

Establishing a national women's network in the DRC: a challenge

ELISE MUHIMUZI, PERMANENT SECRETARY OF CONAFED, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC)

Elise Muhimuzi has played a leading role in the National Committee for Women and Development (CONAFED) – one of Congo's main women's networks – since the 1990s. This is a great achievement in a vast country hit hard by dictatorship and war. Working with other women activists, she built up the CONAFED network over a number of years and has been its Permanent Secretary since 1997.

What part did you play in establishing CONAFED?

In early 1990, I worked for a small NGO called the Collectif de Diffusion d'Information et d'Appui aux Femmes (CODIAF – Collective for Information Dissemination and Support to Women) (...). We saw how difficult it was for farmers, both women and man, to make a living. In partnership with others, we tried to come up with ways to enable women to get some benefits from the fruits of their labour. At the time, the country was still under Mobutu's dictatorship. In 1991-1992, there were widespread lootings in Congo. That was when we started to campaign with other organisations.

The movement began in Kinshasa but we soon realised that women in other Provinces shared our concerns. Rural women were also oppressed by the existing system. So we came to the conclusion that we had to work together. (...) We launched a large-scale women's movement that culminated in 1997 in elections for CONAFED, aimed at promoting the rights and status of women. There were 12 of us – all women NGO members – who launched the process in Kinshasa. We chose

a permanent secretary and a chairwoman among these women. I was ideally placed to be the first leader of CONAFED. Some of these women went on to hold important posts, such as the Minister of Gender, Family Affairs and Children, Ms Marie-Ange Lukiana. I have remained at CONAFED ever since... and have just been re-elected.

Are you concerned that there has been no change of Permanent Secretary at CONAFED?

There may have been times when people thought I was clinging on to CONAFED. In fact, at the last elections I had made up my mind to leave, but the women wouldn't let me go – even though there were other strong candidates. When I started out, I didn't have all the skills: I learnt on the job. It must be said that a number of individuals have left the

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movement, mainly to go into politics. In 2002-2003, many were involved in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. CONAFED's strategy came to prominence, largely because we had made decentralised provincial education our primary focus – with some success. In 2002, 24 of the 29 women civil society members of the transitional Parliament established under the Inter-Congolese Dialogue came from CONAFED! (...) The newcomers to CONAFED have coped well, but naturally they do require training. I think that's another reason why they want me to stay – as a stabilising presence amid all the departures. That said, these departures are no bad thing in themselves; they are testimony to the quality of the movement, its members and training.

How has CONAFED become such an important player in this vast country?

From the outset, we had a very clear programme, namely to work on equal rights and equity. The movement aims to get women involved in decision-making bodies. We decided that education would be the best way to achieve this objective. Right from the start, the courses were run in a decentralised way, in the provinces, with the involvement of the customary and religious authorities. It is an unusual approach: in Congo, most human resources are located in Kinshasa owing to the centralisation of dictatorial power. The idea was to return power to the people.

How do you view CONAFED's capacity-building activities?

I believe that the capacity-building activities have had a big impact. Today, there are many competent women in positions of power who have passed through CONAFED. (...) This is of great benefit to us, because these women form a network, which means we have access to many high-ranking individuals.



Elise Muhimuzi during the Dimitra workshop held in Brussels in September 2008.

Has your work on women's emancipation caused any difficulties in your family life?

My husband has always encouraged me. In fact, he was around so much and so committed to the cause that many of my colleagues thought he was a human rights activist! Without his support, I don't know if I'd be what I am today. (...) In the early days, we didn't have any funding and it was his wages that paid for the office rent.

My family was a long way away in Bukavu [in eastern DRC – Ed.]. To start with, some people thought I was mad. They didn't understand how I could work for five years with no pay! [She laughs] (...) They would have preferred me to go into business, but I couldn't have done that.

I devoted a lot of energy to setting up CONAFED and everything went very well to begin with. But it created tensions, especially with other women, because of the backing that CONAFED received from donors. I have to admit that I wasn't too bothered by that. (...) I was pleasantly surprised when our first evaluation suggested we might become the main national women's organisation.

Have there been any difficulties in your dealings with the authorities?

Before the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, I had become a public figure. At that time, we were demanding that the rebels stop the rapes and other violence. In 2001, my elder sister paid the ultimate price: she and two of her children were murdered. It was an attempt to silence me. They targeted my family. I received a lot



of encouragement from our partners, because they didn't want me to leave Congo. Cordaid [a Dutch Catholic development aid organisation – Ed.] helped pay to save my little niece, who had been shot but not killed.

At the time, I was devastated by the loss of my sister. I lost my father when I was nine and she was the one who supported the family. She was everything to me. Then I figured that maybe her death could help restore peace to other women. She was dead, but so many other women had died in similar circumstances. Life had to go on.

How do you see the future for women in Congo?

We need to work at putting in place equality mechanisms. I think the fact that there have been elections has triggered a democratic process in spite of everything. Congo needs capacity to run the country. We have to be really determined to assume sovereignty over the country and have genuine rule of law. Congo's wealth must be allowed to benefit the Congolese people. I think this is possible – it's a matter of political will.

Do you have a message for our readers engaged in gender equality issues?

Opening up rural areas is very important. We need to keep up the work in that area. Today, completely isolated populations now have access to information that is of relevance to them. For us, the people of Congo, Dimitra is a very important programme, not only in terms of agricultural issues but in a much broader sense, in relation to the rights of women in forgotten rural areas. To work for others you have to believe in what you are doing: only when you believe do things get done.

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CONAFED

The Comité National Femme et Développement (National Committee for Women and Development) is a network of women's organisations in the DRC aimed at promoting gender issues and women leadership. It comprises over 360 member associations grouped into Women and Development Networks (REFEDs) in each of the country's 11 provinces.

CONAFED arose from the need to create a framework for Congolese women to discuss issues that affect them and, most importantly, join forces in order to be stronger and make their voices heard. Rural women are well represented and play an active role in CONAFED.

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