



NAIROBI MAY 27-31  
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**5<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Economy of Communion** – Nairobi (Kenya), 27-31 May 2015

“Yes to an Economy of Communion”

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## CASOBU: The Associative Framework of Solidarity with Burundi

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Mariapolis Piero, 28 May, 2015

Burundi is a small country which is located in the heart of Africa, between two huge countries: Congo and Tanzania. It is one of the countries that make up the East Africa community.

Socio-political conflicts that the country has known, leading to civil wars (of which the last one ended in 2006), deteriorate the living conditions and the number of vulnerability has increased. The ideas to contribute to the fight against poverty arose among the members of the Focolare Movement from 1999.

We then made a commitment to give our contribution to rescue some of those people among us who were in need. Together, we began to share our ideas and talents, in the light of the charism of unity in order to give a response to these challenges. So, in 2000, the Associative Framework of Solidarity with Burundi - CASOBU began as a local organization through which members can act in communion to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

Thus, throughout the country there are cooperatives of producers (farmers, breeders, beekeepers, shopkeepers...) which have been put in place and in this way we help contribute to meet the needs of our own people. Unfortunately, the persistent war disabled these activities. At the same time CASOBU opened its eyes to look around and not to remain only among its members. This is how communities support actions have been initiated. To achieve this, CASOBU collaborates and builds partnerships with other organizations with which they share the principles. Action for a United World - AMU, an Italian organization which acts according to the principles of the ideal of unity was the first to help CASOBU to achieve its objectives. By these various actions, CASOBU becomes a field to contribute to human development and the fight against poverty.

CASOBU desires to have a United Burundi and one where by misery and destitution would be reduced and where people live in peace and dignity. Strong is our diversity, our resources, and with our experience, we encourage innovative solutions and the responsibility to improve the living conditions of vulnerable people in Burundi. CASOBU undertakes to facilitate lasting change by strengthening empowerment; influencing participation; supporting basic infrastructure; building access and good management of natural resources. Specifically, CASOBU has committed itself to work through the community micro-credit in order to bring a lasting change, in the improvement of food safety, financial education, water and sanitation, as well as various cross-cutting themes (in the field of health and the right to vocational training) that can be included in every action undertaken in order to make life in the communities more harmonious.

Our actions have enabled us to create relationships with the beneficiaries so that in success as well as in failure, we share the joy and challenges and together look for a way out.



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For example, in 2008, due to the various constraints encountered in the management of a food security project that we ran with the support of the European Union, we could not achieve the expected results in the forecast period. We felt that we could not remain indifferent to such a situation. We then sought to find a solution together with beneficiaries. In common accord with the beneficiaries we have decided to request an extension of the period of the project and this without that the project budget be increased. The lesson has accepted our proposal. Many activities such as labor, which before were paid and which was expensive, have been entrusted to beneficiaries of the organized producer groups. CASOBU is responsible for coaching and supporting agricultural inputs. This proposal was for us surprising because the population was considered to be inactive, owing to a humanitarian aid situation which characterized most of the projects in this part of the region and which were often emergency projects. We were happy to see how the beneficiaries have given themselves for success and we were able to exceed the expected results. We understand that in everything we do, the dignity of the person must be put in the first place and that we must give them a responsibility which makes them feel loved and valued. During an evaluation organized by the European Union with all the organizations that had benefited from the subsidies, it was an opportunity to criticize the beneficiaries, as if they are not active and responsible. On the other hand, we were witnesses of our experience with our beneficiaries and it was an opportunity to speak in favour of the beneficiaries by highlighting positive abilities and that they are considered in their dignity.

In addition to the willingness to commit ourselves and to do well our actions, every time we seek that they lead to communion, reciprocity and to the unity between the people and human development.

This attitude was adopted for the power projects and the abduction of drinking water that we have already carried out since 2009. The participation of beneficiaries in the activities is such that these projects are a meeting place for beneficiaries who have differences that make them live uncomfortably. It is inter alia of ethnic differences between those returning to the country and those who had remained in the country. These differences are related to being members of various political parties. This was an opportunity to meet as brothers on a common good and this has strengthened their peaceful coexistence. For example, in Kayanza (Murago), political differences were that the implementation of the project delayed because beneficiaries of various political parties had been unable to adhere to the project. After the active participation of members of the Focolare Movement in the community, they understood that water is a common good and beneficial for all, so we have gained their participation.

Since 2008, we have experienced a model of savings and credit to seek how to help the poor out of their misery. Initially it was very difficult to make the poor to understand that they can save and grant loans. That is why prior to this proposal, we also made an experiment. We started with a group of 20 women in Kinama (a suburb of the city of Bujumbura and which had been affected by the war) and who were in vulnerable conditions. After a year, the number of women who asked to introduce them to the microcredit has increased and with time and adhering to the model itself the number has gradually multiplied. In collaboration with AMU and other partners, many people joined this project and many others ask to be trained and supervised. Currently, more than 1,800 people attend Community microcredit activities. Those people who organized themselves into savings and internal credits groups are pooling money that helps establish a microcredit Fund used to grant credits. This has permitted many of them to have credits and provide capital, which previously, they could not have done in the banks because they were not credible



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with regard to banks and microfinance institutions. These constituted capital, various activities are undertaken with beneficiaries and they are able to repay their credits and at the same time meet the different needs. This has made the poor feel valued in their dignity to be persons. When we dialogue with them to understand the impact of this activity in their lives, whatever it is, is always difficult to quantify the gain for each of the activities, we understand the effectiveness of this model when beneficiaries admit to meet the needs that they couldn't meet before.

For example, "it was very difficult for me to feed my children once per day, now, through the income made possible by micro-generation, I manage to feed my children three times a day, pay the monthly rent, school fees, health care and clothing for people who are in my care... I was able to build a House for habitation. ... I was able to buy land to be able to build a House, I am valued by my husband and by those around me and I am proud to live and understand others. I can now participate in festivals because I now have clean clothes and I feel worthy as others. And when a person asks me a habit, I give him a new loincloth... ".

In rural areas where the population lives on agriculture, many were able to buy land to increase the cultivable land. Ruyigi has engaged 722 people to microcredit until 2014; and they confessed that they have not had a problem to find seeds for the planting season because Community microcredit helps overcome the problem of lack of the means to procure seeds.

This attitude of pooling their resources so that they are at the services of the others is a practice already present in the minds of each of the participant for microcredit which is also a faculty in African and particularly the society of Burundi which must be cultivated to an economy of communion.

The impact of these micro-credit actions is not only economic. They also contribute in social cohesion and in the family. In the cities, women had no capital to contribute to the economic production of the family, the fact that they can now contribute gives values and they feel their dignity restored.

In the future, we would like members of savings groups, groups from the (micro enterprises) income-generating activities can grow and developed such that each one meet its needs, and can put their resources together in order to work in cooperatives. This year, we will work with the community of Ruyigi, which is in the Butezi and Ruyigi Counties, where we will assist in the creation and management of beneficiaries in cooperatives so that, alongside the pooling of financial resources for granting credits, they can also pool their knowledge, their talents and strengths for production. We will continue to help each other so that each person who is in need finds in communion the possibility of getting out of poverty and find the joy of life.