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No Longer Oppose or Coexist: Forty Years of Trans-Border Business and the State in the Republic of the Congo¹

Mikako Toda

1. Introduction

Brazzaville, a city in the Republic of the Congo (RC), is located just across the Congo River from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Separated by the four-kilometre width of the river, these two capital cities are the closest in the world and, because of that, there is substantial transport of people and goods between them. A group of persons with physical disabilities (PWDs), known as *rois du commerce* (Kings of Commerce), used to operate the 'Beaches'² of both cities. They developed trans-border businesses despite suffering physical or visual impairments resulting from foreign and domestic conflicts in the two nations. These trans-border businesses began as a survival tool for those who had to learn to live without reliance on the government and have continued due to the involvement of public institutions and other stakeholders.

Constantly changing social and economic conditions in Africa mean, however, that uncertainty is inherent in these businesses. Since 2013, a large-scale project involving African Development Bank funds to build a bridge and railway between Brazzaville and Kinshasa was under way. The completion of such a bridge would no doubt force PWDs to reconfigure their trans-border businesses. Similarly, the possibility of economic liberalisation reaching the Congo would make these businesses unsustainable through the elimination of tariffs. While equal opportunity and economic liberalisation can be important, it is also necessary to consider how such reforms will make life more difficult for already marginalised groups. Trans-border businesses on the Congo River faced a major turning point in

2014 when the transport of people and goods between Brazzaville and Kinshasa, which had existed for more than 40 years, came to a halt.

This chapter is focused on the changes that occurred at river Beaches due to security operations conducted by police in Brazzaville. It includes local media reports and on-site surveys conducted before the changes (in November 2013) and after (in November 2014, February 2016 and February 2018) to reveal the effects of strengthened state controls and regulation of the lives of entrepreneurs with disabilities. It then reconsiders the relationship between these border businesses and the countries themselves. Finally, findings are used to explore the issue of disability and society in the context of ‘African Potentials’ (Matsuda and Hirano-Nomoto (eds) 2016).

2. The Policy Approach to PWDs in the World and the Congos

Since the International Year of Persons with Disabilities in 1981, many African countries have worked toward full participation and equality for PWDs. It is estimated that between 3 per cent and 10 per cent of the one billion people in Africa (at least 30–50 million) have physical, mental or functional impairments (Chimedza and Peters 2006). The causes of physical impairments in Africa today range from environmental pollution caused by industrialisation, to road accidents, infectious diseases and conflict, and are strongly linked to poverty. In recent years, the issue of PWDs has attracted attention in the development field. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was proposed in 2001, a year after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed (which entered into force in 2008). As of May 2016, 43 of Africa’s 54 countries had ratified the CRPD (United Nations Enable 2016). PWDs are also mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as successors to the MDGs.

Despite these global trends, social welfare in the RC and DRC suffered until recently due to continuing conflict and its resulting political and social disorder. To illustrate this point

comparatively, the politically stable neighbouring country of Cameroon in Central Africa enacted the Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities in 1983 (*loi no. 83/013 du 21 Juillet 1983 relative à la protection des personnes handicapées*) following the International Year of Persons with Disabilities in 1981. Other policies have followed since: a decree promoting employment opportunities for PWDs in 1990, a disability certificate in 1993 and a framework for enforcing social services for PWDs (Toda 2017). The RC, on the other hand, has yet to put into effect the law stipulating that a disability certificate should be issued (see Table 1). PWDs, instead, have cards identifying them with the Association for Persons with Disabilities, which previously allowed them to get an unofficial discount on public transport. That discount underpinned the trans-border businesses on the Congo River by entrepreneurs with disabilities.

Table 1. National policies with respect to PWDs in the RC and DRC

| | Republic of the Congo | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Act of relative disability | <i>Loi portant statut, protection et promotion de la personne handicapée</i> (1992) | Section 49 of the Constitution |
| | Section 30 of the Constitution (2002) | Joined CRPD (September 2015) (under development of the laws and action plans due to CRPD) |
| | Act of relative CRPD (2014) | |
| Disability card | Underdeveloped administrative measures | None |
| Services for PWDs | Unwritten discount on public transport | Unwritten discount on public transport |
| Percentage of PWDs | 1.1% (1974) | Unknown |
| | 1.4% (52,935 people) (2007) | |

Source: Prepared by the author from materials and interviews with Centre National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (CNSEE), Ministère des Affaires Sociales et de l'action humanitaire, the Republic of the Congo, and Ministère des Affaires Sociales, Action Humanitaire et Solidarité Nationale, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

3. The Situation of PWDs in the RC

Analysing the RC's 2007 national census from the social and economic perspective of PWDs, Onka and Poumbou (2010) found that the population of PWDs was 52,935, or 1.4 per cent of the total population. This figure is much lower than the WHO's estimate of 10 per cent, so it is possible that the census underestimated the number of PWDs.

