

SDSR/GIZ Project, Burundi: Tools for Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health

Protecting the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people with disabilities

Support Burundi's *Union des personnes handicapées du Burundi* to ensure a better future for these particularly vulnerable young people!

To be young and disabled in Burundi

Whether you suffer from blindness, deafness, motor disability, albinism or intellectual impairment, and whether the disability dates from birth or was acquired in the course of a lifetime, living with a disability is an immense challenge in all societies.

In Burundi, the stigma faced by persons living with a disability is sometimes compounded by sociocultural factors such as the belief that the birth of a disabled child is a divine punishment for the parents' misdeeds. This prejudice causes families to hide their disabled members and contributes to the fact that barely 10% of these children attend school. Tragically, very few achieve a sufficient level of schooling and income to be able to fully integrate into society and start a family.

UPHB, Burundi's leading advocate for persons with a disability

The *Union des personnes handicapées du Burundi* (UPHB – Union of Disabled People of Burundi), founded in 1989, is a collective of 45 associations active in all regions of the country. UPHB 'promotes a society where the disabled person is well off and participates fully in community and national development by enjoying all their rights in Burundi.'

The UPHB pursues this mission through two main avenues:

- Direct support, especially for children and young people, in inclusive education, empowerment and socio-professional development, with promotion of savings and credit groups and income-generating activities
- Intensive lobbying and advocacy for an inclusive legal framework in Burundi: UPHB is a promoter of the 'Law on the organic framework of the rights of people with disabilities' of 10 January 2018 and its National Implementation Policy of 19 June 2019. UPHB is a partner of multiple sector ministries and national and international NGOs. As a member of several regional structures, UPHB is also active outside Burundi.

Too often, school and health programmes, like the larger society, forget that disabled youth have the same sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs as other young people their age, leaving them defenceless against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.



Peer educators in training

Already disadvantaged due to their disability, this lack of knowledge makes these young people – especially girls – even more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This threat is compounded by incorrect beliefs widespread in Africa, e.g. that sex with a girl who has a mental disability or cerebral palsy brings good luck.

A shared vision and a promising collaboration

By promoting schooling and financial independence for young people with disability, UPHB opens a door to their future. But well aware that SRH is part of the development of the whole person, in 2020 the UPHB found a committed partner in the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH* (GIZ) through the project 'Strengthening health structures in the field of family planning and sexual and reproductive health and rights' (SDSR). Commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the project is implemented in partnership with the National Reproductive Health Programme (PNRS) of Burundi's Ministry of Public Health and AIDS Control.

An adapted and participatory approach

To start their collaboration, the partners UPHB and GIZ conducted enquiries in the SDSR project's three intervention provinces – Mwaro, Muramvya and Gitega – to identify the SRH needs of young people living with disability, as well as the centres, associations and inclusive schools where they could be reached. These charitable structures are mainly organised by religious denominations. Based on the location of the 18 selected facilities, three health centres in each province were chosen to serve as referral centres.

The enquiries revealed a critical lack of access to SRH information and services for young persons with disability. Health staff had not been trained on how to deal with disabled people – let alone concerning SRH – and many health centres lacked physical accessibility.

To enable the nine 'referral' health centres to properly accommodate young people with disability, they were provided mobility equipment, including wheelchairs and crutches. More importantly, 43 staff members were trained on inclusive SRH for disabled people.

But before disabled youth dare to consult the health centre on such intimate matters, they need knowledge about SRH. For maximum impact on this particularly sensitive and vulnerable group, the partners chose a 'peer educator' approach: Indeed, what could be more reassuring than hearing another young person with disability discuss shared experiences and perceptions?

Selected on recommendation of their specialised educators, 90 disabled youth – 45 girls and 45 boys – were trained as peer educators in SRH, taking into account the particularity of their respective disabilities. They hold information sessions, either in the form of 'clubs' in inclusive centres and schools, or awareness-raising sessions in the associations of disabled people. Since September 2021 they have reached over 1500 disabled youth – with a majority of girls – with messages on responsible sexuality, SGBV and 'knowing how to say no to sexual solicitations'.

Would you like to know more?

To discuss how your institution could support UPHB's actions to protect the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people living with disabilities, please contact : M. Vianney Kirajagaraye, Directeur du Centre de services, UPHB, at kiravian201@yahoo.fr, (+257) 22229610, 79918102 ou 76534618

A solid foundation for moving forward

There is already an improvement in the knowledge of the young people who have been targeted, and a greater willingness to go to the health centre. The partnership with GIZ has laid a promising foundation for the sustainability of this action by UPHB, including the following resources:

- 90 active and motivated young persons living with disability as peer educators in youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (YSRHR), trained for participatory sensitisation
- A YSRHR awareness manual – 'Victorious Youth' – developed jointly by the SDSR project and religious denominations
- A training guide on inclusive care for health workers
- A UPHB focal point in each province, trained to coordinate activities
- The community networks set up around the health centres with support from the SDSR project.
- UPHB's complementary programmes that promote the social inclusion of persons with disability.

“Being a peer educator has forced us to be role models in sexual and reproductive health. Participants in the awareness sessions come back for clarification and referrals to the health centre.”

A disabled peer educator on YSRHR

Published by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH* Registered offices Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Projet Renforcement des structures de santé dans le domaine de la planification familiale et de la santé et des droits sexuels et reproductifs (SDSR) au Burundi – Phase 3

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As at June 2022

Photo credits GIZ/Antoinette Niciteretse

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On behalf of Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany

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