

POVERTY ALLEVIATION: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC APPROACHES TO RESOURCEFULNESS AND SURVIVAL IN KINSHASA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines survival mechanisms in the face of extreme urban poverty in Kinshasa, combining psychological and socio-economic approaches. From a psychological perspective, poverty generates a logic of survival characterized by resignation, external attribution of the causes of misery (to the state and the political class), an inferiority complex, and passive hope in a savior figure.

From a socio-economic viewpoint, the persistent imbalance between explosive demographic growth (Kinshasa has approximately 18 million inhabitants) and weak economic growth perpetuates massive unemployment, contraction of the formal sector, and increasing reliance on the informal economy.

The article highlights that “débrouillardise” (symbolized by the popular expression “Article 15”) has become the dominant adaptive strategy, enabling pragmatic individual survival but at the cost of eroding collective norms and limiting mobilization for structural change. The prolonged failure of the state in fulfilling its core missions (job creation, wealth redistribution, regulation) fuels this vicious cycle.

Consequently, combating poverty in Kinshasa requires moving beyond rhetoric to implement concrete, planned, and inclusive measures capable of transforming individual resilience into sustainable collective progress.

Keywords: urban poverty, débrouillardise, Article 15, hyper-religiosity, informal economy, state failure, resilience, DRC.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term "poverty" is used on a daily basis without a universal consensus on its definition. The difficulty in defining poverty is that the concept of poverty is deeply rooted in a given time and society.

According to the definition adopted by the European Council in December 1984, poverty is defined as "people whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so low that they exclude them from the minimum acceptable lifestyles in society" (National Poverty Observatory, 2000).

For nearly two decades, the issue of poverty has occupied a central place in the analysis of development. Among the dimensions highlighted by the recent literature is the "urbanization of poverty", i.e. the increasing concentration of poor populations in cities.

It is in this context that the acute urban crisis in Kinshasa deserves an in-depth analysis. The city is indeed strongly affected by poverty, which manifests itself in particular in massive unemployment, a chronic deficit of economic resources and a lack of formal production.

Since the 1990s, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been going through a multidimensional economic crisis with devastating effects on the population, especially the most vulnerable groups. Faced with the state's inability to provide a social safety net, a collective consciousness has developed around private initiative and individual effort called "resourcefulness", often presented as a true Congolese culture (Streiffeler, 2001).

Today, this social reality has taken on a considerable dimension in Kinshasa. To deal with poverty and its corollaries, resourcefulness, mainly exercised through the informal economy, has become an almost generalized practice. It is embodied in particular in the popular expression "Article 15", a fictitious and humorous article that refers to the injunction "Get on with it!". This formula, popularized since the Congolese crisis of the 1960s and especially under the Mobutist regime through songs by musicians, such as Papa Wemba, etc., symbolizes the absence of state aid and the need for everyone to find the means to survive by themselves (Lelo & Tshimanga, 2005).

In Kinshasa, describing someone as "poor" is often a meaningful insult: it refers not only to objective material deprivation, but above all to the perceived inability to take care of oneself, to "get by". Thus, subjective poverty (lack of hope, initiative, capacity for action) is clearly distinguished from objective poverty (lack of measurable resources). Informal work is not seen as a sign of poverty in itself, but as evidence of resourcefulness in the face of adversity.

In this context, our reflection focuses on the way in which individuals ensure their survival and their daily existence in a context of extreme poverty in Kinshasa. How do psychological approaches (resilience, cognitive strategies, subjective perception of the situation) and socio-economic approaches (informal economy, social networks, resourcefulness as an adaptive practice) work together to allow survival and, sometimes, a form of overcoming precariousness?

The prolonged failure of the Congolese state in its role of regulating and providing essential public services, since the crises of the 1990s, has fostered the rise and social normalization of "resourcefulness", symbolized by the popular expression "Article 15" (get on with it!), as the main survival strategy in the face of extreme poverty in Kinshasa.

From a socio-economic perspective, this resourcefulness is mainly manifested by the massive use of the informal economy, which allows individuals to generate income in the absence of formal opportunities, but at the cost of increased precariousness and a low contribution to social cohesion or collective development.

