

Bringing the Local Back Into The DRC's 'Post' Conflict Transition: What Role Should Local Solutions Play In Bringing Peace To The Congo?

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*The daunting, flawed giant that symbolizes Africa's triumph of disappointment over potential.*¹
- Tim Butcher

*Important questions about the socioeconomic dynamics that underlie the seemingly intractable phenomenon of war in the eastern DRC remain unanswered; indeed, many remain unasked.*²
- Koen Vlassenroot and Timothy Raeymaekers

Anyone interested in coming up with solutions for the future of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) might find the process a bit tough going. At first glance, it is easy to be taken aback by the sheer hopelessness of the country's current predicament. Today, the future of the east appears once again to hang in the balance, with Laurent Nkunda's rebel group on the move and a quarter of a million people displaced from North Kivu. In the most prominent written portrayals of the Congo too, pessimism abounds. Reading *Blood River*, for example, Tim Butcher's recent bestselling account of his epic journey across the country, it is easy to be left with an overriding impression of a failed state routinely neglecting to deliver on its potential.

Negativity momentarily allayed, a search for constructive suggestions might focus on overcoming the recent troubles DRC has faced at regional and

national levels. As a country recovering from 'Africa's first world war' surely the answer to its problems lies with its relationship with its neighbours within the Great Lakes Region? Or taking a look at the government's routine failure to deliver on its social contract with its own people over the past two decades, perhaps the focus of policymakers should gravitate towards reforming national institutions?

Recent history of the Congo has shown, however, that regional and national solutions are no panacea to stemming the tide of conflict. Despite substantial international interventions in both areas, in the form of regional ceasefires and peace deals, and national power-sharing agreements and elections, the challenges facing the Congo seem as enormous as ever. As we shall see, the reason for this conundrum is that policy-makers have not paid enough attention to some of the DRC's key underlying conflict dynamics *at local levels*. While national and regional causes are of course important, getting to the bottom of the challenges in the Congo demands a far fuller understanding of socio-economic factors existing locally, particularly within the east of the country.

Uncovering these dynamics provides a helpful starting point for then shining a light on possible paths towards a

more prosperous future for the Congo. In the here and now, one crucial window of opportunity exists with the 'R' of the country's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process, which could be used more effectively as a vehicle to help repair local hostilities. Longer term, avoiding a drawn out return to conflict will only be possible if the government addresses the underpinning drivers of violence in the east, particularly citizenship rights, land distribution and access to mineral resources.

An Analysis of Conflict in the DRC at Local Levels

National and regional interpretations of conflict in the Congo have tended to dominate both analysis and international policies. At first sight this seems perfectly sensible. From a national standpoint, Zoe Marriage succinctly points to two main drivers paving the way for conflict and instability under Mobutu: an informalisation of economy and politics, and the normalisation of violence as a means of determining the patterns of distribution. In her view, Mobutu's role in encouraging these developments from the centre help explain the systematic pillaging of major towns in the Congo by neglected elements of the army and population during the early 1990s.³ Turning to the regional perspective, the central role played by the DRC's neighbours during its five-year war is well known to have been crucial to both the sparking and prolonging of the violence. Not only did the arrival of the ex-Forces Armée Rwandaises (FAR) into the east in 1994 create a series of tensions eventually culminating

in the invasion by Rwanda and Uganda in 1998, but also the lure of mineral resources motivated regional powers to occupy and then establish proxy forces to maintain their influence.

As logic would dictate, policy responses encouraged by the international community to date have mirrored the national and regional interpretations of the conflict. Indeed, one distinctive aspect of the Congo's political settlement has been the deliberate inclusion of states from within the Great Lakes Region. Peace deals signed in July and September 2002, for example, agreed to the withdrawal of the Rwandan and Ugandan armies respectively. The other most notable characteristic has been the adoption of national solutions to promote stability. The DRC's presidential and parliamentary elections at the end of 2006, buffered by international support, was central to this strategy; as was the Pretoria peace agreement which brought the principal opposition and rebel leaders into the government as vice presidents.

