



A child in one of the TEP  
classes in Butare, Burundi

# Combating social exclusion in post-conflict recovery: education and disability in Burundi

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Since independence on 1st July 1962, Burundi has suffered a series of political crises and inter-ethnic violence which left an estimated 300,000 dead and created waves of displacement, both internally and externally. Over 800,000 Burundians fled to neighbouring countries, particularly Tanzania, and at the height of the conflict there were also around a further 800,000 people in internal displacement (including up to 125,000 school children). Armed conflict in Burundi finally ended in 2008 and improved political stability since 2002 has brought some 500,000 refugees home from exile, as well as the return of the majority of IDPs<sup>1</sup>. However, enormous challenges remain in the areas of post-conflict reconstruction, national reconciliation, reinforcement of the rule of law and the provision of public services.

## Difficulties obtaining information about disabilities in Burundi

Information relating to Burundians with disabilities generally is scarce and statistics

for disabled children in particular are virtually non-existent<sup>2</sup>. Agencies working with disabilities in Burundi base their rough calculations on the World Health Organisation's estimate that around 10% of any given state's population is likely to be disabled. Burundi has approximately 3.6 million children under 15<sup>3</sup>, which suggests that about 350,000 are disabled. There is also very little information about the types of disabilities that affect young Burundians and what little information there is generally relates to physical disabilities. Mental illness is often seen as a fate for which nothing can be done. Many physical disabilities are linked to injuries during the conflict but not all. Although Burundi is now at peace, there are estimated to be hundreds of thousands of small arms circulating. In 2008 alone, 1,262 people were reportedly injured by explosive devices<sup>4</sup>; many of these incidents involved grenades being lobbed into family homes to settle local grievances (often relating to land), which inevitably puts children at risk. Burundi is also one of the poorest countries in the world<sup>5</sup>, with high risks of debilitating diseases and a very

limited health care system; there is therefore very little therapeutic care and although some prosthetics and wheelchairs are available they are often unaffordable. There is also very little support for mental health issues.

## Challenges for the Education Sector

The conflict crippled the education sector in Burundi, since it led to the destruction of schools, infrastructure and educational materials as well as the displacement and loss of qualified teachers. Peace has also brought considerable challenges, since the return of thousands of refugee children creates even greater pressure on very limited resources. To its credit, the Government of Burundi (GoB) has since 2005 implemented a policy of free education for all children up to the age of 15, which has substantially increased the number of children in primary education<sup>6</sup>. However, many children have<sup>7</sup> and are still missing out and young disabled people are especially at risk of social exclusion. There is no government data on the

1 Exact number of IDPs in Burundi is not known. In 2002 there were approximately 281,000 IDPs in 230 sites (GoB/UNFPA, 2002) and by 2005 this dropped to 116,000 in 170 sites (UNOCHA, 2005). Today the numbers are estimated to be about 100,000. Although there is very little analysis, IDP children do not appear to have particular problems accessing education over and above the population at large.

2 The Ministry for National Solidarity, the Repatriation of Refugees and Social Reintegration is proposing to carry out a survey in March 2010

3 Government of Burundi's Development of Education and Training Sectorial Plan 2009-2016, page 17

4 Small Arms Survey Report Burundi 2009 [www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org) [Analyse de la Violence Armée au Burundi]

