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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

This report, prepared for the third Trade Policy Review of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, has been drawn up by the WTO Secretariat on its own responsibility. The Secretariat has, as required by the Agreement establishing the Trade Policy Review Mechanism (Annex 3 to the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization), sought clarification from the Democratic Republic of the Congo on its trade policies and practices.

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SUMMARY

1. Trade is a key lever for the economic development of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The DRC is one of the countries with the greatest economic potential in Africa and the world, given the abundance of its natural resources, its strategic geographical position at the centre of the continent, and the size of its population. The country has large reserves of strategic minerals, considerable hydroelectric potential, vast areas of arable land, a young population, and ready access to the markets of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. This combination of natural and human resources offers considerable leverage in favour of economic diversification, regional integration and integration into global value chains. However, this potential remains largely underexploited.

2. Despite its abundant resources, the DRC faces major infrastructure deficits, particularly in the transport, energy and technology sectors. These constraints are compounded by inadequate governance and high levels of corruption. Limited access to electricity, education, healthcare and essential services curbs productivity and human capital development. Moreover, the lack of transport infrastructure, particularly roads and railways, severely restricts internal connectivity and integration into external markets, thereby constituting a major obstacle to trade, economic diversification, industrial development and economic growth. These difficulties are exacerbated by the ongoing armed conflicts in certain regions, as well as institutional weaknesses that hinder efforts to unlock the national economic potential. Against this backdrop, the development of the Lobito corridor takes on strategic importance, as it will provide more effective access to international markets and improve logistics links for exports, particularly mining products.

3. In 2024, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was approximately USD 654, meaning the country is among the world's least prosperous economies in terms of per capita income (205th out of 218 countries). The poverty rate remains extremely high, placing the DRC among the poorest countries in the world. In 2024, about 73.5% of the population lived on less than USD 2.15 per day, demonstrating the extent of poverty. The Gini index, which was 0.44 in 2020, reflects a relatively moderate but persistent level of income inequality.

4. Over the period 2016-2024, the DRC recorded an average economic growth rate of 5.4%, higher than that of Sub-Saharan Africa. However, this momentum was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which slowed growth, down from 4.4% in 2019 to 1.7% in 2020, due to health restrictions, sluggish global demand and supply chain disruptions. Overall, the trend was driven by exports, particularly those of the mining sector, which benefited from favourable international prices.

5. While inflation remains high, it is falling; averaging 7.4% annually in 2025, compared to 11.7% in 2024 and 19.9% in 2023. In the face of inflationary pressures, the Central Bank of the Congo (BCC) tightened its monetary policy considerably, raising its policy rate from 7.5% in January 2022 to 25% in August 2023. This rate was gradually reduced to 17.5% in October 2025 and to 13.5% in April 2026. Despite these measures, inflationary pressures persist. The fiscal deficit remained modest in 2024 (-1.3% of GDP), but public finances are under pressure due to higher security spending and public investment. Public debt, although low, reached 20.2% of GDP in 2025. The current account remains in deficit (3.8% of GDP in 2024), despite an improvement compared with previous years.

6. The primary sector remains the main driver of the economy, accounting for 36.8% of GDP in 2024, compared to 37.9% in 2016. The extractive industries, in particular copper, cobalt, gold, and diamond mining, account for 19.7% of GDP alone (19.3% in 2016), while agriculture, largely dominated by subsistence activities, contributes 17.1% (compared to 18.6% in 2016). The secondary sector accounts for 26.9% of GDP (21.8% in 2016), of which about 18% comes from manufacturing. The services sector contributes 33% to GDP, the same proportion as in 2016. However, the employment structure contrasts sharply with the production structure. In 2025, industry accounted for only 8% of total employment, a share unchanged from 2016, reflecting the highly capital-intensive nature of the mining sector. Meanwhile, agriculture's share was close to 59% of employment (compared to 60% in 2016), while services accounted for around 33% (32% in 2016). These shares have changed little since 2016, confirming the major role of agriculture and the informal sector in labour absorption. The DRC's heavy reliance on the mining sector increases the risk of "Dutch disease", characterized by a misallocation of resources to extractive activities to the detriment of other productive sectors. This situation hinders economic diversification, limits job creation, and increases the country's vulnerability to shocks related to commodity prices.

