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Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malnutrition

## **Democratic Republic of the Congo: Eradicating Malnutrition through Community Initiatives**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the 4<sup>th</sup> most populous country in Africa, with a population of 81 million. By area, it is the 11<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world. It is in central Africa and it is just north of Angola while just south of the Central African Republic. It was formerly named Zaire and gained its independence from Belgium in 1960 (World Factbook 1).

To the west of the nation lies the Republic of Congo. The two nations are separated by the Congo river. To the east of the nation lie Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi. The nation lies to the north of Angola. An exclave of Angola, Cabinda, lies to the north of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Because of this exclave, the nation has a very short coastline of 37 kilometers. The people speak both French and their native language, which is usually Lingala, Tshiluba, or Swahili. Most of the population lives in Kinshasa or the northeastern region close to Uganda. The south is the least densely populated region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (World Factbook 1).

Felix Tshisekedi became the leader of the country in January 2019. Before him, Joseph Kabila was the leader. This was the first peaceful transition of power in the nation's history (World Factbook 1).

There are 3 major national parks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Kahuzi-Biega, Kudelongu, and Maiko national park. The capital of the country is Kinshasa, which lies on the Congo river. It lies directly opposite Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo. Kinshasa is the largest Francophone city in the world and is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city in Africa, behind Cairo and Lagos. The country has a very short coastline and is mountainous in the east. It is around 1/4 of the size of the United States.

The country's major trading partners are China (41.4% of all exports/19.9% of all imports) and Zambia (22.7% of all exports). China has invested lots of resources into projects in the DRC (World Factbook 1). 70% of the people live in rural areas. Most of the nation has a tropical climate since the nation lies on the equator. The country is a constitutional republic, with both a president and a prime minister. The legislature has 2 houses: The Senate and the National assembly. Only 10% of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's arable land is currently being cultivated.

Major exports for the country include cassava, yams, plantains, rice, and fish. Farming is the most common profession. The agricultural sector comprises 58% of the country's GDP and employs 66% of the population.

The average household consists of 6 people. Most people live in small dwellings, like huts or brick houses. Marketplaces are common ways for families to get food.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a very poor nation. The average annual income for a Congolese is \$394 per year. This is the lowest average wage figure out of any country in the world. The trend is only getting worse over time since the GDP of the nation has been consistently declining. At the time of its

independence in 1960, the nation was the 2<sup>nd</sup> most industrialized country in all of Africa. It had a thriving mining industry.

Since then, corruption, war, and political struggles have crippled the nation's economy. 72% of the population lives in poverty. A large fraction of the population does not have access to fresh drinking water or healthcare due to poverty. The life expectancy is 55. Diseases like AIDS are quite common in the nation, as 1.1% of the country has the disease.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most malnourished country in the world, with only 2,056 calories available per person per day (Nag 1). The nation is only ahead of Haiti in this regard. In most regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, over 10% of the population is malnourished. In children aged 6-59 months, the malnutrition rate is 43.4% (Nag 1). This is a staggeringly high figure. 43.5% of the children in the country have stunted growth. Additionally, the nation has a birth rate of 32.8 per 1000 people per year, which is 30<sup>th</sup> internationally. The country is booming in population, so malnutrition rate will keep increasing since there will be less resources per person. Even though over half of the population works in the agricultural sector, a significant fraction of the population is malnourished.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has the most available farmland out of any African nation. It has the potential to feed around 2 billion people. However, only 10 percent of the arable land is currently being used. It has many resources, including diamonds and gold. Yet, corruption and internal strife has made it rank last in the world in the Human Development Index. The inflation rate has also gone up dramatically: 41.5% in 2017 while in 2016 the inflation rate was 18.2% (World Factbook 1).

In the 1970s, Mobutu came to power and embezzled much of the country's resources. The GDP of the nation decreased by 65% during Mobutu's reign.

The first Congo War took place between 1996 and 1997. Forces from Angola, Rwanda, and liberation forces toppled the regime led by Dictator Mobutu. The leader of the forces was Laurent-Desire Kabila. The conflict was marked with ethnic violence and widespread devastation of the nation. The new regime did not bring much change: Kabila was a dictator just like his predecessor. This led to the second Congo war, which was the deadliest war since World War 2 (Zapata 1). The incompetent governments and the 2 deadly conflicts have crippled the nation (Zapata 1). Even to this day, there is continuous conflict in the eastern portion of the nation. Groups like the Allied Democratic Forces, Mai Mai militias, and Rwandan Democratic Liberation forces are present in the eastern regions of the nation (World Factbook 1). The UN Organization Stabilization mission in the DRC is the largest peacekeeping mission in the world.

