

ECONOMIC DECOLONIZATION AND STRATEGIES OF BELGIAN BUSINESS AFTER CONGOLESE INDEPENDENCE (1960-1978)

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This article is devoted to the history of economic decolonization in the Congo after 30 June 1960. For postcolonial states, democratic, socialist and autocratic alike, economic decolonization was a vital and complementary step following political independence, since the achievement of political sovereignty did not automatically lead to economic sovereignty. Establishing economic sovereignty by postcolonial states foremost involved challenging the continued control over their economies by former colonial powers and foreign firms, aiming for autonomous economic development and the integration in the world economy on fairer terms.¹ Congo was no exception to this. Large Belgian firms controlled key sectors of the Congolese economy particularly mining, transportation and plantations. After the First World War, the colony became the prime destination of Belgian foreign investment. In particular the holding company the Société Générale de Belgique controlled a huge share of the Congolese economy; ranging from mining (Union Minière du Haut Katanga), diamonds (Forminière and SIBEKA²), as well as controlling subholdings like the Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l'Industrie (C.C.C.I). It took several years before this strong influence and position was actually reversed. The aim of the article is to offer a new and broader assessment of how independence influenced the behaviour of Belgian business and what strategies companies pursued in relation to Congolese efforts in the 1960s and 70s to gain control over the domestic economy.

I. Introduction

Our understanding of the history of economic decolonization, both in relation to the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as in a more global fashion, is still incomplete. Initial research has been done, but more systematic research into the post-colonial strategies, highlighting Congolese as well as business strategies, is needed.³ Written in 1980, Peemans offered a first assessment of how colonial business ultimately unravelled, indicating that particularly the interests of the larger holding groups as one pillar of the colonial “power structure” persisted way into the 1970s in spite of nationalizations and other measures to challenge their position. Overall the importance of Belgian investments declined, especially since the economy in Congo went into crisis in the 1970s.⁴ In the landmark study on the impact of colonialism in both Belgium and the Congo, Vanthemsche assessed the overall importance of economic ties between Belgium and the Congo and particularly the political machinations behind protecting business interests after 1960. From this point of view, the fact that most investments were the work of large financial holdings and elite entrepreneurs, increasingly detached to other Belgian firms and the domestic economy at large, explains the relative ease with the ties were eventually severed.⁵ Yet both Peemans and Vanthemsche stressed that while Congo declined in importance for Belgian business, the enduring presence had major ramifications for Congo itself.

The analysis of Moreau in 2012 offered an appraisal of business strategies: ranging from political manipulation (especially immediately after independence) to attempts for risk aversion through diversification.⁶ From an empirical point of view, it is arguable that not all of these strategies and aspects have been fully explored. Moreover, research into economic decolonization has also evolved to such an extent, in particular because of global and postcolonial perspectives, that a new assessment is in order. The work of Vanessa Ogle called for an understanding of decolonization as a global economic and financial event, that is only beginning to emerge in full detail.⁷ Similarly, this article calls for a broader understanding of the ways in which Belgian businesses adapted to economic decolonization as a (global) process by focusing on four aspects: firstly, the collective and coordinated action of firms, secondly, new ideas and strategies of political risk management that were being incubated, thirdly new ideas and practices surrounding diversification and development in the postcolonial world that could valorize the colonial experience of Belgian firms, and fourthly labour strategies, in particular the use of expat labour as a way to instrumentalize control over company interests in the Congo.

In recent years, the research agenda on decolonization and postcolonial relations has changed substantially. First of all, decolonization cannot be de-coupled from global processes, in terms of causes and effects. In other words, scholarship

1. BRAD SIMPSON, “Self-Determination and Decolonization,” in MARTIN THOMAS & ANDREW THOMPSON (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford, 2018, 417; ADOM GETACHEW, *Worldmaking after Empire. The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton, 2019.

2. The diamond companies involve on the one hand the Forminière, the Société Internationale Forestière et Minière du Congo, established in 1906. It exploited also diamonds outside its concession, like that of the Société Minière du Bécéka. The Société Minière du Bécéka was established in 1919 in order to develop the diamonds that were found on the concessions of the railway company Compagnie du Chemin de fer du Bas-Congo au Katanga (BCK). In 1960, the Société Minière du Bécéka separated from its Congolese concessions, that were placed in a new Congolese company, the Société Minière du Bakwanga (MIBA). The Société Minière du Bécéka became in 1962, SIBEKA (Société d’entreprise et d’investissements du Bécéka). The SIBEKA managed its participation in MIBA, but also aimed to develop other diamond and mining fields in the world.

3. MICHEL DUMOULIN ET AL., eds., *Du Congo belge à la république du Congo*, Brussels, 2012.

4. JEAN-PHILIPPE PEEMANS, “Imperial Hangovers: Belgium - The Economics of Decolonization,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15/2, 1980, 257-86.

5. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, *Belgium and the Congo 1885-1980*, Cambridge, 2018, 246.

6. JEAN-LOUIS MOREAU, “De la décolonisation à la Zaïrianisation. Le sort des capitaux belges au Congo,” in MICHEL DUMOULIN ET AL., (eds.), *Du Congo belge à la république du Congo*, Brussel, 2012, 165.

7. VANESSA OGLE, “‘Funk Money’: The End of Empires, The Expansion of Tax Havens, and Decolonization as an Economic and Financial Event,” *Past & Present*, 249/1, 2020, 249.

has to move beyond “the mere deconstruction of colonial relationships” to a wider, global framework.⁸ The disintegration of colonial economies went hand-in-hand with processes of international diversification and was shaped by a global agenda of anticolonial economic nationalism. But economic decolonization also offered new and unexpected opportunities for businesses as well as new postcolonial states, but, of course, under totally different circumstances to former imperial firms.⁹ Recently put in the spotlight is the link between the private sector and development, in terms of project-based investments and consultancy in Africa. Moreover, many of the developmental projects had strong roots in late colonial designs.¹⁰ Strick and Dimier showed that Belgian businesses saw money in these “white elephants”, and set up joint ventures to shape new large projects like the Inga Dam.¹¹ Obviously, development aid and project-based infrastructure offered a potential new role for business with a colonial pedigree.

Second, and relatedly, is the overall effect of economic decolonization on investment strategies and the conceptualization of political risk management as a way to structure and organize investments abroad. Nationalizations – as the main instrument for establishing economic sovereignty – shackled international business between 1950 and 1970. Weary of the threat of expropriations, international business looked for new ways

to safeguard their interests, like political risk insurance. In other words, modern notions of political risk management are deeply associated with forms of anticolonial economic nationalism.¹² In the face of assertive states seeking to establish their economic sovereignty, businesses, and governments in the West, navigated towards a potential new international system that enabled to protect property and investments abroad, a system that eventually never materialized.¹³ Nevertheless, the article will explore how Belgian firms gestured at systems of political risk management as a means to stabilize postcolonial economic ties.

The last point of interest relates to labour relations, in particular the relationships between expatriate and indigenous workers, as a tension field for ex-colonial business. Perhaps even more than the firms themselves, the presence of expatriate, white workers and managers was a highly visible artifact of the colonial past. As part of the economic sovereignty agenda, postcolonial states pushed to maximize the presence of local workers in higher positions. Some firms responded to such pressures by “Africanizing” the workforce as a sign of goodwill and as a deliberate attempt to enhance corporate legitimacy towards postcolonial states and their inhabitants.¹⁴ Yet at the same time, firms continued to see expatriate staff in the field as a necessity to exercise control over their investments.¹⁵ The presence of expatriates in the Congo is an aspect of

8. MARTIN THOMAS & ANDREW THOMPSON, “Rethinking Decolonization: A New Research Agenda for the Twenty First Century,” in MARTIN THOMAS & ANDREW THOMPSON, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford, 2018, 17.

9. NICHOLAS J. WHITE, “Imperial Business Interests, Decolonization and Post-Colonial Diversification,” in MARTIN THOMAS & ANDREW THOMPSON, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford, 2018, 647-49.

10. VÉRONIQUE DIMIER & SARAH STOCKWELL, “Introduction: New Directions in the History of Business and Development in Post-Colonial Africa,” in VÉRONIQUE DIMIER & SARAH STOCKWELL, (eds.), *The Business of Development in Post-Colonial Africa*, Cham, 2020, 1-37; KATE B. SHOWERS, “Electrifying Africa: An Environmental History with Policy Implications,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 93/3, 2011, 193-221.

11. VÉRONIQUE STRICK & VÉRONIQUE DIMIER, “Belgian Firms, Development Plans and the Independence of the Belgian Congo,” in VÉRONIQUE DIMIER & SARAH STOCKWELL (eds.), *The Business of Development in Post-Colonial Africa*, Cham, 2020, 99-126.

12. CHARLES LIPSON, *Standing Guard: Protecting Foreign Capital in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Princeton, 1985.

13. VANESSA OGLE, “State Rights against Private Capital: The ‘New International Economic Order’ and the Struggle over Aid, Trade, and Foreign Investment, 1962-1981,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 220/2, 2014, 211-234.

14. SARAH KUNZ, “A Business Empire and its Migrants: Royal Dutch Shell and the Management of Racial Capitalism,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 4, 2019, 377-391.

15. KEETIE SLUYTERMAN, “Decolonisation and the Organisation of the International Workforce: Dutch Multinationals in Indonesia, 1945-1967,” *Business History*, 62/7, 2020, 1196-1197. See for diversification strategies of multinationals in Africa: STEPHANIE DECKER, “Africanization in British Multinationals in Ghana and Nigeria, 1945-1970,” *Business History Review* 92/4, 2018, (92), 691-718.

the postcolonial relations that has up until now received little or no attention, even though it was a central component of the postcolonial business presence after independence.

