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Democratic Republic of the Congo, Education

Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo can be found on the west coast of Central Africa. It is the second-largest country in Africa. Despite the vast abundance of natural resources, however, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the second-poorest country in the world, at a GDP per capita of only \$773 (Burton, James). This is a result of the many conflicts that the nation has seen in its brief history as an independent nation. These conflicts have left the country having to deal with many issues like food insecurity, poor education, a weak economy, and an almost nonexistent infrastructure system. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has so much potential to be a major player in the world market, but it first has to overcome these problems that currently exist.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was first founded in 1885 under the name of the Congo Free State. It was held as a personal belonging of King Leopold II of the Belgians until it later was transformed into a Belgian colony in 1908. Belgian Congo finally gained full independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960. It was formerly known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Shortly after gaining independence, the government was overthrown by General Mobutu Sese Seko in 1965. This led to much political instability since Mobutu banned all other political parties. He renamed the country Zaire in order to create a more culturally united country. His reign ended in 1997 when he died in exile. His successor restored the name of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and led the country to where it is today (Lemarchand, René et al.).

The population of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as of the most recent estimates from the U.N., is 82,242,685 people ("Dr Congo Population."). The median age for a citizen of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is 18.3 years for males and 18.8 years for females. Only 43.5 percent of the population lives in an urban area, while the remaining 56.5 percent live in a rural area. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is governed under a semi-presidential system ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency"). This means that the nation has a president and a prime minister who collectively work on the legislature of the country (Elgie, Robert). The current president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is Joseph Kabila. However, this has led to more conflict since President Kabila's term officially ended on December 20, 2016. The next election has been pushed back to December in 2018, but could be pushed back even more (Stewart, Phil).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has a land area of 2,344,858 square km. This makes it the second-largest country in Africa and twelfth-largest in the world. Despite this great land area, only 11.4 percent of the land is used for agricultural uses, and 0.3 percent of the land is used for permanent crops ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency"). The average farm size is 1.5 hectares (3.7 acres) (*Global Growing Casebook*). For comparison, the average farm size in Nebraska is 934 acres (Network, University). The major crops and exports of the DRC are coffee, sugar, palm oil, rubber, tea, cotton, cocoa, quinine, cassava (manioc, tapioca), bananas, plantains, peanuts, root crops, corn, fruits, and wood

products. The climate of the country is varied, from being hot and humid in the central river basin to being cooler and drier in the southern highlands. The country is a vast central basin is a low-lying plateau with mountains in east ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency").

Family size in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is much larger than in the United States. The average fertility rate of women in the D.R.C. is 4.39 children per woman, compared to the United State's 1.87 children per woman. However, these children live in very poor conditions. 23.4 percent of the children under the age of 5 years are underweight. The average age children leave school is 9 years ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency"). The average annual income of a family is US\$422 (Said, Sammy). With school fees of US\$44, it is understandable why most kids leave school early. 75 percent of the funding for schools comes from these ordinary families who can't afford it (Brown, Gordon). This leads to a poor quality education for the few student who can afford to go to school. Another major calamity is that many Congolese people, an estimated 6.7 million, have to live without food ("UN World Food Programme"). The most common food consumed by the population is fufu, a white, pasty carbohydrate that lacks in many needed vitamins and minerals ("Culture Of Democratic Republic Of The Congo - History, People, Clothing, Women, Beliefs, Food, Customs, Family, Social"). Most food is cooked over a wood-fire, but some houses are lucky enough to have a fuel-burning stove (*Cooking In The Congo*). Housing is also a major problem. The cheapest house in the DRC sells for US \$40,000 and is about the size of 100 square meters ("Congo, Democratic Republic Of The - CAHF | Centre For Affordable Housing Finance Africa"). Because they are so expensive, most houses are built by hand. They are also lacking in many accessories that we take for granted. Along with poor education, minimal food, and a horrid house market, the Congolese people suffer due to poor infrastructure. 71.3 percent of the population lives with unimproved sanitation systems and only 9 percent have access to electricity. Of the 153,497 km of roadways, only 1.8 percent of them are paved. To top it all off, healthcare is commonly overlooked in the D.R.C. The government only spends about 4 percent of the total GDP on healthcare. There are only 9 physicians per 1,000 citizens and 0.8 hospital beds per 1,000 citizens ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency").

