

“THE ROLE OF INCLUSIVE NATIONALISM IN POST-CONFLICT STATE-BUILDING: INSIGHTS FROM RWANDA”

Research Paper

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Abstract

This article examines the synergistic relationship between inclusive nationalism and comprehensive development in stabilising developing states, with Rwanda as a case study. It explores how, following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda strategically fused civic identity-building efforts with targeted socio-economic development programs to foster stability, national cohesion and peace. By promoting a shared national identity and prioritising broad-based development initiatives, Rwanda has managed to avoid the fragmentation and instability that continue to plague many post-conflict societies. The study contrasts Rwanda's experience with neighbouring fragile states to highlight the critical role of inclusive governance and effective development strategies in post-conflict reconstruction. It further considers the influence of external actors, such as international donors and regional organisations, on shaping state-building trajectories. The article concludes by proposing that inclusive nationalism, when cultivated alongside comprehensive development, can serve as a powerful catalyst for durable peace, resilience, and sustainable growth in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Nationalism, development, fragile states, Rwanda, Great Lakes Region, peacebuilding

1 Introduction

The African Great Lakes region, including Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—has long grappled with state fragility, marked by protracted conflict, ethnic tensions, and underdevelopment (Bekoe, 2004). These challenges are deeply rooted in colonial legacies, artificial borders, and the politicisation of ethnic identities (Bekoe, 2004). Conflicts in this region rarely remain confined within national boundaries but frequently exhibit cross-border dynamics that undermine regional stability (Bekoe, 2004).

This article argues that a specific form of civic nationalism, when strategically paired with inclusive and sustained development initiatives, constitutes a critical pathway toward stabilisation and peace in fragile states. This approach challenges exclusionary, ethnic-based nationalism, which has historically fueled violence and disintegration (Shinoda, 2008). Simultaneously, development is framed not solely in economic terms but as encompassing human capital, infrastructure, good governance, and equitable distribution (African Development Bank, 2012).

The case of Rwanda exemplifies this dynamic interplay. Following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda's post-conflict reconstruction incorporated a dual strategy of civic nation-building and ambitious development programming, significantly altering the trajectory of its recovery and stability (Ferragamo, 2024). The lessons drawn from Rwanda's experience are assessed through comparative analysis with neighbouring countries, shedding light on how divergent nationalist ideologies and development paradigms influence post-conflict outcomes.

2 Nationalism in the Great Lakes Region: Historical Roots and Modern Rearticulation

Understanding nationalism in the Great Lakes region requires a departure from Western-centric models. National identity in this region was profoundly shaped by precolonial ethnic affiliations, colonial classifications, and post-independence elite manipulation (Bekoe, 2004). In the 1960s, nationalism

served as a tool of anti-colonial mobilisation, yet its post-independence expression often morphed into a vehicle for elite consolidation and ethnic exclusion (Bekoe, 2004).

Rwanda, however, embarked on a path of civic nationalism after the genocide, with policies emphasising unity, shared citizenship, and the suppression of ethnic labels in public life (Ferragamo, 2024; Ingabire, 2014). Programs such as Ingando solidarity camps and the Ndi Umunyarwanda initiative fostered a shared national consciousness rooted in common values rather than ethnic origin (Mgbako, 2005).

3 Redefining Development in Fragile States

Development in fragile contexts cannot be reduced to GDP growth. It must be holistic—encompassing social equity, education, health, infrastructure, and governance reform (African Development Bank, 2012; Uwizeyimana, 2019). In post-genocide Rwanda, the Vision 2020 and Vision 2050 strategies prioritised economic transformation, poverty reduction, and human capital development (Ferragamo, 2024; Uwizeyimana, 2019).

These policies were implemented in tandem with institutional reforms and anti-corruption measures, which strengthened state legitimacy and citizen trust (Verpoorten, 2006). Unlike in some neighbouring countries where fragmented authority and resource predation persist, Rwanda's integrated development approach has reduced grievances that often fuel instability (Carayannis, 2009).

4 The Nexus of Peace, Stability, and Development

Stability in fragile states involves more than the cessation of armed conflict. It requires functioning institutions, social cohesion, and the rule of law (Onuoha, 2023; Shinoda, 2008). Rwanda's progress in these areas has been facilitated by the synergy between national unity initiatives and targeted development efforts. The Gacaca courts, for instance, provided community-level accountability, while national reconciliation programs worked to mend social fractures (Ingabire, 2014; Rieder, 2014).

Peace, in this context, is viewed as a sustainable condition anchored in justice, inclusive governance, and socio-economic opportunity—features that Rwanda has pursued more robustly than many of its regional counterparts (Ferragamo, 2024; Rieder, 2014).

5 The Role of External Actors

The involvement of external actors has been pivotal across the Great Lakes region, both positively and negatively. Rwanda initially received strong international support in the form of aid and technical assistance, becoming what scholars termed an “aid darling” (Verpoorten, 2006; Randhawa, 2012). This external support was critical in facilitating post-genocide recovery programs such as Vision 2020 and institutional reform (Uwizeyimana, 2019; Ferragamo, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of international engagement has varied. In one of the neighbouring countries for instance, despite substantial investment in peacekeeping and governance, donor-driven frameworks have often lacked coordination and local ownership, leading to unsustainable gains (Carayannis, 2009; Murangwa, 2011). The African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), and regional bodies such as the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) have played roles in mediation and regional cooperation, but challenges of sovereignty, political will, and competing interests have constrained their impact (Bekoe, 2004; Onuoha, 2023).

6 Conclusion

The Rwandan experience powerfully illustrates that the combination of inclusive, civic nationalism and a comprehensive development agenda can act as a transformative force in stabilising fragile states. This dual approach has contributed to significant improvements in security, institutional strength, economic growth, and social cohesion. However, the Rwandan model also highlights the complexities of balancing national unity with political freedoms and the risk of developmental authoritarianism.

The comparative analysis with neighbouring countries affirms that peacebuilding and state consolidation are deeply context-dependent. While Rwanda's approach prioritised national unity over ethnic representation, emphasis on ethnic quotas in some countries has had mixed results, and the fragmented nationalism in others has hindered durable peace altogether.

External actors must therefore adopt flexible, context-sensitive approaches that reinforce—not replace—local efforts. As fragile states continue to grapple with the legacy of conflict and underdevelopment, Rwanda offers important, though not uncritical, insights into how strategic nation-building and people-centred development can restore broken societies.

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