Rwanda

Location

Deep in the heart of the African rainforests lies a country in the midst of volcanoes, lakes, forests, hills and valleys. Measured at 26,340 square kilometers, the Rwandese Republic is roughly the same size as Maryland. With a total population of 8.7 million people, the average population density is over 330 people per square kilometer. This statistic includes all of the volcanoes and lakes within the country’s borders; if you take them out of the total, you are obviously left with an overcrowding problem.

Financial Status

With the gross domestic product of Rwanda being $6.4 billion, and agriculture making up 44% of that GDP, it is not surprising that the per capita GDP is poor. Compared with other countries in the region such as, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, Rwanda’s GDP per capita of $900 is similar to the $1,100, $1,500 and $710 for the GDP per capita of those three countries, respectively. Using Gini coefficients as a comparison reveals that Rwanda has one of the best Gini coefficients in the world at 0.289. Interpreting this number shows that, although the wealth in the country is minimal at best, there is not much distinction between rich and poor people. In fact, it is ranked 18th in the world in relation to Gini coefficients. Of the three countries previously compared with Rwanda, Tanzania is the next closest in this statistic, ranked number 50 with a coefficient of 0.381. To put this in perspective, the United States’ Gini ratio is 0.401.

People

Rwanda is composed of three different groups of people. Batwa were the first people to migrate to this area sometime between 2000 BC and 1000 AD. They live off of nature by hunting for
their food and gathering berries and plants throughout the forests of the area. Today, these Batwa make up only 1% of the 8,700,000 people living in Rwanda. Another group in the region are called Bahutu, or just Hutu for short. Between 1000 and 1500 AD, Hutu migrated into the valleys of the land and began to clear it for cultivation. The Hutu comprise 90% of the population of Rwanda. Lastly, the Batutsi people took control of the country between the 16th and 19th centuries. They were a taller race of people who used their military power to overcome their lack of numbers. Making up only 10% of the population, the Tutsi dominated the much more numerous Hutu with military tactics and economic advancement. Soon the Tutsi became chiefs and the Hutu became their “voluntary” slaves. The Hutu provided free labor and, in return, they had access to the Tutsis’ pastures, cattle, and received military protection from other aggressive Tutsi. Since 1962, when Rwanda was granted independence from Belgium, there has been a power struggle between the two majority powers. This deep-rooted struggle between the Bahutu and the Batutsi people has led to numerous wars, changes in authority, and has truncated any attempt at improving the economy and the country as a whole.

Demographics

Demographic transition in Rwanda is very similar to other Sub-Saharan African countries. Rwanda is currently only beginning the demographic transition. The total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped quite substantially, but it is still way above the post-transition replacement level of 2.1. There hasn’t been much change in the crude death rate (CDR). It has a long way to go before reaching its low point of around 10 per thousand. Even with the sharp drop in the crude birth rate (CBR), the natural increase (CBR-CDR) has only slightly declined over this twenty-year time span. There are a number of reasons why both the CBR and the TFR have decreased since 1980. A common reason for the high birth and fertility rates throughout developing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia is the need for farm laborers. Although this is very true in Rwanda, this doesn’t mean that the decrease in the CBR and TFR are caused by a decrease in the need of laborers or because of urbanization in Rwanda. This can be
refuted with the fact that 93% of the population lives in rural, agricultural communities still. Other factors that lead women to have fewer children is a diminished infant mortality rate, easier access to contraceptives, and education. The infant mortality rate over the last 25 years has decreased from 133/1000 to 125/1000. This is partly due to a slight rise in the standards of health care in Rwanda. There are 34 hospitals and 188 health centers scattered throughout the country. Eight out of ten people live within 5 kilometers of a health facility of some sort. Still, a decrease of eight over 25 years isn’t a huge accomplish. Contraceptives are gradually becoming available to the public. Because the country is almost 60% Catholic it has been difficult to administer any kind of birth control from the Catholic run health centers. Until Pope John Paul visited the country in 1990 and made no reference to birth control, good or bad, it was looked upon as a sin. Now, Rwandan bishops are allowing the health centers to use their own discretion when handling family planning. The increase in demand for women’s education, I believe, is the main reason for the decrease in the CBR and the TFR. Women have been the true workers of the family in Rwanda for a long time. They didn’t have the time to receive any formal education. Working at a young age on the farm and then becoming baby machines, by age 15 or so. Women are not only asked to care for the children, they also do the sowing and weeding of the fields. They help in harvesting, transporting, drying, sorting, and storing the food crops. All of the housework including, meal preparation, cleaning, and fetching wood and water entail a day’s work. It is no wonder that women didn’t have time for education. Now there has been a new consciousness of the injustice of their position in the household. Women’s groups are being formed and strides are being made in the legal aspects of their lives. This is a big reason for the decreased total fertility rate. Another big factor associated with population growth, CBR’s, CDR’s, and TFR’s is total migration. That is a huge, incalculable number in Rwanda, but it has a great effect on population growth.
Trade

