

# Perspectives on the 1972–1973 massacre and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Burundi

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## **Abstract**

How do we repair and reconcile a society broken multiple times by years of political violence and cyclic mass atrocity events? Reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies tend to favour state-led peace processes to aid individuals and communities alike to heal, make sense of the past while also imagining and forging an interdependent future together. The Burundi Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 2014, has the mandate to investigate past crimes and mass violence events dating from 1885 to the 4 December 2008 ceasefire with the aim of aiding truth-telling, reconciliation and transitional justice. The article comments on how the TRC shapes ongoing healing, reconciliation and transitional justice efforts in post-conflict Burundi. This article uses desk-based research to draw insights from documented works and reports of the TRC between 2018 and 2022. The TRC's findings sparked multiple narratives and public discourse in the Senate which further led to the re-examination of the 1972–1973 massacre, the legacy of colonisation and its impact in cementing ethnic divisions that led to cyclic mass violence in Burundi.

**Keywords:** Truth and Reconciliation Commission, mass violence, colonial legacy, narrative, reconciliation, transitional justice

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## 1. Introduction

The need to reveal and preserve the truth in the aftermath of mass violence and gross injustices and human rights violations is central to national reconciliation, healing and post-conflict reconstruction in societies and countries befallen to mass violence. The Nobel laureate Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, also former president of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission charged to investigate crimes committed during apartheid, eloquently affirmed that, despite how painful past experiences were, there was an urgent need to deal with past wounds and allow them to heal for the sake of the future (60 Minutes, 2022). In this spirit, the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement was negotiated between former warring parties of the Civil War in Burundi (1994–2005) which put in place provisions for the formation of a truth and reconciliation commission to deliver transitional justice, national healing and contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. The guarantors of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, namely the United Nations (UN), the European Union, the African Union, the East African Community and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, need to continually support and accompany Burundi in its quest for lasting national reconciliation and healing.

In the years subsequent to the signing of the Arusha Agreement, juridical frameworks for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) formed the basis of several rounds of negotiation with key partners and stakeholders. Between 2005 and 2006, several UN delegations negotiated with the Burundi government on the joint establishment of a TRC and an international inquiry commission on genocide, war crimes and other crimes against humanity as stipulated in the Arusha Agreement (Reliefweb, 2006). Protocol 1, Article 6 of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement stipulated the formation of a judiciary commission at the discretion of the UN Security Council to investigate crimes of genocide, war and crimes against humanity for the period from 1 July 1962 until the signing of the Arusha Agreement in 2000. However, the Burundi government unilaterally established the TRC in 2014 amid a climate of heightened political tensions (Reliefweb, 2014). Vandegiste (2012) correctly predicted this move in 2012 when he alluded to limited influence of international partners on Burundi's formation and composition of the future TRC.

For four years, the TRC struggled to deliver on its mandate amid a political crisis brought about by the contested third term of the incumbent Pierre Nkurunziza (The Guardian, 2014). In 2015, mass protests erupted across Burundi to demonstrate against the third term, reaching its zenith with a failed coup on 13 May 2015. In the ensuing confusion and chaos, the TRC suffered from shortage of funds as the country was plunged into a political crisis. Several international partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that lobbied for accountability pulled their support or reneged on pledges for financial support (Jamar, 2022).

In 2018, the TRC's mandate was renewed and expanded to include investigating past crimes and mass violence events dating from 1885 to the 4 December 2008 ceasefire (Presidential Decree, 2018) with the aim of uncovering the truth, creating collective memory, healing and eventually helping all Burundians to reconcile. The investigations of the TRC are also focused on establishing individual responsibility and the role of state instruments and moral or public bodies in perpetrating mass atrocity crimes during pre- and post-colonial Burundi. The long historical period and mandate to uncover truth for past mass atrocity events spanning 123 years is broad and overly ambitious. Yet the TRC can be credited with breaking the 'cycle of silence' surrounding the 1972–1973 massacre. Findings by the TRC on crimes committed from April 1972 to early 1973 indicate that around 150 000 victims predominantly from the Hutu ethnic group were systemically killed and dumped in mass graves, rivers or on the open ground (NTRC, 2021a).

