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Democratic Republic of the Congo, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

Resolving Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Malthusian idea that population grows geometrically while agricultural output grows arithmetically has long been known to be a falsehood. Population growth is beginning to level off and agricultural output grew exponentially during the green revolution. However, these gains have not been enough to prevent world hunger. People around the world still suffer from food insecurity. The number of people on the Earth that have to endure the negative consequences of hunger has been estimated to be over 800 million (“Hunger Statistics”). The impacts of this cannot be overstated. Poor nutrition causes up to half of the deaths in children under age 5, quantified at 3.1 million deaths per year (“Hunger Statistics”). While the problems of hunger are global, Sub-Saharan Africa remains near the top of the list for food insecure regions. One very relevant case is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The DRC is ranked 174th out of 178 in the Failed States Index, 186th out of 187 in the latest Human Development Index, and until 2012 was ranked last on the Global Hunger Index (“Congo, Democratic Republic of”). The DRC faces extreme challenges in developing a sustainable agricultural sector to jumpstart its economy and populous. The most glaring reason why agricultural productivity is so low is the fact that conflict has been widespread in the country since the first of many wars began in 1996. Conflict has continued to this day and is a constant hindrance to agricultural practices. Many previous attempts to prevent conflict in the DRC have failed, but new, recently unveiled methods promise to hold the key to resolving conflict in the DRC. Resolving conflict in the DRC is the only way to insure sustainable development and food security for citizens. Part I of this paper will introduce a typical Congolese family and show the barriers each family overcomes in regards to agricultural productivity. Part II will discuss the impacts of conflict on the agricultural sector as well as the impact of other major issues on the DRC’s people. Part III will introduce a specific plan designed to resolve conflict in the DRC and benefit productivity and will also define the appropriate role of governments, communities, and other organizations in implementing the plan.

Part I: Rural Dwellers in the DRC

The average household size in the DRC is 5.4 (“Democratic Republic of Congo” (1)). While this figure may seem low, there are a few harsh realities behind it. The total fertility rate (TFR) of the DRC is 6.3 births per women (“Reproductive Health at a Glance”). Unfortunately, many children die due to malnutrition, starvation, and conflict. The under-5 mortality rate is 96 in the DRC (“At a Glance: Congo”), meaning that almost one in ten children die before their fifth birthday. The composition of each family is quite youthful. Parents have between three to four young children living in the house. However, many children and adolescents are orphaned due to deaths in the family. 47% of the DRC’s population is under 14 years old, a statistic that can be attributed to one of the highest TFRs in the world. Just over 50% of the population is between ages 15 and 64. This leaves less than 3% of people in the DRC to be over 65 years old (“Reproductive Health at a Glance”). For this reason, few families have any elders that are supported by younger generations. The reason that the DRC does not endure massive population growth is the fact that the life expectancy is a staggeringly low 58.3 years (“At a Glance: Congo”), almost 13 years lower than the international average. This is caused again by massive internal strife as well as a near complete lack of nutrients and raw calories.

The diet of the average rural subsistence farmer rotates around very few foods. Cassava is the largest staple crop in the country. This is usually ground into a paste and is served with plantains, bushmeat, or fish. Caterpillars and grubs can also be served to add flavor to the meal (“Food and Daily Life”). The average caloric intake of a typical citizen is 1,500 kilocalories (“Agriculture and Food Security”), 300

below the 1,800 necessary to maintain good health. About 70% of Congolese lack access to a necessary amount of food (“DR Congo”).

The education of the DRC’s population is very limited. While most of the country’s population attends primary school, less than 40% of males and females attend secondary school. The literacy rate for the country is only 67% (“Democratic Republic of Congo” (1)). This alone suggests that citizens are not getting the education they need. Furthermore, the literacy rate for females alone is a mere 56.1% (“Reproductive Health at a Glance”), meaning that females are treated extremely unjustly in the education system. This is reflected by the fact that the DRC scored 148th out of 157 countries on the Gender Development Index (“Reproductive Health at a Glance”), meaning that females are treated far worse than males.

Healthcare in the DRC is not prevalent. A severe lack of infrastructure and investment in healthcare programs due to the country’s large size and widespread conflict has made it very difficult for rural dwellers to access the healthcare they need. This has caused many preventable diseases to spread rampant through the populations. Recent epidemics have included Malaria, Measles, and Cholera (“Democratic Republic of Congo: Condition”). Children are particularly vulnerable in part because the vaccine rate for the most common diseases is only about 45% (“Democratic Republic of Congo” (2)). Many other diseases are frequently contracted due to poor sanitation conditions. In rural settings, only about 30% of the population drinks clean water while less than 15% use improved sanitary techniques (At a Glance: Congo). Lack of access to healthcare can also be seen in the lack of contraception use. Less than a tenth of married women use contraceptive techniques and this figure is only 3% for the lowest quintile of wealth. Up to 25% of current need for these methods is not being met due to the poor health infrastructure. These factors have led to a staggering maternal mortality rate of 13 per 1,000 births (“Reproductive Health at a Glance”).

The average subsistence farm size in the DRC is a mere 1.6 hectares (4 acres) (“FAOSTAT”). There are about 4 million families with farms similar to this. The main crops grown are cassava, plantain, maize, groundnut, and rice (“Country Profile”). The main way of growing crops is slash-and-burn agriculture (Partow 38). Farmers clear a patch of trees and bush and burn it. They then use this plot of land for a few years and afterward let the bush grow back afterward.

Farmers face many barriers to improving agricultural productivity. The biggest is that widespread conflict has prevented the cultivation of fertile land. Today, only 10% of arable land in the DRC is cultivated (Banea-Mayambu, J.). This lack of land has led to nutrient depletion and deforestation due to the need to grow food on such a small area (Partow 38). Lack of refrigeration also is a major problem and often leads to losses of up to 80% (“Country Assistance Framework”). There also exist many barriers to employment. Up to 70% of the workforce in the DRC works in agriculture (“Agriculture and Food Security”). The failing of this sector due to conflict has led to many people becoming unemployed. These workers usually cannot find jobs anywhere else due to the isolated nature of rural areas. Farmers in the DRC have a hard time selling their products. Up to 50% of the farmers live over 8 hours from the market (“Country Assistance Framework”). This, combined with the fact that most of the country’s infrastructure has been devastated in war, presents an almost insurmountable barrier to farmers. These factors have made food very valuable and most definitely under supplied. The lack of access to food has led to up to 70% of the population to become malnourished (Partow 38).

Part II: The impacts of conflict on food security.

As some background on the conflict in the DRC, civil wars have been occurring since 1996, when Rwanda invaded and captured much of the country (“Democratic Republic of Congo – Timeline”). Brief cease-fires have interrupted the violence, but every time the peace eventually disintegrates and war continues. Current conflict mainly stems from leftover Hutu militias from the Rwandan genocide as well

as Ugandan and Rwandan militant groups that seek revenge on Hutus. These rebel groups fight over land, resources, or for ethnic reasons. The DRC is rich with rare-Earth metals and other minerals including gold, diamonds, cobalt, tin, copper, and cassiterite. These resources generate massive profits for many rebel groups. Regarding ethnicity, Congolese people are very accepting of ethnic differences and do not wish for conflict. However, the warlords of many rebel groups as well as militants from Rwanda and Uganda wish to eradicate the other ethnicities from the area. Recently, many Hutu militias have been revolting against the government. These include almost 50 rebel groups, the most prominent being the M23 group. This rebel group committed many war crimes between 2012 and 2014, including summary executions, rapes, and forced recruitment (“DR Congo: M23 rebels”). Violence continues today.

Unlike many African nations, the problems facing the DRC in regards to food insecurity are not environmental, but rather political. Conflict in the DRC is hampering agricultural productivity in many ways. The first is that the country’s livestock sector has become near nonexistent since the start of the many wars. Almost all of the animals were stolen or killed during the fighting. For this reason the population must rely on poorer sources of protein like bushmeat (“Country Profile”). This has caused major malnutrition problems. Another problem is that farmers are not farming because they fear they will be pushed off of their land by militants. To quantify this problem, up to 90% of arable land is not currently being cultivated in the DRC (Banea-Mayambu, J.). This statistic means that conflict has reduced productivity by 90% in the DRC. Beyond this, conflict has also reduced the ability of consumers to obtain the food. Widespread conflict has severely damaged infrastructure and has made it much more difficult for goods to be traded. This has caused food prices to skyrocket (“Country Profile”), making it so that the typical person cannot afford as much food as they used to. Both the producers and consumers of food are being harmed by conflict.

