



Why the Many Years of Failure? Is There a ‘Missing Link?’

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) hosts the largest United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in the world—the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO.) The mission currently has 18,399 personnel,¹ and costs the international community USD\$1,086,018,600 per year. UN peacekeeping troops have been in the eastern DRC since 1999. Paradoxically, since their arrival, conflicts in the eastern DRC, currently involving more than 100 armed groups,² have intensified and become more complicated.

MONUSCO’s mission has changed over the years. Initially seen as an interim measure to help the DRC build a new army, the UN later increased MONUSCO’s size, then broadened its powers, and finally extended its mandate to protecting civilians. Despite these adjustments, peace has been elusive in the DRC. 2019 and the beginning of 2020 witnessed a reigniting of conflict in the eastern DRC, with a significant number of victims.³ This situation has led stakeholders to ask: “Why the many years of failure? Is there a ‘missing link?’” This paper aims to respond to these two questions.

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It is widely understood that the DRC experienced a two-phased rebellion between 1996 and 2003. The first phase, which began in September 1996 and ended in May 1997, was described as a “war of liberation” by its initiators. This war ended the Mobutu dictatorship, which had lasted 32 years, and saw Laurent Désiré Kabila take over as president. The second phase started in August 1998 and ended in April 2003 with the signing of the Comprehensive and Inclusive Agreement on Inter-Congolese Dialogue and the establishment of institutions to lead the country’s political transition. Both phases of the rebellion have been well researched and assessed by multiple studies.⁴

The period after the 2003 agreement has been characterized by persistent violence across the eastern DRC, especially in the fragile Kivu region. The most culpable armed groups in the violence include the National Congress for Development (CNDP, 2003-2009); the March 23 Movement (M23, 2012-2013); the Forces of Defense and Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR, 1996-present); and, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF, 1996-present). Hundreds⁵ of local militias known as “Mayi-Mayi” were also dragged into the conflict.

These post-2003 conflicts deeply undermined the exercise of central power from the capital, Kinshasa. The DRC’s national army (FARDC) has continually had to confront various forces, including the regular armies of Rwanda and Uganda alongside proxy rebel groups⁶ they sponsor, external armed groups,⁷ and the numerous Mayi-Mayi militias.

To put an end to these conflicts, the Congolese government and the United Nations, with massive support from the international community, undertook several peace initiatives, some of which are ongoing.⁸ The first was the International Conference for Peace and Security in the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Its major early achievement was the Dar-es-Salam Declaration that was signed and adopted in June 2004 by the region’s heads of state during a troubled period marked by the beginning of the CNDP rebellion. Signatories to the declaration pledged to:

✓ Fully support the national peace processes in the region and refrain from any acts (...) to negatively impact them (...) Strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation, through the adoption and effective implementation of Non-Aggression and Common Defense Pacts; Establish an effective regional security framework for the prevention, management and peaceful settlement of conflicts (...) Fight genocide in the Great Lakes region and hereby undertake to neutralize, disarm, arrest and transfer to relevant international tribunals the perpetrators of genocide, including the forces that committed genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and any such other forces that may occur in future (...) Strengthen cooperation in the area of defense and security and promote confidence building by establishing policies, measures and mechanisms aimed at enhancing good neighborliness and multi-sectoral cooperation (...)⁹

When the ICGLR process began to falter because of a new wave of CNDP operations, the DRC government convened a second peace initiative, the Goma Conference in 2008. This was an important and innovative initiative that included broad representation of local communities.¹⁰ The Goma Conference launched two years of negotiations (2008-10) between the government and the CNDP. However, like the earlier ICGLR process, the Goma process was also unable to definitively end the conflict.

