

**ETHNIC COUNCIL  
OF SHEPPARTON AND DISTRICT Inc.**

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Reg. No. A6321

## **Congolese Community Profile**



**April 2010**

**Updated June 2013**

**Updated June 2015**

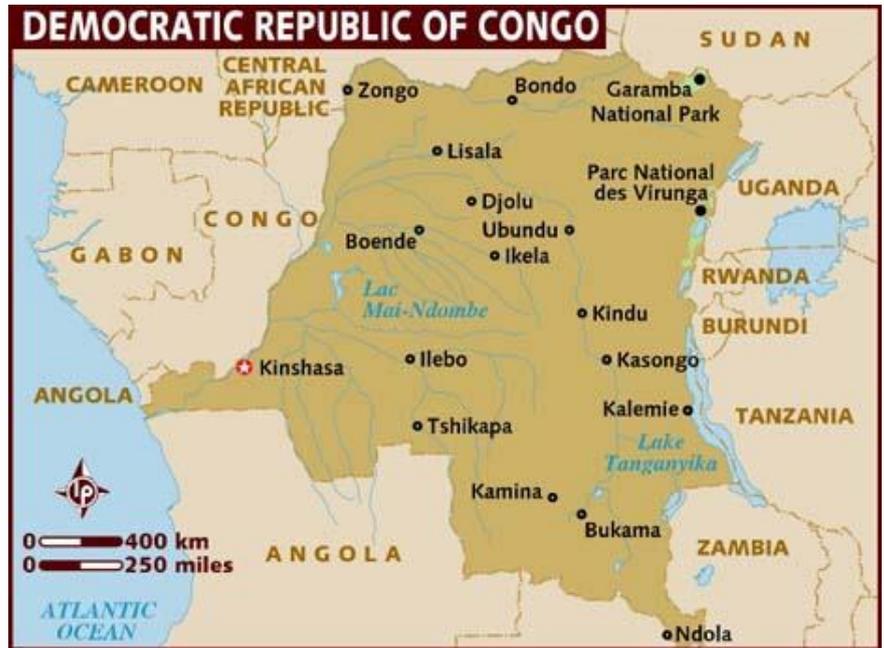
**Updated August 2017**

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# Country Background

## Location

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (French: *République démocratique du Congo*), sometimes referred to as DR Congo, Congo-Kinshasa or the DRC, is a country located in central Africa. It is the second largest country in Africa by area and the eleventh largest in the world. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the nineteenth most populous nation in the world, the fourth most populous nation in Africa, as well as the most populous officially Francophone country.



It borders the Central African Republic and South Sudan to the north; Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi in the east; Zambia and Angola to the south; the Republic of the Congo, the Angolan exclave of Cabinda, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west; and is separated from Tanzania by Lake Tanganyika in the east. The country has access to the ocean through a 40-kilometre (25 mi) stretch of Atlantic coastline at Muanda and the roughly 9 km wide mouth of the Congo River which opens into the Gulf of Guinea. It has the second-highest total Christian population in Africa.

## Population

In 2009, the United Nations estimated the country's population to be 66 million people, a rapid increase from 39.1 million in 1992 despite the ongoing war. As many as 250 ethnic groups have been identified and named. The most numerous people are the Kongo, Luba, and Mongo. About 600,000 Pygmies are the aboriginal people of the DR Congo. Although several hundred local languages and dialects are spoken, the

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linguistic variety is bridged both by widespread use of French and intermediary languages such as Kongo, Tshiluba, Swahili, and Lingala.. Average life expectancy at birth in 2006 was approximately 51 years of age. A large proportion of DRC's population is young with 47% of the population being under 14 years of age.

During 2017 Democratic Republic of the Congo population is projected to increase by 2,561,635 people and reach 83,523,543 in the beginning of 2018. The natural increase is expected to be positive, as the number of births will exceed the number of deaths by 2,583,494. If external migration will remain on the previous year level, the population will be declined by 21,860 due to the migration reasons. It means that the number of people who leave Democratic Republic of the Congo to settle permanently in another country (emigrants) will prevail over the number of people who move into the country (to which they are not native) in order to settle there as permanent residents (immigrants).<sup>1</sup>

## **A brief history**

The country has experienced significant conflict and instability since gaining independence from Belgian rule in 1960. The country was known as Zaire from 1965 - 1997, under the presidency of Colonel Joseph Mobutu but was renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1997 following the toppling of the Mobutu regime in a rebellion led by Laurent Kabila.

