MERANKABANDI
Social Protection nets support project

Collection of true life stories

Cornelle, beneficiary of the MERANKABANDI project in the commune of Itaba, province of Gitega. She makes modern pottery, November 2020.
It is essential to keep on strengthening the social protection system, to meet the needs of vulnerable households and their children throughout their life cycle.
Foreword p. 4
Introduction p. 6
Program overview p. 6
Areas of intervention and beneficiaries p. 7
Program Components p. 8
Project Cycle p. 10
Accompanying modules p. 11
- Financial education p. 14
- Maternal and child health – Family planning p. 16
- Nutrition p. 18
- Integrated Early Childhood Development p. 20

Conclusion p. 23
Bibliography p. 23

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with the technical support of
unicef
for every child

with the technical support of
REPUBLIC OF BURUNDI
Foreword

“Will we ever be like the others?” That’s the question a mother asks herself just after being selected as beneficiary of MERANKABANDI support project. The lack of dignity in the community, the malnutrition of the children and their dropping out of school, such was the bleak description of the households’ situation, which are now ‘like the others’, thanks to the cash transfers granted by the MERANKABANDI project and used in the daily life.

MERANKABANDI - literally meaning “be like the others” - is a national social safety protection program designed to restore dignity to households in extreme poverty, and to enable them to recover from this situation. This program fulfills the Burundi government’s ambition to guarantee access to decent living conditions for the most vulnerable Burundian households.

In its pilot phase, the MERANKABANDI project selected 56,090 of the most vulnerable households, compared to others in their respective collines, to benefit from the program. Three years after its launch, beneficiaries are sharing the impact of the program in their lives.

This booklet is a collection of testimonies, compiled to share the human aspect of the MERANKABANDI project. A father, several mothers and a little girl testify on the improvement of their situation through the economic development of the household and the adoption of good practices acquired during the implementation of the MERANKABANDI program.

Through these few testimonials, my thoughts go out to all the actors committed to the success of this program. May they be encouraged in their noble mission, to guarantee access to decent living conditions for the most vulnerable households in Burundi. My thoughts also go out to all households still living in vulnerable situations and who remind us that there is still a long way to go.

I wish everyone an interesting reading. May these few real-life stories serve as a source of inspiration for all of us to contribute to the success, continuity and extension of this pioneering program in support of social safety and protection nets in Burundi.

Michel NYABENDA
Coordinator
Burundi is facing humanitarian emergency in some areas, while having to address the structural vulnerability of the poorest households. According to the analysis of monetary poverty and child deprivation in Burundi (UNICEF - 2017), 65% of the Burundian population and 69% of children aged 0-17 are poor. This analysis also reveals that 78.2% of children suffer from multidimensional poverty, with an average of 4.1 deprivations out of 7. According to the national survey on the nutritional situation and food security in Burundi (ENSNSAB - 2019), 54% of children under five years of age suffer from chronic malnutrition.

In this context, the International Development Association (IDA) has granted the Government of Burundi for the implementation of the "MERANKABANDI" social protection net and support project, i.e. a cash transfer program with complementary training activities, targeting the most vulnerable households living in rural areas. These social safety nets, which provide a social protection base for the most vulnerable, aim to protect families from the consequences of economic shocks, natural disasters and other crises.
The objective of the MERANKABANDI project is to provide regular and predictable cash transfers to households having children aged of 0 to 12, living and suffering from extreme poverty and vulnerability, in selected areas.

In addition, accompanying measures are implemented to promote self-investment of beneficiary households in their human capital, to consolidate the key mechanisms developed for the social safety nets system.
Targeted Provinces
- Gitega, Karuzi, Kirundo and Ruyigi.

These provinces were selected according to the degree of monetary vulnerability and the prevalent rate of chronic malnutrition. In these four provinces, 16 communes were selected (4 communes per province) and they were identified considering their level of vulnerability. Within these communes, a total of 247 collines were randomly selected.