On the psychological level, it may have led to a cognitive and behavioural adaptation marked by a prioritization of immediate individual profit and a relative erosion of collective civic and moral norms (justice, common good, professional ethics), in favor of a pragmatic and opportunistic logic of survival.

Thus, the hypothesis posits that the combination of these socio-economic and psychological dynamics has transformed resourcefulness into a dominant adaptive norm in Kinshasa, where the unbridled search for personal livelihoods tends to prevail over the ideals of good governance, civic education and community solidarity, paradoxically strengthening individual resilience while hindering collective and institutional progress.

To carry out this study, it is imperative to adopt a qualitative approach inspired by the methodological principles outlined by Ngoyi (2016) and adapted to the Congolese urban context, which favors an in-depth understanding of social phenomena rather than their quantification. This orientation makes it possible to grasp the subjective meanings, representations and strategies that Kinshasa actors attribute to poverty, resourcefulness and their daily survival.

Three complementary techniques have been used to support this approach, including:

1. Direct observation (participant or non-participant) Carried out in the field in Kinshasa. This method made it possible to observe in situ the concrete manifestations of poverty (living conditions, informal activities, daily interactions) and forms of resourcefulness (itinerant trade, small trades, informal solidarity networks). The observation extended over a period of 4 months due to 2 days per municipality, with systematic field notes taken.
2. The documentary technique made it possible to consult books, scientific articles, institutional reports (World Bank, UNDP, INS-DRC, etc.) and previous works on urban poverty in Kinshasa, the informal economy and resourcefulness (e.g. Streiffeler, 2001; Lelo Nzuzi & Tshimanga, 2005; Trefon, 2004; De Boeck, 2012).

3. Exploratory (semi-structured) interviews conducted with a reasoned sample of the Kinshasa population aged between 25 and 40 years old, including the profiles of informal actors, namely: street vendors, craftsmen, motorcycle taxis, vulnerable households, community leaders, etc. ; Selection criteria: socio-economic diversity, age, gender, neighbourhood. The interviews focused on lived experiences of poverty, coping strategies, the meaning attributed to "resourcefulness" (and "Article 15"), psychological impacts (stress, hope/despair, self-esteem) and perceptions of the role of the state.

In view of the above, the development of this study is based on two main axes, corresponding to the approaches announced in the title:

1. The psychological axis;
2. The socio-economic axis.

2.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL AXIS

The psychological analysis of poverty in Kinshasa requires an understanding of the dominant logics of action in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which shape the behaviour of social actors in the face of extreme precariousness. Two interconnected logics emerge in particular: the logic of survival and hyper-religiosity, which influence individual and collective perceptions, attitudes and strategies.

2.1 Survival logic

The logic of survival refers to the set of economic, social and political rationalities of action centered on the immediate preservation of existence in a context marked by chronic uncertainty and the absence of a state safety net. It is part of what can be described as the "culture of poverty", understood as the set of ways of thinking, acting and expressing oneself shared by poor individuals, those belonging to vulnerable socio-professional categories, and even some non-poor people who adopt these models by mimicry or anticipation (Kapagama, 2011).

This logic is dictated by an environment of deep insecurity: uncertainty about the future, recurrent discouragement and systematic attribution of misery to the "Other", the political class, the regime, the government or civil society actors. It has a cultural dimension, affecting perceptions, attitudes and beliefs:

- **Perceptions:** The poor often perceive the "Other" as the holder of the means and positions necessary to transform their condition, especially when this "Other" claims to be from the people while soliciting external help and support in a sometimes-abusive way.
- **Attitudes:** An inferiority complex and resignation predominate, accompanied by a passive hope in a "providence" or in the arrival of an external "liberator".
- **Beliefs:** The dominant conviction is that the "Other" does not want the happiness of the poor, but on the contrary their continued suffering, in order to avoid a collective awareness that would threaten their privileges. This suspicion feeds a radical uncertainty, leaving the poor with only one alternative: to fight for their survival and that of their household, for fear of being marginalized or eliminated, while hoping for future improvement.

Thus, the logic of survival often stifles collective awareness and mobilization for structural change. It is unfortunately reinforced by a related phenomenon: hyper-religiosity.

2.2 Hyper-religiosity

Hyper-religiosity can be defined as an exacerbated and atomized form of religiosity, centered on the promise of immediate happiness obtained without productive effort, through prayer, devotion or offerings alone, as part of the evangelization of prosperity. This doctrine, which presents material wealth as a sign of divine blessing and poverty as a curse or lack of faith, tends to obsess the faithful and to turn them away from the structural causes of poverty, while sometimes aggravating their economic precariousness (through the expected repeated gifts).

In Kinshasa, this phenomenon has taken on a significant scale since the 1990s, following the failure of the structural adjustment policies imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions, the loss of confidence in the State and widespread social discontent. The populations have turned massively to new Churches from the evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic and prophetic currents. These churches promise miracles, healings, and prosperity in exchange for active faith (often materialized by offerings). The political class, aware of the "soporific" effect of this religiosity, tolerates or even capitalizes on it: religious leaders are courted (pastors "close to the government" or the opposition), and creating a Church has become a professional outlet for some unemployed graduates (Kapagama, 2011).

Today, the status of pastor confers significant social prestige, the Church often replaces the family and failing state structures as the main place of sociability and support. To maintain their hold, preachers are multiplying initiatives (prolonged evangelistic campaigns, prayer vigils, radio/TV channels, social networks) and competing to attract the faithful, promising prosperity, deliverance from blocking spirits or healing. Large gatherings in stadiums become spaces for the "sale" of blessings, where mass offerings are encouraged.

This phenomenon contributes to a form of passivity in the face of poverty. The believer expects divine intervention, "manna from heaven", multiplication of gifts rather than collective or productive action. It partially strips the faithful of their power to make demands and reinforces the logic of individualistic survival. Although the State has regulatory tools at its disposal (registration of associations, laws on religions), the sector remains largely informal, making effective supervision difficult.

Thus, the combination of the logic of survival and hyper-religiosity favours a resigned and opportunistic adaptation to extreme poverty, where individual hope (providential or miraculous) predominates over mobilization for structural socio-political change. An evangelization more oriented towards liberation and social justice could be an alternative path, promoting critical awareness and collective action rather than passive waiting.

3.0 SOCIO-ECONOMIC AXIS

The socio-economic analysis of poverty in Kinshasa highlights two major structural factors that maintain and aggravate the precariousness of the population:

1. the chronic imbalance between population growth and economic growth,

2. the very advanced dilapidation of the road infrastructure and the resulting supply difficulties.

3.1 The imbalance between economic growth and population growth

The persistent gap between the very rapid evolution of the population and the structural weakness of economic growth is generating very serious consequences on the labour market and on the living conditions of the inhabitants of Kinshasa.

Among the most visible effects are:

- a massive increase in unemployment and underemployment,
- a very sharp contraction in salaried employment in the formal sector,
- the spectacular development of the informal sector as the main recourse for the majority of the working population.

Faced with the inability of the formal sector to create jobs in sufficient quantities, the modest purchasing power of employees, and the daily imperatives of survival, the informal sector has become the real "safety valve" for hundreds of thousands of Kinshasa households.

This phenomenon has been greatly accentuated by the massive rural exodus of previous decades. Kinshasa, which had only about 1,600 inhabitants in 1920, grew to 200,000 inhabitants in 1950, then to about 1 million in 1970, to reach today a population estimated at between 15 and 17 million inhabitants (recent estimates – INS-DRC & UN-Habitat). This extremely rapid urban growth has been accompanied by largely anarchic urbanization, with no commensurate public investment or formal job creation.

This demographic and economic imbalance has also aggravated rural poverty, which in turn has fuelled the exodus, creating a vicious circle. The resulting social explosion was reflected in particular in the looting of 1991 and 1993, which caused a profound disorganization of the productive apparatus, the closure or drastic reduction of many enterprises, and the massive termination of employment contracts (Enyuka Ngamba, 1994).

Faced with this collapse of the formal sector and the absence of institutional alternatives, informal private initiative has emerged as the main, if not the only, survival strategy for the vast majority of the Kinshasa population.

3.2 The dilapidation of road infrastructure and alternative supply strategies

The very poor state of road infrastructure is another major aggravating factor in poverty and food insecurity in Kinshasa.

Supplying the city from the hinterland (neighbouring agricultural provinces) has become extremely difficult and expensive due to the very pronounced dilapidation of the road network. Faced with this situation, several strategies have been implemented, with varying degrees of success:

1. Food imports from abroad, especially from Angola (Entered through Lufu);

2. A few rare road rehabilitation programmes (e.g. Kinshasa-Banza-Ngungu road and some main arteries) (Bukasa, 1995);
3. The increasing use of the river route from the former province of Bandundu (now the provinces of Kwilu, Kwango and Mai-Ndombe);
4. The emergence of an artisanal activity of building "whaleboats" (large wooden canoes) for river transport.

At the same time, and much more significantly in quantitative terms, urban and peri-urban agriculture has become a key pillar of food security and poverty alleviation in Kinshasa.

Today, we can distinguish:

- Registered urban farms (often medium-sized to professional),
- A very large informal sector much larger in volume (market gardening, poultry and pig farming, fish farming in ponds, etc.).

These activities, even if they suffer from many handicaps such as lack of capital, low level of technicality, risk of theft, lack of land tenure security, nevertheless constitute a very important means of survival for a large number of households.

However, several major obstacles limit their development, including:

- the lack of secure land titles (permanent risk of eviction),
- low investment (rudimentary tools, lack of inputs),
- limited agricultural qualifications,
- land insecurity and frequent theft.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- No longer systematically destroy fields in the absence of land titles,
- Legitimize and secure urban and peri-urban agriculture,
- Supervise and support informal farmers (access to land, agricultural extension, microcredit, inputs),
- Enhance and develop the spaces still available (roadsides, flood zones with little construction, slopes, areas in the municipality of Maluku, Nsele, etc.),
- Encourage agroforestry to improve productivity,
- Encouraging youth entrepreneurship,
- Increase professional training.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The fight against poverty in Kinshasa is a multidimensional challenge that is deeply rooted in the extreme urban realities of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This study made it possible to explore two complementary approaches: psychological and socio-economic, to better define the mechanisms of survival and adaptation of Kinshasa populations in the face of structural precariousness.

On the socio-economic level, the persistent imbalance between explosive population growth and insufficient economic growth maintains massive unemployment, a contraction of the formal sector and an increased dependence on the informal economy. The hyperinflation of past decades, combined with the chronic depreciation of the Congolese franc, has eroded purchasing power, including for workers in the formal sector, who are often forced to resort to parallel activities to ensure their livelihood. In this context, resourcefulness, embodied by the popular expression "Article 15", is emerging as a dominant adaptive strategy, while urban and peri-urban agriculture is emerging as a concrete and accessible lever for food security and vulnerability reduction. Although limited by the lack of capital, inputs and land tenure security, this practice contributes significantly to the survival of households and deserves enhanced supervision (access to land, agricultural extension, microcredit) to maximize its positive impacts.

On the psychological level, extreme poverty favours a logic of survival marked by resignation, the external attribution of the causes of misery and a passive hope in providential intervention. This phenomenon is amplified by hyper-religiosity, particularly through the prosperity evangelization that dominates many revival churches in Kinshasa. By promising miracles and material wealth in exchange for faith and offerings, these tend to divert the faithful from the structural causes of poverty and to reinforce individual passivity. The Church has become a central space of sociability, partly replacing failing family and state structures, while some religious leaders exert significant political influence (close to the government or the opposition).

These interconnected dynamics illustrate a vicious circle: the prolonged failure of the state in its sovereign missions (employment, redistribution, regulation) pushes individuals towards informal and opportunistic survival strategies, while hyper-religiosity consolidates passive resilience rather than a collective mobilization for change.

To overcome this impasse, several avenues deserve to be explored:

- Strengthen public policies promoting formal employment, land tenure security for urban agriculture and support for the productive informal economy.
- Promote balanced regulation of the religious sector (supervision of religious associations, fiscal transparency, respect for freedom of religion) in order to avoid abuses while encouraging theological approaches more oriented towards social liberation and community development.
- To encourage a collective awareness, where resourcefulness is not limited to individual survival, but contributes to solidarity and sustainable initiatives.

In the end, the fight against poverty in Kinshasa cannot be reduced to speeches or one-off measures. It requires concerted, united and planned action, involving public, private, community and religious actors, to build a more inclusive, resilient and equitable city. Future research could deepen the empirical assessment of the impacts of urban agriculture or analyze recent developments in Pentecostal religiosity in a post-crisis context, in order to refine these recommendations.

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