

Mind the Billboards: International Aid Conquering the Public Space in Burundi

This two-part blog series will examine the prominence of aid billboards in Burundi and analyse how these billboards produce colonial continuities, which in turn shape the public space and public authority in Burundi. In the first article, Astrid Jamar discusses how these billboards and their colonial nature dominate the public space. Along with symbols of the regime, their physical presence in Burundian streets illustrate how paternalism and authoritarianism simultaneously shape public authority.

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Burundian roadsides are littered with aid billboards. Displaying the name of aid projects, with funding and implementing agencies, these boards have multiple functions. Within the posh neighbourhood of the country's capital, Bujumbura, they provide directions to head offices. In the countryside, they mark places of intervention. In the main squares of rural towns, they inform the population about projects negotiated with local authorities.



A series of aid billboards along the roadside in Rutana, Burundi in June 2018
Image Credit: Astrid Jamar

Billboards are the most visible indication of the omnipresence of international aid throughout Burundi. For example, along the main street of Rutana, the capital city of the Southern Province on the Tanzanian border, there are no less than 20 billboards in 200 metres (as illustrated in the image above). There are so many billboards in Burundi that many aid workers told me that they pay no attention to them. But what do these billboards say and do?

20 Aid Billboards in 200 metres

In recent years, relations between Burundian authorities and international aid actors have been marked by severe tensions due to Nkurunziza's [controversial third mandate](#), subsequent violently-repressed demonstrations and the failed coup d'état in Burundi in 2015. Prior to the 2015 crisis, [more than 50 per cent of](#) the State Budget came from international aid. However, increasing authoritarianism and human rights violations led to aid cuts and sanctions as well as mounting obstacles for NGOs to operate in country. This culminated in the announcement [to suspend most NGOs](#) for three months from 1 October 2018. Despite these tensions, aid billboards remain omnipresent. During my recent fieldwork in Burundi in June 2018, I went on a short weekend trip to the Southern province. On Sunday morning before leaving Rutana, the capital city of the province, I took my camera and captured twenty billboards – illustrated below – in the 200 metres that separated my hotel from the main square of the town.



Legend: Left: "Republic of Burundi, Rutana Province, Unique Provincial Counter, To put the performance of Public Administration at the service of the Citizen. 250m to the right" Top Right: "World Vision Burundi, GITABA ADP, Founde WVS Korea Office, 200 to the left," Middle Right: Solidarity to AIDS Orphans and Protection of Children in Difficulty – SOSPEC, Address and Contact info for Head Office in Rutana and Liaising Office in Bujumbura, Gihosha – Motto: Soli – Actions – Protection," Right bottom: left board: "PRO-ACT 1 and 2 – Project (extended) Supporting Improvement in resilience capacity of rural and most vulnerable people the most affected by the multi-factorial crisis in Burundi – Projec Reference Numbers, January 2016 – December 2018, January 2017 – December 2019 – Regional office of FAO – Thi project is financed by the EU – This project is implemented by FAO," Right board: "Logos: EU – Republic of Burundi – Oxfam – Accord – GCV – NTUSIGARINYUMA (Join us) – L.V.I.A. (Lay Volunteers International Association) – AVEDE CAPAD – ISI IDUTUNZE (The Earth that makes us live) – Development of an integrated approach to food security and nutrition in Eastern provinces in Burundi – Rutana Municipality – Rutana – This project was financed by the European Union."



Legend: Top Left: “Logos: IOM – EU – IRC – Project Supporting Displaced and Returnees in Burundi – European Union Implementing partners: International Rescue Committee (IRC), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Rutana Municipality,” Top right: Middle Fabric Banner: logos: German Humanitarian Assistance – Republic of Burundi – Rutana Municipality – 13 June 2018 – Municipal Day “Celebrating reaching open air defecation free status ,” Large billboards: Republic of Burundi – USAID – Fainted Logo, long text in Kirundi explaining administrative requirements and procedures, birth, marriage and deaths registrations, Bottom Left: Logos: Burundian Flag – UNDP – EU/Burundi Collaborative Consolidation – “Laying of first stone for the construction and rehabilitation of Municipal Offices by His Excellence Dr Yandiki Ndayishimiye First Vice-President of Burundi – Rutana, 20 November 2008 – Fainted text,” Bottom Right: Logos: CUFOR (University of Burundi Training and Research in Entrepreneurship), Louvain Cooperation – FODEV (Training for Development) – “Project Supporting promotion of agricultural products and handcrafts in provinces of Makamba and Rutana – Let’s Increase Employment – European Union – Starting day: April 2016 – Executing period: 42 months.”



