

Tackling inequality for Batwa graduates in Rwanda

Students and graduates from Rwanda’s most neglected and marginalized community learn to design development-focused research projects

The Batwa people in Rwanda are particularly marginalized and face challenges with high unemployment and poverty. These barriers are reflected in the very low numbers of Batwa students in higher education in the country. In 2016, INASP’s AuthorAID project provided a grant to support research writing training for Batwa graduates. This training has helped many of these students to attract research funding.

The rights of the 370 million indigenous peoples scattered throughout the world are enshrined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, with its promise to “leave no one behind”. Unfortunately, despite making up 5% of the global population, indigenous peoples comprise 15% of the world’s poorest according to UN figures – and they are behind on almost every social and economic indicator.

Rwanda’s Batwa people are no exception to this. Also known as pygmies, Batwa are the most disadvantaged minority in this small East African country, where they do not have a collective land base. Numbering just 25,000 – 0.2% out of a total population



A workshop in Kigali supported by an AuthorAID grant helped redress the imbalance in research opportunities for the Batwa people in Rwanda

of 13 million – Batwa were historically hunter-gatherers. For many generations, they used their pottery skills to trade with

their agricultural neighbours, but, with the proliferation of metal and plastic, their workmanship is becoming increasingly

Rwanda’s invisible people

Almost 800,000 people were killed in the Rwandan genocide, which took place between April and June 1994. The Batwa suffered disproportionately during this time, losing an estimated 30% of their entire population. In an attempt to diminish racial tensions and ensure ethnic atrocities do not ever occur again, in 2002 Rwanda passed a new constitution that completely outlawed ethnicity. Even speaking about ethnicity is seen as divisive, and the government encourages its citizens to pursue a shared national identity.

Unfortunately, one result of this legislation is that the government refuses to recognize the unique identity of the indigenous Batwa, choosing instead to officially label them “historically marginalized peoples”. This downplays the fact that the Batwa are a specific ethnic community with specific needs – and many advocates argue that their needs will not be adequately addressed nor their rights respected unless they are officially recognized as a distinct community.



“During the training, I studied project design and research methodology deeply. As a development studies graduate, I had time to open my mind and to reflect on the challenges faced by my community.” – Sebanani Just, workshop participant

undervalued. Today, Rwandan Batwa face extremely high levels of poverty and unemployment; an estimated 30% do not generate an income, with many reduced to begging on the streets.

“Batwa communities in Rwanda are a neglected and marginalized minority,” states Richard Ntakirutimana, Executive Director of the African Initiative for Mankind Progress Organization (AIMPO). “They are routinely excluded from participation in political life, and are denied equal access to public resources.”

Facing the challenges

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that in 2016 there were only 40 Batwa university graduates in the entire country. And, as Ntakirutimana explains, even these graduates face enormous difficulties. “Unemployment levels are high among Batwa graduates due to institutional and societal discrimination,” he says. “Many Rwandans believe that the ‘primitive’ lifestyle of the Batwa people renders Batwa graduates

incapable. Secondly, a lack of skills such as leadership and management, public relations, public speaking, social media and advocacy strategies prevents Batwa graduates from reaching their full potential. Thirdly, lack of support is a huge challenge for Batwa graduates.”

About AIMPO

The African Initiative for Mankind Progress Organization (AIMPO) was established in 2001 under its original name: the African Indigenous Minorities People’s Organization. As a national NGO, it aims to advance the rights and interests of Batwa communities in Rwanda. Its mission is threefold:

- To promote the individual and collective rights of the Batwa
- To facilitate sustainable development in Batwa communities
- To accelerate the social, political and economic integration of Batwa into Rwandan society

A workshop in Kigali, Rwanda in 2016, funded by INASP’s AuthorAID project, aimed to address some of these challenges by equipping 24 Batwa undergraduates and recent graduates with the basic skills to design and plan research projects and gather data. The training emphasized community engagement and consultation, and focused on engaging the students in skill-building activities that would contribute to the development of Batwa communities.

Projects with purpose

Entitled “Project Design, Research Methodology and Capacity-Building Skills for Batwa Graduate Students”, the workshop was conducted by Ntakirutimana and Meghan Laws, a PhD candidate in Political Studies at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. On the first day, the participants were walked through the essential characteristics of successful research projects, as well as steps in project planning and tools to engage communities and gather information. They

“I am overwhelmingly positive, despite the institutional and societal barriers that Batwa youth continue to confront. The 2016 workshop demonstrated the eagerness of Batwa graduates to acquire foundational knowledge and skills in research design and project management in order to address key problems that affect Batwa communities across the country.” Meghan Laws



“From the bottom of my heart, I want to express my gratitude to INASP’s AuthorAID for providing us with the support and resources to implement our workshop.”

– Richard Ntakirutimana

also examined independent and conceptual thinking: “The participants discussed obstacles to the project vision, and talked about developing ideas and testing the feasibility of the project through consultation with the beneficiaries,” says Ntakirutimana.

On the second day, the students looked at interviews and gender matrixes in more detail. Through role-play, they practised different interview techniques – including structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews – aimed at addressing a specific issue of high importance within their communities. Based on the issues they identified, the participants proceeded to produce research design templates.

A third and final session took place one week later, in which

the participants were tested on everything they had learnt through a two-part written and oral examination where they were asked to design and present a project that would address pressing needs within their communities.

Ntakirutimana was impressed with the “diversity of topics” presented in the workshop, as well as with the participants’ ability to produce clear and refined research proposals. Similarly, Meghan Laws pointed out that the workshops “stimulated dialogue among a group of intelligent, educated and motivated youth with a desire to work toward positive change”.

A brighter future for Batwa communities

After the workshop, attendees were given a certificate of completion to use for job applications, and Laws offered to provide them with letters of recommendation for university programmes and references for job applications. Moreover, in the following months, the participants used the skills they acquired to create sound research proposals focusing on the Batwa community in Rwanda’s Bugesera District. Out of the 10 projects designed by the participants, three have been accepted and funded by donors.

“We received positive feedback on the workshops from all participants, and many students requested that we run a

supplementary workshop on data analysis,” states Laws. “We were exceptionally pleased with the level of interest Batwa graduates displayed, and impressed by the knowledge and dedication participants showed.”

During the training, Ntakirutimana and Laws also encouraged the graduates to consider getting involved with AIMPO and, excitingly, four have since begun volunteering. This is an important step for the organization as the greater number of volunteers has enabled it to take on more projects and serve the needs of Batwa villages in remote parts of the country.

Going forward, Ntakirutimana and his colleagues hope that more development-focused research projects aimed at Batwa communities will be designed, and that these projects will be given the funding they need to succeed by research institutions. They are planning further similar workshops.

Vibrant and engaged

Ultimately, equipping Batwa graduates with the skills to design robust research projects and gather data has helped prepare them for the world of work. It has also cemented their position as active citizens with the ability to engage with complex development issues that will improve the position of the Batwa community in Rwanda.

“The funding from INASP and AuthorAID enabled AIMPO to acquire vital experience in staff and volunteer training, and identify areas of weakness. We are very grateful!” – Meghan Laws

