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From Survival to Stability:

Building economic empowerment for conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) survivors

A TRTA Framework in Conflict and GBV-Affected Contexts



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1. Introduction

This document outlines the approach for trade-related technical assistance (TRTA) that the International Trade Centre (ITC) has taken to support economic empowerment of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). It is written for practitioners, policymakers, and partners who work at the intersection of trade and development and economic empowerment of marginalized communities. The intention is to offer practical reflections from ITC's experience — showing how trade- and market-based support can assist survivors as they heal, regain confidence, and build independent lives.



The insights presented here draw from ITC's work in South Sudan, one of the world's most challenging settings both in terms of conflicts and development. The project 'Building Socio-economic Resilience for Survivors of CRSV in South Sudan' was implemented in partnership with the UN Action Network against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action), the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Rural Development Action Aid (RDAA), Women's Agency for Resilience and Transformation (WART), and African Initiative for Rural Development (AIRD), Centre for Inclusive Governance, Peace, and Justice (CIJPG), and Survivors' Network in South Sudan (SUNSS). The project demonstrated that economic inclusion, when linked to protection and psychosocial support, can restore more than income — it can restore dignity, confidence, and hope.

ITC's engagement in this mandate builds on its mission to make trade more inclusive and accessible to those often left behind. As a joint agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, ITC brings expertise in connecting people and small enterprises to markets in ways that create sustainable livelihoods. Extending this experience to CRSV contexts means using trade not just as an engine of growth, but as a tool for recovery and peacebuilding. By tailoring to the needs of the survivors, TRTA helps transform vulnerability into opportunity — linking skills, confidence, and market access in a way that allows survivors to provide for their families and participate meaningfully in their economies.

The sections that follow outline the CRSV context and economic empowerment of survivors, ITC's approach to economic empowerment of CRSV survivors, highlight examples of tailored TRTA interventions, and capture key lessons learned from implementing these approaches and interventions.

2. Conflict-related sexual violence and economic empowerment of survivors

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) occurs when sexual violence is used during or connected to armed conflict. Too often, it is a deliberate tactic — used by perpetrators to terrorize, dominate, and forcibly displace individuals and entire communities. Its effects are devastating and enduring, shattering individuals' bodies, minds, as well as to social fabric that hold communities together. The recurring conflicts, trauma, and difficult economic outlook faced by the survivors often undermines their ability to reclaim dignity, rebuild livelihoods, and restore a sense of security.

In 2024, more than 4,600 survivors of CRSV were identified, according to the UN Secretary-General's annual report — a 25% increase from the previous year. Yet these numbers likely capture only a fraction of the reality. Fear, stigma, and the breakdown of justice systems mean that many cases go unreported. While men, women, boys, and girls can all be affected, women and girls represent the majority of documented survivors.

Economic marginalization both contributes to and is reinforced by CRSV. Many survivors already live with limited resources and opportunities; some are facing additional challenges as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), returnees, and refugees. CRSV adds more layers to these challenges, making it difficult for the survivors to reconnect with livelihoods or participate in economic life. Without support, survivors can remain trapped in cycles of dependence and isolation, their potential untapped.

Yet when survivors are given the right resources, skills, and opportunities, they can reclaim agency — being able to provide for themselves, their children and families. Moreover, they can become active contributors to their communities and local economies. Access to trade and markets plays a critical role in this regard. In conflict-affected settings, economic participation serves as more than just a source of income — it can reconnect and rebuild communities, restore trust, and create shared incentives for peace.



3. Approaches to TRTA in economic empowerment of CRSV survivors

Trade-Related Technical Assistance (TRTA) is about helping people and countries take part in trade in a meaningful way. It focuses on giving them the knowledge, skills, and connections they need to turn opportunities into real economic benefits. In practice, this can mean training small business owners on how to market and sell their products, helping small-scale producers improve product qualities and meet the standards to access new markets, or working with governments to create conducive and practical trade policies.

