

Choppy Waters: Improving the Business Environment in the Transport Sector

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: The Congo River and its tributaries carry significant volumes of freight and passenger traffic. For many small farmers in the northern provinces of the DRC, river transport is their only link to market. An efficient and effective water transport system is therefore essential to economic development. This paper describes the experience of ÉLAN RDC in working with boat operators and traders to advocate to government for elimination of informal and illegal taxes.



Executive Summary

The Congo River and its tributaries carry significant volumes of freight and passenger traffic. For many small farmers in the northern provinces of the DRC, river transport is their only link to market. An efficient and effective water transport system is therefore essential to economic development. One of the factors constraining the efficiency of river transport is the widespread practice amongst government agencies of levying illegal taxes and charges (known as *tracasseries*) on boat operators. Reducing this tax burden, especially the illegal taxes (which cost time as well as money), became a priority intervention for ÉLAN RDC, especially in the province of Equateur, through which the Congo River flows for much of its length.

In June 2014, the Government of the DRC issued an order to abolish 38 illegal taxes and charges in the water transport sector. One year on, nothing had changed, so ÉLAN RDC, which was already working with boat operators on other issues, decided to support their campaign to implement the order. The campaign was centred on the province of Equateur, where many of the boat operators are based. The campaign, begun in 2015, was a combination of dialogue with the provincial authorities and raising awareness amongst boat owners and traders of the content of the government order. The key to success was obtaining the support of the Governor, after which the state agencies largely fell into line. Within weeks, the level of illegal taxation had fallen by nearly two-thirds, an annual saving of some \$500,000.

A few months after the successful advocacy campaign, the province of Equateur was split into five smaller provinces. This increased the political pressure to generate revenue whilst reducing the already low capacity of government and fragmenting its institutional memory. It also destroyed the public-private dialogue platform that had been established. The net result of this upheaval was the reappearance of illegal taxes. This was exacerbated by personal rivalries within the private sector, which prevented the formation of a truly national platform for long-term advocacy.

Despite setbacks, including the re-emergence of some of the illegal taxes, the business environment for the river boat operators and traders is considerably better than before ÉLAN's intervention. Key findings emerged as follows:

- Political economy matters – the support of the Governor was central to the success of the initial advocacy campaign, and later political instability was an obstacle to further progress in the new Equateur province.
- Work both sides of the problem – ÉLAN RDC acted as an “honest broker”, discussing the aims and approach with the government as well as supporting the business associations more directly. This engagement played a key role in generating a successful outcome.
- Impact versus Systemic Change – there have been practice changes by some actors, notably the private sector associations and the provincial revenue authorities, but other state agents have not fundamentally changed their *modus operandi*. This has nevertheless generated lasting impact.

This experience has demonstrated that evidence-based public-private dialogue can achieve reform, even in a fragile state such as the DRC. It has also, however, shown how fragile reform can be. A comprehensive solution lies beyond the resources of a programme such as ÉLAN RDC, but a pragmatic approach can still make a meaningful difference to the lives of economic operators.

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Background

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the second largest country in Africa and the 11th largest in the world. Transport infrastructure is very limited – there are few rail lines, and many trunk roads are in a very poor condition. The Congo River and its tributaries, on the other hand, constitute a major network for moving goods in the DRC, on which significant volumes of freight travel. Hundreds of economic operators of various sizes use this communication network to transport and sell their goods. About 85% of agricultural products in the markets of the capital Kinshasa arrive by river. The province of Equateur is one of the largest agricultural provinces and about 70% of transportation within the province is by inland waterway.

ÉLAN RDC (see box below) had a target of improving the livelihoods of over one million Congolese men and women. One of the strategies to achieve this goal was to increase the production and incomes of small agricultural producers through improving their access to markets. For many parts of northern and eastern DRC, achieving this means increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of river and lake transport. In practical terms this means reducing the operational costs of water transport providers, cutting turn-around times to increase the number of voyages that can be made and improving product aggregation to maximise load factors.

One of the factors constraining both time and cost efficiency is the widespread practice amongst government agencies of levying illegal taxes and charges (known as *tracasseries*) on boat operators. Improving the business environment by reducing the tax burden, especially illegal taxes, became a priority intervention for ÉLAN, especially in the province of Equateur, through which the Congo River flows for much of its length.

