

## **What chance for self-determination? – farmers and foragers in the forests of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo?**

David S. Wilkie  
Ituri Forest Peoples Fund  
18 Clark Lane  
Waltham MA 02451-1823  
Tel: 781-894-9605  
Email: [dwilkie@msn.com](mailto:dwilkie@msn.com)

Gilda A. Morelli  
Department of Psychology  
Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167  
Tel: 617-552-4094  
Fax: 617-552-0523  
Email: [Gilda.Morelli@bc.edu](mailto:Gilda.Morelli@bc.edu)

### **Indigenous peoples of the Ituri in the new Congo – an optimist's view of the future**

*June 2009. The peace brokered by retired President Nelson Mandela has held for over 10 years, and the Federation of Congo States has the fastest growing economy in Central Africa. The three states in the federation – Haut-Congo, Katanga, and Bas-Congo, with technical assistance from the United Nations established transparent and accountable national governments where power is shared amongst independent legislative, executive and judicial branches. The spirit of federalism is evident not only in the level of autonomy exercised by each state, but extends down to the local level through a legal hierarchy of governance. Empowerment of citizens and political and economic links between rural and urban activists has resulted in rapid demilitarization of the region. The new transparency, accountability and subsidiarity of government has created, for the first time, citizen faith in, and adherence to, the rule of law.*

*In the Ituri forest of what was northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Efe, Mbuti, and Sua foragers are citizens for the first time. Bira, Lese, Budu and Mamvu farmers are working alongside the Efe and Mbuti to negotiate individual and clan title over their lands. Throughout the Ituri, local management councils have formed self-governing institutions to regulate access to and use of forest resources, raise tax revenues and finance social services. Literacy and numeracy rates have risen quickly and traditional beliefs and practices are now integrated into school curricula. All citizens choose their local council members and elect individuals to represent them in regional and national*

*government. Local management councils are allied in wide-ranging networks that share "best practices," market information, and development knowledge.*

This futuristic vision of DRC and its citizens may seem utopian, but it reflects the core desires of the foragers and farmers with whom we have lived and idled away many an hour chatting about the past and present, and wondering about the future. Yet, is it likely that their vision will be realized? Sadly, as we will show, historical factors along with present political and economic anarchy all are likely to conspire against indigenous peoples in the Ituri from taking actions that move them closer to this wished-for future.

## **Self-determination and governance in historical context**

Since farmers first entered the Ituri over 2,000 years ago and started clearing patches of forest to cultivate yams and oil palms, they have been involved in a complex exchange relationship with Efe, Mbuti and Sua foragers. The foragers trade resources from the forest and their labor in farmers' fields for agricultural crops. This relationship provides forager families with 60% of their annual calories, and offers farmer families with a ready supply of forest foods and materials and a way around agricultural labor bottlenecks.

Long ago, Ituri region farmers and foragers lived in small, isolated communities throughout the forest. These communities typically consisted of a village of Bantu (Bira and Budu) or southern Sudanic speaking (Lese and Mamvu) farmers and an adjacent camp of their Efe, Mbuti or Sua exchange partners. Villages and camps were extended families made up of related men (fathers, sons, and brothers) and their wives. These communities were small – seldom if ever exceeding 100 residents – and if communities grew beyond a critical size, families of young men would leave to found new communities on the banks of nearby rivers. Authority was based mostly on residence duration, precedence, and age – a true gerontocracy.

Oral tradition records that, eventually, competition for settlement sites and forest resources resulted in progressively more frequent internecine warfare, that was further aggravated by the arrival of Zanzibari slave traders into the Ituri in the 1850s. The round leaf huts typically built both by foragers and farmers were by this time fortified on the inside with split sections of young *Musanga cecropiodes* trees, and foragers had the assumed the additional role of settlement sentries. The process of settlement growth, division and mutual distrust or dislike created lineages of communities -- but with no capacity or desire for political, economic or military organization above the village or camp level.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, indigenous settlement patterns were disrupted by Belgian colonial administrators who forcibly relocated farmer and forager families to build the three roads that now form a rough triangle in the Ituri. Settlements were strung along the road to make sure that sufficient conscripted labor was available to fill potholes and cut back the ever encroaching vegetation even in the most isolated sections of the forest. Though the resettlement process increased local population density and brought once isolated villages into closer proximity, it did not result in the establishment of inter-

village alliances, nor supra-village political structures. Rather, village size changed little, distrust between villages did not diminish, and the insular village and camp level political structure remained intact.