This article draws insights from publicly available reports and documented works of the TRC between 2018 and 2022 to understand identity salience in past mass atrocity events in Burundi, dominant narratives in light of the recent classification of the 1972–1973 massacre as genocide, and ongoing healing, reconciliation and transitional justice efforts in Burundi. Between 2018 and 2022, the TRC organised systematic truth-telling fieldtrips across Burundi and conducted healing sessions for survivors, eyewitnesses, scholars and the general public across Burundi and in the diaspora to shed light on their lived experiences of the 1972–1973 massacre. The TRC's ongoing efforts have implications for understanding colonial legacies, group identity formation, dominant narratives in the aftermath of the 2021 qualification of the 1972–1973 massacre and how each one of those factors shapes the reconciliation and transitional justice efforts in post-conflict Burundi.

## 2. Dealing with colonial legacies and group identity

Since the mandate of the TRC extends to precolonial times (1885–2008), there have been efforts to understand the role of former colonial countries in the cyclical and violent conflict in Burundi. Burundians lived relatively harmoniously before contact with European colonisers (Lemarchand, 1970). The Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement and stakeholders in the negotiations recognised that Burundi's three ethnic groups, namely Bahutu or Hutu (85 %), Batutsi or Tutsi (14 %) and Batwa or Twa were cohabiting peacefully before the arrival of colonial rulers. First, Burundi became a colony of German East Africa in 1885 along with many other German colonies, such as present-day Rwanda, parts of Tanzania and territories of Ghana and Namibia until the end of World War I (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Second, the League of Nations awarded Belgium a mandate to rule over present-day Rwanda and Burundi (formerly Ruanda-Urundi) in 1921 and its rule would last until the gaining of independence in 1962.

Burundi's three major identity groups cohabited harmoniously and fought European colonisers together under the rule of the King or Mwami and his governors chosen among his capable princes. Ethnic identity in Burundi is a bit different from the conventional sense of 'ethnicity' as Hutu, Tutsi and Twa all share the same language and have little markers to differentiate who is whom. Before the arrival of colonial administrators, there were no known existing conflicts between the aforementioned group identities and any arising dispute was expertly mediated by the council of elders 'Abashingantahe' (Buszka, 2019). The council of elders was an institution of men chosen in their respective communities, in part due to their honesty, good judgement and strong character. Colonisation capitalised on differences based on dividing factors and sowed discrimination that included ethnic divisions among communities and tribes in Africa that have continued to haunt Africans and communities alike to date (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2011). Against this backdrop, successive governments across Africa, including in Burundi, continued to persecute their citizens and leveraged the administrative infrastructure and governance machinery left over by colonial rulers.

In order to cement their powers, the 'divide and rule' policy became the norm and Belgian rulers favoured the minority Tutsi over the majority Hutu. The chasm between Hutu and Tutsi became apparent as the Burundi Kingdom was about to 'recover' its independence in 1962. Princely rivalries between Bezi and Bataga emerged over the succession of

Prince Louis Rwagasore who had been assassinated on 13 October 1961 (Lemarchand, 1970).

During the rule of the Belgians, a minority Tutsi elite gained control of power and resources in the country, such as who could be sent to school or who could become a leader in a given community or over the country. Thus, the Tutsi's unequal access to a plethora of resources over other identity groups resulted in very few educated Hutus or Twas, with Tutsis occupying nearly every important position in the political life of Burundi (NTRC, 2021b). Thus, before the Forces Technical Agreement (FTA) between the Transitional Government of the Republic of Burundi and the National Council for the Defence of Democracy – Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD has been the ruling party since 2005), the Tutsis dominated Hutus in the military, gendarmerie and intelligence branch (United Nations Peacemaker, 2003). Access to education was restricted and, despite excelling in school, Hutu were marginalised and discriminated against in schools through a systematic and structural education system (Dunlop, 2021).

Even after the departure of colonial rulers in 1962, successive governments were characterised by deep polarisation and political marginalisation that culminated in the 1972–1973 massacre and many other recurrent mass violence events. For instance, in 1965, a Rwandese refugee assassinated then Burundi Prime Minister Pierre Ngendandumwe (a Hutu who had just taken the Oath of Office) (Twagiramungu, 2016). In 1966, a fresh captain in the army, Michel Micombero abolished the monarchy and proclaimed himself president of the new Republic. It is during Micombero's rule that the 1972 massacre was orchestrated (NTRC, 2021b).

