Explaining the design of the Rwandan decentralisation: elite vulnerability and the territorial repartition of power

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Abstract

Rwanda has made important progress since the start of the decentralisation process in 2000. Local government enjoys an unprecedented range of competences and resources. With the exception of the provincial level, elections are generalised, something novel in the history of the traditionally centralised Rwanda. This, however, conflicts with widespread analysis that decentralisation, instead of empowering the local level, has improved control from the centre through top-down policy making and control of local governments and the population. This article aims to improve our understanding of the paradoxical nature of Rwandan decentralisation. To do so, it first analyses the Rwandan decentralisation process by disaggregating it into administrative, financial and political dimensions. This demonstrates that, in all three dimensions, decentralisation is characterised by the heavy role of the centre, and the promotion of tightly monitored, technocratic and depoliticised local governments. The article then explains such design by focusing on the political elite's perception of its environment. It argues that the vulnerability collectively experienced by the political leadership, rooted in the experience of the genocide, its search for legitimacy, the volatile international environment, and the dependency on international aid, has spurred it to design local institutions in a way that promotes swift implementation of its development agenda and limits local political entrepreneurship and elite capture at local level.

Keywords: Rwanda; decentralisation; *imihigo*; elite; RPF; vulnerability; threats.

Since Rwanda embarked on a decentralisation process in 2000, it has made tremendous progress. It has completely redesigned local administration, setting up strong local planning and monitoring mechanisms. Local governments are today the main implementers of national policies, executing more than 25% of the domestic

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budget in 2011-12[1], and employing 50% of the Rwandan administration[2]. Officially, decentralisation intends to be a means of breaking away from the governance pattern of the pre-1994 period by fostering local participation.[3] To reach this goal, "home-grown solutions" such as *imihigo* performance contracts and the *ubudehe* grassroots social protection program were introduced, as well as the election of the main local executive (the mayor), something unprecedented in the history of the traditionally centralised Rwanda. Not surprisingly, a whole strand in the literature considers Rwandan decentralisation as an exemplary reform that has fostered not only service delivery but also citizen participation and reconciliation.[4]

This conflicts with widespread analysis that decentralisation, instead of empowering the local level, improves control from the centre through top-down policy making and widespread control of local governments and the population.[5] Sommers epitomises this stance when he writes: "the decentralisation process appears to provide the national government with opportunities to expand, rather than transfer or devolve, its power and influence".[6] The paradox deepens when one remarks that, despite being the tool to break the bad habits of local governance of the past, decentralisation displays continuities with this past, such as the *de facto* monopoly of one party, the pervasiveness of state control and the top-down policy making pattern. Purdeková even considers that "[t]hough governments replace one another, [the] intricate [political administrative] organisation, while modified, has remained fundamentally unchanged".[7]

This article aims at improving our understanding of the paradoxical nature of Rwandan decentralisation. Its contribution is twofold. First, while much of the literature emphasises the uniform top-down pattern of governance in the Rwandan decentralised framework, decentralisation is an eminently multidimensional process

that has not been analysed as such in the case of Rwanda. Understanding tensions between the centralisation and decentralisation dynamic thus requires disaggregating decentralisation to gain a more accurate picture of the phenomenon. Second, and more importantly, none of the literature has put forward an explanation for such a pattern of decentralisation. How can we account for the mix of bold institutional decentralisation producing tangible developmental results and tight control from the centre undermining local ownership? Why does decentralisation display such continuities with a past the government is so adamant to leave behind?

This articles proceeds in three parts. The first section analyses decentralisation in Rwanda by distinguishing among the political, administrative and financial dimensions. It shows that power lies heavily in the centre in order for decentralisation to fulfil three functions: control of local governments by the centre, depoliticisation and development. The second section aims to explain this particular pattern. My argument is that the paradoxical nature of decentralisation in Rwanda can be best explained by the collective vulnerability experienced by the political elite. It is the fear of external and internal threats that spurred the elite to design decentralisation conducive to swift policy implementation from the top and limit political participation. Finally, the third section offers some concluding remarks.

The findings presented in this article are based on five months of fieldwork in Rwanda (between January and September 2013, with some interruptions) combining formal interviews with local officials (17, all outside of Kigali, in three different districts), central government officials (26), RPF senior members (6), international partners and Rwandans not working for the state (local NGOs, international organisations, etc.: 10), as well as numerous informal exchanges. Direct observation of the *imihigo* evaluation process in rural areas was also used.

Administrative Decentralisation

Portrayal of Decentralisation

The decentralisation process in Rwanda formally started with the adoption of the National Decentralisation Policy in 2000.[8] A series of laws redesigned different tiers of local government and instituted the election of local leaders. In 2006, another reshaping of the local government structure rendered its current form: the number of provinces, districts, sectors and cells were reduced, while a new non-administrative tier, the village or *umudugudu*, was created (figure 1). The province lost its pre-eminence to the district, confined to a role of coordination of districts and controlling the legality of the district council's decisions.

