
” It could have made a good picture ! ” Reflections on the failure of a visual approach in a multidisciplinary research in Burundi

Christine Deslaurier*^{1,2}

¹Institut de Recherche pour le Développement – Institut de recherche pour le développement [IRD] :
UMR237 – France

²Institut des Mondes Africains – Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Institut de Recherche pour le
Développement : UMR8171, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Ecole Pratique des Hautes
Etudes, Université Paris sciences et lettres, Aix Marseille Université : UMR8171, Centre National de la
Recherche Scientifique : UMR8171 – France

Abstract

The ”Suburbu” project (Urban subsistence and labor mobilizations in Burundi), funded by the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) and launched in 2018 at the University of Burundi (Bujumbura), aims to shed light on urban dynamics that haven’t been much invested before in research devoted to Burundi, because the country is predominantly rural. To understand the new forms of social and political order, as well as ideological and cultural ways of being which form today the burgeoning urban society of Burundi, the multidisciplinary Suburbu team (history, geography, political science, sociology), decided to visit the question of categories, representations and labor mobilizations. Four research axes were thus opened, in 5 cities of the country, more or less important by their size (Bujumbura, Gitega, Ngozi, Rumonge and Rutana): two relating to specific employment sectors (domestic workers – ”boys” and ”nannies” – and bicycle and motorbike taxis), and two others referring to more fluid activities (community work and urban agriculture). Like any ”good” research project framed to respond to requests from decision-making bodies concerning ”societal development”, ”dissemination of knowledge” and ”popularization”, Suburbu planned in its introductory version the production of ”visuals” intended to feed a photographic exhibition which would be presented at the time of its closing conference (November 2020). All the elements of language were brought together to reinforce this intention (”systematic images taken in surveys”, ”restoring to members of mobilized communities the knowledge transmitted”, etc.) and of course to acquire budget for the purchase of cameras and payment of large format prints for the exhibition. Indeed, these resources were allocated to the team. However, almost nothing was achieved... Observing the few pictures taken during the investigations in Bujumbura or during the seven collective surveys conducted in the other cities, the result is that of a total failure of the planned visual approach. Neither the quantity, nor the technical or heuristic quality of the shots meets the objectives set in the initial project. This communication takes note of this failure to question the methodological unthoughts that took place at the origin of the project, to examine the cultural constraints, the disciplinary resistances and the human contrition which blocked the field of the ”photographable”, and to consider the way in which a true ”visual turning point”

*Speaker

could be taken in other projects to come. The aim is to think about these photographs which were not taken, about these pictures which one did not want, could not or did not dare to take, about these situations which could have "made a good picture" for the project but were not captured. Three lines of reflection will support the point. First, the *methodological expectations* of the rapprochement between social sciences and photography were not clarified beforehand in Suburbu. The image remained there as an illustration, it was not considered as an investigative technique or a process of knowledge in its own right. Then, *cultural barriers and discipline obstacles* hampered also the visual approach. The posture of the "photographer", in a local context where photos are above all family, and in a tense political and social atmosphere, often seemed embarrassing for the investigation (request for permission to take pictures, distrust or sudden silence of the interviewees, requests for compensation, etc.). In addition, the generation and disciplinary culture of researchers engaged in Suburbu (7 Burundians, a French woman) have imposed a lack of interest in photography, or even its rejection, people in their fifties having little appetite for shooting and the value of research being mainly given to the production of publishable texts (in general, without photography). Finally, the last point concerns the *deficient technical skills* of the team's researchers who have never benefited from any photographic training. Framing, light, definition, aesthetics are problems that have not been considered and make the few photos taken during the investigations unusable. The general conclusions of this speech will be reserved for those who will listen to it. But it is already tempting to wonder if a photography professional should not systematically be involved in the assembly of a project incorporating a visual dimension. To take himself the pictures – at the risk to aestheticize research – or, at a minimum, to advise researchers and train them in basic techniques. **Video presentation**
: <https://ifra.exposure.co/african-workplaces>