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Overcoming Fragility as an Impediment to Development in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Abstract

This brief is intended for the purpose of providing an objective analysis of the fragile state of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in order to critically and holistically break down the limiting factors of conflict, resource exploitation and corruption as they each play a role in hindering sustainable development. For the past decade-and-a-half, a multifaceted struggle composed of numerous armed groups has plagued the region, each vying for control over the nation's plentiful natural resources. Given the combined presence of the United Nations MONUSCO intervention, Congolese forces and over one-hundred different militia groups, a complex power-struggle at the regional, national and local levels has emerged. Subsequently, the DRC has been left vulnerable to various human security concerns, a weak national government and institutional framework, an under-functioning economy and an inability to progress towards sustainable, long-term development.

Institutional fragility at the national level due to systematic corruption, political patronage, resource exploitation, and prolonged armed conflict has suppressed local actors from actualizing their economic and development potential by creating physical, institutional, infrastructural, and control barriers. As a result, the DRC merely maintains a facade of democracy, sustained by actors whose goals have primarily been to mitigate the current conflict and maintain militaristic control, rather than to implement key peacebuilding initiatives and localized social and economic projects that would develop the country from the bottom-up and carry it into the future as a key player and competitor on the regional and international fields.

Background

Comprising twenty-six vastly unique provinces, The Democratic Republic of Congo is a relatively newly reestablished state that has seen complex, multifaceted levels of political and social unrest on a scale far more significant than likely any other territory in its region. One of the most interesting states within the African continent, the troublesome history of the DRC foreshadows many of the obstacles that the country continues to face in the modern day.

Beginning at the 1884-85 Berlin Conference that divided the African continent among multiple global superpowers, the DRC was claimed by Belgium as a private property of King Leopold. Because the region was designated as private property rather than a colony, the king

retained complete authority over the people and resources within it. The center of economic activity was in rubber exports, given the high international demand at the time, of which spurred the emergence of child labor as a common practice to inexpensively source the material.

In 1908, the DRC was officially transferred to Belgium from King Leopold as a province, which became known as the Belgian Congo. The years under Belgian colonial control are characterized by a dramatic, monumental shift from the sourcing of rubber to cobalt and copper, instead, of which remain among the country's most sought-over resources to this day. There was also a notable economic-based shift from the Western to the Eastern part of the country, where mining was prevalent. This shift sparked a longstanding power-struggle in the Eastern DRC that has only worsened over time; fueled by greed, as well as both human and resource exploitation.

After the DRC (then, known as the Republic of Congo) gained independence from Belgium in 1960, political turmoil escalated into a military coup in 1965; Col. Joseph Mobutu seized power as president and subsequently changed the country's name from the Republic of the Congo to Zaire. For the following thirty-two years, Mobutu retained his power through a combination of sham elections and sheer violence (CIA 2019), fostering intense anger and distrust among the many clashing cultural groups in the region, both between each other and towards the national government. After years of internal ethnic and political conflict, Mobutu's regime finally collapsed during a Rwandan/Ugandan-backed rebellion in 1997 (notably comprised of refugees who survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide) led by Laurent Kabila, who again re-named the country to the Democratic Republic of the Congo after claiming the presidency. Peace was unsustainable once again, as a massive-scale civil war erupted in 1998; parties included roughly nine nearby African countries and various local armed groups. The war formally ended in 2006 with the signing of the multilateral Sun City Agreement and Pretoria Accord, which removed Rwandan forces, reintegrated all armed groups into society, and established a national government. Moreover, many argue that the war has never truly ended given the everlasting conflict, which is believed to have killed up to six million Congolese people ever since.

Shortly after in 2006, the first elections, as well as the first Presidential, National Assembly, and provincial legislatures took hold (CIA 2019), with Joseph Kaliba officially solidifying his role as president of the DRC. In 2011, he was narrowly reelected for a second term; however, the delaying of the most recent 2016 election to late December of 2018 (citing the Ebola epidemic) once again heightened tensions between the public and national government, as

Kaliba had extended his stay in office for half of a third term; this is prohibited by the two-term limit stated in the DRC's Constitution. Though the 2018 elections brought longtime politician Félix Tshisekedi of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress Party to the presidency, Tshisekedi only narrowly retained a plurality win with 38.6% of the popular vote. As a result, political tensions, distrust, and overall state-fragility remain high; the economy is militarized under the control of few generals (who retain governmental control under Tshisekedi's nose) who have personal strategic interests to deploy troops in the mining regions and resources remain under the control of numerous armed groups and foreign actors, rather than the Congolese people.