In this article, I will focus on how Belgian businesses responded to independence by opening these new and broader lines of inquiry. This involves looking at strategies of diversification, the development of risk management and the position of expatriate workers. This study has however its limitations. As decolonization warranted a substantial degree of coordination and state-business consultation, both within the former metropolis and the newly dependent state, the article is mainly concerned with business interests associations and the common strategies and initiatives undertaken. Yet a focus on these associations has the advantage to capture shared initiatives, ideas and practices of businesses during the process of economic globalization. The development of these business interest associations are discussed in the next part. As far as the activities of individual businesses are concerned, the analysis is mainly based on firms that were part of the Société Générale de Belgique holding company. Focusing on this holding is justifiable as the main research strategy. As the largest colonial investor, it had the strongest influence in the Congo. Moreover, other larger colonial holdings, like Cominière, Brufina (Société de Bruxelles pour la Finance et l'Industrie) and Empain, have regrettably few or no archival traces. Reconstructing their activities and strategies is therefore a complex endeavour. Where possible, the article aims to provide a general overview by focusing on business interest associations and collective actions in addition to comparing and contextualizing the SGB activities with other business interests.

II. Organizing Belgian Business after Independence

In the 1950s, a number of business interest associations existed with the aim of defending private investments in the colonies. They offer an inroad to study the way in which businesses responded to the process of economic decolonization by promoting new strategies, ideas and activities for ex-colonial business in the postcolonial world. First to mention was the Comité Intérieur Colonial (CIC), a committee that coordinated the “economic empire” of the Société Générale de Belgique, overseeing the holding’s many participations in individual companies. It was established in 1928 after the SGB absorbed the Banque d’Outremer, which dramatically increased the scope of its activities in the colony. The committee mainly analysed balance sheets and reports, but members also inspected on “the terrain”.¹⁶ The CIC was transformed into the Comité Intérieur Congolais (CIC) after independence, which reported intensively on the Congo crisis. Most of the discussions in the committee were devoted to the changing political situation in the Congo. Only a few years later the CIC was finally re-baptized in the Comité Intérieur Africain (CIA). This change is indicative of the growing interest of the group in the wider African continent, which is discussed later, but admittedly the situation in the Congo remained key to the existence of this committee.

While the CIC/CIA coordinated the SGB’s interests from the metropolis, there were business interest associations with a roots in the Congo. The main business interest association in that respect was the Fédération des Entreprises du Congo (FEC) established in 1959, just before independence. The FEC – that united the interests of colonial companies

16. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, “Comment la Société Générale gérait-elle son ‘empire économique’ au Congo belge ? L’action du Comité Intérieur Colonial pendant les années 1930,” in SERGE JAUMAIN & KENNETH BERTRAMS, (eds.), *Patrons, gens d’affaires et banquiers. Hommage à Ginette Kurgan-van Hentenryck*, Bruxelles, 2004, 251-68.

mostly in Belgian hands – was the result of two major colonial business interest organizations, the Association des intérêts coloniaux belges (AICB) and the Association des intérêts industriels au Congo (AIIC). While the former was a pressure group in the metropolis, the AIIC, that united businesses in the Congo, was a direct interlocutor to the colonial administration. It was no coincidence that the AIIC was established during the War, in 1942, absent metropolitan oversight.¹⁷

Redolent of the system of structured social negotiations in Belgium, the FEC was purposed as a classical employers' organization. Major transformations in the late colonial system of social governance warranted this. In 1958, the colonial state forced business to unite into a employers' organization in order to make possible collective meetings with labour unions. Only in 1957, the colonial government allowed syndical freedom of organization, a move strongly opposed by colonial business wary of the creation of powerful unions that paralleled those of the metropolis.¹⁸ Grudgingly acknowledging union power in mid-1959, employers saw the FEC as a vehicle to reduce the "irritating and exuberant claims of the workers".¹⁹ In addition, presaging the political problems of post-1960, the FEC also chimed in with "the decentralizing political and administrative tendencies" in the colony.²⁰ Companies did face different local problems, especially after independence, but, it is hardly a secret that many business leaders envisioned Congo's future as a federal one, with high degrees of regional political autonomy. Mirroring this decentral future, the FEC

effectively created five provincial business associations (Léopoldville, Katanga, Kasai, Equator, Eastern provinces), with a strong local autonomy.²¹ Another colonial association FEDACOL, la Fédération congolaise des classes moyennes, defended the interests of smaller businesses. As a settler organization, the FEDACOL represented a very different group of people as opposed to the financial and business elites that governed their economic empires from Brussels. According to its own definition, colonists were by their very nature self-employed and making their own living, in contrast to whites with little or no material interest in the colony: colonial administrators or those working for the colonial companies (who often did temporary contracts). FEDACOL issued the monthly magazine 'Eurafrica'. Even though self-portrayed as one of the colonies powerful lobby group, the FEDACOL represented only 25% of the *colonat*, or 2,595 independent and self-employed settlers, mostly merchants, planters, farmers and artisans.²² It played a limited role after independence.

Soon independence would dominate the agenda and the future position of these business interest associations. The FEC held a seat on the economic round tables in April 1960 in order to prepare the economic and financial aspects of independent Congo.²³ During the roundtables, Congolese negotiators already made a difference between businesses that had enjoyed colonial privileges, whereas they saw the need to attract new business and initiatives that would support the industrialization and modernization of the country after 1960. Unsurprisingly, the FEC moved into the

17. RUBEN CASSIMAN, *L'association des intérêts coloniaux belges. Over de relatie tussen bedrijfswereld en koloniaal bestuur in Belgisch Congo (1940-1960)*, Master dissertation, Universiteit Gent, 2011, 38.

18. PEMANS, "Imperial Hangovers," 270. PIERRE TILLY, "Le Congo Belge, une colonie modèle en matière sociale?" in CATHERINE LANNEAU, PIERRE LUC PLASMAN & PATRICIA VAN SCHUYLENBERGH (eds.), *L'Afrique belge aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles. Nouvelles recherches et perspectives en histoire coloniale*, Bruxelles, 2014, 229-246; PIERRE TILLY, *Au travail! Colonisateurs et colonisés au Congo belge: entre exploitations et résistances*, Bruxelles, 2020.

19. AICB réunion, 12.05.1959. (ARA2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311). What was on the table was the representation of workers in company boards, structural negotiations between workers and labourers in a national labour board (as in Belgium), and a system of sectoral wage-setting commissions.

20. Ibidem.

21. La F.E.C tient sa première assemblée générale, excerpt from *Eurafrica* (1960, no. 4, issue 4, 31) (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311). Before 1961 this also included an association in Ruanda-Urundi.

22. "Organisation et action des colons au Congo. La Fédération congolaise des classes moyennes (FEDACOL)," *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 60/25, 1959, 1-21.

23. Fédération des Entreprises du Congo (FEC), rapport annuel, 1961. (ARA2, *Umicore*, no. 548).

defensive and called for the creation of a new state that would abstain from “planification” and leave enough space for private enterprise and a business climate favourable for old business interests as well.²⁴ After independence, the FEC portrayed itself as the main defender of colonial business interests in the newly independent Congo, holding an office in Léopoldville (Kinshasa) as well as in Brussels. Tellingly, the FEC office in Brussels was the largest, also hosting various study groups (on social and fiscal matters).²⁵ Business leaders officially ran the employers’ organization, but it also had staff of its own. The president of FEC in 1960 was Pierre Gillieaux, the vice-president of COTONCO (Compagnie Cotonnière Congolaise). The dualistic face of FEC as an organization that was ran from Brussels as well as Kinshasa can be clearly traced in its communication. Upon independence, the FEC presented itself as the main and almost exclusive Congolese employers’ association that functioned to uphold the economy: “because of the high levels of investments, and sustained efforts in technical and social domains, the private sector has equipped this country without which political independence would have been without meaning”.²⁶ But its true task was in safeguarding those former colonial interests, and the shareholders in living in Belgium. Upon reading its internal meetings there could be no misunderstanding of its role: “the FEC (...) and the enterprises are practically the only institutions (...) that have defended economic interests and guaranteed Belgian presence [in the Congo]”.²⁷

It is difficult to fully appraise the activities and impact of the FEC after independence. In Léopoldville, FEC representatives and especially F. De Pooter – the head of the office there – kept in close touch with Congolese politicians as well as foreign diplomats,

passing on information to Brussels. But during the Congo crisis the organization was left in tatters. In a country torn apart by secessionist movements, acting as a unified federal association had become virtually impossible. By 1962, internal FEC reports revealed that it had lost touch with most regional business associations and individual business, which were often operating quasi-independently in dealing with local and national authorities. Furthermore, the 225 companies it united in the same year (excluding those of Katanga) did not generate enough revenue for it to sustain its operations.²⁸ The FEC desperately tried to convince the Belgian government to subsidize its existence.

In 1966, the FEC was reorganized in the sense that it became a full Congolese organization. Instead the Centre pour l’étude et le développement des investissements outre-mer (CEDIOM) was established in Belgium, an organization that grew out of the Brussels branch of the FEC and operated independently. CEDIOM was established to avoid the image – which was in fact close to reality – that Brussels controlled the FEC.²⁹ Under the impulse of the Congolese government, the FEC had to assume the narrower role of a “syndical” employer interest organization engaging primarily with social and labour matters. While Belgian businesses saw a larger role for the organization, as a lobby and pressure group, the consensus in CEDIOM was to conform FEC to the ideas set out by the Congolese ministry of work and social security. An additional requirement, and seen as “a problem” by Belgian entrepreneurs, was that such an organization was to be headed by Congolese nationals, which meant that sooner or later control over FEC would be lost.³⁰ As a heir to (the metropolitan leg of) the FEC, the CEDIOM pursued a broader agenda. It promoted invest-

24. “Dossier de l’économie et des finances congolaises à la veille de la table ronde économique,” *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 61/15, 1960, 1-24.

25. Note sur la situation de la FEC, 15 February 1962 (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311).

26. La F.E.C tient sa première assemblée générale, excerpt from *Eurafrica* (1960, no. 4, issue 4, 31) (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311).

27. Note sur la situation de la FEC, 15 February 1962. (ARA2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311).

28. Réunion de la Fédération des Entreprises du Congo (FEC), 23 February 1962. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311).

29. Réunion du comité du CEDIOM, 24 January 1968. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, nr. 394). In spite of the separation, this meeting stressed that the relationship between CEDIOM and FEC should remain as close as it was intended to be.

