

President's Report 2014-15

This year has been one of the most difficult but also the most successful for ACN. We have suffered the loss of several key members to the organisation which was a devastating blow. However, we have also secured new agricultural land and seen an increase in the number of participants in Mbuji-Mayi.



The year 2014-15 has been the most difficult but also the most successful for ACN. We have suffered the loss of 2 important members of our team, Dr Roxanne Zolin and Ms Cassandra Sheppard. They have been the backbone of ACN and two of my most valuable advisors. Cassandra contributed her strong background and passion in community development, and Dr Roxanne the same level of experience and passion in business development. These two people have been very instrumental to the development of ACN. Without them this organisation would not have reached the level it is at now. I take this opportunity to thank them again for their valued contribution.

We have not been successful in finding new members with those skills of business and community development training. This means the community and business training from Australia to Congo has stopped. Instead, training in the Congo is now provided by our dynamic Congo team, led by Director, Jean Calvin Tshibuabua, who is doing a fantastic job. I strongly acknowledge the valuable contribution of the Congo team.



Since Roxanne and Cassandra left, we have been trying to rebuild a strong structure in the Australian organisation. There have been difficulties in several areas: too few people have been able to commit to participating as management committee members, monthly management committee meetings have not always had a quorum, this has slowed down decision making, and we have struggled to secure skills in administration, community and business development, fundraising, events management and promotion. I feel like I am a champion for being able to keep the organisation operating despite the lack of the necessary human and financial resources. Fortunately, we have managed to both rebuild our committee and have strong support of people who work behind the scenes.

Dr Emma Campbell has come back and is working as a Projects Director with students at University of Queensland. Dr Ann Ingamells has been working as the supervisor of the internship program of Griffith University and also as grant application writer. So far she has already supervised four intakes of students that helped us improve our development and undertake research. This year we have worked with three students from Griffith University in the internship program. Ms Kaiyi Chen and Ms Zhao Qian have assisted in producing some marketing materials and Ms Georgia White has conducted research of the Loan Default Repayment Review for our micro-finance program in Congo. Dr Helen Betts of Griffith University has helped us work with the students in the University Workplace Program at the Longalea Community centre. These students organised a "Cross continent community development workshop and fundraiser" where they raised \$621. It is unfortunate that this semester no students have enrolled in this program. We hope that next semester more students will enrol.



Our lawyer Mr Duncan Mackwarld, is working on getting charity status for our organisation. It is expected that, if successful, ACN will have charity status and will be able to receive tax deduction for all the donations. Ms Leilla is a fantastic graphic designer, always ready to assist us. Anytime we send her a job she does it satisfactorily. Mr Martin Omdahl, our website designer is really the master of our website. Once he receives the information from us, he puts them on the website professionally. Mr James Desilva has been instrumental in recruitment of new volunteers. I admire his passion and readiness. James DaSilva is our Human Resources Manager assisted by Ms Emma Cason as a recruitment officer in the HR Team.

Our treasurer, Mr Alex Ng is beyond reproach. He is always on time with all the financial updates. We are very lucky to have Mr Alex Ng as our treasurer. He is excellent. Thanks to Alex we have the transparency and accountability to our members, our partners and supporters. Mr Peter Forday, is always ready for advice and an assistance. This credibility gives reason to all our supporters to continue assisting and supporting us. Mr Bob Helyar has agreed to work as secretary of ACN, - completing the list of our three office bearers in our organisation to comply with the requirements of our constitution. He has already started working as a secretary and will be confirmed officially in the AGM. We are lucky to have two Congolese boys who have just finished their University degrees in Finance from Griffith University: Mr Fabris Kalala and Mr Rodrick Kayembe. That is why we are so successful beyond expectation.

We have not received any funding since August 2014 to support the centre in the Congo. This Centre includes seven staff: a Director, Administrator, and Accountant, I.T. officer, and two guards. Costs include the renting of a building for their activities. In the short term the centre has been operating miraculously without any financial assistance from Australia apart from financial support provided by Costa. They have only one old laptop, and have no internet facilities. They have no transport or office furniture.

The grass-root model of development we have initiated means people continue to work together to solve their own problems and the centre continues to be a central hub for positive change, grass-roots activity, community-centred development. Various reports indicate that our participants are now familiar with our community-based model of development. Their quality of life continues to improve including access to food, kids attending school and university, improved housing, clothes to wear and capacity to save. The number of participants has increased from 1200 last year to 1900 persons in 2015 who receive our services in Mbuji-Mayi. Among the 1900 participants, 97 have registered as effective members to support the centre with their contributions for furniture and other small expenses such as transport and communication for the staff. They pay fees off and in-kind contribute every month to support the centre financially. We are proud of them and salute this initiative to bring self-reliance to the centre.



Reports indicate that the microfinance program is improving: they have set up a system to control the payments of the loans by setting up a team of five members including four men and one woman to follow up all the transactions. The accountant and the administrator of the centre support this finance program, by training and by following up with visits on the field to see individuals and collective groups. And now people are able to take a loan of up to US \$200, where before they could borrow only up to US \$100. Rules for running have been improved: they have set up a period of five months for the loan to be paid in monthly instalments with interest of 7.5%, - at least 20 persons have taken loans of up to US \$200 for their business.

Reports state that 95% of the participants have paid their loans back thanks to this capacity building. The project groups have increased from 11 to 22 disseminated across different villages.