The DRC's complex historical background, formal peace accords, and subsequent government implementation each run a theme of a lack of true legitimacy due to an absence of coordination and the presence of far too many actors who vie for control. The Congolese people nor elected officials of the DRC have never experienced genuine autonomy due to conflict driven by heavy resource exploitation and extreme, deeply rooted corruption within the government. None of the formal accords have sufficed due to a failing to address the roots of the issues; the emphasis has instead been placed on promoting a facade of democracy and liberal institutions (that satisfies the West) rather than concrete plans for investment in education, health, and infrastructure at the local level in order to boost the economy and promote sustainable development. As a result, the DRC hasn't experienced any sort of long-term development, despite its plentiful natural resources and ideal geographical positioning among key trade routes.

Thematic Rationale

The rationale behind this analysis emphasizes themes of global status and the global agenda, as well as national and regional stability. While the DRC remains widely recognized, it holds a reputation as an underdeveloped, corrupt, and unstable state. By addressing the root of what is preventing the DRC from sustainable development, fragility, caused by conflict, resource exploitation, and corruption, the nation will have the chance to actualize its developmental potential for long-run success on the international stage.

Moreover, development of the DRC through mitigating conflict, corruption and resource exploitation in order to provide stability will provide a sense of legitimacy throughout the African Continent, particularly for partnership with the African Union. Overall regional stability is key for Sub-Saharan Africa's development and competitiveness as a global *partner* for growth and investment; as an equal player rather than a supplier. If we take a look to the SDGs,

development through my recommendations will encompass the “No Poverty,” “Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure,” “Decent Work and Economic Growth,” “Good Health and Well-being,” and “Quality Education” goals set forth by the UN in 2015. Enhancing the DRC with these goals in mind will not only enhance the global agenda, but also enhance the country’s global and regional status through its commitment to its people and the greater well-being of the world in terms of collective security. Human security is not a state-specific problem; it presents spillover effects, just as development does as well. If the DRC is to develop and promote human security, a change is likely to be spurred in Rwanda, Uganda and the Central African Republic, given their close ties in the region.

Theoretical framework

A victim of interdependency, the DRC has remained stagnant as both dependent upon and as an exploited supplier to numerous outside actors and their host nations, who each vie for control over the nation’s natural resources. The theory of interdependency within the context of the developing world highlights interconnected nature between states and non-state actors within the global system, as evolving with globalization. The global system relies on the DRC for inexpensive sourcing of metals/materials, yet the DRC remains far more dependent on the global system for underpaid revenue. Further, the DRC is the ultimate example of the “resource curse” in the sense that many actors feel entitled to the resources available and are willing to do anything in order to assert control, degrading the country’s environment/biodiversity, economy, and human security in the process. In theory, if the UN framework and the FARDC were to unite under a common agenda to take back control of the mines, the Congolese would be given space to operate the production and distribution of their own natural resources and to participate in the international market, thereby enhancing human capabilities through job access as an approach for economic development. If not, these issues will continue to hinder development for years to come if new solutions are not developed from a bottom-up perspective.

Main Points

Encompassed within the overarching theme of development, I assert that state fragility at the hands of multifaceted conflict, resource exploitation and corruption is what has prevented long term development within the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The longstanding conflict in the country has prevailed long since the formal end of the civil war, leaving villages of

innocent people to fear for their lives and for the loss of their livelihoods. Moreover, a society simply has no room for development if constant armed conflict and violence undermines local livelihoods and basic human security.

