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FPIF Postcard From...

Postcard from...Bujumbura

Beth Tuckey | March 16, 2009

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Burundian youth are in a difficult but important position. Some were perpetrators of war during the conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in the late 1990s. Others were victims of the violence, leaving an empty hole in Burundian society that demands attention. Still others were caught in between either because they abstained from violence or grew up with both Hutu and Tutsi family members and found it impossible to choose sides. Whatever their background, young people are vital to the future stability of Burundi.

The international community hasn't forgotten Burundi, but it hasn't really focused on it either. The Burundian

government provides few social services for those affected by the violence, leaving NGOs, churches, and local communities to do the heavy lifting. A few U.S.-based NGOs such as [Search for Common Ground](#) support youth programs in Burundi, but the U.S. government has yet to fund such methods of reconciliation on a broad scale. Currently, the United States provides a modicum of support for youth initiatives through the UN, but truly effective programs are few and far between, reinforcing the need for a new generation of Burundian peace advocates.

At the Centre Jeunes Kamenge in the Kamenge neighborhood in the capital city of Bujumbura — a youth center that received the Swedish Right Livelihood Award in 2002 — over 31,000 young people are enrolled in programs that encourage living together peacefully. Even during the war, the center was one of the few places where young people from various tribes could come to study or play sports, despite the bloodshed occurring outside the center's property. Many of these youth are now taking the lead in their communities and finding more common ground with their peers across ethnic lines than politicians believe possible.

Clubs such as the Komezakaranga Cultural Association in the Kamenge neighborhood sustain traditional Burundian drumming and dance, as pictured above, while also teaching future peace and reconciliation. The drum tradition in Burundi is a ritual that symbolizes responsible governance and an active civil society within each step and drumbeat. Its application today is crucial as young people are working to restore tribal relations within the confines of a central government that is only partly democratic.

These grassroots methods of community restoration and engagement, however small, should be celebrated and encouraged as Burundi looks forward. An empowered youth, accompanied by job creation, education, and health care, is one of Burundi's best hopes for a sustainable peace.

Foreign Policy In Focus contributor Beth Tuckey is the associate director of Program Development and Policy at the [Africa Faith and Justice Network](#) in Washington, DC.



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