

The Challenges of Mennonite Agriculture Development in the Congo: The Service du Développement Agricole, 1965–1980

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The 1960s and 1970s marked a transition in North American Mennonite views about the aims and methods of development in Africa. Mennonite missionaries and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) personnel sought to promote new ideas about partnership and listening to African stakeholders. Mennonite scholars such as John Janzen and Alain Epp Weaver have emphasized the role of community development and the need to recognize Africans as equal partners.¹ For all the good intentions lauded in this literature, celebratory language about building African/North American partnerships often obscures the difficult ways this process actually played out.

This study analyzes the shifting approaches to development within a single project between 1965 and 1980: SEDA (Service du Développement Agricole), an agricultural program founded by Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM) missionary Fremont Regier in 1965 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).² North American Mennonite organizations initially created and implemented SEDA programs without consulting the Congolese in the mid-1960s. By the early 1970s, Congolese Mennonite church leaders pushed

SEDA to generate revenue for their congregations. Particularly when the Congolese economy deteriorated after 1973, Congolese Mennonite leaders had three priorities: keep access to North American Mennonite personnel and financial support, transition from US to Congolese leadership over the project, and make SEDA a source of revenue for their churches rather than an exercise in selfless charity. AIMM and MCC members wanted to wean SEDA from its dependence on North American funding, even as they also tried not to alienate Congolese Mennonites desperate for aid. In a telling demonstration of how North American Mennonite objectives for SEDA were undone, AIMM and MCC staff endorsed the decision of Congolese Mennonite pastors to replace SEDA's first African director, Bernard Ngulubi Mazemba, with North American leadership in 1978.

This study diverges from the limited scholarship on Congolese Mennonite agricultural programs in Africa after independence in several ways. This essay does not praise North Americans for their contributions to Congolese development, even as it is clear Congolese and North Americans admired SEDA's founder Fremont Rieger. Rachel Walter Goossen and Robert Kreider's 1988 survey of MCC's history contended SEDA was a mutually beneficial African-North American partnership.³ Their discussion ignores divisions over how the project operated and who should control it. Missionary Jim Bertsche's brief summary of SEDA argued that Ngulubi could not separate himself as SEDA's leader from the demands of his family and clan, thus suggesting Congolese cultural differences were a cause of the project's problems.⁴ Former MCC volunteers also blamed cultural differences for the failure of Mennonite agricultural projects, even if some added that the distortions of colonial rule allegedly exacerbated a sense of Congolese inferiority and dependence on North Americans.⁵ Without fieldwork in the Congo, I do not try to evaluate the ultimate successes or failures of the program.

The Mennonite literature on African development tends to ignore the crucial issue of conflict within African communities. Here I draw on Jeremy Immerwahr's history of secular community development in the 1950s and 1960, particularly his argument that US proponents of community development imagined non-Western peoples as living harmoniously, rather than being fractured by internal hierarchies of wealth and power.⁶ AIMM and MCC staff's idealistic hope to aid Congolese did not prevent them from being drawn into internal African conflicts over how SEDA should be run. James Ferguson has argued African state authorities used ostensibly apolitical foreign funded projects for their own interests.⁷ The case of SEDA

demonstrates Congolese pastors could act in a similar way to officials by competing with each other through control of a development program.

Mennonite scholarship on the history of African/North American partnerships also should avoid exaggerating the intentionality and originality of Mennonite development in practice. North American Mennonite agricultural missionaries continuously revised project goals and operations. This lack of consistency reflects AIMM and MCC's ad hoc methods of management in this era. Other Congolese/North American Protestant partnerships in development in the same period resemble SEDA, especially in arguments over how to place Africans in charge of programs designed by Westerners.⁸ Key figures within MCC's Africa programs referenced SEDA as they revised their approaches towards development in the 1980s to favour ending direct North American management over Mennonite program.

Unfortunately, the dearth of work on MCC's engagement in development makes comparative approaches difficult. MCC and AIMM's engagement with Congolese agricultural programs fit what Philip Fountain and Laura Meitzner Yoder have described as the "techno-quietist" approach of MCC volunteers in Indonesia in how they promoted technical solutions to social problems and evaded confrontations with state authorities.⁹ Unlike in other countries, however, MCC did not work directly with government programs in Congo. Though North American Mennonites avoided any direct conflicts with the authoritarian Congolese government, they could not escape becoming unwilling participants in conflicts within Congolese communities. Church leaders, subsistence farmers, and Congolese personnel in SEDA all had different ideas about what the project should accomplish.

