

Human Resource Management in the DRC, how to Manage the Unmanageable?

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Abstract: This article offers an in-depth reflection on human resource management (HRM) practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), through the analysis of three case studies that illustrate the country's organizational diversity: a hospital, a public administration, and a mining company. These cases, selected for their representativeness and the authors' intimate knowledge of them, highlight the wide range of practices and constraints faced by managers in the DRC. The study adopts a contextual approach, drawing on an adaptation of the PESTEL framework—expanded to include historical dimensions (PHESTEL)—to examine the influence of the external environment on HRM. It shows how managers must constantly juggle individual expectations, internal constraints, and societal pressures, using the IOS model (Gosse & Cornet, 2023a). The article highlights the structural challenges confronting HRM in the DRC: a weak state, lack of effective regulation, and a strong influence of international standards. These factors often result in arbitrary practices (Pichault & Nizet, 2013). In response, the authors recommend adapting HRM practices to local specificities, rather than transplanting universal models ill-suited to unstable contexts (Kamdem & Apitsa, 2024a), in order to promote more coherent and sustainable human resource management in the DRC.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, PH-ESTEL Model, IOS Model, Organizational Diversity, Individual Expectations, Internal Constraints, Societal Pressures, Universal Model, Arbitrary Model.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Enterprises in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) operate within an environment characterized by significant organizational diversity and specific challenges in human resource management (HRM). These challenges stem from the very structure of the country's economic fabric, which consists of multinational corporations—mainly active in the mining, banking, and telecommunications sectors—a small number of large Congolese- or African-owned firms (particularly from South Africa), a vast network of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with varying degrees of formalization, and a predominant informal sector.

In parallel, public services—currently undergoing transformation under the influence of "new public management" reforms—and both local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a significant role. These reflect the strong presence of large international organizations and a dynamic associative fabric. Despite this multiplicity of economic actors, HRM practices remain

under-documented and largely misunderstood. Although numerous academic studies and dissertations have addressed the topic, their dissemination remains limited, confined to a small circle (Kamdem et al., 2020a).

HRM in Africa, and more specifically in the DRC, remains an emerging field, marked by a lack of professionalism and the absence of tools genuinely adapted to local specificities. Congolese managers face a complex and unstable socio-economic and political environment, which forces them to adopt constantly adaptive management strategies. In this respect, their situation can be likened to that of captains navigating turbulent seas, compelled to constantly readjust their course to avoid shipwreck. In a context rife with organizational and cultural contradictions, these leaders must continually reinvent their HRM practices in response to their evolving environments.

Although inspired by imported models drawn from management textbooks applied to public and multinational organizations, these practices are often reshaped and adapted

to the local context—frequently through a trial-and-error approach (Kamdern et al., 2020b).

This study adopts an empirico-inductive approach, grounded in concrete field practices from which broader insights are drawn. Our objective is to better understand the individual and social phenomena underlying HRM dynamics in the DRC, taking into account the meanings that these practices hold for the actors involved. We therefore focus on the behaviors of actors and their ability to develop strategies suited to their socio-economic and cultural environments. This approach falls within an interactionist perspective, which seeks to analyze actor strategies and power plays as shaped by the contexts in which they operate (Apitsa, 2013; Kamdem et al., 2020c, 2021c).

The core question of this study is: How can one manage the unmanageable in an environment characterized by complex institutional, cultural, and structural constraints?

This article follows a progressive structure, beginning with an introduction that sets the research framework. It proceeds with an exploration of existing literature on HRM in the DRC, shedding light on the theoretical foundations of the study. The chosen methodology is then detailed, followed by the presentation of results derived from the three case studies. These findings form the basis for an in-depth discussion of their implications. The article concludes with a summary of the main lessons drawn from the analysis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores various ways of conceptualizing human resource management (HRM) in Africa, with a particular focus on management specificities in sub-Saharan Africa and, more specifically, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). To better understand the Congolese context, we adopt the PH-ESTEL analytical framework (Political, Historical, Economic, Socio-cultural, Technological, Ecological, and Legal), which allows for a multidimensional understanding of the factors influencing HRM practices in the DRC.

➤ *Different Approaches to Understanding HRM in Africa*

The literature identifies four main approaches to examining management practices in culturally distinct contexts (Kamdern et al., 2020d; Kamdem & Apitsa, 2024b; Pichault & Nizet, 2013): the universalist approach, the local cultural approach, the structuralist approach, and cultural interpretivism.

The universalist approach seeks to identify the gap between the management practices observed in a given context and the "best practices" taught in business schools—High Performance Work Practices (HPWP)—which are largely based on European or North American models. Much of HRM and management education, both abroad and within the DRC, is grounded in these generic management theories. Some research focuses on the discrepancies between HR practices in Africa and the obstacles that hinder the optimal implementation of these best practices in African enterprises,

particularly in SMEs (Kessy, 1998), but also in multinational subsidiaries, major NGOs, and public services (OECD, 2004). This universalist model is often criticized as ethnocentric, taking North American and European business models as benchmarks.

The local cultural approach aims to identify the specific features of HRM practices within a given country or region by demonstrating how these reflect particular cultural contexts (Kamdern et al., 2021d; Kamdem & Apitsa, 2024c; Mutabazi, 2001a). This approach supports a polycentric management style—adapted to local values and norms. Scholars in this tradition seek to outline the distinctiveness of "African management" (Apitsa, 2018a; Kamdem & Apitsa, 2024d; Mutabazi, 2001b), emphasizing aspects such as the relationship between the individual and the collective, time perception, norms of morality, traditions, rituals and beliefs, the role of religion, and familial or social interpersonal dynamics (Kamdern et al., 2021e; Mutabazi, 2001c).

