

Rwanda: Empowering Youth by Investing in Their Skills and Self-Confidence

“Asking a Rwandan teenager if he or she knows other orphaned children is like asking the Pope whether he is catholic or not,” says Jean de Dieu, Coordinator of the Youth Center in Musanze for Population Services International, the local partner of the International Youth Foundation in Rwanda.

The fact that about 41 percent of children between the ages of 15 and 17 in Rwanda today are orphans reflects the magnitude of this tragic reality. If you think back to 1994, you can easily do the math and know these are the children of the genocide and the years of civil war that led to it.

But even if you are not aware of this grim statistic, you cannot ignore the sheer quantity of children that seem to pop out of nowhere as you make your way out of Kigali and into rural Rwanda, the land of the thousand hills, as it has fittingly been described in countless books.

Here children are like mushrooms, sprouting beneath trees and amidst the fertile plots of land that dot the lush green landscape. Their bright smiles are charming and defenseless at the same time. Without a primary caretaker, orphans live more precarious lives.

According to data collected by UNICEF there is a clear relationship between parent survivorship and school attendance, good nutrition, age of first sexual intercourse, inheritance laws and protection against violence and sexual exploitation. With no parents to look after them, orphans easily fall through the cracks and contribute to inflate the grim statistics.

The vulnerability of orphaned children is particularly pronounced in Rwanda where in the span of three months in 1994 close to one million people were brutally murdered by their fellow citizens. Many of today's teenagers have vivid memories of their first childhood years. Their innocence was stolen abruptly.

“I lost my parents at age six,” says 18-year-old Julienne Mukasine. “A priest found me in the Congo forest where I was hiding from the militia. I lived with him until two years ago when the Rwandan Red Cross reconnected me to my brothers and sisters in the Musanze region of Rwanda. I had been away for 11 years.”

These kinds of narratives are all too common in Rwanda where the future of the country seems to rest on the shoulders of people who have been deeply traumatized when they were young.

“The trauma on the kids is that some of them have seen their parents being hacked to death, they are traumatized with fear. They no longer trust anything or anybody because anyone can be an enemy,” says Bishop John K. Rucyahana, of the Episcopal Church of Rwanda.

“You can rebuild their trust by loving them, by sharing, by speaking against it [genocide], by engaging their reasoning capacity, telling them the source and history of the genocide and how things worked out and how God can employ the same humans again to restore sanity into people's lives.”

The bishop, who is a very influential person in Musanze and in all of Rwanda when it comes to peace and reconciliation work, is closely associated to the International Youth Foundation and its local partner Population Services International in a project that aims to help young people develop the necessary skills and strengthen attitudes and behaviors that will enable them to find and keep a job or create their own.

One of the strengths of this project is that it brings together two very different partners, the International Youth Foundation and Population Services International. The first one focuses on investing in employability skills while the second one on providing reproductive health services and education. Together they can effectively tackle two major problems that afflict Rwandan youth, unemployment and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases.

"It has been an extremely positive experience," says Camilla von Schroeder, Project Manager for Population Services International in Rwanda when describing the collaboration with the International Youth Foundation.

"Through this collaboration, we have realized the values of integrated services for the youth. The Dushishoze (Youth) Centers operate as a one-stop service point. Here youth receive sexual and reproductive health education, employability and life skills as well as vocational skills training. This is especially important for specific target groups, like female sex workers," von Schroeder explains.

In a country the size of Maryland with a population of 8 million people land is scarce and unemployment is high, especially among young people who constitute a large percentage of the population. Building livelihoods is critical to the stability of the country and this is why local authorities in Musanze are very supportive of the employability and life skill project spearheaded by the International Youth Foundation through Population Services International.

"It all started in November 2006 when we received more than 200 applications from vulnerable youth," explains Jean de Dieu, adding that in Rwanda the government issues 'vulnerability certificates' to children at risk.

"We could offer training to only 75 students and thus had to put into place strict selection criteria that included a minimum of secondary school, and a math and language test." Mukasine is among the 75 youth who were selected and received a 6-month training course. She focused on catering and tourism, one of the six specialization areas offered by the project in Rwanda. The other skill training areas include hairdresser, video production, dress making, mechanics and information, communication technology.

"I studied cooking and customer relations for the restaurant. I learned how to make soup, cakes and cookies, rice, spaghetti with Bolognese sauce and much more," she says. Mukasine now works at the guest house of the Episcopal Church of Rwanda.

A total of fourteen youth were trained here, two were hired immediately after the training and more are likely to be employed as soon as the second wing of the guest house opens in 2008. Twenty-year-old Emmanuel Micomyiza works alongside Mukasine.

He heard about the project through his local church and decided to apply. His father is still alive but remarried with another woman and does not keep in touch with Emmanuel and his two sisters. He makes 20,000 Rwandan francs, approximately \$ 37 per month. "With the money I earn, I buy soap, clothes and food for myself and my sisters."

Like other youth we met, he knows many young men and women and conditions similar to his. HIV/Aids has also taken a toll on the youth population in Rwanda, leaving many children orphaned at a young age. "The main problem that orphans face," he says, "is that they have nowhere to stay and because of that they end up begging in the streets. It is important to teach them something useful and enable them to continue their education."

De Dieu explains that business owners are selected carefully in order to find the right kind of mentor for the youth. "They must be in a position to train others and have the proper equipment and a business that is large enough to accommodate a certain number of apprentices. They also must have the proper motivation to assist the youth."

Pierre Celestin Maniragwa is the owner of the Amani Photo and Video Studio, a business he started in 1996. His other studio is across the border in neighboring Uganda. He trained eight youth in photography, video production and sound system and eventually hired four of them. One now works in the Ugandan store.

Twenty-year-old Jean Fidel is originally from Giseni, in Western Rwanda. He trained at Amani Studio and loves his job. "As a boy I always liked electronics and technology," he explains as he expertly maneuvers his way into the recording studio sets up a microphone and gets ready to demonstrate to us a proper recording session. Later, he also shows us what he can do with the video editing machine.

Jean Fidel shares his rented home with another youth who is a secondary school student. He lives in a modest but clean and comfortable two-bedroom home. He is beaming with happiness as he welcomes us in his home where a couple of chickens and several children who belong to his roommate's relatives are roaming around the premises.

With his salary, also approximately \$ 37 per month, Fidel is able to pay his share of the rent, which comes to about \$11 per month, and buy food, clothes and soap. Though the salary is far from high, explains Jean de Dieu, it enables the youth to take care of their basic needs and, "if one has enough food and a safe place to sleep there is no need to engage in risky sexual behavior."

The life skills learned during the project are critical since they provide the youth with a sense of reality and some valuable common sense. Jean Fidel, for instance, is highly conscious that in the future he prefers to have a small family. "In Rwanda we do not have enough land to give to our children," he says. "Having too many children means that some will die. I only want to have maximum two children and I don't want them to have a hard life."

Thanks to this project, funded by USAID and the Lions Club International Foundation, that Fidel has internalized one of the main lessons that Bishop Rucyahana is trying to impart on the Rwandan youth.

"We are encouraging families to develop a consciousness of responsibility of education for their children," he says. "They need to provide for their children and to provide well. It is not just about existence, it is about living."