As with the overall population of the RC, the population of PWDs is significantly concentrated in cities. According to the 2007 census (RGPH 2007), there were 35,189 PWDs living in cities and quasi-urban areas (66.5 per cent of the total population). Brazzaville is home to 17,439 PWDs, or 32.9 per cent of the total population (Onka and Poumbou 2010: 37). Lower limb disability (37.2 per cent) and upper limb disability (18.0 per cent) – caused by polio and malaria muscle injections and paralysis from accidental poisoning by bitter cassava, locally known as '*Konzo*' – represent large fractions of disability type.

For example, 'Mr G', a former Congolese trader in his 40s, described his disability as follows:

I was born like every other child who is born well. One day I got sick and a nurse gave me an injection and that's when I got paralysis. But it got worse afterwards. In fact, there was a party in my village that went on during the night. In the evening, my mother had the revelation to tell the children not to go out. So she closed the doors and windows. But I intended to go out and I went and jumped over the wall. When I landed on the other side, a boy who was on a mango tree jumped and fell with his boots on my foot which broke. I didn't know I was hit. As I tried to get up, the bone in my leg pierced my flesh and I slumped down there. I was carried home. Mama was surprised to see me accompanied by people who were transporting me since she knew that I was sleeping as a result of her instruction that she had made. I was in too much pain and they took me to a fetishist in the village. He dug a hole not far from the wall and put in his leaves and bark to treat me. I spent six months with this man until I regained my health. He massaged my foot with hot water mixed

with decoctions of leaves and bark, which finally relieved me. These were the steps related to my disability. (Interview, 26 February 2018)

Age-specific statistics show that about 45 per cent of people with lower limb disabilities are in their 30s and 40s. It is suggested that paralysis of the lower and upper limbs is decreasing in the younger population due to widespread polio vaccinations and a decrease in medical accidents. In addition, the presence of men with disabilities who were war-wounded by the civil war in the 1990s has been identified (Onka and Poubou 2010: 14–19).

Statistics on the social and economic activities of PWDs reveal important trends. Thirty-nine per cent of PWDs twelve-year-old and above are married – a significant difference from the 45.6 per cent of those who are not disabled (Onka and Poubou 2010: 28–29). Men with disabilities are considered to have fewer barriers to marriage than women with disabilities, with 46.7 per cent of male PWDs being married as opposed to only 30.9 per cent of female PWDs. According to disability groups, this has to do with the fact that men can apply for marriage in Congolese society, but women cannot. In addition, 46.5 per cent of PWDs (51.9 per cent men and 40.6 per cent women) are engaged in some form of economic activity (Onka and Poubou 2010: 41). In particular, 77.7 per cent of heads of households (80.9 per cent male and 67.8 per cent female) work (Onka and Poubou 2010: 27–28). People with disabilities live with their families and need to engage in livelihood activities to make a living.

Débrouillez-vous

Whether you're young or old, we all face the same reality: a difficult life: The daily nightmare: What to do? If nothing else, refer to *Article 15, débrouillez-vous pour vivre* (do what you must to live) in Kinshasa.

These are lyrics from the smash hit song *Article 15, beta libanga* sung by Pépé Kallé, one of Zaire's most famous singers, in 1985. *Article 15* refers to Article 15 of the Constitution of South Kasai, which declared independence from Congo Leopoldville in 1960 (Kisangani and Bobb 2009: 124). This part of the Constitution is said to have encouraged illegal diamond mining, in conjunction with the government admonishing its citizens to earn their own money

(Mayele 2008). Although South Kasai was returned to and united with the Republic of the Congo in October 1962 and did not achieve independence, *Article 15* has been widely used by Kinshasa citizens as an informal expression of wit and justification of bribery during the economic downturn of the 1970s. In French, there is a term '*se débrouiller*' meaning 'to somehow make it through'. This term is often used in French-speaking African countries to describe situations in which people have to be flexible and make it on their own, even when society is not helping them.

