

Governance, Security and Culture: Assessing Africa's Youth Bulge

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Governance, Security and Culture: Assessing Africa's Youth Bulge

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Although Africa has a youth-dominated population, African government policies are often not youth-centered and African governments and their international supporters are frequently under-informed about the priorities of most youth. Reliance on the “youth bulge and instability thesis” leads to distorted assessments of everyday realities. Examination of the lives, priorities, and cultural contexts of African youth, and the cases of youth in Rwanda and Burundi in particular, shows that the nature of relations between the state and massive populations of young, marginalized, and alienated citizens directly impacts the governance, security, and development prospects of African nations.

1. Learning from Liberia

If ever there was a youth-dominated conflict in modern times, it was Liberia's long and grueling civil war (1989–1996, and again in 2000–2003). Ignited by Charles Taylor's Christmas Eve incursion from neighboring Côte d'Ivoire late in 1989, together with perhaps one hundred other men, the conflict soon took the form of youth-led chaos. “What initially was seen as a revolution ... fought with sticks and cutlasses,” Utas writes, “was eventually transformed into a war of terror where young people started fighting each other” (2005: 55). In fact, some youth continued to view the war as their revolution, for as long as they were able to take advantage of the opportunity that armed conflict afforded. The civil war provided them with “a chance to become someone in a national system that had marginalized them, but also a chance to get rid of the load of work and expectations that the parental generation had laid on them” (65). Some of the more successful young soldiers, sometimes goaded by their girlfriends, “felt so affluent that they could wash their cars in beer – a beverage most could not even afford to drink prior to the war – and that they could drive a car until it ran out of gasoline and then just dump it for another one” (66). The result was a war that wreaked colossal destruction. By 1997, civil war had already left a nation of perhaps two and a half million

with up to 200,000 dead, 700,000 refugees, and much of the remaining population internally displaced (Utas 2008: 113).

The region of Sub-Saharan Africa has the most youthful population in the world. Of the forty-six countries and territories where at least seventy percent of the population is under the age of 30, only seven are not in Sub-Saharan Africa (Leahy et al. 2007: 87–91). With this in mind, one of the most striking aspects of contemporary Africa is how male African youth have so frequently been viewed as threats to their own societies. However, the view from below differs dramatically from the largely quantitative analyses from above and from outside the continent. Again, the Liberian example is illuminating. A nation long renowned for grasping leaders and withered government institutions has more recently provided truly upbeat signs of forward movement. That said, most youth continue to be left far, far behind. Fieldwork in rural Liberia uncovered a widespread fear of “rebel behavior youth” – youth who had assumed the attitudes of wartime combatants and became socially sidelined (Sommers 2007b: 1). Liberia's post-war youth unemployment has been estimated at the astonishing rate of 88 percent (Government of Liberia 2004: 7). Taking all of this into account – a widespread sense of estrangement and social distance felt by many youth and an

economic recovery that is passing most of them by – one could certainly argue that Liberian youth are among the world's most peaceful populations.

Just why most Liberian youth, and a great many other African youth, are not viewed as mostly peaceful underscores the central argument of this paper: that African governments, and the international donor agencies that support them, are generally under-informed about the priorities of marginalized youth majorities. While Africa may have an exceptionally youth-dominated population, African government policies are often not youth-centered. As a result, and quite unintentionally, this collective stance runs the risk of making Africa less, not more, secure. I begin by examining the implications of today's exceptionally youthful population demographics, paying particular attention to arguments and oversights concerning connections between today's youth bulge and instability. Next, I examine a crucial literature that is often overlooked: that which illuminates vital issues that inform youth lives in war-affected Africa. I further probe these issues by comparing youth realities and priorities in the neighboring Central African countries of Rwanda and Burundi. The conclusion returns to a central concern of proponents of the youth bulge and instability thesis: whether such "bulges" threaten internal security.

2. Assessing the Youth Bulge and Instability Thesis

"The current cohort of young people in developing countries," the World Bank forthrightly states, "is the largest the world has ever seen." About half the world's people are under age twenty-five, 1.5 billion of them are youth, and 86 percent of them live in the developing world (World Bank 2006: 33, 4). The situation is even more pressing in war-torn nations, where youth cohorts challenge efforts to rebuild governments, societies, and peace. Virtually all wars in the world today take place in demographically "young" nations (Leahy et al. 2007: 24). Sub-Saharan Africa stands at the intersection of these and related trends: its youth population growth rate is the highest of any region (World Bank 2006: 33), some of its nations are currently impacted by conflict or have been recently, and the expansion of its urban areas "has no precedent in human history" (Caraël and Glynn 2008: 124).

