

The ZFD Rwanda Refugee Programme

Supporting peaceful coexistence between host and refugee communities

The challenge

The recurring rebel atrocities against the local population in Eastern DR Congo and the 2015 election crisis in Burundi have led thousands of Congolese and Burundian citizens to flee their homes and seek refuge in Rwanda. As of September 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counts 134,658 refugees in the country.

As a result of their stressful experiences, coupled with their need to adapt to a new environment, refugees face several challenges, such as insufficient resources and living space, restrictions on some of their rights and unemployment. This situation can lead to conflicts and violence both among refugees and between refugee and host communities that struggle for the same infrastructure and limited resources. Prejudice and mistrust grows on both sides.

Since 2024, the influx of Sudanese refugees to Rwanda has posed an additional challenge for peaceful coexistence in the camps, also due to the cultural differences that need to be dealt with. At the same time, significant budget cuts have been imposed on the UNHCR and the World Food Programme. In this context, it is foreseeable that tensions in and around the refugee camps will increase rather than decrease.

Against this backdrop, the Civil Peace Service (ZFD by its German acronym) refugee programme, in cooperation with the Rwandan Ministry in charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA), focuses its interventions on contributing to peaceful coexistence between host and refugee communities through violence prevention and conflict transformation.

Our approach

Our intervention started in 2014 as a component of GIZ Rwanda's ZFD core programme and became a stand-alone programme in 2022. Contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), its two fields of activity are:

- Peace education and conflict transformation
- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

To strengthen a culture of peace among its target groups, the Programme builds on the expertise in peacebuilding of its local partner organizations: Vision Jeunesse Nouvelle (VJN), Église Évangélique des Amis au Rwanda (EEAR), the Legal Aid Forum, the National Organization of Professional Trauma Counsellors (ARCT-Ruhuka) and Life Wounds Healing Association (LIWOHA). Through creative and interactive methods, such as educational cinema, forum theatre, and sports, young people practice constructive ways of dealing with conflicts, promote dialogue and build mutual understanding. Additionally, the Programme trains service providers and works with local leaders from in and around the camps on conflict management techniques. Regarding psychosocial interventions, together with its partners, the Programme strengthens people's mental health and helps them overcome trauma. Using community-based approaches, it promotes social skills, knowledge on mental health conditions, representation of interests and networking. All Programme interventions are framed by the Do-No-Harm approach. In 2025, Prison Fellowship Rwanda (PFR) and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC) became new ZFD partner organisations.

The ZFD's technical team consists of three national and two international peace advisers who, backed up by administrative staff, support the peacebuilding activities of the partner organisations.

Project name	Promoting peaceful coexistence through psychosocial support, peace education, and non-violent conflict resolution for refugee and host communities
Commissioned by	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Project region	Rwanda
Lead executing agency	Civil Peace Service (Ziviler Friedensdienst, ZFD)
Duration	2014 - 2026



L. to r.: Youth living in and around Mugombwa refugee camp practice sports together, animated by staff from VJN. The ZFD advisor and the local peace advisor of EEAR during a training on conflict transformation for so called peace ambassadors. These are local leaders from refugee camps and host communities that become agents for peace.

The benefits

The ZFD refugee programme implements activities in and around Kigeme, Mugombwa and Mahama refugee camps as well as with Huye urban refugee population. The first two camps are located in the southern, the latter in the eastern province of Rwanda. These three camps host a total number of almost 100,000 refugees (UNHCR 2024).

The main target group of the projects implemented jointly by ZFD and its partners are young persons between the ages of 15 and 35. By involving them in cultural and sports activities, as well as community work, they learn to analyse conflicts and how to manage them without resorting to violence. In this way, they become role models who apply peacebuilding methods in their communities and raise awareness. Another initiative are the monthly peace dialogues, where leaders from the camps and host communities exchange and take actions on issues affecting both refugees and Rwandans. When it comes to MHPSS, the Programme offers capacity building opportunities to community-based psychosocial workers who reach out to refugees and host community members. With the support of its two latest partners, the Programme will further strengthen its focus on MHPSS and positive masculinity, especially in and around the Mahama camp, the biggest and fastest growing refugee camp in Rwanda hosting almost half of the country's refugee population.

The ZFD refugee programme together with its partners promotes gender equity and the reduction of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in and around the camps. By allying with key actors and other GIZ projects, it facilitates the access to employment opportunities, internships, apprenticeships, and junior positions for young refugees.

In 2024 the Programme began with the design phase for the construction of a youth centre near Mahama refugee camp. This will be managed by its partner VJN and is meant to be a safe space for youth to participate in sports activities and cultural events, exchange and learn.

An example from the field

"I am a teen mother. I was 17 when I had my child, and it was a very difficult time. Some Community Psychosocial Workers (CPW) from ARCT Ruhuka approached me and helped with my struggles. After I felt better and stronger, I decided that I also wanted to become a CPW to give back what I had received", says Diana Umurera, a 20-year-old Congolese refugee living in Mugombwa refugee camp. She is part of a team of 24 CPWs, refugees that play a

critical role in supporting other refugees experiencing psychological distress, trauma, and social challenges. They receive training on topics such as stress management, active listening, SGBV, from ZFD partner ARCT Ruhuka as well as the ZFD advisor on MHPSS. Using their newly acquired knowledge and skills, they offer individual and group counseling or couples therapy. At the same time, the Programme together with its partner address the CPW's needs and those of their families, creating safe spaces for dialogue and healing. These initiatives showed to have a lasting positive impact on the overall well-being of individuals and families in refugee and other stressful settings.



Top to bottom: Diana, first on the left, exercises with other CPWs after a workshop.

Diana exchanges with another CPW during a training on SGBV.

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