In August 1998, a regional war broke out between the DRC Government and Ugandan- and Rwandan backed rebels. As a result, around 1.8 million Congolese were internally displaced and around 300 000 fled to neighbouring countries. Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and succeeded as president by his son Joseph Kabila. The new president began overtures to end the war and a peace accord was signed in South Africa in 2002. However, much of the country remains unstable, particularly in the east. It is estimated that since it started in 1998, the conflict in DRC has killed up to 5.4 million people and is often described as the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. As of March 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that around 320 000 refugees from DRC were dispersed among neighbouring countries, with significant numbers located in Tanzania (around 155 000), Zambia (around 66 000), the Central African Republic (around 58 000) and Uganda (around 18 000).

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## **Ethnicity, language and religion**

In 2009, people in the Congo may still be dying at a rate of an estimated 45,000 per month, and estimates of the number who have died from the long conflict range from 900,000 to 5,400,000. The death toll is due to widespread disease and famine; reports indicate that almost half of the individuals who have died are children under the age of 5. There have been frequent reports of weapon bearers killing civilians, destroying property, widespread sexual violence, causing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes or otherwise breaching humanitarian and human rights law. A new study says more than 400,000 women are raped in the Democratic Republic of Congo every year.

On February 24, 2013 a United Nations-backed accord aimed at stabilizing the Democratic Republic of the Congo called the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo was signed in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa by eleven African countries – Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania

In 2015 major protests broke out across the country and protesters demanded that Joseph Kabila step down as President. The protests began after the passage of a law by the Congolese lower house that, if also passed by the Congolese upper house, would keep Kabila in power at least until a national census was conducted (a process which would likely take several years and therefore keep him in power past the planned 2016 elections, which he is constitutionally barred from participating in).

This bill was passed, however, it was gutted of language that would keep Joseph Kabila in power until a census took place. A census is supposed to take place, but it is no longer tied to when the elections take place. Currently, elections are scheduled for late 2016 and a tenuous peace holds over the Congo.

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# Ethnicity, language and religion

## Ethnicity

There are between 200-250 ethnic groups in DRC, each with different languages or dialects and customs. The majority groups are Bantu (including the Mongo, Luba and Kongo/Congo tribes) and the Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic). These two groups make up 45% of the population. Other ethnicities reported in small numbers are Lubu, Kasai, Congo and Bantu.

Ethnicity, citizenship and nationality are complex factors. Nationality, for example, can be seen as an artificial construct, having been created through the imposition of colonial rule without regard for Ethnic boundaries. People are likely to identify themselves in relation to their tribal or ethnic backgrounds and the region from which they come.

Relationships between ethnic groups in DRC vary. During the country's turbulent recent history many competing interests have at times encouraged and exploited ethnic tensions to gain political, military and economic power.

## Language

French is the DRC's official language, used in government, as well as in secondary and tertiary education. It is meant to be an ethnically neutral language, to ease communication among the many different ethnic groups. However, only a small proportion of the population uses French as a working language. There are four national languages - Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili and Tshiluba. In addition there are approximately 200-250 local languages which are a different dialect of the four national languages.

## Religion

Christian missionaries had an enormous impact on Congolese society. Catholicism in particular has had a major impact developing a large network of churches, school and hospitals within the DRC. Approximately 80% of the population in the DRC are Christian. Approximately 50% are Roman Catholic and 20% protestant. Traditional beliefs still feature strongly and there are Congolese-Christian-based religions which integrate indigenous beliefs. Approximately 10% of the population follow the Islamic religion.

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# Family Values

## **Family**

For the Congolese family encompasses a wide group of relatives, including extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces and cousins. Congolese people take pride in coming from a good family, and are taught to contribute to the family's well being by respecting their elders and providing for family members. It is common for people to take in nephews or nieces if necessary.

## **Relationships and marriage**

The legal age for marriage in DRC is 18 years, although in rural areas, girls may be prepared for marriage at a much earlier age. While polygamy is illegal, the practice continues in some tribes.

Marriage in DRC is considered as the uniting of two families. In DRC dowry is paid to the bride's family. The dowry not only is provided to the bride's father but it is customary to also provide dowry to the bride's uncles.

Congolese people are generally against divorce and believe that it has a detrimental effect on the children of a marriage. Divorce is considered a very last resort to marital problems. If a couple are having marital problems it is not unusual for the wife to live with the husband's relatives until the issue can be resolved. Both the wife and husband's families will provide advice and mediation in an attempt to prevent the couple from divorcing.

