

Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville)

Issa Sikiti da Silva



Overview

The Republic of Congo is a Central African oil-producing nation on the banks of the Congo River. It is one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most urbanised countries. Between 65% and 70% of its population live in urban areas, mostly in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire.¹ This constitutes an asset in terms of the implementation of development policies and a handicap in terms of the pressure on land, development of basic infrastructure and access.² In urban areas, including the capital Brazzaville, housing challenges include continuous building of houses in areas unsuitable for human habitation (flood and landslide zones), poor service delivery, and lack of basic services. Accessing neighbourhoods built in high-risk areas due to poor roads is also a problem, alongside a huge housing deficit, and weak implementation of the urban renewal policy.³

Much of the population still live in unplanned settlements, without adequate sanitation and housing, especially in the capital Brazzaville and the second's largest city, Pointe-Noire. Many households in rural areas lack most amenities including clean water sources and sanitation. Artesian wells or un-clarified water sources account for over 20% of all water access in the country.⁴ Power outages are frequent and millions of remote and rural households remain unconnected to the national grid. In addition, there is little improvement in urban areas. According to the newly appointed Prime Minister Anatole Collinet Makosso, restructuring precarious neighbourhoods, providing adequate sanitation and modernising people's living spaces will be at the heart of his government's action during his term in office.⁵ He said his government would improve rural housing and complete work on housing built in Dioso in Kouilou and elsewhere. Congo Housing and Construction Minister Josué Rodrigue Nguounimba disclosed his ministry's priorities for 2021 in July to include urban planning, controlling the cost of housing, and improving housing.⁶

The World Bank is financing 10 projects, to the tune of approximately CFA250 billion (US\$451 million) to improve governance, strengthen human capital and diversify the economy.⁷ Congo is a member state of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and its monetary policy is governed by the Bank of Central African States (BEAC). Its economy, which has been overrun by years of civil war, bad governance, state corruption and nepotism, lack of diversification and falling oil prices, was recently worsened by the impact of COVID-19. However, after contracting by 6.8% in 2020 and

KEY FIGURES

Main urban centres	Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire
Exchange rate (1 July 2021): 1 USD = [a] 1 PPP\$ = [b]	553.23 CFA Franc (XAF) 312.04 CFA Franc (XAF)
Total population [b] Urban population [b] Population growth rate [b] Urbanisation rate [b] GDP per capita (Current US\$) [b] Percentage of population below national poverty line (2017) [b] Unemployment rate (% of total labour force, national estimate) (2017) [b] Proportion of adult population that borrowed formally (2017) [b] Gini coefficient (2017) [b] HDI country ranking (2019) [c] HDI country score (2019) [c]	5 518 092 3 742 867 2.53% 3.20% US\$1 973 42.0% 11.0% 3.7% 48.9 149 0.57
GDP (Current US\$) [b] GDP growth rate [b] Inflation rate (2019) [b] Lending interest rate (2017) [b]	US\$10 885 million -7.95% 1.40% 20.60%
Number of residential mortgages outstanding (2020) [d] Value of residential mortgages outstanding (USD) Prevailing residential mortgage rate Term (2020) [d] Maximum LTV on a residential mortgage Ratio of mortgages to GDP Number of residential mortgage providers (2020) [d] Number of microfinance loans outstanding (2020) [f] Value of microfinance loans (USD) (2020) [f] Number of microfinance providers [g]	150 564 n/a 11-12% 10 years n/a n/a 6 755 US\$0.75 million 10
Total number of residential properties with a title deed Number of formal dwellings completed annually Price of the cheapest, newly built house by a formal developer or contractor in an urban area in local currency units [h] Size of cheapest, newly built house by a formal developer or contractor in an urban area [h] Typical monthly rental for the cheapest, newly built house [i] Cost of standard 50kg bag of cement in local currency units [j] Type of deeds registry: digital, scanned or paper (2020) [k] World Bank Ease of Doing Business index rank (2020) [k] Number of procedures to register property (2020) [k] Time to register property (2020) [k] Cost to register property as share of property price (2020) [k] World Bank DBI Quality of Land Administration index score (0-30) (2020) [k]	n/a n/a 350 000 000 XAF 400m ² 120 000 XAF 3 750 XAF (US\$6.78) Paper 180 5 54 days 13.6% 3.5
Percentage of women who own a house alone and/or jointly (2012) [l] Percentage of female-headed households (2012) [l] Percentage of urban population living in slums (2018) [m] Percentage of households with basic sanitation services (2012) [l] Percentage of households with electricity (2012) [l]	16.3% 22.0% 77.5% 11.3% 41.6%
Cumulative number of COVID deaths per 100 000 as of 1 Oct [n] Percent of population fully vaccinated against COVID-19 as of 1 Oct [o]	3.57 n/a

NB: Figures are for 2021 unless stated otherwise.