A third peace initiative centered on the *San Egidio* meeting in Rome (2005) and the "*Tripartite-Plus-One*" mechanism convened by the U.S. government in Nairobi (2007). These efforts attempted to find a solution to the presence in the eastern DRC of an ex-Rwandan army group, the FAR,¹¹ who had fled into Congo after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.¹²

that Juba was linked to Khartoum prior to the independence of South Sudan.”¹⁶

This testimony alludes to the existence in the mind of some leaders, who have long engaged in the conflict, of a possible plan to dismember the DRC. This would motivate the continued destabilization of the eastern region. It highlights a new dimension of this decades-long crisis.

Another shortcoming of the UN's engagement in eastern DRC peace efforts is its overly bureaucratic approach to peacebuilding that tends to apply a generic model of actions to be taken to build peace. Unfortunately, this one-size-fits-all approach does not work in all cases and has repeatedly failed in the eastern DRC. The UN must be honest in recognizing this.

A 2017 debate on what needs to be done to build peace in the DRC highlighted the flaws in the UN toolkit. The researcher Séverine Autesserre wrote in *Foreign Affairs*¹⁷ in March 2017 that peace efforts in the DRC focused too much on the organization of elections and ignored the local dimensions of the conflict. According to her, focusing on elections distracted from the basic peacebuilding issues of poverty, unemployment, corruption, crime, and poor access to land, justice, and education. She argued that these problems were at the root of the persistent violence and conflict in the DRC. Therefore, even if the levers of political power changed hands in Kinshasa, peace and prosperity would not automatically follow. To support her argument, she pointed out that the DRC's elections in 2006 and 2011 did not end the violence in the country's volatile east. On the contrary, the country's newly elected leaders consolidated power and took actions to shrink the democratic space. She concluded by arguing for a change in perspective in order to rebuild peace:

✍ Bringing peace and prosperity to Congo will require a change in attitude, away from the crisis in Kinshasa and toward the local actors who have the power to address the deeper sources of the country's troubles.”¹⁸

Autesserre's article was written at the time when a majority of actors—including MONUSCO, foreign diplomats, international NGOs, humanitarians, journalists, and peace activists—were concentrating their efforts on demanding elections that the Kinshasa regime was deliberately delaying. Consequently her article, by questioning the consensus approach to peace in the DRC, raised eyebrows and caused controversy within the peacebuilding community. Two weeks after its publication, a group of other notable researchers¹⁹ offered a rebuttal to Autesserre's article.²⁰ They rejected her argument that local conflict was the root cause of war in the DRC. According to them, the local conflicts cited by Autesserre were not organic, but rather were provoked, exploited, or supported by national or regional political actors. Consequently, they argued, bringing peace to the DRC would hinge not on directly addressing local conflict, but rather on dealing with those who “pull the strings” of conflict—i.e., national elites and the leaders of neighboring countries. These authors further argued that the road to stability in the DRC must also involve national-level reform:

✍ The road toward stability in Congo must pass through the reform of state institutions. The only way that can happen is by increasing official accountability, which will require national elections, the opening of democratic space, and a shift from predatory to responsible everyday governance.”²¹

Autesserre responded to her critics by referring to her findings during her field studies:

✍ Local, provincial, national, regional, and international issues combine to produce conflicts over power, land, economic resources, and social standing, fueling violence in the eastern provinces

(...) Elections cannot guarantee institution building. What's more, ending the power struggle in the capital is unlikely to automatically address the 'poverty, unemployment, corruption, criminality, and poor access to land, justice, and education' that I argue are at the root of Congo's problems."²²

She further argued there was no guarantee that elections would help in building peace. However, she concluded her response with a more nuanced stance proposing a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down approach to peacebuilding in the DRC:

✍ The massive national and international peace efforts of the past two decades have clearly failed to end the violence. What Congo needs is bottom-up peacebuilding in addition to the current top-down approach: foreign interveners should not end their current focus on Kinshasa

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 20 by Rigobert Minani Bihuzo.

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16. *Hearings on the devastating crisis in Eastern Congo, Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations*, 112th Congress, (December 11, 2012) (statement of Steve Hege, former member United Nations Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

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