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Democratic Republic of the Congo, Factor 20: Farm to Market

### **Democratic Republic of the Congo: No Reason to Grow**

Across the United States, millions of families choose to have small backyard gardens every year. While these gardens are usually not meant for profit, they do produce fresh food and enjoyment for the family. Americans are willing and able to grow gardens because of the political stability and wealth the country enjoys. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this is not necessarily the case. Unlike American families, which usually have one or two children, families in the DRC often have four or five kids, meaning there are more mouths to feed (Democratic). Because of a broken education system, many have no choice but to become subsistence farmers, farm coffee, or work in the mining industry. If the family owns a farm or garden, it will most likely be large enough only to grow food for the family and perhaps sell small amounts of produce. However, farming is not necessarily a profitable industry. While it employs around three quarters of the nation, and almost all of the nation's women (Agriculture) it is almost impossible to make a living through the profession. A 2012 estimate suggests that around sixty three percent of Congolese may be living under the poverty line (Democratic), and it is fair to assume that many of those people are employed either in the agriculture or mining industries. With coffee and sugar representing the main crops (Democratic), gardening of other crops and vegetables has to be done in order to provide a family with truly edible, life sustaining foods. Because of the poverty of such areas, access to education and health care is lacking. Families who intend to plant gardens or crops know that conflict may uproot them and others may reap the rewards of their labor. Those who live in rural areas are painfully aware of the lack of passable roads to bring their crops to market. For those living in refugee areas or other places reached by international aid, it is much easier simply to rely on those organizations for help rather than invest time and money into a garden. Because farming is seen as futile, potential farmers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have no incentive to grow food.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo suffers a conflict-ridden history. After gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, a struggle for power began that utilized force and glorified the leaders (Payanzo). Because of this, the people of the DRC received few benefits from their new government. Their roads continued to deteriorate, and the economy continued to struggle. Mobutu, president for over twenty years, focused more on returning to the cultural authenticity of the country rather than improving it (Payanzo). His rule was often based more on benefitting those who were friends with the government rather than the people as a whole. The country desperately needed, and still needs, a vast improvement to the roads and communication systems, but never received these due to a preoccupied government. The conflict did not stop after Mobutu became president, however. Other groups, even some international, kept the conflict going throughout the last decades of the twentieth century. Finally, a civil war erupted around the turn of the twenty-first century that devastated the country (Payanzo). In fact, the fighting has involved so many countries and become so severe that some hail the DRC as the site of "Africa's World War" (Country Profile). Over three million had died, and the country was in no place to sustain those left. The government could not control the entire country, and fighting continued in the east regions. The war had annihilated the infrastructure of the DRC and the economy had been hit hard as well. Even though international aid organizations tried to help, remnants of the fighting often forced both the Congolese and the aid workers to flee. Unfortunately, the fighting has never truly ended, and conflict remains an issue to this day (Payanzo). Those living in the easternmost regions of the country still fear rape and death from military groups in the area (Country Profile). For a family, keeping each other safe and away from the conflict becomes first priority. Many know that they may not be able to stay in one location long because of the fighting. While in other circumstances families would plant their own gardens, the realization that they may quickly have to leave makes it futile to invest the time and money into growing their own food.

As Dr. J. Peter Pham stated, "If I'm a Congolese, I'm not going to plant, hoe, weed and do all that back-breaking work for the next six months if I have a reasonable fear that in three months I might be running for my life - or if I'm not running, that a marauding gang, or for that matter, marauding government troops, are likely to eat my crop for me." (McCluskey). The possibility of the food they worked hard to grow being eaten by their enemies is enough to discourage planting. As a result, much of the arable land lays empty and is subject to erosion which may cause soil fertility problems for future farmers. Conflict creates issues in agriculture both today and in the future.

The constant fighting and political unrest has also led to deteriorating roads. As the government focused more and more on itself and less on the people, the infrastructure fell into disrepair (Payanzo). In such a poor area, none of the citizens had the money or the equipment to fix the roads themselves. The lack of roads makes it hard for aid to reach the people, and also for the government to reach the areas where fighting is still occurring and put an end to it. Perhaps the largest issue, however, is that local farmers cannot bring their produce to a large market easily. While a garden can grow fresh vegetables that can sustain a family for a couple months, farmers need money to be able to buy clothing, school books, and food. Being unable to bring their produce to market drastically lowers the incentive farmers have to grow crops. Buying the seeds and putting in the labor takes valuable time and money, and if they cannot earn money doing so, why would they do it? Local markets are often flooded with the exact same goods, forcing producers to accept prices well below a fair market price. Somewhere around 75% of those living in the DRC are trying to make a living through agriculture, meaning millions of people are trying to sell identical products ("10"). Farmers long to bring their produce to a larger, more differentiated market, but due to impassable roads, this is often impossible. For those living in the cities, this often means that food cannot reach them. Those living in urban slums, who lack the space to grow their own food, often cannot find fresh foods because rural farmers are not bringing it to their markets. Often, the cheapest food available in urban areas is junk food, providing calories but not vitamins and minerals necessary for a healthy life. Over a lifetime, this can lead to malnutrition even though the people may be technically receiving enough calories. While those living in the countryside may still be able to grow enough for their family, those living in the cities are often left hungry because they can neither grow food nor buy it. If a family only grows one variety of crop, lacking access to a market means the family only has that one crop to eat, which may lead to nutrient deficiencies and stunted growth. Every storm or rainfall a dirt road endures makes the conditions even worse as parts of the road begin to erode or are covered over in vegetation or debris from the storm. Every day is making this situation worse; the roads are deteriorating and the people are becoming more and more malnourished. Rural farmers want to sell, and urban residents want to buy, but the lack of infrastructure makes it impossible for these deals to occur.

