

10 Years “River of Hope”

2010 – 2020

Tala Mosika

meaning “look beyond”

Democratic Republic of Congo

Content:

- How it all began
- “...nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come”, Victor Hugo
- What have we achieved in the last 10 years?
- Four containers sent between 2013 - 2019
- The first trip was the most the most exiting trip
- The sixth trip in 2015 - with my family in tow! What an adventure!
- The 11th visit - the scariest one.
- In every Challenge lies an Opportunity
- UN – Agenda 2030 and how we are working on the 17 sustainable goals

How it all began

In 2009, when I decided to study for a Coaching Certification, everything turned out to be the opposite of what I had envisaged. During such a program, you discuss coaching – obviously. You observe how someone is coached, you are coached yourself and then you learn how to coach other people.

I was convinced that, after the course, I would start up my own coaching company to help women who wish to pursue new paths in life. But then, during this process, I unexpectedly discovered something which had been slumbering deep inside me for a couple of centuries! In the end, *I* was the one who took the

different path! There it was - all so clear. I wanted to build a school somewhere in the world and name the project "River of Hope". The name my father-in-law, Dr. Nathaniel Doron, assigned to *his* biography.

Nathaniel was born in Belgium in 1936. During the Second World War. He was separated from his parents. To escape deportation, he was hidden by a Catholic family on the outskirts of Brussels. At the age of thirteen he emigrated to Israel where he spent almost ten years living in a Kibbutz and serving in the Israeli Army. He studied agriculture and Human Resources and became a UN Official and Diplomat. He dedicated his life to fighting poverty, famine and AIDS across the globe. With relentless devotion he touched the lives of thousands, if not millions, of children and adults in the most deprived parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Nathaniel did not win his one final battle against cancer. But he went in peace, leaving an inspiring legacy behind, one to be cherished, and brought forth into the light of day.

His *opus* was the spark that gave birth to my 'River of Hope'. He continues to inspire us with his smile, compassion and devotion to making this world a better place, one small step at a time. We will follow in his footsteps and continue the work we started together. Godspeed, dear Nathaniel!

For my idea to create a non-profit organization, I needed three people. For me it was clear that I would ask Jake who was my husband at the time and my dad to join me. The reason was, that I needed a chance to do my own thing, since I saw it quite clearly and wanted to implement my own personal approach. Thus, I created a document which stated the purpose of the project: "To build a school to assist needy and willing communities, and other target groups, to help themselves and others to improve their standard of living for future generations."

My father asked me: "How will you find such a project?" and I replied: "The project will find me".

Jake asked me: "To help others you will need money. Where is it coming from?" I told him: "Listen, if the idea is sound, I will find people to support my cause."

Well you can imagine how these two men looked at me when they heard the answers to their so legitimate questions! Their facial expressions were priceless. Nevertheless, they agreed to sign, and the idea was born.

One week later we had already created a tax-exempt, non-profit-making association with no project and no money! But hey, what is there to lose? At worst, a blow to your ego when it does not work out as planned. But then...

"...nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come"

Victor Hugo

Now is the time to tell you why I waited until the project found me. The purpose of our organization was clear and thus it was important that I found people with a vision. I needed to gather together associates whom I could trust and who had enough influence to be locally active without me being present all the time. I would never go anywhere in the world telling people that they needed my help. Since I was not a specialist in the field, it would have been simply arrogant. I grew into my new position and became a specialist over the years in learning by doing. So yes, I believe that, if the time is ripe, the universe does the rest. You just need to be open and aware when the moment has arrived.

I was wondering how to make sure that people would know that River of Hope existed. So, I organized a flea-market to help a friend raise 500 Francs. She lives in the Guyamie Indian Reserve in Costa Rica and needed to fix the roof of their school. My new organization was ideal for such a project. During that flea-market, a Congolese lady who lives in my town and who had also rented a table to sell her stuff, approached me. She said that she needed someone active like me to help her brother who was a football coach in the Congo. He had been nurturing the idea for a project for 10 years. He wanted to get the kids off the streets in the outskirts of Kinshasa by enticing them with football. I told her that we had just started and had no money but that we could look into it. I told her to speak to her brother to see if he would agree to the fact that we would be starting from zero with no money. We would have to build the project up together. He agreed. Who would have thought that one day these people would stab me in the back? But I mustn't jump the gun!