Yet still in 1988, ethnic tensions between Hutu and Tutsi in Marangara and Ntega broke out in North-Eastern Burundi and led to the death of roughly 50 000 people. Preliminary findings from investigations by the TRC into the 1988 killings reveal that both Hutu and Tutsi participated in the massacre. The 1988 mass killings also prompted national talks and dialogues that were sealed with the signing of the National Unity Charter in 1991. This charter bound every government, current and future, to adhere to its mandate for the sake of unity and common vision (Burundi Office of the President, 1991).

Unfortunately, the commitment to peaceful cohabitation among all ethnic groups and clans in the wake of the 1988 ethnic tensions failed when

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Burundi relapsed into violent conflict fueled by the Civil War between a Tutsi-dominated army and Hutu rebel groups (Schwikowski, 2023). In 1993, the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye (a democratically elected Hutu) by the Tutsi-dominated army led to a massive Hutu uprising which later morphed into a decade-long Civil War. The Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement is credited with a return to peace in postwar Burundi. The said agreement set the conditions for subsequent peace negotiations, such as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) brokered in 2008 between the Nkurunziza Government and the Party for the Liberation of Hutu Peoples-Forces for National Liberation (PALIPETHUTU-FNL), which effectively put an end to the intractable Civil War.

While the current TRC was formed during Nkurunziza's presidency (2005–2020), the role of colonial powers in recurrent mass atrocity events and the need for reparations and damages was first officially communicated by the Senate in 2021 (Deutsche Welle, 2020). However, prior to 2021, the first attempts were made to include accountability for colonialism and colonial crimes in setting in motion the conditions that led to heightened ethnic tensions, mass violence and the destruction of cultural norms in the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement (Chapter I, Protocol I, 2000). During the negotiations of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, provisions were included for the future role of a TRC to investigate past injustices. This included cases of gross human rights violations and colonial crimes, but attempts to include the accountability of past colonial crimes was compromised in order to secure potential aid for effective implementation of the peace deal (Daley, 2008).

One year before the 2021 Burundi Senate pushed for reparations and damages for colonial injustices and crimes, the Belgian parliament established a commission in June 2020 with the mandate to launch an enquiry into Belgium's overseas colonial legacy and to reflect on appropriate reparations (Destrooper, 2023). Unfortunately, the commission achieved little in garnering political consensus for an apology and potential reparations and compensation to victims (Ponselet, 2023). While there is some blame attributable to colonial powers for cementing ethnic divisions among Burundians, the TRC's findings also point to the role of political leaders in encouraging inter-ethnic violence. Collected testimonies by the TRC unequivocally cite the role of the Micombero government (1966–1976) in preparing, inciting and coordinating the

1972–1973 mass killings through the unconstitutional use of state instruments, such as the army and youth militia, to commit crimes against innocent and predominantly Hutu victims (NTRC, 2021b). In its findings, the TRC also cites numerous cases of Tutsis who went above and beyond to rescue the lives of thousands of persecuted Hutus. Further reports by the TRC on the 1972–1973 massacre have recently become known and recount many Tutsi rescuers and victims. Thus, the 2021 qualification of the 1972–1973 massacre as ‘genocide’ was met with mixed feelings and did not garner consensus among all Burundians but rather led to the development of differing narratives.

### **3. Understanding predominant narratives and events surrounding the 1972–1973 massacre**

The trigger of the 1972 mass killings and atrocities is rife with controversy and competing narratives. The instigation of so-called Hutu rebel groups attacking Tutsi communities has been predominantly reported on and the 1972–1973 massacre in Burundi was seen as a catalyst element in which the need to protect life (Life trigger) and to defend the Tutsi ethnic group (Tribe trigger) against the so-called traitors was at play. This was used to justify the killing of Hutus. Some proponents also point to a rebellion of Mulele-Bahutu (of the Hutu ethnic group) that emerged from Tanzania in the south-east of Burundi, the insurgents of which embarked on a killing spree of all Tutsi and moderate Hutu in surrounding communities, leading to between 2 000 and 3 000 Tutsi victims (Clay, 2024). Furthermore, the TRC also recognises that during the 1972–1973 massacre, there were several Tutsi and Twa victims, especially in the south and centre of Burundi in the provinces of Bururi, Makamba, Mwaro and Muramvya (Ntakarutimana, 2024). Consequently, if any ‘genocide’ had been pre-planned, it had been against Tutsi only and not only against Hutu and, as such, the characterisation by both the TRC and recently by the parliament of the killings and mass violence events between 1972 and 1973 as a ‘genocide against Hutu’ would be unfounded and misplaced. Despite the qualification of the 1972–1973 massacre by the Senate, the Burundi government has yet to formerly label the events of 1972 as genocide.

