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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Economic Stability, the Foundation of Infrastructure, and Nation-wide Peace Initiatives as Means of Improving Food Security

Introduction

As displayed through the rise and fall of seemingly unwavering states, countries, and empires, abstractions continue to be the conclusive root of revolution. Deemed as the direct cause of change, ideas have both inspired movements for exploration, innovation, and spiritual and scientific enlightenment, while also those of retaliation, hatred, and war. Like a virus, ideas pronounced by corrupt dignitaries poison the minds of innocent peoples, blinded by lies of hope in political, social, and economic renewal. It is such that plagues the long struggling Democratic Republic of the Congo, a nation tortured and mutilated by foreign intruders and, more importantly, itself.

Centrally located in the heart of Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the second largest country in the continent and the eleventh largest in the world. It is currently the fourth most populous in Africa, with a population of roughly 75.5 million (growing 3% annually) and is also the fourteenth most populous in the world. The Congo, or DRC, is now a democratic country with eleven provinces and French as its official language, due to colonization by Belgium in the 1870's, in addition to local languages, such as Swahili. The Congo contains a stretch of 25 miles (40 kilometers) of Atlantic coastline and is surrounded by the Central African Republic and the Republic of South Sudan in the north; in the east by Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania (separated by Lake Tanganyika); Zambia and Angola in the south; and the Republic of the Congo to the west. Running through the country is the Congo River (Central).

The Congo, in all its vastness, is a fertile land of minerals, crops, and other precious resources. Having a lush, tropical climate, with a central low-lying plateau, and mountains in the east, the DR Congo is a precious paradise, threatened minimally by a looming volcano in the east. It contains nearly 30% of the world's diamond reserves, 80% of the world's cobalt ore (high in demand by the United States for production of cellular devices), 70% of the world's coltan (material used in capacitors), and multitudes of others, including gold, tin, copper, etc. (Wikipedia). Despite the abundance of natural wealth, it is estimated that of the country's population, 70% are in poverty. Malnutrition affects the lives of two-thirds of the Congolese population. 5.2 million children in the DRC receive no education as a result of the 6 year civil war (U.S Department). As of 2000, 39.8% of children 10-14 years of age were working to financially support their families. Foreign businesses that could provide work placement for Congolese natives have failed to maintain a presence in the Congo due to the unknown directional paths of the on-going conflict in the north and in the east and a lack of national infrastructure on the most primitive scale.

"Although the country has great agricultural potential and plentiful resources, more than 70 percent of its population remains poor. An estimated 6.4 million people are in acute

and livelihood food security crisis as of June 2013. Since 2009, some 2.6 million people have been displaced, predominantly in the east." (World Food)

Also, 4.4 million are affected by food insecurity in the eastern regions of the country, where necessary food and supplies are sometimes unavailable or are used by the military. Millions are displaced throughout the country or have migrated due to conflict, away from their homes and farms. With farmers and foreign and local businesses yearning to tap the country's great fertility of natural resources, they are met with the challenges of not only the seemingly never-ending conflict, but with that of a lack of transportation and finances for bringing in equipment vital to their successes.

Background

Congo, in its recent tumultuous history, has been given four titles, confirming the country's existence and lack of continued stability: Congo Free State, Belgian Congo, Congo/Leopoldville, Congo/Kinshasa, and most recently Zaire. Dating back to the 15th Century, to what is commonly referred to as the beginning of the Age of Exploration or the Age of Discovery, the Congo was first "scrutinized" in the late 1870's by the western European country of Belgium under the authority of King Leopold II. In 1908, the Congo became an official Belgian colony. Belgium, along with nearly every other industrial power of the age, was given whole-hearted permission by fellow European nations, to delve into the African continent, claim and colonize their given tract of land, and "profess humanitarian objectives," in other words, utilizing the land and its people to satisfy the needs of the industrial nation, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. Such discussions were held at the 1885 Berlin Conference, and the imperialistic ventures into Africa became known as the Scramble for Africa, as each power sought its own portion of the divided continent. However, as temporary territories and borders were created, based on the guidelines presented at the conference, disputes rose to dramatic levels between rival tribes and ethnic groups, as each had to learn to coexist in a contained environment, under the "guidance" of a colonial nation.