30. Note sur les conséquences pour les statuts de la FEC (...), 04 December 1967. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 394).

ments in overseas and developing countries but it is clear that advocating the interests of Belgian industries in Congo remained the primary objective. Indeed, CEDIOM was supported by the main financial holdings and large companies with interests in the Congo, SGB, Lambert, Brufina, Lever, Empain, Texaf and others.³¹ CEDIOM operated from Brussels and kept a short line with Belgian politics, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It followed and informed companies about the situation in the Congo, but also organized a number of services for its members, for instance training sessions for European expatriate workers who were sent to the Congo. In 1969 CEDIOM ranked 129 members, but throughout the 1970s there was a gradual membership decline that paralleled the overall decline of Belgian business influence in Zaïre. CEDIOM's membership base dwindled to about 80 members in 1980, and in 1984 the organization dissolved.

It should be underlined that the CEDIOM had counterparts in the sphere of defending (former imperial) business interests in other European countries as well, to which it held close contact: the Afrika-Instituut (Netherlands), Afrika Verein E.V. (West Germany), Association internationale pour le développement économique et l'aide Technique, AIAT (France), Instituto Italo-Africano (Italy), the East Africa and Mauritius Association and West Africa Committee (UK).³² The AIAT was established in 1959 by French businesses in Africa specialized in commerce, mining and transportation.³³ In the world of ex-colonial defence associations, business interest associations held a special place, because they were not merely looking after compensa-

tion for lost property but also aiming to maintain and even revive economic activities "overseas". In Paris, there was an overarching association that embodied this dual goal: the "Centre européen pour le développement industriel et la mise en valeur de l'outre-mer" (CEDIMOM). Its primary goal was to act as an interest group "to maintain or to support the efficiency of the activities installed in Africa".³⁴ Several Belgian companies, most importantly Union Minière, SIBEKA, Belgolaise, Compagnie financière européenne et d'outremer, were direct members of CEDIMOM. Together with sister organizations of business interest organizations that represented the interests of European industries in Africa, the CEDIOM formed part of a "group of seven" that aimed to inform and influence E.E.C. negotiations with ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries in the 1970s, like the first Lomé convention in 1976. Next to localized strategies, such pressure groups also tried to influence the foreign political agenda.³⁵

Lastly in this world of business interest associations with ties to the Congo is the Fédération des Industries Belges (FIB), the main employers' organization in Belgium.³⁶ In 1964, Baron Snoy et d'Oppuers, an important business and political figure, established a FIB working group on cooperation and development, in full "la Commission de Coopération avec les pays en voie de développement de la FIB".³⁷ Its mission was to establish a doctrine of "technical assistance in the Third World", exploring how business and the private sector could and should play a role in the emerging policies and projects of national and international aid and development assistance.³⁸

31. Réunion du comité restreint du Comité Intérieur Africain, 27 April 1967. (ARA2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, no. 170).

32. Communiqué, 29 October 1973 (ARA2, *Sibeka*, no. 3405).

33. ANDREW COHEN, *Politics and Economics of Decolonization in Africa: The Failed Experiment of the Central African Federation*, London, 2017, 254.

34. Colloque du CEDIMOM, 7-9 November 1969 (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, nr. 168).

35. CEDIOM, rapport du comité pour l'exercice 1976 (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 3406).

36. From 1973, the FIB became FEB (Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique) or VBO (Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen), also incorporating non-industrial enterprises. See René BRION & Jean-Louis MOREAU, *1895-1995. 100 ans pour l'entreprise. Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique*, Brussels, 1995.

37. *La Belgique et le développement du Tiers Monde. Livre blanc*, Brussel, n.d.

38. Quelques éléments pour une doctrine de l'assistance technique belge aux pays du Tiers-Monde, et en particulier au Congo, 4 August 1964 (ARA2, *Finoutremer*, nr. 312.)

The FIB argued that a working group was necessary mainly because of the absence, in their view, of a coherent policy of development aid. But like most other associations it faced an uphill struggle domestically against “a general indifference of the Belgian public opinion and the government with regard to Congolese matters”.³⁹ The FIB framed the participation of the private sector in the Congo and Africa more broadly as being part of a “Belgian tradition of cross-border expansion to which it can be proud” and consequently that “Belgium has, therefore, contributed (...) to the development of many Third World countries, and to the penetration into them, not only of technical progress, but also of civilization. Among these countries, the Congo obviously occupies a very special place, to which we will have to return”.⁴⁰ Belgian businesses thus construed a narrative in which the legacy of Belgian industries in an imperial context was a positive one, as they have contributed to (economic) development. In 1970, Georges Velter, until 1965 the president of Fabrimetal, headed this development commission.⁴¹

Obviously the FIB wanted to enhance the participation of the private sector in development aid and support, in order to valorize the industrial potential of the country and its economic welfare, which is “conditioned by the exchanges between Belgian and the external world”.⁴² In avoiding the explicit colonial connection, the FIB followed herewith the policies of European sister-organizations, particularly the Comité National du Patronat français (CNPF), that “decolonized” by cutting the links with former imperial industries and replacing it with a single organism that laid out the attitude towards developmentalism policy for the entire French industry. The working group on cooperation and development of the FIB was thereby broader than the CEDIOM, which more

clearly focused on investment protection and the maintenance of business assets in the Congo. That being said, the FIB development commission as of 1969 did also have a permanent representative in Kinshasa.⁴³

It is evident that the organizational landscape of business interest associations evolved considerably as a result of independence. Businesses moved from colonial interest groups to more encompassing organizations, invoking seemingly neutral names. “Overseas” and “African” replaced “colonial” or “Congo”. Development became a buzzword in names of some of these organizations. In spite of new names and claims, all these Belgian business interest organizations kept a strong focus on Congo. Except for FIB, former imperial interests controlled such business interest groups in Brussels as well as Congo’s main patronal organization, the FEC, at least until 1967. These organizations were the most important, but also more informal networks continued to exist, particularly the more illustrious “group of wise men” (Group des Sages), gathering notables from the financial world and that was said to be behind the establishment of FEC in 1959 and CEDIOM in 1967.⁴⁴

III. From neo-colonialism to investment security

A much hoped-for business-as-usual scenario after independence did not play out. In April-June 1960, economic roundtables were to settle pressing issues in terms of the Congolese economy after independence, however, most issues like debt, the colonial portfolio (i.e. the stakes held by the colonial state in important chartered firms like the Comité spécial du Katanga, CSK) and the position of business remained unresolved. These issues

39. Problèmes de l’assistance technique belge au Congo, 11 February 1964. (ARA 2 *Finoutremer*, nr. 312).

40. Quelques éléments pour une doctrine de l’assistance technique belge aux pays du Tiers-Monde, et en particulier au Congo, 04 August 1964. (ARA2, *Finoutremer*, nr. 312).

41. Association des Entreprises du Katanga (Assekat,) 27.02.1969. (AfricaMuseum, *Fonds BCK*, nr. 403).

42. Quelques éléments pour une doctrine de l’assistance technique belge aux pays du Tiers-Monde, et en particulier au Congo, 04 August 1964. (ARA2, *Finoutremer*, nr. 312).

43. Interview de M. Raymond Pulinckx. Administrateur délégué de la FIB, 04 May 1970 (ARA2, *Sibeka*, nr. 5321).

44. Note du CEDIOM, 26 Novembre 1975. (ARA2, *Sibeka*, nr. 3405).

came to be known as the “contentieux” (contentious issues). Two issues are important to understand the position of colonial business after independence, as well as Congolese dissatisfaction. First, worried about future legal and tax status, many business opted for the Belgian status just before independence. This was made possible by a hastily adapted law of 17 June 1960, only two weeks before independence, that allowed firms registered in the Congo (under colonial law) to change seats to Belgium. The transfer of the nationality registration made these businesses officially foreign and arguably harder for the new Congolese state to tax, control and govern most businesses operating on its territory.⁴⁵ Second was the issue of the colonial portfolio, in essence the participations (i.e. sharing in the profits & board representation) in various companies held by the colonial state, in exchange for giving mining or land concessions to these firms. Parastatal companies like the Comité spécial du Katanga (CSK) that held such shares (in exchange for concessions for instance) on behalf of the colonial state were dissolved, but upon independence there was no definitive arrangement as to transfer shares and the participation in UMHK to the Congo, so they remained in Belgian custody. In 1965, the colonial portfolio was finally released, giving the Congolese state a 17.95 % participation in UMHK.⁴⁶

In addition to the lingering struggles over the *contentieux*, however, political instability made business-as-usual also difficult. To begin with there was political instability and upheaval in the Congo: during the Congo crisis (1960-1963), most notably the Katangese and Kasai secessions. Companies like the UMHK and Société Minière du Bécéka actively lent support to the secessionist states of Katanga and Kasai respectively. The relationship between UMHK and the Katangese secession is generally complex, as the company supported Tshombé against the formal Belgian diplomatic

stance pro a united Congo. An important reflection should be made whether the Katangese secession was solely the machination of the UMHK, as it is often viewed. The secessionist movement in Katanga formed an important and long-standing, domestic political force on its own.⁴⁷ Whether or not instigated, business did play along with regionalist forces, thus undermining political stability after independence. Overall political upheaval made business operations difficult in the longer run and at least in some areas, and caused an outflux of expatriate workers as well. From a business point of view, the take-over by Mobutu was welcomed for its relative stability after 1965, especially after the Simba rebellions of 1964-65.

But also Mobutu would not accept the enduring position of former colonial business within Congo. In 1966, a decree forced companies to establish their head office in the Congo (rather than in Brussels) by the end of the year, something the UMHK refused to do. On the last day of 1966, the mining assets of UMHK were nationalized and its assets were transferred to a newly established company, La Générale Congolaise de Minerais (Gécomines), later La Générale Congolaise des Mines (same acronym) and after 1972, La Générale des Carrières et des Mines (Gécamines). However, an important settlement was reached that would continue Belgian involvement in the strategically important copper and cobalt mines of Katanga, as a technical and marketing contract was signed between Gécomines and the Société Générale des Minerais (SGM) for the marketing of Congolese copper, and technical assistance needed for continued operations. The SGM was the sales arm of the UMHK, and a SGB vehicle, and would continue as a service provider for the new state-owned company.

