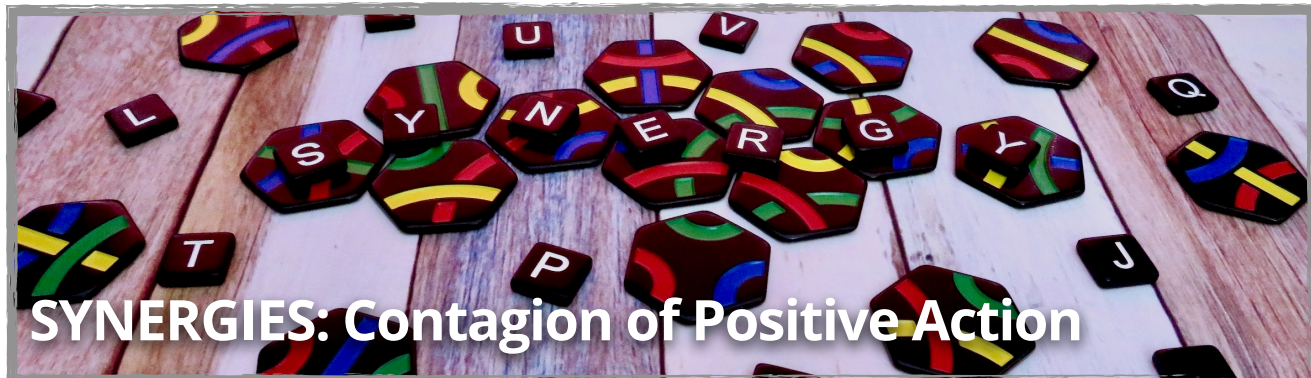
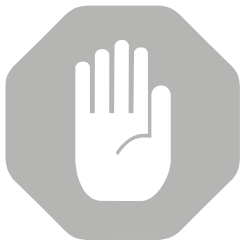




SYNERGIES: Contagion of Positive Action

Combatting witchcraft accusations
in the Goma area of the D.R. Congo

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Contagion of Positive Action

...combatting witchcraft accusations in the Goma area of the D.R. Congo.

Context

Goma is the capital and largest city of North Kivu Province on the eastern border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is on the northern shore of Lake Kivu, next to the town of Gisenyi, Rwanda, and is near the active volcano, Mount Nyiragongo, which last erupted in May 2021. The area around Goma is affected by ongoing unrest and conflict, which has resulted in the mass displacement of people to the city of Goma, as they flee guerilla warfare and the fighting between ethnic groups, the M23 rebels, and the Congolese army. [1]

The city and its environs are an epicentre for witchcraft accusations against children and the resulting harm. Child abuse in multiple forms is carried out with impunity, including the rape and sexual assault of both boys and girls. Many children run away to or are thrown onto the streets, with accusations of witchcraft being the primary reason. [2] In the words of Rev Jean-Paul Aruna, Director of a local NGO, *Laissez Vivre les Enfants* (LVLE): “Over the last decade, the phenomenon of child witch accusations has thousands of victims in this part of the region and mercilessly forces a dizzying number of children onto the streets. Most of these children are orphans, stepchildren, and victims of a life of extreme poverty. It is enough for there to be a death, sickness, or the end of an employment contract for children to fall victim to this ordeal. Bad luck is always linked to witchcraft. When the targeted innocent child refuses to confess, he or she is either chased out of the house or becomes a permanent victim of abuse and suffering, which often compels the child to run away to the streets.”

The Democratic Republic of the Congo passed a Child Protection Law in January 2009 explicitly penalising child witch accusations under Article 160 as follows:

Article 160 of the Child Protection Law, Jan 2009.

Anyone who maliciously and publicly attributes to a child a specific fact which is likely to harm his or her honour and dignity shall be punished by two to twelve years of principal penal servitude and a fine of two hundred thousand to six hundred thousand Congolese francs.

In the event of an accusation of witchcraft against a child, the perpetrator is punished by one to three years of principal penal servitude and a fine of two hundred thousand to one million Congolese francs. [3]

[1] Halyk, S., Schroeder, K., “DRC: At least 78,000 children displaced and families ripped apart as fighting escalates”, Kinshasa: Save the Children, Feb 2024; Neuman, M., “Goma’s IDPs: a catastrophe in plain sight”, Médecins Sans Frontières: Centre de Réflexion sur l’Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires, Jun 2023.

[2] Tchumisi, I., “What are the drivers of child homelessness in the DRC?”, London School of Economics, Aug 2020.

