

## Article

# Erasing Our Humanity: Crisis, Social Emotional Learning, and Generational Fractures in the Nduta Refugee Camp

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**Abstract:** Ample scholarship thoroughly documents how modern humanitarian aid enacts legacies of colonialism and processes of Westernization through the imposition of foreign values and promotion of ‘universal’ norms. Extensive research has also explored processes of socio-cultural-moral transformation due to crisis and displacement. This paper extends this work by demonstrating an explicit connection between the two. Drawing on 10 months of ethnographic research that examined how Burundian refugees in Tanzania experience humanitarian social emotional learning (SEL), findings reveal various intersecting lines of crisis in the Nduta refugee camp. This research illuminates how SEL interacts with these lines of crisis to exacerbate intergenerational tensions. The self-centric values promoted through SEL and the pedagogies it employs conflict with the collectivist ethos of the Nduta community, thus breaking the Burundian generational contract of reciprocity, solidarity, and moral responsibility. In this context, SEL operates on conflicting narratives of crisis that clash with generational hopes for the prevention of future crisis in Burundi. These generational fractures are resulting in fears across the Nduta community that the decline of traditional Burundian values and communitarian ethos will not only perpetuate intergenerational experiences of crisis but has also initiated the perceived erasure of their culture and the essence of their humanity.

**Keywords:** crisis; refugees; humanitarian intervention; social emotional learning; generational fractures; Burundi; Tanzania



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## 1. Introduction

*“These organizations are destroying our values by keeping children in play. They say they are protecting the rights of our children, but what about the rights of our community? Because of play, children are now thinking and doing only for themselves. They are losing the culture of Burundi, they are losing their future success, they are losing their humanity.” —Miburo, Nduta Community Elder*

This sentiment exemplifies the variety of issues currently influencing intergenerational connections and conflict in the Nduta refugee camp in Western Tanzania. Nduta community members fled Burundi in 2015 due to political violence, which caused nearly 400,000 Burundians to seek refuge in neighboring countries (UNHCR 2018). Since then, Nduta residents have languished in protracted displacement for the last decade, as repatriation to Burundi has resulted in discrimination, imprisonment, torture, and death for many returnees.

Much has been documented about the generation gap across Africa. Research over the last two decades has identified generational ruptures that stem from tensions related to tradition vs. modernity, evolving moral and social orders, and the imposition of foreign values through the global development regime. For example, various scholars have documented how rhetoric and interventions related to child rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and education for development violate the African generational contract, impede the principles of generational reciprocity, solidarity, and moral responsibility,

and render young people as ungrateful, selfish, irresponsible, and morally tainted in the eyes of elders (Alber et al. 2008; Bourdillon and Musvosvi 2014; Rwantabagu 2003).

Parallel scholarship has also documented the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma across African societies and diasporas—due to the slave trade, colonialism, apartheid, genocide, civil war, and the HIV/AIDS crisis—and how it contributes to both generational connections and conflicts (Berckmoes 2022b; Boersch-Supan 2012; Prager 2016). However, while an intergenerational lens has been applied to examinations of values, morality, and trauma across African societies, explorations of intergenerational issues related to humanitarian intervention—specifically among refugee communities—remains limited (Kalocsányiová et al. 2024; Tize 2022; Turner 2001; Yvette and Berckmoes 2022). This article begins to address this lacuna by examining the recently popularized humanitarian intervention of social emotional learning (SEL)—the process of learning and applying social and emotional competencies, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making (CASEL 2024)—and how it intersects with various lines of crisis in the Nduta camp to produce perceived intergenerational fractures.

Based on 10 months of ethnographic research, I show how legacies of colonialism and processes of Westernization—enacted through modern humanitarian aid—conflict with traditional Burundian means of collective survival. Through the promotion of universal child rights in the Nduta camp, humanitarian intervention is not only contributing to the crisis of survival, but also socio-cultural-moral crises that are resulting in generational tensions. I outline how the implementation of humanitarian SEL programming exacerbates these tensions, as well as operates on conflicting narratives of crisis that clash with generational hopes among Nduta residents for the prevention of future crisis in Burundi. While the imperative of humanitarian aid is to ‘do no harm’, findings demonstrate how families and generations are being pulled apart by the very structures intended to help during crisis. These generational fractures are resulting in fears across the Nduta community that the decline of traditional Burundian values and communitarian ethics will not only perpetuate intergenerational experiences of crisis, but has also initiated the erasure of their culture and the essence of their humanity.

## 2. Complicating Crisis

Crisis is often referred to as a specific event, moment, or period in time—a terrorist attack, a hurricane, a pandemic. Roitman (2014) complicates this narrow conceptualization by positioning crisis as an object of knowledge and outlining the different ways crisis narratives can be put to work and introduce new temporalities. Shirazi (2020) builds on this interpretation to showcase how crisis narratives justify and inform humanitarian intervention, and specifically the Education in Emergencies (EiE) sector.

For example, Nicolai and Hine’s (2015) review of investment in EiE responses indicates that there is little engagement with longer-term—or protracted—crises, which suggests that the temporal, spatial, and political dimensions of crisis in EiE responses are narrowly defined. Despite the recognition of increasing protracted humanitarian crises globally, funding for EiE work remains tight, resulting in short-term, contextually uninformed, and unsustainable interventions (GGHEIE 2022; UNHCR 2020). Correspondingly, such limited narratives of crisis perpetuate status quo ways of working and interventions premised on attitudes of supporting crisis-affected learners in the ‘here and now’ that ignore the longer-term and intergenerational implications of EiE work.

Deviating from this narrow conceptualization, Roitman (2014) argues that crisis is increasingly understood “to be a condition, a state of affairs, an experiential category . . . posited as a protracted and potentially persistent state of ailment and demise” (p. 16). Similarly, Holzer (2014) challenges the idea that humanitarian crisis is unrelenting violence that ends quickly, and instead highlights the ongoing crisis that refugees living in protracted displacement experience. While many researchers often overlook the mundane everyday experiences of crisis in favor of more systemic and structural forces like capitalism and state governance, Holzer (2014) builds upon the work of Appadurai (2003), Brun (2001),

and [Hyndman \(2000\)](#) to argue that refugees force us to confront the power of space, place, and everyday routines of survival in unsettled crisis.

