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Réseau des Femmes Oeuvrant pour le Développement Rural:

An Organizational Case Study

by:

Jennie E. Burnet
Jacqueline Mukandamage

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Réseau des Femmes Ouvrant pour le Développement Rural

Organizational Case Study by Jennie E. Burnet and Jacqueline Mukandamage

Introduction

Réseau des Femmes Ouvrant pour le Développement Rural is a grassroots network of over 300 women committed to assisting rural Rwandan women in their personal development and thus to contribute to the development of the entire country. Founded in 1986, the organization brings together women with the capacity to analyze and address the problems of Rwandan society, in particular those problems associated with sexual discrimination. The association is recognized as one of the most active Rwandan women's groups and is admired for the way in which it quickly recommenced activities following the 1994 Rwandan genocide and war. The purpose of this case study is to elucidate the factors that enabled the Réseau des Femmes to respond so quickly, and also to determine its impact on the lives of its members, other Rwandan women, and the country's rehabilitation and development. Further, it assesses the role of international assistance and offers guidance to organizations assisting women in post-conflict development contexts.

Réseau des Femmes is unique among Rwandan women's organizations because of its emphasis on membership action. Its major strength is the emphasis on empowerment and autonomy of women at all levels of the organization's activities. Réseau members are expected to initiate projects at the grassroots level, organize association activities in their regions, and take a leading role in Rwandan society. The association's principle strategies for empowering its members and Rwandan women in general are the dissemination of information, training of its members to enhance their ability to act in all sectors of development, and the study of social problems so that effective interventions can be developed and implemented.

This case study reports on Réseau des Femmes' development, activities, and empowerment of women, based on documentary research, open-ended interviews, and focus groups conducted during March 2000. The researchers spoke with members of the Réseau des Femmes National Coordination Committee; executive staff; Réseau members; beneficiaries of Réseau initiatives; national and local government officials; representatives of other women's associations, civil society, and the Catholic Church; and Réseau des Femmes partners and funding agencies. Interviews and focus groups were based on a guide for interviews adapted from the Outline/Guide For Interviews At The Organization Level received from DAI.

Researchers visited three Réseau des Femmes initiatives in rural Rwanda to develop a fuller picture of how the association addresses Rwandan social problems and reaches women at the grassroots level. The three projects visited were:

- **Taba Commune, Gitarama Prefecture:** SEVOTA,¹ was initiated by a member of Réseau des Femmes just after the war and received several inputs and support from Réseau des Femmes. This project is known widely to have had a significant impact on the lives of women in Taba commune following the war. The founder and the association won an international prize in 1998 in recognition of their work.
- **Shyanda Commune, Butare Prefecture:** AVEGA-Duhozanye² was initiated following the genocide and war to assist widows whose husbands perished during the genocide and massacres of 1994. While the association was not created by Réseau des Femmes, it has received many forms of technical and financial assistance from Réseau over the past six years, especially in terms of training its members and encouraging the association to take a leading role in the community and local government.
- **Kinyamakara, Gikongoro Prefecture:** Fonds de Développement Communautaire (FDC) was initiated as a collaborative effort between Réseau des Femmes and the Rwandan government. The goal of this project is to provide local communities with the ability to administer local funds for development and encourage micro-lending to small cooperatives.

These visits were based on the Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal model. Researchers attempted to speak with a wide variety of community members, local government officials, representatives of civil society, project beneficiaries, and outside observers. The objective was to understand how Réseau des Femmes' activities affect local initiatives, how the initiative was viewed by beneficiaries and outside observers, and how Réseau des Femmes was viewed by beneficiaries of the local initiative, by outsiders and by local Réseau members.

The first section of the report examines the history and organization of Réseau des Femmes. Then we discuss the ways that Réseau des Femmes responded to the unique problems of post-war Rwanda. The third section examines Réseau's current activities, major accomplishments, and position within Rwandan society, including the overlap of Réseau's membership with that of other women's associations. The following sections discuss empowerment in the areas of leadership, participation, and changing gender roles. Next, the role of international assistance is addressed. The report concludes with recommendations to Rwandan women's organizations, the international community, and funding agencies.

History and Organization of Réseau des Femmes

The idea of Réseau des Femmes was born in 1984 when several Rwandan and expatriate women working in the area of rural development realized the need for greater reflection on the participation of Rwandan rural women in agricultural planning and development. Initially intended to be a "circle for reflection" and never a women's association, a group of three women

¹ Structure d'Engagement des Volontaires (veuves et orphelins inclus) pour le Travail et l'Autopromotion. (Structure for the Engagement of Volunteers (widows and orphans included) for Work and Self Promotion).

² "Association des Veuves du Génocide d'Avril 1994 – Consolons-nous." (Association of Widows of the April 1994 Genocide – Let's Console Ourselves).

began meeting regularly to think about challenges in promoting the well being of rural women. Slowly, the idea caught on, and women from all corners of the country were encouraged to join. Following meetings, participants would inform others about the discussions.

In 1985, several women in the network attended the 10th anniversary of the Declaration of the International Year of the Woman in Nairobi. Following the meeting, the network reflected on the recommendations made by the convocation so that they could be incorporated into development work in Rwanda. It soon became clear that the “circle of reflection” needed an official status so that its ideas and recommendations would receive full consideration from government ministries and the NGO community. The name, Réseau des Femmes Oeuvrant pour le Développement Rural,³ was chosen because it accurately captured the association’s character and origin. In 1986, the association was officially chartered by about 30 women.⁴ The chartering members of the association included Rwandan NGO workers, civil servants, government officials, expatriates, and representatives of international NGO partners and bilateral assistance agencies.

Mission and objectives

Since its founding, the mission of Réseau des Femmes has been to empower Rwandan rural women to be agents in their own development and in the development of the country. While Réseau members must be “intellectuals” who are “capable of analyzing Rwandan social problems,” Réseau des Femmes’ initiatives attempt to recognize rural women as valuable partners in development matters. The general objectives of the association are to:

- Favor and facilitate exchanges on the best way to promote the participation of rural women in decision-making for sustainable development.
- Make known the needs and resources of the rural environment in general and rural women in particular.
- Promote the creation of adequate services to relieve the overburden of work on rural women.⁵
- Support members in their professional activities linked to involving women in decision-making, the culture of peace, gender equality for sustainable human development, and the education of girls.

³ In English, “Women’s Network Working for Rural Development”. In Kinyarwanda, “Isangano Ry’Abari n’Abategarugori Baharanira Amajyambere y’Icyaro.” The word, “isangano,” in Kinyarwanda means both “network” and “the place where one feels at home and at ease.” Chartering members chose this word over, “ihuriro” which does not capture this sense of warmth and home.

⁴ As Newbury (2000) points out, the early formation of Réseau des Femmes was elitist in character. The association still retains this elitist character in terms of membership, as members must be “intellectuals.” While this elitist character could be faulted “Réseau des Femmes has consistently demonstrated a real commitment to community organization and women’s empowerment” (5).

⁵ Rural Rwandan women have innumerable responsibilities in the family whether or not they still have a husband in residence. For example, rural women must clean the house, cook food, gather firewood for cooking, draw water from sources a kilometer or more from the house, cultivate their fields, go to market, take care of the children, etc. For women whose husbands are in prison is added the duty of procuring, preparing, and carrying food to the prison several days per week.

From these general objectives, the association develops operational ones that set specific goals to guide the annual workplan. The chief strategies employed to achieve these goals are: 1) the dissemination of information to those involved in making decisions about rural development; 2) the training of members and rural women to reinforce their respective capacities, and 3) the study of Rwandan social problems to enhance policy-making. The major themes that Réseau des Femmes has addressed since the 1994 war and genocide include:

- poverty eradication,
- lightening the workload of rural women,
- reproductive health and AIDS education,
- eliminating violence against girls and women,
- human rights and women's rights in particular,
- gender and development,
- women and decision-making, and
- education of young girls.

Organization

The association is organized in five autonomous regional networks that carry out its annual workplan as approved by the General Assembly of Members which meets once every year. The General Assembly elects the National Coordination Committee which is responsible for supervising activities between general meetings. Each regional network is led by a Regional Coordination Committee that is elected every 2 years by the Regional Assembly. The Regional Assembly, composed of the members working in the region, elaborates an annual program of activities which are realized by its members. Today, Réseau des Femmes has over 300 members engaged in implementing activities in all the prefectures of Rwanda. Every Réseau des Femmes' member is attached to the regional network where she lives so as to increase her participation and to effectuate regional activism and autonomy.

Réseau des Femmes has a limited staff of 13 members whose principle responsibilities are to coordinate regional activities; ensure the dissemination of information through the organization's newsletter, the library, and recently-added video studio; and to organize and conduct trainings for its members and others. The association maintains a Consultants Collective that provides technical assistance to member initiatives in the regions and conducts research and training for the organization and outside bodies⁶.