The MERANKABANDI project operates in the following 4 provinces: Gitega, Karuzi, Kirundo and Ruyigi. These provinces were selected according to the degree of monetary vulnerability and the prevalent rate of chronic malnutrition. In these four provinces, 16 communes were selected (4 communes per province) and they were identified considering their level of vulnerability. Within these communes, a total of 247 collines were randomly selected.

The MERANKABANDI project registers a total of 56,090 direct beneficiary households, these households are registered in the beneficiary database. For each selected ‘colline’, the choice of eligible households for the program was subjected to community validation, after a survey of all households residing in the ‘colline’ and having children between the age of 0 and 12.

This survey collected a number of data, to sort households according to their degree of vulnerability and to establish provisional allocation lists. A community consultation was then conducted to validate the beneficiary households on these lists. This process allows the community to take an active part in the program and reinforces transparency and equity in the selection of beneficiaries.

Within the selected households, women and children are the main beneficiaries of interventions. With few exceptions, mothers are entitled to receive payments on behalf of the household.

The program was launched in July 2017 for a period of five years. Project management and execution at central and local levels are carried out by the Program Implementation Support Unit (PIU) under the supervision of the Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights and Gender.
Project components

The MERANKABANDI project is an approach combining cash transfer (Cash) and support for beneficiaries (+), a unique innovation increasing the impact of the program and the sustainability of investments in human capital.

1. CASH TRANSFER COMPONENT

Payments consist of cash transfers (wire transfers) of 40,000 Burundian francs (about USD24) every 2 months 30 months.

Payment is made via a cell phone, a device given free of charge to the beneficiaries.

Transfer and withdrawal fees are covered all along the program, to ensure that the beneficiary household receives the full amount of the assistance payment.

2. COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES COMPONENT

Complementary activities to cash transfers are implemented in parallel, to promote and generate change in beneficiary households through adoption of positive behaviours, leading to self-investment to human capital.

These accompanying measures consist in:

- Facilitating home visits to model and struggling households to promote peer education.
- Conducting demonstration sessions on good nutrition, agriculture, hygiene and exclusive breastfeeding practices.
- Conducting awareness sessions on behaviour change promotion modules.

To support the complementary activities, 5 modules have been developed around the following themes:

- Explanation of the process and objectives of the Household Social Nets support program (POP).
- Maternal and Child Health/Family Planning (SMI/PF).
- Infant and young child feeding (ANJE).
- Basic financial education, savings, mutual credit and IGAs (EF).
- Integrated Early Childhood Development (DIJE).

These complementary activities are conducted by NGOs, specialized in supporting rural households:
- Caritas Gitega (ODAG), Gitega province,
- Pathfinder International, Kirundo Province, and
- ActionAid International Burundi, Karuzi and Ruyigi provinces.
UNICEF is partner of the project and provides technical assistance for the implementation of complementary activities. UNICEF focuses its support on quality assurance of complementary activities, to ensure that they are properly implemented according to internationally recognized standards in the field of communication for development.

UNICEF is also supporting the analysis of complementary activities performance to enhance advocacy for the national expansion of the program.

Finally, UNICEF supports capacity building, quality control, activity monitoring and program studies.

“Hinduringendo” (Let’s change our behaviour) wellness areas have been set up to facilitate the implementation of complementary activities.

The project plans to develop a total of 215 Hinduringendo wellness areas, 213 of which are already operational.

An Hinduringendo area includes:

A: Two hangar spaces
B: A hand washing device
C: A school garden
D: A space for cooking training
E: Playgrounds for children.
F: Latrines.

Wellness Areas

Hinduringendo

Let’s change our behaviour

merankabandi
Supporting beneficiaries during 36 months.

**Project cycle**

**SELECTION OF GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**
- The provinces are selected according to their degree of monetary vulnerability and their chronic malnutrition rate.
- Each targeted province identifies the most vulnerable communes.
- In each targeted commune, the collines are selected at random.