"Revolution" and "reform" are two terms coined in the long history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They are, as such, the major barriers the country and its multiethnic people, as a whole, are burdened with for political stability, a renewal of infrastructure, and political, social, and economic reform. However, an end to conflict and a beginning of peace seem but a memory of a dream in a country shadowed by corruption and oppression, and recovering from repeated abuse and tyranny. However, the fight for freedom still remains a passionate objective in the hearts of many Congolese people who believe in hope. Patrice Lumumba, an independence leader, led the rising nationalist movement, the MNC (Mouvement National Congolais), against Belgian colonial oppression on the Congolese people. This political party, unlike the others, favored a centralized government and "a Congo united across ethnic and regional lines." Lumumba became the first prime minister of the newly liberated DRC, but fate was not so kind, as he was kidnapped and assassinated by Katangese and Belgian officers by demand of Belgium and by the advice of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (those who thought he proclaimed communist ideology in the Congo). Even after his sudden death in but the beginning of a rising independent country, his work and dedication for political, social, and economic reform continued to inspire people of the Congo and those of other struggling, colonial-oppressed countries.

After gaining its independence in 1960, the Congo entered into a period of political instability and social turmoil. The provinces of Katanga, South Kasai, and North Sivu engaged in *secessionist struggles* regarding the current leadership of President Joseph Kasavubu. However, a heated crisis over leadership arose between Kasavubu and Lumumba, as Lumumba was suddenly and “unconstitutionally” forced out of office as prime minister. This gap led the way for Lumumba’s chief of staff, Joseph Mobutu, of the Congo’s national army, Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC), to take the advantage and create mutiny. Supported (financially) by both the United States and Belgium in order to block the efforts to spread communism in Africa, Mobutu kept “order” in the country, whilst Kasavubu and Lumumba were “neutralized” in a coup d’état. Beginning in 1971, Mobutu declared himself the head of state, in opposition to communism, changed his name to what he is more commonly known as Mobutu Sese Seko (full name meaning “the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, shall go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake”), and he renamed the country Zaire. Thus began an era of “political repression, a cult of personality and corruption” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

It is estimated that Mobutu stole \$4-5 billion while in office. With him and other government officials embezzling national funds, the DRC soon modeled a kleptocracy. His guiltiness didn’t arise just because of his financial crimes, but also because of his negligence of humanitarian law. Following the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the fall of communism in most areas of the world, and the end of foreign aid in attempt to keep communism from spreading in Africa, rising democratic movements swept across the African continent. In response, Mobutu ordered a massacre of students at the University of Lubumbashi in the south of the DRC (French). In government elections, he would pay off participants with virtually worthless money and conduct murders on his opponents using the army as his personal death squad. Despite all of this, the Congo did, however, experience a period of some stability and peace. The Congolese people felt different. As tensions rose between rival ethnic groups (remnants of the Rwandan genocide), Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi soon launched an offensive in the DRC against Mobutu’s government, for allowing Hutu rebel militias to form refugee camps in Eastern Congo with the goal of incursion into Rwanda. With the country in its first civil war, Mobutu was forced out of the country in 1997; his regime of brutality and corruption was toppled. In all of the country’s history, to the modern era today, two civil wars and other outbursts of conflict have tainted the innocent country, claiming an estimated 5 million lives, mostly civilian (Wikipedia).

With such a conflict-ridden history, one cannot merely solve the issues at hand in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in a one, or even two-step process in a matter of days or months. Over the past few years, the DRC has reached a more stable political climate, comprised of less corruption and more systematic procedures for jump-starting the country’s economy and its people’s livelihood. Yet there remains, as always in a democracy, those whose viewpoints and ideals for the development and success of themselves and the greater good of their country differ, to a point where the decision-making process becomes bogged down. A crucial step to the future of the Congo is creating a stabilized environment, particularly in the east, where rebel forces, such as the M23, abuse and inherently renounce humanitarian law.

