



REACH OUT TO US

Findings from Focus Groups with Young Men and Women
in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Conducted October 2011

By Rebecca Feeley and Driss Choukri

with foreword by Christopher Fomunyoh, Ph.D.

February 2012

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs



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This report and the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) public opinion research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are made possible by the generous support of Humanity United. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Humanity United.

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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communications among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens. For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

FOREWORD

After the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) conducted its first democratic elections in 2006, the country's leaders faced the challenge of addressing citizens' basic needs in a country emerging from a decade of armed conflict. Their task was rendered more urgent by the need to re-establish security and state institutions in parts of the country. Five years later, a new government and legislature would emerge from the 2011 elections. Information on how citizens prioritize their needs and perceive the development of the country's democratic institutions can help legislators and officials craft new policies and reforms. Giving leaders from different political parties equal access to information on these issues can also provide the basis for constructive and results-oriented interparty dialogue.

To furnish Congolese political leaders across party lines with reliable information on citizen attitudes toward democracy and development priorities, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), with the generous support of Humanity United, conducted a series of focus groups in the DRC in October 2011. The Institute held 12 focus groups in six locations across regional and linguistic divisions, offering Congolese participants neutral, nonpartisan venues for free and unfettered discussions. Focus group research can help fill communication gaps and provide information about citizen needs and priorities. In the immediate post-election period for the DRC, this information can serve as a starting point for Congolese leaders to identify and build consensus on the next steps in the country's democratic development.

The research sought to identify issues that Congolese perceived to be the country's most pressing economic, social and political concerns. The focus groups also explored citizens' attitudes toward democracy. The study found that Congolese participants are, first and foremost, concerned about their economic subsistence and prospects for an improved well-being in the future. They want jobs, security, and the economic growth that accompanies stability. The participants understand how a democratic society should function, and while they acknowledge that their country has adopted democratic forms, they do not consider the state democratic. In some areas, security is the overriding concern. In most cases, however, Congolese state that better governance will lead to more human security and the economic gains they desire. When they describe this better governance, participants do not refer only to new laws or improved administration; rather, they believe that better governance depends on political will to curb corruption, guarantee basic freedoms and work together for the common good. When this happens, participants say, the DRC will develop.

A new legislature and government now prepare to take up the challenge of giving voice to citizens' views and addressing their concerns. NDI hopes that these focus group findings will stimulate dialogue among Congolese democrats, across political affiliation and at both the governing and grass-roots levels, on how the country can respond to citizen needs and regain the path to democratic development that it began in 2006.

Christopher Fomunyoh, Ph.D.
NDI Senior Associate for Africa

PREFACE

By providing citizens' own descriptions of their needs and priorities, as they emerge in open-ended discussions, focus group research can assist elected leaders in their responsibilities to both represent and respond to their constituents. When collected and shared, citizens' perceptions of their needs, and their expectations of the country's political leaders can help spur elected leaders to establish responsive policies and positions.

To identify citizen concerns and expectations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched a qualitative study of public opinion in October 2011, with the goal of sharing the findings with the newly-elected leaders from the November 2011 general elections. Specifically, the study examined:

- Perceptions of the DRC's most pressing economic, social, and political issues;
- Expectations of political parties and elected leaders;
- Attitudes toward democracy; and
- Expectations for the future of the country.

Any public opinion research, including focus groups, is only a snapshot of opinion at the moment the research is undertaken. Public opinion is dynamic and evolves as people experience and react to major events. Notably, the conclusions of this report represent opinions of Congolese participants in October 2011, before the November elections.

Demographics

NDI organized a total of 12 focus groups – two each in six locations, selected to balance the country's regional and linguistic divisions. In each location, one group was held in an urban setting, and the second, in the rural outskirts of each urban center. Each session was conducted in the region's predominant language as noted in the following table:

Province	Location	Language
Kinshasa	Kinshasa	French, Lingala
North Kivu	Goma	Swahili
Katanga	Lubumbashi	Swahili
Bandundu	Kikwit	Kikongo
Equateur	Mbandaka	Lingala
Kasai Oriental	Mbuji Mayi	Tshiluba

Focus group participants had at least a high school education and included male and female citizens ranging between 25 to 35 years old. This participant profile gives insight into the views of Congolese who experienced the democratic transition as adults but whose overall quality of life depends on the country's future development. Groups contained between eight and ten participants and were comprised of equal numbers of men and women. The focus groups were all recruited and moderated in the dominant language of the location.

Focus Group Methodology, Results, and Usage

Focus groups are semi-structured group discussions directed by well-trained moderators. Participants respond to open-ended questions and statements but are also permitted to raise other concerns. This flexible group format enables participants to inspire each other in an exchange of ideas that would not emerge in quantitative surveys that rely on structured questionnaires administered individually. Information gathered in this way reflects citizen values and needs and is critical in helping decision-makers test their assumptions and incorporate the will of the people into policy-making.

Although focus groups are a superior research method for understanding the meanings behind commonly held attitudes, the total number of participants in focus group research is always relatively small and thus is not statistically representative of the larger population. Unlike a survey, whose claim to reliability is based on the “representativeness” of its sample, focus group results are useful because they reflect the views of typical individuals in specific social groups. In other words, the research focuses on understanding attitudes, rather than measuring them. This report reflects the opinions of the citizens of the DRC who participated in this study. General terms, such as ‘people’ and ‘citizens,’ may be used on occasion in this report as a convenience to represent the attitudes of the young men and women who participated in the focus groups.