Narratives of crisis also feature significantly in discourse at the crossroads of anthropology and refugee studies. For example, various scholars demonstrate how the crisis of displacement often excludes refugees from mainstream society, confines them to liminal spaces, and suspends them from 'normal' life ([Agier and Bouchet-Saulnier 2004](#); [Turner 2005](#)). Maintaining that such framings and processes are grounded in deeply held assumptions about how place, nation, and culture coincide, this powerful regime of order, which [Malkki \(1996\)](#) designates as the 'national order of things', equates movement across international borders with the loss of identity, culture, and agency.

Alternatively, various scholars dispute and/or nuance this narrative by illustrating how the crisis of displacement acts as a socio-cultural conditioner, rather than an eraser. That is, displacement does not remove culture and identity from refugees, but reorders their social structures, cultural customs, and value systems ([Berckmoes 2022a](#); [Berckmoes and Turner 2021](#); [Lubkemann 2008](#)). In particular, the protracted refugee camp has been shown to be a space of social, cultural, political, and moral transformation ([Abduramadan 2022](#); [Ciabbarri 2008](#); [Feldman 2012](#)). For example, [Turner \(2001\)](#) documents how factors unique to displacement result in perceived social crisis and 'moral decay' among protracted refugees. [Holzer \(2014\)](#) showcases how protracted refugees respond to these moral and social crises by engaging in 'moral boundary work' that establishes new social and moral orders for how 'good' people should act in inhumane circumstances.

EiE policy and practice are largely uninformed by these wider conceptualizations of crisis. Rather, EiE actors stick to age-old narratives of refugee and crisis-affected learners as traumatized victims, deficient in the skills needed to cope with adversity and academically achieve, and in need of external support to address these deficiencies ([INEE 2024b](#); [Shivshanker et al. 2021](#)). The governing secretariate for EiE work, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), maintains that "Education in emergencies provides physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection that can sustain and save lives" ([INEE 2024a](#)), thus perpetuating the assumption that without humanitarian support the futures of crisis-affected children will remain in crisis. Driven by the global child rights agenda, EiE actors also maintain that "The rights of children and young people are not suspended during an emergency... Quality education protects cognitive development and supports psychosocial well-being. In times of crisis, it offers children a sense of hope", (*Ibid.*), positioning EiE as compulsory and the solution to existing and future crises that learners may face. These crisis narratives in turn produce an affective economy that commodifies refugees and crisis-affected children to inspire individuals, policymakers, and donors to support EiE work ([Sinervo and Cheney 2019](#)).

Driven and supported by these crisis narratives, the EiE sector has implemented a number of interventions (e.g., peace education, life skills, psychosocial support) in refugee contexts over the last three decades. While delivered with seemingly positive intentions, it is no secret that these interventions carry with them a hidden curriculum of how individuals should think, behave, and conduct themselves, engage with others, manage and express their emotions, and make decisions ([Burde 2007](#)), which aligns with the largely Western ('universal') values framework that informs the global humanitarian system ([Davey et al. 2013](#); [Jayawickrama 2018](#)). This sentiment is reflective of larger discourse on how development and humanitarian aid are part of the neocolonial project of democratization and the global propagation of Western values, which aims to solve the social, political, and economic crises that non-Western and 'underdeveloped' countries are perceived to be in ([Barnett 2011](#); [Duffield 2002](#); [Fox 2001](#)).

The most recent EiE initiative to garner support is social emotional learning (SEL). SEL is a U.S.-centric pedagogy that aims to help students develop skills to manage their behaviors, emotions, and interactions with others in order to maximize their learning experiences and later-life outcomes ([Elias et al. 2006](#)). Over the last decade, SEL has been taken up widely by EiE actors in the name of helping crisis-affected children to

overcome trauma, develop resilience, and improve their academic achievement (INEE 2016; UNESCO 2019; Varela et al. 2013). Aligned with the EiE sector's narrow conceptualization of crisis, humanitarian SEL is often implemented with short timelines, limited resources, and status quo attitudes of learning for the 'here and now' with little reflection on its longer-term implications. Indeed, prior research demonstrates that SEL work in refugee contexts is largely uncontextualized and uninformed by the processes of socio-cultural-moral transformation that result from displacement (Dalrymple 2023). This article explores how SEL in the Nduta refugee camp converges with multiple lines of crisis and how it is driven by and perpetuates various crisis narratives that are incompatible with those across the Nduta community. In doing so, findings demonstrate how this incompatibility is exacerbating perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis in the Nduta camp and is contributing to generational fractures among its residents.

### 3. Methodology

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Nduta refugee camp from October 2022 to July 2023 to explore how the Burundian residents experience and make sense of humanitarian SEL programming. I used in-depth interviews, observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), informal chats, and document review to triangulate data. Data validation checks were conducted through voluntary FGDs with research participants to ensure data accuracy.

Data was collected by myself—the author—who identifies as a white, North American, cisgendered woman. At the time, I was a Ph.D. Candidate conducting this research for my dissertation. Data were also collected by Elisha—my research partner—who identifies as a Black Burundian man and is a resident of the Nduta camp. Elisha had recently completed secondary school and was recruited due to his deep knowledge of his community, availability, interest in the research project, and language skills.

While SEL was delivered through various programs across the camp, for data collection we selected three primary schools and five Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), targeted by a recently launched humanitarian education program with a significant SEL component. We conducted nearly 150 h of observation, which included teacher training sessions, classroom instruction, student recreational activities, community meetings, distribution activities, and humanitarian organization (NGO) meetings. We collected and analyzed over 140 documents, including teacher training manuals, curriculum materials, policy briefs, and project monitoring data. In-depth structured interviews were conducted with 158 members of the Nduta community<sup>1</sup> and 16 individuals working for NGOs delivering SEL programming in the camp. We used a stratified-purposive sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of various stakeholder groups in order to explore diverse perceptions and experiences across the wider Nduta community. Interview protocols were used for each stakeholder group and freeform notes were taken during observations.