Colonial administrators, largely as a tool for tax collection and to enforce crop production quotas, established a hierarchy of appointed chiefs starting at the village level and extending up to the Ituri as a sub-region (village, localité, groupement, collectivité, zone, sous-region). This, however, did not alter the underlying village level gerontocracy, but overlaid upon it a paternalistic governance structure that evoked a cowed, passive, dependency mentality in local communities. A further layer of authority and domination was added at this time by private plantation (oil palm and coffee) and mining concessions that effectively established states within a state. Though farmers and foragers found employment within these “company towns”, and saw their standards of living rise to unprecedented levels, almost all of them quickly fell into a system of peonage and complete dependence on the concession for their livelihoods, health care and children’s schooling.

This top-down, autocratic system of public and private sector governance remained in place post independence in 1960. In the early 1970s, Mobutu launched his authenticity campaign, forcing transfer of foreign owned companies to Zairian, elite, absentee owners. In response to the Simba and Katanga rebellions in 1964 and 1977, he also adopted an implicit policy of infrastructure neglect causing a gradual deterioration of the transportation system. As President Mobutu later joked with the president of Rwanda who had just defeated a coup attempt, “look what happens when you build roads - in Zaire we have no roads, we have no insurrection.” These events, along with a sharp drop in world commodity prices, lead to a progressive collapse of the concession system and a plunge in Ituri residents’ standards of living.

Through the 30 years of the Mobutu presidency, the government’s administrative system changed from a paternalistic structure dictating actions and delivering services with no input from the recipients, to a predatory structure existing simply to tax the population to finance the structure itself. In 1974 world copper prices crashed and the governments primary source of revenue all but disappeared. In 1978 an IMF team determined that almost 40% of the nation’s foreign exchange earnings were being diverted into private European bank accounts by the ruling elites. A decline in state revenues, rampant corruption, and possibly the belief that illiterate citizens are less likely to rebel, motivated President Mobutu and the national government to declare, in 1987, that state financing for primary schools would only go to those constructed of brick with corrugated tin roofs. This left the majority of primary schools in rural areas without paid teachers and school supplies, and abdicated responsibility for education to the Catholic and Protestant missions that by this time were also managing and financing most hospitals and clinics in the Ituri.

Though the dependency mentality among elderly Zairians, relegated them to inaction while Mobutu’s regime openly stole the nation’s wealth, not everyone was similarly affected by the oppressive and exploitative policies promulgated by Mobutu and his

supporters. The generation of Zairians born and educated when standards of living were at their peak were less willing to accept their circumstances as 'fait accompli'. Rather, many began to take action as their age allowed them to assumed positions of authority within communities.

In one small groupement in the northeastern Ituri, an ex-state teacher and two charismatic brothers mobilized (i.e., coerced, shamed, persuaded) the community of farmers and foragers to build, with local materials and labor, a three room clinic and six classrooms for a primary school. With financing from the Ituri Forest Peoples Fund (a special project of Cultural Survival organized by a group of American researchers who had been working in the area since the late 1970s), one of the brothers was selected by the community for training as a primary health care worker at a distant Catholic hospital; medicines and first aid materials were purchased from a Protestant mission pharmacy on the edge of the forest near the border with Uganda; school books and supplies were shipped in from Kenya and Quebec; and six teachers were hired. The costs of teachers and health workers salaries were shared by the community (in kind) and the fund (in cash). By the end of 1995, over 200 children were attending primary school and the clinic was treating over 3,000 patients a year.

