To all supporters of the 4Pillars

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1. Back to Where It Began

Remke and I are bouncing across the vast savannas of northeastern Congo in my ultimate dream vehicle: an old four-wheel-drive Toyota pickup. Our destination is Faradje, the capital of the district of the same name in Haut-Uélé Province. It will take us two days to get there. The evangelical church we work for has entrusted us with setting up an agricultural program in this district.

We have history in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the 1990s we worked here before, as development workers. We arrived with our six-month-old son and left nine years later with a son and two daughters. Congo never let us go: the people, their potential and problems, the endless savannas, the rainforests, the mighty rivers - these are lodged deep in our hearts. And now, 25 years later, little seems to have changed: the half-collapsing mud huts, women carrying baskets on their heads, men ploughing their fields under the blazing sun. Children are everywhere; on their mothers' backs, in the yards, along the roadside. They wave at us, and some shout *Mondele!*, "white people." As long as we keep driving, they find us fascinating. But the moment we stop for a picnic or to ask directions, the fun is over. They scatter shrieking, as if they've just seen a troop of ghosts.

It's February 2019. The sun is merciless, and we're in the middle of the dry season. Air conditioning? Ha, no. So, we drive with the windows cranked all the way down, which hardly helps. By ten in the morning sweat is already streaming down our faces. Our Congolese travel companions, Pastor Reta and Mister Alio, seem less bothered, though now and then they let out a sigh. Still, spirits remain high no matter how hard the trip gets. Our friends are always approachable and answer every question with a quip. At one point I ask, "Alio, what's on your mind?" He grins and says, "A nice piece of chicken," pointing at a rooster tearing off the road in a panic. The mood is easy-going. Congolese people rarely contradict one another—kindness and respect come first. If you disagree, you simply change the subject. The result? Everyone talks freely, without fear of being

cut down. Remke and I relish the chatter and the upbeat atmosphere—perfect for getting through long travel days. It feels like a good start to our new mission in Congo.

2. The Assignment

Remke and I believe in this: we can make a difference in the lives of Congo's rural population. We've worked long stretches for well-known relief and development organizations, both Christian and non-Christian. The UN Sustainable Development Goals have always been a clear compass for us, and every year we saw global progress: less poverty, better status for women, improvements in education and health care, better access to drinking water, better hygiene.

Yes, there's plenty to celebrate worldwide. However: in the rural heartlands of Central Africa, hardly any progress has been measured. That fact was a thorn in the side of the development world. With redoubled energy and serious capital, we threw ourselves at the challenges. We rolled out projects for better seed, helped governments subsidize fertilizer, supported farmers in organizing themselves more effectively, and invested in initiatives for fair land distribution and land rights. The result? A failing grade. Central Africa remains a problem child; poverty and malnutrition are still widespread. Of course, insecurity plays a role, but even in peaceful areas the situation is dire.

Still, Remke and I are optimistic. We've done extensive research and believe we've designed an approach that works. It rests on four spearpoints we call the 4 Pillars. The individual elements aren't new, but the way we combine and adapt them locally is. To have impact, we know we must live among the people, understand their concerns, and apply practical, appropriate knowledge. We want results, both short-term gains and long-term progress.

After two long days we reach Faradje. Once a bustling administrative center under Belgian rule, it's now a ghost town. Colonial buildings are still there but badly decayed: rusting roofs, missing windows, cracked walls. Yet these ruins still house government offices. We report to the main office, fill out forms, pay twenty dollars, and secure an official document stamped and sealed. Then we head to the district evangelical church center, where we're warmly received.

It's busy at the church because tomorrow the annual development conference—CODEFAR, *Conférence de Développement de Faradje*—begins. In the 1990s we were involved in founding the conference and still feel part of it. Reta had apparently arranged with the chairman that we would present our mission. But listening to the internal discussions, it doesn't sound like there's a slot reserved for us. Oops. I walk up to the chair and explain who we are. Two minutes later I've secured a full hour of presentation time. Excellent. We realize a presentation alone will have limited impact, but it's important that as many high-level people as possible hear our approach before we head out into the countryside.

