

ACHIEVEMENTS OF AVEGA

1995 - 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

AVEGA is a non-profit making organization of Rwanda genocide widows which was established in 1995. It renders and performs its activities all over Rwanda with its head office located in Kigali, the capital of the country.

It is comprised of 20,312 widows and 71,478 of their dependants, mainly orphans. Amongst these members 5,628 widows are 58 years old or over. 926 of them are childless.

The widows and orphans in membership of AVEGA are those who were affected by the 1994 genocide. The 1994 genocide claimed the lives of over one million Tutsis and a number of moderate Hutus. In a period of huge upheaval and enormous terror, Tutsis were slaughtered, stabbed, battered and hacked to death ruthlessly. Many women and girls were raped and endured extreme sexual violence, while a number were infected deliberately with HIV.

Many survivors were left homeless, disabled, traumatised, and impoverished, with other insuperable difficulties. Many others were left widowed and orphaned. Some orphans lost all their relatives, their homes and income and are now alone. Many are heads of households, poor as they are.

Widows also lost their children as well as their husbands and relatives. As a result many of them do not have even a single child to care for them. Nevertheless, after the genocide, many widows adopted orphans who did not have anyone to care for them. Many orphans and widows are traumatised and are in need of regular counseling and aid. Because of disability and trauma they cannot work and therefore can barely earn a living.

AVEGA AGAHOZO was established to address all these problems.

1. Mission and vision of AVEGA:

The role and aim of AVEGA was, and is, to support the social and economic development of widows of the genocide. This is done through training, provision of technical and social aid, as well as teaching them how to initiate and manage income generating projects.

2. **Global objective:**

In a wider sense, the main objective was, and is, to improve members' living conditions and knowledge through education, sensitization and provision of social, economic and health support.

3. **Principal objectives:**

- To promote the general welfare of the genocide victims
- To promote solidarity among members of the association
- To carry out activity aimed at the amelioration of the widows' living conditions
- To cooperate with other organizations which have the same goals as AVEGA
- To commemorate genocide victims and to fight for justice
- To participate in the national reconstruction and reconciliation processes

After the genocide, widows came together to form an association known as AVEGA AGAHOZO (Genocide widows association) which would help them address a multitude of problems that were being encountered. The association was initiated by 50 widows referred to as founders and eventually grew country-wide, as regional offices were opened in Rwanda's Eastern, Western, and Northern provinces. This was done to decentralize its activities in order to be closer to the beneficiaries and to expand its zones of operation.

The major plan of AVEGA was, and is, to empower widows and their dependants in order for them to emerge from poverty, loneliness, misery, agony, and anguish and to have hope to live after the horrific and shattering experience of genocide.

The most pressing problems that needed to be addressed were as follows:

- Trauma
- Lack of shelter since the genocide survivors had their houses ruined
- Members being HIV positive due to rape being used as a tool of genocide
- Grinding poverty
- Disabilities
- Insurmountable problems such as being bedridden
- Loneliness
- Loss of hope
- Judicial problems

AVEGA accomplishes its activities through four programmes:

- Medical department
- Advocacy, Justice and Information department
- Administration and Finance department
- Economic and Social Operations department

4. The Organization Structures:

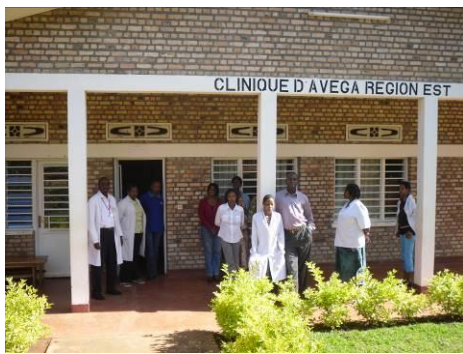
- The national board
- National administrative council
- Provincial committee
- District committee
- Sector assembly committees and Cell committees

I. ACHIEVEMENTS

II.1. PSYCHO-SOCIAL MEDICAL PROGRAM

A. MEDICAL SERVICE:

- Three health centers were set up: Ntarama health centre, AVEGA East Health centre and AVEGA head office Health centre. These centres provide medical care and treatment to members suffering from various diseases, including AIDS, caused by genocide. This has assisted members greatly, making it easier for them to access to regular care, treatment and medication. The health centres are now open to the general public and receive at least 6000 patients a year.
- Every year about 500 vulnerable members are assisted to join mutual health insurance so that they can safeguard their lives and acquire medicine easily.
- Regular visits were organized in order to support members suffering from AIDS.
- Awareness was raised about the importance of voluntary HIV tests. So far AVEGA clinics have tested 11,874 members, found 1,561 to be HIV positive and placed them on ARVs.
- Many members are uneasy about accessing treatment in public health facilities (due to the triple stigma of being a survivor, a rape victim and HIV+), and as such a member accompanies them if hospitalized.
- Various meetings, seminars and workshops were conducted to discuss AIDS issues.
- Volunteers were visited now and then in order to supervise them and provide them with technical support as regards to AIDS.
- The problem of AIDS as a stigma has been reduced following sensitizing sessions. As a result most beneficiaries' now have less fear when it comes to disclosing their diseases and illnesses.



