

Minerals, Forests, and Violent Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is emerging from a bloody war that has claimed the lives of nearly 4 million people, the majority of them in the eastern part of the country. In the absence of a strong state, the raging civil wars allowed the rebels, neighboring countries (Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda), and international players to plunder the country's unparalleled endowment of valuable minerals, wildlife, and timber. In its investigations, the United Nations (2001) found that the violence in the DRC was largely supported by the funds the players gained by looting and exploiting natural resources, mostly minerals in areas under their control—confiscation and extraction of resources made the war, the expert panel reported, “a very lucrative business” (p. 6).

Despite this great natural resource wealth, the people of the DRC suffer great poverty: More than 75 percent live on less than a dollar a day and lack access to drinking water, and the infant mortality rate is one of the highest in the world (OECD & ABD, 2006). In this article, I propose two intertwined frameworks that help explain the paradox of a rich country with poor people. One, throughout its history, different natural resources in the DRC have been

deemed “strategic” by the international markets. Two, Congolese institutions have been unable to protect the country's resources due to corruption, weak governance, and low capacity. Thus, natural resources are vulnerable to exploitation and violent competition when they are found in abundance in a particular location.

Some conflicts cannot be fully explained or properly addressed if environmental factors—especially those related to access and control of some strategic natural resources—are not integrated in the overall causal analysis. Failure to integrate these crucial dimensions leads to incomplete conflict resolution; patterns of violence are then more likely to return after peace accords have been implemented.

The current fragile peace, 2006 presidential and parliamentary elections, and subsequent 2007 local elections have paved the way for a new governance system in this war-torn country. But peace will not be sustainable without reconstructing the systems that govern the country's natural resources. Efforts by the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to establish codes of conduct for forest management and mining are steps in the right direction but much work remains to be done.

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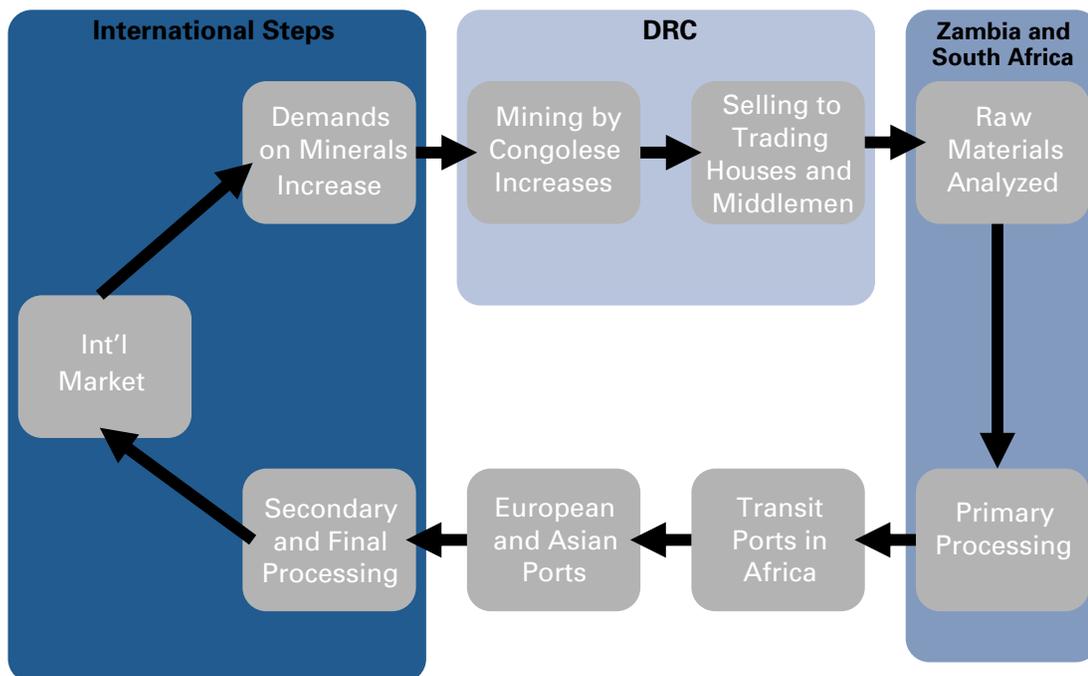


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“Strategic” Natural Resources: Technology and Tragedy in the History of the DRC

Technological advancements are linked to tragedies in the DRC's history. A look at the country's conflict timeline reveals a sad coincidence, a deadly game of ping-pong: An international technological discovery utilizing critical

Figure 1: The Mining Cycle



Source: Adapted from Global Witness (2006).

mineral inputs leads to violence and human losses in the DRC. A vicious cycle of mineral extraction drives competition, promotes exploitation, degrades the environment, diminishes resources, and drives more competition (see Figure 1). The more demand grows, the higher and faster the cycle, and the larger the number of victims.