After we decided to kick-off the project in the Congo, I spoke to my son's football coach about my project and he helped me to collect amongst the football club over ten cubic meters of football gear – simply staggering! Joey was so proud to help collect football material but my then nine-year-old son just had one question for me:

“Mum, how can you start a football school when you don’t even know the rules of the game or have no eye-ball coordination?”

“Well, my son, I am not planning on playing football myself! I wish to set up a school so that kids get the chance to play - just like you do.”

In May 2010, without a cent and two suitcases filled with forty-six kilos of football material, I flew to Kinshasa for the first time. Now, I have been to the Congo eleven times in all. But without any doubt, the first was the most exciting, the sixth trip with my family the proudest and the eleventh trip the scariest one of all. But I shall come to that a bit later.

Jake supported me all the way with my project and my parents looked after the kids while I was gone. I felt in my element. This was my project, my island and my way of charging the batteries. Daily routine had been getting to me and I kept asking myself, “Well? Is that all I can expect from life?”

I had always travelled far and wide until I began a family at the age of thirty. But don’t get me wrong. I loved to be a fully devoted mum and a spouse, working part time, but the kick was missing. I needed to be in another place where I could have another role, go away, and a change of scenery whilst knowing that my family was being taken care of. Even though Jake supported me, he was a bit scared of me going to the Congo. He even called the project manager and told him: “Listen, I am ok that my wife is going to Kinshasa, but please take care of her, protect her and make sure she comes back exactly in the state that I sent her. She is a mum and my wife and we need her back here. Also, if she is thinking of going on an adventure trip by herself, you either stop her going - or you go with her.”

I felt touched by his care and by the fact that he had taken the trouble to call them. For my part, the excitement overpowered all the doubts, worries and the fear of the unknown. I just wanted to dive in at the deep end.

What have we achieved in the last 10 years?

The first two years we were in Sanga Mamba and were able to use the football field of the Salesian Sisters at Don Bosco. In December 2012, we purchased four acres of land in Selo, Kasangulu, Bas Congo, about sixty kilometers outside Kinshasa on the N1, the main street between the capital and Matadi, the harbor. We named our center “Tala Mosika” (Look Beyond). In the spring of 2013, we were able to start construction straight away, thanks to all the sponsors and foundations. It is hard to believe that in the fall of 2015, in just under two-and-a-

half years, we inaugurated our seventh building and two converted containers. We had set up an elementary and secondary school for over 330 children who make their way to school across the fields from the surrounding villages. A safe path to school replaced the six-kilometer walk along this deadly road - the N1 - where many accidents had happened previously. We have boarding facilities for the girls and boys, and dormitories for the staff - since all our teachers come from the capital and stay with us during the week. For any visitors, we offer two rooms, and we have a big kitchen and dining room for over 100 people, a health center, a residence for the project coordinator, who lives on site with his family and a FIFA-sized football pitch for our football school. Our center has solar power and running water and agriculture. The goal was to make this center as autonomous as possible. We are still working on it. A significant achievement is that our first five students completed twelve years of school and passed the state high school diploma in the year of the Corona virus, where they prepared themselves online at our center with the online program offered by the state. We planted over one thousand trees together with the students and the people from the village. This has changed the ecosystem of the area which had experienced deforestation during the last thirty years.

We have achieved a lot in the last ten years despite progress being very gradual. Of course, we still have a lot planned now the infrastructure is more or less in place. We aim to stimulate the local economy with a micro-economic approach in order to achieve sustainability. Development clearly requires a lot of patience and time, training and frequent discussions with the local people. With our help, they need to become partners in their own development in order to free themselves from the cycle of poverty.

Four containers sent with the support of family and friends

Between 2013-2019 we sent four containers from Switzerland to the Congo and converted them into a shop, snack-bar and storage areas. Every time it was quite an adventure. First of all, I was looking for a secondhand, twenty-foot sea-container and we always found a place to put it so we could fill it over a period of one month or so. While my son spread the word amongst his football friends for second hand equipment, I contacted the football clubs in the region. We even got the official national dress of the Liechtenstein Team - we really are the best dressed football team in the Congo. Noa on, the other hand, rummaged around