Unless otherwise noted, the principal findings presented in this report represent views commonly and repeatedly cited by participants.

Participant Perceptions vs. Political Realities

The *perceptions* of participants in these focus groups do not necessarily reflect *reality*. Ordinary citizens often judge progress based on the change in their own lives. Improvements in areas outside their immediate interests (although important in the greater context) are not always viewed as progress by the average person. Participants in this study sometimes get their facts wrong and often form their opinions based on inaccurate or semi-accurate readings of the world around them. Nevertheless, even if their perceptions do not represent reality, there is power in these perceptions. Citizens make decisions based on what they believe.

MAP OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO



VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Congolese citizens express what they would say to their leaders if they were given the opportunity.

“I would tell these politicians to leave their air-conditioned offices because it’s difficult to know or to be familiar with issues that the people face when you stay in an office. Let them go to the field. How will they assist the people if they don’t know the country well? Reach out to the people.” Urban Kinshasa

“Let everyone enjoy freedom of expression and opinion. People should not be arrested because they criticize the country for moving in the wrong direction.” Rural Goma

“Your Excellency, have mercy on us. We, the Congolese people have endured a lot. We have studied but we cannot find jobs. At least, we were lucky to get married, but what about our children, will they have the same chance? Are we sending them to school to study for nothing?” Rural Kinshasa

“To the Minister of economy, stabilize the local currency rather than use foreign currencies for a better national economy.” Rural Mbandaka

“As for me, if I were to talk directly to a government authority, I would talk about security because you may have a good education, but without security, it’s pointless. The authorities should think thoroughly about the issue of security because we’re living in total insecurity.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

“Take our difficulties to heart.” Rural Kikwit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on 12 focus group discussions with over 100 participants in the DRC, this report examines the needs and priorities of Congolese citizens as well as their attitudes toward democracy, political parties, and their elected leaders. The summary of the main findings can be found below. The full results, along with selected quotations from participants, can be found in the Principal Findings section of this report.

I. The General Direction of the Country

Congolese are extremely unhappy with the current state of their country. When asked their perceptions of the DRC today, nearly all participants – male and female, in rural and urban settings alike – express negative views. They feel that the country is barely functioning and are frustrated by a lack of development and poor quality of life. Their awareness of Congo’s great economic potential compounds this frustration into outrage that average citizens do not benefit from its natural wealth. When asked if the DRC was moving in a positive or negative direction, nearly all participants respond that the country is moving in the wrong direction. Interestingly, many equate “wrong direction” with the status quo rather than a sense of moving backwards.

Participants hold the government responsible for not addressing the country’s woes. When asked who is responsible for the problems in their country, Congolese most often say “the authorities,” “the leaders” or “the government.” They feel that their leaders do not have the interests of the Congolese people at heart and lack the political will to help the DRC improve.

Congolese consider the holding of elections one of the country’s only major achievements. They draw a distinction between Mobutu’s Zaire, when promised elections never came to fruition, and today’s DRC, holding elections for the second time in five years.

II. Citizens’ Main Concerns

Half of all participants choose employment as a top priority. They believe that many of the social ills that Congolese face are a result of poverty caused by unemployment.

About one-third of participants consider the elections as a top priority. These participants believe that holding elections is the first step toward achieving progress in other areas, and they are excited to be able to exercise their right to vote. They have faith that free and fair elections can yield a government that will focus on solving unemployment and the country’s other problems.

Security is the top concern of participants in rural Goma and urban Mbuji Mayi. These participants believe that improving security is more important than any other priority. Insecurity interrupts their daily lives and their ability to make a living, while impeding development and leaving their lives and property at risk.

Participants are also very concerned about the corrosive power of corruption in the country.

While the majority of participants did not rank corruption as a top priority when given other choices, the issue of corruption was an underlying concern throughout all the focus group discussions. They believe that corruption impedes development and that corruption among political leaders is the reason that the country's problems and, specifically, the basic needs of people, remain unaddressed.

III. Perceptions and Expectations of Political Parties and Elected Leaders

Most participants generally understand the roles political parties and elected leaders are expected to play in a democratic society. They believe that parties should embody an ideology and present to their supporters ideas and plans for the country. These plans should reflect the needs and wants of their supporters. Elected leaders should act as spokespersons for their constituents' concerns, they say, and work to resolve these concerns.

Participants in all six regions have a strongly negative perception of Congolese "politics," "politicians," and "political parties." They regard politics as a dirty game and politicians as mere liars, thieves, and demagogues. They believe that, rather than working for the good of the country, Congolese political parties exist solely to enrich their members through access to government funds.

Congolese view their leaders as inaccessible and indifferent to their concerns. Focus group participants in the six regions believe their elected leaders and their parties have failed in their responsibility to listen to their constituents and advocate for their needs. These leaders are perceived to all follow the same pattern: get elected and then hide from your constituents.

Participants want elected officials to communicate and interact with the public more. Given the chance to express their expectations of the leaders who will emerge from the next election cycle, focus group participants simply request communication with and easy access to their elected leaders.

IV. Attitudes toward Democracy

Nearly all participants equate democracy with freedom. Asked to define "democracy," focus group participants in the six regions furnish the same definition of the concept. For them, democracy is synonymous with liberty, in general, and freedom of expression, in particular.