Legend: Top left: "International Organisation for Migration – the United Nations Agency in charge of migration – Let's fight abuses – To signal an abuse call the free line 109 – With the Support of Belgian Cooperation for Development," Bottom left: "European Union – REACH – "State Project for Food Rich in Nutrients – Let's eat food rich in nutrients," Right: "Burundian flag, WFP, World Vision – "Project Improving Food Security and Livelihood in Giharo and Bukemba Municipality Rutana Provinces – July – November 2015 – Direct beneficiaries: 3040 – Construction of Shelter: 5 shelters – Rural Road Counter Line: 319km – Firebreak belt: 7km."



Legend: Top left: Faded painting, Middle Top: logos: International Medical Corps and BPRM – “Let’s avoid adultery because it has negative impacts on the family – drawing of people eating in restaurants”, logos: International Medical Corps and BPRM – “Let’s avoid adultery because it has negative impacts on the family”, Bottom Left: CNDD-FDD Monument in front of board with faint Middle Bottom: Logos: Belgium Cooperation for Development, Caritas International, SOPRAD (Solidarity for the Promotion of Assistance and Development) – “Project to support the socio-economic reintegration of returnees in Giharo, Mpinkga, I Musongati municipalities – Construction of six complete primary schools: Kagunga, Rusunsu, Gagenga, Mirehe, Nkury (Giharo) – Distribution of seeds and agricultural inputs to returnees and other vulnerable persons – Upgrading contour hills (distance 216km) – Construction of 25 plant nurseries – Implementation dates: 18 months (01/01/2009 – 30/06/2009) Belgian Development Cooperation (DGCD) – Implementing partner: Caritas International Belgium – Implementing: SOI Bottom right: “AIDS [missing text hidden by branches] Youth – Let’s avoid the superficial” – Logo: SEP/CNLS.



Legend: left: Middle board: logos: UCDP, American Friends Service Committee, THARS – “Title of Project: Psychosoci Economic Reintegration of people affected by the conflict in the municipality of Musongati and Rutana in Rutana Provir Implemented by UCPD in partnership with THARS – Funded by: American Friends Service Committee,” Right: Logos: American Friends Service Committee, CORD, People with a Messiah– “With the Collaboration of the Ministry of Youth, Culture – Project: Building Bridges in Burundi – Dutsibataze Amahoro [Let’s Consolidate Peace] – Funding: Ministry of of the Kingdom of the Netherlands – Implementing: CORD in Collaboration with Ubuntu Centre and Humanitarian Gest Economic and Social Resilience of Youth – Beneficiary Municipalities: Isale, Mubimbi and Mugongomanga in Bujumbu Mpinga, Kayove, and Giharo in Rutana Province – Length of Programme: 2017 – 2021.”

The 20 boards are associated with projects and organisations working on all sorts of matters, ranging from child protection, food security, unemployment, and displacement, to peace building and health issues. Their primary role seems to be publicity and information. They give visibility to aid initiatives, and provide information about which programme is doing what, where, and with which partners. Some of the boards are used as sensitising tools and contain messages specifically addressed to passers-by. For instance, they may admonish people to eat healthily (eg food rich with nutrients), complete administrative paperwork (such as driving licenses, birth or marriage registrations), or adopt good morals to avoid economic and health issues (such as poverty and AIDS). Some include the directions to an office or health centre, and the helpline numbers to report abuses. A number of boards are broken, with faded painting, or related to programmes that already ended – in some cases more than 10 years ago. Yet apparently, nobody has bothered to remove them, indicating these boards serve more functions than their intended ones.

While Burundi is famous for its stunning hilly landscape, aid billboards are mostly left out of photographs portraying the country. The omnipresence of externally-funded initiatives affect the configuration of everyday landscapes of Burundians, and hence the public space and public authority. These boards are also useful reminders of how alleged “beneficiaries” in rural areas of Burundi have been bombarded by internationally-funded initiatives of all sorts, for their “development” and “betterment.”

