

# **How Children’s Well-Being Reflects Government Choices and National Circumstances in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda**

Kayla Benjamin

## ***Abstract***

*This article looks at children’s rights and protections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. During the last few decades, Rwanda has made significant progress economically and in terms of human development, whereas the DRC has continued to struggle. Examining children’s rights in both countries reveals that national government choices as well as historical legacies of conflict and instability contribute to a nation’s ability to take care of its children.*

## **I. Introduction**

In many of the world’s least developed countries (LDCs), children face deprivation in many forms. Even more so than adults, children are subject to the fortunes of their families, communities, and countries. This article examines how children’s rights and protections can be a reflection of both a country’s overall developmental success and its priorities. It explores how legacies of colonialism shape – but do not determine – nations’ ability to care for their children even today. The article examines these issues by comparing the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with Rwanda, which, though neighbors, have had vastly differing experiences, particularly in the last two decades.

Following the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Rwanda has enjoyed political stability and a conflict free environment. The Rwandan government has used the opportunity to invest heavily in public services and poverty reduction. These choices made by the government have improved children’s lives and outcomes significantly. Meanwhile, the DRC continues to struggle with violent conflicts that have remained nearly continuous since the early 1990s. The lack of strong governance and slow economic growth has left many of the nation’s children in misery.

Following this introduction (Section I), the article provides a short literature review (Section II) as a way to understand what is currently known and studied about children’s rights in the DRC and Rwanda. Section III summarizes the trends in GDP per capita, life expectancy, and literacy rates in the two countries. Section IV presents the ethical origins and existing ethical structures related to the violation and protection of children’s rights in the DRC and Rwanda, while Section V

illustrates the situation of children in the DRC and Rwanda by examining fertility rates and dependency ratios, childhood multi-dimensional poverty and child mortality, child labor and education, and finally, the current efforts to protect children in the DRC and Rwanda. The last section provides some conclusions.

## **II. Brief Literature Review**

This literature review focuses mostly on the most recent reports on child rights' issues faced by the DRC and Rwanda. Looking at these reports gives a substantial overview of where each country's child population stands currently. The review is organized by categories: two reports by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on multidimensional poverty (one for each country);<sup>1</sup> two reports by the Bureau of International Labor Affairs of the U.S. Department of Labor on the worst forms of child labor (one from each country);<sup>2</sup> and one chapter from a recent book about child soldiers (focused on the DRC).

In a report for the DRC's Ministry of Planning and UNICEF in the DRC, de Neubourg, Ramful, and Dangeot (2016) analyze multidimensional poverty of children in the DRC. They found that 95 percent of children under the age of 15 suffered from at least one form of deprivation, and 80 percent experienced at least two forms of deprivation. The report found that the number of children lacking access to clean drinking water is particularly high. The authors note that this form of deprivation is related to other dimensions of poverty, such as issues with sanitation, health services, and very high mortality rates. Difficulties with regard to food, health, and water access also contribute to high rates of stunted children, many of whom suffer from related health and development issues. The rates and types of deprivation differ markedly between urban and rural areas as well as among different regions of the DRC. Finally, the report points out that poverty and deprivation are tightly correlated, but even among children in non-poor households, deprivation remains somewhat high. They conclude that any strategy to address the issue of childhood deprivation must address both monetary assistance and deprivation relief.

UNICEF Rwanda and the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2018) describes the multidimensional poverty experienced by Rwandan children. The report begins by noting that Rwanda has made great strides in poverty reduction, with extreme poverty dropping from 40 percent to 16 percent, and achieved many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Similarly, multidimensional poverty in Rwandan children has declined significantly in recent years, particularly related to basic health. However, nearly all children between the ages of 0 and 4 are still deprived in at least one dimension. The report's multidimensional analysis of childhood poverty revealed that most of Rwanda's children face multiple overlapping deprivations, and that younger children are particularly vulnerable. Geographic inequalities persist, with rural children experiencing higher rates of multidimensional poverty. Throughout

---

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF works to provide humanitarian aid to children around the world and has chapters in both the DRC and Rwanda. To assess the form and severity of childhood poverty, UNICEF utilizes Multiple Overlapping Deprivations Analysis (MODA). MODA looks at various forms of deprivation and how they impact children of different ages. This methodology allows researchers to measure multidimensional poverty, which can reveal more about children's experiences with poverty than measuring income alone.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs produces annual reports about the worst forms of child labor in various countries with which the United States does business. The reports present information on the prevalence of child labor in the country and assess the country's government efforts to address the problem.

the country, even children monetarily non-poor households sometimes still experience deprivations.

The Bureau of International Labor Affairs' (2018a) assessment of the worst forms of child labor in the DRC found that the country made minimal advancement in 2018. On one hand, 2018 saw two former militia leaders convicted of war crimes (including for the use of child soldiers) and the launch of a tracing and monitoring system by the Ministry of Mines to detect child labor in artisanal mines. However, for the third year in a row, there were no actual worksite inspections of mines. Additionally, children seen to be affiliated with rebel militant groups were targeted by the government-run military. Laws mandating free primary education are not enforced, and many children continue to work in dangerous conditions mining gold, tin ore (cassiterite), tantalum ore (coltan), and tungsten ore (wolframite). Some child labor is forced, and some is a result of widespread poverty and other push/pull factors that lead children to start working at very young ages.

The Bureau of International Labor Affairs' (2018b) assessment of the worst forms of child labor in Rwanda found that the country made significant advancement in 2018. Children in Rwanda do still participate in some of the worst forms of child labor, including dangerous tasks in agriculture, and human trafficking remains prevalent. However, the Rwandan government has put increasing emphasis on the protection of children, passing several laws seeking to combat child labor and human trafficking. Resource constraints and poor coordination sometimes get in the way of full enforcement of these policies, but there has been improvement. The country actively partners with U.S. and international organizations in human trafficking research, and in 2018 made a conviction in a child trafficking case. Finally, Rwanda also launched a 5-year advocacy campaign against child labor, called *It Takes Every Rwandan to End Child Exploitation*.

