

# Building and Managing an Educational Institution of Higher Learning in the Congo: Université Espoir du Congo (UEC)

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Theme: [History](#)

*In this wide-ranging interview, **Associate Professor Elisée Byelongo Isheloke**, Rector/Vice Chancellor of Université Espoir du Congo (UEC), narrates his experiences of managing an educational institution from scratch, its embryo stage in many ways and with zero-capital, little support and a myriad of challenges. Despite the existing difficulties and challenges, the UEC is steadily becoming a regional powerhouse of knowledge, research and development. The UEC administration will also appreciate any form of assistance and support from external sources. Here are the interview excerpts:*

**Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK):** What are the peculiarities of managing an educational institution of higher learning, Hope University of Congo which is located in a small town of Baraka, in central Africa?

**Byelongo Elisee Isheloke (BEI):** First of all, I would like to greet you and your viewers/readers on this day and thank you for having me on this platform. Now, to answer your question, there are a number of challenges in managing any University, let alone a young one like the “Université Espoir du Congo” (UEC) also known as the “Hope University of Congo” with very limited infrastructure and a myriad of challenges.

To name but a few, the peculiarities stem from a variety of factors such as the lack of operational funding, inappropriate infrastructure and the (endemic) insufficient registered students. Most people in the small town of Baraka still send their children to bigger cities for their education. Although I do not entirely condemn this act, I would like to urge the community members to support this tailor-made community University in its mission to address some of the challenges of the very community as so far as education is concerned.



**The UEC is the only University of Fizi which is entirely based in that territory** – with only one branch in Kamituga (Fizi is a territory of an area of 41 745 km<sup>2</sup> which is bigger than that of the neighbouring country of Burundi or Ruanda). Although there are a few other Higher Learning Institutions, the UEC had been conceived to cater for the academic needs of Fizi-Itombwe with its five faculties, namely Economics, Law, Social, Political and Administrative Sciences (SSPA in French acronym) or six if one dares to add the Faculty of Languages, Interlinguistics and Esperanto which is still on its embryo stage in many ways.

In cities like Bukavu and Lubumbashi, Universities started small and developed into greatness and maturity over the years. I understand that most of those used resources from the state to develop but there are instances in the Great Lakes region where community Universities outperformed public ones in many regards. In my view, the UEC is not following a strange path per se, what is strange though, is the attitude towards it taken by not only “the elites” who live in or have roots within but even by the people who were supposed to hold it dearly. It is time this attitude changes in favour of one which is going to mobilize resources, provide capabilities and get more involvement with research and development; one which is going to allocate funds to build, manage and strengthen this University, the “UEC”.

**KKK:** For now, what would you count as the marked achievements during the past few years, despite the fact that the university has a short history?

**BEI:** The university had its years of glory when a lot of funding were allocated to its administration by the Free Methodist Church and when the Faculty of Theology had some bursaries for registered students supported from the United States of America (USA). At that time, many professors came from abroad and the region to lecture and do a number of initiatives with the aim of giving the population of this territory a better chance to education. It will be remembered that Fizi is a war-torn territory owing to more than two decades of war, conflicts in the eastern DRC where the UEC is based, and an aftermath characterized by relative security or the lack thereof.

The population of Fizi deserves better and needs access to better education in their own territory and this should allow interactions to take place between the people of Fizi-Itombwe and other indwellers who have come to Fizi for socio-economic reasons and are now part and parcel of our destiny.



To answer your question more directly, the UEC has formed many cadres now deployed in many state institutions. Alumni include the sector chief, education prefects, bankers, magistrates, lawyers, teachers, religious superintendents, pastors, agriculturalists, economists, political analysts, esperantists, businessmen and businesswomen, entrepreneurs, Engineers and many other cadres who play a vital role in the socio-economic, development and political spheres, not only of the territory, but also that of the entire country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

**KKK:** Do students, in other words, your clients recognized the educational curriculum (quality education) useful in the current competitive labor market in central Africa?

**BEI:** There is no doubt about it because a year or two ago the government published a list of viable institutions in the entire DRC. The UEC came out as one of those viable institutions recognized on a national scale. This goes without saying that the diplomas, degrees and certificates issued by UEC are equal to those issued by the University of Kinshasa, Lubumbashi or Bukavu, to name but a few. Some of our graduates have been employed as magistrates by the state. There is therefore no reason to turn away this important institution of education.