"In many sub-Saharan African countries," Eguavoen notes, "young people already represent the majority share of the population pyramid, which is referred to as the 'youth bulge'" (2010: 268). However, the paucity of first-hand information about African youth in general, and the majority of youth who are poor and marginal in particular, has opened the door for policy development to be informed by narrowly conceived data and misguided assumptions about youth. Many of these assumptions have been powerfully influenced by the above-mentioned youth bulge discussion. While this demographic phenomenon is currently present in a great many developing nations, most scholarly and policy references to the youth bulge highlight the "extremely robust" correlation between countries with youth bulges and the incidence of political instability (Urdal 2004: 16). Cincotta, for example, confidently states: "As one might expect, and as numerous studies have shown, populations with excessive numbers of young people invite a higher risk of political violence and civil strife than others" (2008: 80–81).

The idea of youth or young people as, essentially, looming terrors, regularly invites exceptionally bleak and frightening imagery. In an article with the unnerving title, "The New Population Bomb," Goldstone cites "Cincotta and other political demographers" who assert that "countries with younger populations are especially prone to civil unrest and are less able to create or sustain democratic institutions. And the more heavily urbanized, the more such countries are likely to experience Dickensian poverty and anarchic violence" (2010). On the other hand, Cincotta also predicted the rise of democratic movements in North Africa. "The first (and perhaps most surprising) region that promises a shift to liberal democracy," he announces with, it turns out, remarkable prescience, "is a cluster along Africa's Mediterranean coast: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, none of which has experienced democracy in the recent past" (2008: 82).

In addition to security concerns that are attached to youth in war and post-war Africa, there are additional apprehensions about Africa's urban youth. An Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (USAID) publication states this frankly: "Urbanization concentrates precisely that de-

mographic group most inclined to violence: unattached young males who have left their families behind and have come to the city seeking economic opportunities" (2005: 7).

African cities have also seemed to have ignited a series of positively doom-laden responses from Western observers. From Alex Shoumatoff, for example, we receive speculation about a dangerous irrationality spreading through male urban youth minds in Africa (1988: xiv):

It is only when large cities begin to appear in the [African] landscape ... that a societal madness begins to occur; that detribalized young men, lost souls wandering in the vast space between the traditional and modern worlds, can be heard howling in the streets of downtown Nairobi in the middle of the night.

Much more famously, Robert D. Kaplan spoke of male youth in urban West Africa as "loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite" (1996: 16). Echoing Shoumatoff, that "social fluid" is of a menacing, urban kind, divested of "certain stabilizing cultural models" that are anchored in rural areas. Relying on the sort of purple prose that can make one's stomach churn, Kaplan also extemporizes on the muck of West African city life. Forced by a flat tire to take in his surroundings, Kaplan highlights (62):

the piles of garbage, the empty shelves in the single store, the buzzing flies, the vacant and surly stares of the numerous young men hanging out until our flat tire gave them something useful to do, the sheer nothingness of it all. Life went on, babies were being conceived and born, and yet little was created, or even repaired, beyond the bare necessities. This was a timeworn life based on high infant mortality and low life expectancy.

The – for Kaplan – unnerving presence of many young men in African cities seems to have inspired him to make the following influential prediction: that "the perpetrators of future violence will likely be urban born, with no rural experience from which to draw" (12).

Kaplan's take on Africa and Africans has proven influential indeed. Not only has his use of West Africa as a lens for predicting a frightening future sustained a cottage industry of commentators over the years, it has also, reportedly, proven remarkably influential with policymakers. As Dunn, one of a plethora of Kaplan critics, notes: "The fact

that Kaplan's article has become part of the USA's foreign policy vision of the world makes it highly alarming" (2004: 497). In dramatic, compelling prose, Kaplan evidently voiced widely felt, but privately held, revulsions and terrors – and made them stick.

