

Around Burundi's largest lake, women and children bear the brunt of floods

Experts say more must be done to build resilience to landslides and other climate-related disasters

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In April 2024, unusually heavy rain in south-western Burundi caused a landslide that [flattened](#) nearly 500 homes in the village of Gabaniro, Rumonge province. A young child was killed, 2,500 people were left homeless and 500 hectares of cropland were damaged.

For those whose houses remain, it feels a precarious peace. “We have been living in constant fear since witnessing something we never thought possible,” Evangélique Hatungimana, a survivor of the landslide, tells Dialogue Earth.

The flooding caused ground movement in Mubone, some four kilometres south of Gabaniro. “My whole house is cracked,” says resident Christine Tuyisenge; when it rains, she leaves with her children for fear the family will be swept away.

Hatungimana and Tuyisenge are just two of the people impacted by the heavy April rain that hit several provinces in Burundi. Such women are often left to pick up the pieces after a disaster. When floods and landslides damage infrastructure and hurt local opportunities to generate income, men often venture further afield to seek work, leaving women to work and raise children alone.

Such disasters have become a magnifier of inequality and demonstrated the country's vulnerability to climate-induced catastrophes, especially in areas near Lake Tanganyika in south-western Burundi.

Facing challenges alone

Claudine Ntakirutimana is currently a single, working parent to five children, since her husband left Gabaniro to look for work. “I am struggling to care for my children, who sometimes deceive me into thinking they're going to school, while they instead wander in the bush,” she says. Ntakirutimana works cultivating crops for families with land.

Though some husbands leave temporarily to seek opportunities to provide for their family, others depart under that pretext and never return. Albert Mbonerane is Burundi's former environment minister and leads the NGO Green Belt Action for the Environment (ACVE). He says: “They never come back, leaving the women to face the catastrophe alone.” Women elsewhere in the country have [reported](#) similar abandonment after climate-related disasters.

In Mubone, Amissa Nizeyimana used to make and sell banana beer, which is popular in central Africa. But her banana suppliers fled Mubone after the rain, because their houses were badly damaged. Moreover, banana production is no longer possible here. “Our economy has been ruined,” she says. Nizeyimana has had to move her family three kilometres north to Gitaza, on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, to sell cassava bread beside a major road.

Agriculture accounts for 80% of employment in Burundi and disasters such as landslides make it more challenging. Property boundaries are washed away, making it difficult to prove ownership and gain access to arable land. When floods and landslides occur, women find it more difficult to rebuild, notes Evelyne Ndoricimpa, who is in charge of gender issues at the Association of Women for Peace and Integrated Community Development (AFPDIC), a Burundian NGO.

Women cannot inherit land under Burundian law. Despite comprising over 70% of smallholder farmers and being responsible for over 90% of agricultural production, they account for just over 5% of those who hold land titles.

Even when properties are owned by women, Ndoricimpa says they may fall into the hands of neighbours if they are not advocated for or adequately represented. This is especially so if they have not had the properties registered in the national land register and do not possess a deed. Awareness of land rights is low amongst women, notes the International Development Law Organization. The effects of such disasters have become an opportunity for people to seize land from women, Ndoricimpa says. “Furthermore, it often ends in litigation, which takes very long periods to be concluded.”

Many women and girls have been left homeless as a result of the flooding and landslides and are in vulnerable situations, says Innocent Banirwaninzigo, an environment and climate change researcher. Living in camps for displaced persons, they have to travel long distances on foot to collect water, sometimes in the dark. “This endangers their safety and increases their vulnerability to sexual violence,” notes Afrique Gacuti, a water and sanitation researcher.

Marguerite Tubihabwe is from Gatumba, a village on the northern end of Lake Tanganyika near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. She says her young daughter narrowly escaped sexual violence one evening. “The tap for drawing water was a little far from the camp [for people displaced by the landslide]. We had to cross suspicious areas,” she recalls. Tubihabwe’s daughter says she shouted for help when she saw three boys running towards her from a grassy area off the path. A group of women walking from the water source several hundred metres behind her screamed at the boys, who fled into the bush. In 2021, the UN’s International Organization for Migration also highlighted instances of attempted sexual assault at a displacement site in Gatumba.