Conversely, another dominant narrative echoes from the recent public discourses on testimonies and reflections on 1972 killings organised in the Burundi Senate in April 2021 under the stewardship of former President of Burundi Sylvestre Ntibantunganya. The so-called rebellion used to

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justify the systematic Hutu massacre between 1972 and 1973 was indeed pre-planned and well-organised by senior cadres in the military and the national War Council. Furthermore, when Micombero reached out to President Mobutu of former Zaire (present-day DRC) for help to quell the so-called insurgents, Mobutu's servicemen allegedly found out that the killings were ethnically motivated and decided to leave the theatre (Agence Burundaise de Presse, 2021). Thus, the systematic mass violence between April 1972 and early 1973 was orchestrated and coordinated by President Micombero and his government.

Furthermore, proponents of this narrative assert that the killings that followed the rebellion in 1972 by state agents unequivocally targeted more Hutu than Tutsi and violated the sanctity and nature of the duty of any government towards its own citizens – providing protection and ensuring justice for all. During the public hearings organised in the Senate, survivors and eyewitnesses of the 1972–1973 massacre participated from both inside Burundi and in the diaspora. All attendees seemed to converge on the fact that indeed Hutus suffered more greatly than Tutsis. Differing interpretations of the past are quite normal as it can be hard to fully recollect what happened nearly five decades ago. However, the TRC has a responsibility to all victims of the 1972–1973 massacre. Ongoing reconciliation and transitional efforts need to fully capture, in their own measure, the complexity of each mass atrocity event in post-conflict Burundi. Interpretations of the past influence how we view the present and also shape the creation of collective memory in post-conflict Burundi. Narratives shape how conflicts and post-conflict interventions evolve over time, especially under conditions of interests-based interactions.

A common denominator in the above narratives is that what happened should never have happened in the first place and need not happen in future. Whichever way any one identity group recounts the trigger event of the 1972–1973 mass killings, committed atrocities showcase yet again the limited capacity of human understanding and the propensity to violence towards someone they perceive as different from 'them'. The conversion of private hatreds into public devaluations, whether through the process of stigmatisation or the nurturing of threat narratives, becomes a major source of protracted conflicts (Rothbart and Korostelina, 2006). Narratives alone are not the cause of conflict, but they shape how conflicts evolve and can deeply impact how a conflict gets transformed or mitigated. The Hutu in Burundi were called Abamenja (literal translation



meaning traitors) in 1972. This naming caused deep fragmentation between Hutu and Tutsi groups and the mobilisation of extremist Tutsi against Hutu (Ntibantunganya, 2021a). Name calling of the perceived ‘Other’ set a tone for moral confrontation that arose between the virtuous ‘Us’ (Tutsi) and the demonised ‘Them’ (Hutu), which provided further justification for the need to get rid of the perceived ‘unwanted other’. Lasting peace and reconciliation in post-conflict Burundi can only begin to emerge when all stakeholders develop a shared common understanding and interpretation of the violent past and establish the root causes and drivers of the given conflict and violence in order to chart an interdependent future together.

Furthermore, effective reconciling of the predominant narratives in Burundi is imperative. This requires truth-telling and a shared understanding of events and facts as they occurred. Hearing the truth about crimes committed during the 1972–1973 massacre and mass atrocity events prior could help to understand how past policies and practices have and may continue to impact the lives of Burundians today. Being cognisant of the past also serves as a fitting reminder and cautions that, if we are not careful, extremist leaders could still use traumatic events such as the 1972–1973 massacre to justify violence, extremism and push exclusionary ideologies and mobilisation against members outside of a given identity group (Straus, 2015). Despite having differing narratives surrounding mass atrocity events between 1972 and 1973, the TRC has consistently given a grim account of mass violence and atrocities committed since the 1960s and 1970s, including atrocities committed during the 1972–1973 massacre.