[Figure 1 about here]

Decentralisation in Rwanda was thus a profound and relatively rapid institutional change: it created new entities, suppressing others, redrawing the boundaries of existing ones. Adding symbolic change to institutional ones, the names of the main localities in the country were altered. The role of the local level has been expanded to an unprecedented degree in Rwandan history. Although heralded as the engine of development before 1994, communes never had the means to play this role, the timid attempts of decentralisation since the 1970s until the genocide having regularly failed.[9]

Districts are the main local government entity. Financially and legally independent, they are in charge of economic development, including agriculture, tourism, and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME). Districts also coordinate service delivery. In this respect, they oversee hospitals, water sanitation and schools. They can apply for grants for investment projects. Below the district, the sector is in charge of delivering services to the population (e.g. administrative documents), data

reporting and mobilisation. The cell is involved in community mobilisation and data reporting. The village is not an administrative unit but is used as a channel of grassroots mobilisation and information diffusion. The delivery of local public services and policy implementation are also conducted by ministers' agencies that deploy agents at the local level (figure 2) to perform technical tasks.

[Figure 2 here]

The tension between the national and the local administration

Overall, decentralisation in Rwanda has been a deep process that has reshaped local government and entrusted it with a wide mandate. This has not meant, however, that the centre has relinquished power. To analyse power distribution in administrative decentralisation, I propose to distinguish (1) planning power, i.e. the translation of national policies into objectives at the local level, and (2) implementation power, i.e. the way of implementing those national policies. In other words, who in Rwanda sets the objectives at the local level and who decides the way to attain them?

Planning at district levels is through a 5-year District Development Plan, disaggregated into yearly action plans from which a performance contract or *imihigo* is extracted. The *imihigo* constitutes the focus of the planning process between the centre and the districts, as sectorial ministries "don't go much into the action plan"[10]. Implemented in 2006, *imihigo* comprise a list of the most important activities drawn from the annual district action plan. It is signed between the district mayor and the President of the Republic, and is evaluated by a team composed of high officials from different sectorial ministries, the Prime Minister's Office and the President's Office. The planning at district level is as follows: guided by a checklist of national priorities, districts write a draft of *imihigo* while consulting informally each relevant line

ministry. Although theoretically this process should be informed by the aggregation of the population wishes by cells up to the district council, this process barely takes place in reality.[11] The line ministries and the district then bargain over the draft through an iteration of meetings at province and national level.

Where lies the decision-making power in this bargaining process? The central government retains much of it. The sectorial ministries exert great influence over the choice of objectives to be incorporated in the *imihigo* and also the targets related to those objectives. Interviewees from central governments often mentioned that unless a mayor does not have the money, he has little reason to refuse to implement the activity. The planning process is the occasion for the centre to ensure that priority activities are present and, conversely, to push districts not to include secondary or easily reachable ones.[12] The reason for this involvement of sectorial ministries is ultimately that they have their own targets from their own *imihigo* and other national documents (EDPRS, Vision 2020 etc.) to reach, but are dependent on local government to attain them and thus encouraged to retain a grip over the planning and monitoring process. Consequently, target setting by districts for national policy is limited, as summarised by a district vice-mayor: "For important sectors, such as health and agriculture, it all comes from the top".[13]

The focus on *imihigo* as a planning tool means that districts have more freedom in the planning of secondary policies, i.e. those not in the *imihigo*. Such policies can be SMEs development, cleanness and assistance to the poor. This said, *imihigo* usually contains around 40 indicators, evolving every year, leaving few activities for which planning is not reviewed by the centre. In addition, ministries regularly keep an eye on districts through regular "descents" or their agents deploy locally.

While the centre retains most of the clout in setting local objectives, what leeway does local government have in implementing these objectives? Freedom of implementation does exist in districts but remains limited by two factors. First, targets in *imihigo* are very precise, presented in a quantitative way. Each activity has a measurable indicator, a baseline, a target to reach, its means of verification, and a source of funding. Arguably, this has great advantages for planning and evaluation but the downside is that the preciseness of targets limits flexibility of implementation and the need for consultation. A good example lies in agriculture: *imihigo* specify the crop to be cultivated on a given area at a certain productivity level, which limits adaptation to the local ecology or local demand.

Second, avenues for policy implementation by districts are limited by the high ambition of the targets. This encourages local leaders to resort to expeditious, sometimes brutal, approaches. In the case of the Crop Intensification Program (CIP), promoting crop regionalisation and monocropping, local governments sometimes resort to uprooting crops not planned by the program even though this is officially forbidden.[14] In health, the national target of 100% health insurance enrolment has pushed some local governments to use swift methods, such as fining, arresting, confiscating livestock or denying administrative documents to the non-bearers of *mutuelles* (community based insurance) cards.[15] This means that local governments have to be responsive to contradictory demands from the centre: taking into account the local context, not necessarily conducive to swift implementation, and the exigencies of meeting ambitious targets. As summarised by a district official in the case of mutuelles, "It is their role in Kigali to get concerned by human rights and stuff like this. But it is not them on the ground [doing the work]."[16]

What pushes locally elected officials to implement very ambitious and sometimes unpopular policies from the centre? The answer lies mostly in the *imihigo* system, which plays the role of transmission belt from the centre to the local level. As discussed in the section on political decentralisation below, performance is a key criterion in the selection and renewal of elected officials at the local level. The consequence is thus local governments taking very seriously the objectives of *imihigo*. One vice-mayor remarks that "*imihigo* is the engine of everything", before lamenting that "it is killing us, no one can escape it". Local officials may even resort to data falsification to reach their objectives. The phenomenon has gained its own verb in Kinyarwanda: *guteknica* or "to technicate".