This essay relies on MCC and Oxfam records to examine negotiations between Congolese and North American partners in SEDA. To complement these records, I interviewed over a dozen former AIMM and MCC workers. The testimonies of former development workers and written correspondence provide a rich set of materials to consider changing North American approaches to development. They include documentation on Congolese engagement with SEDA, even if direct interviews with Congolese about the program would undoubtedly make much clearer how Congolese stakeholders engaged with the project and what lasting impact, if any, the program had on farming practices.

The Origins of Mennonite Community Development in the DR Congo, 1958–1965

In 1912, US Mennonites established the Congo Inland Mission (CIM, later AIMM) in the Kasai region of south-central Belgian Congo.¹⁰ Some CIM missionaries managed extensive farming programs to maintain solidarity among Congolese converts as a separate community of believers. More typically, CIM missionaries turned to farming to generate revenue and to feed students and mission staff.¹¹ The collapse of Belgian colonial rule and the onset of ethnic violence in the CIM mission area interrupted a program begun in 1958 to bring in North American agricultural missionaries.¹² To fight malnutrition in rural area, CIM formed SEDA with the support of the Mennonite Central Committee. A group of Canadian and US Mennonite church conferences had formed MCC in the early 1920s originally to assist Anabaptist communities in Ukraine during the Russian Civil War.¹³ After the Second World War, MCC expanded its operations to assist Anabaptist missions in Africa, Asia, and South America.¹⁴ MCC youth volunteers first arrived in the Congo in 1956 as part of the Pax program, designed to give young, draft-eligible US men an alternative to military service.

Fremont Regier exemplified North American Mennonite ideas about reimagining Protestant development in the early 1960s. He and his wife Sara agreed to run the fledgling SEDA program in 1964, less than a decade after Regier had served as a Pax volunteer in Congo.¹⁵ Upon arrival, Regier toured several agricultural programs, including those operated by Catholic and Protestant missionaries, drawing up a clear plan for SEDA. He noted several flaws in programs run by Catholic and Protestant missionaries. In particular, Regier was appalled by the advice of a Belgian Catholic priest who told him that “the simplest [agricultural] program will always be too complicated for the Congolese and must be further simplified.”¹⁶ Regier visited the Congo Polytechnic Institute agricultural school, a project run mainly by US United Methodist Church volunteers that relied heavily on USAID financial support. Although impressed by the program, Regier had doubts about the viability of the school if the US government reduced support for the project.¹⁷

Regier initially followed the ethnocentrism of modernization theory dominant among US development programs in the mid-1960s.¹⁸ On the one hand, Regier and other Mennonite missionaries asserted the program was solely for the benefit of Congolese. “Tell them [the Congolese] that we love them,” enjoined one directive from a late 1965 SEDA planning meeting.¹⁹ However, loving Congolese also meant correcting Congolese cultural practices that allegedly

impeded agricultural development. Regier worried that most foreign agricultural projects in the DRC were not producing “farmers, but agronom[ists], desk men, technicians.”²⁰ He also blamed the allegedly innate conservatism of farmers as an obstacle to promoting needed technical improvements.²¹ “Constant leveling processes” by relatives allegedly undermined prosperous farmers who had the obligation to satisfy demands of their families.²² Not only did Congolese kinship obligations threaten individual success, so did the attraction of young people to formal education rather than working the land to support themselves. “We have chosen extension work in favor of schools because we feel the greatest need . . . is to help farmers already trying, rather than making farmers out of boys,” Regier noted in a 1966 SEDA brochure.²³ Congolese thus remained passive figures to be remoulded by altruistic North Americans rather than active stakeholders in assessing and designing programs in the early years of SEDA.

SEDA operations initially centred on the Nyanga demonstration farm with funding from both CIM and MCC. Regier and MCC volunteers joined Congolese staff in raising hogs, chickens, and rabbits. They sold eggs and Rhode Island Red chicks to Congolese, hoping the meatier North American chickens would provide more protein than local breeds.²⁴ In theory, the farm also offered a model for commercial farming that Congolese could emulate. Diamond mining created relatively high-paying jobs and a market for rural farmers in Tshikapa, sixty-five kilometres from Nyanga. However, Nyanga’s farmers could not easily reach this lucrative market. Poorly maintained roads and a lack of transportation impeded commercial farming in the town. With no reliable sources of income, farmers could not realistically follow the model of the demonstration farm. Recognizing this problem, Regier turned increasingly to agricultural extension.