7. Exports and imports have seen rapid growth since the DRC's last Review. The DRC's exports remain highly concentrated with little diversification. The mining sector accounts for over 90% of total exports, reflecting a structural dependence on raw materials. Trade flows are also geographically concentrated, primarily destined for Asia, particularly China, while Africa's share remains limited. Despite regional integration ambitions, Congolese exports remain more competitive in European and Asian markets than in regional markets, particularly those of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). The comparative advantage index reveals a comparative advantage in ores and metals between 2016 and 2023, confirming the increased reliance on the extractive sector. On the other hand, the DRC's imports are dominated by electrical machinery and equipment, mainly from Asia and the Middle East, with China as the main supplier country.

8. The competitiveness of Congolese exports continues to be undermined by high trade costs. These are mainly the result of red tape, significant border delays, poor institutional coordination, limited access to reliable and affordable electricity, and inadequate logistics and transport infrastructure. These constraints drive up transaction costs and reduce the ability of firms to compete effectively in international markets. Although certain logistics performance indicators have improved, including customs clearance and the quality of logistics services, the DRC continues to underperform compared with most of its neighbouring countries. This hampers export diversification and restricts the country's integration into global value chains. Imports are subject to multiple duties, taxes and levies, which increase their cost and the complexity of administrative procedures, putting additional pressure on economic operators.

9. Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to the DRC rose steadily between 2016 and 2024, reaching USD 3.1 billion in 2024, or 4.3% of GDP, up from USD 1.2 billion in 2016 (3% of GDP). However, these investments remain highly concentrated in the extractive industries and, to a lesser extent, in services. The infrastructure and agriculture sectors receive a relatively small share of FDI flows. The main investor countries include China, the United Kingdom, Egypt, India and Mauritius. Despite this positive trend, the sectoral concentration of FDI underscores the need to diversify investments in order to enhance their contribution to the structural transformation of the economy.

10. The DRC participates actively in the work of the WTO as a member of several negotiating groups, including the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), the African Group, the G-90, and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) Group. It is also involved in the joint initiatives on investment facilitation and the development of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). The DRC ratified the Agreement on Trade Facilitation and the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies on 11 July 2025. Despite the progress made since the previous Review, the country's notification record remains mediocre and below that of most LDCs. Since its accession, the country has only submitted 38 notifications, of which 25 were submitted since 2016, covering mainly services, trade facilitation, subsidies and countervailing measures, and anti-dumping measures.

11. The DRC remains committed to the process of regional economic integration as a member of several trade agreements, including COMESA, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Nevertheless, the effective application of tariff preferences under these agreements remains non-existent, partly due to opposition by the Directorate-General of Customs and Excise (DGDA). Customs duties are still levied in full on the basis of the national tariff, without systematic implementation of preferential schemes. This situation reduces the expected benefits of regional integration and restricts the access of Congolese economic operators to regional markets.

12. The legal framework for investment is based in particular on the Investment Code. The country has also joined and applies the rules of the Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa (OHADA), the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA). The National Investment Promotion Agency (ANAPI) is the main institution responsible for the administration and implementation of measures relating to investment procedures. The economic environment remains affected by major structural obstacles, including corruption, inadequate infrastructure, legal insecurity, the complexity of administrative procedures, the high costs of production factors, the multitude of taxes and fees, and armed conflicts. Access to finance remains limited, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. In this context, it is essential to pursue reforms to strengthen governance, simplify procedures and improve infrastructure, and thus stimulate private investment and support economic diversification and inclusive growth.

13. The roll out of the ASYCUDA World System is the main customs modernization reform undertaken during the period under review. This system has made it possible to digitalize customs procedures, including the electronic submission of declarations and documents, and thus simplify administrative procedures. The progressive computerization of customs offices has improved processing times, strengthened risk management-based controls, and increased customs revenue mobilization. In addition, interconnections with other administrations have fostered better institutional coordination and accelerated the clearance of goods.