In terms of capacity building, we have the privilege to work in partnership with two Catholic organisations: Caritas/ Mbuji-Mayi and Order of Malta. They provide logistic and technical support to our centre. They will facilitate the shipments of all the materials and resources from outside with their taxes exemptions and all the customers' duties as non-profit organisations. This means that they take the container from the port and deliver it to our centre. We are very lucky to have this service. It will enable us to send any resources such as clothes, computers or any materials to Congo at low cost. We just need to pay for the container from here to the port in Congo. The rest will be done by Caritas or Order of Malta.

Our greatest achievement this year is that we have received a grant for our agriculture project from Entrust Foundation: "AD \$15,000.00". With this grant we have just purchased a 14 hectares of land at about 20 kilometres from our Congo centre, employed an agriculture officer and we have small amount of money remaining for agriculture activities. This vital physical asset is very important because it will help us attract other funding, and has also reinforced the capacity of our centre to operate more project groups including cooperatives, livestock, micro-enterprises etc. More importantly, we have been able to mobilise the population for agriculture activities including livestock and fish ponds. This land is near a fishpond which has not been well managed due to lack of finance and experience but now with our land nearby, they will make a partnership to work together as it is part of the agriculture projects. This will facilitate our partnerships with the business sector, as we own now a 35 acre farm in Mbuji-Mayi which is used for agricultural training and education of the Congolese people. We are going to work with a team of international investors and advisers, including the very wonderful Jeremy Britton.

Thank you to the Entrust Foundation for the grant that allowed us to purchase 14 hectares of land 20 kilometres from our Congo centre and hire an agricultural officer.

We are currently seeking investors who would like to purchase grain for \$100 per bag. The bag of grain will be sown for harvest and used to teach basic farming skills. When the crop is successfully harvested, we expect to be able to repay the original investor with a bonus of up to 20% or 50%, depending upon rainfall.

If you would like to invest \$100 into African farming, we would be most grateful for the opportunity to partner with business people, making good returns on investment and helping to educate African farmers.

We are now in the process of partnering with Mr Jeremy Britton, the Founder of 24 Hour Wealth coach to apply the Return on investment (ROI) model of funding for our micro-finance, micro-enterprise activities.



<http://24hourwealthcoach.com/coaching/>

In view of building the capacity to run this program professionally, to reduce default of loans payments and to make partnership with other financial institutions such as KIVA and Barefoot, Ms Danielle, a volunteer student, has conducted research on how we can work with KIVA and Barefoot Power in order to reinforce the micro-finance and micro-enterprise programs. KIVA is a non-profit organisation with a mission to connect people through lending to alleviate poverty. Leveraging the internet and a worldwide network of microfinance institutions, KIVA lets individuals lend as little as \$25 to their micro-finance programs. Barefoot Power is for profit social enterprise headquartered in Australia that sells fixed and portable solar energy products.



www.kiva.org



www.barefootpower.com

KIVA and Barefoot Power have a unique relationship that secures low interest rates and special repayment terms for borrowers. However, before securing a KIVA loan, an organisation must import Barefoot Power products for at least six months. That is why we have conducted the research to make sure that we are eligible to have access to their programs.

We have finished all the research. What we need is only money at least US\$3,000.00 to start this program from Barefoot Power Ghana office. We are refining the rules the run this program.

As I say it in my book: "I would have become a street kid", my passion and my compassion to help reduce poverty in Congo is still burning in my heart. It has reinforced our capacity of development. We are in the process of making partnership with Acacia Ridge community centre to reinforce our capacity building here in Australia. The MOU has been drafted but we have not yet discussed this in our management committee meeting.

We have also the privilege to work with Ride for refugees. Last year they helped raise AD\$700 and are asking people to register for riding on September 12 this year.



<https://rideforrefugees.com.au/>

We are working with Rotary Computers 4 Learning to refurbish some computers to support the youth internet café project. Thanks to Ipswich Family Fun event, we have received a donation of 24 old computers which we have given to Computers 4 Learning for refurbishing and in exchange they will give us 12 laptops that we shall send to Congo for our youth Internet project. We hope that somebody will help us ship them to Congo, once they are finished. We are working with QPASTT to receive a donation of old computers with the assistance of Mr Robert Mukombozi, and Ms Fernanda. It is expected that they will donate old computers to us, which we can send to Congo for our Internet café youth project.

MDA, has put us in contact with Bike4life which is a non-profit organisation based in Melbourne, with workshops also in Brisbane and Sydney. Bikes 4 Life is a network of concerned citizens, organizations and companies, who are dedicated to supporting extremely marginalized and neglected individuals and communities by providing re-cycled bicycles as a mode of sustainable transport, a vital instrument for access to independence and livelihood. They have agreed to start packing a container for ACN in 2015.



<http://www.bikes4life.com.au/project-overview/>

Our partnership with World Relief Australia is still vital to our organisation. We shall continue working with WRA to manage all the funds sent to Congo, to write projects and grant applications. Our vision is to reinforce our partnerships with different organisation such as UQ, USQ, MDA, Griffith University, TELLS/Michael coffee machine for Fundraising ventures, and to continue fundraising for our current project capacity building.

The challenges which we are working on through 2015-16 are to extend financial assistance and capacity building here in Australia and in Congo.

Once more huge thanks to those who have been with behind the scene this year 2015. I strongly believe that next year 2016, it will be a year of exponential development of our organisation "AusCongo Network" with the financial and human resources because I know that success attracts success. May God richly bless all of you who helped us directly or indirectly.