The conflict within the DRC lends way to my next point, that resource exploitation is behind the state fragility and lack of development. There are over 100 known militia groups that operate within the DRC that are backed behind numerous states. Of the various armed groups who vying for control over the natural resources within the DRC (namely cobalt, copper, diamonds and gold), the three largest are the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the Mai Mai militia groups. The ADF (based in Uganda) is believed to be the largest of the three and is even regarded as a terrorist organization by the neighboring Ugandan Government. Regardless, these three groups have been responsible for creating a warzone out of the DRC; millions of civilians have been killed and many more have been permanently internally and externally displaced (BBC 2013), all in the name of control over the mines.

Aside from conflict, the issue of resource exploitation creates economic implications as well. For example, many Chinese distributors serve as the middleman between sourcing cobalt at the mines and selling it to American companies who use it in batteries to power cell phones, computers, and automobiles (i.e. Apple, Tesla, Microsoft, etc.). Many other actors from different nations play the same sort of role, harvesting cobalt for use in ways that does not at all directly profit the DRC, therefore undermining its economy through the restriction of its profit margin.

These practices lower the human capabilities of the Congolese in terms of development because they are pushed out of the industry at higher levels past the sourcing of the minerals themselves. Child labor is still heavily relied upon at the mines, where up to 35,000 children work in mining, which depletes the long-term workforce because children are kept out of school and do not learn skills needed for the workforce down the road. This leaves more room for outside actors to take control, thus promoting the cycle of interdependency.

Finally, I purport that corruption at the national level has weakened the government and the institutions set forth during the drafting of the most recent constitution in 2006. While the most recent 2018 election presented a promising outcome by finally electing a president who has never previously served in the FARDC, the national government itself remains executed by military generals and ex-soldiers from the corrupt FARDC. These individuals who enter politics

generally only have military goals in mind and do little to ensure any civil, economic or health benefits for the Congolese people. For example, in July of 2018, then president, Joseph Kabila, appointed two sanctioned generals to key army posts, despite their charges for known human rights violations (Ssuuna 2018). Decisions are made on the basis of retaining power and influence. Himself an ex-military general, this incident took place when Kabila was in the midst of overstaying his term in office, which was set to end in 2016. The majority of these leaders aim to retain power and influence for personal benefit while fronting a democratic exterior to hush outside condemnation. Development is simply not a priority for the national government, and never will be if corrupt, greedy actors continue to have a place in it.

Challenges

In addition to my main points, additional challenges remain in the way of the Democratic Republic of the Congo by suppressing development and further contributing to the corruption, conflict, and resource exploitation that exist. First and foremost, the FARDC; the national military organization responsible for defending the DRC, of which was rebuilt after the Second Congo War as part of the formal peace process. As stated in the 2002 *Pretoria Agreement*, all hostile groups were required to incorporate themselves into an integrated national army; among these groups included the DRC soldiers, members of the RCD, the MLC, and the Mai-Mai (Pretoria Agreement 2002). The forced integration of these previously warring parties did not provide a smooth transition, as many still retain their previous groups' ideologies and goals, of which operate within hidden chains of command in the FARDC. As a result, the force remains weak, divided, poorly trained, and without direction; thus, ineffective. This presents challenges in the face of development given their inability to work cohesively and effectively with the UN mission. If the FARDC cannot mobilize as a singular force in order to take back control of the country from armed rebel groups and ensure human security, development is not a viable option.

Another prevalent challenge emerges from the United Nations MONUSCO mission itself. Aside from its ineffectiveness in light of the continued conflict, there are numerous problems within the body that exacerbate the conflict at hand. What began as a mandate to “facilitate peaceful political negotiations between belligerents,” (Yenda Ilunga 2019), has since evolved into an offensive peacekeeping mission with a focus on protecting civilians and building institutions. The mission has taken a far more invasive approach than it was originally intended to, which has caused further hostilities in the region from both rebel groups and in the eyes of the

FARDC/national government. Moreover, MONUSCO peacekeepers are trained to operate within a formal war, where sides are clear, and hostilities solely take place between combatants.

However, the conflict in the DRC is entirely asymmetric, including belligerents from multiple sides even within a singular force, as characterized by the FARDC. The UN's incoordination and lack of a tailored strategy has left civilians in harm's way and further fueled the existing conflict by presenting yet another actor, rather than any sort of concrete relief.

