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Sharing Scarcity Land Access and Social Relations in Southeast Rwanda

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Summary

Land is a crucial yet scarce resource in Rwanda, where about 90% of the population is engaged in subsistence farming, and access to land is increasingly becoming a source of conflict. This study examines the effects of land-access and land-tenure policies on local community relations, including ethnicity, and land conflicts in post-conflict rural Rwanda. Social relations have been characterized by (ethnic) tensions, mistrust, grief and frustration since the end of the 1990-1994 civil war and the 1994 genocide. Focusing on southeastern Rwanda, the study describes the negative consequences on social and inter-ethnic relations of a land-sharing agreement that was imposed on Tutsi returnees and the Hutu population in 1996-1997 and the villagization policy that was introduced at the same time, but also analyses more recent land reforms, such as land registration and crop specialization. The research was carried out in the village of Mubinda (not its real name) in the southeastern district of Ngoma, an area that is close to Tanzania and has known a great influx of Tutsi returnees who returned to Rwanda shortly after the genocide after many years of exile.

Rwanda is notorious for the 1994 genocide that targeted the Tutsi population and destroyed society's social fabric. It took place in a civil war between the Hutu-dominated government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel army which consisted mainly of (descendants of) Tutsi refugees who had fled Rwanda during earlier anti-Tutsi violence. The introduction describes the genocidal violence and how this violence was related to land scarcity. It also deals with other, violence that is related to the genocide: structural violence in which the genocide took place and the violence against the Hutu population by the RPF after it took power. The chapter then concentrates on present-day Rwanda and analyses the Tutsi and RPF-dominated Rwandan government that is involved in social engineering to drastically change the political, economic, spatial, behavioural and cultural domains. Despite government's efforts to suppress references to ethnicity and promote an all-inclusive Rwandaness, ethnicity and perceptions of ethnic differences are still important factors in everyday life. The chapter continues with a description of the research area and the research questions and research-related issues such as its relevance and limitations. The chapter ends with a more theoretical exposé about the connection between land tenure and social relations through the access theory of Ribot & Peluso (2003) and the focus on (political) authority and legitimacy with regard to land claims, as explained by Sikor & Lund (2009) and Lund & Boone (2013).

The second chapter concerns the fieldwork and the research methods, but is foremost an account of the interaction between the Rwandan state and the researcher and Rwandans and the researcher. It discusses the government's omnipresence, manipulation and spying activities and the Rwandan attitude of distrust and fear in which metadata like rumours, appearances, silences and lies emerge. Other problematic features of Rwandan society that are analysed are self-censorship, secrecy and the role of language as communication, historically, served and was directly defined by the relationship and status of the different interlocutors. This explains how most respondents cannot easily talk about sensitive and controversial topics, censor their answers or stick to safe public transcripts when discussing topics like social life, matters of ethnicity and the consequences of the land-sharing and villagization policies. Through the interaction with the Rwandan state and Rwandan respondents and informants, I encountered, especially during my 2008 fieldwork, feelings of uneasiness, stress, fear and agitation. These were valuable metadata as they proved to be a valuable source of information concerning the way Rwandan society works and made me realize that the Rwandan population has to deal with situations of oppression, manipulation and deception on a daily basis. Necessary precautions were taken, such as selecting my

interpreters from among my friends and interviewing respondents in their own homes, and the research was conducted with great care and an awareness of the situation and the risks involved. This, and the help of two excellent research assistants, enabled me to collect, understand and interpret my findings.

The third chapter deals with Rwanda's history. It describes several forms of land and cattle clientship and its implications for the Hutu population and reveals how land was already a scarce resource in the pre-colonial era. It shows how land was then linked to processes of state formation, in which authority was reflected and produced by control over land and political identity. In the reign of King Rwabugiri (1876-1895), violence against the population became a part of everyday life and power became centralized, monopolized and ethnicized with a Tutsi elite controlling land, cattle and people. This resulted in social polarization between Hutu and Tutsi and created political and social inequality and gravely affected social relations. After independence in 1962, Hutu took power and the ruling style of the Hutu presidents resembled that of the former Tutsi kings. Their governments made the Tutsi population the target of discrimination and recurrent violence that ultimately resulted a civil war and genocide.

