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Research that supports Increased Life Sustainability through Increasing Access to Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Hunger and conflict have plagued the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for the past twenty-five years. The DRC was ranked 5th of 178 countries on the 2019 Fragile States Index (The Fund for Peace, 2019). To put this into perspective, the DRC has a population of almost 80 million people with 80% of its citizens under the international poverty line, living off of \$1.25 per day (Keysa, 2018). Studies have shown that the lack of human development indicators (health, education, and access to resources) is widespread within the DRC, validating the fact that poverty is a mass phenomenon. This common situation of extreme poverty within the DRC does not discriminate against age or sex. The repeated cycle of destitution from generation to generation continues to keep children out of school. Currently, 7 million children from the ages of 5 to 17 are not receiving primary education (UNICEF DRC Oatway, 2020). Being that the DRC is the second-largest country in Africa and has access to an abundance of natural resources, it has potential to improve its country, more specifically its education system and policies.

There are many other organizations that support increased education in the DRC as a means to improve the quality of living within the country and have gone to fund programs. USAID and the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID) jointly funded a five-year education program in hopes that its results like increased literacy outcome and job availability and retention within the DRC's education system will improve the DRC's government (USAID, 2019). Their program is targeted to improve the reading outcome of 1.5 million children. Its program's effectiveness also relies on creating a safe school environment by training teachers, administration, and parents on sensitive pedagogy, children's socio-emotional well-being, and on how to assess safety and security at the school (USAID, 2019). In addition to USAID and DfID, UNICEF and GPE also aim to strengthen the current educational opportunities within the DRC. UNICEF's focus on national policy aims to reduce the number of children not in school through the implementation of free school measures and a curriculum reform package. UNICEF's program also relies on creating a safe and conducive learning environment for attending children (UNICEF DRC Oatway, 2020). GPE has a very similar approach to UNICEF when it comes to improving education in the DRC. The GPE has invested over \$100 million dollars into the two most impoverished provinces of the DRC in an effort to

increase the quality of primary level school education, specific tactics include increasing funding for textbooks, improving the quality of learning, instilling teacher training, and strengthening the management of the school. The work done by GPE has resulted in commitment by the DRC's government to maintain education as a priority (Albright, 2015). Cordaid is another organization that has invested millions of dollars into primary level education in the DRC. Their three year plan from 2018-2021 will improve the lives of more than half a million girls and boys. The technical assistance agency will approach their goal through applying performance based financing (PBF). PBF is a system where mutually agreed benchmarks by the key stakeholders in the educational chain are applied to the newly funded schools in the DRC. Through this program, Cordaid will be improving education in 12 of the 26 DRC provinces (Cordaid, 2018).

One might be asking why organizations are contributing millions of dollars towards educational facilities and education policy reform versus advertising the environmental crisis, building new infrastructure, increasing industry, or funding peace troops for areas of conflict. This is because countless organizations and studies like the ones listed above have copious amounts of research that support education as the key to break free from poverty.

Improving policies regarding the DRC education system would have a positive holistic impact on its society. The International Monetary Fund (2007) conducted a study on the DRC that analyzed strategies that could reduce its poverty rate. The study discussed education as one of the possible solutions to decrease widespread poverty by first developing the idea that victims of conflict are vulnerable people. In many cases, these affected citizens become displaced and food insecure, some being forced off of their land and possibly into some type of armed anti-government militia. The International Monetary Fund (2007) goes on to explain that the reason the victims of conflict cannot leave this awful cycle is because of their lack of education. Without education, these affected citizens do not have the knowledge or means to seek justice for their rights. Throughout the study, the International Monetary Fund further develops its stance as to why education gives life stability. The International Monetary Fund created a sociodemographic characteristics chart with joint analyses by the World Bank, Afristat, and UPPE; the chart supports that as the head of the household's education improves, the living conditions improve. This conclusion supports the fact that the DRC's concentration of poverty lies within households headed by people who do not possess high levels of education. This research shows that not only does education have the ability to directly improve one's socioeconomic situation, but it also gives people the knowledge needed to escape or approach difficult situations.

Education offers citizens of the DRC a gateway out of poverty. With the initiation of the policy change and increased access to learning resources, the literacy rate will improve as well as the average capacity in which a citizen can comprehend values and ideas (Hartly, Horne, & Australian Council for Adult Literacy, 2006). Hartly, Horne, and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (2006) examine the link between literacy levels and their economic and social outcomes. Their research supports that increased literacy levels have both economic and social benefits. Charles Wheelan (2010), the economist, also supports that economic and social benefits can result from a person having higher education. Because when a person has education, it adds to their human capital. Human capital is the idea that a person's intangible qualities like education, charisma, creativity, and valued talents can put them ahead of others in life. Obtaining higher education gives a person a larger skillset which will result in the ability to fulfill more jobs within one's community. Education also has the ability to enable a person to think more critically. The research of both Hartly, Horne, and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (2006) and Charles Wheelan (2010) is validated by Biesta (2006). Biesta (2006) explains how life long learning is seen as capital through understanding that one's knowledge is an investment in economic development.