[a] Xe.com	[h] Congo Immobilier
[b] World Bank World Development Indicators	[i] Nbyimmo.com
[c] Human Development Reports, United Nations Development Programme	[j] Ministry of Commerce, Supply and Consumption
[d] World Bank Publication: Housing Financing in the CEMAC Zone, 2020	[k] World Bank Ease of Doing Business Indicators
[e] Bank of Central African States (BEAC)	[l] Demographic and Health Surveys, USAID
[f] Central African Banking Commission (COBAC)	[m] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)
[g] Ministry of Finance	[n] World Health Organization (WHO)

0.6% in 2019, it is expected to rebound in 2021 and 2022. Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to grow by 1.2% in 2021 and by 1.5% in 2022.⁸ GDP per capita reached \$2 279.97 in 2019, according to the World Bank.

The oil sector represents around 90% of the exports of the country. The Republic of Congo also exports gold and diamonds and generates revenues through the forestry sector. Social conflict has arisen around the management of oil revenues,⁹ from which most of the population receive little real benefit.¹⁰ The non-resource sector continues to decline, contracting by 5.5% as a result of the weakening of activity in construction and public works, transport, and telecommunications, according to the World Bank.

Hit badly by COVID-19, the construction sector recorded an output drop of 9.9% in 2020. Despite its agricultural potential, at least 10 million hectares of arable land and abundant rainfall,¹¹ the agricultural sector contributes only 3.4% to GDP and represents 35% of all jobs.¹² Inflation is expected to reach 2.6% in 2021 and 2.8% in 2022. The budget balance is expected to show a surplus of 0.4% of GDP in 2021 and 0.7% of GDP in 2022.¹³

The key bank rate remains unchanged at 3.25% in the CEMAC region on decision of the BEAC. The rate on marginal lending facility also remains unchanged at 5%, while the ratio of bank minimum reserves is still set at 7% on demand liabilities and 4.5% on term liabilities.¹⁴ Heavily indebted, Congo's outstanding public debt stands at CFA6.016 trillion (approximately \$10.9 billion).¹⁵ It reached 83.3% of GDP at the end of 2019 and was expected to increase to 104.2% of GDP in 2020.

Congo has been actively improving its infrastructure, building new airports, dams, bridges, roads, stadiums, and administrative buildings in recent years. Chinese construction firms are heavily involved in these projects.¹⁶

Access to finance

Despite the majority of the population not having a bank account, banks are still the main source of finance. Eleven banks operate in the country. Banks' performance has been steady despite the COVID-19 health crisis and a limping global economy. The National Economic and Financial Committee said the precautionary savings rate of households has increased, reflected by the increase in bank deposits, a decline in gross credits to the economy and a decrease in bad debt.¹⁷

However, despite positive developments, most banks only offer short-term and medium-term loans. Only three out of the 11 are reportedly offering long-term loans: Société Générale Congo (SGC) (28.67%), Congolaise de Banque (LCB) (27.85%), and Banque Commerciale Internationale (17.92%).

In the second half of 2020 (July to December), the CEMAC zone's average monthly credit flow was CFA530 billion (nearly \$958 million) overall, with a peak observed in December 2020 (CFA730 billion or approximately \$1.3 billion). During the period under review, large companies remained the main beneficiaries of these loans, capturing 51.01% of the funding granted, followed by individuals (15.67%) and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (14.17%). Public entities only got 6.05%. Cameroon captured 45.78% of the total volume of loans, followed by Gabon (20.86%) and Congo (19.91%). Between July and December 2020, Congo banks granted credit to individuals in the following manner: short-term CFA21.4 billion (approximately \$38.6 million), medium-term CFA59.149 billion (nearly \$107 million) and long-term CFA3.449 billion (approximately \$6.2 million).¹⁸

