

NDEGE: A Closer Look at the Congo

By: Christopher Wei



NDEGE:

1. Bird
2. Aeroplane

Above the horizon, the sun starts to rise. The birds chirp, calling out, "I'm here". A dry wind blows across the plain, muffling their voices and their songs. A tree holds a nest securely on its branches, and in that nest sits a baby bird. A bird, at the edge, beadily eyes the rising sun. A bird who has tried many times to fly before but never could. Suddenly a stronger gust of wind slams into the tree, knocking the baby bird off. A bird who's falling, dropping further and further from its home. And then the bird starts to fly.

Displacement is something I'm lucky enough to not have experienced at a "high-level". To some degree however, I think it's experienced by everyone at some point in their life. It's a period where you feel trapped, lost with no direction. Yet, even through its struggle, some people manage to smile, and dance, and sing with all the joy in the world. This isn't fiction. This is NDEGE.

ENTERING THE CONGO

A little while back, I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to interview Vitoria de Mello Franco, director of the upcoming documentary NDEGE (recorded in Goma). To my surprise, our conversation cast a completely different light on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from what I had envisioned before. Why? See for yourself.

To put it in the simplest terms, the M23 is a militant group that has been escalating conflicts almost, if not, exclusively in the DRC. According to an [Aljazeera News article written in 2025](#), numerous ceasefires and truces have been brokered before, but all have been broken. For example, a ceasefire that was recently signed in Doha was followed up by an attack that killed "at least 319 civilians".

The [Council of Foreign Relations \(CFR\)](#) corroborates that these ongoing M23 initiated clashes have caused an estimated 7 million people to become displaced within the region. Moreover, increasing armed conflicts have resulted in the need for defense, influencing the recruitment of child soldiers by the M23 and its rival groups. In just the Ituri province, [Save the Children](#) wrote this year that "13,000 children remained... in the armed groups." But last year, only about 1 in 10 children were freed from them.

These are real facts, and real lenses to view the DRC with; but my interview with Vitoria reminded me that my experience with mass media has only taught me to view it under one lens. Because while those devastating facts are true and can be reasons why you view the Congo the way you do, they shouldn't be the only lens you see it through.

THEIR HEARTS STILL BEAT

Vitoria embodies the message very well. She's a part of NDEGE because of her "non-exposure to a war zone", because of her "non-exposure to their reality". She realized that to fully tell a story, you need exposure. So this is what our conversation exposed to me.

To start, the film follows 6 characters, protagonists, tailors, who've all come from a displaced background. In other words, they've all been either "child soldiers or female victims of war." And that is very important to their story, and the development of the film. Because though internally displaced, they're strong enough to continue on.



A picture of one of the protagonists and some of the pieces created by Threads of Transformation

That doesn't just go for the protagonists. In the war-torn region, Vitoria comments, "The first thing they did, turn on music. At home, from the neighbors, on the streets, from cars, from motorcycles. So there was music everywhere." It became extremely clear that the people here aren't void of hope, they dance, they sing, just

like we do anywhere else. And the birds, they sing as well.

Even more inspiring, however, was hearing about the design project that Vitoria took part in. Fittingly, the project is called Threads of Transformation, which is led by BBS and Saskia Lenaerts, a London based designer, with Remember Youth for Change ("a non-profit that focuses on rehabilitating former child soldiers in the DRC") acting as the local project implementor. For weeks, they "[brought the protagonists] together locally, every Saturday, [to] be involved in a pilot collaborative design project that had the premise of deconstructing military garments tied to trauma to create a new design product". But why is this so powerful?

The American Psychological Association defines post-traumatic growth as "experiencing [a] positive transformation after trauma." This experience includes but is not limited to things such as seeing more hope, attaining closer relationships, or being more confident in yourself. Unfortunately, not

everyone is able to experience this. That's why transforming traumatic objects from a war-torn area into a beautiful piece of art is more remarkable and symbolic of people's hope for more reasons than I can put in words. NDEGE's true purpose shapes out in two ways. One is to spread awareness of these people's situations, and the other to remind us that we shouldn't lose hope in a country that hasn't lost hope in themselves.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE



Vitoria is an amazing director, narrator, storyteller, and a person overall. She understands the importance of a voice, and the integrity of a story. But more than anything, she understands the importance of her work, and the message that it sends. And that's one of the best traits anybody pursuing film can have.

And just like how she emphasizes what films and characters are trying to convey, I think it's only fair to emphasize what she conveys. So here is a little bit about her:

- Dreams of featuring at Venice Biennale
- Working with one of biggest media conglomerates in the world, Studios Global
- Prioritizes using no/little AI
- Message to the world: Taking action and spreading love lol!

A lot of these things are so underappreciated, especially now. A little thing like abstaining from using AI, for example, until absolutely necessary goes a long way. Let's be honest. When multi-million-dollar corporations use AI for character concepts, and the original concept is right there, we all do a little facepalm. So, thanks Vitoria.

To close off, it's only right to end with a powerful quote. From a storyteller to us. And from Vitoria to the people of the DRC.

"Who the heck is this white girl who never ever came to Congo, who never ever, and why does she want to tell their story? I think that's the first question I asked myself."

BBS PROJECTS IN THE DRC

BBS has worked with Remember Youth for Change (RYC), a Goma-based nonprofit, for more than five years, collaborating on initiatives that support young people and communities affected by the ongoing conflict.

Our work has included emergency humanitarian aid, expanding RYC's vocational skills programs, providing practical resources for community projects, and initiatives such as transforming discarded hotel linens into school uniform shirts.

Threads of Transformation, developed along with London-based designer Saskia Lenaerts, gave the six young people who feature in NDEGE an opportunity to develop creative skills while expressing their personal stories through design. The program later expanded to the Adjumani Settlements in Uganda, where women from South Sudan worked together to develop their tailoring skills. Bringing together women from different South Sudanese clans with a history of conflict also gave the program an important peacebuilding dimension.

Through NDEGE, BBS hopes to shine a light on the resilience, creativity and hope that continue to exist among young people in Goma, despite the challenges they face.

To give to NDEGE and the projects supported by this initiative in the DRC and Uganda, you can donate through our GlobalGiving project page. US and UK nationals will receive tax receipts from GlobalGiving.

Donation Link

<https://goto.gg/72465>

CITATIONS

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