Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Event
Palace of Westminster
March 31 2011
Prayer for Peace in Congo

Community based responses to poverty and injustice in the DRC, UK policy response and role of the diaspora.

A Christian Aid in the DRC

Thanks for the opportunity to meet together.

As the Head of Christian Aid's Africa Division for 6 years I was responsible for programmes in 20 countries. I visited the DRC several times. The scale of the challenges there were obvious, but I was also impressed by the resilience and strength of the communities there. The actions of people living in poverty and of communities responding to conflict, injustice and poverty are testimony to the strength of the human spirit. I would like to share something of that with you today.

Gathering here gives an important opportunity for those of us living outside the DRC to reflect on our role- from within government, from the churches, from the diaspora communities. Christian Aid seeks to strengthen the ability of all of us to act in solidarity. It is overwhelmingly clear that the future of DRC is tied up with the Great Lakes region as a whole and with global political and economic actions. We need to take a holistic view and be in it for the long haul.

The vision of Christian Aid in DRC is to contribute to the creation of a strong and democratic nation at the heart of Africa:

- A nation where every woman and man is a citizen with the **freedom** to build their future without fear.
- A nation where the people will have a **voice** in matters of state, benefiting from a system that ensures justice for all.
- A state which shares the country's resources evenly for the **well**-**being** of all the population.

We are a partner-based organisation. With the launch of our DFID-funded Civil Society Fund for Good Governance this year we will be working with partners nationally across all 11 provinces. Over the first 4 years of the Fund's operation, the Fund expects to provide support to more than 400 Congolese civil society organisations. DRC is Christian Aid's largest programme in Africa.

As we all know DRC is a country with extraordinary potential. Its vast mineral deposits alone should ensure that it is one of the strongest economies in Africa.

Instead the mismanagement of its wealth and the plundering of its natural resources have not only prevented it from realising that potential, but have in effect been used against its own people – it is this very wealth that has sustained the brutal conflict which has so far claimed more than five million lives.

Christian Aid's analysis, with our partners, is that part of the solution to the DRC's problems lies in establishing a strong civil society to hold those in power to account. This is now at the heart of our programme, supported by DFID and others. Stories of

lives in this talk are of those who are and will be supported by civil society to enable long term change in DRC.

It is also important to work with existing state structures – such as the government, army, police and judiciary – to ensure that they operate in the best interests of the Congolese people.
Many of the issues on which Christian Aid works in DRC are directly related to the ongoing conflict. Our partners engage with communities to address these issues and empower them to find solutions.

Women are crucial to this process. Christian Aid sees them as key **agents for change in DRC.**
I'm going to share with you three examples of the people that we work with in the hope that this will give a human face to the statistics and political narrative.

Sexual violence

One of the major reasons for high incidence of sexual violence in DRC is a culture of impunity and the breakdown of law and order. Christian Aid partners are helping brave women to challenge this. We are also working with partners that engage with the army- seeking structural long term change for peace

24-year-old Francoise (not her real name, pictured right) was helped by Mme Benedicte (pictured left) of CBCA to bring a case against the man who raped her (a civilian). He was sentenced to 25 years jail.

Ally Carnwath / Christian Aid

Francoise's testimony:

'It happened in June this year. ..

I wasn't ashamed or afraid of what people might think of me, I knew he was the one who had done wrong. I had to go to hospital to make sure there were no infections and it was there that I heard about the work CBCA does, helping women who have been raped to bring cases against their attackers.

The court case took place in Butembo, quite a long way from where I live in the countryside. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

I feel proud of myself for speaking out about what he did to me and I feel much more at ease, knowing he is being punished.

But also I believe that the police must continue to punish these wrong-doers because otherwise they will rape other women. And with so many soldiers living in the community, getting away with rape, now civilian men are beginning to imitate them. But men who do this must be punished.'

CA also recognises the necessity of engaging with men, and particularly with the Congolese army, to bring an end to sexual violence.

The Congolese army (FARDC) is implicated in illegal mining, rape and indiscriminate killing. Nonetheless, it is clear that engaging with FARDC, rather than simply denouncing it, is key to the prospects of peace for the region. It isn't just a question of stamping out army indiscipline, it is also about helping FARDC to realise its potential. A national army that works in the people's interests has a key role to play in building a strong and democratic Congolese state.
Since September 2009, our church partner CBCA (Central Africa Baptist Community) has been working on a project to support this kind of army reform. So far CBCA has organised training sessions for 492 senior soldiers on topics such as civilian rights, child protection and sexual violence.