In spite of these conflicts, former colonial business interests remained influential. A study issued by

45. GUY VANTHEMSCHÉ, *Belgium and the Congo 1885-1980*, 245.

46. WOLF RADMANN, “The Nationalization of Zaire’s Copper: From Union Minière to Gécamines,” *Africa Today*, 25, 1978, 29–30.

47. ERIK KENNES & MILES LARMER, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa: Fighting Their Way Home*, 2016, 7; The argument of the autonomous development of Katangese nationalism was crafted earlier in: ROMAIN YAKEMTCHOUK, *Aux origines du séparatisme Katangais*, Bruxelles, 1988.

the national university of Zaïre, in 1974, estimated that Belgian interests still had a large influence in important sectors. The study assumed that the contribution of Belgian-controlled enterprises to domestic GDP still floated around 20%, whereas this figure was said to be around 55% in 1958.⁴⁸ In December 1973 Mobutu announced another large attempt to establish economic sovereignty by taking control over businesses in a number of key sectors, that became effective in January 1974. These nationalizations were an important component of the Zaïrization policy of the “Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution” (MPR) and a central part of nationalistic discourse. Mobutu argued that Zaïre “was the most exploited country in the world” and that the economy and natural richness should belong to the Zaïrois only.⁴⁹ Mobutu prioritized the nationalization of agricultural enterprises and the Africanization of staff in individual companies. With regard to copper production, plans involved the creation of refining capacity to treat Zaïre copper for the full 100% and that Gécamines would be fully controlled and managed by Zaïrois.⁵⁰ However, as a result of problems that emerged from governing nationalized companies, several owners were offered the possibility to reclaim a 40% share in their former possessions in 1975, somewhat reversing the Zaïrianisation policy.

How did business try to ameliorate these conditions? There were almost continuous attempts to influence Congolese politics at various levels and to improve the conditions for business. Initially the FEC was preoccupied with the new legislation and initiatives that were imposed by the new independent state and the position of firms in the economy. One of the main obstacles for Belgian business were the strict measures on moving

capital outside the Congo, which prevented the transfer of profits.⁵¹ The FEC also lobbied the Belgian government to initiate a new law that would guarantee the social security measures for European workers that were previously covered by the colonial administration (*supra*). In the face of many restrictions with regard to the expatriation of capital and benefits, companies focused on the re-investment of these profits (*autofinancement*) that could not be transferred abroad. The FEC portrayed this accounting technique as a substitute for the (falling) input of capital from Belgium.⁵² However, the structural adoption of autofinancement was then seen by Congolese authorities as a lack of willingness to invest in the Congo. Overall, the FEC strategies focused on adjusting businesses to the new political reality, rather than bending the rules as it was initially hoped.

By 1970, the investment doctrine of the SGB had been stripped to a core. It focused on maintaining the existing “primordial interests” that reflected their long standing presence in the Congo. These were the copper industry (the contract between SGM and Gécomines), diamonds, and (maritime) transport. Around 1970, the functionality of the Brussels CIA committee was questioned, after the somewhat overdue recognition that “Kinshasa had replaced the royal palace” as the main political force.⁵³ In this process of economic decolonization, smaller businesses were worse off. While some larger business assets of the SGB could often be protected because of its size and importance, smaller farmers and businesses had completely lost political influence and formed an easy target for local notables and political mandates of Mobutu’s MPR party.⁵⁴ Moreover, the SGB distanced itself from settler organizations and their interests like the ABIA (Association belge des

48. La position et l’avenir des investissements belges au Zaïre, in *industries et travaux d’outre-mer*, no. 244, Mars 1974. (ARA 2, Union Minière du Haut Katanga, first transfer. no 2557).

49. Discours du Mobutu au conseil législatif, 3 December 1973. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no 3405).

50. *Ibidem*.

51. Rapport des relations économiques et financières entre la Belgique et le Congo, 30 September 1966. (ARA2, SGB, 3rd transfer, no. 170).

52. Note de André de Spirlet à Philippe Chevalier, 17 December 1969 (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, nr. 5319).

53. Comité Intérieur Africain (CIA), doctrine des investissements, 10 February 1970 (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 5319).

54. « Problèmes économiques et financiers », *La Libre Belgique*, 12 February 1970 (ARA2, *Sibeka*, nr. 5319).

Intérêts en Afrique). Resentful settlers who had lost their properties (small plantations, workshop SME's) often took "extreme" positions in seeking compensation by the Congolese government, which would be ultimately damaging to the SGB's relationship with the regime.⁵⁵

Nationalizations were not limited to Congo alone. Confronted with nationalizations throughout the developing world, businesses and western governments increasingly hoped that an international system of arbitration and settlement could alleviate such threats and, ultimately, make investments more future-proof. Business sought predictable and enforceable rules for investment, and initiatives emerged bent on the protection of foreign business property as an universally accepted norm.⁵⁶ In 1968, the RDC subscribed to the convention of Washington (18.03.1965) issued by the World Bank, that governed disputes between firms and states. This was applauded by Belgian businesses, seen as a first important step in resolving the issue of protection and promotion of private investment in the Congo. On 26 June 1969, the government of the Congo promulgated an investment-code law and adhered to Washington convention, urging states to settle investment disputes preferably via international negotiation.⁵⁷ Clearly, in spite of all the hostility fuelled by economic nationalism, the RDC was seeking foreign capital in order to make possible large-scale infrastructural projects. Related to the investment code, the Congolese ministry of economics had an investment service that attracted investors to carry out (well-circumscribed) projects, but it also opened the door to non-Belgian investors.⁵⁸ In a list of 1970, investment projects were submitted by Peugeot, but also the match-fabricator Union Allumettière SA of Belgium. Above all, the Congolese government

attempted to control the influx of capital and the conditions under which it occurred. For instance, each project had to list the number of expats, and indicate the number of jobs involved for Congolese workers. Around 1969 there was optimism that this would bring new opportunities for Belgian business, although the process was obviously guided and highly political.

The rampant economic nationalism in the postcolonial world and in Latin America initiated new ways to insure against political risk and the loss of investment. As of the late 1950s, an important instrument that surfaced in the international political economy were bilateral treaties, in which states mutually promised to guarantee the protection of assets of the other party's nationals on their soil. Very often such agreements were conditioned upon development aid, as was the case of the Hickenlooper amendment in the US that penalized the expropriation of US business interest by restricting development aid. Such a treaty was something that Belgian businesses wanted between Belgium and the Congo as well, but only two treaties were signed with other African countries: Tunisia and Morocco. Belgium continued to give development aid or financial support without guarantees for its businesses.⁵⁹

More successful was the attempt to create a national insurance system against political risk and the loss of property. Both CEDIOM and FIB pleaded for an independent insurance agency, preferably government-backed. According to the FIB, a system of insurance against political risk was needed particularly in relation to the developing world, while risks in Europe or the US were relatively low: "for Belgium, particular encouragement is needed for investing (...) given the recent

55. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, *Belgium and the Congo 1885-1980*, 235.

56. CHARLES LIPSON, *Standing Guard*.

57. Activités du CEDIOM en 1969 (ARA2, *Sibeka*, nr. 3405). According to the UN it was only ratified in 1970, see: "Congolese investment code", website of the UN, < <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=080000028012a925> >, accessed on 15 June 2023

58. Circulaire d'information CEDIOM, n. 84, 13 February 1970 (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 5319).

59. Bilateral agreements and treaties containing provisions directly relevant to the security of foreign investments, 1 August 1968 (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, fourth transfer, nr. 5127).

unfavourable developments with certain developing countries.”⁶⁰ What was needed was a “fund” that protected businesses against a whole set of risks, in particular with regard to expropriation, but also against “indirect confiscations”, restrictions that problematized foreign operations like currency exchange restrictions and discriminatory taxation. Generally, the fund should also protect against war and revolution, a risk that, according to the FIB was large in the developing world. While the FIB preferred a multinational guarantee fund, they viewed a national system more realistic on the short term: “the industry wishes that the government creates the possibility for, guaranteed by the state, a system of protection”.⁶¹

In 1970, CEDIOM urged that the Office national du Ducroire (OND), a state agency that offered insurance against export and payment risks abroad, would change its statutes in order to include insurance against expropriation as well.⁶² In February 1971, a law was accepted that made this possible. But debilitating to the former colonial enterprises was the exclusion of the system of self-financing (*autofinancement*) – the re-investment of profits in the Congo that could not be transferred abroad – which placed this system at a disadvantage against “fresh” capital brought from abroad.⁶³ The efforts to include self-financing were in vain. Possibly because of the reluctance of ex-colonial firms to bring in new capital, the effective use of the system remained relatively modest. In 1972, OND issued a first contract for an investment of 8.2 million BEF, and in 1973 to four more investment projects totalling 23,8 million BEF. By 1978, seven new projects were covered for over 187,1 million BEF, regrettably there are no data on the whereabouts of the covered risks.⁶⁴ But all things considered, Belgian businesses did not massively use this system and it

was not encompassing enough for existing colonial investments.

The change in the OND nevertheless reflected a new international “innovation”: to insure against political risks. Already in the 1960s a guarantee program for American business existed that was increasing in size (covering about 9 billion dollars in 1968). Because of its success, in 1971, the Nixon administration established the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, a public insurance organization.⁶⁵ While a national system of insurance against political risks was put into position, business associations like CEDIOM and FIB continued to be in favour of a multilateral, independent system for covering such risks, which would however, only materialize by the end of the 1980s under the wings of the World Bank. All things considered, the system of political risk insurance seemed to be of little value for the former imperial enterprises, yet, issues related to economic decolonization did spur the emergence of expropriation insurance and political risk management. Similarly, it should be no surprise that interest groups that promoted the protection of private investments found fertile soil in the 1960s, the heydays of postcolonial economic sovereignty. The problem of private investment security was subject of a European round table held in Berlin in the last days of May 1963, organized by the “Association pour l’Étude des Problèmes de l’Europe”, an organization that held meetings about economic problems faced in Europe. The round table called for an international convention for the protection of foreign property and an international fund to protect these investments.⁶⁶

Another organization that dealt with the problem of property abroad, in which the Société Générale de Belgique was an active member, was the

60. Comité consultatif de l’expansion commerciale, 21 August 1964. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 312).

61. *Ibidem*.

