



UN Volunteer Bhanu Bhaktar (left) weeds a piece of land with the spouses of members of the Armed Forces of the DRC. (UNV, 2014)

Fighting poverty by teaching new skills

On the right bank of the Congo River in Kisangani, thirteen women weed and plough a piece of land as part of a UN Volunteer's Initiative for Peace and Development. The idea of this community garden run by the spouses of members of the Armed Forces of the DRC is to diversify their sources of income and improve food security for their families.

On the right bank of the Congo River in Kisangani, thirteen women weed and plough a piece of land that you can see from the road. Small rows of all kinds of vegetables have been planted side by side - eggplants, green beans, tomatoes, cabbage, amaranth, and sweet potatoes, among many others.

A few months ago, Bhanu Bhaktar, UN Volunteer Logistician with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), presented a project as part of the Volunteer Initiatives for Peace and Development by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). His project was to start a community garden with the spouses of members of the Armed Forces of the DRC (AFDRC) in order to diversify their sources of income and improve food security for their families. Thirteen women signed up for the programme after hearing about what it would teach them.

Bhanu explains what motivated him and other UN Volunteers who also took part in this initiative: "We were struck by the paradox that a large proportion of arable land lies uncultivated, and despite a great climate for agriculture throughout the year, there is widespread poverty and malnutrition and a lack of variety of vegetables in Kisangani. We also found that current agricultural practices have low yields, there is a lack of access to seeds and an ignorance of market gardening techniques. But we believe that vegetable cultivation can be a route out of poverty for vulnerable households that face food shortages."

"Better to teach someone to fish than to give them a fish", the saying goes. Developing and strengthening the capacity of women to cultivate a small vegetable garden is the workhorse of this group of volunteers.

"We made the first investment by buying farm tools, and we are teaching the women agricultural techniques that we apply in our home countries - Bhutan, India and Nepal - such as how to plant, how to water according to crop species, how to germinate seeds, etc.," says Bhanu. "We also wanted to ensure the viability of this initiative by basing it on a sense of empowerment and self-management. We do this by transmitting our knowledge, by helping participants to open a bank account, and by encouraging them to save 50 percent of the sales profit."

After two months of daily work, the fallow land granted by the Congolese Government is beginning to take shape: different plants are growing here and there, and a small greenhouse is under construction and will soon be used to germinate seeds for planting.

The atmosphere is one of collaboration. Mama Esperance, the representative of the women's group, said she was delighted with the initiative: "It has introduced us to teamwork: we realize that we are stronger together than apart and that we can maximize revenues through teamwork. This gave us the idea to form our own association."

For the participants to be properly trained, the project also includes a component aimed at supporting the women in marketing their products. "The final stage of the project involves setting up a farm stand at the exit of the field on the main road in front of MONUSCO," says Bhanu. The first harvest scheduled for October 2014 should yield more than fifteen different vegetables, offering a new and wide variety of flavours for the residents of Kisangani, or the Boyomais, to put on their plates.

To make this project possible, other UN Volunteers took part in it: Meena Rajbhandari, UNV Air Operations Assistant, Prakash Bista, UNV Movcon Assistant, and Shafi Uz Zaman, UNV Electrical Engineer.

• Democratic Republic of the Congo • Monusco • poverty • women

Sustainable Development Goal: