

The Current State of Local Distribution in Post-conflict Society: A Study on Orientale Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Place of fieldwork: The Democratic Republic of the Congo

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- Research Background

Repeated conflicts have plagued the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR-Congo). The Second Congo War in 1998 included 19 countries and caused the deaths of 5.4 million people. Although the conflict ended in 2003, a state of war persists along the eastern national border of Orientale Province. Antigovernment forces periodically raid local villages and exploit mineral resources in an extensive area. The conflict has also devastated the distribution infrastructure, such as roads and bridges (Fig. 1), which has stymied the rural economy. Today, using rural tracks to travel to sell goods has become impossible, due to bridge collapses. Further, rural residents have lost outlets for their agricultural products. According to Kimura et al., (2012), local people have adjusted their subsistence strategies to compensate for the lack of truck trading. Since the end of the Second Congo War, local people have engaged in long-distance peddling to obtain cash income and imported merchandise (Fig. 2). While his study revealed local people's adaptation to the post-conflict situation, little research has been done to explore specific livelihood and distribution processes since the conflict. Thus, the current state of urban-rural distribution remains unclear.



- Fig. 1. Collapsed bridge



- Fig. 2. Long-distance peddling

- Research purpose and aim

The purpose of this research is to illustrate urban-rural distribution within Province Orientale, DR-Congo. The current state of urban-rural distribution processes must be determined to rehabilitate local communities. However, this knowledge is currently lacking. The author, therefore, describes and analyzes the impacts of the conflict on urban-rural distribution and indigenous distributional activities, based on qualitative and Global Positioning System (GPS) data collected from an extensive area survey. I accompanied a petty trader, who handles imported merchandise, for a total of 34 days, and we collected data on the movement of industrial commodities and local products. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with rural residents, petty traders, and administrative officers, to investigate the rapid changes that occurred before and after the conflict.

- Results and achievements from the fieldwork

During the investigation, I observed an expansion of periodic riverside markets in lieu of a land distribution system. The war destroyed the colonial distribution practice that had been sustained by expatriate companies. Therefore, local people have had to organize an alternative distribution system themselves. Local farmers transport their agricultural products to market by foot or bicycle. Petty traders then purchase the local farm produce in the markets (Fig. 3), and ship it to urban areas, using traditional dugout canoes, (Fig. 4). Today, a mass of people attend the markets as the main mechanism for urban-rural commodity interchange. The collapse of the pre-conflict distribution system has caused the markets to become influential regional economic nodes.



Fig. 3. Palm oil brokerage



Fig. 4. Shipping by canoe

- Implications and impacts on future research

Through this fieldwork, I was able to sketch out the processes for urban-rural goods distribution

since the conflict (Fig. 5). In spite of the abrupt change in the social environment, local people have tried to rehabilitate the distribution channels, by utilizing indigenous knowledge and the ecological environment. Without government aid, they have spontaneously coped with devastating social problems. These recent changes indicate that local people preserve the potential to reconstruct local communities.

One of the limitations of this study is the limited research period. I could not observe the traders' livelihoods and their subsistence patterns. MacGaffey (1987) suggested that traders possess fundamental initiatives that can reconstruct society. Can her insight be applied to the post-conflict situation? A further study about traders' subsistence strategies should be conducted.

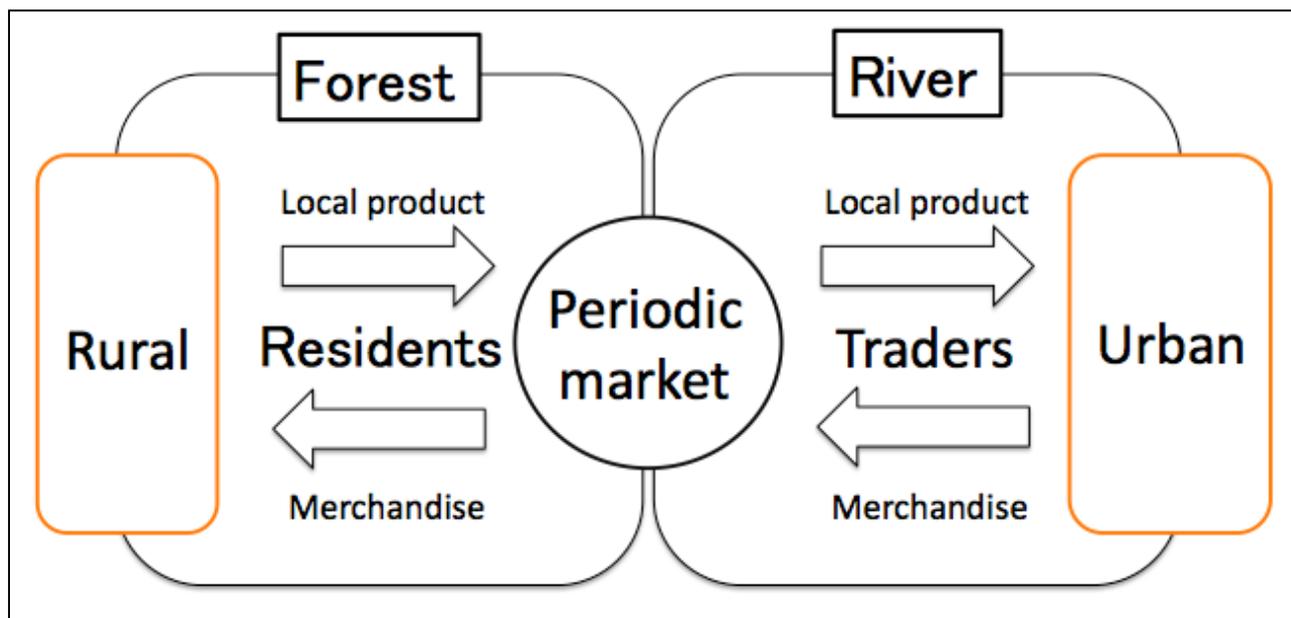


Fig. 5. Model of local distribution

- References

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