

## **Itetero: Promoting Holistic Early Childhood Development in Rwanda**

### **1. Background**

#### **Overview:**

The Nutrition Country Profile of Rwanda from 2017 (Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd. 2017) reports that under 5 mortality rates continue to slowly decline with 42 deaths per 1,000 live births (data from 2015), however estimates from WHO/World Bank Group Joint Child Malnutrition in 2017 indicate that 38% of children under five in Rwanda are likely to be stunted which shows a negative picture for the optimal development of children during this critical period. Another striking statistic included in the Nutrition Country Profile according to UNICEF data from 2016, finds that only 44% of women attend 4+ antenatal care visits, implying the gaps in quality and access to care. Nevertheless rates of exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life are quite high at 87%, however, data from 2014 shows that 32% of the population is undernourished and therefore, a significant portion of children as well as parents are lacking adequate dietary diversity.

According to the Rwanda Demographic Health Survey (RDHS) 2014 – 2015 only 49% of children engaged with an adult family member in four or more activities that promoted learning during the three days before the survey. Only 30% of children under 5 years played with two or more toys. Less than 1% of children under 5 years had three or more children's books. This lack of early stimulation hinders children's development: only 7% of children aged 36-59 months are developmentally on track in literacy-numeracy; just 63% in this age group are developmentally on track in the combined domains of literacy-numeracy, physical development, social-emotional development, and learning.

The government has made excellent progress in recent years with the development of the National Early Childhood Development policy, increased investment in pre-primary education and the passing of various laws and policies. These advances have resulted in increased pre-primary enrollment and a surge of multisectorial collaboration within the country to tackle the challenge at hand and promote positive parenting on a large scale.

#### **Sociocultural determinants of early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding practices**

##### **At a socio-political level:**

- The CRC is incorporated into the 2003 Constitution and children's rights and freedoms are also protected by the Law Relating to the Rights and Protection of the Child (2012)
- The Government developed its first multi-sectorial Early Childhood Development Policy and Strategic Plan in 2011 and it was revised in 2016.
- Rwanda Stunting Prevention and Reduction Project is a Multi-Sectoral national program aimed at reducing stunting for children between the ages of 0-5. It is financed by the World Bank.
- The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) is responsible for policies relating to gender, families, women's empowerment and children. Within the MIGEPROF, the National Commission for Children (NCC) was established in 2011 to monitor the observance of children's rights and drive child protection interventions. A Child Rights Observatory Office responsible for advocating for the rights of the child exists within the National Commission for Human Rights with responsibility for child-rights advocacy. (UNICEF 2018)

- Other ministries responsible for ensuring the well-being of children, women and families include the Local Government (MINALOC); Justice (MINIJUST); Health (MoH); Education (MINEDUC); Youth; Environment; and Infrastructure (MININFRA) Ministries of Finance and Economic Planning (MINECOFIN) (UNICEF 2018)

#### **At a health-care providers/service provision level:**

- Minimum Service Standards for Early Childhood Development have been established to ensure equitable and accessible ECD services, however, poor quality of care is a persistent problem.

#### **At a community-level:**

- The parents of Rwanda’s newest generation of infants and young children came of age during the devastating 1994 genocide, which left hundreds of thousands of children orphaned.
- Parents in rural areas tend to have significantly lower education levels and inadequate parenting skills. (RDHS 2015, UNICEF 2017)

#### **At an individual level:**

- According to the 2017 Situation Analysis of Children produced by UNICEF parents show inadequate levels of early stimulation and early learning. Only about half of parents surveyed in the RDHS engaged in these activities. (RDHS 2015, UNICEF 2017)
- Children in rural areas are far more commonly left alone (37%) at home than children in urban areas (23%). (RDHS 2015, UNICEF 2017)
- Children in rural are more likely to lack access to adequate: water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); health and nutrition, educational opportunities; child care and protection. These “mutually reinforcing conditions of stunted growth (38 per cent) and developmental delay (37 per cent)” for rural children (UNICEF 2017)

#### **Itetero: Nurturing a Space for Children on the Radio**

*Itetero* is a weekly radio program currently airing in Rwanda. *Itetero*, means “nurturing space for children” in Kinyarwanda, a local language of Rwanda and it has been designed for both children aged 0-6 and parents. It is the first radio program that has ever been produced in the country, specifically targetting young children. It has been on air on Rwanda Broadcasting Agency’s (RBA) airstreams since 2015 and has broadcast over 100 episodes. Each episode is 30 minutes long and it incorporates: drama, music, storytelling, children vox pops and play time, numbers and letters, etc. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

According to SFCG’s report to UNICEF in February of 2018, the program was created “with children, for children”. The content includes Rwandan folklore and cultural references, making it uniquely relatable. Even at a global level, targeting young children as a primary audience for radio programs is still new. Listeners follow the stories of both animals and people as they discover explore: gender roles; play; fairness; fear & rumours surrounding health services; complementary feeding; parental love; hygiene; expressing oneself; positive discipline; handwashing, and other topics. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

Five Listening Clubs (LCs) were created as a means of tracking the program. Once a week, families were brought together in “Listening Clubs” where they listened to *Itetero* and reinforce the messages being promoted in the

program. Parents and Children were encouraged to provide their feedback on the program during these sessions. The Listening Clubs organized by Search for Common Ground, were held in Early Childhood Development Centers in Rwamagana, Ruhango, Mageragere, Musanze, and Nyamasheke. Parent members of the Listening Clubs were also trained to promote *Itetero* and the messages it covers within their communities. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

## 2. Goals and Objectives

*Itetero* was designed to:

- (1) stimulate the brains of young children, aged 0-6 years, focusing on their cognitive; social; emotional and physical development and
- (2) encourage positive parenting practices for adults.