SEDA, Congolese Farmers, and North American Community Development, 1966–1972

SEDA’s shift to rural extension started as a result of a temporary change in leadership. Medical problems forced Regier and family to stay in the US in 1967, leaving SEDA in the hands of two MCC Pax youth volunteers, Dean Linsenmeyer and Roger Busenitz. In a 2019 interview, Linsenmeyer reflected on how his role changed after Regier’s sudden departure.²⁵ After Regier’s evacuation, Linsenmeyer and Busenitz decided to establish extension routes. Linsenmeyer recalled, “We would take the truck . . . and load it up with a couple of

rabbits. We'd go flying out there into the middle of the village to see if somebody was interested. . . . Yet, because we were going forty miles an hour through the sand, they couldn't [talk to the volunteers]."²⁶ Rather than relying on an expensive vehicle, the two MCC volunteers soon chose to ride on bicycles and to bring Leonard Ganza, a Congolese worker from the farm.

This method of visiting communities won over rural Congolese. The willingness of the volunteers to learn Gipepe, eat local foods such as palm grubs, and stay overnight in villages earned the volunteers respect in the villages. "The Congolese said, '[Before Regier], the missionaries would come out, but be in a hurry to go back. You actually come to live with us.' That really opened up people," Linsenmeyer noted.²⁷ While the volunteers maintained Regier's hope of increasing protein production, they focused on promoting raising rabbits rather than poultry. "Chickens need a high protein diet. Well, people didn't have a high protein diet. . . . You couldn't take grains from the people [for chicken feed] that people could eat," Linsenmeyer reasoned. By contrast, rabbits could eat palm branches not edible by humans. People could build rabbit hutches entirely from locally available materials, thus avoiding dependency on external support. Within months, a few Congolese made the arduous trek to sell rabbits in Tshikapa. As Linsenmeyer put it, "I remember we had people with two years of primary school" who could sell enough rabbits in the city "to make the same as a primary school teacher."²⁸

Upon his return to Congo, Regier endorsed the new model of extension to forge relationships between North American Mennonites and Congolese farmers. He joined MCC Pax volunteers on extension routes and drew on his immense popularity among Congolese to promote the program. Extension work became a means of improving ties between Canadian and US development workers with Africans. A 1969 SEDA brochure depicted individual Congolese and North American participants as equal stakeholders instead of presenting MCC volunteers as the sole catalyst of change.²⁹

Some North American volunteers became convinced that this ideal of building a community of mutual reciprocity took precedence over the actual raising of rabbits. Former SEDA volunteers remembered relatively few people raising rabbits or using enclosures for chickens.³⁰ Arnold Harder, an AIMM missionary who worked with Regier from 1969 to 1975, believed some villagers simply raised a few rabbits to ensure SEDA staff regularly visited them.³¹ The fear that Congolese did not identify with the goals of SEDA deeply grieved Regier. In 1969, he wrote about a close Congolese friend who told him, "[Congolese participants in SEDA] are

only making nice farms so [Regier] will have something to show frequent American visitors. They do not want to be ashamed.”³² These debates over how Congolese viewed SEDA took a new turn after 1970, when Congolese Mennonite pastors asserted their control over the program. While Congolese farmers had negotiated directly with SEDA in the 1960s, leaders of the Congolese Mennonite Church (the *Église Mennonite au Congo* [EMC]) did not have any real role overseeing the program. AIMM agricultural missionary Arnold Harder arrived in Nyanga for the first time in 1969. He noted that “[the EMC leadership] kept their hands off. They didn’t know what we were doing and had no idea where it was going. . . . They were mostly happy because it was just running smoothly.”³³ This relative indifference to SEDA changed dramatically over the following decade.

