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**PROMOTING YOUTH LIVELIHOODS  
AS A STRATEGY FOR PROTECTING  
BURUNDIAN REFUGEE YOUTH:  
A CASE STUDY FROM MAHAMA CAMP, RWANDA**

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**EMERGENCY:**  
BURUNDI REFUGEE CRISIS

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## SUMMARY

**This case study describes an innovative youth livelihoods project that was implemented in Mahama refugee camp, Rwanda, to strengthen the resilience and protection of 400 young Burundian refugees between 18 and 30 years old.**

Between April and July 2015, over 150,000 people fled Burundi to neighbouring countries after civil unrest and political violence. Three years later, over 90,000 Burundian children, young people and adults still reside in Rwanda, of which nearly 57,793 (as of 21st June 2018) in Rwanda's largest refugee camp Mahama . Young women and men in Mahama camp are facing extreme hardships. The majority of them have missed years of education and have little or no skills as they enter into adulthood, severely limiting their livelihoods opportunities. The economic dependency of young women on their families and spouses makes them more vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation.

In 2017, Plan International Rwanda started a youth livelihoods programme in the camp to support 400 vulnerable young women and men between 18 and 30 years old, including many survivors of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. Vocational trainings and income generating activities supported 282 young women and 118 young men with technical and saving skills and support to become economically self-sufficient. The livelihoods activities were coupled with psychosocial support activities to increase young women's and men's socio-emotional skills, confidence and hope for the future.

## The humanitarian needs of Burundian refugee youth

Youth make up 14% of the nearly 54,000 Burundian refugees in Mahama camp . Most young women and men have missed years of education and have no viable skills to earn an income. In the camp there are limited educational and vocational training opportunities for youth. The lack of livelihoods opportunities does not only limit young people's self-reliance, but also impacts on their psychosocial well-being and mental health. Most unemployed youth remain idle in the camp; some report they have let go of their future dreams. Many young women rely heavily on their families or spouses to make ends meet. This economic dependency creates serious protection risks as it makes them more vulnerable to experience violence, exploitation and abuse; some girls and young women are reportedly engaging in transactional sex to survive and meet basic needs.



## PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S ACTION

### Youth livelihoods as a strategy to protect young women and men

The purpose of the integrated livelihoods and protection approach was to strengthen the resilience and protection of 400 at-risk young women and men, including survivors of violence, abuse, and exploitation. The project aimed to address economic vulnerability as a root cause of protection concerns among youth, particularly young women, and strengthen their economic resilience through technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and income generating activities (IGA). Parallel to the technical training and IGA activities, all young women and men were trained in life skills and provided with individual and group-based psychosocial support to overcome distress and past experiences of violence, to gain greater confidence and to set future goals.

## Youth participants

The project targeted at-risk women and men between 18 and 30 years old, including young and single mothers, survivors of sexual violence and abuse, out of school and unemployed youth. Some participants were referred to the project by case management partners, while others were identified and referred by community leaders and other NGOs in the camp. Youth were given the possibility to choose their preferred livelihoods track. A total of 100 youth, 38 young women and 62 young men, opted for vocational training in masonry, bakery and shoemaking. Whilst the majority of participants in vocational training were male, the 300 participants of Income Generating Activity (IGA) groups were largely female with 244 women and 56 men participating. The IGA participants formed 12 groups of 25 members each.

## Tackling gender stereotypes

The difference in livelihoods preferences between young women and men can partly be explained from a cultural perspective; it is less common for some Burundian women to work, as they are typically taking care of children and working in the domestic sphere. Moreover, the vocational trainings offered through this project, masonry, bakery and shoemaking, were by some seen as 'male' vocations. For example, when Eveline\*, 19 years old<sup>1</sup>, wanted to enroll in masonry training, this was initially not supported by her family and her husband. They wanted her to stay at home taking care of the baby and household chores. However, Eveline managed to convince her husband and family to enrol in the course.



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<sup>1</sup> \* ALL NAMES ARE CHANGED TO PROTECT IDENTITIES.

## Market survey and participant orientation

To identify viable vocational training options, a market survey was carried out to assess the available livelihoods opportunities in and around the camp. The top five viable vocations were presented to the youth groups, who indicated their individual preferences. For female participants, small group sessions were held to help them explore their preferences and set personal goals before choosing their training course, as many of them have never considered taking on a job.

## Vocational training

Three groups were formed for vocational training in masonry, shoemaking and bakery. The project enrolled 50 youth (15 young women and 35 young men) in masonry, 25 youth in bakery classes (12 women, 13 men) and 25 youth (11 women, 14 men) in shoemaking. Each group and participant received a start-up kit consisting of relevant materials such as technical tools for masonry, ingredients for the bakery training and sewing materials for the shoemakers.

Stoves, sewing machines and other larger assets were shared between the group members. All trainees were provided with follow-up support including financial literacy training and individual coaching to help them with during the start-up of their businesses, and with financial planning and accounting.

## Bakery

The bakery training consisted of two weeks of intensive courses, followed by a period of practice in making the products. Trainees learned to make different types of bread and pastries, such as cakes, samosas, chapatti and pancakes, and how to price and sell their products on the market.

Maria\*, 19 years<sup>2</sup>, had for years wanted to build her career in bakery and catering services: *“I always dreamt of becoming a professional baker or caterer for weddings and special events. When this opportunity came up, I immediately applied. I am very excited that I was able to participate in this training programme supported by Plan International Rwanda. It was the right decision”*.



<sup>2</sup> \* ALL NAMES ARE CHANGED TO PROTECT IDENTITIES.