When I took office as the Rector of UEC, I led my team in conducting a number of reforms which have also visibly make UEC impactful in the society. The human capital is one of those cornerstone achievements under my leadership. I have also managed to bring a few professors to volunteer as academics, deans, professors, assistant lecturers, fund-raisers, technical advisers and prayer-warriors in favour of the UEC. We have academics who joined in different initiatives from Africa, Italy, India, Spain, France, the USA and so forth.

We managed to introduce reforms, under my stewardship, such as enhancing the quality of education through improved training by suitably qualified professors, assistant lecturers, the provision of technology, solar panels, Wifi, and the reception of new books from France, in the past and recently, mainly from the USA. The last donation of almost four hundred books from the Emeritus Professor Denis Aliko Songolo made history, making the UEC library an institution with very important written books – a treasure to be cherished for many more

years. I managed to reschedule that all major transactions be done through a local bank and organized many conferences and events to enhance the culture of reading, researching and engaging in meaningful as well as robust debates about all aspects of life. Briefly, I managed to give to the university more international exposure in America, Europe, Australia, Africa and Asia; all this with the support of my team.

Last but not least, my aim is also to promote the culture, social cohesion and collaboration among the people, within and beyond the community. To do this, we started to organize the Faculty of Language, InterLinguistics and Esperanto which apart from teaching other African languages next to imported ones, namely Mandarin, English, French, Esperanto, it will particularly promote and defend the use of Ebembe, Kiswahili and the likes - previously disadvantaged African languages. **This will not only restore our dignity as the people of that territory but will also affirm our determination to a more equal society where linguistic human rights and indigenous knowledge of culture and science will be preserved and shared.**

**KKK:** What competitive advantages has Hope University of Congo over other similar educational institutions in the region?

**BEI:** To go straight to the point, I would say the UEC has now the biggest library in the entire Fizi territory. The library which is yet to be built to the desired standard already has more books than any other in Fizi-Itombwe. If we manage to make my dream of building new facilities for the library, and later on for the UEC, it will become a milestone achievement of all the time.

The community University namely UEC places at the centre of its policy the preservation of this community core values, traditions and culture, its languages Ebembe, Kiswahili as well as others and the sharing of science and technology through the use of other means of communication. It was initially meant to be a bilingual University (French and English) but evolved to accommodate other medium of communication including Esperanto, although it is in this regard that capacity need to be reinforced with infrastructure, volunteers, funding, bursaries and win-win partnerships.

Science and technology remain two weaknesses of UEC owing to the lack of investors and regardless of entrepreneurial activities we have undertaken in the past. I appeal to the world to join us in this vision. A university like the UEC is destined to be a catalyst of peace in that slowly recovering region. If we get funding for entrepreneurship incubators, we could make UEC an economic hub of that semi-rural territory of Fizi.

Beyond competition, I believe we could extend access to our library to sister Higher Learning institutions such as the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique (ISP Baraka), Institut Supérieur de Développement Rural (ISDR Baraka), Institut Supérieur de Technique Médical (ISTM Baraka) to name but a few. Where we could help we will not hesitate to do so in order to serve others with our library, sharing of knowledge, know-how through research products and beyond. Please help us build and further develop the library.

We have managed to bring professors and other academics to join us in shaping the future of this University project. The likes of Emeritus Prof Denis Aliko Songolo, Prof Majaliwa Mwanjalolo, Prof Nehemie Mwilanya, Prof Extraordinary Badar Iqbal, P.O Hon. Obedi Nyamangyoku, Prof Renato Corsetti, Prof Vicente Manzano-Arrondo, Ir. Ahmed Mamdoohi, Dr. Jean Sikatenda, Rev. Nana Yenga, Mrs. Francoise Noireau, Mr. Yamungu Yamalong

Boniface, Mr. Jérémie Mahungu, Mr. Kester Kenn Klomegah and many more, team up in support to our vision to make the UEC a regional powerhouse of knowledge, research and development.

While some of them lecture physically or virtually, others either support/ed with donations, books, vehicle, Ruforum bursaries procedure, visits, lobbying, conferences, advocacy, fundraising and most importantly with technical advise to the office of the Vice-Chancellor that I hold.

**KKK:** What has been the most difficult challenge running this university? And what management styles do you disagree with especially as head of this institution?