All interviews were audio recorded and conducted in the language of the interlocuter's choice (e.g., Kirundi, French, Kiswahili, English). Translation was performed by Elisha and transcription was completed by us both. Elisha and I went through several rounds of separately free coding data then comparing our findings as a validation measure. Once we compiled a key set of findings, we shared them with 79 voluntary participants through 6 co-validation FGDs. We correspondingly revised the initial findings and conducted deeper analysis that resulted in the findings outlined below. As I was unable to install any qualitative data analysis software on Elisha's computer due to licensing issues and fees, we conducted all data analysis and coding using analog methods.

Participants were fully informed about the academic nature of this research, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. All interviewees provided verbal consent to participate and blanket consent for observations was obtained from school and CFS administrators and their governing organizations. I was hosted by an NGO to secure camp access and the study received ethical approval from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the hosting NGO, and the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology.

Finally, it is important to note that while school children were observed and interviewed, the voices and perspectives featured in the findings below are mostly from adults. This is because children only represent 14% of total interview data and because much of the data obtained from them did not contribute directly to the findings described in this article. As children's perspectives could potentially tell an entirely different story of generational conflict and connection, their thin presence serves as a limitation to the study and is something to consider more thoughtfully in future research.

#### 4. Results

The crisis of perceived socio-cultural-moral decay in Burundi has been well documented. Burundian scholars like [Nkeshimana \(2007\)](#) argue that through colonization and the rise of the global development regime “the process of Westernisation has gradually eroded the binding power of traditional value systems as well as the social institutions which embodied those norms that shaped youth behaviour and ensured social harmony” (p. 121). For example, much scholarship has charted the cyclical rise and fall of the *Bashingantahe* institution—pre-colonial councils of elders who advised on political matters, upheld justice, and exemplified the moral values of *ubushingantahe*, a conceptual set of peace-enhancing values and characteristics (e.g., compassion, self-control, responsibility, honesty, fairness, justice, tolerance, etc.) ([Nshimayezu 2023](#)). Traditionally responsible for supporting the moral development of youth, after its collapse during colonization the *Bashingantahe* institution was somewhat rehabilitated after independence and again after Burundi's civil war in the early 2000s. Today, the institution lacks power as it has no formal recognition in the national constitution and the moral authority and influence of *bashingantahe*<sup>2</sup> is steadily declining ([Kwizera 2017](#); [Rwantabagu 2020](#)).

Similarly, scholars like [Berckmoes \(2022a\)](#) showcase how the enduring effects of conflict have led many Burundian parents to feel unable to pursue their culturally desired parenting goals, which are often framed with reference to goals and practices of pre-colonial society. While post-civil war promotion of *ubushingantahe* aimed to reinstall pre-colonial peace-enhancing values across Burundian society, much of this work was influenced by international organizations, who aligned education curricula, social cohesion interventions, and reconciliation activities with the largely Western human rights and global development agendas. Scholars like [Rwantabagu \(2010\)](#) and [Manirakiza \(2020\)](#) argue that this continued dominance of foreign values and the declining authority of those traditionally responsible for children's development has corrupted the moral character of young people, thus perpetuating cyclical crises in Burundi today. Framed by this historical and contemporary landscape, the findings outlined below illuminate how the crisis of perceived socio-cultural-moral decay in Burundi is compounded and intensified by factors unique to the crisis of displacement and the influence of humanitarian intervention.

##### 4.1. Compounded Crisis in Nduta

While Nduta community members have certainly been shaped by the external socio-political forces described above, the quote at the forefront of this article articulates various dimensions unique to the Nduta camp that are compounding the perceived crisis of socio-cultural-moral decay in Burundi. Four dimensions in particular were noted by adult interviewees, including bans on child labor and corporal punishment and a strong emphasis on play, encompassed by the larger umbrella of child rights.

##### 4.1.1. Child Rights

Various scholars highlight how the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) promotes a universalist ideal of childhood that is incompatible with many African societies ([Bourdillon and Musvosvi 2014](#); [Chibanda 2015](#)). Regardless of this critique, child rights rhetoric based on the UNCRC is mainstreamed through all humanitarian services in Nduta and child rights policies are strictly enforced. Findings



demonstrate that this interpretation of child rights is contrary to realistic life in the Nduta camp and the traditional Burundian moral and social orders.

Almost every adult community member we spoke to expressed frustration at the influence of child rights rhetoric on children's development of two key qualities, respect and discipline, which they believe are the cornerstones of moral character. Respect was referred to mostly as having respect for elders and other people's property, as well as being obedient to parents. The concept of discipline was articulated as an umbrella term that encompassed most of the virtues associated with *ubushingantahe*. For example, while various participants equated discipline with respect, trustworthiness, and integrity, Manirakiza, a mother of five, explained:

*"Discipline is everything. It is respecting, it is valuing school, it is knowing right from wrong and how to behave. To have discipline is to be kind and work in a team with others. It is about conducting yourself well, acting polite, being responsible, helping others, and avoiding problems."*

Additionally, the quality of being responsible was mentioned time and again. This included being responsible for one's self, as well as one's family and community. Responsibility and the other virtues associated with moral character were framed within a relational worldview guided by the tenet of *ubuntu*—the belief that humanity exists only through others; often translated as 'humanity' (Ogude and Dyer 2019). Thus, striving to embody *ubushingantahe* in the Nduta community is not regarded as a means to individual success, but rather for the success of the entire family and community, as articulated by *mushingantahe* Muhoza: *"Everything we teach children is for them to participate in the community, to contribute to the success of the community, to love each other and live together peacefully."* However, the following sub-sections illuminate how the influence of child rights policy is affecting children's development of these key values and characteristics.