Turmoil began once more in the northern and eastern regions of the Congo, in 2011 (World Report). Civilians arriving to practice their natural rights during the presidential and legislative election periods

were “threatened, arbitrarily arrested, and killed.” Of these civilians were those both opposing and supporting the electoral candidates. The M23 rebel group, led by former general Bosco Ntaganda, is comprised of his loyal comrades, former members of the CNDP (National Congress for the Defense of the People) rebel group. In the course of their reign over the region, they have executed numerous “targeted killings, mass rapes, abductions, robberies, and resource plundering”. Some reports presume these groups have radicalized as a result of “conflict mining” (struggle of power over the regions precious mining sectors) (Gilpin). Whatever the cause, the Congolese government, instead of directing a portion of its support to the maintenance of its crumbling agricultural division, has spent its undivided support fighting single consolidated groups, most importantly, the M23 rebels (meanwhile losing sight of newly uprooted militia bands of almost parallel gravity).

The Farmers

Congolese rural families typically consist of a mother, father, and 2-3 children. The average per capita income is about \$300 U.S dollars. They usually own about 1 hectare of land, upon which they grow key crops such as plantains, maize, cassava, groundnuts and rice. Cash crops, usually grown on plantations by smallholders, include coffee, cocoa, sugar, tea, cotton and rubber. Palm oil products and quinquina bitter, alcoholic drink containing quinine) are also produced for domestic and export markets (New Agriculturalist). Unfortunately, about half of all Congolese rural families suffer from food insecurity. Studies showed in September of 2010 that 24% of children in the DRC under the age 5 are underweight, 43% have had their growth stunted permanently, and 9% are wasted (DRC).

Farming, due to civil war, is met with low input as areas in the country have become increasingly volatile, which in turn makes commercial activity virtually impossible. For a country with 40 million people depending on agriculture for capital, or more importantly subsistence, farmers are given little to no government support for their efforts and have no means, with the country’s lack of infrastructure, to transfer their products to the urban market-centers for profit. Ironically, urban farming has become increasingly yielding in cultivation. UN programs, such as the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) have assisted urban farmers with a \$10.4 million horticulture project aimed at increasing and improving their agronomic skills. So why doesn’t the 40 million rural farmers receive any funds?

Growing 122% more than previous years, urban farmers, with their small gardens and plots of land, sell 90% of their harvests to markets in order to provide the growing populations of cities with adequate supplies. The reason for such population growth in these big cities is due to the fact that rural farmers are suffering financially from having no way to sell their products due to lack of infrastructure, such as roads, displacement of civilians from the conflict ridden countryside, and the lack of support by a government unsuspecting of the gravity rural farmers’ success has on the future of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Solution

The methods by which the DRC can create a more stable political, social, and economic state, free of food insecurity may seem daunting, far-fetched, and expensive; the many years of civil wars, corruption, and chaos have drastically reduced national output and depleted government revenue. This, however, is the reality....reform is possible. Estimates show that the mining of the untapped deposits of raw materials present in the DRC would produce on average a total of \$24 Trillion U.S dollars (Wikipedia). By 2005 alone, the DRC gained up to 90% of its revenue from minerals. Statistics also show that the many river

and waterways branched out across the Congo, if correctly harnessed, would provide enough energy to supply the whole continent of Africa with electricity. All there is left to do for the Congolese people is to exploit their country's vast deposits of natural resources, just not to the point of depletion, in order to better stabilize their economic state of being and improve the foundations of infrastructure throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Microfinancing, according to Kiva, a site that offers such effective measures, is a general term to describe financial services to low-income individuals or to those who do not have access to typical banking services (About Microfinance). Without sufficient capital, the poor and impoverished have no realistic method of escaping their state of backbreaking work without adequate recompense. Sites like Kiva offer loans to families or local business in dire need of financial aid. These loans, provided by everyday people such as ourselves, range from large to the common small loans, though always providing money well-needed for their business's maintenance and stability. These loans are little beacons of hope to small business owners unable to keep up technologically, financially, and economically. Another microcredit sources is Grameen Bank, founded by Muhammad Yunus. According to Mr. Yunus, "Poverty is created by failure at the conceptual level." By this, he refers to the underestimation that people have towards the potential strength and ability of the poorer classes. This type of aid would be extremely beneficial to the 40% of agricultural practitioners, living primarily in the southern grasslands of the DRC.