### **3.1 A grim account of mass violence and efforts for collective memory**

Findings on committed crimes during the 1972–1973 massacre vary, but still indicate that victims were both from Tutsi and Hutu groups, despite the crimes occurring at different times, in different localities across Burundi and in different proportions. A lot of work has been done by the TRC on crimes committed between 1972 and 1973 and the TRC consistently gives updates of discovered mass graves since 2020. The TRC indicates that its commissioners proceed scientifically in their quest for truth and accept only testimonies given by eyewitnesses, including survivors and, at times, perpetrators of the massacre of 1972. Members of the TRC indicate that collected testimonies were intended to be used for

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healing and reconciliation purposes but also for the “official qualification” of the 1972–1973 massacre (Agence Burundaise de Presse, 2021). In other cases, TRC commissioners indicate relying on systematic reviews of existing official documents (most were hidden to the public) related to 1972 or other past atrocity events in order to uncover the truth. Interviews of eyewitnesses, perpetrators and survivors of the human rights violations between 1972 and 1973 led to the discovery and exhumation of several mass gravesites (Burundi TRC, 2020) and unequivocally implicate members of the army, gendarmerie and youth militia affiliated with the then-ruling party UPRONA (TRC, 2023a).

Throughout 2023, members of the TRC visited diaspora communities in several countries (Belgium, Canada, the United States of America, Brazil and many others) to collect testimonies and lived experiences and accounts of the 1972–1973 massacre. In collaboration with local authorities, the TRC made discoveries of around 142 505 victims of the 1972 massacres dumped in 4 163 mass gravesites across the country (BBC News, 2020). Findings by the TRC between 2018 and 2022 reveal consistent cases of unprecedented acts of violence and systemic injustice towards predominantly Hutu citizens in post-independence Burundi.

Official accounts of the achievements of the TRC in 2022 are equally grim and reports have estimated over 150 000 victims (TRC, 2021). The TRC embarked on a country-wide tour of all provinces which led to the massive discovery of mass gravesites. In some cases, reported victims allegedly did not factor in the number of victims that may have been thrown into rivers or left on the ground; victims that were set ablaze or those whose remains had completely decomposed leaving no trace behind.

TRC’s findings further indicate that victims were predominantly from Hutu families and were chosen among adults and children alike. The investigations and hearings conducted by the TRC revealed that Hutu pupils and students were kidnapped, and victims were put in mass gravesites with their hands tied behind their backs. Furthermore, testimonies also indicate that other Hutu pupils in schools across Burundi, at the University of Burundi and other prominent Hutu in high positions in business, governance and clergy were arrested, tortured and later killed and put in mass graves as well (Ntibantunganya, 2021b). Eyewitnesses equally attest that nearly any Hutu person between the ages of 16 or 17, or older, who could read and write was killed. These killings included religious leaders. The bereaved families were forbidden from

mourning the loss of their loved ones or visiting the graves for over 40 years lest they also suffered the same fate reserved to all Abamenja – to be killed and put in a mass grave. Survivors and their families had to submit to a ‘vow of silence’ while perpetrators roamed free in their midst with total impunity.

Furthermore, most survivors of 1972 were systemically banned from attending schools or were discouraged by surviving loved ones who feared for their disappearance. The ongoing efforts for truth-telling and testimonies on acts of mass violence and crimes committed in the past, both private and public, are a great start for healing and possible reconciliation. Reconciliation does not always mean resolution and the latter can come in many forms including recognising the harm caused and asking for forgiveness. Survivors of mass violence acts sometimes carry traumatic experiences and need to be listened to and to see that those who robbed them of their loved ones are held to account or ask for forgiveness. Some progress is being made on that front and the TRC collaborates with religious leaders and actors within local civil society organisations to encourage forgiveness between survivors and their persecutors (TRC, 2023a). Asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness go a long way to assisting on the healing spectrum between a survivor and their identified persecutor.

