



October 2006

CongoAction News

Did you read Martine and Katie's *Blog* of their trip to the Congo?

For those not in the know a *Blog* is a contraction of the term 'Web Log' and is really a journal on line for all to read, enjoy and comment on. You will find ours at <http://congoaction.blogspot.com>. It is well worth reading the day by day impressions and feelings of Martine and Katie, expressed in an entertaining and readable way, as they saw for themselves the work that needs doing and the value of Congo Actions' efforts.

On her return Martine has reflected and here is her report of the visit to Bukavu in the Kivu Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo during September 2006.

The sponsorship scheme:

As we do every year, we planned to see each of our sponsored children, and meet with their parents or guardians. Meeting with them is a bit like meeting with family members, the same familiar faces and warm welcome every time! They are so delighted to see us, and ask me to transmit their grateful thanks to you.

As you can imagine, trying to see 65 children, take a photo of each, and congratulate them on their hard work at school is not a simple task! One has to contend with crowds of children and parents, all excited for the attention that we give them, and to have their photos taken! We try our very best to review each child, talk to the teacher, look at their work, take a photo, encourage teacher and child and so on. But our system is never fool proof, and inevitably, we manage somehow to miss a child or two each year! This is because the child is ill on the day, and we have no time to return; in which case we would ask our representative to ensure that they will take a photo later, to send to you, our sponsors.

On the whole, we have managed to keep the same children in the scheme. This year, we "lost" three, the first one because he no longer wanted to go to school, the second moved away from the area and the third one, a 14 year old, fell pregnant so no longer attends school. (Last year, one of the children went to Canada and was adopted by a

black family. This is a very rare occurrence!).

We rely on our colleagues out in the Congo to inform us of these events and, of course, we will quickly pass the information to the child's sponsor and ask if you wish to transfer your sponsorship to another child.

Do the children benefit from the sponsorship?

My answer is "yes, most definitely!" I have had the joy and privilege of seeing these children every year for five years, and seeing on their faces their pride at being supported by you, and happiness at going to school! I can see the transformation in them, they are growing up, they look smart in their blue and white school uniforms. This year, five of them have left the two primary schools that we are supporting, and have gone on to secondary schools, where we have met them individually. We have to increase our contribution to those studying in secondary schools, to meet the higher costs of buying books and paying for exams.

We are aware that the sponsorship will not cover the cost of university fees, but since the scheme is still young, we have not yet had any request for these (around £350 a year). We will endeavour to look at individual cases on their merits, and perhaps some of you will not mind increasing your contribution accordingly.

As we are on the subject of money, some of



Photos
Above:
Village children

Top from left:
Katie being greeted by the village chief after a warrior dancing display;
Three of the dancers;
Village children practicing dancing;
Healthy pigs;
Katie during a visit to the school;

Next page:
Martine with the soap makers

you very kindly gave me an added contribution to give to your sponsor child and family. I agonised over this dilemma, which was to give to some and not others, and I have to confess that I could not do it! It was so hard on the day, when all the families were queuing, and looking to see if one had received more than the other! Katie and myself discussed this over and over again, and decided that the best way to deal with it was to put all the monies in a common pool, and buy school supplies, to be distributed to all the children in the school. The timing of this worked out very well, as it was the beginning of the term, and some children had come to school with nothing!

So, this is just to say please carry on supporting these children! We do endeavour to provide you with news and photos as regularly as we can, and our site visit is to ensure that your money does not go astray. Thank you!

The pig project

From goats, we have diversified into pigs. We thought that pigs would multiply fast, and be an effective way of helping the whole community. The pig project started in February 2006, with nothing else but a starting up budget from us, and a lot of goodwill from our colleagues out there.

To be honest, this was a bit like “a shot in the dark”, something we had never tried before, but felt was worth having a go!

The pig project manager is Polepole, a very thin, very unassuming and quietly spoken young man, whose name in Swahili means: “slowly, slowly”. My intuition was right! (Just as well that the Congo Action committee trust my judgement.) Polepole has done a brilliant job, slowly but surely! This year, I was presented with 30 piglets, four solid breeding females, and a boar.

I was also asked for my advice as to what to do next, and I hasten to say that I have never bred pigs in my life, so I was not too sure... So if one of you out there is a specialist pig breeder, and can give them and us some sound advice, please let us know. Meanwhile, we trust Polepole and his team to keep on fattening the piglets and get them to a point where they can be sold. One little piggy went to market...

The soap factory

Another way to move people forward in a place where there is very little paid employment is to look at their local markets, and see what sells there. Soap is a very useful and saleable item. So there again, our friend Polepole came up with the right answer, and, with the help of Congo Action, set up a small soap making industry. This now provides work to single mothers – often victims of rape, shunned by their community, and with no means of support. They make a range of blue soaps that have multiple usages, and cut them up

to get them ready to take to market. The project is still young, but the ladies are eager and work hard. We will continue to watch their progress and help them in expanding their small enterprise.

The disabled group

In the Congo, they still use the word “handicapped”, and it is not thought to be offensive or discriminatory. I met with this group, made of physically “handicapped” people, who had become so, due to disease like polio or following disastrous operations that had gone wrong because of lack of equipment. Most of them have to “make do” with wooden crutches or ill fitting and cumbersome looking callipers. They are willing to work, but have even less chance of finding employment than able people.

When I first saw them last year, they did not have a workshop, but were working under a very precarious tent made of canvas. They produced very attractive craftwork, mobiles and figures made of banana leaves. Congo Action started supporting them by renting a workshop for them, giving them sewing machines, and financing their basic materials. The moral uplift that they received from this was phenomenal!

The group has, since the start, proved to be very industrious and more than deserving of our trust and support. Congo Action now regularly exhibits their craft products for sale at some of our fund raising events. We also sell their beautiful cards, hand made with banana leaves, representing scenes of every day working lives, as well as Christmas cards. So please, if you are thinking of buying unusual handmade Xmas cards, please remember this group and how you too can contribute to their expansion!

A final word about these latest ventures: Congo Action aims at supporting children in their education. However, when in the Congo, faced with so many people living in the most appalling poverty, it is difficult to focus on only one aspect of helping. I believe that if we have the means (no matter how small), and the imagination, and some basic knowledge of how things work (apart from pig raising), then we must use all our skills and resources to help the Congolese population. So if you happen to read this and have come across a brilliant idea that can help the developing world of Africa, please let us know.

Thank you! Martine for Congo Action



Fund Raising at Home

As you all know Congo Action doesn't just rely on sponsorship money but actively organises and takes part in various events during the year to raise all that extra money which is then spent on funding special projects some of which have just been described.

This year we have already run a French Evening, an African Evening, a Quiz Night and sold pancakes, craft work and ran a tombola at the Maidstone Mela. Before the end of the year we plan have a craft stall at the Tankerton Christmas Market 12-6pm on the 3rd December - visit www.tankertonchristmasmarket.co.uk.

If you have ever organised fund raising events you can appreciate the work that goes into the planning. Congo Action are very lucky to have an enthusiastic and able fund raising event organiser in Edith Neilson. Helping her before and at the events are a number of reliable and hard working volunteers. But, of course, we always need more so if you are interested in helping with the events please let us have your details and we will contact you. We are also always looking for new ways of raising money so if you have any ideas please also let us know.

Finally, all of us at Congo Action would like to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.