When the economy of the former Zaire was in turmoil in the mid-1980s, then-President Mobutu is said to have sent a message to the people in a speech urging them to live without relying on the state (terreAfrica 2013). The economic situation was so distressing that even the president was telling the people to fend for themselves (*débrouillez-vous*). Since the state did not have the financial resources to provide public support for PWDs, instead of looking to society for support, Kinshasa PWDs started businesses in the port to make their own living.

4. The Development of the Trans-Border Businesses of PWDs

'Mr M' (born in Kinshasa in 1958), a long-time Kinshasa port worker and wheelchair user, said that PWDs have been working at the port for nearly 40 years and that he was 17 years old when he arrived with a secondary school certificate.

I (Mr M) came to Kinshasa's river port through the help of a former trader with disability who works at the port, as I did not want to continue to be cared for by my elderly father. This was at a time when large ferries called the *Matadi* appeared and people with disabilities could transport large quantities of goods astride our tricycles. In 1975, there were less than 50 people with disabilities working at the port, but as word got out that persons with disabilities were working at the port, people with disabilities from the provinces flocked to Kinshasa to participate in the Congo River trade. In no time, there were more than one hundred persons with disabilities working at the port, and in the

1980s an organisation of people with disabilities working at the port was established. (Interview, 26 February 2018 in Kinshasa)

The arrival of a large wheelchair-capable ferry in the early 1970s that could carry luggage was a major factor in the development of the businesses of PWDs on the Congo River. More importantly, there was preferential treatment for PWDs. It was not explicitly expressed by the state, as public support for PWDs was not available, but it has continued to be a tacit understanding that has led to the current businesses of PWDs in the RC and DRC.



Figure 1. The situation on Brazzaville Beach in 2013 (photographed on 19 November 2013)

Until April 2014, between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., two ferries and a number of small, high-speed boats from Kinshasa and Brazzaville each made two daily round trips (Figure 1). The speedboats were mainly used by foreigners and wealthy Congolese residents, while most people used the ferries, which cut the cost by about half. PWDs used the ferries to engage in various types of cross-border trade.

According to the records of the Brazzaville Port Authority, the number of ferry passengers crossing the river from Kinshasa to Brazzaville in 2012 was 163,278 (of these, 67,766 were foreign nationals). The records show, however, that an average of about three

hundred crossed on any given day, which indicates a significant discrepancy in the total. I therefore investigated and observed first-hand the number of passengers arriving off the ferry and high-speed boats at Brazzaville Beach (a river port for ordinary passengers) on one particular day.

Table 2 shows the number of passengers with disabilities who arrived in Brazzaville on 19 November 2013, along with the nature of their disabilities. On that day, the total number of passengers with disabilities was 448, while the number of non-disabled passengers was estimated to be around twice that number, or one thousand. It can be assumed that all passengers made the crossing safely from the Kinshasa port to the Brazzaville port.

These data show that, in a national port, where strict management of the border can be assumed, roughly half of the passengers were simply missing from the records. One possible explanation is that the port authorities did not strictly monitor the activities of the traders with physical disabilities who congregated every day on the Beach or the activities of the many non-disabled persons who accompanied the PWDs.

Table 2. Number of passengers who arrived in Brazzaville on 19 November 2013 (unit: person)

| Hour | Course | Type of disability | | | | Total | Non-disabled | |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|--------------|---------|
| | | Blind | Deaf | Movement disorder (Wheelchair) | Upper limb disorder (Crutch) | | | |
| 10h30 | Kin→Bra* (Kin ferry) | 110 | 2 | 52 | 44 | 5 | 213 | 449 |
| 13h17 | Kin→Bra** (Bra ferry) | 49 | 2 | 3 | 16 | 3 | 73 | Unknown |
| 14h30 | Kin→Bra* (Kin ferry) | 36 | 1 | 7 | 26 | 3 | 73 | Unknown |
| 17h45 | Kin→Bra** (Bra ferry) | 30 | 2 | 28 | 26 | 3 | 89 | Unknown |
| Total number | | 225 | 7 | 90 | 112 | 14 | 448 | Unknown |

*Kinshasa's ferry, **Brazzaville's ferry

According to the World Bank, the round-trip fare at the Malebo Pool is at least forty US dollars (Brühlhart and Hoppe 2011: 24). Although residents of either Congo nationality were allowed to cross the border with just a pass, and without a visa or passport for a stay of less than 72 hours (as of November 2013), people of other nationalities were required to produce a passport and visa. For this reason, carrying out cross-border trade is far less easy for merchants of foreign nationalities than for Congolese.

