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The Democratic Republic of The Congo: Education is the Answer

On a Monday morning, the average child in the United States will wake up, eat breakfast, and rush to school in order to beat the first bell. Students may complain about getting up before eight in the morning, eating school lunch, and most do not appreciate the privilege that they have as a United States citizen. In the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa, many children do not receive the gift of an education. Due to political turmoil and lack of resources, the life of a person in Congo is very different than of a person in the United States. A citizen of Congo may wake up and work on the farm for endless hours, just to meet the basic needs of life. A family may frequently wake up to the sound of gunfire and have to run to a new makeshift home. A person in Congo does not have the resources that one in the United States automatically expects. This can include the bare necessities like housing, healthcare, food, sanitation, and even safety. The quality of life for many citizens in Congo is poor. The root of this problem is a lack of education.

Life, Agriculture, and Education:

The average family in Congo is generally larger than in the United States. A typical mother has six children. Family is also referred to not only immediate family members, but also extended family members. This is due to the fact that often extended families will live together in order to have a better chance in providing for themselves by sharing resources. Nearly two thirds of families live in rural areas. Most are subsistence farmers. These farmers can grow a wide range of foods including mangoes, oranges, mangosteens, guavas, papaya, avocados, bananas, maize, groundnuts, peanuts, corn, millet, rice, Cassava, and much more. Cassava is a root vegetable that can be ground into a paste and served with other foods. It is referred to as the staple food of Congo. Although Congo seems abundant with lush greenery, food is scarce. Over half of the population in Congo lives below the poverty line, and most of the other half lives just above the poverty line. Therefore, food and other necessities are unaffordable for most families in Congo.

Rural subsistence farming dominates the untapped potential of the agriculture in Congo. These farms are run by families, to support the families only. Thus, they are not very large on the scale of productive farms. The average agricultural household has 1.5 hectares. The main crops grown by these farms are corn, millet, cassava and rice, but they can grow a wide variety of crops. These farms can not afford technology, so they stick to traditional agricultural practices. Families divvy up work day in and day out in order to support themselves. They rely often on a simple hoe and watering cans. This method is productive enough to sustain the family, but is not very organized or efficient.

Rural families face a variety of issues when regarding agricultural productivity. Even if a family supports themselves through traditional agricultural practices, they have limited options when trying to expand. This is due to regulations put in place by the Congo government; “The law (the Law of 20th July 1973, amended and completed by the Law of 18th July 1980) is based on customary rights and stipulates that the chief of the ‘owner’ clan must consent to any registration of usage or ownership rights to the land by the relevant administrative authority. In practice customary law regulates most allocation of land” (Smoes). This law makes it impossible for people who are not from the relevant clan or village to access land. Even if people are relevant to the clan, they could have disagreements with the chief, again not allowing for expansion of land. This law keeps farmers from increasing agricultural productivity by expanding their land. Due to conflict a lot of property has been purchased by the state, which rendered

arable pieces of land unused and unaffordable to poor farmers. Lastly, yet again conflict has caused frequent population displacements, creating groups of farmers without any land. Because of this, farmers must rent land. These are often undocumented deals and come with a substantial amount of uncertainty. Also, renting land means farmers can not make any major renovations. “This system renders agricultural investments very risky and significantly restricts any improvement, for example the construction of terrace systems or wells, or any measures to increase soil fertility” (Smoes). This means it is hard for farmers to improve their land by changing it in any drastic way. Thus they cannot produce better yields by using more advanced techniques, and provide more for their family or eventually sell a crop. The current regulations by the government keeps poor families poor, and makes it difficult for farmers to ever move beyond subsistence farming.

The definition of the poverty line is the estimated minimum level of income needed to secure the necessities of life. In Congo, over half of the population lives below the poverty line. The root cause of this is political turmoil, which resulted in leaving many families with absolutely nothing. The civil war in Congo can be referred as the deadliest conflict since World War II. This war was between groups with different ideas about mining or other industries, but also between rebels and the DRC government. Starting with King Leopold II in 1885, The DRC has had government officials leading them in the wrong direction. This is one of the main reasons for never ending conflict which has harmed the country in a variety of ways. The war destroyed infrastructure, resulting in a lack of connection between villages. Meaning, if a family cannot support themselves, they do not have access to outside sources to help. This is figuratively speaking, because in most cases there would be no outside help to reach. These factors play into families struggling to meet a living wage.

The same factors affect a family’s ability to access food markets and adequate nutrition. If a family cannot support themselves enough to have food, then they would need to seek outside help. This is unattainable due to the lack of infrastructure, along with common markets, which were and are being destroyed by war. Due to the farmers in Congo using traditional agricultural practices, most of the work is very labor intensive. Because of the lack of access to healthcare, if farmers have a health issue or illness, they are unable to farm and provide healthy food for themselves and their families. Thus, they become unwell and need more health care. It is like the proverbial double edged sword.

Due to families struggling to meet their basic needs, education is often pushed aside. According to Our Africa, even if school fees are paid for by church groups or non-governmental agencies, the cost of books and supplies is unaffordable. Conflict has destroyed many public buildings, because of this there is only one school for every five villages. As a result, many children do not finish primary school, and only one third of those children go on to secondary school. Lastly, there is very minimal access to health care, specifically rural families, but also urban families. It is a custom in Congo that families take care of their family members and do not seek external health care. Even if they wanted to seek outside help, “For patients to get access to healthcare, they often have to walk for many hours. Imagine you are a pregnant woman, and you may even have to carry another child on your back. These distances are very difficult to overcome. This is a daily challenge – just to get to a health facility” (Medecins Sans Frontieres 2011). Due to the lack of healthcare and unusual customs, epidemics often strike citizens in Congo.

Benefits of Improving Education:

The Democratic Republic of Congo has spiraling detrimental issues. As soon as one issue seems to get better, another gets worse. The root of this problem is a lack of education. Without education, nothing can improve, because nobody has enough knowledge and skills to solve critical problems. Just one of these problems includes a lack of agriculture skills and technology. Congo has many untapped areas for agriculture, and they are not being used, because most people do not have the knowledge, skill, or overall opportunity to start a sustaining farm or business. Families only pass on the knowledge that they learned

from their parents and no new information is gained. Education is the only way to ensure a well trained and qualified workforce. According to The Global Partnership for Education, “The Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the countries with the largest number of out-of-school children: it is estimated that 3.5 million children of primary age are not in school mainly because of dropout” (2017) This is a major issue when trying to improve a country regarding all aspects. The lack of education greatly affects a citizen's ability to create a sustainable household income in any field. Without education, every person in Congo will have the same skill set. If every applicant is the same, they will all be striving for the same jobs, which creates greater competition. Especially in agricultural production, which is how a farmer creates a household income. If every farmer has the same practices and grows the same crops, a farmer's household income is decreased because there is no diversity for buyers.

The typical family in Congo includes many members who often work in the same field. The most common fields include agriculture and farming, along with mining. In agriculture and farming, more education would greatly improve yields and quality of products. A skilled farmer that is aware of the biological processes in agriculture will be more efficient, and create a better product. In mining, the uneducated worker receives the minimal paying hard labor job. This is common to most citizens in Congo, because most do not have the education for a higher paying position. Labor jobs are necessary for a successful mining operation, but so are more skilled and educated positions. Without innovative and educated people to fill positions that are in control of mining operations, the business will never truly improve. Meaning that profits will, correlatively, also never improve. These hard labor jobs are taken by the bulk of the families in Congo. On average, these families incomes would increase with better education.

The current status of education in Congo is poor. The war that raged in Congo from 1996 to 2003 Children who need to be in school in order to lead a successful life are instead working. According to the USAID; “The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) education system is plagued by low coverage and poor quality. 3.5 million children of primary school age are not in school, and of those who do attend, 44 percent start school late, after the age of six. National data indicate that only 67 percent of children who enter first grade will complete sixth grade. Of those who reach 6th grade, only 75 percent will pass the exit exam” (2017). Despite a decision made by the Congo government in 2011 to make all primary school free, children still seem to not be attending, specifically women. Data shows that females attend school 15% less than males in Congo. The reason behind this is costs. Even though primary school is currently free, parents must pay the cost of transportation and teachers salary. Along with clothes for their children to wear to school and proper supplies. Much of this is completely unattainable for a significant amount of families. Teacher salaries are often as low as less than one dollar a day. Therefore it is extremely difficult to obtain teachers that are willing to instruct at this rate. Without teachers and funds, attending school is an impossible goal.

The status for education in Congo is poor, yet improving. This is measured in an attendance to mainly primary schools. After a decrease in civil war activity, the country is increasingly safer, which allows for more schooling. According to Borgen; “Gross attendance rate in primary schools increased from 83.7 percent in 2007 to 101 percent in 2012. The number of students attending school regularly rose as well – 8.8 million to 12.6 million” (2014). These statistics include mostly urban students, because there are less schools in the rural areas. This has only been improving since then. Government and nonprofit organizations have been helping with education in Congo. Since the Congo government devoted 100 million dollars to launch the Reconstruction and Renovation of School Infrastructure Program in 2013, education has only improved, but not enough to see the results that are needed to truly benefit this country.

Education is truly how people become successful in any field. This can be applied to business, mining, and even agriculture. On average more educated farmers have greater success; “Research shows that basic education affects small landholders’ and subsistence farmers’ productivity immediately and positively, and that a farmer with four years of elementary education is, on average, 8.7 percent more productive than a farmer with no education. Moreover, farmers with more education get much higher gains in income from the use of new technologies and adjust more rapidly to technological changes” (Gasperini 2000). These advances in skill and knowledge increase agricultural productivity because farmers can thus be more efficient, creating a better quality and larger yield. They can then sell their product to citizens around them or other villages, which will not only increase the average income, but will also provide to the needs of the community.

While education is a stable foundation of all countries, there are some issues that can sometimes cause a decrease in quality or quantity of education. For Congo, one of these factors is political unrest. Currently, there are still civil conflicts in Congo, but they are not as damaging as they used to be. According to The Guardian; “In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the M23 rebels were largely responsible for putting 250 schools out of use last year, either as a result of occupation for military purposes or looting. Between April and December more than 240,000 students went without schooling for weeks” (2013). If the civil war in Congo reaches its peak again, education will be negatively affected.

Improving Education, The Solution:

The main barriers of education in The Democratic Republic of Congo include; conflict and displacement, transportation, poverty, and high cost of schooling. In order to refute these barriers, the DRC needs to increase and improve military functions, create more transportation opportunities, and decrease the average cost of schooling. While the issue of conflict and displacement has been improved since the official end of the civil war, this issue is far from gone; “The government’s response has been to integrate militants into the army and to disarm and repatriate foreign armed groups but this process has been marred by corruption and further conflict, often reflecting local ethnic divisions and competing command structures” (Zeender, Rothing 2010). In order to stop the displacement, the Congo government should increase funding to their military service. By doing this Congo will have the ability to stop conflict which will lead to less displacement. Less displacement will allow for a more stable communities. Stable communities will allow for construction of schools or for children to be sent to schools elsewhere.

Another factor that needs to be improved to better education is transportation. The current transportation system in Congo is very poor, and mainly consists of train and water systems. According to the Congo Forum; “The DRC has thousands of kilometres of navigable waterways, and traditionally water transport has been the dominant means of moving around approximately two-thirds of the country.”

While improving the water way seems to make the most sense, because most people are said to use it, this is not what is needed for Congo right now. What needs to be done is reach the people that can not reach the waterways. In order to provide adequate transportation to rural and urban citizens unable to reach water transportation, the Congo government needs to improve the current rail system by creating and connecting more railways, and fixing the current railways. The railroad system is one of the most intact means of transportation in Congo, so this will be the most effective way to reach the most citizens. By adding this mean of transportation, families in Congo will be able to reach schools for their children.

The last and main barrier of furthering education in the Congo is the high cost of schooling. Families cannot afford to send their kids to school even if they could find a way to reach them. Despite free primary school in Congo, the cost of teachers and supplies is still too high. In order to fix this, there needs to be more parent and school committees that will work together to find a solution to every problem in each specific school until the government finds a widespread solution. This is where families, specifically rural, need to assist. They need to pass down or share supplies, pool together money for

teachers, and keep searching for better options. Without collaboration, there is no way the lack of schooling in these communities will ever improve. An example of this working is how children were schooled in the 1800's in rural United States. Farmers pooled their resources to build a community school house and combined their money to pay a teacher. This system worked in the United States for thousands of children and is the foundation of the current educational system in the United States and also in other more advanced countries around the world.

These three factors play the most significant role in improving education in Congo. This will better educate children and even adults. Education will then help with poverty which leads to food security. Improving education will create more jobs, and create more successful citizens. Also, the more people that complete primary school, then more are likely to move onto secondary school. This is where knowledge and leadership in forestry, natural resources, and agriculture overall will come into play. With Congo's untapped potential in agriculture, the possibilities a further educated public would have are endless.

While looking at the Democratic Republic of Congo, one may be overwhelmed with the unsolved issues. This country, like many others, seems to have too many problems to solve, but along with these endless problems, comes even more solutions. For Congo, the solution to so many problems starts in the classroom. Improving education in Congo will have too many positives to count. An educated population would be more likely to peacefully assemble to improve the infrastructure in communities and ultimately the government. The main changes needed to be made in order to improve education are less internal displacement, better transportation, and lower school costs. Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world (Nelson Mandela). Increasing education in the Democratic Republic of Congo will only create better food security, less poverty, and a more stable government.

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