Housing credit rates (TEG, "taux effectif global") to individuals in Congo during second half of 2020 were as follows: 11.15% in July, 11.86% in August, 11.75% in September, 12.24% in October, 11.87% in November and 10.78% in December.¹⁹

Though they come with highest interest rates, home loans are also offered with a longer duration to increase the borrower's eligibility.²⁰ However, few banks in Congo offer mortgages, hence the lack of long-term housing finance. The Banque Congolaise de l'Habitat (BCH), the main housing lender, grants mortgage loans at 6.5% over five years (on Savings Housing Plan only), while commercial banks offer mortgages at 14%. BCH's outstanding mortgage loans represent 20% of total loans, but these loans are similar to consumer loans as their duration does not exceed five years. The BCH also grants real estate loans (or construction loans) for real estate developers. It finances real estate developers and allocates funds according to the progress of the work.²¹

Further, that most people lack a bank account and do not have formal employment constitutes a major hurdle to developing a successful and reliable mortgage sector. Those who cannot open a formal bank account make use of microfinance entities such as Mutuelles Congolaises d'Epargne et de Crédit, (MUCODEC), the country's biggest and best organised microfinance institution. MUCODEC, which mainly serves rural areas, grants housing loans to employees of the private sector; civil servants, farmers, craftsmen, and traders. The MUCODEC model consists of a mutualist organisation and a redefinition of roles in which clients join forces and become owners.²² Microfinance institutions depend mostly on customers' deposits.

Urban informality

In the Republic of Congo 48% of the population lives in slums, according to 2018 World Bank figures. A project called Développement Urbain et Restauration des Quartiers Précaires (DURQUAP or Urban Development and Poor Neighbourhood Upgrading) aims to improve access to infrastructure and basic services in slums in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire and improve slums' connectivity and integrate their network with the rest of the city. The percentage of the population that is urbanised is 67.37%, with an urbanisation rate of 3.2% and the population growth rate is 2.6%. 66% of the urban population and 47% of the rural population have access to clean water, while 76% of those living in urban areas have access to sanitation, while 34% still use uncovered latrines.

Despite the presence of many microfinance institutions (MFIs) in Congo, few offer specific housing products due to lack of access to long-term resources. Households wishing to invest in housing often only have recourse to ordinary consumer credit.²³ The microfinance sector in Congo, like elsewhere in Central Africa, is in a bad shape as problems such as unchecked growth and poor governance have led to numerous bankruptcies in Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville. Nevertheless, Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville seem to have well-structured microfinance providers. Microfinance in Central Africa is not the priority of the public authorities, who do not put in place specific measures to support it. Microfinance institutions in the CEMAC zone offer little support to entrepreneurs and are selective in granting credit.²⁴ The main housing lender, BCH, has a classic commercial bank income structure consisting primarily of margins from customer transactions and some income from miscellaneous transactions.

Affordability

Data provided by the Department of Studies and Planning at the Ministry of Construction, Town Planning and Housing and reported in local media suggests that in Bacongo, a unit with one living room plus three bedrooms, built in an area of 111.70m² with a garden, costs nearly CFA36 million (approximately US\$65 000), excluding notary and land title fees. One unit with two living rooms plus five bedrooms with an area of 278.20m² built on a large plot with a garden costs nearly CFA 92 million (US\$165 000), excluding notary and issuing of land title fees. Other new houses cost around CFA105 million (nearly US\$190 000). The houses are being bought through the BCH's five to six-year terms. Affordability is a thorny issue in Congo. These exorbitant prices mean that the majority of the population cannot afford these new houses, simply because they are poor and have no access to long-term finance. The poverty situation, already dire due to years of recession, falling oil prices and economic mismanagement, and the COVID-19 crisis, is nearly catastrophic. The Prime Minister has recently urged Congolese to show solidarity, calling on private creditors of heads of families and households, landowners and landlords, and lenders, to show understanding and patience, to make arrangements with their debtors and retired tenants.²⁵