About ÉLAN RDC

ÉLAN RDC is a UKAID market development project in the DRC implemented by Adam Smith International. The project aims to reduce poverty in the DRC by increasing the incomes of over one million poor smallholders, producers, entrepreneurs and consumers by the end of 2020.

Despite its extraordinary economic potential, the DRC remains desperately poor. Decades of conflict, instability and poor governance have taken their toll, and 85% of the population living in poverty lack the opportunities to lift themselves out of poverty.

We work to tackle the root causes of market failures and constraints. We work with the private sector to design and spread new economic models that increase income, create jobs and lower prices for the poorest. Our work places a particular focus on advancing the role of poor Congolese women and adolescent girls, some of the most marginalised in the world.

ÉLAN RDC works across four geographical areas and six sectors of the economy.

- Perennial agriculture
- Non-perennial agriculture
- Access to finance
- Mobile money
- Renewable energy
- Transport

We have more than 200 partnerships with private sector actors in the DRC, providing technical advice, leveraging funds and fostering networks to change business practices.

Prelude to Intervention

On 19 June 2014, nine Ministers of the Congolese Government signed an inter-ministerial order (arrêté interministériel) abolishing 38 illegal taxes and charges in the river and lake transport sector. This came about in no small part as a result of lobbying by the Alliance of Ship-owners of Congo (AAC) and other private sector associations. The AAC had worked in partnership with the Federation of Enterprises of Congo (FEC) to advocate for the arrêté. Almost a year after its promulgation, however, there had been little progress on implementation of the order by state agencies, which continued to levy illegal charges. ÉLAN RDC was already active in the transport sector, working to increase the availability of finance for transport operators and to improve aggregation of agricultural products. Taxation had been identified as an additional systemic constraint, so the decision was taken to support the boat operators in further advocacy and dialogue to raise awareness of the AIM and accelerate its implementation. The province of Equateur was the obvious place to pilot the intervention because of the importance of the sector to the economy.

The Boat Operators

There are a number of industry associations in the water transport sector. Most important among them are:

- The Professional Committee of River Transporters – part of the Federation of Enterprises of Congo (CPTF/FEC).
- L'Association d'Armateurs du Congo (ASSARCO), established in 1995, centred on Kinshasa.
- Union Congolaise des Armateurs de Baleinières (UCAB), established in 2000 and strong in Equateur.
- Alliance des Armateurs du Congo (AAC). An umbrella association formed around ASSARCO with support from ÉLAN to bring together the disparate associations into a single group.

The First ÉLAN Intervention

In June 2015, ÉLAN decided to pilot an intervention to support boat operators in their campaign for implementation of the 2014 arrêté. The pilot was centred around the city of Mbandaka, at the time the capital of Equateur province. Mbandaka was home to many boat operators; several other major ports, such as Akula, Bumba and Lisala were also located in Equateur province.

Through this intervention, ÉLAN RDC supported the associations in their engagement with the provincial government. The 2014 arrêté banning 38 illegal forms of taxation was itself the result of successful advocacy by the private sector but there had been insufficient follow-up, hence implementation was lacking. The core of ÉLAN RDC's intervention was support to UCAB for a public-private dialogue to be followed by a broad campaign of awareness in the ports of Equateur. An important element of this was the involvement of the provincial government, so approaches were made to the Governor's Office, under whose auspices subsequent public-private dialogue took place. In total, eight dialogue sessions were held throughout the campaign period.

The campaign was launched officially by the Governor. The public-private dialogue involved representatives of the private sector, not only from the water transport sector but also more broadly, civil society organisations and the public sector agencies responsible for the illegal taxation, as well as the provincial government. The very clear support of the Governor was an important element in obtaining buy-in from the rest of the public sector.

Case Study

Mr Baby Monzondo is a boat operator living in the town of Mbandaka with his wife and four daughters. He plies his trade between Mbandaka and various towns and villages in its rural hinterland. On most trips, he carries manufactured products, either on his own account or for other traders, from Mbandaka and for the return trip he buys agricultural products (mainly maize and cassava) from small producers that he then sells in the markets of Mbandaka.

On a previous trip to Bolomba, prior to the campaign for implementation of the inter-ministerial tax decree, Mr Monzondo had made some 40 different payments totalling around \$120. Nearly all of these payments were illegal charges levied by various government services. This was fairly typical for boat operators in the area and represented approximately 3% of the total costs of the trip. This may not sound like a huge amount but is comparable with his profit margin, and thus has a major impact on the viability of his business.

