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**The Democratic Republic of Congo: Rebuilding the Future**

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has a culture of pride, dignity, and beauty, but with recent violence and the accompanying issue of food insecurity, such a distinguished nation has fallen into deep poverty. For years, the blood spilt on the country's lush lands resulted in displacement of its native peoples. The brutally violent wars, as well as the lack of much-needed infrastructure and economic growth, have left the DRC with millions of starving citizens. The key problems in need of immediate attention are the aftermath of the Congo Wars, the current malnutrition faced by the general population, the lack of financial resources among the rural population, gender discrimination against women, and the widespread use of sexual violence.

The DRC has faced much hardship over the past few decades. The First Congo War, which lasted from 1996 to 1997, is known for the destruction that occurred across the DRC-Rwandan borders and the strength of the rebellion armies. Less than a year passed before the rise of more rebel groups led to the Second Congo War, which is also referred to as the "African World War" because it resulted in violence, chaos, and, until its end in 2003, the brutal death of 5.4 million people, both during the war and in its aftermath (Pike). After a new government came to power in the post-war years, corruption became prominent. The DRC was ranked by the Corruption Perceptions Index as 164<sup>th</sup> out of 178 countries based on corruption in the 2010 government ("Corruption Perceptions Index 2010"). Some of this graft is evident in the military, where soldiers are expected to create their own salary by collecting road tolls. Often soldiers take advantage of their position of authority by stealing money, destroying homes and raping women (Ziemke). The Congo Wars caused immense damage to the DRC and left it with millions dead and an unorganized, crooked government.

From 2007 to 2008, food prices globally skyrocketed, adding nearly 100 million to the world's hungry; in a country like the DRC, these inflated prices change everything ("Harkness"). According to the Global Human Indices, a study that contrasted hunger levels in 1990 with those documented in 2006, the DRC experienced a spike in malnutrition even before the war, with effects that are continuing today. In 1990, nearly 29% of the population of the DRC was undernourished. In 2006 that number had reached 75%, with a shocking 19.9% under-five mortality rate among children (von Grebmer). These statistics can be almost directly attributed to the Congo wars and to a lack of infrastructure. Another contributing factor is the existence of hundreds of thousands of foreign people who have fled to the DRC and 1 million of its own internally-displaced peoples (IDPs) fleeing war and famine (Ziemke). Many of these refugees are still not with their families in the place they once called home and are in desperate need of aid. Refugees often move more to seek food or to steal the rare livestock that lives in the DRC's rural farmland. Increased food prices and transient people have created serious global problems for humans and have demonstrated the need for action in countries that are currently unable to rely on domestic food sources.

Violence and warfare have caused many rural families to rebuild fields, homes, and farms, resulting in a lack of capital available to the citizens of the DRC. Bank accounts are only available to about .01% of the population, and banks only exist in the largest cities and are thus unable to provide the other 70% of the population with the resources they need, 60% of whom need the capital to support a farm (Ziemke). The lack of financial resources has also had a strong effect on the availability of micro loans. Micro financing would allow low-income individuals or groups to start up a company or provide necessary, but expensive items. The country has one of the lowest GDP per capita rates in the world, and a DRC citizen makes an average of \$300 to \$1000 USD per year (Ziemke). This generally low

income rate, combined with the scarcity of financial institutions creates an environment that is not conducive to rebuilding.

Though there are many issues to deal with in the DRC, by capitalizing on the country's potential, balancing the use of national funds, refocusing aid to enhance long-term goals, and creating infrastructure, as well as by relying on and supporting women, the DRC can flourish and eliminate some of the debilitating poverty that plagues the nation.

Though the country may be in a poor condition, its potential is uniquely positive. With nearly half of the rivers and forests in all of Africa (Ziemke), the lush land and precious gems that are buried beneath make it potentially the wealthiest of all the African nations. Unfortunately, the violence that has occurred *for* those resources has severely lowered the standard of living. In the DRC about 2.86% of the land is arable and only 0.47% is used for permanent crops (*New Agriculturalist*). The rest of land has a far more lucrative purpose, as it is often sold to foreign investors for non agricultural uses (*New Agriculturalist*). The DRC needs this foreign owned land because 55% of exports come from agriculture, but studies have shown that by 2015, at the latest, any growth in the agriculture industry will be far exceeded by the population growth (*New Agriculturalist*). An investment in crops like maize and cassava as well as in agricultural research and methods of transport for the goods would benefit the DRC (*International Food Policy Research Institute*). The DRC could follow the lead of New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)'s Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP). The CAADP's four pillars have improved food security, access to clean water, agricultural research, and market access. However, both the CAADP and the International Food Policy Research Institute recognize that-too much emergency aid could spark riots and violence instead of promoting health and stability.