#### 4.1.2. Child Labor

Since reopening the Nduta camp in 2015, the Tanzanian government has enforced a strict encampment policy. Additionally, in an effort to motivate refugees to repatriate to Burundi, over the last few years the Tanzanian government has closed all businesses and markets in the camp and banned agricultural activities. These actions have been accompanied by child rights policies that prohibit child labor in the camp. Almost every adult interviewed reported these policies and restrictions as contributing to the poor moral development of children. In particular, not being able to teach children about farming, animal husbandry, and commerce was equated with not being able to instill in children the value of hard work. As *mushingantahe* Miburo shared:

*"Children in the camp will get problems when they go to Burundi as they are being poisoned with the current situation in the camp where it is forbidden to grow crops, to sell goods. This is making children build a negative image in their mind for what is important for them, their families, their communities. Now, the culture of encouraging children to be hard working in farming, breeding, and selling is disappearing."*

The restrictions on agriculture and income generation have rendered families in Nduta completely reliant on humanitarian services, which have been steadily declining over the years. As a result, children and youth have been driven to illegally exit the camp to earn income in the host community through menial labor. While many adults reported advising children not to violate the encampment policy, numerous youth respondents felt they have no choice but to disobey their elders for the survival of their families, as secondary school graduate Niyonkuru reflected: *"There is no freedom to earn here in the camp. I must go out, otherwise there is nothing here, we will go hungry."*

Additionally, by not learning to engage in family work, many elders expressed that children have come to expect aid from humanitarian agencies, resulting in laziness and entitlement. In an informal meeting with PTA members, one individual explained, *"[When they return to Burundi], children who are in the camp will be homeless and street beggars because*

*they do not know how to work, they only expect things to be given to them".* Numerous individuals also expressed that the issue of child labor is nuanced in their culture and context as most families rely on whole-family participation in agriculture, income-generation, and household chores to survive. This was reflected by PTA member Butoyi:

*"To stay alive in Burundi is the result of hard work; in Africa people eat because of their hard work; the community survives because of hard work. So, since the NGOs say that the children do not need to work hard and cannot do physical [labor], what life are they expecting children in Africa to live?"*

#### 4.1.3. Corporal Punishment

In line with child rights policies, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union 1999), corporal punishment has also been strictly forbidden in Nduta. Despite a strong push on the continent to end violence against children, most adult study participants in Nduta aligned with the majority perspective across the continent—as seen from other research (Afrobarometer 2023; Vohito 2021)—that corporal punishment is often justified as it is perceived to help positively shape child behavior, discipline, and respect. Thus, in the eyes of the older generation, this ban is critically influencing children's development of moral character. For example, most educators interviewed, and even students themselves, reported that the lack of corporal punishment has resulted in students speaking back to teachers, arriving late to school, and being disruptive in lessons with no repercussions. Similarly, many parents and community elders described children coming home late from school, not helping with family chores, speaking rudely to elders, and threatening to report parents to NGOs if they punish their children or force them to do something they do not want to do. In various observations of community events, Elisha regularly witnessed these threats being waged by children against their parents and youngsters talking back to elders who reprimanded them. Numerous times while driving from one school to another, Elisha and I experienced children shouting and throwing rocks at our car for fun and Elisha would remark, *"See their disrespect? If we were in Burundi, those children would be too afraid of punishments to throw rocks."* PTA member Tuyikeze reflected Elisha's sentiment: *"In Burundi each fault goes with punishment, while here in the camp no child is punished. This is negatively affecting the development of our children. They are not learning discipline and respect."*

#### 4.1.4. Play

Numerous NGOs also promote the right to play for refugee children, maintaining its importance in supporting psychosocial wellbeing, trauma recovery, social and emotional development, and a return to 'normal' childhood. Various psychosocial programs in Nduta include recreational activities like dance, music, art, and sports activities, while free play is facilitated in CFSs and play-based pedagogies have been mainstreamed through the education system. Play has been a natural part of Burundian processes of learning and development throughout history. However, play as a pedagogical tool in formal schools is sparingly used, especially at the upper-primary and secondary-school levels. As a result, many educators in Nduta explained that play is not an effective means of teaching discipline and respect, as primary-school teacher Kaneza shared: *"Now anytime I ask my students to do something all they want to do is play. They don't listen, they don't work, they are only demanding to play."* This observation has also permeated the wider community, as reflected by mushingantahe Kabura:

*"The culture is changing because children are taught to keep playing all the time. Children are valuing play above anything else. When a parent asks a child to fetch water, the child says, 'No, it is my right to play'. Children are not learning about what is important and necessary for community life."*

These findings begin to illustrate the various dimensions contributing to perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis, and corresponding intergenerational tensions, in the Nduta

camp. Most study participants expressed desires for the social progress and economic development of Burundi and did not dispute the basic tenets of child rights, play, and children learning non-agrarian vocations. However, the intense enforcement of these ideals through the channel of humanitarian intervention, and the severe restrictions administered by the Tanzanian authorities, have resulted in a departure from the traditional values relied upon to help the Nduta community navigate the crisis of displacement and collective survival, and a shift towards the Western values that inform the humanitarian system. With the younger generation seemingly failing to learn and embody the values of hard work, discipline, respect, and responsibility, the older generation worries that if/when they return to Burundi, young people will face the alternative crisis of lacking the socio-cultural and workforce skills needed to survive outside of displacement. These issues put even more pressure on forms of moral education to address the perceived socio-cultural crisis and moral decay among Nduta's youth. Though, as the following sections illustrate, dissonance between traditional moral education and humanitarian SEL converges with the issues of child rights to exacerbate this perceived crisis and corresponding generational tensions.

#### 4.2. Converging Crises: SEL and Moral Education in Nduta

NGOs working in Nduta began to formally integrate SEL into their programming starting in 2017. This was achieved primarily through teacher training and the provision of teaching guides with suggested classroom activities (i.e., songs, games, group work, art activities) for helping children to develop social and emotional competencies. Since then, at least 6 NGOs have been involved in delivering a variety of concurrent SEL programs, targeting mostly primary and pre-primary students in formal schooling, as well as recreational and psychosocial support activities. All SEL interventions in Nduta are derived from content, materials, and approaches developed by NGO staff based in North America and Europe with little to no contextualization.

Due to its rise in public formal schooling in the U.S., SEL is often positioned as a secular skills-building approach that teaches learners skills to enact their personal values, rather than a method of values inculcation itself (Elias et al. 2014). However, scholars like Greene (2019) have highlighted the moral and religious roots of SEL, showcasing how it deeply influences the codes of ethics, values, and socio-cultural norms that children are expected to abide. Indeed, a review of SEL materials used in Nduta indicates that SEL in this context is clearly influencing the development of children's moral values and character. For example, almost all SEL materials include content on how children should conduct themselves with emphasis on self-control, emotional regulation, developing positive relationships, and showing empathy and respect for others. Additionally, all SEL programming in Nduta includes content designed to teach children about responsible decision-making and processes of moral reasoning by giving hypothetical scenarios for discussion: "If you saw a fellow student being insulted by other students, what would you do?". Thus, whether it intends to or not, SEL in the Nduta camp clearly functions as a form of moral education.