In the latter half of the 19th century, following the discovery of rubber, 10 million Congolese were subjected to murder, mutilation, torture, deportations, and forced labor by rubber hunters operating on behalf of Belgium's King Leopold II, who then owned the DRC (Hochschild, 1999). After the DRC became a Belgian colony in 1908, the colonial overlords continued to exploit natural resources including copper, gold, cassiterite, wildlife, and timber. In particular, the massive exploitation of minerals sustained Belgian imperial ambitions, strengthened the colonial system, and provided a model for the subsequent autocratic regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. Belgium's desire to protect its stake in the Congo prompted the assassina-

tion of nationalist Patrice Lumumba and its support for Mobutu and secessionist Moïse Tshombe of the southern Katanga Province, home to immense reserves of cobalt, copper, manganese, zinc, and uranium.

DRC minerals have played numerous strategic roles in world politics. For example, uranium from the DRC was shipped to the United States for the Manhattan Project, and thus partly fueled the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. State-owned Gécamines, the source of the uranium, sustained Mobutu's kleptomaniac regime.

Today, the DRC is still awash in valuable, strategic resources. Copper, cobalt, diamond, columbo-tantalite (coltan), and gold mines flourish in the eastern and southern regions (see map). The Congo Basin forest, most of which is in the DRC, is the second-largest area of dense tropical rainforest in the world, containing one-quarter of the world's remaining tropical forests, as well as a spectacular array of biodiversity—10,000 species of plants, 1,000 species of birds, and 400 species of mammals, many of



Minerals and forest products, instead of being engines of growth, development, and well-being, have largely been to blame for most of the past and current misfortunes visited on the Congolese people.

which exist nowhere else on Earth (USAID, 2005). However, the DRC's forests are threatened by plunder and mismanagement: Logging for timber and fuelwood, clearing forests for agriculture, poaching wildlife for bushmeat or the endangered species trade, and mining are degrading the forest at the rate of 2 million acres every year (USAID, 2005).

Technological developments and the demands of international markets continue to determine the patterns of resource exploitation and conflict. The spike in the price of coltan, which is used in consumer electronics such as cell phones, kicked off a mining rush in 2000 that inflicted hefty environmental damage and supported the various armies fighting in the civil war (Global Witness, 2005). However, the worldwide economic slump in 2001 drove down demand for consumer electronics and with it, the price of coltan. Similarly, demand for cassiterite (tin ore)—which is found in the same areas as coltan, and is traded by the same networks—recently surged due to laws in Japan and Western Europe that require electronic circuit boards to use tin instead of lead (Global Witness, 2005).

Gécamines' holdings in the copper belt running through the DRC's Katanga Province and neighboring Zambia contain the world's biggest concentrations of cobalt and copper metal (Mbendi Information for Africa, 2004). Demand for cobalt, of which the copper belt holds 34 percent of the world's reserves, has risen in the last few years due to its use in rechargeable batteries for mobile phones (Global Witness, 2006). The belt also contains vast stores of copper—10 percent of the world's reserves—and production is predicted to soar to more than 100,000 tons after falling to virtually zero in the early 1990s (Global Witness, 2006). Diamonds from the DRC are worth an estimated US\$400 million in foreign exchange each year (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Institutional Weakness: Corruption and Predation

With so much wealth, why are the people of the DRC still so poor? Between 1990 and 2000, the