Conflict in the DRC has grave and disastrous implications for civilians. The situation has improved since the M23 group was still rampaging in late 2014, but violence continues. After the M23’s defeat, new groups stepped up to take its place. The 40-50 rebel groups still trying to bring down the government pose major problems to peace in the country (Vogel). Thousands of civilians continue to die each week from these rebels so conflict remains a major problem. The environment is also significantly being harmed by unresolved conflict. The thousands of refugees and International Displaced Persons in the DRC have contributed to significant increases in soil erosion, deforestation, and poaching of native animals (“Democratic Republic of the Congo”). These problems can only be resolved when people are allowed to return to their homes. This of course can only happen if violence is stopped. Women are also disproportionately harmed by the conflict. This is because many rebel groups are atrociously using rape as a weapon of war and terror (The Crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo”). While males are still victims of this, the majority of rape victims in the DRC have been female. Despite the horrible outlook of the situation, it looks to be improving. The chief rebel groups have been largely eradicated (Vogel). The most common for measuring the conflict is how many civilians are killed. This number has been slowly falling since the fall of the M23 rebellion. This would indicate that the situation for our rural family is improving, yet further action is needed to definitively insure its safety.

Eliminating conflict would mean massive gains for agricultural productivity as well as environmental sustainability. Farmers would now be able to cultivate 100% of arable land instead of just the 10% cultivated currently. This would mean a 10-fold increase in the quantity of food. The amount of food that reaches the market would also increase. Infrastructure can only be repaired if the conflict stops. Remember that up to 80% of food crops can be lost due to lack of refrigeration and infrastructure. When the infrastructure improves and farmers can reach the market faster, they do not have to refrigerate crops as long and many losses can be cut. Both of these factors will greatly increase the amount of food available to consumers. The environment will also be benefited by a reduction in conflict. When farmers gain access to much more land, they no longer need to rely as much on slash-and-burn agriculture in small scales. Slash-and-burn agriculture causes much deforestation as well as greatly depleting the soil

fertility (Partow 38). When these two negative consequences are reduced or even eliminated, the quality and nutritional value of food will increase. This also greatly benefits the environment.

Economic development would be near unimpeded if conflict were to be eradicated. Agriculture currently accounts for almost half of the DRC's GDP. This means that even when only 10% of the land is farmed, the products make up a large part of all the goods and services made in the DRC. When conflict decreases, the percent of arable land cultivated will drastically increase. This could very well mean drastic increases in GDP. The agricultural sector employs 62% of Congolese men and 84% of Congolese women ("Agriculture and Food Security"). Improvements in the sector could mean higher wages and better standards of living for the majority of the country's people. Government investment could greatly help reduce the poverty in rural areas ("Country Profile"), but for this to happen, violence must stop.

Other major issues also affect agricultural productivity and conflict. The first is climate. The DRC is one of the few places in Africa where the climate is near ideal for growing crops ("Climate and Agriculture"). The climate of the region boosts productivity and helps to mitigate some of the negative effects of conflict. Rapid population growth stemming from the DRC's very high TFR may lead to major problems down the line. Population growth inherently puts a strain on the agricultural sector because more people need to consume food ("Overpopulation: Environmental and Social Problems"). Wars can also be started from rampant growth due to the fact that resources are increasingly strained. Population growth serves to exacerbate the problems of conflict on food security. Water scarcity is also a negative issue facing the people of the DRC. Due to the collapse of infrastructure over the past few years, people have near no access to water (Shore). This leads to a decrease in productivity because people lack the water necessary to grow crops. Water scarcity has also sparked many wars in the past and was a big reason for conflict in the DRC. Conflict must be stopped and infrastructure repaired in order to insure that a vicious cycle of water scarcity and war does not continue. Urbanization is rapidly occurring in the DRC. This unplanned growth causes poverty, inequality, harms to the environment, and socio-economic tension. It can also lead to the loss of open space due to sprawl, harming agricultural productivity (Shouyu). The demand for energy also has impacts on the DRC. The primary sources of energy are coal and firewood ("Scaling-up Renewable Energy in Africa"). The demand for these causes deforestation in order to gain these materials. This can lower the soil fertility and harm agricultural productivity, thereby increasing the likelihood of future conflicts due to a decrease in resources. Pollution is a major issue not by way of emissions, but rather in the form of water pollution. Lots of waste is dumped in water sources and people are unable to clean it due to the lack of sanitary infrastructure (Shore). This can cause health harms and may lead to conflict.

