



FROM RATIONS TO RESILIENCE

REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS TACKLE FUNDING
GAPS IN MUSENYI REFUGEE SITE



BURUNDI'S BACKGROUND AND HUMANITARIAN PRESSURES

Burundi is experiencing increasing humanitarian challenges due to conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). More than 100,000 refugees from North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri have sought refuge in Burundi, straining already fragile infrastructure and limited resources. Since early 2025, funding cuts have sharply reduced access to food, healthcare, shelter, and livelihoods. Rising food prices, fuel shortages, and climate shocks have worsened food insecurity nationwide.

Musenyi refugee site, designed for only 10,000 people, now hosts more than 21,000 refugees, most of them children. Humanitarian organisations, particularly World Vision International Burundi (WVIB), continue to face shortages of relief supplies and operational resources. Even with these increasing pressures, refugees in Musenyi refugee site demonstrate resilience by developing cooperative livelihood initiatives that strengthen self-reliance, social cohesion and community stability. This case study, developed for World Refugee Day, explores how Congolese refugees respond to humanitarian gaps through livelihood activities, particularly through the Susuruka Cooperative.

MUSENYI REFUGEE SITE SNAPSHOT



21,794
Refugees
hosted

10,000
Original
capacity

~10 WVIB
Livelihood
Cooperatives

Key Challenges & Resilience Efforts:

Facing reduced food assistance, shelter overcrowding, funding cuts, and staffing shortages, refugees are strengthening resilience through cooperative livelihood groups and agricultural initiatives.

HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES AND ECONOMIC STRENGTH

Food assistance has declined drastically. Monthly distributions of maize, beans and even soap have been replaced by monthly cash transfers of 38,000 Burundian Francs (BIF) (≈ \$12.81 USD) per person from World Food Programme. Inflation and rising food prices have further reduced the value of this support, forcing families to adjust their eating habits and daily survival strategies. Meat and fish are unaffordable, and many meals now consist mainly of maize bread, small sardines, vegetables; some even eating small portions of porridge after their meal to feel satiated.

One mother explained:

"We were getting 5 kilos of maize and 5 kilos of beans. Now there is no food being distributed. We are getting 30,000 BIF each month per person in each house." -Bokeci Asende



Bokeci Asende, Susuruka Cooperative Member



Naason Tatizo, Susuruka Vice President

WVIB staff emphasise that needs continue to rise while aid declines, limiting the expansion of livelihood programmes. Naason Tatizo, Vice President of a local cooperative, Susuruka, stated, "People in need are increasing and the aid is decreasing." In response, WVIB has assisted refugees in creating livelihoods that promote resilience, economic participation, and self-reliance. Rather than waiting for assistance, refugees are developing strategies to stabilise households and support each other through cooperative action. This includes sharing resources with other refugees and host community members.

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People in need are
increasing and aid
is decreasing.
-Naason Tatizo

BUILDING SELF-RELIANCE THROUGH COOPERATIVES

WVIB, in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), implements the project Autonomisation Et Inclusion Socio-Economique in Musenyi refugee site. Refugees and host community members collaborate in agriculture, soap production, butchery, and handicrafts activities that supplement declining humanitarian aid while strengthening economic robustness.

Currently there are nearly 10 livelihood cooperatives at the Musenyi refugee site. Cooperative participants earn 50,000–100,000 BIF (≈ \$16.80–\$33.60) per month, depending on their level of engagement and market access, while cooperatives generate an average of 500,000–5,000,000 BIF (≈ \$167.81 - \$1,678.14) collectively, depending on the number of active groups and seasonal production cycles. Figures may fluctuate because of market conditions, seasonality, and the scale of support.

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There was also not enough food, but now we have more. The livelihood programme fills in the gap. You cannot survive on aid alone.

-Buhendwa Ntamugo

Susuruka Cooperative, a 23-member group led by a female refugee, illustrates this resilience-centred approach. Members developed business plans with the support of WVIB and received funding from UNHCR. WVIB also provides training, monitoring, and technical support. Through these efforts, cooperative members build not only livelihoods, but also confidence and long-term economic security.

The cooperative has become a powerful model of community resilience. Families earn income, access hygiene products, and strengthen social ties despite prolonged displacement. Refugees who once received soap assistance are now producing and supplying soap to the wider community. One mother caring for a family of ten shared:

“I sell soap and have work which helps my children. They now also have access to hygiene (soap). There was also not enough food, but now they have more. The livelihood programme fills in the gap. You cannot survive on aid alone.”-Buhendwa Ntamugo



Josephine Safi, Susuruka Cooperative President

Instead of remaining inactive recipients of aid, cooperative members are emerging as entre-

preneurs, suppliers, and community leaders. Refugees and host communities cultivate land together, exchange materials, exchange knowledge, and support wider community needs. This participatory approach fosters dignity, resilience, peacebuilding, and social cohesion, while reducing tensions between displaced and host populations.

A cooperative member stated, "Before, refugees relied only on support from UNHCR, but now each member is able to sell soap and earn income through the cooperative's livelihood activities. As members began working together in agriculture and small businesses, they were also able to support people beyond their own households. When cooperative members cultivate and harvest together, they are able to contribute to and support the wider community." – Donatien Ngendabanka

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-Donatien
Ngendabanka

WVIB also links livelihood activities with education and child well-being. Through a partnership with WFP, Susuruka Cooperative supplies maize and beans for a school feeding programme serving 4,500 children across schools in Musenyi. This supply chain reinforces community resilience by improving nutrition, strengthening school attendance, supporting local economic activity and strengthening refugees' roles as contributors rather than beneficiaries alone. Plans are currently underway to expand nutrition support for pregnant women, lactating mothers and malnourished children under five.