Night falls. A young woman leans toward me and whispers in Lingala, *Mai ezali tayari*, "the water is ready". She's set a bucket of hot water in a little shower hut so I can wash. Remke and I always chuckle about these "showers," wrapped in such secrecy. I play along, sneak off with my towel, and pour the water over myself. Around here they say, *Mai ezali kisi*, water is medicine. Entirely true.

Later that evening we chat comfortably with other conference participants: politicians, school principals, representatives of local organizations. Some still know us from years ago. We rarely recognize them right away, of course, but you don't say that. People would be deeply disappointed. I say something like, "Ah, I recognize your face—remind me of your name." A little white lie to keep the mood warm.

The conversations take place in the distinctive Congolese French that Remke and I know so well. Everyone has strong opinions about how to tackle Faradje's development. First the big obstacles must go: *corruption, tracasserie,* and *détournement*. And the blame? Always on someone else, naturally. Just as 25 years ago, people say the population is uneducated—*ignorant*. Here are the intellectuals who know best.

3. Agriculture in Congo: A New Opportunity

In a hall packed with some three hundred people I get my chance to present our agricultural plans. Exciting! According to cultural protocol I begin by greeting the VIPs seated in the finest chairs up front. Then I thank the church leaders for their hospitality and the audience for their undivided attention, even though they've yet to give it. Now everyone feels appreciated, the mood is positive, and I can begin.

First, some expectations management. I tell the hall we're going to look at a series of photos, not dense pages of text. Pictures say more than a thousand words, right? For Congolese audiences this takes getting used to. Photos? That's for children. Adult presentations are supposed to be crammed with text in tiny print so the presenter must read everything aloud. The more text, the more impressive the presentation. I see the doubt, but I keep gently insisting on the photo idea. After a few minutes most people are nodding in approval.

What problem do Remke and I want to tackle? We all know the traditional slash-and-burn method has had its day. When population density is low, under about 70 people per square kilometer, it can still work: forests and savannas are cut and burned, land is planted, then left fallow long enough to recover. But with rapid population growth that becomes impossible. There's no time for extended fallow periods. Soil quality drops quickly, erosion increases, yields collapse. Farmers are trapped in a downward spiral. The situation is bleak.

Many people, especially young people, move away in search of available land elsewhere. They end up in areas owned by other ethnic groups, pay a few goats for a patch of forest or savanna, and start over. But as outsiders they're met with suspicion. When hardship strikes, say a prolonged drought, they're accused of witchcraft and must move on again. Tensions can escalate quickly into hatred and violent conflict between ethnic groups. Remke and I want to help break this vicious cycle of soil degradation, migration, and poverty. We're not the only ones with this vision; many

international development workers share the dream: find an alternative to slash-and-burn, a sustainable system that lets people farm productively without long fallow periods and without constantly seeking untouched forest or savanna. Sadly, the dream usually stays a dream.

The average Congolese farmer doesn't dwell on such macro-level thinking. Even Congolese agricultural engineers prefer immediate, visible results: new rice varieties, harvesting machines, or the introduction of exotic crops, like cocoa. So, in the presentation I spend a lot of time describing the slash-and-burn problem. Gradually participants begin to see the links: slash-and-burn → loss of soil fertility → poverty & malnutrition → forced migration → tensions between groups → conflict. Now everyone grasps it: traditional farming offers no future.

Some photos were taken four years after the first introduction of the 4Pillar method. These come from my work in Uganda, where I served as adviser to an international organization. The photos show people who adopted the new techniques and are still enthusiastically using them. There's very little "dis-adoption," a dreaded phenomenon in development work: the project ends and people revert to their traditional methods. Apparently, our method is compelling enough to persuade people to turn their backs on tradition and commit to more intensive, sustainable agriculture. I never tire of these photos. I know the people personally and have seen how the 4Pillar method improved their lives.