The structuralist approach contextualizes management practices within their institutional and historical environments. Culture, in this sense, must be understood through the lens of institutional analysis, legal developments, and socio-political contexts (Davel et al., 2008; Iribarne, 1989; Sem et al., 2017). History plays a key role, especially in recognizing the legacy of colonial rule (Reybrouck, 2012). Scholars in this stream advocate for a comprehensive view that incorporates the interplay between culture, political institutions, social and educational systems, languages, and geographic factors.

Cultural interpretivism, meanwhile, focuses on how managers adopt compromises based on constructivist theories. Pichault and Nizet (2013) analyze how Western management tools are hybridized with local cultural particularities (Glidja & Awignan, 2021). They show how African managers reinterpret and translate external influences to reduce organizational dependence on various external environments (Pichault & Nizet, 2013).

➤ *Management in Sub-Saharan Africa*

Let us now turn to the key characteristics of management in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the numerous criticisms directed at this framework, we begin with Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1984), which remain useful for providing a preliminary overview of a region or country's cultural traits. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, Hofstede's data suggest a high power distance index (>80), a collectivist orientation (>80) rather than individualistic, low uncertainty avoidance (<40), and a short-term time orientation (<15).

In line with this high hierarchical distance, highly bureaucratized processes are commonly observed (Tidjani & Kamdem, 2010), especially in public administration, where numerous hierarchical levels and paternalistic management styles (Kamdern, 2002; Sampieri et al., 2000) contribute to the disempowerment of employees (Kamdern et al., 2021f).

African societies are generally characterized by collectivist values and what Hofstede terms “feminine” cultural traits. These dimensions are often highlighted in research on African management (Kamdem & Apitsa, 2024e; Nkakleu & Manga, 2015). Henry, in Iribarne’s seminal work (Iribarne, 1989), shows that in African enterprises, spoken communication plays a central role in maintaining community cohesion, with strong reliance on personal networks (Henry & Monkam-Daverat, 1998). Hernandez emphasizes the importance of consensus-building and the cultural difficulty of handling open conflict. He proposes an HRM model based on the three Cs: Cooperation, Community, and Collaboration (Hernandez, 2001). Mutabazi (2001e) describes a circulatory model founded on the logic of gift and counter-gift, the reciprocity of rights and duties, the defense of community interests by those in authority, and peer-to-peer information exchange (Akowoura & Livian, 2020; Kamdem, 2002; Mutabazi & Pierre, 2008).

However, several studies also reveal that behind these collectivist norms lie individualistic behaviors marked by jealousy, sabotage, complacency, and mistrust (Henry & Monkam-Daverat, 1998; Özbilgin & Chanlat, 2018).

Congolese management, like most management practices in sub-Saharan Africa, tends to reflect Taylorist principles of work organization, characterized by strong horizontal and vertical divisions of labor, and a high degree of centralization in decision-making, often in the hands of hierarchical superiors or political authorities. In public services and large corporations, procedures are standardized, with minimal focus on performance outcomes and a certain fatalism regarding goal attainment. Distrust of workers is often expressed through direct supervision styles, leaving little room for experimentation, error tolerance, or constructive critique. Organizational structures tend to undervalue teamwork, and training—both initial and ongoing—is severely lacking.

Furthermore, discriminatory practices persist based on gender, ethnicity, and region of origin. Many employees remain in their positions well beyond retirement age, thereby limiting employment opportunities for younger generations (Apitsa, 2018b; Rubbers & Gallez, 2015; Sem et al., 2017).

HRM practices in the DRC remain heavily influenced by colonial-era work organization models. During colonization, labor shortages were addressed through coercion. Although such coercion has formally disappeared, power imbalances in the labor market continue to restrict worker autonomy, reducing their role to that of mere executors.

To this day, the Congolese system largely mirrors the colonial model described by Ombredane in 1951: *“Unlike what occurs in customary settings, labor is organized, imposed, and supervised by others, often fragmented to such an extent that its utility is not even apparent to the worker”* (Ombredane, 1952).

In line with a structuralist approach, we emphasize the need to situate management practices within their institutional and historical environments, which justifies the relevance of the PHESTEL model for analyzing the Congolese context.

➤ *A Specific Context: The Congolese PH-ESTEL*

From a structuralist perspective, understanding the managerial context in the DRC requires an analysis framework that is both accessible and comprehensive. For this purpose, we build upon the well-known PESTEL model, expanding it by integrating a historical dimension—thus forming the PH-ESTEL model (Political, Historical, Economic, Socio-cultural, Technological, Ecological, and Legal) (Kamdem et al., 2021g). We argue that incorporating the historical dimension is indispensable to fully comprehend HRM practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

This Congolese PH-ESTEL model was co-developed over several years with local instructors and students at ISC and UPC business schools. It gradually evolved by incorporating data from specialized press coverage on African and Congolese realities. The model has been validated by multiple Congolese experts, including university professors, policymakers, and economic actors (Mapapa, 2016; Matamba, 2015b).

• *Political Dimension*

The first “P” in the PH-ESTEL framework stands for Politics. In the case of the DRC, there are some positive developments such as a degree of political stability under President Félix Tshisekedi, in office since 2019 and re-elected in January 2024. A decentralization process is underway, aiming to develop policies more closely aligned with local needs. However, implementation remains slow and complex, even if some provinces have begun assuming greater responsibilities (Kabamba, 2023). Civil society is increasingly active and influential, partly compensating for the deficiencies of public services and the state.

