

U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Testimony by Ben Affleck, Founder, Eastern Congo Initiative
March 26, 2015

Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify here today. My name is Ben Affleck and I am the founder of Eastern Congo Initiative, a grant-making and advocacy organization working with and for the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I want to offer a special thanks to the Chairman for holding today's hearing. Senator Graham, like others on this subcommittee, has proven time and again to be a genuine champion for smart, effective U.S. foreign assistance. In August 2013 amid renewed violence in the region, Chairman Graham led a delegation to eastern Congo, bringing five Senate colleagues along to see firsthand the potential of the region. This marked the largest ever delegation of U.S. Senators to visit this war torn region. Thank you Mr. Graham for your confidence in the people of Congo and for learning more about what can be done.

And to Senator Leahy, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the second biggest Batman fan in the room. Good morning, sir!

Members of the Committee, I am here today to offer a case study of the difference our nation's foreign assistance and diplomacy is making – where smart, targeted public and private investments are transforming communities in need, advancing our nation's interests and creating opportunities, both in the countries we assist and here at home.

You have undoubtedly heard a bit about Congo – about its challenges and the worst of its past: two decades of armed conflict; the estimated 5 million deaths due to violence, disease, and starvation; the 2.7 million people who remain displaced today; and the appalling levels of sexual violence.

But these statistics tell you nothing about Congo's future, or about the extraordinary and resilient people working – everyday – to rebuild their nation.

Despite the many challenges, the Congolese people refuse to be defined by their country's past. And, in spite of those who may question the effectiveness of our foreign assistance, I can tell you first-hand that U.S. diplomatic and financial investments in Congo are working.

U.S. foreign assistance accounts for only 1% of the entire federal budget, and vastly less than 1% of that 1% is allotted to DRC. Yet from that fraction of a fraction, we are seeing important progress.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

In the late 1970s, Congo was one of Africa's leading coffee exporters. But because of conflict and diseased crops, production today is less than 10% of what it once was. Congolese families lost a vital source of income, and the rest of us lost some of the world's greatest coffee.

Three years ago, ECI saw an opportunity to revitalize Congo's coffee sector. In our work, we had met struggling rural farmers living on less than a few dollars a day. And we knew that with the right partners, we could help give them the skills and resources they needed to transform their communities.

And we were thrilled that USAID agreed. Our government made the bold decision to help us create a public-private partnership bringing together ECI, the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and Catholic Relief Services.

Together, in only two years, we've trained and supported 4,500 coffee farmers across four cooperatives to dramatically increase the quality and quantity of their crops. And to help maximize farmer profits, we brought in global trade specialists to build an ethical supply chain that keeps money in the pockets of farmers and their families.

But what we've been able to achieve together doesn't end there.

Prior to ECI's involvement, these coffee farmers had no access to financing, no line of credit. Imagine trying to start a small business without any capital. You simply can't, let alone in an emerging economy like DRC.

So to close this gap, we brought in the experts. We approached Scott Ford's company, Westrock Finance, which has worked alongside these cooperatives to dramatically scale their businesses in environmentally sustainable ways – I should add that Scott was part of that historic delegation with Mr. Graham that visited Congo in August 2013.

The final puzzle piece was getting this coffee into American homes, so ECI brought in another investor: Starbucks. In the coming weeks, Starbucks officials will travel to the eastern region of Congo to begin a partnership with us to develop Congo as a key source of high-quality coffee. Starbucks has already purchased 40 tons – the entirety of the cooperatives' very first export, representing millions of cups of coffee that will be sold in U.S. markets.

Involvement by the world's largest coffee company is a clear testament to what's possible for Congo. This isn't charity or aid in the traditional sense, it's good business. From a relatively modest investment, farmers' incomes have more than tripled, and they can now afford to send their children to school, put food on the table and access proper healthcare. And as a result, the world has a new source of high quality coffee.

This public-private partnership has transformed the lives of thousands of families in the eastern part of DRC, all made possible because USAID agreed it could be done. But we think this is just the beginning of what's possible.

Next month, ECI will launch an economic development fund focused on expanding our existing work not only in coffee, but in cocoa and other strategic crops. As a result of our new fund, we will work with at least 10,000 additional farmers over the next 4 years to build their business capacity, improve the quality and quantity of their products and secure direct access to premium markets.

This work is scalable. This work is replicable. And in just 5 short years it will have transformative impact on nearly 100,000 individuals living in eastern Congo.

None of this would have happened without USAID's commitment and without private sector partners willing to operate in one of the highest risk environments in the world.

With proper training and strategic investments, agriculture will become a driving force for Congo's economy, supporting the more than 60% of Congolese – that's 40 million people – whose families rely on agriculture as their primary source of income.

Simply put, we believe that a country with enough arable land to feed a third of the world's population should not struggle to feed its own people, to send its kids to school or access basic health care.

Senators, this brings me to my final message. The next two years represent a critical turning point for DRC. With local elections scheduled for later this year and national elections in 2016, DRC enters an incredibly important window of opportunity for an unprecedented democratic transition.

Direct and consistent engagement by Secretary Kerry, the Special Envoy's office and Ambassador Swan have helped Congo reach this moment. As you know, your former colleague Senator Feingold served as Special Envoy until just a few weeks ago. His leadership and the 15 trips he made to DRC during his 18-month tenure was the very definition of direct and consistent diplomatic engagement, and we thank him for his service.

U.S. leadership played a vital role in the recent – yet fragile - progress toward peace and stability. To ensure this progress does not come undone, we urge you to join ECI and other groups like Open Society, Humanity United, Human Rights Watch and the Enough Project, in calling on the Administration to appoint a new Special Envoy – without delay.

Senators, if we continue to make smart and effective financial and diplomatic investments, we will help foster the next generation of Congolese entrepreneurs and leaders who will carry their country forward, to stand as a model for the region and the continent.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.