



\$100 Around Here ...

Logan Cochrane

Before coming to Africa I spent one-hundred dollars (USD) on a jacket for the rainy season. One-hundred dollars in Ethiopia is the equivalent of the total of one-hundred manual labor working days. Here, in Bujumbura (Burundi) – the poorest nation on Earth in terms of per capita GDP, one-hundred dollars is more than the average persons yearly salary. Interestingly, I could also spend that same simple amount and buy an AK-47. The ownership and sale of weapons is illegal, however I could buy one today or tomorrow if I so desired.

Mayonde Melchior is a 10-year old street child, whom I met along with his three friends as they slept outside my window. While he was young such weaponry took his fathers life, during the Burundian civil war (1993-2004, officially however many say it continues today). Mayonde works in local shops as a cleaner, earning 500 Burundi Francs (approximately \$0.50 USD) for a full days work.



“My dream is to go to school, but I can not because if I go I am always hungry,” he says. Primary school is free in Burundi, but for familyless kids like Mayonde working to buy food is more vital. His daily wage does not even provide him enough for three meals, he often goes without dinner, as three meals costs about 600 Francs – for the bare basics. Mayonde’s mother is living in Burundi, but he does not stay with her as she is very poor and cannot provide any food. “She cannot take care of me,” he tries to explain as I try to comprehend the situation. “She is too old and too poor.” Instead Mayonde and his three friends take care of each other, all being under the age of twelve, by gathering and saving money in case one becomes ill.

Burundi borders the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Tanzania – with much of its Western boarder along Lake Tanganyika. During colonial times Burundi was a German colony until given to Belgium after WWI. Independence was officially proclaimed on July 1st of 1962 – an event memorialised through a chunk of painted cement in the centre of Bujumbura. Post-colonial times have equally been as negative for Burundians, in 1993 the country’s first democratically elected president was assassinated after only a few months in office. In 2005 the government signed a cease-fire agreement with the rebel opposition, which

has resulted in relative peace and stability but many still feel the civil war that began in 1993 has not ended.

Judging by the picturesque landscape of green mountains, lush fields, lakes, and blue skies one would never suspect that Burundi is among the poorest nations in the world. Over two-thirds of Burundians live below the poverty line, a massive problem considering Burundi has Africa's second highest population density. Of the 6.2 million inhabitants half are under the age of 14, a result of extreme poverty, disease, and conflict.



In exchange for spending an hour with me, Mayonde and his makeshift family of three street children were able to buy something usually unattainable: “If I had money,” says the 10-year old, “I’d buy food, meat and cassava.” The cost for such a meal is the total of his daily wage, something normally he spends on three meals. The value of \$100 here in Bujunbura allows Mayonde’s dream to come true, it provides food security so that he can go to school.

Logan Cochrane is the founder of Working To Empower, a Canadian NGO based in Victoria, B.C. This year he is working with refugees in DRC, Tanzania, and Benin concerning HIV and AIDS. For additional information please visit: www.workingtoempower.org