Gender equality remains a significant political challenge. No woman has ever held the presidency, prime ministership, or the presidency of the Senate. In the 2020 Human Capital Index, the DRC ranked 164th out of 174 countries. Furthermore, ongoing tensions with neighboring countries and internal conflicts—particularly in North Kivu and Ituri—have resulted in mass displacements and severe sexual violence affecting women and girls in conflict zones.

The state remains heavily influenced by international political dynamics (e.g., United States, France, Belgium). Political interference in the management of state-owned enterprises is widespread. Tax revenue accounts for only 9–10% of GDP, significantly below the sub-Saharan African average. Public services are plagued by inefficiency and ineffectiveness. There is widespread dysfunction in political institutions, with ministers and parliamentarians often lacking relevant expertise. These shortcomings foster public distrust in the state and negatively affect entrepreneurial morale, worker motivation, and job satisfaction.

- *Historical Dimension*

Understanding the present situation in the DRC requires revisiting its history. From 1879 onward, explorer Henry Morton Stanley charted the interior of the country on behalf of Belgian King Leopold II, marking the beginning of colonization (Reybrouck, 2012). In 1908, the Belgian Parliament officially annexed the territory, renaming it the Belgian Congo.

By 1955, as demands for independence grew, Belgian academic Jef Van Bilsen proposed a plan to gradually train a Congolese elite—but it was rejected. The colonial administration deliberately avoided forming an educated local elite capable of challenging the colonial order (Matamba, 2015c). At independence in 1960, the country had no Congolese engineers or doctors—despite having hundreds of priests and tens of thousands of soldiers (Matamba, 2015d). In contrast to British and French colonial policies that encouraged higher education for colonial elites, no Congolese during the colonial era had access to Belgian universities.

In 1965, Mobutu seized power, renaming the country Zaire and ruling for 32 years. In 1997, Laurent-Désiré Kabila became president, and the country reverted to its former name, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Félix Tshisekedi's election in 2019 marked the return of civilian leadership through relatively free elections.

While economic development occurred under colonial rule (1900–1960), it was accompanied by intense repression and exploitation. HRM practices in the DRC still reflect colonial administrative methods—focused on control, task standardization, and minimal worker autonomy, with no emphasis on shared decision-making or accountability.

- *Economic Dimension*

The third dimension of the PH-ESTEL model concerns the economy. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is endowed with immense human and natural resources, which could, in theory, drive strong economic growth comparable to that of some BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). However, as noted by the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2019), the country remains significantly behind. Some observers even refer to the “Congolese disaster” (AfDB, 2019).

In 1960, the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Botswana all had a similar per capita income (approximately \$1.10 per day). Six decades later, CAR's per capita income has halved, the DRC's has stagnated at around \$1.50, while Botswana has seen its figure rise to \$20 per capita per day. Botswana effectively leveraged its resource wealth through sound economic governance, whereas the DRC has often failed to do so, with its mineral and natural riches frequently mismanaged (Matamba, 2015e).

The business climate in the DRC remains unfavorable for investment. According to the World Bank's *Doing Business* report (World Bank Group, 2020), over 70% of large companies operating in the DRC are foreign-owned. The country ranks 183rd out of 190 in the global *Doing*

Business index. In 2019, the country's GDP per capita stood at \$495, placing it among the world's poorest nations.

Despite its immense mining wealth—diamonds, gold, cobalt, copper, and more—the population reaps little benefit. The economy relies heavily on the informal sector, which accounts for nearly 70% of economic activity. The DRC remains an externally-oriented economy, designed since colonial times as a reservoir of raw materials, rather than an autonomous economic actor (Matamba, 2015f).

This challenging economic context severely affects the population, leading to low purchasing power and a daily struggle for survival—burdens increasingly shouldered by women, thereby reshaping gender and social dynamics.

- *Social and/or Socio-Cultural Dimension*

The fourth component of the PH-ESTEL model is the social and/or socio-cultural dimension. This refers to the structure of society and the dominant cultural systems. According to Schein, culture consists of shared assumptions developed by a group, expressed through artifacts (e.g., language, dress, cuisine), beliefs, values, and norms (Schein, 2010; Vanderlinden & Dupriez, 2017). The socio-historical context gives meaning to actors' behaviors.

Public education in the DRC is severely deficient, while the private education sector has developed in a largely unregulated fashion, making it extremely costly for Congolese families. Only 6% of Africans hold a university degree (compared to a global average of 26%).

Although the DRC has ratified most international frameworks on gender equality, significant inequalities persist in practice—particularly in horizontal and vertical labor market segregation, workplace sexual harassment, and wage gaps between men and women. The DRC is a society in which the extended family plays a central role. A family head is expected to support both immediate and extended relatives. Unlike in Western nuclear family models, a Congolese worker is surrounded by an entire clan, which disperses attention and multiplies financial and social responsibilities.

There is a strong cultural emphasis on the authority and respect owed to elders. The diaspora is beginning to return and invest in the country, contributing to a societal renewal process. This returning labor force is often highly educated, holding degrees from European, American, Russian, or Chinese institutions. However, Congolese returnees frequently face inequalities in status and compensation—between expatriates and locals, and between white and Black workers. Sem has extensively studied wage disparities in the mining sector, especially through the lens of efficiency wage mechanisms (Sem, 2013).

The associative and cultural sectors are particularly active, partly compensating for the deficiencies of public services. Churches, especially Pentecostal and evangelical churches inspired by North American models, are omnipresent (Abbruzzese, 2007). Economic hardship pushes many companies to offer social support to employees in the

form of mutual aid schemes, health care contributions, education support for children, retirement assistance, and funeral support.

A massive rural exodus is underway, leading to chaotic urbanization and problematic peri-urban expansion. The social security system is extremely weak: health care coverage is minimal, access to medical services is costly, pensions are meager and irregularly paid, and youth unemployment is extremely high.

Each region is associated with a dominant ethnic group, each with its own norms and cultural references, making social balance difficult to achieve. Ethnic and regional affiliations heavily influence recruitment preferences, often generating tensions and undermining perceived legitimacy in hiring decisions. The country is home to several hundred ethnic groups. French is the official language, while four national languages—Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili, and Tshiluba—serve as lingua francas across regions.

- *Technological Dimension*

The fifth dimension of the PH-ESTEL model concerns technological development. In recent years, there has been a notable expansion of mobile phone networks and digital applications in the DRC. However, telecommunications remain unstable, with frequent disruptions for a variety of reasons. Most businesses and economic actors lack adequate IT equipment, often relying on outdated and low-quality hardware.

There is also a significant lack of advanced technology transfer through international cooperation or economic partnerships—except for those individuals who can afford to study abroad, and who, in many cases, do not return. A marked digital divide exists in the country, both generational and social, largely driven by limited education and widespread poverty.

Automation of production processes is minimal, and infrastructure (electricity, water, etc.) is generally obsolete, with a few exceptions in the mining and banking sectors. Higher education remains underfunded, and many students struggle to afford and pursue their studies. Research output in Congolese universities is very limited—accounting for just 1.8% of global scientific publications annually (Kamdem et al., 2021h).

- *Ecological Dimension*

The sixth dimension of the PH-ESTEL model addresses ecological factors, referring to the geographic configuration and the country's natural resources. Demographic and geographic characteristics fall outside the realm of deliberate policymaking; when favorable, they represent latent “potentialities” that require visionary and proactive national strategies for effective exploitation (Matamba, 2015g).

The DRC is richly endowed by nature. It is one of the most populous countries in Africa and the second-largest in terms of landmass, after Algeria. It stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Eastern Plateau and encompasses most of the

Congo River Basin. The country's total hydropower potential is estimated at 74,000 gigawatts—representing 35% of Africa's potential and 8% of the world's total. The Grand Inga project, in its ultimate form, aims to support Africa's industrial integration by providing abundant, low-cost, renewable, and non-polluting energy (Matamba, 2015h).

The northern part of the country contains one of the world's largest equatorial forests. The east borders the Great East African Rift, with mountains, hills, lakes, and volcanoes. The southern and central regions form a high savannah plateau rich in minerals. On the far western edge, the DRC has about 40 kilometers of Atlantic coastline, just north of the Congo River mouth. It is the fourth most populous country in Africa (after Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Egypt).

The DRC possesses abundant mineral and natural resources: 30% of the world's diamond reserves, 50% of cobalt, 80% of coltan, 10% of copper, as well as significant deposits of gold, manganese, and uranium. Many mining contracts have been signed with multinational corporations and countries such as China (Gabas & Chaponnière, 2012), Rwanda, and South Africa, often involving tax exemptions and long-term exclusive exploitation rights—with minimal benefits accruing to the local population.

The country boasts exceptional biodiversity, fertile soils, and diverse climates. A distinction can be made between subsistence crops and agro-industrial crops (Matamba, 2015i). The former are traditionally and artisanally produced by local populations near villages or in the hinterlands of major cities. The latter require substantial capital investment and mechanization, typically for export after basic local processing. Agro-industrial crops can also be produced by small farmers who sell to larger companies or exporters.

Tourism—hampered by ongoing insecurity—could represent a major source of income. Environmental issues receive little attention, with inadequate consideration of the ecological impacts of economic and social activities (e.g., vehicle emissions, industrial pollution, and waste management). Investment in renewable energy and sustainable power sources remains scarce, despite the country's immense hydro potential. A third of the population lacks access to clean drinking water.

One of the country's major challenges is the poor condition of roads and the extreme difficulty of domestic transportation. Large-scale infrastructure renovation projects have been announced but have yet to deliver significant results.

The much-repeated narrative of the country as a “geological scandal” may be true, but it only scratches the surface. Beyond this geological wealth, the DRC is also:

- ✓ An ecological scandal, due to its vast equatorial forest—the second-largest in the world, with untapped potential for carbon credit markets;

- ✓ A tourism scandal, given its unparalleled biodiversity, endemic species, year-round hospitable climate, and dramatic landscapes;
- ✓ An energy scandal, thanks to its world-leading hydroelectric potential;
- ✓ And an agricultural scandal, owing to its 80 million hectares of arable land.

With such natural endowments, remaining underdeveloped seems almost intentional (Matamba, 2015j).

Today, the DRC still faces two major paradigms of underdevelopment: natural resource depletion and biodiversity erosion—two significant obstacles to sustainable development.

• Legal Dimension

The final dimension of the PH-ESTEL model concerns the legal environment. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a large number of laws and regulations exist, many of them designed to align with international standards. The legislative framework is in constant flux, undergoing frequent revisions and restructuring aimed at improving governance. However, corruption and the circumvention of legal provisions remain widespread and deeply rooted.

While there are legal instruments in place for the protection of workers, their application is limited and inconsistent. Human resource management (HRM) practices often deviate from formal legal procedures, operating instead within informal and arbitrary frameworks. Many managers and employees lack sufficient knowledge of the relevant laws, and even when legal provisions are known, the financial and institutional capacity to enforce them is often lacking.

Legal uncertainty and weak enforcement mechanisms contribute to a climate of impunity, which undermines both workers' rights and the professionalization of HRM. This environment reinforces informal practices, personalized negotiations, and reliance on networks or patronage, rather than transparent and legally compliant procedures.

• Key Takeaways

The Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to lag behind neighboring countries such as Rwanda and Cameroon in terms of socio-economic development. Despite possessing valuable expertise and enormous potential, the country faces multiple challenges: achieving lasting peace and stability in the eastern provinces, reducing corruption, ensuring a democratic political transition, developing the agricultural sector, managing peri-urban areas, improving the education and healthcare systems, and upgrading critical infrastructure—particularly in transportation.

The Congolese environment is undeniably complex, unstable, and fraught with uncertainty (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg, 1982). Within such a context, HRM is far from straightforward. Managers must navigate a multitude of individual, organizational, and regional variables.

This situation could be described as “*managing chaos*,” where managers are compelled to continually reinvent their managerial practices. As Thiétart and Forgues (2006) describe:

“Organizational actors implement artifacts that, on the one hand, create the illusion of management, and on the other hand, construct zones of rationality and certainty within which they can act and decide. These artifacts, through their power to close off ambiguity, may indeed assist managers in their action—but at the same time, they may sow the seeds of new sources of disorder. The dilemma remains intact for the manager, who must learn to confront the ongoing dialectic between order and chaos.”

In this landscape, Congolese actors construct their HRM practices (the content) through a political process (actor dynamics), mobilizing both internal and external contextual factors. Viewed through the lens of contradiction management theory (Brabet, 1993), managerial decision-making appears circular and dialectical, shaped by multiple overlapping temporalities and always provisional forms of regulation. Behaviors may often seem “irrational” but in fact reflect deeper logics of constraint and adaptation.

This aligns with the model proposed by Dejours (1995a), where the actor is both author and captive of their actions. Individual behavior is not solely rooted in an objective world validated by truth and efficiency—it also draws meaning from a social world grounded in shared history and values (culture), and from a subjective world based on personal perceptions and identity (Dejours, 1995b).

III. METHODOLOGY

The case study methodology employed in this research is based on a qualitative and contextual approach, aimed at deeply exploring human resource management (HRM) practices in three distinct sectors within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): the healthcare sector, public administration, and the mining industry. This method was selected for its capacity to offer a detailed and nuanced understanding of organizational dynamics and HRM practices in specific contexts. Case studies allow for capturing the complexity of local realities and identifying patterns or trends that may not emerge through broader quantitative methods.

The three case studies presented in this research were selected from a rich and diverse database of over 100 documented HRM practices across various Congolese organizations and enterprises. These data were accumulated over a 15-year period through applied teaching in four management schools located across the country. Students were regularly invited to describe HRM practices within organizations in a structured and detailed manner, using a formalized reporting framework. This methodological framework enabled the collection of comprehensive, comparable, and locally representative data.

The selected cases were chosen for their organizational diversity and their relevance in illustrating the specific features of HRM practices across different institutional contexts. Each case provides a unique perspective on the challenges and strategies of HRM in environments marked by particular economic, social, and institutional constraints.

To enhance the richness of the data, interviews were conducted with professionals actively involved in the studied organizations. These interviews served to validate, nuance, and further explain the HRM practices described, providing additional insights into the motivations, challenges, and outcomes associated with the HRM strategies employed.

The presentation of the case studies follows a narrative approach inspired by the *storytelling* model (Banks, 2012; Laethem & Moran, 2014), which involves recounting the story of HRM practices in a vivid and engaging manner. This narrative strategy not only reports the facts but also situates them in context, highlighting the key lessons that can be drawn from the cases.

By combining descriptive data, qualitative interviews, and narrative presentation, this methodology offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of HRM practices in diverse organizational settings across the DRC.

IV. RESULTS

The findings of this study are based on three distinct case studies—a general referral hospital (HGR), a public administration (MINIPA), and a mining company (Mikuba Mining)—which reveal complex challenges and diverse HRM dynamics across contrasting organizational contexts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

A. The Health Sector

The first case study focuses on a general referral hospital (HGR) in the DRC, based on the experience of a former hospital director (Matamba, 2015k). The hospital had 350 beds and employed around 125 staff members, including 10 physicians. Three of these doctors were expatriates—Belgian medical cooperants—who remained at the hospital for several years. Although HGRs are public hospitals whose operational budgets are theoretically subsidized by the state, the government frequently failed to fulfill its obligations, particularly in paying salaries and covering basic hospital operating costs.

The hospital operated relatively well, largely due to the substantial contributions of the expatriate doctors and the presence of religious sisters from an Italian congregation known as the “Sisters of the Poor.” These sisters played a critical role in the hospital’s daily management and operations. Their contribution was described by one former director as “extraordinary” and “invaluable”:

“The sisters have no children. They are available at any time of day or night.”