The reduction in illegal charges that followed the awareness campaign generated a saving of around \$70 per voyage for Mr Monzondo. With the money saved, he bought more maize – a total of seven additional bags – from 16 men and women small-scale producers in the agricultural production areas.

He is hopeful that the reduction in illegal charges will continue, increasing both his own income and those of the smallholder farmers that he buys from.

There were other elements of the campaign. Billboards were installed at the ports in the city of Mbandaka, indicating which charges were legally valid in the sector and which were illegal. Leaflets were printed and distributed in the ports across the province.

Intervention Results

As a result of the dialogue and awareness campaign, a majority of the 38 illegal taxes were successfully eliminated or substantially reduced within a matter of weeks. Total illegal charges fell by nearly two-thirds from their pre-campaign level, an overall reduction in costs for the approximately 2,500 boat operators of Equateur of around \$500,000 per year¹.

Follow-up

In order to maintain the initial success and, if possible, move towards 100% implementation of the arrêté, the boat operators and ÉLAN RDC set up a monitoring system to provide permanent oversight of taxation in water transport in Equateur. A number of operators were trained to keep records of the taxes and charges paid during their voyages and the results were shared through the dialogue platform. This information allowed for rapid response in case of any signs of recidivism and informed further action to achieve additional reductions in illegal taxation.

Developments Post-Intervention

Developments since ÉLAN RDC's initial involvement have served to illustrate some of the difficulties of working in the DRC. Firstly, soon after the awareness campaign, the province of Equateur was divided by the process of "découpage" into five parts (see box). This had several negative effects. The division of government created both a problem of capacity in government institutions and a political imperative for greater revenue collection by government. It also effectively destroyed the existing institutional memory at provincial level. Although there was some continuity in the case of Mbandaka, other

ports had brand new governments to deal with and newly created offices of state agencies. Even in Mbandaka there was significant dislocation, with many staff being relocated to the other new provinces.

The découpage process also dealt a severe blow to the public-private dialogue platform. Largely as a result of découpage, the government in the new Equateur province has itself lacked stability: since 2015, there have been six different Governors or Interim Governors, and with each change at the top have come changes in key personnel throughout the administration, notably at the Tax Authority. Thus, although the private sector and civil society have been ready and willing to engage, the difficult question to answer is who can and should they engage with? In the newly created provinces, it has also been necessary in some cases to create new chapters of the private sector associations, which, because of their smaller numbers and inexperience, have lower capacity to engage with government.

Benefits from elimination of tracasseries

The harassment and illegal charges levied by state agencies on boat operators have a pernicious effect on the rural and fluvial economies. For the larger operators plying long distances along the Congo River and its larger tributaries, not only can they incur additional costs running into thousands of US Dollars for each journey but less than 30% of the total journey time is accounted for by the actual navigation. As an example, in 2014 the round-trip between Kinshasa and Kisangani of just under 3,500km took typically at least 60 days and sometimes more than 100 days against a theoretical journey time of under 20 days. Much of this additional time is attributable to the negotiations associated with tracasseries. Even partial success therefore stands to improve the efficiency of the transport system, for the benefit of the wider economy.

Furthermore, for the owners and operators of baleinières, boats carved out of wood with external motors, the economics of transport activities are marginal. These operators therefore supplement their income by trading, buying agricultural produce from rural areas and selling it in the larger ports such as Mbandaka. ÉLAN's research showed that 75-80% of the savings from a reduction in tracasseries would be spent on buying additional produce. This would not only boost the boatmen's incomes but also increase access to markets for small-scale farmers in the rural areas served by the baleinières, hence increasing their incomes too.

Finally, none of the illegal charges levied on boat operators find their way to the public treasury. Reduction in the level of illegal "taxation" reduces the incentive to seek to avoid legitimate taxes, thereby increasing the flow of funds to the treasury.

¹ Source: ÉLAN MRM reports

With all of this upheaval, it came as no great surprise that the level of illegal taxation started to creep back up. There were signs that some of the old illegal taxes had been reappearing under different names. It should, however, be considered a success of the public-private dialogue and the awareness campaign that this trickle of taxes had not become a flood and the level of illegal taxes remained substantially below its original level.

A second obstacle for ÉLAN RDC related to the private sector associations themselves. The initial campaign of advocacy and awareness was envisaged as the first stage of a longer process, whereby ÉLAN RDC would support the umbrella organization AAC over an extended period and help to build a capable, self-sustaining, national association.