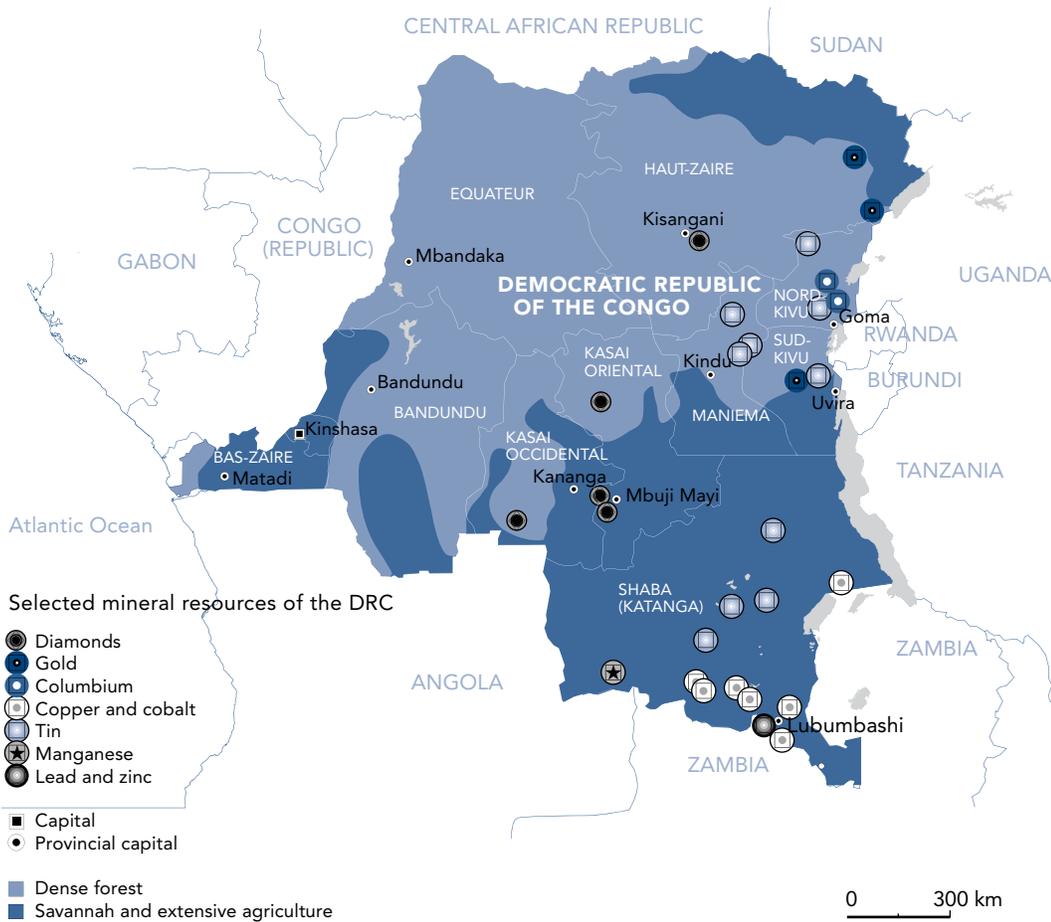
country experienced severe inflation and falling production in manufacturing and agriculture. As a result, food prices spiked, the banking system collapsed, the deficit skyrocketed, and investors fled to more stable nations. Individual measures of well-being also declined—GDP per capita fell from US\$240 to US\$85, while human rights abuses escalated, and life expectancy fell (Bernardin & Cinyabuguma, 2004). Agricultural clearing, logging for fuel and construction, poaching, and the diversion of streams for mining all contributed to the country's flailing economy. Yet they are all evidence of a larger problem: the government's weak hold on the resource markets.

These repetitive crises are the result not only of international powers discussed above but also of a systematic structural pathology characterized by the inability of state institutions and leaders to mediate the internal and external competing demands on the country. The cyclical explosions of violence and destruction of the basic infrastructure and lack of service delivery are the fruits of inadequate state structures. The failure to meet people's basic needs creates frustrations. And these frustrations have been fertile ground for violence.

These weak state structures and institutions spring from poor decision-making processes, including flawed electoral systems, unconstitutional seizures of power, favoritism, and corruption. Leaders emerging from these undemocratic procedures are less accountable to the people than they are to those who appointed them. The less inclusive the processes, the more likely they will lead to less legitimate leaders and unrepresentative institutions. In the DRC, this lack of legitimacy is accompanied by repression and violence, further distancing people from their predatory leaders.

Relationships between communities in the DRC are embedded in a history characterized by denigration and internalized superiority. Nepotism, tribalism, and favoritism were erected in place of a governance system. Power remained in the leaders' hands, doled out to their cronies and members of their tribe. Consequently, public resources were

Minerals and Forests of the DRC



Source: Adapted from Philippe Rekacewicz, *Le Monde diplomatique*, Paris, and Environment and Security Institute, The Hague, January 2003

concentrated in the hands of a few to the detriment of the rest of the population.