The program is also a celebration of the cultural heritage of Rwandan people incorporating cultural values and folklore within the story lines. Children are communicated with by “animals” and characters from Rwandan folklore, while messages on early childhood development are embedded in the program for parents as well. *Itetero* LCs promote social capital as a vehicle for changing norms in Rwanda, illustrating how CHWs and religious leaders can help with parenting for example. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

## 3. C4D Strategy

### a. Participant Groups /Target Audiences

The primary participant groups/target audience for the intervention was children (0-6 years old) mothers and fathers.

SEM Level	Expected outcomes <sup>1</sup>
<b>Policy/Enabling Environment</b>  Government agencies	1. Greater awareness of the importance of investment in Early Childhood Development.
<b>Organizational</b> Early childhood development centers, non-profit agencies.	1. Improved morale and job satisfaction among staff at Early Childhood Development.
<b>Community</b>  musical artists, radio personalities.	1. A more supportive culture on positive parenting. 2. Improved cultural norms around positive parenting.

<sup>1</sup> Expected outcomes are based on a review of the program scripts.

<p><b>Household/Individual</b></p> <p>children (0-6 years old) mothers and fathers.</p>	<p>In children:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase child responsiveness.</li> <li>2. Improved Cognition.</li> <li>3. Improved emotional response.</li> <li>4. Greater autonomy and self-efficacy.</li> <li>5. Greater self-confidence.</li> <li>6. Improved relationship with parent.</li> </ol> <p>In parents:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improved rates of exclusive breastfeeding.</li> <li>2. Improved awareness of the importance of the first 1,000 days.</li> <li>3. Timely introduction of nutritious and diverse foods.</li> <li>4. Greater awareness of the benefits of early stimulation and play.</li> <li>5. Increased involvement of fathers in child care.</li> <li>6. Improved handwashing practices.</li> <li>7. Reduction in violent disciplining practices.</li> <li>8. Improved ability to engage with children.</li> </ol>
---	--

**b. Delivery platforms and communication content**

**Media**

**Radio Show:** A new episode is broadcast once a week on the National Radio channel. Each episode is 30 minutes long and it incorporates: drama, music, storytelling, children vox pops and segments about counting and letters for example.

**Community-based**

**Listening Clubs:** set up as a monitoring mechanism to assess how well messages are resonating with both parents and children.

**Community Engagement:** parents involved in the listening clubs served as “ambassadors” for the educational content covered in the radio program and encouraged community members to listen in.

**Service-based**

**Capacity-Building:** of RBA staff on hands-on production and dubbing skills.

**c. Enabling Environment / Implementation Strategy**

The intervention brought together a coalition of multisectorial actors from government agencies, early childhood development centers, non profit agencies, musical artists, radio personalities, local authorities, caregivers and young children, creating a well rounded program that was able to reflect the reality of life for children and parents in Rwanda. The commitment of these multisectorial actors has been crucial to ensure

program sustainability, including the commitment on the part of the RBA who covered the costs of airing the program.

More than 100 episodes of *Itetero* have aired and the show was recognized as a finalist for the Japan Prize, a media award for educational programs. The behaviors promoted among parents include handwashing with soap; timely introduction of nutritious and diverse foods; immunization; fathers' participation in child care; elimination of violent disciplining practices; and nurturing and engaging communication with children. Cross-cutting issues such as social inclusion of children with disabilities and gender equality are addressed throughout the show. The program also works to increase families' awareness and use of available community support by featuring interviews on how Community Health Workers and religious leaders can help them. In one such case, a Community Health Worker was interviewed to share information on a new RapidSMS messaging platform that allows the CHW to track the development of mothers and children, and respond quicker should complications arise. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

In preparation of the LCs, UNICEF held a training on July 24th, 2017 for SFCG staff to learn Early Childhood Development skills that will allow for young children to have the best possible start in life. Orientation sessions were then conducted by SFCG at early childhood development centers to introduce them to the objectives of the program and ask for their support in establishing listening clubs. It was emphasized that the purpose of the Listening Clubs was to gain a sense of how *Itetero* could be improved and to empower participants to become "ambassadors" in a certain sense, of the ECD messages being shared in *Itetero*. Early Childhood Development Coordinators were invited to participate in the training as well as local authorities, caregivers and representatives of Imbuto Foundation. Between 2-10 participants were present at each orientation meeting in five districts: Rwamagana, Ruhango, Mageragere, Musanze and Nyamasheke. The RBA crew was trained in November of 2017 on hands-on production and dubbing skills. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