Though child soldiering has not impacted Rwanda in a major way for many years, it has been a widespread problem in the DRC for decades. Kiyala (2018) provides an overview of child soldiering, giving both a global perspective and specifically addressing the child soldier situation in the DRC. Kiyala cites estimates from another researcher that during the peak of the second Congolese war in the late 1990s, around 30,000 child soldiers were involved in the conflict. She mentions several initiatives both within the DRC and internationally to curb the use of child soldiers, but the practice still persists. Currently, around 7,000 children remain enlisted in government forces and other militant groups in the DRC. Children – some younger than 10 years old – have been used as fighters, guards, sexual slaves, and in other roles within the armed groups. Kiyala argues that the widespread use of child soldiers in the DRC can be traced back to the colonial and post-colonial periods, because colonization disrupted traditional family values surrounding the protection of children and left a legacy of conflict. Finally, Kiyala points out that the issue of child soldiers is much more complex than the picture painted by the global media and that global and local initiatives to reduce the use of child soldiers must go beyond simply criminalizing the practice.

### **III. Socioeconomic Background**

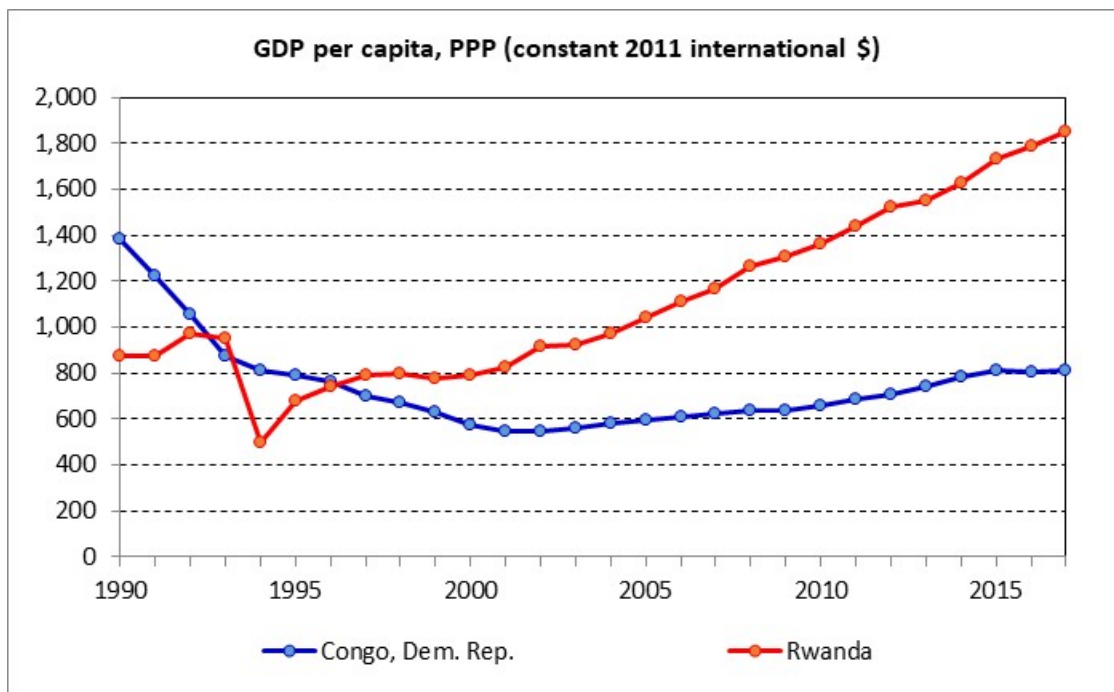
Following the South Sudan's secession from Sudan in 2011, the DRC became the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite many natural resources, its poverty rate has fallen only slightly over the past two decades, particularly in rural areas. In 2018, 72 percent of the DRC's population were living in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day, and hence, the DRC remains one of the

poorest countries in the world.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, 56.1 percent of the population lived in rural areas and 81.9 percent of all employed were working in agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Progress on implementing substantive economic reforms remains slow because of political instability, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and patronage. Much economic activity still occurs in the informal sector and is not reflected in gross domestic product (GDP) data.<sup>5</sup>

Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and has very few natural resources at its disposal. However, strong governance in the years since the end of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide have helped create high levels of political stability and economic growth. Measured by the national poverty line, poverty declined from 59 to percent in 2001 to 39 percent in 2014. However, progress with reducing poverty was almost stagnant between 2014 and 2017.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 displays GDP per capita in constant international dollars for the DRC and Rwanda from 1990 to 2017. The DRC's GDP per capita (in constant 2011 international dollars) has continuously declined from \$1,387 in 1990 to \$546 in 2002, after which it increased very slowly, reaching only \$808 in 2017, which is \$579 below the 1990 value. Clearly, in terms of GDP per capita, the DRC is worse off today than it was three decades ago. Rwanda's GDP per capita declined very sharply in 1994 due to the genocide, but has more than recovered since, reaching \$1,854 in 2017, which is \$982 higher than it was in 1990.

**Figure 1: GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2011 international \$), 1990-2017**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2020a).

