



MONUSCO

Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies
pour la Stabilisation en République
démocratique du Congo

United Nations Organisation Stabilization
Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Portrait of Charlotte SONGUE-PRISO



Mrs. Charlotte is the pride of her leadership who greatly appreciate her commitment to serve the most vulnerable people since she joined the United Nations system, 12 years ago.

She entered the system as a UN Volunteer and Human Rights Officer within the Human Rights Division, at the time when the UN Peacekeeping Mission in DRC was known as MONUC. It was exactly in February 2006. She was then based in Kisangani, currently named Tshopo province, where she coordinated for two years the National Access to Justice Program for the victims of sexual violence, within the thematic Unit "Transitional Justice and Fight against Impunity" 'within the Human Rights

Office. This Unit was tasked to facilitate access to justice and other services (medical, psychosocial, socio-economic) for the victims of gender-based violence and armed conflicts. Did anything in Charlotte Songue suggest that one day she was going to work for MONUSCO Human Rights Office or was it just a stroke of luck? Her response is quite clear: ***" I was dreaming to study international relations when I was attending grammar school. After the university, I took a special interest in human rights, which led me to the United Nations, the best framework for promoting and protecting human rights,"*** she said, with a tinge of pride in her voice.

It would be right to some extent to say that human rights are a logical consequence for after completing her secondary studies in Douala (the second city of Cameroun where she was born), she studied Public Law at the University of Yaoundé (the political capital city of Cameroun) before travelling to France to study human rights at Nantes University.

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Prior to working for the United Nations, Charlotte Songue had a noble professional career in her country. When she left the university in 2000, she started her career as an intern at the legal and litigation department of the "Société Nationale de Raffinage du Cameroun (SONARA)/Cameroun National Refining Company". Later on, she landed several contracts with international NGOs. ***"That is where I got specialized in IT/Office Automation, in the English language and human rights designing and implementing projects."*** She further specified ***"It is in one of the above organizations that I learned human rights activism."***

It is worth noting that the professional experience gained in Cameroun helped her to carry out her mission successfully within MONUC Human Rights Division. For two years, she travelled across the then Orientale province, namely Ango, Bafwasende, Opienge, Banalia, Yangambi, Opala, Buta, Isiro and Dungu territories for investigative purposes and above all, to provide assistance to victims.



In 2008 she was redeployed in Kinshasa within the Human Rights Reporting Unit; a year later, she was redeployed to Mbandaka to coordinate the field office and to supervise the Gbadolite and Gemena sub-offices, once again as United Nations volunteer. She recalls having driven through the Equateur's swampy forest in Mbandaka... from Ingende up to Djoa; driving on the Boende road, or else Makanza on the river Congo, and through the Enyele village after the infamous armed conflict suffered by Equateur province. Charlotte Songue is not the type of persons who would make do with very little; before being deployed to Kinshasa, she consolidated her knowledge by enrolling in the university *Kofi Anan International Peace keeping Training Center (KAIPTC)* in 2007 for a course on Disarmament and Demobilization.

After gaining substantial experience from the UN Mission, Charlotte left MONUSCO in June 2011 to take up an international position with the United Nations Office in Burundi (BNUB). ***"In Burundi, I joined the Justice and Human Rights Division in September 2011; more precisely***

in Makamba, southern Burundi, as coordinator for the UN office in the Burundi regional office that includes Makamba, Ruyigi and Rutana provinces." Her contract with the UN Office in Burundi ended in September 2012.

Having strong ties with the DRC, in 2013, Charlotte came back to the country of Lumumba, to join the Mission that was renamed MONUSCO (the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Congo). Meanwhile, the Human Rights Office was renamed United Nations Joint Human Rights Office as a result of the merging of the MONUSCO Human Rights Office and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the Country Office. She was entrusted with the project for the Reparation of the victims of sexual violence in the DRC. At least 530 victims benefitted from the Brazil-funded project; talking about the project, she said *"it took me to the Rocky Mountains of Lamera as well as the forests of Baraka and Shabunda, in the South Kivu,"* when she was in Bukavu.

In June 2014, she was redeployed in North-Kivu, a province adjacent to South-Kivu where Charlotte has been coordinating the National Access to Justice program for victims of sexual violence within the UNJHRO, from Goma. *"As part of this program, I carried through 5 projects on the fight against sexual violence and assistance to the victims, some of which are multi annual, covering more than a dozen provinces in DRC."* The program, she said, was funded by Japan, Canada, United Kingdom and Wallonia-Brussels. Currently, another 5-year project on the fight against gender-based violence with funding from Canadian government is under way.

