

A beautiful idea



Journalist **Jude Hill** reports on her recent trip to the DRC on behalf of the World Development Appeal (WDA), with added background from the convener of the WDA, Rev. Dr. Katherine Meyer.

She smiles with her entire face. And with it the atmosphere in the room changes; the tone of the story transforms.

I'm listening to Hope. She's one of the Democratic Republic of Congo's many victims of sexual violence. But this 25-year-old is a gritty survivor. She's choosing to speak out about what so many in the DRC still consider to be one of the country's unspeakable stories.

When she was just 15 years old, Hope was abducted from her family home by militia men. Dozens of them forced her up into the mountains and raped her for several days. They repeatedly sharpened their machetes, ready to kill her.

But this girl helps make a miracle possible. She looks upwards and pleads with the God she is so sure loves her. "If you're there," she tells Him, "I need to see you – not in a dream. I need to know you're there."

Light fills her vision. She recalls seeing an army in white torpedo their way towards her. She hears a voice, "Hope, my daughter, I am with you."

And from that place of total love she turns to her rapists. "God loves you so much," she tells them. "He doesn't love what you're doing – but He loves you."

Unbelievable bravery

After enduring much more hellishness she is able to escape. Her attackers judge her to be a witch and let her go.

"I was a little girl in the forest," she says. But after wandering for some time, she reached a military camp, and one of the men there helped her get to hospital.

There she received love and medical attention. Recovery was slow – but after some time Hope returned to

her church choir. She also returned to her studies and eventually received a bachelor's degree from UCBC (Université Chrétienne Bilingue du Congo, a bilingual Christian university in the DRC), whose work is supported by Congo Initiative, a Tearfund partner. Congo Initiative speaks of itself as 'an envisioned community of Christ-centred Congolese leaders and global partners united for the transformation of lives and a flourishing Democratic Republic of Congo'.

I honestly couldn't take my eyes off Hope as she told me this story. Pain constantly wrote itself across her face. But joy and love continually overwrote it. "God loves me so much," she kept saying.

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Here is a young woman with a message. To those going through their own suffering she says, "Don't give up on hope, it's not the end. Don't think God doesn't exist or isn't there. I've seen God."

Every story is unique. But stories like Hope's are heartbreakingly common in the DRC. And so it's against this backdrop Tearfund is working to bring change.

Tearfund's Sabine McAllister explains that in every project they run, tackling sexual/gender based violence has to form part of the programme: "All communities have women like Hope. Women here have been used as weapons of war. There is no age that is immune – girls as young as two, and older women too.

"We try to challenge the culture and work with faith leaders so they understand that men and women are equal. It's not just about

stopping men – it's about helping women not to accept it. And we have seen monumental change."

Sabine lights up as she tells of a couple in Kinshasa whose relationship has been transformed after engaging with a Tearfund programme. The woman was used to going to get water herself and carrying eight containers – 20 litres each – back to the family home. But her husband's whole perspective began to change when he realised he too should be pitching in to help. Now they both go to carry the water home. They take equal responsibility.

Tearfund's support has also helped make it possible to set up community action groups as part of its programme to address sexual and gender-based violence. Through these groups first responders are trained up to help victims – providing them with care and support, and equipping them to deal with their trauma. Change has to be group by group, couple by couple, person by person.

The DRC is a fragile state whose very limited structures are being further undermined by the ongoing violent conflict. Roughly the size of western Europe, and rich in natural resources, the DRC is nevertheless ranked only 12 from the bottom in the 2016 Human Development Index. Inside the DRC, 3.7 million people are internally displaced. The sustained conflict has already cost six million people their lives – that's the equivalent of the whole island of Ireland, wiped out. On the ground, frequent atrocities against civilians include not only rape, but also mass executions, and the forcible recruitment by militias of both adults and children.

And yet the DRC rarely gets international media attention.



Showing Hope's story in congregations

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“This is a silent crisis,” says Tearfund’s David McAllister. “Even as we speak (in September 2017) massacres are happening here. The Congolese live in continual trauma and crisis.

“We go to villages and talk about peace to people who have never known what peace is.”

That is why the McAllisters continue to give their lives for the people of the DRC.

“I get to sit in the dirt with these women and talk,” says Sabine. “It’s hard – but in the midst of the most horrible parts, God is here and that’s why we’re here.”

David has a dream that fires his passion and work: “I wish to God and I hope that one day every little girl here has the same good life that my daughter was able to have.”

It’s a prayer that needs so many amens.

Showing Hope’s story in congregations

Hope’s story is told in one of two films produced for the 2017 World Development Appeal, and the World Development Committee suggests that it be shown to adults only. Congo Initiative, from whose educational ministry at UCBC Hope has benefited, will receive

support through this year’s Appeal. UCBC has become convinced that an imbalance of power along gender lines contributes to continuing conflict and economic disparity, not just in the DRC but throughout the world.

Supported by Congo Initiative, UCBC is taking practical steps to address this imbalance in its local context. Equal numbers of female and male students are enrolled in its programmes, and gender studies are incorporated into the content of student coursework. Hope herself has spoken in conversation about how

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important it has been for her to be in a place that gives value to women, and to women’s voices.

Help for pregnant women

The 2017 World Development Appeal also highlights the work of Tearfund

partner, Action Entraide in the DRC. Committed to reducing both poverty and violence, Action Entraide works in a number of focused areas, which include developing the capacities and theological reflection of the churches; enabling community awareness of issues related to gender and child protection; savings and small business development schemes; and peace and reconciliation, encouraging the participation of Christian young people in development and in the reconciliation process.

Action Entraide works to enable some of the women who have been most deeply scarred by violence to speak out, and to participate fully in the building of a new and more safe and stable society.

In one small village, as you will see in the other film produced for the Appeal (this one suitable for all ages and a congregational setting), the women have set up a fund to provide transport for pregnant women who need hospital care when they go into labour. A cabbage field, which the women planted with agricultural training provided by Action Entraide, now provides a steady income for the fund. And the men have come on board, and sometimes lead the harvest singing.



A four-year focus for WDA

The 2017 World Development Appeal highlights the long-term challenges and resilience needed for good and sustainable development in fragile states, with a particular emphasis on the importance of gender justice and the prevention of gender-based violence. This Appeal theme will be continued over the next four years, because the reality of good sustainable development work is that it is hard, it is long-term, and the forces ranged against it can seem overwhelming. Yet the wonder is not that the work is so hard, but that so many have the courage to embark upon it.

Over the next four years, therefore, you are invited to travel this hard road in solidarity with our partners in fragile states like the DRC. We invite you to learn more

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about the need for resilience over time in the work of sustainable development. We invite you to listen to our partners as they speak both about the obstacles they face, and the successes they celebrate. We want you to hear how voices raised for gender justice are absolutely critical to development work in fragile states, both for women and for men.

And we invite you to stand in solidarity with Hope, with the women and men of Zumbe, and with all our partners as they imagine, and continue to build, a different future. Please give the 2017 World Development Appeal your generous support.

World Development Appeal 2017

The WDA is an annual appeal of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, in support of sustainable development work in some of the world’s poorest communities. Funds raised are distributed through Christian Aid, Tearfund, and the Council for Global Mission. Materials for the Appeal are distributed to all congregations and are also available online, with more information about the Appeal, from www.presbyterianireland.org/world-development