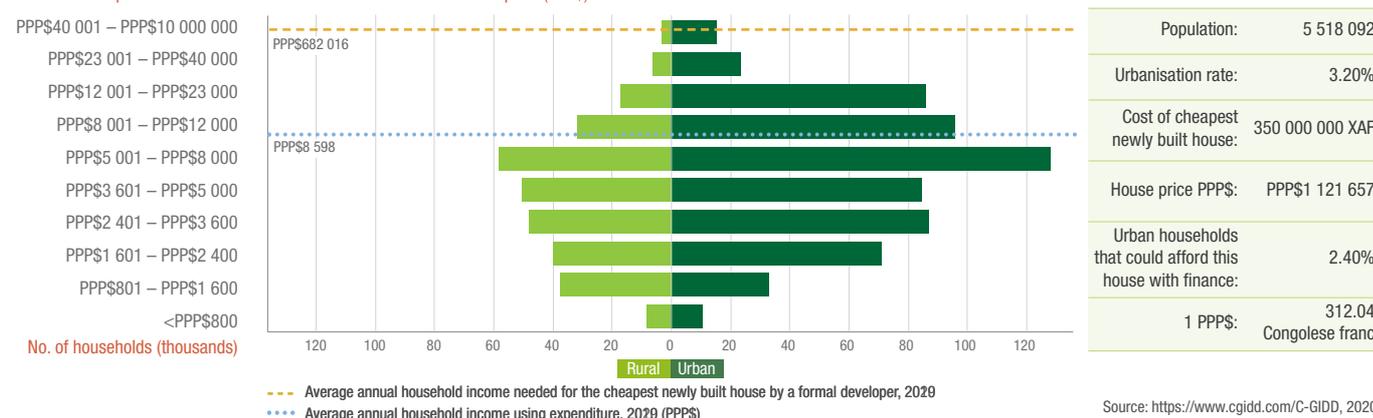
Housing supply

The housing crisis remains a real problem in Congo-Brazzaville where the gap is widening between the different social classes. Recently, the government made available a huge portion of public land to build more houses. The land, covering an area of 368 700m², is located in Sangolo OMS (Poto-Poto Djoué), south of the capital Brazzaville. The premises have been used since 1959 by the Agency for the Safety of Air Navigation in Africa and Madagascar (ASECNA). Now it appears to have been decommissioned and incorporated into the real estate property of the state.²⁶

However, state-funded housing programmes face many difficulties. Despite the resources invested, the results of these programs are still limited. The housing ecosystem in Congo suffers from many weaknesses. Certain structural constraints limit the development of the sector both in terms of supply and demand. The lack of access to titled land and affordable plots remains a real obstacle to investment in property. Although many reforms have been carried out, disputes over land issues remain a real risk.²⁷ In addition, the lack of basic infrastructure represents an additional cost, which is reflected in the final price of housing. Self-built housing is widespread despite the rising costs of building materials. More than 90% of houses in Congo are self-built.

CONGO

Annual income profile for rural and urban households based on consumption (PPP\$)



The state aims to develop Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), which allow the state to reduce risks associated with residential real estate projects by distributing such risk between real estate developers and public agencies specialising in housing and habitat.

Local and international experts in January 2021 approved an urban development plan aimed to change the face of Brazzaville. Its recommendations include allowing the administration to better control the public domain of the state, and to define a zoning plan which specifies the rules applicable to construction.²⁸

Property markets

Turnover in the Congolese property market fell 27% in 2020, alongside accommodation and food services (-40.3%), a decline attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁹

The urban land management department manages urban land and issues building permits, occupation permits for public areas to users, and deals with disputes regarding demarcations. However, ordinary citizens who opt for self-construction, as well as private property developers – Congo has few of these – often face complaints of the slowness in obtaining a building permit, registering property, and the issuing of title deeds. The construction techniques used in the Congo are not sustainable and use a lot of energy.³⁰

The quality of land administration index (3.5) fares poorly compared to the Sub-Saharan Africa average (9.0) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) high income nations (23.2). Registering a property takes nearly two months through five procedures.

Despite the economic downturn and the global health crisis, prices of building materials keep skyrocketing, frustrating buyers, self-builders and investors. The foreign-owned (Togolese and Indian) cement factory that closed recently in Mindouli (135km of Brazzaville) was a bitter pill to swallow for local investors, builders, cement retailers and workers, and delivered a huge blow to the region of Pool's local economy, severely affected by years of armed conflict and separatist policies.³¹

A 400m² plot of land in Brazzaville in peripheral areas costs between CFA15 million (approximately US\$27 000) and CFA20 million (nearly US\$36 000). The same size will cost between CFA50 million (approximately US\$90 000) and CFA200 million (approximately US\$360 000) in the city centre and suitable surrounding areas. For a country where the minimum wage hovers around CFA51 000 (US\$92), these prices are prohibitive. Unaffordable housing prices, lack of long-term planning to alleviate the housing crisis and ill-conceived housing policies force many people to build anywhere. As long as they have a roof over their heads, it does not matter if it means being exposed to weather hazards such as landslides and flooding, or having no running water, power or adequate sanitation and roads. As a result, every year during the rainy season, many people die and others lose their belongings and become homeless.³² Urban-centered,

infrastructural and utility projects often fail to address the basic needs of the majority of the population, with rural areas in particular hampered by the inadequate distribution of state resources.