14. Imports remain subject to mandatory quality control checks of goods before shipment. In principle, the DRC applies the provisions of the WTO Agreement on Customs Valuation and mainly uses the transaction value as the taxable basis for duties. Administrative and judicial appeals mechanisms exist in the event that customs decisions are challenged. However, the DRC has not yet notified its non-preferential rules of origin to the WTO and does not apply preferential rules of origin, due to the incomplete implementation of regional agreements.

15. The DRC's customs tariff is based on three tariff bands (5%, 10% and 20%), applied to almost all tariff lines. In 2026, these rates covered 36.2%, 32.9% and 30.8% of tariff lines, respectively. The simple average MFN tariff is 11.3% in 2026, compared to 11.2% in 2016, reflecting the overall stability in the level of tariff protection. Agricultural products remain slightly more protected (11.5% compared to 11.1% in 2016) than non-agricultural products (11.2%, unchanged since 2016). The DRC has bound all its tariff lines. The simple average bound rate is 94.4%. The large gap between the bound and applied rates leaves considerable room for tariff flexibility, which could increase uncertainty regarding the future evolution of tariff policy. There are still significant tax and customs exemptions in the DRC, particularly for the mining, agriculture and energy sectors, representing a substantial loss of revenue for the State.

16. In addition to customs duties, the DRC applies several taxes and fees on imports, including excise duty, an administrative fee (2% of the customs value), an IT service fee (1% of the c.i.f. value), in addition to a statistical tax and storage fee. These levies push up the overall cost of imports significantly. In addition, value added tax (VAT), at the standard rate of 16%, is applicable to both imports and locally produced goods. Excise duty is applied to a limited range of products, including alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, petroleum products, and other goods or services, as defined by the relevant legislation. The primary aim of that duty is to further the objectives of public health, environmental protection and consumption controls.

17. Several import prohibitions and restrictions remain in force for reasons of public health, security, environmental protection, and support for domestic production. Since 2024, temporary restrictions have also been imposed on certain manufactured products, as part of the "Made in Congo" policy, aimed at encouraging local processing and reducing dependence on imports. Furthermore, the DRC has not implemented any anti-dumping, countervailing or safeguard measures during the period under review.

18. Government procurement in the DRC remains governed by the 2010 Law, based on the principles of transparency, competition and equal treatment. However, concerns remain about the frequent use of non-competitive procedures, including direct contracting, as well as inadequate controls, transparency and contract management. In 2020, an assessment by the Government Procurement Regulatory Authority (ARMP) identified structural weaknesses affecting the effectiveness, transparency and credibility of the system, including the legal framework, institutional capacities, the planning and execution of contracts, as well as control, audit and anti-corruption mechanisms. Procurement and contract management practices often fail to comply with regulatory provisions, while payment delays, inadequate information systems, and weak follow-up of audit recommendations continue to affect the effectiveness of public expenditure and the confidence of economic operators.

19. Agriculture remains the main employment sector in the DRC, employing nearly 59% of the labour force, although its contribution to GDP shrank slightly during the period under review. The country has exceptional agricultural potential, with an estimated 80 million hectares of arable land, supported by significant water resources and rich agro-ecological diversity. The fisheries potential is also significant, due to the abundance of rivers, lakes and bodies of water. Furthermore, the livestock farming potential in the DRC is considerable, with around 125 million hectares of pastureland capable of supporting up to 40 million head of cattle and producing a substantial amount of meat, even under an extensive farming system.

20. Despite this potential, the agriculture sector continues to be dominated by subsistence family farms with low levels of mechanization and that are poorly integrated into value chains. Low yields are explained by the limited access to modern inputs, financing, rural infrastructure, and support services. The agricultural sector is also affected by the growing incidence of climate change and extreme weather events, such as droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall, which undermine the agricultural production potential and increase the vulnerability of producers. The livestock and fisheries sectors also remain underdeveloped. Moreover, ongoing insecurity in certain agricultural zones impedes the exploitation of large areas of arable land, disrupts production activities, and restricts producers' market access. This weak performance contributes to persistent food insecurity and a growing dependence on food imports. During the period under review, food imports increased significantly, reaching nearly USD 3 billion per year, and concern in particular cereals, dairy products, vegetable oils and other staple foods. This situation is contributing to the structural agricultural trade deficit.