Friction between the associations arising from personal rivalries made it impossible to follow through on this aim. One specific negative result of this has been an inability to advocate at national level for compliance by the state security services. The police and military have never complied meaningfully with the requirements of the inter-ministerial decree and have continued to harass and levy illegal charges on boat operators. These charges account for the majority of the illegal taxes that have remained in place.

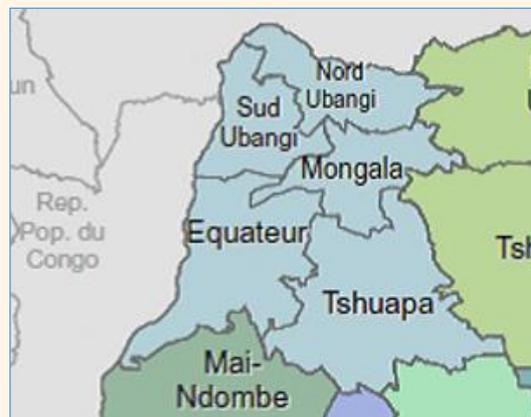
The Second ÉLAN Intervention

By late 2017, some two years after the original dialogue on illegal taxes, private sector actors in Equateur, Sud-Ubangi and Mongala were starting once again to complain about the reappearance of illegal taxes in new forms or with new names but levied on the same basis as the illegal, supposedly abolished taxes. ÉLAN RDC still had a partnership agreement with the Boat Operators' Union, UCAB, in Equateur and identified another potential partner in Sud-Ubangi, ACOGEM, an association representing traders (many of whom are also transport operators). ACOGEM had ambitions to represent traders across the whole of the former Equateur province and beyond and could therefore possibly cover Mongala. There was no doubting the commitment of ACOGEM but the association's willingness to advocate for reform was not matched by either its resources or its skills. It had previously adopted a very confrontational approach in its campaigns against tracasseries and harassment by state agencies and had achieved only limited success, whilst antagonising many senior officials, including the previous governor.

ÉLAN RDC extended its partnership agreement with UCAB to continue its support to the association and signed an agreement with ACOGEM. In Sud-Ubangi, ÉLAN RDC agreed a new approach with ACOGEM and other private sector and civil society groups, which, it was hoped, would prove to be more effective over the long term than their earlier efforts. This approach comprised three main elements: the formation of a coalition to advocate jointly to the government, initially on transport taxes but thereafter on other issues of economic development and the business environment; training for a number of the coalition partners in systematic, evidence-based advocacy; and the development of a "white list" of permitted taxes rather than a "black list" of banned taxes. This latter measure was intended to reduce the scope for invention of novel illegal taxes.

Découpage

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a vast country, approximately half the size of Western Europe. From early in the 20th century, originally as the Belgian Congo and, since independence, as the Republic of the Congo, Zaire and now DRC, it has undergone numerous changes in its administrative structure. The most recent of these changes took place in 2015, when six of the 11 provinces were split, in a process referred to as "découpage", into 21 new provinces, creating a total of 26 provinces. What had been Equateur province became five new provinces: a new province of Equateur (centred around the existing capital, Mbandaka), Nord-Ubangi, Sud-Ubangi, Mongala and Tshuapa (shown below).



ÉLAN's work prior to the découpage had covered the whole of the original province. Post-découpage, ÉLAN's work was concentrated in the new province of Equateur, plus Sud-Ubangi and Mongala. Whilst this distinction is largely immaterial for most purposes, it assumes far greater significance in interactions with government, as the experience of ÉLAN has shown.

As with the initial intervention, ÉLAN RDC held informal discussions with the Governor's office and the provincial tax authority in parallel with its private sector meetings in order to ensure that there would be adequate political buy-in on the government side. ÉLAN RDC also commissioned an independent analysis of the taxes that were being paid by ACOGEM members to determine their legality or otherwise. Although this is a very direct intervention, the negative impact of this was assessed as being acceptable because both ACOGEM and the tax authority had their own positions on the legitimacy of the existing taxes and this was seen as a way to help arbitrate in cases of disagreement.

