



REFUGEE-LED DAYCARE CENTER, RWANDA

A new entrepreneurial approach to deliver vital services

In Mahama refugee camp in Rwanda, female small business owners face the daily challenge of balancing parental responsibilities with sustaining their enterprises. Refugee-led daycare centre provides a sustainable, community-driven solution empowering women to grow their businesses, generating local employment, and enhancing the wellbeing and early development of children.

A 2022 study found that female refugee small business owners in Mahama Camp earned on average 78% less than their male counterparts. Women attributed this gap largely to the need of bringing their children to work. The lack of affordable childcare not only restricts women's full participation in economic life and discourages entrepreneurship but also poses risks to the well-being and development of the children, who are either brought to workplaces or left home unattended.

Rather than offering free childcare, Save the Children partnered with mothers to develop a sustainable, fee-paying model. In 2022, the *Itetero* Daycare Centre opened and achieved financial self-sufficiency within just 16 months. An evaluation revealed remarkable results: mothers whose children were enrolled saw a 108% increase in weekly earnings and extended their time on income-generating activities from 5 to 9 hours per day. Parents also reported significant improvements in their children's learning and wellbeing, alongside healthy weight gains due to regular nutritious meals. The centre remains fully operational today.

Building on this proven success, we aim to scale the model by establishing additional daycare centres, expanding economic opportunities for women and improving outcomes for their children.

Itetero Daycare Model

Mahama Refugee Camp in Rwanda is home to over 50,000 refugees—predominantly from Burundi. Rwanda's progressive refugee policies that grant the right to work and freedom of movement combined with access to microloans have enabled many women to launch small businesses. Women in the camp operate a diverse range of enterprises, including fruit stalls, restaurants, mobile and online banking services (e.g., mobile money, Western Union, bank agency work), retail shops, boutiques and tailoring services.



Itetero Daycare Centre, Mahama Refugee Camp, Rwanda.

Yet, despite this entrepreneurial activity, female small business owners earn, on average, 78% less than their male counterparts. This disparity is largely due to the challenges of balancing childcare responsibilities (which disproportionately fall on women) with running a business. It is further exacerbated by the severe shortage of affordable childcare options within the camp. As a result, women are unable to fully develop their businesses and earn sustainable incomes.

The lack of childcare also poses risks to children's wellbeing and development. With no safe alternative, mothers often bring children to their workplaces, leave them in the care of older

siblings, or, in some cases, leave them unattended.

From 2022 to 2024, Save the Children piloted a community-led and community-financed childcare solution: the Itetero ("Hope" in Kinyarwanda) Daycare Centre. The centre supports refugee mothers in growing their businesses by providing a safe and stimulating early learning environment for their children. At the same time, it creates stable employment opportunities for local community, with all daycare staff hired from within the Mahama refugee community.

What distinguishes the Itetero Daycare from conventional refugee services is that it was co-designed by the local community and is now fully owned, financed and managed by parents. Mothers themselves developed the daycare's business model—setting tuition fees, determining the child-to-carer ratio, and establishing carers' salaries. The daycare is formally registered as a business and is owned and managed by the Parent Community Association—a structure facilitated by Save the Children but now operating independently.

The daycare centre operates Monday to Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and offers half-day sessions on Saturdays until 12:30 p.m. The structured schedule includes playtime, early learning activities, and nutritious meals. It is designed for children under the age of three and employs eight staff members from the Mahama camp community—four women and four men, with the latter also serving as night security guards. All staff received training from Save the Children.

Remarkably, the Itetero Daycare achieved full financial independence within just 16 months, sustained entirely through tuition fees paid by parents. The centre remains fully operational today with 30 children enrolled and even more on the waiting list.

Impact

An evaluation of the Itetero Daycare revealed transformative outcomes for entrepreneurial mothers, their children and wider Mahama camp community.

Before the daycare, mothers struggled with stress, burnout, unstable income, and loss of clients—making it difficult to participate consistently in income-generating activities. With access to reliable, safe, and nurturing childcare, mothers now have the time and stability to expand their businesses and improve their livelihoods.

