

My First Trip to Burundi

I had the opportunity to travel to Burundi as a member of the "Project to Support the Improvement of Rice Farming in the Republic of Burundi" for the first time. The field activity period spanned one and a half months, commencing in mid-May 2024.

Burundi is an inland country in East Africa. It shares borders with Rwanda to the north, Tanzania to the east and south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. The country is situated at high altitudes, with most of its territory lying above 1,500 meters and consisting of mountains, hills, and plateaus. However, the western edge of the country borders Lake Tanganyika, the second-largest lake on the African continent, and the narrow Imbo Plain stretches north to south along the lakeshore. The capital, Gitega, is located in the Central Highlands, while Bujumbura, the country's economic hub, is a city situated on the northernmost part of the lakeshore.

The project aims to improve rice production in the irrigation area under the Imbo Regional Development Company (SRDI: Société Régionale de Développement de l'Imbo) near Bujumbura. Although bananas and tubers have traditionally been the staple foods in Burundi, rice has become a common staple since. Annual rice production increased from 40,000 tons in the 1990s to 80,000 tons in 2011, but consumption has also risen, and in recent years the country has been importing around 12,000 tons. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 1993, the country's food production has deteriorated. Since then, the economy has remained unstable due to the failed coup attempt in 2015 and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020, and the country continues to rely on aid and imports for its food supply. Improvement of rice production is expected to contribute to economic development.

When I visited, most farmers had finished harvesting their rainy-season crops, but I was able to conduct surveys on the fields of some farmers. The survey results showed that the rate of off-type plants, which is an indicator of

varietal impurity, was high at just under 10 percent, indicating quality issues. However, the average yield was around 5 tons per hectare, so productivity was higher than expected. Since the farmers in the Imbo irrigation area are primarily settlers, the farmers' associations under the SRDI are more thoroughly organized than in traditional rural communities, which may make it easier to disseminate guidance on matters such as variety selection and fertilization. Many of the farmers I met during my activity are earnest, and I believe that if seed purity were improved and areas for improvement—such as weeding and fertilization timing—were further addressed, it would be possible to increase both quality and productivity.

Burundi is one of the poorest countries in Africa, with a gross national income of \$230 in 2023. During my stay, I observed long lines of cars at gas stations due to fuel shortages, as well as reduced bus service, with many people commuting on foot. I also saw roads along the shore of Lake Tanganyika

submerged, reportedly due to rising water levels caused by recent climate change. Although life is tough for people both economically and environmentally, the Burundians are gentle, and the atmosphere in the city felt peaceful. When I visited shops, imported goods seemed quite expensive, but vegetables and fruits were plentiful, and seasonal fruits like mangoes and mandarins were delicious. Other delicacies included mukeke, which tastes like sea fish; sangara, a white-fleshed fish; and ndagara, small fish simmered in tomato sauce—all from Lake Tanganyika—as well as the well-balanced Burundi coffee. I look forward to enjoying these again on my next trip.

(November 2024, Kojima)



Harvesting of rice



The fish of the lake Tanganyika, Mukeke