Congolese Negotiations and Remaking SEDA, 1970–1974

The end of the 1960s marked a change in the relationship between North American-based Christian missionary organizations and Congolese churches. Disciples of Christ pastor Itofo Bokelelale convinced Protestant churches to form a single legal institution in 1970, the *Église du Christ au Congo* (later, *Église du Christ au Zaïre* [ECZ]).³⁴ AIMM agreed to work with ECZ after Congolese Mennonites joined the new church. CIM/AIMM staff had accepted the independence of the formerly mission-run EMC since the early 1960s before accepting the merger of the CIM with the EMC in 1971 under the guidance of EMC president Moïse Kabangy.³⁵ Until his death in 1979, Kabangy promoted Congolese control over Mennonite development and educational programs. He also had to placate powerful EMC clergy eager to receive a share of SEDA’s work for their regional and ethnic bases of support.³⁶ EMC clergy especially wanted to see new SEDA stations at other mission centres once run by the CIM. “Looking back on it, [SEDA] was way too big. But, everybody was clamoring. It was also a church, a big thing they wanted people in,” recalled AIMM missionary Arnold Harder.³⁷ SEDA’s growth to six stations and its new mandate to promote poultry increased the budget. To satisfy their Congolese church partners, AIMM and MCC had to increase their financial support at a time when AIMM staff would have preferred to reduce assistance.³⁸ Regier worried that EMC leaders’ ambitions might exhaust SEDA resources. “Our refusal to go into all [Congolese Mennonite areas] immediately is taken to mean we are prejudiced and love only the Nyanga tribe [region],” he complained to MCC Africa director Vern Preheim.³⁹

By 1971, when AIMM cut funding for the EMC, Congolese pastors wanted SEDA to generate revenue for their church. SEDA manager Arnold Harder warned MCC's Africa department in 1972, "[The EMC] want us to expand. . . . We cannot convince the church here that rural development as we are doing it now can be done in a 2 to 5 year period. . . . I suspect they are impatient now and want to redirect the money."⁴⁰ EMC leaders decided to change SEDA's funding in early 1972 by having AIMM send financial support to the EMC rather than directly to SEDA.⁴¹ Like other North American denominational missionaries in the 1970s, Mennonite missionaries and MCC staff resisted the idea of surrendering control over financial matters to Congolese.⁴² MCC Congo director Ray Brubacher realized this meant EMC leaders wanted to make money through SEDA: "This is a misunderstanding on their part because at this stage SEDA is not a profit-making organization," Brubacher wrote his colleagues at MCC.⁴³ Tellingly, Brubacher considered Congolese to be confused rather than committed to remaking the organization on their own terms.

Fremont Regier found a new source of funds to pay for SEDA expansion, thus satisfying EMC demands without increasing costs for AIMM. In 1971, he successfully applied for a grant from the British agency Oxfam for the equivalent of approximately \$366,000 US in 2021 dollars. This money allowed SEDA to acquire a truck and incubators for each SEDA station.⁴⁴ By 1973, Pax volunteers were occupied as much with chicken production as extension routes.⁴⁵ Chickens were in high demand in the expensive Tshikapa market and popular throughout SEDA's area of operations.⁴⁶ This increased emphasis on commercial production did not fit well with the original goal of increasing meat consumption. "How much of the protein produced by the [chicken] scheme is eaten by the villages? Very little, although the project increased the villagers' purchasing power," reported an Oxfam agent who inspected SEDA/Nyanga in 1973.⁴⁷

Regier found himself facing pressure to ensure the Congolese church would participate in setting SEDA's goals, so he responded creatively to the new demands of Congolese church leaders. He emphasized dialogue and expressed his confidence that Africans now should own the program. He enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin, where he made SEDA's integration with Congolese concerns a central theme of his thesis.⁴⁸ He took responsibility for having made the project too dependent on himself.⁴⁹ He contended that top EMC church leaders had not recognized the value of SEDA to local farmers because AIMM missionaries like Regier had never consulted them in creating the project.⁵⁰ Village farmers also felt "[SEDA] teams defined the problem and provided

the ‘solution,’” leaving rural people shut out of making their own ideas known to SEDA workers.⁵¹

Regier’s plan to improve communication had mixed results that reflected class and regional hierarchies in the EMC. He set up numerous meetings that brought together church leaders, farmers, missionaries, and Congolese SEDA personnel. By providing reports and holding meetings with different stakeholders, Regier hoped to convince farmers and EMC authorities alike to see themselves as crucial to the program. His efforts had mixed results. EMC authorities from the Tshikapa headquarters only slowly took up Regier’s invitation to visit Nyanga, but increasingly wanted to set SEDA’s priorities after 1973.⁵² Nyanga’s Mennonite community naturally wanted SEDA to prosper and resented Congolese officials and national EMC authorities who they felt would undermine SEDA’s operations.⁵³ Even as Mennonites at Nyanga wanted to keep the foreign-funded program going, EMC leaders from areas with no SEDA centres resented not receiving material aid from AIMM.⁵⁴