## **Role of men and women**

Gender roles are traditional, particularly in rural areas. Men undertake hunting, clearing the forest and much of the important decision making. Women tend to crops, prepare meals, care for children and look after the home. Women's legal rights are limited – married women cannot open a bank account, obtain a passport or rent or sell property without their husband's permission.

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## Children and childcare

Families are usually large as children are seen as a sign of prosperity in DRC for the family and the community. Traditionally, contraception is not commonly practised and may be frowned upon as it deprives the community of growth.

The raising of children is often seen as a community responsibility, with all adults in the community taking a role in providing guidance, discipline and protection. Strict obedience is shown to parents, especially the father. Children are expected to meet the academic and career goals that their parents set for them. It is a disgrace when a child disobeys as this is seen as bringing shame to the family and the parents amongst relatives and the community.

A booklet published by Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre titled *Parenting in a New Culture: A guide for Congolese parents* is an informative publication which explores, in depth, the traditional parenting practices common to the Congolese people. A copy of this can be downloaded at: <http://www.spectrumvic.org.au/>.

## Education and Employment

### Education

By law, primary school is compulsory and free in DRC. In reality, there are not enough schools or teachers in DRC and many schools that do exist are insufficiently resourced. In the early 1990s fewer than 50 percents of school-aged children were enrolled in primary and secondary school. Boys are more likely to receive education than girls, with only five out of every 100 girls finishing their schooling. In 2003, it was estimated that approximately 65 per cent of the population was literate that is, aged 15 or over and able to read and write in French, Lingala, Kinwana or Tshiluba. Refugee education levels may be considerable lower.

### Occupations

Males from rural areas of DRC may be familiar with basic farming practices. Women from rural areas may also have skills in growing small food crops but are unlikely to have any formal employment history.

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In urban areas in DRC, unemployment is high. Men may have experience in a range of fields including tailoring, or shoe repair, construction, taxi and bus driving and small-scale retail. Females may also have experience in information small-scale retail.

## Pre-arrival experiences

Conflicts in DRC have been extreme and brutal. Both militia groups and national forces have targeted civilian homes, hospitals, school and communities. Forced recruitment of child soldiers has been common. Most entrants have experienced highly traumatic events, including physical violence against themselves, family members and friends.

Prior to coming to Australia most Congolese people have spend many years in refugee camps in the Central African region. The conditions in the camps can vary from camp to camp. Camps sizes vary greatly. In some camps there are tens of thousands of people whilst others may only have a few thousand. Some camps provide basic accommodation and services, like health clinics, education and employment programmes, while others have no such resources.

Other Congolese living in Australia may not have lived in refugee camps. They may have established themselves in urban areas in other countries after fleeing DRC. These people may be more familiar with urban lifestyles and technology but are still likely to have been living in poverty with limited education and employment opportunities and inadequate health care.

## The Congolese people in Australia

The 2011 ABS Census identified 2,576 people living in Australia as being born in DRC, an increase of 316.8 per cent from the 2006 Census. The 2011 distribution by state and territory showed Queensland had the largest number with 578 followed by South Australia (544), New South Wales (490) and Western Australia (448), according to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) Settlement Database (SBD).

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# The Congolese Community in Shepparton

## *Population*

Refugees from the DRC began arriving in Shepparton in October 2005 as part a federal and state pilot program to resettle refugees in regional Victoria. As of April 2010 16 Congolese families (a total approximate of 140) were living in Shepparton. The families are considerably large with one family having 7 children. On average there are six people in each family.

In June of 2013 the Congolese community in Shepparton had increased to 23 families and approximately 160 people.

In June 2015 the Congolese community in Shepparton had approximately 280 people. There were 25 large families with 8 or more children, 11 families with 3-4 children and approximately 9 singles.

By March 2017 the community had grown to 300 with 30 families and large numbers of children and young people.

## *Languages*

Because the Congolese people in Shepparton have come from different parts of DRC, belong to different tribal groups and vary in their level of education, the languages spoken amongst the 36 families in Shepparton is quite diverse. This diversity is such that when all members of the community meet, interpreters are often required to translate. For example, an interpreter may be required to translate from English to French and one also to translate from French to Swahili. A number of Congolese also speak Lingala as their first language.

New entrants from DRC are likely to have limited or no English Language skills and will thus require translating and interpreting services in French, Lingala or Swahili.

## *Education*

Most of the adults in the Congolese Community have at least a primary school education. Prior to arriving in Australia some people had been to secondary school and only a few had completed tertiary education.

The Congolese children attend local schools predominantly Christian / Catholic schools. Some children may experience some problems with adjusting to school when they first arrive due mainly to language difficulties.