The general passenger fare in Kinshasa was 18,000 Congolese francs (20 US dollars), but for PWDs it was half that amount. By contrast, PWDs and non-disabled persons in Brazzaville were charged the same fare: 5,500 CFA francs (about 11 US dollars). In both countries, PWDs could be accompanied by a non-disabled person as a caregiver or guide, whose fare was reduced to a pass fee. Many Congolese crossing the border used this system for disability attendants as a means to bypass the strict border controls. Harbour staff turned a blind eye, expressing tacit understanding when they said, 'It's because it's their job'.³ In addition, Congolese with disabilities from both nations received preferential rates when transporting luggage. Tariffs were not increased for PWDs with two pieces of luggage. There was apparently informal exemption from certain other tariffs. The functional loopholes in this disability discount system at both Kinshasa and Brazzaville Beaches were used to benefit PWDs, as well as a number of others.

5. The Activities and By-Products of Trans-Border Businesses

In Brazzaville Beach, PWDs were engaged in four different types of work as of 11 May 2013. The first, described as '*rois du commerce*' in the media, was mostly brokerage of transport luggage, the most common and best-known work. Brokerage was run exclusively by one association, the '*Association des personnes vivant avec un handicapé du Congo*' (APVHC), organised by PWDs living in Brazzaville. The APVHC has operated as a kind of guild in Brazzaville Beach since the 1980s, negotiating with the border police and customs officials, as well as shopkeepers of the two cities. Members have to give 7,500 CFA francs as an enrolment fee and pay 500 CFA francs per month

as *'cotisation'* (contributions). Since 2009, the APVHC has been the 'official' organisation of the Beach, protected by the 'public'. Its 225 members suffer mainly from movement disorders (although only about one hundred people actually worked at the Beach) and account for only about 2.4 per cent of Brazzaville residents with this type of disorder. The APVHC is organised around secretariats that are voted for and that carry out activities systematically. They receive requests for work by mobile phone from both cities' partner merchants.

On that day in 2013, APVHC members came to the Beach at 8:00 a.m. and loaded luggage transported from Kinshasa onto each of their wheelchairs until 4:00 p.m. When the last ferry arrived and they had finished wrapping all the goods, the organisation's representative paid for the customs declaration forms (5,000 CFA francs each), which together comprised the customs process for the imported goods. From 6:00 p.m., they moved their luggage up to the road shoulder from the Beach – a distance of about 1.5 kilometres – with the help of their caregivers (guides), where they delivered the product to the customer. After finishing work at around 8:30 p.m., they returned home by taxi, bus or wheelchair.

Members work in this way for twelve hours, starting at 8:00 a.m., for which more than 4,000 CFA francs each day is always paid by a representative. According to the CNSEE (2009), the average monthly income of Brazzaville residents is 97,800 CFA francs. Among informal sector workers, it is 76,000 CFA francs. At the time, APVHC members were earning somewhere in between, at a minimum of 96,000 CFA francs a month.

The second kind of work at the Beach using the disability attendant system, which operates with a significant discount, was helping with movement at the general customer border as a *'transporteur'*. This involves a visually impaired person putting their hand on the shoulder of a general passenger so that the passenger can travel as a caregiver and is thereby able to move between the two countries at a lower cost than the general fare. In circumstances when passengers are not in possession of identification, they have difficulty passing through the strict border security controls on their own.

