

“People don’t understand that information is the beginning of all development”

ADELINE NSIMIRE BALIKA, COORDINATOR OF SAMWAKI - SAUTI YA MWANAMKE KIJIJINI

Adeline is the coordinator of Samwaki, an NGO working to improve the livelihoods of rural populations in South Kivu through access to information and communication. The province of South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been ravaged by war. And whereas Samwaki is thriving today, as evidenced by its second-place ranking in the AfriComNet 2010 Awards for its communication campaign on HIV and AIDS (see page 11), that success is largely due to the determination and leadership of its coordinator.

Tell us a little about yourself ...

I studied general educational science in Walungu [in South Kivu, some 50 km northeast of the city of Bukavu], then started teaching French and technology at a secondary school. After that, I was hired in 2001 by the NGO Association des Femmes pour le Développement (AFD, Association of Women for Development) and put in charge of gender-related issues, before going on to found the NGO Samwaki and become its coordinator.

When did you first get involved in civil society?

Very early on actually. Even as a child representing others came naturally to me. My friends would ask me to speak on their behalf and I really enjoyed doing it. They knew me. And my family liked what I was doing and supported me. I’ve always had a talent for leadership.

Were gender-related issues already your prime concern back then?

No, to be quite honest, they were not. Even though I felt strongly about them, without being entirely aware of what they were. It was only when I joined AFD that I really got to improve my knowledge of gender-related issues. And it was there that I underwent training that gave me a proper insight into the relations between women and men.

Before that, my efforts in that domain were pretty intuitive. My parents were in favour of me getting involved in youth movements, but they also had problems with it, because letting a girl go out and about was just not ‘the done thing’. As representatives, we often had to travel around to meet other youngsters. I was the girls’ representative. It was a great pleasure to be of service in that way. I will always remember the day when I was in charge of a theatrical performance put on in a village, and my sister said to me: “Do you feel no shame in front of an audience? You aren’t afraid to speak, dance or act!” She still reminds me about it today! (Laughs)

But it wasn’t always easy with the family. I used to attend a Catholic church where the mission-



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aries called on the youngsters, including me, to play an active role in all kinds of initiatives in the region. When you understand the importance of girls in families in our society, you can see the paradox my parents faced. On the one hand they were in favour, but on the other hand they were not, because custom dictated that girls had to be protected. If it meant leaving the house, that was going to be a problem. In the end they didn’t stop us, but it wasn’t easy for them. (Laughs)

Could you explain what Samwaki concretely does?

In Swahili, Samwaki’s full name – Sauti ya Mwanamke Kijijini – means ‘the voice of rural women’. Our mission is to give people living in rural areas, especially women, access to information and communication for their own advancement. More specifically, since 2003 we have identified women’s and mixed groups in the villages of Walungu territory and we have helped them set up lines of communication (“axes de communication”). In the end we managed to put nine farmers’ groups from neighbouring villages in Walungu and Kabare

“There isn’t one society for men and one society for women. We need to find ways to complement each other. We must combine our efforts to achieve development.”

territories in touch with one another and enabled them to take action together. Samwaki set up the network to make that possible. We then moved on from the lines of communication, which included organising training courses and meetings at which people could exchange their experiences, to setting up listeners’ clubs in 2005 with Dimitra. In parallel, in 2006 we helped to set up the Réseau des Femmes rurales du Sud-Kivu (REFERUSKI – South Kivu Rural Women’s Network), which not only includes the groups I already mentioned, but also some of the listeners’ clubs. And in 2008 we facilitated the establishment of



Radio Bubusa FM, a community radio station for rural women. That's an achievement we're very proud of.

What prompted you to set up Samwaki in the first place?

When I was working at AFD, we acquired new skills and gained fresh knowledge. But then the rural areas were affected by the war and I saw for myself how women suffered under those circumstances. So I brought several women together to see what could be done. We were cut off from the city of Bukavu, a few dozen kilometres away, but something had to be done. In 2002, the decision was made to set up an organisation of rural women to make our voices heard, even though the situation was chaotic. Initially, the challenge we faced was that people thought an NGO would bring them humanitarian aid, food or provide some kind of assistance. We told them that they ought to expect something different, but our message didn't

“What moved things forward was that we always involved the traditional authorities in our meetings and activities.”

get through. They thought we were a bit crazy because in their eyes information served no purpose. So Samwaki did a lot of awareness-raising work, moving from village to village to speak about the role and position of women in the context of war and to rally people to our cause. The people didn't understand that information is the beginning of all development.

Did you encounter any opposition because you were women and were talking about gender-related issues?

Yes of course, and we still face opposition today, even though things have definitely changed! The concept of women speaking their minds freely was not tolerated, and it was also hard to get people to agree that women, too, have things to say. Some people said they thought we women were effectively crying in the wind or described us as “nanny goats urinating on billy goats”. (Laughs)

That was how people regarded women who told men what they thought. On top of that, the social context was highly unfavourable. But things changed because we persisted and thanks to the concrete activities we undertook, everyone realised that women can help to bring about change. Today, we are in partnership with men too, but we always need to strike a balance.

Did you find yourself facing other types of challenges as well?

You bet. The first such challenge we came up against was the tradition that women may not speak in the presence of men, or address customary or local chiefs. That was a real problem. I used to wrestle constantly, day and night, with the dilemma of how to deal with the fact that some people weren't willing to listen to me.

The second challenge involved family constraints. After I got married, I had children straight away and my in-laws made it difficult for me to travel. They didn't want me to do this. They didn't really understand who or what I was. I sensed there was a problem, but nothing was said directly. Fortunately, my husband always supported and encouraged me. But in Africa women are there for their entire family, not just their husband. Thanks to my husband's backing, I managed to make progress anyway. And today everyone has understood the validity of my approach.

Being courageous helped me overcome these obstacles. People said “you can't go down that path”, but I did so anyway! I was not afraid to face these difficulties, even when there seemed to be a deadlock. I knew that they were only words and that nobody was going to hit me.