

DR Congo's street food mushrooms as crisis grows

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In crisis-hit Democratic Republic of Congo, people in the capital increasingly turn to street hawkers to feed themselves and their families cheaply, but the makeshift option is often not a hygienic one.

From civil servants and students, to construction workers and parents with their children, hungry Kinshasa residents depend on so-called malewas, or street [food](#) sellers, whose numbers have grown as the economy has worsened.

"Here, I eat my fill for under 2,000 Congolese francs (\$1.1, one euro)," said Jose Bangamba, a 29-year-old taxi driver.

Leaning over a plate of chicken in gravy, which cost him just 1,500 francs, Bangamba also tucked into a side dish of fufu, a traditional recipe made from cassava flour that cost 400 francs.

"In a normal restaurant, this meal would have cost me at least 10 times more. How can I possibly afford that?" he said.

DR Congo has been mired in political and economic unrest for years. A fall in commodity prices that hit the country's mining industry, leading to mass job losses, sparked a crisis in mid-2015.

The slump in production left the government without a much-needed source of revenue. The situation has been further compounded by high inflation after a fall in the Congolese currency.

Since December, the political crisis has also worsened, with President Joseph Kabila refusing to step down despite his mandate coming to an end.

Though the vast central African nation is rich in mineral wealth and water, it has long been one of the continent's poorest nations and rising unrest has only deepened the economic malaise.

Making ends meet

For the past year and a half, malewas have become massively popular in Kinshasa, home to 10 million people.

And it isn't just those looking for a cheap meal who are turning to malewas; it is also housewives like Marie Aloka Hioma, who have started selling hot food in front of their Kinshasa homes.

Better known as Mama Marie, the 48-year-old mother of eight said she set up her malewa six years ago "to pay my children's school fees".

Customers for her malewa stand in line from 5:00 am every day, waiting to be served from pots of fish, chicken, meat and pondou, a local dish made from cassava leaves and vegetables.

Mama Marie, who serves all the customers herself, does not know how many people come in a day.

"A hundred or so, I guess," she says, standing under a parasol by her makeshift food stand, stuffing the cash she makes into a handbag slung over her shoulder.

For the past seven years, Mama Annie has been running a similar business just a couple of streets away.

Most of her profit, she says, goes "to my children, to buy them shoes" and clothes.

'Public health problem'

Papi Bula Mbemba, a 49-year-old regular who works for a pest control company, comes to Mama Annie's every day.

"You get the best prices here. Malewas really do offer the people of Kinshasa the solution they need," he said.

But these cheap meals often come at the cost of hygiene.

Bangamba, the taxi driver, says some malewa owners use unwashed plates and glasses.

Customers also run the risk of diseases such as typhoid, diarrhoea and even cholera as malewas are often located near rubbish dumps and polluted water tanks.

"Worsening living conditions force the population to eat what they can afford," said Benjamin Kewngani Mavard, director of DR Congo's public hygiene service.

Warning of a "growing public health problem", Kewngani conceded it would be "impossible" to shut down all the malewas.

"We have to improve them," he said, adding that authorities would seek to raise street food vendors' hygiene awareness.

Mama Marie said that, while others may not be up to standard, her food was clean.

"I eat what I cook, and so do my husband and children," she said, as she washed her plates and cutlery.

"I don't want people to fall ill. I want them to come back the next day."

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