National and external forces took advantage of the state's structural incapacity to enforce existing laws and to protect and control the resources of the country. This predation, further exacerbated by endemic corruption, primarily targeted the mineral and forest sectors. These natural resources were easily accessible and available, thus attracting organized and unorganized local and international players—including rebel groups backed by neighboring countries—who often used violence to capture these resources for thirsty international markets.

The DRC Today: A Fragile Peace Under Fire

In 1999, the Lusaka Peace Agreement established a roadmap for the return of normal governing institutions in the DRC. The agreement called for a ceasefire, withdrawal of all foreign troops, the disarmament and repatriation of “negative forces,” and an inter-Congolese dialogue to develop a new political system. After a few subsequent years of disruption, all parties signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003, creating a governance structure with a parliament, a senate,

one president, and four vice presidents representing each of the rebel movements, unarmed opposition parties, and civil society groups. In the July 2006 elections, none of the 33 presidential candidates received the absolute majority. After a run-off in October 2006, interim President Joseph Kabila was elected to top office, and the remaining new institutions were formally established.

The Lusaka Peace Agreement and subsequent accords between belligerents are the political response to the DRC's prevailing legitimacy crisis. The current electoral process is supposed to bring an end to the confusion that has reigned since 1996 and has led to most of the deaths and destruction in Congo.

But despite these hopeful developments, Congolese are still living in fear. The mineral-rich regions in the eastern DRC are still plagued by violence and insecurity. The prevalence of violence is highest in areas considered to be rich in coltan and cassiterite (the Kivu provinces), gold (Kivu provinces and Province Orientale), and diamonds (Province Orientale). For example, fighting continues around key mining towns in North Kivu between pro-Rwandan groups, the national army, and militias; and in South Kivu, national army soldiers and Rwandan Hutu rebels seek to control mines and their revenues (Global Witness, 2005). The foreign rebels and militia groups still operating in eastern DRC remain motivated by the money to be gained from exploiting natural resources.

Some communities in the eastern and central parts of the country, unhappy with the results of elections, are rumored to be considering using violence to resume their claim for more participation. Many others fear losing their grip on the natural resources they are exploiting as new players come on the political scene. These concerns are well-founded since most of the rebels' arsenals are still intact, due to the slow, partial, and disorganized disarmament and demobilization process.

Natural resources may again surface as a powerful incentive for organized violence in the eastern DRC. Minerals and forests may once

again become engines of chaos. The control and establishment of sound management systems of these two sectors of the Congolese economy will not only be essential to preventing future conflicts but also vital for the economic recovery of the country.

Institutional Rebuilding: The Mining and Forest Codes

The World Bank Group, USAID, and the Congolese government have tackled the task of rebuilding institutions that will guarantee effective management of the mining and forest sectors. To be most effective, these instruments should be in accord with existing international frameworks, as well as environmentally sound. In addition, these new arrangements must take into consideration the needs and aspirations of the communities living around these resources via a participatory decision-making process.

With the support of the World Bank Group, the government of Kinshasa developed a Mining Code and a Forest Code, which were well received by international investors.¹ The existence of these new codes, along with rising demand for minerals, has revived interest in investing in the DRC. The mining and forest sectors are the two pillars upon which the country's economic recovery will be based. To this end, the World Bank committed US\$1.83 billion in loans and grants from 2001-2005 to encourage stability and provide capacity for the government to provide basic services (OECD & ABD, 2006).

In 2002, USAID established a regional framework known as the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, which was launched by Colin Powell, then U.S. Secretary of State, at the Summit Institute for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.² The partnership has led to the cooperation and collaboration of six countries—Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, the DRC, Gabon, and Chad—in the responsible and environmentally friendly management of the forests. This regional framework seeks to stem the loss of the forest, which is currently disappearing at the rate

of 2 million acres per year under pressure from logging and farming, as well as the increased demand for bushmeat (USAID, 2005).

However, these initiatives are not without difficulty. The Mining Code “strongly favors private investors,” as does the World Bank’s approach to restructuring the bankrupt Gécamines, most of whose assets were hurriedly sold to private investors (Global Witness, 2006, p. 35). Global Witness also claims that government interference and delays in the restructuring program have undercut implementation of World Bank programs.