Economic empowerment of mothers:

- Working hours increased from 5 to 9 hours daily.
- Weekly earnings rose by 108%—an average gain of USD 42 per week (from USD 39 to USD 82).
- Weekly savings grew by 136% (from USD 10 to USD 24).

Child development and wellbeing:

- Cognitive and learning gains: 89% of parents reported significant improvements in basic language and counting skills of their children, attributing these directly to the structured learning environment of the daycare.
- Health and nutrition: 81% of parents observed their children were healthier—with improved height and weight—thanks to the daycare's nutritious meals.
- Happiness and social-emotional wellbeing: 93% of parents said their children were happier, more confident, and eager to attend daily, crediting the daycare's supportive, child-friendly atmosphere.

These results demonstrate that Itetero is not just a childcare service—it is a powerful enabler of women's economic participation, a driver of child development, and a model for sustainable, community-owned impact. It also creates meaningful employment opportunities within the local refugee community, further reinforcing its economic relevance. Notably, the model has had a positive ripple effect on gender dynamics—encouraging greater male engagement in caregiving. During the pilot, father involvement increased both in the home and at the centre itself: 50% of the daycare's trained caregivers are men, and many fathers now take an active role in daily routines, regularly bringing their children to the centre in the morning and collecting them in the evening.

Scalability of the Itetero Model

The Itetero Daycare model is community-owned, financially self-sustaining, and adaptable to diverse refugee and low-income contexts. By employing and training community members and financing operations through affordable parent fees, the model reduces dependency on external funding while ensuring long-term viability. Its co-design process with parents fosters strong community ownership. The success in Mahama demonstrates that, with minimal start-up investment and tailored support in the early stages, similar centres can quickly achieve financial independence while delivering measurable economic and developmental gains. This makes *Itetero* a proven, replicable solution that can be expanded to reach more women entrepreneurs and their children in Rwanda and beyond.

Importantly, the model requires only limited external input during the early stages, which can be delivered through a structured, replicable process:



1. Rehabilitation work of an existing building to transform it into a functional daycare centre facility.
2. Recruitment and training of local staff. All staff receive Save the Children's Early-Childhood Development, Health and Nutrition and Safeguarding training and access to Kumwe Hub's Business Development services¹.
3. Provision of a start-up grant to the daycare centre to procure materials (kitchen, learning and hygiene materials, etc.).
4. Community marketing and outreach to mothers who have children aged 6 months to 3 years.
5. Set up of a Parent and Community Association: involving all parents, staff and community leaders in monthly strategic decision-making for the daycare centre.
6. Measuring Impact on children's health and mothers' livelihoods.
7. Transitioning the daycare centre to full community ownership and 100% financing through the fee-based model.



Batamuliza's Story

Batamuliza, a 31-year-old refugee and mother of two, faced the daily challenge of balancing caregiving with running her tailoring business. Like many mothers in Mahama camp, she often brought her young daughter to work, struggling to focus on customers while taking care of her child.

That changed when Itetero Daycare opened, offering a safe, nurturing space for her child. With her daughter enrolled, Batamuliza could focus on expanding her business—improving her operations, increasing customer engagement, and diversifying her products. "Once my daughter started daycare, I noticed an increase in my income, enabling me to purchase another tailor machine – something that once seemed out of reach," Batamuliza shared.

Today, Batamuliza feels hopeful and determined. She plans to enroll her youngest child as soon as he turns one. "I can't wait to enroll him when he's 9 or 12 months," she says with a smile. Her story reflects how access to quality childcare can empower refugee mothers to pursue their economic goals and build a more secure future.

¹ Kumwe Hub, meaning "together" in Kinyarwanda, is an impact innovation and finance hub pioneered by Save the Children in Rwanda. It invests in and supports local entrepreneurs with solutions for children and families—providing grants, financing, business advisory services, and market testing to drive sustainable child-lens social impact across Sub-Saharan Africa. See more at www.kumwehub.com