

Holistic approach to Peace-building and Biodiversity Conservation in Rwanda: Success Stories, Best Practices from Communities Working with GER- Rwanda



Experience learning -Agroecology practices Nduba-Gabo in 2023 Rwanda and USA Youth 2023

1.0 Executive Summary

The Global Initiative for Environment and Reconciliation (GER) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) legally registered in Rwanda in 2016 with vision to see people living in harmony with themselves and the nature. Its mission is to support the process of peace-building and community development in Rwanda, and the Great Lakes region.

The organisation also facilitates training and interactions with communities, policy makers, religious leaders, and young generations for healing, improving relationships and livelihoods, ecosystem restoration and connecting people with nature to support social cohesion in the country.

From last year (2022) and this year (2023), GER has continued to organize group discussions and workshops in various communities in Rwanda on development activities that center on biodiversity preservation as well as peace-building efforts to cope with climate change.

Thereafter, there have been continued examination of case studies and field visits to assess the application of the knowledge learnt. Equally, there has been discussions with partners to strengthen collaboration.

2.0 SCOPE OF WORK

The major points covered during the group discussions and workshops in various communities in Rwanda, included, among others:

- Sharing and exchanging knowledge, especially the traditional knowledge of communities, learning from the elderly, on agricultural activities connected with the conservation of biodiversity: for instance, the production of compost.
- Preserving traditional seeds and traditional trees and discussing the importance of seeds used as medicinal plants, as well as food for people and animals, producing pesticides, preserving Rwandan culture and practices that help to reconcile Rwandans.

3.0 SUCCESS STORIES

Through this active engagements and visitations, members of the communities proudly shared their stories. One of them, Mr Rutabana Jean Damascene, representing a group working with GER-Rwanda, narrated that:

“We formed an association because we want to reconcile, to unite following the bad history that befell our country, (referring to the Genocide against the Tutsi in April 1994);

Our association include members of all ethnic groups, that is people from the families of genocide survivors, and those from families involved in the Genocide. Therefore, while uniting, we were looking for a long-term solution that can help us re-unite as we needed to embrace peace-building activities that do not harm our ecosystem and protect our environment, farming activities that preserve the environment, such as the cultivation of bananas, pineapples, livestock activities such as lending each other livestock (cows and pigs); which help us to build capacities for ourselves, for our families and neighbours.”

Further, one of the young people making the Abunzubumwe associations **Yankurije Claudine** told us:

“We grouped ourselves together as young people who are looking for solutions for our problems. We carry out activities that preserve our environment, such as producing fruit trees, trees that comply with crops, and after some training, we planted some of the traditional seeds and trained

other young people in High school, we planted a tree of unity and reconciliation. We're also giving one another sheep as livestock amongst us.” While **Mukashya Dancille** said:

“I'm grateful that our group discussions took place at my home, after the filed study we had with the help of GER-Rwanda, we continued to seek from ourselves the capacity and increase knowledge here and there to preserve our culture, use traditional tools, plant traditional fruits as well as traditional trees that were very important to our lives and culture as Rwandans.”

2.1 BUGESERA

In Bugesera District, Ms. Mushimiyimana Dative narrated:

“Our group is named “*Ubumwe-buzira-mbereka*” (Unity-without-double standards), we started as a young film actors, and later found that even though they were united to play a movie, they disagreed on a number of issues because some of them come from the families of Genocide perpetrators and others from families of Genocide survivors.

Then we grouped together and bought a farmland; we grow banana to unite us, we cultivate it together, plant it, mulch it, we get together and craft some of the most valuable traditional tools (a basket is very important in our culture), we unite parents and family members of our group. We are working in high school, mobilizing them on unity. Our Sector became number one (1) in unity and reconciliation in 2022.

Later, we continued to think together to find activities that help us continue to work together as a group and continued agriculture with a focus on environment conservation, capacity building, creating one of the insecticides but we introduced a variety of its species that does not harm the ecosystem, using pepper and some other appropriate traditional trees (*Vernonia amigdarina*, *nyiramukanabi*, *ibibonobono*, *inyabarasanya*, weeds) and we built our capacity to produce fertilizers using water, ash, grass, urine, cow urine. We are busy mobilizing people in activities meant to preserve our biodiversity and protect our environment.”

While Udahemuka Christian shared that:

“Every day we are faced with climate changes in agricultural activities, some trees and even some of the traditional seeds are disappearing; as young people we've been making a nursery of agroforestry trees. We also take a look at some of the traditional trees and add them to the ones being preserved, and then give them to others for planting”.

2.2 RUHANGO, GASABO and BUGESERA

In Ruhango, Gasabo and Bugesera, through its ad hoc programme, on August 4, 2023, GER-Rwanda came up with a long-term objective - to build lasting peace, unity and stability and improve people's well-being, through the conservation and protection of biodiversity. This also includes community members in Rwanda indulging in the appropriate agriculture that protects the soil.

