

## Interview with Sedrick Ntwali

The Democratic Republic of Congo (French: République démocratique du Congo) is located in Central Africa, is the second largest country in Africa, and eleventh in the world. With a population of over 80 million people, this country is made up of eleven states including the capital city, Kinshasa but a new law could possibly change the number to 26 states. Bordering countries include South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia and Angola. The Congo is home to the second largest rainforest which affects climate change in a major way. There are more than 250 ethnicity groups, or tribes, in the Congo and all of them have their own culture. Political corruption and constant attacks from rebels are a norm for the Congolese but even with all the violence, they are a noble and courageous people.

The structure of tribes in the Congo is very simple; the king is all powerful. No one challenges his authority and the tribals comply with whatever he tells them to do. The only way to become king is to be born in the Royal Family. Occasionally two or more sons will fight to be king which sounds like it came out of a medieval story.

Just like with any culture there are always traditions people have to follow. In most tribes, women are also not supposed to receive education and is viewed as a waste of time to educate them, because they eventually will get married and belong to their spouse's family. The men are the ones who make decisions and work to provide for their household.

Marriage does not follow our traditional way of giving a woman an engagement ring. In Congolese marriages, the husband gives at least two cows and three gourds to his wife's family, and has to buy suits for the mother and father-in-law. A problem arises when the groom has to give a certain amount of gifts because however many daughters a family has, can determine how rich they are. In tribes, the number of cows you have, determines how much power and wealth you have and to get power, have many daughters.

The social classes in the Congo are somewhat similar to ours in America because there is a poor and rich class. Conflicts do not allow the Congolese people to become economically stable which means the poor keep getting poorer and rich keep getting richer. Jobs that pay well are politicians, doctors, and businessmen. They are able to send their children to school which many families are unable to do. When the economy is not good, then there are no jobs available and unemployment rates skyrocket.

A major problem the Congo is facing would be the lack of industries creating supplies for its people. Right now, the Congo is importing resources from foreign countries like China, the United States, and other foreign countries rather than creating jobs of their own which would relieve unemployment and economic pressure. Competition is the culprit causing all this distress. There are no laws to prohibit monopolies which allow companies to pay off government officials in exchange for immunity from any competition.

Bralima is the only beer company in the Congo and generates billions of dollars a day because they crush anyone who tries to manufacture and sell beer. If a new company wants to sell beer, they pay the government to tax the new business which will most likely make them go out of business. Workers in Bralima are being paid less than fifty dollars a month which is barely enough to support a family.

Federal workers like soldiers, nurses, and teachers are not getting paid on a regular basis because the government does not regulate their salaries. Small businesses are set up because the owner is not usually educated enough to obtain a well paying job to support their family. Even the people who go to school and graduate with a degree get minor jobs or have to rely on nonprofit groups to give them a salary because of the limited amount of jobs

available. The reason nonprofit groups can pay people is because of the grant they receive to set up in a specific area. These groups include the UNHCR, Unicef, UNDP, IRC, and many more. Everyone wants to work with these nonprofits because they are for sure going to get paid. Workers can live off this salary but only for a certain amount of time. Contracts usually last about two years. Once contracts expire, the worker no longer has a job.

No accountability is a major issue because government officials are being paid way too much. Some even have millions of dollars in their accounts because they are allowed to pay themselves. Economic changes have been promised many times but corruption has been going on for more than 20 years. Like many other countries, the Congolese government is trying its best to pay off any debts it has. Even though the country is rich with minerals, the government itself needs to be able to have access to these resources.

International countries benefit largely from the unrest occurring in Congo. Since the government is unstable and the country at war, resources can be obtained easier. Reconstructing the Congo is very difficult because there are numerous political parties and the army is separated fighting different rebel groups. The Democratic Republic of Congo deserves to become stable but other countries disagree because they will lose their access to all the natural resources.

A beacon of hope shined for the Congolese people when President Laurent-Désiré Kabila united the Congo by cutting off external interests in the Congo. For about five years, the Congo was finally prosperous and everyone was being paid equally. Industries and agriculture were finally flourishing in a country that, before President Kabila, had close to none. Just like the saying goes “all good things must come to an end,” on January 18, 2001, President Kabila was assassinated. Some speculation arose about whether a foreign power planned his assassination because they were cut off from the resources. The Rwandan and Ugandan government have been accused several times for supporting armed groups in Eastern Congo. This goes to show that many countries are secretly eating away at the stability of the Congo just for their own personal gain. Sadly, the successor to President Kabila is being manipulated, like many past leaders, and the Congo resumed to being a corrupt country again.