A key to the organization's effectiveness is that its initiatives are not necessarily integrated into the association. Rather, Réseau members engage local women, local initiatives, and cooperatives directly. This policy has been present from the very beginning of the association's work. For example, in the period before the war, the Réseau was instrumental in the creation of other women's associations to assist women in specific ways (Newbury 2000:5). In the 1980s, Réseau members realized that a major problem facing Rwandan women both in the cities and in the rural

⁶ Jacqueline Mukandamage, the local researcher for this organizational case study, is a member of this Consultants Collective.

environment was a lack of access to credit. Rwandan women did not have the necessary capital to back regular bank loans⁷. Based on the experiences of women in other countries and using the World Women Banking model, several Réseau members founded DUTERIMBERE to give Rwandan women access to small loans to encourage entrepreneurship.

Similarly, Réseau members recognized that Rwandan women and children faced serious violations of their rights on a daily basis. Most Rwandan women and children were not educated about the rights guaranteed to them under international or Rwandan law. As a result, several Réseau members founded HAGURUKA. This new association serves as a mechanism to advocate the rights of women and children, provides legal services and consultations to Rwandan women and children, and educates Rwandans about women and children’s rights. In the early 1990s, Réseau members recognized the need for an umbrella women’s organization to avoid duplication of efforts among Rwandan women’s associations. They created Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe,⁸ which has won numerous prizes for its efforts since the war.

Coping with genocide and war

Like all of Rwandan society and women’s associations in particular, Réseau des Femmes was devastated by the events of 1994. Following the war, Réseau des Femmes found that its membership was literally decimated by the massacres and flight of refugees into Zaire and Tanzania. Réseau members who formerly implemented the association’s programs had suddenly become potential beneficiaries in need of the basic necessities. Furthermore, the few remaining members were traumatized by the ordeals of the genocide and war.

The loss in human resources was appalling. In September 1994, Réseau de Femmes found that only three of eight staff members were present and available for work: two had been killed, and three were absent. Remaining members of the volunteer leadership were less than half the number of before the war (see Table 1.) The regional bodies were similarly affected. For example, the formerly vibrant regional network of Gikongoro and Butare found that only three members from before the war were still alive and in the country.

Table 1. Loss of Human Resources in Leadership

| | Total | Dead | Absent or Unknown | Present and Available |
|---|--------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Staff | 8 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| National Coordination Committee | 9 | 0 | 6 | 3 |
| Regional Coordination Committees | 16 | 1 | 8 | 7 |

Beyond the loss of human resources, the infrastructure of the association had also been devastated. The national offices had been looted of all equipment including two vehicles, office

⁷ Rwandan women only gained the legal right to own property in the early 1990s.

⁸ In English, “For Women All of Us Together.”

furniture, and computers. The organization's archives and library retained only a few volumes and boxes of documents. Similarly, the regional bodies had lost all of their physical resources including the solidarity funds for extending small loans. Fortunately, the national association's modest bank accounts remained intact as well as its relationships with its principal partners, NOVIB – Pays Bas and PAC/PRODEVA Canada, who returned to Rwanda quickly following the events.

Restarting activities

Despite these problems, the few remaining members felt the need to meet and reorganize. The earliest initiative following the end of the war was to conduct an assessment of the state of the organization. The subsequent report, *Rapport sur la Situation du Réseau des Femmes Ouvrant pour le Développement Rural après la Guerre et le Génocide d'avril – juin 1994*, clarified the physical, emotional, and moral situation of the organization and made recommendations for restarting activities.

The first general meeting was held in December 1994. Through their discussions, the remaining members realized that "they were still alive and that the will to live among them was strong". From this will to live, they found the strength and initiative to go on living and to bring the association back to life. The first thing to do was to help the members themselves find the stability that they needed and build within themselves the peace and confidence necessary to support themselves and then be able to help others. Then, together they could begin rebuilding Rwandan society. Following the first general meeting in December 1994, surviving Réseau members began conducting awareness meetings in their regions to recruit new members.

The post-conflict situation required a new approach to problem-solving. In fact, the face of society had completely changed, and women had suffered the worst consequences. In addition to the household activities that she had before, the average Rwandan woman was now the head of the household, a widow weakened by the consequences of war and genocide in every sense. She suffered economically because she had lost even the most basic material possessions; she was physically exhausted by the ordeals and morally traumatized by the loss of loved ones. Perhaps the most challenging obstacle was that she was socially isolated because none of the traditional social supports such as extended family or neighbors existed any longer. Furthermore, the country's infrastructure was in shambles as troops on both sides had destroyed public buildings and services in fears of losing the war. Among other new approaches, Réseau members decided to integrate a gender perspective into all of their work and to reinforce their commitment to increasing the role of women in Rwandan society.

A number of internal and external factors contributed to Réseau des Femmes being able to restart activities quickly and effectively.

Internal Factors

Réseau des Femmes members and leaders chose to change problems into opportunities for positive change. The recently-deceased National Coordinator, Vénérande Nzambazamariya, used

to say, “Uri umuti cyangwa uri ikibazo? Hitamo kuba umuti aho kuba ikibazo!” which means, “Are you the problem or are you the solution? Choose to be the solution!” Réseau des Femmes members responded to Vénérande’s rallying cry. What others perceived as problems, Réseau des Femmes members transformed into opportunities. Réseau des Femmes found that it was an opportunity to reinforce the capacities of women through training, through the building of self-confidence so that she could take on a new role that she should play in society. When others said that there were no men and that Rwandan society was comprised of 60% women, Réseau des Femmes lobbied for women-in-development initiatives and incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of Rwandan society. Réseau des Femmes advocated that women to be integrated into decision-making structures and have control over important resources such as access to education and to credit.

Another strength of Réseau des Femmes in the post-war situation was the organization’s spirit of leadership. After the war, the remaining members were professional women who were animated by their volunteerism. These women put their experience and their knowledge at the disposition of Réseau des Femmes in order to re-launch activities. Certainly, this leadership tradition was reinforced by the capable tutelage of the National Coordinator in 1994, Vénérande Nzambazamariya. The commitment and contribution of these remaining leaders was key to Réseau des Femmes’ success. Before the events of 1994, Réseau members had developed leadership capacities which far surpassed those of other women’s organizations. In the wake of the genocide surviving Réseau members wanted to pass on this tradition of leadership to newly-recruited members. The association put in place an extensive training program on a wide range of subjects for new and old members. The training program helped to consolidate the associative life of all members and to infuse the membership with a sense of unity and cohesion around the Réseau des Femmes’ vision.

Finally, there was the firm commitment among members to bring Rwandan society back to life. To fulfill this engagement, the members decided to analyze the situation and then to re-evaluate the mission of Réseau des Femmes to see whether the mission of the association was appropriate to the post-conflict context. The members concluded that the old mission of building rural women’s capacity to be agents in their own development and in the development of the country was not only valid, but exactly the right thing to do. The most important factor in Réseau des Femmes’ continuing success in the post-conflict period is the fact that they committed themselves to the transformation of society in an effort to heal the profound illness which led to the genocide.

External Factors

The Rwandan genocide and war had left an enormous, empty space in which to redefine the role of women in Rwandan society. Because the old molds had been destroyed, Réseau des Femmes members were free to experiment and bring about a revolution in Rwandan thinking. The new leadership of Réseau des Femmes, being sensitive to the gender perspective, took advantage of this empty space to redefine for the good of all Rwandans the “proper” role of Rwandan women.

Furthermore, Réseau des Femmes benefited from the different political situation after the war. Before the war, organizations like Réseau des Femmes, although apolitical, were often perceived as a form of opposition by the regime in place. The single political party, MRND, had a women's branch, URAMA, which also undertook development projects. Other women's organizations were viewed as being in opposition to the single-party line. In addition, women who publicly advocated women's rights were instantly dubbed, "opposition members." Réseau des Femmes had difficulties before the war because of pressure to conform or to remain silent from the Habyarimana regime.⁹ After the war, associations like Réseau des Femmes were viewed as an appropriate response to the desperate needs of Rwandan women. The post-war regime (even if it did so out of desperation rather than out of a commitment to building civil society) encouraged women's associations to participate in rebuilding Rwandan society. The injection of large amounts of emergency aid also bolstered women's associations like Réseau des Femmes.

A final external factor was the link between Réseau des Femmes and the world-wide women's movement. Not long after the war, several Réseau des Femmes members participated in the regional preparation conference for Beijing which took place in Nairobi. This conference exposed the women of Réseau des Femmes to new ideas and opened their vision to a new status for women rather than an improved status for women. The conference also bolstered the moral of participants and gave them new energy which they brought back and shared with Réseau des Femmes members in Rwanda. As part of its commitment to empowering rural women, Réseau des Femmes made sure that Rwandan rural women were represented at these conferences. A member of AVEGA-Duhozanye was part of the Réseau des Femmes delegation at the Beijing conference. Continued participation of Réseau des Femmes members in other preparation conferences, in the Beijing conference, and in follow-up conferences have contributed to bolstering the momentum of Réseau des Femmes members and of the association as a whole.