for girly stuff like dresses, scarves, shoes, jewelry and toys. They both helped me to pack boxes and – with the help of friends - to fill up the container. The most valuable container was undoubtedly the final one. With the help of our team, we loaded the container in the ice-cold, snowy landscape of the parking lot belonging to a company. They were the sponsors of over 60 solar panels for our center. Firstly, they prepared the packaging and the material near my house, which then had to be transported by bus to the container. The only challenge we had were the four football goal-posts which were delivered fully assembled instead of packed up as ordered. Thanks to a good friend with a cool head who assisted me in dismantling them and packing them into the container. Unbelievable how much we packed into one container. The Liechtenstein soccer national dress, loads of sports material, solar panels, metal cupboards, chairs and much more besides. It left Switzerland on 29 January 2019 at 8.00 am and reached its final destination at the center of Tala Mosika on 17 April 2019 at 5.20 am - one month later than planned. Often, we had no idea where the container was, due to wars, weather conditions or corruption, which left me the legacy of many sleepless nights. Every time I swore to myself that never again would I ship a container. The responsibility I felt towards all the donors was often more than my poor brain could take - even though the container was insured. But once more, even the fourth container arrived without anything being stolen or broken during the journey. If all went well, it was largely thanks to Christoph, my loyal and trustworthy project manager, who seems to be on top of things at all times. He received the container as usual at the port of Matadi, looked for a truck driver and started the ten-hour journey back to the center.

My sixth trip in 2015 - with my family in tow! What an adventure!

This was the year when I proposed that my family should join me during the fall break. The reason for this trip was to inaugurate the Health Center “Margaretha” which was officially opened by Noa. Joey brought the Peace Ball with him and opened the game. Jake and I thought that it would be good if our kids shared such a special experience. Now we had a project in Africa, Jake was intrigued at going back to the ‘black continent’ - where he had spent so many years of his life.

Noa was seventeen by then. She happily packed her bags and collected together all her giveaway’s. Joey, just fourteen, was not sure what he was letting himself in for. He simply wished he did not have such an exotic family who insisted on travelling to places which could hardly be considered holiday destinations.

We collected large suitcases, which their owners no longer needed. We got vaccinated. We began the task of packing eight suitcases, each weighing twenty-three kilos, laden with all kinds of stuff destined for our African project. Then there were our four hand luggage cases containing all our personal belongings. You can imagine how long it took us to check in all our suitcases. People even asked us if we were leaving Switzerland for good.

This trip went a lot more smoothly than what we had expected. Our kids would have had so many justified reasons to complain. But, instead, they emerged from their shells and became an integral part of the team, each one in his or her own way. Noa assisted the teachers and Joey helped arranging the health center and played football with the kids. Speaking French got better from day to day. One day we realized how little it mattered that charging our phones was problematic, that we ate the same food every day, that we had to get up at 6am as the sun was rising - or that we went to bed early because we were exhausted and there was no electricity to give light. In addition, it was very humid. We worked all day, walked on sand and there was no ventilator or air conditioning and not enough water to take a shower every day. Often, we needed to manage our hygiene with only a few liters of water available. That meant first you washed your body, and then used the same water to wash your clothes, then your feet before you went to bed. Finally, at the end of the day, you flush the toilet with the remaining water. It was a good lesson in survival and a unique life-experience for our kids – whatever they might have thought about it at the time!

One day, Joey was carrying a heavy box in his arms. He was stopped by a local boy who told him that it was wiser to carry it on his head, because it would be better for his back. He tried it out and got the hang of it. In the evening, he asked us a question. "How come we don't carry things this way back home? We should learn from the Africans. It was so much easier to carry the box on my head."

Well, Joey had a good point there!

Inauguration day for the "Margaretha" Health Center

The Health Center "Margaretha" was named after my mum, whose dream had always been to visit Dr. Schweizer. Now it's too late because, due to her asthma, she can't travel to humid countries. We decided that Noa, in her beautiful African dress, would officially open the doors in her name.

Since 2010, we have two doctors in our team who helped us with the building regulations, grants and logistics. The infirmary will offer, from January 2017, on-site medical care to over one thousand people. Until then, the nearest medical facility was seventeen kilometers away.

One way to finance medical care, is through our own health insurance where adults pay a monthly fee of 5 dollars and children 2 dollars. Children who are enrolled at our school will pay 10 dollars per year. Those who cannot yet afford this insurance scheme pay a contribution at each visit. We focus on providing timely paid medical care, which covers the salaries of the staff. We are very happy that two babies were born in this safe environment. Mums and babies are doing well!