ÉLAN RDC held a number of preparatory meetings with the public and private sector actors individually prior to the first face-to-face discussions held in late September 2018. There was some initial confusion over the role of ÉLAN RDC in the discussions, as the civil servants were accustomed to seeing aid projects drive the agenda directly. Once the facilitative approach of ÉLAN RDC was clarified, however, the two sides were able to proceed with constructive dialogue, not only on illegal taxes but also on a review of the rates of legitimate taxes, a major step forward. Although no firm agreements have been reached at the time of writing, the dialogue is continuing.

This dialogue is still at an early stage of development. Other public sector agencies will need to be involved as it progresses but there is optimism that tangible change will result from the process.

A very similar approach was agreed with UCAB in Equateur and the advocacy training was delivered to a group of private sector actors who had agreed to work together as a coalition. ÉLAN RDC also commissioned an analysis of the taxes being paid by UCAB members on the same basis as the study in Sud-Ubangi. There was, however, one major difference in the political economy: the instability of the government. ÉLAN RDC adopted the same approach as in Sud-Ubangi of engaging at first with government and business separately to prepare the ground for direct exchanges. It was not possible, however, to meet with the Governor's office and there were some personnel changes at the tax authority office which were unhelpful to the cause of reform. The outbreak of Ebola centred close to Mbandaka was an additional, unforeseen factor that prevented ÉLAN RDC from engaging meaningfully for a period of some three months. This also constrained activities by UCAB itself. Ultimately, it was not possible to proceed with the advocacy as planned, though some of the building blocks remain in place should the opportunity arise in future to revisit this topic.

Lessons

Of all of the interventions by ÉLAN RDC to support improvements to the business environment, this has been arguably the least successful. The intervention has, even so, generated tangible benefits – a reduction of over 50% in illegal taxes – for many boat operators and the small-scale farmers who depend on them for access to markets; these benefits continue, in spite of the re-emergence of some of the illegal taxes. It can be argued that a change has taken place in the operation of the river transport sector. There has been a sustained (even if only partial) change in the behaviour of several of the state agencies and their interactions with private-sector operators. The private sector has adopted a different, more collaborative and less confrontational, approach to advocacy, which appears to be paying dividends. A deeper systemic change would have been the institutionalisation of public-private dialogue on taxation and other aspects of the business environment. This may yet happen. The situation in Sud-Ubangi shows promise, with the start of a constructive dialogue between the revenue authority and the coalition led by ACOGEM and facilitated by ÉLAN RDC. It is still too early, however, to be confident that it will be achieved.

What has ÉLAN RDC learnt from this experience?

Political economy matters

The evolution of this intervention demonstrated once again the central importance of the political economy. Some level of success of the advocacy and dialogue in reducing illegal taxes was almost guaranteed once it became clear that the Provincial Governor had been convinced of the merits of the case. His central concern was the prospect of increased revenues flowing to the provincial treasury if the level of illegal taxes (none of which ever reached the government coffers) were reduced. This naturally brought his position more closely into alignment with the position of the business community rather than that of the civil servants who were collecting the illegal taxes. He therefore applied pressure to the senior officers of the revenue collecting agencies to modify their behaviour. With hindsight, it is also no surprise that the security services were largely immune to the pressure that the Governor's office was able to bring to bear on other agencies.

The *découpage* created a huge political upheaval and invalidated much previous analysis in a single blow. Although the legislation had been passed some time previously, its implementation was only triggered by events elsewhere in DRC and came as a surprise to most observers. An argument could perhaps be made that ÉLAN RDC would have been better served by waiting until after *découpage*. This assumes advance knowledge of the event, however, and we are not convinced that a better result would have been achieved in any case. Instead of one public-private dialogue, there would have been several, with all that entails in terms of logistics, facilitation and support.

An important aspect of the political economy and stakeholder analysis is the timely reminder that the government and state agencies do not constitute a single homogenous entity. The Governor and some of the provincial ministries were supporters of reform, not because of any particular altruism towards the boat operators but because they could see that the reform was also in their own interests. Several front-line agencies were opposed to the abolition of the illegal taxes, as shown by the need to engage in dialogue, but were susceptible to a combination of pressure from elsewhere in government and greater awareness and understanding amongst the private sector. The security services, a third group of state actors, were able to resist these pressures and continued to exact illegal charges.

A final point to note, and one that is often overlooked, is the political economy of the private sector. Business operators are not immune to personal or professional disagreements, ambitions or rivalries. In this case (and this is not the only instance encountered by ÉLAN RDC), personal differences between the leaders of rival groups of boat operators forced ÉLAN RDC to step back from its original aim of facilitating the development of a truly representative national association able to lobby national government. This has been to the detriment of the sector and the wider economy.

