

# DRC *in focus*

**Equality for all men and all women...  
Progress moves forward!**

## **In this edition**

**Feature:** The right of women to access to land

**Activity:** Women's involvement in volunteer activities

**Interview:** Julienne Lusenge, women's rights activist



# Editorial

**The equality of women is  
progress for all genders!**

**M**arch 2014 was marked by two major events: first, International Women's Day was celebrated on March 8th and highlighted the importance of gender equality, women's empowerment, and the full enjoyment of women's rights in the fight against poverty and social and economic development. Meanwhile, the World Francophone Women's Forum, held in Kinshasa on March 3rd and 4th highlighted the role of women as agents of development.

Volunteerism plays a role in the quest for equality and emancipation of women. It provides a place for participation and the building of active citizenship. Volunteerism offers women the opportunity to question their traditional place in society and make their voices heard, while also providing a route to acquiring sustainable livelihoods and a role in decision-making in their community.

We have devoted the March edition of DRC in Focus to female engagement in volunteering and in particular women engaged in volunteer activities that promote solidarity. In this issue of DRC in Focus, we salute the involvement of women in the community or in the promotion of fundamental human rights for all and we also devote space to reflection on the status of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and on how to promote an explicit recognition of their role and their value as agents of development and of social and economic growth.

Happy reading to one and all.



Crédit: Myriam Asmani/MONUSCO

« Here, rural women are not valued: they work in the fields, but they neither have a right to inherit the land nor to decide on the income it generates. The land is managed by the men of the family,” explains Emilie Matembera, representative of the Synergy of Women's Associations for Kalehe territory, an active platform for promoting the rights of women, including access to land.

Born in the wake of International Women's Day on March 8th 2013, the Synergy of Women's Associations for Kalehe territory took shape following a series of workshops organized by UN-Habitat on alternative land conflict management and access of women to land, which has led



By Covadonga Murias Quintana  
UNV Reporting and  
Communication Officer  
UNHABITAT  
Minova (South Kivu)



*Women play a significant role in rural development, particularly in farming. In rural areas, they contribute to family incomes and the economic growth of the community in many ways. When women are economically and socially independent, they are powerful agents of change. But their subordinate status relative to men often prevents them from realizing their full potential.*

## Access to land, “capital” for rural women in DRC

### Testimony of the Synergy of Women’s Associations for Kalehe territory.

to the signing of an act of commitment between women’s associations. ‘After several awareness sessions on the peaceful resolution of land disputes, we felt the need to address the issue of women’s access to land,’ says Dady Mutemba, mediator of UN-Habitat in South Kivu. Madame Matembera says the Synergy brings together women ‘as one to defend their rights.’

Access to land and natural resources is essential for the survival of a large part of the population in eastern DRC, men and women alike. However, custom continues to play an important role not only in setting the rules of access but also in the enjoyment of land rights. This practice discriminates against

women and girls, by not giving them the right of access to decision-making bodies (the tribal chief or Mwami) in order to acquire a plot of land, which in turn exposes them to extreme socio-economic vulnerability.

In fact, over 80% of the land in the DRC is still under the jurisdiction of customary law and local practices (1). Legislative and regulatory measures pertaining to land have not affected the authority of traditional chiefs. According to the evidence, many of the customary rules, especially in the eastern provinces, enshrine patrilineal land management in which women have a minor role. In these systems, a woman’s right of access to the land

remains subordinate to that of a man. He is responsible for reassigning a piece of land to her without any real right of ownership.

### **The scourge of sexual violence.**

Furthermore, decades of violence in the DRC have exacerbated the vulnerability of women with regard to their access to land. Numerous population displacements, which affect mostly women and children, give rise to the loss of both tenure rights and the use of the land and as a result the loss of livelihood. At the same time, the "masculinization" of land management practices that discriminate against women in relation to land rights and the lack of agricultural land due to population pressure, are compounded by the insecurity caused by the presence of armed groups and the scourge of sexual violence against women.

This is the case of Michelle Bandungu (her name has been changed to protect her identity), a member of the Association of Disinherited Persons United for Development, one of the Synergy's groups. Aged barely 20 years old, she was raped by armed men near her house and then rejected by her family after the rape. She now works in the association that came to her aid. "Our association helps women victims of sexual violence and those traumatized by the war, as well as children born of rape and orphans," she says. The association provides women survivors of sexual violence with a plot of land in a communal field, where they can grow "cassava, maize, potatoes and beans". In this way, they are assured a livelihood and can regain their self-esteem.

Aware of their role in bringing peace and development to their territory, the female members of the Synergy decided to get involved to gain better



*Training session for women leaders from women's associations in Kalehe territory (South Kivu) organized by UN-Habitat in Minova.*

Crédit: UN-Habitat DRC/C. Muñias

consideration for their interests. An action plan for the first half of 2014 has been developed. Most activities will educate community members about the right of access of Congolese women to land and inheritance. Having been trained in the peaceful resolution of land disputes and the right of access of women to land, by land mediators from UN-Habitat and its partners in South Kivu, Synergy women members are organized into sub-groups, which are then sent out again throughout the entire territory.

According to Emilie Matembera, addressing the land issue would positively change the situation of rural women in the DRC: "We must not forget

that it is women who are working in the fields and rural women make a living from agriculture; if they are deprived of agriculture, if they do not have land, they cannot support their families. So the land is in essence capital."

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<sup>1</sup> Women and land in the post-conflict context: Study for a programme of action in eastern DRC. Note prepared in February 2013 by the UN-HABITAT Land Programme in eastern DRC in consultation with UNWOMEN, UNFPA and FAO. For more information contact : Oumar.Sylla@unhabitat.org

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Covadonga Murias Quintana, from Spain, UNV Reporting Officer within UN-Habitat Country Office in Goma. Since April 2013, Covadonga has been in charge of reporting and communications for the UN Habitat Land Programme in Eastern DRC. This programme aims to promote land governance as a vehicle for peace conducive to socio-economic recovery of the country.

