

Indigenous Peoples



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Socioeconomic status of the Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Traditionally, the Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been closely attached to the rain forest, the source of their spirituality, livelihood, and protection. They used to lead a nomadic life in camps of 30–40 families, which maintained regular links with each other. But today their lifestyle is in danger, as they become more sedentary, lose access to the forest, and face a deteriorating relationship with Bantu farmers.

Research suggests that there could be anywhere from 100,000 to 600,000 Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which would represent up to slightly more than 1 percent of the country's population. In the "123" survey conducted in 2004/05, 29 of 11,959 households self-identify as Pygmies, which extrapolates to 63,097 Pygmies out of a total population of 54 million people. This number likely underestimates the number of Pygmies because they are difficult to reach and thus are often underrepresented in household surveys.

While the sample in the 123 survey is not large enough to lead to robust findings, differences in poverty between the Pygmies and the rest of the population are large (table 1). Poverty is widespread in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with 71.7 percent of the population estimated to be poor, but the share of the Pygmy population that is poor is even higher, at 84.8 percent. Measures of poverty that take into account not only the share of the poor but also the distance separating the poor from the poverty line

(such as the poverty gap) suggest even larger differences between the Pygmies and the rest of the population. The data also suggests that the pygmy population is significantly less well educated, more rural, and more involved in the informal sector than the rest of the population. Pygmies are hard working, as suggested by very high rates of labor force participation, but they appear to be especially vulnerable.

The main reasons behind the Pygmies' impoverishment are linked to their past as well as to current Congolese society. The loss of access to and the depletion of natural resources—caused by the proliferation of cut-and-burn agriculture, among other reasons—are affecting the Pygmies. The foresight and planning skills needed to successfully transition from life as hunter-gatherers to agriculture are lacking among the Pygmies. The Bantu's feelings of superiority and disdain for the Pygmies as well as the Pygmies' self-disregard, passive attitude, and feeling of inferiority are harmful. Pygmy families sometimes own small parcels of land, but more often they work as farm hands for the Bantu in the communities in which they live. Their labor is paid at a very low rate, at best about half of what a Bantu laborer would get paid. Average household monthly income is only \$20.

That school enrollment rates are very low (especially in secondary education) despite the fact that most Pygmies are now sedentary and have lived close to Bantu villages for at least 15

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TABLE 1

Poverty and human development indicators in the Democratic Republic of Congo, by ethnicity, 2005

Indicator	Pygmies	Non-Pygmies
Share of population living in rural areas	95.0	70.0
Share of population that is female	51.6	50.4
Average age	26.7	20.9
Median age	24.0	16.0
Share of female-headed households	6.6	17.1
Average age of household head	41.7	43.3
Average household size	3.2	5.3
School enrollment rate (age 6–11)	18.7	56.1
Adult literacy rate (% ages 15 and older)	30.5	65.0
Labor force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)	85.9	73.8
Adult unemployment rate (% ages 15 and older)	1.0	6.2
Share working in informal sector (%)	100.0	90.2
Poverty incidence (%)	84.8	71.7
Poverty gap	39.4	32.4
Number of households surveyed	29	11,930
Number of individuals surveyed	110	64,454

Source: Authors' estimates based on 2004/05 census data.

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years suggests that the Pygmies have limited access to public schools. Many Pygmy parents do not have the means to pay for their children's education. Negative attitudes in schools persist toward Pygmy children, who often lack school uniforms, pens, and books. And school attendance by Pygmy children is interrupted by trips to the forest for several days or weeks.

The Pygmies' health status and access to health services are poorly documented, but for the most part Pygmies have limited access to primary health care and use mainly traditional medicine. Such issues as tropical parasites, sexually transmitted diseases, tuberculosis, infectious and respiratory diseases, and high maternal and infant mortality affect the Pygmies more than other population groups. This is due partly to the Pygmies' lifestyle—including poor hygiene, consumption of unclean water, promiscuity, and smoke-infested houses—and partly to their exclusion from the healthcare system.

They are poorly informed about diseases and disease transmission, vaccination campaigns often fail to reach or target them, and access to health infrastructure or medication is often nonexistent.

The Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo tend to live in extreme poverty. At the same time, they embody a valuable cultural heritage that should be protected and preserved, one of the most original forms of human adaptation to the particular ecological conditions of the rain forest. They have a sophisticated knowledge of their environment and the possibilities for humans to adapt to it in a sustainable manner.

The Pygmies are clearly accelerating their integration into the broader society as they become more sedentary, but this process—unmanaged and with little input from the Pygmies themselves—is linked to their impoverishment, exploitation, and poor health and education outcomes.