Approach to TRTA in building economic empowerment of CRSV survivors combines this fundamental support with specific needs and situations of survivors – whose realities involve recurring conflicts, subsequential trauma, and difficult economic outlook. It aims at creating opportunities that are both tangible and informed by real market demand – while allowing survivors to recover and rebuild their lives in a safe and sustainable manner. This approach rests on three interconnected elements: applying survivor-centred approach, taking market-informed and conflict-sensitive design, and integrating economic support with multi-sectoral services.

1. Survivor-centred approach

At the heart of survivor-centred approach is the belief that survivors are best placed to determine what is safe, feasible, and meaningful for them. Guided by this principle, TRTA begins by engaging survivors directly to understand their priorities, interests, preferred livelihoods, and perceptions of risk. During the preparation stage, this includes involving survivors and community members as key informants in market assessments, ensuring interventions reflect real priorities vis-à-vis opportunities. In impact monitoring, it means creating spaces for survivors to share their experiences, their journey of change, and their vision of what true economic empowerment looks like for them.

2. Market and conflict-sensitive assessments

Conflict-affected settings rarely function as stable markets. Infrastructure is limited and weak, trade channels thin and fragmented, and support systems are scarce. On top of this, survivors face constant risks across multiple dimensions. Recognizing these realities, TRTA relies not only on market assessments to identify viable market and economic opportunities, but also on conflict-sensitive assessments that highlight safety concerns linked to recurring violence and potential risks that arise from economic activities. By integrating these perspectives, TRTA ensures that support is both realistic, practical, protective, and safe, fostering economic participation without exposing survivors to further harm.

3. TRTA as part of an integrated multi-sectoral support

Recovery is rarely linear, and economic empowerment cannot occur in isolation. A survivor's ability to rebuild livelihoods is deeply connected to their physical health, psychological well-being, legal protection, and overall safety. For this reason, TRTA works best when implemented alongside broader multi-sectoral support, ensuring survivors can access a full spectrum of services simultaneously. This integrated approach enables careful and continuous tracking of individual needs across different sectors, and timely referrals and coordinated support. By bridging TRTA with other critical services, the approach not only addresses immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for sustained recovery and long-term economic growth.



4. Implementation in practice

TRTA for CRSV survivors adapts traditional TRTA interventions — such as skills development, enterprise support, and market access — to meet the unique needs and realities of the survivors. These tailored interventions include additional protective and trauma-informed dimensions, ensuring that survivors can participate in learning, production, and trade without added risks, at their own pace. This approach helps the survivors to build confidence and readiness for broader economic initiatives, and to regain control over their livelihoods and future.

1. Identifying conflict-sensitive and immediate economic opportunities

TRTA begins with market assessments to pinpoint economic activities that are realistic, achievable, and aligned with existing or emerging market demand. These assessments consider factors such as market size, supply chains, production capacity, and potential barriers such as infrastructure or access to finance. In conflict-affected settings, this process integrates conflict sensitivity to prevent interventions from reinforcing inequalities or creating new tensions. Tools such as [ITC's Guide to Conflict Sensitivity in TRTA Delivery](#) support practitioners in conducting these analyses effectively.

For CRSV survivors, assessments go further, adding safety screenings, trauma-informed consultations, and survivor input to avoid risks such as harassment, stigma, or unsafe travel. For example, if mobility is limited or unsafe, programs prioritize home-based economic activities such as baked goods, soap-making, or small-scale poultry rearing — activities that are practical, safe, and marketable.

3. Facilitating access to market and business relationships

In standard TRTA, market linkages are critical for sustainable livelihoods. Participants receive support to showcase products, connect with buyers, and establish business relationships through activities such as market fairs, business-to-business meetings, and buyer visits. The real exposure to markets enhances negotiation, pricing, and customer engagement skills.