Results

Réseau des Femmes' recruitment efforts have been very successful in terms of numbers (see Table 2). While a precise census of remaining members following the 1994 events is unavailable, anecdotal evidence indicates that members remaining in September 1994 were less than a third of the membership census of 1993. There are several reasons for recruitment success following the war. In general, there has been a surge in interest in Rwandan women's organizations. Many elite women who returned from exile in 1994 had been active members of women's associations in neighboring African countries, Europe, and North America. They brought with them an enthusiasm for associational life that was new to some Rwandan women. In addition, the amount of emergency, international aid surged in the post-war period. It is not uncommon to see an automatic increase in associational activity when international aid directed at this sector increases. Finally, many Rwandan women had suddenly become widows. These women found themselves faced with a gap in their social lives, as well as an increase in time and autonomy that they did not have before the war. Many Réseau members remark that Rwandan

⁹ At one point, the association was infiltrated by women sent to destroy the association from within.

women turn towards associations when faced with widowhood, whether they are widows of the genocide, war, or life circumstances.

Table 2. Réseau des Femmes Membership Before and After the War and Genocide

| Region | Members | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| | 1993 ¹⁰ | 1998 ¹¹ |
| Central: Kigali Town, Rural Kigali, and Byumba | 38 | 60 |
| East: Kibungo and Mutara | 20 ¹² | 57 |
| South I: Butare, Cyangugu, and Gikongoro | 17 ¹³ | 60 |
| South II: Gitarama and Kibuye | 30 | 68 |
| North: Gisenyi and Ruhengeri | 46 | 60 |
| Total: | 151 | 305 |

The increase in Réseau membership does, however, have its problems. Many members from before the war indicated that some of the newer members do not share the vision or commitment of the association. At times conflicts have arisen within the association between older and newer members over the direction of the association. In addition, the loyalty of newer members of the association is sometimes in question. This problem manifests itself in numerous ways.

For example, the region South I, has recently been having difficulties. The leadership of the Regional Coordination Committee has faltered, and many regional members have become inactive as a result. Many credit the problem to the fact that the Committee members are virtually all new and lack associational experience either within Réseau or in other organizations. Regional activities have come to a complete halt in Butare prefecture and are severely handicapped in Gikongoro prefecture.¹⁴ A particularly experienced, long-term member of Réseau in Gikongoro prefecture admitted to having been made to feel very unwelcome by the new leadership of Regional Coordination Committee. Last year Réseau members in Cyangugu prefecture¹⁵ requested to become an autonomous sub-region to avoid the problems of the region. While the Executive Secretariat is aware of these problems, effective action to solve them has not yet been taken.

¹⁰ Figures taken from "List of Members prior to 6 April 1994" in **Rapport sur la Situation du Réseau des Femmes Ouvrant pour le Développement Rural après la Guerre et le Génocide d'avril – juin 1994**.

¹¹ Figures taken from Rapport de l'Atelier: Analyse Institutionnelle de l'organisation Réseau des Femmes Ouvrant pour le Développement Rural (1998).

¹² The prefecture of Mutara did not exist prior to 1994.

¹³ Réseau des Femmes did not have members or activities in Cyangugu prior to 1994.

¹⁴ The activities of Réseau in Gikongoro will be discussed further below.

¹⁵ Réseau des Femmes is relatively new to Cyangugu prefecture, only having begun about a year ago.

Reintegration of Réseau des Femmes and Rwandan Society

Since 1994, Réseau des Femmes has collaborated with other women's organizations to welcome the internally displaced and returning refugees of all ethnic groups, particularly women. The association organized a training program for its members to actualize their vital human forces to use these forces to assist others. This training began the healing of Réseau members so that they could then intervene effectively in healing society.

On a more fundamental level, Réseau des Femmes assisted in reintegrating the internally displaced and refugees by giving them basic necessities such as clothing, soap, and food. The association put in place a credit system to help members restart economic activities and/or to re-equip their homes. In the region of Gikongoro and Butare, Réseau des Femmes members put in place a center for trauma counseling. This center was at the service of genocide survivors, old case-load returnees¹⁶ and new case-load returnees.¹⁷ With this service, many women recovered little by little and were able to reintegrate into the activities of daily life.

During the period 1994 through 1996, Réseau des Femmes members within Rwanda made a concerted effort to communicate with those members who had gone into exile. They invited the exiled members to return to Rwanda to rebuild their organization and the country together. In this familial spirit, members returning from exile often sought Réseau des Femmes first. Virtually all found that they were warmly welcomed by other members as if by their own families. All of the members of Réseau des Femmes who were in exile and returned rejoined the association and recovered their status as members.¹⁸

Another major initiative to assist in reintegration and reconstruction of Rwandan society was the CAP (Campagne Action pour la Paix)¹⁹ Program. This program was originally conceived within the folds of Réseau des Femmes, but the initiators transferred it to the umbrella organization, Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe because they realized that collaboration from all Rwandan women's organizations was vital for successful implementation. As part of this initiative, Réseau des Femmes developed an expertise in conflict resolution. Réseau des Femmes members benefited from conflict resolution training, and then they trained other women. Another contribution of Réseau des Femmes to the CAP initiative was research and study on Gacaca²⁰ as a mechanism for conflict resolution.

Réseau des Femmes made another important contribution to reintegration of the massive return of refugees at the end of 1996. The organization put into place a system for welcoming the women returning from the camps. This program operated in northern Rwanda and was based in

¹⁶ "Old case-load returnees" refers to those Rwandans (most of whom were Tutsi) who left Rwanda before 1994.

¹⁷ "New case-load returnees" refers to those Rwandans (most of whom were Hutu) who left Rwanda in 1994 and returned in mass in late 1996 and early 1997.

¹⁸ Among this group is even a Réseau des Femmes member currently imprisoned on charges of genocide.

¹⁹ In English, "Action Campaign for Peace."

²⁰ "Gacaca" refers to a "traditional" form of conflict resolution which existed in Rwanda prior to colonialism. The Rwandan government is currently in the process of resurrecting, or more accurately, re-inventing Gacaca to deal with over 120,000 prisoners accused of genocide.

the Nkamira Transit Center in Gisenyi where almost all returning refugees passed when entering Rwanda. It consisted of assisting the refugees, especially the women, by welcoming them, by giving them accurate information on the situation in Rwanda, by offering trauma counseling, and by handing children who were separated from their families over to organizations responsible for reuniting them.

A current Réseau des Femmes' initiative continues to help reintegrate Rwandan women into economic life. The Fonds de Développement Communautaire (FDC) is a collaborative effort among Réseau des Femmes and the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Agriculture. This credit program permits beneficiaries to reintegrate into the economic life of the country. FDC consists of a training program for groupings of men and/or women followed by access to micro-loans. The training program includes sessions on gender and development, the role of leaders in the community, conflict resolution, and managing loans. The purpose is to reinforce the capacities of beneficiaries in the areas covered.

Groups of marginalized people, particularly women, receive preferential consideration for loans over groups of men. According to Spéciose, a Réseau member who supervises the project as a volunteer, the women's groups function better than the men's group and the women are often more regular with their loan payments.

The experiences of one group, Duteraninkunga II, in Kinyamakara commune, Gikongoro prefecture illustrates some of the successes of the FDC credit program. Originally composed of seven women (three of whom were widows), this group lived in extremely poor economic conditions. All of the women were bothered by the fact that they were so poor they could not even afford soap to wash their clothes. One of the women knew how to make soap from her two year exile in Zaire. The women formed a cooperative, and each member paid dues to buy the materials (palm oil and lye) to make the first batch of soap. In November 1998, they received a loan of 294,000 RWF through FDC. With this money they were able to buy additional materials such as molds, buckets, basins, and a stock of raw materials. To date, they have reimbursed 103,500 RWF of their loan. Their production is about 120 bars of soap per week or 500 bars per month. Each month they realize a profit of 10,000 RWF.

Their financial situation has greatly improved. They are each guaranteed a weekly supply of soap for their own personal use or sale. In addition, the group has purchased a cow which has already given a calf and two goats which have already reproduced. The group has also saved 12,000 RWF in a bank account. They affirm that they are proud of the way in which their socio-economic situation has improved. Further, they are proud to be useful to the community by selling their soap at a low price.²¹ The membership has grown from seven to twelve vulnerable women including another widow, a handicapped woman, and three women whose husbands are in prison. With the profits and the 100 RFW monthly dues, the group hopes to assist orphans and other handicapped members of the community.

²¹ If manufactured soap sells for 100 RWF in the local market, they sell their soaps for 70-80 RWF.