In addition to SEL, there are many traditional forms of moral education in the Nduta camp. These include community-based mechanisms such as religious education activities, as well as parents and community members like *mushingantahe* instilling the traditional values of *ubushingantahe* at home and in everyday interactions. Pedagogical practices include the use of songs, riddles, proverbs, storytelling, group discussions, hypothetical scenarios, and the general imparting of advice. Numerous individuals also mentioned the necessity for adults to model appropriate behavior and character, as community elder Mutabazi articulated: "Children are amazing creatures; they play, do, sing, and practice what they have seen from adults. When adults are insulting or mistreating each other, the child will also gain these habits as he or she grows up."

These mechanisms are compounded by the delivery of Burundian civics education in formal schools. The *Formation Civique et Humaine* (FCH) course at the primary school level, focusing on life skills, and the *Formation Patriotique et Humaine* (FPH) course at the secondary school level, focusing on citizenship, both include topics related to knowledge



of the self and others, human values, peace education, and environmental protection and aim to foster skills like conflict resolution, responsible decision-making, empathy, and establishing positive relationships (MENRS 2007). These curricula were developed as part of post-civil war social cohesion efforts and have an explicit aim of helping children to develop the traditional values of *ubushingantahe* in order to prevent future conflict and crisis in Burundi. Though, as mentioned above, while these curricula materials are currently viewed by educators as promoting pre-colonial 'traditional' Burundian values, they were heavily influenced by the largely Western human rights and global development agendas.

Thus, there is much overlap between these various forms of moral education in the Nduta camp. However, there is significant dissonance between the framings of the skills, values, and characteristics they promote; the pedagogies they employ; and their rationales and ultimate aims. The following sub-sections describe this dissonance further and showcase how crisis narratives are utilized, promoted, and exacerbated by the differing agendas behind these various forms of moral education in the Nduta context.

#### 4.2.1. The Individual vs. the Collective

All forms of moral education in Nduta promote values like respect, peace, sharing, and integrity. However, the ways they are framed and understood are disparate. For example, the FCH and FPH curricula and community-based approaches are driven by the relational communitarian ethos of *ubuntu*. Thus, teaching children skills like conflict-resolution, empathy, and responsible decision-making are accompanied by the promotion of values like inclusion, social justice, and solidarity. These skills and values are not framed as necessary for individual success, but rather the progress and peaceful cohesion of Burundi and humanity as a whole, as reflected by *mushingantahe* Irankunda: "*Prioritizing personal success takes communities nowhere. The most necessary thing is to critically form/raise a generation that is willing to create a safe and joyful environment for others.*" These materials and approaches also include content on the value of environmental protection to ensure sustainable generational success.

SEL overlaps with these traditional approaches in the promotion of skills like teamwork, positive communication, and collective problem-solving. Though, most SEL initiatives frame these skills as necessary for individuals to possess in order to be accepted by their communities; requisite for their personal success, not for the greater good of the community. Correspondingly, most SEL interventions in Nduta do not include content on environmental or community welfare and are concerned mostly with individual skills-building (e.g., fostering competencies like self-control, self-confidence, and self-worth).

While this individualistic framing of SEL is driven by assumptions that these personal competencies are necessary for children to achieve academically and cope with crisis, it is also contributing to perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis in the eyes of Nduta elders. A key issue raised by adult community members is the perception of changing child behaviors and attitudes. Many blame child rights policies for the newfound boldness of children. Though, SEL's conditioning of children to feel comfortable interacting with individuals across the social hierarchy and prioritize their individualistic desires over collective community needs also contributes to perceived violations of the traditional socio-cultural-moral order.

For example, Elisha observed various instances of young children casually sitting next to elders in community meetings; an action traditionally viewed as rude and disrespectful. On one occasion, Elisha observed a distribution process whereby a young girl felt that her bucket of toiletries was missing certain items. When she returned to the distribution table to advocate for herself, she was harshly reprimanded by the crowd for breaking social protocol and questioning her elders. At a primary school in Nduta, the head teacher explained to Elisha and I how the hole in the ground in front of us was the result of school children pulling out a newly planted tree. This disregard for the natural environment was interpreted as the absence of moral responsibility to future generations, as articulated by *mushingantahe* Butwengo: "*We advise children to not climb trees or hunt birds for enjoyment.*"

*They don't think about the impact of these actions now or later. They feel no responsibility to the earth or the future generation. They think only for themselves."*

#### 4.2.2. Pedagogies

The perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis in Nduta, exacerbated by SEL, is further compounded by the pedagogies SEL employs. Almost all SEL programs in Nduta are play-based. As discussed previously, while play is a natural part of Burundian culture, its use as a method of reinforcing the traditional moral order is not. Rather than engendering the values of hard work, discipline, respect, and responsibility, many adult community members regard the intense encouragement of play among children as a key contributor to their moral decay.

Another practice promoted by SEL is the use of positive discipline. This is partly due to the ban on corporal punishment in the camp. Though, improving child-adult relationships and eliminating fear from learning is also a key focus of many SEL programs. For example, numerous SEL training manuals include content on how teachers should create safe, inclusive, and happy learning environments for children and treat students with kindness and respect. One SEL guide includes a module on positive discipline, citing that children learn best when they are not afraid and feel safe and excited to learn, while another explains that children's social and emotional wellbeing is dependent on nurturing adults who make children feel safe and valued. While traditional Burundian culture does not dispute prioritizing the safety and value of children, positioning teachers and other authority figures as benign contradicts traditional fear-based processes of teaching, learning, and development. This was emphasized by father of three Ntirampeba, who shared that:

*"[Previously] children would not pass between or near parents when they are having a discussion, but now children are not afraid to interrupt. The discipline of long ago was formed on fear, where children were afraid of parents and teachers so that they would develop respect. But now, children are not afraid and have no discipline, no respect."*

#### 4.2.3. Rationales and Aims

As noted previously, the prevention of future crisis is a primary aim of the FCH and FPH curricula. The Burundian Ministry of National Education and Culture maintains that the consequence of the most recent civil war "has been that moral and social values, once the basis of social cohesion, balance and stability in society, have been undermined. ...Values such as mutual respect, mutual aid, tolerance, the culture of non-violence, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and others have progressively disappeared, giving way to violence, [and] intolerance of all kinds" (Ibid, p. 7). In response to these concerns, the main objective of the civics curricula reform was to develop individuals of peace, integrity, and patriotism by supporting students to develop the values of *ubushingantahe*.