The vast majority of participants believe that the DRC is not a democracy at present because it lacks freedom of expression. To live in a democracy, they say, they must be free to choose their leaders *and*, importantly, feel free to voice their opinions and be critical of their leaders. While many of them believe that they are free to choose their leaders now, they don't feel they yet have the freedom to criticize their leaders. Without this ability, they do not believe true democracy has yet come to the DRC.

A minority of participants believe that the DRC is making progress toward democracy. A few participants believe that democracy is in its nascent stages in the DRC and regard the holding of elections as a good indication that the country is making progress toward a democratic system. These participants are more likely than others to believe that freedom of speech exists in the DRC.

The overwhelming majority believe that the DRC can become a full-fledged democracy. Participants point to two factors that could bring about a fuller democracy: better leadership at the top, and unity among the people. If citizens can overcome their differences, they reason, politicians cannot resist them; a collective voice and demands, they say, may force elected leaders to respond to the needs of the people. Participants affirm that elections are the only way to achieve democracy.

V. The Future of the Country

The majority of participants say the future depends on the outcome of the elections.¹ They believe that there is a possibility that the situation can improve but it depends on the outcome of the elections. They are unsure of whom voters will choose and if the newly elected leaders will honor their promises.

Congolese dream of a country where their basic needs are taken care of and where they can live in peace. The majority of participants express the same ideal vision for the future of their country. They describe being employed, well fed, having access to good quality education, health services, and most importantly, living in peace.

¹ As noted earlier, the research was conducted in advance of the November 2011 elections.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

I. The General Direction of the Country

1. Congolese are unhappy with the current state of their country.

When asked their perceptions of the DRC today, nearly all participants – male and female, in rural and urban settings alike – express negative views. They feel that the country is barely functioning and are frustrated by a lack of development and poor quality of life. Their awareness of Congo’s great potential compounds this frustration into outrage that average citizens do not benefit from its natural wealth.

“The country is in total chaos.” Rural Goma

“I see that our country is not making progress; rather, we continue to go deeper into poverty. Our country is not developing.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“Things are not working well and there is too much difficulty.” Rural Kikwit

“The Congo has immense wealth. Where has all this wealth gone? ... I wonder because the Congolese people are living in dire poverty.” Rural Kinshasa

“The Congo has so much potential, but the people are robbed of it. Look at the abundant forest resources in the country, and then look at the people’s standard of living, it’s terrible.” Rural Mbandaka

2. Most participants feel that the country is moving in the wrong direction.

When asked if the DRC was moving in a positive or negative direction, nearly all participants respond that the country is moving in the wrong direction. Interestingly, many equate “wrong direction” with the status quo or stagnation rather than a sense of moving backwards. For them, the country is moving in the wrong direction because their quality of life remains poor.

“I don’t see anything that is working well, because we still live in misery. There’s lot of erosion in the city. There’s neither electricity nor water. Nothing works well.” Rural Kikwit

“There’s no order, and there’s no progress at all, we’re under-developed from all standpoints. We’re moving backward instead of moving forward.” Rural Goma

“It’s true that some roads have been rebuilt, but people are still not satisfied. As for food, you really have to fight to get some.” Urban Lubumbashi

These citizens often point to the lack of employment opportunities in the DRC as proof that the country is moving in the wrong direction. Many express bitterness at having an education but not being able to find a job. If there were more jobs, they say, they would enjoy a better quality of life and the country would progress.

“We have a lot of jobless people around. We have people with their Bachelor’s degrees and graduate degrees, but there are no jobs.” Urban Mbandaka

“We have no jobs, and it’s a real hell to get one.” Rural Goma

“It’s difficult to get a job because experience is always a requirement to get one. But, how will those of us with no work experience get a job?” Rural Lubumbashi

“You have to be the son of somebody or a very important personality; otherwise, it’s difficult to get a job.” Rural Kikwit

3. Participants hold the government responsible for not addressing the country’s woes.

When asked who is responsible for the problems in their country, Congolese most often say “the authorities,” “the leaders,” or “the government.” A few even mention President Kabila himself. They feel that their leaders do not have the interests of the Congolese people at heart and lack the political will to help the DRC improve. They consider government leaders corrupt and self-interested.

“Things are not going at all in the right direction because we have a bad government. The government does not value the people.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“Everything is going wrong in the Congo. In Congolese households, living standards are terrible, even inhumane, but for a certain class of people, things are going well in the Congo because they embezzle public funds.” Rural Mbandaka

“Generally speaking, leaders manage to get out of poverty; these are people who were starving before. Now that they have become deputies, they first take care of themselves by filling up their own pockets and bank accounts.” Urban Kinshasa

“Given the immensity of the country, our authorities fail to meet the needs of the people. Their efforts are piecemeal and do not improve living conditions. This shows the lack of will on behalf of our authorities.” Rural Kikwit

Some participants also express disappointment with President Kabila for failing to implement his infrastructure improvement plans for the country. These plans, known as the “Cinq Chantiers,” or the five pillars of development,² were the centerpiece of the president’s 2006 campaign, and these participants are bitter about what they consider a broken promise.

“People believe that the five projects are an illusion. The roads are impassable in the provinces. People walk. They walk 50km because there are no roads to the neighboring villages.” Urban Kinshasa

² These “pillars of development” are infrastructure, job creation, education, water and electricity, and health.