62. CEDIOM, garantie des investissements, 24 September 1970. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 3405).

63. Activités du CEDIOM en 1972. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 3405).

64. *Rapport annuel de l’Office National du Ducroire*, Brussels, 1973, p. 24.

65. CHARLES LIPSON, *Standing Guard*, 242.

66. XI Table Ronde des Problèmes de l’Europe à Berlin, 29 – 30 May 1963 (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 187).

“Association internationale pour la promotion et la protection des investissements privés en territoires étrangers (APPPI)”, established in Geneva.⁶⁷ The organization intervened in several conflicts between businesses and states in Latin America as well as Africa, including the case of UMHK in 1966–67, leading to a failed attempt to set up an independent arbitrage system. Importantly, such organizations not only favoured the protection of private foreign investments, preferably through international arbitrage systems, they also aimed to cast overseas investment in a new favourable light, as a necessary contribution to global economic development. On the one hand, it read in a statement of the APPPI that “for the developing countries, investments (...) form a necessary precondition for economic growth in commerce and industry”.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the APPPI recognized that companies needed to acknowledge the concerns and priorities of host governments, in other words, that investments came with a certain economic and social responsibility.

Businesses eagerly legitimized their presence by stressing the need for foreign investment in the developing world along the lines described above. As part of a public media campaign internationally, press releases stressed the positive contributions of the private sector in the Congo, legitimizing their protection. To this end, the SGB hired the Hill and Knowlton bureau in the US in 1962.⁶⁹ Back then it was necessary to reverse a severely tarnished image of Belgian business during the Congo Crisis, but rhetoric that legitimized the presence of the “private sector” held strong appeal. For the CEDIOM, overseas investment was a necessity to economic development in the underdeveloped world as well. At the same time, it recognized that investors should adapt or “naturalize” their presence to the host countries, a “harmonious integration” that involved the adaptation

of company structures to local methods and practices and committing local workers, executives and even local entrepreneurship. While concessions had to be made, CEDIOM mentioned that private foreign investments were indispensable and essential for the development of a country, by shipping in new capital and technologies, and therefore needed to be protected.⁷⁰ CEDIOM saw this as beneficial to both the recipient country as well as Belgian business in uncovering export and investment opportunities.

Above all, it is clear that businesses connected to a rhetoric of economic development, couched in a language of rights and duties, which could only be achieved through foreign investment. The trade-off was that countries invested in local infrastructure and industries, trained local personnel, while respecting, it was argued, national priorities and sensitivities. Such new rhetoric echoing what would later be called corporate rights and responsibilities, however, made little reference to the heavily burdened postcolonial economic legacies and dependencies. But they can be seen as a clear global consequence of decolonization, and changed the way in which Belgian business perceived as well as framed its business operations particularly in the developing world.

IV. Diversification

In November 1964, a royal Belgian delegation, including Belgian prince Albert and princess Paola, arrived on the ship “Escout” in Vera Cruz in Mexico, after visiting the Olympics in Tokyo held the same year. The timing of the visit was no coincidence. The SGB had orchestrated the royal visit in order to underline the interest it had recently taken in the central American country.⁷¹ André de Spirlet, the president of the Compagnie

67. APPPI. Rapport annuel pour la période 1.05.1967 – 30.04.1968 (ARA2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 4th transfert, no. 5217).

68. Association internationale pour la promotion et la protection des investissements privés en territoires étrangers (APPPI), juillet 1962, p. 2. (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 4th transfert, nr. 5217).

69. The public relations program (report), 1 April to 31 October 1962. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, nr. 187).

70. CEDIOM. Rapport du Comité pour l'exercice 1969 (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, nr. 3405).

71. La lanterne du Lundu, 31 November 1964 (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfert, no. 164).

Maritime Belge and leading figure in the SGB, saw Mexico as a country where investors might face some risks but most of all plenty of opportunities. Particularly he had the situation in the Congo in the back of his mind: "the possibilities of Mexico should be studied. Is Mexico not the ideal terrain for the implementation of Congolese activities (cotton, sugar, etc)?"⁷² In his judgment, it seemed that Mexican investment policy was hostile towards the overwhelming American influence, but Europeans could "exercise their charm". Four years earlier, the *Compagnie Maritime Belge* had opened a new shipping line between Mexico and Belgium precisely in compensation of the loss of passengers and goods of its important Congo lines. Another company in the SGB portfolio, Sybeta, had gained a contract to build a zinc refining plant.

In the case of Mexico, there was a clear link between Congolese independence and Belgian businesses seeking markets elsewhere. The SGB also seriously engaged with the question of (partial) divestment from the Congo. In 1962 the SGB prepared for selling (parts of its) participations in major Congolese companies, negotiations were held with Lazard and Mediobanca.⁷³ According to one proposal, a large new international corporation was to be established, in order to source capital from different international companies. The proposal should not be misread as a full divestment attempt. Instead, it was hoped to tie in third-party interests in the Congo. This had the potential advantage of improving the level of protection offered by other countries and ultimately diluting the provocative image of Belgian capital monopolizing Congolese assets.⁷⁴ A serious contender for buying SGB shares was the American firm Reynolds International Inc, an aluminium

producing firm, which also seemed to offer the prospect of offering American political protection of assets in the Congo.⁷⁵

The plans for partial divestment ultimately did not materialize. Yet there is enough evidence to show that the businesses of SGB, the main operators in the Congo, actively followed a policy of diversification as a reaction to the events in the Congo, and the uncertainty of the postcolonial situation. In 1959, the SGB was in a geographic sense strongly undiversified: the bulk of its portfolio was situated in the Benelux (66.6%) and Congo (26.6%).⁷⁶ Decolonization did spur attempts for diversification, but it was not the only reason since some sectors in the Belgian economy headed for troubled waters. In 1964, the same year as the visit in Mexico, the SGB board ordered to prepare for a diversification policy and make an inventory of expertise that could be used elsewhere: "the metropolitan companies of the group have to (...) make an overview in order to determine the opportunities for collaboration that could be organized for the Congolese companies, whether to organize new companies, or to extend the current companies in the development of their capital, people and techniques (...)."⁷⁷ Diversification was also deemed essential in order to maintain a large expatriate workforce, for which a stay in the Congo increasingly lost appeal: "in order to permit the rotation of personnel that was employed in the Congo in other countries and to offer them other job opportunities at the end of their careers".⁷⁸

In the first years after independence, new investigations and explorations took place for new sources of natural resources and infrastructural projects. The CCCI holding, a subholding of the SGB empire, controlled plenty of agricultural

72. Voyage au Mexique, 9 November 1964. (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, no. 164).

73. Moreau, "De la décolonisation à la Zaïrianisation" 174.

74. A proposal for restoring and further developing the industrial economy of the Congo. 19 November 1962. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 550).

75. Memorandum re: Congo Project. Strictly Confidential. 05 June 1962. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, nr. 566).

76. RENÉ BRION & JEAN-LOUIS MOREAU, *The Société Générale de Belgique, 1822-1997*, Antwerp, 1998, 414. Only minor attempts at diversifications had been made prior to 1960, especially in Canada.

77. Réunion du Comité de CIA, 23 April 1964 (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, no. 170).

78. Ibidem.

enterprises and plantations in the Congo. In addition to focusing on Congolese agriculture, the study bureau of the CCCI, the INDACOM, ought to explore new opportunities in different countries in Africa and Latin America. The quest for diversification was not necessarily linked to developing countries. INDACOM also explored investment opportunities in the European common market, and other European countries like Spain and Portugal.⁷⁹ The railway operator in Katanga, Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Bas-Congo et Katanga (BCK) followed a similar strategy as INDACOM, using colonial expertise and technical assistance as tools for diversification. Its team of engineers was set out to work on new projects including ones in Belgium. In 1972, the old BCK was transformed into a full engineering study bureau for railway construction, the “Études et réalisations de Génie Civil et Ferroviaire” (Gecifer), a company that combined the exploration of new opportunities with research and engineering missions on behalf of the National Zaïrese railways in 1970s. The diversification strategy seemed to be strongly connected to a different, more physically detached, business model. The new model focused on contract-based consultancy and support rather than managing fixed assets and thereby matched to the looming threat of expropriation. It was echoed by the SGB governor Max Nokin statement that the future of SGB companies in African countries was not based on classic investment but as service enterprises.⁸⁰

For the mining industries, diversification seemed all the more pressing. Its core activities depended upon sunk assets and fixed natural resources that could easily be expropriated.⁸¹ Yet also here, tech-

nical assistance and expertise formed the mainstay of diversification strategies. The diamond company, SIBEKA further invested in the development of industrial diamond production called boart, for which Congolese diamonds that were unfit for gems were already used.⁸² The same goes for UMHK, which could field a large number of experts in terms of mining engineering and geology. Together with other mining companies of the SGB group, the *syndicat de recherche* was established to explore new mining concessions abroad. While results were still seen as disappointing in 1964, prospecting had been done in various parts of the world: Latin America, Europe and the Middle East. The need to diversify became more acute when the copper deposits were actually nationalized in 1967. In the same year, the UMHK held a 37.5% interest in Sogemiran, that developed a lead deposit in Iran.⁸³ The UMHK's role was to build a concentrator plant near the mine in 1968, for which it employed an engineer, Delcorde, who previously had worked in Katanga.⁸⁴ A few years later, UMHK made serious efforts to gain a stake in the Sharamesh copper mine in Iran, which would turn out to be one of the largest copper mines in the world. Ironically, it had to stake its claim in between major international companies which had suffered a similar fate of expropriation, like the Anaconda Copper Company (in Chile) and the Selection Trust (in Zambia).⁸⁵ But also here companies were facing assertive states that were looking for junior partners to back state-led exploitation rather than companies that would operate independently as had happened in the past. This made clear, above all, that UMHK was operating in a heavily competitive field, and not the only major player to follow a strategy of (forced) international diversification.

79. Procès-verbal du comité restreint, 25 June 1964 (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, no. 170).

80. As cited in: GUY VANTHEMSCHE, *Belgium and the Congo 1885-1980*, 245.

81. MARC BUNGENBERG & STEPHAN HOBE, *Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources*, Cham, 2015. The ownership of natural resources was heavily disputed, supported by the international resolution like the permanent sovereignty over natural resources issued in December 1962, the right for countries to freely dispose of their own natural bounty.

