

Industry ‘Bridge Builder’ Dorothee Gizenga Dies



RAPAPORT... Dorothee Gizenga, a long-serving advocate for artisanal diamond miners, passed away of complications from diabetes on February 18 in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), aged 60.

Gizenga was instrumental in establishing the Diamond Development Initiative (DDI), which is now part of the Washington, DC-headquartered umbrella organization Resolve. She served as DDI's executive director from its inception in 2008 until 2019. However, her work in social upliftment within the diamond industry began years earlier, when the issue of conflict diamonds surfaced, and the Kimberley Process (KP) was established.

Partnership Africa Canada (PAC) had taken a central role as part of the KP's civil society coalition and needed a project officer, recalled Ian Smillie, who led PAC's work on conflict diamonds. Gizenga was hired in 2003 and took responsibility for the diamond file of PAC, a group of Canadian and African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that work to advance human rights, human security and sustainable development. She attended all KP meetings from the first in 2003 until the last in-person gathering before Covid-19 in 2019, initially representing PAC and later DDI, Smillie noted.

Recognizing that the development of the artisanal diamond-mining sector was not on the KP's agenda, PAC, along with other members of civil society, decided to create a framework for that purpose. While the DDI advertised for an executive director and received high-profile applicants from every continent, except Antarctica, according to

Smillie, Gizenga threw her hat in the ring at the last minute.

“She was the perfect candidate,” Smillie recalled. “A real go-getter, Dorothée had drive; she knew the industry and could communicate with people across all segments of the industry and society.”

Fluent in English, French, Russian, Portuguese and Lingala — spoken in parts of the DRC — she could effectively network within the corridors of the KP, but also with NGOs and members of the diamond trade.

Her work in advocating for the artisanal sector took on multiple functions, such as building programs and partnerships from which the DDI could strengthen communities and support responsible sourcing of artisanally mined diamonds. Examples include facilitating mobile schools for children of miners in the DRC and the creation of the Maendeleo Diamond Standards, which provide a framework for ethical artisanal mining production. Those were largely her ideas and ones she oversaw, Smillie explained.

Gizenga was also instrumental in establishing the working group for artisanal mining at the KP, and she took her message about the sector everywhere she could — gaining support from US, European, Australian, and African audiences, among others.

“She had a huge impact in demonstrating that the artisanal mining sector needed attention and the idea that development problems required development solutions,” Smillie stressed. Gizenga was influential across African governments and NGOs, international NGOs, large donors and industry, he added.

“She was a bridge builder between communities and interests that had never really thought much about each other or were even antagonistic toward each other,” he added.

Beyond the diamond industry, Gizenga cofounded the Canadian and African Business Women’s Alliance and helped establish the African Canadian Social Development Council. She was also a board member of the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund.

Gizenga was the daughter of Antoine Gizenga, a prominent politician in the DRC’s independence movement. Serving as deputy prime minister, he was jailed following the assassination of prime minister Patrice Lumumba, and the family was exiled in 1965, living for periods in France, Russia and Angola — an experience that helped forge her linguistic skills.

Having grown up among prominent African liberation leaders, Gizenga’s independent spirit and desire for education took her, alone as a refugee, to Canada, where she earned degrees in chemistry and economics, according to Resolve. She also gained a curiosity about the diamond and gem trade, having completed courses through the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) as recently as 2015, Smillie said.

She returned to the DRC in 2019, where she went into politics following her father's death in that year, aiming to reunify the party he had established.

“Dorothee Gizenga was as fearless as she was tireless in her pursuit of development and social Justice,” Resolve’s leadership concluded. “She will be greatly missed.”

Gizenga is survived by her son, André, in Toronto.

Gizenga received numerous awards for her work in development related to the diamond industry. The following video was presented as a tribute to her by Diamonds Do Good at the organization’s 2016 gala dinner.

Image: Dorothee Gizenga. (Diamonds Do Good/YouTube)