Implementation of the FDC project is based on the volunteerism of Réseau des Femmes members in Gikongoro prefecture, as well as the volunteerism of communal officials who serve as local FDC agents. Other than the costs of the trainings and the loan funds, all other daily activities and supervision are provided by Réseau volunteers. There are no paid personnel at the communal or sector levels. Unfortunately, precisely for this reason, the project has not operated well. A program of this size—which has a financing of 120,000,000 RFW and operates in five communes—requires at least one full-time, salaried person to provide regular supervision. Réseau des Femmes had asked IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), the donor agency, to allow funds for this post, but IFAD refused.

The project has been further complicated by the number of intervening bodies which include three government ministries, the Agricultural Development Project of Gikongoro, Réseau des Femmes, communal officials, and IFAD. FDC had to be suspended because funding was blocked for over six months. There is a serious lack in management of the funds already dispersed. The researchers were unable to find anyone who knew what had happened to the funds that had been returned as loan payments. The vast majority of groups that have received loans have not paid them back, and even the “successful” groups are far behind on loan payments.

Finally, difficulties within the Regional Coordination Committee of Réseau des Femmes have resulted in a breakdown of supervision by Réseau members. The director of the Agricultural Development Program – Gikongoro indicated that he had received no response from the Regional Coordinator or from the Committee after having asked several times for a meeting to address the problems with the FDC initiative. Some Réseau des Femmes members from the region have given their own work more attention than to that given to the FDC project. A further complication is the absence of Réseau members in the communes where the project operates.

The problems with the FDC initiative draw attention to several weaknesses of the Réseau des Femmes model. First, regional autonomy can result in organizational failure if the Regional Coordination Committee and regional membership do not fulfill their duties. The inability of the Executive Secretariat to intervene under the organization’s current statute is another weakness. According to the statute, three quarters of the regional members can call a special assembly when such problems arise. It was clear to researchers, however, that regional members were not informed of organizational procedures and were reluctant to “cause conflict” within the association. Secondly, relying solely on volunteers for a project of this magnitude is perhaps not the most appropriate role for volunteerism. Réseau des Femmes should give careful thought to the role of volunteerism in these types of projects. Finally, the problems with the FDC initiative draw attention to the declining role of volunteerism in Rwandan society at a time when society tends more and more towards capitalism and where “no interest, no action” is the catch-phrase best understood.

Current Activities, Accomplishments, and Position

As mentioned earlier, the chief strategies employed by Réseau des Femmes are:

- the dissemination of information to those involved in making decisions about rural development;
- the training of members and rural women to reinforce their capacities, and
- the study of and research on Rwandan social problems.

Giving details about all activities supported by Réseau des Femmes and its members is not possible here, but the following are a few highlights.

The Training Service of the national office ensures the continued training of members in gender and development and support to local training initiatives such as SEVOTA in Taba commune and DUHOZANYE in Shyanda commune. A key to Réseau des Femmes' success in reaching out to all levels of Rwandan society is that training sessions are conducted as "Trainings of Trainers." Recipients of Réseau des Femmes training are expected and encouraged to train other women in rural areas in return.

The Consultants Collective section of the national office oversees on-going research projects by Réseau des Femmes as well as research of interest to the Réseau conducted by other entities. An example of Réseau des Femmes' recent research is the series of studies on women's involvement in decision-making. Another example is the research on Gacaca as a mechanism for conflict resolution that was part of Réseau des Femmes' contribution to the CAP initiative.

A less tangible, and yet vital, activity of Réseau des Femmes is the recovery of self-confidence by Réseau members. The genocide and war had immeasurable psychological and social impacts on Rwandan women. Many Réseau members from all ethnic groups were left without a single family member still alive, without any neighbors, with destroyed houses, with a deep-seated mistrust of their fellow citizens. At the heart of Réseau des Femmes' philosophy and on-going work is the creation of a space where Rwandan women feel safe, accepted, and free to express themselves. When problems within the association arise, the members meet, often informally, to discuss the roots of the problem and to come up with a solution together. Réseau des Femmes' success in this area is discussed at greater length below.

Major accomplishments and measures of success

Reinforcing local capacities

Réseau des Femmes has assisted women in many ways in the post-conflict period. Most evident of its successes are the emerging women's associations at the local level that the organization has fostered. One such association, AVEGA-Duhozanye in Shyanda commune, was initiated following the genocide and war to assist widows whose husbands perished during the genocide and massacres of 1994. Initially, the group was concerned with finding the means to bury their dead and spending time together consoling each other. Eventually, out of the common needs of widows, the association began to implement programs in house-building, trauma counseling, income generation, and agricultural cooperatives. Réseau members trained Duhozanye members and staff on project development, managing entrepreneurial projects, and approaching donor

organizations. As the leaders of Duhozanye began to distinguish themselves in the local community, Réseau des Femmes encouraged them to take on public roles in local governance.

In October 1999, the coordinator of AVEGA-Duhozanye, Spéciose, was named Burgomaster of Shyanda commune and is currently one of only three female burgomasters in Rwanda. Many people credit Réseau des Femmes for having lobbied Spéciose and the association so that she would take the position, and for having lobbied government authorities responsible for appointing her. Both Réseau des Femmes and Duhozanye continue to “accompany” the new Burgomaster in her new work by providing moral support and technical assistance as needed. When the Shyanda football team needed transportation to its matches, the Burgomaster called on Duhozanye to donate use of one of its vehicles. When local elections occurred for administrative posts and the women’s organizational structures, Duhozanye members were well represented among those elected. As the president of Duhozanye remarked, “It’s as if Duhozanye is the Burgomaster of Shyanda commune.” The successes of local women’s associations such as AVEGA-Duhozanye attest to the effectiveness of Réseau des Femmes in reinforcing local capacities.

On the negative side, Réseau des Femmes’ policy of encouraging capable women leaders to take public office risks tying women’s associations too closely to the Rwandan state. Rwanda has a history of excess in state dominance (the genocide being one example) and of efforts to co-opt women’s associations that are deemed to be too independent. Under the Habyarimana government, leaders of women’s associations were sometimes “co-opted” or at least reigned when their husbands were named to important government posts. Today, it is often the women themselves who are named (cf. Newbury 2000:52 footnote 64). This co-optation of women leaders into government posts can create a leadership crisis for women’s associations and thus weaken them. Réseau des Femmes was instrumental in lobbying for the creation of “Grassroots Women’s Structures”²² at all levels of Rwandan government administration. These structures are now in place and a national coordinator was elected in April 2000. While it is unclear precisely what these “Grassroots Women’s Structures” will do, they risk emptying local, regional, and national women’s associations of their leadership.

A danger in AVEGA-Duhozanye’s success is the potential for stifling the growth of other women’s associations in the commune. Currently, there are only a few, small women’s groups in the commune and no other women’s association. Because Duhozanye is well-known within the commune, within Rwanda, and even internationally, potential women leaders from outside the association risk developing an inferiority complex out of fear of having their efforts compared to the widows’ association. Further, because Duhozanye limits its membership to widows of the genocide and massacres, other women cannot benefit from their programs. When outside agencies go to Shyanda commune to start a project or administer assistance, they understandably tend to go to Duhozanye first. If new interventions do not also reach out to the other women’s

²² The “Grassroots Women’s Structures” are a government initiative to have elected women’s representatives in each administrative unit of the country. Elected last year, these structures have not yet taken an active role in most regions of the country.

groups or encourage their growth, a large portion of the commune's population risks being left out of development initiatives.

Fortunately Duhozanye is not completely unaware of this problem. They continue to play an important role in rural development in Shyanda commune and have begun discussing ways to reach out to assist non-members in the community. If the association and the large number of Duhozanye members elected to the "Grassroots Women's Structures" reach out to other women, the potential for continued and expanded development among women in Shyanda is great.

Expertise in gender and development

Réseau des Femmes and its members are recognized nationally for their expertise in gender and development. In cooperation with SNV,²³ Réseau des Femmes wrote and published a Guide to Training in Gender Perspectives. The association's members are regularly called on for their input by other associations. As one member of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe remarked, "Réseau des Femmes is recognized for giving its members sufficient training so that they can intervene effectively." Réseau des Femmes' further success in this area are discussed in detail later in this report under, "Empowerment through Changing Gender Roles."

Research and Publications

Réseau des Femmes has made significant contributions to research and publications on women in development issues in Rwanda. Most recently, the association presented an in-depth study on the Role of Women in Decision-Making Bodies. Many interviewees cited the importance of this report for changing public policy. One short-coming in this area that was cited was the difficulty in finding copies of the report. A greater investment of resources in publishing sufficient copies of reports and making sure that they reach the right people could increase Réseau des Femmes' impact in this realm even more. In addition, the association should consider using new electronic information technologies, such as the Internet, to distribute information. A further weakness of this initiative is confusion over the final report. The majority of people involved in the August 1999 conference in Kigali believed that the report presented there was the final version. The delay in publication of the final version of the report, which will include feedback gathered at the conference, has resulted in further confusion and frustration among those who would like to make use of the report.

