates and controls all the development interventions in the commune.

Tasks of the commune

Since 1977, the commune is, according to the law, the “local partner of all development interventions.” Since the end of the 1980s, this has been strengthened with the commune becoming “the instrument of the inversion of the administrative tradition”, acting as the source of local development, in conjunction with the population. Since 1984, the commune has also become “autonomous”, i.e., it receives no more subsidies from central government. Other laws have charged the commune with responsibility for the construction and maintenance of schools, roads and clinics, forestry, etc. The commune can directly negotiate with foreign donors, although the Ministry of the Interior has an oversight role.

As such, the commune in Burundi is probably the most powerful local government structure in all of Africa, all the more impressive if one knows that its average population is only 50,000. How did this situation come into being?

The central state is almost bankrupt and must get rid of some costly functions: privatization and decentralization are the key words here. To do so, the state had to give the commune the right to find its own funding. The same holds for the population. There is a lot of privatization of certain economic functions to peasants or local organizations (even if they do not exist). Water users' committees, health centre committees, seed multiplication associations, etc. – these are all examples of this tendency.

On the other hand, there is little faith in the capacity and the morality of the commune to manage money. Hence, the state attempts to limit the financial power of the commune, giving it mainly powers of execution and maintenance, but not initiative. This is also caused by the fact that the top-down nature of the Burundian state and its policies remains intact.

Hence, the need for decentralization to the communes and the population clashes with a reluctance to abandon traditional top-down models of authority. It is in this tension that the local institutional future of Burundi is made. The risk is that the communes and the population become merely executors of the state's policies, while having to pay for them too. Clearly, this will create resistance. On the other hand, the legal texts and the absence of central state financial power, give a margin of manoeuvre to these local actors that is quite new and potentially revolutionary.

Here now we will study the capacity of the commune to play its role, while in the next part we will discuss the capacity of the population to increase its power.

Legitimacy of the commune

This part asks the following questions: is the commune anchored in the aspirations and values of the population? Is it recognized as legitimate, deserving the role it has?

Let us first look at the history of the commune, for history is an important element of legitimacy. To resume the history of the commune, we can observe the following tendencies since colonialization:

- A continual increase of the physical distance of local authority: from the level of the hill to the level of 50,000 persons (150 square km, without transportation for the personnel). More recently, lower levels of administrative coverage have been created, with the zonal chiefs, but these are rather elements of control of the population than elements of representation.
- A continued decrease in the capacity of the population to influence the local authority: no more election, no social sanction, no input in communal management. In the past, there existed popular control over local authorities – the institution of *umushingantahe* is famous for that. At present, local authority is a simple transmission level of central state power.

Of course, history is not all. The commune can, for example, acquire legitimacy, as it becomes a part of daily life and expectations converge around it. And indeed, one observes that everyone knows the name of the *admicom*, the zonal chief, and the local agricultural chief. Hence, its contact with the population is frequent. Moreover, the commune fulfils many tasks that directly concern the population: registration of births and deaths, agricultural support, health care, and education, etc. The commune is often the only instance that can provide these important services. All this can contribute to acquiring a functional (as different from a historical) legitimacy.

However, this capacity for legitimacy is counterbalanced by two factors at least. These two factors are at the level of the persons that make up the commune, i.e., its personnel:

- Corruption and mismanagement, absenteeism, disinterest for their work, low presence in the field, lies towards the population and promises broken, stealing from the commune and abuse of public property, etc. There are exceptions to this, of course, but they mainly prove the rule.
- The commune and its representatives are prime actors in the ethnic conflict that divides Burundi. The proportion of its personnel that is Tutsi is very high, although the population is almost totally Hutu. Many (but certainly not all) of these people actively play ethnic games, sowing division, creating rumours, discriminating, etc. It is no surprise that often the violence that hit the country started at the communal level.

In conclusion, the commune has no historical legitimacy but could acquire a contemporary one because of the frequency and importance of its contacts

with the population. The key variable here is the quality and the performance of its personnel, which tends to be low.

Financial resources

The income of the commune is low and fluctuates heavily. It largely serves to pay the salaries of the communal employees. Only a very small part – some millions of FBu at the most – can be allocated to infrastructure investment and maintenance. This is barely enough to build a mile of road, construct some classroom, repair a health centre.

There is little possibility to increase the commune's income. Almost all the commune's income comes from local taxes. Taxation is fixed by law, and already strongly resented by the population, who feels the commune taxes them too much and who try to escape it by all means. Tax collection is more of a permanent fight than a standard procedure in these communes. Moreover, tax collectors are not necessarily honest or competent, which decreases tax income further. Hence, tax income could increase a bit, but not much.