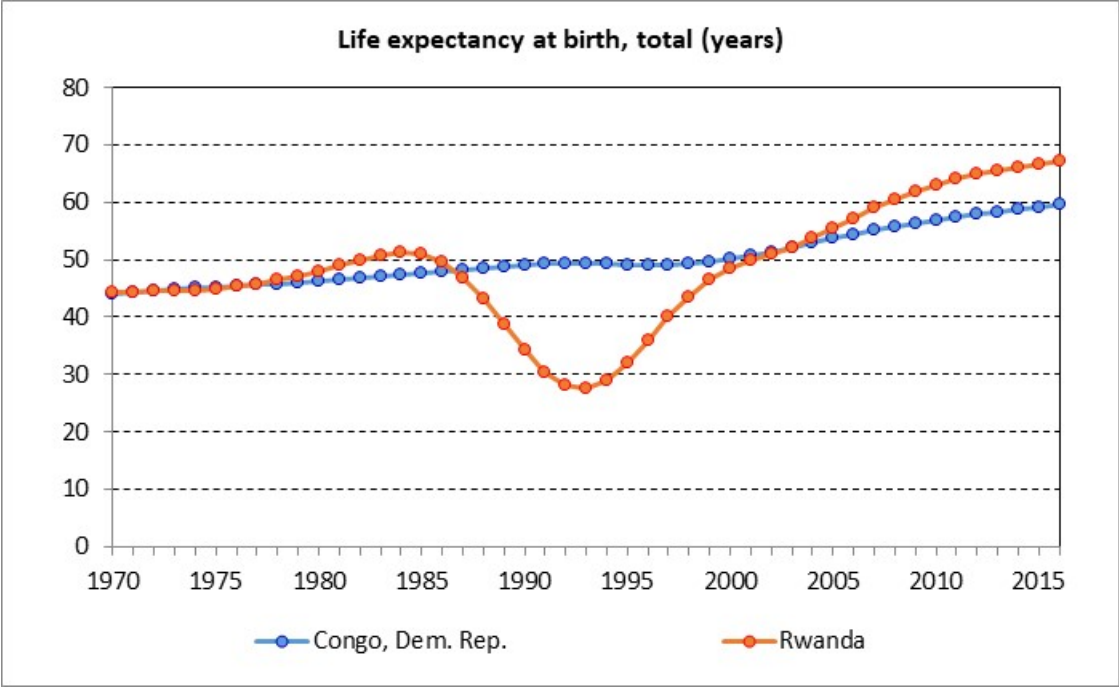
<sup>4</sup> World Bank (2019).

<sup>5</sup> CIA World Factbook (2019a).

<sup>6</sup> World Bank (2020b).

As displayed in Figure 2, life expectancy has also evolved very differently across the two countries. In 1970, the DRC and Rwanda had nearly the same life expectancy, amounting to 43.9 years in the DRC and to 44.3 years in Rwanda. While the DRC's life expectancy increased very modestly, reaching 59.6 years in 2016, Rwanda's life expectancy increased relatively fast in the early 1980s, reaching a temporary high of 51.1 years in 1984. However, it then declined very sharply, reaching a minimum of 27.6 years in 1993, after which it rose very fast, reaching 67.1 years in 2016. Hence, in 2016, Rwanda's life expectancy was 7.5 years higher than that of the DRC.

**Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (years), 1970-2016**

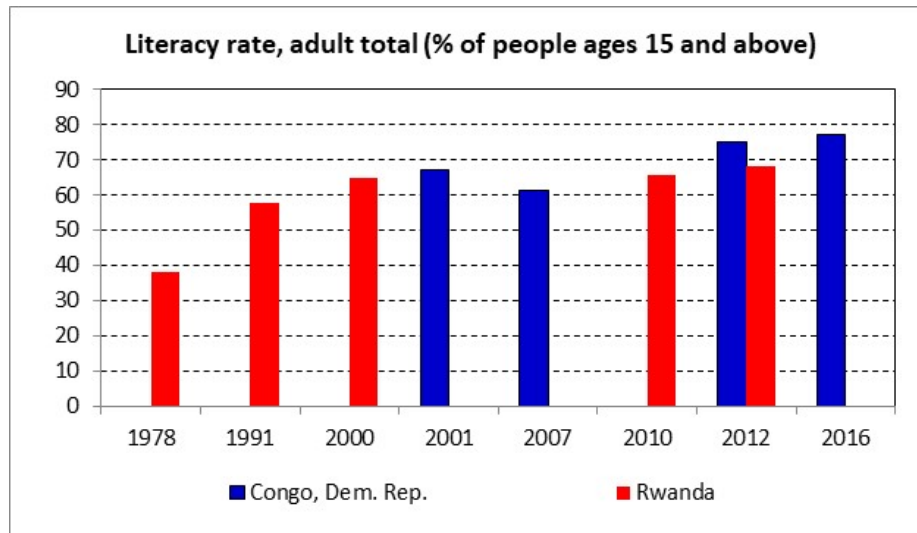


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019).

As shown in Figure 3, the collection of reliable data for literacy rates has been spotty over the past decades in both countries. The available data shows that Rwanda has made steady progress, increasing total literacy rates from a very low 38.2 percent in 1978 to 68.3 percent in 2012, while the DRC's literacy has initially declined from 67.2 percent in 2001 to 61.2 percent in 2007, but then recovered very quickly to 75.0 percent in 2012 and 77.0 percent in 2016.

There are some interesting observations that emerge from comparing the last three figures with each other. First, though the DRC's GDP per capita was far lower in 2017 than it was in 1990, the DRC was able to increase its life expectancy during the same period. Second, despite Rwanda's progress in terms of increasing its GDP per capita and life expectancy, Rwanda's adult literacy rate has been nearly stagnant since 2000. Third, though the DRC is currently lagging behind Rwanda in both GDP per capita and life expectancy, the DRC had a considerably higher literacy rate than Rwanda in 2012.

**Figure 3: Literacy Rates (% of total population over age 15), all available years**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019).