CBCA recognises that it is an initiative which is dwarfed by the scale of the problem. The Congolese army is riven with factions, too many soldiers have a vested interest in mistreating civilians, and there is an entrenched culture of impunity which means that the vast majority of soldiers get away with their crimes.

But, it is a step in the right direction and it is one that is supported by a series of other initiatives that are also part of the CBCA project.

- CBCA have organised reconciliation ceremonies to help repair relationships between soldiers and the villagers they live among.
- CBCA and Christian Aid are working with the judiciary and prison staff to encourage a policy of zero tolerance (advocated by the 2006 Congolese law on sexual violence) towards rape.
- CBCA are also helping women bring cases against rapists (including soldiers) to try to end the culture of impunity. So far 40 women have brought cases, resulting in 30 convictions.

Collectively, these measures could establish the conditions for a change in army conduct. And crucially, they support those within the FARDC ranks who themselves want to improve the Congolese army's behaviour and reputation. By engaging with the army rather than simply demonising it, it helps to support these soldiers to reform the army from the inside.

Testimony: Major Janvier Bulambo was one of 492 senior Congolese soldiers to receive civilian rights training organised by CA partner CBCA.

Ally Carnwath / Christian Aid

'I can understand why the behaviour of certain soldiers has destroyed the population's faith in us. Among us, there have been those who haven't recognised what bad conduct actually means. The abuse of power by certain soldiers has resulted in this crisis of confidence between us and civilians. All these grievances – the rapes, the looting – that are laid on the head of the army do us no credit.

I hear NGOs denouncing us, calling us rapists. But rare are those who come to talk to us, to consult with us about the problems and what we can do about them.

….We, as soldiers ourselves, are best placed to tell them that the army's behaviour must improve.

"For peace to be established, we need to be close to the population,….So the process has to start with the army - we have to address our own behaviour.'

This is an approach which is replicable and could work elsewhere in DRC. Donors working in security sector reform should consider supporting this type of approach and the potential of faith-based and community organisations to play a role in security sector reform programmes.

But whilst it is sexual violence which gets most media coverage, the difficulties facing Congolese women, and the work they are doing to improve their situation, goes far beyond this.

HIV

An estimated 300,000 people live with HIV in the DRC. The ongoing conflict, the displacement of thousands of people, and the use of rape as a weapon of war are all factors that have contributed to a situation in which the illness has spread rapidly. HIV costs lives, leaves children without parents, causes disharmony in close-knit communities and represents a major barrier to development. HIV disproportionately affects women in DRC (as elsewhere).

HIV-related stigma is a major issue in DRC. However, thanks to CA's work through partners, the situation is starting to change. Congolese society is becoming more open and less judgemental about the illness, life-saving Anti Retro Viral (ARV) drugs are more widely available, more people are getting tested and there is more support available to people living with HIV.

A major CA-led advocacy campaign, in partnership with CAHAC (Community Action against HIV/ AIDS in Congo), gave HIV+ women the opportunity to demand better medical treatment and an end to discrimination. Key to this campaign was the idea that HIV+ people should themselves be driving it.

CAHAC's campaign has transformed the way the state and large sections of Congolese society view the illness. In November 2007 the consortium took its demands to the streets, organising the country's biggest HIV demonstration with simultaneous marches involving ten thousand people across all 11 of the country's provinces.

Activists were received by the Congolese Prime Minister and the Head of Parliament and the event received coverage across the national media, something which would have been unthinkable before the campaign began.

As a direct result of the march a proposed law, which had stalled in parliament for months, was passed enshrining the right of all people with HIV to ARV medication and defending them from discrimination, such as obligatory HIV testing by prospective employers.

Finance for ARV treatment remains dwarfed by the scale of the problem. But the new law and increased lobbying strength has helped CAHAC maintain pressure on the government to live up to its commitments on HIV.

Since the campaign began, the number of people under ARV treatment has risen from 4,000 to 32,000**.** Around a third of these receive their medication from Christian Aid partner AMO Congo, whose health centres operate in the DRC's poorest communities.

A permanent group of national and international NGOs has now been established, which represents the needs and concerns of people living with HIV to the government and speaks with a more powerful voice than the Congo's disparate group of HIV organisations could manage before.