The fluctuations in GDP per capita growth rates have been extreme over the past two decades. The 10-year average of GDP growth between 1975 and 1985 was 6.1. This was during the time of the Second Republic, when many economic reforms were being made and internal strife in the country was minimal. The average between 1985 and 1995 was –4.8. Taking a more in-depth look at Rwanda’s exports and imports will allow us to determine why this number is decreasing. In order for Rwanda to pay for imported goods that they cannot produce nationally, they must be able to export goods that they can produce. By far, Rwanda’s export market consists of mostly coffee. It makes up almost 80% of the total export earnings with tea earning about 15%. In the mid-1980s, the government of Rwanda set a price ceiling on all coffee exports at 125 Rwandan francs per kilo. During this time, the prices of coffee were higher than the 125 set by the government. Because of this, the government was able to take the excess revenue from exports and use it to their own benefit. They did use some of it for infrastructure throughout the country, especially in the capital of Kigali. But, by the end of the 80s, the price of coffee on the world markets fell dramatically and the Rwandese government was forced to subsidize the Arabica farmers throughout the country at the existing price of 125 RWF. In 1989, the International Coffee Agreement, which used to uphold prices to producing nations, disintegrated. This caused a snowball effect all through the world. The price of coffee on the London international market plummeted to half its 1980 level. Large coffee exporting countries, such as Brazil, began to unload their surplus. This sudden gigantic increase in supply decreased the market price even further. Price taking countries, like Rwanda, had the roughest time with this because coffee was their main export. The drastic fall in price ran up enormous debts for the government.
Crisis

Another factor influencing the negative growth of GDP per capita in the early 1990s was an internal genocide. Civil wars have long been a part of life in the country of Rwanda. In 1990, Rwandan society was more violently divided than at any time since they voted for independence from Belgium in 1962. The civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi grew to a climax and caused unbelievable amounts of damage to the already poor economy and the environment. It began with the invasion of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), a group of exiled Tutsi living north of Rwanda in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Peace agreements were negotiated in Arusha, Tanzania in August of 1993. The Arusha Accords called for power sharing among the existing internal opposition groups and the RPF. The agreed upon treaty never was carried out even with the help of United Nations troops, who were deployed to help. A series of assassinations pitted the two rival groups once again. In the spring of 1994, all hell broke loose in Rwanda. The assassination of the Hutu President, in neighboring Burundi, signaled the instant beginning of a nationwide plan to completely eradicate the minority population of the Tutsi population. Within four months, 800,000 people were slaughtered. On top of this horrific number, another 1.7 million people fled to refugee camps in neighboring countries, such as Zaire and Tanzania. The war and personal survival took priority for all Rwandans in the early and mid-1990s. Once the RPF took over Kigali in early July 1994 and the war was won, an already weak economy was devastated. A new government of National Reconciliation was created and their desire was to return normalcy to Rwanda. The new government was composed of ministers from all political parties. Between 1998 and 2000, signs of advancement and growth began to appear with an average annual growth in GDP per capita of 5.8. Much of this increase is due to foreign aid given to Rwanda for reconstruction after their civil war. Rwanda still has an unstable look into the future. The possibility of the “Dutch Disease” entering Rwanda is high. This “disease,” refers to the economic deterioration that occurs within a country as a result of an unusually high inflow of foreign investment or foreign aid.
Because of this so-called disease, it is difficult to determine a true GDP per capita for Rwanda. Much of the improvement in the country is a result of this financial aid and now, it is time to begin repayment of the loans. Refinancing is about the only way to do this because of a lack of internal production.

**Population**

Rwanda’s population growth rate is one of the highest in the world, at 3.1% each year. As previously mentioned, the total fertility rate is around 6. This rate, along with the fact that half of the population is under the age of 15, indicates that the 3.1% is not at its peak. Because of the young population, a phenomenon known as demographic momentum will continue to increase the population growth rate. This trend occurs because as the young population approaches childbearing age, even more babies will be born. Until the age distribution of the population is relatively uniform, the population growth will show no signs of leveling off.