As a result of the lack of food and money, international aid often comes to the DRC. Groups like the UN and World Food Programme provide food, clothing, and other basic needs to the Congolese people. While they are providing much needed help and often keep people from dying of starvation, the help also discourages people from growing their own food (McCluskey). If westerners are always there to help, why would they spend their own time and money growing food? Especially in times of conflict, when the people know they may have to move quickly, knowing that aid will come lowers the incentive for people to work the land themselves. This is an especially complex problem; hoping the people will be able to farm for themselves is not a reasonable justification for taking away the supply of food being brought into the country. When conflict arises and people have to flee their homes, they desperately need the aid to keep from dying of starvation. However, after they are able to stay in one place for an extended period of time, there has to be a weaning process. The western aid is necessary and does great things in times of peril. When the conflict ends, however, the people will have to live without aid. If they get used to always receiving food from others, they may struggle to produce it themselves once the aid has to leave. If food is not available and a family lacks money, some may turn to prostitution or other means of getting money that are less than beneficial for them and the community. Money becomes an issue for the aid organizations as well. It is costly to provide food and ship it overseas to Africa, and many organizations

rely on donors who pay attention only when there is risk of a major famine. Wealthy countries, such as the United States, tend to only prioritize aid when the peril of life in third world countries makes the news, when in reality each day is a struggle. As situations like these become more long term, it is harder to keep raising the funds for continued aid to these areas. While aid is very helpful and often necessary, it can become difficult to continue with the same results as time goes on. Perhaps instead of providing things like food and clothing up front, international groups could teach refugees trades and then reward their work with what they need. This way, the people learn a skill they can use even after the aid is gone, and the help is not seen as “free”. World Food Programme has tried this, but it has not been entirely successful (McCluskey). The attitude towards aid may need to change before this method can be fully implemented.

My suggestion for large international aid organizations is to teach each family in a community how to grow a different nutrient-rich crop. Because it is hard to know how long an aid organization can stay in one area, it is vital that they have an easily and quickly achievable goal. Hopefully, one afternoon would be enough to equip a family with the knowledge and seeds to grow one variety of cereal or vegetable. In the short term, the community can then trade with each other and everyone ends up having a variety of healthy foods. As time passes, families should then trade their knowledge so that everyone learns how to grow many different types of grains and vegetables. This way, in case of conflict where everyone has to flee, the families will at least be able to bring their knowledge of gardening with them. Also, as they become more accustomed to eating a variety of foods, the family will become healthier, allowing them to work harder, make more money, and potentially pay for the education of their children. While this does not help those living in urban areas, it reduces the need for rural farmers to make long, dangerous treks across horrible roads to larger markets. Hopefully, as the communities become healthier and more self-sufficient, they could begin to work on the roads around their area. If every community made an effort to create passable roads near their village, the road system could become much better without the need of help from the national government. In a few generations, we could see the DRC becoming a much more prosperous nation due to today’s families being educated about gardening.

Through a variety of situations, farming is often seen as futile in the DRC. Whether families know that they cannot stay in the same place for long, they cannot get their produce to market, or international aid groups will give them food, there is simply no incentive for them to try to grow their own food. While short term solutions can be found to keep the Congolese from starving, the end goal has to be to end conflict in the area. When peace rules the DRC, the country can begin to focus on improving its infrastructure and economy rather than fight wars. Once the road system allows farmers a way to transport their produce to a larger market, agriculture will experience a revolution in the country. Knowing they could sell their food would bring back the incentive for the citizens to grow their own food and take it to market. As farmers and people in rural areas begin to make more money, the education system will improve as families no longer need their children in the fields. From there, poverty begins to lose the fight. Kids can go to college, learn skilled trades, and bring themselves out of poverty. The national government should focus first on reducing conflict and fighting, and then on improving infrastructure so that farmers can sell their crops. In order to prevent perfect competition among farmers, communities can organize amongst themselves to make sure everyone is growing something different. This allows each farmer to receive the maximum price possible for his good. As farmers barter with each other, it also encourages the people of the community to eat a variety of produce and therefore consume different nutrients than they may normally consume. On a family level, education should be prioritized, especially for women and children. Education is the key to escaping poverty, and is the greatest gift parents can give their children. Although each level works independently, together, the DRC could be on a path to a brighter, fuller future.

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