

# Report on Rwanda Women's Network 10 Year Anniversary Celebrations

## Executive Summary

Rwanda Women Network (RWN) is an NGO which has worked in Rwanda since 1997 to directly address the situation described below. RWN was established with the mission to work towards promotion and improvement of the socio-economic welfare of women in Rwanda through enhancing their efforts to meet their basic needs. The organization's objectives include:

- To economically empower poor women and widows in the rural and urban areas;
- To foster economic and social growth within households and communities;
- To improve the health status of widows and orphans;
- To promote peace and reconciliation.

Rwanda Women Network implements four core programs. These include provision of health care and health support, education and awareness programs on different issues affecting women including HIV/AIDS, human/legal rights, sexual gender based violence, etc., socio-economic empowerment as well as networking and advocacy.

RWN recognized the anniversary of its 10 years as an opportunity to acknowledge the important role its partner, donors and supporters have played in its continued success. In keeping with one of RWN's main activities, it was recognized that the event could also serve as a platform on which to advocate for women's issues, in particular encouraging support for achieving the gender indicators in the Millennium Development Goals and Rwanda's Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy. Finally as the event would be held on the eve of the launch of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence RWN planned to use the event to sensitize all participants and the greater Rwandan public on the link between gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. Therefore the objective of the project was to publicly recognize the role women have played in Rwanda's development and to advocate for continued commitment to issues that affected women, their families and their communities.

Rwanda Women's Network 10 Year Anniversary received national news coverage through The New Times, Television Rwanda, and Radio Rwanda, thus giving public recognition to the role women play in community and national development. All presentations were followed by engaged discussion, with participation from donor representatives and community partners alike, indicating a strong interest in the issues discussed. RWN community partners were empowered with knowledge and recognition for past work to continue the pivotal roles they play in their families and communities, and in particular to work to end gender based violence.

In planning an event of such size Rwanda Women's Network faced many challenges, in particular how to ensure meaningful participation from key stakeholders such as donors,

community partners and those in the RWN organizational structure. This challenge was overcome by ensuring all groups were well represented at planning meetings, were kept well informed with progress reports, and their suggestions and wishes were taken in full consideration. Another challenge was the lack of technical knowledge of staff in terms of the production of a documentary DVD. This challenge was overcome by hiring a private firm to undertake the technical aspects of the production.

## **Background Information**

Rwanda Women's Network identified its 10 Year Anniversary as a milestone which if celebrated could act as an event to achieve a multitude of goals. Under the theme *Celebrating 10 Years of Community Engagement, Leadership and Action* the anniversary was seen as an opportunity to recognize the achievements made by RWN over the last decade in its work with grassroots community groups, in particular women. The event would also be an opportunity for RWN to recognize the contribution made by various partners and donors at the national, regional and international level, and most importantly the contributions made by the grassroots organizations themselves. In this way the event would also act as a public recognition of the important role of women in the rebuilding and development of their communities and Rwanda as a whole. The event was also identified as a platform to mobilize grassroots communities towards the observation of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence which commenced on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2007.

The short term objective of the project was to ensure that the event demonstrated to participants and the greater Rwandan society the importance of women's role in community and national development.

The long term objective of the project is to motivate those working at the grassroots, national, regional and international level to continue to recognize and support women's issues and initiatives. In particular to commit to meeting the women focused indicators in the Millennium Development Goals and the EDPRS (Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy), as well as to work to eradicate gender based violence.

## **Project Results**

What were the results that the project set out to achieve?

- National media outlets recognize women's involvement in community and national development as important and news worthy.
- Increased recognition from government of all levels in Rwanda of the importance of women's role in development as exhibited by public commitments to meeting MDG and those indicators in the EDPRS which specifically focus on women.
- Community partners gain market exposure for their income generating projects.
- Participants know their HIV/AIDS status.
- Increased knowledge among participants on the Millennium Development Goals, Rwanda's Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy and the link between gender based violence and HIV/AIDS.
- Participants use knowledge to create positive change at community level in order to reach goals of MDG and the EDPRS as well as reduce gender based violence.
- Community, national and international partners recognized for their role in the achievements of Rwanda Women's Network, and as a result they renew their commitment to support the work RWN does.

- Recognition of community partners who have developed models of best practice in order to encourage peer learning and replication of successful strategies to address community development issues.

#### Actual results of the project

- Event was covered in two national media outlets, The New Times, Television Rwanda, and Radio Rwanda, which created public awareness at the national level about the important role that women have played, particularly at the grassroots level, in Rwanda's development.
- Representatives from all levels of Rwanda's government, including the Minister of Gender and Family Promotion and the Minister of State in the Ministry of Commerce in charge of investment programs attended the event and publicly recognized RWN and in particular its grassroots community partners for the work they have done as well as renewing their commitment to ensuring the Rwandan government continues to strive to meet all gender objectives.
- Community partners exhibited their income generating products thus having the opportunity to reach a wide and varied market through the event participants and the general public frequenting the Hotel Novotel. By conversing with each other, event participants and customers, exhibitors gained an increased level of marketing skills. As well they were able to collectively sell 500,000 Frw worth of goods which will be used to further strengthen their micro-enterprises and improve their own welfare via income earned.
- Rwanda Women's Network has been a long advocate for people to know their seropositive status. Thus in order to further this advocacy RWN set up a free VCT at its anniversary celebrations, providing instant testing and counseling. In total 29 people were tested over the two days. The outcome of this is those 29 people are now aware of their status and will act accordingly, whether that be to take advantage of medical and support services offered through RWN or to continue to take the necessary precautions against contraction.
- Very engaging and lively question periods following each presentation, questions being posed by donors and community partners alike. Increased level of knowledge of those in attendance which translated into increased interest in how one can act at the community level to meet the MDGs and those outlined in Rwanda's EDPRS. Grassroots community partners expressed their interest in working to involve their community to meet the previously stated objectives and to support the campaign to end gender based violence.
- Donors gained new insight and appreciation for the work that RWN and its community partners are doing and many expressed their intentions to continue to support RWN.
- Staff and key individuals were recognized for their contributions to RWN over its history, which fostered a sense of achievement and cohesiveness particularly among staff, encouraging them to continue their hard work.
- Grassroots community partners dialogued and shared challenges, success and best practices. This exchange of knowledge will aid those groups as they go back to their communities empowered with knowledge and renewed energy.