## Masonry

The masonry training took place over a course of three months. Trainees learned about types of soil structures for construction, site preparation and measurement, and were trained on constructing home foundations, elevation, roofing and home pavements. At the end of the course an exchange visit with a formal

technical training institute was organised to introduce the trainees to different types of equipment and exchange learning experienced with Rwandese students.

Leony\*, 25 years, participant of the masonry group said: *"I now know how to make a soil analysis, conduct site setting and undertake any measurement related to masonry. I am ready to go out and use my skills"*.



## Shoe making

The shoemaking training took place over a course of three months and included training sessions on drawing different types of shoes and sandals, cutting and assembling parts of the shoes, sawing and finishing shoes. Participants in the shoe making training felt that the programme did not only transforming their own skills, but also had a positive impact on their families and the wider community.

Nomba\*, 25 years<sup>3</sup>, shoemaking trainee, said that members of the refugee community have begun purchasing shoes with them, even during the course while they were still trainees. Orders starting coming in shortly after a community exhibition was held where trainees showcased their products to the community. His family's attitudes began to change after seeing his work during the exhibition and the product he brought back home. He says he feels support and encouragement

from his family: *"These days, when I was running late to attend my training, my family members remind me to hurry up and be on time for my training."*

Claudine\*, an expecting mother with her first-born child playing by her side, is determined to create the change necessary in her life: *"This [shoemaking] training is more than a gift. When I go back to Burundi one day, I will have a career to support my children"*. She also sees a positive change among her peers: *"The training programme has given youth an opportunity to organise themselves as an association, which has created more social interaction in our community"*. In January 2018, Claudine's association started saving as a group, 500 Rwf (0,50 EUR) per person per month, to ensure that by the time they graduate they have a start capital to start up their own shoe-making business. Saving takes place as an informal Village Saving and Loan Association (VSLA) schemes to build up start capital.

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<sup>3</sup> \* ALL NAMES ARE CHANGED TO PROTECT IDENTITIES.



### Psychosocial support

The youth livelihoods activities were coupled with structured psychosocial support. Group activities such as life skills and peer discussions were organised weekly to enhance young people's skills and social competencies, and to help them recognise and reduce risks violence, abuse and exploitation. The livelihoods training groups created a strong social network between young women and men, where they receive peer support and advice. Strengthening social and peer support is an important protective factor for youth in displacement settings, as it helps reduce distress and increase positive coping mechanisms. Young women and men who experienced violence and abuse or high levels of distress were referred to more specialised psychosocial support and counselling provided by case management partners.

### Successes and challenges

The project has been a milestone in securing a better future for refugee youth; the shoemakers and the bakers have begun selling their products in the camp. In June 2018, shoemakers showcased different types of leather shoes, sandals, belts for men, women and children during World Refugee Day celebrations in Mahama camp. The bakery graduates were not only been able to sell their products successfully, they also started saving their profits as a group.

Many participants felt that the project increased their chances of finding paid employment or start their own businesses. Maia\*, 19 years, notes: *"I hope Plan Rwanda will scale up these same technical skills to other youths in the camp. I find these skills empowering and are a good source of revenue to support us and our families"*.



The psychosocial impact of the project has been remarkable. Most trainees report that their self-confidence has vastly increased. Many young women and men expressed that before the training they not only lacked self-confidence to engage in productive work, but also lacked the confidence to engage socially and participate in a group setting.

John\*, 26 years, shoemaking graduate, says: *"I want to extend our appreciation to Plan International Rwanda for the kind support given to us. We forcefully left Burundi empty handed and worse: with no skills. Nothing did we bring with us, not even any property. We didn't have any income generating skills but here we are today: selling our own products to the community. We have what it takes, nothing can stop us now".*

Another success of the project was the collaboration between the different stakeholders: refugee youth, local artisanal trainers, Plan International and MIDIMAR (Government) in Mahama camp. Local artisanal trainers were recruited in the area of the camp and trained to work with young refugee women and men. While Plan International provided training materials and start-up kits for the participating youth, MIDIMAR provided youth and their trainers with training spaces within the camp.

A challenge during the project was the limited availability of ground for the masonry course, to excavate soil for the training sessions and brick making. This was due to the fact that the selected site was prone to erosion and the holes and ditches formed a hazard for younger children playing in the area. This was solved by identifying alternative working grounds for the trainees.

## Key recommendations

- **Provide vulnerable youth with a comprehensive vocational training and livelihoods support package that includes structured psychosocial support tailored to their specific needs.** Activities such as life skill sessions, peer group support and individual coaching can help strengthen positive coping mechanisms including dealing with emotions, trust building, social skills, stress management and conflict resolution skills that can help overcome experiences of distress and violence and build a positive future.
- **Provide graduated youth with an internship or apprenticeship in a business or institution upon completion of vocational training.** This is a critical form of follow-up support to help youth improve their professional practice and employability.
- **Unlock the potential of girls and young women by promoting their equal participation in vocational training and livelihoods opportunities.** Design intentional programmes that address existing gender stereotypes and inequalities by targeting girls and young women to enroll in vocational training; sensitising families, spouses and community leaders to support young women's access to livelihoods; and arrange coaching and mentorship between successful working women and young female trainees.
- **Include out-of-school adolescents above the minimum working age (usually 15-17 years) in youth livelihoods projects where possible.** Particularly adolescent girls and boys with large educational gaps might have a preference for vocational training over schooling. Tailored livelihoods programs can offer older adolescent girls and boys a chance to secure decent work as a viable alternative for child labour, child marriage and other forms of violence that out-of-school adolescents are prone to.

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I DUNHCR, 27 MAY 2018

II RCM COORDINATION BRIEFING, 30 APRIL 2018



## **About Plan International:**

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.