“My personal knowledge of the five projects is based on hear-say. That’s why I have dubbed them the five songs... The five projects are not working. It’s rather demagoguery fabricated to deceive us and to make us believe that roads are paved in DRC.” Urban Goma

4. A number of participants also believe that the Congolese people bear responsibility for the country’s condition.

While most place blame for the country’s problems wholly on the government, some participants mention the social responsibility of citizens in their country’s development. Interestingly for a nascent democracy, most link this responsibility to citizens’ choices at the ballot box. In other words, they admonish citizens for making poor choices during elections.

“I blame the people for poorly choosing their leaders without even knowing who they are.” Rural Goma

“The one responsible is you and me. The enemy of the Congolese is the Congolese. It’s not the outsider who is going to fix things. Let’s be responsible for our misfortunes and fortunes.” Urban Mbandaka

“It’s our responsibility, as we are getting ready to elect leaders in the coming days. If you’re just going to vote because somebody played good music or corrupted you, you will be responsible for the outcome.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“It’s our right to have improved social conditions, but let’s not only blame leaders. We the people are the first to destroy this country.” Rural Kinshasa

“We are the ones that choose the best leader at the ballot box. Please, ask candidates to present policies for the future government. After examining and studying the candidate’s policy, its feasibility will then inform our voting decisions.” Rural Goma

5. Congolese consider the holding of elections as one of the country’s major achievements.

Most participants are unable to conjure up a response when asked to name positive developments in the DRC. Those who do proffer a reply most often mention the holding of elections. They draw a distinction between Mobutu’s Zaire, when promised multiparty elections never came to fruition, and today’s DRC, holding elections for the second time in five years. Participants are generally excited to be able to vote in the November 28, 2011 elections.

“Under Mobutu’s rule in former Zaire, we didn’t talk about elections. Talking about elections is a good start that may lead to development.” Rural Goma

“There were no elections then, but now there are elections. On November 28, we’ll have the second elections. That’s a great change.” Rural Lubumbashi

“We notice some improvements in voting, because in the past, we didn’t know how to vote. But, we’ll soon vote for the second time, that’s a good thing.” Urban Mbandaka

“We’ve grown up in this country and in the past we didn’t really know what elections were. But today, we talk about them.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

6. In particular areas, better roads stand out as a positive development.

Participants in Lubumbashi, Kikwit and Mbandaka often mention construction of new and improved roads as a useful improvement.

“Roads have been rebuilt. Today, we can travel long distances without having accidents.” Urban Lubumbashi

“They did well by rebuilding the roads. Rather than spending days going from Kinshasa to Kikwit, now it takes only one day to travel, and accident rates have dropped.” Rural Kikwit

“In our province of Equateur, roads are in complete disrepair, but the authorities hired Afritel Company to fix the roads. That’s a good initiative.” Rural Mbandaka

II. Citizens' Main Concerns

Focus group moderators asked participants to choose two topics that most deserved urgent attention from the government, from a list that included:

- Unemployment/Employment;
- Corruption;
- Economic development;
- Education;
- Elections;
- Management of natural resources;
- Land disputes;
- Health;
- Security and Civil Rights; and
- Women’s rights.

1. Half of all participants choose employment as a top priority.

Citizens in urban and rural Kikwit and Lubumbashi, rural Kinshasa, and rural Mbuji Mayi consider employment issues particularly important. They believe that many of the social ills that Congolese face are a result of poverty caused by unemployment. Many repeatedly lament that they are educated and have degrees but still cannot find jobs.

“All the Congolese should have access to jobs. Most Congolese are jobless. The unemployment rate is high. I would guess that more than 90% of people are jobless.” Kikwit Urban

“If a person works, that person has the capacity to take care of his personal and family needs, including other problems that he must address in life.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

“In the Congo, to afford healthcare, one has to work. If you take any ailing person to the hospital, and you have no money, that person can die.” Urban Kikwit

“My choice is joblessness because employment is the foundation for people’s development. Without jobs, it will be difficult for the country to develop.” Urban Lubumbashi

“Employment is the foundation of everything; if someone works, he earns a salary to provide for his family and can even afford to have an education. In short, it’s everything.” Rural Kinshasa

“There are many people with degrees, but they keep them in their suitcases.” Rural Kikwit

Complaints about underemployment accompany discussions about unemployment. Many Congolese who have jobs are not employed in their sector of study and/or feel they are underpaid.

“Today, many people who graduate, people with Bachelor’s and graduate degrees, cannot find a job. You will come across someone who attended a good program or did well in school, but who ended up being an itinerant salesperson, or becoming a vendor of something.” Urban Kinshasa

“We have people with their Bachelor’s degrees who became shoemakers.” Urban Lubumbashi

2. About one-third of participants consider the elections as a top priority.

Participants in urban Goma and urban Kinshasa select elections as a top concern, as do those in rural Mbuji-Mayi, where elections and employment are chosen evenly as the two most urgent priorities. These participants, and some from other regions, believe that holding elections is the first step toward achieving progress in other areas, and they are excited to be able to exercise their right to vote. These citizens have faith that free and fair elections can yield a government that will focus on solving unemployment and the country’s other problems.

“I choose elections because they are really very important for us. These are moments to be taken seriously. Congolese must know who to elect for any given position. This is really a moment when the people have to remain alert.” Urban Kinshasa

“For the upcoming elections, I wish the authorities could manage the situation to allow the elections to unfold calmly and peacefully. I also wish that they let the people determine freely their choice.” Rural Goma

“For me, elections are the best way forward for the country.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

3. Participants from Mbandaka gave primary importance to economic development.

For residents of Mbandaka (both urban and rural), economic development is their main concern. They believe development of the economy could be the solution to all the socio-economic challenges facing the country.

“If a country’s economic development is not guaranteed, then that country will have issues. It’s the most important thing because economic development leads to education, assists in the fight against corruption and joblessness.” Rural Mbandaka

“Economic development is a passage from less humane conditions to more humane conditions.” Rural Mbandaka

“Economic development is the foundation for a nation’s development because when the economy is strong, I don’t think we’ll need foreign currencies. Corruption will also be eliminated because if someone is well paid, I don’t think that that person will be corrupted easily.” Rural Mbandaka

Mbandaka participants acknowledge some progress in this area, but want their leaders to do more. In particular, they would like them to focus on stabilizing the DRC’s currency and reinforcing the local economy.³

“They are doing something. But, more efforts are still needed. More work needs to be done in the banking sector and access to credit.” Urban Mbandaka

“We should support our local currency, the Congolese franc, so that it may become stronger than the other foreign currencies. By so doing, our living conditions will improve. Otherwise, we won’t make any progress.” Rural Mbandaka

“To enhance the national economy, I think we need a sound management of the state’s income generated by revenue-collection departments.” Rural Mbandaka

“Foreign currencies should be banned in our country to increase the value of the local currency and stabilize prices on the market.” Rural Mbandaka

4. Security is the top concern of participants in rural Goma and urban Mbuji Mayi.

In the rural area of Goma and the urban area of Mbuji Mayi, participants believe that improving security is more important than any other priority. Insecurity disrupts their daily lives and their ability to make a living, while impeding development and leaving their lives and property at risk.

“We cannot work due to wars and turmoil developing everywhere. People are dying like dogs.” Rural Goma

“The top priority is human rights and security; these are the most important things.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“In a situation of insecurity, people can’t live in peace... You can earn your money with dignity in the day, then when night comes, you lose everything because of thefts and burglaries.” Rural Goma

“In a situation of insecurity, there’s no development. Insecurity causes a lot of disasters.” Rural Goma

³ The U.S. Dollar is used widely in the DRC and, in some regions, more often than the Congolese Franc. In recent years, the Congolese Franc has dramatically decreased in value.

They feel that current leaders do little to address the insecurity in their regions.

“The government does nothing to provide us security.” Rural Goma

“There’s no protection, and human rights are ignored. People are killed and our leaders do nothing about it. We are left to fend for ourselves. We are killed like chickens.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

Residents of Goma believe that ill-paid and restive soldiers are a main cause of insecurity and thus counsel the government to pay salaries to the soldiers and keep them away from civilians.

“The government should guarantee the payment of the military because when they receive meager salaries, they turn against the people and steal their goods.” Rural Goma

“The leaders should relocate the army out of our cities, and build barracks and military camps because the military shouldn’t live in the same location as civilians.” Rural Goma

Mbuji Mayi participants think that improved security needs to be part of a larger initiative to emphasize civil liberties and human rights, in general.

“Human rights should be a top priority, and they should be valued.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“They’ve done nothing; let them solve this issue of human rights first, let them find a solution to this issue.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

5. Participants are also very concerned about the corrosive power of corruption in the country.

While the majority of participants did not rank corruption as a top priority when given other choices, the issue of corruption was an underlying concern throughout all the focus group discussions. Participants believe that corruption among political leaders is the reason the country’s problems and, specifically, the basic needs of people, remain unaddressed.

“Corruption is an important subject because if there’s no corruption, there will be development.” Rural Lubumbashi

“All these things such as theft, even insecurity, joblessness, all that is happening in our country now, all this comes especially from the lack of honest leaders.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

III. Perceptions and Expectations of Political Parties and Elected Leaders

1. Most participants generally understand the roles political parties and elected leaders are expected to play in a democratic society.

The majority of participants have a general idea of the role political parties should play in a democratic society. They believe that parties should embody an ideology and present to their

supporters ideas and plans for the country. These plans should reflect the needs and wants of their supporters.

“The role of a political party is to introduce a platform.” Rural Kikwit

“In theory, this [focus group] is what political parties should do. They should bring us together and listen to us because politics does not mean fighting each other. It’s about having provocative discussions, exchanging ideas, getting to know the other’s vision for the people.” Urban Kinshasa

*“Political parties should develop norms and work to ensure adherence to rules for the advancement of the country.”
Urban Mbuji Mayi*

“It is to get people together – men, women and the youth – to discuss a common vision for improving the populations’ lives.” Urban Mbandaka

Participants are also aware of the roles and responsibilities their elected leaders should play. Elected leaders should act as spokespersons for their constituents’ concerns, they say, and work to resolve these concerns.

“An elected official must always be ready and active to fulfill what he promised the people.” Rural Goma

“Their role is to fulfill the will of voters.” Rural Kikwit

“They should speak on our behalf.” Rural Kinshasa

“They are like the spokespersons of the people within the government.” Rural Lubumbashi

“The role of MPs is to submit the concerns of their voter base to the government institution that should solve such problems.” Urban Lubumbashi

“When we elect people, we want them to stay with us and to find solutions to our concerns; they should give us jobs and allow the country to develop.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

2. The majority of participants do not believe they live in a functioning democracy; in all six regions they have a strongly negative perception of Congolese “politics,” “politicians,” and “political parties.”

When participants were asked what they thought of when they heard the word “politics,” many immediately jumped to discussions about Congolese politics and politicians. They regard politics in the DRC as a dirty game and politicians as mere liars, thieves, and demagogues.

“The word politics always reminds me of crooks.” Rural Goma

“In the Congo, politics means lying, theft, and embezzlement.” Urban Goma

“For me, politics means buffoonery, it’s mixed with lies.” Rural Kinshasa

“Whenever I hear ‘politics’, I see a means, an opportunity to make money.” Urban Lubumbashi

“When we talk politics, the first thing that comes to the Congolese mind is self-interest.” Urban Mbandaka

“When people say politics, I see demagoguery and lies.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

Bringing up the topic of political parties to focus group participants instigated sarcasm and bitterness. Most participants believe that, rather than working for the good of the country, Congolese political parties exist solely to enrich their members through access to government funds. This self-interest is summed up by many participants as “la politique du ventre.”⁴

*“Political parties fail to fulfill their duties. They don’t share any good ideas with the people to help them decide who they should vote for. So, the people think that belonging to a political party means receiving money and a t-shirt.”
Urban Mbandaka*

“Today, political parties pursue personal and selfish interests.” Rural Mbandaka

“Political parties have forgotten their role in training and informing their partisans about their party ideals and to guide them in development ideals.” Rural Goma

“They don’t do their work as they should. When they get in politics, their primary objective is ‘la politique du ventre’.” Urban Kinshasa

“If you look at the visions of political parties, the way they present their platforms, we notice that there is nothing. That’s why they don’t do anything good.” Rural Kikwit

“Our political parties are more about playing politics to become a minister, to earn money, to become rich, to be an MP. It’s about personal profit.” Urban Lubumbashi

Some participants mention that there are too many political parties in DRC. They believe most exist primarily to gain access to state resources and that the number of parties does not allow citizens to make a meaningful choice among them.

“There are too many political parties, it’s chaos.” Rural Lubumbashi

*“Political parties are created with the sole objective of putting their leader in power, that’s how we have many parties with each trying to put their leader in power so that they can enjoy governmental profits and fulfill personal goals.”
Rural Goma*

“There are 11 candidates in total. So, if these political parties actually work for the people, they would agree on only one or two candidates to run.” Rural Kinshasa

⁴ “Politique du Ventre” (“Politics of the Belly”) is an expression coined by Cameroonians and borrowed by Jean-François Bayart in his 1989 book: L’état en Afrique: La Politique du Ventre. It refers to the “eating” of public resources by politicians for the private benefit of themselves, their families and supporters.

3. Nearly all participants view their national leaders as inaccessible and indifferent to their concerns.

Focus group participants in the six regions of the DRC voice the same opinion concerning the lack of achievements of their elected leaders. They believe their elected leaders and their parties have completely failed in their responsibility to listen to their constituents and advocate for their needs. Participants have difficulty stating examples of positive things that national leaders have done. These leaders are perceived to all follow the same pattern: get elected and then hide from your constituents.

“For me, there’s no political party that does its work because we notice that right after the elections, all of them lock their doors and wait for new elections, and then they come back to ask people to vote for them.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“They are not accessible at all.” Urban Goma

“When they run for office, they flatter us by telling us that they would defend us, but once in power, they only buy land and jeeps and don’t concern themselves with us.” Rural Kikwit

“Truly, these people don’t even come to see us.” Urban Kikwit

“I can say that they are not accessible to the people because when they need votes, they come closer to the people to make promises, but once elected, they are nowhere to be found.” Urban Kinshasa

“Of the 500 MPs, most of those at the National Assembly are not in touch with their constituents. Those in touch with their constituents are not more than twenty five.” Rural Lubumbashi

Political parties are active when elections are nearing, but after these events, such parties become silent.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

Furthermore, the vast majority of participants are unable to name good works by provincial leaders and view them as negatively as national leaders. Only participants in rural Kikwit could name examples of provincial leaders responding to citizen needs.

“They have created schools and built houses that are presentable.” Rural Kikwit

“We see for example buses that they put at the disposal of some universities.” Rural Kikwit

“Some hospitals have been built.” Rural Kikwit

4. Participants want elected officials to communicate and interact with the public more.

Given the chance to express their expectations of the leaders who will emerge from the next election cycle, focus group participants simply request communication with and easy access to their elected leaders.

“They should walk around with a notebook and a pen in their hands, and they should show concern for the people, they should be closer to the people, and they should seek to understand the concern of the people.” Urban Kinshasa

“In the future, I would like the people that we elect to be accessible to everybody.” Rural Kikwit

“They should be accessible in a way that allows them to know our concerns so that they can respond to them openly and publicly.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

“I hope that they won’t derail from their doctrine anymore, and that they will convey correctly the expectations of the people to the government.” Rural Goma

IV. Attitudes toward Democracy

1. Nearly all participants equate democracy with freedom.

Asked to define “democracy,” focus group participants in the six regions furnish the same definition of the concept. For them, democracy is synonymous with liberty, in general, and freedom of expression, in particular.

“In a democracy, people should feel free.” Urban Kikwit

“In a democracy, there is freedom of expression, freedom in everything you want to do.” Urban Kinshasa

“Democracy means freedom.” Rural Mbandaka

“Democracy is being free at all levels.” Urban Mbandaka

“The word democracy means freedom.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

2. The vast majority of participants believe that the DRC is not a democracy at present because it lacks freedom of expression.

To live in a democracy, most participants say, they must be free to choose their leaders *and*, importantly, feel free to voice their opinions and be critical of their leaders as necessary. While many of them believe that they are free to choose their leaders now, they don’t feel they yet have the freedom to criticize their leaders. Without this liberty, they do not believe true democracy has yet come to the DRC.

“I define democracy as a life style where freedom is prevalent in thought and speech, which is the opposite of our daily life because sometimes, we must be careful before expressing our opinions. This shows that we are still far from democracy because freedom of expression is not real yet.” Rural Goma

“Democracy exists theoretically, but not in practice.” Rural Mbandaka

“I say that there’s no democracy in our country and that by just looking at what’s happening in Kinshasa, we learn that such and such journalist was arrested at work after the end of his/her program and disappeared without a trace. Such things show that there’s no democracy in our country.” Urban Kikwit

“We hear that there is democracy as shown by the name of our country the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but it’s in name only. In fact, we can’t see this democracy in our country because I don’t see any freedom.” Urban Kikwit

3. A minority of participants believe that the DRC is making progress toward democracy.

A few participants believe that democracy is in its nascent stages in the DRC and regard the holding of elections as a good indication that the country is making progress toward a democratic system. These participants are more likely than others to believe that there is some freedom of speech in the country.

“In the Congo, there’s democracy but it is still nascent. Democracy has many components and among these components are elections.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

“Yes, there’s democracy. To be in power, you have to go through an elections process. Also people can speak freely on the radio or television compared to the past and this is a sign of democracy.” Urban Mbandaka

“I say that there’s democracy because people have power to say loudly what they actually want. In former Zaire, one couldn’t criticize an MP or a President because you’ll be arrested and they’ll make you disappear. But for the time being, people go on television to denounce the misbehavior of authorities to have them respond to their needs. So in this regard, there’s hope.” Rural Lubumbashi

4. The overwhelming majority believe that the DRC can become a full-fledged democracy.

Participants point to two factors that could bring about a fuller democracy: better leadership at the top, and unity among the people. If citizens can overcome their differences, they reason, politicians cannot resist them; a collective voice and demands, they say, may force elected leaders to respond to the needs of the people. Participants affirm that elections are the only way to achieve democracy.

“There should be love among us; we should be united, and avoid betrayal among us, then there will be democracy.” Urban Goma

“Yes, if a man of good will can lead us there.” Rural Kikwit

“Our Congo cannot be a democratic country if there is no love between us. For me, I ask that there be love.” Mbuji Mayi Rural

“Yes it’s possible if we have a President of the Republic who can lead us well.” Rural Mbandaka

“Our democracy is flawed. So with such a flawed democracy, we cannot abandon it, we need to refine it to allow it to be in good state, but how? We the Congolese, we should be decisive, if we all speak with one voice, the leaders will follow our ideas. But if they realize that we are not united, they will take advantage of our naivety.” Urban Goma

V. The Future of the Country

1. The majority of participants say the future depends on the outcome of the elections.⁵

The majority of participants are unsure about the future. They believe that there is a possibility that the situation can improve but it depends on the outcome of the elections. They are unsure of whom voters will choose and if the newly elected leaders will honor their promises.

“In the coming days, if we make a good choice during the elections, I know that the Congo will certainly change. The situation we are experiencing today, we will no longer be in the days ahead.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

“The future of the Congo in five years will depend on the authorities we’ll elect. If they take into account our recommendations and solve our problems, if they stabilize things, the Congo will be better off. But if they engage in ‘la politique du ventre,’ if they are only concerned with personal interests, that’s when the Congo will die further.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“It is highly likely for things to move in the right direction, provided that elections are free and transparent. If that’s not the case, we risk losing even the little achievements we’ve already made, and we won’t succeed in anything.” Rural Kinshasa

“We don’t know. Those we’re going to elect...we are not in their minds and we don’t know what they are thinking. How will the leaders work? Will they achieve what they tell us?” Urban Goma

The few participants who are wholly positive about the future base their optimism on their ability to choose their representatives. They often mention that they look forward to exercising their right to vote and will not be duped into voting for inadequate leaders.

“We are improving gradually. So to improve we’ve got to follow up on what has already been done...The mistakes that people made last time, we won’t make such mistakes again.” Rural Lubumbashi

« In past elections, our elected officials promised so many things that they failed to achieve over the five years. Experience makes us wise; the Congolese won’t be deceived anymore. Now, we’ve got to choose worthy and capable leaders who can solve the difficulties faced by the people.” Urban Goma

“Five years ago, we held elections...We saw who did things and who didn’t do anything, and that made us wiser. But this time, we need to put our knowledge to good use, because people are complaining. Many MPs were elected, and then we never saw them again since they gave us t-shirts, sugar, transportation fees....But this time, we’ll be wise.” Urban Kinshasa

⁵ As noted earlier, the research was conducted in advance of the November 2011 elections.

2. Congolese dream of a country where their basic needs are taken care of and where they can live in peace.

The majority of participants express the same ideal vision for the future of their country. They describe being employed, well fed, having access to good quality education, health services, and living in peace.

“We want to live in a Congo where there’s no joblessness, corruption and where economic development occurs, where education is free as promised; we want fair management of natural resources.” Rural Kinshasa

“We need a good education. Civil servants must earn good salaries. With respect to health, doctors should also properly take care of patients.” Urban Mbandaka

“We want to go back to the old system where shops were well supplied; food should be guaranteed, salary payments and the standards of living should be improved.” Rural Kikwit

“Our wish is an end to the famine.” Urban Kikwit

“We’ll gain weight.” Urban Goma

“I wish for stable electricity, and a regular water supply, [...] and I wish to be well paid, and to get a good job, and that my children would study in good schools.” Urban Kinshasa

“If jobs are created for everyone, roads are well paved, mobility is easy and secure, and all the ravines around us are managed; then, the people will live in peace in this country.” Rural Mbuji Mayi

“We are dreaming of a Congo full of security, and security in the fullest meaning of the word—job, health, education, and physical security.” Urban Mbuji Mayi

“Everybody will move around in peace, even in the most remote areas.” Rural Goma

APPENDIX A: MODERATOR'S GUIDELINE

I. GENERAL SITUATION IN THE CONGO

I would like to start by asking your opinion on the general situation in the Congo.

1. How are things going in the Congo these days? Is the Congo heading in the right direction or the wrong direction?

1.1. What are the things heading in the right direction?

[FOLLOW UP: What makes you say that? Who is responsible?]

1.2. What are the things heading in the wrong direction?

[FOLLOW UP: What makes you say that? Who is responsible?]

II. IMPORTANT TOPICS

1. Now I would like to discuss the important issues the Congo faces today. Please tell me what you think the most pressing issues are. In order to properly complete this exercise, please make sure you take into account all the comments you made earlier in the discussion. Of the 10 subjects I am going to list, I want you to pick the two most urgent issues in your opinion:

List 1: Topics

- Unemployment/Work
- Corruption
- Economic Development
- Education
- Elections
- Management of natural resources
- Land disputes
- Health
- Security and civil rights
- Status of women

Distribute the exercise brochures to all the participants. Then ask them to circle the two choices they made.

[FOLLOW UP on the two most picked topics: Why are they so important to you?]

1.1. In your opinion, what are government authorities doing to address these issues?

[FOLLOW UP: Are they doing anything to address these issues?]

[FOLLOW UP: In your opinion, what should government authorities do to address these issues?]

III. PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS FROM POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

1. When I say “politics”, what are the first thoughts and ideas that come to your mind?
[FOLLOW UP: Can you please explain why you are saying that?]
2. What is the role of a political party? What responsibility does it have in regards to development and public management?
[FOLLOW UP: Do you think political parties fulfill their role?]
[FOLLOW UP: Please give me some examples.]
3. What is the role of an elected official?
4. Do you think that elected officials are accessible to citizens?
[FOLLOW UP: Can you please explain why you are saying that?]
5. Do you think elected officials respond to citizen needs at the national level?
[FOLLOW UP: If so, please give me some examples.]
[FOLLOW UP: If not, which needs are unaddressed?]
6. Do you think elected officials respond to citizen needs at the local level?
[FOLLOW UP: If so, please give me some examples.]
[FOLLOW UP: If not, which needs are unaddressed?]
7. How can elected officials better respond to citizen needs in the future?

IV. ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

1. When I say “democracy”, what are the first thoughts and ideas that come to mind?
[FOLLOW UP: Can you please explain why you are saying that?]
2. Do you think there is democracy in the Congo? (Ask participants to raise their hands, and then count the numbers of “Yes” and “No”)
[FOLLOW UP: If you said “Yes”, what makes you say that?]
[FOLLOW UP: If you said “No”, what makes you say that?]
3. In your opinion, is it possible for the Congo to become a democratic country?
[FOLLOW UP: If not, what makes you say that?]
[FOLLOW UP: If so, how can it become democratic?]
4. Do you think elections are a good way for the Congolese people to choose their leaders?
[FOLLOW UP: Why?]

V. **EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY**

1. Imagine waking up the next day and the Congo is better than ever.
[FOLLOW UP: How would that be? What is your vision of a perfect Congo?]
2. What do you think the country's situation will be in 5 years? Will it be better, worse or the same?
[FOLLOW UP: Why?]

VI. **CONCLUSION**

1. While acknowledging the importance of the topics we covered during our discussions, imagine being in the presence of a high-level government authority and the latter asks for your recommendations on ways to improve the living conditions of all Congolese people. What recommendations will you make? What problems should be addressed?
We want to thank you all for your time. You have been a great help.

APPENDIX B: ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rebecca Feeley is a Senior Program Officer supporting NDI's programs in Post-conflict Francophone Africa. Prior to joining NDI in 2009, Ms. Feeley specialized in Africa's Great Lakes region as a researcher based in Goma, DRC for a number of international organizations including the Enough Project, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Humanitarian Policy & Conflict Research International. She previously served as a Program Officer for the Clinton Foundation in Rwanda. Ms. Feeley holds a Master's Degree in International Affairs from Columbia University.

Driss Choukri is the manager of Bridgehead consulting and a consultant for international organizations such as the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) and NDI. Mr. Choukri served as a Program Manager for the Solidarity Center in the Maghreb between 2008 and 2010. Before joining the Solidarity Center, Mr. Choukri worked as Operation Manager and as Field Work Manager with NDI-Morocco between 2003 and 2008. Mr. Choukri has previously organized focus groups in Kuwait, the DRC and Mauritania and has moderated more than 300 focus groups throughout Morocco. Mr. Choukri holds a Master's Degree in Education from the Faculty of Education in Rabat, Morocco.



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Made possible by support from Humanity United.