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Factor #15: Populations
March 26, 2025

The DRC Food Crisis: Leveraging a Demographic Dividend

We are at the head of the energy revolution, a time in advance of our industrial past, where electricity dominates even the time-tested reliability of fossil fuels. Today, we have designed extraordinary machines: battery-fueled vehicles, compounds of artificial intelligence, robotic instruments that can perform incredible stunts, and much—MUCH—more. However, at the foot of this innovation is an incredibly delicate and scarce natural resource: cobalt; which is used in the production of lithium batteries. You may be thinking, “How does cobalt connect to agricultural production?”, this is the World Food Prize after all. This is a perfectly valid question and I will explain this connection in just a moment.

In the heart of Africa lies the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Also known as the DRC, the Congo is where 70% of global cobalt exports originate, with lithium batteries accounting for approximately 55% of the global cobalt market (World Bank, 2021). According to the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2024), our battery-fueled innovation has come at the expense of modern slavery for hundreds of thousands of Congolese people, including an unknown number of children in the mining industry. These workers are forced to mine under incredibly unsafe conditions to keep up with the West’s economic demands.

With this race to a world of clean energy and a government that has constantly neglected miners' humanitarian rights (Global Focus, 2025), it’s no wonder why the Congolese people have lost focus on the importance of agriculture. As a matter of fact, only 12.5% of the DRC’s arable land (80 million hectares) is currently being utilized for agricultural purposes (Investing in Rural People, 2024). Due to these inefficient practices, over 60% of the Congo’s population is currently employed in agriculture (World Bank, 2024), making an average of \$630 USD per year (World Data, 2025) compared to the estimated “living wage” (for the Congo) of \$2436 (Global Living Wage Coalition, 2022).

This is where the problem lies today, and nutritional health in the DRC reflects this inefficient agricultural sector. According to the World Food Programme (n.d.), approximately one-fourth of the Congo’s population is faced with life-threatening (acute) food insecurity. As reported by the Global Hunger Index (2024): 37.0% of the DRC’s population is undernourished, 36.0% of Congolese children under the age of five have experienced stunted height development due to chronic malnutrition, and 7.6% of all DRC

children die before their fifth birthday. Just to put this into perspective, 46% of the Congo's 105 million people are under the age of 14 (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is not beyond repair, however. As a matter of fact, the DRC is currently in a very unique position to improve its agricultural sector. One method to address the Congo's food insecurities would be to supply those in need with food and storage supplies, however, I personally do not like this method as it isn't a long-term solution. I believe that the DRC needs to fight this crisis on a deeper, societal level. As I mentioned earlier, the modern-day Congo is home to a massive youth population, which introduces the opportunity for a demographic dividend, a potential lifeline for the DRC's agricultural sector. This is the method that I will be focusing on today. Now, to truly learn the value of this societal transition, I will be focusing on answering three key questions: first, what is a demographic dividend? What does it do for a country? And finally, how can we, as individuals and institutions, make it a reality in the Congo?

First, I will address question one. According to the John Hopkins School of Public Health (2024), 'demographic dividend' is the term used to refer to "the boost in economic growth that can result from changes in a country's age structure." In most cases, this boost is caused by a massive youth population (which the Congo currently has) growing into the working class. For more substantial demographic growth, this working class is paired with a decreasing birth rate. To sum this up, a demographic dividend is a massive boost in economic growth, provided by a big working class and a decreasing youth dependency ratio.

Now, onto question two. From my research, I have concluded that a demographic dividend provides five major opportunities for a country. First, a growing working class supplies a large labor supply, boosting economic efficiency and overall production. Second, with fewer children per household, parents can focus on saving money more effectively and improving the health of their family. Third, with more money, families have better access to transportation, which is crucial for many great improvements including education. Fourth, with better-developed education systems, practices in nearly every industry improve significantly (which for the DRC would be very valuable in agriculture). Finally, with a booming and active economy, governments are provided with the funds needed to effectively support their constituents in everyday life. - *paragraph loosely guided by this article:* (Luoma K. June 12, 2016)

A great example of this marvel in action is South Korea, whose economy developed from a below-average standard into a global powerhouse in just a few decades (Luoma K. August 23, 2016). The

South Korean government accomplished this by pushing a developed family planning campaign, eventually decreasing their total fertility rate by over 4 children per woman. This decrease in youth dependency provided South Korea with many benefits, including an increase of 26 years in life expectancy, key reforms in public health and production practices, and a growth in GDP per capita of over 32,000 USD (World Bank Group, 2023).

Now, I will address the final question. Learning from South Korea, there are 3 main things that the U.S. government and other agencies can provide to make a demographic dividend in the Congo a reality. First, we can establish funding programs to make contraceptives more accessible in the Congo. Second, we can help set up an established sex education program in DRC public schools. Finally, we can campaign for the Congolese government to provide healthcare centers across the state. These programs have two main purposes: first, to encourage Congolese citizens to have fewer children, and second, to decrease DRC mortality rates and increase their average lifespan. With better access to contraceptives, sex education, and healthcare, a reduced youth population and demographic dividend are almost guaranteed to materialize. If this is the case, sustainable agricultural practices and teachings will increase exponentially.

There are some challenges to this solution, however. Aside from the obvious financial constraints, there are many cultural setbacks for a demographic dividend in the Congo. Arguably the biggest of these challenges is religion. According to the U.S. Department of State (2020), approximately 95% of the DRC's population identifies as Christian. Historically, Christian tribes in developing countries are very hesitant to accept developed healthcare, believing cultural healing methods, or simply praying for the sick, to be more effective (Migration Letters, n.d.). Although this is not usually a majority belief, it could still pose a serious threat to our mission. The only real way around this without violating human rights laws is to persistently advocate and educate DRC citizens about the importance of developed healthcare.

Another considerable challenge would be accumulating foreign aid, specifically from the United States. With recent political turmoil, providing finances towards foreign contraceptive access and sex education would be incredibly controversial. However, I do believe that it is more than possible. In the long run, a demographic dividend in the DRC would be beneficial for the U.S. economy, especially in regard to cobalt imports and the energy revolution. One idea that could be implemented would be a trade deal between the U.S. and the DRC. This could closely resemble the rare minerals deal currently being debated between President Trump and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, but instead of having a strategic economic relationship, the DRC would receive contraceptive and sex ed. funding in return for the minerals. This plan would require a great deal of advocacy from numerous bodies, but if we can convince the U.S.

government, and other agencies, to make such deals, I believe that it would be beneficial for all involved parties.

Demographic dividends are very complicated transitions, with numerous variables and factors all contributing to this spectacle, it is very difficult for us to comprehend it all. With that in mind, let's recap what we learned today. First, we set the scene; learning that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is full of sketchy cobalt operations and deeply malnourished farm-workers. Then, we sought out a solution to these issues. We decided to look towards a long-term solution and then learned about the demographic dividend; a massive boost in economic growth, provided by a big working class and a decreasing youth population. Afterward, we learned what a demographic dividend provides for a country, including major growths in labor supply, overall production, family health, transportation, and government strength. We then discussed how we can make a demographic dividend a reality in the DRC. We considered how better access to contraceptives, sex education, and healthcare all contribute to accomplishing our goal. Finally, we discussed two major challenges we would have to overcome to establish these initiatives, including religious values and foreign funding.

Now, the only thing left to do is make it a reality. From my research, I believe that enabling a demographic dividend is the best thing we can do to provide food security in the Congo. It will not be easy, but with the help of the World Food Prize Foundation, and many other advocates, I believe that this marvel can come to fruition in the distant future.

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