

Congolese Women Turn to Cultivation to Reduce their Vulnerability to Sexual Violence

Uvira, Democratic of the Congo, November 23, 2010: Three weeks ago, 28 women harvested 1200 kilos of beans on rented land near this town in Eastern Congo. Each of the cultivators earned \$31 - enough to send 2 children to school for a year.

It was a small but hopeful sign in a country that is wracked by violence. The 28 cultivators have all been raped, many of them multiple times. Instead of giving in to despair, they are participating in an experimental program to reduce their exposure to further attacks by cultivating together in relative security.



The program is the brainchild of Marceline Kongolo, who lost her brother and father to the war. In 2003, Ms Kongolo started SOS Femmes en Danger (SOSFED) to treat survivors of sexual violence. In the years since, the group has taken in more than 800

women at three centers in Fizi Territory.

The Advocacy Project (AP) has supported SOSFED since September 2008 with several dedicated volunteers (Peace Fellows). AP has also helped to secure a grant for the program from the [Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations](#) (IFA) in Berlin, which is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

SOSFED's work has been plagued by chronic insecurity. Four large armed groups are currently operating in the region: the Congolese army (FARDC); Hutu rebels who took part in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; rebels from Burundi; and a breakaway Congolese militia known as the Mai Mai. In a [report earlier this year](#), SOSFED also noted the emergence of five smaller groups (Nta Mushobora, Bisogo, Yakutumba, Twirwanaeo, and Mulumba) which operate roadblocks and extort money and cattle from travelers.

Rape is now the preferred weapon of war in the Eastern DRC. In a survey of 492 survivors, SOSFED found that 79% had suffered multiple rape. In many cases, family members were forced to rape each other to maximise the humiliation. According to the [UN Population Fund](#) (UNFPA), at least 2,275 cases of rape occurred in South Kivu in the first 6 months of 2010.

Militia destroyed one of the three SOSFED centers last year, forcing the women to flee into Burundi and Tanzania. In October, Mai Mai militia took control of the area around another center, seized a ferry and closed the local market. [Ned Meerdink](#), who has headed AP's work in Uvira since 2008, has endured repeated black-outs and militia raids.

SOSFED understands that women alone cannot prevent sexual violence. But its interviews have shown that many of the attacks occurred when women went out alone to collect fuel or cultivate. As a result, SOSFED is trying to provide a more secure alternative through the [communal fields](#). Next year the program will test out a [new experimental stove](#) that uses agricultural waste for fuel, and lessens the need to seek fuel in forests.

So far the focus on risk reduction appears to be working, and no attacks have been recorded in the rented fields during 2010. But a major sweep by militia could leave women terribly exposed. The program is also heavily dependant on variables such as the weather and the cost of transporting produce to market, which will determine whether the fields yield enough profit to keep women from cultivating further afield.

Among other initiatives, women at the SOSFED centers are developing a "best practices" manual which will be promoted through billboards. Mister Jack, a local hip-hop DJ, has recorded a [public service announcement](#) which is being aired 15 times a week on six radio stations. "In Congolese culture, we find that music and songs can carry a message of peace to a broad audience in ways which simple speaking does not. Mister Jack has helped," said Amisi Awi, an SOSFED field officer.

The program is also seeking "safe houses" which can be used in the event of an emergency. SOSFED also launched a [new website](#) in October and produced its [first online newsletter](#) two weeks ago.

Next year SOSFED hopes to take its campaign to North America and Europe, with help from a large quilt that is being put together in DRC and the US. The panels for the quilt, which is known as Ahadi ("promise" in Swahili), were made by women at the SOSFED centers who wanted to tell their story through embroidery and asked to be [profiled](#) on the SOSFED website. Chantal Ebubu, 38, was one of many who chose a graphic design for her panel. "I want testify about the terrible things that have happened in Fizi," she said.

The quilt project draws from AP's work with Bosnian weavers who lost relatives in the 1995 [Srebrenica massacre](#). It is being coordinated by [Sylvie Bisangwa](#), a graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School who served at SOSFED this year as an AP Peace Fellow. Ms Bisangwa has arranged for the panels to be connected by quilting associations in Michigan and Maryland. AP will report on progress in the weeks to come.



Meanwhile, SOSFED's pioneering work has begun to attract international attention. Ms Kongolo received a share of the prestigious Fern Holland award from the Washington-based [Vital Voices](#) in 2009 (left). The designer and philanthropist [Diane Von Furstenberg](#) has also given generous support. This year's grant from IFA in Berlin has allowed SOSFED to put the program onto a sound organizational footing.

Much of this is due to the drive of [Ned Meerdink](#), who arrived in Uvira as an AP Peace Fellow in September 2008. Mr Meerdink's family has stayed closely involved in his work from the US and organized several fundraisers to support his program.

Mr Meerdink will be replaced in January by [Walter James](#), a graduate from the University of Maryland who also served as a Peace Fellow in Uvira in 2009. One of [Mr James' videos](#) was shown at the UN Commission on the Status of Women last year.

- Like to help? Email nmeerdink@advocacynet.org, or dcoffice@advocacynet.org
- For background visit the [SOSFED website](#) and [AP campaign pages](#)