To the neutral observer, however, it is clear that these national and regional solutions have not yet delivered the intended results. Five years on from the official end of the war and two years after the national elections, large parts of eastern Congo remain fundamentally unstable. *The Lancet's* most recent research into the region reports that 1,200 people continue to die each day as a result of the conflict – and that prior to the current episode of instability.⁴

In the view of academics such as Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers, the reason for the apparent failure of these

approaches is that they tend to conceal as much as they illuminate – and crucially that they neglect to acknowledge the local motivations underpinning violence in the Congo both prior, during and after the five year war. Indeed, the *constancy* of local conflict dynamics over the last two decades which this view emphasises – combined with the clear limitations of national and regional perspectives – powerfully draws one's attention to the search for local interpretations and policy solutions.

Where to begin? When examining local conflict dynamics in Eastern Congo, two subjects raise their head most of the time. The first is unequal access to resources, particularly land, the single most important local economic resource. The second is rights bound up in ethnic identity. Numerous commentators⁵ identify the denial (or attempted denial) of the Banyarwanda⁶ community's right to their own native authority as a major cause of local violent struggles in both North and South Kivu throughout the 1990s and beyond. Without this entitlement, the Banyarwanda people have been barred from full ethnic citizenship and the socio-economic benefits associated with it, including customary rights to land.⁷

An examination of the genesis of some of the most intransigent conflicts in eastern Congo frequently points the finger at this volatile mix of unequal access to land and uneven citizenship rights. In North Kivu, for example, conflict between the Bahutu and Bahunde communities was prompted first by unequal access to arable and grazing lands. By

1994, as the conflict came to focus on the question of who was entitled to customary land rights, it pitted the Bahunde, Banande and the Banyanga against the Banyarwanda population, causing the death of 10,000 and the displacement of some 250,000.⁸

In South Kivu, tensions over the denial of the right to a Native Authority to the Banyamulenge community came to a head in 1994 when the local administration began to appropriate Tutsi property throughout the region, following the influx of Hutu refugees into eastern Congo. Under pressure from armed Bahutu in the camps and from soldiers of the Congolese army, the Banyamulenge began to forge links with the RPF to acquire arms.⁹

In Ituri, violent clashes in 2001 were provoked by fierce competition between the pastoralist Hema and agriculturalist Lendu over access to land and fishing rights, killing 10,000 and displacing a further 50,000.¹⁰ The Mai Mai rebellion also had its origins in clashes over land and mineral sites, triggered by the Rwandan army's demands to give the Banyamulenge their own Native Authority, which in turn threatened their monopoly on access to land in the area.¹¹

If local economic and social grievances provided the starting point for conflict, economic opportunities – what Paul Collier might call 'greed' – very often perpetuated it. This was not just the case for regional powers but also for local armed groups for whom the opportunity to accumulate valuable mineral resources often became the overriding motivation for remaining at war.

Following the withdrawal of the Ugandan and Rwandan armies from Ituri, for example, local Hema and Lendu militia groups became the principal contenders for control over local gold mines. What begun as a conflict over land and fishing rights quickly became intertwined with the struggle over gold, with both groups fighting for the control of mining areas and trade routes.¹²

Amongst non-combatants too, opportunities presented by the war economy generated a substantial group of people who benefited in some respects from the prolongation of the conflict. This was particularly the case for artisanal mining, on which an estimated two million Congolese have now come to depend as a means of survival due to the collapse of the peace economy, shrinking access to land and growing food insecurity.¹³ As a coltan trader interviewed by Vlassenroot and Romkema explained:

It is a pleasure when you make some profit, to know that you have done this yourself, even if you put your life in danger always. Even if the war ended and the president tried to put a stop to this commerce, I would find a way to continue.¹⁴

The 'R' of DDR: Untapped Potential

Despite the relevance of local factors to gaining a fuller understanding of what lies beneath the violence in the Congo, policy-makers have tended not to prioritise the pursuit of local solutions to local problems. This is particularly clear when examining the county's process of DDR, the

vehicle with arguably the biggest potential to address some of the key underlying conflict dynamics outlined above.