A country with such abundant farmland and valuable resources should not face such a problem. One country that has successfully addressed the problem of malnutrition is the Democratic Republic of the Congo's neighbor, Rwanda. In 3 years from 2012-2015, the rate of child stunting dropped 6%. Rwanda is led by President Paul Kagame. He has made significant progress during his time in office. Rwanda is ranked as the 48<sup>th</sup> least corrupt nation in the world, which is 2<sup>nd</sup> in all of Africa. It also has the 15<sup>th</sup> fastest growing economy in the world. The crime rate in Rwanda is over 6 times less than that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kagame has made addressing malnutrition one of Rwanda's biggest priorities (The Encyclopedia Britannica Editors 1). He has created a National Strategy for Transformation and Prosperity that aims to significantly reduce child malnutrition. He has eliminated lots of corruption and government inefficiencies. Rwanda decreased its malnutrition and stunting rate by increasing social safety nets for the poor.

Just over a year and a half ago, Felix Tshisekedi became the president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The nation was previously led by Joseph Kabila, the son of dictator Paul-Laurent Kabila. Joseph Kabila had visions to reduce corruption, but never did anything about it. Many government officials were swindling money (Nguh 1). Kabila even had the constitution changed to accommodate his needs. Tshisekedi should take inspiration from the progress Rwanda has made through Paul Kagame. He should crack down on government officials stealing money. If this happens, more resources can be used to help the citizens and thus help the problem of malnourishment. He should create a comprehensive plan like Kagame did with the National Strategy for Transformation and Prosperity.

There are some weaknesses with the aforementioned plan. Rwanda is a much smaller country and it would be easier to eliminate systemic corruption from government officials in a smaller nation than in a very large nation like the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, the plan should still be put in place.

Another solution is to make community-based health projects. The UN has implemented this in some communities in Nigeria and Rwanda. UN workers will conduct weakly health checkups in children and measure signs of malnutrition, like stunting and low arm fat (UNICEF 1). They also prescribe micronutrient powders that can help alleviate malnutrition. Vitamin A and anti-worming pills can prevent blindness from malnutrition. Children aged 6 months-2 years are given Ongera, a micronutrient powder with many essential vitamins and minerals. Ongera is mixed with the children's food to help provide nutrients that may not be provided in the food. Community health initiatives from the UN that help address malnutrition in the population through micronutrient powders can be implemented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Peru is another example of a country that has had success in addressing malnutrition. In 10 years, Peru was able to reduce its high stunting rates by half: from 28% in 2008 to 13% in 2006 (World Bank 1). They did this by implementing a program known as Juntos. The program gave money to mothers of young children in poor areas in exchange for them taking their children to regular health checkups and enrolling their children in school. This program worked because the mothers could devote time to take their children to regular checkups which otherwise would be spent in activities to earn their livelihood. They also implemented the Scaling up Handwashing Project, which helps promote hygiene. These 2 policies have significantly reduced Peru's malnutrition rates. They also reallocated portions of the budget to put more resources into fighting malnutrition.

In 5 years, the malnutrition rate in the Amazonas province of Peru dropped by 10%. In Cajamarca it dropped by 8.2% and in Huánuco, it dropped 11.7%. In the nation overall, the malnutrition rate dropped 6% in 5 years from 2011-2016. (World Bank 1) Community based tracking of child health reached 83.4% because of the program. The Juntos system drastically improved national health insurance coverage in infants from 18% in 2011 to 74% in 2016.

The approach Peru used has been shown to work. The Democratic Republic of the Congo could use a similar approach. The government could work in conjunction with UNICEF to develop a system of routine health checkups in each community.

Developed countries can enter into free trade agreements with DRC which will spur investments to enhance industrial development by private industries to tap human resources into industrial activities in DRC. This can reduce the unemployment which can reduce poverty in the country. Such programs will not be negatively perceived by the people in the developed countries like USA where the monetary aid to

other countries are now being opposed by concerned citizens who want such aid to be diverted to poor people in their countries.

Conclusion: The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a country with great potential to solve its malnutrition crisis. It has enough arable land to feed 2 billion people and has plenty of natural resources. However, it has not lived up to this potential. There are tons of corruption by government officials who take away money meant to go to citizens. Thus, there is a mismanagement of resources. However, a new leader, Felix Tshisekedi, became president just about a year and a half ago. He should follow the lead of the leader of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, by strictly enforcing corruption rules and creating a national agenda.

Felix Tshisekedi could also partner with organizations like UNICEF to create community-based health plans like what is happening in Rwanda and Nigeria. Micronutrients are given to the children and frequent measurements of height and arm span are taken to ensure that children are meeting normal growth requirements.

Tshisekedi could also provide incentives for people to participate in community health initiatives, like what Peru did with the Juntos system. They would pay mothers of children in poor areas to send their kids to school and participate in frequent health checkups. Through this, many mothers would participate in the program and malnutrition would decrease significantly, as we saw in Peru.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the nations that is doing the least to address malnutrition. Even though the former leader, Joseph Kabila, tried to reduce corruption, his plan failed. Many government officials still swindled money meant for the citizens. In the 1960s, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was one of the most prosperous nations in all of Africa and had a thriving mining industry. Corruption from Mobutu and Paul-Laurent Kabila, along with the 2 Congo wars, have devastated the nation. Hopefully, due to the new government led by Tshisekedi, a concrete plan on malnutrition incorporating some of the ideas mentioned above can be implemented.

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