## **IV. Ethical Origins and Existing Ethical Structures**

### **IV.1. Colonial Origins of Instability**

A difficult legacy of colonialism lies at the heart of both countries' past and present difficulties in protecting their children from poverty and violence. The very different trajectories that the DRC and Rwanda find themselves on now illustrates that nations do have agency and their outcomes are certainly not determined solely by historical wrongs. However, an understanding of the colonial period lends insight into how the DRC and Rwanda came to be the way they are today.

#### *IV.1.a. Colonial Origins of the DRC*

In the 1880s, Belgian King Leopold II claimed ownership of the Congo region. His rule of the "Congo Free State" was marked by extraordinary cruelty in pursuit of profits from rubber, palm oil, and ivory.<sup>7</sup> Leopold's army was responsible for millions of deaths, widespread forced labor, kidnapping and coercion, and even mutilations of Congolese people, including children. In 1908, after the world learned of the atrocities under Leopold II, the Belgian government took the region over as a colony. During this period, Congolese people were excluded from all legislative and decision-making roles.<sup>8</sup> When colonial rule ended in 1960, only three Africans worked in managerial positions in Congo's administration, and there were fewer than 30 graduates in the whole country.<sup>9</sup>

Since then, the DRC has continued to struggle with poor governance and a lack of infrastructure. Joseph Mobutu became president of the country in a 1965 coup, which the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped to orchestrate.<sup>10</sup> Mobutu nationalized many of the country's top industries, including copper and diamond extraction. His corruption, embezzlement, and

<sup>7</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica (2014).

<sup>9</sup> The Guardian (1999).

<sup>10</sup> Weissman (2014).

mismanagement – as well as a steep drop in copper prices during the 1970s – crippled the country’s economy.<sup>11</sup> Since the First Congo War in 1996, during which Mobutu was deposed, nearly constant fighting over political power and control of resources have further limited economic growth.

#### *IV.1.b. Rwanda’s Colonial Origins*

European colonization left Rwanda vulnerable to instability as well, though for different reasons. The area encompassing today’s Rwanda and Burundi was colonized by the Germans during the 1880s, but after WWI, it was turned over to Belgian governance.<sup>12</sup> Both the Germans and the Belgians used the region’s ethnic groups to form a class system in which the minority Tutsis (representing only 14 percent of the population) were privileged over the majority Hutus (representing 85 percent of the population). The Belgians used Tutsis to enforce their rule and utilized ethnic identity cards. In the late 1950s, a massive Hutu rebellion against both the Belgians and the Tutsis forced 150,000 Tutsis to flee to neighboring Burundi.<sup>13</sup>

The Belgians withdrew in the early 1960s, but the ethnic tensions they set up did not disappear: political discrimination and severe violence against Tutsis continued throughout the following decades. Exiled Tutsis formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel group, to fight back against the oppression, starting a civil war in 1990.<sup>14</sup> The situation reached its peak in April 1994, with a genocide that killed 800,000 people (about 75 percent of the remaining Tutsi population) and left millions displaced. According to Reid (2019), 75,000 survivors were children who had lost one or both parents.

The Tutsi-led RPF defeated the Hutu militia and national army in late 1994, ending the genocide. By 1999, the RPF had set up a national unity government. RPF’s leader, Paul Kagame, won Rwanda’s first election and has been president since 2000. Since then, economic growth and living standards have been improving rapidly in the country, largely driven by heavy government investment.<sup>15</sup> However, there are concerns about political repression in the country: Kagame amended the constitution in order to run for a previously illegal third term and has suppressed political opponents and press freedoms.<sup>16</sup> However, the prosperity that has accompanied his reign has made him popular with the Rwandan people.<sup>17</sup>

## **IV.2. Existing Ethical Structures**

In 1989, the United Nations (UN) established the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Among the more than 50 specific rights outlined in the CRC are the right to health services, education, formal birth registration, freedom from poverty, freedom from sexual abuse and labor exploitation, and protection from violence. This Convention not only recognized that children have their own rights, but also tries to hold signee countries accountable for working to uphold those rights. Almost every country – including the DRC and Rwanda – has signed the CRC. However, the rights identified in the Convention are not always implemented. Rwanda’s

---

<sup>11</sup> Payanzo, Wiese, Cordell and the Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019).

<sup>12</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Most of this paragraph is based on the Historical Chronology of Rwanda provided by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2018). World Factbook: Rwanda.

<sup>15</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2018). World Factbook: Rwanda.

<sup>16</sup> Muhumuza (2019).

<sup>17</sup> Muhumuza (2019).

recent decades of political stability have allowed it to make significant progress on children's rights, while the DRC's continuing conflicts and weak governance have left many children missing out on their rights.

The CRC utilizes the Rights Approach as the ethical basis for providing children with their needs and protecting them from certain forms of harm. The Rights Approach asserts that all human beings have a dignity that ought to be respected simply because of their human nature or ability to exercise free choice.<sup>18</sup> Children's rights advocates seek to include children in the concept of human rights for all people.

Another relevant ethical framework is the Capabilities Approach, which claims that 1) the freedom to achieve well-being is the most important moral consideration, and 2) that freedom should be understood in terms of one's actual capabilities and real opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Children, simply by virtue of being young, have limited options to increase their own capability to pursue well-being. As such, providing children with what they need for well-being currently (i.e. proper nutrition, physical safety, clean water) and what they will need for future well-being (i.e., education) are of paramount importance under the Capabilities Approach.