The hospital included internal medicine, gynecology-obstetrics, surgery, and pediatrics departments. A separate ward housed pediatric patients, many of whom were severely malnourished due to extreme poverty in the region. Another ward, known as *Bumba*—meaning “to hide”—was reserved for terminally ill patients (e.g., those with snake bites, advanced malnutrition, cancer, or elephantiasis). While the medical team achieved several remarkable surgical outcomes, the hospital faced persistent issues related to dilapidated infrastructure, such as power outages caused by failing generators and fuel shortages, and a lack of reliable access to clean water.

➤ Three Categories of Nurses Worked at the Hospital:

- Medical Assistants (A1 level, equivalent to post-secondary graduates), mostly men;
- A2 nurses, with upper-secondary education, both men and women;
- A3 nurses, with lower-secondary education, mostly women, many of whom were single mothers.

The nursing staff were generally well trained. Some had completed formal nursing education supplemented by in-house training; others had limited formal education and were trained on the job through apprenticeship. Given that no Congolese doctors existed at the time of independence, medical assistants were rapidly upskilled to perform clinical tasks. Over time, many of these assistants acquired sufficient knowledge to carry out medical procedures, including surgery. Some were later sent to Europe for fast-track medical training (in four years), enabling them to qualify as full physicians. The hospital also became a training ground for Belgian medical students through partnerships with various Belgian universities, which enhanced the institution’s reputation.

One of the most pressing HRM challenges faced by the former director was the chronically low wages of the medical and paramedical staff, which were insufficient to sustain a decent standard of living. Staff often resorted to charging informal fees to patients for medications and services to supplement their income. To address this, the hospital leadership sought ways to improve compensation and increase access to healthcare.

At the time, public hospitals were, in principle, required to remit revenues from consultations, laboratory tests, and medical procedures to the state using a “standard receipt ledger” to report all financial inflows. The chief medical officer quickly realized there was no traceability of funds transferred to the state—the money seemed to enrich intermediaries rather than support public services. The new hospital leadership therefore decided to retain all generated revenue and cease transfers to the state.

This shift enabled the hospital to increase staff pay and invest in construction and renovation projects, including the hospital’s perimeter wall and a rehabilitation ward developed in collaboration with the wife of one of the expatriate doctors.

The hospital director noticed that service providers were collecting fees directly from patients, leading to significant revenue loss for the institution. He introduced a transparency policy centered on a single-entry point for all payments. This required a complete reorganization of the financial flow and patient intake process. All patients had to register at a single payment counter, pay a flat fee, and then be directed to the appropriate clinical service. Before accessing any care, a payment slip specifying the requested procedure had to be issued and presented to confirm payment. This new system increased the hospital's revenue sevenfold. As the director stated:

"We stopped the leakage!"

Initially, staff resisted the changes because they had been relying on informal payments to supplement their wages. However, the director responded by raising salaries to offset the loss of informal earnings. Over time, the staff embraced the system, appreciating the stability of regular monthly income.

In collaboration with medical personnel and other staff categories, a performance-based bonus system was introduced, structured around four criteria :

- Educational qualifications, certified by diplomas;
- Seniority and work experience, to recognize and reward long-serving employees;
- Responsibility level, based on job description and organizational chart placement;
- Performance, assessed on a scale from 0 to 10 by supervisors.

This system doubled or even tripled base salaries. The effects were immediate and significant: greater staff engagement, reduced absenteeism, and fewer incidents of theft or loss of supplies and equipment. Patient attendance increased as well. In addition to base salaries and bonuses, the hospital compensated for overtime hours and offered supplementary allowances.

B. The Public Administration Sector

MINIPA is a public financial administration in the DRC. Its workforce includes both senior civil servants from the pre-war administration and newly integrated staff recruited from former rebel factions. These individuals were integrated into the civil service as part of the peace agreements that followed the national dialogue and the comprehensive accords to end hostilities.

Staff from rebel backgrounds tend to be younger, less experienced, and less qualified than their senior colleagues—technocratic professionals with extensive knowledge of administrative procedures. The fear of renewed conflict remains widespread among the population. Corruption has reached alarming levels, and poverty continues to rise, making it increasingly difficult even for civil servants to make ends meet. Executive, legislative, and military positions are largely controlled by former rebels, many of whom use guerrilla-style tactics to intimidate or eliminate dissent.

At MINIPA, remuneration is, in principle, based on the official salary scales for public servants. Pay depends on qualifications and hierarchical rank. However, civil servants who attend training abroad receive significant financial supplements, often in the form of scholarships equivalent to a full month's salary. These scholarships are funded by host countries (bilateral cooperation) or international institutions (multilateral cooperation) as part of peacebuilding efforts. They are awarded in addition to regular salaries.

Access to these paid training programs is typically restricted to newly integrated staff from rebel groups. This has generated deep frustration among senior civil servants from the old regime, who are excluded from such opportunities. The resulting inequalities in training access have created significant salary disparities. For example, a junior officer (N+2) might earn more than a higher-ranking one (N+1), simply because of participation in such programs.

Veteran civil servants, even those with foreign degrees, receive no additional compensation. They are only offered short, local training programs. Although they are the most experienced and should, in theory, earn the highest salaries, much of the top pay now goes to younger, less qualified staff affiliated with former rebel factions.

To cope, many senior staff offer private consulting services to multinationals, NGOs, and private companies. However, this dual engagement negatively affects their performance at MINIPA. Absenteeism is widespread, and administrative resources—computers, printers, vehicles, office assistants, and drivers—are often diverted for private use.

