

113th Great Lakes Policy Forum

“The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo: The Link between Conflict Prevention and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP)”

Meeting Report – April 7, 2005

The 113th Great Lakes Policy Forum, “The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo: The Link between Conflict Prevention and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP),” was aimed primarily towards the Security Working Group. The presenter was Dr. Francesca Bomboko, who is currently serving as World Bank Consultant for the PRSP in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Dr. Bomboko is also the Executive Director and founder of BERCI Institute, a research and polling institute in the DRC. In addition to these two roles, Dr. Bomboko is also a National Expert for the Ministry of Planning in the Government of the DRC. Ozong Agborsangaya, Director of Sub-Saharan Africa Programs at Search for Common Ground, facilitated the forum.

First, a brief history of events leading up to the current state of affairs in the DRC was laid out, illustrated with supporting statistics, to set the stage for a discussion of the PRSP and the current dynamic in the DRC. The focus was on the conflict in neighboring Rwanda and Burundi in the early 1990s, as well as the role played by Uganda and Rwanda in the 1998 war in the DRC. As a result of such events and their influence on Congolese affairs, localized conflicts in the DRC became regional.

Several recent surveys have found high percentages of the population (66% of the overall population, 82% and 94% in North and South Kivu, respectively) who had known someone who died in the 1998 war. A vast majority of the population (75% in Kinshasa) indicated in surveys that the war had a significant effect on them. This number rises to between 98 and 100% for people living in Eastern DRC.

In July of 2003, 70% of the DRC population was pleased with the Global and Inclusive Agreement, which had been signed in Pretoria, South Africa in December 2002. When surveyed, Congolese citizens had three main expectations of the new government: create employment, stabilize the economy, and improve social life. With regard to organizing elections, however, only 31% of the population was confident in the transitional government’s commitment to and progress towards the elections. It was suggested that this problem lies with the government’s failure to communicate with its people vis-à-vis its preparations and that the largely invisible arrangements for the elections cause the population to believe that no progress is being made.

Regarding the timeline for elections, surveys have indicated that a majority of the population would accept a 6-month prolongation of the Transitional Government’s mandate, but not longer. The government has not yet officially announced that the elections will be postponed. It is expected that officials are waiting for the end of this month when the National Assembly will vote on the constitution and hopefully the government will have a new proposed elections date. It is hoped that the elections will address the problem of personal power with rules and accountability standards.

Forum participants discussed the link between poverty reduction and conflict prevention with regard to potential post-election conflict. The continuity of the PRSP and other long-term programs was underscored, as were trends towards accountability and democratization. Examples such as the recent election in Togo are a source of legitimacy for the elections process and send a strong message to leaders and potential leaders in the DRC.

The World Bank's measuring methods in the DRC rely heavily on population surveys. In the Eastern part of the country, such surveys help to assess citizens' access to food, potable water, and electricity. Results indicate that greater than 80% of the population considers itself poor. Over 50% of people in North Kivu live on only one meal per day, while only 1% of those in South Kivu have access to potable water. The percentage of the population that has access to electricity throughout the region ranges from 0%-7%. It was underscored that poverty is a transitive process; the poor today are not the same as the poor of ten years ago. In order to understand the root causes of poverty, one must trace populations' fluctuations into and out of poverty.

The World Bank is completing a large, participative consultation in 11 provinces and 350 communities, which has focused on peoples' perceptions of poverty, what they expect from the PRSP, as well as how civil society can best participate in the program. The results will be available this month (April 2005) as a resource on what is being done in the program and which communities are currently active.

Monthly surveys are used by the World Bank to assess populations' views on specific issues. The January surveys indicate that local reaction is overwhelmingly positive with regard to South Africa (87% approving) and the World Bank's (86% approving) work in the region. Overall, however, the surveys indicate that the response from external actors, such as the UN, France, the United States, and Belgium is inadequate.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP) is a document produced by a poor country appealing for assistance, which describes the micro economic strategy that it will pursue over several years to reduce poverty and promote growth. The Program is country-driven, results-oriented, comprehensive, partnership-oriented, and takes a long-term approach to poverty reduction. The focus is on peace and good governance, community dynamics, and economic stability. The PRSP also provides a platform to coordinate donor agencies, as well as organize the national budget. Finally, it provides a link between the public actions, donor support, and development outcomes needed to meet United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The DRC must submit the final document in August of this year in order to be eligible for debt relief.

Given the PRSP's far-reaching and comprehensive agenda, there remain certain challenges to its success. Poverty reduction depends on the sincere commitment of the government to properly address the issue. There was some concern expressed during the forum about the DRC government's commitment in this respect. Forum participants agreed that elections have to create strong internal and external institutions that would oversee and direct the government's actions. It was further stressed that only 13% of the DRC population knows about the PRSP, which may pose a threat to the program's success. The criteria used to measure the PRSP's success are traced with indicators, but it was observed that many of those measures deal with macro level

changes – the number of children going to school in contrast to 5 years ago, for instance. There is too little attention paid to what is happening on the micro level, which is often either unrelated to or even negatively affected by progress on a macro scale.

Presenter and attendees engaged in a lively conversation about whether the world has been “fair” to the Great Lakes Region and to the Congo. It was pointed out that there has been some support, but that the larger issue revolves around the wide gap between what donors pledge and what is actually given. A suggestion was laid out for a new commission at the United Nations, which would follow pledges and create a special fund to draw attention to major problems not being addressed by media and countries’ political agendas around the world.

There was some discussion about the achievability of poverty elimination in the DRC by 2015, a millennium goal. It was suggested that the goal is attainable if it is taken seriously and if the DRC manages its resources towards productive and progressive ends. Several organizations are also concerned with economic development in the DRC, including UNDP, NEPAD and the World Bank. These efforts will build infrastructure in order to increase stability and security for future generations. Furthermore, a recently finalized World Bank study based population surveys addresses what can be done in the short term with debt relief money.

The goals of the PRSP are similar to those of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, organized by the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) for the Great Lakes. The Conference’s Stability and Security Development Pact (SSDP) has four main goals, which align easily with those of the PRSP: regional peace and security, democracy and good governance, economic development, and regional integration. Despite similar goals, however, there is no interaction between the World Bank’s poverty-relief programs and conflict prevention efforts by the UN. Although it was pointed out that countries are beginning to understand that conflict prevention is a priority for poverty alleviation, there is significant work to be done to coordinate the efforts of these two international institutions in the DRC. In order for conflict prevention and poverty reduction efforts in the DRC to have the maximum impact, such coordination must be a priority.

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