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The adults that have settled in Shepparton have been enthusiastic to embark on further their education. In addition to attending English lessons some of the Congolese adults have completed vocational training in hospitality, horticulture, landscaping, aged care, agriculture and some are attending university to obtain a Bachelor degree and undertaking post graduate studies.

### *Employment*

Many of the adults are currently employed. Their occupations include teaching, dairy farming, aged care assistance, community work, landscaping, and hospitality.

### *Health*

In general the people of the Congolese community are in good general health. Their main health concerns revolve around vitamin deficiencies particularly vitamin D and iron. Some have experienced malaria but have not had any reoccurrence since arriving in Australia.

### **Contacts**

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# Issues

## Language

When children first arrive in Australia they are enrolled in mainstream schools. The experience has been that these children struggle until they gain proficiency in the English language. When first arriving in Australia, or Shepparton, it would be beneficial for school aged children to attend English classes before attending mainstream schools.

An inability to speak English prevents many people from the Congolese community from obtaining their drivers licence and accessing health care.

A lack of English also contributes to a high number of people failing the citizenship test. Passing the citizenship test is considered very important to the Congolese people as it ensures travelling back to visit family in DRC less problematic.

Language is increasingly becoming a communication issue for parents who may have limited English and their children who have good English skills but limited ability in their parents language. Often a parent will speak to the children in Swahili or Lingala and the child will respond in English.

Parents are concerned that in time their first language will not be used and a significant link to their country of origin and heritage will be lost.

The community has identified a need for increased English language training linked to day to day activities and vocational training.

## Communication

The best form of communication was through the leaders and holding information sessions. These sessions could include Australian culture, Family Law, violence, career pathways, health, computer literacy, Centrelink, Medicare, purchasing property, consumer rights, local government, civil and criminal law and specific training courses.

Community indicates concerns that there is Alcohol and Drug misuse within the community and there is a need for education in Drugs and Alcohol, Family Violence and Crime Prevention however the community may not be willing participants if it's titled as such. Use events such as Music, Food or Arts to introduce issues.

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## **Education**

Parents indicate a concern that the school system does not adequately involve them in the school processes and that the schools could be more culturally appropriate and inclusive. Language is a huge barrier for parents as is literacy and parental education as they find it difficult to assist their children with studies and homework.

There is concern that young people are dropping out of school and becoming disengaged from their community. At tertiary level the community feel the focus should be on speaking, rather than academic writing and numeracy. Needs to be a strategy to help students understand the reasons they are studying and help students understand that it is their future not just money from Centrelink

Study should be linked to employment opportunities as low education levels reduces work pathways and most work in factories or farms.

Access to tertiary education limited by English proficiency.

In broad terms the community is concerned at a perceived lack of discipline in schools and feel the students have too much decision making ability. Parents feel students are not operating at the same level socially and emotionally due to trauma impact of family escaping violence

Congolese parents would like to help their children more but feel they need different communication strategies i.e. a communication book and worksheets that they can go through with students. Followed by feedback from the school re progress

Community members would be happy to support delivery of cultural training/workshops/conversations with school staff

## **Family**

As per Congolese culture, husband has the right to have the control of the family and be able to chastise his wife as part of being married to her. There has been a massive change in power between husband and wife as they are equal in their new country and this can be the cause of more issues within the family.

Many have family overseas and uncertainty over reunification increases anxiety and family pressures. Community is frustrated and angered at Department of Immigration and Border Protection delays in processing applications and what the community consider unfair processes.

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## **Involvement with the Police**

The community leaders are generally the first point of contact for any family/community matters and they will try to resolve any conflict or matters in their community and if community leaders cannot find a solution the last resort will be the police.

Due to lack of understanding of the role of police some community members feel that they were targeted.

Community reported that there is Alcohol and Drug misuse within the community and they need education in Drugs and Alcohol, Family Violence and Crime Prevention. However the community will not be willing participants if it's titled as such. Use events such as Music, Food or Arts to deliver messages.

## **Understanding the legal system**

Although many of the Congolese people have been in Australia for several years there is still a lack of clarity about the Australian legal system and there has been confusion over issues such as bullying, child discipline, domestic violence and privacy.

Congolese people are reluctant to go to court because lawyers cost money and the costs are prohibitive.

## **Isolation and barriers to women's participation**

Many women experience a sense of isolation due to a lack of participation in activities outside of the home. Many of the women would like to participate in a regular exercise program. However they feel they are restricted by a perceived lack of childcare options available to them.