The country has struggled to accommodate a swift and stark change in government after the Congo wars. The 2004 Maputo agreement intended to deal with the fiscal structure of the country and lay the foundation for a stronger economic sector, but many of these ideas were never realized and the plans never came to fruition. For example, it was agreed upon that 10% of national spending would be focused on agriculture, but recent investigation shows that only about 2% of national spending is actually directed to this sector, one of the most necessary areas of growth in the Democratic Republic of Congo. A 1% increase in agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) is worth "three times as much to poverty reduction as a 1% increase in non agricultural GDP" ("Summary of London . . ."). This demonstrates the need for more permanent solutions in agriculture and more reliable methods of growth in the agricultural sector.

While emergency food rations are important, they have also contributed to food insecurity. So many impoverished nations have turned to imported food, instead of sustenance from within their own country, and it has become increasingly difficult over time to readjust. Sometimes food rations that are supposed to go to the rural people end up in the hands of rebel groups or even the military, which are then strengthened and empowered (Ziemke). With many rural people depending on imported food (*New Agriculturalist*), and the majority of the citizens starving, we reach a stalemate: how can we balance the immediate needs of millions of people, but also secure and stabilize the DRC long-term? The key is a healthy balance between the two, found in a multi-phase plan wherein the short term needs for food and water could slowly be replaced by domestically grown goods and local food. The creation of infrastructure is vital to achieving this goal.

Through the creation of a solid, nationwide infrastructure in the form of roads, secure barges and floatillas, signs, and electricity, food will become far more accessible and open up the possibility of distributing local goods which will in turn create less dependence on imported goods. The development of better, cleaner refugee camps is also important because the successful resettlement of the DRC is a process and will require time and effort.

It is also important to note the feasibility of such a scenario, making strength in the banking industry a foremost priority. In a strong banking system, a few monetary losses would not be a major blow, but in the DRC, a minor debt could force an entire corporation into bankruptcy. A way of preventing corruption and ensuring a diverse economic and banking sector could come from the Organization for Business Law Harmonization in Africa (OHADA) which promotes fair and consistent banking practices among the African nations. This kind of addition would not only develop standards and benchmarks of success, but it would also give more credibility to the DRC's banks. By giving that level of credibility, the bank could weather larger defaults, if necessary, which would in turn create consumer confidence.

In terms of microfinance there are already a few organizations in the DRC that provide these loans. Though they are concentrated mostly in the DRC's capital, Kinshasa, there are other sites in nearly every major area of the country, covering North, South, East, and West (Isern). By using these current locations, it is possible to create a network of financial institutions and to expand its range to include more people and villages. This inevitably brings about the issue of an individual or family's ability to repay their loans. A solution to this problem is for banks to initially start providing microfinance loans in the larger DRC cities and work their way out to the more rural areas. To provide incentive for the banks to continue expanding, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund could provide equity for 30 - 40%, or a negotiated figure, of the loans for small farms in the most rural areas. By giving some fiscal confidence to the small banks of the DRC, more financial institutions would be willing to support such ventures and tentatively make their mark on the agriculture industry. Heifer International, which provides farms with livestock, makes a world of difference to many families and their farms; but even this is not enough to provide millions of people with the economic support that they need. Through the NGO Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP), there are many opportunities to allow domestic banks and other microfinance providers to expand their services to a more rural population.

The Hunger Project has claimed that, "Women are the key to ending hunger in Africa," yet in the DRC, women are treated as less than their male counterparts. A crucial factor for rebuilding the DRC has been, and will continue to be, women. It is important to first address the culture from which discrimination occurs in the home. The most common form of nutrition in the DRC is *fufu* a carbohydrate-filled paste that comes from manioc tubers and is eaten out of a communal bowl (Ziemke). This not only opens up the risk of disease and infection, but the order in which the food is eaten – first the father, sitting in a chair, then the children and mother, who are seated on the floor – also creates the pervading malnutrition found in children and women (Ziemke). Additionally, women cannot own land without their husband's consent, and single, urban women are regarded as prostitutes with no regard as to their career ("Women's Economic Empowerment"). This basic level of gender discrimination gives even more credence to the growing ideology that accepts that this happens every day toward women. As the backbone to much of what is produced, from the house to the fields, women are paradoxically treated with less respect and are in desperate need of help.

Women are one of the keys to success in the DRC; so much depends on their work in the home and in fields that renewed support of females in the DRC is vital. According to the World Bank, women, on average, reinvest 90% of their income into the household and their family, whereas men only reinvest 30-40%. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that "agricultural productivity could be raised by as much as 20 percent by allocating a bigger share of agricultural input to women" ("World Bank Site Resources"). Women are already generating a good deal to agricultural production. 80% of farms in Africa are small farms – less than 4 hectares – and nearly 90% are farmed by women (Astyk). As important as their role may be, women are still regarded as lesser than men and many just need simple education to inform and empower them. Through the World Health Organization and NGOs like Women for Women

International, thousands of women can be helped by other women around the globe and by education on personal health, job-skills training, and their legal rights, all services which Women for Women and WHO provide.