Significantly, such theorizing is taking place without interviews with the African male youth about which the theorists are so concerned. What is their take on urban life, or life anywhere, for that matter? The sense that observers may be jumping to conclusions is reinforced by Kaplan's tendency to observe male youth instead of talk to them. Viewing from afar, for example, Kaplan claims that "the robust health and good looks" of youth in urban West Africa (and it is clearly male youth he is talking about) "made their predicament sadder" (1996: 16). Kaplan bases his assessment on the opposite of what he observes. It is far more likely that something is amiss in such analyses, that the actual reality male youth inhabit diverges from such speculative assertions. In this case, it appears that the dread of African male youth in cities substitutes for evidence-based analysis.

What might be called the "youth bulge and instability thesis" is typically used to illuminate what its proponents consider the central threat to political stability in post-war countries: male youth (shortly we will also examine what might be called the "urban threat thesis," which views urban youth as the principal potential youth menace). At the same time, it is indeed difficult not to sense strongly that something is seriously amiss with these arguments. For one thing, a correlation linking disproportionately high numbers of youth to political instability does not demonstrate a causal relationship. This is not to say that this renders the tenets of the youth bulge and instability thesis irrelevant. On the contrary, Urdal, Cincotta, Goldstone, and others have established that the correlation between the two has validity. We should indeed be concerned about nations with weak governments and economies that have exceptionally youthful populations. However, a correlation alone has limited explanatory power and provides an incomplete and fairly distorted picture of broader realities.

Contextual evidence invites added challenges to the descriptive power of the youth and instability thesis and the

urban threat thesis. Some of the assertions that proponents have brought forth are weakly supported. For example, the relationship between “too many youth” and violent instability has been buttressed, in part, by the assertion that young men are “inherently violent” (Cincotta et al. 2003: 44). However, biological research challenges this claim (Rowe et al. 2004). Additionally, a great majority of African nations with youth bulge populations have not experienced recent civil conflicts. Furthermore, when civil conflicts do, in fact, arise in African countries with youth bulges, “the vast majority of young men never get involved in violence” (Barker and Ricardo 2006: 181). Moreover, most of the recent African wars are now over – Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and so on – despite all of them taking place in countries that still have youth bulge demographics. Finally, a commonly cited predictor of instability and war that lies at the core of the urban threat thesis – the concentration of large numbers of unemployed male youth in cities – is confronted by the fact that most recent armed conflicts in Africa began and were largely fought in rural areas of the countries involved (such as Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda).

Given that the predictors of unrest and instability are in evidence in country after country across Sub-Saharan Africa – such as populations infused with youth bulge demographics and high rates of urbanization – the fact that so many wars have ended, and that things are not far, far more unstable across the region, directly challenges both the youth bulge and instability and the urban threat arguments. The absence of the voices of ordinary male and female youth themselves in the debates helps explain just why these two statistical, correlation-based arguments have so many weaknesses. What accounts for the fact that the overwhelming majority of youth do not engage in wartime violence? If African cities are magnets for unemployed male youth, then why are the cities they inhabit not far more unstable? Since the predictive power of the youth bulge and instability thesis, in particular, is so inexact and, apparently, weak, then to what extent should we rely on it?

Exactly what, in short, are we supposed to be so concerned about? One senses that a fear of male youth, however sub-

conscious, may inform at least some of the damning predictions and unnerving descriptions. As Gavin notes: “Any discussion of the youth bulge in Africa risks veering into the land of breathless alarmism – *young men and street gangs and guns, oh my!*” (2007: 70). Developing policies that build on the youth bulge and instability thesis and/or the urban threat thesis will probably prove counterproductive if they incorrectly color most male youth as menacing and encourage unproven assertions about how male and female youth think and act. They may also support “dangerous discourses of ‘savage,’ ‘barbaric,’ and (above all) ‘dangerous’” male youth in unstable and conflict-affected countries (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 315). After all, the orizers tend to focus on certain kinds of male youth, especially those who are unemployed and live in cities in Africa and the Middle East.

3. Literature on African Youth Realities

It is well worth considering that a fundamental shortcoming appears to exist in the youth bulge and instability literature – the limited nature (or complete absence) of information about how youth view their own situation and what motivates them to make life-altering choices. Profound marginalization and the social construction of masculinity can figure prominently in such decisions. The social exclusion of youth is a recurring structural feature of many societies and communities (as in Rwanda: Uvin 1998; Sierra Leone: Richards 1996; and Liberia: Utas 2005 and 2008). While mention of the social, political, and economic marginalization of most young people in war and post-war societies is now commonplace (Ebata et al. 2005), the threats facing many youth in unstable and war-affected contexts – “the near-invisibility of female youth and the emasculation of male youth” (Sommers 2007a: 113) – remain under-examined.