Similarly, a common sentiment among Nduta community members, and particularly elders, is the aim to ensure children do not endure a future that is reflective of the violent past of Burundi. As such, much of the community-based moral education in the camp is preoccupied with instilling communitarian values in children that will foster social cohesion, contribute to peace, and prevent ethnic division. For example, primary school teacher Niyonzima articulated: "Of course social skills are important for children. They help children to love each other, be connected, and work together. That is the only way we will prevent groups from fighting." Additionally, many community elders expressed feeling responsible for establishing social harmony for future generations to come. As *mushingantahe* Nikiza shared: "In the world of today, we must prioritize and prepare youth before all else. They are the leaders of tomorrow and our hope for a peaceful Burundi."

Conversely, SEL programming is less preoccupied with the prevention of future crisis (Dalrymple 2024). The common attitude among EiE actors of supporting crisis-affected learners in the 'here and now' was reflected by Jonah, a Tanzanian NGO worker in Nduta:

*"The main aim [of SEL] is to help children here and now. A lot of the project documents have language about 'building a brighter future for children' and supporting the wellbeing*

*of communities, but really it focuses on helping individual students cope with stress and get back to learning in the immediate timeframe. Sure it will help them in the future, but the priority is dealing with the current situation. That is emergency education, right?"*

Indeed, SEL is driven by rhetoric about the urgent trauma of crisis and displacement and how it can affect children's learning and psychosocial wellbeing. Thus, most SEL programs in Nduta prioritize stress-reduction and the cultivation of social and emotional competencies to develop positive relationships and coping mechanisms. For example, one program description states:

*"...many refugee children are suffering from the excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain. 'Toxic stress' can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan. Holistic psychosocial support and social-emotional learning strategies are needed to address the effects of toxic stress in children...enhance holistic learning and heal from trauma."*

Much SEL programming in Nduta is also informed by statistical data that demonstrate how many displaced individuals will experience chronic poverty, adversity, and displacement throughout their lives (Ferris 2018). Correspondingly, numerous SEL materials include extensive resilience rhetoric that expounds the importance of supporting children to develop skills that will help them 'bounce back', 'cope', and 'thrive' in the face of immediate and future crisis. This seemingly pragmatic approach is in juxtaposition with the traditional forms of moral education that are driven by desires to mend the social fabric of Burundi for future generations to come. Instead, SEL appears to be preparing children in Nduta for continued existence in a torn and irreparable society, rather than addressing the root causes of societal tears in the first place.

These findings not only outline the various forms of moral education in Nduta, but also how they converge with different crisis narratives. While traditional approaches are driven by hopes for crisis prevention, SEL utilizes the trauma of crisis to justify its presence and prepare children for assumed life-long crisis. Traditional approaches aim to instill relational values that will support the community's needs for collective survival and generational sustainability. SEL is conversely rooted in an individualistic orientation that is driven by assumptions about the personal skills children need to individually survive and thrive in the face of current and future crisis. Additionally, through its promotion of self-centric values, play, and positive discipline, SEL is compounding perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis across the camp as evolving child attitudes and behaviors are violating the existing social and moral orders and breaking the contract of generational responsibility and reciprocity. The dissonance between these approaches to moral education and contradictions between these various crisis narratives are not only exacerbating generational tensions but are resulting in more severe generational fractures through the unraveling of the collective social fabric that has traditionally shaped Burundian children's socio-cultural-moral development.

#### 4.3. Generational Fractures in Nduta

Within the crisis of displacement, it is clear that humanitarian intervention is contributing in various ways to generational tensions among Nduta residents. While the external socio-historical-political landscape of Burundi may have initiated many of these tensions, the intense enforcement of child rights policies and the introduction of SEL in Nduta has certainly exacerbated them. The following illuminates how these tensions are contributing to the re-ordering of child-adult relationships and shifting perceptions of those traditionally responsible for the moral development of children. While the power and influence of the older generation in Nduta appears to be in decline, anxieties about the future of Burundi are rising.

On the one hand, the increased exposure of children to humanitarian intervention appears to be a key factor. Some *bashingantahe* keenly observed that the greater the amount of time children spend in NGO programming, the less time they spend at home with their families. This has increased the role of NGOs in shaping children's values and character,

and decreased the amount of influence parents have on the development of their children. In reviewing our observation notes, we identified numerous children who attended CFSs in the mornings, then attended school, then returned directly to the CFSs for recreational programming after school, racking up nearly eight hours a day under NGO influence. Elisha reflected that in Burundi this phenomenon would be impossible as many children must help their families, not only out of moral and cultural obligation, but also for survival.

In addition to the reduced control of parents, *bashingantahe* described their decreasing authority in the camp. Numerous *bashingantahe* expressed how the guidance they give to youth in Nduta is undermined by NGO programming like SEL, which contradicts their advice and limits their influence. As reflected by *mushingantahe* Nzisabira: “The responsibility of *bashingantahe* are decreasing. When youth want advice, they go to other sources like these organizations. . . They are learning new behaviors and values different from ours. The *bashingantahe* will [fade] and the next generation will not know us.”

On the other hand, the restrictions and limitations enforced by NGO programming like SEL are also taking a toll. For example, the fact that NGOs hold decision-making power in Nduta has resulted in the imposition of SEL without significant community consultation. Indeed, we observed a serious lack of contextualization or adaptation of the SEL materials—sourced from Western contexts—that were used in Nduta. While basic translation of materials was completed, and images were adapted to reflect the racial identities of children in the camp, the basic tenets and values promoted by these materials remained unaltered. When asked why, NGO staff cited donor requirements, global best practice, and EiE standards as reasons for lacking the authority to conduct any deeper contextualization to more closely align SEL materials and approaches with community cultural practices, values, and the foundational aims of traditional socio-cultural-moral development described in the previous section.

