

## “The Way We Are” A Club Promoting Self-Confidence in the DR Congo

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**A**t IPVRC rehabilitation centers\* for children and youth with disabilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, wearing short pants has meaning far beyond simply helping people stay cool in the tropical climate of central Africa.

IPVRC was first introduced in *Post-Polio Health* (Vol. 22, No. 1; Winter 2006) in an article describing the unique challenges facing children with varying degrees of paralysis in the DR Congo.

On Saturdays, everyone at the centers wears shorts because that is the day new beneficiaries and their parents come seeking treatment. The staff – virtually all of whom are brace-wearing and former beneficiaries of the program themselves – want all visitors, and especially the impressionable children and youth among them, to see clearly that people with disabilities are exercising very critical roles. This is important because significant stigma and misunderstandings about people with disabilities are still widespread in the society.

For the newer beneficiaries at the centers, showing off braces by wearing shorts when visitors are around takes a certain amount of new-found courage and confidence. Knowing this, older beneficiaries started a club called “Ndenge Tozali,” which means *The Way We Are* in Lingala, a language spoken by many people in the Congo, to encourage confidence and support.

decided that future members would have to be voted in based on whether the candidates frequently opted to wear shorts in public, especially far away from the center and the support of their fellow beneficiaries. New members are nominated and considered for membership only twice a year.

The strategy has worked. There is a noticeable proliferation of shorts-wearing around the IPVRC centers as other children and youth, hopeful of getting in and participating in the social outings, try to impress the current voting club members. In so doing, they gradually become less and less self-conscious.

When other people see the members out in public not trying to cover up their braces, but rather quite naturally dancing or participating in sports, they are impressed and ask questions. The members welcome these opportunities to educate and engage the community.



Several times a year club members wear their shorts on a social outing in a public place, having a good time together while also helping the public feel more relaxed around people with disabilities.

Not everyone can be a member of the Ndenge Tozali club. The founding members

### \*IPVRC Update:

IPVRC (International Polio Victims Response Committee) is now operating brace-crafting facilities and rehabilitation centers in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Butembo, Bunia, Kalemie and Goma. The organization continues to need additional funding. Information about IPVRC, including a description of its new Medical and Educational Sponsorship programs, can be found at [www.ipvrc.org](http://www.ipvrc.org). ▲