DDR, and the reintegration aspect in particular, is a crucial means of addressing the localised causes of a conflict because it engages with some of the key potential agents of change at community levels. This includes firstly the highly volatile group of ex-combatants themselves, who in the Congo have been estimated at numbering around 330,000.¹⁵ Successfully addressing the economic and social grievances of former fighters – as well as ensuring that they benefit from the peace economy as much as they did from the war economy – in many ways holds the key to dissuading them from resorting to violence.

Survivors and victims of violence are also directly impacted by those reintegration programmes which oversee the return of combatants and perpetrators into their communities. This has a profound bearing on local relationships and dynamics since it determines how far local people perceive themselves to have gained from a post-war settlement. Clearly, if survivors and victims perceive combatants and perpetrators to have benefited unfairly, such as over issues of land or impunity, then the heightened sense of injustice committed against them could create a new set of potentially volatile grievances.

Despite over \$200 million being made available by the World Bank and other donors, the DDR programme in the DRC has been relatively unsuccessful to date in allowing its engagement with these two groups to create disincentives for

violence. Carried out by the DRC's National Commission for Demobilisation and Reinsertion (CONADER), the process is widely reported to have failed to persuade a sufficient number of former fighters to pursue redress of their grievances peacefully or to make a living from non-violent means. Former rebels who have chosen to join the national army, for example, have been widely disappointed by levels of pay (often just \$10 a month, if salaries are paid at all), food and other forms of support, prompting many to prey on the local population for survival.¹⁶

Those ex-combatants who have chosen to reintegrate into Congolese society have also been frequently let down by the reintegration services offered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Whilst substantial numbers of ex-fighters have officially demobilised, the DDR process has frequently failed to provide reintegration support for a large proportion of the total, often on account of a sheer lack of co-ordination and efficiency. By mid 2006, for example, reintegration programmes in Eastern DRC had only managed to support 17,614 of the total 77,146 demobilised.¹⁷ Where reintegration schemes have been rolled out, the support programmes provided by CONADER and the UNDP have often proved to be limited. In theory, the local and international NGOs carrying out reintegration projects have been commissioned to implement reintegration programmes in areas of vocational training, labour intensive works, agriculture and income-generating activities. But in practice, this has not tended to go far beyond providing a couple

of weeks of training or distributing farm tools.¹⁸

Reintegration programmes in eastern Congo have also done little to positively engage with any of the key constituencies identified above. In the first place, survivors and victims have seen very few benefits – and the policy of providing \$125 to ex-combatants without giving any financial assistance to local communities has done little to help promote societal cohesion. As for the ex-fighters themselves, the upshot of both the non-existent or poor quality reintegration projects on offer – combined with the endemic frustration that it has generated – has been for significant numbers to rejoin rebel groups which are hostile to DDR.¹⁹ The opinion from a farmer in Province Orientale provides case in point:

In the east of the country there are some who have demobilised and gone home. But what will they do? The people who had arms – it is hard to return to civilian life when there's nothing to eat. They could take up arms again just to get some food. The Maimais went to Kisangani, but when they went there, there was no work, no money – what are they going to do?²⁰

Making the 'R' of DDR Work for Peace in the Congo

A more imaginative take on the 'R' of DDR could do far more to help address the underlying causes and catalysts of conflict. One clear priority should be to help to reduce tensions over access to land, perhaps through

enabling CONADER's reintegration programmes to prioritise the donation of land to particular groups or individuals who had been deprived of it before or during the war. This happened successfully in the case of the DDR programme in El Salvador, where the UN mission (ONUSAL) implemented an extensive land transfer programme in order to address the problem of land scarcity which had motivated many to take up arms in the first place.²¹

Reintegration processes in eastern DRC could also be far more deliberate in ensuring that they promote a sense of justice in the community as a whole, not just amongst returning ex-combatants. Clear lessons here can be drawn from the work of Save the Children (STC) UK in the Congo. In the Kivus, STC has been careful to include both former child soldiers and other vulnerable children in their vocational skills training in order to avoid stigmatising or favouring one group of children over another.²² STC's functional approach to resettling child soldiers – in which the local community gains from receiving returnees – is also instrumental. In Kinshasa, STC has supported a fish and pig farming project which applies a portion of its profits to cover the school fees of 100 vulnerable children from member families. This community-based approach to reintegration can play an extremely useful role in promoting a sense of trust between 'perpetrator' and 'victim.'²³