My 11th visit - the scariest one.

This trip had been eagerly awaited since the previous one had been in March 2017. I arrived on my own in May 2019, one month before my daughter's wedding. My agenda had to undergo some changes two days after my arrival, because I was threatened by those very people whom I trusted most when we started the project. It all started with two unknown guys who arrived on a motorbike at our campus. They claimed they were from the Secret Service and that they needed to see my passport. They told me that my visa was not valid and that I needed to go with them to their office. I refused and told them that Christof and I would follow them. But we didn't! We knew something was wrong. I spent several nights in terror of 'their' return. The experience had scared the hell out of me! My fear was made worse because my room was only lockable with a padlock, the bats made an awful noise under the roof and the cricket which leapt freely around my room made me even more jumpy.

Once 'those men' had left, we called my friends in Kinshasa and told them the story. They practically ordered me to hide in their flat in town. We even got protected by the real Secret Service and reported the event to the Swiss Embassy who found such Wild West behavior quite inexplicable. Christoph, my project manager, received threats over the phone. He was told that if he tried to escape, they would seize me at the airport and throw me in jail.

And who was the shadowy figure behind all these very real menaces?

To my surprise and horror, it turned out to be Mr Nshombo, the man with whom we started up the football project. He accused us in March 2017 at the court in Kikonka/Kisantu, claiming that the Tala Mosika Center was his property.

The main points of his accusation were as follows:

Firstly, he requested arbitration over the ownership of the plot of land on which our center was built. He wanted the court to rule in his favor, claiming that he should inherit the land from its Swiss owners. He offered no evidence to back up his claim.

Secondly, he demanded that the Congolese State should sequester the property and entrust its management to the Catholic Church.

Thirdly, he wanted to expel the entire organization – set up by one Claudia Doron – and make us pay a fine of \$20 000 for his supposed loss of income since 2017, arguing that he could no longer trade from The Tala Mosika Centre.

Together with our local lawyer, Christoph handled the case on behalf of River of Hope and Tala Mosika. He was present in court several times at hearings presenting documents proving that certain individuals were trying to take the center away from us by presenting forged evidence and by fraudulent means. This required a tremendous effort and gave the entire team countless sleepless nights. The same question came up time and time again: "How can someone with whom you have worked in harmony with for seven years, building something solid together, stab you in the back in this manner?". I was told that, unfortunately, this happens frequently, through greed and envy. And that is what I sadly experienced first-hand during my eleventh trip to the Congo in 2019.

The court rules on the three charges:

Firstly, Mr. Nshombo is not the owner of the concession because as a collaborator, he received money from River of Hope in order to buy the land as he himself confessed in an official report to the Kinshasa public prosecutor's office.

Secondly, he was convicted for attempting to mislead the court by requesting the confiscation of the property of others – added to the fact he was acting against a foreign partner who is sympathetic to the Congolese people.

The third ruling was almost irrelevant, since the Tribunal cannot contradict itself in the light of the first judgments already delivered and because Mr. Nshombo himself had admitted that it was River of Hope who had sent him the money, that there was physical evidence of the money being transferred.

Mr. Nshombo was fined \$10,000. He and his team are no longer allowed to set foot in Tala Mosika. In addition, Mr Nshombo and his partners are black-listed at the Swiss Embassy in Kinshasa.

Despite all these disturbances, I had time to visit the Ministry of Gender and Family of the Congolese central government, where I discovered my portrait placed on the wall alongside all the other women who have distinguished themselves through their work in the DRC. I was touched when the minister told me.

On my last day we were escorted by the Secret Service, who accompanied me directly to the Security Director of the Ndjili International Airport. He smoothed our path through the check-in. He gave me his card and said: "You can come back whenever you want, you are one of the investors that the new authorities of the country are looking for."

Never in my life was I so relieved to sit on a plane heading for home. All of a sudden, I felt relief as the fear faded. I was in tears. Had it all been worth the trouble? What if I had never made it to my own daughter's wedding? It did not bear thinking about!

As soon as I landed in Brussels, I saw the a press article on WhatsApp, which described what had happened to me in those last few days.

As soon as I arrived home, I described these events to my family. My son made things quite clear to me:

"Mum, that is the last time you go to the Congo! Do you understand?"

