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The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Infrastructure

## **An Approach to Uplift the Democratic Republic of the Congo through the Building of Infrastructure**

In 1885, Belgium seized the Congo for exploitative access to ivory, minerals, and, most importantly, rubber. Although Belgium's pretext for colonization was to uplift and civilize the Congolese, they truly were there in order to gain opportunity in the rubber trees that populated the region. Congolese children were kidnapped by colonial officials, mutilated, and murdered if their villages failed to meet their quotas of rubber. King Leopold II's oppressive Belgian regime in the Congo was not ended until 1960, when the Congo finally won its independence (Rannard). However, almost a century of horrific enslavement and forced labor left the Congolese without a stable government or infrastructure. In the first few years of independence, the political scene was wracked by coups, political crises, and assassinations ("Patrice Lumumba"). Today, the government is still too weak to protect its people from the Allied Democratic Forces (a branch of ISIS that systematically attacks Congolese civilians), create a cohesive education and healthcare system, or elicit the building of paved roads that would interconnect the regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo ("Democratic Republic of the Congo – United States Department of State"). Declared a Level 3 Emergency by the United Nations, the country's food insecurity has risen by 400% in the past nine years ("The DRC Crisis, Explained"). The issues of the Congo, including incredible food insecurity and low wages for those who do have the opportunity of employment, can all be traced back to the lack of infrastructure, a problem that continues to plague the 94 million people who live in the third poorest country in the world.

To understand the demographics and societal structure of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is important to look at it in comparison to another country – more specifically, the US. For example, in the Congo, 45.6% of the population lives in an urban setting, while 54.4% live rurally ("DR Congo Population"). If one compares this to the US's 82.8% urban and 17.2% rural, it is evident that the typical way of life for a Congolese native is quite isolated ("United States Population"). This makes paved roads incredibly important to connect the people of the Congo. However, a lack of infrastructure now presents itself as a problem: in the 905,600 square miles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are only about 1,400 miles of paved road ("The DRC Crisis, Explained"). To put it into perspective, New York State, with only 54,556 square miles, has 16,000 miles of paved road. Additionally, as most Congolese live rurally, it is typical to live on a farm. Almost everyone relies on subsistence farms, each family owning the equivalent of about three football fields of land ("Congo"). The problem with subsistence farms is that they can generally only (and many times barely) support the family (each averaging about 5 members) who it belongs to, and thus they have no surplus that they can sell and at the same time are not making any money to use in the market ("Democratic Republic of Congo"). This stagnates the economy. There is some commercial farming in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the form of export-oriented plantations, but the problems that arise from this are due to the fact that the crops grown are not necessarily ones that can be used in a diet. The major cash crops of the Congo are coffee, rubber, palm oil, cotton, sugar, tea, and cocoa ("Congo"). These are the crops being cultivated on commercial plantations, and because they are not diet staples, the people of the Congo are not able to really benefit from them being grown. Even if one does not have a subsistence farm and works on a commercial plantation, they will not have access to the food they need nutrition-wise because the subsistence farms do not make enough to mass-produce for the public consumption. Also, lack of transportation systems and the prevalence of the Allied Democratic Forces (mentioned briefly above) makes it near-impossible to ship goods to places that might need them the most ("Democratic Republic of the Congo – United States Department of State"). These terrorist groups and ethnic infighting have caused a significant amount of

displacement and fear that needs to be taken into consideration when contemplating the building of transportation. Not only would vehicles containing food possibly be intercepted by these groups, but the roads built could be used by these extremist groups to reach and possibly upend the lives of even more Congolese families already suffocating in malnutrition and poverty. Even if there was food available to be bought, a typical employed person makes the equivalent of \$1.90 per day (“Democratic Republic of Congo: Overview”). Subsistence farms, also, are small and therefore diets are limited. Foods are carbohydrate-heavy with cassava in every meal. Congolese typically get their protein and fat from peanuts and palm oil, and on special occasions (and if it can be afforded), chicken, goat meat, and fish (“Customs & Cuisine of the Democratic Republic of the Congo”). For these reasons, 43% of Congolese children under the age of 5 have significantly stunted growth as a result of malnutrition (“Democratic Republic of Congo”). Similarly to a lack of a transportation system affecting food insecurity is the lack of a healthcare and education system that just as equally adds to the problems that the typical Congolese face every day. 12% of men, for example, are illiterate, along with 36% of women (“Democratic Republic of Congo”). Without education, there is no way jobs can be created and the country can be uplifted out of poverty. Engineers and doctors in the Congo are scarce; there is only one physician for every 14,000 people (“Customs & Cuisine of the Democratic Republic of the Congo”). The Democratic Republic of the Congo has one of the highest birthrates and one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world (“Democratic Republic of Congo”). Coupled with this, there are limited employment opportunities, which essentially forces many to stay or become subsistence farmers, locking themselves in poverty.

