

Promoting socio-economic development for women-led small-sized enterprises in Kigali, Rwanda

Beneficiary: Progetto Rwanda Onlus
Location: Rwanda, Africa
Grant Cycle: 2023 - 2026
Type of Grant: three-year program support
Human Welfare & Rights
Website: progettowanda.it

The Associazione Progetto Rwanda Onlus was founded in 1998, a few years after the end of the Rwandan Genocide, the tragedy that overwhelmed the country in 1994 and which saw the death of almost a million people. The aim of the association is to carry out projects for the protection of the rights of children and young people and to empower women, thus contributing to the social, economic and cultural development of local communities.

The **Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation** has been committed to improving living conditions in Rwanda since 2006. In 2013, the Foundation began collaborating with Progetto Rwanda Onlus to support women's entrepreneurship and schooling projects, including the creation of a school farm in Kibaya. Supporting micro-entrepreneurship projects for the empowerment of women means enabling them to overcome a state of extreme vulnerability, become autonomous and, in many cases, find the courage to escape situations of abuse and domestic violence. As of 2018, 113 small businesses have been successfully started by Rwandan women, thanks to the support of NaEPF. Progetto Rwanda Onlus believes that education is one of the main factors for social change and self-development, particularly for young people living in poverty. Adequate education offers the opportunity for an improvement in living conditions in the medium and long term and helps to strengthen the economic and social structure of the country.

The female unemployment rate in Africa averages around 45%, about twice as high as the male rate. The development of business-smart solutions is a key strategy to cope with an uncertain economic

environment and to open up new opportunities for small entrepreneurs. Compared to the rest of the world, there are very few female-led enterprises in the region. This gap is due to many factors related to the business environment and socio-cultural barriers. However, in spite of its terrible recent history, Rwanda has experienced tremendous growth over the past nine years and has implemented key policies to counter increasing poverty. The involvement and success of women is crucial to the competitiveness of every economic sector.

This project, which will last three years, is aimed at developing and consolidating the business activities opened by the women who participated in the women's entrepreneurship project in 2018, which was then replicated every year until 2023, thanks to the support of the Peretti Foundation. It therefore stands in continuity with what was previously realised but, at the same time, intends to develop the project further. In fact, although almost all the activities opened by the women participating in the programme have significantly changed their precarious initial living conditions, the continuous monitoring carried out from 2018 to the present day has highlighted the need to start a new training process to achieve higher and more significant entrepreneurial standards. For the new programme, 45 women (15 per year) will be selected who have already participated in the programmes in previous years and who demonstrated superior entrepreneurial skills in running their businesses. All of them, thanks to the training and financial support they received, have emerged from their initial state of extreme poverty and are now successfully running small businesses.

The women's level of education ranges from elementary to high school level, but they have also acquired business and entrepreneurial skills through personal experience, which were significantly enhanced by the initial training programme. During the numerous follow-up interviews conducted in the field by the Project Rwanda team, these women entrepreneurs expressed their willingness not only to continue their education by developing and deepening their knowledge in business, finance, social media and English but also to develop creative and dynamic entrepreneurial techniques, conceiving new, original and sustainable development ideas. The number of participants limited to 15 women each year was deemed the most suitable so that each woman could be closely monitored.

An important project partner will be E4Impact, social change organisation that supports the start-up and growth of new businesses in Africa through MBAs, entrepreneurship programs, business accelerators and economic development projects. It was launched in 2010 as an initiative of ALTIS – Graduate School of Business and Society of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and in 2015 it became a Foundation with the support of Associazione Genesi, Mapei, Webuild, the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and Always Africa Association. E4Impact Foundation carries out entrepreneurial training programs in twenty African Countries.