In one recently launched education initiative in the camp, we observed a behavioral mapping exercise to understand local practices of play and to identify traditional games to incorporate into schooling. To our knowledge, no such assessment has ever been conducted to understand cultural conceptualizations of SEL in Nduta. When asked if they were aware of pre-existing SEL practices, the FCH or FPH curricula, or the concept of *ubushingantahe*, all but two NGO workers said no. When asked if there was any consideration of Burundian cultural concepts of SEL or socio-cultural-moral development in their humanitarian programming, the answer among NGO workers was unequivocally no.

Study participants did not appreciate the imposition of SEL programming without their input and involvement. For example, most PTA members expressed their extreme frustration at not being consulted about the integration of SEL throughout schooling in the camp, as articulated by PTA member Minani:

*“PTA members are like working gears, we are not welcomed to give our suggestion or opinion in education; we are not respected by these NGOs. PTA members no longer feel responsible for schools and community education activities for youth because we are not being valued, respected, or welcomed by these NGOs.”*

Similarly, the requirement for teachers to implement humanitarian SEL in their classrooms is non-negotiable, as pushback or non-compliance would result in the termination of their employment. In various teacher training sessions, we observed educators being trained to utilize SEL manuals without any discussion of how SEL activities could be aligned with preferred cultural practices and traditional values. Instead, teacher training emphasized the importance of upholding child rights—particularly through play-based learning—as well as the harm of corporal punishment and need for positive discipline. The requirements for teachers to utilize play-based pedagogies and positive discipline in lieu of corporal punishment significantly influenced how they perceive their role in children’s development, as shared by primary-school teacher Nimubona:

*“I am useless as a teacher now. How can I help my students develop discipline and respect if I cannot punish them and if I am required to only play with them? They are not*

*developing in the right way. Before, I thought of students like my own children, but I cannot treat them like my own children anymore. I am failing them."*

Stripping teachers, parents, and other authority figures of their role in the development of children is not only resulting in feelings of frustration and inadequacy, but also the unraveling of the traditional social fabric that regarded the development of children as the collective responsibility of the community. This is reflected by *mushingantahe* Nyandwi:

*"The saying that 'a child belongs to the community' is changing. Before, the development of children was the responsibility of everyone in the community. A child could sleep at their neighbor's house. But today if a neighbor punishes your child for their own safety or to teach discipline, it causes conflict and can even impact the terms of resettlement for people in the camp. So parents now are not comfortable to be responsible for children that are not their own."*

This deteriorating sense of responsibility for the development of children among Nduta's elders is yet another contributing factor to the perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis escalating across the camp. While many traditional stewards of child development in Nduta are relinquishing their responsibility, others maintain it but feel powerless to exercise it. Rather, they now watch from the sidelines as their children and students scamper off to play, instead of learning to embody the values of *ubushingantahe* and the collectivist ethos needed for community survival and the prevention of future crisis. This power imbalance created by the extreme influence of NGOs over child development in Nduta is not only compounded by general low morale amongst caregivers, due to experiences of prolonged displacement and the inability to work or plan for the future, but it is also further intensifying anxieties about the future of Nduta's children and the erasure of Burundian tradition and the very essence of their being, as articulated by school administrator Nduwayo:

*"There are many intelligent individuals in the camp who can help to fix the problems of discipline and respect. But we are considered fools by these organizations. They have all the power and they are destroying our culture and the nature of Burundian discipline. They are destroying the future of children and killing their humanity."*

These findings showcase how the crisis of generational disunion in the Nduta camp is not a straightforward narrative, but one that is complicated and complex. On the one hand, children's violations of the existing social and moral orders in Nduta and their lack of responsibility to generations past, present, and future are perceived as fracturing the Burundian generational contract. Alternatively, the stripping and relinquishing of responsibility of many of Nduta's elders for the moral development of children also contributes to the breaking of the generational contract and gives rise to a new crisis narrative: one of socio-cultural-moral erasure exacted by the dominance of humanitarian intervention.

As outlined in the previous sections, the prevention of future crisis is a main aim of many Burundian socio-cultural-moral development approaches. In particular, helping children to develop the peace-enhancing and collectivist values of *ubushingantahe* is viewed by elders as crucial to ensuring that the younger generation contributes to social cohesion and generational survival across Burundi. Thus, the perceived cross-purposes of SEL to these aims and the limited control of elders over children's socio-cultural-moral development in Nduta have dimmed hopes for a one-day peaceful and prosperous Burundi.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article contributes to scholarship that complicates the concept of crisis (Roitman 2014; Shirazi 2020) and explores the influence of crisis on socio-cultural-moral reproduction and transformation (Berckmoes and Turner 2021; Lubkemann 2008). It also addresses the dearth of knowledge regarding the influence of humanitarian intervention on generational connections and conflicts among refugees in protracted displacement. By utilizing the vehicle of SEL, I show how humanitarian intervention in the Nduta camp converges with multiple lines of crisis and is driven by and perpetuates various crisis narratives that



are incompatible with those across the Nduta community. In doing so, study findings demonstrate how this incompatibility is exacerbating perceived socio-cultural-moral crisis in the Nduta camp and resulting in generational fractures among its residents.

First, this study extends Roitman's (2014) conceptualization of crisis as a "protracted and potentially persistent state" (p. 16) and reinforces Holzer's (2014) observations of everyday crises that protracted refugees face. Aligned with Holzer (2014) and Shirazi (2020), study findings refute the idea of humanitarian crisis as an intense burst of violence and/or destruction by documenting the chronic forms of crisis at work in the Nduta camp, from the crisis of displacement to the crisis of survival, and acceleration of socio-cultural-moral crisis to the crisis of erasure. This study also builds upon Roitman's (2014) research that outlines the work crisis narratives perform by showcasing the various crisis narratives at play in the Nduta camp. For example, while traditional forms of moral education and child development in the camp are driven by narratives of collective survival and the prevention of future crisis, humanitarian interventions like SEL are motivated by narratives of academic and psychosocial crisis—due to supposed crisis-induced trauma—and assumed life-long crisis, thus necessitating the development of individual skills and resilience. While these narratives may have positive intentions, they operate at cross-purposes, as the domination of SEL throughout the community is resulting in the perceived individualizing of the collective and lack of responsibility among Nduta's youth for the creation of a peaceful and cohesive Burundi.