C. The Mining Industry

Mikuba Mining is an open-pit copper and cobalt mine currently operated by Xinjuan Group International Resources Co. Ltd, a Chinese mining conglomerate that holds 75% of the company's shares. Located approximately 10 kilometers from the city of Lubumbashi in the Haut-Katanga province (southeastern DRC), the mining site includes both a mineral concentration plant and a solvent extraction and electro-winning (SX-EW) processing facility. In 2019, the company produced 31,536 tons of copper and 4,805 tons of cobalt. It employed 1,813 Congolese workers—30% of whom were on fixed-term contracts—and 386 expatriates, the majority of Chinese nationality.

Since the Chinese acquisition in 2018, working conditions have deteriorated significantly, particularly in terms of occupational health and safety. Workers lack access to basic protective gear, including safety boots, uniforms or overalls, felt hats, barricades, and adequate lighting throughout the mining site.

Working hours were extended: miners now arrive at 7:00 a.m. and leave only 12 hours later. During the day, they are allowed just 30 minutes for lunch, which must be eaten standing. The meals provided are widely criticized by workers. Furthermore, several social benefits were revoked,

including medical care for employees' families, child allowances, and educational support for workers' children.

The current management team promotes an organizational culture centered on performance and driven by strict profitability targets set by the Chinese headquarters. Even minor errors are met with anger and public blame; workers are never asked to explain what went wrong and are systematically held accountable. Internal competition among employees has intensified, driven by specific HRM practices: unequal distribution of resources, performance-based comparisons, individualized pressure, and even psychological harassment. As a result, many employees are on the verge of burnout.

Delivery deadlines are extremely tight. Most workers report a complete lack of support from their supervisors. In the past three months alone, five employees have broken down on the job. Absenteeism has increased by 15% and now affects nearly 30% of the workforce.

Due to poor working conditions, Mikuba Mining was recently denied a contract with a U.S.-based firm, following concerns raised by NGOs regarding labor standards. Company executives are beginning to recognize that most international contracts now include clauses mandating audits of subcontractors and suppliers with regard to their working conditions.

Although leadership is reluctant to invest significantly in improvements, they are increasingly aware that some changes will be necessary. The provincial governor has expressed concern over the declining labor conditions at the site, which are tarnishing both the industry's image and the international reputation of the Katanga region.

V. DISCUSSION

The three case studies presented—a general referral hospital (HGR), a public administration (MINIPA), and a mining company (Mikuba Mining)—offer a rich and nuanced perspective on human resource management (HRM) practices within diverse organizational contexts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Each case illustrates specific challenges linked to state sovereignty, individual and organizational dynamics, and socio-cultural influences. Together, they demonstrate how HRM practices are shaped by a complex interplay of political, economic, and societal forces, as well as interactions between local and international actors.

➤ *State Sovereignty and Institutional Fragility:*

All three case studies clearly reveal the symptoms of a fragile or failing state. The government struggles to recruit qualified personnel and remains heavily dependent on international aid, with expatriates often playing central roles. The state is unable to guarantee decent, regularly paid salaries, thereby encouraging informal workarounds and corruption. In the second case, post-conflict political integration led to the hiring of former rebel group members, creating imbalances in favor of these individuals at the

expense of existing public servants—generating frustration and internal conflict. In the third case, the Congolese state is effectively overruled by foreign industrial interests (notably Chinese investors), who impose their own HRM models without any meaningful mediation or contextual adaptation. The illusion of national sovereignty is laid bare, as HRM practices are shaped largely by the values and reference systems of external managers operating on the ground.

➤ *Applying the IOS Framework (Individual–Organizational–Societal) :*

We further interpret the findings using the IOS model (Gosse & Cornet, 2023b), which emphasizes the influence of three interconnected levels: individual behavior, organizational structures, and broader societal context (notably the PH-ESTEL environment).

- **At the individual level**, we observe actor dynamics and conflictual interactions rooted in diverging interests: between former rebels and veteran civil servants in Case 2, or between Chinese managers and Congolese workers in Case 3. These tensions produce jealousy, resistance, and even burnout. A sense of fatalism prevails, with staff often resigned to panoptic HRM systems. However, Case 1 demonstrates the potential for reconciling divergent interests through win-win strategies: the chief physician successfully builds a coalition around transparency and fair compensation, engaging staff in a shared vision to improve health service delivery. The cooperation between expatriates, religious sisters, and local staff stands as a notable example of effective alignment. Moreover, we see a form of local empowerment in response to a failing state, with hospital revenues being redirected to improve salaries and care.
- **At the organizational level**, we observe significant disparities in the recognition and treatment of different professional categories: expatriates (Case 1), former rebels (Case 2), and Chinese staff (Case 3). Status and income inequalities—especially between locals and expatriates—lead to demotivation, frustration, and disengagement. In Case 2, veteran civil servants feel marginalized, particularly in access to training and per diem benefits that supplement salaries. In Case 3, the Chinese managers show little regard for the working and living conditions of Congolese workers. Conversely, the hospital case illustrates how effective leadership can harmonize complex stakeholder relations, including religious institutions, to foster collective commitment.
- **At the societal level**, the three cases clearly highlight the interdependencies between socio-economic context and organizational management. The findings resonate with the broader PH-ESTEL dimensions outlined earlier. The DRC presents a highly turbulent environment, making it extremely difficult for managers to maintain direction. Political interference is pervasive: in Case 1, hospital revenues are siphoned off by state intermediaries; in Case 2, post-conflict reconciliation mechanisms reinforce inequality within the civil service. Case 3 illustrates how the mining sector's poor working conditions—amplified by global supply chain standards—can provoke reputational risks for the province.