Solving some of the social and economic problems through higher education would not only bring more citizens above the poverty line, but with education offering this new opportunity to make more income, the new generation of citizens would have the resources to contribute back to the country. This would create a more stable society because individuals with more education indicate a decrease in the lack of human development indicators (International Monetary Fund, 2007). The new generation of individuals with higher education could use their wealth of knowledge to develop businesses, creating more access to jobs; this would decrease one of the main causes of global poverty in DRC (Concern Worldwide U.S., 2019). In hopes of lifting the remaining citizens in the DRC out of poverty, the new influx of money coming into the DRC from the new businesses could be used for a range of other reforms and projects: creating environmentally-conscious programs, building new infrastructure, and increasing availability to clean water. All these changes that could happen through the incorporation of education would lead to longer-term sustainability for the citizens of the DRC.

The incorporation of education through national policy would have the most widespread effect on citizens (Winthrop, Greubel, & Ackerman, 2013). Policies would aim to outline the importance of education and decrease the number of students out of school in hopes of increasing reading outcomes in the DRC. To have maximum effectiveness, the new policies

would have to be coupled with the implementation of free schooling with trained administration, targeted benchmarks, a peace centered curriculum, and a safe and conducive learning environment. The success of these implications is validated by similar education programs already placed in the DRC by USAID, DfID, UNICEF, GPE, and Cordaid. These specific implementations would be used to combat the DRC's main barriers against education: poverty, gender inequality, expensive schooling, sexual violence, and conflict and displacement (Educate A Child, 2013).

Access to free primary school has succeeded in improving enrollment significantly, but the retention rate is low (Epstein & Yuthas, 2012). With most of the country under the poverty line, free tuition appears as a very appealing option for families who cannot afford the expensive tuition of normal schooling. Although tuition is free, other fees like transportation, food, and uniforms, are still too expensive for poor families to pay. In addition to these fees, students are doing an economic trade-off when they attend school: in exchange for an education, they are not working a job that would earn their family money. Additional fees coupled with the loss in possible economic income are both factors that contribute to low retention (Epstein & Yuthas, 2012). Low retention could be combated by creating policies that advocate for children to attend primary school as well as stress the importance and benefits of education (International Rescue Committee, 2017). The focus on the importance of school could open up citizen's perspectives by explaining how education is an economic investment. Over the years, The Fund for Peace (2019) has moved the DRC up on the list of countries with economic improvement. If the DRC continues the trend of putting education as a priority, more citizens will be educated, including girls which will lower the gender inequalities. The country's future will also be filled with more businesses and citizens will have increased job accessibility. Skilled citizens will have to fill those jobs, and the only way they will be able to do that is through education. Another way to combat low retention is to specifically target students who do not attend school, usually living in the most rural areas. This improves accountability at the provincial level (USAID, 2019). Policies and education governance that advocate for children attending school have the potential to sustain primary school enrollment.

A peace centered curriculum spreads the culture of peace within schools, trickling to communities (Kim, 2019). The peace centered curriculum invests in a future free of conflict by turning the students' traumatic experiences into learning experiences. To avoid the recurrence of a traumatic experience, students are taught ideals of understanding, compromise, and reconciliation. Instilling these ideals are preventative measures that the youth can incorporate into their lives, avoiding the possibility of violence and war. Through education, students can be

taught to avoid conflict which is one of the main contributing factors to poverty within the DRC.

A safe and conducive learning environment is an implication that could be shaped to fit the specific needs of any community. Because the DRC is a war-torn country, many of the students will have experienced being displaced or sexually assaulted. Curating an ideal learning environment with trained staff administrators that are aware of the students' experiences will not only encourage children to come to school because it is a place that offers them the resources they need and accepts them, but it also creates an encouraging setting for improved literacy rates. Studies conducted by both (Hartly, Horne, & Australian Council for Adult Literacy (2006), Charles Wheelan (2010), and Biesta (2006) support that improved literacy rates would help citizens in the DRC escape social and economic problems.

The DRC has the ability to lift its country out of poverty. Through the joint implication of free school, a peace centered curriculum, and an ideal learning environment in conjunction with policies advocating for students to stay in school, education gives a holistic approach to tackling the most pressing problems within the DRC. Because of the plethora of opportunities education offers, its application satisfies sustainable development goal number four on the United Nations (2019). Education can lead the way towards economic stability, establishing the skills needed to work a higher paying job, the knowledge needed to escape difficult situations, and the values needed to avoid conflict. These adversities that education can overcome shows that education is not only life-sustaining, but it is also life-saving.

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