

Interview with Véra Mutoni, Project Lead, Impunity Watch Burundi - “Akariho Karavugwa” project.

- **What specific techniques are being used in the project? Individual, collective, community-based, etc.**

The "Akariho karavugwa" programme plays a complementary role to the formal truth-seeking process, through organising communal and intergenerational dialogues which create spaces for exchange and sharing of experiences about the violent past. Communities find opportunities to share their experiences and to share truths about the past between generations (adults and young). Young Burundians are able to ask questions to eyewitnesses (adults or youth). The ethnic and gender diversity of the target groups, residing in the 60 targeted communities, enables the programme to influence Burundian society at different levels. On an individual level, several types of trauma were found in communities, where the failure to deal with past violence has left traumatic memories that are frequently rekindled. Psychosocial support delivered through listening and support sessions in therapeutic centres, as well as collective sociotherapy sessions, serve as opportunities for victims to express their accumulated grief, to release feelings of abandonment, and to start to let go of hatred fostered by years of violence. This support leaves people with the ability to cope with the past, while equipping them with resilience skills and hopes for rehabilitation and social reintegration.

At the community level, greater investment in psychosocial support alongside transitional justice awareness-raising has enabled communities to aspire to set up community initiatives. An example of this from the Akariho karavugwa programme is an initiative being developed to renew the broken links between displaced people and the habitants of their former communities. Civil society organisations are also contributing to the process following skills trainings and the transfer of expertise provided by Impunity Watch.

- **Why is this type of support important for transitional justice processes and the prevention of future violence? Why should donors and INGOs carry on implementing these types of projects?**

Through the programme's activities, we have seen how Burundians have endured several cycles of displacement either inside or outside the country, which resulted in the loss of material goods. Poverty remains very striking and is hindering the appropriation of themes

related to transitional justice. However, the "Akariho karavugwa" programme, as well as the other Impunity Watch programmes, highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of the divisions among Burundians in order to achieve genuine reconciliation and development. To this end, it is important to understand the relationship between the mismanagement or failure to deal with the past, and the need for trauma-healing. Taking into consideration the political and security dynamics of Burundi, we must prioritise the mental health of our society because otherwise victims struggle to work for their personal and community development. In the absence of attention to memory healing, victims express the feeling that their experiences are stuck in memories of the violent past.

This situation is aggravated by the cohabitation between perpetrators and victims across communities in Burundi, further weakening the capacity for traumatised individuals to move on from the past, and who continue to relive painful scenes upon the sight of certain individuals from certain political periods that have marked the country's history. The fragility of mental health in Burundian society, scarred by years of war, should be a priority for donors and NGOs. The integration of listening and support strategies would even facilitate the implementation of other development approaches. Moreover, the complementarity of the psychosocial care approach within dealing with the past guarantees the sustainability of actions and interventions in communities. Within the framework of the programme, the first strategy therefore consists of supporting trauma-healing through psychosocial care and victim participation in community and intergenerational dialogues, in counselling sessions, and in different community exchanges.

All of these activities aim to bring about transformation of the individual and the group, which support both local transitional justice processes and local development. The impact of our programme is proof that trauma-healing must accompany efforts aimed at economic growth. An individual battling with feelings of despair caused by cycles of violence is confronted with many barriers to their personal development. By contrast, after having benefited from psychosocial support, individuals have been able to manage their traumas, let go of negative feelings, and contribute to rebuilding their community using their own initiatives in the hope of overcoming the past. Hence the importance of projects that aim to provide psychosocial support and dealing with the past, in order to achieve different objectives and contribute to the reconstruction of the country at different levels.

- **How has the project broken taboos around mental health in Burundi?**

The project broke taboos around mental health in Burundi. The best evidence of this is that the number of people seeking psychosocial support has far surpassed expectations and projections at the outset of the programme. Communities have recognised the need for psychosocial assistance, which demonstrates the need to expand such interventions throughout the country.

Through seeing the impact of this work and by listening to the testimonies of some community members, local authority figures have openly proclaimed their support for such psychosocial approaches - even admitting being personally affected by such testimonies. As a result, the programme's psychosocial assistants and psychologists have seen their work encouraged by the authorities. They now receive referrals at different levels such as from civil society organisations working on thematic areas related to transitional justice and from decentralised government structures. This multi-level referral reflects greater emerging awareness and sensitivity of the impact of conflict on the mental health of Burundians society, as well as the hope that such psychosocial care services can be multiplied in the community.

Below are a couple of photos from implemented activities.



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¹ Community dialogues preparation session - with women leaders from Dushirehamwe, Bujumbura



2

² Validation sessions of the community initiative six CSOs from Cibitoke province-within the framework of "Akariho karavugwa" program

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³ Preparation sessions for community dialogues - Province of Muyinga.

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Interview with Alexis HATUNGIMANA, Psychologist & Programme Manager from THARS-Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services.