Some Congolese still felt that SEDA was really still a program run by and for North American missionaries, regardless of Regier’s efforts to convince them otherwise. Pax volunteer Glenn Troyer observed in 1973 that rural farmers “not directly involved [in SEDA] believed that the SEDA farm is ‘the white man’s farm,’ and [is] there for [whites’] personal gain.”⁵⁵ After recounting how Congolese described a burning SEDA building containing incubators as “the SEDA house,” one volunteer asserted, “I realize people don’t think SEDA belongs to them, but a business to serve [North American missionaries].”⁵⁶ Since AIMM and EMC kept funding SEDA and sending volunteers to work there, one can hardly blame Congolese for assuming the project was still North American.

To prove SEDA was now Congolese, Regier announced in 1973 that his eventual successor would be Bernard Ngulubi Mazemba. This candidate had close ties to Reiger, and a family connection to church leadership. He had attended an EMC secondary school and had worked as the veterinary assistant at the Nyanga farm in 1968. More significantly, he was the son of a prominent EMC pastor from Nyanga.⁵⁷ The timing of this announcement was significant. From 1972 to 1975, Mobutu’s regime confiscated many foreign owned businesses.⁵⁸ “In December 1973 with nationalization SEDA seemed for a while to be up for grabs,” Regier later wrote, adding that, “[the Tshikapa [EMC] offices were able to ward off the trouble by convincing the powers that be that SEDA belonged indeed to the church and not to a missionary.”⁵⁹ The appointment of an African director could save SEDA from a rumoured government plan to nationalize the project.

Indeed, the selection of Ngulubi mollified officials who had threatened to take over the project, but EMC pastors objected to Regier's handpicked candidate. In December 1974, the majority Congolese membership of the SEDA executive committee met to select a new director a year after Regier announced he wanted to be replaced by a Congolese national. Some EMC members pleaded not to put Ngulubi in charge. They told Regier at the meeting, "He needs more training. He is thirsty for power and prestige. Other SEDA posts will get wild ideas into their heads if we name a Zairois director of SEDA Nyanga. Even the president of this country has whites at head of some of his departments."⁶⁰ The committee voted to have Ngulubi receive one or two years more training before he could become director, despite EMC chairman Kabangy's fear of nationalization if Regier continued to run SEDA.⁶¹ Regier was convinced the real reason for the committee's actions was to make sure a local Nyanga person did not take over SEDA.⁶²

Ultimately, Kabangy and Regier managed to work together to finally ensure Ngulubi was officially named the head of SEDA in June 1975.⁶³ Following Pende custom for gifts to be presented to invited guests who could attend a major event, Ngulubi went to Tshikapa and offered a goat to church leaders. There, he tried to convince his Tshikapa church colleagues to overcome their misunderstandings. To assure Congolese Mennonites that an African director did not mean the end of AIMM and MCC support, Regier organized a tour for Ngulubi to the US in early 1976. Upon their return, Ngulubi gained respect: "Many have said, 'Now we know Fremont was really serious about wanting him to become director. This trip proves it.'"⁶⁴ Despite these promising trends, Regier's interventions would not save Ngulubi's tenure.

From Black to White Again: The Rise and Decline of Congolese Control of SEDA, 1975–1980

Ngulubi encountered many troubles in his three years as SEDA director. Structural factors posed major challenges for development programs in the DRC in the late 1970s. The collapse of the global copper market in 1973, skyrocketing rates of inflation, and endemic embezzlement wracked the Congolese economy.⁶⁵ Another obstacle was the declining infrastructure of rural Congo. Government officials neglected roads. Routes in the SEDA region became so impassable that Ngulubi used missionary aircraft to visit SEDA centres outside Nyanga, driving up operating costs.⁶⁶