There are few or no other sources of income to the commune. It can try to sell some of the wood in the communal forests – if the population does not cut it, or if the forester has not sold it for himself already. In the past, state subsidies allowed the commune to invest in some constructions of general benefit. Since 1984, however, as part of the structural adjustment, the state has ended all subsidies.

All the commune can do is hope for development projects to come and give things to the commune, or to mobilize local savings and labour of the population. In theory, the latter is part of commune life: since decades, there exist the "communal development works" (TDC) in which every able bodied male above 18 years spends a Saturday morning working for the commune. The capacity of the admicom to use this resource depends on the quality of his programming (does he ask the population to work on projects they consider to their interest?) and his authority. Both should be high to overcome the dislike and the resistance of the population to these TDCs.

Human resources

A number of problems concerning the human resources of the commune are usually recognized and discussed by the authorities. They are:

- lack of people
- lack of transportation
- lack of qualification of the personnel.

Less discussed, but as important, are some other limitations:

- Lack of capacity in animation and support: technical and administrative services have no idea how to really implement a strategy of self-help promotion, how to experiment. They feel insecure when obliged to do so and largely prefer the old top-down style
- Lack of deontology and morality (already discussed) – undoubtedly linked to very low salaries
- Factors that limit the capacity of the admicom to play his role as "chef d'orchestre":
 - too many tasks, especially as the quality of his staff is low; he must control and do everything himself. Too many meetings outside his commune: training sessions, meetings with the governor, the ministry, the Party, etc.
 - high rotation: basically, once the admicom knows the job, he goes. As the lower personnel is very stable, however, he depends on it and cannot easily control it. Moreover, for social reasons, it is very hard for him to fire people.
 - he has little power over his "musicians". They are hired, paid and judged by either the ministries or the development projects, and hence their loyalties go to these institutions, which do not play the card of the commune. Indeed, the communal technical services are often paid by the development projects intervening in the region, while the teachers, nurses, etc. are paid by their respective ministries.

Management capacity

The management capacity of the commune is low and deficient. The communal programs – annual or triennial – are formal exercises, copies of previous years, devoid of interest, without information about delays, costs, maintenance, etc.

The usually invoked reason for this situation is lack of capacity and training. This is at the most only a partial answer: many admicom have been trained repeatedly in programming, monitoring and evaluation, but still do not apply it. Why?

- they don't see the reason for programming: for them, it is only an administrative obligation to be dispensed with as easily as possible
- they are hardly sanctioned: even if they don't make any program at all, it is often not even noticed by the Governor
- they lack information: absence of data, archives, etc.

Willingness to promote local development

The agenda of the admicom – the activities he priorities (as well as his administrative personnel) – consists foremost of security, followed by tax perception, then conflict regulation. Rural development comes by far last. That is due to the fact that the admicom himself is hired and paid by the Ministry of the Interior, whose main preoccupations are with security matters – especially given the explosive nature of the Burundian state.

Conclusion

The commune has few financial resources, and precious little capacity to increase them. The available funds allow to pay the salaries of some underqualified commune personnel and to make some small investments or maintenance projects. If anything, its resources have declined as the subsidies from central governments have evaporated. Yet, at the same time, the commune has received more and more responsibilities – so-called decentralization – with financial implications. That puts a tight squeeze on the commune.

The solution is not totally desperate, however. First, there are some solutions to this low financial income. One is to use the labour and investment capacity of the population. If properly mobilized, that can make a serious difference. The second is to draw external actors into the commune: NGOs, the Church, bilateral and multilateral agencies. Second, we must not underestimate the resources of the commune. Indeed, the commune has sufficient revenues to pay the salaries of more than 10 persons, and to invest in some activities – some of which could generate revenue by themselves. Moreover, it has at its availability the human resources of up to hundred persons, paid by their ministries but legally under the authority of the admicom. There are few places in Africa, if any, where the lowest administrative unit, responsible for approx. 50,000 persons, has such a pool of personnel and legal powers. A lot could be done with that.

The quality of the functioning of the commune is heavily dependent on individual qualities, foremost the admicom. A dynamic admicom can make the commune move, mobilize the population, get projects to come and invest. A non-dynamic, corrupt one? Tax perception decreases by 30% after the death of a tax collector; the previous accountant quit his job and took the books of the last 5 years with him; the participation in the TDCs fluctuates in function of the authority of the zonal and sector chiefs, etc. This lack of institutionalization of the commune is important. It creates insecurity, and renders any external intervention dependent on these chance factors.

Moreover, notwithstanding its legal mandate, the commune is hardly interested in development matters. The administrative personnel has a strong security agenda, whereas the technical personnel basically attempts to please the projects that pay it while minimizing its work input.

Face to face with these weak, poor, non-institutionalized communes we find the development projects, with much higher budgets, much better trained personnel, committed leadership, clear objectives and well functioning decision making structures. One may wonder where the real power in the communes resides, or who will set the local development policy. We will come back to this later.