Another important research project cited by interviewees was the association's contribution to the World Bank study on Women and Poverty in Rwanda. Réseau des Femmes assisted the World Bank in conducting the study by giving researchers access to the association's network of women throughout Rwanda. Following the publication of the World Bank Report, Réseau des Femmes summarized and publicized the study's conclusions and recommendations.

²³ The Dutch Development Organization, an international NGO known for its support of women-in-development initiatives in Rwanda.

Effective lobbying founded on sound research

Réseau des Femmes has had a great deal of success in influencing government policy vis-à-vis women's issues in the country. A representative of a donor agency put his finger on Réseau des Femmes' effectiveness in lobbying. He said, "Réseau des Femmes succeeds in changing policy because their lobbying efforts are based on sound research conducted by the association."

Réseau des Femmes staff and leaders, as well as government representatives, credit the association for the creation of the Ministry of Gender²⁴ in 1994. Many Réseau members are in key government posts both within MIGEPROF and other government bodies including, the recently appointed Minister of Public Administration (MINIFOP), the Honorable Madame Sylvie Kayitesi Zainab.

Another Réseau des Femmes lobbying success was the promulgation of the inheritance law. The battle to finalize and implement this law which gave women the right to inherit property lasted for over four years. Although the National Assembly passed the law last year, the Constitutional Court rejected it on the grounds that certain clauses of it were "unconstitutional." After being amended, the law was finally put into effect early this year.

The most recent success is Réseau des Femmes' lobbying based on its Women in Decision-Making report. In six months since publication of the preliminary report, the number of women burgomasters has grown from one to three. The number of women in the national cabinet has grown from two to three (two ministers and one secretary of state.) As mentioned previously, the increase in women in government bodies has its drawbacks as well because such posts limit the capacities of these leaders to operate in the domain of civil society.

Reconciliation: Living "Isangano"

As discussed previously, a great deal of Réseau des Femmes' energy since the war has been spent ensuring the reintegration of its own members into the association and into Rwandan society. Relations between Réseau members are unlike those in any other Rwandan women's associations. As one Réseau member said, "Réseau des Femmes is more of a family than an association." The membership of Réseau des Femmes is truly diverse and Réseau members share their experiences of war and genocide with each other with comparative ease. Most members feel welcome and the ethnic problems of the genocide and war do not seem to reside within the association's walls. Many credit the energy, patience, and love of the former National Coordinator, Vénérande Nzambazamariya, for the strides that Réseau des Femmes has made towards genuine reconciliation between its members. The key to Réseau's success in this arena is the creation of a space where members feel comfortable expressing themselves.

The importance of the space for self-expression cannot be understated in Rwandan society today. Historically, Rwanda has been an extremely stratified society where forms of politeness as well as political and social hierarchy control self-expression. Rwandan rhetorical skills are very

²⁴ Since its establishment, this ministry has had several names and incarnations with the reorganizations of the Government of National Unity. Its current incarnation is as the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROF).

highly admired and these include the ability to make commentary in such a way that most listeners, especially “outsiders,” cannot follow. The wise Rwandan conforms publicly to the status quo so as to avoid trouble. This culture of silence has been reinforced by many years of “terror-warfare”²⁵ and other forms of state-sanctioned control. Many, more cynical Rwandans express this culture of silence by saying, “You can’t trust a Rwandan. One day he tells you he loves you and the next he kills you.” The level of mistrust among most Rwandan citizens is palpable. Whereas before the war and genocide Rwandans conversed casually in the minibuses used for public transport, today most avoid such conversations unless they are with a trusted friend or family member. Another indication of this mistrust is the well-founded paranoia of poisoning.²⁶

Like all associations in Rwanda, however, Réseau des Femmes remains vulnerable to people playing “the ethnic card.” While Rwandans do not speak about ethnic identity or ethnic problems openly,²⁷ a person’s presumed ethnic identity makes a difference in social interactions (cf. Newbury 2000:19). Since the genocide, accusations of being “Interahamwe”²⁸ or an ethnic extremist have been used to undermine the credibility of (or even endanger the lives of) active members of civil society. Furthermore, when internal discussions of the “ethnic problem” come to light in associations, it risks destroying the often already limited amount of trust and amity of association members. To date, Réseau des Femmes has largely avoided this problem by recruiting a diverse membership and fostering trust and open discussions between members. The association, however, remains vulnerable as the “ethnic problem” is still far from resolved in Rwandan society.

The results of Réseau des Femmes’ accompaniment efforts with surviving members and members returning from the camps are tangible in the atmosphere in the association’s office. In the office, greetings are friendly. One often finds Réseau members passing by the office to “gather morale” before making a trip to the field. In the office, Réseau members feel at ease. Members have access to the phone, copy machine, and computers as members are confident that no one within the association would abuse the association’s resources for frivolous personal reasons.

The family spirit of Réseau des Femmes was evident at the funeral of Vénérandia Nzambazamariya. The atmosphere among Réseau members was as if their sister had died. The

²⁵ “Terror-warfare” is a concept elaborated by Nordstrom (1997), whereby acts of terrorism and violent acts laden with cultural symbolism against civilians in the context of war prevent opposition to violence perpetrated by the state as well as by armed opposition and maintain an absolute silence.

²⁶ Poisoning is another cultural trait with a long history in Rwanda. Even today, most deaths are suspected to be caused by poisoning. While this seems to be an unjustified paranoia, the number of poisonings documented in Rwandan health centers is not negligible.

²⁷ The official policy of the Government of National Unity is to abolish ethnic distinctions altogether. The practice, however, does not always follow the policy.

²⁸ “Interahamwe,” which means “those who fight together,” was one of the militias responsible for massacres during the genocide. Since 1994, the name, “Interahamwe,” has also been applied to armed opposition against the new regime. This opposition was seated in the refugee camps in Zaire from 1994-1996, then in northwestern Rwanda and eastern Congo (Zaire) from 1996-1998, and now operates out of eastern Congo (Zaire).

entire association participated in the week-long mourning festivities as if they were members of the family and not merely friends or colleagues.

Position in Rwandan society and relationship to other institutions

Réseau des Femmes maintains very good relations with other women's organizations that consider Réseau to be a source of thoughts and policy-making on women-in-development issues. A representative of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe explained, "Réseau is considered a fundamental pillar in the umbrella of Pro-Femmes, but more importantly Réseau members emerge and work at the heart of Pro-Femmes." She gave the examples of Vénérande Nzambazamariya and Immaculée Mukankubito, two Réseau members who were successive presidents of Pro-Femmes. A HAGURUKA representative said that even today, HAGURUKA recognizes the large role that Réseau des Femmes played in its creation. She underlined the importance of the continued technical assistance from Réseau in the evolution of HAGURUKA, especially in the early days.

In terms of its relationships with the Rwandan government, Réseau des Femmes works in close partnership with the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development (MIGEPROF). Many interviewees stated that when dealing with Réseau des Femmes members, they often feel as if they are working directly with MIGEPROF. According to a MIGEPROF representative, Réseau des Femmes is considered a source of information and a training mechanism because of its expertise in women-in-development issues. Furthermore, Réseau des Femmes is justly considered an advocate for women's causes.

The vast majority of Réseau members are active in other women's organizations or professional positions directly involved in women-in-development issues. This phenomenon is in line with Réseau's founding philosophy of being a "circle of reflection" about Rwandan social problems and women-in-development issues. For outsiders, confusion may arise over "whom" they are talking with when a Réseau member comes calling because members often have several overlapping roles (e.g. as a civil servant, as a government official, or as a representative of another association).

For the association, this confusion is not considered a problem. Yet, a representative of a donor agency warned that Réseau des Femmes should be vigilant against the risk of having its resources hijacked or manipulated for political interests. He said that sometimes strong associations like Réseau des Femmes are targeted for exploitation for other, presumably negative, political ends by government officials, by the political opposition, or by other organizations. Réseau's grassroots structure that reaches every prefecture of the country makes it a prime target for such attacks. Furthermore, Réseau des Femmes has experience with this as under Habyarimana the association was infiltrated by government informants sent to destroy the association from within. Current Réseau des Femmes leadership should be vigilant against such risks.

People from all sectors of Rwandan society consider Réseau des Femmes as a vibrant member of Rwandan civil society because it operates on democratic principles and always seeks to empower its members and its partners. A representative of a donor agency declared that what he appreciates about Réseau is its democratic and decentralized structure that is present on the

ground across the Rwandan territory. He added that the relations between his organization and Réseau des Femmes constitute “a true partnership and not vassaldom.”