5 Human Development Index 2009, Burundi is 174th out of 182 countries.

6 For the school year 2008/9 89.7% of children between the ages of 7-12 were enrolled in school (2009, GoB)

7 Between 1999-2000 school fees tripled which resulted in priority being given to male able-bodied children

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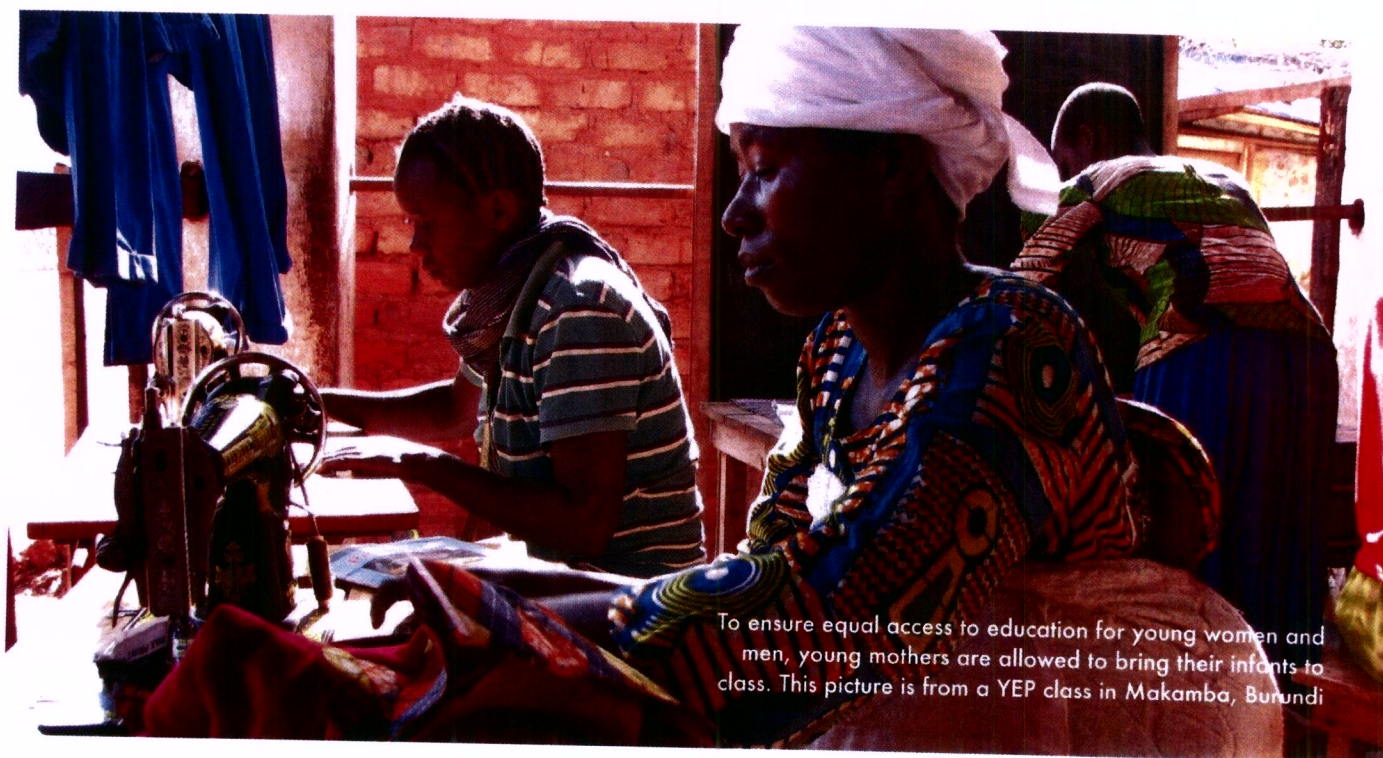
**"Before learning this trade, I was entirely dependent on my four brothers as I was unable to work on the land or to do other things."**

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numbers of disabled children attending school and there has also been very little official analysis of the extent to which disabled children are excluded from the education sector and the causes of this exclusion. The reasons are likely to be both practical and cultural. In a country where the average journey is at least two kilometres, the roads are very limited and the footpaths wind across steep *collines* (hills), it is very difficult for children with physical disabilities to access school without significant support from their family. Those who do get there usually have some self-mobility, but then find that the classrooms are not easy to access, that there is little in the way of special assistance and that discrimination is commonplace. Ensuring sensitivity to disability in the school environment is difficult in any context and is even more challenging where teachers are not taught effective ways of managing diverse classes, or how to handle or challenge discriminatory behaviour in the classroom. Since Burundi is the least urbanised country in Africa and 90% of the population rely on small-scale farming to survive, it is perhaps not surprising that those not physically able enough to be agriculturally productive are marginalised and often condemned to menial and low-paid jobs, with little priority given to their education by families and communities. Although there is no specific analysis in Burundi, evidence from around the world suggest that disabled girls are doubly disadvantaged due



By the help of a wheelchair this girl is able to access school.



to expectations about their social roles and gender-based discrimination. Class sizes are very large (on average around 83 children per class<sup>8</sup>) and there is little psychosocial support for children traumatised by the conflict; it is therefore likely that drop-out rates for children with mental illness are high.

### Inclusive education in Burundi

Burundi has some special education facilities for children with physical disabilities, many of which are run by religious organisations<sup>9</sup>, but these have a very limited capacity and cannot assist many children. The challenges are also enormous for agencies working with the GoB in the mainstream education sector. Although Burundi has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there are no national policies directly targeting disabled persons. The GoB's Education Sector Plan 2009-2016 however

refers to disabled children and envisages three programmes in the long term: an evaluation of the numbers and problems affecting disabled children; programmes to improve accessibility for disabled children to schools; and a study of programmes and lessons learned in neighbouring countries (Uganda and Rwanda) who have improved access to secondary and further education.

