

When they finally manage to get up the hill, they discover a whole neighbourhood up there which is new to them. It is very different from where they live. Their friend lives in a very small and very dark house. No windows, no electricity, no furniture, nothing to sit down on. The neighbours ask: "What are you doing here?" "You're going to visit the people with sand flies?" Some whisper that they are thieves.



But the children don't care. They form a big circle with Irengé's family and they start singing. Soon, other children in the neighbourhood join them and even some adults. People dance, play and share candies. Then, some parents start asking if their children could join the children down the hill and make friends.

The following Saturday, Irengé comes down the hill with other children. Aimé, Lydie, Dieumerci are welcomed with songs and dances. They share stories about their schools, their neighbourhood and their families.

Now, children from up and down the hill aren't afraid of each other anymore. Quite the opposite! They speak together. What they have to say is so interesting that it doesn't matter

where they live. Even though Irengé's life is still hard, he has friends and it is like a bright sun shining in his heart.

THE END



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Irengé

A child from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)



Irengé* is 10 years old. He lives with his family in Bukavu, a city in DRC surrounded by hills. There are eight children in the family but the three eldest left home looking for work. Most of the time, they live in the street.

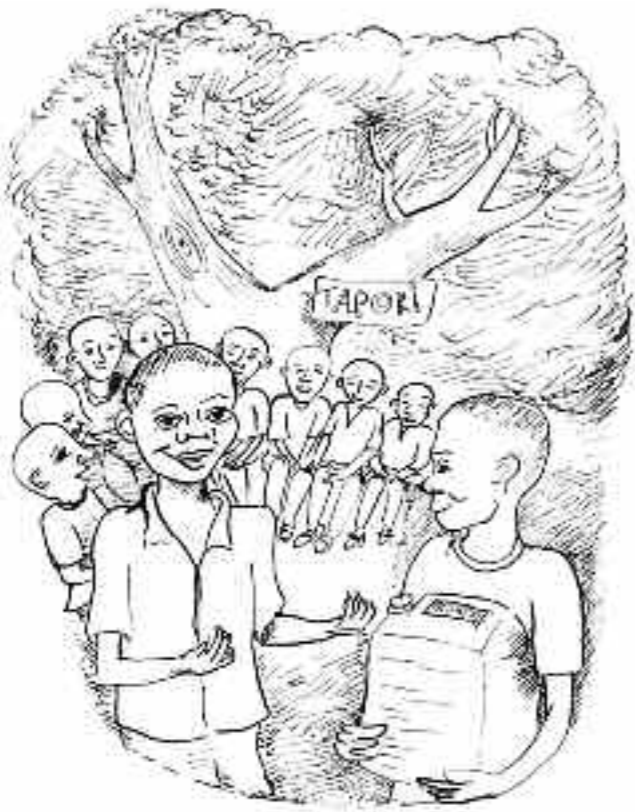
Irengé's father is a shoemaker.

Often he is not at home and life is difficult for the family. Irengé's mother also works very hard. She carries heavy loads, doing the laundry for people, and farms a small plot of land. Still, it is not enough for the family to live on.

Irengé stays at home to help his mother. He takes care of his younger brother and his two sisters, one of whom is handicapped. He makes the fire to prepare the meals, and he goes to fetch the water down the hill. By foot, it takes about twenty minutes. With a heavy 5-litre container of water on top of his head, it takes longer.



* Pronounce: « Irengué »



One day, upon arriving at the well, he sees children gathered around someone who is reading them a book. One of them approaches Irengé: *“Hi! Are you joining us? We are Taporí children.”* Irengé says that he can’t; he has to carry the water back home. The boy tells him: *“We will get your water after. I will help you. My name is Basole. What’s your name? - I’m Irengé.”* Still unsure, he follows Basole.

He listens to the stories. Then they talk about the story together, play, sing, and at the end, Basole, helps him fill his water container. Irengé didn't say much. He was very timid! But still, he asks: *What does Taporí mean?* It means ***“Making friends with children all over the world.”***

Basole invites him to come along next Saturday at the same time. Now, every Saturday, Irengé joins the Taporí group. He always arrives early, but still he doesn’t say much.

One Saturday, he arrives with dirty clothes on, swollen feet and covered with sand flies*. To remove them, you have to pluck them off one by one with a pin. After the gathering, Malibu, one of the facilitators, offers to give Irengé some water to clean himself, and she washes his clothes while Bob, another facilitator, patiently removes the sand flies. It hurts a lot but Irengé grits his teeth and doesn’t complain at all during the two hours it takes to remove them all.

When he goes back home, his mother is happy that he is looking well. She is really touched when Irengé tells her the story of how Bob and Malibu took care of him.



The children from the Taporí group are amazed by Irengé’s courage: Going down and up in a muddy and slippery hill to get water; walking so many kilometres in all types of weather, sliding in the mud... What kind of life does their new friend lead? In fact, they don’t know much about him. One day, they decide to go and pay him a visit. On that day, there is heavy

rain and the mud is too slippery for them to go up there. The trip was postponed but not abandoned.

* sand flies : sand flies are parasites that can be found in sandy soils in tropical countries.