One troubling development is a new law being considered in the Rwandan National Assembly regarding associations. As currently conceived the new law will require all Rwandan associations to re-register and to operate under the supervision of a government body. If this law should pass in its present form, vibrant associations like Réseau des Femmes risk losing their autonomy and independence. The law threatens to handicap emerging, post-war civil society. Réseau des Femmes has already joined a platform of other associations and presented a brief opposing these regulations to the National Assembly. Efforts in this area should be redoubled, if possible. More importantly, international NGOs, donor agencies, inter-governmental bodies, and foreign governments should apply whatever pressure they can to ensure that this provision is removed from the law before it is approved.

Throughout interviews conducted in the field with people who were not directly familiar with Réseau des Femmes, they said that they had heard that Réseau des Femmes is an organization that has helped rebuild the country following the war and genocide. Others said that although they had never come into contact with or visited Réseau, the accomplishments and behavior of Réseau members that they had seen made them think that Réseau must be a strong organization that is very engaged in the domain of gender.

Empowerment through Leadership

An observation made almost universally about Réseau des Femmes members was that they are dynamic and courageous women with self-assurance and confidence in their abilities. During the time of the study, the organization was in a period of mourning after having lost its National Coordinator and founding member, Vénérande Nzambazamariya, in the Kenya Airways plane crash in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. Vénérande is probably one of the greatest examples of Réseau des Femmes dynamism and courage. Many interviewees noted Vénérande’s impact on their lives. At certain points in the post-war period Vénérande faced public accusations of being a genocide participant and was decried in some Rwandan newspapers as being “Interahamwe.” Vénérande’s response to what turned out to be baseless accusations was, “How can we find enough love to help these people?” Many interviewees noted that although these accusations frustrated and at times frightened Vénérande, she refused to abandon her course of action. She redoubled her efforts in reconstructing the country, especially in terms of the Campaign Action pour la Paix discussed earlier. Eventually, many of Vénérande’s accusers realized their mistake and became her supporters.

It is important to state that Vénérande’s impact on the association, on the Rwandan women’s movement, and on the lives of many Rwandans has been remarkable. At the heart of many women’s initiatives in Rwanda, whether as part of Réseau or not, one finds Vénérande or a woman brought to activism by Vénérande. Her indefatigable energy in the wake of the genocide and war and her ability to motivate others to action is one of the keys to the Réseau des Femmes’ quick return to activities following the war.

While most Réseau des Femmes members speak in awe of Vénérande and her energy, it is clear that Vénérande relied on the vibrancy of the women around her. A Rwandan proverb often repeated by Vénérande was, “Ntawe utanga icyo adafite” which means, “No one can give what he does not have.” She explained to Réseau members and others that rural women were asking a lot of them, and they had to rise to the occasion to supply it. For Vénérande, any action required first a focus on the self and one’s own capacities. In 1996, Vénérande was awarded the UNESCO’s Madanjeet SINGH prize for the promotion of tolerance and non-violence in her work in the CAP project of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe. The fact that after she won the prize she returned to the university testifies to her adherence to the self-empowerment principle.

A drawback of Vénérande’s impact on Réseau des Femmes is the risk of a leadership vacuum in her absence. In the weeks since her death, it is clear that the association is having some difficulties as it tries to recover from her loss. Many Réseau members stated that Vénérande was always careful to make sure that a core group of women led Réseau des Femmes and they are sure that the association will have no problems. Yet, the association should be extra careful that new leaders are brought to the fore and that the association does not falter as it moves forward.

Empowerment through Participation

Members

Most Réseau des Femmes members have been empowered through participation in the organization’s activities. The keys to Réseau’s approach to development reinforce the empowerment of everyone involved: unity and autonomy. Réseau members seek unity through their adhesion to the same mission—the rural woman as the agent of her own development—and through the use of common strategies to realize this goal. Réseau members find autonomy through personal reflection and the development of professional skills through the association’s activities.

Rwandan culture requires the silence of women in public fora and in the presence of men. The majority of Réseau des Femmes members, however, have abandoned this practice. As more than one male interviewee noted jokingly, “The problem with Réseau members is to get them to shut up.” This statement points to the fact that thanks to their empowerment, Réseau members are not afraid to speak out when other women might remain silent.

Many interviewees made the observation that Réseau members have so developed their own capacities that others are unable to refuse their requests. Réseau members always arrive well-organized and well-prepared to refute any counter-arguments. One interviewee cited his presence at the interview, which occurred while he was on vacation and outside normal work hours, as a testament to this fact. He said, “I would have refused to meet with someone from my own office, but when I heard it was someone from Réseau des Femmes I didn’t dare say, ‘No.’ ”

The life-histories of many individual members of the association illustrate the empowerment through participation principle. For example, one interviewee explained the transformation he

observed in one Réseau member that he had known and worked with before she joined the association. He explained, “When I used to work with X, she always seemed flighty and unsure of her ability to do her job. She was a bit of a butterfly. Now, it’s hard to recognize her. In fulfilling her tasks for Réseau she always acts with a sense of seriousness and self-assuredness of her technical abilities.”

Direct Beneficiaries

The direct beneficiaries of Réseau des Femmes programs are Rwandan rural women. The philosophy behind Réseau des Femmes’ work is to keep rural women at the center of all of its programs because these women are forgotten by most development programs, despite the fact that they claim to defend the marginalized or rural women in general. Réseau des Femmes seeks to improve the lives of rural women by empowering them economically, politically and socially.

An example of Réseau des Femmes success in empowering direct beneficiaries of its programs is the SEVOTA initiative in Taba commune, Gitarama prefecture. SEVOTA was started by Godeliève Mukasarasi, a Réseau member from Taba commune. In the months following the war she found her calling in organizing the widows and orphans of Taba. After Godeliève had organized the widows and orphans in groups and helped them hold their first annual meeting in December 1994, Réseau des Femmes provided technical and financial assistance as needed. Over the years, Réseau has helped secure grants and funding for SEVOTA activities, paid the founder of SEVOTA a salary for several months so that she could dedicate herself full-time to the association, and conducted trainings on different themes for SEVOTA members.

Thanks to the assistance from Réseau des Femmes, SEVOTA members were successful in lobbying the Rwandan government to move rape from the third category of crimes into the first category in the genocide statute. Another sign of SEVOTA members’ empowerment is the fact that they were the first women to have the courage to travel to Arusha and testify against genocide suspects on counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and rape as a weapon of genocide. In terms of economics, individual SEVOTA members now have not only the basic necessities, but are also have small amounts of capital. One SEVOTA member spoke with pride of the fact that she now has a cow thanks to the SEVOTA livestock cooperative. It is important to note that in Rwanda, a cow is considered a noble animal, a sign of wealth, and the property of men. For many genocide survivors, owning cattle is a great symbolic (as well as economic) triumph.²⁹

Underlying Réseau des Femmes’ philosophy is the idea that a key to empowerment is autonomy both for individuals and for associations. By maintaining SEVOTA as a separate, autonomous entity, Réseau des Femmes encourages the empowerment of SEVOTA’s members and leaders. For example, an active member of SEVOTA also became a Réseau member. She explained that before the war and genocide she was not interested in associative life. She was preoccupied with her family and lived, more or less, in isolation from other women in her area. Following the

²⁹ Many expatriates and urban Rwandans are baffled by the seeming obsession with cattle expressed by genocide survivors from the countryside.

genocide and war, she became active in SEVOTA because she met Réseau members like Godeliève and was encouraged by them. Being a school teacher in a rural area, she has now become a key agent in Réseau’s work.

Another key to Réseau’s success illustrated through SEVOTA is the organization’s ability to reach the lowest levels of Rwandan society. SEVOTA is organized all the way down to the sector and cellule levels. SEVOTA has 989 widows in 69 groupings and 609 orphans in 28 groupings; 219 foster parents in 14 groupings; and 203 women victims of violence in 14 groupings. In addition to these formal members of the association SEVOTA also gives trainings to 132 other groupings who are not members of SEVOTA.

Table 3. Members and Groupings within SEVOTA

| | Number of Members | Groupings |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Widows | 989 | 69 |
| Orphans | 609 | 28 |
| Foster Parents | 219 | 14 |
| Women Victims of Violence | 203 | 14 |

SEVOTA’s structure denotes that the leadership and organization of Réseau des Femmes reaches the smallest administrative units of the country. SEVOTA is the best example of the way that Réseau reaches the lowest levels of Rwandan society and transmits its leadership to rural women even though the organization does not have any funds or structures of its own formally in place at these levels.

Another important aspect of Réseau des Femmes’ work reflected in SEVOTA is in terms of fostering a culture of peace and reconciliation. Unlike many other widows associations in Rwanda, SEVOTA has welcomed all widows into its fold whether they are widows of the genocide, of the war, or of life. Likewise, the orphans and foster families within SEVOTA’s groupings are accepted without reference to how they became orphans or what ethnic group they are from. In focus groups held with researchers, it was clear that both Hutu and Tutsi are amongst its active members and benefit from the association’s activities. Because SEVOTA’s groups bring together Rwandans with different experiences and backgrounds, they have the opportunity to discuss their problems and find common ground through solving these problems.

