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Kinshasa, D.R. Kongo

Ambassade d'Allemagne
Kinshasa, R.D.C.

50th Anniversary Conference

"Revisiting Independence: the DRC 50 Years On"



On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Pole Institute (the intercultural institute of the Great Lakes region) organized, from the 29th of June to the 2nd of July 2010, an international conference in Goma on "**Revisiting Independence: the DRC 50 Years On**". The conference was supported by EED, NOVIB, DFID, as well as the German embassy in Kinshasa. It aimed at taking a critical but also constructive look at the developments during the last 50 years, the situation today and the perspectives for the future.

We wanted to celebrate this Anniversary in our own way, analysing the situation of the country and the factors which probably led to today's quagmire. At the same time we draw from our lasting commitment to work for a better future and a life with more dignity for all Congolese.

We want to act against the resignation to, and acceptance of the difficult and unbearable situation of most Congolese as an almost predestined fatality or a doomed destiny.

We want to refute the hateful, destructive and infantilising hypotheses looking for a scapegoat, the eternal "other" causing all of Congo's troubles.

The conference was attended by about 40 researchers, analysts and experts in various fields from all corners of the DRC (Kinshasa, Bas Congo, Katanga, Ituri, North and South Kivu), as well as from Cameroon, Kenya, Benin, Nigeria, South Africa, Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Germany.

The unanimous feeling of the participants was that the Conference initiated and facilitated a constructive debate on the responsibilities of different stakeholders, the errors of the past, the treasury of experience gained, and the way for the future.

The idea of rethinking or revisiting independence in the context of - but apart from - the official celebrations and power displays was seen as an urgent necessity. There are great expectations concerning the follow-up of the conference and its possible outcomes.

Three witnesses of the historical moment of June 1960 spoke to us about their experiences and emotions during the lowering of the Belgian and the raising of the Congolese flag. This was a strong symbol, a sign that from that moment on all things became possible for all people. Alas very soon after followed the traumatic events of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and other developments that were seen by many as attempts to take the newly independent state hostage, or worse. The reading of the statement of Lumumba was a powerful moment for the participants at the conference. A participant from Cameroon recalled the special friendship that the pan-Africanists Félix Moumié of Cameroon and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana had towards Lumumba.

The younger participants (students, journalists and members of the media) were fascinated by being able to 'connect' with the living memories of the past. In exchange they contributed and shared the emotions and sounds moving today's young Congolese.

The work covered four areas:

- **Independence Cha! Cha!: Let us finally dance constructive steps.**

Our independence celebrations, whether in the DRC, or in Cameroon or in Senegal display certain basic common structures:

- 1) Independence celebrations are characterized by **parades and displays** as major moments and events performed before presidents well established in their powerful positions surrounded by other similar presidents and attended by counselors provided by “allied” powers. Behind all this lies a hidden agenda focused on one man exercising his power. We celebrate our ignorance of what being independent really means. We live in complete disorientation.
- 2) We celebrate our independence with our musicians and our music. We find joy and energy in this exhilaration. But we drown this energy in alcohol. Alas, we dance without thinking. We dance to forget. This **disastrous mentality** has taken over the people.
- 3) We suffer from **the frivolity of the African intelligentsia** focused on serving and courting the men in power.
- 4) Some **forces of resistance** to, and revolt against this situation do exist, but they are marginalized. In each Congolese there is a Mobutu who has marked us and created in us a certain culture: we dance while the country collapses around us. But there are also Lumumba and Kimbangu who represent other approaches, other perspectives. How can we reinforce *their* mark in us?

How can we achieve an independence which opens the way to development and thus allows each one of us to gain our freedom?

How do we rethink new forms of independence that will make us part with backward political orientations?

How do we engage in constructive revolt in the way it has been conceptualized by Pole Institute’s *Bustani Ya Mabadiliko (Garden of Change)*?

How do we create a new educational framework in order to provide future generations with a basis on which to reconstruct the country?

Finally, there is a very close connection between the independence of the DRC (which is at the centre of the African continent) and that of other countries. In the 1950s and 1960s independence was linked to pan-African aspirations.

Is that still the case today?

Indeed the DRC is not a unique or isolated case. A re-reading and analysis of the novels of the great Amadou Kourouma led to some reflection on the common lot of former colonies and the egocentric sometimes absurd power strategies of their leaders.

At the conclusion of the conference there was a strong sense that **independence is also and above all a mental state** which allows one to realize one’s potential and be

integrated in a system of governance in which citizens and not subjects (to quote Mahmood Mamdani) demand accountability from the decision makers.

- **Independence and interdependence: creating constructive alliances**

Many Congolese and Africans today live without a functioning state system, but, perhaps even more to the point, they survive *in spite* of the state often seen as an enemy. For a long time now there have been expectations that, by miracle, the DRC would reconstruct itself as a functioning state falling from the skies. The state apparatus more or less exists, but it does not provide basic services for its people. Security, education, health, economic development, all the necessary elements have been left to chance, to the inventiveness of people, or to the good will and intentions of foreign powers evidently looking after their own interests. The sad fact is that the Congolese state exists, but that throughout from the colonial period to present times it has been privatized and taken hostage by individuals and small power clans.

The United Nations, MONUC or MONUSCO are still present, representing different interests that are at times contradictory. There is no way they can offer any solutions, either in the mid- or long term for the stabilization of the country.

Should the UN and its various organization always defend the power in place as legitimate?

On what base does a government establish its legitimacy? Elections alone do not appear to suffice, as has been abundantly seen in the perceptions and reactions of the people on many different occasions in the history of the DRC.

How can the Congolese people as such be re-introduced into the governance and decision making process? They, and only they are the ones to assume responsibility in finding solutions to the needs of their country.

- **Natural Resources: Breaking the Curse**

Violence, ignorance and destruction were at the roots of the colonial economy and the fact is that they still remain the basis of the official 'formal' economy of today.

The scandal of the pilfering and theft of Congolese resources is well known and frequently spoken about, but the fact that even at least twelve years after the official declaration of independence these resources still remained in the hands of private shareholders, the majority of whom were Belgian, is less known.

When Mobutu finally nationalized the big enterprises in 1973 as part of the policy of "Zairianization", he in fact privatized them for his own profit and that of his cronies. To this day the contracts relating to these industries are not transparent. As one of the participants at the conference ironically put it, "We give you our underground resources provided you tar the roads on the surface for us".

The Congolese informal economy functions like an empowering counter-balance created by the people, but the state, that is to say the administration, acts as a brake and an obstacle to this economy which constitutes the basis for the survival of the vast majority of the Congolese people. The state apparatus behaves like a robber and an

extortionist towards the small and medium enterprises and impedes their participating in the national, regional and international economies.

The arrival of the Chinese not only at the level of big industry but also at the level of small scale and medium enterprises aggravated this situation.

It is **not just the maximization of the state's income but that of the people which creates the wealth of a nation.**

Studies are being conducted on borders as places that both separate and connect, as places of conflict but also means of survival. These studies show that there is a dire need for transparent and equitable trans-border trade.

- **Rebuilding what and starting from where? The cultural challenge.**

The DRC has always been a surface, a “black hole” on which all sorts of myths and fantasies have been projected. Beginning with Stanley, Joseph Conrad, but also André Gide, Georges Simenon right up to Che Guevara, Angelina Jolie and all the self-proclaimed saviours, humanitarians, and peace makers of the 21st century.

The representations of Congolese and African people as perceived by Western and Northern cultures can be summarized as: the black pagan, banana grower and eater, in the heart of darkness, the African victim waiting for salvation from the West. The historical continuation of this negative myth of the Black person has never changed from the time of Las Casas' struggle for the existence of a soul in every Native American, thus making him similar to the white man, and his equally firm belief of the soullessness of the Black person, thus reducing him to slavery and to forced labour in the then young American plantations.

The onus is on the Africans to put an end to the continuation of this negative myth and to create, instead, constructive myths and perceptions: for instance of a Congo that is not the flaccid belly of Africa (*le ventre mou de l'Afrique*), but its heart, with forests as the lungs of humanity, not to mention its head and brain, a Congo with a rich history of the resistance of its heroes, a Congo of creativity, an energetic and hopeful Congo in which cultural diversity is taken both as an opportunity and a source of positive alliances.

The identification of the Congo and the Congolese with football, music and fashion is not in itself sufficient if not complemented by an inclusive Congolese identity rejecting the culture of exclusion; an identity which constantly re-invents and recreates itself as it survives common sacrifice, focuses on the will to live together, and takes responsibility of past and present common history.

External appearance - visible for instance in elegant shiny clothes and glorifying speeches - has alas become the trademark of the Congolese, not just the political class but the people as well. It is imperative that this be replaced by using the amazing creativity and energy of the Congolese people to develop responsible citizenship and governance at all levels.

The cultural dimension that we often neglect is very important for social transformation. There is a need to create constructive, positive myths, a culture of solidarity between agents of hope from the Northern and Southern hemisphere instead of perpetuating the victimisation of the self and the exclusion of the eternal “other”.

Conclusion

The conference was seen as a breath of fresh air, an opening up of opportunities at various levels, founded on a common vision. Important links were forged between the different speakers and participants who had come from various backgrounds.

After this promising start Pole Institute takes the responsibility of facilitating the contacts and networks established during the conference, and also of making the work of the conference available to a wider public.

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Onesphore Sematumba/Christiane Kayser, Pole Institute
Translated from French by Luke Mlilo