**ACCURATE AND FAIR SELECTION OF THE MOST VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS**
- In each selected colline, a survey is conducted on all resident households having children aged 0-12 years, and also classified according to their degree of vulnerability.
- The community confirms this ranking of the most vulnerable households, eligible for the program.

**BENEFICIARY REGISTRATION IN THE DATABASE**
- The beneficiary household is officially registered in the MERANKABANDI project.
- The mother is registered as the representative of the household and receives a beneficiary card.

**DONATION OF A CELL PHONE FOR MONEY TRANSFERS**
- A cell phone with a SIM card is given to the mother.
- This phone number corresponds to the account number used for the money transfer.

**MONETARY TRANSFERS (FOR 30 MONTHS)**
- Registered households receive 40,000 BIF (about USD24) every 2 months, through cell phone money transfer.

**CASH+: COMPLEMENTARY SUPPORT ACTIVITIES (FOR 36 MONTHS)**
- To help beneficiary households to develop their human capital,
  - Awareness-raising/demonstration sessions are organized twice a month
  - The households benefit from home visits (continuously).

**TRANSVERSAL ACTIVITIES:**
- Follow-up training of community facilitators
- Real time monitoring of a sample of beneficiary households (continuously).
Consolate, beneficiary of the MERANKABANDI project in the commune of Butaganzwa2, Ruyigi province, is going about her daily doughnut production activity initiated since she benefited from the complementary activities of the MERANKABANDI project, November 2020.

**Milestones**

- Start of cash transfers: **April 2018**
- Start of complementary activities in **Ruyigi** province: **February 2019**
- Start of complementary activities in the provinces of **Gitega, Karuzi and Kirundo**: **February 2020**
- Estimated Project Completion Date: **June 30, 2022**

**EVALUATION AND GRADUATION: (AT 36 MONTHS)**
Implementation of evaluation and graduation modules to ensure the sustainability of interventions, with a focus on income-generating activities (IGAs), solidarity groups and connections with social services.

**5 MODULES DEVELOPED IN THE AWARENESS AND DEMONSTRATION SESSIONS:**

1. Explanation of the process and project objectives (2 months)
2. Basic financial education, savings, mutual credit and IGA (2 months)
3. Maternal and Child Health/Family Planning (3 months)
4. Infant and young child feeding (2 months)
5. Integrated Early Childhood Development (2 months)
Hinduringendo, tumere nk’abandi
Let’s change our behaviour, let’s be like the others.
Yaratwigishije vyinshi
We learned a lot
Mukuj’inama mu rugo, n’iterambere mumuryango
In joint decision making and family development.

Kuja inama mu rugo bitez’imbere mumuryango
Making decisions together contributes to family development
N’akanyamuneza mu rugo
And happiness in the family.

Mukenyezi wibungenze, fungura mu nyenyeri zitanu
Pregnant woman, take supplement foods, 5 stars!
N’ih’uzogira amagara meza
For good health.

Yaratwigishije kuvyara ku rugero
We learned to space births
Nih’umwana akura neza
In order to ensure a good development of the child.

Baratwigishije umugabo GITO
We learned through the character of ‘GITO’
Yar’ikigaba mu rugo
Which did not contribute to the development of the family.

Mugabo Gito yarahindutse
Mr. ‘GITO’ has changed his behaviour
Agura ibitungwa bito bito, yitez’imbere mu mumuryango
He bought small livestock to help his family develop.

Kuj’inama mu rugo bitez’imbere mumuryango
Making decisions together contributes to family development
N’akanyamuneza mu rugo
And happiness in the family
The MERANKABANDI social protection net support project has proven to be an effective social protection mechanism in Burundi. The following testimonials attest the important results already achieved.

Complementary behaviour change activities aim to promote household investment in human capital. They consist of awareness-raising sessions and learning about good practices in financial education, maternal and child health, nutrition, and early childhood development in beneficiary households and communities.
Consolate and her husband opened a cafeteria at the Muriza market, in the Commune of Butaganzwa2, Ruyigi province. This couple is raising 9 children, 2 of whom are adopted. Repatriated, the family has long lived in poverty, without any arable land. For Consolate, the situation has changed thanks to the MERANKABANDI project.