Inflation undermined SEDA. Congolese employees left the program, sometimes blaming Ngulubi for not raising their pay to keep up with rising prices. Chicken feed had to come all the way from Kinshasa, with the cost rising by 75 percent in 1977 alone.⁶⁷ A shortage of feed forced SEDA to shut down its incubator, halting the poultry program for months.⁶⁸ MCC continued financial aid even as high fuel prices drove up costs.⁶⁹ Inflation only made SEDA more dependent on AIMM and MCC funding as US dollars increased in value relative to the zaire (the Congolese currency). Without any consistent ways of producing chickens or otherwise generating a profit, SEDA could not maintain its various branch stations.⁷⁰

There were initially signs that SEDA could remain viable under Ngulubi, albeit mainly with continued money coming from North America. Despite the ballooning inflation of the mid-1970s, SEDA prospered to some degree in Ngulubi's first year in office because of increasing demand for eggs. The massive US-funded Inga-Shaba dam and power line project purchased eggs directly from Nyanga in 1975 and farmers used SEDA transport to sell eggs at Tshikapa.⁷¹ It appears that neither one of these opportunities continued after 1976 as Oxfam significantly reduced funding for SEDA. The Canadian International Development Agency funded SEDA through MCC Canada until 1981. These funds allowed SEDA to continue to buy incubators for poultry production, although the donor assistance did not ameliorate SEDA's problems in actually raising chickens.

North American MCC volunteers and Mennonite organizations blamed the program's problems especially on Ngulubi's alleged incompetence, not larger structural factors. Ray Brubacher stated, "[Ngulubi] is a nice guy, but simply not capable."⁷² AIMM missionaries became increasingly anxious that individual Congolese were enriching themselves through church development programs.⁷³ Such concerns led AIMM missionary director Arnold Harder to review SEDA's accounting ledgers in 1976. Harder showed MCC-Congo director Phil Rich the ledgers "where Ngulubi repeatedly inflated bills that he had paid and did not account for the cash difference. . . . The only way [Harder] and I can understand it is that Ngulubi was simply inflating the figures in the cash book and pocketing the difference."⁷⁴ Although Ngulubi did later keep better records, SEDA was owed over 10,000 zaires in 1978 (approximately \$40,000 US in 2021).⁷⁵

AIMM and MCC staff framed their discussion of SEDA's financial unsustainability and Ngulubi's control in essentialist terms about the separation between African and Western modes of understanding. For them, Ngulubi's individual responsibility was entangled in the larger question of whether or not SEDA could ever

entirely be truly transformed from a top-down Western model into something that fit with Congolese needs and realities. Brubacher, Rich, and MCC administrator Edgar Stoesz agreed that SEDA's financial problems were partially due to mistakes by North Americans who had not adequately prepared the program for transfer to African leadership. "Expatriates did a fairly poor job in financial management and setting up a financial system that would not become a serious problem for the Zairian manager," Brubacher told Rich.⁷⁶ For example, no one from AIMM or MCC had closely monitored how Fremont Regier had kept accounting ledgers.⁷⁷

MCC staff agonized over continued support for SEDA. Stoesz wrote to Brubacher from Akron: "I looked on 1976/77 as a transitional year with the . . . white biggies out and Zairois [Congolese] taking over. [The Congolese] were most anxious to put us to the test whether we would support these institutions even when they were under black control."⁷⁸ MCC staff did not want to disappoint their long-time Congolese partners. Yet they were skeptical SEDA ever could achieve self-sufficiency without radical changes.

To try to salvage SEDA, MCC managers intervened at the behest of Congolese pastors. First, MCC imposed budget austerity. In April 1978, Rich authorized a reduction of \$9,260 US in MCC's contribution to SEDA (approximately \$42,300 US in 2022). This forced Ngulubi to cut back on promised raises to his Congolese workers to deal with unceasing inflation.⁷⁹ Secondly, Rich had new MCC volunteer George Klassen take over accounting duties from Ngulubi in 1978.⁸⁰ Finally, Brubacher sent former Mennonite Brethren aid worker and agricultural expert Merrill Ewert to evaluate the program in 1978 and to discuss solutions with Ngulubi. Ewert's report on his visit to SEDA's Nyanga farm brought out the tensions within the organization.⁸¹ His very arrival at Nyanga set off rumours among Congolese workers "that Ngulubi was about to be fired by MCC and would be replaced by a white missionary."⁸² In a letter to Brubacher, Ewert discussed Ngulubi's perception of the relationship with MCC. The account exposes how Regier's model of SEDA had fallen apart. "[Ngulubi] had expected the free and easy camaraderie that existed between [Regier] and MCC to continue, but suddenly found himself dealing instead with impatient creditors," Ewert wrote.⁸³ Nyanga's role in production was largely over: chicken feed was too expensive, local people now raised rabbits on their own, and bad roads meant that the expensive MCC-purchased truck to transport chickens to urban markets had no use other than for Ngulubi himself. Ewert argued that missionaries and MCC staff had unfairly signalled out Ngulubi without ever considering the apparent racism of never similarly auditing Regier. "[Ngulubi's] first priority [after becoming

director] was not to 'do' extension, but rather to avoid messing up the accounts and getting himself fired," Ewert concluded.⁸⁴