ONE OF THE CLINICS OF AVEGA



A PHARMACY



A LAB

IMPACTS:

- Most beneficiaries whose lives were in danger were healed and have since managed to work and develop themselves personally.
- Those who were left with deadly diseases after genocide were relieved after getting treatment and medication to minimize their pain. As a result they have lived long lives and managed to look after their dependants (for those who have them).
- The volunteers that were put in place to identify beneficiaries with medical issues allowed AVEGA nurses to address the beneficiaries' ailments quickly. This ultimately led to faster recovery rates.
- During home visits, beneficiaries were taught about the prevention of various diseases, hygiene issues and the value of early treatment in stopping disease. As well as exposing the ineffectiveness of traditional charm-based treatments, these visits also convinced many beneficiaries to go for voluntary HIV testing in order to determine their health status.

B. TRAUMA COUNSELLING SERVICE:

This service helped raise awareness of AIDS among beneficiaries. At first, whenever a beneficiary found out that he or she was HIV positive, the solution was either to commit suicide, be desperate or to lose hope and develop a stigma, shyness and the like. However, after intensive counselling sessions and support, beneficiaries have confronted these issues and have been able to continue with their lives.

Trauma counsellors also deal with other issues that cause trauma such as family disputes, perennial problems of poverty and Gacaca court process. Counsellors are always closer to the beneficiaries in endeavours to sort out such matters; this helps them to build their self-confidence so that the stigma of AIDS can be reduced. 1225 voluntary counsellors were also chosen to help AVEGA counsellors cover their huge zones of operations. They were provided with telephones and bicycles to help with their transport and communication.



**A COUNSELOR WITH A BENEFICIARY
DURING INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING**

Trauma counselling service performs the following:

- Individual and group counselling; 1254 beneficiaries have come for individual counselling each year.
- Home visits.
- Training and supervisions of AVEGA counsellors.
- Training and supervision of psycho-social animators (APS).

IMPACTS:

Even though healing trauma needs a holistic approach to deal with sudden and abrupt pitfalls, the trauma counseling service has played a pivotal role towards the healing and reduction of such trauma. It is true that the consequences of genocide are still present in Rwandan society and that underlying traumatic problems can be aroused at any time. Yet the presence of experienced trauma counsellors at AVEGA clinics and voluntary counsellors in various areas, has played a vital role towards addressing trauma issues.

c. SOCIAL SERVICE:

- Members and their families were visited in their respective homes, where their problems were listened to and they were given advice on how to maintain their lives.
- 12,929 members were provided with iron sheets, doors, windows and nails for shelter. Some had their ramshackle houses rehabilitated or refurbished, while other beneficiaries had houses and plots of land bought for them.
- Nutrition support has been given to 1561 members who are taking ARVS.
- Urgent social support is given to about 8110 people a year.
- Permanent assistance is provided to 136 elderly women.
- Vulnerable beneficiaries who lost their relatives are assisted during funeral rites.
- Home-based care is provided to numerous beneficiaries.
- Scholastic materials were provided to 1471 students every term. Among those students are those who were born as result of rape.



A House before repair



A House after repair



Distribution of basic goods

IMPACTS:

- Elderly widows, whose age does not allow them to be exposed to tiresome work, are given urgent and regular support which helps them to earn a living and ultimately live longer.
- Beneficiaries who suffer severe illnesses and disabilities cherish this urgent and the direct support.
- Support has consoled many survivors whose property has been looted or has suffered incalculable damage.
- The provisions of all sorts of social support were of paramount significance to the well-being of beneficiaries. AVEGA members developed trauma as a result of the poverty and lack of shelter caused by the destruction of their homes. Similarly, many orphans and widows were traumatized upon realizing they could not afford scholastic requirements. However, receiving home-based care, hardship allowance and urgent support, has helped them to reduce this trauma and continue their lives.

II.2 ADVOCACY, JUSTICE AND INFORMATION PROGRAM:

- Many sensitizing sessions were held to teach members about key Gacaca issues including how to give testimonies, the new law which governs Gacaca, family law, their rights, and gender-based violence. Committee members were also elected to deal with issues related to gender-based violence.
- Members were accompanied in court during cases. They were also provided with transport whenever they wanted to go to courts and had all their other needs catered for.
- Each and every year AVEGA staff, its members and all natives or citizens join hands and commemorate the 1994 genocide.