## Successful strategies and challenges

### Successful strategies

- Regular meetings, to ensure plan of action was being respected, and to follow up on commitments made to fulfill certain responsibilities. Through these meetings RWN ensured participation of all staff, and other key persons such as provincial focal points (who act as a consistent line of communication between RWN office and grassroots partners), board members, advisory board members, and external consultants.
- Planned and reviewed DVD in a participatory fashion as to ensure the final product accurately portrayed RWN and its partners work. Through this process RWN made certain that the messages in the DVD were reflective of the visions and convictions of those involved in RWN, from staff through to community beneficiaries.
- Hired a private company to produce DVD. This was key to the success of the project because the private company brought expertise and experience that RWN does not possess in this area.

### Challenges encountered and how they were responded to

- As RWN has been in operation for 10 years and is a network of 40 grassroots partners it was difficult to narrow down the focus of the DVD and to choose which groups to feature with out seeming to favor one group over another. This was overcome by including community groups in the process of developing the DVD and ensuring no one group was too heavily featured.
- A lot of freedom had to be given to the private firm hired to make the DVD because of lack of time and expertise held by the RWN staff to devote to the project. Although consensus was had on the script, those reviewing the first draft found many areas they wanted to see improvement in, thus indicating creative differences between those reviewing the DVD from RWN and the technical firm. This was overcome by noting the desired changes; with the technical firm there during the viewing to ensure the changes suggested were properly incorporated into the production. Then assigning a RWN staff member to work directly with the team on including those revisions to ensure the DVD was completed in timely fashion and met expectations.
- In terms of the 10 year anniversary celebrations as a whole RWN realized that not enough time was allotted to the presentations and discussions. As a result the discussion has to be cut short in order to maintain the schedule of events. All participants were encouraged to discuss their concerns and issues further during tea and lunch breaks as well they were given details on where they could obtain more information.
- When meeting with partners to discuss plans and preparations for 10 year anniversary event they expressed their desire to have logo bags over desktop calendars. Their argument was that bags useful to all participants no matter their language abilities, and would give more visibility to RWN as they would be then

carried in public all around the country. RWN completed a cost comparison and determined that it would be feasible to order 250 bags in lieu of desktop calendars.

### **Project Management**

The creation of the DVD was managed in the following way. The concept and direction, as to what community partners, achievements, events and messages would be communicated in the DVD were decided on in a participatory fashion, through group meetings with RWN staff, focal points, and the private firm hired to handle all technical aspects of the DVD development. Through these meetings a schedule for material collection and timely completion was established. The RWN capacity building officer was charged with establishing, with community partners and the private DVD firm, the schedule for material gathering, as well as accompanying the firm in this process as to ensure the overall messages of the DVD were expressed through community partners' work and testimonies. The RWN Program Manager was charged with ensuring the development of the DVD followed the timeline. The script, and subsequently the first draft, was reviewed by key stakeholders (RWN staff, focal points, and private firm) in a participatory fashion, with suggestions being incorporated into the final product.

This management structure proved successful in that the final product was approved by all key stakeholders. The failure of the structure appeared to be that not enough guidance or supervision was given to the private DVD firm in the process of translating the script into the actual product. This failure can be linked to an over commitment of the Program Managers time during the period of preparations for the 10 year anniversary celebrations and his lack of technical knowledge. It was also recognized that the script was not detailed enough, leaving a lot of room for interpretation, and resulting in a first draft that needed several revisions.

### **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

In conclusion RWN feels that the celebration of its 10 year anniversary was a resounding success. By giving community partners, national and international donors, and government officials a space to interact and dialogue the short term objective of demonstrating the important role that women play in community and national development was reached. As our schedule was very full, in the future we would like to afford time for a more interactive and participatory types of dialogue between the aforementioned groups as we found that despite the fact that we allowed discussions to run over their allotted time, many questions still remained to be asked and responded to. The strong level of interest in the topics discussed at the anniversary indicate that the long term objective of motivating those working at the grassroots, national, regional and international level to continue to recognize and support women's issues and initiatives, in particular to commit to meeting the women focused indicators in the Millennium Development Goals and the EDPRS (Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy), as well as to work to eradicate gender based violence, will be achieved.

Many lessons were learned in the planning on the 2 day event, and in particular the creation of the DVD. In planning the DVD production in a participatory manner, RWN gave the opportunity to its stakeholders to provide input, which not only aided in the creation of the DVD but also the planning of the event as a whole. In the future RWN would assign a staff member to work more closely with the private firm hired to complete the DVD as to ensure the desired images and messages are conveyed. RWN plans to use the DVD to further promote its work and that of its partners to those working at the national and international level. It is very important to celebrate achievements in order to both recognize the progress made and those who contributed to the success, but also to highlight the issues that still need to be resolved. RWN wants to champion the women of Rwanda, particularly those working at the grassroots level, because they are the cornerstone of the post-genocide reconstruction in Rwanda. Thus they need to be supported to continue their extraordinary work, for the betterment of their families, community and country.