Adulthood and masculinity expectations and pressures can also profoundly influence youth decisions and their outlook on the future. Utas describes a “crisis” facing many young men in Liberia who are unable to become socially accepted as men because they have been unable to achieve the cultural mandates of building their own house and then getting married. The males who had chronologically outgrown youth were thus becoming not men but

“youthmen” (Utas 2005: 150). Governments can exacerbate the promotion of male youth frustration in a number of ways, including making access to land and non-farm employment difficult. This can severely reduce the ability of male youth to marry and become men (Uvin 1998).

While much research has noted that male youth who are caught in inescapable positions of social failure may turn to desperate, even violent, action (Correia and Bannon 2006), the “the indigenous sources of strength” (individual, familial, and community) that “allow or keep young men out of conflict” are “nearly absent” from discussion and research (Barker and Ricardo 2006: 175). Speaking of Burundi, Uvin argues that (2008: 178):

when young men face great difficulty in achieving normative manhood, they do what most of us do when confronted with major challenges in our lives – they try harder than ever, they seek to innovate, they try to move and find opportunities elsewhere, they turn to God for strength, they hang out with friends and complain – but they do not necessarily become murderers.

Many if not most African male youth, in short, resist engagement in violence and demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of dire circumstances (Boyden and de Berry 2004; Annan et al. 2008).

The situation facing female youth is similarly serious, since attaining a respectable and hence more protected form of womanhood is typically attainable only if there are men available to marry (Coulter 2009; Stites, Akabwai, and Mazurana 2007). The phase of prolonged delay before male and female youth can marry and become seen as adults has been called “waithood,” during which youth find themselves confined in “an adolescent, liminal world where they are neither children nor adults” (Singerman 2007: 6). In the absence of marriage, and since female youth tend to have significantly fewer economic options than their male youth counterparts, involvement in irregular or risky income-generation, including prostitution, is

often their only means of survival (Angola: de Barros 2005; Rwanda: Sommers 2012). An additional threat is what Nordstrom has termed the “invisibility” of girls and young women in war-affected contexts, in which a “veil of silence” descends and makes it difficult to access the trials and alarming vulnerabilities that girls and female youth endure (1999: 75).

Sadly, fear and presumption appear often to make poor female youth virtually imperceptible and transform young men, particularly those in African cities, into an undifferentiated mass of security threats.¹ Speaking to members of the marginalized youth majorities in urban or rural Africa invokes an entirely different view of contemporary Africa: one where innovation and resourcefulness characterize the increasingly separate social worlds of African youth; where humiliation hounds many male youth who are simply unable to become men; where far too many female youth endure desperate and strikingly overlooked lives; where governments are seen as predatory and riddled with corruption and nepotism; and where older generations grow more and more detached from the younger generation. After examining how agencies and – much more crucially – societies define what it means to be a youth, we will turn to cases that illuminate some of these tendencies. For the fortunes of youth in two Sub-Saharan African countries – Rwanda and Burundi – are strongly influenced by the combined impact of two critical factors: the nature of governance and culture.

4. Between Ages and Cultures: The Challenge of Defining Youth

Before we embark on examinations of ordinary youth in two Sub-Saharan African nations, we must clarify what is it that we mean by “youth.” While it is hardly a pedestrian concern, the definition is also, unquestionably, a moving target. The United Nations, for example, defines youth as “persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years.” At the same time, the UN also states that its definition is “for statistical purposes” and “without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.” In other words, while it was necessary to

¹ Extended discussions of Africa's youth bulge and security concerns can be found in Sommers 2006 and Sommers 2007a.

arrive at an age range so that statistics could be gathered, it is accepted that individual states may have their own definitions (ECOSOC n.d.). And so they have: the African Union, to name just one example, defines youth as persons aged 15 to 34 years (Eguavoen 2010: 268). At the same time, USAID observes that “The UN system defines young people [as distinct from “youth”] as persons in the 10–24-year age group.” Young people, USAID explains, “includes both adolescents, ages 10–19, and youth, ages 15–24” (USAID n.d.).