Part III: How to effectively resolve conflict in the DRC.

The response to conflict in the DRC must be multi-faceted in order to combat the many causes of violence. One of the first problems that must be addressed is the alleged support of many rebel groups by neighboring countries. A key part of a peace process would be to insure that countries in the region, mainly Uganda and Rwanda, would not continue to fuel rebels. This could be done with incentive mechanisms as well as enforcement mechanisms. The international community could offer a reward for keeping the peace, but if the arming of rebel groups continued, the price would be high for these regional countries.

Second, with scarcity of resources and current violence, a cycle of unproductivity exists. With only 10% of the arable land being cultivated, conflict exists to simply obtain the food. Capital is needed in order to jump-start farmers' willingness to grow crops. For this reason, monetary entities such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and European Union need to increase investment in the DRC. These entities can help achieve the first millennium development goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. Increasing the efficacy of the agricultural sector will mean more people become employed, lifting them out of poverty. This can also help women and young people find work because of their high

representation in agriculture. The increased quantity and quality of food will make it so that fewer people are hungry and malnourished.

Third, the Congolese government must engage in constructive reform in many segments of the country. This could include absolving impunity in regards to sexual violence and bringing many people to justice. Also, the government could take policy measures to allow for a more democratic system of government. The current president continues to postpone elections to later years. Democracy is needed to end cyclical crises.

Finally, governments, NGOs, and rural civilians alike need to support the United Nations MONUSCO mission. The MONUSCO mission, and the Force Intervention Brigade that came with, was able to take down the largest rebel group in the DRC: the M23 rebellion (Verini). Such success has been unparalleled by any other armed operation in the region. The only problems that existed in the operation were lack of governmental support and lack of civilian approval. Governments need to increase support and funding of the UN mission and pledge support to the cause. Civilians are also key players in this operation. They need to support the mission and agree to not hamper its effectiveness. These operations must be successfully scaled up in order to insure peace in the country.

The DRC is a volatile region plagued by many political, environmental, and economic problems. Widespread conflict has made food security almost nonexistent. For the typical rural Congolese family with almost no variety in diet, next to no education, and little healthcare, surviving is a struggle. Conflict resolution is needed to produce both economic and social development of the DRC while eradicating food insecurity. This is because of the large impact that conflict has on the agricultural sector. Very little land is currently being cultivated out of fear of rebel groups. This lack of land for farming has caused environmental problems such as deforestation and depletion of soil fertility as well as a price increase in food, leading to even less consumption. Conflict has also destroyed the country's infrastructure, thereby creating significant barriers to farmers from selling their crops. Eliminating conflict would mean that both the quantity and quality of the food would increase. Since such a large portion of the country's population works in the agricultural sector, economic gains would also be a reality. Population growth, water scarcity, and pollution are all factors that cause cyclical crises. If food security were to be improved, these factors would all decrease, leading to a better chance of long-run peace. While single-target solutions may bring about short-term peace, a multi-faceted solution targeting many segments of the population is most likely to bring long-term stability to the DRC. Such a solution would include agreements between other countries in the region to stop arming rebels, increased investment from entities like the IMF, reform implemented by the DRC's government to improve citizens' standard of living, and an upscaling of the UN MONUSCO mission in order to destroy the last remaining rebel groups. What must be understood in carrying out this plan of action is that food insecurity and conflict cause each other. Left unchecked, conflict causes food insecurity which causes conflict and so on. Intervention in one of these steps is necessary to solidify peace. Increased action from governments, NGOs, coalitions, and civilians is necessary to resolve conflict and improve food security in one of the most vulnerable countries in the world.

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