21. The lack of a coherent and sufficiently integrated agricultural policy is one of the main obstacles to the development of the sector. The current framework suffers from a lack of strategic vision, insufficient investment, and inadequate support mechanisms for producers. An updated agricultural policy should promote sustainable growth in production; the development of competitive value chains; improved access to markets, financing and technology; and the local processing of agricultural products. Such reforms are essential for increasing productivity, enhancing food security, reducing imports, creating jobs, and making agriculture an engine for economic diversification.

22. The mining sector is the main driver of the DRC's economic growth and exports. The country is one of the world's largest producers of copper and cobalt, and also has significant reserves of gold, diamonds, tin, coltan, zinc, lithium, and other strategic ores. Mining exports generate the bulk of foreign exchange earnings and are the main source of government revenue. Production followed its upward trend during the period under review, but the sector continues to face several challenges, including low levels of local processing, inadequate infrastructure, the persistence of artisanal mining, as well as governance and environmental and social sustainability issues. Cobalt exports were suspended by the Congolese Government between February and October 2025 and, since then, they have been subject to quotas.

23. Despite its economic weight, the contribution of the mining sector to employment remains limited because of its highly capital-intensive nature and the marked prevalence of artisanal production. The majority of jobs are concentrated in artisanal mining. Moreover, local value added remains meagre, due to the underdevelopment of processing activities and domestic value chains. A major goal is to strengthen the linkages between the mining sector and the rest of the economy in order to enhance the impact on inclusive growth and employment. Furthermore, in December 2025, the DRC and the United States signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement to strengthen cooperation on critical ores, infrastructure, mining governance and regional security, while promoting investment, value chain development, and the sustainable exploitation of mineral resources.

24. Industrial development in the DRC remains limited. Major constraints include the inadequate electricity supply, the high price of inputs, high logistics costs, and poor infrastructure. The manufacturing sector is mainly composed of the agri-food and chemical industries, producers of building materials, and mining-related processing activities. Public policies seek to promote industrialization, the local processing of natural resources, and the development of special economic zones (SEZs) in order to diversify the productive base and create jobs; however, implementation efforts face major structural challenges, including an unfavourable business climate. SEZs, which enjoy tax and customs benefits, target sectors with high development potential, notably the agro-industry, wood processing, building materials, and metallurgy. In addition, the DRC has considerable renewable energy potential, particularly hydroelectric and solar power, which remains largely underexploited. Harnessing this potential would increase the electricity supply, improve the reliability of the energy supply, and enhance the competitiveness of the industrial sector.

25. The service sector plays an increasingly important role in the DRC's economy. Progress has been made with regard to telecommunications thanks to the expansion of mobile networks and the Internet. Financial services have also been gradually modernized, driven by digital innovations. However, transport infrastructure remains unable to meet the needs of domestic and foreign trade. Improving logistics corridors, roads, railways, ports, and airport infrastructure remains crucial to

enhancing the overall competitiveness of the economy and facilitating trade. Financial inclusion remains low, and access to credit from the private sector, especially for SMEs and women, remains limited. This situation hinders investment and the creation and growth of businesses, impedes the development of entrepreneurship, and stymies industrial development.

26. In short, the DRC has considerable economic potential, but this potential remains largely underexploited. The country has undertaken several reforms to overhaul its trade regime, strengthen regional integration and improve the business climate, including by modernizing customs procedures, promoting investment, and participating in multilateral trade initiatives. However, carrying out these reforms in full will require more effective implementation, improved governance and better institutional coordination. The country's competitiveness could be enhanced by reducing trade costs, simplifying administrative procedures, improving transport and energy infrastructure, as well as the effective implementation of regional trade agreement commitments. Improving the business climate will also require greater legal certainty, a streamlined tax system, greater transparency in government procurement, and the implementation of governance reforms.