Beyond the welter of age-based definitions of youth, there are cultural classifications for youth and adult. Instead of an age range, the challenge of passing into adulthood stands out. It is not easy to achieve. Eguavoen summarizes substantial academic literature on African youth definitions and finds that they are exacting (2010: 268):

In academic debates, youth is understood as a social category that assembles individuals in the social transition stage between childhood and adulthood . . . as well as ‘adults without adult status’, meaning individuals who have not succeeded in establishing themselves socially as adults by getting married, finding their own household and/or being able to take economic care of themselves and dependants.

In addition, exiting the culturally defined category of “youth” may not be permanent. One must return to “youthhood” if one fails to maintain one’s status of “adult.” As Eguavoen explains (*ibid.*):

There is growing empirical evidence that the social status of adulthood may be reversed if the individual falls back into poverty, which means that young adults are socially delegated back to youth status and, as a direct consequence, denied full adult rights, again resulting in low social status and limited access to resources and political decision making.

Gender dimensions are also crucial in movements between being a youth and an adult, since “African women usually have a shorter time within the period identified as youth (from puberty to 18 or 19 years old), because they tend to marry at a younger age than men and thus receive the social status of adulthood earlier than their male counterparts” (Eguavoen 2010.: 268–69). To be sure, there are cases in Africa where adulthood can be achieved in other ways. But as we will see, much depends on whether cultural

mandates and expectations are rigid (as in Rwanda) or more flexible (as in Burundi).

5. Views from Below: The Cases of Rwanda and Burundi

African cultural definitions of what it means to be a youth and how a youth might enter adulthood differ by gender and create the risk of engendering public disapproval for youth who fail to achieve and maintain the cultural prerequisites of adulthood. What the cases of Rwanda and Burundi reveal is how dominant the threat of failed adulthood can be for youth, and how governments can play a decisive role in determining whether youth fail or succeed in this seminal quest.

Just as it was before the devastating genocide of 1994, Rwanda is again widely seen as a model of development (Sebarenzi 2009; Uvin 1998: 1–2; International Development Association 2009: 1). Laudatory prose is routinely reserved for Rwanda and its current government. In Kinzer’s words (2008: 2), Rwanda has

recovered from civil war and genocide more fully than anyone imagined possible and is united, stable, and at peace. Its leaders are boundlessly ambitious. Rwandans are bubbling over with a sense of unlimited possibility. Outsiders, drawn by the chance to help transform a resurgent nation, are streaming in.

Cooke sums up Rwanda’s internationally-inspired glow, noting that the Rwandan government’s “expressed vision of national reconciliation through development and service delivery has won accolades from the international community” (2011: 1). While warnings about and condemnation of extensive government repression and human rights violations have also come to the fore (for example, Reyntjens 2004 and 2011), it is the image of Rwanda rising from the ashes of genocide that has captured the imagination of most.

The same cannot be said for its neighbor to the south, Burundi. There, in the aftermath of an extremely violent, destructive, and generally overlooked civil war, Burundi, despite its movement into post-war democracy, remains plagued by the poor reputation of its government. Kron contrasts conditions in these two countries, which have similar languages, colonial histories, cultures, and sets of ethnic groups, commenting that, “in contrast to orderly

Rwanda, the darling of the international aid community, Burundi is violent, dysfunctional, and chaotic.” Significantly, Kron adds: “On the plus side, civil society in Burundi is indigenous and true, and unlike in Rwanda, ethnicity is not being ignored. Politics can breathe” (2010: 2).

The striking contrasts between Rwanda and Burundi are revealed in research conducted by myself and a colleague, Peter Uvin (Sommers and Uvin 2011; Sommers 2012; and Uvin 2009), based on nearly identical sets of qualitative questions, as well as very similar samples of rural and urban, and male and female youth, the procedures for which we devised together. What our research collectively uncovered largely contradicts the reputed realities in the two countries: the general situation and outlook of Rwandan youth was bleak, while their Burundian counterparts, while materially just as poor, had outlooks that were vastly more upbeat and optimistic. In Burundi, “generally weak governance and social tolerance toward manhood mandates provides space for many youth to generate trajectories of their own.” Meanwhile, in Rwanda, many youth are “risk averse and tied to a future where public failure appears likely” (Sommers and Uvin 2011: 2).