Eastern Congo is the hotspot where most of the natural and valuable resources are located. Rebels control this area and reap major profits. East and West are not cooperative which leaves the West dependant for food from other countries. Recently, the M23 and the Congolese government have been fighting for control of areas with steady progress from the Congolese Army. Unification has been a huge problem for the Congolese Army because Rwandan soldiers want to integrate into the army which only confuses and hinders their efficiency to fight. Even though the M23 may be hindered, they are not the only rebel group causing trouble. Different rebel groups have different goals. Some are against the government while others want to take resources for themselves which makes the minerals the downfall of the Congo.

Mines which extract minerals are mostly controlled by rebel forces. Once a group invades a village, they make the villagers mine resources without any machinery. The majority of the work is traditional which means the process of mining is done by hand. These captives are paid a little to no amount of money which makes the term “slavery” very appropriate to describe this situation. As of 2011, 25 mining companies, two from the United States, are recorded to be working in the Congo. Out of these 25, none of them are supporting or working for the benefit of the Congolese.

The system of how people make money off of minerals is quite strange. Workers may make about \$5 a month and the rebels may make about \$5,000 off a deal with a bordering

country. Once a country has the gold, they could get as much as \$50,000. The amount paid for the minerals keeps going up and up each time they are sold. Lack of knowledge is the reason for this because the seller does not know how much his buyer could make off of the product.

Putting all war and depression aside, the Congo holds the second largest rainforest in the world. The landscape is made up of many different forests with different species of animals in each one. There are two seasons throughout the year, a dry season which lasts five months and a wet season which last seven months. During the wet season, the Congo can get an average of 58 inches of rain per year.

Lakes and rivers also make up a major part of the Congo since there are a total of thirteen lakes which shapes the geography. Mountains are abundant and found largely on the eastern part. Agriculture is done mainly during the wet season when the Congo gets most of the rain. Unfortunately agriculture is small scale and doesn't benefit the country at all. Absence of large machines deters from farming because food cannot be harvested at a fast rate. There could be more income and sustainability from farming but the government does not supply villagers with machines nor space. Those who do have machine power and land only use it for personal gain but hardly any roads creates distribution issues to people.

Sedrick Ntwali is originally from South-Kivu, Congo. He belongs to a tribe known as Shi or Bashi. Their customs do not allow women to do physical labor and are supposed to stay home to take care of the children. Bukavu is a city located in the eastern Congo and close to Lake Kivu. The name Bukavu comes from the transformation of word “bu” “nkafu” (farm of cows) in Mashi, which is the language of Bashi. Bukavu was established in 1901 by Belgian colonial authorities. It was originally named “Costermansville” (French) or “Costermansstad” (Dutch). In 1954, it had a prominent European population under colonial rule and locals are attracted by the subtropical climate and scenic location because Bukavu is built on five peninsulas and has been described as “a green hand, dipped in the lake.”

Sedrick did not have many jobs in his young age, just like the high schoolers in his area because they were not allowed to work. Not only were they not allowed to work, there were hardly any jobs for adults. He mostly stuck to his studies but in the summertime, he was an intern at Bralima because his mother had a position working there for a while. Children of the employees were allowed to have an internship there without any strenuous work. In his city there are two big industries, the first is Bralima and the second is Pharmakina (they make medicine for malaria). His father worked as a businessman and a teacher and his mom specialized in making different types of juices at ARAFRUIT which was a women empowerment program run and worked by women only.

Sedrick attended Bulenga Primary school in Bagira when he was about 12 years old. After, he went to Saint Paul’s College which is a Catholic high school. Some of the best schools in the Congo are Catholic schools because of the professional teachers. Also, students have to be advanced to be able to succeed in those types of schools. The learning styles differ from private and public because even though they both have a government curriculum, teachers make all the difference. In public schools, students can basically do anything they want and some of these schools do not provide an adequate learning environment. Corrupt teachers are present in the public school system which means they can easily give free grades if a student pays enough money. Even if a student is at the top of his or her class, they can fail because of the amount of money the teacher demands from an individual student. These injustices occur because public school teachers are not paid enough or none at all because they hold a government regulated job. Some public universities do not have textbooks so resources are limited and a lot of money is needed to pay for materials like a syllabus. This is the most important part of the class because if you do not buy this item, then it is almost impossible to be successful. Horrific events also arise between the student and teacher because there have been times where a female student has to sleep with a teacher in order to pass the class. If you refuse the teacher then you automatically fail, no matter what. Essentially, attending a Catholic or private school is better overall for a student because it is organized and hard work will pay off.