The next two chapters, Chapter 4 and 5, take the reader to Mubinda. Chapter 4 discusses the land-sharing agreement and the villagization policy, two examples of social engineering by the Rwandan government that had a political and economic impact on ethnicity and livelihoods, but also significantly influenced spatial, behavioural and social structures. It explains how, shortly after the genocide ended, many Tutsi returned after many years in exile and took over the property of Hutu families who had fled the area in the previous months. After the return of these Hutu families in 1996-1997, a land-sharing agreement was put in place within a context of great insecurity and fear, whereby the Hutu refugees had to share their land with the Tutsi returnees. Around the same time a national policy of villagization was implemented that forced the inhabitants of Mubinda to resettle in a village structure. These policies resulted in numerous Hutu respondents losing significant amounts of land and created much anger and frustration against Tutsi refugees as well as local authorities. It also led to a degree of physical segregation between genocide survivors (Tutsi), Tutsi refugees and Hutu because, in the words of a Tutsi refugee, 'each group felt at ease within their own group. We were regarded as savages, while we considered them to be killers. There was even distrust between genocide survivors and [Tutsi] returnees'. In interviews, many Hutu expressed that they felt worse off than the Tutsi returnees who were allocated land and were not asked to give anything, such as livestock, in return.

The perception by many Rwandans that the state engenders inequality and exclusion and is perpetuating ethnic cleavages has been intensified by an increasing 'Tutsification' and ethnicization that is also mentioned in the introduction and is further analysed in Chapter 5. This chapter looks into Rwanda's current social relations and the role of the Rwandan state. With regard to social relations, respondents revealed that they are 'living apart together', engaging in merely superficial relations in which fear, distrust and hatred prevail, solidarity is lacking and where the different groups (genocide survivors, Hutu families and Tutsi returnees) are unable to understand the suffering of others. In addition, the chapter demonstrates the political nature of people's ethnic identity by showing how government officials, who are often of Tutsi origin, enforce government policies and programmes and (financial) obligations that the population feels are most often not rooted in local realities but have a huge impact on people's lives. It raises the issue of legitimacy as the data presented in this chapter suggest that many Hutu do not feel politically represented by the current government and resent the numerous (financial) obligations and programmes that are imposed on them. The tense social relations among neighbours and their relationship with authorities are further aggravated by the above-mentioned omnipresence, strength and weight

of the Rwandan state. Ordinary Rwandans, both Hutu and Tutsi alike, are unable to engage and unite and lack democratic power and are, thus, also unable to weaken the force of the state and change existing power relations. The problem of ethnicity adds to peasants' feelings of powerlessness, voicelessness and frustration *vis-à-vis* their authorities and is yet another source of frustration and hatred among Mubinda's inhabitants.

Chapter 6 is a more theoretical chapter about the most recent land reforms and analyses the 2013 Land Law and the 2004 land policy and especially the land registration, land consolidation and crop specialization policies that have been implemented to stimulate a more productive land management. They have far-reaching consequences for the peasant population and the chapter reveals how the new Land Law and policy largely favour Rwanda's better-off, commercially oriented, entrepreneurial farmers. It claims that this orientation is likely to have a negative impact on the majority of small-scale, subsistence peasants, who are being confronted with forced and controlled commercialization and commoditization of their land, and concludes that the implementation of the 2013 Land Law and policy is likely to lead to an increase in food and land-tenure insecurity for many small-scale subsistence peasants in Mubinda and elsewhere.

Chapter 7 is again an empirical chapter and discusses the problem of increasing land scarcity, which affects many young Rwandans in particular because of a lack of off-farm employment and educational opportunities. It also examines the numerous land conflicts that flared up during land registration in Mubinda and suggests that these conflicts and the problems that the Rwandan youth face are problems for Rwanda as a whole. As a result, frustrations are mounting. The chapter demonstrates that land conflicts are now usually within families and that the position of women and illegitimate wives and their children is particularly vulnerable. In addition, the chapter reveals that land registration has led to higher numbers of land conflicts and that many of the current conflicts are caused by grudges about the land-sharing agreement. This, in turn, is negatively influencing already strained social relations. In addition, peasants feel vulnerable and are increasingly resenting land reforms and this resentment jeopardizes the legitimacy and credibility of the Rwandan state, again raising questions related to its authority and legitimacy.

The concluding chapter is structured around three main issues. First, the structural violence that many Rwandans have to deal with in everyday life and of which many examples are given throughout the dissertation. Adding to this is the way that direct violence is historically related to land. With land scarcity and land conflicts increasing, this could lead to renewed, land-related violence. Second, the problematic role of ethnicity and ethnic segregation that is undermining already tense social relations. Third, the consequent effects of these two issues on the legitimacy and authority of the Rwandan government. After connecting these issues, the dissertation comes to the conclusion that Rwanda's current stability is unlikely to be sustainable and that its long-term prospects are gloomy.