Promoting a rights-based approach in civil society organizations in Rwanda

We empower civil society actors to claim citizens’ rights.

The context

In the preamble of the Rwandan Constitution, Rwanda commits itself to follow the principles of human rights. Accordingly, Rwanda has signed and ratified most human rights treaties and made significant progress, especially in the area of social and economic rights. However, despite the successes achieved, Rwanda still faces challenges in the realisation of some human rights.

Civil society can contribute to the realisation of human rights and development by advocating on behalf of the most vulnerable citizens. However, competition and lack of joint action amongst civil society actors in Rwanda is widespread whereas the government emphasizes the role of civil society in service delivery. In addition, many civil society organizations struggle with capacity gaps in terms of both human resources and financial means.

Our approach

The Rights-based Program (RBP) has existed within GIZ Rwanda since the end of 2013. The strategic design of this program has been developed in close cooperation with Rwandan partners from civil society. GIZ and its partner organisations worked together to identify joint interests and needs, which then formed the basis of the program concept. The rights-based approach represents a shift in the approach to development: from the focus on needs to the focus on rights. Civil society organisations that use the approach work towards development as well as the realization of human rights. They empower people to claim their rights and governments to fulfil their obligations. This combination contributes to sustainable development for all.

Objective: The goal of the RBP is that selected Rwandan civil society organisations position themselves more strongly for the realization of the rights of their target groups, especially for particularly vulnerable groups.

Currently RBP cooperates with seven Partner organisations working on different human rights topics such as children and youth rights, social and economics rights (e.g. access to health care), and gender equality, civil and political rights. The partner organisations receive support from up to five Development Advisors who are advising on the integration of the rights-based approach into programming but also on organizational development, communication, monitoring and evaluation. RBP also finances local experts who are working in the partner organisations and are responsible for mainstreaming the rights-based approach in their respective organisations.

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Photos: Workshops for representatives of civil society partner organizations and development workers of the Rights-Based Programme.
RBP supports partner organizations further through local subsidies for projects, which include the rights-based approach, and especially projects, which are implemented together with other partner organizations to foster cooperation.

The program offers trainings on human rights, gender sensitive programming, the Do No Harm approach, fundraising and organisational development. Next to strengthening individual civil society organisations, the trainings support networking and collaboration between RBP’s partners. The objective is to encourage them to cooperate with each other in order to cover specific human rights issues in a holistic way and to become a stronger voice for vulnerable groups.

The collective learning environment and use of the rights-based approach strengthens actors of Rwandan civil society, rendering their human rights work more effective and promotes the incorporation of internationally recognized norms. Applying the rights-based approach also means that people in the most vulnerable situations benefit from a constructive dialogue between civil society and government institutions, a dialogue that is guided by the international, regional and national legal framework.

Our Impact

GIZ Rwanda’s Rights-based Program has increased the knowledge about human rights within Rwandan civil society organisations and helped them to put the rights-based approach into practice. Nine of RBP’s former and current partners use the rights-based approach and consider human rights during each step of their programming. RBP partners have used the acquired skills to raise awareness on human rights amongst other stakeholders as well. In a range of workshops, they have sensitized duty-bearers such as local authorities, but also journalists, young people and health care providers on issues like stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS or the causes and effects of gender-based violence.

The integration and application of the rights-based approach as well as capacity development in the area of advocacy enabled the RBP partner organizations to launch very effective and successful advocacy campaigns. One joint project of five of our partners addressed various aspects of preventing teenage pregnancies in Rwanda. During the project, 145 teenage mothers received legal aid while 50 teachers and 89 local officials have been trained on child rights as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights. In the course of the project, almost 700 children born by teenage mothers received civil registration. Advocacy by our partners further emphasized the need for access to health services for young people. Two joint campaigns by six organisations have highlighted the successes and challenges of preventing gender-based violence. Through advocacy work, for example, it has also been possible to work towards changes in the penal code that enable girls and women to have easier access to safe abortions. In the area of access to justice, victims of gender-based violence have received better access to counseling services.