

# The challenges of rehabilitating a Central African garden in a country in search of stability and good governance

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## Garden history

In 1893 Justin Gillet a Jesuit brother arrived in Congo to help the first Belgian missionary to settle in the region of Inkisi 120 km from Leopoldville, (now Kinshasa). Gillet, a nurse by training, realised immediately that the lack of food, and above all vegetables, would affect the fathers' health. He started to plant European vegetables and in a few years succeeded in acclimatising many crops such as carrots, onions, rice, potatoes, and fruit trees.

Gillet became very interested in botanical matters and started to describe local species and to collect herbaria that were sent to the Royal academy in Belgium. In 1909 the first catalogue of The Botanical Research Garden of Kisantu was published in the *Belgian Journal of Tropical Agronomy*. In 1927, after 30 years of endless effort, the plant catalogue, boasted 780 genera composed of 1775 taxa.

The garden was described as 'a real success story' by the Minister of Belgian Colonies (Gillet, 1927). Brother Gillet continued taking care of the garden until his death in 1943. During that period an important focus was on horticultural development of the garden. This led to the creation in 1953 of the Garden Horticultural School an institute devoted to training young people of the region in cultivation techniques and to support agricultural development through capacity building of national staff.

In the late fifties, at the end of the colonial period, the garden was very active in botanical study, but was also one of the main attractions between Kinshasa (Leopoldville) and Matadi in the Bas Congo region.

Unlike other gardens in the early 1900s in the central African region, Kisantu's success was due to the motivation of Gillet's fellow missionaries. At that time Kisantu was a privately owned enterprise. Other national institutes, the Eala Botanic Garden, created in 1900 by King Leopold II together with the Royal Greenhouses in Laeken (Belgium) belonged to *Institut Agronomique du Congo Belge* (INEAC)

Kisantu was at its best as a scientific institution around 1946 to 1960, prior to the country's independence from Belgium on June 30 1960, when the nation became the Republic of the Congo. Although in other aspects the garden operations were well maintained for a further 15 years.

In 1966, President Joseph Désiré Mobutu started the process of *Zairinisation*. This process set out to replace all non Congolese positions of responsibility with those of Zaire origin, regardless of training and education. Mobutu also changed the country's official name to *Zaire*. Kisantu became part of the newly created Institut des Jardins Zoologiques et Botaniques du Zaire (IJZBZ), now DRC's Institute of Zoological and Botanical Gardens. At first President Mobutu was very supportive and financed construction improvements. In 1972 principal roadways were covered with asphalt and restaurant and sitting areas were built to make visits to the garden more pleasant. These improvements definitely attracted more local visitors from Kinshasa and the rest of the region.

Whilst tourism increased, the management of the garden was shelved. This corresponded with a change in garden's direction, when in 1975 the Jesuits who still maintained the garden left.

People imagined that this step would have meant an accelerated development of the garden as a tool for conservation and tourism but unfortunately reality was different. Salaries were not paid and this led to reduced work and the need for the garden's curators to deploy survival strategies not only for the garden but also for the individuals themselves.

During a period of 10 years, between 1990 and 2000 the government failed to maintain the infrastructures. The result was the access of Kisantu Botanic Garden was cut off, resulting in no tourism. Despite this the staff continued to work using the garden to cultivate local crops for their subsistence.

In 1997 the rebellion against Mobutu's rule started. Unfortunately the rebel army used the garden as a military base. They settled in the director's house and they misused other buildings. In that period most of the orchid collection was stolen or sold. The same fate came to other botanical collections along with ancient books and research volumes in the library.

Kisantu had to cope with '*32 years of dictatorship and nearly 10 years of a frustrating political transition*' (Trefon, 2006).

### **Preparing and starting Kisantu's rehabilitation**

In 2003 The Central Africa Botanic Garden Association Network (Cabgan) met in Limbe Botanical Garden and established a priority plan to safeguard and revive its members' role in nature conservation and in poverty reduction strategies. Following the meeting, a needs assessment was carried out in Kisantu to identify potential areas of intervention. The mission reports pointed out that in spite of poor scientific and management work during the last 10 years, (mainly due to lack of financial and human resources), an important effort had been made to maintain at least the major infrastructures and some of the collections during the war period.

An effort had also been made to partly maintain the Garden role to develop agriculture in the region as it was done during the Jesuit management period. The partnership between the garden, the Salvation Army and the British Cooperation (DFID) resulted in the publication of a series of booklets and in the education and encouragement of villagers in lower Congo to conserve diversity of plant and animal life, and, at the same time, improve the productivity of their land (Latham, 1999).

In 2003 the fact finding mission to prepare the DRC's national parks rehabilitation programme agreed on the urgency to rehabilitate the Kisantu garden before its collections and buildings were completely lost.

