The future of DRCongo
Luc Reychler

Thank you for the invitation. I always have been fascinated by the role of intellectual salons or cafés. This initiative can help to overcome today’s sound bite culture and give a new élan to deeper discussions of sensitive issues, such as ‘Does Belgium or Congo have a future?’

Before reflecting on the future of Congo, let me share two experiences which influenced my worldview as a little kid and as a teener.

The first experience is about money boxes or missiebusjes. On the counter in my parents tobacco shop stood two money boxes. When customers dropped a coin to help the “little blacks or little Chinese”, as people used to say, their heads nodded gently to thank the donor.

If I would have become an artists, instead of a professor, at the Shangai art exhibition this year, I would have presented artistic mega copies of the money boxes, and wonder how the visitors, critics and dealers would respond to these two pieces of art.

I think the Chinese would glance at the Chinese money box with a wide smile; showing a maximum of teeth.

What about the African money box. Some African visitors, I think, would consider it a piece of cynical realism and Dambisa Moyo would probably call it a memorial of 50 years of development aid that has not helped Africa, but ruined it. (Art is so liberating)

The second experience, that influenced my worldview took place, when as a 15 year old adolescent, I watched on black and white television, the independence speeches of the 30th of June 1960, presented by Boudewijn, the king of the Belgians, and Lumumba the prime minister of the Congolese.

I was disappointed with the address of the Belgian king; it come across as highly pretentious, tactless, without a grain of empathy.

In contrast, the words of Lumumba felt straightforward, refreshing and full of brutal honesty and truthfulness. “We are going to show the world what the black man can do, when he works in freedom, and we are going to make of the Congo a radiant centre for all Africa (nous allons faire du Congo le centre de rayonnement de l’Afrique tout entière).

My admiration was not shared by most Belgians. Half a year later Lumumba was brutally murdered. It was one of the first Cold War political assassinations by Western democracies of unfriendly leaders.

This year Congo celebrated 50 years of independence. President Kabila called for a ‘moral revolution. A giant banner, near the official tribune, read “The giant awakes, DRC, heaven on Earth”, while giant images of the former presidents looked on (Kasavubu, Mobutu, and father and son Kabila). S3

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1 For most of you this is pre-history.
Congo’s futures.

That’s all history. Let’s turn to the future. What can be expected? How will Congo look like the next 20 à 25 or 50 years? What can the nearly 70 million Congolese long for; except a doubling of the population?

Uninviting prospects.

Listening to Western and Belgian Congo specialists, one hears a lot of uninviting prospects. These gloomy forecasts seem to rest on assumptions, which are not always made explicit. First, there is the propensity to envision the future of Congo as a continuation of the past. “Congo has always been a problem or looser state; it will probably remain so in the future.” Extrapolations from the past tend to further ‘future blindness’. The study of history is fascinating, but has limits. It’s a huge laboratory for researching human behaviour; it’s important to get the facts straight, find different truths and understand why things occurred, but history is not a good predictor. Think of the creation of the EU, de implosion of Soviet Union, the shift of global power to the East, or the globalization and the steep growth of information, communication and global awareness.

The second reason why gloomy analysts do not discern better or best case scenarios, relates to their perceptions of the civilization and culture, especially of inferiority or lack of culture. Just look at the claims of the superiority of the Judeo-Christian culture and of the ‘so called ‘ inferiority of the Islam and other backward cultures.

The third explanation of the gloomy forecasts is the widespread fatigue, frustration, defeatism and cynicism about Congo’s capacity for change.

Gloomy forecasts are wrong.

These gloomy forecasts are wrong for three reasons. First, because they stand in the way of imaging and building a better future. Research indicates, that the belief in an attractive common future, as the result of joint efforts, is a necessary condition for starting and sustaining successful peace building. Without the perspective of a compelling future, it’s close to impossible to motivate people.

The second reason, why gloomy forecasts are counterproductive and wrong, is the fact that Congo possesses ample natural and human resources to construct a rosier future. I don’t have to make a picture of the minerals, agri-ecological potential, water resources, the world’s second largest rain forest..

The third reason, why the doom-mongers are wrong, is that they do not listen to the Congolese youth / the next generation / who is fed up with living poor on top of these natural riches and wants to change the country. I am especially talking about the private opinions of Congolese university students, which will become part of the future elite.
The private opinions of Congolese university students.