The Common Good Approach may also be useful in discussion of children's rights for two reasons. First, because the Common Good Approach places emphasis on communities' most vulnerable members, which inarguably includes children; and second, because the amount of support and investment offered to children is a key determinant of the entire society's future success.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of the ethical approach one uses, it is relevant that children are more vulnerable and less able to control their circumstances than adults. That said, recognizing that children deserve certain rights and protections raises a difficult question: who is responsible for making sure that children receive those rights and protections? Schweiger and Graf (2015) argue that many different "agents of justice" are responsible for alleviating child poverty. They go on to point out that families have the closest relationship with their children, which has historically caused families to be the default actor responsible for children's rights. However, most poor children come from poor families, which often lack the capability to provide for a child's wellbeing.<sup>21</sup> As such, the state – which has a more distant but still highly relevant relationship to the child – also has a significant ethical responsibility to assure justice.<sup>22</sup>

## **V. Situation of Children in the DRC and Rwanda**

The first three sub-sections of this section lay out the facts on the situation of children in the DRC and Rwanda with regard to (1) fertility rates and dependency ratios, (2) childhood multi-dimensional poverty and child mortality, and (3) child labor and education. A fourth sub-section summarizes the current efforts to protect children in the DRC and Rwanda.

---

<sup>18</sup> Velasquez et al. (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Robeyns (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Velasquez et al. (2009).

<sup>21</sup> Schweiger and Graf (2015).

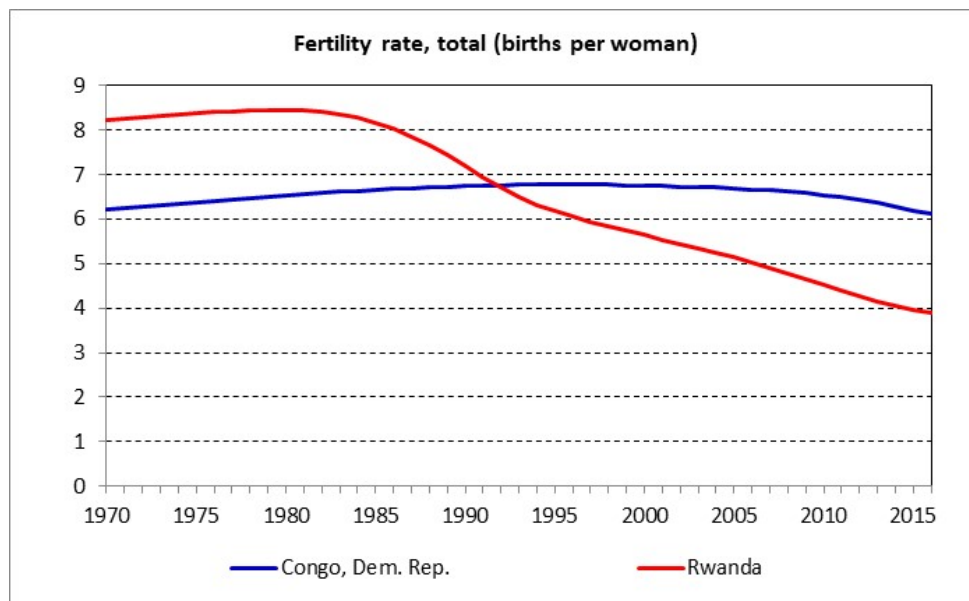
<sup>22</sup> Schweiger and Graf (2015).



## V.1. Fertility Rates and Dependency Ratios

The DRC's population is growing rapidly, with a current (2017) total of 81.3 million people. Of those 81.3 million people, 46.3 million (46.8 percent) are between the ages of 0 and 14 years. As Figure 4 shows, the DRC's fertility rates increased from 1970 to 1995 and have decreased only very moderately since. In 2016, the average fertility rate was still very high, at 6.1 births per woman. Rwanda's population also grew rapidly during the 1970 and 1980s, but population growth has been slowing down during the 1990s and especially in this Millennium due to the decreasing fertility rate shown in Figure 4. There are currently (2017) 12.1 million people living in Rwanda, of which 4.9 million (40.1 percent) are between the ages of 0 and 14.

**Figure 4: Fertility Rates (births per woman) in the DRC and Rwanda, 1970-2017**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019).

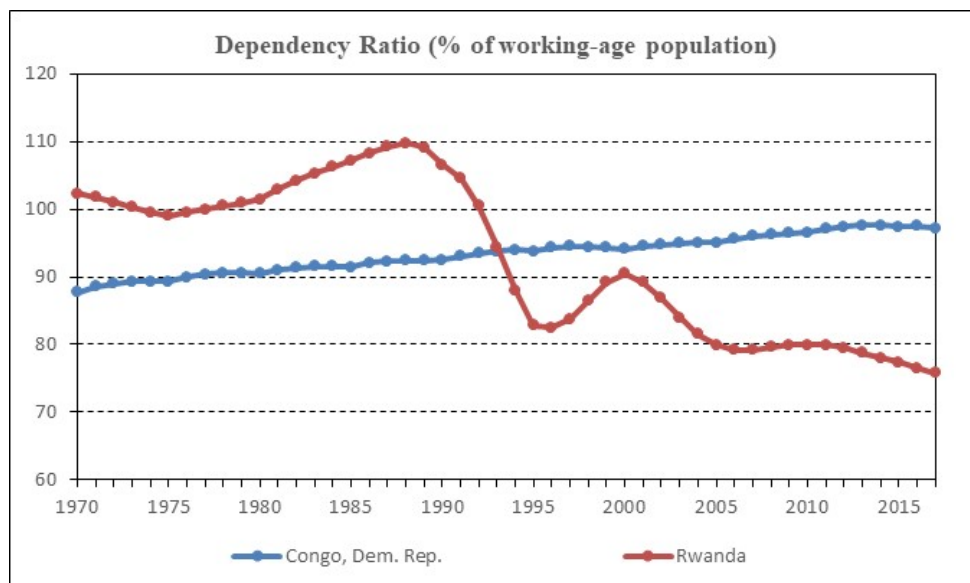
Many of the ethical aspects of protecting children from deprivation and violence revolve around children's rights. As discussed in section IV, this is because children deserve particular rights just because they are human and have a vulnerable status. However, there is also an economic reason, particularly for LDCs, to invest in their children. This is referred to as making use of the demographic window of opportunity. The demographic window of opportunity is defined as the period of time when a country's dependency ratio [i.e., the number of dependents (children and seniors) compared to the number of working age adults] is falling.<sup>23</sup> This time period of falling dependency ratios offers a chance for significant economic growth, as the workforce expands and the lower dependency ratios allow the workers and government to spend more money on other issues than taking care of children and the elderly.