Poverty and economic instability normalize informal or “deviant” behaviors as survival strategies. In the hospital, overbilling by staff was previously considered a necessary form of income redistribution. The rise of new economic actors—particularly Chinese investors—has introduced new tensions, especially around transparency and control. Calls for accountability are not always welcome, as diverging interests undermine alignment. Transparency, in this context, often requires a return to direct supervision and strict performance monitoring—practices that may conflict with established informal norms.

➤ *Ecological and Logistical Constraints :*

In the hospital case, the institution is located in a remote rural area, far from the capital Kinshasa. Poor infrastructure makes transport difficult and unpredictable. Sanitary risks are high, with many children suffering from preventable diseases linked to waste mismanagement. Despite the state’s absence, bureaucratic burdens persist. Workers—including state employees—have no real social safety net. Though laws exist, they are often incoherent and subject to manipulation. Administrative delays are so common that small informal payments are routinely offered to “unlock” stalled processes.

➤ *Cultural Dynamics :*

Culture also plays a significant role, particularly in intergenerational management, gender inequality (under-explored here), and the tension between collective versus individual strategies. In theory, Congolese society favors collective values, yet the structural context often forces individuals into self-centered survival strategies, undermining group cohesion.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to provide a reflective analysis of human resource management (HRM) practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). It is evident that, in a context marked by instability and structural chaos, the role of Congolese managers is far from simple. Their strategies are mostly emergent (Pichault & Nizet, 2013), shaped through trial and error, and adapted to constantly changing environments.

HRM in the DRC still draws heavily on Taylorist principles: task standardization, centralized control, and limited worker autonomy and responsibility. Managers often deal with a labor force that is undereducated and affected by extreme poverty and uncertainty. The Congolese labor market operates in a society where work does not provide a living wage, where economic circuits are disorganized, and where capital is concentrated in the hands of multinational corporations and foreign investors. The state, for its part, has largely failed to play its role in redistributing national wealth.

The widespread prevalence of low-capacity HRM systems in many developing countries, particularly in the DRC, reflects the broader consequences of an unstructured economic system and a disorganized and dysfunctional state apparatus. In this environment, survival often hinges on individual or family-based strategies. The workplace is rarely

a space of wealth creation or social advancement for workers; rather, it is a space of suffering and exploitation, from which foreigners and the national political elite benefit far more than rank-and-file workers or lower-level public servants. In such a context, workers may come to despise their own labor—the ultimate form of alienation. The crisis is deeply structural, like an undertow disrupting the sea beneath the surface, with only the waves above being visible. These waves translate into social tensions: interpersonal conflicts, friction between locals and foreigners, resentment toward members of the diaspora who seem to possess everything—money, qualifications, networks. The list of grievances is endless.

These modes of work organization fail to satisfy workers, who feel deeply frustrated by the lack of autonomy. However, many have internalized a mindset of inevitable submission, viewing compliance as the price to pay for job security. The challenge, then, is to initiate a process of empowerment embedded within a broader process of learning new behavioral norms and expectations. Such behavioral shifts will not emerge spontaneously—they must be cultivated through relationships of mutual trust and learning between employees and managers.

A more just and equitable society—one that places the human being at the center of organizational and societal development—requires visionary governance and a renewed commitment to HRM led by competent and well-trained personnel.

As we often teach in HRM: “*To manage human resources well is to ‘DREAM’: Dignity, Respect, Empowerment, Attention, and Meaning.*”

Each of these words takes on profound meaning when applied to the Congolese HRM context. How, in such a fragile setting, can one build employee engagement and commitment, while minimizing opportunistic individual behavior? What factors can effectively foster such engagement?

These questions remain open for both the scientific community and practitioners—including Congolese and expatriate managers alike.

To conclude, we give the final word to Mr. Tumba Matamba:

“How can we explain that the DRC—a country with immense potential and among the richest in natural resources—remains, in fact, so poor that it brings shame to Africa and is mocked by the world? The answer is simple: a deficit in human capital. The most valuable natural resource is the human mind, and the most important production factor is the human being. The Congo started off badly, particularly due to a colonial education policy that was intentionally minimal. It is now paying the price. One of our earliest Congolese thinkers, Auguste Mabika Kalanda (1932–1995), once wrote: ‘Self-questioning is the foundation of mental decolonization.’ But he preached in the wilderness”(Matamba, 2015l)

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations beyond common methodological constraints. It does not comprehensively cover all economic sectors or regions of the DRC, leaving unexplored local realities—especially in rural or conflict-affected areas—where HRM dynamics may differ substantially. The selection of case studies may reflect atypical or relatively privileged contexts, which do not necessarily represent the majority of Congolese organizations. Additionally, the study pays limited attention to vulnerable labor groups, such as women, youth, and low-skilled workers, and does not fully explore the influence of cultural and historical factors on management practices.

For future research, a mixed-methods approach—combining qualitative and quantitative data—would be valuable. Comparative studies with other African countries could offer enriched perspectives and help identify good practices that may be transferable to similar contexts. Running through the entire study is one essential theme: the human being. Do we really take the time to understand and support individuals in dealing with their own problems, before asking them to solve those of the community? What can we realistically expect from partners who lack the minimum necessary for survival—physically, materially, morally, and socially?

Stakeholders must learn from one another. Only through shared and inclusive management of available resources can we meet everyone's needs. Each person's contribution is essential for understanding socio-cultural contexts that are often too complex to grasp from the outside.

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