In 2007, Sedrick fled from the Congo to Uganda along with his family due to the conflicts. At this time, his family consisted of six brothers including his father and mother. The Congolese government was split in two parts and there was a lot of confusion caused by rebels. Once you enter a country, you get a choice of whether to live in a refugee camp or live in the city. His family stayed in a four by three room with no windows, located in Kampala instead of in a refugee camp because his parents knew what living conditions were like in refugee camps. He says the first few years living in the new country was hard because they had to adjust to new culture and conditions were not that great. All of his family members lived in a four by three room with no windows. Hoodlums roamed outside on the streets which made walking at night very dangerous. The bathroom was next to their house which

filled it with an unpleasant aroma. For the first two years Sedrick did not go to school because of change and financial problems. In Kampala there is barely any jobs, let alone almost impossible for a refugee to be hired.

Uganda is a beautiful country and is similar to the geography of the Congo. Agriculture is widely used in Uganda which means there is barely any hunger among the people. Sedrick says he likes the country a lot but would prefer living in his home country. His family encountered discrimination while living in Kampala, but not everyone was harsh. Once they adjusted to society, life eventually got better but malice was shown towards them.

During November of 2008, Sedrick's mother died in a house fire which left his family in a state of despair and perplexity. His family had to find options about what to do next and next thing they know, the United States of America accepted them to enter the country. The UNHCR interviews refugees and distributes cases to different countries hoping one of them is accepted. Even though you get accepted into a country, the process takes a little over a year until you finally arrive in your destination country. Refugees, once accepted, are given a package which includes information about the country to which they are being relocated. Culture, cities, and economic information are the most important to know before departing to a new country.

In 2012, Sedrick's family received a letter from the United States which stated that his family, if they accepted, will be relocated to Lexington, Kentucky. California, New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C. are among the most known and talked about cities but Kentucky was unknown for his family. Sedrick stayed in Kentucky for about two months because life there was very boring and the type of work he wanted to get into was not prominent there. He says he never dreamed of moving to the United States but mostly to Canada or Australia. It was not really a big deal for him but he had a positive attitude toward the whole situation. He started moving around to many cities like Arizona, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Chicago until making the decision to finally move from his home in Lexington to San Diego. The International Rescue Committee was introduced to him by his friend Armand. After learning about what the IRC is about and what their goals are, he wanted to work there because he did the exact same type of work in Uganda. He first started off volunteering with the food security department, peacemakers club, and the Youth Ambassador Program. A position eventually opened up that needed someone who spoke French, English, and many other languages. Sedrick was perfect for the job since he knows about seven languages. Now he is still working in job readiness and financial literacy. Working with the IRC was important but he also wanted to learn more about refugees who have been resettled in the USA because he has found that San Diego has many refugees from different countries. He is producing his second documentary with the help of refugees and the youth. His first documentary is about the struggles urban refugees face in Uganda.

The United States and the Congo have some similarities and differences being that the US is more organized and peaceful but the cost of living is better in the Congo because in the US, you need an excellent education to get a decent job which will, in return, allow you to succeed here. The houses in the Congo are cheap and everybody more or less owns their own home and even if you have to rent, prices are very affordable. The Congolese are more sociable than people in the United States which means everybody is treated as a family member. Sedrick says Americans are self-centered and a bit selfish because they only care about the people living in their household rather than outsiders or even strangers. In the Congo, neighbors are considered family and they will be the first ones to be there, even before the police, in case of an emergency. Sedrick has been living in his apartment for about a year

now and still does not know who lives next to him. The family unit is a big part of what he misses because in America, people have to make appointments to see people and some families here are not as close knit as those in the Congo.

Future plans for Sedrick include going to back to the Congo once he finishes taking classes at Mesa College. After attending Mesa, he hopes to transfer to the University of California, Berkeley or the University of California, Los Angeles. One of his goals is to make a difference in his home country either toward government or peaceful change. He wants to continue being a refugee advocate and Youth motivator. Public speaking is his strong suit because he has a lot of experience speaking in different events and conferences. He is focusing towards the subject of peace and conflict, youth and change, refugees and immigrants, as well as conflict in Congo and great lake region of Africa.