The DRC has one of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world. According to Women for Women International, a nonprofit organization that educates and connects women globally; at least 200,000 Congolese women are rape survivors, with many more who were killed after their attack (Women for Women International). The online campaign Stop Rape in the DRC has raised funds for the victims, 50% of whom are just children. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, rape is seen as a tool of war and used in epidemic proportions. Women who are attacked are ostracized and shunned, while the actions of male perpetrators are condoned. Often the women are no longer seen as pure or worthy of marriage. Necessary medical attention for these women is also not as available as it should be, with very few hospitals even open, much less prepared to deal with some of the extreme results of gang-rape and mutilation that so many women suffer.

Women have long been unable to access the proper medical treatment for themselves and their children and with sexual violence and disease at such high rates, an examination of health issues is very important to aiding the women of the DRC. One of these issues is traumatic fistula (a large tear in a woman's genitals as a result of sexual assault) which has incredibly painful physical effects. In a clinic in the eastern portions of the Congo, thousands of women are treated for the physical and psychological effects of sexual brutality and of the fistula cases received in its first year of operation, 95% were "traumatic in origin" ("FAWCO"). Since that first year of operation in 2003, the rate of traumatic fistula operations has come down significantly to 68% ("FAWCO"). The clinic performs the relatively simple surgery to physically heal the fistula, but that is never a guaranteed indicator of the woman's mental health. Through extensive therapy and emotional rehabilitation, it is possible for the women to lead a healthy life (*ACQUIRE Project/Engender Health*). Unfortunately, there are not nearly enough of these clinics to keep up with demand, and often the issue of financial resources becomes a large problem for women. The government of the DRC spends less than 1% of their GNP on healthcare, totaling up to about \$15 per person annually (Ziemke). The largest obstacles to women receiving this much-deserved aid are a lack of financial resources and a lack of education on their personal health and the resources available to them. The surgery costs only \$300 USD, but many women suffer the painful effects commonly attributed to traumatic fistula such as incontinence, immobility in their legs, severe damage to the reproduction organs, kidney disease or failure, sterilization, infection, disease, and even death ("FAWCO").

Despite difficulties, one organization has found a way to protect women *and* make a profit. HEAL Africa, an NGO that focuses mostly on African women and country-specific needs, has a program called Heal My People. Its founders, Mama Muliri and two of her friends, began seeking out rape victims in their communities and training local women in other communities to speak to the assaulted women and encourage them to find the best treatment possible. Not only does this remove the stigma of foreign doctors coming into a closed society where the women are not comfortable enough to open up and thus receive the treatment they need, but it also laid the foundations for Tungaane Kwa Mokopo (TKM). Tungaane Kwa Mokopo translates into English as "Credit Together." TKM began when the local counselors realized that the problem for women came down to this question: "How can a woman pay for her delivery, or buy food, or pay school fees for her children without a way to earn income?" ("HEAL Africa"). This organization has not only networked women in villages across two provinces of the Congo, but it has also provided women with the loans necessary to provide for their families, give their children an education, and get the vital medical care whenever they need it. One of the most important attributes of this NGO is the standards and consistency of their work, from the criteria for receiving a loan, to the local representation on the governing board. TKM has changed the lives of women by providing loans based on submitted proposals that must be paid back in 6 months with 2%

interest. So far the return rate on the loans has been a staggering 98% (“HEAL Africa”). This organizational model is vital to the future of the DRC: in the first six months of operation in the original city of Maniema, TKM made \$15,000 USD from interest alone (“HEAL Africa”). Heal My People and other programs can help the women of the DRC to stabilize their lives and become strong and independent.

The puzzling nature of problems in the DRC speaks to its need for assistance. The DRC has battled its way through both of the Congo wars and a new government, which left the country reeling. With some calling the brutal aftermath and death toll akin to an “African World War,” the wartime chaos still has not been completely removed. Some of the effects of the violence were looting of livestock, destruction of crops, and 1 million internally-displaced people. While this destruction was on the rise, so was the Congolese dependence on imported food. Much like other poor, rural countries, the DRC relied on the cheaper and easier foreign food rather than domestic crops and then suffered greatly with the steep inflation of food prices. Although the current, widespread hunger and food insecurity deserves our immediate attention, we must balance the desire for emergency rations and the need for long-term social, economic, and governmental security and stability. The creation of infrastructure and a larger financial presence will increase the availability of microfinance loans and other provisional lending to the more rural villages and small farms. Although the Congo has very serious problems, its potential is overwhelming. It is considered to be one of the richest nations on the globe, based solely on natural resources, with untapped deposits worth more than \$24 trillion USD, greater than the combined GDP of the United States and Europe (“Women’s Economic Empowerment”). While these minerals give the DRC power, they have also brought much of the turmoil that has wracked the country for several decades. One of the most horrific and prevalent issues in the DRC is the amount of sexual violence that is committed toward women daily. With this issue being called a “Rape Epidemic,” (Polgreen) there remains a serious demand for medical treatment centers, but this kind of assistance is largely unavailable save in a few of the largest cities. A beautiful country of rivers, forests, and lush land, the Democratic Republic of Congo has faced its fair share of trouble, especially with extreme violence toward women and serious levels of food insecurity and malnutrition, but with the help of micro financing and increased infrastructure, there is potential for the Congo to lift itself out of poverty and starvation and make significant steps toward success.

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