“The cash transfers allowed the children to go to school and our family to have food. In addition to money, MERANKABANDI taught us a lot, especially about financial education, how to save money and how to do an income-generating activity. These trainings were a real eye-opener for us. You can receive money but not do anything really useful with it because you need to improve your knowledge on how to manage the money you receive.

We applied what we learned to the letter. We joined a savings and credit association and we saved. Finally, we got a credit to start the cafeteria. We offer tea, doughnuts and cakes that we make ourselves. My husband takes care of the customers and I take care of the production. With the cafeteria, we are able to provide for our family. We have a house and arable land. We are no longer indigent; we have become like others.”

Although cash transfers were closed in the commune of Butaganzwa2, Consolate is pleased that the MERANKABANDI project has enabled its household to lay the foundations for its development.

“Beneficiaries learn how to set financial goals, manage the household budget, save, undertake efficiently, as well as the functioning and benefits of a solidarity group and techniques for identifying an income-generating activity (IGA). Beneficiaries are also made aware of the dialogue between spouses for all decisions concerning the management of household assets.”
Cornélie lives on the Kibogoye colline in the commune of Itaba, province of Gitega. She is married and mother of 4 children, 3 girls and 1 boy. Today, in addition to pottery, Cornélie practices agriculture and animal husbandry with her husband.

"Before MERANKABANDI, the traditional pottery did not allow us to provide for the needs of the family. We didn’t have enough food for the children and they didn’t go to school every day. We all lived in a small one-room house and could not afford to farm. The program taught me how to develop my pottery business. I now make beautiful vases and pots. Before, I used to sell a vase for 100 or 200 Burundian francs. Today, my new models sell for 5,000, 10,000 or even 50,000 francs (BIF), depending on the size. Every Wednesday, we meet in a women’s association to save money. We hope, over time, to be able to buy a cow and one day open a store where I will show my vases. Today, we are like the others. We have become good farmers and manage to make good harvests to feed our household. Our children eat before going to school and when they come back. Thanks to the savings, we have bought small livestock: 4 goats, 3 pigs and 3 chickens. We were able to enlarge the house and separate our room from the children’s room. I am really grateful to MERANKABANDI who gave us a solid base. I am sure we will continue to move forward."

Cornélie’s story shows that the complementary activities of the MERANKABANDI project have had a positive impact not only on household income, but also on self-confidence, skill building and family cohesion.

97.4% of respondents declare money saving in their households.
Éliane lives on the Gasasa colline in the commune of Butaganzwa2, Ruyigi province. She is married and has 2 children, a newborn baby and a 3 year old daughter. Éliane is a beneficiary of the MERANKABANDI project. According to her, a big change happened in her household. “Before MERANKABANDI, it was difficult to feed the family. We worked in the neighbours’ fields to survive. When you are a farm worker, they pay you 1,200 Burundian francs. With this money, you go to the market and buy 1 kg of beans for 1,000 francs. You don’t have enough left to buy flour, which costs 500 francs. When we managed to add sweet potatoes to the beans, it was the most consistent dish we could afford. At mealtime, my daughter often went to the neighbours’ house and sometimes they were ‘forced’ to feed her.

With the first cash transfers, at first we went to buy food. Then, with the awareness sessions, we got the idea to use the money received for an activity. Today, we have our small business in the market of Muriza, in addition to the agriculture that we do on our own land...

Our situation has really changed. With the sessions on nutrition for pregnant women and better access to food, I just gave birth to a 4 kg baby. When I think about it, I see that I am much better than I was after the birth of my daughter. She no longer begs for food from the neighbours. She knows that her mother cooks for her every day and I can see in her eyes that she is proud of that.”