For CRSV survivors, these market linkages are carefully structured to minimize risks. Examples include guided visits to markets and safe points of sale in secure areas in town centres, small consignment arrangements with local shops, and digital channels such as WhatsApp for orders. Programs may also facilitate participation in local festivals with accompaniment – ensuring survivors gain market exposure safely and confidently.

2. Building technical and entrepreneurship skills

A core feature of TRTA is the development of technical and business skills that strengthen people's capacity to produce and trade competitively. Training covers the full spectrum of production and entrepreneurship skills — from raw material selection and product quality to market analysis, pricing, and customer engagement. These activities are designed to translate knowledge into practice, equipping participants to create marketable goods and navigate business environments effectively.

For CRSV survivors, training is adapted to be trauma-sensitive, paced according to comfort, and delivered in supportive group settings. Modules may include soap-making workshops, vegetable gardening, baking classes for women returning from displacement, or handcraft production for local markets. Sessions emphasize peer support, confidence-building, and practical exercises that survivors can immediately apply, such as making sample products to sell at a community market.

4. Accessing financial services and savings mechanisms

Financial inclusion is a cornerstone of TRTA, enabling entrepreneurs to sustain and grow their businesses. Interventions typically include access to credit, savings, and investment tools through partnerships with financial institutions, cooperatives, or microfinance organizations. This is complemented by training on budgeting, record-keeping, and reinvestment for long-term financial stability and resilience.

For CRSV survivors, financial services are adapted to be secure, discreet, and easy to manage. In many conflict-affected areas, where formal banking or large financial institutions are limited or non-existent, TRTA prioritizes microfinance options, such as small women-led savings groups or community-based loan schemes, providing immediate access to funds for activities such as baking, handicrafts, or small-scale poultry rearing. At the same time, TRTA engages larger institutions at the ecosystem level, to lay the groundwork for future access to more formal financial services as local conditions improve.

5. Lessons learned

TRTA for CRSV survivors succeeds when it is practical, protective, and survivor-driven. Combining skills training with peer support and community engagement restores confidence and agency.

Community-based training hubs:

Locating training hubs within communities reduces travel-related risks and creates safe spaces for learning and peer support. Beyond training, these hubs foster social connection and a sense of belonging while survivors develop new skills.

Phased economic engagement:

Starting with small, low-risk activities such as vegetable gardening, soap-making, local retailing, and home-based production allows survivors to re-enter economic life gradually, regain confidence and establish a foundation for larger and more complex ventures.

Early access to grants and start-up kits:

Skills and knowledge only translate into impact when survivors have the means to act on them. Small grants or start-up kits provide that bridge — allowing survivors to purchase initial inputs and begin producing or selling right away. Without these resources, even motivated and skilled survivors may remain stuck, unable to start. Providing capital from the outset increases the likelihood that new businesses take off, generate income early, and grow over time.

Market linkages through production groups and clusters:

Working in production groups helps survivors to pool limited resources, increase output, and meet larger market demands. Shared branding and marketing, and collectively negotiating, strengthen bargaining power, reinforcing both economic and social empowerment.

Cultural sensitivity and staff training:

Understanding local norms is essential for trust and participation in the delivery of survivor-centred support. Training staff on cultural dynamics ensures interventions are respectful, relevant, and effective. builds trust and allows survivors to feel respected and safe. This practical sensitivity improves participation and the overall impact of the program.

Group sessions as safe spaces:

Group sessions encourage participation from survivors hesitant to speak individually. They provide a supportive environment for sharing experiences, voicing concerns and shaping responsive and relevant interventions, grounded in trust, confidentiality, and empathy.

Role of social workers and local leadership:

Social workers and caseworkers identify survivors, understand their needs, and ensure accurate documentation, while local leaders build community acceptance, bridge the gaps between survivors and project teams early in the programs. This collaboration promotes safety and inclusion.

Coordination with protection and GBV partners:

Working closely with protection and gender-based violence (GBV) partners ensures that the most vulnerable survivors are reached. This coordination promotes inclusivity, enhances safety, and guarantees that support is holistic. Shared commitment among partners improves the effectiveness of TRTA interventions and reinforces survivors' trust in the program impact.