The administrative decentralisation in Rwanda thus constitutes an unprecedented transfer of competencies and means to the local level. It produces the advantages classically associated with administrative decentralisation: service delivery has never been closer to the people in Rwanda since most of it happens at sector level, rather than communes and prefectures before 1994. In addition, local sectorial activities (health, agriculture, education, etc.) are better integrated and coordinated since the district government, and not sectorial ministries, heads them all. However, despite an enlarged mandate, districts are tightly controlled by the centre.

This assessment echoes the observations of many critical works on Rwandan decentralisation.[17] It departs, however, from this literature, arguing that such a decentralisation pattern has two significant advantages often forgotten, beyond simply bringing integrated service closer to the population. First, through tight planning and monitoring, the centre is able to retain greater coordination, shift priorities and get information flowing to the bottom to implement its policies. Undeniably, this creates serious problems as well. The lack of popular participation in planning and evaluation

means that targets can be irrelevant and/or unrealistic, but also that accountability flows upward only. This paves the way for "cooking" numbers, harsh implementation and undermining local ownership. This said, in a resource-scarce environment as in Rwanda, top-down coordination arguably has significant merits. The theoretical literature warns that decentralisation may diminish effective allocation of resources or undermine service delivery if the local government turns out to be incapable of doing so.[18] The strong role of the centre in planning and evaluation is a safeguard against such tendencies in Rwanda.

The other key advantage of this approach to decentralisation is the diffusion to the lowest level of the state apparatus of a culture of delivering results. As one vice-mayor said, "You see this table [pointing at the *imihigo*], now everyone knows what it is and how to read it. Everyone knows what is an output, a baseline, a target." Although hard to measure, this educational effect of decentralisation is extremely useful in diffusing a norm of result-oriented work in the Rwandan bureaucracy, which many countries in Africa would envy.

Fiscal and financial Decentralisation

The pattern observed in administrative decentralisation is also found in financial decentralisation. Financial decentralisation has achieved great progress if one looks at the transfer of resources. The share of local government budget now represents more than 25% of the national budget. If we include the districts' own revenue, it is 30% of the state's resources that go through local government.[19] That said, the leeway of districts to spend those resources is limited if one looks precisely at how districts are supposed to manage the money for each of their funding sources.

Districts receive from central government the following four types of transfers (figure 3): (1) a recurrent block grant (the Local Authority Budget Support Fund -

LABSF); (2) capital block grants; (3) earmarked grants; and (4) inter-entity transfers. To these sources of finance, one has to add the district's own revenue combining fees and local taxes. For each, what is the freedom of the district in spending the money?

[Figure 3 about here]

The LABSF provides a grant to be spent discretionally by districts for their functioning costs and to improve service delivery.[20] In practice, however, the objective is mainly payment of district staff's salaries, which are determined at the national level. This means that the capacity of the district to discretionarily spend the LABSF is limited because it has to be used mainly to pay for the wage bill of the district, as well as the sectors and cells below it.

Similarly, capital block grants, drawn from the Rwanda Local Development Support Fund (RLDSF), should theoretically give a certain financial freedom to the district. The districts must use these grants for infrastructure investment but are free regarding the projects they want to finance, as long as they are inscribed in the District Development Plans. This theoretical freedom is limited, however. The centre does not hesitate to intervene in the choice of investment projects and can override district choice. A good example is the priority given to electrification in the planning of the districts in 2013/2014, as the result of the pressure from the national level. While this is understandable to allow the rolling out of national priorities, it goes against the theoretical functioning of the capital block grant. Second, a proportion of the capital block grant is not used for "capital" but for social protection initiatives that are partly planned by central government in the case of the VUP program.

The earmarked transfers are by definition controlled by the national level. In Rwanda, they are extremely detailed, giving the district no leeway in spending the money in the 15 sectorial transfers. For instance, instead of a general grant for

education, the transfer specifies a myriad of sub-accounts, for instance one for the transportation of textbooks.[21] Donors and agencies' grants are also earmarked transfers. On the other hand, districts enjoy full freedom in the use of their own revenue. Those revenues however only represented 16% of the district budget in 2012/13.[22]

Whereas the Habyarimana regime's attempt to implement financial decentralisation failed, the post-genocide government succeeded: districts are financially independent and have developed capacity to manage a sizeable part of state resources. However, careful analysis reveals that the centre is still very much in control.