While Ngulubi had one sympathetic listener in Ewert, Congolese SEDA workers preferred to raise any concerns to MCC volunteers instead of their African director.⁸⁵ Ray Brubacher worried about the increasing debts Ngulubi incurred at SEDA.⁸⁶ Phil Rich recalled in 1978 the doubts EMC president Kabangy had about any Congolese from Nyanga running SEDA.⁸⁷ Rich asked Brubacher to not abandon SEDA out of faith in its potential and argued that MCC could not "unilaterally dismiss" its Congolese director. Instead, he suggested a gradual transition towards ending MCC financial support.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, staff at MCC's headquarters took a more critical view. Edgar Stoesz wrote, "If we can't make [SEDA] work in Nyanga after all which has been already invested, then I wonder where we can make it work."⁸⁹ Rather than quitting, Stoesz asked for clarification on who really was in charge of SEDA.

Finally, the EMC leadership at Tshikapa demoted Ngulubi from program director to head of agricultural extension in October 1978, selecting George Klassen to replace him.⁹⁰ Both Harder and Klassen expressed regret for how Congolese Mennonite pastors and US missionaries had treated Ngulubi.⁹¹ Rather than admit he had made alleged management errors (including selling wire that belonged to SEDA for his own profit), Ngulubi blamed his old opponents in the EMC in Tshikapa for wrecking his career. He finally quit to get a job with the national *Église du Christ au Zaïre's* development agency.⁹² AIMM missionary Arnold Harder remembered the EMC's decision to depose Ngulubi in 1978.⁹³ The EMC had agreed to send Ngulubi for training at the Pan-African Agricultural Institute in Douala. They then installed Harder as the temporary director. Harder reviewed SEDA's financial ledgers and then asked MCC to handle the audit. Ngulubi returned and a rumour at Nyanga spread that Harder wanted the Congolese director fired. Harder recalled EMC leaders became infuriated when he wrote EMC president Kabangy, "I don't want this job. I want Ngulubi to continue.' That letter surfaced later and [EMC people] accused me of all kinds of things."⁹⁴ Harder then went on a scheduled furlough in 1978, just before Klassen took over. Upon Harder's return in 1979, Kabangy's successor Mbonza Kikunga invited Harder to reconcile with Ngulubi, who claimed SEDA still owed him money. Mbonza, Ngulubi's brother-in-law, asked Harder, "What will you do for your brother here?" Harder agreed to pay Ngulubi, on one condition: "I'm going to come to your house. I'm going to eat with you, talk with you, do everything to build up our relationship.' He just hugged

me.”⁹⁵ This act of reconciliation showed Harder’s commitment to Mennonite values, even if the EMC did not reinstate Ngulubi.

Congolese pastors on SEDA’s executive committee decided to replace Klassen with Harder on November 8, 1979. They largely did so at the behest of the dominant Tshikapa-based faction in the EMC that preferred a North American director. After a long discussion, AIMM missionary Earl Roth recommended Harder. EMC pastor François Bukungu then begged the committee to choose Harder rather than consider rehiring Ngulubi. According to MCC Congo/Zaire director Menno Plett, the result left “all people involved quite happy. . . . Ngulubi may be the one exception.”⁹⁶ After discovering the chickens and livestock had all vanished at Nyanga, Harder focused mainly on agricultural extension—returning to the same program so dear to Fremont Regier.⁹⁷

It was a bitter irony that Ngulubi’s removal came at a time when AIMM and MCC staff increasingly complained of Congolese dependence on North American patronage. Ngulubi’s fall constituted a victory for a faction of the EMC who wanted to assert their authority over the Nyanga branch of their church. By personalizing SEDA’s failures in Ngulubi, Congolese pastors and MCC staff did not take into account how the economic downturns of the late 1970s would have undermined the program regardless of who was in charge. Having an AIMM missionary at the helm also offered the EMC more access to continued foreign financial support than if Ngulubi had remained director. Their dealings with Ngulubi show how they could use AIMM and MCC staff to achieve their own ideals of development.

