

## CONGO BRAZZAVILLE

### Young people fight HIV/AIDS in a post-conflict situation

In Kinkala, a town of Pool Department – an area surrounding the capital Brazzaville that has only recently emerged from a long-lasting and devastating conflict – an innovative experience is developing: a project on HIV/AIDS prevention run by the youth for the youth.

“In my own group of friends, a girl contracted HIV after being raped by several armed men,” says Project Coordinator Dieumerci Mbenza. He pauses for a few seconds, struggling to keep away emotion.

“These terrible acts are still common in our area,” he adds, “and it is particularly the girls who are victims of rape. But concerning HIV/AIDS, both girls and boys are very much in danger due to lack of information, poverty and prostitution, prevalent violence, alcohol and drugs, and because of a lot of misconceptions.”

“With some friends, we decided to create a small association to fight poverty and HIV/AIDS. I still remember the community meeting, last year, in Kinkala, when we approached a lady from UNICEF to ask for support,” says Dieumerci. And this support has come. Peer educators are now being trained on how to share correct information, dispel doubts and misconceptions, and teach other young people the skills needed to prevent AIDS.

“We have created four youth clubs in Kinkala, and all of them are active. UNICEF provided materials, such as games (scribbles, Stop AIDS) and a TV and DVD player to organize film shows and discussions about AIDS, but also about other topics, such as development, education, health and environment. These games are very useful and encourage young people to join us, engage in conversation, break the ice and start talking about AIDS. We also organize discussions and meetings in schools and churches. This year, we went door-to-door to lobby all households with information on how to prevent AIDS,” explains Dieumerci.

“The members of our clubs are girls and boys aged 10-24. We have also convinced several former child soldiers to join our clubs. Some of these boys used to believe that they could not catch AIDS, that they were invulnerable. It was because of ignorance. Now they know that they too have to protect themselves if they are not sure of their partners. It is the golden rule to avoid AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. At the beginning, they would become very aggressive when we talked about condoms as one of the ways to prevent AIDS. But now they talk about sex and risk practices without problems and they even distribute condoms to their friends. Pablo, one of them, does not stop shouting at the top of his lungs that he preaches by practising. He does use condoms.”

“In general, it is not that easy to talk about AIDS”, adds Dieumerci, “I have noticed that it is easier with the girls than with the boys. But these days, more and more young people want to get tested for HIV. Unfortunately, here in Kinkala there is no way to take the test, and going to Brazzaville is a long way.”