

# Rooftop Programme in Burundi implemented in 2018-2022

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## Abstract:

The article briefly describes a social roofing and simple house construction program in the Songa area in the Bururi district, Burundi, implemented using Slovak money in 2018-2022. The main sponsor of the program was St. Elizabeth's University of Health and Social Work in Bratislava, Slovakia. The initiator of the programme and the first sponsor was the parish of Slovenské Pravno. A total of 41 roofing sheets were provided, including the construction of 7 complete houses (1 earthen and 6 brick). The aim of this article is to highlight the fact that in developing countries the standard of housing for poor families can be significantly improved for a relatively small amount of money.

Burundi is one of the poorest countries in the world and the second most densely populated country in sub-Saharan Africa after neighbouring Rwanda. The population density is probably related to both the favourable climate – a long rainy season from September to May – and the humidity of the air caused by nearby Lake Tanganyika.

The population is made up of the Hutu, Tutsi and Batwa (1-2%) ethnic groups. The climate allows crops to be planted 2-3 times a year. The majority of the population subsists on agriculture, mainly growing beans, maize, sweet potatoes, and potatoes. Thousands of families live in simple houses made of clay or unfired bricks with dry grass roofs. These have to be replaced after about two years because the tropical rains destroy them, allowing it to rain into the house. The standard size of a house is usually 5x6 m, sometimes less. The inside consists of a small entrance room, a room for the parents, and a room for the children. The house is mainly used for sleeping and shelter from the rain, as most of the day is spent working in the garden. The kitchen tends to be located behind the house where there is room for an open fire. It is the children's responsibility to provide dry kindling as well as to fetch water. The water source is often 1 km or more from the house.

Having worked as a doctor – in Africa since 2007, in Burundi since 2009 – I was more interested in the availability of treatment and the prices of medicines than in the prices of building materials. I work in a team with a Burundian, Gaston Ndazegamiye, who is a registered nurse with a social conscience. In 2010-2013, we supplied three pygmy (Batwa) communities with food because their communities had the most malnourished children. Even then, I was met with a request from their leader to help them rebuild the roofs of their huts by buying metal sheets. I assumed that this was a costly solution and my employer (St. Elizabeth's University) was not such a wealthy organization as to be able to meet their expectations.

In 2018, a woman came to the Rumeza Health Centre asking for donations of plastic wrappers. Small bags of peanut paste are packed in these wrappers for malnourished children and she knew that Rumeza is the centre of the area in which the anti-malnutrition program operates. In conversation, we learned that she came from the

village of Horezo, 12 km downhill towards Lake Tanganyika. She is a widow who has given birth to eight children, five of whom have died. She uses plastic bags to protect her head from the rain at night. I shared this story with my relative, a catechist in the parish of Slovenské Pravno. The story touched her heart as well as the parish priest and they initiated a collection in the parish as well as among their friends. In a short time, they sent 2,200 euros to Burundi in the hope that it would help the widow repair her roof. They were probably thinking of European houses and roofs. We visited the widow in the village of Horezo and saw that her house of unburnt brick was in fairly good condition and could support a tin roof. We then bought the metal sheets for the roof, special nails, and paid for the work of a builder. With the money sent, we built two complete houses for widows with children in the village of Ndago whose mud houses were falling apart and 10 roofs for the houses of the poor in surrounding villages.

With the approval of the founder of St. Elizabeth's University, prof. MUDr. Vladimír Krčmery, DrSc., we continued with this programme. Suggestions on which widow or poor family needed help were given to us mostly by the representative of Caritas Burundi in the parish of Rumeza, Mr. Jean Nibigira, or by close people in the neighbourhood. We personally visited each case and assessed the condition of the dwelling as well as the social situation of the family.

In early 2022, we were approached by the administrator of Commune Songa to sponsor roofing sheets in the Batwa community, where upwards of 30 families were living in desolate dwellings. The Batwa ethnic group communities are the poorest of the poor. They live on the margins of society with very small gardens that are unable to sustain them. They work for the better-off segment of the population as wage labourers. They eat once a day, in the evening. Children often do not go to school because they are hungry. Very rarely does anyone from this community finish primary school or achieve secondary education. Fifteen families from this community were able to sundry their bricks and build simple houses on their own during the dry season. The municipal authority paid for the builders and nails for the roofs. When the scaffolding for the

roofs was ready in October 2022, we purchased 285 metal sheets for 15 roofs, completing a total of 41 roofs as of 2018.

The strategy for building houses – clay or brick – is chosen by local residents according to the availability of materials and the time of year. In the dry season, from mid-May to mid-September, bricks can be dried in the sun, especially if the family has suitable material in the garden. In the rainy season when the wooden frame of a house and roof is built and covered with metal sheets, the spaces between the wood can be filled with mud. In this type of construction, a larger quantity of wood is needed, starting from large trunks to smaller and even the smallest branches.

garden for 5 years to pay for her late husband's (unsuccessful) surgery and funeral. There are new challenges ahead to continue providing social assistance to the most vulnerable.

## Summary

We purchased sheet metal for 41 roofs in 2018-2022 in the Songa area of Bururi district, Burundi, including the construction of 7 complete houses. The purchase of 19 pieces of metal sheets for a standard 5x6 m house, nails, roof work, the purchase of four wooden windows, and two doors cost about 150 euros. We rarely bought more sheets for one house – only if it was a large family and the preserved house was of larger dimensions. Building a complete house costs about 500 euros. I would like to point out that in developing countries it is possible to significantly improve the quality of housing for poor families with relatively small sums of money. In our group, these were mostly widows and abandoned mothers with children. At the same time, I would like to express my gratitude to the management of St. Elizabeth's University and especially to Prof. Krčmery for their support and understanding in the implementation of this project.

## Addendum

During a presentation on the first group and their individual fates, I was asked why there are so many widows in the country. In my opinion and personal experience, poor people work hard, accept any kind of work, including carrying heavy loads for construction, and so they wear out sooner physically if they are not well nourished. Another factor is that health care must be paid for and so a poor person will postpone visiting a health centre or hospital until their illness is advanced and can no longer be helped. One widow in our group had to rent out part of her