82. Réunion du Comité Restreint de CIA, 23 April 1964. (ARA2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, no. 170).

83. “Union Minière du Haut Katanga SA”, *Opera Mundi-Europe, A weekly report on the economy of the common market*, 420/3, 1967.

84. Note pour H. Fortemps. Directeur Général Elisabethville, 27 April 1966 (ARA 2, UMHK, 1st transfer, no. 2129).

85. ABDOLREZA ALAMDAR & ALI A. SAEDI, “The Establishment of Iran’s Copper Mining Industry: The Downfall of Anaconda and Selection Trust in the 1960s–70s,” in ROBRECHT DECLERQ, DUNCAN MONEY & HANS-OTTO FROLAND, (eds.), *Born with a Copper Spoon. A Global History of Copper, 1830-1980*, Vancouver, 2022, 274-97.

The strategy for international diversification eventually favoured more “politically safe” areas in the world. Union Minière deployed significant investments and research into Canada, where it had a subsidiary the Union Minière Canada Ltd (UMICAN). At the same time, it had a subsidiary in Australia, Union Minière Australia. But by the early 1970s most of the projects were still in the development and prospection stage.⁸⁶ The large copper-nickel “Thierry” mine in Ontario was discovered by Union Minière in 1969, and brought into operation between 1976 and 1982. Such prospecting activities were largely funded by incomes generated from (minority) participations in other companies, Métallurgie Hoboken-Overpelt SA and the Vieille Montagne SA. A forward looking move was the interest of Union Minière in experimental deep sea mining, one that is increasingly gaining relevance today. Union Minière took an interest of 25 % in an international conglomerate “Ocean Mining Associates” that was raised by the American Firm Tenneco Corporation, and was meant to mine the polymetallic nodules found at the bottom of the ocean.⁸⁷

UM also showed an interest in new geological studies inside Belgium in order to find deposits, concentrating its prospecting efforts on the axis between Fleurus and Andenne.⁸⁸ The prospecting for ores in Belgium seemed peculiar. There was the vain hope to find lead-zinc but also uranium, as well as the idea of replacing the faltering industries of coal mining and steel production in Wallonia.⁸⁹ Both mining at sea or at home, however, failed to produce positive results. In the meantime, the SGM remained enmeshed in the copper mining industry in the Congo, offering management and sales services. Potentially new investments in the Gécamines concessions still carried large priority. Especially SGM-Zaïre (as SGM was called in the 1970s) showed a large interest in new construction

and expansion plans made by Gécamines, especially the P2 program that involved the construction of an electrolytic refinery and a concentrator (to crush copper ores) in the 1970s. In 1974, SGM started with recruiting personnel in the anticipation of winning this contract.⁹⁰

While there was an emphasis on finding politically safe investment areas, the diversification strategies and particularly the emphasis on technical assistance and service provision was also clearly linked to the agenda of economic development in the postcolonial world that seemed to offer plenty of business opportunities. An example of this belief in the business of developmentalism was the new Belgian firm Sybeta, that was already established in 1955, well before independence. Sybeta was composed of a conglomerate of Belgian enterprises, and also by the SGB. As a study and construction firm, it employed 190 people, of which 42 engineers, and it focused on construction projects as the result of the industrialization frenzy in the developing world. In its own wording, the company focused on projects “clé sur porte” (turnkey projects), the building of new factories and installations without actually having to manage them on the long term, thus avoiding the risks involved in ownership. In 1966, Sybeta was active in the construction of a zinc refining plant in Mexico, building a steel plant of Chimbote in Peru, an electricity plant in Tijuna, Mexico, a chemical plant in Spain, a hydro-electrical plant in Rio Mayo in Colombia, a chemical plant in Kunta, Yugoslavia.⁹¹ Attracting such projects offered benefits to a diverse range of Belgian (SGB-owned) industries and was also done on their behalf. The purpose of Sybeta in the SGB group was seen as a “general entrepreneur and coordinator of industrial enterprises in Belgium “clé sur porte”, (...) we have a mission to achieve and a presence to assure, so that our industrial

86. Union Minière, rapport annuel 1972, 18. (ARA 2, *Umicore*, nr. 205).

87. Union Minière, rapport annuel 1974, 26. (ARA 2, *Umicore*, nr. 205).

88. Union Minière, rapport annuel 1975. (ARA 2, *Umicore*, nr. 205).

89. Réunion de concertation, 21 October 1976. (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, first transfer, nr. 2578).

90. Réunion de concertation, 01 July 1974. (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, first transfer, nr. 2578).

91. Syndicat Belge d'entreprises à l'étranger (Sybeta), Conseil d'administration, 18th January 1966. (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 4th transfer, no. 1200).

fabricator of construction goods and equipment can broadly participate in new projects of development and prevent that other foreign companies from Italy, Japan, the US do not gradually substitute the Belgian industry".⁹² Again this kind of project-based business did not bring the results that were hoped for. Sybeta ended in the 1980s in scandal as an investment project in Iraq failed.

According to the FIB, similarly, diversification driven by the specific needs for technical and industrial assistance in the developing world seemed to hold the future. A doctrine had to be established in which Belgian expertise was to be used in nascent economic development projects, offering new opportunities to Belgian companies: "the private sector has numerous reasons for engaging in international activities, not only to protect the investment patrimony already established, but also to activate the industrial potential of our country, as our economic prosperity is conditioned upon the country's relationship with the outside world (...). With regard to Congo this is evident given the large investments already made in the country and the high numbers involved in the trade between our countries (...)".⁹³

Diversification seemed to be both defensive, compensating for the unstable future in the Congo, as well as offensive, creating a new era of Belgian expansionism in the developing world. The latter was evinced by new methods like turnkey projects or an orientation towards service provision, that enabled the use of personal, technical and organizational expertise (much of which had matured in colonial firms), not least in terms of engineering, construction and geology. Employing this logic, businesses continued to show an interest in investing in the Congo as well, in large-scale infrastructural projects like the sewing system of Kinshasa or in the touristic sector, which

was identified in 1969 by the World Bank as one of Congo's future sectors.⁹⁴

At the same time, other aspects of international diversification, particularly mounting foreign competition in the Congo, were hard to swallow. CEDIDOM, the organization promoting European overseas investment was not only a partner organization of CEDIOM, but also organized economic missions to the Africa and the Congo. In 1964 companies, including major French industrial corporations like Pechiney and Saint-Gobain, investigated potential investment projects in the Congo.⁹⁵ International diversification was an important weapon for the Congolese government in the pursuit of economic decolonization and the defenestration of Belgian business. A heavy blow was that the Tenke-Fungurume concession in Katanga was awarded in the 1970s to a Japanese mining firm rather than accepting the offer of Union Minière/SGM. Unaccustomed to much competition during colonial times, Belgian firms saw this as a deliberate foreign attempt to undermine their position in the Congo.⁹⁶ But also in other sectors, like cement-making, the Congolese government allowed the German company Klöckner to construct a factory mid-1971, to the despair of the SGB which saw that Congolese cement production was already sufficiently "covered" by its own company CICO (Ciments du Congo).⁹⁷ Competition was deliberately promoted by the Congolese government, and it is clear that international diversification also put Congo in a stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis Belgian firms.

V. Expats and economic decolonization

A final element that this article aims to tackle is that of the position of expatriate personnel after independence. Colonial firms strongly relied on

92. Sybeta, 24 January 1969 (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, 3rd transfer, no. 168).

93. Quelques éléments pour une doctrine de l'assistance technique belge aux pays du Tiers-Monde, et en particulier au Congo. 04.08.1964. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 312).

94. CEDIOM. Note pour M. Gillieaux, président. 09 December 1969. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 5319).

95. CEDIMOM, *Projet de Mission au Congo Léopoldville*, 02 November 1964. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 312).

96. RENÉ BRION & JEAN-LOUIS MOREAU, *Van mijnbouw tot Mars : de ontstaansgeschiedenis van Umicore*, Tiel, 2006, 338–39.

97. Note à l'attention du Baron André de Spirlet, 23 June 1970. (ARA 2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, third transfer, no. 169).

white staff for management and technical expertise, whereas traditionally rank-and-file labour was supplied locally or through internal migration. Unlike settler empires, where whites worked in lower positions like miners as well, this separation between higher-end and lower-end jobs on the one hand and white versus black workers on the other hand was strictly maintained in the Congo. But how did this evolve after independence? Across the postcolonial world states not only wanted to gain ownership control over post-imperial companies, but also to advance their own nationals within the workforce and especially the management of said companies.

During the chaotic summer of 1960 immediately after the independence and the mutiny in the Congolese army, Sabena repatriated roughly around 25,000 Belgians living in the Congo.⁹⁸ Yet the overwhelming majority of these returnees were females and children, only 25% of the white males living in the Congo left.⁹⁹ Of course, the presence of Europeans or Belgians would never regain the same levels as 1960, but after independence a residual white, predominantly male community stayed in Congo. In addition to missionaries, aid workers, or remaining settlers (*colons*), the largest subgroup was the expatriate worker. Their presence would of course erode in the course of the years. Yet, according to internal documents of the SGB in 1972, the number of European agents working for private companies in the Congo amounted to 10,000 people while the number of expats was 30,000 in 1960, roughly 1/3 of the white population in the Congo.¹⁰⁰

It is difficult to provide a sweeping overview of the total number of expats and how that population

evolved in the years after independence. In September 1960 an estimate of the SGB counted 6,359 employees in total; this of course excluded spouses and children and excluded sizeable non-SGB companies like Sabena.¹⁰¹ The September 1960 count is likely to be underestimation, moreover, as some expats did return after the upheaval of the summer of 1960. Indeed, certainly in the larger companies we see a partial restoration of the numbers of expatriate personnel. In September 1960, within the SGB group the three main employers of expats were the UMHK (2212), the Katangese railway company (691) and the diamond mining companies Forminière and Société Minière du Bécéka (279). The mining company UMHK lost over 300 expats in 1960, but over the course of the years, and due to intensive recruitment campaigns in Brussels, the company gained a number of expats that was similar as in 1959 (see figure 1). Société Minière du Bécéka, after 1962, renamed the diamond mining company the Société Minière de Bakwanga (MIBA) in the Kasai, employed 166 expats in July 1960, of which 47 left their posts in the Kasai during the ethnic conflicts.¹⁰² In 1973, the level of expats had stayed largely the same as MIBA employed again 156 expats. 109 Congolese “executives” worked for the company as well.¹⁰³ The railway operator BCK in Katanga employed 691 expats in September 1960, but a list drawn in April 1971 indicates still a total number of 560 white expats on the payroll.¹⁰⁴

The presence of expats continued to be a source of agitation for the Congolese, as the advancement of African executives went very slow. Even after the nationalization of UMHK in 1967, tellingly, European expats continued to outnumber Congolese management and white collar employees until

98. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, “1960. Een luchtbrug evacueert 25.000 Belgen uit Congo,” in MARNIX BEYEN, MARC BOONE, BRUNO DE WEVER ET AL, (eds.), *Wereldgeschiedenis van Vlaanderen*, Antwerpen, 2018, 483-88.

