
Governing the DRC: Balancing Local, Provincial and National Concerns

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Introduction

On 2 December 2015, the Chatham House Africa Programme hosted Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo to reflect on the progress of decentralization and the status of local and provincial governance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In his talk he set out his thoughts on the country's political and economic trajectory. While big picture national dynamics have dominated international attention on the DRC, the creation of 26 new provinces in 2015 has had a more immediate impact on Congolese citizens' experiences of governance. Despite positive trends in economic growth – fuelled by Chinese investment – significant political questions remain, particularly over constitutional reform and the timing of elections scheduled to take place in 2016.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

The vast size of the DRC poses a huge problem for effective governance and territorial management. The country has an area of 2,245,000 square kilometres – an area equivalent in size to the combined total of nine neighbouring countries. The country also has provinces the size of several European countries. In this context it was decided to break up the 11 larger provinces into 26 smaller units. President Kabila's vision is to improve provincial governance, and therefore encourage a provincial development trajectory that is aligned with the interests of local communities, whilst fuelling national economic growth. The potential of such a decentralized program was already proven by the split of Kivu province into three smaller provinces 20 years ago. This positively impacted on development in the region.

This process operates in accordance with the DRC constitution, ratified by a referendum on 18 February 2006, which outlined the need for provincial assemblies, provincial governors and effective provincial governance. In this system, members of the provincial assembly and governors are elected directly by the people. The assembly then ratified the government proposed by the provincial governor. The provinces are currently managed by interim governors, until elections can be held.

This decentralization program will facilitate development in multiple ways. The creation of smaller provinces will allow governors to be more closely attuned to the needs of the population, and translate them into viable programmes. Governors will be able to design more innovative policies that would not have been possible on a larger scale.

Synchronizing the needs of local communities with the developmental vision for the entire country will be crucial to the positive outcome of this programme. The constitution underpins the importance of finding synergies between provincial and national agendas to create a coherent development plan. This includes integrating national and provincial budgets. Similarly, the potential of the DRC's 145 territories needs to be enhanced, as these are the most dynamic levels of the country. This includes placing each territory under the guidance of a skilled municipal leader as well as economic and cultural advisers. Moreover, the Prime Minister's office has implemented a new development indicator analysis in tandem with a municipal engineer working in each territory. This will allow the effective gathering of social, economic and cultural information that can be aggregated by the national government in order to ascertain the

capacities of every territory. It will also provide information to development partners on each of the territories.

This fundamental vision for accelerating development relies on the people, rather than the government, leading the process, as well as the prominent role of economic advisers in governance.

Summary of question and answer session

Question

What role will the decentralized territorial entities, the sub-division of territories, play? Are there any issues concerning their capacity?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

The decentralized territorial entities form part of the layered approach that links local communities to provincial governments. Unfortunately, the shortage of skilled staff is inhibiting good governance. Due to the importance of this issue, concerted efforts will be undertaken to correct this deficiency.

Question

How can it be ensured that revenue from the forest sector is distributed to the communities that live in and near forested areas?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

This issue is already being addressed through ongoing fiscal reform. A new mechanism of revenue collection is being developed, including revenue from the forest sector, at both the national and provincial levels. There are also provisions to ensure the redistribution of funds to the communities from where revenue is collected.

Question

What is the expected timeframe for provincial elections in Orientale? Is the decentralization program occurring simultaneously across the country, or has it begun specifically with Katanga? What will be done about provinces, such as Equateur and Maniema, which have been left behind?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

This question is being dealt with through the inclusive political dialogue inaugurated by President Kabila, in which all political players, including civil society and religious institutions, are being consulted. This dialogue should provide the basis for an electoral process that is rooted in consensus and will hopefully address the timeframe of the provincial elections. At the moment, it is necessary to wait on the outcome of this process. Decentralization has been implemented across the country, not just Katanga. All of the provinces have been split, with the exception of Kivu, which was already broken up 20 years ago. This includes Equateur and Maniema.