The third type of business was retail (commerce), taking advantage of the difference in prices between Kinshasa and Brazzaville. In

Brazzaville, it was mainly people from Kinshasa with visual impairment or movement disorders who were involved in this small-scale sales industry. From my direct observations,⁴ the merchants working at the unofficial market near the Beach were all visually or physically impaired. Most of them purchased bread, biscuits or medicine in Kinshasa, which they resold in the market. 'Mr B' was one of them, a wheelchair user (born in Kinshasa in 1969, married with seven children) who tried to earn revenue from bread sales. In November 2013, Mr B came to Brazzaville to earn money every week. Having left his wife and children at home in Kinshasa, he said he had come to earn money in Brazzaville, sleeping in the open under the eaves with other merchants from Kinshasa near the Beach and paying 200 CFA francs per day to the security guard. Mr B purchased one box of 30 loaves of bread at a bakery in Kinshasa for 30,000 Congolese francs (about 17,000 CFA francs), selling one loaf for 1,000 CFA francs on the streets of Brazzaville. At the time, he paid 9,000 Congolese francs (or 5,500 CFA francs) in ferry fare, 2,000 CFA francs in Brazzaville customs at the port and 1,500 CFA francs for a transportation of luggage fee, with between 6,000 CFA francs and 8,000 CFA francs cash remaining. Mr B had earned at least 6,000 CFA francs per week or about 25,000 CFA francs (about 50 US dollars) a month – almost the same as the average monthly income of a Kinshasa citizen (Brühlhart and Hoppe 2011: 24). Retailers with disabilities from Kinshasa earn a very low income compared to people with disabilities from Brazzaville. Many of those I talked to had once been engaged in the brokerage business at the Beach of Kinshasa as members of disability organisations. For more than ten years, there were two organisations at Kinshasa Beach, but one of them disappeared following disputes between the organisations. It seems that the PWDs among the merchants in Brazzaville have been expelled from the Beach of Kinshasa.

The fourth type of work at the Beach was transporting passenger luggage. These porters are deaf people who make up groups of seven or eight.

PWDs in the luggage packing and transportation industry sometimes employ young people called 'caregivers', who used to be street children and petty thieves, to help with their movement

disorder. This form of support differs from the ‘assistance’ provided by general passengers in that the ‘caregivers’ are employed.

Those with disabilities have an employment relationship with others in addition to caregivers. Among disability traders, the motorised tricycle has become popular. In the Congo, rather than assistance for the handicapped coming from the public purse, it comes from limited donations from charitable organisations and benefactors. Those with disabilities must purchase items such as their own wheelchair (Figure 2). Under such circumstances, they can take it upon themselves to make their tricycle into a motorcycle. By using this improved tricycle, a trader with disabilities can make their day-to-day work more efficient. This adaptation emerged from PWDs creatively helping themselves.



Figure 2. A modified tricycle for PWDs called ‘adaptation’. Gears are changed with the left hand (photographed on 21 November 2013)

6. Turning Point of the Trans-Border Businesses

The border businesses of PWDs on the Congo River arose as a survival strategy for people who had to live without government assistance. Despite these businesses surviving over a long period of time and being involved with public institutions and stakeholders, there are always inherent uncertainties due to changing social and economic situations in Africa.

Beginning in 2013, a large-scale project funded by the African Development Bank to build a bridge and railway has been in progress in Brazzaville and Kinshasa. If completed, it will change the nature of disability border businesses.⁵ In addition, if international economic

liberalisation reaches Congo and abolishes tariffs, PWD border businesses will not survive. This is not to deny that liberalisation of the economy is important, but it is necessary to pay attention to consequences that may make it more difficult for social minorities to live. In fact, the border businesses of PWDs on the Congo River reached a major turning point in 2014.

In April 2014, RC police started to enforce the involuntary repatriation of illegal DRC nationals in Brazzaville to Kinshasa in an operation known as *mbata ya bakolo* (meaning 'slap in the face of elders' in Lingala). The operation involved the mobilisation of more than 1,500 police officers (Itagali 2014; L'Avenir 2014). It is reported that, including those who returned voluntarily, more than two million people, or 10 per cent of the previous population of Brazzaville, had crossed over to Kinshasa by 5 May 2014. Between April and May 2014, Brazzaville was brimming with people intending to cross the river to Kinshasa.

