

Research Engagement in The Democratic Republic of Congo

Aims and Objective:

AISA's responsibility on the implementation of the objectives of HSRC's current strategic plan are Africa-focused for the purposes of contributing towards HSRC's knowledge and transformation agenda. It is imperative for HSRC to build networks and partnerships in the African region with alliance and strategic partners. The engagement in the DRC intended to seek partnerships with universities, government entities and non-government organisations that are actively involved in activities related to AISA's thematic areas of food security (sustainable development, science and technology) and nation building (Governance, Peace and Security) through research. Additionally, the aim of the visit to the DRC was to initiate collaborative and impactful projects with Francophone African countries; and to enhance the visibility of AISA which dwindled post covid-19, amongst other factors.

Summary:

Research in the Congo on the major factors of instability and injustice - which are the underlining variables perpetuating violent extremism in the country and Africa - have identified the question of Islamic radicalism, the nature, composition, and constitution of the post-colonial state, acquisition, and dispensation of power, and the plight of 'stateless children' on the continent, as concerning and needing special attention. After several interactions with key stakeholders in Kinshasa, including staff at the South African Mission in Kinshasa, the AISA Team: Prof. Check Achu, Dr. Palesa Sekhejane, and Ms. Mmakwena Chipu, underscored the need for Private Military Companies (PMCs) operating in the Congo and the plight of Child Soldiers and children 'left behind' by Peacekeeping Officers as needing particular attention. The initial discussions in Kinshasa pointed to a strategic re-orientation of the 'Violent Extremism Project in Africa' to focus on the financing and operational capabilities of extremist groups in Africa, especially in the Horn of the continent, and their implications on violent conflict and instability in southern Africa. From our discussion, particular attention should be placed on identifying violent extremist groups, their operational capabilities, sources of finance, and the movement of their weapons across international boundaries. Further, based on our interaction, the research mission upholds to deepen the understanding of these phenomena and to ensure that a pathway to dialogue between the state and non-state actors is consolidated.

Food and nutrition security status in the DRC is an important area worth researching at both macro- and micro-economic levels, focusing on structural interventions and understanding capacity needs or programs in the country. There is lack of policy formulation and thus state interventions are neither sustainable nor existent for transforming the food systems. For instance, agripreneur program was started in 2015 due to the lack of interest in food and agriculture system. It was influenced by the nationwide sentiment from youth and policy implementers. The production capacity is often in the rural areas, yet the rural population produces food for the urban populace which ends up migrating to the urban areas in search for employment opportunities. Factors that negatively affect rural farming and sustainable food production are due to transportation and relevant infrastructure. Some of the key points shared in a dialogue with youth and researchers are:

- Transportation - moving the food from production to central points. Bigger farms are created closer to the city, there are challenges of producing in bulk if not central or closer to the market. Again, inward migration to the city presents food availability/access challenges for the centrally located population, which drives the high cost of food.
- Adaptation of food to the needs, yet the quality and quantity is not known. There is a need for goat meat for instance, but the market does not offer, so there is adequate demand for staple foods and fresh produce.

- Food production in the DRC is a productive industry; however, lack of infrastructure and supply chain is unable to meet the country and regional demands, and it is further weakened by the import and export dynamics linked to poor government policy.
- Youth seems to disregard agriculture as poverty plagues the peripheral communities, as a result, the ensuing tension due to conflict & instability does not motivate participation of the people to take risks in investing in agriculture.
- Lack of infrastructure does not inspire interest to participate in the food system chain and economy, the losses far exceed the gains.
- Policy engagement platforms and information dissemination on food policy in DRC is not well coordinated or focused on i.e. information dissemination from state and private sector such as banks for financing is not known.
- Lack of organisation/coordination within the state institutions, the state does not support food and agriculture in areas such as finance and support for cooperation and the citizen's ability to borrow money for farming and supporting food and agriculture. There is no policy to create healthy competition, the imports should not flood what they already have/produce and the infrastructure for harvesting food produce.
- The general youth perceive the State as lacking in governance and political will to improve the food and nutrition security of the nation. Therefore, there can not exist agricultural policy when there is no governance. Infrastructure for moving the produce is also a huge challenge i.e. utilisation of river routes is common, but during the rainy season they are flooded sometimes. The nutritious food basket remain in the hinterland, so movement of food affects access to high nutritious food.
- There are three policies on food security, but the policies were not consulted among stakeholders. Research on food security and existing policies are not commensurate with the domestic context, as such they are not impactful as the education is purely theoretical.
- On land, farming is not sustainable due to poverty. Villagers kill animals to eat, and investing in cassava is also not an option because villagers destroy the farm.
- Technological lag is critical area for investment - without technology, winning over the youth to participate actively in agriculture poses a problem. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement and mobilisation of farmers to support policy formulation, curriculum and agricultural system is a practice to be developed.
- Due to poverty and lack of systems, the locals sell the land to foreigners – rural communities have lost homes and livelihoods. These are people who had agricultural skills, but also there is a narrative that farming is for poor people, it is not fashionable. The young generation is willing to correct the mistakes of their fathers as there is no need to copy everything from the West and it is not sustainable for the future of Africa and its future generation.

Food systems chain does not exist or it is weak from production/source to market - linkages on the capacity building both technological & human skills. There should not be short term planning, it is not sustainable - creation of youth forums for incubation of ideas that will contribute to the societal impact and nourish an environment for growing food production system in the DRC.

Strategic Value:

There is a common challenge between SA and DRC, the current MOU between STI ministries is strong on building STEM capabilities between two countries, and address societal challenges through innovation. The economic environment in DRC is a challenge; however, it is critical to develop original research collaboration with NGOs and University in order to gain traction on the development challenges and opportunities in the country and contribute towards transformation. The DRC's stability is important to two regions – SADC and East Africa, which makes it critical for HSRC to maintain constant communication with key stakeholders in the country and the sub-region to ensure that the South African government is kept abreast of developments in the sub-region that may impact negatively on the security of South Africa and the sub-region at large.

Recommendation:

Through AISA, HSRC should make use of platforms such as AYGS for training the research capacity of youth on policy and research intersection. The prospects of deepening knowledge production and capacity exchange were highlighted and thus an attempt to create institution-to-institution initiatives is key. Therefore, AISA should make necessary efforts to support Senior researchers in the HSRC and institutions in the DRC, among the identified initiatives was in the area the Political Economy and mixed methods research for policy-informing outputs.