Whereas government representatives recognize that the Mining Code is a good attempt to harmonize laws regulating the mining sector and end the prevailing chaos, implementation faces important challenges due to the Mining Ministry’s lack of capacity for follow-up; loopholes regarding artisanal miners, especially the identification and allocation of concessions; and unabated corruption of government officials. In addition, Global Witness (2006) reports that international investors are ignoring the conditions of the Mining Code for the export of raw minerals, leading to huge loss of returns for the government.

Recommendations

International bodies like the United Nations, the African Union, and the European Union should help the DRC bolster its environmental security, by encouraging and supporting the protection and development of World Heritage sites and forests in the country, as well as the development of a regional ecotourism infrastructure that includes Rwanda and Uganda. These international bodies, as well as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), should also continue to support the Mining and Forest Codes.

The World Bank and the IMF should refocus capacity-building efforts in the mineral and forestry sectors at the national (ministerial) and local levels, and encourage the creation of a special parliamentary commission on mines and forests management. Second, the international



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financial institutions should also organize an international conference for corporations interested in mining and forestry in the DRC. The conference should seek to establish ways to assess progress on the Mining and Forest Codes; set verifiable targets for economic development in the country; establish a social program for local communities; and set up regular mechanisms for assessing progress on these commitments.

The DRC’s new parliament should discuss the results of the investigation by the Lutundula Commission into mining and other business contracts that rebels and government authorities signed during the war, which found that many contracts are either illegal or have limited development value and should be terminated or renegotiated. The parliament should appoint a commission to oversee the implementation of their decisions. The government should also reappoint the drafters of the Mining and Forests Codes and task them to include clauses organizing the artisanal sector, as well as mechanisms for implementation. The World Bank and IMF can assist the DRC government in designing these mechanisms, and help keep the public informed about their progress. Finally, the DRC government should implement and enforce anti-corruption laws by creating a special inter-parliamentary commission and anti-corruption unit, assisted by the international



A group of ex-combatants who have been trained and employed by local NGOs to construct roads in the region of Ituri, Democratic Republic of the Congo (© 2006 Wendy MacNaughton, courtesy of Photoshare).

financial institutions, NGOs, and other members of civil society

International civil society and faith-based groups can help the DRC by maintaining pressure on all the actors to make and keep long-term commitments, and respect international and national instruments. Civil society can also support capacity building at the provincial and local levels, especially for efforts to address corruption, develop and track budgets, improve tax collection, and promote environmental sustainability.

The United States, too, has a particular role to play, as it has a tangible interest in a stable DRC, not only as part of the overall fight against terrorism but also as a potential partner for lucrative joint ventures, particularly given Chinese and Indian interest in the market.

The United States should expand its Tripartite Plus process—a series of talks among Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC, and Uganda aimed at improving security in the region—to include a leadership training program and efforts to harmonize military cooperation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. The United States should also devote more resources to the Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), a USAID initiative aimed at promoting sustainable natural resource management in the Congo basin.³ Finally, the U.S. government should hold regular consultations with U.S. corporations active in the DRC.

Conclusion

From the slave trade to King Leopold II, Mobutu, and the civil war, violent conflict in the DRC, as in many other parts of Africa, has been closely linked to the predatory exploitation of natural resources. These resources have played a lethal role in the lives of the Congolese people. Minerals and forest products, instead of being engines of growth, development, and well-being, have largely been to blame for most of the past and current misfortunes visited on the Congolese people. The international markets for these products continue to grow, and international scarcity drives the exploitation of the DRC's unprotected abundance. Without the development of stable institutions, legitimate governance structures, and enforcement of regulations aimed at controlling natural resources, the country's forests and minerals will once again be prey for deadly predators, and the people of the DRC will be doomed to repeat their tragic cycle.⁴

Notes

1. The Mining Code is available online (in English) at http://www.miningcongo.cd/codeminiier/codeminiier_eng.pdf and the Forest Code is available online (in French) at [http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/files/forest%20loi011_2002\[1\].pdf](http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/files/forest%20loi011_2002[1].pdf)

2. For more information on the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, see <http://www.cbfp.org/en/index.htm> and http://www.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/initiatives/cbfp.html

3. For more information on CARPE, see <http://carpe.umd.edu/>

4. Meaghan Parker and Alison Williams of the Woodrow Wilson Center contributed to this article.

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