- **Tell us about the *Akariho karavugwa* project: name meaning, areas of implementation, target groups, their gender and age, and donor.**

The "Akariho Karavugwa" programme means, "what happened in the past cannot be kept secret, we must talk about it to prepare for the future". The programme's areas of psychosocial intervention include listening to victims and empowering them to take charge of past violence, awareness-raising, and mobilisation around trauma and transitional justice. The target groups are men, women, and youth victims of past violence, all generations, meaning from all ages. The project is supported by the Belgium government through Impunity Watch. It is implemented by 3 local organisations: THARS, MIPAREC and DUSHIREHAMWE.

- **Why is MHPSS needed in Burundi and in the specific areas of implementation?**

Burundi has experienced repetitive crises for years since its independence. The many crimes committed have negatively affected both individuals and communities. As a result, people often feel overwhelmed and sometimes even afraid and/or experience anxiety, or feel as though they are paralysed and detached from social reality. If these people do not receive psychosocial support, they will never be able to participate in reconciliation efforts as well as in the restoration of peace and reconstructing the social fabric.

Dealing with the past at the national level will help victims overcome the violent past through community initiatives. Indeed, people who have suffered loss, attacks, family separation, and gender-based violence have unresolved grievances and injuries that can create the foundations for further cycles of violence.

Our areas of intervention - Bujumbura, Cibitoke and Muyinga - have been the target of violence in the crises experienced by Burundi. Thousands of individuals have been traumatised and few actors are interested in this area of intervention.

- **What specific techniques are being used in the project? Individual, collective, community-based, etc.**

The techniques used within the framework of the programme are individual, family, and group counselling, EMDR, memory healing sessions, mass sensitisation on trauma, as well as awareness-raising about the causes and consequences of trauma.

- **What impact does MHPSS have on the daily lives of people who've participated / benefitted ? Can you mention examples of someone's life before and after the support ?**

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The impact of psychosocial support is evident in the daily lives of those who have sought treatment from practising psychologists or their assistants. For example, after listening and memory-healing activities, several victims confirmed feeling eased of their traumas and have developed greater psychological resilience. We can also highlight the case of victims who, through the memory-healing session, have forged parental links with people they have never met: A mother from Muyinga assigned herself to mother an orphaned girl from Bujumbura who lost both her father and mother. In addition, a mother from Bujumbura felt like the paternal aunt of another victim from Cibitoke, because all her aunts were victims of the crisis that Burundi has experienced. All these victims have set a schedule of visits to keep the connection alive.

NDA.L. is a 38-year-old married woman and mother of 4. She lives in Kanyosha commune, MWICO hill. After her father was assassinated, and as the eldest daughter of the family, she suffered enormously. Indeed, as soon as her father died, her mother fell ill and passed away in her arms. Although the death of her mother came after a long illness, NDA.L. was traumatised by the fact that during the burial gunshots between the security forces and rebels broke out, and as a result the deceased was left before being placed in the tomb. Until today, she does not know if her mother was devoured by animals or if someone buried her. Before her interviews with the programme's psychosocial assistants, and then by the psychologist, the consequences were inevitable: negative emotions, nightmares, no future prospects, isolation, intrusion of unwanted ideas. But today, she can socialise with others, feel relieved, loved, and supported, and she has taken her destiny in her own hands. Today, she is able to implement development projects and give public testimonies.

- **Why is this type of support important for transitional justice processes and the prevention of future violence? Why should donors and INGOs carry on implementing these types of projects?**

Psychosocial support is important to achieve genuine reconciliation. Fear, rage, and persistent hatred block the process of reconciliation, as well as the individual and collective capacities of people to trust one another, live side-by-side, and accept each other. Trauma-healing has close links with reconciliation and therefore can contribute to lasting peace. Lasting peace in a society is not possible if the hearts of individuals are still stuck in the painful events that caused psychological wounds.

If the wounds and numbness of the past are healed or alleviated, then people can regain their thirst for life, become capable of social interactions, and therefore available for reconciliation. Hatred, cycles of violence, fratricidal wars will give way to reconciliation, lasting peace, and development to take root instead.

On 8 September, UN SG Antonio Guterres said that mental health and psychosocial support must be considered integral and cross-cutting components of all United Nations humanitarian,

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peacebuilding, and development programmes. Hence, countries and financial and technical partners will all have to mobilise to integrate MHPSS into their development interventions and programmes because peacebuilding, mental health, and psychosocial support are deeply linked.

How has the project broken taboos around mental health in Burundi?

The programme enabled the target population to recognise their mental health problems and to consult psychosocial assistants, as well as psychologists. People were able to let go of the burdens of the truth they had held since the crises.

Below are a couple of photos from implemented activities.



⁴ Kick-off meeting for “Akariho Karavugwa” project.
⁵ Exchange Session Mutimbuzi.



⁶ Coaching Session with psychosocial assistants of Muyinga.

⁷ Capacity Building Session with psychosocial assistants of Cibitoke.

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