### NRC's experience in Burundi

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has been in Burundi since 1997 and implemented its first education project (known as the Teacher Emergency Package or "TEP") in 1999. The TEP is an accelerated learning programme where learners cover the first two years of primary education in one school year. The objective is to assist children who have missed school due to conflict to catch up and reintegrate into the formal system. In

2005 NRC set up the Youth Education Pack ("YEP"), which is a basic vocational training course for young men and women over the age of 15 that also includes literacy classes, life skills education and business skills training. Through the NRC Education policy, the organisation is committed to ensuring access to education for "vulnerable individuals and groups", including children and youth with special education needs. NRC Burundi has put policy into practice through the following steps:

*No discrimination policy adopted and priority given to disabled children/youth:* From the inception of both the TEP and YEP projects, NRC has included disability in the selection criteria for students and has actively encouraged the participation of disabled children and youth. Parent-teacher committees are involved in selecting out-of-school children and youth and are actively involved in identifying and enrolling disabled learners to the programs.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Burundi, Ministry of Education annual statistics 2008-2009

<sup>9</sup> Government of Burundi, Development of Education and Training Sectoral Plan 2009-2015. There is no specific policy yet in relation to the education of children with disabilities but the Government does however support some of them with a small grant.



YEP learners learning income generating skills in a carpentry workshop

***Building community support and awareness:*** NRC works closely with communities when setting up, implementing and evaluating education programs in Burundi. The aim is to strengthen community support for the right to education for all including marginalised children. To ensure inclusion of disabled learners, NRC education staffs promote the rights of disabled youth and children.

***Ensuring accessible infrastructure:*** The physical school environment in Burundi often acts as a barrier to inclusion, as schools are inaccessible to disabled learners. NRC constructs all TEP classrooms with easy accesses and provides extra school furniture for learners with physical disabilities who need extra space. Other initiatives include supporting young learners in the YEP vocational training programme to set up their workshops in locations close to their homes making travel to work feasible, building all TEP classrooms with easy accesses and providing extra school furniture for children with disabilities.

***Recruitment and teacher training:*** The role of teachers is crucial in creating an enabling, inclusive learning environment. Government teachers participating in the NRC programme are trained on working with vulnerable and traumatised children. Where possible NRC advocates for the recruitment of disabled teachers and artisans to schools and centres close to their homes and if necessary finances replacement teachers for physical education. It is difficult however to find

and recruit disabled teachers and artisans, which means that the programme loses out on role models for both disabled and able-bodied youth and children in the schools and learning centres.

***Advocacy for changes in education policy:*** The Education Working Group (comprising a number of international agencies including the Norwegian Refugee Council, Handicap International, UNICEF, CARE and IRC and others) has successfully advocated for a change national classroom standards. All new government classrooms will now have easy access, ramps and larger windows to assist partially-sighted children. UNICEF Burundi is also implementing a child-friendly schools project which includes components such as child-centred learning, transparent school management and community participation, as well as better designed classrooms. These are important steps towards the creation of a more inclusive learning environment for disabled as well as able-bodied youngsters.

Since starting education programs in Burundi, NRC has gradually been moving towards a more inclusive education response. Despite enormous challenges, NRC's experience so far is encouraging. Gaspard, a young disabled man from Makamba province in Southern Burundi, describes how a vocational training programme has helped

him: "Before learning this trade, I was entirely dependent on my four brothers as I was unable to work on the land or to do other things. I used to have to beg at the market sometimes. Since I have learned how to repair shoes and work with leather I am independent. I have been able to build a house and I am married.... I would like to thank my former classmates who shared the start up kit with me so I could start a business close to my house". Nestor, another graduate shares his experience: "I used to beg to be able to eat even from the people who run this workshop! Now I can rent my own workshop and can feed my little sisters. I even pay for their school expenses and their uniforms."

## A future of inclusive education

Education is a basic right – at all times and for all children. The Government of Burundi has taken important step towards achieving education for all, but children and youth with disabilities remains particularly marginalised. Mapping of who is excluded from learning and how barriers can be minimised is essential, to inform policy and delivery of education.

In countries recovering from prolonged conflicts, there are often a huge number of competing demands on scarce resources. The physical and human infrastructure of public service provision has generally been severely degraded and therefore struggles to cope with the pressure of mass return from displacement and the high level of need among those affected by the conflict, as well as the burden of public expectations. In such situations, vulnerable social groups can easily become excluded or overlooked in the provision of key public services, even though they are often the ones in greatest need. The example of Burundi shows the importance of working with government, civil society, other humanitarian agencies and the local population through advocacy and practical measures to ensure that the needs of a highly vulnerable and traditionally marginalised section of society are taken into account. Educational and vocational training programmes of the type implemented by NRC assist in the reintegration and stabilisation process by providing key skills for life and work, and also offer the opportunity of positive cultural change. Education for all can only be reached through an inclusive approach, where the learning needs of all children and youth are ensured. ■