



STITCHING

a new lease of life

Sewing for some is not just a hobby, but for some a precious life skill. We find out more about how charity Kimbilio uses sewing, with a huge positive impact for the future of street children

How did the Kimbilio charity come about?

The vision came about when Ian Harvey, a British social worker, volunteered as an election observer for 2006 Democratic Republic of Congo. Concerned by the huge numbers of children living rough on the streets, he returned to the UK to raise the funds to set up the Kimbilio project. Leaving his job in 2008, Ian spent five years in Lubumbashi recruiting and training local carers and social workers alongside building shelter and training facilities for the children.

What type of children does Kimbilio deal with?

Any children who live on the streets in Lubumbashi. As the second city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are around 5,000 children on the streets, aged between six and 18 years old. We work mainly with children between 10 and 14 that arrive on the streets due to a variety of reasons, from family poverty to death of a parent from malaria or HIV/AIDS.

In what specific ways does Kimbilio help the children?

At our day centre Kimbilio (meaning safe place in Swahili), children come here for a safe place to be away from the risks of the streets. We provide them with food, clean water and soap to wash, activities as well as assessing their health and wellbeing. Where possible we try to reunite children with their families. Either in our short-term or long-term homes children can receive care and support, while we aim to have them re-accepted into their family. For those who aren't repatriated we can provide them with education and training, so that they can eventually become independent members of society.

Why was sewing seen as an important skill to teach the children?

Sewing is a skill that is highly sought after in Congo where many people make and repair their own clothes. It can enable and equip women and men to have an income and provide support for their families. This in the longer term prevents children from ending up on the streets.

Where is the sewing studio based?

The sewing centre is based in the girls' home at the Maison Kimbilio. The

surrounding population is rapidly growing and families are from a low socio-economic background, many living on less than £1.50 per day.

What kind of equipment are the children using?

The machine blend was very carefully selected to ensure the girls would be able to cope with any machines they might meet in the future. There are three electric sewing machines - a robust model designed for use in schools and workshops. We also have two overlockers to enable goods to be produced to professional standards. In addition, there are two Congolese hand machines and a treadle machine.



“SEWING CAN ENABLE AND EQUIP MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO HAVE AN INCOME AND SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES”

Readers may remember their mothers using almost identical machines, except that these feature round shuttles, as is usual in machines produced for the African market. The children are taught to press articles with both an electric iron and a charcoal iron, which is normal practice in Africa. The girls, therefore, will be able to sew at home in an electricity-free environment, but also seek employment in a workshop where they would be expected to cope with modern electrical machines. They are also taught hand-sewing skills - another very important skill.

What sewing skills are the children taught?

They begin with construction of simple articles such as totes, aprons and glasses cases, which are sold at fairs in the local ex-pat community, from which they progress to clothing, concentrating on children's dresses requiring less fitting, and clothing for themselves. In addition to machine usage, the girls enjoy embroidery in the evenings, using locally bought wool to embroider large plastic bags that can be converted into smaller handbags. We encourage the girls to learn these skills, which are taught by the mamas who care for them.

What's the most successful sewing project you've taught so far?

Financially, the smaller articles sell well,



but being conscious that we do not wish to set up a 'sweat shop' or limit the girls' potential, our aim is to give them a comprehensive sewing education. Sometimes a project will come from the girls themselves - for instance, they were recently given some second-hand jeans and wanted to remodel them into a more fashionable shape, which they did very successfully (and with great hilarity).

Who teaches the children and how do you make this part of their education sustainable?

Our main sewing teacher is Mireille, a highly confident sewist who, after receiving training in teaching methods with a UK volunteer, has evolved into an excellent sewing teacher. Kimbilio also works with a partner charity First Step International and by having a sewing workshop together we provide free participation in a sewing course for impoverished women. These women are able to sell the goods they produce at a profit. We hope that

through the development of links into the community will open up opportunities for future employment for the girls.

What positive effects will this have on the children and what will it enable them to do in the future?

Having a marketable skill will firstly improve their self-esteem, especially as sewing is directly linked to improving body image as they will be able to clothe themselves. As well as increasing their chances of future employment, they will also be able to clothe their family. Lastly, sewing is taught in French, using Swahili for reinforcement if necessary, and the practical activity greatly reinforces their comprehension of French. In a country where all commercial activities are conducted in French, this greatly increases their employment prospects.

Can you tell us more about the beautiful Congolese fabric used in the projects?

Readers would be amazed by the quantity of fabric shops in Lubumbashi!





Fabrics are generally cotton, sometimes with a peached finish but often with a shiny 'waxed' finish. In a very wide range of designs, they are often based on traditional patterns and sold in six or 12-yard lengths. Kimbilio uses this fabric for the students' work, but it is also brought back to UK where volunteers sew it into strong tote bags backed with calico for aprons, peg bags and other small articles. These articles are sold in churches and festivals and contribute significantly to Kimbilio's costs.

Where can we find out more about Kimbilio and how our readers can support you?

We mainly rely on the generosity of supporters in the UK to continue to provide the service and welcome any kind of new support. 98% of donations made go directly to the work on the ground.

You can make a one-off donation or set up a standing order at www.justgiving.com/congochildrentrust

If you are interested arranging a sponsored event to support the work of Kimbilio or wish to make a donation by cheque, please get in touch with ian@congochildrentrust.org or find out more about the charity go to www.kimbiliocongo.org

-  www.facebook.com/groups/kimbilio
-  www.twitter.com/KimbilioDRCongo

Sewing for a cause

If you want to put your own stitching to use for a charitable cause, look no further

MAKING FOR CHARITY

After seeing an advert in her local sewing shop Julia started to sew syringe driver bags for cancer patients and has sewn over 100 and involved local school too, using the project to teach children how to sew.

To get involved, go to www.makingforcharity.co.uk



PYJAMA FAIRIES

Pyjama Fairies was founded in May 2015 to bring comfort and support to young patients and their families in hospitals in the UK. Its simple goal was to create and distribute beautiful pyjamas and surgical gowns that give children an emotional boost and remind them that they are not defined by their illness and help to relieve their fear. Their pyjamas are specially designed with front opening to make dressing easier and to allow ease of access for the medical professionals. For patterns and more information, go to www.wrappyjamafairies.co.uk