Research


Initially the research team opted for oral interviews, but logistic and especially political-psychological problems, led to the use of a questionnaire. In a climate, characterized by mutual distrust, it’s very difficult to collect personal or private opinions. The questionnaire and the assurance of a discrete treatment of the responses, produced private perceptions and attitudes of approximately 800 students of 11 Congolese universities (50% male and 50% female students) on nine issues:

DR Congo today

- On violence
- Peace and the Congolese
- Imagining a better future
- Peace building assessment
- Congolese identity
- Dealing with the past
- Foreign players
- Personal responsibility and influential persons.

The questionnaire, has open and closed questions, is 100 pages long and requires a few hours to complete. The students however were strongly motivated and wanted their voices to be heard. We ended up with more than 80.000 pages of information. The initiative for the study was taken by IPRA (the International Peace Research Association -a global network of peace researchers created in 1964) in cooperation with 11 Congolese universities. The data were collected in 2008-2009 and analyzed in the Centre for Peace Research and Strategic Studies (CPRS). (new director Prof. Arnim Langer)

Underlying assumptions

The research project was based on 4 assumptions:

- The DR Congo has the potential to transform itself into secure and affluent country.
- The international community relies too much on external experts, and not enough on Congolese insights and expertise. A more elective approach or listening to the experiences, the wisdom and the advice of the Congolese people could speed the transition process.
- The schools and especially the universities, students and professors, could and should play a greater role in the construction of the future of Congo. Universities are the hubs of large and complex networks of people which influence the future of the country; they attract students from all over Congo and have alumni in all the sectors of the Congolese society.
- Almost 75% of the Congolese are younger than 30 (nearly 2/3 of population?); they must be heard, be more involved and educated in order to contribute to the transformation of their country.
Results

The overall feeling- or conclusion one can derive from the study is, that a great majority of the students is convinced that their country is turning (or is capable of) slowly but steadily, in the direction of becoming a strong and prosperous nation. This feeling or assessment is based on six observations.

1. Critical analysis of the reality

First, most of the students make critical analyses of the reality and assess the problems in a thorough and comprehensive way. They identify big gaps in each of the necessary building blocks for sustainable peace: (a) peace negotiations, (b) political, economic and security structures, (c) the social-psychological climate, and (d) institutions responsible for humanitarian aid, health, education, justice and communication and information, and (e) the international environment. The problems are depicted as interdependent. Fighting corruption, for example requires an effective state, law and order, decent salaries and living conditions, education, and a better control of the activities of foreign actors. An overwhelming majority considers the current situation moderately better than previous, but remains deeply dissatisfied.

2. Non-acceptance of the current situation

The second observation is that the students do not accept the current situation and refuse to continue to live insecure and poor on top of the natural riches of the country. The level of war weariness and the hunger for peace is very high. The attitudes towards the current state of the country are influenced by the awareness of the availability of considerable human and material resources. This could explain the feelings of relative deprivation and frustration but also the hope in a better future. What is clear is that they do not accept the wretched predicament of their country. The predominant attitude is not avoidance, resignation or aggression, but characterized by a determination to transform the situation.

3. Imaging a better future

The third observation is that more than 80% percent of the students expect their country to become a secure, affluent and free country twenty to twenty-five years from now. They seem to believe that the only future Congo can have, is the one it can imagine. The hope of the students is based on e.g.: the implementation of at least part of the changes promised in the ‘5 building sites or chantiers’, the awakening of the Congolese people, the cement of Congolese identity which prevents a ‘Somalisation’ of the country; the role of Asia, and the availability of the natural riches.

The past is not forgotten, but the main concern is to tackle the current problems successfully and create better future. The most salient past is the turbulent 1996–2006 period, marked by two wars from ‘96–’98 and ‘98–2003. The Mobutu era and the first republic come in the second place. The least salient, but not unimportant, part of the past is the period of colonization.

Approximately 150 persons were referenced for influencing the thinking of the students about peace and the future of the DRC. The top four are: Mzee Laurent Kabila, Emery Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Kabila Kabange and Nelson Mandela.

