Columns
Ministry



Sr. Claudine Dumbi, center, stands with women in the Congo she supports in agricultural activities. The women learn farming techniques that will all grow produce they can sell and practices that keep the soil healthy. (Courtesy of Claudine Dumbi)



by Claudine Dumbi

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I am a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur of the Congo-Kinshasa Province. I am currently a professor and dean at the Université Catholique du Congo and the Université Pédagogique Nationale in Kinshasa, where I teach economic rural and environment development.

As a professor, the education of young people is of paramount importance to me and, of course, to our country, because young people are our future as we face many political and social challenges. Although the primary mission of universities is ordinarily to pass on scientific knowledge, I also set myself the goal of passing on human and ethical values. Values, such as learning to collaborate with others, honesty in carrying on small businesses, kindness and care toward one another and caring for the earth are all essential to our future.

I am especially passionate and attentive to the needs of women, who are so important in our culture. Rural women, in particular, are struggling to support their families as the socioeconomic situation in the DRC continues to deteriorate. Families must find ways to generate income to meet basic needs of health care, food, school fees and other daily living costs. Unfortunately, there are few ways for women to earn income, particularly in rural communities. Lack of education and poverty often keep them from access to jobs. Others like me are fortunate to receive an education that will help their future lives as mothers and generate income as farmers.

In my work with the students, I follow the education philosophy of St. Julie Billiart, a French woman who founded our congregation in 1804. She encouraged the sisters to "teach them (students) what they need." I have found that this admonition requires a commitment to sensitive listening, which is not always easy.

Even though many of my students grew up in rural communities, the majority of the women have realized the need to learn agricultural practices that they had not learned in their village upbringing. I firmly believe that women taking up farming is an important way for them to cope with the current national economic crisis and ensure the survival of their households.



Sr. Claudine Dumbi shares a moment with her students, highlighting the collaborative efforts in education and mentorship. (Courtesy of Claudine Dumbi)

My goal is to train them in organization and management skills to become successful small farm holders, particularly market gardeners. Each woman will probably have only about one or two hectares of land, but they are eager to learn about soil health, water conservation, biodiversity, intercropping, pesticides and fertilizers. These are all part of the expertise I gained in becoming an agricultural engineer.

The program includes methods of organic farming so that as well as providing healthful food for their own tables, the women are also helping the soil remain healthy and productive by using organic matter from plants and animals for fertilizer and organic pesticides they produce. Eventually, the students will learn no-till farming, another important method to protect the soil from wind and soil erosion.

During the past growing season, some other farming techniques students discovered included using local seeds they bought from area farmers that they can then produce themselves and reduce costs the following year. New ecological techniques included planting trees in combination with food crops, particularly pineapples. In order to prevent food insecurity, each student planted a fruit tree that she cared for until she graduated. The practicum helps students to carry in their memories, not only the theories they learned but also memories of what they did and their success.

Because the students also want to earn income, I teach them entrepreneurship skills. They learn how to develop business plans that include budgeting, pricing and accounting so that the farm will produce profit as well as food for their families. They also learn how to turn profit back into developing the farm and even expanding it.

Market planning includes developing a variety of biodiversity produce, which is not only good for the soil but can counter local competition. It often happens that one farmer will grow something new, find a market for it, and before long, the neighbors, seeing a new opportunity, begin growing the same thing and taking it to the same markets. This can be discouraging if not planned for. Creativity, vision and experimentation are so important to successful farming.

Finding markets is always a challenge and requires constant effort in advertising, along with searching out new products that have potential for sale. Offering families new and different foods also encourages and promotes diet diversity and health. A diverse diet can also keep a family from food insecurity at times when climate conditions prevent production of familiar foods.

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For some female farmers, the lack of transportation is another challenge. Most small farmers do not own trucks or other vehicles to transport their produce to market. Learning to collaborate with others by sharing such costs has been recognized as a valuable skill.

Without planned access to transportation, produce may deteriorate by the time it reaches the market. This in turn affects what prices they can charge. Recognizing the economies of communities also requires planning. People in rural communities

are often poor, necessitating charging prices they can afford, which are sometimes lower than desired.

Another unfortunate aspect of poverty in rural areas is police corruption. Frequently, the officers will not allow women to enter the market area without first paying them a bribe. All these conditions require planning and imagination.

Thinking about the future, I am convinced that transmission of both science and ethical and humanitarian education will help us renew our country. My goal is to accompany young female farmers to be part of this renewal.

Teaching farming is of course a benefit for the students as well as for me too. I have learned from people who are poor the importance of living in cooperation with the earth and how important it is to protect it for our future. I am also spiritually enriched being with women who live with a simplicity that is important to me. Being with the students keeps me close to St Julie Billart, who accompanied those kept poor in her small French village of Cuvilly, and reminds me, too, of Pope Francis' call to be with those often left behind.