

Rwanda Women's Lapidary & Jewellery-making Project

Concept Note

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Background

East and Southern Africa have abundant sources of beautiful coloured gemstones. However, most coloured gemstone deposits are small and unpredictable and found in remote, inhospitable terrain. This means the majority of coloured gemstone deposits (estimates range from 80 to 90%) are mined in low-cost, widely-dispersed, artisanal and small-scale mines. The rough stones are mostly exported illegally to Thailand, India, and China for beneficiation such as cutting, polishing, and jewellery-making. As a result, African countries and their citizens who produce these gemstones are losing an enormous economic opportunity. In response, many gem-producing countries in East and Southern Africa, including Rwanda, have adopted policies to prioritize the development of local gemstone beneficiation and value-addition.

Rwanda produces some of the highest quality amethyst in the world, with a deeply saturated purple colour. State-owned Ngali Mining produces significant quantities of amethyst at its mine in Ngororero. The country is also host to gemstones such as sapphire, tourmaline, topaz, spinel and aquamarine; these deposits are mined sporadically by artisanal miners or are by-products of other mining activities.

Although they make a significant contribution to the mining sector, Rwandan women are disadvantaged due to cultural perceptions and gender stereotypes, the poor implementation of gender recommendations and policies, skills gaps, and a disabling work environment. Women are at the bottom of the hierarchy of this male-dominated industry, often doing subordinate work. In addition, there has been a focus within the Rwandan mining sector on the 3Ts (tin, tungsten and tantalum), leaving gemstones behind.

The diversification of the mining sector to include the beneficiation of gemstones will allow women within the industry to increase their knowledge and develop their skills and become economically and socially empowered.

Project Proposal

The goal of the project is to develop a social enterprise to 1) train 8-12 women in lapidary (beading, making cabochons and faceting gemstones) and jewellery-making skills, and 2) produce polished gemstones and jewellery for sale. After initial support for training and the purchase of equipment, it is envisioned that the operations will be financially self-sustaining. Anticipated products are polished stones, as well as jewellery for the local, tourist and international markets.

Desired Outcomes

1. Women's Social and Economic Empowerment Rwandan women will be the immediate beneficiaries of the program, learning valuable skills in which to earn a living. They may be hired by the social enterprise or other companies or have the skills to establish their own workshop.
2. Development of Local Beneficiation The women's lapidary and jewellery workshop will serve as a catalyst for the development of the lapidary and jewellery-making industries of Rwanda. It is also envisioned that the training program will be developed and implemented in conjunction with a local educational institute, thereby establishing a local program, including certification.
3. Creation of "Rwanda amethyst" brand Of particular importance to the successful development of the Rwandan gemstone industry will be the "branding" of Rwanda's gemstones, to realize their full value in the competitive markets of North America and Europe. For example, amethyst is not rare but Rwandan amethyst is considered to be among of the world's most beautiful, and this needs to be communicated to the consumer.

Next Steps

Developing Rwanda's gemstone industry is a top priority for the government. The Rwanda Mining Board are strongly supportive of the project, which they believe will be an important catalyst for the industry. Ngali Mining has expressed their interest in being a possible partner. The Rwandan Development Board has offered their assistance in navigating registrations and permits.

Now it is time to:

- 1) undertake research, including on Rwanda's gemstone resources and lapidary training options
- 2) hold stakeholder meetings, including community engagement
- 3) more fully develop the business plan, including a realistic budget, with quotes on facilities, machinery, training, salaries, etc., and critically, a marketing plan, because the success of the project will depend on selling a good product and product branding

This process is expected to take about 6 months. The final goal will be a formal "launch" to present the research results and the business plan to all interested parties and solicit indications of interest for donations and/or seed capital financing.