Reintegration schemes could also seek to contribute more actively to community level cohesion through deliberately supporting economic activities which build

relationships between formerly antagonistic groups. One example comes from the International Alert report *Local Business, Local Peace* which highlights the activities of a Goma businessman who hired several hundred local workers and combatants from various local armed groups to work on one of the region's largest tea plantations.²⁴ If actively supported by the international community, such an approach could prove to have beneficial results both in terms of job-creation for ex-combatants and vulnerable individuals, as well as in building trust between former members of different rebel groups.

Local Problems, Local Solutions

No matter how effective the 'R' of DDR, however, reintegration programmes will never alone be sufficient to achieve future peace in eastern Congo. Ultimately, they must be accompanied by government policies enacted throughout the region which together address the causes and catalysts of conflict at local levels. One fundamental issue in this regard, as discussed, is that of access to land and ethnicity. In the long term, the 'solution' to the land question in eastern DRC must involve the granting of full land and inheritance rights to all indigenous peoples of the region – in order to provide land rights to ethnic groups who have previously been denied them, notably the Banyarwanda people.

One practical and quick-win model to the thorny land issue could be for NGOs to help facilitate increased access to land for those who have hitherto been denied it. One interesting example comes from a Christian Aid supported project

near Uvira in South Kivu. Christian Aid's local partner in this case has established a joint agricultural project between the Banyamulenge and other ethnic communities. Through pooling their resources, the groups have bought communal desilting machines and cattle dipping tanks for use on the land, which have then been utilised by the different groups involved. Perhaps most importantly, the Banyamulenge members are given permission by the landowners to graze their animals there. Not only has this model reduced tensions over access to land between local inhabitants, it has also served to build trust between the various ethnic groups who commonly sell their pastoral and agricultural goods to one another.²⁵

Aside from land, another important area will be to draw on the DRC's huge mineral wealth in order to transform 'conflict resources' into 'development resources.' Artisanal mining should be central to this strategy. The crucial objective for the Congolese government in this regard should be for it to authorise and regulate artisanal mining as far as possible, thereby legitimising it as a form of employment and avoiding the marginalisation of local entrepreneurs, middlemen and small scale miners. A leaf could be taken out of the book of the province of Katanga which has implemented several pilot projects providing schooling and alternative livelihoods to some artisanal miners and has identified concession areas where some local people can work legally.²⁶

Inevitably, foreign investment in Congo's mineral

reserves will accelerate in years to come. Where this does happen, it is critical to ensure that the benefits deriving from the blossoming mineral industry are felt as widely as possible. International investment could, for example, be made dependent on quotas which guarantee employment for local communities rather than for migrant workers, and particularly for ex-combatants and other vulnerable groups involved in reintegration projects. Mining companies could also learn from a Canadian company which has reportedly undertaken a series of community projects in return for its mineral concessions, including the refurbishment of several schools, the payment of teachers, the establishment of twenty micro-enterprises, the funding of skills training and the drilling of wells.²⁷ Approaches such as these could serve an important purpose in providing sustainable employment to those most affected by the conflict, thereby decreasing a prevailing sense of grievance which could tip the balance towards future confrontation.

Conclusions

Getting to grips with the underlying causes and drivers of conflict in eastern Congo is helpful in two main ways. Firstly, it reveals an often neglected piece of the puzzle in understanding the multi-layered nature of violence in the region. Conflict in the DRC has taken place at multiple levels – local, national and regional, both intra and interstate – and while a local interpretation is not sufficient to understand the full picture it is certainly a necessary component. Secondly, understanding local challenges within the east points usefully to

local solutions to what are both rational and explicable socio-economic drivers. The limited success of national and regional policy solutions employed in the Congo to date suggests that the pursuit of practical local remedies – both within the context of the ‘R’ of DDR and beyond – could hold the key to a peaceful and prosperous future.