Nascent community efforts to provide educational and health services were severely hampered in the mid 1990's as the road system collapsed. Each year during the heavy rains, from August to December, large sections of the roads that bound the Ituri became largely impassable for trucks and 4x4s. Commerce survived solely on the strength of merchants willing to push overloaded bicycles through the muddy gruel that now substituted for roads. Yet, despite these efforts, trade effectively ceased in many parts of the forest. No longer were people able to sell their crops or bushmeat to buy salt, soap, aluminum pots, metal hoes and machetes, and used clothes donated in the USA. In villages across the Ituri, old women once again were teaching daughters how to make clay pots. Women and girls spent hours trickling water through the ashes of charred plantain skins to make salt. And men were using ivory mallets to pound bark into loin cloths, that few had needed to wear since the roads were first built.

Just when everyone began to believe that things could not get any worse – they did. In October 1996 Rwandan backed rebels from the eastern province of Kivu staged a revolt driving Mobutu's regime from the capital in a surprisingly few months. As a last affront to rural Zairians who had endured the Mobutu regime for three decades, retreating troops ransacked villages stealing anything they could carry or force local porters to haul. They even stole the blackboards from the community-run primary school, tossing them into a river a few kilometers down the trail.

With Mobutu finally gone and Kabila installed as President expectations soared. In Ituri villages everyone was murmuring that now things would get better – the roads would be repaired, commerce would pick-up and life would improve. Though the Kabila regime was able to curb hyperinflation, at least initially, and to bring some fiscal reality back to the government of DRC, vague priorities, dreadfully weak technical capacity, and deeply entrenched corruption squandered the meager financial resources available for improving

the livelihoods of the rural and urban poor. Less than 12 months after Mobutu was deposed a second rebellion erupted in the east to oust Kabila. Today, the nation remains divided into “government” and rebel-held territories, peace talks are bogged down, the formal economy is almost non-existent, and communities have *de facto* responsibility for maintaining rule-of-law and providing themselves with social services.

## **Prospects for self-determination and reconciliation**

Lack of any formal system of governance above the family level, the ubiquity of well armed and non-regulated militias, and the economic anarchy associated with timber, diamond and gold mafias, all contribute to an extraordinary level of civil and economic insecurity in the DRC. The speed and scale of the collapse of civil society has left a governance void that the village level social systems of Ituri farmers and foragers have been unable to fill, and are unlikely to soon, given the inertia and resistance to change of traditional gerontocracies, and the residual belief that others, not themselves, are responsible for governing.

Though indigenous communities in the Ituri have demonstrated their ability in the absence of government support to mobilize and provide themselves with primary education and basic health care, they did so only with the ‘indulgence’ of other more powerful national and international actors. With little education, no history of political organization beyond the local level, no economic or military clout, and no trusted, universal system of judicial recourse, Ituri residents are now at the mercy of roving bands of soldiers from the different factions involved in the civil war, are easily bilked out of valuable forest resources such as timber and ivory, and are pressured to pan gold or porter goods for better educated and wealthier Congolese.

Because economic options are few, and profits from diamonds, gold and timber huge, it is unlikely that the elites who profit from these rents will jeopardize their future stream of income by acknowledging the land and resource use rights of indigenous peoples. Since the start of the civil war, politically, economically and militarily impotent foragers and farmers within the Ituri have watched as the benefits from resources extracted from within their landscapes flow increasingly to outsiders, and their power to complain or prevent it further diminished.

An end to the civil war in DRC and establishment of a new government is unlikely to change the prevailing power and economic structure, as present elites are likely to become future government officials. Even if the next head of state is a libertarian bound on ensuring social equity and governance by the majority for the majority, it may be decades before present systems of patronage and sycophancy are replaced with transparent, representative, and accountable government. Without the latter it, is hard to believe that the farmers and foragers within the Ituri will have any meaningful level of self-determination, and the power to influence government and private sector decisions that alter access to and disposition of their forest resources.

The livelihood and health of Ituri forest inhabitants depends on their regaining control over their lands and resources. But in the future Congo this will only be possible if

predatory elites are prevented from running rough-shod over these less empowered communities. As donor interest shifts from aid to trade (c.f., the African Growth and Opportunity Act - H.R. 434) it is imperative that the international community seek ways to level the economic playing field by promoting and reinforcing Congolese civil society and facilitating establishment of democratic governance institutions within a post-civil war Congo. For without these safeguards foragers and farmers throughout the Ituri will remain a marginalized underclass with little if any control over their lands, their livelihoods, and their future.