The government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo had spent 14.7 percent of the allocated budget on education. However, only 2.2 percent of the total GDP is spent on education ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency"). 3.5 million children at the primary school age are not in school. 44 percent of students start school late, after the age of six. Only 67 percent of all students are expected to complete sixth grade, but only 75 percent of students will pass the exit exam ("Education | Democratic Republic Of The Congo | U.S. Agency For International Development"). Only 77 percent of the population of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is literate ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency"). There are also many inequalities: rural compared to urban, richer families compared to poorer families, and male students compared to female students.

The trends seem to be improving. The percent of the budget spent on education has increased from 7.9 percent in 2012 to 14.7 percent in 2015 ("Education | Democratic Republic Of The Congo | U.S. Agency For International Development"). Now, there have been 20 million books distributed across the country. This is not quite enough, since books usually only last 4 years, but it is a great improvement (Albright, Alice). Another positive, the completion rate at the primary level has drastically increased from 29 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2014 ("Education In Democratic Republic Of Congo").

The most common incident that is tied with the failure of the education system is the inequality of wealth between the rich and the poor of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Children from the families that have plenty of money are able to get a longer-lasting education than the children from poorer families. Take Hubert Ilunga for example. He was an 18-year-old bus conductor working 12 hours a day and making only 3,000 Congolese Francs, or about US\$2.50, a day. He had to dropout of primary school when he was only seven years old (Maila, Héritier). This is just one of many different stories of families not being able to afford schooling and children dropping out to be left on the streets. In America, people know that schools are places of safety since the teachers are there to protect and assist students. Most of the children of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are not able to afford that luxury.

There are estimates that show that of the 3.5 million children that are not in school, 2.75 million of them are from rural areas ("Education In Democratic Republic Of Congo"). Also, since almost all rural areas have no access to electricity, this leads to students that live in more urban areas are more likely to get an improved education. From recent conflict, many schools have also been destroyed. This can lead to there being only one school for every five villages in the rural areas ("Education & Jobs"). Family sizes are way too large for one school to support this many villages. Attendance of primary schools in urban areas is at 86.4 percent while it is only 69.9 percent in rural areas ("Statistics").

There are also major differences between the quality of education between men and women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. According to the C.I.A. World Factbook, 88.5 percent of men are considered literate, while only 66.5 percent of women are considered literate. Another disparity is the fact that most women dropout of school at the age of eight years old, while men usually last until about ten years old ("The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency"). With so many of these families paying high amounts of money for school, it takes away that money which could be spent on food. However, when these families pay for food instead of school, the children do not get the education they need to get a high paying job and therefore cannot afford food.

The government has been very slow to help improve the education system in order to help the indigenous Pygmy people enter the schooling system. Another problem facing the Pygmy people is that their villages lack the infrastructure for state education. A shocking statistic is that only 18.7 percent of indigenous Pygmy children are enrolled in primary education, while the national average for enrollment is 56.1 percent. Furthermore, 30.5 percent of the indigenous people aged 15 and over are able to read and write, compared with 65 percent nationally (*NGO Report On Indigenous Pygmy Peoples*).

The education system in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has never been able to rapidly expand since the country has been in conflict for most of its existence. The full education system in the Democratic Republic of the Congo consists of multiple stages. The first stage is Ecole Maternelle, or Kindergarten. This lasts for three years and are attended by students from the ages 3 to 5, but it is not compulsory. The second stage, Ecole Primaire, is the same as our primary education. It lasts six years and is divided into three sections: preparatory, elementary, and medium class. All sections consist of two years. During the last year, students have to take the Secondary School Entrance Test to determine which school they can enter for the Secondary Level. The third stage is Ecole Secondaire. This stage is seven years long and consists of two parts. The first part, the college level, lasts four years and the second part,

the lycee level, lasts three years. College is the standard secondary education while lycee is broken down into three different focus groups. These groups are the Agricultural Lycee, the Technical Lycee, and the General Lycee. Agricultural lycee teaches students everything about agriculture. Technical lycee teaches students about economic, technology, engineering and others. General lycee includes French language, Foreign Languages, Philosophy, Mathematics, Physics, Biology and Earth Science ("The Education System In Congo").