[3] Leganet, Article 160 of: Loi n° 09/001 du 10 janvier 2009 portant protection de l’enfant, D.R.Congo, Jan 2009.

However, this law is little known and rarely enforced. Many schools and churches are unregulated and can be set up by anyone, regardless of training, without checks by the authorities. Children are particularly vulnerable in these unregulated settings, although most accusations originate within the home, particularly where children are living with step-parents or second wives. Children living on the streets are often feared because they resort to theft and violence in order to survive, and they are at risk of physical and sexual abuse from the police and other authorities, as well as from the general population.

The SCWA Coalition

The *Stop Child Witch Accusations* (SCWA) coalition of organisations and individuals was established to provide a specifically Christian response to the phenomenon of child witch accusations, with a view to playing a part in bringing the phenomenon to an end. The coalition recognised that the local church in affected areas was both implicated in the problem and potentially a part of the solution to it. SCWA believes in the importance of engaging with churches, ensuring that they are trained and equipped to challenge these harmful practices and to use their influence to bring about positive change in communities.

SCWA has developed research-based, biblically-underpinned training resources which help participants to reflect on beliefs and practices in their communities and to critically examine the root causes of these beliefs and practices and their impact on children, families and the wider community. The principal resource is the *Heart of the Matter* [4], which is a participative tool with seven modules addressing root causes of accusations and related topics, as identified by focus group research conducted in Kinshasa, D.R.Congo, and across all regions in Togo. Later further focus group research was conducted in other parts of D.R.Congo, including Goma, Lubumbashi, and Kasai, and in three areas in Nigeria around Calabar (Cross River State). This research has confirmed that these root causes occur in multiple contexts.

SCWA's training materials have been used in sub-Saharan African nations including the D.R.Congo (in Goma, Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Kasai), Nigeria (Akwa Ibom, Cross River, and Niger regions), and across Togo. They are freely available to download from the SCWA online resource hub [5] and the training has reached thousands of people, with proven impact on communities. [6] One recent story from SCWA's collaborators in Calabar, Nigeria, referred to a church whose pastor has received training in the *Heart of the Matter* and has passed on the teaching to his congregation and community. A visiting preacher endeavoured to stir up anti-‘witch’ activity. Every member of the congregation refused to participate, leaving the preacher completely disempowered.

There are many stories from Nigeria, D.R.Congo and elsewhere of trained church leaders taking in children who have been accused of being witches and raising them alongside

[4] *The Heart of the Matter* modular training course, SCWA Coalition. 2018. — « stop-cwa.org/resources/45 »

[5] Stop CWA resource hub. — « stop-cwa.org/resources »

[6] *Getting to the Heart of the Matter*, SCWA Coalition. 2018. — « stop-cwa.org/resources/40 »; and multiple accounts from collaborators on location.

their own children, changing attitudes in their communities in the process, and multiple testimonies of former accusers who have become passionate advocates for children.

Introduction to LVLE and its work

Laissez Vivre Les Enfants (LVLE) [7] was set up in 2017, and partnered from the outset with *The Bethany Children's Trust* (BCT) [8], a UK based charity which was a founder member of the *Stop Child Witch Accusations* (SCWA) coalition. [9] LVLE began by training local church leaders in child protection and children's rights. It also addresses issues which directly increase the risk of abuse, such as family breakdown, malnutrition, and harmful beliefs associated with physical and mental illness, using training resources produced by BCT [10] and by SCWA. The training spread organically, as LVLE recognised the need to extend it to school and community leaders. These groups have proved to be enthusiastic participants and the training resources are proving effective with them, as well as with church leaders. [11] Alongside training, LVLE works directly with children who are living on the streets of Goma and of villages in the surrounding area, and with children in the informal Mugunga Internally Displaced People's camp in Goma.

Because of the prevalence of children reporting that they were the victims of child witch accusations and the resulting harm, this issue became a priority for LVLE. Along with other groups in D.R.Congo and Togo, LVLE piloted SCWA's *Heart of the Matter* [12] training resource with church leaders in 2017 [13] and has been training churches, schools and communities with this tool, and associated training materials [14] ever since.

LVLE's approach has typically involved mapping an area (whether an urban 'commune' in Goma itself, or rural villages surrounding the city) to identify church leaders who are interested in receiving training and who agree to pass on the key messages to their church congregations, church connections, and their communities. Then LVLE's trainers deliver the training over three to five days, with thirty to fifty church leaders at a time. Those trained are followed up over the next six to twelve months and beyond, to ensure that the training

[7] *Laissez Vivre les Enfants* translates as "Let the Children Live". LVLE is registered with the authorities in Goma and has the appropriate Constitution and other requisite documents.