I believe it is possible, however, to turn around the poor hand with which the Congo has been dealt. Based on the weak government that the Congo historically has, it is evident that foreign aid would truly make all the difference in uplifting the country and its citizens and combatting food insecurity. The first thing that must be done is the construction of roads, railroad systems, and airports that can transport goods and food. These modes of transportation would more centrally connect the Democratic Republic of the Congo and allow for the movement of people, creating easier access to water, education, work opportunities, and nutritional food and meat. For example, the United States of America’s Interstate Highway System, an east-to-west transcontinental highway, makes transportation of goods and people simple, which also stimulates and strengthens the economy, and thus the nation itself (“Interstate Highway System”). Subsistence farmers would be able to use these roads for greater access to markets, where surplus food could be sold for a profit. This would not only help alleviate poverty but also improve food security for themselves and others. If the Democratic Republic of the Congo had a central road that ran through the country, connecting towns and villages with distribution centers, schools, employment opportunities, and commercial farms, many of their issues regarding lack of infrastructure would be solved. In the United States of America, for example, the Interstate Highway System was created partly because it was deemed as a “defense” strategy against the Soviet Union during the days of the Cold War. In this way, the cost of the Interstate Highway System was partially paid for by defense funds because of the roads’ possible use in the future to defend the country (“Interstate Highway System”). Foreign aid in this endeavor would be almost necessary, as having an ambassador from a country who has undergone a project like this would be crucial, such as someone from the United States who could help oversee and guide the process of potentially giving out federal bonds to large companies that are in charge of the exporting of cash crops. However, it must be noted that, even for the United States of America, the road was hard to pay for. Tolls were created in order to raise money for the upkeep of the roads. This could potentially be an option for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but diverting money from the government’s spending budget would be an option friendlier to the impoverished and many times moneyless families that the roads would be aiding. It would also be important to gain political support for this plan, as it could not be carried out without the politicians of the Democratic Republic of the Congo being willing to work with the United States of America.

Another internal improvement that is desperately needed by the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a law that dictates that on commercial plantations, there must be a certain amount of crops or goods saved

for within the country for every amount they export. This would solve a lot of problems; it would not only employ more people who would be able to make real wages they could spend to stimulate the economy, but it would also allow for a greater circulation of intranational trade and products that the typical Congolese family could benefit from. The exports of the country will mostly benefit the owners of the plantations; these raw materials such as cocoa and rubber will in no way benefit a family that cannot even afford enough food to feed their numerous children. This law would make sure that export-oriented plantations would have a certain number of acres set aside that would grow food to be sold for the people of the Congo and that would stimulate the movement of money and goods within the country itself, breaking the cycle of vast exporting with little importing that solely benefits plantation owners and the companies in charge of certain products. A downfall to this would be that wages would still be so incredibly meager that it may not make enough of an impact on the economy and on the people themselves. They still may not be able to afford high-nutrient food and at a quantity that is necessary, and they most likely will not be able to afford to send their children away to school and to a college to become the next generation's engineers and doctors, of which only 9% of men and 4% of women have the opportunity to do so, in comparison to the 90% of Americans who have this opportunity ("Democratic Republic of Congo", Bureau). Therefore, commercial enterprises that reside in the Congo in order to exploit the lucrative crops that are grown there must give wages regulated by the government. With this, unfortunately, comes the inescapable truth that none of this is possible unless the government *wants* it to be. Thus, it would be beneficial if an outside company, or maybe even a non-profit and potentially even the locals and the farmers, backed one politician that promised to mandate portions of products to stay in domestic circulation and regulate wages. Non-profit organizations within the Democratic Republic of the Congo can rally support of subsistence farmers and wage workers, both of whom would benefit from more food available for consumption and higher wages that can help lift families out of the cycle of poverty. In fact, there are already grassroots organizations that are working to increase the wealth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. One such organization is known as the Foundation for International Community Assistance, otherwise known as FINCA. This organization works to create brick-and-mortar access to banks for hundreds of rural families who would normally never have access to one due to their geographical location ("Financial Inclusion: FINCA"). Another organization currently working to improve the quality of life in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is called Action Against Hunger. By broadening Congolese access to clean and uncontaminated water, healthcare that encompass both the physical and psychological needs of the people, and information about nutrition, they are lowering mortality and malnutrition rates ("Democratic Republic of Congo: Hunger Relief in Africa"). Unfortunately, while these organizations are changing many lives, the impact could never be as great as it could possibly be if the government was willing to step in and make a change. In stimulating the economy with higher wages and domestic product circulation, Congolese families across the country would be able to provide for themselves proper nutrition. This will improve standard of living, improve education opportunities, and ultimately lower the percentage of children with stunted growth who suffer from malnutrition and lower the number of children under the age of five that will die, an alarmingly high number at 10.4% ("Democratic Republic of Congo").

From the very beginning of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a nation independent from Belgium, the country has seen incredibly hard times. From the mutilated, handless Congolese children of the Belgian rule to the malnourished, starving Congolese children of today, it is clear that while some things have changed, others have not (Rannard). The Democratic Republic of the Congo supplies the world with crops such as sugar, cocoa, tea, and coffee, goods not even necessary for daily life, while the people growing these crops do not even have access to food containing the proper nutrients, medical care, education, electricity, or a better lifestyle ("Congo"). There is hope for the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and while organizations such as the United Nations and the World Food Prize Foundation would find the Democratic Republic of the Congo in great need of foreign aid, the real change must come from within the country, spearheaded by a government with the support of foreign aid and by commercial enterprises held accountable for providing jobs and wages that allow the people of the

Democratic Republic of the Congo to enjoy the human rights of education, medical aid, and, most importantly, always having access to safe, nutritious, and enough food.

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