And these people just applied some of the 4Pillar techniques. Once we're settled among the population, we hope to introduce all the other techniques as well. That will take further research and many trials—always together with rural families.

At the end of my presentation I have a surprise. I show a photo of myself with the Minister of Agriculture in Kinshasa. Another shows me with the national agricultural inspector, surrounded by microphones. I project a snippet from his speech on national TV and radio: "We are asking the initiators of the 4Pillars to roll out this new

method across the entire Republic." Indeed, not long ago I visited the country's top agricultural officials, and they publicly encouraged me to pursue our 4Pillars agenda without delay. The hall falls into a respectful hush. For people here in the northeast, Kinshasa is as unreachable as a distant planet. For a moment they stare at me as if I'm from Mars. I break the silence and invite questions.

Time to be careful. In Congo people are quick to grab the microphone to promote themselves. Being concise doesn't matter; you simply use the moment to attract attention. We're going to do this differently. I ask participants to submit their questions in writing during a short break. They look surprised, but no one objects.

After the break, Remke and I move through the questions at a brisk pace. Most are straightforward, and it feels good to exchange ideas with our audience. After a little more than an hour we wrap up. We sense that Faradje is open to us. But we also know the real work is only beginning. We still have to win the hearts of rural families. Agriculture is culture, you don't change it overnight. We'll need to build relationships, learn to understand the people, share our lives with them. What a challenge!

4. Old Friends and Disappointment

The next morning. We lash our luggage tightly to the pickup and off we go. Where exactly? Our aim is to find a place to settle for a few years, but we don't yet know where. Definitely not in a town like Faradje, where most people are traders or government employees. No, we're looking for a village that lives by agriculture, where daily life revolves around work in the fields. We head toward the village of Todro. In the 1990s we lived and worked there for four years and forged friendships across the whole region. Could we rekindle those ties?

The journey is long under the relentless sun. By Congolese standards the road is good, which means we average 25 km per hour. The closer we get to Todro, the more we recognize: the green hills south of the village, the colourful birds, the rock outcrops where thunderstorms can explode with deafening force.

As we approach, more and more people begin to recognize us. Some look a bit puzzled; others call out cheerfully, "Monsieur et Madame Van." Apparently the name "Van" stuck. Only the elders still recognize us, but it's lovely to greet them and recall memories. We don't linger too long, though; we want to reach Todro before dark.

Just before the village: trouble. A few thin planks lie across a narrow stream, never strong enough to hold the vehicle. Apparently no cars come into Todro anymore, at least not by this route. I get out to check the streambed. Sand, little mud, fine. Four-wheel drive engaged, deep breath. While the passengers pray, I gun it. Off to the right through tall grass, steeply down, splash into the water, full throttle, angled left up the far bank. The wheels spin, speed drops, but the truck scrambles up the last stretch. We all breathe out in relief and shout together: *Gloire à Dieu!*

When we arrive in Todro everything is silent. Word of our coming had been sent, but it seems no one expected us. Eventually Mama Theresa, an older woman who runs the church guesthouse, appears

and confirms the message was received. In remote villages like Todro it's understandable that no elaborate preparations are made; travel is unpredictable, and arrival dates and times are always "subject to." Along the way there's only patchy phone coverage, and even where there is, airtime is a luxury. People simply have to wait and see.

Gradually folks begin to show up. Someone catches a chicken, another sets water to boil for a wash, another readies a couple of bedrooms. A few leaders from the local evangelical church arrive. We recognize one from the old days; it's a joyful reunion. We ask after the other leaders from back then, but they've all passed away. Sadly predictable in rural Congo, where life expectancy is under sixty.

The best moment comes when Ruta walks in. She used to help us at home and with the children. She's an old woman now, and the sparkle we remember in her eyes is gone. After we left, she had a hard life: much illness, and she even lost her only daughter, still in the prime of life. But she's overjoyed to see us. She and Remke sink onto a bench, pray together, hug again and again, and chatter nonstop about the highs and lows of the past 25 years. Moving to witness.