Besides, in a bid to preserve our ecosystem, our rich culture, our hard-earned peace and unity, and even to celebrate the annual harvest, GER-Rwanda, during the years in discussion, has helped to organize Umuganura festival for its stakeholders in three districts. The aim was to preserve a culture-based biodiversity through community and ecosystem resilience in partnership with the African Biodiversity Network and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

3.0 THE NATIONAL HARVEST DAY CELEBRATION /UMUGANURA

Mr. David Matabaro from Ruhango District, narrated that:

“Umuganura (The National Harvest Day) aims at celebrating not only the national harvest, but is also an historic day in the history of Rwanda where Rwandans enjoy the harvest together, to share it with the disadvantaged, share the harvest to their children, to prepare for the coming harvest season, all of which focused on sharing the ancestral diet, the traditional Rwandan meal, the traditional Rwandan fruits”



Umuganura Day Celebration in Gashora Sector-Bugesera 2023

A group called Urufatiro (The Foundation), one of GER-Rwanda's partners, was later helped to identify the traditional way of doing agriculture, preserving traditional fruits and Rwandan culture.

The role of GER-Rwanda was to encourage them to collaborate with the local administration, to prepare the Umuganura festival, which includes the celebration and preparing for the coming harvest season, sharing the traditional meal, showing the traditional seeds, sharing the harvest with those who did not produce enough.

It was a very important occasion for our ancestors but later was overlooked due to the divisive history of Rwanda that led to the Genocide against Tutsi in 1994; but because of good governance now, working to achieve unity and reconciliation in Rwanda, to preserve the traditional culture, the Umuganura was restored again, as a National Day, it is celebrated on August 4, 2023 with a motto every year.

To celebrate Umuganura, associations working with GER-Rwanda strengthened peace-building and environmental conservation activities in Gasabo (Nduba), Bugesera (Juru), and Ruhango (Musamo) and also organized Umuganura, a Rwandan ceremony celebrated on the first Friday of August where Rwandans celebrate their achievements in agriculture, livestock and other trades contributing to the country's prosperity.

Umuganura also helps to protect and preserve our culture, our biodiversity based on the Rwandan culture, as a way of helping Rwandans to find the solutions from within as well as the sharing of intergenerational knowledge; the theme of this year was the first of its kind: "Umuganura: the source of our unity and the foundation of our stability and self-reliance", people were happy with the results they have achieved including the preservation of their ecosystem and their friendly relations; they are delighted to celebrate these achievements and appreciate the important role played by the Rwandan culture in development.

A representative of Urufatiro, another association working with GER- Rwanda, Mr Matabaro David gave a talk on the history of Umuganura, how it was celebrated, some of the most important activities of that ceremony; he continued to say that celebrating it was a source of joy, a preparation for the coming harvest, celebrating it was an important part of giving young people knowledge and traditional culture; teaching them to respect the ecosystem, to protect the environment, and adapt their activities to climate change.

He expressed his deep gratitude for the role played by GER-Rwanda in joining forces with other people in the preparation of Umuganura, a source of Rwandan unity and commended the leadership of Ruhango District.

4.0 YOUTH WORKSHOP ON LEADERSHIP AND RECONCILIATION.

The founder of GER-Rwanda (Musore Innocent) led the training of youth leaders and youth link-USA. The training was meant to discuss the capacity of each young person in building lasting peace, being a catalyst for positive change, unity and reconciliation.

The training and discussions also centered on helping each other to cope with stress and trauma and prevent the spread of depression in young people, and striving to support the ecosystem. Young people had the opportunity to visit agricultural activities that do not harm the environment.



*Named “Reconciliation Tree” planted with GER and Youth from Nduba Sector -Gasabo 2022
Participants in Youth-Reconciliation leadership training*

Mr. Rutabana Damascene, one of the elders who attended the workshop, discussed how the Rwandan people used to live in harmony before the colonial period; he described how the colonialists destroyed the unity in Rwandans by creating ethnic divisions among them until the Genocide against the Tutsi took place.

He showed how Genocide was stopped, with the dedication and effort that were required to stop it in 1994 and how Rwandans, thereafter, rebuilt themselves from the scratch, and demonstrated how unity and reconciliation is making Rwanda to become one of the most advancing countries in the world.

So far, three people have come out with testimonies recorded in sound and picture after seeking their consent. These are Mukarutesi Clementine who is a Genocide survivor, Gahire Vedaste, whose father is in prison because he was involved in the Genocide, and Sinamenye Christophe, who was involved in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

While the other one, Uwanyirigira Regine testified on resilience: when the genocide took place, she was seven years old and was left alone as her parents were all killed; she talked about her

experiences and how she copes with the consequences of the genocide: she is now a parent, she was able to study and regain hope.

We'd like to thank the survivors of the Genocide against the Tutsi who have demonstrated their resilience by rebuilding themselves and sharing their life histories with others. After that, there was a visit to a tree collectively planted and called "The Tree of Unity and Reconciliation".

5.0 CONCLUSION

GER-Rwanda will continue to support culture and heritage-based activities in Rwanda such as Umuganura since that initiative embraces the core values of Rwanda, including enjoying the national productivity, love of work, building of good relations in the society and helping people to respect their environment also supporting the existing process of peacebuilding and climate actions with focus to next generations.

GER-Rwanda 2023