MCC administrators recalled the contradictions between MCC’s stated goals of promoting self-sufficiency and how MCC actually dealt with SEDA. An administrative assistant in the late 1970s for MCC’s Kinshasa office remembered: “We worked supposedly with partners like . . . SEDA. But we ran things. MCCers ran things. . . . That tension between this philosophy as wanting people taking their own responsibility and yet not knowing in the least how to do that.”⁹⁸ At the same time, after Ngulubi’s departure MCC staff doubted Africans could ever run the project. “I felt that more and more running a large agricultural project was unsustainable. . . . It ran well enough, but maybe there was no hope [SEDA] would be able to sustain itself,” said Menno Plett, the MCC Congo/Zaire representative from 1979 to 1982.⁹⁹

Former MCC Africa Department director Ray Brubacher reflected on how Ngulubi’s downfall led him to reconsider how MCC operated in Africa: “[SEDA] collapsed [when Ngulubi took over]. It did not work. It started teaching me—is it fair to develop something

based on Western ways of doing and you train someone to run a Western-type of operation? Then you set them up for failure.”¹⁰⁰ Even as AIMM North American missionaries oversaw SEDA in the 1980s, MCC staff like Tim Lind and Howard Good pushed MCC volunteers to listen to Congolese and assist them rather than impose programs without consultation.¹⁰¹ Building relationships with Congolese church leaders without offering significant financial support became typical in MCC programs in the Congo by the late 1980s.

Conclusion

SEDA's evolution broadly illustrates the complicated trajectory of North American Protestant engagements with Congolese stakeholders in the DRC in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, AIMM and MCC's participation with SEDA revealed the contradictions in North American Mennonite approaches to development and Africanization. Fremont Regier's agricultural program coincided with MCC efforts to build partnerships with Africans that would not rely on coercion. Despite espousing the ideal of partnership, North Americans ran the program from 1965 until the early 1990s interrupted only by Ngulubi's three years at the helm. MCC volunteers formed close bonds with rural farmers, but ultimately, their framework still assumed that North American technical knowledge was a gift for needy Congolese.

MCC volunteers and Regier had to adjust to a new era in the 1970s. Church leaders wanted SEDA to generate revenue rather than just encourage gradual changes in rural farming. They also wanted to placate constituents within the EMC. Foreign NGOs like Oxfam furthered these changes by providing funding for these new aspirations that was not tethered to Regier's original plans. Mennonite North American development workers accommodated Congolese demands that often focused just as much on distributing patronage as they did on promoting economic growth. North American Mennonite personnel wanted African leaders. However, they did not always like how Congolese church leaders and Ngulubi actually ran the program. Instead of cutting ties in the late 1970s, AIMM and MCC staff equivocated about how they should proceed with a Congolese director.

The Congolese legacy of SEDA is impossible to determine without hearing from Africans, but the North American records do fit with larger transitions within MCC regarding development in the 1970s. SEDA's problems offered MCC planners difficult lessons about shifting from North American to African control over

programs. It is little wonder North American preferred to emphasize “presence and partnership” over managing long-term projects by the 1980s, assuming the transition to indigenous control over Mennonite programs was not unique to Congo.¹⁰² The case of SEDA suggests that changes in North American Mennonite views of development came in part from the difficult experiences of specific projects as well as broad philosophical discussions about the role of expatriate aid workers in Africa.

Notes

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- ⁴ Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment, and Grace* (Elkhart, IN: Fairway, 1998), 200–201.
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- ¹³ Cornelius Dyck, Robert Kreider, and John Lapp, eds., *From the Files of MCC: The Mennonite Central Committee Story*, vol. 1 (Camp Hill, PA; Herald Press, 1980); Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*.
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- ³⁶ Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*, 275–90, 297–305.
- ³⁷ Arnold Harder, telephone interview with author, May 18, 2020.

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- ⁵¹ Regier, "Ownership," 45–46.
- ⁵² Regier, "Ownership," 110–111, 140–141.
- ⁵³ Regier, "Ownership," 160–164.
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