The way the TRC in Burundi is conducting its works has several implications. Against the backdrop of national tragedies suffered by both Hutu and Tutsi identity groups, there is a sense of collective loss that could unify all Burundians if well channeled. This could also propel the country forward to making significant strides towards positive change. The entrenchment of ‘Never Again’ culture could serve as a reminder of shared values, hopes and dreams for a prosperous Burundi for all. If not careful, however, the extremist narratives could stoke hate and potential violence with an immediate consequence of forfeiting the chance of communal change and unity. To solidify peace and reconciliation gains in post-conflict Burundi, the culture of ‘Never Again’ needs to be cultivated through the establishment of collective memory spaces for all victims of recurring violent episodes in the history of Burundi.

While public memory spaces do not contribute to prevention of mass atrocities, they still play a vital role in acknowledging the harm that victims have experienced and educating the public about the past (Whigham, 2023). As the TRC continues to undertake its mandate, several

survivors and their families have put forward claims for reparations and damages. The erection of public memory spaces that capture all tragic events in the past of Burundi, not only crimes committed between 1972 and 1973, would be a good place to start for collective memory. Collective memory spaces could contribute to educating children and adults about the past while also prolonging the healing and reconciliation process.

### **4. A long path toward reconciliation and transitional justice**

While being given a platform to mourn or to share suffered injustices is a step in the right direction, it is not nearly enough for survivors and their families who were expropriated from their lands or stripped of their valuable belongings and items. The TRC recently published a record of seized vehicles and other valuables during the 1972–1973 massacre and their owners are still waiting for compensation (CVR, 2023). During the public hearings in 2021, some survivors recounted how their boutiques were taken from them and their homes looted. There is hope that some cases of injustice committed in the past will be adjudicated with the new 2024 mandate of the TRC taking over the portfolio of the now-defunct Commission Nationale Terres et Autres Biens (CNTB – National Commission on Land and Other Assets). The Burundi government established the CNTB in 2006 with the mandate of settling land disputes arising between returnees and new landowners, which resulted from the mass exodus of thousands of citizens owing to recurrent conflicts since independence in 1962. When the CNTB's mandate was not renewed in 2022, there were about 20 000 pending unsettled cases by the commission. This lot now falls on the TRC. This new mandate is somewhat of a complication in the quest for transitional justice as the TRC's mandate is broad and overly ambitious with 123 years (1885–2008) of past to sift through. In a recent cabinet meeting, the Burundi government, while renewing the mandate of the TRC, promised to hire new staff to deal with cases related to land disputes or any other assets lost or unlawfully seized in the past (Présidence – République du Burundi, 2024).

Beginning with the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, stakeholders to the negotiations mediated by former South African President Nelson Mandela recognised the importance of establishing a TRC to deliver transitional justice in the aftermath of war. Lederach (1997) presents reconciliation as dual natured: (i) first, reconciliation as the building of relationships and (ii) second,

reconciliation as creating spaces and opportunities where people can express to and with one another suffered or caused traumas and the pain and memory of injustices experienced. The TRC strenuously strives in building relationships and creating spaces between survivors, victims' families and perpetrators of the 1972–1973 massacre. The TRC's 2022 annual report to the Burundi National Assembly points to key objectives of the TRC's methodological framework conducive to truth-seeking, healing, reconciliation and transitional justice, namely (i) sharing testimonies can break the cycle of silence surrounding mass atrocity events, such as the 1972–1973 massacre; (ii) sharing one's lived experiences of the past can contribute to healing; (iii) knowing and identifying victims, survivors and perpetrators of mass violence can aid in healing, transitional justice and reconciliation as forgiveness can be asked or given; (iv) there are some untruths written about the past in Burundi and there is a need for harmonised collective memory for the sake of imagining together a 'Never Again' future (TRC, 2023c). So far, some successful reconciliation efforts by the TRC have been achieved and reported on by the TRC working together with members from religious communities and formations such as the Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation Under the Cross (MIPAREC) or the Burundi Catholic Church (TRC, 2023a). This approach agrees with Niyukuri's perspectives on the role of religious leaders and the Church (globally understood to include Catholic and Protestant leaders) in driving reconciliation and forgiveness efforts in post-conflict Burundi (Niyukuri, 2020). However, given the large number of survivors from past mass violence events in Burundi, reported cases of reconciled parties are still very few.