Work both sides of the problem

ÉLAN RDC has had a very limited mandate to work with the public sector. When attempting to facilitate public-private dialogue, this is a significant constraint. In this case, ÉLAN RDC was able to engage with the provincial government, especially the Governor's office, first in Equateur and later on in Sud-Ubangi, and this engagement was instrumental to the success of the advocacy and dialogue process. Wider access to government ministries, departments and agencies could have provided an opportunity both to raise the capacity of government to consult with businesses and to increase its understanding of the benefits and hence its willingness to do so.

Change and Impact versus Systemic Change

As noted in the introduction to this section, there has been some change in the water transport sector and this has generated beneficial impact but just how systemic is this change? We would have to concede that, in this case, the argument in favour of the change being truly systemic is not compelling. There has been a reduction in the number and level of illegal taxes levied by the civil authorities but some still remain. Some of the illegal taxes have made a reappearance in different guises and the legislation remains opaque and at times ambiguous. The police and, especially, the armed forces have continued largely as before. It would perhaps be appropriate to describe the results as a partial systemic change.

In order to tackle this, ÉLAN RDC has attempted in its second intervention to facilitate a renewed public-private dialogue to generate a "white list" of taxes and charges, along with agreed rates, that are explicitly permitted, rather than the approach of the inter-ministerial decree, which was to create a black list of taxes explicitly forbidden. This approach, though initially welcomed by both sides, has stalled in the new Equateur province because of institutional instability. ÉLAN RDC has continued to support the ship-owners' alliance so that it remains the state's essential partner in public and private exchanges on the business climate in this sector but further progress here will require a more permissive political environment. In Sud-Ubangi, the signs are more positive but it is still too early to make any strong claim of success.

Knowledge is Power

One of the reasons why agents of the state have been able to extract illegal taxes from boat operators (and other business people) is the lack of clarity in the legislation relating to taxation. Even where clarity exists, it can be difficult to find the relevant legal texts to confirm the regulations – requiring time that a boat operator on the Congo River is unlikely to have. The wide dissemination of information on what is and is not permissible is a vital element in successful implementation of reforms. The recent publication in the Official Journal of a

comprehensive tax typology has been a most welcome move by the national government to aid clarity in this regard.

Of course, power also grows out of the barrel of a gun, which goes a long way to explaining the lack of compliance with the law by the military and police.

The Chicken and Egg Conundrum

One of the drivers of illegal taxation is the failure of the state to ensure that its officers are paid their salaries reliably. In such a situation, front-line staff face a stark choice between extorting illegal payments and destitution. They naturally opt for the former.

A complete solution to the problem of illegal taxation cannot therefore be achieved only through public-private dialogue of the type that ÉLAN RDC can support and facilitate. It requires a broader approach that includes public financial management and the re-establishment of the financial flows that are mandated by law but which do not always take place. This depends on strong, capable institutions, able to discharge their duties. Without the ability to gather taxes, the state cannot function properly but, with a dysfunctional state, people are disinclined to pay their taxes and may even prefer to negotiate some level of tracasseries rather pay taxes for, apparently, nothing in return. The current system effectively cuts the state out of the taxation system so that businesses pay directly to public servants. In these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that only partial success has been achieved.

Conclusions

The experience of ÉLAN RDC has shown that reform can be achieved, at least in part, through a systematic and evidence-based dialogue between the private sector and the government. It has also, however, highlighted some of the difficulties of operating in a fragile state such as DRC. Given the dysfunction in the public financial system and the extent to which the social contract between the government and its people has broken down, “fixing” the business environment in DRC will require a major effort of political will. The task is also clearly far beyond the capacity of a programme such as ÉLAN RDC to support by itself.

Partial solutions can be achieved through the promotion of dialogue at provincial level but this must lead on ultimately to further dialogue at national level, followed by resolute action to ensure that agreed solutions are implemented. This will not be a rapid process but it is possible, if there is a shared commitment from politicians and people.

Lacking the resources or the time to tackle such a complex system in its entirety, ÉLAN RDC has chosen to focus on small-scale reforms which are achievable rather than attempting to bring about root and branch reform. This approach has paid dividends. Some illegal taxes remain but many have been eliminated and others greatly reduced in severity. These changes have contributed to greater efficiency in the river transport system of the Congo basin and have benefited the rural economy.