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Mothers' Union making grass roots level impact

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From EAB Extra, the newsletter of the Anglican Church of Burundi

"I have a business selling tomatoes and palm oil at the market. I can now take care of my 11 children, 6 of my own and 5 orphans".

"Before I joined the savings group we used to keep money at home but it was eaten by mice which caused conflict in the family. Now there is peace at home and we have a business selling tomatoes. With the extra money we can buy clothes for our children".

"With the profit from my business selling tomatoes I can now afford to save as well as provide for the needs of my children at school, such as buying exercise books".

"I can now buy soap to wash my clothes and am proud of looking smart. Now I look nice!"

"I can pay for school fees so my child can go to school. When I was a child I was kept at home and was never sent to school. Now all my children will go to school, I won't keep any at home because I was kept at home and I don't want that."

"I didn't think women could do anything on their own. Now I have the confidence to contribute to my family's income. Look at me, I am well dressed!"

Such comments give a snapshot of how the Mothers' Union in Burundi is making an impact in individual lives and in whole communities.

There are now various elements to the work of Mothers' Union.

The Literacy and Development Programme (MULDP) provides literacy circles through which women and a few men acquire literacy and numeracy skills. These skills enable them to develop small projects that benefit their families and communities.

There are women in the community who are literate but poor. They are already skilled and want to undertake income-generating activities in order to move out of poverty. Helped by Trinity Grants they are able to establish small businesses for income generation.

In addition to its literacy and development programme and income-generating activities, Mothers' Union in Burundi now has a new partnership with Five Talents that is providing some of the literacy programme participants with training in business skills and savings-led microfinance with



Verdiane from the Rumonge Group
Credit: Anglican Church of Burundi

a view to enabling groups to save and lend, budget, and plan businesses. The long-term goal is to empower them to take a lead in development issues within their communities.



Kiyange group in Gitega
Credit: Anglican Church of Burundi

It is already evident that the savings group participants are experiencing improvements to their lives. Some talk of greater harmony in their families due to their ability to contribute to the family's income. Groups are becoming motivated to support their members with such things as the cost of health care. They are beginning to improve their communities, and are engaging in development activities such as orphan care, improving sanitation and health, HIV/AIDS awareness, and promotion of women's rights, including mobilization of communities on issues such as domestic and gender-based violence.

Take Gabriel for example, he thought joining the programme would be a waste of time for his wife. When he saw the skills she had gained, and when the whole group turned up to help cultivate their plot of land, he was amazed. His wife can now afford soap and clothes, which he sees as a sign that they have increased their income. The couple can feed their children who had been suffering from a form of protein malnutrition called kwashiorkor.

The financial education they have received has taught them how to manage money properly.

Aileen describes how she used to be lonely at home, and unable to cultivate her plot alone. Now the group comes to help her cultivate the land and she is able to get a bigger harvest of beans. Aileen explains that she previously knew nothing about business and just lived on what she could grow. After learning that she can buy and sell produce to make a profit, she now has a business selling bananas, potatoes and other vegetables in the market. Her specialty is making banana juice and selling it. In the photo she is on her way to the market with the bucket in which she makes the juice. Aileen takes care of 8 children, some of whom are not hers but are children of relatives who have died. She enjoys working in the group, as it means each member can multiply what they have.

Mary, a widow, is a member of a group of 26 members. Her group was able to help her when she had to go to the hospital with a back injury. She had no savings with which to pay the bills and there are no free clinics in her community. Now she knows that the group will support her and that she is not alone.

Catarina had been an orphan and is now a widow, who said that her group has really helped her to come out of poverty. She had learned to read and write with the rest of the group and now wants to learn English! She was in a bicycle accident and the group paid for her medical fees out of the emergency fund. With the interest that the group shared out after six months she was able to go to the market to buy clothes.

Chantalle has been married for 7 years and has 3 children. She said that she used to be ignorant, and initially her husband did not want her to join the group as he thought she was being lazy just sitting around with the group rather than working. However when thieves stole a radio and some money that they could ill afford to lose from their house, she explained to him that the money would have been safe had they joined the savings group. He agreed and she is now saving her money with the rest of the group.

Verdiane got a large loan from her savings group. She bought a field and took the harvest of cassava to sell in the market in Bujumbura. She made a profit of 50% after expenses and was able to repay the loan and interest. Not only did she have food for her children but she was also able to employ someone to help her with her business.

These participants in the savings programme, like many other people in Burundi, are recovering from a civil war that lasted 15 years. An estimated three hundred thousand died and others were driven from their homes, leaving women and children in particular vulnerable to gender based violence or abduction. The war devastated many of society's structures and particularly disrupted regular education. It is estimated that only just over half of women and girls are able to read and write. Through its work Mothers' Union is seeking to bring God's love and compassion in practical ways to communities throughout the country.

As Claudette Kigeme, the Mothers' Union Coordinator says, "Though poor, people have many talents and skills. By building their capacity and enabling them to work and share together, Mothers' Union is determined to make its contribution to changing the situation in Burundi in order to see families free from poverty".

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