Indirect beneficiaries

It is difficult to quantify the number of indirect beneficiaries of Réseau des Femmes’ programs. A key tenet of its philosophy is to make every Rwandan woman an agent in her own advancement and to make her an agent for change in Rwandan society. Underpinning this philosophy is the idea that Rwandan women are at the center of the economic, social, and moral life of the family and society. These ideas are not foreign to Rwandan culture. One Rwandan

proverb says "Umugore ni umutima w'urugo" ("The woman is the heart of the family" and another one says, "Ukurusha umugore akurusha urugo" ("He who has a good wife has a good family.") These Rwandan proverbs point to the traditional point of view that women are the preservers of the morality and future of the Rwandan family and by extension, Rwandan society. By reaching out to Rwandan women in the rural milieu, Réseau des Femmes indirectly reaches out to every person that a woman comes into contact with.

Thus, the indirect beneficiaries of the Réseau des Femmes' activities are concentric circles beginning with women themselves and then moving out to family members, the family as a whole, and eventually the whole society. In a more concrete way, all Rwandan citizens are the potential beneficiaries of certain Réseau des Femmes projects, such as the book on the new inheritance law.³⁰

Empowerment through Changing Gender Roles

Réseau des Femmes has been a leader in the injection of a gender perspective into the leadership and development of the country. Over the past few years, Réseau has developed a national expertise in gender. As the first Minister of Gender appointed after the war, the Honorable Madame Aloysia Inyumba, asserted at the funeral of Vénéranda Nzambazamariya: "It is as if Réseau des Femmes created the Ministry of Gender." Integrating the gender perspective is a cross-cutting theme of Réseau des Femmes' work. All Réseau des Femmes members have been trained in gender and development and are gender consultants at the national level.

Working in concert with several other Rwandan's women organizations, Réseau des Femmes lobbied Members of the National Assembly to revise inheritance laws in the wake of the genocide and war. Under Rwandan law as it existed at the end of the genocide, women did not have the right to inherit land or property from their fathers. This left a vast portion of the post-war population vulnerable to losing their land to male neighbors or family members. Along with other women's organizations, Réseau lobbied so that girl and boy children have equal rights to inheritance.

Another example of Réseau's work in the area of changing gender roles is the study on Women's Participation in Decision-Making Bodies. The recommendations of this study went to all levels of Rwandan government, from the President of the Republic down to the lowest levels of local government; to all accredited ambassadors and staff of bilateral aid programs in Kigali; to all UN organizations; to senior staff involved in the development of programs and projects for local and international NGOs; members of the media; and international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. Study results were distributed widely in the hope that its recommendations to integrate women into decision-making bodies would have a greater effect.

³⁰ The Rwandan parliament recently approved a new inheritance law which guarantees for the first time, the rights of women to inherit. Thanks to funding from the US Embassy, Réseau des Femmes developed a book to explain the law to rural Rwandans.

A specific example of Réseau des Femmes empowerment in the area of changing gender roles is a statement made by a Counselor³¹ at a recent event. He explained that his wife had received training through PROFORGI, a training center in Gitarama run in collaboration between Réseau des Femmes and SNV. The training was part of Réseau des Femmes' thematic project to alleviate the workload of rural women. As part of the training, women learned how to construct better cooking hearths which require less attention, less maintenance and create less of a mess. The Counselor explained that now when he returns home from church or from work in his nice clothes, he no longer fears lighting the cooking fire himself if his wife is away or occupied with other activities. It is through small triumphs like these that rural women are empowered through Réseau des Femmes activities.

Role of Assistance from International Community

The key international partners of Réseau des Femmes are NOVIB, the Canadian Cooperation, and SNV. Réseau des Femmes has worked since before the war with NOVIB. Today, NOVIB continues to be Réseau's institutional partner. Combined, these international partners provide over 80% of the operating expenses of the association. In general, Réseau des Femmes finds that they are flexible with a genuine respect for the competence of the association and its projects.

Réseau des Femmes also works with other partners for projects of limited scope or duration. This is the case with the American Embassy in the area of their "Rights and Democracy" project. The US Embassy funded Réseau to develop and publish a book explaining the new inheritance law recently passed by the Rwandan National Assembly and to develop the Réseau des Femmes' Year 2000 Calendar which educates on key themes in women's rights. In this vein, Réseau des Femmes assists local women's organizations and initiatives in approaching potential donors as needed for their projects. Réseau has done this in the case of SEVOTA in Taba commune, Gitarama and helped them secure funding from Terres des Hommes-Netherlands among others.

As described earlier, Réseau des Femmes is also a partner with IFAD in the Fonds de Développement Communautaire project. This project has not succeeded as well as other Réseau des Femmes' initiatives in part due to problems with the donor agency. Réseau had proposed that a full-time staff person be added to the project, but IFAD refused. In addition, the funding was blocked at the national level for over six months which resulted in a suspension of the project. It is unclear to the researchers what the exact cause of the blockage was, but it seems to be due to a conflict between IFAD and some combination of the government ministries involved. Réseau attributes part of the difficulties with the FDC project to the exigencies and inflexibility of the donor agency, as well as failure on the part of the Rwandan government to execute its responsibilities.

³¹ Counselor, or "Conseillé" in French, is a government administrator at the sector level.

Donor Impact

While it is donor dependent, like all women's associations in Rwanda, Réseau des Femmes maintains a firm resolve to develop independent funding. However, efforts in this direction to date have not had much success. Opportunities for self-financing explored to date include:

- **Consulting fees gathered through the Consultants Collective:** A contract is currently in preparation so that members of the Consultants Collective will pay a percentage of their consulting fees to Réseau des Femmes.
- **Rental of portions of the national office:** Réseau des Femmes has a large building and rents offices to another women's association, SWAA-Rwanda, and to Voice of America.
- **Video and documentary services:** The services of the recently-installed video production studio will be sold to other organizations wanting video documentary services.
- **Advertising** in the Réseau des Femmes newsletter, *Echo*.
- **Telephone and fax kiosk:** In the past Réseau des Femmes offered use of its telephone, fax, and copier for a fee. The organization is currently exploring the feasibility of restarting these services.
- **Rental of the organization's four vehicles.**

A committee on self-financing was recently put in place to explore the possibilities and means of attaining the goal of becoming financially independent.

Despite these efforts, the revenues realized to date are insignificant and it is currently impossible for Réseau des Femmes to survive on them. While the energy of members and their volunteer efforts are an important contribution to implementing its programs, without the continued support of donor agencies these programs would not exist.

Recently, thanks to technical assistance from the Project for Institutional Assistance of SNV, Réseau des Femmes completed a feasibility study on the opportunities for self-financing and a range of possibilities for financial independence have been proposed. Réseau des Femmes will soon begin to implement these projects and hopes to reduce its reliance on external financial assistance.

Compatibility of donor and association goals

The dependence on donor agencies is certainly a constraint for Réseau des Femmes in that the association's objectives do not always correspond to those of the funding agencies. Very often, Réseau must modify its projects to adapt them to the wishes of the funding agency or must resort to going door-to-door to find a donor for a particular project. Despite this situation, the women of Réseau are confident that soon the funding agencies will conform to the objectives of the association. As one member stated, "the donor agencies and international NGOs need us to exist."

A representative of Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe explained that the funding agencies oblige women's organizations to engage in a sort of prostitution. The donors require associations to run

after them looking for money. Finally, a grant comes to those associations more “crafty” than the others, to put it in the language of the funders. Several interviewees recommended that donor agencies and international NGOs work for transparency in offering grants, reviewing applications, and seeking partners. Some pointed to a de facto collusion between certain representatives of donor agencies and certain local NGOs because requests-for-proposals are whispered to each other informally rather than announced publicly.

According to another representative of Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe, the donor agencies should also respect the objectives and activities of the associations rather than forcing them to follow the donor’s objectives. Regarding the situation of Réseau des Femmes in comparison with other Rwandan women’s organizations, she affirmed that without external assistance, the mission and objectives of Réseau des Femmes would survive thanks to the determination of members, but that certain activities would stop. At the very least, Réseau des Femmes has its own building and Consultants Collective to give it a small margin of financial freedom.

A general criticism leveled at donor agencies and bilateral aid was that these bodies fail to give Rwandan civil society its appropriate role. Many bilateral donors seem plagued with an attitude that “Rwandan civil society is weak, there is no hope, so why not give the money to the government?” Without financial assistance that acknowledges the strengths of existing associations and respects their objectives, civil society in Rwanda will remain handicapped and active associations like Réseau des Femmes risk becoming paralyzed.