**BEI:** The lack of funding is number one problem of this young University. We need funding to pay (decent) salaries to employed staff and visiting professors/Assistants, run the University, support research, equip with infrastructure, promote discoveries, use the 45 hectares of land that we have for agriculture and/or tree planting, nature conservation, and manage developmental projects. As a community University, we could use financial resources to intervene where necessary in the suburbs, villages where the Lake Tanganyika water rise effect impacted so negatively to the housing facilities, standard of living and life in general in Fizi territory and beyond. A proper operational budget coupled with reforms that I am conducting would take this university to another level of service to the community. If for example industrial fishing, research and development are promoted via the UEC which is (relatively) at the shore of the Lake Tanganyika, it can become a hub of economic development and job creation in the region.

I adopted an open door policy in managing the UEC and I therefore do not agree with the autocratic leadership style. I treasure excellence in doing work and want to steer my colleagues to follow my example. I don't agree with insubordination in any way.

**KKK:** Some say entrepreneurship is very challenging, but what keeps you motivated as a rector? Who are some of the most notable people that have experienced during the work of Hope University of Congo?

**BEI:** I taught entrepreneurship and business economics to the university community and around Fizi and I am prepared to do so hoping to get people and organizations to extend some form of support. Fizi should not depend on handouts from NGOs instead I suggest an economic model similar to that of China where community development is catered for, supported, and developed through a bottom up approach at times with top down support most of the time; so that we teach the people to fish more efficiently, to cultivate the land, to work with their hands and brain, hard and smartly, to preserve the environment, recycle, reuse, reoriente our inputs/outputs, promote own literature, fight corruption and mismanagement of funds, embrace the culture of saving and maintenance, promote peace and stability, build on faith, educate on good governance and so forth.

I have been inspired by our leaders. The former Bishop Welongo Wehusha who saw the need to start off the UEC and the current Bishop Dr Lubunga Wehusha whom I believe to hold dear the idea of taking this University to another level and provide it with the necessary support as I lead it to a phase of ambitious project of greatness.

As I said before, I also met many professors both in the country and abroad willing to do more to help. I should say the team efforts of those who sacrifice their time to work with me

in Baraka or from wherever they are, I say thank you so much. I think of people who work/ed as security guards, librarian, cleaner, assistants, professors, office bearers, and appreciate their contribution which makes it possible to hope for a better future. I pray and work that we will one day have funding to rewards and recognize their efforts.

Serving and working in the DRC and at the UEC for me it is in a way giving back to the country of origin and my people. It keeps me going. Having survived the atrocities of the war in that region, I think the people deserve better. It will all start with a better education to change the course of their life. After 26 years in South Africa, I am equipped to do something to change the world around me. With benefactors' support, I believe that I will make it happen.

**KKK:** How do you value education and training for staff, as well as regular educational exchanges, as a means of forging relations with external universities (international cooperation) here?

**BEI:** I think the UEC must be a learning organisation. We need to provide continuous training and cater for career development. We are not doing enough although during my term I am trying it. I have conducted not less than five conferences/workshops and invited other academics to do so but over the years we need more capacity, volunteers, missionaries, investors, authors, engineers, economists, business analysts, educationalists, scientists, researchers, esperantists, philosophers to join me in doing capacity building, training and more.

The major partnerships we forged so far is that with Université Catholique de Bukavu (UCB), with Civencia (Spain) although in both instances we ought to materialize the agreement with practical initiatives. I am willing to steer my team in this regard going forward. I invite people with resources and the will to support me and get involved. We need well established universities to kindly provide bursaries and training opportunities to both our staff and students, invite us for joint venture initiatives, and we are willing to have twin relations with other universities abroad. Please let us know if you are reading me and could help with this.

**KKK:** Where would you like to see this business of education, at least, in the next five years? In other words, what's your future vision for Hope University of Congo?

**BEI:** I would like to see a modern library built and then after the rest of the infrastructure for the UEC. I will reveal later the name of it when the project starts. The UEC must grow into becoming a modern University with all the facilities; it can be a unifying force that call for peace and stability in the Great Lakes region. If developed into a full-fledged University, it will have the muscles to fully call for social cohesion, security, people to people relations, peace and cater for community development, culture preservation, environment conservation, research and development, publications, natural medicine, medicinal plants, multilingualism, food security, breeding of cows and other animals, controlled hunting, that put the spirit of Ubuntu, this African philosophy of humanity and generosity, at the centre of our core values. I thank you for the opportunity and the readers for their time, especially, those who will extend a hand of support to the University project that I have. God bless you!

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**Kester Kenn Klomegah**, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), Weekly Blitz and InDepthNews, is now a regular contributor to Global Research. He researches Eurasia, Russia, Africa and BRICS. His focused interest areas include geopolitical changes, foreign relations and economic development questions relating to Africa. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

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