In a country as large as DRC the report recognised the advantage of the botanic garden to bridge *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation. This is especially important because of its closeness to the capital Kinshasa with its 7 million people and DRC's decision making authorities.

In 2004 European Union agreed to invest in the garden. The World Wide Fund (WWF) and Belgium National Botanic Garden (BNBG) were the institutions providing technical assistance, logistical support and advice to the program.

In its short life, the program has achieved an enormous amount of visible results:

- Plant collections have been developed, buildings have been renovated, training sessions provided, tools acquired.
- Buildings for administration, research, interpretation and education are now completely operational from the funds provided by the UE.
- Trails have been reopened, giving good access to the entire 225 hectares site.

- A GIS database has been finalised, which allows the mapping of the buildings and the trails for garden management and tourism. While in near future it is hoped that the plants collections will also be mapped.
- The greenhouse has been rehabilitated and the National Belgium Botanic Garden furnished a major collection of cactus, which is most likely the best documented and most diverse collection of cactaceae in central Africa.
- The Herbaria have been completely reorganised, classified and the garden is in a process of creating a computer database.
- Actions to allow the establishment of income generating activities are being developed. The nursery is being restructured and enhanced to answer the existing demands for reforestation and collection development.
- A shop with products coming from the garden was opened in 2006. This contributes to an education program aiming to teach garden staff and school teachers how to use natural products to earn an income as has been successfully achieved in other botanic gardens (Waylen, 2006).
- The guest house for visiting botanists and a conference room allows Kisantu to play its role as a training and meeting facility.
- The garden has recently been promoted as a place for learning and tourism, attracting people from all over the country particularly Kinshasa. Leaflets have been produced and the number of visitors to the garden has doubled from 9,000 in 2004 to 18,000 in 2006.

All of these activities have been linked with an effort on capacity building of the existing personnel who participated in all the rehabilitation process. Computer skills, organisation, management and environmental education training have all been implemented.

At a national level an institutional study preparing the reform of the forest and conservation sector could positively affect Kisantu and reinforce its autonomy leading to easier and more efficient management, especially in human resources and finance.

Between the months of June to September 2006 the institutional study pointed out the reality of a critical number of old, inefficient and unmotivated personnel whose salaries are low and are not delivered on a regular basis (Agreco, 2006). This is the reason why the garden is unable to attract qualified or interested people.

## Conclusions

In DRC the need for positive change is sharply felt. The newly elected president and his government will be under pressure to address these expectations quickly. Without some tangible improvement in social and economic conditions, the political context could become explosive. Violent clashes in August 2006, and again at the end of political transition in February and in March 2007, show that the stability of the newly born democracy is still uncertain.

While political analysts speak of a *grace period* in terms of months, development experts refer to decades of reform and rehabilitation before a meaningful development process can take form (Trefon, 2006).

Tackling the problem of reforming the garden management in a context of potential political instability will be probably the major challenge in the next few years. International cooperation remains a necessary instrument to connect Kisantu garden with similar institutions and to foster change. The program is the

evidence that strong international partnership and national goodwill can induce this change in a short time frame at the local level.

After two years the program still has a lot to do to achieve and completely finalise the garden's infrastructures and rehabilitation. But to realise long term sustainability the main constraints are human capacities and sound financial management. If these constraints are addressed, the garden can become an important member of the Central African Botanic Gardens Network (CABGAN) and assume leadership to build capacity in other Central African Institutes. In addition, the Kisantu Botanic Garden can facilitate research activities in one of the least known floras of the world.

The second phase of the rehabilitation program is to implement the reforms plan. This means to hiring younger technicians to prepare the new generation of the garden staff and putting in place a salary policy that insures incentives for motivated and technically valuable people. A transition towards a more private management of the botanic garden seems to be the way proposed by the institutional study.

It is highly recommended that a stronger connection should be developed between Kisantu and the country national parks. Therefore guides will be trained to use the living collections as teaching aids to demonstrate to the visitors and to improve public awareness about the World Heritage Sites within DRC. Additional funding from other donors (e.g. UNESCO) will help realise this ambitious aim and allow a large population of school children from Kinshasa to visit the garden.

With political will the garden has the potential to succeed the transition and, in two or three year's time, run independently. This will allow a regular income to be reinvested to safeguard the institute, fulfil its mandate and enhance its capacity to employ well trained staff in a sustainable way. Congo is one of the most important countries in Africa for its biodiversity. Kisantu work in *ex situ* conservation can play an important role as a nature advocate. It serves as a model to the national public and to international institutions.

## References

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*Fig 1 Training session for environmental educators*



Fig 2 Restoring the herbarium



Fig 3 Cacti and succulent garden renovation