Meanwhile the items on the reception program are ticked off one by one. By ten in the evening we've eaten and can go to bed. We're too tired to notice the slats poking through the thin mattress into our backs, or the many mosquitoes feasting through the holes in the net. Still, I lie awake awhile. Something here doesn't sit right. I sense something is off, an absence of energy in our encounters. Then it hits me: no one has asked about our mission. No one has mentioned our past work. Not a single request to restart something similar. Strange, and unsatisfying.

We wake around 5:30 the next morning, maybe roused by the roosters crowing in competition, or by people already bustling noisily with water and food. Still a bit groggy, we get up. There's plenty of time before breakfast. Remke and I freshen up with cold water that someone set out for us and head out for a walk. It's pleasantly cool; the sun is just rising. We visit the places where we once planted

trees. They've been repeatedly cut and have resprouted. Good to see, apparently they're useful: people cook with the wood and also build houses with it.

We climb some nearby rocks and look out over the landscape. We're struck by how much more vegetation there is than we predicted 25 years ago. Back then, calculating for a doubling of the population, most reliant on agriculture, we bleakly predicted that by around 2020 all natural savanna would be gone. Many people would move away; those who stayed would face increasingly exhausted soils and ever-declining yields. The population doubling seems roughly correct. And yes, many people do appear to have left. But the idea that the whole area would become a vast barren plain turns out to be far from reality. Looking around, we even spot areas where nature is recovering. There seems to be a kind of natural reforestation underway. Young mahogany stems reach skyward; several species of acacia spread broad canopies. It's a beautiful sight and a welcome surprise. What's behind this?

We take a quick drive to the Obi River near Todro. Remke and I swam and fished here often. We recognize the place immediately: towering forest giants along the banks, broad placid water gliding past, exuberant birdsong from hundreds of songbirds. Yes, at this river, on this stretch of bank, we feel our history in Congo more strongly than anywhere.

On the veranda of the guesthouse Adara is waiting for us. Tears spring to my eyes and I run to him. For years we crisscrossed the region together from village to village. Together we encouraged and helped people think systematically about their development. Together we formed village committees, guided them in drafting concrete action plans, and supported their execution. Clean water sources emerged, small bridges were repaired, tree nurseries began, fish ponds were dug. It was a dynamic time; both of us were at our best. We slept in people's homes, took up shovels ourselves, and bicycled for days across the sweeping savannas.

Like Ruta, Adara has suffered much. Two of his children died, and his wife passed away recently. Today he is a highly respected community member; a church leader, director of the local evangelical radio station, and a secondary-school teacher. Despite all the warmth, something seems to weigh on him. I ask about what happened with the development work after we left. Through Dutch colleagues of ours, funding had come in. A kind of training center was built, and people were paid and trained to provide ongoing support in the villages. Adara says things started going wrong after a few years. Management siphoned off the funds, and from there it went downhill fast. The financial reports turned dishonest; donors came to inspect. The whole program was halted immediately. The buildings and grounds have gone untended ever since. We drive over to look. Indeed, it's a disgrace for Todro. Most windows and doors are broken; parts of the roof are missing. The once well-kept grounds with fruit trees and groundcovers are completely overgrown. Aha, now pieces fall into place. There's a stain on development work here. People are ashamed of the failure and avoid the topic. Hence my uneasy feeling; hence the lack of energy in our interactions. Remke whispers that something feels wrong. She hasn't felt at home here since last night either.

After a good breakfast we confer with Reta and Alio. Will Todro become the place where we live and work in the coming years? Remke and I share our impressions. Reta and Alio already knew about the development debacle but hadn't told us. Typical Congolese. If the truth might shock a friend, you'd rather keep it to yourself. You might cause your friend deep disappointment and the messenger would carry the blame. Better not.

Gratitude for seeing our friends again outweighs our disappointment. Still, the four of us agree: we'll look for another village. Better to start fresh than to clear old rubble first. We have no clear travel plan now. We strap down the luggage, pray with the people gathered around us, and leave.