[8] The Bethany Children's Trust — « bethanychildrenstrust.org.uk »

[9] The SCWA Coalition — « stop-cwa.org »

[10] The Bethany Children's Trust resource hub accessed via — « bethanychildrenstrust.org.uk/resources »

[11] Comment: Interestingly, in some areas, including Lubumbashi, where *Heart of the Matter* training has been organised for church leaders and health workers, some students and members of the local government authorities have heard about the workshops and have asked to participate.

[12] *The Heart of the Matter* modular training course, SCWA Coalition. 2018. — « stop-cwa.org/resources/45 »

[13] *Getting to the Heart of the Matter*, SCWA Coalition. 2018. — « stop-cwa.org/resources/40 »

[14] *Sickness, Health & Healing* training workshop « stop-cwa.org/resources/60 »; *Mental Health Matters* training workshop « stop-cwa.org/resources/61 »; *What the Bible Says About Dreams*: Module 13 of *Transform Families* « bethanychildrenstrust.org.uk/resources/1/transform-families »

is put into practice and disseminated. LVLE then follows the same process in the same geographical areas with school leaders. In places where the team does not have local connections, and where it is culturally appropriate, LVLE engages local community leaders in the process. These leaders receive the *Heart of the Matter* training and facilitate access to schools and churches in their geographical areas of authority. To date, literally hundreds of churches and schools have been trained and are now actively engaged in promoting child protection and, in particular, in challenging accusations of witchcraft which are made against children.

The SYNERGIES

LVLE quickly identified so-called 'prayer rooms' as a frequent setting for abuse associated with witchcraft accusations against children and adults. These 'prayer rooms' proliferate around the outskirts of the city, particularly in the more rural areas. They are run by small, unregulated religious groups, often led by 'pastors' or 'prophets' who have rebelled against leaders of established denominations or are simply self-proclaimed. These 'pastors' are motivated by profit and status. Parents often bring children to them for 'deliverance' ceremonies and procedures, which are violent and may include enforced fasts which last for days and other physical tortures, including burning of parts of the body. This abusive treatment of the child or adult not only involves physical harm, but also leads to untold emotional, mental and spiritual harm, social stigma and abandonment. The 'pastors' claim success in delivering the children from the 'witch' entity within them, and so become popular, drawing further business. They typically operate unchallenged and some of these 'pastors' are even under the protection of the Congolese police.

LVLE's systematic training of church, school, and community leaders gained momentum, and in 2019, LVLE approached the local police forces in two distinct areas of Masisi and Monigi, to the north-west and to the north-east of Goma respectively [15]. Both are impoverished rural areas where 'prayer rooms' proliferate. *Heart of the Matter* training workshops, and follow-up meetings with participants in these areas revealed many personal accounts of denouncing the various abuses which children were suffering as a result of accusations of witchcraft, with some 70% of these reports citing the 'prayer rooms' as the primary source of these abuses. As a result, LVLE approached the local police forces in both areas to report what was happening.

The impact of LVLE's work in the area was such that the police forces in both places asked LVLE to work with them to target the leaders of the 'prayer rooms'. The idea of the synergies was born. 'Synergy' is a chosen term given to a formal collaboration between LVLE, the local police, trained church leaders, local authorities including neighbourhood chiefs, and some local human rights organisations.

Two such active synergies have been established so far.

[15] « openstreetmap.org/relation/5327779 »; « openstreetmap.org/relation/8974600 »

Each synergy has a formal written agreement with their members, and their aims are:

- to work together to identify any person, communities, or 'prayer rooms' that are involved in child witch accusations and the related harm;
- to educate leaders of 'prayer rooms' using the *Heart of the Matter* materials to provide an opportunity to refuse to engage in accusations of witchcraft and the related harm;
- to bring to justice those who are identified as using violence against children or otherwise abusing them, particularly in the name of 'deliverance' from so-called witchcraft;
- to collaborate with the State, the police, and any other organisation working to promote child protection and children's rights to defend children and prevent harm to them.

The synergies have proved effective and continue to grow. The members of the synergies are involved in training others and are targeting villages that are known to be epicentres of child abuse, with a view to creating new 'synergy cells' that will work with the synergies to tackle the issues of child witch accusations and wider abuse.