An AVEGA Memorial Site and Commemoration Event

- 12 memorial sites were constructed in order to bury genocide victims in dignity
- Testimonies were recorded, written and archived in order not to forget the 1994 genocide.
- A conflict resolution club made up of 20 groups was formed. It is composed of students who come together during their vacations to do communal work for vulnerable people including constructing houses, cultivation and so forth. They also teach beneficiaries how to resolve conflict, and inform them about their rights and unity and reconciliation. This is a positive programme which helps shape young people into good, fair and responsible adults and ultimately aids the reconciliation process.
- About 900 Voluntary Paralegals chosen from local communities were trained to help AVEGA's legal advisors in issues related to justice in their respective areas. Some were provided with telephones and bicycles to ease their transport and communication.
- The Government of Rwanda has a strong will to help the survivors. The introduction of Gacaca courts contributed much towards the speeding up of trials and judgments. It also led to unity and reconciliation among Rwandans survivors and provided information about the deaths of their relatives and friends. This process also enabled many to detect where their remains lay so as to bury them in honour.
- Despite the many achievements of Gacaca, the process has also caused much trauma. Indeed, we have seen some examples of widows dying on hearing the testimonies about the death of their beloved relatives.
- A decree was made by the Prime Minister to protect orphans and survivors of genocide from being deprived of their property.



Students in training on conflict resolution



The closing ceremony of a conflict resolution training workshop

IMPACTS:

- Accompanying members in courts of law has given them essential support, confidence to testify and has also contributed to many cases being resolved.
- These broken-hearted beneficiaries are also happy at having the remains of their beloved relatives, friends, companions and acquaintances etc. unearthed and buried in honour. While survivors used to feel sad at seeing the remains of their relatives scattered on lying inhumanely on the ground, in toilet pits, rubbish dumps, cesspools and trenches, now that this problem has been addressed, their trauma has been significantly reduced.
- The testimonies recorded will be kept for centuries for the future reference of whoever shall be interested.

II. 3. CAPACITY BUILDING AND SELF- RELIANCE PROGRAMME:

- 321 projects were funded by different donors in order to ameliorate the members' standards of living, their welfare and their self-sustenance. These projects include: livestock projects, handcraft projects, business projects, crop husbandry such as the pepper project, and the livelihood program.



GOATS DISTRIBUTION BY AVEGA TO THE BENEFICIARIES



ONE OF THE ELDERLY WIDOWS GIVEN A COW BY AVEGA



MAIZE GROWING PROJECT

- Members were provided with 633 cows, 427 goats and 90 pigs. Members keep on passing cows and goats onto others after they have produced. With access to milk and manure, the health of many members and their families has markedly improved.
- Members were supported in crop husbandry where they grew Soya beans, beans, sorghum, groundnuts and sweet potatoes. This led to utilization of idle land and a reduction of poverty.
- With the help of modern tailoring machines, members from all over the country were taught essential handicraft skills including how to knit sweaters, cardigans and jumpers. These products have since entered the world market.
- Community development workers, in conjunction with committee members, have helped members come together to form groups, cooperatives and tontines (social economic groups) that help each other in various aspects.
- AVEGA has training centres which enable the provision of support to the disabled, the impoverished and the traumatized. It is comprised of conference rooms, a kitchen, a restaurant lodges, tents and a canteen and makes a profit of almost 30,000,000 a year. This profit is used to solve the social problems of poverty-stricken beneficiaries.
- AVEGA's reception centre provided job opportunities to over 26 Orphans and widows in order to earn a living.



AVEGA WIDOWS AND ORPHANS EMPLOYED BY AVEGA RECEPTION CENTRE PROJECT

- An Internet café was established where secretarial duties are carried out and orphans are given computer skills. About 400 orphans who have finished their secondary school have been trained so far.



AVEGA ORPHANS LEARNING COMPUTER SKILLS

- A bee project was introduced so as to provide beneficiaries with honey. Since it is planned that the project will be expanded by beneficiaries passing it onto their neighbours, it is hoped that this will help real unity and reconciliation, the final goal of the project.



AVEGA Bee Project



IMPACTS:

The establishment of an economic operation unit has improved the welfare and living standards of the beneficiaries and has taught them to initiate and maintain sustainable projects rather than to be too reliant on others. This has helped to rebuild the confidence of beneficiaries, and though many still endure extreme poverty, it has helped them to make a step towards greater independence.

