One woman’s courage to educate her community

CASE STUDY  Christine Sibomana, Burundi

“We became role models, speaking out on COVID-19 prevention. Now every household has hand washing facilities.”
Christine Sibomana is 45 years old and from Gashikanwa village in Ngozi province, north Burundi. She founded her Village Savings & Loan Association ‘Jijuka’, meaning ‘wake up’, fifteen years ago. She also helped to set up, and now supervises, six other savings groups in her local area, with a total of 173 members. Christine is married with nine children. Educated to primary school level, Christine generates an income through farming and cultivates beans, maize, potatoes, rice and sweet potatoes. She also owns cows, goats and rabbits. Members of Christine’s savings group often farm together sharing their harvests, and last season they collectively rented two fields for farming maize and beans. The group also supports vulnerable children in their community by buying them school materials.

Suffering in Silence

Christine’s province has seen very few cases of COVID-19, however the impact of the pandemic was still felt, as the community was no longer able to access products and materials from the major city of Bujumbura, instead relying on locally available produce, such as vegetables. This not only impacted individual households, but also business activities.

Christine explains: “COVID-19 affected our group by limiting our economic activity. People were showing economic deprivation, but it’s very rare for someone to tell you that they have gone a night without eating, except in extreme cases. We like to suffer in silence.” Christine explains how people in her community have prioritized their spending: “During this period, people bought a lot of food and hygiene materials like hand washing buckets, soap and sometimes masks. We could no longer buy new clothes.” Christine also noticed the impact of the pandemic on women, simply saying: “COVID has added work for women.” This includes increased care giving, increased water collection for handwashing, and the responsibility to buy more soap.

Members of Christine’s savings group were nervous about attending the weekly meetings for fear that they might catch COVID-19. They were also reluctant to continue saving, she explains: “The total savings in the group decreased because people panicked and reduced their contributions, as they weren’t sure what might happen the next day.”

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Adapting to change

Christine’s group made several changes to the way in which they operated, she explains: “Our adaptations consisted of respecting social distance during the weekly meetings, installing hand washing facilities at the meetings, and removing the role of counters so that the money does not pass through several hands before it goes into the cash box.”

The group also adapted by giving out smaller loans. She adds: “We restricted the number and size of loans to ensure people were capable of paying them back.” The group also decided to allocate its social fund to buying hygiene materials, such as soap, for group members.

Educating others

Christine’s group received guidance from health non-profit SACODE on COVID-19 prevention, she explains: “What was good was that we were able to make informed decisions about how to protect ourselves when others did not have this information. We were also given advice on how to manage and adapt our economic activities to the current situation.”

Knowing that other members of their community were not receiving prevention guidance, Christine’s savings group decided to act. Christine explains: “The rest of the community was scared; they didn’t have enough information on how to protect themselves. When a local child caught COVID, people started to take the pandemic seriously.”

Christine continues: “It was our essential role to educate other members of the community. Initially, people thought we were crazy, but they soon took us seriously when they knew that we were well informed. As the leader of all the savings groups in my local area, I started with COVID-19 prevention awareness raising amongst my group and encouraged members to spread the word. We soon became role models, speaking out at the markets and other trading centers, like hotels and restaurants. For me, I became even stronger because I raised awareness in a context where nobody understood me at the start. People used to blame me, but eventually they embraced prevention, which made me stronger.”

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Future needs

Christine is proud of all the things she has learnt through her savings group, including business management, conflict resolution, women’s rights, and leadership. She also speaks proudly about the impact she and her group have had, including all the households and savings group in her community now having hand washing facilities.

She is crystal clear on what she and other members of her group need to survive future crises, saying: “We need access to knowledge, so that we can face any crisis without fear. We also need support to maintain economic activities because that can stabilize us in times of crisis. Before COVID, we needed knowledge of profitable economic activities. During COVID, all our attention was focused on accessing information, so that we could stabilize and feel safe. Now, our concern is to prepare for the future in a stable manner and to stay informed about the evolution of the pandemic.”

For the future, she hopes that the economic activities of the savings groups will boost the local economy. She hopes for further stability and the economic empowerment of each member of the savings groups. She concludes: “In the savings group you have easy access to information and the means to take out credit. You also have support from friends during difficult situations.”

Christine Sibomana was interviewed in December 2021 as part of CARE’s Women Respond initiative – an unprecedented listening exercise, learning from women and girls to help CARE better understand the unique situation that COVID-19 presents, refine CARE programming and advocacy and elevate women’s voices and concerns to meet those challenges. The Women (in VSLAs) Respond sub-initiative is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.