Political decentralisation

Political decentralisation has established elections at every tier of local government, except the provincial level. Elections are direct only at its lower tier, the cell. Members of sector and district councils are elected indirectly from the level below, with reserved seats for representatives of the interest groups of women and of youth. Specifically, the district council is composed of a councillor elected at the level of each sector of the district, three councillors from the Bureau of the National Youth Council at district level and one councillor from the National Council of Women at district level.[23] Crucially, no candidate at local elections can claim partisan affiliation: parties are not officially allowed to campaign or play any role in local elections. In terms of power, elected officials form a committee in the case of the cell or a council in the case of the sector that have a mainly consultative role, the power resting in the hand of an appointed executive secretary, i.e. not accountable to them. At district level, the council plays a greater role: it is in charge of, among other things, the approval of annual budgets, 5-year district development plans, action plans or the

recruitment of personnel.[24] The mayor and the vice-mayors are elected by the council and can be removed by it as well.[25]

What repartition of power, between the local and the centre, does this system induce? Although the system is a rupture from the pre-1994 era, where the main local official – the *bourgmestre* – was appointed, it still allows the national level to preserve its influence by depoliticising local politics. The design of decentralisation indeed prevents elections being about mobilising people around competing projects for their community. This is achieved by banning claims of partisan affiliation at the local level and the fact that elected officials do not have an executive role in cells or sectors. In addition, the elections are indirect at sector, and even more so at district, level. In the latter case, councillors are elected after two, and the mayor three, tiers of indirect elections. In addition, elections in Rwanda have a corporatist component whereby representatives of interest groups, instead of individuals, get reserved seats. Overall, this means that the link between voters (and their preferences) and their representatives (and their actions) is tenuous, making it difficult for the population to hold representatives of sectors and districts accountable.[26] Besides, this system with many indirect elections and their corporatist components multiplies space for the centre to intervene.[27] Overall, this design produces benign political competition. Elections are hardly decisive either in the running of the sectors and cells because of the consultative role of elected individuals or the running of the district since the mayor is a very indirect emanation of voter's preference.

The question is therefore for what purpose does the national level use this political space at the local level? My argument is that it uses it to promote a depoliticised[28], but technocratic local elite, loyal to the centre. This can be shown by analysing the final redesign of local governments in 2006. Decentralisation, by

creating new political positions, can be a way to increase opportunities of clientelism. The Ugandan decentralisation, which multiplied political entities, epitomises this process[29]. Remarkably, the case of Rwanda is the opposite. The drastic reduction of political entities in 2006 created many losers. Rwanda did not shy away from it because it was adamant in streamlining local governments. At the end of the first phase of decentralisation (2001-2006), the government realised that the 106 districts were not financially viable unless it increased their size. Besides, their high number would fragment the resources for investment projects. Districts were consequently decreased in number. They were also redesigned so that each had ecological uniformity.[30] The drive was therefore far from creating clientelist opportunities.

This deep institutional reform was the occasion to promote a technocratic local political elite. In 2005, before the institutional redesign, the Ministry of Local Government engaged in a process of identifying and retaining the best elements in the local bureaucracy. In anticipation of the important reduction of staff, governors were tasked to organise the evaluation of all civil servants at province and district level according to a standardised evaluation framework. Evaluation aimed to determine who to keep and the results were discussed in one-to-one meetings with the concerned civil servant. An appeal system was in place, with the minister judging litigious cases in last resort.[31] If not retained, people were offered a reconversion package, often a scholarship to return studying. The same logic applied to politicians: provincial governors were in charge of identifying talent that could be backed for running for mayor.[32] As a consequence, technocratic profiles, knowledgeable about the functioning of local government, have been promoted.

The sociology of current district mayors supports this point (figure 4). Former local civil servants are clearly over-represented: 53% of mayors (as of September

2013) were former civil servants of the district or sector immediately before their election. The proportion reaches 70% if administrators of health centres, teachers and ex-local civil servants back from studies are included.

[Figure 4 about here]

One could argue that in a developing country, where the state provides most of the jobs for educated people, this is not surprising. However, two aspects indicate that it is knowledge of local government, rather than the mere fact of being educated, that is remarkable of mayor's profiles. First, mayors with a background of being civil servants at national level represent only 10% (and among the three of them, two were working in the Ministry of Local Government). Second, of the 16 who previously worked in local administration, 13 became mayors in their district of origin, showing that educated people are not randomly given jobs anywhere in the country. Instead, the picture is one of a local administration producing its local leaders.

This, along with the electoral system, creates a technocratic and depoliticised class of politicians. It also fosters political loyalty as local politicians (and civil servants), often quite young and after a meteoric rise, are grateful to the centre for such a trajectory. Of course, expertise is not the only criteria determining the emergence of local politicians; others such as political loyalty play a key role as well. However, technical competences have been crucial criteria in the design of political decentralisation in Rwanda.