Recommendations

Pillar	Key recommendations
1. Programming: Strengthen TRTA design	• Prioritize survivor-centred, locally viable opportunities that aligns with market demand while meeting the safety requirements • Start with small, low-risk activities to build confidence and skills progressively • Maintain flexibility to adapt interventions to changing conditions on the ground • Include criteria for integrating survivors in broader TRTA initiatives as they progress
2. Partnerships: Integrate trade and protection actors	• Strengthen collaboration among trade practitioners, humanitarian actors, and protection specialists for integrated support • Establish referral pathways to ensure survivors' access to complementary services • Engage local leaders and caseworkers early to identify and prioritize survivors most in need • Promote local partnerships to enhance impact, ownership and sustainability
3. Policy and advocacy: Mainstream CRSV-sensitive TRTA	• Advocate for inclusive trade and development policies that reflect survivors' economic roles and unique challenges • Position TRTA as both an economic empowerment and protection tool • Link livelihoods to peacebuilding and social cohesion through cooperative production groups and market collaborations
4. Scaling and Sustainability: Expand and Replicate	• Document and replicate successful TRTA models in other CRSV contexts • Integrate TRTA into multi-sectoral programming to support long-term recovery and resilience. • Ensure survivors have ongoing access to markets, financial tools, and ongoing mentoring to maintain and grow economic gains.

Conclusion

ITC's experience demonstrates that when TRTA is delivered through a survivor-centred and conflict-sensitive lens, it becomes a powerful driver of dignity, resilience, and economic recovery for CRSV survivors. By connecting survivors to markets and livelihoods in ways that prioritize safety and context, vulnerability turns into opportunity. This approach enables survivors to rebuild their futures while contributing to the recovery and stability of their communities.

Where sowing seeds and making soap means solidarity and safety – South Sudan

In towns and villages across South Sudan — Juba, Bor, Yambio, and Bentiu, where UN Action is at work — survivors of conflict-related sexual violence are rebuilding their lives through livelihoods of their own choosing. Guided by a conflict-sensitive, market-driven assessment, survivors mapped out futures rooted in their strengths and the needs of their communities: from vegetable farming and tailoring to soap-making, bread production, and small trade.

With training, start-up kits, and psychosocial support, nearly two hundred women began the slow but powerful journey from isolation to reintegration. *“This project helped me find my voice again,”* said Maria, a 28-year-old mother who once felt silenced by shame. Today she sells tomatoes and okra at the market and proudly declares, *“I am a provider, a farmer, and a survivor.”*

The transformation was not only economic, but deeply personal. With trauma-informed counselling and the solidarity of survivor groups, women began to see themselves differently — as capable, resilient, and worthy of respect.

For Angelina, who once could not look anyone in the eye after surviving gang rape during displacement, tending vegetables became a source of healing. *“It wasn’t just about the vegetables,”* she reflected. “It was about getting my dignity back. I laugh again.”

Others echoed the same spirit: Nyanaath, once hidden in shame, now calls herself *“a strong and successful businesswoman.”* Regina, once rejected by her family, has become financially independent and respected. Stella diversified into crafts and fashion, saying with pride, *“My family will not lack again.”*

Beyond individual stories, the collective impact has been extraordinary. By mid-2025, nearly every participant in UN Action’s project had launched an income-generating activity, collectively earning the equivalent of almost USD 28,000 from vegetables, soap, and small trade — three times what they made just months earlier.

Market fairs and business-to-business events showcased not only products but also the resilience of women once marginalised. As Tereza shared, *“Most importantly, I am not exposed to harm anymore. I can’t stop being grateful for this positive change.”* These women are no longer defined by the violence they endured but by the businesses they run, the children they support, and the communities they inspire. Their journeys show that with the right tools, survivors can move from silence to strength, becoming leaders of renewal and dignity in their communities.







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