



Fidelie Bivugire owns a small business importing and selling artisanal crafts. Fidelie lives in Burundi, and is a member of a COSOPAX group. Photographer: Michael Stulman

Integrating Social Cohesion Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC

CASE STUDY 2: WOMEN CROSS-BORDER TRADERS UNITE IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

In the COSOPAX (Commerçantes Solidaires pour la Paix/Région des Grands Lacs) program, CRS and four diocesan partners created robust socio-economic networks of cross-border women traders to bolster trade and peace in Central Africa's Great Lakes region of Rwanda, Burundi, and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Over six years, CRS united 120 women across borders to form strong bonds through reconciling deep-seated divisions driven by mutual fear, suspicion, and prejudice. At the same time, CRS and partners provided entrepreneurship training and established Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) to improve the women's business acumen.

Project results demonstrate that combining social cohesion with economic strengthening efforts produced mutually beneficial outcomes.

As the women became more economically secure, they stepped into respected roles of community leaders and advocates for peace in communities recovering from conflict. Forging stronger personal and working relationships with other women traders contributed to more income for savings and

Countries: Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo

Project location: Cross-border areas of Cyangugu (Rwanda), Bujumbura (Burundi), and Bukavu and Uvira (DRC) in the Great Lakes region

Target population: 120 female cross-border traders, 50 SILC groups with 1,500 members.

CRS' role: Implemented the pilot and scaled the project

Duration: 2013-2020

Donor: CRS private funds

Partners: Diocesan Commissions for Justice and Peace in dioceses of Bujumbura, Bukavu, Uvira and Cyangugu

household expenses, joint decision-making with husbands, and elevated respect and influence from family, neighbors, and community members. Collectively, they improved women's economic justice and rights by organizing public events against illegal taxes.

THE COSOPAX PROGRAM

COSOPAX aimed to increase solidarity among women traders by breaking down long-harbored mistrust and fear between bordering communities. It focused on moving past individual and collective trauma to embrace prospects for peaceful and positive co-existence. The program's first phase supported 60 women traders, but participation doubled in the second phase (2017-2020) to 120 women in the same areas. The original 60 women took charge of the next generation of COSOPAX traders by replicating and expanding training on conflict management and entrepreneurship.

The healing process enabled women to overcome division and build bridges with women traders in other countries. Conflict transformation training helped participants assess and manage conflict in their own lives and empowered them to become a positive force for change in the broader community.

“Applying improved business management associated with social cohesion skills was a good opportunity for new discoveries. My life changed dramatically ... [and] the prejudices that I had towards the Congolese and Burundians ended. From the first SILC loan of RWF 20,000 [approximately \$20] I got in 2016, I'm now eligible to get RWF 1,000,000 [approximately \$1,000] and can pay it back on time, which increased my household social-economic status”. Eugenie Mukarugwiza, COSOPAX Cyangugu participant

COSOPAX supported the women with opportunities to strengthen their capabilities through entrepreneurship training and the establishment of SILC groups within each diocese. The women gained skills to improve their businesses and capacity to fund short and longer-term needs. The SILC groups strengthened members' solidarity, such as helping each other cover expenses for the birth of a baby, visiting a sick family member or comforting the hopeless. CRS trained participants in advocacy and leadership, skills that fostered more self-confidence in their new role of promoting peaceful cohabitation.

MAIN PROJECT INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

Empower women with conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches

CRS and partners applied the 3Bs and 4Ds¹ approach to support individuals and groups to build understanding and tolerance for intergroup solidarity and cohesion through internal reflection and a perspective that prioritizes strengths and commonalities rather than weaknesses and differences during interactions with others. This process led the women to form meaningful relationships with other women traders within the communities. They collaborated to mediate conflicts with their neighbors and fellow traders, advocated for peace, and

organized peace marches, community events, and meetings with officials. Increased trust and solidarity among the COSOPAX women, regular information sharing and greater collaboration all contributed to strengthening the women's economic results.

Empower women with economic capacity building for long-term peace

COSOPAX women established SILC groups to encourage savings and develop financial literacy. The women, who typically report low literacy and numeracy skills, gained access to credit to meet household needs, such as school supplies or emergency medical costs, and grow their businesses. Implemented alongside SILC groups, entrepreneurship training gave women the tools to manage their business better and ultimately increase their profit and economic well-being. During a series of cross-border workshops, CRS and local partners trained and equipped the women with skills to implement joint income-generating activities, such as making paper bags, organizing events, and processing fruit juice.

Equip women with crosscutting skills of advocacy and leadership

Trainings equipped COSOPAX women with advocacy and leadership skills. They mapped out the top advocacy needs and determined the level of intervention using different styles of advocacy, leadership, and communication. This fostered greater self-awareness of their potential and ability to influence others' behavior and resist negative influences. Interactions served to create strong alliances among women and recognition by community leaders and local authorities. The COSOPAX women have exerted their influence by issuing regular press releases and providing testimony at a range of public events in Bujumbura, Uvira, Bukavu and Cyangugu.

RESULTS OF INTEGRATION

- The territory of Uvira officially deeded land to COSOPAX women for a permanent office.
- The COSOPAX women in Uvira, Cyangugu and Bukavu successfully advocated for clarification and proper application of the tax regime. As a result, the Congolese Customs Authority held trainings for customs officers, leading to a reduction in harassment for illegal taxes.
- In 2017, the UN peacekeeping force in Uvira invited COSOPAX women to participate in a sub-regional platform on peacekeeping.
- The COSOPAX Cyangugu Association created a culture of providing weekly food assistance to the vulnerable and sick at Gihundwe Hospital and quarterly support to St François d'Assise Center for handicapped children.

¹ CRS' 3Bs (Binding, Bonding, Bridging) peace-building approach and 4Ds of Appreciative Inquiry (Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver) method