4. Considerable natural and human resources

The fourth observation relates to the existence of natural and human resources that could be used to build a better future. The natural resources are well-known and exploited by the
international community; they need to be better managed to further the interest of the Congolese people. As human resources, the students mention the will to change, the Congolese spirit, the unique Congolese identity, the perception of Congo as an indivisible country, the strong affective and utilitarian commitment to their country (patriotism, genuine nationalism) 7. A considerable number / 2/3’s claim that their commitment to their country has become even stronger, after the wars. The students stress the importance of building a high quality system of education that can respond to the concrete needs of their country. Learning multiple languages is considered important for national integration and for dealing with and competing in the globalizing world. English and French are the most important non-African languages. English is needed to engage and compete in the globalizing world and keeping up with the scientific developments.

5. Good governance and leadership. S13
The fifth observation relates to good governance and leadership as the key to a successful transition. They believe in the merits of a constitutional state and of the democratization process, and expect (demand) a more effective and efficient (uncorrupted) state that can deliver: defence, law and order, property rights, macro-economic management, public health and education.

6. Globalization and a Congolese foreign policy that protects and promotes it’s economic and security interests. S14
Sixth, their positive perception of the future is also based on some favourable changes international system and the development of a strong Congolese diplomatic service to protect and promote the economic and security interests.
On the whole, the international environment is perceived as not very supportive and even inimical. Some close neighbours contribute directly or indirectly to the instability and the chronic violence in the east of the country. A strengthened African regional cooperation could enhance the transformation of Congo into a great country. The evaluation of the role of non-African countries for Congo’s peace is slightly negative. The international governmental organizations are considered very important for coping with the painful consequences of wars, but incapable in preventing or stopping them. International non-governmental organizations receive a slightly positive score. The attitude towards the multinational business organizations is quite negative. The respondents are also very critical of the donor community. Two thirds observe that the aid meets the interests of donors more than the Congolese and that Congolese expertise is barely used.
They expect a great deal (a) from the changing international landscape; the highest appreciation for the non-African countries goes to China, and (b) from a Congolese Foreign office with clout..

Conclusions
Let me conclude by reiterating that gloomy prospects are wrong and counterproductive in the process of transition from a failed to a stable, secure and prosperous state.
The students are convinced that their country can be a secure and affluent 20-25 years from now. I think they are right. Of course the transition will be difficult, because of the many peace building deficiency gaps that have to be taken care of, but also, for example, by the fact by 2035, there could be nearly 130 million citizens.

What can we do to support the transition process? First, we could at least strengthen the intellectual solidarity with our Congolese colleagues, and to cooperate in the development high quality education and research, and to stop the ‘epistemic violence’. Second, more efforts should be made to reduce the negative impacts of the international trade system and to help to strengthen the Congolese Department of Foreign Affairs.

This study is more than just another ‘academic exercise, without political consequences’, as a diplomat framed it. The Congolese students expect to be heard and to involved in the building of the future. They see this report as part of a larger process of peace building in which they want to be involved.

1 Congolese bishops stated that the dream of a beautiful Congo had been destroyed.
2 The perception of the future determines the present and the past.
3 Luc Reychler, Jean Migabo and the Congolese partners.
4 Less than half of the students believe that in the short term the situation in Congo will improve.
5 The Cinq Chantiers - “Five Building Sites” - programme is a development initiative launched to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence, covering infrastructure, health and education, water and electricity, housing, and unemployment.
6 Dealing with the past. The most salient past is the turbulent 1997–2006 period, marked by two wars from ’97–’98 and ’98–2003. The Mobutu era and the first republic are of secondary salience. Less salient is the period of colonization. Two thirds of the respondents are dissatisfied with the way the past has been handled. The discontent is attributed to untruthful written and taught history, lingering impunity, the ongoing looting and illegal/unfair exploitation of natural resources, and the inadequate efforts to prevent the violence and the looting. Immediate attention should go to the installation of security, law and order, the strengthening of nationalism or the Congolese we-ness feeling, rendering justice, compensating victims, stimulating the economy, and establishing the truth.
7 Personal identity is shaped by multiple sources of attachment. In the first place by their family and country; secondly profession, Africa and religion; in the third place one’s province, ethnic group and language; and last, the Great Lakes region.
9 The results will be debated in each of the partner universities; further steps are explored, including the development of an inter-university peace education and research network.