With the MERANKABANDI project, Éliane and her husband were sensitized on maternal and child health. They learn good practices for the health of children under five years old and pregnant and/or breastfeeding women, as well as for the prevention of mother and child diseases and better use of health services.

Beneficiary households gain knowledge about the pre- and post-natal periods. They learn about nutrition of the pregnant women, how to help a spouse during pregnancy, the advantages of giving birth in a health center, and the advantages of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. They are also informed about the immunization schedule, the various common childhood diseases, sexual and reproductive health and the prevention of epidemics.
Ernest and Annonciate are living in the Bitare colline in the commune of Bugendana, province of Gitega. Since some time, they have always attended the awareness sessions together and with their two-year-old son.

“The first time I went to the awareness session alone. When I came back, I told my husband what I had learned. I told him that he was invited to the next session. At first he refused, pretending that adult men don’t have to receive lessons. ‘Go ahead, you women!’ he told me.

I went back alone, and once again I shared with him what we had learned.

At the third time, I insisted and we went together. That day we were told the story of a character named Gito who didn’t care about the future of his home. My husband enjoyed the meeting and he didn’t miss any further sessions. We went back together. These sessions helped us change our behaviour and now he is the one who reminds me that it is the day of the meeting. Today there is harmony in our household. We have learned to make decisions together to develop our home in harmony.”

Like the other beneficiaries of the MERANKABANDI project, Ernest and Annonciate attended the modules on joint decision-making within the household, for harmonious household development.

In 90.4% of beneficiary households, exclusive breastfeeding is properly observed during the first 6 months.
Virginie picks vegetables for the evening meal, November 2020.

The MERANKABANDI project assists households in situations of extreme poverty and malnutrition. Virginie lives in the Gisura colline, in the commune of Buraza, province of Gigeta. She is the mother of 7 children, and is a beneficiary of the MERANKABANDI project. “I remember when we were validated by the community as beneficiaries of MERANKABANDI; I couldn’t believe it! I was finally going to get help! My children were malnourished. They didn’t go to school and didn’t sleep because of the leaky roof of the house. I asked myself, “Who are these people who are going to get me out of here?” We waited impatiently and finally we started receiving the cash transfers. With my husband, we decided to buy food and school supplies for the children at first. Now the children are going to school and they are healthy. Through awareness sessions, the program teaches us good practices on different subjects. I learned how to take care of the vegetable garden. I can come back from the fields a little later and pick what I need to prepare the evening meal. Neighbours can come and ask me for some vegetables from my garden, and I give them some. They are happy with this sharing. I also take the opportunity to share my new knowledge with them.”

Like other beneficiaries of the MERANKABANDI project, Virginie benefited from complementary activities in gardening and nutrition. This allows her to grow vegetables that enrich her children's meals and enable the household to get out of chronic malnutrition.
Évelyne is a mother living in the colline of Buriza, in the commune of Butaganzwa2, province of Ruyigi. She has 4 children: Ingrid (7 years old), Frize (4 years old), Aimé (1 year old) and Jérôme, an adopted child of 14 years old. Évelyne is delighted to see them in good health.

“Before MERANKABANDI, I didn’t know how to feed the children properly, and that affected their health. They were not gaining weight and often had diarrhea and suffered from malaria. We often went to the health center. At one point, I was afraid that they were among the malnourished children who were given cookies.

MERANKABANDI really brought us out of financial poverty but, more importantly, out of ignorance. In addition to the cash transfers, I benefited from the cooking demonstration sessions and, thanks to ‘Maman Lumière’, I learned how to prepare good food for the children. Today, I know how to cook a balanced diet with meat or fish, fats, sweet potatoes and beans. I often buy fruit, avocados for example, to supplement their diet. A diversified diet helps children to be healthy. I learned all of this in the nutrition learning centers of the program.

I am very grateful to MERANKABANDI. My children are doing well. They don’t get sick as before. Even if the program is ending in our community, I hope we will continue to move forward.”