Buhendwa Ntamugo, Susuruka Cooperative Member



Donatien Ngendabanka, Susuruka Cooperative Member

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If there is a poor harvest due to climate change, they can have another source of income. -Christophe Nshemezimana, WVIB Grant Coordinator



Christophe Nshemezimana, WVIB Grant Coordinator

SKILLS, ADAPTABILITY, AND RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT BEST PRACTICES

Beyond income generation, WVIB's programming strengthens leadership, financial management, problem-solving, and adaptability skills among refugee communities. Cooperative members stated that they have been able to learn to manage money, identify business challenges, resolve conflicts, and collaborate across cultural differences. These experiences are helping refugees build the self-reliance and resilience needed for navigating uncertainty and rebuilding their lives regardless of displacement.

WVIB staff emphasise that livelihoods programming has become vital as humanitarian funding declines. Resilience-centred approaches are helping communities become more resourceful and less dependent on emergency assistance over time.

"Through the livelihood programme, we are

Supporting families to improve their agricultural practices and build their capacity in smart agriculture, so they can increase production and meet their basic needs. We are also building capacity to layer on agriculture and diversify their sources of income. For example, if there is a poor harvest due to climate change, they can have another source of income. These practices can make families more resilient." — Christophe Nshemezimana, WVIB Grant Coordinator

FROM LIVELIHOOD SUPPORT TO RESILIENCE OUTCOMES

Through livelihood training, UNHCR start-up funding, cooperative membership, and technical support from WVIB, refugees build skills and generate income. These outcomes contribute to greater self-reliance and resilience by enhancing households' ability to adapt to economic shocks and pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Reflecting on the impact of these interve-

ntions, Theodore Riziki, WVIB Livelihood Grant Officer, noted that the training, particularly in climate-smart agriculture, has transformed refugees' mindsets. He explained that participants are learning how to manage cooperatives, engage in agribusiness, identify new economic opportunities, and navigate challenges more effectively. These skills are helping refugees become more independent and better equipped to adjust to changing circumstances.

Estelle Syahengema, a member of the Susuruka Cooperative, shared a similar perspective stating, "The livelihood training has changed the way I think. I learned how to manage money and identify the root causes of problems so I can find practical solutions."

These experiences showcase how livelihood programming strengthens resilience among refugee communities. Refugees in Musenyi are able to generate income and access cooperative support networks, helping families cope with reduced humanitarian assistance and other economic challenges, including inflation. Beyond meeting immediate needs, diversified income streams improve household economic stability and reduce vulnerability to future shocks. Participation in cooperatives also creates opportunities for leadership, collaboration, and market engagement, enabling refugees to move beyond dependence on aid and build more sustainable livelihoods.

WVIB BEST PRACTICES FOR BUILDING REFUGEE RESILIENCE

WVIB has implemented key practices that enhance livelihoods and resilience.

- Integrated humanitarian and livelihood programming that combines emergency aid with long-term economic resilience strategies.
- Participatory, community-led approaches that empower refugees and host communities to design, lead, and manage cooperatives.
- Cash assistance that preserves dignity and allows families to prioritise urgent household needs.
- School feeding programmes that strengthen child well-being while linking livelihoods to education and local food systems.
- Social cohesion initiatives that reduce tensions, strengthen trust, and promote peacebuilding between refugees and host communities.
- Adaptive programming models that integrate staffing, share resources and diversify funding partnerships to sustain services during funding shortages.
- Livelihood initiatives that position refugees as active economic contributors capable of rebuilding stability in their communities.

Resilience Programming in Practice:

This case study demonstrates World Vision's Resilience Programming Guidelines by linking humanitarian assistance with long-term livelihood development. Through community-led cooperatives, livelihood training, and market-based opportunities, the intervention promotes local ownership, strengthens adaptive capacity, and supports greater self-reliance among refugee and host communities.

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Refugees are becoming more resilient because they know they cannot wait only for support.

-Theodore Riziki, WVIB Livelihood Grant Officer

CONCLUSION

Burundi's humanitarian crisis reflects the intersection of conflict-driven displacement, climate change, economic instability and declining humanitarian funding. Refugees in the Musenyi site continue to face severe food insecurity and economic hardship. Regardless of the challenges they face, refugees exhibit resilience through cooperative livelihoods, entrepreneurship, and community partnership.

Those in Musenyi refugee site highlight that resilience is not only the ability to survive a crisis, but the ability of displaced communities to quickly adapt, rebuild and contribute significantly to their own futures. Livelihood activities improve household stability, strengthen social ties, improve self-reliance, and in particular, allow refugees to support their children and community.

While the results from the Autonomisation Et Inclusion Socio-Economique project have been impactful, scaling to assist other refugees and sustainability will require ongoing efforts to address key challenges. Cooperative members mentioned that they hope others will be able to participate as well; however, funding cuts have limited the expansion of more cooperatives like Susuruka.



Theodore Riziki, WVIB Livelihood Grant Officer

Refugees also experience limited market access due to location and fuel shortages in Burundi. In addition, climate variability in Burundi poses an ongoing risk to agricultural production, including droughts in Musenyi and floods in other areas of the country.

As Mr. Riziki noted:

"Refugees are becoming more resilient because they know they cannot wait only for support."

SOURCES

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2026). Burundi refugee population factsheet. UNHCR.

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