Beyond ongoing and past campaigns by the TRC on reconciliation and truth-telling, there is a need for a common understanding, teaching and sharing of a common version of the history of Burundi. This could play a role in promoting civic education and patriotic values, especially for the youth so that young generations do not make the same mistakes as others before them or fall victim to ill-advised extremist and divisionary accounts of history. Thus, recommendations for the future could focus on studying history objectively and impressing upon civil servants the need to be servant leaders of the people – sole guarantors and real power holders in any nation. Throughout 2021 and 2022, ongoing campaigns on collective memory, reconciliation and transitional justice in post-conflict Burundi successfully convened government officials, diplomats accredited to Burundi and select members of the defense, security and intelligence

branches. A prime focus during discussions was placed on the importance of the rule of law, and having leaders and institutions that were willing and committed to serving all people, regardless of geographical, ethnic or partisan factors. Sustaining peace and reconciliation may also mean making voices heard that do not conform to the trending political climate and yet contribute solutions to social injustices, or any other prevalent issues in society.

Rendering justice for all survivors of crimes committed in post-conflict Burundi is a complex task. Members of the TRC need to ensure that all survivors and victims' families are being given the kind of justice they need and deserve. Justice can come in many forms. For instance, for someone who was not given a chance to mourn the death of a loved one or close relative, one form of justice may partly be allowing them to express their true feelings of loss and to properly mourn their loved one. For others, justice could take the form of a public monument and an annual public commemoration (Purdekova, 2017). The tragic events between 1972 and 1973 in Burundi clearly demonstrate the consequences that can befall a country whose actions are directed against its own people. Furthermore, history is even more abundant with even grimmer cases. All reconciliation and transitional justice efforts need to be directed towards the intended recipients with a global aim of building more resilient and socially cohesive societies and communities.

### 5. Conclusion

Burundi is breaking with its past culture of silence in the wake of mass violence. The country is making progress in cementing peace and delivering transitional justice to survivors and victims' families from the cyclical episodes of mass atrocity. The TRC has an important task in elucidating events as they happened and in contributing to reconciliation and the rewriting of Burundian history.

Despite a rocky start in 2014, the Burundi TRC has made progress on the front of healing, reconciliation and delivering transitional justice to survivors and victims' families of past mass atrocity events. Ongoing healing, and reconciliation efforts also include many participants from government, civil society organisations, the media, academic circles and religious leaders. Since 2018, the TRC has uncovered thousands of mass gravesites connected to the 1972–1973 massacre, hence opening up public discourse and reaching a qualification of the 1972–1973 massacre as 'genocide' by the Burundi parliament – this despite the qualification of not reaching consensus among all Burundians and different narratives

being formed (NTRC, 2021a). Among drivers of conflict and mass atrocity events in Burundi is also colonial legacy that cemented differences and divisions between Hutu and Tutsi identity groups. The TRC indicated that the 1972–1973 massacre was predominantly influenced by power politics with tragic consequences in which irresponsible leaders capitalised on and incited divisions among identity groups.

The following are key recommendations for a way forward:

- For living perpetrators to have the courage to acknowledge their crimes, take responsibility and ask for forgiveness;
- For all eyewitnesses of the 1972–1973 massacre and any other past mass atrocity events to continue to come forward and give testimonies to members of the TRC in order to contribute to ongoing efforts on healing, truth-telling, reconciliation and transitional justice;
- For the TRC:
  - To formulate policy on collective memory spaces related to all past mass atrocity events. While no one single monument or museum can claim to capture the complexity of cyclic mass violence that transpired in the past, there is a need for a clear policy on erection of public memory spaces to cement the pledge: ‘Never Again’. Every year on 29 April, first- and second-generation survivors and victims’ families of the 1972–1973 massacre celebrate the tragic event in Burundi and in the diaspora. Therefore, there is a need for visible symbols of collective memory to render homage to all victims of the massacre and to help victims’ families to remember.
  - Formulate policy on reparations and damages to survivors and victims’ families;
  - Contribute to the preparation of teaching manuals that reflects the correct history of Burundi with an emphasis on unity and social cohesion, civic duty, and accountable leaders and good governance structures;
  - Empower and hire the youth as this would cover a large population base and support the youth’s future role as mediators and reconcilers of communities across Burundi, even beyond the mandate of the TRC. ◆

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