

BELGIAN MINISTER PRESIDENT'S VISIT HIGHLIGHTS 'HEALTHY VILLAGES, HEALTHY SCHOOLS' IN DR CONGO

By Cornelia Walther

KINSHASA, Democratic Republic of the Congo – “Your school has become a model of a modern school, which will hopefully set an example for other students and schools in Congo,” declared Rudy Demotte, Minister President of the Walloon Government and the French Community in Belgium,

speaking to residents of Mbimi village on the outskirts of DR Congo’s capital, Kinshasa.



“We cannot improve the future of children without the full support of the communities they live in,” he added, noting that the ‘Healthy Villages, Healthy Schools’ program has “illustrated what we can achieve together.”

‘Healthy’ criteria

The Mbimi village school is part of Healthy Villages, Healthy Schools, a UNICEF-supported government initiative aimed at reducing child mortality and

improving child development. Since 2008, the program has become an integral part of DR Congo’s national strategy to achieve the Millennium Development Goals on environmental sustainability, child survival and education for all.

In order to be certified ‘healthy,’ a village or school must fulfil a series of criteria, including full access to protected water sources and adequate sanitation, as well as applied hygiene practices. Already, thousands of villages and several hundreds of schools have been certified ‘healthy’ across DR Congo.

“A healthy environment is vital to ensure that children actually benefit from education. Clean water and hygiene practices prevent them from falling sick and increase their ability to concentrate,” explained the Executive Director of the Belgian National Committee for UNICEF, Yves Willemot, who accompanied Mr. Demotte on the delegation that visited Mbimi.

Vulnerable communities

Today, three out of five children go to school in DR Congo, representing a marked increase over the past decade, with near-parity for girls and boys. However, there are still disparities in school enrolment and attendance depending on families’ economic welfare and geographic location.

The same inequities apply for access to safe water and sanitation. According to a countrywide study conducted by UNICEF in 2010, only one in seven people lives in acceptable hygienic conditions, and barely half of the population has access to safe drinking water. This situation is even more worrying in rural areas.

Yet progress is under way.

“Preventive and curative interventions address 30 per cent of a DRC’s health problems,” stressed UNICEF Deputy Representative in DR Congo Steven Lauwerier. “The remaining 70 per cent can be efficiently reduced via low-cost prevention measures, such as community sanitation and hygiene.”

‘Like a miracle’

Suzanne Booto, a third-grader at the Mbimi village primary school and a member of the school hygiene committee, fully understands that idea.



“I show my colleagues what to do after using the toilet,” she said. “It is very important that we all wash our hands with clean water and soap, including the fingernails.”

Miriam Mbala, 45, now gets her water from a protected source that is a five-minute walk from the village. What has happened to us is amazing,” she said. “Since we have clean water, our children do not fall sick with diarrhea anymore. This is like a miracle, and it cannot stop here. I pray that other villages get the same chance to change.”

About UNICEF

UNICEF has saved more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization in the world. Working in more than 150 countries, UNICEF provides children with health and immunizations, clean water, nutrition, education, emergency and disaster relief, and more. The U.S. Fund for UNICEF supports UNICEF's work through fundraising, advocacy, and education in the United States.

UNICEF is at the forefront of efforts to reduce child mortality worldwide. There has been substantial progress: the annual number of under-five deaths dropped from more than 12 million in 1990 to 7.6 million in 2010. But still, 21,000 children die each day from preventable causes. Our mission is to do whatever it takes to make that number zero by giving children the essentials for a safe and healthy childhood.