When one looks at administrative, financial and political decentralisation, a common picture emerges: decentralisation is massive in terms of transfer of responsibilities and resources but nonetheless its design allows the centre to retain tight control over the local level and to ensure rapid implementation of national policies. The maintenance of "centralisation" in disguise of decentralisation echoes

many African cases[33] that would render the Rwandan paradox less Rwandan or even less paradoxical. The evidence indicates, however, that the Rwandan pattern is idiosyncratic at least in two major respects. First, the level of emphasis on performance that permeates the whole state apparatus (to even reaching the household) level is unheard of in Africa. Second, the effect of political decentralisation is also unusual. Decentralisation in Africa is often a way to accommodate local elites, especially by offering possibilities of resources capture.[34] This phenomenon is absent in Rwanda.

Interpretation: elite vulnerability as an explanatory framework

This final section shifts attention to explaining the origin of such a design. I argue that this pattern of decentralisation can be explained by the kind of vulnerability experienced by the current political elite in Rwanda. This vulnerability, i.e. the perception of intense threats, spurs it to design a tightly controlled decentralisation able to implement the elite's ambitious developmental agenda. The argument here is inspired by the theory of "systemic vulnerability" of Doner et al. that explains the emergence of development states in Asia "when political leaders confront extraordinarily constrained political environments".[35] More specifically, the systemic vulnerability occurs when the elite is

> simultaneously staring down the barrels of three different guns: (1) the credible threat
> that any deterioration in the living standards of popular sectors could trigger
> unmanageable mass unrest; (2) the heightened need for foreign exchange and war
> materiel induced by national insecurity; and (3) the hard budget constraints imposed by
> a scarcity of easy revenue sources.[36]

In this case, Doner et al. argue, the only way to stay in power is for leaders to engage in economic upgrading. This article embraces the approach of Doner et al. by focusing on how institutional arrangements are the result of the elite's perception of

their environment. However, the argument here is both more modest, limited to exploring the roots of the decentralisation design in Rwanda, and more ambitious since it uses systemic vulnerability not only to explain the importance of development for the elite, as Doner et al. do, but also to explain the kind of (restricted) popular participation generated at local level.

The vulnerability of the political elite in the Rwandan case is particular by its intensity as it reaches not only to mere political survival but also to the physical security of this elite. While one could argue that the two aspects should be differentiated, they are almost synonymous in the Tutsi-dominated elite's, and generally in many Tutsis', psyche. For both, the RPF is the liberating force that put an end to the genocide and to the oppressive political order in place since 1959. RPF rule is viewed as the guarantor of their security and losing power for the RPF is equated by the political elite at least to instability, possibly to violence.[37] It is important to insist that such threats are experienced collectively by the elite due not only to the experience of the genocide targeting the Tutsi as a whole, but also the strong esprit de corps characterising the RPF. The pattern of decentralisation, dominated by development and control, constitutes a part of the response to that vulnerability.

Internal vulnerability

Vulnerability of the elite in Rwanda is multidimensional but can be divided into internal and external threats. Internally, the first dimension of vulnerability is the rule by the political elite over an ethnically different population previously steeped in an ideology advocating this very elite's ethnic annihilation. The experience of the RPF during the genocide was key in this respect. Its soldiers constantly experienced the rift between them and the local population. At the launch of the war with Rwanda in 1990, Prunier remarks on the surprise and disappointment of the RPA in the

"liberated zone" not to be welcomed by the population as liberators.[38] The following years exposed the RPF to the horrors of the genocide, the extent and rapidity of which came as a surprise.[39] The people who fled Rwanda and joined the RPF left behind a family they often found massacred upon returning. At the end of the genocide, "the Tutsi population was totally obsessed with the experience of the genocide and the collective guilt of the Hutu race."[40] The end of genocide did not correspond, however, to safety for the RPF and survivors. The northwest of the country was the site of full-fledged fighting between the RPA and infiltrators from Congo supported by some of the population until 2000.[41] Manifestations of "genocide ideology" also sometimes still resurfaced. [42]

These ethnic antagonisms are reinforced by human geography, relevant when analysing decentralisation. The population in the countryside is mostly Hutu. While this is statistically logic[43], this trend has been accentuated by the fact that "old caseload" Tutsi returnees, i.e. those who fled the country following the 1959 violence, constitute mainly an urban population:

> Following the RPF's military victory, the new elite installed themselves in the capital. While this was partly for security reasons (the countryside was still unstable in the immediate post-1994 period), it also reflected the fact that a considerable number of the returnees had lost their ties with the 'hill of origin' and had little incentive to go to the rural areas."[44]

Arguably, these double, and partly overlapping, ethnic and geographic antagonisms have consequences for decentralisation, which has been mostly about setting up rules and institutions in the countryside where the elite's legitimacy is at its slimmest.

This creates a strong incentive to prevent political entrepreneurs from mobilising people along ethnic or regional lines. The political decentralisation is

deeply informed by this fear. I have shown how it has been tailored to foster a benign political competition. For instance, the official explanation for the ban on party affiliation for local elections "is that the people do not want parties, given the role parties played during the genocide".[45] Put bluntly by a high official in MINALOC, "[When thinking about decentralisation], we did not want parties but we did implement elections at the local level to match international standards."[46] This helps also to understand more generally the restricted political space in Rwanda. As put by a former prefect in office after 1994, "[When designing political decentralisation], it would have been irresponsible to allow full political competition"[47].

Such fear is supported by the theoretical literature that points out that a major danger in decentralisation is the capture of local government authority and resources by local elites.[48] Given the past and current priorities of security and development, such a risk is not an option in the minds of the post-1994 political elite.

In addition to the limited political space, internal vulnerability explains the priority in decentralisation given to swift, efficient, tightly monitored, target-driven policy implementation over other considerations, including popular participation. As summarised by Protais Musoni, a principal RPF historical figure and one of the architects of Rwanda's decentralisation as minister of local government, "The main driver of decentralisation [design] was how we could suppress conflictual notes in our decentralisation system."[49] This is because the developmental agenda is conceived as a tool not only to fight some of the causes of the genocide, notably poverty, but also to promote reconciliation through the change of the popular mindset. As put by a senior RPF figure, "[With development], there is the idea to get the people into a better state of mind. Development allows that by raising capacity and education.

Development shapes how people think, how people behave. Development was for us a precondition to democracy and unity."[50]

The importance of development is best visible in the fact that, despite a sense of vulnerability and a craving for legitimacy, the state, using the local administration, does not hesitate to engage locally in unpopular, and possibly brutal, policy implementation. The CIP is emblematic in this respect: it touches on a sensitive element for the population – agricultural production – and has been unpopular but stringently implemented by local authorities. This paradox has to be viewed against the backdrop of a larger sense of vulnerability that promotes a long-term horizon, as summarised by a consultant in the ministry of agriculture:

> They bet that the benefits of the CIP will outset the anger. They do everything they can not to repeat history. And they are very conscious about how quickly things can go and how much can upset people. For that, in their mind, they have to raise quickly rural income but also get people out of the agriculture sector. […] I can tell you that the minister of agriculture, when she goes to bed, it is what she sleeps with in mind.[51]

But the role of development in post-genocide Rwanda is not only a way to defuse violence. It is also a way (probably the only way) for the elite to gain legitimacy that cannot be based on ethnic or social representativeness. This is first visible through the constant discourse during the political education sessions of the RPA[52] in the bush[53] on the importance to make "a difference" from the regimes of Kayibanda and Habyarimana when the RPF is in power. The will to inhabit a functioning and prosperous country long idealised by the old caseload returnees is also an important reason for such emphasis on development.[54]

Furthermore, development has a crucial legitimising function for the elite. Decentralisation is key to this process not only because it brings development "closer

to the people" but also because, through *imihigo*, it is a great advertising machine. Indeed, the function of *imihigo* is to project the commitment of the elite to development. Ubiquitous quantitative narrow indicators enable the state to present apparently transparent and objective measures of yearly progress. This is supported by the well-orchestrated and widely covered signing ceremony with the President. The international audience is not forgotten because, although *imihigo* is presented as the Rwandan "home-grown solution" *par excellence*, its format is a copy/paste of a typical "logical framework" used in international development projects.

The importance of development for the RPF has also informed the design of political decentralisation where political competition is seen as an obstacle to RPF developmental ambitions. This logically resulted in the limit put on political entrepreneurship and the nurturing of a depoliticised technocratic local elite. Interestingly, and logically given the RPF background, interviewees often used the Ugandan experience as a justification of the Rwandan political decentralisation model:

> We did not want political parties at local level to avoid confusion. […] Look at Kampala: there is the Democratic Party running Kampala, then the NRA of Museveni, at the national level. The DP wants Museveni to fail and Museveni wants the DP to fail, so it creates constant tension.[55]

On the contrary, Rwanda wanted to avoid politics, viewed as a dangerous interference with the country's ambitions.

External vulnerability

Threats to the elite are not only domestic but also external. The range of external threats, by creating the need to build a strong state and economy, fund an

effective army and sustain social stability, has created the incentive to fashion a form of decentralisation that allows tight coordination of resources and rapid implementation of the national developmental agenda.

The first and obvious source of external vulnerability is the genocidal militias at Rwanda's borders. In the past, they were an immediate threat as a potential invading force or driver of insurgency in the country. While it has considerably decreased, this threat remains and regularly materialises in the form of grenade attacks in Kigali during genocide commemoration or elections.[56] More generally, the ranting of some elements of the Hutu extremist diaspora on the Internet leaves a deep impression of insecurity among the political elite, especially because of their revisionist narrative on the genocide and the damage they may cause to the reputation of Rwanda.[57] Another source of insecurity is the perceived anti-Rwandan or sometimes anti-Tutsi sentiments at Rwanda's borders and globally. Such sentiments are obvious in the DRC and more recently in Tanzania.[58] This goes beyond the geopolitics of the Great Lakes region: a high Rwandan official for instance reflecting on the numerous negative academic views on Rwanda lamented, "Why does the world hate us?"[59] The point here is not to assess the reality of such insecurity, nor to debate its origins. What is important is the elite's *perception* of such threats. The perception of a state under siege is an incentive to design an institutional environment at the local level allowing the building of a strong state.