Children 0-6 years old and parents were then recruited in the five districts to form part of the Listening Clubs which took place at the Early Childhood development centers in the five targeted districts. Each club had around 15 members on average, and parents and children met separately, on a different day. Participants in the listening clubs were selected based on their interest in participating, and their openness to providing feedback and sharing what they learned at the groups with other members of their community. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

SFCG conducted outreach trainings in each targeted district to provide information on the types of services caregivers and children could access at Early Childhood Development centers and also to equip participants on how to share information gained by listening to *Itetero* and participating in discussions during the listening clubs. Community health workers, local authorities and parents participating in the listening clubs were all invited to participate in the training. (Search for Common Ground 2018)

#### **4. Monitoring, Evaluation and Results**

The *Itetero* listening clubs were organized to obtain feedback from primary beneficiaries and offer a space for them to engage with the educational messages embedded within the *Itetero* narrative. Additionally, parents were trained on how they too could promote the main messages of the show further by engaging with their communities. Furthermore, with the LC's taking place at ECD centers, facilitators who work at these centers, coach parents and share their valuable information and insight on the best way to care of young children. Leveraging LCs as a monitoring tool is not new, but training parents to engage with their community on the

content being covered in the show and share information on the services provided at the ECD centers, is an interesting innovation.

As a result of the interventions listed above, behavior and attitude changes were observed in a mid-line ECD evaluation:

- Reduction in use of violent disciplining practices on young children from 77% at baseline to 54% at midline;
- Reduction in proportion of parents who believe that physical punishment is necessary from 30% at baseline to 16% at midline.
- The newly established ECD radio programme *Itetero* received recognition at the Japan Prize 2016, an international award on education media. This has resulted in increased donor funding. The impact of the programme was also highlighted with a case of a child with blindness who convinced his parents to enrol him in primary school after listening to the episode on school readiness.
- Further, assessment conducted with young children, including children with mental and physical disabilities, showed promising results. The impact of the programme was also documented with a case of a child with physical disability who convinced his parents to enrol him in primary school after listening to an episode on school readiness. Finally, three key religious leaders demonstrated their commitment to supporting ECD.

According to a report from Search for Common Ground to UNICEF, parents involved in the listening clubs reported high levels of satisfaction with the course. Some started allowing their children to listen to the radio, acknowledging that they could learn something from the program. Parents were impressed by how useful the information was and commented that the characters and storylines were also relatable. Parents suggested that in some cases the language could have been simplified; they recommended focusing on one issue per program; to including more cases of children making mistakes; they suggested to include a male teacher and a male community health worker. Children reported wanting more songs in the programs and games they are more familiar with.

## **5. Lessons Learned Challenges**

Challenges were experienced in the selection of members of the listening club. Some of these challenges arose from caregivers conceiving the show to be, just for kids. Once they realized that they could benefit too, this challenge was in most cases, overcome.

The annual budget of *Itetero* remains modest. This suggests that even in resource-scarce countries, it is possible to mobilize governments and partners to create high quality media programmes for children, leveraging relatively low-cost, high-impact technology like the radio. Observations have been made that the program which airs during the day, should potentially be re-broadcast in the evenings to reach more parents who cannot listen to the radio at work.

## **Lessons Learned**

*Itetero* address issues of critical importance for families with young children in Rwanda. The Listening Clubs created a safe space for participants to gain more information that they were then encouraged to share with other members of their community. Listening to the program as a group allows for deeper reflection of the topics being covered and can also reveal when a message needs further reinforcement. The LC also allowed for

a space for community members to directly voice their concerns to the coalition of actors producing the program. The children's participation in the listening clubs provided invaluable insight into the developmental needs of children. It was observed that 30 minutes was probably too long for the attention span of children and program staff at SFCG recommended splitting the segments for children from those for adults. Children also should a significant preference for the songs over talking segments. Simplified language was also recommended

### **Looking Forward**

There are plans for Itetero to be on TV by the end of 2018; the TV show will include Rwanda's first home-grown animation content.

## **6. References**

Development Initiatives Poverty Research Ltd (2017) Nutrition Country Profile of Rwanda from 2017. Global Nutrition Report.

National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) [Rwanda], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Rwanda], and ICF International (2015) Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2014-15: Key Indicators. Rockville, Maryland, USA: NISR, MOH, and ICF International

Search for Common Ground (2018) Listening Club Itetero Radio Program.

UNICEF (2018) Situation Analysis of Children in Rwanda, 2017.

UNICEF (2001) Communicating With Children, Principles and Practices to Nurture, Inspire, Excite, Educate and Heal, Kolucki, B and Lemish, D

### **Annex**

Itetero was produced by Search for Common Ground, Rwanda Broadcasting Agency the Ministry of Gender and Family Planning UNICEF the Imbunto Foundation.