

Promising Practices

Strengthening a rights-based approach in civil society organisations in Rwanda Supporting civil society actors to claim citizens' rights

Background

In the preamble of the **Rwandan Constitution**, Rwanda **commits to principles of human rights**. Accordingly, Rwanda has signed and **ratified most human rights treaties**. The policies, programmes, and guidelines that are in place clearly show that the Government of Rwanda has committed itself to implementing human rights as a contribution to the sustainable development of the country. The **Rwanda National Strategy for Transformation (NST1) 2017-2024** refers to the **Leave No One Behind** principle as the central, transformative promise of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, the NST1 prioritises among other key interventions: “build[ing] capacities of media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations and the private sector.”

Since 2013, the **German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)** has been commissioning GIZ Rwanda to support civil society partners. The **project's objective** is to **strengthen the role of civil society organizations in promoting the rights of the most vulnerable** in Rwandan society. The target groups are:

- **People living in extreme poverty** who cannot access basic goods and services including, among others, the right to adequate housing, the right to food;

- **Women**, who are disproportionately exposed to discrimination and gender-based violence;
- **Children** who depend on adults to access their rights, **persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, and LGBTIQ+ people** who are affected by different and sometimes intersecting forms of exclusion, stigma and discrimination.

The interventions of the civil society partner organisations include **legal advice and legal representation**, including special outreach to persons who face additional obstacles accessing legal facilities, e.g. people living in remote areas, women, people with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ people. Civil society organisations also provide **legal and human rights education** for the population in general, especially with regards to land law, family law, and succession law. **Fighting stigma and discriminating norms and practices** against women, the LGBTIQ+ community, people with disabilities and people living with HIV is another important concern of the partner organisations which they address together with these target groups while also making activities more inclusive in general.

The project is organised in **three fields of action**:

- (1) Capacity development of civil society organisations that work on human rights issues.

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- (2) Strengthening self-help and/or interest groups through cooperation with civil society organisations.
- (3) Strengthening the visibility of NGOs' advocacy work vis-à-vis state actors.

The thematic focus is on **SDG 3: Health** (especially for people with disabilities, people living with HIV), **SDG 5: Gender Equality** (women and girls as well as LGBTIQ+ people) and **SDG 16: state institutions**.

The strategic design was developed in close cooperation between GIZ and Rwandan civil society organisations. **Using the human rights-based approach to development (HRBA)**, they have worked together to identify joint interests and needs in line with the development agenda of the Government of Rwanda. Among other things, **the HRBA empowers people to know and claim their rights** and enables them to advocate for the **government to fulfil the obligations which it has committed to**. This combination contributes to sustainable development for all.

Human Rights Framework

Rwanda has ratified most of the core international human rights treaties and regularly reports on progress and challenges in the implementation of these instruments. The Ministry of Justice has put in place a unit in charge of **Human Rights Treaty Reporting**. The **Universal Periodic Review** process has been identified as an important way for the Government of Rwanda to track and report implementation and to be accountable at the international level for the respect, protection, and fulfilment of human rights.¹

The **Constitution** of the Republic of Rwanda provides for **protection from discrimination**

The Senior Legal Officer and Local Expert of iPeace, a partner organisation to the Rights-Based Program, providing legal aid during a mobile legal aid clinic in Kigali.

of any kind. Women's rights and gender equality are key and are translated into practice by **women's participation**, as provided for in the national legal and policy framework. This results in noticeable participation of women in political and public life, including participation in policy formulation and implementation as well as holding public office as enshrined in the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Elimination against Women**.

The **Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is implemented through national laws** which provide for the **participation of persons with disabilities** from low level administration to the parliament. The parliament has, as provided by law, one female and one male member, who represent persons with disabilities.

1 Universal Periodic Review Documentation of Rwanda: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-index>

Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach

The project cooperates with civil society organisations that intervene in different areas of human rights such as social and economic rights (e.g. access to health care), gender equality, civil and political rights, disability rights, as well as LGBTIQ+ rights.

Advising the organisations on the application of the human rights-based approach happens on two





levels: Firstly, **concrete measures** are implemented to **improve the situation of vulnerable groups**. Secondly, **civil society organisations** are supported in **advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups** towards state actors more effectively.

The partner organisations receive support from two development advisors in the areas of **organisational development, professional development of NGO team members, research, communication, advocacy, monitoring, and evaluation**. The project provides funding for activities fostering the rights-based approach and subsidises salaries of experts working in partner organisations. In addition, the development advisors offer **trainings on international and national human rights cooperation, gender sensitive, gender responsive and gender transformative programming, LNOB, the Do No Harm approach, and fundraising**.

The Rights-Based Program moreover supports **networking and collaboration** among partner organisations. The aim is to encourage civil society organisations to cooperate with each other to cover specific human rights topics in a holistic way and to **become a stronger voice** for vulnerable groups. The cooperation among Rwandan civil society organisations includes **joint advocacy through monitoring of and reporting on the implementation of human rights recommendations**. They also monitor and report on voluntary pledges by the state in the context of the UN human rights mechanisms such as the hu-

man rights treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review. Moreover, the cooperation focusses on **joint interventions to reach groups facing intersecting forms of vulnerability**, such as persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ in rural areas.

This collective working environment strengthens Rwandan civil society organisations, renders their human rights work more effective, and promotes the incorporation of internationally recognised norms. Applying the rights-based approach also means that people in the most vulnerable situations benefit from a **constructive dialogue between civil society and government institutions** – a dialogue that is **guided by the international, regional, and national legal framework**.