However, these loans may not necessarily be sufficient for the activities of an individual farmer. The best option for the DRC would be for local farmers to come together and consolidate into one interdependent system, such as cooperatives, achieving higher credit, and therefore a higher valued loan. By doing so, these farmers could help each other in the next step toward reducing their food insecurity by purchasing proper machinery and other equipment for both farming and mining.

As mining is a major financial influence on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, methods of reaching these multiple sectors must be considered. With microloans being utilized by co-ops of farmers to build roads to urban market-centers or to purchase vehicles to bring their harvests to the markets, mining companies sponsored by the government (in anticipation of great mineral income) must partner with these farmers. It is in the best interest of the farmers, the government, and the nation for these roads used by farmers to be shared with those working and transporting mine materials. Farmers could simply come into agreement with the government to share their roads, in a compromise possibly consisting of tax breaks, economic aid, or the continued development of infrastructure to benefit both parties without taking any risks of failure.

With agriculture being such a large portion of the DRC's economy, building up the farming class will have multiple positive outcomes. One is the improved nutrition of a large part of the population, both the growers and purchasers of food. Improved nutrition results in better performance and quality in work and school.

"This is a scan of two brains of two three-year-olds: one that had adequate nutrition; the other who was neglected and did not, malnourished. And the brain volume is actually 40 percent less. And this chart shows the neurons – this is from a research institute in Chile – if you see on the left, a normal brain with many synapses and then a malnourished brain.... (Sheeran)"

This quote from Josette Sheeran truly symbolizes the degradation of the poorer classes.

“I don’t think this is only a compassion case – this is an economic imperative for nations. If you look at the 36 nations that have the highest burden of malnutrition and then look at the studies that the World Food Program has done with the Intra-American Development Bank, you’ll see that an average of six percent of GDP can be lost from the burden of malnutrition in early childhood, permanently lost every year. If you look at the World Bank’s estimates of what it would take to do proper nutrition interventions in those countries, and then look at the total GDP of these nations, the cost benefit analysis for investment in ending malnutrition and undernutrition is compelling.” (Sheeran)

In other words, Josette Sheeran discusses that it is in the economic interest of a country to have better nourished citizens, starting with the children. It gives the country smarter, healthier, more productive future workers. By including government supported programs, food nutrition guidelines would be used to outreach to pregnant women or to those families with children, so as to try to prevent future issues regarding malnutrition.

By having improved economic conditions in the farming class, a large segment of the country will have a vested interest in maintaining long-term stability. This systematic approach includes the interests of those not associated with the agricultural division. Peace is important for maintaining the natural rhythms of agriculture, as it does not disrupt the amount of crops harvested, nor does it add any stress to the farmer to cultivate a certain amount of crops.

With a lack of infrastructure comes an inaccessibility to transport/ export product goods to the local or even national market. As such, the lack of a true foundation of infrastructure is a vital component in the process of ending food insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, with the suspected incline of the economy, as a result of the success of local agro-businesses, the problems regarding infrastructure can now be dealt with. Infrastructure in the Congo can be funded based on the earnings of the wealth of the country’s vast mineral deposits. However, because microloans may not necessarily cover all of the costs for the equipment needed for mining, local farmers/businesses will have to partner with the government of the DRC on the baseline of financial grants, benefitting both the workers and the overall health of the nation. Once these viable resources are tapped and distributed on the market, the doors are open to endless possibilities. The country will be at a point of enough economic stability to cover the reconstruction of roads, electrical grids, farms, and schools in the DRC that were destroyed or fell into disuse as civilians left their homes away from conflict. As infrastructure throughout the country is renovated, farmers will then be allowed much easier and swifter access to markets where they can sell their harvested products. Also, improvement of infrastructure will allow more businesses to have access to mining sectors where the true foundations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s wealth lie.