I had to explain to him that I was not threatened by some criminal gang but by a bunch of weak individuals. The Congolese authorities had taken this threat seriously within hours of it happening. They had taken care of my safety. I cannot punish my own team by not returning to them - otherwise those underhand characters would have won.

In every Challenge lies an Opportunity

With a monumental effort, constant reinforcement and a large dose of patience, we had managed work in harmony with the local population, establish partnerships, and create local jobs through a micro-economic approach. We had helped them kick-start a new life, get them out of the cycle of poverty, malnutrition, and poor sanitation. They had begun to understand that, with a change of mind-set, they can influence their own future. A vital part of this

development is the education of their children. And although we recently received state recognition, until now, the government has not taken measures to support all our teachers' salaries. Families struggle to survive on a daily basis. We are glad, that the government with the new elected President Tshisekedi in 2019 offers free education to all children but it can only work if the salaries of the teachers are secured.

My goal for our center and the region is to ensure sustainability with the support of local organizations. In addition, the local people need to understand what is at stake and become an active part of their own development with the approach: My ambition for the center is to ensure self-sustainability through the support of local entities, and in order to achieve this, we all need to understand and embrace PEP (Purpose -Energy-Patience)

PEP (Purpose - Energy - Patience).

- 1. Purpose** – understand why do we do what we do.
- 2. Energy** – they need to have the energy (health and ability) to become a part of their own development
- 3. Patience** – Change does not happen overnight, we need more time than what the developed world thinks. Together with the necessary tools, we can take small steps. They allow the locals to succeed, become even more motivated to create a better future for themselves and their family.

We would like to see educational opportunities offered to the village population with the help of local organizations. Certain discussions are already underway.

1. Hygiene - education and sanitation in the villages
2. Education, training in the villages on topics such as: Agriculture, keeping small animals, planned logging for charcoal production, microcredit, etc.

UN - Agenda 2030 and the 17 sustainable Goals

What is our Center «Tala Mosika» in Selo, Kongo Central, DRC doing to achieve them? We are stimulating the local economy with a micro-economic approach in order to achieve sustainability is already a first success story. It clearly requires a lot of patience, time, training, and discussions with the local people, who are considered vulnerable. There needs to be a rethink, so that they can free themselves from the cycle of poverty with our ongoing assistance. This can only happen when they become partners in their own development.

1.Poverty: We are in a very poor region where most people did not go to school. With a micro economic approach, we help them get out of the cycle of poverty by offering literacy programs to adults and creating paying jobs in construction, agriculture and tailoring. Our center has now solar energy and at the same time we run an educational program for electricians so we have professional on place to maintain the solar infrastructure. We plan to put in place cooperatives and Micro-Credits programs.

2.Hunger: We run health checks for all our school children (330) to monitor the status of malnutrition. We aim to feed all kids at least once a day, since most of the kids in our region are in a vulnerable situation. Goal is to buy more land and support families to get their farming land and domestic animals through our Tala Mosika program and cooperative. We are also working together with the ministry of Gendre & Family to put a program in place.

3.Good Health & Well Being: We have a small health center "Margaretha" and created the Tala Mosika "Health Care insurance" – Mutuelle, where all our staff members are insured. It will soon be accessible to anyone. We are also a state-approved vaccine center and have a maternity section to ensure that pregnant women do not have to walk 20km before they can give birth in a safe environment. We offer workshops about health and hygiene to kids and adults at school and at our football school.

4. Quality Education: We are offering 6 years of primary and 6 years of technical secondary education with about 330 students, and still growing. We are a state-approved school and accredited by the Diocese of Kisantu. The state was supposed to pay the teacher's salary since 2014, but has failed to do so, which dragged us

in financial difficulties. 5 years later with the new president, the law has changed and Congo fulfills the goal "free education" and also our primary school teachers are payed now. At this stage we still wait for the salary for our secondary school teachers, but we get support from local organizations and the UNDP and hope this problem will be solved very soon. Our future goal is to offer education to all children, with vocational skills in the fields of nutrition, tailoring, electricity & farming.

5. Gender Equality: We strive for gender equality, and purposely empower women and girls since the beginning. Any form of violence at our center is not tolerated. Women are actively participating in the running of the center in varied roles: medical, teaching, supervision, cooking, farming, and get equal rights and salaries. Men and women in the village can be a part of our projects. Girls are also member of our football club if parents allow. Since about 6 years we have no child pregnancy anymore.