II. 4. INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING PROGRAMME

The following activities were carried out:

- Various committee members were elected, from the sector level up to the regional level, ensuring that representatives are local and remain closely connected to beneficiaries.
- An annual review meeting is always convened so as to discuss the progress of activities and take measures to solve other challenges encountered.
- Auditors always supervise how finance was managed and books of account were balanced.
- During the mourning period in commemoration of genocide, beneficiaries are visited and supported by committee members. They also visit members in cases of impromptu need.
- AVEGA encouraged its staff members to go for further studies in universities and other institutions of learning in order to promote their education, improve their skills and ultimately to increase their future prospects.
- A field visit was made to Uganda, one of Rwanda's neighboring countries, so as to exchange ideas on how to take care of people suffering from AIDS.
- AVEGA's authorities made several contacts both within the country and overseas in order to seek donations and to maintain good will, social ties, collaboration and cooperation with various organizations and bodies.
- Monthly staff meetings are held to see how the activities are going or went.
- Various weekly meetings are held by heads of programs to determine the activities that must be focused on.
- With the advocacy made by the SURF (the Survivors Fund) and AVEGA, other donors such as the CAFOD (Catholic Overseas Development Agency), DFID (the UK Department for International Development), WFP (the World Food Programme), HCR (the UN Human Rights Committee), and MSAADA, have assisted AVEGA in many aspects of our work. The British embassy also emerged and assisted in various developmental plans, while CAFOD supported in psychosocial affairs. All along the members had been overwhelmed by constant traumatic problems.
- AVEGA managed to acquire its own offices without having to spend huge amount of money on house rent.

IMPACT:

The re-enforcement of the institutional capacity has led to greater levels of efficiency and effectiveness.

I. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

- There are still 5,253 people without shelter in spite of much Government effort to solve this issue.
- Most beneficiaries are growing older and weaker which means that they need regular assistance.
- Some beneficiaries have chronic trauma and therefore need to be looked after all the time.
- Some beneficiaries have constant, serious and severe illnesses or disabilities to the extent that they are bedridden and consequently face a perennial problem of poverty.
- Most students complete secondary education and fail to get either jobs or scholarships to go for further studies and therefore come to AVEGA to seek help.
- The problem of profound trauma still exists because its causes can not be mitigated and controlled. Such causes include: absolute poverty, Gacaca proceedings where members recollect their past, shattering experiences, mocking remarks by genocide perpetrators who were released and are either on parole or, after confessing, are on suspended sentences and by those doing communal services. Members who live with traumatized relatives find it a problem because they also eventually become affected. For example, you may find a young person, who, after being looked after by their elder brothers or sisters who suffer trauma, also starts to suffer. According to research made by Dr Naason a psychiatrist and psychotherapist in 2009, it was found out that about 30% of the Rwandans suffer from post-trauma stress disorder and that 53.9% suffer from depression. These forms of trauma are prevalent among genocide widows and orphans. 8% of them are alcoholics and 1.2% are addicted to drugs.
- Some orphans who are household heads find survival difficult for they had parental responsibilities and care at an early age. They need regular assistance in various areas.
- There are elderly childless widows who, being alone, are unable to look after themselves and carry out household chores, all of which makes survival very difficult.

II. FUTURE PROSPECTS AND WISHES

- To carry on with advocacy as a way to look for funding.
- To keep on sensitizing members to work hard and to get involved in and maintain income-generating projects.
- To show members the value of accessing loans and to help them develop a habit of saving.
- To convince members to carry on with self-sustaining projects.
- To support AVEGA build another counseling centre in Kigali in order to cater for beneficiaries that are engulfed by trauma issues.
- To collaborate with local leaders to find solutions to housing and poverty issues, possibly through communal work.

- To carry on with the counseling program.
- To collaborate with other bodies and organizations.
- Survivors need compensation. IBUKA (Umbrella organization of genocide survivors) and FARG (Government of Rwanda Assistance Fund for Survivors) have started a process of discussing how this can be done in what is referred to as “AFRICAN RIGHTS”.
- To employ doctors who are specialized in mental health and would help members suffering such problems.
- To employ more community development workers so as to always be closer to the beneficiaries and be able to know their day-to-day problems. For example, in the Southern Province, where there are more than 8,000 members, there are no community development workers at all, a fact which disrupts the smooth running of the activities because it becomes difficult to ascertain members’ daily problems and wishes.

III. **CONCLUSION**

We are extremely indebted to everyone, young and old, from far and wide, whose generous support has led us thus far. It connected us to other donors and reduced the problems faced by our members. We are indeed overly grateful. However, while beneficiaries are now able to resolve various problems, there is still a long way to go to fully overcome the consequences of genocide. Yet by and large, a good beginning makes a good ending. We shall always cherish donor’s gargantuan aid.

THANK YOU