What Is Being Accomplished Now

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, in spite of its great potential, still has the disadvantage of having corruption, instability, and turmoil seared into its past and remaining in its present. However, positive steps are being taken. On February 24, 2013, Security-General Ban Ki-moon and other foreign diplomats of the African continent met regarding the status of the DRC. In this meeting, he urged regional African

leaders to take part in a United Nations-backed accord of “the highest political and diplomatic levels” to stabilize the DRC (UN 1). The treaty implemented the establishment of a framework for the peace, security, and cooperation of not only the DRC, but for the surrounding regions suffering from equal or greater conflict. “It is my earnest hope that the Framework will lead to an era of peace and stability for the peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Great Lakes region,” said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Whether his plan for peace is a huge success, he still claimed the signed treaty to be a “comprehensive approach that will require sustained engagement.” Under the declaration of the treaty, eleven African countries--Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania--all agreed to form an alliance, forged under the peaceful preservation and protection of each African sovereignty, though specifically highlighting the stability of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. What was continually stressed by Mr. Ban during the signing was the need for continuity by the signatories (those who signed the treaty) overseeing the process of progress in Africa. “I therefore call for your sustained political, technical and financial support, especially over the long-term, to accompany the implementation of the national and regional commitments outlined in the Framework,” Mr. Ban said.

However, does such a plan really offer any enforcement of peace, or is it just another goodwill gesture in attempt to resolve conflict in Central Africa and especially the DRC? This proposed and initiated treaty is, yes, a form of a goodwill gesture between the central African nations which doesn't really have any securement of its goals, but what's necessarily wrong with that. Whether or not this treaty is successful, it still shows that this reoccurring conflict in central Africa will not be tolerated any longer. It shows that the initiative is being taken to rid the DRC of its internal and external conflicts. What can be done to secure the maintenance of the principles discussed in this treaty can be as simple as offering incentives to those responsible for keeping this peace. These incentives could range from debt forgiveness between one country and another over previous endeavors and the availability of foreign aid during times of need (natural disasters, starvation, and genocide). Otherwise, options such as the creation of sanctions and other punishments, such as embargoes, lack of aid, and divestment, still remain viable alternatives for enforcing peace and balance in Central Africa and the DRC.

Further UN operations, such as MONUC (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), have already deployed troops into the DRC, with the mandate of protecting civilians on a humanitarian level, and with the mantra “What is peacekeeping? Peace is a full-time job. Like war, it must be waged” (United 1).

Other growing sources of assistance have also begun to take root and transform the future of the African continent. Develop Africa is a non-profit organization whose interests lie in child sponsorship, health, education, workforce empowerment, emergency disaster relief, leadership development, and microfinancing throughout the African continent (Microfinance). FINCA is another non-profit microfinancier whose operations continue to have a dramatic effect in the DRC, as seen in areas such as its capital Kinshasa and the town of Lubumbashi, where the average annual income of a farmer “increased from around \$500 in 2004 to \$2,000 in 2010”, and in Likasi, where it “rose from \$700 to \$3,500” (DRC). Operatives of the DRC- based FINCA headquarters have shown that 99% of their given loans to farmers have been paid back in full and delivered in time, some even saying how people have come in seeking \$300 in credit and have returned with the same amount in recompense and \$1000 more for depositing.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution, economic stability, and the foundation of infrastructure all correlate in being a necessary step to overcoming the food insecurity issues that exist in the Congo. Each must be addressed in some way to improve the current conditions of a potentially prosperous nation of great wealth. However these conflicts and confrontations are ultimately resolved, whether it be through diplomacy and peace initiatives, or through the troublesome option of military intervention on a large scale (approved by the UN), political, social, and economic reform is a reality. All that needs to be accomplished is giving the rural farmers a portion of these microcredits for financial security, where they can make their case to the government as a consortium for an improvement in national infrastructure for the future livelihood of their country and its flourishing people. The future of the Democratic Republic of the Congo doesn't merely lie on the ground or in the earth, but in the hands of the Congolese people themselves.

“If you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time cultivate the fields to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace.” (Norman)

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