Achievements and Impact

Mapping of the Interest Groups on SOGIE

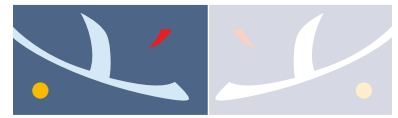
A mapping exercise was conducted, which resulted in **identifying 40 LGBTIQ+ self-led groups/associations** in Rwanda. The mapping exercise had the objective, among others, to review relevant interest groups/organisations on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) currently active in Rwanda. It aimed at **identifying the challenges** that interest groups/organisations on SOGIE face as well as **avenues for collaboration** between the Rights-Based Program, its partner organisations, and the identified interest groups.

Capacity Development of the Most Vulnerable Groups

The project has provided capacity development for the rights-holders to know and be able to claim their rights. In that respect, **members of 54 interest groups**, that is 36 associations of **LGBTIQ+ persons**, 11 associations of **female sex workers**, and 7 associations of **youth living with HIV**, have



Demonstration of the use of the white cane during a street challenge organised by the Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB) as part of the celebration of the White Cane Day on 15th November 2023



participated in capacity development **sessions on access to human rights, such as the rights to non-discrimination and to healthcare.**

In addition, 7860 people have benefited from **advisory and information services**, including legal aid and awareness raising sessions on human rights and health care, provided by partner organisations of the Rights-Based Program.

Advocacy for More Conducive Laws and Policies

Following the advocacy conducted by the partner organisation **Rwanda Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (RRP+)**, the **Rwandan Ministry of Health issued two ministerial orders** that responded positively to the request of RRP+, namely the “Ministerial Order related to the **well-being of children living with incurable diseases**” and the “Ministerial Order determining **modalities to ensure assistance to a child infected or affected with incurable diseases**”. RRP+ had conducted research at the grassroots level and held meetings to present their findings to the stakeholders. Meetings included relevant public officials in different districts as well as the decision makers in ministries, mainly the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and the National Assembly. The research included recommendations requesting from the ministries to put in place measures that support children living with HIV/AIDS who study in boarding schools, so that they would be able to take their antiretroviral drugs for HIV in privacy.

The recommendations provided by the civil society partner organisation **The Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB)** were also taken into consideration. Through different consultative meetings with the **Ministry of Trade and Industry**, RUB recommended the **ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled**. The Treaty was ratified, and RUB proceeded with advocacy for its implementation. Now the incorporation of the treaty into **national law** has started, and the **implementation roadmap** is developed and validated.

Through the Rights-Based Program’s local subsidy support, **Initiatives for Peace and Human Rights (iPeace)** conducted action research on **workplace sexual harassment** in Rwanda, by collecting data and providing legal aid to victims of this crime. Based on the insights gained from this intervention, iPeace and other civil society actors **advocated for the ratification of ILO C190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work**. Rwanda ratified the convention in November 2023.

Challenges

Legal Personality of LGBTIQ+ Self-led Organisations

Most of LGBTIQ+ self-led organisations are **not registered** as NGOs, which makes it difficult to work directly with them due to accountability requirements.

Limitations in Working with the Most Vulnerable People

Working with vulnerable community members for their rights is challenging since there are requirements of the project that they do not fulfil. For example, supporting people who **do not have a bank account** by paying their transportation fees to attend training or workshops has become difficult since the use of mobile money is no longer an approved means of payment at GIZ Rwanda.

Lessons Learnt

The project applies the following approaches that are important key factors for its success:

Participatory Approach

The **joint planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation by the Rights-Based Program and its partner organisations** fosters a common understanding of the project and

thus the choice of interventions. In fact, at the beginning of the project phase, the Rights-Based Program and the partner organisations developed a **joint strategic plan**. At the beginning of each year of implementation they develop a **joint annual action plan**. In addition, **each organisation's intervention** (a project or an activity) is **chosen by the partner organisation** but designed in collaboration with the Rights-Based Program. The monitoring and evaluation of the activities are also conducted collectively by the Rights-Based Program and partner organisations. Quality assurance through **regular joint field visits** and continuous technical support further strengthens this collaborative approach. It also allows both the Rights-Based Program and partner organisations to **identify and address the needs that can arise** in an ongoing implementation, for example through adaptations within the limits that are set in the agreement.

Multilevel Approach

The partner organisations are intervening at different levels: The national level is responsible for policy-making, whereas the local level of the district works on the implementation of policies and laws. Interventions at the **local level** allow partner organisations to **monitor how the laws and policies are implemented**. The fact that evidence is collected at the grassroots level and presented to policy makers by the very persons who have collected and analysed it enables them

to **successfully campaign for the improvement of laws and policies at the national level**.

Development Advisors and Local Experts

GIZ-development advisors facilitate capacity development for partner organisations in collaboration with international experts through training and coaching of their staff. The **development advisors closely support partner organisations** in different areas, such as organisational development, gender mainstreaming, technical advisory for planning and implementation, monitoring and evaluation, national and international human rights cooperation, and resource mobilisation.

Local experts, who are employees of these partner organisations, **lead the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the projects**, that are funded through local subsidies by the Rights-Based Program. They are counterparts to the development advisors but also participate in the implementation of other projects in their organisations.

The work in tandem of the development advisor and the local expert makes the work a success since the international experience on the one hand and the knowledge and experience of the local context on the other hand allow **addressing the work holistically with the expertise of both sides**.

Local Subsidies

Local subsidies **support partner organisations in their learning journey** through project implementation. These are small grants that are disbursed to partner organisation accounts to help them **implement the project that they themselves have designed**. They therefore play an important role in applying and internalising what is learnt through capacity development sessions.



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