Finally, another main source of vulnerability is the dependency of Rwanda on international aid. This dependency means that the volatility of aid might jeopardise the elite's developmental project. This is visible by the constant effort to promote self-reliance at the local level through heavy taxation and non-monetary contributions such as *umuganda* (monthly collective work). This vulnerability is heightened by the

history of the RPF. Interestingly, it is the fact that the international community ignored the situation of Tutsi refugees in Uganda, rather than its non-intervention during genocide, which was first put forward when discussing with senior RPF members the importance of self-reliance in Rwanda. The experience of being stateless refugees was seminal in their wariness toward the international community. As put by one senior RPF official, "[A source of the importance of self-reliance] is the quick realisation that the international community will not help us [as refugees in Uganda]. We wrote a letter to the UN every 30th of June, for refugee day, to call for the attention of the UN, with no results."[60] This experience emphasised the need of a strong state in Rwanda. As recalled by a high ranking Rwandan military official in charge of political education in the RPA before 1994, "I heard once that the security of Israel is not only about the security of Israel, it is about the security of all the Jews in the world. And I used to tell people [Tutsi refugees] the same: to have Rwanda, to be secure in Rwanda is not only about the security of Rwanda, it is about the security of all the Tutsis." External vulnerability is thus rooted not only in present realities but also in the historical origins of the current Rwandan elite.

Conclusion

The vulnerability of the Rwandan political elite is a powerful framework to explain the design of the Rwandan decentralisation. This analysis reveals that the mandate and resources of local government in Rwanda have never been so important, but so has the control of the centre over it. This is because such design allows reconciling decentralisation reforms not only with an ambitious developmental agenda but also with security concerns. This framework also sheds light on the apparent contradictions between the elite's will to foster social peace and avoid repeating history on the one hand, and the imposition of top-down and sometimes

brutal policies, potentially constituting a great source of resentment, on the other. It is because the vulnerability is collectively experienced and based on long-term factors that the elite adopts a long-term horizon, and an approach to development where, put bluntly, the end justifies the means.

How then, overall, should we assess the Rwandan decentralisation? Must it be disapproved on the basis that it reproduces dangerous patterns of the past and does not hold to its promise of grassroots participation, as argued by a whole strand in the literature? One must not forget that increase in local government mandates paralleled with heavy involvement of the centre, even at the expense of local ownership, is not a zero-sum game. First, the heavy transfer of competences locally has the benefit of building a strong institutional framework and staff capacity, which are necessary conditions for the fostering of local democratisation. Second, the Rwandan decentralisation pattern has a great advantage in allowing formidable monitoring and coordination of the scarce resources of the country and the diffusion of a norm of result-oriented work. This is a notable evolution from the past, from local control founded on political loyalty before 1994 to one based, besides political obedience, on technocratic capacity. This is not a zero-sum game.

The Rwandan decentralisation thus cannot be analysed ahistorically. Understanding its design requires taking seriously the sense of vulnerability of the elite and not focusing solely on the lack of local democratisation and ownership. Of course, top-down undemocratic policy-making in the long run is dangerous, but it has had the merit in the Rwandan case of offering a narrow path for the elite to engage in decentralisation in an exceptional context. The coming challenge will be for this elite to recognise potential evolution of threats, for instance constituted by popular resentment generated by the lack of grassroots participation and the growing

inefficiencies of top-down planning as the economy becomes more complex.

Nevertheless, one can wonder if the Rwandan approach to decentralisation, in its

principal characteristics, was not the only possible form of decentralisation that

Rwanda could have afforded so far given its recent history.

Notes

1 RGB, *Sectoral Decentralisation in Rwanda*, 42-44.

2 Private communication, high official, Ministry of Public Service and Labor. See also MIFOTRA,
Public Sector Retention Pay Policy, 36.

3 For instance, the *Rwanda Five-Year Decentralisation Implementation Program* of 2004 states the
need to replace "the sub culture of passive obedience which left people open to political and sectarian
manipulation." (MINALOC, 11).

4 Andrews, *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development*, 161-191, McConnel *Institution
[Un]Building*, Kauzya *Political Decentralisation in Africa*, Van Tilburg "Decentralisation as a
Stabilizing Factor in Rwanda."

5 Ansoms, "Re-Engineering Rural Society"; Ingelaere, "The Ruler's Drum"; Ingelaere, "Peasants,
Power, Ethnicity"; Purdeková "Even if I am not here".

6 Sommers, *Stuck*, 89

7 Purdeková, "Even if I am not here", 476. See also Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power, Ethnicity"; Gaynor,
Decentralisation, Conflict and Peacebuilding.