There can clearly be no silver bullet solutions to what are complex and longstanding problems currently facing the Congo. However, some of the case studies cited above suggest that positive steps are being made within local communities, and also point to possible routes forward out of what might at first sight seem an impenetrable impasse. Indeed, a more

satisfactory understanding of the local causes of conflict – coupled with a realisation that actions can and are being taken to turn post-conflict transition into effective conflict-prevention – hints at a future for the Congo which is far from hopeless.

NOTES

¹ Tim Butcher, *Blood River* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 345-6.

² Koen Vlassenroot and Timothy Raeymaekers, ‘The formation of Centres of Profit, Power and Protection: Conflict and Social Transformation in Eastern DR Congo’, Occasional Paper, Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, 2005, p. 3.

³ Zoe Marriage, ‘Flip-Flop Rebel, Dollar Soldier: Demobilisation in the Democratic Republic of Congo’, *Conflict, Security and Development* (Vol. 7, No. 2, 2007), pp. 4-6.

⁴ B Coghlan, et al, ‘Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a nationwide survey’, *The Lancet* (Vol. 367, No. 9504, 2006), pp. 44-51.

⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, ‘Understanding the Crisis in Kivu: Report of the CODESRIA Mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo, September 1997’, Report for the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1998,

<http://www.bard.edu/hrp/resource_pdfs/mamdani.kivu.pdf>; Jonas Ewald, Anders Nilsson, Anders Närman and Patrik Stålgren, ‘A Strategic Conflict Analysis for the Great Lakes Region’, SIDA, 2004,

<http://www.sida.se/?d=118&a=3140&language=en_US>; René LeMarchand, ‘The Democratic Republic of Congo: From Collapse to Potential Reconstruction’, Occasional Paper, Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, 2001, p. 27.

⁶ The Banyarwanda community denotes the kinyawanda speaking people of Eastern DRC, whose origins lie to the east in Rwanda. The Banyarwanda can be categorised into two groups (just as they can in Rwanda and Burundi) – the Bahutu and the Batutsi. The Batutsi group in the DRC are also often referred to as the Banyamulenge.

⁷ Mamdani, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13; LeMarchand, *op. cit.*

⁹ Mamdani, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ LeMarchand, *op. cit.*, p. 36; Henri Boshoff, ‘Overview of Security Sector Reform processes in the DRC’, *African Security Review* (Vol. 13, No. 4, 2004), pp. 20-21

¹¹ Mamdani, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹² Human Rights Watch, ‘The Curse of Gold: Democratic Republic of Congo’, 2005,

<<http://hrw.org/reports/2005/drc0505/>>, pp. 20-21.

¹³ Stratos, ‘Risks, Responsibilities and Real Benefits: Mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’, Workshop Report, 19 June 2007, <http://www.edc.ca/english/docs/csr_independent_report_e.pdf>, p. 4.

¹⁴ Koen Vlassenroot and Hans Romkema, ‘The Emergence of a New Order? Resources and War in Eastern Congo’, *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 2002 <<http://www.jha.ac/articles/a111.htm>>.

¹⁵ Amnesty International. ‘DRC: DDR and Reform of the Army’, January 2007, <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR62/001/2007>>, p. 6.

¹⁶ Maria Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Making sense of violence: voices of soldiers in the Congo (DRC)’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Vol. 46, 2008), p. 64.

¹⁷ Charlotte Vaillant, ‘EU Peacebuilding Activities in the Great Lakes Region: Impacts, Challenges and Opportunities’, International Alert Working Paper, 2006, <http://www.eurac-network.org/web/uploads/documents/20060601_7832.pdf>, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ Amnesty International, *op. cit.* p. 20.

²⁰ Marriage, *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

²¹ Sarah Meek, and Mark Malan, ‘Identifying Lessons from DDR Experiences in Africa’, Monograph No. 106 (Cape Town: Institute for Security Studies, 2004), p. 35.

²² Beth Verhey, ‘Going Home: Demobilising and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo’ (London: Save the Children, 2003), <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/temp/scuk/cache/cm_attach/932_GoingHome.pdf>, p. 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁴ International Alert, *Local Business, Local Peace: the Peacebuilding Potential of the Domestic Private Sector* (London: International Alert, 2006), p. 147.

²⁵ Marian Matshikiza, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), interview conducted in October 2006.

²⁶ Stratos, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.