Program Description

The My Education, My Future (MEMF) project ran from 2020 to 2025. It was funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented in partnership with the Norwegian Refugee Council. It reached more than 18,000 children living in refugee camps in Tanzania and more than 28,000 children in returnee communities in Burundi.

MEMF improved access to education for primary school-aged children, particularly girls. We trained teachers on how to integrate play-based learning and life skills lessons in the curriculum. We formed Girls' Clubs where girls learned life skills like communication and leadership. We led community awareness sessions on child protection and children's right to education. And we established Reading Clubs in Burundi to support children to improve their literacy.

CONTEXT

Civil war and ethnic conflict in Burundi in 2015 led to widespread displacement, trauma, and learning loss. Children living in refugee and returnee communities on the Burundi/Tanzania border experienced high school drop-out rates, especially girls and children with disabilities. Those in school faced overcrowded and unsafe classrooms, inadequate resources, and a shortage of trained teachers. Many children also struggled with trauma and psychosocial distress resulting from the conflict and their forced displacement.

KEY RESULTS

1. **Children's life skills improved**
In Tanzania and Burundi, 65% of children demonstrated life skills like communication, leadership, and decision-making at the end of the program, up from 20% and 21% at the start. This increase was achieved through the work teachers did to incorporate life skills lessons into their teaching, as well as the establishment of Girls' Clubs, which provided safe spaces for girls to develop life skills, seek support, and explore topics such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

2. **The number of children who demonstrated minimum reading proficiency for their grade level almost tripled in Tanzania**
The percentage of children who demonstrated key reading skills like letter identification, oral fluency, and reading comprehension almost tripled, rising from 12% to 35%. This was due to teachers' efforts to create positive learning environments and use play-based techniques to teach basic literacy skills and develop children's love of learning.

3. **Reading Clubs increased the number of students in Burundi reading at a grade-appropriate level**
Midway through the project, only 1% of boys and girls in partner communities in Burundi were reading at their grade level. We established Reading Clubs in schools that fostered children's enjoyment of reading and strengthen their ability to read letters, words, and short stories. By the end of the project, two years later, the percentage of students reading at a grade-appropriate level had reached 21%.

4. **Parental support for girls' education increased in Tanzania and Burundi**
The percentage of parents who encouraged girls to attend school increased from 58% to 99% in Burundi and from 75% to 99% in Tanzania. This was achieved thanks to work done with community leaders and parent-teacher associations to build parents' support for girls' education. Parents became more supportive by providing school materials, helping with homework, and being aware of how chores can conflict with learning. We also saw 461 new school enrollments in Burundi as a result of back-to-school campaigns.

KEY LEARNINGS

1. **Teachers need ongoing support to continue to apply play-based learning techniques**
The project saw an increase in the number of teachers applying and play-based learning techniques in class and creating more inclusive learning environments for children with disabilities. In order to maintain and increase their capabilities, teachers need ongoing, tailored coaching to maintain and refine their skills.

2. **More partnerships could improve sustainability and impact**
Expanding partnerships with community organizations could improve long-term sustainability of impact and provide participants with increased access to scholastic materials, financial support, and mentorship opportunities.

3. **Activities should be designed with children, not for them**
Integrating participatory monitoring approaches throughout the project to ensure that activities are co-created with children could lead to even more impactful results. When children guide the design of activities, clubs become more responsive to their realities and changing needs. Regular opportunities should also be created for children to share their perspectives and ensure they can access safe, inclusive spaces that reflect what matters most to them.

Claiming Her Right to an Education: Ella's Story

Ella, 15, lives in rural Burundi. For more than two years, she was out of school. After she finished Grade 5, her parents stopped supporting her education due to difficult financial realities and widespread social beliefs that girls don't need to go to school. They told Ella to focus on household chores. But Ella refused to give up on her desire to go to school.

Ella sought support from a friend who had recently resumed school and become a youth leader in the My Education, My Future program. With her encouragement, Ella worked up the courage to approach the school's headmaster, who welcomed Ella back to school. "The following day, I joined the classes for the first time. I was so excited," Ella remembers.

However, at home, her joy quickly turned to fear. "My parents and siblings strongly intimidated me for going to school," she says. Overwhelmed, she returned to school the next day and told her teachers she would give up. But the school and Right To Play Coaches stepped in. They met with Ella's parents and spoke about the importance of girls' education and the opportunities it creates for the future. "After some time, they finally began to accept that girls' education is important and agreed to let me go to school," says Ella.

Today, Ella stands at the chalkboard with her classmates, proudly taking her place in the classroom she fought to be in. She has the chance to learn and shape her own future. But for thousands of girls who are kept from school by poverty, harmful social norms, or the weight of household chores, this opportunity is still out of reach. Programs like MEMF are critical to breaking these barriers, ensuring more girls can step into classrooms, claim their right to education, and unlock their full potential.

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