II. Local organizations

Situation

There are few private local organizations in Burundi, compared to most other countries. We will discuss the reasons for that below.

We distinguish seven types:

- mutual help associations: it is hard to know how many of them still exist; the common wisdom is that they are dying out,
- the Church and its local groups: they are by far the strongest and oldest local organization in Burundi, with committed personnel and significant resources. Since the end of the 1980s – since the Buyoya regime opened up the political atmosphere – the Church has become more active in development work,
- the co-operatives: dating from the colonial period, they are weak, suffering from the usual problems of co-operatives in Africa: mismanagement, member disinterest, etc.,
- peasant associations: there are few of them, and they are usually very dependent on development aid (see below),
- intermediary NGOs: there are also very few of these (not more than 10 nationally in 1991), with little presence in the field or popular legitimacy,
- natives' associations: there are few of them, but they can be powerful actors in the commune, for they have access to the resources in the government and the aid agencies,
- users' committees: recently imposed by the aid agencies in the field of water and health (and maybe even education in the future), they are an outgrowth of structural adjustment.

Constraints on the emergence of local organizations

We distinguish at least four of them:

- Lack of resources to pool: there is almost no land or money to bring together for peasants – only labour, which is over-abundant. Associations mainly exist in the handicraft sector, outside agriculture.
- Lack of markets: even if associations come into being and produce food crops or handicrafts, the demand for these is low, especially when one moves further away from the few cities.
- Lack of civil space: between the state, with its omnipresent Party and administrative and security apparatus, and the family unit, there is hardly any civil space left in Burundi for people to organize.
- Lack of potential leaders: in past occurrences of violence, Hutu leaders have systematically been killed, depriving the rural milieu of its potential leaders.

Support by the commune

In theory, the commune is in favour of local private organizations, following in this the discourse of the central state since structural adjustment. In practice, however, admicom makes clear that there is little they can do to favour or strengthen local organizations – except the case of the users' committees, which admicom was obliged to help create and which were to their interest anyhow (decrease of communal expenses).

It is true that the commune has little capacity to influence the constraints that face local organizations. It has little to give to them – no money or land – except advice, which it is not particularly good at. It constitutes only a small market – although still a real one. It cannot change the global political situation – and, for that matter, its personnel often worsens it. Moreover, the few local organizations that exist ask little from the commune: they put no pressure on the commune, but focus on the Church or the aid system.

III. Foreign aid and its relation with local actors

The basic attitude of almost all foreign aid towards the commune is neglect, combined with distrust. Most projects, whether managed by governmental, intergovernmental or non-governmental organizations, intervene within the boundaries of the communes but do not even inform the admicom of their activities or their annual budgets. Indeed, amazing as it may seem, admicomms often have no idea what is being invested within their communes –

although, they are often partly in charge of the management, if not the financing of the maintenance. One admicom proudly told us that, after three years of lobbying, the project now sent him its annual reports.

This situation gets worsened when we realize that, in many cases, it is the projects – or the foreign-funded national institutions – that pay the salaries of the communal technical services. As such, these people are hired, paid, judged and let go by project managers – not by the admicom. This decreases the admicom's authority over these people.

Moreover, the projects have many more resources than the commune. This offers real possibilities, of course, for investments that benefit the commune and its inhabitants, but also creates many problems between them. Very often, even lowly project employees have salaries and means of transportation that are beyond the earnings of the commune's personnel. While the admicom at the most has a small motorcycle, and his sectoral and zonal chiefs only their feet, many project employees have Landrovers, Pajeros, etc. Many people – technical and administrative agents, but also peasants – receive some of the added benefits of projects: training opportunities with per diems, salary complements, grants, credits never to be paid back, jobs for a cousin, etc. It is clear where people's loyalties lie, especially in case of conflict between the commune and the projects.

Hence, the impact of the projects is to seriously decrease the power and the capacities of the commune. It is a case of institutional destruction.

As much as the foreign aid system neglects the public local organizations, it is in favour of private ones. Indeed, and much more than the local administration, the aid system seeks to favour the emergence of local organizations – and has the means to do so. Foreign aid can both give incentives for the creation of local organizations – land, credit, gifts – and invest in their supervision and support (training, advice, contracts, etc.). The aid system seems to be capable, to a certain extent, to overcome some of the constraints on grassroots organizations: most notably the economic ones. It can supply money and sometimes even land; it has competent personnel that can help in identifying markets and commercialization opportunities. And, at first sight, the positive effects are clear: local organizations exist mainly where foreign aid projects that favour them work.

Of course, the risk here is the overly rapid creation of artificial associations, dependent on subsidies and support, manipulated by their "support" institutions, show-cases for project managers, but without real roots in local milieu, and without long-term survival capacity. After all, the constraints remain essentially the same, and the political ones are not even being touched by the aid system.