8 MINALOC, National Decentralisation Policy (2001).

9 Andrews, "The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development", 165.

10 Interview, official in the Ministry of Health, September 2013.

11 Different interviews including, MINALOC official, September 2013, Kigali, and a district vice-
mayor, June 2013. See also Gaynor, *Decentralisation, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Rwanda*, 34-36
and 44-54; IRDP, *La Participation citoyenne*.

12 For instance, in the case of health, the ministry is likely to refuse that a district with a low

prevalence of malaria puts the fight against malaria as an objective.

13 Interview, district vice-mayor, June 2013.

14 E.g. Nsanzimana, 2013, "Rwanda: Farmers Decry 'Overzealous' Local Leaders", *Rwanda Focus*,

March, 24.

15 Nsanzimana, 2013, "Rwanda: No One Should Be Forced to Pay Mutuelle – Premier", *Rwanda*

Focus, February 15. http://focus.rw/wp/2013/02/no-one-should-be-forced-to-pay-mutuelle-premier/

16 Interview, district official, June 2013.

17 Ansoms, "Re-Engineering Rural Society", Gaynor, *Decentralisation, Conflict and Peacebuilding in*

Rwanda, Ingelaere, "The Ruler's Drum"; Ingelaere, "Peasants, Power, Ethnicity"; Purdeková

"Even if I am not here".

18 E.g. Prud'homme, "The Dangers of Decentralisation".

19 RGB, Sectoral Decentralisation in Rwanda, 42-44.

20 MINALOC, Decentralisation Implementation Plan 2011-2015.

21 MINECOFIN, 2013-14 Districts'Earmarked Transfers Guidelines, 90-91.

22 RGB, Sectoral Decentralisation in Rwanda, 43.

23 RoR, Law N° 08/2006 of 24/02/2006, art.10.

24 Ibid., art. 20.

25 Ibid., art. 12 and 69

26 See also Lutz, Reflection on Rwanda's Electoral System, 10.

27 For an illustration, see for instance Ingelaere, "The Ruler's Drum", 71-73 and Gaynor,

Decentralisation, Conflict and Peacebuilding, 42-43.

28 Depoliticized is used here in the sense of not being interested in articulating competing political

projects and mobilizing followers around them. Mayors are politicized however in the sense that

they apparently all belong to the RPF.

29 Green, "Patronage, District Creation, and Reform".

30 Interview with Protais Musoni, Kigali, September 2013, Minister of Local Government and Social

Affairs during the 2006 reform.

31 Interview with Protais Musoni, Kigali, September 2013.

32 Interview, former local official, Kigali, September 2013.

[33] See for instance Wunsh "Decentralisation, Local Governance", Crook "Decentralisation and Poverty Reduction".

[34] Crook "Decentralisation and Poverty Reduction", Green, "Patronage, District Creation, and Reform".

35 Doner et al., "Systemic Vulnerability", 328.

36 Ibid.

37 Sometimes it is even the loss of power by Kagame himself, which creates worries. Beginning of 2013, people publicly declared on radio that in case Kagame leaves power, they would go back to exile (personal communication, April 2013). The extent to which such declarations are orchestrated is unknown, but, as arguments publicly used, they are nonetheless telling.

38 Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 133.

39 Interview with Tito Rutaremara, Kigali, Septembre, 2013.

40 Waugh, Paul Kagame and Rwanda, 123.

41 See African Rights, *Rwanda, The Insurgency in the Northwest.*

42 One episode was the discovery in 2008 of teachers preaching ideology of the old regime in schools: "Genocide hatred lingers in Rwanda schools", BBC News, February, 28, 2008.

  http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7246985.stm

43 Hutu compose about 85% of the population.

44 Ansoms, "Re-Engineering Rural Society", 295

45 Lutz, Reflection on Rwanda's electoral System, 21-22

46 Interview, MINALOC official, Kigali, September 2013.

47 Interview, former prefect, Kigali, September 2013.

48 See Bardhan, "Decentralisation of Governance and Development", Blair, "Participation and accountability at the periphery"; Prud'homme "The Danger of Decentralisation".

49 Interview with Protais Musoni, Kigali, September 2013.

50 Interview, Kigali, September 2013.

51 Interview, consultant in the Ministry of Agriculture, May 2013, Kigali.

52 Rwandan Patriotic Army, the armed branch of the RPF during the war.

53 Interview with army senior officer, Kigali, February 2013.

54 Interview with Tito Rutaremara, Kigali, September, 2013.

55 Interview with Protais Musoni, 18th October 2013.

56 E.g. "Blasts in Rwanda capital Kigali kill two ahead of vote", BBC News, September, 14, 2013.

   http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24095890

57 Private communication, Kigali, April 2013. This is visible in the effort of the Ministry of Foreign

   Affairs to counter such discourse through the program "come and see" targeting the diaspora.

58 See "Why has Tanzania deported thousands to Rwanda?, BBC News, September 2, 2013.

   http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-23930776.

59 Private communication, Kigali, September 2013.

60 Interview, Kigali, September, 2013.

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