Recommendations

In order to build off of existing development momentum, key infrastructural and institutional changes that are directly tailored to the needs of local populations are required in the DRC. There must be a strengthening of national policies, more space given for civil society to operate, and intense institutional reform at both the local level in order for sustainable, autonomous development to take place in the long run. To achieve this, my recommendations to combat the most immediate major challenges are fourfold:

1. Unify the FARDC from the bottom-up.
 - a. Follow President Tshisekedi's approach for strengthening military and bring effectiveness by ending the war mentality, weeding out corrupt actors, and changing the overall culture within the army. Emphasize unification under a common goal. Direct Tshisekedi to appoint honest military leaders and try/convict individuals guilty of war crimes and/or treason.
 - b. End the history of no compensation; the national government must start paying soldiers so that they are incentivized to defend the DRC and not fall to corrupt ideologies and hidden agendas.
 - c. Prioritize coordination between the MONUSCO and the FARDC to unite under common agenda for the FARDC to regain control of the region and suppress the militias and rebel groups.
 - d. Institute a plan to properly train the FARDC as an effective unit. Maintain UN military assistance until the FARDC is ready, then promptly remove in phases.
2. Maintain an authoritarian government that is committed to development and the improvement of the lives of the Congolese or continue with the current democratic system but with a strict function of accountability for elected officials.

- a. Current system is nothing more than a facade of democracy; autocracy might be necessary in order to reduce corruption due to conflicting goals of various actors.
 - b. Solely appoint Congolese leaders to government positions, who have the best interest of the Congolese people; a Ghaddafi 2.0 would be ideal.
 - c. Align the national government with the AU and UN (but retain the sole power) for the sake of regional stability and oversight for long-term projects.
 - d. Give a voice to minority groups; Address ethnic divisions and aim to house all groups peacefully (peace and human security creates sustainable development)
 - e. Enforce punishment for belligerent leaders and corrupt actors within the current system in order to set a harsh precedent.
3. The national government must take back control of the mines for the sake of economic expansion and reducing conflict, as well as incentivize the local population to run them.
- a. Remove the middleman in cobalt distribution; create a system in which buyers must buy directly from the source to generate maximum profits for the DRC.
 - b. Impose child labor restrictions at the national and local levels in order to allow for an educated workforce to grow for the long-term.
4. Infrastructural reform with an emphasis on bottom-up approach to development that stress enhancing the health and human capabilities of local actors for sustainability (i.e. redirecting the bulk of the responsibility for development to the Congolese).
- a. Support localized educational efforts through NGOs and national funding.
 - b. Encourage micro-financing for small businesses and entrepreneurs at the local level, particularly for female owned businesses, in order to empower the population and to spur local economic growth aside from mining.
 - c. Implement a comprehensive set of health initiatives with a focus on strengthening the direct supply chain of medicines and supplies to Congolese medical facilities.
 - i. Improve and build additional roadways near new and existing clinics, thus reducing immediate physical barriers to access.
 - ii. Direct donor funding towards establishing additional clinics and hospitals, as well as towards supplying them (rather than supplying aid directly to the Congolese citizens).

- iii. Fund a cold-chain vaccine storage-hub in the capital city of Kinshasa, utilizing Solar Direct Drive refrigerators, powered by renewable solar energy (Gavi 2019), for storage of oral-cholera and malaria vaccines.
- iv. Improve access to the electrical grid starting with the Equateur and Tshuapa Northwestern provinces, which serve as existing NGCA Initiative sites that are currently experimenting with healthcare supply chain revision projects (VillageReach 2015).

Conclusion

On the surface, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a state riddled with conflict, corruption, and resource exploitation to a degree that has severely restricted its development prospects for decades. What is left is a state that has become imprisoned by its own fragility, controlled by actors who have no business in the country. The inability of the DRC to fully stand on its own has kept it from emerging as the dominant economic power that it has the potential to be within the African continent, given its vast natural resources. However, with the right set of institutional and infrastructural changes, combined with a comprehensive approach towards development that focuses on bottom-up and enhancing human capabilities, the DRC may finally see the evolution that it is long overdue for.

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