In 2024, LVLE is systematically training the police, churches, and communities who are connected with the synergies in trauma awareness, and in working with children and families who have experienced trauma. Behaviour relating to trauma (such as aggression, regression, bed-wetting, or nightmares) can trigger accusations of witchcraft, and children who are accused are further traumatised by such accusations, and the related physical, emotional, mental and spiritual harm, and abandonment that follow. Thus, LVLE is aiming to equip those who are working with the children and families to ensure that they have an appropriate understanding of trauma and its impact.

Impact upon a child

The following story is a testimony from a 14-year-old girl, whose name is Simone. [16]

I, the Reverend Jean-Paul Aruna, received this testimony in person, with the help of Pastor Muhindo of Sake, one of the members of the synergy who had already been trained in the *Heart of the Matter*.

[16] Note: name has been changed to protect her anonymity.

Simone's story...

...testimony of a 14-year-old girl.

Simone had lost both her parents and two brothers in an armed attack in her village of Kitembe (deep Masisi). She was her parents' only daughter. Two days after the death of her parents, she decided to go down to Sake to look for a job with a family.

She was welcomed by a family who needed a maid to look after their children, who were still small and in school. Simone arrived when the owner had just given birth. Simone did her job well, and everything was fine until the day her boss's older sister arrived in the house. Simone told me this:

I was very happy at home with my boss. I was happily doing my job. Her husband worked in Bukavu and came home on the last weekend of the month. One day, my boss's older sister visited us with two of her children for the holidays. One Sunday as we were getting ready for church, the child of my boss's older sister developed a convulsion and fell to the floor, showing signs of epilepsy. His mother was in the bedroom when I ran to inform her. She accused me of being a witch, claiming that the child had never fallen ill in this way before and that I was the one who had bewitched him. There was hot water on the fire for cooking food and she poured it on my back, scalding my back and part of my neck. She then started beating me mercilessly, using the mixing ladle and her leather sandals. And she insulted my deceased parents and my whole family. [Simone burst into tears on recounting this.]

She brutally stripped me of my blouse and skirt in front of all the children in the house, five in total, and in front of my boss, who couldn't open her mouth. She told me that since I was a witch, I must suffer the greatest humiliation to force me to give up witchcraft. She forced a spoon into my vagina. I was a virgin. Then she tied me up and locked me in my little room without clothes. Her younger sister, my boss, asked her to stop but she just screamed, "This witch wanted to eat my son. She has to pay!"

On the night of the second day, she came with a small plate where there was a little rice and beans. She spat in my food and demanded that I eat it. She refused to give me water. She stood in front of me and I ate while crying. She told me to stop crying or she would slit my throat.

The next morning when I woke up, I was very cold and my hands were swollen. I cried out to my boss to free me so I could leave the house, but my boss did not help because she seemed to fear her sister. Fortunately, this coincided with the end of the month, when my boss's husband returned home. He heard me moaning when he came through the door and asked who was there. The sister of my boss yelled, "I'm punishing a witch." The husband asked curtly, "Who is the witch?" and she said, "Your servant." At the same time, one of the children said "Auntie Simone is in the room. We burned her back."

My boss's husband entered the room and found me lying on the floor with no clothes.

He called a neighbour, who came in and untied me. He then called Pastor Muhindo. The Pastor rushed me to the hospital because I was bleeding, my hands and feet were swollen, and I was dizzy and disorientated. I spent a week in the hospital, then Pastor Muhindo came with his wife and elder daughter. They said that they had prepared a room for me and brought me to their house. It is a good family.

I asked what had happened to the woman. I was told, "Pastor Muhindo contacted the police [who are part of the synergy] and she was taken to the courts [where she was prosecuted by lawyers connected to the synergy] and imprisoned."

I asked Simone if she was comfortable at Pastor Muhindo's house. She replied, "Yes, I'm happy here. It's like being at my parents' house. I still have to go to the hospital because of the burns on my back, but Pastor Muhindo's family take me there and look after me. I feel safe and I am glad that the woman who hurt me has been sent to prison where she cannot hurt anyone else."

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice.

— Proverbs 31:8-9, NLT

Authors

Carolyn Gent is the Chair and a founding member of the Stop Child Witch Accusations Coalition.

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Further Resources

The SCWA Coalition has resources accessible via its online resource hub:

— « stop-cwa.org/resources/ »

The Bethany Children's Trust has resources accessible via its online resource hub:

— « bethanychildrenstrust.org.uk/resources/ »

These can all be used and adapted for different contexts.

Contact us with any queries via our website: « stop-cwa.org/contact »

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