Many interviewees involved in Rwandan associations attributed part of the disappointment that some donor agencies and international NGOs have with their Rwandan partners to the fact that there is a lack of follow-up to assistance. In all three sites visited, members of the local initiatives complained of a lack of on-going technical support to manage projects properly. Increased awareness of Rwandan partners’ weaknesses and appropriate measures to shore them up will increase the impact of grants awarded.

A further problem with financial support from the international community is the transfer from the mode of emergency intervention to sustainable development. Many international NGO’s have left Rwanda in the last two years claiming that the crisis is over. Furthermore, some international and bilateral donors have decreased their financial assistance for the same reasons. The fact of the matter is that the Rwandan economy is dependent on international humanitarian assistance, both in terms of the actual aid directed at Rwandans, and in terms of the expatriates and expatriate salaries that are then served by Rwandan businesses. Beyond the money involved, this phenomenon risks abandoning many Rwandans in need. In most communes of the country, there are still genocide survivors without their own housing. There are also thousands of Rwandans who are only now beginning to show signs of long term traumatism. Careful thought should be given to the best and most appropriate way to transition to sustainable development projects without abandoning those Rwandans with desperate needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several conclusions and recommendations have been drawn throughout this report. In this section we will try to summarize them and point to those that could be applied to other post-conflict contexts.

The major strength of Réseau des Femmes is its emphasis on empowerment and autonomy of women at all levels of the organization's activities. Réseau members are expected to be autonomous individuals who initiate projects at the grassroots level, organize association activities in their regions, and take a leading role in Rwandan society. Virtually all of the examples in this case study re-affirm this principle. The FDC example, however, points to the weakness of autonomy in that when a regional body runs into difficulties, the Executive Secretariat does not have the means or authority to intervene easily

Following from this philosophy is another key to the organization's effectiveness: its initiatives are not necessarily taken over by the association. This principle increases Réseau des Femmes' effectiveness in three ways. First it allows the organization to reach the lowest levels of Rwandan society without adding cumbersome and needless levels of bureaucracy which would eat up donors' money and reduce effectiveness. Second, as in the cases of DUTERIMBERE and HAGURUKA, it encourages the development of expertise in specialized areas of gender in development outside the Réseau des Femmes' administrative structure, but still connected to it by the network of members. Finally, it widens the geographic and theoretical space in which Réseau des Femmes can have an impact.

The most important factor in Réseau des Femmes' continuing success in the post-conflict period is the fact that they committed themselves to the transformation of society in an effort to heal the profound illness which led to the genocide. The early re-launch of activities can be attributed to the organization's spirit of leadership and capable tutelage of Vénérande Nzambazamariya. While Vénérande's contribution to Réseau des Femmes should be honored, the association should also be careful that its future never become too closely tied to a single individual. Fortunately, in the post-genocide context and even today, Réseau des Femmes has benefited from a **group** of core members who have maintained their commitment to the association and to volunteerism even when their lives were ripped apart. Furthermore, the insistence on reintegration and calling old members back set Réseau des Femmes immediately on the track to reconciliation. At the heart of their success in this area is the creation of a space where Rwandan women feel accepted and free to express themselves.

The principle of turning problems into opportunities for positive change is one which goes beyond the Rwandan case study. Yet, in the case of Réseau des Femmes, their ability to act was strengthened by its members' common vision of the organization's mission. In addition, their commitment to analyze the situation first and then to take informed action second increased their effectiveness. The commitment to lobbying based on effective research should continue.

Another aspect of this case study applicable to other post-conflict contexts is the link between Réseau des Femmes and the world-wide women's movement. This link enhanced the

organization's performance and strengthened the morale of Réseau members as they felt world-wide solidarity. More importantly, the Réseau commitment to empowering rural women ensured that Rwandan rural women were represented at international conferences. Continued insistence on involving women from all classes and backgrounds will improve the status of Rwandan women as a whole.

Rwandan civil society has been seriously handicapped by the oppression of the previous regime and the subsequent war and genocide. Although Rwandan women's organizations benefited from an opening immediately after the war, the government has again begun to discourage the growth of vibrant and independent associations. The international community should do everything in its power to strengthen associations like Réseau des Femmes³² that have shown a history of apolitical and independent action. The importance of a strong civil society in Rwanda should not be ignored, especially since a major factor facilitating the genocide was the weakness of civil society (cf. Longman 1999). At the same time, Réseau des Femmes should be vigilant that its resources are not hijacked or manipulated for political purposes.

The commitment of members to volunteerism is certainly a key to success. As the organization continues to grow, careful thought should be given to the most appropriate role of volunteerism. In addition, the association should consider drawing attention to the need for volunteerism in Rwandan society at a time when society tends more and more towards capitalist self-interest.

Réseau des Femmes should be careful not to allow donor agencies' objectives and/or demands to impede the proper development of projects. The association should think twice before risking its reputation on a project that is ill conceived or poorly organized. In particular, it should avoid projects encumbered by too many government ministries and/or agencies.

On the other hand, donor agencies need to respect the competencies of local organizations and not place too many restrictions on projects. Furthermore, international NGOs and donors should provide grant recipients with adequate follow-up and technical assistance, as needed. USAID, specifically, should channel more of its funding into local NGOs rather than into the American NGOs that it seems to favor.

Recommendations to Réseau des Femmes:

- Build on your strengths.
- Reinforce the organization's social capital through continued training of leadership and members.
- Continue to combine sound research with effective lobbying efforts.
- Be sure to distribute the results of Réseau des Femmes' research projects widely.
- Explore new information technologies such as the Internet to enhance the association's ability to communicate and distribute information.
- Do not allow donor agencies' objectives and/or demands impede the proper development of projects.

³² Réseau des Femmes' track record goes back to before the war.

- Think twice before risking your reputation on a project that is ill-conceived or poorly organized.
- Work towards financial independence through the development of self-financing activities.
- Beware of attempts to hijack or manipulate Réseau des Femmes' resources for political ends.
- Continue involving women from all classes and backgrounds.
- Train the women elected to Women's Grassroots Structures to reach every corner of the country.
- Be sure to transfer technology and technical abilities as well as money to ensure the development of local expertise.
- Ensure the future of the association by being careful not to become too closely tied to a single personality.
- Give careful thought to the most appropriate role for volunteerism.

Recommendations to the international community:

- Respect the competencies and objectives of women's associations. Do not place too many restrictions on grants and make procedures as uncomplicated as possible.
- Ensure transparency in offering grants, reviewing applications, and seeking partners to avoid collusion which disadvantages local organizations that are out of the loop.
- Give Rwandan civil society its appropriate role and the necessary financing and room to grow.
- Lobby for improvements to the new associational law to protect the independence and autonomy of Rwandan associations.
- Be aware of partners' weaknesses and provide adequate follow-up to grants and/or partnerships, including the transfer of technical abilities.
- Take advantage of existing organizations to be more effective in development initiatives.
- Keep Rwandan women at the center of development initiatives by eradicating poverty and building their capacities.
- Bilateral funding agencies, particularly USAID, should invest in local NGOs with a history in the country to help them gain economic and social independence so that they can play their appropriate role in Rwandan civil society.

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Unknown

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Annex 1: List of Interviewees

Alexie, Staff, **AVEGA-Duhozanye**

Arabine, Former member, **Region South I, Réseau des Femmes**

Bourgmestre, **Kinyamakara commune, Gikongoro**

Communal officials implicated in FDC, **Kinyamakara commune, Gikongoro**

Delphrose, President, **AVEGA-Duhozanye**

Director, **Agricultural Development Program – Gikongoro**

Female community member, **Save, Shyanda commune, Butare**

Female community member, **Kinyamakara commune, Gikongoro**

Florence, Member, **Region South I, Réseau des Femmes**

Julienne, Member, **SEVOTA, Taba commune**

KANAKUZE Judith, Staff, **Réseau des Femmes**

MUKAMUSONI Concessa, Member, **Central Region, Réseau des Femmes**

MUKAMUTONI Antoinette, Staff, **Réseau des Femmes**

MUKASARASI Godeliève, **National Coordination Committee, Réseau des Femmes**

NTEZIMANA Laurien, **AMI, Butare**

Père Isaac, **Save Parish, Shyanda commune, Butare**

RUBONEKA Suzanne, **Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe**

RUZIBIZA Emmanuel, **SNV**

Seven members, **Knitting group, Kinyamakara commune, Gikongoro**

Sheikh Fadhir, **MIGEPROF**

Spéciose, Member, **Region South I, Réseau des Femmes**

Ten members, **SEVOTA, Taba commune**

Three members, **Duteraninkunga II, Kinyamakara commune**

Two AVEGA-Duhozanye members, **Save, Shyanda commune, Butare**

UWAGIRISHYA Rose, Secrétaire Exécutif, **Réseau des Femmes**

Venantie, **HAGURUKA**