In both Rwanda and Burundi, the culturally mandated norms for adulthood were similar: to become socially accepted and recognized as a man, a male youth must build his own house before marrying and starting a family. For female youth, being an adult is culturally defined by marriage and then having children. But in Rwanda, most youth are failing to make significant progress towards adulthood. Field research there found that there is a severe housing crisis in the country and government regulations contribute significantly to making it unusually difficult for most male youth to complete a house. As a result, most male youth are failing to achieve the first step towards socially recognized manhood. Meanwhile, a female cannot become a woman until she has someone to marry. For most, they are forced to wait for male youth to finish building a house – which many are unlikely to achieve. The pressure on female youth is acute, since it is illegal to marry before age 21. But by their mid-twenties, male youth may view them as too old to marry. When this occurs, a female youth faces a future as a spinster and social outlier (Sommers and Uvin 2011: 3).

Although the ideals of normative manhood (and, for that matter, womanhood) were similar in Burundi, it was not the central focus of male youth lives there. Unlike Rwanda, where strict government housing regulations contributed significantly to failed manhood, and where cultural mandates were unyielding, the prospect of social failure and public humiliation as failed adults did not threaten male and female youth in Burundi. Burundians “widely accepted that [adulthood] could not be perfectly achieved, and were willing to accommodate alternatives” (Sommers and Uvin 2011: 4). Ultimately, our comparative analysis revealed that “most Burundian youth believe that they have options and possibilities while most Rwandan youth do not.” While the Rwandan government is lauded for being “simultaneously progressive and prodevelopment,” research with Rwandan youth found that it is also “interventionist and controlling” (9). Together with rigid cultural requirements and real threats of public humiliation, most of Rwanda’s youth are stuck in a situation where failure is likely – and difficult to avoid. One way to sidestep it is for rural youth to migrate to the capital, Kigali. Yet in Rwanda, shifting to the city was “mainly a destination for the desperate, not the inquisitive or the dynamic” as was essentially the situation for their counterparts in Burundi (7). Not surprisingly, while Burundian youth “held out the hope of improving their lot and perhaps even ascending socially,” most Rwandan youth aimed “to minimize their chances of collapse” (8).

Rwanda’s combination of a strict, strong, and controlling government, and a society that adheres to rigid cultural expectations, leaves most of its youth risk averse and facing the prospect of failing to gain social acceptance as adults. In contrast, Burundi’s comparatively weak government does not appear to play much of a role in Burundian youth lives. At the same time, the government’s minimal presence, together with the fact that society views adulthood norms as flexible and adaptable, rather than rigid and unyielding, gave Burundian youth room to move. The punishing set of circumstances that surrounded Rwandan youth simply does not exist for Burundian youth. Taken together, there appear to be some benefits to having a weak government – provided a youth is ambitious and enterprising, and as long as society supports rather than condemns

youth who struggle and perhaps even fail to meet culturally-defined adulthood requirements.

6. Conclusion

Is the youth bulge a threat to state internal security? Perhaps. Urdal argues that the determining factor is not youth but economic opportunity: "If young people are left with no alternative but unemployment and poverty, they are increasingly likely to join a rebellion as an alternative way of generating an income" (2007: 92). Urdal's argument, however, requires context, since most unemployed and impoverished young Africans do not become security threats even when opportunities for enrichment arise. There is, in addition, scant information on how and why most marginalized African youth resist engagement in violence even when it would seem to provide immediate benefits. Focusing on youth demographics, moreover, runs the risk of overlooking other crucial security concerns, such as illicit drugs and small arms. The easy availability of drugs and arms can fuel conflicts and influence youth behavior. Both can aid youth recruitment into gangs and militias.

A starting point for donor nations is not to make unstable governance unintentionally worse. While such a result is not intentional, supporting government policies and programs that make the lives of profoundly marginalized youth majorities even more marginal creates the risk of undermining government institutions and increasing frustration and despair within youthful populations. Such situations can threaten the credibility of states and foment instability. They are also environments in which gangs and militias can be found, although not necessarily: recent research in urban Rwanda, which has one of the youngest populations in the world and significant governance issues, did not uncover any evidence of gang activity (Sommers 2012). However, even when opportunities for joining gangs and militias are present, such as in South Sudan, where they seem to be enlarging (Martin and Mosel 2011, Sommers and Schwartz 2011), few African youth are likely to do so.