These are examples of women playing their part in tackling specific issues and obstacles to development, equipped and enabled by civil society organisations. But no less important is the everyday heroism of women in managing daily life - running households and bringing in the income to feed and educate their children.

Livelihoods

Christian Aid is also working to improve the livelihoods of ordinary poor people in DRC, helping them in their struggle to survive economically.

Amida Boulambo, 33, has received a series of microcredit loans from Christian Aid partner PIAMF to help support her palm oil business

Ally Carnwath / Christian Aid

Amida's testimony:

'I was in the market when representatives of PIAMF came round to explain that they had a small amount of credit for people selling on a small scale. We received $500 in our group of four, $125 each. We've been working with PIAMF for two years now and have received loans of $700, $900 and $1100. Our union is called Wamama Waumosa and we all sell palm oil.

The loans helped us set up a new point of sale at Karuba, 16 km from here. We have invested in plots of land, cement, food for our children and we have bought a goat for our group. It has also helped me to increase the size of my stock of oil. Before I had a stock of 300 litres, now it's 720 litres and I sell 40 litres every day.

Previously I couldn't afford the school fees for my seven children but the loan has meant that now all of them go to school. The second loan helped me build my own house with wooden planks. The third meant I could buy cement. And all of the loans have helped our family eat more nutritious food and in greater quantities.

Thanks to the money I am able to look after two old ladies who I know in the community and we can contribute to the costs of important ceremonies such as weddings and funerals for the extended family. I am also looking after a small child who I found abandoned in the market one day. She's about two years old and she lives with our family now; I have become her mother.'

In the areas of sexual violence, HIV and livelihoods these are examples of work that is being done by communities in response to poverty, injustice and the ongoing scourge of conflict.

Today it is important I believe to hear these stories and to recognise and affirm the work that the churches and other civil society organisations are doing in the DRC. Work that is based upon the **participation, voice and action of women and men** - entire families and communities - who have suffered too long in DRC but who remain resilient in building a just future.

How can our government here act to support this work? And what is the role of the diaspora?

The role of UK policy

Christian Aid works with our local partners in DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. We encourage the UK to do more to support the churches and civil society across the region.

1. **DFID's prioritization of DRC is welcome**. The UK is the number one bilateral donor and is promoting long-term stabilization and reconstruction including through supporting civil society organizations (via Christian Aid-led consortium 'Civil Society Fund) to play their role and hold their government to account, ultimately to improve delivery of public services to the Congolese people ('demand-side governance').

This is welcome and an important means of supporting the emergence of democratic culture and accountable governance at the grassroots.

However, such support is necessary for the region as a whole – for the neighboring states as well as the DRC.

2. **A regional approach is necessary.** The region's history shows us that internal events in one-country can spill-over and affect neighboring states, because of porous borders and cross-border dynamics. Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi have also experienced violent instability and still have a long way to go in developing state-citizen relations and supporting community efforts to tackle poverty.

Therefore:

- Since the UK is also the number one bilateral donor to **Rwanda** and, as announced recently in the Bilateral Aid Review, is planning to maintain aid to Rwanda, we hope the UK will increase support to **Rwandan civil society**. Until now the UK has not invested enough in supporting these key development actors and is working mainly with the state though direct budget support.

- Equally – it's important for the UK to support development and reconstruction efforts in **Burundi** as part of a coherent regional approach. If Burundi's post-conflict stabilization process falters this could have implications for both DRC and Rwanda. UK should review its recent decision to end bilateral aid to Burundi and consider maintaining a development programme there to respond to the enormous needs and challenges Burundi faces.

3. **Consolidate peace.** As a key diplomatic and aid actor in the region, the UK should use its influence and aid to **help consolidate peace and better governance.** All countries of the region are signatories to international human rights commitments - the UK should support the region to uphold their commitments, make progress in building accountable governance and move forward together.

The combination of strong civil society action for change, and a clear consistent strategy by the international community are essential for lasting peace and an end to poverty in the DRC.

What part can the diaspora so strongly represented here today play?

CA is committed to support citizens working for change. The diaspora can play an important role by:

- Engaging in the political process. Lobby your MP, DFID, FCO to keep DRC on the agenda
- Church and community leaders should take opportunities to represent diaspora and talk about DRC in the media
- Engaging in groups like Peace in Congo, Save the Congo and Congo Now, which recently launched a postcard campaign targeting the British government on the issue of sexual violence in DRC.