Aid Billboards Challenging the ‘Local Turn’

Condemned for neglecting micro-level tensions, foreign aid workers have increasingly attempted to engage with local communities over the past decade. However, given that ‘the local’ does not exist in a vacuum, the so-called ‘local turn’ has been [criticised](#) for neglecting the entanglements between the local, regional, national, and international levels and the actors operating between and across them. Meera [Sabaratnam](#) has further criticised the local turn for its emphasis on ‘otherness’ and its reproduction of the colonial biases that it claims to address. Indeed, even when defining the ‘local’ as the diversity of ways in which local agents reshape and resist within a local space, she argues that the intellectual construction of otherness and cultural distinctiveness re-emerge. Such strong emphasis on the need to engage with non-Western authenticity and indigeneity reproduce the distinction between the modern West and the culturally distinct place of the ‘local’.

The physical presence of aid billboards also confronts distinctions between the local and the international. The question is: are these boards ‘international’ because of the logos of international actors, or are they ‘local’ because of the inclusion of ‘local partners’ and location – being part of the local landscape that Rutana’s inhabitants pass through daily? The boards embody the entanglement of foreign interventions with so-called ‘beneficiary’ communities, and how they have appropriated these interventions. For instance, nearby residents use aid billboards for various purposes such as drying clothes or as landmarks when giving directions – eg “Take the road on the right after USAID AIDS billboard, and then second left after the IOM billboard.”



Image Credit: Astrid Jamar

Among the 20 projects showcased by the billboards in Rutana, half include at least one Burundian institution with the emblem of the State, the name of a territorial authority or national thematic authority. Yet, with two exceptions – a board of a programme decentralising public services and one referencing the politician placing the first stone – the role of the Burundian State is unstated. This portrays an image of national authorities with a limited function besides approving the programmes and acting as silent partners.

Remarkably, the ruling party is almost more visible in the public space than the State, with numerous monuments displaying its emblem – a black eagle holding a sword and manioc leaves with the party's colours (red and green). Since the 2015 crisis, the presence of armed forces and police security check points have also heavily increased in the public place.



Image Credit: Astrid Jamar

The ubiquitous presence of aid billboards and CNDD-FDD symbols in the public space draw attention to the paradoxical imperial nature of aid in an authoritarian system. Most international media coverage over Burundi features international criticism of the regime – mostly related to severe human rights abuses perpetuated against suspected members of opposition – and the regime's denials of these allegations and criticism of the imperial nature of aid.

Paternalism and Authoritarianism Shaping Public Authority

After the European Union (EU) Council invoked Article 96 of the [Cotonou Agreement](#) to cut aid in March 2016, funding from both EU multi-lateral and bilateral institutions can no longer be channelled through Burundian authorities. Aid was redirected through local and international NGOs. In response, the Burundian parliament adopted [a law for INGOs](#) in 2017 that made it harder for them to operate in the country. Now, this law is used as the legal basis to suspend all NGOs (except those working for hospitals and schools) for three months and requires all NGOs to engage with [heavy bureaucratic negotiations](#) with Burundian authorities to renew their registration.

Furthermore, representatives of the ruling party regularly criticise the historical colonial abuses and the neo-colonial attitudes of Western actors from whom they have received censure. A Parliamentary commission examined the [colonial question](#) in 2018 and subsequently recommended a number of initiatives such as prosecuting Belgium and Germany for crimes against humanity and war crimes inflicted on Burundians, demanding compensation and reparation, repatriating archives on Burundi from Belgium; undertaking research and inquiring into crimes committed during German and Belgian colonisation. There are also regular demonstrations in front of head offices of European donors and the United Nations in Bujumbura to protest their criticism towards the Burundian regime.

This anticolonial rhetoric complicates the analysis of the neo-colonial character of aid. On one hand, it seems legitimate for the regime to denounce the enduring paternalistic nature of aid. On the other hand, it is no coincidence that the criticism of colonialism and neo-colonialism started only after important pressure from Western donors and it is clearly a useful tool to negate and freeze censure expressed towards the Burundian regime. This paradox clearly needs to be considered when reflecting on how to decolonise the streets: what landscape would emerge if paternalistic aid billboards would be removed? Would the emblems of the ruling party become even more conspicuous?

By examining the complex contemporary issues of colonialism and authoritarianism, a scrutiny of the public space littered by aid billboards and regime symbols illustrate that these two dimensions are not exclusive. Western aid has indeed conquered the streets with paternalistic billboards without tackling efficiently structural inequalities and political oppression that is also maintained and perpetuated by the current regime.

[Read the second article](#) in this series which examines the text, logos and images displayed on the boards tell us about the nature of aid

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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