Bac +5 journalism graduate and specialist in international communication and project management /cooperation programmes, Covadonga worked as Communication Officer in Haiti and Morocco for Spanish Cooperation before being recruited as a UN Volunteer.

Covadonga is very committed to the promotion of women's rights and the struggle for equality between men and women. Her current work has allowed her to see the lack of access of rural women to land in the DRC and to cooperate in the promotion of land rights through the Synergy of Women's Associations in Kalehe territory (South Kivu).



**Mireille Ntolila**  
**Communication**  
**Officer**  
**National Secretariat**  
**of Volunteerism**

*More than 150  
 people packed the  
 stands at women's  
 volunteerism fair.*



## Promoting Women's Engagement in DRC

Kinshasa - French Institute, March 6, 2014 : La Halle de la Gombe hosted a meeting on the theme: "Women at the heart of volunteerism". Women's associations and volunteers gathered to present their activities.

**W**omen at the heart of volunteerism was the theme of the afternoon's discussions held in advance of International Women's Day. Under the patronage of the Minister of Planning and Monitoring the Implementation of the Revolution of Modernity, Célestin Vunabandi, the meeting was intended as a tribute to women involved in solidarity activities and aimed to celebrate the commitment of women volunteers through presentations by women's voluntary associations and testimonies from national and international women volunteers.

"Women, we can and we want to build this country. Committing ourselves as volunteers, we can change our situation and contribute to the well being of all," says Suzanne Kalela, President of the Association of Nursery Teachers. Following Suzanne's speech, Marie Soulie, a volunteer with Solidarity International, Yvonne Nadège Nguele, UNV Gender Officer and Julienne Lusenge, a women's rights activist were invited to share their experiences in campaigning for women's rights and/or volunteer activities.

In his speech, the Minister of Planning welcomed this initiative held on the margins of the World Women's Francophone Forum and spoke about the importance of women's participation, through volunteer-based associations, to address development challenges. The Minister also called on the heads of associations such as administrative and traditional authorities to take all necessary measures to guarantee the same participation conditions for women and men.

Co-organized by the UNV programme, France Volunteers, the National Secretariat of Volunteering and the Association of Women for Solidarity in Integral Development (SOFEPADI), the event also helped to provide a framework for consultation between volunteer activists and women's voluntary associations to learn about civic engagement opportunities.

# "Solidarity is our strength,"

Julienne Lusenge, Women's Rights Activist

For fourteen years, Julienne Lusenge, President of the association SOFEPADI has been campaigning against sexual violence against women and facilitating their access to justice. Julienne participated in the meeting on March 6 and we took the opportunity to ask her some questions.

## **DRC IN FOCUS - What led to your involvement in the fight for women's rights and gender equality?**

**Julienne Lusenge** - Since my childhood, I have never tolerated injustices or inequalities against any person whatsoever and this has always been my position. My commitment to the cause of women and children started specifically at the time of inter-ethnic conflict in Ituri, where I worked for a local radio station. At that time, I hosted a show on the rights of women and children. I used to broadcast a message every morning for women to encourage them to go out and help those in distress. I also went to the villages in Ituri and met women victims of human rights violations to make them aware of their rights and relay their questions about justice or medical matters. Then I would broadcast the answers to their questions on the air. When the radio station was closed, I continued my struggle by creating SOFEPADI with my colleagues. We could not stand idly by.

## **What is your message on this Women's Day?**

As women, we believe that change is possible and that we can contribute. We women, we want to live in security, with peace of mind so that we can make a difference in the community.

I would like women to claim their rights and fight injustice, not by fighting against people but by leading them to understand that we cannot live in violence. I also call on all people to get involved in the struggle for gender equality and to accept women as complementary partners: It must be understood that men and women are equal before the law and have to work together

and help each other to bring about change in the community.

## **For you, what does volunteering mean in your fight?**

Volunteering means loving your neighbor and not tolerating injustice, inequality and the suffering of others without doing anything. Volunteering is being ready to commit to changing a situation. In the DRC, women in the villages are true volunteers: all contribute to the well being of the community. We women, we stand in solidarity and solidarity is our strength. In the DRC, we often think there is only a history of sexual violence, but there is also the history of women's solidarity. The victims are helped by groups of women who give them first aid, psychological support, help them get access to justice, etc ... The history of solidarity must go on! Volunteers are solidarity in action: volunteers don't work expecting a reward, rather their reward is the solidarity they have shown: how many lives have we saved? how many people in distress have we helped? That is our strength: we must continue to do good, to help others without looking for a reward!



# ONE DAY IN KINSHASA...

## *A robot for road safety*

Kinshasa, the DRC capital, is famous for its miles of gridlock and chaotic traffic. In recent months, in order to regulate the traffic, ‘intelligent rolling robots’ have been placed at some dangerous intersections in the city. These robots are aimed at encouraging drivers to respect the Highway Code and the safety of pedestrians.

The robots are like solar powered traffic police. Their “torsos” swivel from green to red on their raised “arms”. So, for example, they can block a lane to let pedestrians cross. Bilingual in French and Lingala, the robots can speak to drivers: “Drivers let, pedestrians cross.”

The robot may not have real eyes but it is capable of filming traffic offences thanks to a camera hidden behind its sunglasses. The camera can store data for 6 months.

This initiative has already been talked about in the four corners of the world. It’s the brainchild of Women Technology, an association of women engineers in the DRC. The association was founded to provide opportunities for Congolese women who hold degrees in engineering. The robot is also a graduation project that was conceived and designed by female student of engineering.