As shown in Figure 5, Rwanda has been experiencing a demographic window of opportunity for most of the last two decades, which has likely contributed to its remarkable economic

<sup>23</sup> World Bank (2006).

achievements. Though Rwanda’s dependency ratio is falling, it is still relatively high at 75 percent. Hence, the country can expect the window of opportunity to last for some time, as long as fertility rates continue to decrease strongly. On the other hand, because the DRC’s fertility rates have not dropped much (see Figure 4) and life expectancy has been increasing (see Figure 2), the DRC’s demographic window of opportunity has not opened yet; see Figure 5. Assuming fertility rates will decrease, whether the DRC can take advantage of the forthcoming demographic window of opportunity depends on how ready today’s young people are to join the workforce in the future. Thus, the level of support for and investment in the DRC’s young people now may determine the country’s long-term economic success and human development going forward.

**Figure 5: Dependency Ratio (% of working-age population), 1970-2016)**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019).

## V.2. Childhood Multidimensional Poverty and Child Mortality

Both Rwanda and the DRC have high levels of both monetary and multidimensional poverty. Looking at childhood poverty multidimensionally allows for a more comprehensive look at whether children are deprived of what they need. In both Rwanda and the DRC, many children who are not monetarily poor are often still deprived in one or more aspects. Dimensions, often known as deprivations, can vary between studies and age groups, but often include things like health, development, protection, water, sanitation, education and housing.<sup>24</sup>

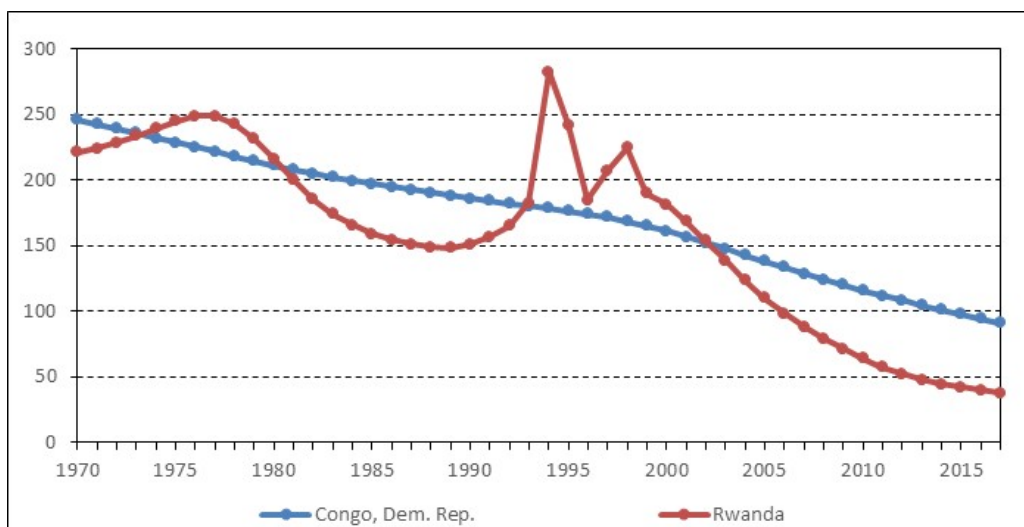
In the DRC, only 5 percent of children experience no form of deprivation, and about 80 percent experience two or more deprivations, which often overlap. The most common deprivation for the DRC’s children is a lack of clean water; in some regions, more than 90 percent of children below age 4 do not have access to clean water. This is particularly troubling because not having clean water can lead to sickness and death, especially for children. Another deprivation commonly experienced by the DRC’s children is growth stunting, which can result from issues with water as well as problems with nutrition and low caloric intake. The levels of deprivation

<sup>24</sup> De Neubourg et al. (2016).

are generally worse in rural areas, with the capital city Kinshasa having the lowest levels of childhood deprivation. In spite of the challenges, the DRC is making some progress in child health services, with immunization levels rising and child mortality rates slowly but steadily decreasing.<sup>25</sup>

Rwanda has made significant gains in reducing child poverty in recent years, in large part due to government investment in health services. The probability of a child dying by five years old dropped 70 percent between 2000 and 2011.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, nearly all children in the country between the ages of 0 and 4 are still deprived in at least one dimension. However, progress is advancing rapidly in this respect as well. In 2010 the percentage of children between the ages of 2 and 5 facing zero deprivations was only 1 percent; by 2015, 11 percent of that age group faced no deprivations. For children ages 5 to 14, the percentage of children facing multidimensional poverty dropped by 10 percent in that timeframe.<sup>27</sup> Rwanda’s national government has made a huge commitment to equity in health services delivery and utilized external financing opportunities to invest in the health sector.<sup>28</sup> As shown in Figure 6, Rwanda’s child mortality has been decreasing in the last few decades, though far less steadily than in the DRC.

**Figure 6: Mortality Rates for Children under 5 (per 1,000 live births), 1970-2017**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019).

### V.3. Child Labor and Education

According to the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2018a), more than 35 percent of all the DRC’s children aged 5-14 are estimated to be working. In particular, the use of children in often unsafe mines is common. However, it is difficult to estimate the number of child miners because the government does not perform any on-site inspections. Further, many of armed

<sup>25</sup> This paragraph is mostly based on De Neubourg et al. (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Farmer et al. (2013).

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Rwanda and National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2018).

