

Congolese fighters become fishers

WORKING FOR 3000 disarmed and demobilized combatants returning home

WORKING WITH local NGOs, provincial and national fisheries officials

WORKING TO consolidate the DRC's peace process through livelihood support

WORKING THANKS TO International Development Association of the World Bank Group

Thirty-two former combatants who settled in a small village near the banks of the Congo River personify the success of an FAO project's effort to support the government's programme to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate returning ex-combatants into civilian life. Under the project, fighters who turned in their arms received kits from FAO that contained the basic tools needed for fishing. Today, those demobilized combatants have established a successful fishing association and have returned to their community lives, reflecting the positive impact that fisheries can provide in consolidating a peace process.

Ex-fighters returning to their villages after almost a decade of the most brutal war in the history of modern Africa found themselves outcasts – feared and reviled by locals who had suffered from the war's atrocities. The war was extremely complicated, with the Congolese army, local vigilantes and foreign militias fighting on indistinguishable fronts. The local villagers who suffered from ongoing attacks resisted the returning combatants whom they often regarded as murderers, rapists and thieves.

combatants into society, with FAO as one of the implementing agencies.

To restore productive livelihoods for former soldiers and ex-combatants and help consolidate a peace process, FAO identified the essentials needed for productive agricultural, livestock and fisheries support. Combatants who had demobilization cards to prove they had turned in their arms could choose to receive agriculture tools and inputs, livestock or fishing equipment.

The war broke out in 1996, ended when peace was signed in 2003, but only in 2006 was the country considered more stable. That was when FAO joined with the Congolese government and other partners in setting up a national programme to support the re-integration of ex-

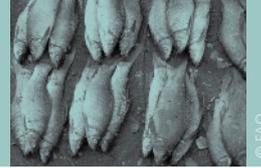


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FISHERIES ASSOCIATIONS



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Ex-Combatants learn to fish

Near the city of Mbandaka in the north-central part of the country, the demobilized fighters who chose fishing received a FAO kit that contained nets, lines and hooks plus a bicycle. FAO worked with provincial and national fisheries officials and contracted local NGOs to work with demobilized combatants in providing fisheries training and assistance in organizing fishing associations. For example, the area around the city was heavily fished, so they identified upstream fishing areas, some two days paddling away, to set up operations. As the programme did not provide boats, association members rented out their bicycles and applied the income to rent canoes. The fishing activities are continuous, with association members alternating fishing expeditions between the village and the fishing area. Because they have no refrigeration, they built smoke houses at the fishing site, preserving the fish until they take it to sell in a city market at the end of the trip.

Association members make their own decisions, re-investing income in new equipment and establishing funds to provide loans, with interest, to members or to assist members in times of calamity. With the income from their bicycle rental and sale of the fish, along with organizational development assistance provided by FAO, the association has bought more bicycles and now owns its own canoes. As its funds accumulated, members have been able to build their own homes, and pay school fees and medical expenses. The majority of the members also have bought small plots of land which their wives plant and care for while they are away fishing.

This story has been repeated in other locations around DRC, in other fishing villages, as well as in farming and herding areas, where small amounts of the right equipment accompanied by appropriate technical and organizational assistance are a successful formula. In addition to the demobilized fighters, the project uses the same successful formula to support “returnees” – repatriating refugees, coming home after living in camps in neighboring countries that also needed support reintegrating into productive livelihoods.



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Thousands benefit

In total, the project has supported some 111 associations, regrouping 2 311 ex-combatants and 596 returnees in associations throughout the country – 470 fishing, 1 634 agriculture, 728 livestock and 75 persons in varied food processing activities, for a total of 2 558 men and 349 women. The production associations have served the double purpose of providing income for its members and increasing agricultural supplies in local markets. For example, during one year (two agricultural seasons), one of the agricultural associations supported by the project placed 16 900 kg of maize on the market and another fishing association caught, processed and sold 4 tonnes of high protein fish. This is in addition to the food association family members consumed in their homes.

Not only has the project provided income-generating activities in this country where 70 percent of the population depends on agriculture and fisheries, it has facilitated the ability of the former fighters to live side-by-side with their neighbors. This peaceful coexistence has enabled their reintegration into civil, social and economic life and provided training to help them improve skills that can eventually take them and their families into more diverse livelihoods, sustaining the peacekeeping process ongoing in the country. It also has provided the kinds of lessons that can be applied in other conflict areas.



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*Ex-combatant or ex-soldier can refer to any fighters who were members of the Congolese army, armed militia or to informal rebel groups during the Congolese civil war. Participants in the FAO project come from all of these groups.