

Centre Mwanga: a new health and care service for the people of Eastern Congo

The National Association of Social Workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is planning to build a new centre, named Centre Mwanga, in Eastern Congo. Our aim is to provide health and psychosocial care for local people, many of whom have been traumatised by war.

The site we have chosen is a city named Uvira, in the province of South Kivu. Uvira is part of the Ruzizi Planes, a location that is well known in DRC. It is where Laurent-Désiré Kabila enlisted soldiers to start his rebellion against the corrupt President Mobutu. (For those not familiar with the history of DRC, Kabila's forces managed to force Mobutu into exile in 1997. Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and succeeded by his son of the same name.)

The local people are still feeling the effects of the Second Congo War, which began in 1998 and ended in 1999. This war, sometimes referred to as the African world war because it involved nine African nations with some twenty armed groups, devastated DRC. Despite the signing of the peace accords in 2003, fighting continues in the east of the country. In eastern Congo, the prevalence of rape and other sexual violence is believed to be the worst in the world (UNCHR, 2010). In particular, the South Kivu region has the greatest number of women in DRC who have been abused or raped. It also has a large number of young boys enrolled in a variety of local armies. It is a region where the war has never ended.

Because Uvira is on the border of Rwanda and Burundi, its people are subjected to criminal behaviour, including rape, murder and looting, by rebel groups from both countries. As a result, many people are deeply affected by trauma, which has a profound impact on their day-to-day existence. Women have been the principal victims of the ongoing war, and are largely forgotten by government.

Our aim in setting up the centre is to provide services that can help them recover from their trauma, with a particular focus on supporting the victims of rape and their children in South Kivu. Specifically we want to:

- Provide quality counselling, treatment and rehabilitation health services to victims of rape, their children, and other vulnerable women, including those who have HIV/Aids.
- Provide counselling and links to legal services. Because some of the women who have experienced sexual violence can identify their abusers, our social workers will work in collaboration with the state court to bring rapists and abusers to justice.
- Provide safe shelter to victims of sexual and gender-based violence and their children.
- Economically empower victims of rape, their children and other vulnerable women, including those with HIV/Aids, with skills to start and sustain income-generating activities.

The services will be free to all women in the community who need them. Based on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) report of 2017, this is about 3,400 women.

The centre will have 16 employees. Eleven of these will be dedicated to supporting service users: four nurses, six social workers, one clinical psychologist and one medical doctor. There will also be a centre director, an executive secretary, a treasurer and an adviser. We will take on international volunteers from places like Europe, the USA and Canada.

The social workers will carry out initial assessments of women to identify the treatment they need and how long it might take before they can be discharged. They will work with the women both individually and in groups to give them a space where they can share their stories to support each other. The social workers will work closely with service users and the community to identify family members who might be able to help them re-integrate into the community. This will help the women avoid discrimination, isolation and stigmatization once they have been discharged.

The social workers will also be responsible for arranging experts to come in and teach women skills like sewing and making bread. The centre will provide women with the equipment they need to use those skills back in the community, enabling them to start a new life and become self-sufficient, as well as integrate back into community life. The social work team will also carry out home visits for one year to make sure that the women are coping. Finally, social workers will be responsible for organising educational activities for children.

The clinical psychologist, who will work closely with the social work team, will provide mental health support for clients who need it.

The doctor and nurses will look after the health needs of the women and children, and, if necessary, recommend transfer to a specialist hospital if they have particular medical needs.

We are aware that this is an ambitious plan. It will be the first psychosocial centre in DRC, though there are some international and local organisations providing psychosocial support. These include ourselves (the National Association of Social Workers) and other NGOs. There are also some mental health centres, supporting people with conditions such as schizophrenia. Centre Mwanga will be the first psychosocial centre in the country, however, to provide this particular combination of services. Our long-term vision is to have other centres around the country, particularly in the provinces with large numbers of people traumatised by civil war.

Building the centre will cost about €200,000. We think it will take about a year to build, because we will be relying on donations from friends and colleagues around the world. If we are lucky enough to raise all the money at the outset, we could build it in six months. Currently we are relying very much on well-wishers: we don't have any NGO partners, but we would be very happy if any would like to get involved.

Our next step is to start fundraising. We have a Facebook page where we will be sharing the videos, pictures of the progress of our work and inviting people to donate. We will also be sharing the updates by email for those who are involved in the project, and we will also organizing some face-to-face meetings and online meetings to share information about the centre. The IFSW will also help us to share information worldwide with its online newspaper.

If you would like to support us, you can contact us directly or get in touch with the IFSW. Anything you can offer will be very much appreciated, and will go to creating a better life for the vulnerable women and children of South Kivu.