99. FRANCIS BALACE, “Regroupement et lobbies des agents coloniaux et des colons belges (1960-1962)” in MICHEL DUMOULIN ET AL, eds, *Du Congo Belge à la République du Congo*, Brussel, 2012, 165-81.

100. Examen de certains aspects des relations belgo-zaïroises, 04 February 1972 (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 5321).

101. Répartition par province du personnel européen (...) de la SGB, 27 September, 1960 (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, 1^{er} transfer, no. 2147).

102. Liste des agents, 18 July 1960. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no 731). See footnote 2 for more information on the company.

103. Rapport MIBA, 31 July 1973. (ARA 2, *Sibeka* no 731).

104. Situation au 30 April 1970. (ARA2, *Tractionel*, no 11408).

about the mid-1970s. It is hard to advance another explanation for this than the glaring reluctance of colonial firms to promote African workers. Two factors should be emphasized in that respect. First, the colonial colour bar prevented advanced training, higher education and opportunities for Congolese workers prior, so making it hard to replenish higher ranked and specialized personnel (think of geologists and engineers) immediately. Second, just like in the public sector, efforts to Africanize staff in colonial times took off very late in the private sector as well. In 1959, once Congolese workers were allowed to be clerks in public administration, colonial minister Van Hemelrijck urged in a letter to the private sector to open up (lower!) executive positions as much as possible, and avoid hiring white employees in such functions.¹⁰⁵ After independence, pressure for Africanization mounted. It was now officially supported by business organizations like CEDIOM, that ran a (modest) internship program for Congolese to be trained in technical and management functions.

Africanization policies constitutes a research topic in itself, what I discuss here is merely exploratory. A genuine problem was that Africanization policies within individual firms varied dramatically, ranging between the extremes of symbolic gestures on the one hand to what could have been more genuine efforts to advance and train local staff on the other hand. Before independence, 10% of the staff of the Banque du Congo higher staff was already composed of Congolese bank clerks and officials, a number that rapidly increased raised to about 40% by the end of 1963. The Banque du Congo staffed some of its individual banking branches exclusively with Congolese staff, and organized training sessions in Kinshasa for that aim.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the largest mining company UMHK initiated

an Africanization and internship program only after 1960, that advanced – with dribs and drabs – a minority of Congolese workers in senior and technically advanced positions.¹⁰⁷ It is telling that even the nationalization of the mining installations of UMHK in 1967 did not immediately revert this distortion. An equal ratio between expats and Congolese workers in the Gécamines was only achieved 8 years later, in 1975 (see figure 1). Some companies made almost no effort at all. In 1968, the plantation company “Société d’Élevage et de Culture au Congo belge” only promoted one Congolese worker in a senior position, as opposed to 17 whites. Whether this problem was sector-specific remains to be seen. In any case, there were Congolese complaints that the problem particularly pertained to the agribusiness, one of the largest sectors at least in terms of number of firms.¹⁰⁸

In the list of priorities of business interest associations FEC and CEDIOM, the position and protection of expatriate personnel featured prominently. It is clear that ex-colonial companies aimed to keep expatriate workers in the Congo, but also to attract new expats to work in the Congo. This ambition was supported by a change in the social security system in Belgium. In 1963, a new social security law created the “Office de sécurité sociale d’Outre-mer” (OSSOM), a social security service to which Belgian expatriate workers could gain pension and health insurance while working in several countries abroad.¹⁰⁹ But it was clear that the system was designed for workers in the Congo primarily, since old colonial pension funds formed the backbone of OSSOM.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, OSSOM was also created in response to the national social security system established by the DRC in the summer of 1961. Its benefits were in Congolese francs, but Belgian companies and their white

105. Maurice van Hemelrijck to BCK, 21 August 1959 (AfricaMuseum, BCK, nr. 178).

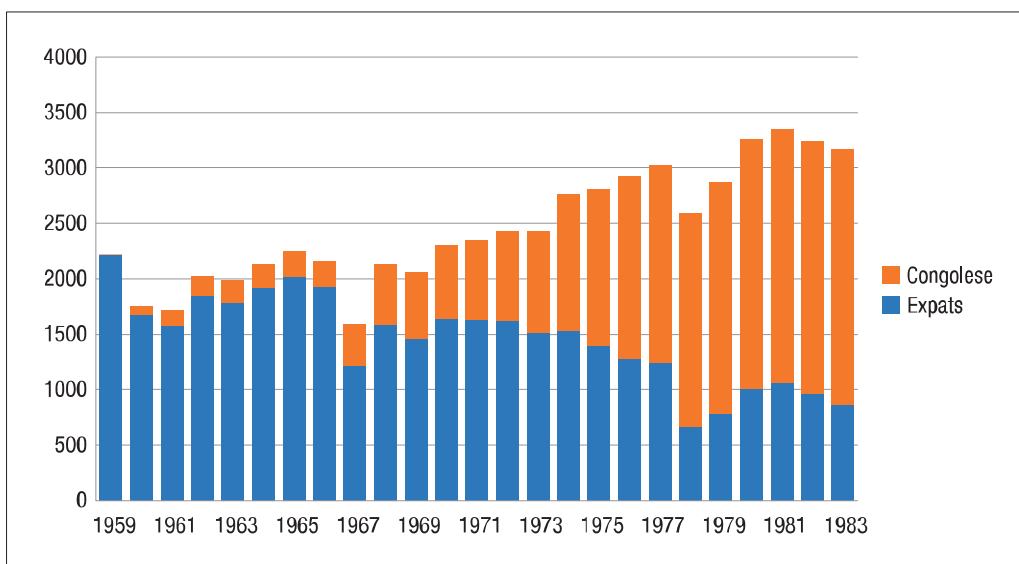
106. RENÉ BRION & JEAN-LOUIS MOREAU, “Inventaris van het archief van de BCB (Banque du Congo Belge) (...) en verwante vennootschappen,” consulted on 1 July 2021, [https://www.bnpparibasfortis.com/docs/default-source/pdf-\(nl\)/kunstcollectie-en-historisch-patrimonium/nl-inventaire-belgolaise.pdf?sfvrsn=2069af6e_2](https://www.bnpparibasfortis.com/docs/default-source/pdf-(nl)/kunstcollectie-en-historisch-patrimonium/nl-inventaire-belgolaise.pdf?sfvrsn=2069af6e_2).

107. Rapport annuel UMHK, 1964 (ARA 2, *Umicore*, no. 204). The internship program welcomed 15 Congolese workers to Belgium in 1963 and 14 in 1964.

108. M. Baloko de l’UNTC, excerpt from « le progrès », 1 September 1967. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 311).

109. Office de Sécurité Sociale d’Outre-Mer, 17 July 1963. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 1299).

110. Circulaire d’information FEC, n. 102, 6 December 1962. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 1299).



Number of white expats and Congolese in UMHK in high level jobs, source : rapports annuels UMHK/ Gécamines, 1959-1983 (Umicore, nos 205 & 977).

Year	Total number	Expats	Congolese
1959	2212	2212	0
1960	1755	1669	86
1961	1708	1576	132
1962	2022	1844	178
1963	1979	1780	199
1964	2132	1913	219
1965	2247	2018	229
1966	2166	1915	251
1967	1591	1212	379
1968	2128	1581	547
1969	2058	1448	610
1970	2299	1637	662
1971	2342	1622	720
1972	2432	1612	820
1973	2427	1504	923
1974	2760	1520	1240
1975	2807	1387	1420
1976	2922	1270	1652
1977	3022	1232	1790
1978	2587	663	1924
1979	2872	773	2099
1980	3260	999	2261
1981	3345	1052	2293
1982	3235	960	2275
1983	3163	849	2314

Number of white expats and Congolese in UMHK in high level and managerial positions, source : rapports annuels UMHK/Gécamines, 1959-1983 (Umicore, nos 205 & 977).

agents wanted a social security system in Belgian currency (BEF).¹¹¹ The system thus entitled Belgian expats to social security benefits comparable to working at home, and the system was in the following years also continuously amended to include other benefits like family allowance.¹¹² In addition, it should not be forgotten that white workers in the Congo could profit from other benefits, like a favourable retirement age of 55 years.

Overall, the strategies with regard to expatriate labour should not be confused with a population or settler strategy. Historically, the large companies had little interest in maintaining a large, permanently settled white workforce, even in colonial times. In the eyes of larger holdings, the independent colon was generally disdained, the competition of smaller business loathed, and the formation of a “poor white” class seen as dangerous in terms of social stability. Companies feared the power of a militant white labour class as in Europe but also in southern African colonies like Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and South Africa.¹¹³ Expats were generally in Congo for the short term, the prevalent system seemed to favour three-year “tours” (which could be prolonged). Their presence was linked to keep the business running, top-down control, management and technical mastery. The SGB acknowledged in 1970 that it would be virtually impossible to control assets abroad without the presence of expatriate workers.¹¹⁴ From the perspective of the expatriate worker, a job experience in Africa could then be used to exploit opportunities in other countries. But the problem was to align both expatriate workers and the political pressures for Africanization. The CEDIOM linked and legitimized the continuous presence of expats to the agenda of development, as expats should use their knowledge and expertise to train domes-

tic workers.¹¹⁵ But here plans were somewhat contradictory. At the same time CEDIOM recognized that it was increasingly difficult to attract large number of expats, especially motivating younger, new entrants for a career in the Congo post 1960, which was then in turn seen as something that should be solved with Africanization.¹¹⁶

On a company level it is striking to see that even nationalizations changed very little, at least initially, to the dependence on expatriate workers. The confrontation between UMHK and the Congolese state in 1967 also strongly revolved around the position of expatriate workers. Nationalist sentiments turned against many expatriate workers (almost one out of four left Katanga in 1967). Reports were made about conflicts and violence towards agents working for UMHK.¹¹⁷ As production collapsed during the stand-off and negotiation, it became evident to Mobutu that expats were in fact needed to maintain the production of copper, which remained critical to the Congolese economy. The contract concluded after the nationalization not only involved financial compensation, but crucially also a profitable agreement on technical and management with the Société Générale des Minerais (SGM). The arrangement between SGM and Gécomines, amongst many other things, included the recruitment of expats. Later SGM also offered the same services for the Société Nationale d'Électricité (SNEL), a former UMHK affiliate company responsible for the production of hydro-electricity needed to keep the mines open.

Due to contracts like this, the system of white expats working in the Congo was continued. In 1974, for instance, SGM managed the contracts and registration of about 6,000 expats and their families, most of them working for Gécamines (but also other com-

111. Législation social applicable dans la république du Congo, 08 September 1961, (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 3102).

112. Des agents Gécamines repatriés de Kolwezi, 12 July 1978. (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, first transfer, nr. 2569).

113. ROBRECHT DECLERCQ, “From Cape to Katanga’: South African Expansionism, White Settlers and the Congo (1910–1963),” in *South African Historical Journal*, 72/4, 2020, 72, 1–23.

114. Rapport des relations économiques et financières entre la Belgique et le Congo, 30 September 1966. (ARA2, *Société Générale de Belgique*, third transfer, no. 170)?

115. Rapport du Comité pour l’exercice 1969. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 3405).

116. Réunion du comité du CEDIOM. 14 February 1968. (ARA 2, *Finoutremer*, no. 394).

117. Report to Philippe Chevalier à Elisabethville, 20 November 1966. (ARA 2, *Sibeka*, no. 5317).

panies in Katanga). Most of the recruitment focused on engineers and technically qualified personnel, mainly recruited in francophone Belgium but also France. To provide a snapshot of this, in 1973, the SGM recruited 15 engineers, 2 doctors, 97 technically qualified workers and 5 administrative workers on behalf of Gécamines. In 1974, the program included the recruitment of 57 engineers, 5 doctors, and 147 technically qualified staff.¹¹⁸ This focus on technical profiles is consistent with a 1974 World Bank Report on Gécamines. It indicated that senior Congolese staff members were primarily in general and administrative functions, about 70% in personnel administration and 50% in social services and general administrations. Only 20% of the technical positions in mining and 27% in metallurgy were filled by Congolese workers. It was said that the lack of training facilities in engineering impeded the Africanization of these tasks and that Gécamines required 100 to 250 expats annually (most of them on a temporary basis), which they hoped to limit to 80 thereafter.¹¹⁹

In spite of the efforts of Africanization, Belgian companies were still very actively recruiting expats for the Congo in the 1970s. The SGM selected staff in Brussels in its agency, and then sent dossiers to Gécamines, which had the last word in engaging them. In 1974, expats had to sign a contract with Gécamines directly, rather than SGM. Colourfully illustrated brochures aimed at interested expats claimed that “one could still make a nice career in Zaïre today”.¹²⁰ Efforts to recruit expats however faced difficulties as well. In spite of the advantages linked to pensions and social security, the policy of Zaïrianisation of staff loomed over longer term career prospects, and expats also complained about conditions and rising cost of living. A major blow to the system was insecurity and war. After the conflict Shaba II in May 1978, the white population in Kolwezi was evacuated

by French and Belgian military intervention, amongst them 380 SGM expats.¹²¹ Nevertheless, this long-standing connection between SGM and the Gécamines illustrates the continuing involvement of former imperial industries in a critical industry even after nationalization.

VI. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to offer new perspectives on the history of economic decolonization in the Congo and the strategies of Belgian businesses in maintaining their presence after 1960. The colonial history of the country was heavily intertwined with colonial exploitation, large Belgian financial interests controlled much of the businesses and main economic sectors. The efforts to reverse these dependencies were rife with controversies and widespread consequences. One of the main efforts of the article was to position this complex historical episode, stretching between 1960 and 1980, in a more global and international framework, following upon recent contributions in the field of global and business history. Underlying this effort is a basic argument that it is difficult to fully understand this episode solely as part of a bilateral decolonization process. Both the agenda of economic sovereignty in the Congo as well as imperial business strategies more broadly were connected to international developments and outside influences. Foremost, from the Congolese side, it is evident to see how agendas of nationalizations were driven by new international principles like economic sovereignty that were widely shared and formed international currency in the postcolonial world. The wider positioning of Congolese economic decolonization efforts, as part of an African or international non-alignment history, is certainly a research topic that deserves further attention. Congolese actors also seemed to

118. SGM, division Zaïre. 08 May 1974. (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, first transfer, no. 2569).

119. World Bank Archives, Appraisal of Gécamines Expansion Project, Volume II: Annexes, December 26, 1974.

120. Brochure “il est toujours possible aujourd’hui d’exercer au Zaïre une profession passionnante, s.d. (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, first transfer, nr. 2569).

121. Situation des agents Gécamines de Kolwezi. Bruxelles, 30 June 1978. (ARA 2, *Union Minière du Haut Katanga*, first transfer, nr. 2569).

have had a clear understanding of what necessary steps to be taken: acquiring property rights over natural resources, ownership and shareholdership of the state in the large ventures that controlled vital sectors, and lastly it clearly underlined the necessity of Africanization of personnel. These steps clearly opposed in various ways the wishful thinking of former imperial firms.

At the same time, the history of independence was conditioned by the colonial (infra)structures and particular economic and political events and institutions that were inevitable part of the colonial legacies of the Belgian Congo, foremost the strong concentration of economic power in a number of large holdings. This meant that the actions of ex-colonial business in the Congo showed a strong degree of cohesion. The concentration of business interests reflects an overall strong capacity for collective action, which was reinforced by the importance of business interests associations like FEC, the FIB and CEDIOM that concerted the actions and initiatives of Belgian enterprises, next to the particular initiatives of the SGB. These organizations followed a double course. On the one hand, the FEC functioned as a typical employer interest organization, that was deliberately designed as the main interlocutor of the Congolese state in labour and economic matters. On the other hand, organizations like CEDIOM and FIB united metropolitan interests in order to promote the interests of Belgian enterprises with interests “overseas”, broadly defined. In reality, these interest groups remained mainly focused on the Congo.

The strategies of Belgian companies too are to be understood in a more global fashion. Importantly, one of the main consequences was the pursuit of international diversification, with the opening of new markets and the agendas of state-led industrialization seemed to offer prospects for new sources of revenue and a spread of risks. Such strategies formed an important add-on – an alternative even – to the existing strategy of maintaining Congolese influence. The appropriation of such a diversification policy also opened the door for new investment practices: consultancy,

technical cooperation, and tailor-made turnkey investment projects. While such flexible investment practices were the central business model of engineering firms like Sybeta, that pursued the construction of factories and mines across the world, they were also successfully implemented in response to nationalizations, showing the intimate link between decolonization as well as international diversification.

Belgian companies pursued new projects en masse, in the developing world as well as in more politically safe areas. This effort was closely aligned to general efforts to promote more worldwide investment security, seeking the system of international investment protection. International business redefined private investment as a necessary and vital part of economic development world-wide, and therefore argued that these investments should be protected. Belgian businesses were part of international attempts behind international frameworks for investment protection and political risk management systems.

Lastly touched upon was the presence and position of expatriate workers in the Congo, showing that companies maintained a large workforce after independence, until at least the late 1970s, which is also partly to be understood because of the use of flexible investment practices and consultancy agreements. The position of expatriate workers was seen as vital part of postcolonial business strategies, in order to maintain and control business assets abroad. In many ways, the expatriate worker, embodied a strong sense of continuation of the traditional career in the colonial economy: management level positions that were executed on short-term contracts, and as no other, it symbolized postcolonial economic and business ties. In addition, the thousands of Belgian expats with Congolese work-experience played a determining role in pursuing new projects of diversification across the world. Clearly, new questions and perspectives in terms of diversification, risk management and expatriate work are reinvigorating research into economic decolonization, and open the possibility as well as necessity for further research.

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List of abbreviations

- ABIA** Association belge des intérêts en Afrique
AICB Association des intérêts coloniaux belges
AIIC Association des intérêts industriels au Congo
APPPI: Association internationale pour la promotion et la protection des investissements privés en territoires étrangers
AIAT Association internationale pour le développement économique et l'aide technique
BEF Belgian Francs
BRUFINA Société de Bruxelles pour la Finance et l'Industrie
CNPF Comité National du Patronat français
CCCI Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l'Industrie
CECIMOM Centre Européen pour le développement industriel et la mise en valeur de l'outre-mer
CEDIOM Centre pour l'étude et le développement des investissements outre-mer
CIA Comité Intérieur Africain
CIC Comité Intérieur Colonial/Comité Intérieur Congolais (after 1960)
COTONCO Compagnie Cotonnière Congolaise
CSK Comité spécial du Katanga
FIB Fédération des Industries Belges
FEC Fédération des Entreprises du Congo
FEDACOL Fédération congolaise des classes moyennes
Gecifer Etudes et réalisations de Génie Civil et Ferroviaire
Gécamines La Générale des Carrières et des Mines (after 1971)
Gécomines La Générale Congolaise des Mines (between 1967-1971)
MIBA Société Minière de Bakwanga
MPR Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution
OND Office national du Dueroire
OSSOM Office de sécurité sociale d'Outre-mer
RDC République démocratique du Congo
SIBEKA Société d'Entreprise et d'Investissements du Bécéka
SGM Société Générale des Minerais
SGB Société Générale de Belgique
SNEL Société Nationale d'Électricité
UMHK Union Minière du Haut Katanga
UMICAN Union Minière Canada