Second, this study extends research that explores socio-cultural-moral transformation as a result of crisis and displacement (Lubkemann 2008; Malkki 1995; Sommers 2001; Turner 2001) and refugee efforts to reproduce their own cultural values and practices in host societies. Findings particularly build upon Berckmoes and Turner's (2021) work, which illuminates how Burundian refugee parents across Rwanda, Belgium, and the Netherlands aim to not only reproduce traditional Burundian values among their children, but also attempt to change what they perceive as a 'culture of hatred and vengeance' with parenting practices. Thus, Berckmoes and Turner (2021) argue that many refugee parents explicitly pursue social transformation through their children.

This study reinforces this argument by demonstrating how Nduta community elders seek to transform Burundian society through reproduction of the traditional peace-enhancing values of *ubushingantahe* amongst Nduta's youth. Numerous scholars have attributed the cyclical violence and crisis in Burundi to the replacement of Burundi's traditional values with foreign values due to colonization and the global development agenda, which has undermined the collectivist foundations of Burundian society that secured peace and social harmony (Manirakiza 2020; Nkeshimana 2007; Rwantabagu 2010). Thus, it is logical that Burundian refugee parents and elders in varying contexts aim to transform the long-standing culture of hatred and vengeance in Burundi to one of cohesion and solidarity through the reproduction of the traditional Burundian values that prevailed in pre-colonial times.

Where this study departs from Berckmoes and Turner's (2021) work is that the context of a refugee camp differs significantly from the context of less regulated life in a host-community. While refugee children in Rwanda, Belgium, and the Netherlands are certainly exposed to varying cultural norms, social practices, and values, refugee parents in these contexts have freedom to choose how to navigate these new exposures with their children and retain general control of their children's development. Conversely, this authority has been stripped from parents, educators, and elders in the Nduta camp as children's development is increasingly governed by NGOs. Tanzania's encampment policy and restrictions on agriculture and income generation and the intense enforcement of child rights policies, compounded by the numerous hours children spend under NGO care and the imposition of play, positive discipline, and self-centric values through SEL, has undermined parent and educators' abilities to raise children according to their cultural and moral standards. This has resulted in a breakdown of adult-child relationships, leaving

many adults feeling powerless to shape children's development and rendering their goals of social transformation and generational peace futile.

This study extends [Berckmoes' \(2022a\)](#) work on conflict in parenting practices in Burundi by showcasing the extreme power imbalance between the Tanzanian refugee regime and refugee educators and caregivers, which has rendered them unable to uphold their part of the generational contract. It also demonstrates that while perceived socio-cultural-moral decay amongst Nduta residents was initiated by long-standing socio-political factors prior to their 2015 displacement, the dimensions unique to displacement and the imposition of humanitarian interventions like SEL appear to intensify and accelerate it.

This study also begins to address the knowledge gap on the intergenerational impacts of humanitarian intervention on refugee communities. Existing scholarship thoroughly documents how modern humanitarian aid enacts legacies of colonialism and processes of Westernization through the imposition of foreign values and promotion of 'universal' norms ([Barnett 2011](#); [Burde 2007](#); [Duffield 2002](#); [Fox 2001](#)). Extensive research also explores processes of socio-cultural-moral transformation due to displacement ([Abduramadan 2022](#); [Ciabbarri 2008](#); [Feldman 2012](#)), and specifically among Burundian refugees ([Malkki 1995](#); [Sommers 2001](#); [Turner 2001](#)). This study enhances this work by revealing an explicit connection between the two. Findings showcase how the imposition of incongruous values, attitudes, and behaviors through humanitarian child rights and SEL interventions are resulting in the disintegration of moral responsibility between the generations in Nduta and the unraveling of the collective social fabric that has traditionally shaped Burundian children's socio-cultural-moral development. This fracturing of the generational contract, reordering of child development practices, and limited influence of adults in children's processes of becoming human has given rise to a new crisis narrative: socio-cultural-moral erasure.

While this study makes various scholarly contributions and demonstrates the use of crisis as an analytical and theoretical tool, the findings also serve to inform humanitarian policy and practice. Particularly for those working in the EiE sector, this research demonstrates that interventions like SEL are not simply well-intentioned, secular, skills-building programs. Rather, they shape how learners think, feel, express themselves, interact with others, and the values they prioritize and embody; in essence, how to be human.

As mentioned previously, the findings in this article lack the perspectives of children, which could provide an alternative view and experience of SEL; possibly a positive one. It is also important to recognize the wealth of research demonstrating the positive effects of SEL in non-crisis contexts and its transformative potential to address issues of equity, oppression, and social justice for marginalized communities like Nduta ([Cipriano et al. 2023](#); [CASEL 2024](#)). However, the older generations in Nduta have struggled to see that potential due to their lack of involvement in the development, adaptation, and implementation of SEL programming. Rather, in the eyes of many parents and grandparents, the intertwining of SEL with the complicated child rights agenda in Nduta has rendered children as lazy, undisciplined, irresponsible, and lacking the skills and values needed for generational peace and survival in Burundi. This highlights the crucial need for SEL implementors to not only directly and deeply involve community members in the design and delivery of programming to ensure it is culturally aligned, but to also take into account the socio-political context and larger ecosystem in which SEL is being delivered. By understanding how SEL intersects with other policies, programs, and processes at both the micro and macro levels, EiE practitioners can better shift SEL programming towards its positive and transformative potential and avoid exacerbating already strained intergenerational ties.

Finally, it is imperative that EiE actors let go of their narrow concepts of crisis and seriously consider the long-term and intergenerational implications of their work. Similarly, it is crucial for EiE actors to reflect upon the crisis narratives that drive, justify, and sustain their interventions and the kinds of work these narratives do in various contexts. While humanitarian actors endeavor to 'do no harm', this study reveals how families and generations are being pulled apart by uninformed, uncontextualized, and culturally-

epistemically-incompatible programming, thus putting their hopes for generational peace and the very essence of their humanity in jeopardy.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Participants included: teachers, head teachers, school inspectors, primary school students, out-of-school youth, school club facilitators and student participants, recreational programming facilitators and child participants, parents, community leaders, and community elders (Mushingantahe).
- <sup>2</sup> *Bashingantahe* = council of elders; *mushingantahe* = individual council member (plural. *bashingantahe*); *ubushingantahe* = conceptual set of peace-enhancing values.

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