Furthermore, rent prices have surged again after a brief truce due to the global health crisis. Many tenants feel "enslaved" by the impossible demands and cunning of "demarcheurs" (informal house brokers), who join forces with landlords to set exorbitant prices as they please without the government lifting a finger. Minister Ngouonimba's announcement in July that he would control housing prices seems to have had mixed reactions from the public. A milestone deal signed in Paris in September 2019 between the Congo President and President Emmanuel Macron saw France commit \$65 million to, among others, implement a land-use planning policy focused on sustainable use of land and natural resources and improve land tenure security in rural areas.³³

Policy and legislation

Construction materials are imported at significant costs and do not benefit from tax exemption. Landowners rule the country as the "real masters of the system" due to the lack of control over urban land management.³⁴ A traditional and empirical urban land acquisition procedure still exists, one which does not allow the state to effectively collect property tax. Other challenges include the numerous land conflicts arising from the "bad" practices of the population, and the state's difficulties in building up land reserves.³⁵ It is possible to establish provisional certificates of ownership from customary land rights. These provisional documents can be transformed into land titles on registered land after the decision of a customary rights assessment commission, which is made up of representatives from several sectors (town planning, cadaster, city technical services, among others).

The land sector is dominated by patriarchal values, and women and particularly women-headed households struggle to own a piece of land or adequate housing. In a country where gender inequalities are still widespread, women and girls have fewer rights, less information, and less access to all kinds of resources. In the impoverished townships, female-headed households are said to be living in compromising, unhealthy and shameful conditions. Despite numerous interventions by the state in the housing sector to enhance production and access to housing finance, more than one in two households does not have access to decent housing.³⁶

The lack of adequate complementary land and housing policies, including the applicability of the existing ones, seems to have led to inefficient outcomes. One example is the case of the National Housing Finance (Fonds National de l'Habitat, FNH), whereby millions of dollars meant to finance housing through the BCH is still waiting to be allocated due to lack of structure and legislation. A bill intended to create an entity capable of distributing NHF funds (approximately CFA3 billion per year or approximately US\$5 million) is reportedly in the pipeline. BCH is pinning its hopes on these funds to develop its range of financial products for housing finance.³⁷

Opportunities

Congo's sprawling urbanisation is leading to an increasing demand for home ownership and rental housing, a need the government is unable to meet despite launching major but overambitious housing projects in recent years. Private investors looking for opportunities in the housing sector should have no problem filling this gap, especially if they can succeed in supplying low-cost houses.

Availability of data on housing finance

Ministère de la Construction et de l'Urbanisme: information on construction and housing sectors, social housing, urbanism trends and policies, urban renewal policies and projects.

Société de Promotion Immobilière: Social Housing Projects.

Banque des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale: Interest rates on mortgages.

Direction de la gestion du foncière urbain: Urban land management, issuing of building permits and occupancy permits for public areas to users, monitoring and handling urban land disputes.

Département des Affaires Foncières, Cadastre et Topographie : Property Registration (lands and buildings).

Notaire: Drafting and signature of sale agreements.

Additional sources

ADIAC <https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/urbanisme-brazzaville-et-pointe-noire-dans-vingt-ans-83210>

World Bank <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P146933?lang=en>

UNICEF eau, hygiène et assainissement <https://www.unicef.org/congo/eau-hygi%C3%A8ne-et-assainissement> World Bank (% of urban populations living in slums) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POPSLUM.UR.ZS?locations=CG>

Websites

Mairie de Brazzaville <https://brazzaville.cg/>

Mairie de Pointe Noire <http://mairiepointenoire.cg/>

MUCODEC <https://www.mucodec.com/>

Banque Congolaise de l'Habitat <http://www.bch.cg/>

Ministère de la Construction, de l'Urbanisme et de l'Habitat :

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