This problem – the lack of sustainability and the artificial nature of associations – is compounded by part of the aid system's top-down definition

of participation. Indeed, the users' committees are typical examples of participation decreed from the top, without implication of the grassroots at all. At worst, one can simply consider them mechanisms designed to make the population pay for previously free services. They reflect a technocratic model of participation, to which the central state is not averse.

In the following article, an analysis will be conducted of the Communal Development Support Program, a Swiss program that set out to be totally different from the other aid agencies in the country – and indeed for ten years acted as a precursor in matters of local institutional development. Yet, notwithstanding its innovative objectives and mode of functioning, it failed to achieve many of its objectives. The reasons for that will illustrate the fundamental dynamics of institutional support, in Burundi and to a certain extent elsewhere.

Abstracts

Nicht nur in Burundi, auch in vielen Teilen Afrikas tritt die lokale Bevölkerung in den ländlichen Gebieten in direkten Kontakt mit dem Staat. Dieser Artikel untersucht lokale Institutionen, die Beschränkungen für ihr Entstehen und die Art ihrer Verbindung zur lokalen politischen Führung. Besonderes Augenmerk wird der Haltung des Entwicklungshilfe-Systems gegenüber der lokalen Führung und ihrem Einfluß auf sie gewidmet. Da in Burundi die lokale Führung über nur wenige Ressourcen verfügt, aber zur selben Zeit im Zuge der Dezentralisierung weitere Aufgaben, die finanzielle Verpflichtungen mit sich bringen, übertragen erhielt, mußte sie nach Auswegen aus dieser Zwickmühle suchen. Eine Lösung betraf die Anziehung externer Akteure wie NGOs, die Kirche, bilaterale und multilaterale Organisationen. Erfolg oder Mißerfolg hingen dabei stark von den Anstrengungen der lokalen Führer bei der Mobilisierung lokaler Ressourcen, wie Arbeitskraft, ab. Im Gegensatz zur schwachen institutionellen Struktur der Gemeinde, verfügt das lokal tätige Entwicklungsprojekt über viel höhere Budgets, besser ausgebildetes Personal, eine engagierte Führung, klare Ziele und eine gut funktionierende Entscheidungsstruktur. Da die meisten Projekte der lokalen Gemeinde nur Mißtrauen und wenig Beachtung entgegenbringen, kommt es kaum zu Verständigung zwischen ihnen, obwohl die Projekte auf dem Gemeindegebiet stark intervenieren. In vielen Fällen zahlen sie die Gehälter technischen Angestellten der Gemeinde, was ihnen auch das Recht gibt, Personal anzustellen und zu entlassen. Die finanziellen Ressourcen des Projekts üben auf eine große Zahl von Gemeindemitgliedern beträchtlichen Einfluß aus, wodurch die Macht und die Möglichkeiten der Gemeinde beträchtlich verringert werden. In vielen Fällen bedeutet dies sogar Zerstörung der Institutio-

nen. Auf der anderen Seite kann das Projekt Anreize für die Entstehung privater lokaler Organisationen schaffen und helfen, Beschränkungen für diese Organisationen zu beseitigen. Doch haften diesen Organisationen mangelnde Dauerhaftigkeit an und sie haben etwas Künstliches an sich. Ort spiegeln sie ein technokratisches Partizipationsmodell wider, dem der Staat nicht ablehnend gegenübersteht.

In many parts of Africa, not only in Burundi, many local people in rural areas interact with the state. This article analyzes local institutions, the constraints on their emergence and the nature of interaction with local government. Special attention is given to the attitude of the development aid system towards local organizations and their impact on them. As local government in Burundi commands few resources, but at the same time acquired increased responsibilities, including some of a financial nature as a consequence of political decentralization, it had to look for solutions to this tight squeeze. One solution involved the attraction of external actors like NGOs, the Church, bilateral and multilateral agencies. Much of the success or failure depended on the local leaders in their effort to mobilize local resources, like labour power. In contrast to the weak institutional structure of the commune, the locally present development projects are characterized by much higher budgets, much better trained personnel, committed leadership, clear objectives, and well functioning decision-making structures. As most projects express an attitude of neglect and mistrust towards the local government there is little communication between them, although most projects intervene heavily in the area. In many cases they pay the salaries of the communal technical services which enables them to hire and fire local personnel. The financial resources of the project to extend substantial influence over a number of local inhabitants which leads to a substantial destruction. On the other hand, the project can provide incentives for the creation of private local organizations and help to overcome some of the constraints acting upon grassroots organizations. Such organizations flower where aid projects exist and favour them. But there is a lack of sustainability and an artificial nature to them. They often reflect a technocratic model of participation, to which the central state is not averse.

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