## **Understanding Health, employment and rental systems**

Community leaders have identified that many members of the community lack an understanding of how various systems work in Australia including the health, employment and accommodation systems.

The challenge of applying for private rental without a rental history was described as a community problem as was the perception of discrimination and assumption by property managers that large families will cause damage to rental properties. Language was seen as a barrier to accessing rental properties and all communities are seeking further information on rights and responsibilities in the public and private rental systems.

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Renting is an issue although 8 families have bought houses on a loan and the remainder rent and report it challenging to find suitable properties.

Community indicates mental health is an issue and they are unsure how to access help if required and most support comes from within the community. Stress is considered normal due to past experiences and most in the community cannot recall not being stressed.

Community members experience confusion accessing services such as Ambulance Victoria and Accident emergency through poor language skills and little understanding of how the systems work. A recent hospital tour was very good in helping the community understand the system.

### **Intergenerational Change**

The community is growing and many parents are concerned that their children are adopting characteristics of the mainstream young population which they believe will lead to a loss of culture and identity.

Parents are anxious that young people will frequent night clubs and entertainment venues, consume alcohol and lose their family values.

The community has identified the need for youth based venues and activities to support traditional family structures.

Disputes within the community were on the increase, particularly due to intergenerational conflict.

On occasion Family violence has occurred and come to the attention of Victoria Police and Child Protection although the level of incidence is well below the occurrence in the mainstream community which suggests an issue of under reporting.

When these issues occur Community Leaders are the first response and other authorities will become involved if the threat increases.

The community identifies contributing factors to family violence as:

- Culture shock from adapting to a new way of life.
- Differing systems from Congo to Australia.
- Family frustration at the loss of culture, language and tradition as younger generation assimilates to Australian culture and systems.
- Loss of parental influence.
- Lack of knowledge about supports and assistance if family violence is an issue.

All new arrival communities have expressed concern at their lack of knowledge or understanding of the Child Protection systems which they view as more favourable to

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their children and do not respect the rights of families. They are seeking more information on the capacity to discipline children and impose family curfews. There is concern that children who leave the family home bring shame to the family and community.

Intergenerational change is a huge issue in the Congolese community creating confusion in families about traditional roles, cultural history, respect and a perceived inability to control their children. Challenges of school, peer group pressure, anti-social behaviours and young people feeling they have rights to do what they want and make poor choices and don't understand responsibilities.

The community wants information on understanding how a variety of systems work in Australia and feel that multicultural events such as St Georges Road Food Festival should be supported to help families.

### **Congolese Cafe / Restaurant**

Aligned to the issues of young people the community has identified the potential to develop a Congolese operated cafe / restaurant catering primarily to young people and also utilising the skills of many community members who have hospitality qualifications achieved through the TAFE system.

The cafe would provide a business opportunity for community members and enable the young people to visit a family approved venue to enjoy music, food and African culture.

### **Community Association**

The Association is functioning well at present but its history has been a group divided by personality issues and with limited capacity to deliver good community outcomes.

Through hard work the current leadership group has brought the community together around common interests and an inclusive approach to women and young people. The Association recognises they need to maintain relevance for community members to remain a viable group and they will seek additional funding to deliver community based projects. They identify the need for leadership training and support. The best way to communicate with the community was through their leaders.

The Leaders of the community identified that their community needs assistance with money skills and budgeting. They wish to be better informed on the journey from refugee to citizen.

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They want support and assistance for their community leaders to ensure connectivity within the community and with the mainstream and other communities.

In general terms English proficiency is poor for some people which is a significant barrier to economic participation.

Accessing appropriate interpreter services at convenient times can be an issue.

The community places significant pressure on community leaders to provide assistance with issues and community direction. If there is a problem with someone, community members will seek the advice of the community leader if they are unable to resolve the problem and the leader will provide advice on what to do. It is very difficult for someone to go to court or go straight to the police.

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\*Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/comm-summ/summary.htm>

\*<http://dfat.gov.au/geo/congo-democratic-republic-of/Pages/congo-democratic-republic-of-the.aspx1> \*

\*[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic\\_of\\_the\\_Congo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_the_Congo)

\*Updating issues raised in community consultation in conjunction with GO TAFE, Victoria Police, Department of Justice & Regulation and Department Health and Human Services., Greater Shepparton Council, Goulburn Valley Health, Department of Education and Red Cross (March 2017)

1. [http://countrymeters.info/en/Democratic\\_Republic\\_of\\_the\\_Congo](http://countrymeters.info/en/Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo)