

DRC – AGF, working for women empowerment in the peri-urban area of Kinshasa

Kindele is an outlying district of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It has a high unemployment rate, but help is at hand thanks to Appui aux Groupements des Femmes et Familles (AGF - Support for Women's Groups and Families), an NGO that works to improve the livelihoods of its members and of families living in the neighbourhood. AGF is a member of CONAFED, the National Committee for Women and Development (see previous page).

AGF was founded in 1991 against a difficult economic and political backdrop. It started out as a group of local women who got together to breed chickens. Though a modest undertaking, it enabled the women to make a partial living and quickly expanded. At the time, it was difficult to access any major funding: the national financial system had imploded and development partners were more geared towards large associations. However, the organisation gradually diversified into a wider range of sectors, moving beyond chicken breeding into agriculture and other income-generating activities with the potential to enhance food security.

AGF's logo is the top of a palm tree. "The palm tree represents a tree that grows tall and strong," explains the organisation's coordinator Agnès Lukamba. And since its inception AGF has indeed grown from strength to strength. The association now has over 120 members –women who work in groups to improve their livelihoods. Most of its members live a rural lifestyle, with all the hardships that this entails. However, AGF also benefits another group not featured in its name: boys, who otherwise would not have any employment, help to sell the goods produced by the organisation's members. As well as being a development actor, Appui aux Groupements des Femmes et Familles has become a full-fledged business.

A range of activities

Today, AGF's members have the necessary experience and tools to organise themselves and contribute to social change initiatives in their area.

The association has over 2,500 broiler and laying hens. It sells its chickens and eggs all over Kinshasa and has developed a micro enterprise for chicken production and preservation.

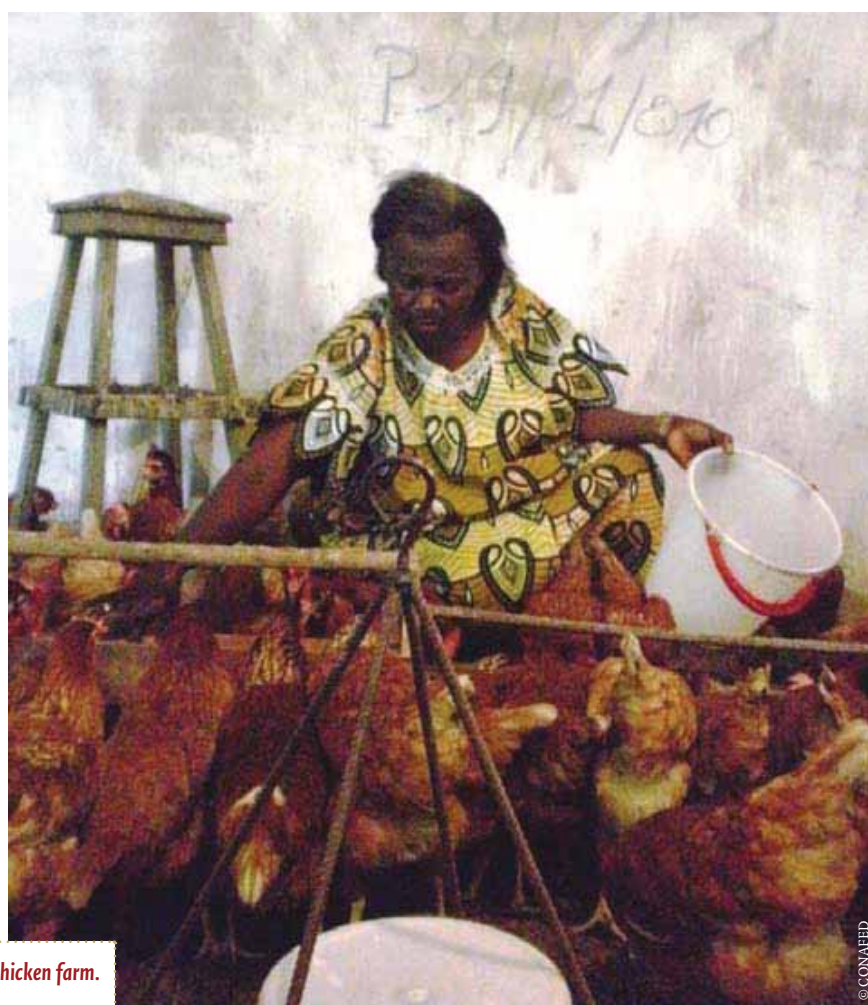
Its members also engage in agricultural activities: growing manioc, peanuts, spices and amaranth and selling large quantities of fresh (rather than frozen) produce.

Last but not least, AGF undertakes other income-generating activities such as the manufacture of detergents and the salting of fish. Some members have specialised in the production of boubous and tablecloths (rarities in the Kinshasa marketplace) based on their own designs. Others have branched out into pastry-making, producing small cakes and waffles.

Here too, youths who used to beg and steal are now helping to sell the products.

Capacity building

AGF's actions are also helping to build the capacity of its members and of neighbourhood residents. The association offers training in a variety of subjects, including literacy, agriculture, responsible citizenship and 'cutting and stitching', as and when it has the necessary resources. In this poverty-stricken neighbourhood, that is not often the case. Consequently, it has decided to focus more on vocational cal-



A woman from AGF in her chicken farm.

capacity building – an approach that has borne fruit.

Jacky Tsh. moved to Kinshasa with her husband and their six children 10 years ago because of the war. She gives an enthusiastic account of her experience: “Quite honestly, when I joined AGF in 2002 I was at the end of my tether and had given up all hope. I have to say that the association has given me everything – not just knowledge but love as well. My family and friends in Kinshasa are the AGF members. Now I’ve learnt to make detergents, which I sell, and I also breed chickens. My family’s situation has improved a lot. My husband has become a craftsman and together we earn a living for our family. We now have eight children, all of them at school and in good health. Thanks to their ability to produce goods, the women of Kindele are now respected.”

Another member, Fifi K., confirms this picture: “I am a young mother with three children. I left school at an early age. I’ve been a member of AGF for the past two years. I decided to turn to AGF because of the problems I faced as a young mother with no regular income. I learnt to breed chickens, salt fish and make detergents and also to sell these products. Through these activities, I’ve brought happiness to my family and to the community. I can meet my children’s basic needs. I’m very grateful to this initiative because I used to be unpopular as a girl – a problem child. Now I am taking responsibility for my children’s future. I’ve become a responsible person and a useful member of the community.”

Many challenges

However, despite this enthusiasm, the organisation continues to face many challenges, with logistical, administrative and communication resources generally limited. For example, the association’s headquarters, which houses offices and a chicken shed among other things, does not have any rooms large enough to gather all its members.

As far as the sale of chickens is concerned, there is stiff competition from imported frozen birds. AGF is applying to the relevant ministry to secure tax exemption on chicken feed, which would ease this pressure.

AGF’s members do not have enough access to land, despite almost a third of them being engaged in agricultural activities.

Access to water is not guaranteed, and women have to walk long distances to get enough water for their work. In addition, the electricity supply is limited and unreliable, which is another major obstacle to a number of the organisation’s activities.

Community ownership and an enthusiastic membership

However, these difficulties cannot overshadow the importance of the NGO’s role in supporting its members and the neighbourhood. Its coordinator Agnès Lukamba believes that it is AGF’s very community rootedness



Meeting of AGF members.

that explains its success: “Personally, it gives me great joy to see my children getting involved in this work, work with a community and a development focus. Within the community, I sense increasing openness to the idea of women as producers. Women are now viewed more positively in the neighbourhood. They have become capable not only of feeding their children but also of defending their rights. (...) Our greatest success has been this major step towards women’s empowerment, with every member now able to produce and sell.”

AGF’s strength lies in the energy and motivation of its members, as Jacky Tsh. and Fifi K. testify. “AGF is no longer just an association: it is a school of life, a centre for personal development. Women’s potential has been unlocked. This NGO is banishing poverty from our community. Myths are being dispelled. Take eggs, for example: they used to be just for well-off households, now they’re accessible to everyone. (...) AGF is a beacon of hope for Kindele. Women in this part of the capital now have the means to be self-sufficient.”

Appui aux Groupements des Femmes et Familles is an example of a successful local initiative aimed at improving the livelihoods of its members and the neighbourhood and empowering women.

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