That said, once a war starts, the availability of so many youth means that young fighters are easily replaceable. This appears to allow military outfits to send child and youth soldiers into high-risk situations and accept unusually high casualties. This is vividly illustrated by accounts from child soldier outfits, which may endure exceptionally high casualties in battle before withdrawing. A former Liberian child commander explained how he had always obeyed his commander's order to continue advancing his contingent of 250 child soldiers in battle until fifty had not been killed or wounded (field interview in Liberia, 2005). A Sierra Leonean youth explained that he had been one of twenty children whom the Revolutionary United Front had abducted from his village. Weeks later, his commander informed him that he would receive a military promotion. The reason was simple: he was the only one of the original twenty who was still alive (field interview in Sierra Leone, 2010).²

The cases of Rwanda and Burundi clearly demonstrate what can occur when outsiders presume the situations of youth rather than investigate them. Rwanda's mostly bubbly international reputation is not reflected in the everyday lives of its nonelite youth majority. In fact, their reality is virtually the reverse: dreadfully constricted and conspicuously overlooked. Indeed, it is necessary to consider the possibility that a country containing so many young people with limited options and facing the prospect of public failure just might turn violent. To be sure, Burundi has its own share of troubles. But a constricted and controlled youth cohort is not one of them.

What we are left with is the towering significance of governance and culture – and the unavoidable necessity to find out, from ordinary, non-elite youth themselves, what their priorities are. An over-reliance on quantitative correlations and journalistic observations runs the risk of missing basic forces that youth face. High quality, field-based, qualitative research with members of non-elite,

2 The exceptionally brutal tactics of child soldier commanders are detailed in excellent books on child soldiering, such as Honwana 2006, Rosen 2005, Singer 2005 and Wessells 2006.

marginalized youth majorities in African countries must be conducted and then used to inform government and non-government policy and practice. This approach effectively calls for ordinary youth priorities to inform government and donor priorities explicitly and directly; a truly mighty task. But as qualitative research with Rwandan and Burundian youth reveals, what such research uncovers about the gap between institutional and youth priorities can be truly surprising.

One of the issues that solid qualitative research with ordinary youth can shed light on is whether youth are able to achieve adulthood in their societies, and what happens to them if they fail. In worlds where youth strain to gain recognition as adult contributors to society, the power of cultural judgment to impact young lives must not be overlooked. Nor can a second option available to youth: shunning traditional adulthood expectations altogether, and living, as a consequence, in social outlier societies, such as Liberia's so-called "rebel behavior youth," whom I mentioned earlier (Sommers 2007b). Heavy reliance on elite youth leaders in civil society as "youth voices," in addition, is almost always a mistake if tensions and suspicions divide elite youth minorities from vast nonelite youth majorities (such scenarios are common). Similarly, if youth programs unintentionally demonstrate exclusion by providing programs to the fortunate few in areas where most youth are desperate for any support, they may inadvertently make difficult situations even worse, most particularly for youth who are not program participants.

In addition, international actors may develop youth programs with a limited awareness of others in their midst. It has been my experience that Christian and Muslim religious organizations are quite often the main institutions that target poor urban youth for outreach and support. In rural areas, there may be other organizations reaching out to poor youth, but even there, religious organizations are often highly effective. An additional result can be a divide between poor youth who are members of a particular church or mosque and those who are not. Religious leaders can, of course, also rally youth for or against their government.

Which returns us to the governance issue. The Rwandan government's strong accent on social control carries with it a significant downside. The lives of ordinary Rwandans are constricted. And although Burundi's governmental weaknesses are not to be sought or aimed for – not in the slightest – the Rwandan government's knack for squelching dissent and profoundly constraining individual life options cannot be overlooked. Indeed, a crucial challenge for democratizing African states lies in questions about their credibility before their own youthful and mostly marginalized populations. African youth cannot, by themselves, threaten the prospects for democratization within their countries. Presuming an inherent male youth threat is suspect and should never be allowed to overshadow other important security-related factors, such as the health of the nation's economy, the degree to which young people are frustrated and endure social humiliation, and, finally, the nature of the state's relations with massive populations of youthful citizens.

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