Of those who were forcibly repatriated to Kinshasa, more than one thousand refugees were without homes or families to return to and had no choice but to live on the streets or in tents inside stadiums. 'Mr G', a hairdresser with physical disabilities in Poto-Poto, Brazzaville, described the day of the '*mbata ya bakolo*' operation:

Really, I was not pleased with the treatment that was inflicted on me during this operation. I arrived one morning at my place of work; my brothers had already crossed the river. Suddenly, three soldiers arrived and told me they were instructed to pick me up. I asked if I could pack up my things, but they said I was to do nothing but simply follow them. I did this, and we soon arrived at the Public Security Station (PSP) in Poto-Poto. There, the Commissioner came to me and asked if I was the hairdresser. I said, 'Yes, that's me'. He replied, saying, '*Mon petit* (my little), it's not my fault. There is a *maman* who lives in the alley where you work who does not love you. She came here to say that you are Congolese from the DRC. So, you must wait here for me.' I waited there all day, without eating or drinking, waiting for him to come back. I even slept there at the PSP. The next day, around 10:00 a.m., the policeman told me to get into a taxi that had just stopped there. They took me directly to a boat that was to take me to Kinshasa.

Everything I had at the place where I worked and everything I had in my home in Brazzaville were left behind. I had to spend four difficult months in Kinshasa, looking for ways to return again to Brazzaville. I was not treated well during this operation when all undocumented members of the DRC living in Brazzaville were repatriated. (Interview, 26 February 2018)

RC authorities enforced two other operations besides '*Mbata ya bakolo*'. The '*Longwa na nzela*' operation, which means 'freeing the streets' in Lingala, was enforced on 28 June 2014, to prevent street crime and secure jobs for the Congolese. All drivers who were not of Congolese nationality were banned, and many taxi drivers originating from Benin and Senegal became unemployed. Then, on 22 August 2014, authorities carried out the '*Radio Matanga*' operation, which prohibited making a noise at night in Brazzaville. This started with a crackdown on new religious groups which, at that time, were rapidly appearing in the RC.

These operations resulted in a continuing decline of the Brazzaville population, a lack of informal workers at the lowest income levels (such as trash collectors, who had usually been of Kinshasa origin) and a skyrocketing of prices (especially of industrial and manufactured goods) in Brazzaville due to the disappearance of the river trade. Although this has made the lives of people in Brazzaville more difficult, traders with disabilities experienced the biggest impacts of the '*mbata ya bakolo*' operation.

7. After the '*Mbata ya bakolo*' Operation

The RC police force banned all permits to cross the river, claiming that these permits allowed criminals to enter the country. Since May 2014, it has become mandatory to obtain a visa to move between the two Congos. The government did not reimburse people who spent money on their forced repatriation. Payment of wages to port workers was delayed, which resulted in strikes. All port activities have halted due to the stoppage of ferry operations and traders with disabilities who lost their jobs at the port have started to flock back to the central city to find work transporting people and goods. Many

traders with disabilities who were married to Kinshasa women have been separated from their wives. Caregivers who helped with the work and mobility of PWDs left them to turn to informal work previously done by Kinshasa people that paid higher wages. As of November 2014, close to one hundred traders had no way to leave their homes, surviving on minimal support from their families.

During an interview conducted in February 2018, 'Mr E' explained how the '*mbata ya bakolo*' operation changed his situation. He has a physical disability, was formerly a trader at the Beach and is currently a shoemaker in Poto-Poto, Brazzaville. He says:

I cannot forget that date. It's a historic date that will remain forever indelibly in my head. When we reach 4 April 2018, I will have been four years without a job, without anything. And I have lost so many of my companions, so many of my friends. They died because they were frustrated and traumatised by the situation. And then, my wife kicked me out, like a pig. While we were still living together, she told me that she would deny me, that she would leave me and that she would shock me. But I took it as a joke, as a joke. We did not think that one day we would have to endure something like the '*mbata ...*' operation. But after this operation, she bore it for just two years, from 2014 to 2016. In 2016, our tenants left, the house was empty. If we rented out the house, we would have more than enough to live on. But it was at this moment that she said to me: '*Monsieur prenez la porte* (take the door)'. (Interview, 28 February 2018)

More than five years after the '*mbata ya bakolo*' operation, nearly one hundred traders with disabilities who worked at the Brazzaville Beach are simply waiting at home, without even going outside, for the Beach to reopen. 'Mr A', who was a representative of APVHC, describes the current situation of traders with disabilities:

Since 2014, there have been no more activities at the Beach until today. At the level of the association that I lead, I can estimate the number of people who used to trade at the Beach as more than three hundred persons with disabilities. But as I speak to you now, there is no one left. All of them have gone home. There are two of us left.

Some have become shoemakers, hairdressers, and others are going into other small trades to survive with their children and their families.

The situation is really serious among the disabled. With the activities at the Beach, we were doing well because we had enough to live on. But now it's serious because we're not able to do anything. That's why today the disabled are out of luck. We approached the authorities. We asked what they could do for the disabled. We talked about our problems in the media, but we didn't get a solution. From 2014 to 2018, how many years ago? No solution.

Exactly. So far, we have persons with disabilities who have died because of the problems. I have my general secretary, Leonard, who had a stroke because of the worries. It's heartbreaking and sometimes you don't want to talk about it because it's an operation that has traumatised, and continues to traumatise, the disabled. You know that if the person is able-bodied, he can do something else (become a taxi driver, he can go wherever he wants, to do what he wants, etc.) but what is the disabled person going to do? You can understand that this political problem between the two states, the two shores, has impoverished and continues to this day to make the disabled person suffer. Not only in Brazzaville but also in Kinshasa.

You are right to use the expression *joindre les deux bouts* (making ends meet) because that is what we are doing. You know, the situation has become serious because in Congo today there are two blocked borders: Brazzaville–Kinshasa is blocked because of the *mbata ya bakolo* operation and traffic on the Brazzaville–Pointe Noire railway is also blocked by political problems, given the situation of Pastor Ntoumi, who continues to make a mess in the forests of the Pool region. This situation has also weakened the disabled who used to trade along this railway and who are no longer doing anything today. That is the deplorable situation we are in. (Interview, 24 February 2018)

A male entrepreneur with disabilities and in his 40s said, 'This was the first time in my life that I had received such terrible treatment.' A male APVHC secretary in his 50s said, 'With money, persons with disabilities can live in society and within a family. Without money, they lose everything.'

These words express the difficult situation that entrepreneurs with disabilities find themselves in.

8. Conclusion

The trans-border businesses previously run by entrepreneurs with disabilities give a glimpse into the structures of both Congolese countries. PWDs used their business skills under the previously ambiguous system, as evidenced by the self-sustaining businesses that made use of the preferential measures for PWDs. In this way, PWDs who found a way to earn an income were able to employ caregivers, which created a society in which they could flourish – the very opposite of a ‘disabled society’.

Traders with disabilities who are able to maintain their livelihoods on an unusual foundation show the potential of African societies. But when they were deprived of a place to live due to the port closure, they found themselves in a state of distress in which they were unable to conduct their business or live together.

Trans-border businesses on the Congo River experienced a major setback in 2014 when the continuous flow of people and goods between the two Beaches, which had lasted for over 30 years, was effectively stopped. This situation continues today. As regulations became stricter in 2014, PWDs were impacted more than their able-bodied counterparts and lost the ability to sustain themselves. Viewed from a judicial perspective, this may be seen as ‘cracking down on those breaking the law’, or as ‘clearing the baggage out of the country’. However, as a person who has seen these businesses functioning, I am unable to see it in such a way. Like other people who live in Brazzaville, PWDs become victims of the use of force by police. Their lives are difficult because they live in an urban society that does not favour them.

Loss of livelihood in African societies due to state intervention, such as urban development, is a common phenomenon. It is necessary to take stock of the current situation of former traders with disabilities and re-examine their ‘potential’ in light of these changes. Their anguish over being suddenly deprived of a place to live because of the port closure continues to this day.

Endnotes

¹ Some parts of this chapter have been rewritten with additions to and revisions of the previous editions (Toda 2016, 2020).

² In both the cities of Brazzaville and Kinshasa, a river port called Port, where large cargo ships of timber and fuel originate, and a river port called Beach for ordinary passengers, are operated by both states.

³ Devlieger (2018) considers humour, 'laughter', at the international border between Kinshasa and Brazzaville as a means through which ordinary people navigate between fulfilling the values of individual opportunism and interpersonal responsibility.

⁴ Of 31 merchants working at the unofficial market, I surveyed their nationality, sex, disability and type of work in the non-certified markets in the neighbourhood of Brazzaville Beach on 23 November 2013.

⁵ For example, at the border between Kenya and Uganda, a land border business has been deployed, using a rowing wheelchair (Whyte and Muyinda 2007).

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