Question

What is the speaker's perspective on the upcoming national elections and the growing human rights abuses linked to them, particularly the political repression against those who oppose a third term for President Kabila, and what actions is the speaker taking to deal with the increasing attacks against political opponents? What actions are being taken against General Célestin Kanyama who is involved in those abuses?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

This is an issue that needs to be dealt with in the ongoing and inclusive political dialogue, and therefore it is not currently possible to provide a definitive response to the question. Nevertheless, this problem should be addressed objectively. Accusations of political repression should be put into perspective. For example, many political players have been punished for the abuse of underage girls and not for their political views. In the DRC, like in the United Kingdom, the law applies equally to everybody, regardless of their political positions. At the same time, many activists have consistently spoken out against a possible third term for President Kabila, and have not been imprisoned. The DRC has amongst the most freedom of expression in Africa, especially compared with its neighbours. On the subject of General Kanyama, the speaker stated that the details are not known to him. However, it does appear that the newspapers are reporting inaccurately on the matter, though they will not be unfairly punished for such conduct.

Questions

Will decentralization impact positively on the governance of Gécamines?

A participant stated that he has three clients operating in DRC and they are all very content with the state of affairs.

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

Decentralization is not designed to have a direct impact on the governance of Gécamines as it is run by the central government and does not operate provincially. Nevertheless, reducing the size of provinces will allow a closer monitoring of Gécamines's activities, particularly in Katanga

The IMF has designated the DRC as one of the most dynamic economies in the world, with a growth rate of between 8 and 9 per cent, inflation of just 1 per cent, a strong macroeconomic base and good prospect for growth up to 2020.

Question

How does the government plan to balance the needs of the rich and the poor in its development agenda?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

One of the key aims of decentralization is to commence a new people-led development. This will enable more equitable wealth redistribution in each province, reducing the wealth gap.

Question

Are there concerns of tensions between communities that are divided by new borders? How will decentralization impact on the activities of armed groups?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

Tensions that may arise from decentralization can be more effectively mediated due to increased ability of governors to travel throughout their provinces and work more closely with communities. Decentralization will likewise increase the capacity of provincial governments to deal with armed groups. However, the new provincial leadership must have the appropriate managerial skills to manage their territories, address the tensions resulting from decentralization and combat armed groups.

Question

How will the fall in commodity prices effect economic growth?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

The government is aware of the fall in commodity prices, particularly the price of copper. However, unlike other countries with macroeconomic instabilities, the DRC's economy is resilient and has not been negatively impacted by lower commodity prices. The mining sector remains profitable and investors in hydropower have not experienced any difficulties as a result of the downturn.

Question

What can Western partners do to help the DRC with its new vision?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

The most important role that international actors can play is ensuring peace and security. The DRC was in a state of war from the mid-1990s to 2001, during which time national wealth fell by 46 per cent. At the same time, the population grew by 43 per cent, and this resulted in significant growth in poverty levels. Economic growth has been strong since 2001, with the GDP increasing annually by an average of 8 per cent. Continued peace and stability are imperative to ensure this trend continues. If the UK, the US and other international partners supported efforts towards peace it would facilitate economic development, improve social services, raise the quality of life and ameliorate the climate for investment.

Question

What is your view on the future of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO)? What should its role be and when should it leave the country?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

It is important that peace and stability are consolidated. When this occurs, MONUSCO will have no further role to play. However, it is not clear when that will be. Perhaps this question is best put to the DRC's international partners.

Question

What role can forests play in the development of the DRC?

HE Augustin Matata Ponyo

The DRC's forests are the second largest in the world. The size and quality of the forests make their management particularly significant, both in the global fight against climate change and for the Congolese people. The REDD-Plus initiative to mitigate deforestation and reduce carbon emissions has not yet had an effect. Despite huge promises for investment in this area, minimal funding has been received. NGOs will play a huge role in ensuring these pledges are actualized for the benefits of the community and the country.