About the relationship nurtured with the different teams she has worked with, Charlotte Songue is greatly satisfied, as expressed in this statement: *"My professional career and experience were enriched and supported by the different teams I have worked with and by my supervisors who have given me the best coaching,"* of course, *"with the help of the almighty God."*

Her chiefs and colleagues also gave laudatory testimonies about her: Abdelaziz Thioye, currently UNJHRO Director has praised her professionalism in these praiseworthy words *"she is one of the rarest human rights specialists with a proven expertise in the area of providing direct assistance to the victims of violence. She gained lot of popularity from the victims of the famous Songo Mboyo dossier and can be proud of having contributed to their reintegration (through the donation of a whaling boat to the victims' association), after winning a major decision in a rape trial having led to the payment of substantial compensation by the Congolese government."*

He further extolled her human qualities: ***“Charlotte is always ready to serve with a smile visible from far away, she continues to back local associations’ efforts towards implementing the response to sexual violence. Her colleagues as well as the external partners of MONUSCO and UNJHRO greatly admire her integrity, professionalism and respect for diversity.”***

Let us now listen to what her colleague Sylvain Masudi Mudimbi, Human Rights National Officer said about her ***“she is always mindful of maintaining good relationship not only with colleagues in Office but also those from Agencies of the UN System as well with state and non-state partners in joint initiative to fight sexual violence.”***



Then we asked her if the UN multicultural environment in which she works is a stroke of luck or rather an obstacle for her? She was straightforward and said: ***“It is indeed a stroke of luck for me to work and to live in a multicultural environment for I like to be informed. I confess I take time to approach people out of respect for their intimacy; however, I take time to observe and reflect on what I see. As a result, I have learnt a lot of things that (I practice when I feel like – other people’s food). The UN multi-cultural environment has helped me to learn about other cultures, peoples, nations.”***

By the way, what is your reading of the overall situation in the DRC? ***"This is a big and beautiful country endowed with wonderful fauna, flora and an awesome climate,"*** highlighting ***"Congolese people are my brothers and sisters; in Cameroun there is a village named Kananga like the Kananga in the DRC and***



in the Equateur province, I found people with names like Lobè, Moukoko exactly like in Douala, Cameroun; and other names like Samba, Besala in the coastal areas and in the center of Cameroun. In the Kasai province, there is an ethnic group known as Basongè in DRC and my own name is Songuè. Lingala is a mixture of several dialects from Cameroun: as an example, the word "heart" in Lingala is Motema whilst in Douala it is Mulema, the word "ears" in Lingala from DRC and the dialects from Cameroun is Matoy, etc."

She believes that ***"the political and security situation is the major challenge to the development of this beautiful country,"*** upholding her faith in the triumph of values like peace, respect for human rights and work to which she greatly contributes through the United Nations, the local partners as well as the state and non-state partners and the Congolese population.

Asked about how she perceives the work done by the UN in DRC: Her response is quite simple and clear: ***"The UN is implementing its mandate in DRC. When I see the satisfaction and joy in the eyes of the rehabilitated victims, the released detainees with our assistance and cooperation with the authorities, I can but conclude that the UN is doing a good job. However, there are still a lot to do in DRC given the huge challenges, the evils are deep seated, there are so many needs ... Not everything depends on the goodwill of the UN civil servants, peacekeepers in DRC and the technical and financial partners. The Congolese Government and people including the elite have each their part to play in the harmonious symphony for the development and emergency of the DRC"*** she concludes. And what about the gender issue, is it at the center of your actions? ***"It is the very essence of my duty"*** she said in earnest ***"the majority of the victims of sexual and gender-based violence in particular are women and***

girls. I am trying to facilitate the rehabilitation of the victims so that they would be reintegrated into the society and contribute fully to the development of the community. We also interact with the leadership of this country, men and young people to get them to acquire the necessary skills and apply the laws, respect the rights of women and girls even in private, and thereby contribute to the improvement of the social norms for the promotion of everyone's rights."

What does Charlotte Songue do beside her job with the UN Mission? What does she do for fun? Very few, she said. ***"Once in a while, I happen to assist non-government organizations outside of my business hours but that relates to my professional tasks."*** I further do fitness with MONUSCO Welfare Club for 1 or 2 hours a day, to keep myself physically and mentally fit to overcome stress.

Moreover, Charlotte loves cooking and doing other housework; while at home, she keeps her home tidy and clean. She is fond of the Congolese music, especially Christian music. She happens to sing in Lingala (laughs), because Charlotte has another hat; she is also songwriter and composer of Christian music.

Does she have a dream for the DRC? She replies with some words borrowed from the Congolese national anthem ***"Wake up Congolese people! Join your efforts and work together, in a beautiful momentum for peace and justice, to build a beautiful and great country."***

Charlotte also revealed that if she had to leave Congo tomorrow, she would ever remember the Congolese people's thirst for life... the beautiful countryside offered by the river Congo, the rocks in the Kongo Central province, the forests in Bikoro and Djoa, Equateur province, the green mountains of Masisi and the splendid islands of Lake Kivu... She concluded with these words: « I will never forget this country for having spent the most beautiful years of my life in." isn't this a beautiful story? Of course, yes.

Translated into English by Yulu Alphonse Kabamba