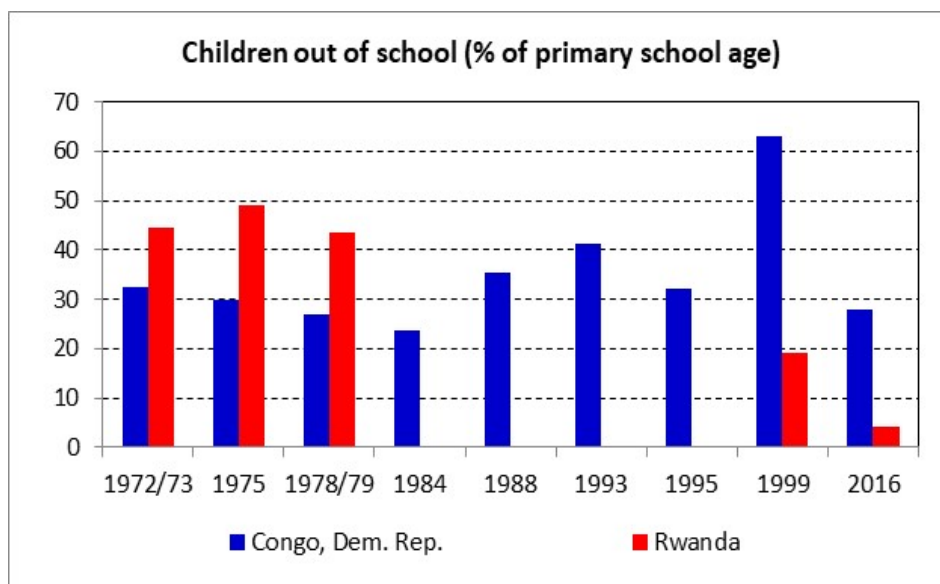
<sup>28</sup> Farmer et. al (2013).

groups operating within the DRC continue to abduct and recruit children.<sup>29</sup> There has been significant progress on this issue, particularly on the part of the national army. However, as Kiyala (2018) states, an estimated 7,000 children still serve as fighters, guards, and sexual slaves within the militia groups around the country.

In Rwanda, there are far fewer mines and armed groups. Rwanda’s political stability has kept conflicts since the 1994 genocide to a minimum. While it may seem obvious that war is the biggest factor in the recruitment of child soldiers, it is nevertheless true that Rwanda’s peace is a big victory for children.<sup>30</sup> Still, child labor in Rwanda’s agricultural sector remains an issue, including in potentially dangerous roles. Approximately 5.4 percent of Rwandan children between the ages of 6 and 14 work.<sup>31</sup> Child trafficking is also a significant concern; Rwanda’s borders are not tightly managed, which has made it a hotspot for trafficked children’s transit.<sup>32</sup>

The DRC also faces challenges regarding education. Not only is the population spread out, but recurring conflict often makes setting up safe schools difficult. As Figure 7 shows, far too many of the DRC’s primary school-age children do not attend school. While the percentage has been volatile over time (and data is likely not fully accurate), there were still an estimated 28 percent of the DRC’s primary school-age children who did not attend school in 2016, compared to 4.1 percent in Rwanda. Furthermore, there are considerable issues with the quality of education provided in both countries.

**Figure 7: Percentage of Children at Primary School-age Out of School (available years)**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019) and data provided in United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2019).

<sup>29</sup> Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2018a).

<sup>30</sup> Kiyala (2018).

<sup>31</sup> Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2018b).

<sup>32</sup> United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019).

#### V.4. Current Efforts to Protect Children

The DRC has not experienced the economic growth and stability that has allowed Rwanda to direct resources to poverty reduction and children's rights. Additionally, the country has not made children's wellbeing a top priority. In 2009, the government passed the *Child Protection Code*, which included many of the provisions outlined in the CRC, but it has failed to adopt any action plan that would actually operationalize the law.<sup>33</sup> Far too few resources are devoted to protecting children in the DRC.

The Rwandan government has passed several pieces of legislation designed to bring the country closer to the vision laid out by the CRC. In 2012, the country passed a law *Relating to the Rights and Protection of the Child* that serves as a bill of rights for Rwandan children.<sup>34</sup> In 2018, the government supplemented that law with stronger protections for children; they also passed a comprehensive anti-trafficking law and a law imposing heightened penalties for the use of children in armed conflict, and launched an advocacy campaign against child labor.<sup>35</sup> These government efforts have facilitated decreases in child poverty and child labor, as well as increases in primary school enrollment. However, Rwandan culture and law places much emphasis on families and so does little to address child abuse in the home.<sup>36</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

This article has sought to provide an in-depth examination of how the DRC and Rwanda are similar and different in their historical and current situation, and how children's rights in both countries reflect those realities. A look at statistics for both countries' GDP per capita, life expectancy, and literacy indicate that Rwanda has recently had rapid development while the DRC has not.

Regardless of ethical approach, all ethical reasoning comes to the conclusion that children's vulnerability to their environment makes their protection a moral obligation. However, that very vulnerability means that children are likely to be much worse off in a nation that is less capable of caring for them. Child labor and multidimensional poverty present challenges in both countries, but the DRC is far behind Rwanda in addressing them.

Both the DRC and Rwanda have struggled with the legacy of colonial exploitation. But Rwanda's success in reducing violence, childhood poverty, and child labor in the last few decades should send a message to other countries that tackling children's rights is possible when it is made a priority by the state. Despite its overall economic success in recent years, Rwanda is still an LDC, just like the DRC; if Rwanda can make such rapid progress, other countries may be able to follow its example.

One important topic for future study is the role of violence in children's lives. In the DRC, especially in the eastern region, militia violence is a regular and pervasive force. In Rwanda, militant conflict is rare but abuse at home is not. Because the types of violence are not necessarily comparable, the topic was not broached in this article. However, the gap in the

---

<sup>33</sup> Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (2012).