Thanks to the MERANKABANDI project, Évelyne has acquired knowledge about balanced nutrition for children under five years old and the prevention of malnutrition, which has had an impact on their general health.

Beneficiaries also acquire knowledge about appropriate and complete food to offer to children through the Nutrition Learning Homes (FARN).

77.9% of beneficiary households have an acceptable level of food consumption.

90.2% of households have soap available at all times.

Évelyne prepared a good meal for her children, November 2020.
Françoise, back from school, helps her mother in the vegetable garden, November 2020.

Françoise is 13 year old girl, the sixth of a sibling of 7 children. She studies at the basic school of Rweza. She lives in the Gisura colline, in the commune of Buraza, province of Gigeta.

“Our life was difficult. I didn’t go to school anymore because I didn’t have any notebooks. It was also the case for my brothers and sisters. My mom and my sister worked in the neighbour’s fields, to feed us. We barely ate once a day, and never enough.

Since our family has been benefiting from MERANKABANDI, we all went back to school, with notebooks. In the morning, we eat before leaving home and in class, we work well.

At school, the course I prefer is the French language; it’s the easiest for me. When I come back from school, I like to eat well, especially when mom has cooked us some rice, cabbage or beans mixed with vegetables or meat.

When growing up, I will be a teacher and I will teach little children.”

This commune is particularly affected by school dropouts. The 2018/2019 yearbook of school statistics recorded 1,632 cases of school dropouts, including 741 girls. Françoise was one of them but thanks to the MERANKABANDI project, she went back to school.

Beneficiaries gain knowledge on the protection of children against violence, exploitation and abuse as well as on children’s rights.

Concepts on the right to education, civil registration, child development, health and safety are shared with the families participating in the program.
Beneficiaries gain knowledge about child development, particularly during two main periods: from birth to three years (the first 1,000 days of life) and from three years to five years. Beneficiaries learn about the effects of diet and maternal behaviour on the prenatal development of the fetus and the role of parents in stimulating child’s mental development and self-esteem.

Ernest takes advantage of the Hinduringendo area’s facilities, to have his son play on a swing.

“I praise the accomplishments of this program, which teaches us about household development in general and parenting practices in particular. Personally, I am an orphan and have not had the chance to live with my parents. I know what lack of love is, and I don’t want my son to experience it. I used to lock him up so he wouldn’t play. I used to tell myself that it’s not worth it, that it’s a waste of time. But through the awareness sessions on child development, we have learned that games and other developmental activities contribute a lot to a child’s development.

... When I have time, I take the opportunity to play with my son to offer him what I didn’t receive. When my wife is busy preparing the meal, I take care of our child and play with him while waiting for the time to eat.”

Like the other beneficiaries of the MERANKABANDI project, Ernest benefited from the module of Integrated Early Childhood Development and learned about his role as a parent in stimulating his son’s mental development and fulfillment.
The social protection sector must be a priority in resource mobilization within the framework of internal and external financing plans.
The MERANKABANDI project’s approach of combining cash transfers with complementary activities is paying off for the beneficiary households and the community. The MERANKABANDI project has enabled households not only to acquire consumer goods but also to invest in the human capital foundations of their children. Households have been able to move out of poverty and malnutrition. Intra-family cohesion was strengthened; children returned to school; income-generating activities were undertaken; and the health of children and their mothers was improved. Beneficiary households have seen their situation improve and now have confidence in a better future.

In the socioeconomic context of Burundi, where 65% of the population and 69% of children aged 0-17 are poor, social safety nets, such as the MERANKABANDI project, are an effective approach to reduce poverty. Such programs protect families from the consequences of economic shocks, natural disasters and other crises, and provide the basis for social protection for the most vulnerable.

**Bibliography**

- Annual activity report of the MERANKABANDI program (2019-2020)
A mother breastfeeding, she prepared food according to the good practices learned in the nutrition learning centers. Buriza colline, Butaganzwa2 Commune, Ruyigi Province, November 2020.

Social protection is an effective response and one of the best investments for sustainable poverty reduction.