6. Clean Water and Sanitation: We have dug a well and had water for the first time in January 2015, and recuperate rain water, in order to provide enough water for our infrastructure and for all the kids and staff. The goal would be to build another well in the village, which did not happen. We re-forest at and around the center in a small scale. Sanitation and hygiene are integrated workshops at our school, since they use our toilets. Sanitary facilities do not exist in their villages, and parents themselves do not know how important it is. Many kids have seen for the first time a toilet at our center. With Ebola, Typhoid Fever and now COVID-19 we are enforcing hygiene as good as we can. Since 2020 we have severe issues with water and also a lack of clean water so that we to some cases of Typhoid and other bacterial disease in the village. We make now a new solar powered well at the center so we can supervise it.

7. Affordable and clean energy: The next electrical source is 17km away. At the beginning we relied on daylight from 6am-6pm, and the a power generator in some cases. We implemented in 2019 a sustainable solar project for our center and a 4- year vocational program. Light and electricity is essential to education and development. In summer 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown our first badge of 5 Highschool students could prepare for the final exam at our center with the online program provided by the state. All our first 5 student succeeded – we all felt so proud of what we achieved with joined forces.

8. Decent Work & Economic Growth we ignite the economy in a very vulnerable region with small steps that achieve a steady growth. We create jobs and encourage entrepreneurship in collaboration with the bank FINCA who offers financial services in the village. Through football, we reach kids and teenagers living remotely, and can ensure that they receive an education & vocational training.

9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Since 2015, we built a health care center, dining room and kitchen for a 100 people; classrooms, offices, two boarding rooms for children and staff members, converted two containers into a snack bar and shop and built a FIFA-size football field. We have running water and solar power. This center was important to strengthen the region. The bank FINCA provides financial services and soon affordable micro credits.

10. Reduced Inequalities We promote and empower families to get strong. We work with people who want to change their lives, irrelevant of gender, origin, race, disability or religion. As a member of the "National Children Football Alliance" we support the play between poor and rich, white and black, girls and boys and people with different nationalities and religions.

11. Sustainable Cities and Communities: Our center is in Selo, on the main road N1, between Kinshasa and Matadi (main harbor). The area is neglected by the state, schools and health services are shutting down, due to the lack of support by the government. The area is very poor, people are not educated to make a change by themselves. With the construction of our center, we can offer the entire infrastructure needed by a community and now we feel how slowly local organizations appreciate what we have done until now, stand up for us and want to help. Without them it will not work.

12. Responsible Production and Consumption: With great efforts, constant repetition, and a large dose of patience, we work with the local and vulnerable population, establish partnerships, and train them to efficiently use the available natural resources. They start to understand that with a change of mind-set they can influence their own future. A vital part of this development is of course on-going education.

13. Climate in Action: The 5 acre of land we bought was completely deforested. We planted over 1000 trees on our site which changed the ecosystem, biodiversity and the climate. The area was known to be deforested during the last 30 years.

14. Life below water – not applicable for us

15. Life and Land Deforestation is a big topic in our region since the local population burns down trees and bushes to make charcoal – as the only business they knew until now. Through education, we have designed areas for reforestation. We planted over 1000 trees with our students in vocational training, and adults from the village.

16. Peace and Justice: At our center we do not tolerate any kind of violence amongst adults or towards children. Our philosophy is to include staff members in the decision-making process. This is not how it usually works in Congo, but in 2017, I ran a one-day Workshop on the topic of “Where is the center now, and where will we go”, with all staff members. Together we designed our future. The outcome was a very positive, even though it was new to them that an entire team sits together, no matter what position they are holding. It looks like since the new President Tshisekedi came to office in 2019, things are getting better.

17. Partnerships for the Goals: For financial resources we collaborate since the beginning with foundations and institutions from Europe. This allowed us to build the Center, get support and profit from the knowledge transfer. Important is now, that more and more local institutions take over and make sure that this Center continues to grow. Only then we have achieved our goal.

River of Hope: www.ariverofhope.org

Tala Mosika: <https://tala-mosika.jimdofree.com>

Press <https://www.ariverofhope.org/media/>

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Claudia, Christoph & Team in Congo and Switzerland

Claudia Doron | River of Hope | www.ariverofhope.org | ariverofhope@gmail.com | +41 79 511 49 24