<sup>34</sup> Abbott and Sapsford (2012).

<sup>35</sup> Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2018b).

<sup>36</sup> Abbott and Sapsford (2012).

literature around how countries' national outcomes affect violence against children should be filled.

## References

- Abbott, Pamela and Francesca Sapsford (2012). *Legal and Policy Framework for Children's Rights in Rwanda*. Kigali, Rwanda: Institute of Policy Analysis and Research – Rwanda, Rwandan Public Policy Observatory Report (July); available at: [https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Childrens\\_Rights\\_1.pdf](https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Childrens_Rights_1.pdf).
- Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2018a). *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Washington, DC: United States, Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs; available at: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/congo-republic>.
- Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2018b). *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Rwanda*. Washington, DC: United States, Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs; available at: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/rwanda>.
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (2018). *The World Factbook: Rwanda*. Langley, VA: CIA Internet Resource of February 1, 2018; available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html>.
- De Neubourg, Chris; Neshia Ramful; and Anaïs Dangeot (2016). *Analyse des Privations Multiples des Enfants en République Démocratique du Congo Selon le Modèle N-Moda*. Kinshasa, DRC: Ministre du Plan et Suivi de la Révolution de la Modernité; Economic Policy Research Institute, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) DRC, Résumé Exécutif; available at: <https://www.unicef.org/drcongo/en/reports/poverty-children-drc>.
- Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2010). *German East Africa*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Internet Resource of January 11, 2010; available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/German-East-Africa>.
- Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2011). *Congo Free State*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Internet Resource of September 27, 2011; available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Congo-Free-State>.
- Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2014). *Belgian Congo*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Internet Resource of October 12, 2014; available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Belgian-Congo>.
- Farmer, Pau E.; Cameron T. Nutt; Claire M. Wagner; Claude Sekabaraga; Tej Nuthulagantihuman; Jonathan L Weigel; Didi Bertrand Farmer; Antoinette Habinshuti; Soline Dusabeyesu Mugeni; Jean-Claude Karasi; and Peter C. Drobac (2013). *Reduced Premature Mortality in Rwanda: Lessons from Success*. *BMJ*, Vol. 346, f65; available at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/346/bmj.f65.full.pdf>.
- Kiyala, Jean Chrysostome (2018). *Child Soldiers and Restorative Justice* (Berlin, Germany: Springer International Publishing AG).



- Muhumuza, Rodney (2019). 25 years after genocide, Rwanda's Kagame is praised, feared. *The Associated Press (AP)*, News Report of April 9, 2019; available at: <https://apnews.com/a97d40a146284383a717aa2ec42eb39b>.
- Payanzo, Ntsomo; Bernd Michael Wiese; Dennis D. Cordell; and the Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019). *Democratic Republic of the Congo: Economy*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Internet Resource of September 6, 2019; available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo/Economy>.
- Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) (1999). Rwanda: A Historical Chronology (compiled from Fergal Keane's *Season of Blood* and Alain Destexhe's *Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*). Washington, DC: *PBS*; available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/etc/cron.html>.
- Reid, Kathryn (2019). 1994 Rwandan genocide, aftermath: Facts, FAQs, and how to help. World Vision, Internet Resource of April 1, 2019; available at: <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/1994-rwandan-genocide-facts>.
- Robeyns, Ingrid (2016). *The Capability Approach*. In: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition); available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/capability-approach/>.
- The Guardian (1999). The hidden holocaust. *The Guardian*, News Report of May 12, 1999; available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/13/features11.g22>.
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Rwanda and National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2018). *Multidimensional Child Poverty in Rwanda: A Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis*. Kigali, Rwanda: UNICEF Rwanda. <https://www.unicef.org/rwanda/reports/multidimensional-child-poverty-rwanda>.
- United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019). In Rwanda, Research on Understanding Human Trafficking Validated. *IOM Press Release* of August 2, 2019; available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/rwanda-research-understanding-human-trafficking-validated>.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2019). *Education: Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Washington, DC: USAID, Internet Resource of September 5, 2019; available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/democratic-republic-congo/education>.
- United States, Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Center for Global Health (2019). *Democratic Republic of Congo*. Atlanta, United States: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/countries/drc/default.htm>.
- Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (2012). *Child Rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo: World Vision Submissions to the Universal Period Review of Human Rights*. Geneva, Switzerland: Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Info; available at: [www.upr-info.org/followup/assessments/session19/democratic\\_republic\\_of\\_congo/Democratic\\_republic\\_of\\_congo-WV.pdf](http://www.upr-info.org/followup/assessments/session19/democratic_republic_of_congo/Democratic_republic_of_congo-WV.pdf).
- Velasquez, Manuel; Dennis Moberg; Michael J. Meyer; Thomas Shanks; Margaret R. McLean; David DeCosse; Claire Andre; and Kirk O. Hanson (2009). *A Framework for Ethical Decision Making*. Santa Clara, CA: Santa Clara University, Markkula Center for Applied

Ethics; available at: <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>.

- Weissman, Stephen R. (2014). What Really Happened in Congo: The CIA, the Murder of Lumumba, and the Rise of Mobutu. *Foreign Affairs*, July/August; available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/democratic-republic-congo/2014-06-16/what-really-happened-congo>.
- World Bank (2006). *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation* (Washington, DC: The World Bank); available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/5989>.
- World Bank (2019). *World Development Indicators / International Debt Statistics database* (Washington, DC: The World Bank); as posted on the World Bank website: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/> (downloaded on January 16, 2019).
- World Bank (2020a). The World Bank in DRC. Overview. Washington, DC: The World Bank, Internet Resource, last updated May 4, 2020; available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview>.
- World Bank (2020b). The World Bank in Rwanda. Overview. Washington, DC: The World Bank, Internet Resource, last updated April 22, 2020; available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/rwanda/overview>.