While the system seems to be in good shape, the execution of it is where problems start to arise. There are many issues when trying to get students into the school system. As previously stated, 3.5 million children that are in the primary school age are not in school and of the students that do make it through all of primary school, only 75 percent of those students will pass the exam that allows them to enter the secondary level of school. Since these students are not able to reap the rewards of education, they are set up for failure because they will not have the knowledge to obtain a successful job. This leads to more homeless people, a poorer economy, and an uneducated populace.

The government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is aware of the problems in their education sector and are trying to fix them. However, the government does not have a large enough budget in order to give the education sector the money that it needs. One solution to this problem is by improving the infrastructure throughout the country. This would allow the government to be able to increase the rate at which it exports goods, leading to more money for the country that could be invested into the existing departments like healthcare and education. With more funding for education, it would lessen the burden on the families that have to pay for school and give the opportunity of a cheaper education for all children. Since the families would be paying less for school, it would also allow them to buy more food and help slowly end malnourishment. Also, since more children will be obtaining an education, they will then be able to get a higher-paying job and that would also help fund the government through taxes.

However, the problem with this solution is that, as previously stated, the government does not make enough money to overhaul the infrastructure system without taking money that would be used for other departments. A way to fix the infrastructure is to use the natural resources that it has as leverage to get foreign companies to build the necessary roads. The Democratic Republic of the Congo sits on an estimated \$24 trillion worth of natural resources (Rotsky, Nikita). The government could take construction of roads and other forms of infrastructure as payment for the resources that certain companies could extract from the land. While allowing these foreign companies to mine for resources in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the government runs the risk of severely harming the natural environment. For example, the government of South Africa has always had weak regulations on coal mining. The leachate that leaks from the giant waste heaps is very acidic and seriously affects the acid mine drainage impact as well as surface and groundwater. It is also predicted that if South Africa keeps to its ways, the rivers will begin to run red, most water will be undrinkable, and most vegetation on land and sea will likely die off due to the acidification of the soil after about a century (Munnik, Victor). If the Democratic Republic of the Congo wants to follow this strategy, it needs to make sure that it is managed well in order to prevent these serious environmental problems.

Another solution to the education would be to have non-governmental organizations (NGOs) take over education until the government is able to develop a more sustainable economy. The benefits to this

strategy is the the government would not have to change how much money it already spends on education or other departments in the government since the rest of the cost would be supplemented by the NGOs. Without the strain of education on the economy, the government could then try to start building its own infrastructure and then begin exporting more goods to jumpstart its economy. Many systems of NGO education are already being implemented throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Edukans is a Dutch development organization that is working with the Salvation Army and other NGOs in order to train new teachers to give lessons in an active way, which increases the pupil's learning outcomes. This coalition is trying to implement the program into three teacher training colleges and 12 schools in the country ("The Turing Foundation - Projects In D.R. Congo"). While NGOs are very helpful, they also have problems of their own. One problem is that the people who donate money usually aren't fully aware of what the actual problems are. They think that their money will fix everything while it only gives a little nudge up. Once the money is gone, the problems will usually return (Sthresley, Lisa). If the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo wants to avoid these problems, it should help explain to the NGOs as well as the donors where the money needs to go. Since the government would show these organizations the direction they should go, it would allow the NGOs to become more efficient in helping to educate the children. If these strategies could be implemented into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the people of the country would start to see the benefits of what a good education system. The extra income would also lead to the improvement of other sectors in the government.

While it is impossible to get a completely perfect education system, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has much to improve upon in order to get its system to the top. The government, once it is finally able to stabilize its economy and get an increased cash flow, will be able to drastically improve and fund the education system and allow the families to not have to carry so much of the burden. Once quality education is achieved in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the country will be able to rise out of the ashes of its past and help propel the world economy into the future.

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