**Agriculture**

When one thinks of African rainforest countries, they usually think of the public service advertisements of starving children who need their help. In 1991, the population density of Rwanda was 271 people per square kilometer. This was the highest in the entire continent of Africa. The actual agricultural land available would have to support an average of 422 people per square kilometer over the entire country. This seems like it would work, but this would require maximum production of the land and a uniform distribution of the population. In 1984, the agricultural population in Rwanda was almost 5.5 million. On average, they consumed 49 grams of protein per day, 10 less than the recommended minimum of 59. By 1990, the agricultural population had increased to 6.5 million, but the protein consumption was down to 36. Throughout the country, rainfall, temperatures, soils, and slopes vary extensively. Taking only these into account, it is still a complicated decision to make when deciding on what crop to plant. Even more fluctuating than climate, are the social and economic factors
which influence what to plant and where. Limited fertile land and increasing population are causing food demand to skyrocket. It is difficult to use the standard supply and demand curve for Rwanda. People work the farms in order to survive and to raise families. Prices are irrelevant to them because they grow what they eat and have little use for hard currency.

Recently, there have been attempts to extensify agricultural land. This expansion has mostly occurred through extending cultivation into the 9% of Rwanda that is woodlands. This happens at the expense of the Batwa people, the hunter-gatherers who previously used this land. Further expansion is limited because of environmental reserves such as the Nyairongo Valley, the Akagara Naional Park, and the Nyungwe Forest. A policy of regional specialization was designed to maximize national output by promoting those crops best-suited to each area; for example, potatoes in the mountains to the north, cassava in the central near Gitarama, and bananas in the southeast. Although this seems like a good idea and is still in place, the government and the country as a whole are the benefactors of such a plan.

The essence of the agricultural production is in the hands of the individual farmers. They are not worried about raising exports or feeding people on the other end of the country. Their main concern is personal food security for the present and for the future. Rwandans are limited to only a certain variety of crops, due to soil type, climate, and other demographic features. Basically, farms are comprised of coffee and tea for export purposes and potatoes, squash, and bananas for personal consumption. More than 50% of the area under cultivation is intercropped. This means that two and, sometimes, even three different crops are planted together in the same field. With the increase in food demand eminent, Rwanda’s future doesn’t look bright.

Food

Rwanda’s food security problems stem from many different reasons. Although production problems need to be addressed and corrected, poverty is currently the main issue regarding food
security. A peasant farmer’s life is that poverty of itself only causes more poverty. The average cash income of a farming household is only 187 francs a year. In addition to this low income, plot sizes and soil fertility have both declined, so poverty has increased. This has become part of the problem of agricultural production. Once again, survival takes top priority, forcing farmers to rely on short-term antidotes to their problems. Poverty also means that farmers have no capital to invest things like fertilizers, pesticides, or improved seeds. On top of this, farmers worry about unpredictable rainstorms, civil war, and plant epidemics. The government of Rwanda is more concerned with the few large farms that produce the coffee and tea for exporting. Two-thirds of the farmers are seen as growing only for themselves and are considered low priority for agricultural research and other forms of support.

Because of the small size of their holdings, Rwandan farmers can no longer afford to let their land rest and recover from periods of cultivation. Plants are continually extracting nutrients from the soil without a break, thus reducing its fertility. Soil is eroded, along with its nutrients, by rainfall and the production of steep slopes with already fragile soil. Half of the farming done in Rwanda is on slopes with a grade of more than 10%. In Europe, this extreme farming has been abandoned because they were able to use intensification on their most productive fields. Because Rwanda is unable to use these same methods and lack many productive fields, they have no choice but to use these steep slopes. The torrential rainfall, along with the resulting flooding of the rivers in Rwanda, cause more than 12 million tons of soil to be naturally exported per year. The soil is so lacking in organic material that it would be difficult for farmers to use chemical fertilizers even if they were available. Policies that have been imposed and tested out include increasing animal husbandry and cultivation in order to provide more manure. Others are trying to develop plants known as green fertilizers, which replenish rather then deplete the soils they are grown in. In the short term, agriculture in Rwanda is aimed at maximum yields to sustain survival. The ignorance of ministry officials, who still favor the high-tech and high-input
solutions to the soil problems, hinder any approaches that would recognize the ability of the majority peasant farmers to develop their own solutions.

In conclusion, Rwanda is a country with many problems, but also much potential. Once the political and racial problems have been resolved, the character of the working peasants will hopefully be recognized. They are a hard-working, determined group of people who can make a difference in any economy. With the help of foreign aid and research, things will hopefully get better in this small Sub-Saharan country. A need for family planning, increase in food production, and peace are still prevalent and necessary for Rwanda to survive.

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