Children at risk

Children have also been experiencing severe impacts from flooding and landslides, both in April 2024 and earlier.

Those who have been moved to camps for people displaced by the April landslide, such as the Gisagara site in Mubimbi commune, east of Gatumba, have had to travel longer distances to get to schools. Dialogue Earth saw children walking three to four kilometres to attend classes. Léocadie Nzeyimana, a mother of four living in the Gisagara site, says fatigue has led to frequent absences and some children quitting school altogether.



A group of children cross flood waters in Gatumba, a village on Burundi's border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. They have been living in a camp for displaced people after flooding and landslides damaged their homes in April 2024. (Image: Gaspard Maheburwa/ **Disclaimer:** The image was originally featured in the article published on Dialogue Earth website)

Burundian children and teenagers displaced by climate-related disasters face increased risks of exploitation including child labour and human trafficking, a Unicef [report](#) found. These risks are heightened by their having to skip school or drop out to support themselves or their families.

In Gitaza market, Dialogue Earth saw children helping shoppers carry their purchases. Sources say the children are paid between BIF 300 and 500 (USD 0.10-0.17) per piece of luggage. “They do not demand onerous [compensation] like adults,” says a business owner in the market.

In the market, Dialogue Earth also saw children selling cooked eggs, peanuts, cassava, bottled water, sweets and biscuits. Four sellers Dialogue Earth spoke to were orphaned by the [Rutunga landslides](#) in 2015 and have since been fending for themselves. One child told Dialogue Earth that multiple children were supporting their families and supplementing their parents’ income in the aftermath of the 2024 disaster.

On nearby Lake Tanganyika, home to dangerous animals including [hippopotami](#) and crocodiles, children were also seen fishing in small boats. Some told Dialogue Earth they took up the activity to earn a livelihood, because the lake is near their displacement camps.

“Before, I was at school,” says a 14-year-old boy who fishes in Gatumba. “As there were floods and we were forced to be relocated to a [displacement] camp, the children who can no longer go to school are taking up fishing here ... in Lake Tanganyika. We practice our fishing on the outskirts by catching small fish. If we don’t do that directly, we help the fishermen in the sale of the fish caught.”

Resilient solutions to climate change

Burundi’s annual rainfall may increase this century due to more high-intensity rainfall events, according to a 2018 [report](#) by the African Development Bank. There will likely be an increase in flooding and its associated destruction, the report notes.

After heavy rains, settlements close to Lake Tanganyika are particularly vulnerable to floods and landslides, as they are by rivers that pour into the lake. The increase in water levels of the lake itself also poses a [risk](#) to lakeshore communities. For example, [multiple floods](#) and landslides have occurred in Gatumba since 2020. In the April floods, the Imbo Plains livelihood zone, which encompasses Rumonge and Bujumbura provinces, was the site of [80%](#) of the national crop damage.

Burundi is taking steps to better prepare its people for climate-related disasters. In September 2024, it [launched](#) a USD 10 million project to enhance the climate resilience of communities in and around Bujumbura city. The UN-backed initiative focuses on advanced flood management, adaptation solutions and developing climate-resilient livelihoods, especially for women and young people.

The local administration of Muhuta commune, where Gabaniro is located, has also been taking measures. Its municipal administrator, Scholastique Niyonsavye, says they “mobilise the population to plant trees, which will protect homes [and] community infrastructure.” This aligns with Burundi’s national [policy](#) of planting trees to limit erosion damage.

Mbonerane, Burundi's former environment minister, has several suggestions on how to better prepare children for the growing climate impacts likely to happen in their lifetimes. He would like to see a disaster-alert system be implemented. Weather warnings are currently only delivered by the national radio and television broadcaster. He suggests private stations should also be used, to reach a larger audience. He also wants to see improvements in education, with lessons on the environment organised to better prepare children.

Ndoricimpa, of AFPDIC, says the government should organise awareness campaigns on registering land properties in the national register. She says widows should be prioritised and exempt from any associated fees, "because some of them cannot access this money".

She also suggests that the government raises awareness of the Burundian land code, so that widows in particular are aware of their land rights, including rights to access: "Justice can be [achieved] in their favour in case their land properties are affected by the effects of climate change."