CHAPTER 12

Local Civil Society Initiatives for Peacebuilding in North-East Congo

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1 Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the site of one of the most egregious conflicts in modern times. Fuelled by a violent political economy of mineral and natural resource extraction, the lengthy cycle of violence and intimidation has resulted in the highest death toll in any war since World War II. Shortcomings of internationally sponsored peacebuilding efforts in the region have led to a local turn in peacebuilding literature and practice where a role for community groups in local conflict resolution and development is being promoted (Autesserre, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2008; Richmond, 2011). Working together across ethnic, gender and class-based divides, in tandem with local political authorities, such groups have the potential to (re-)build trust and solidarity within fractured communities.

This chapter draws on fieldwork conducted with seven community groups, six local CSOs, 13 local political authorities and 22 randomly

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selected individual community members which explored the successes and limitations of local civil society initiatives implemented by the mentioned groups and CSOs for peacebuilding in Ituri Province in north-eastern DRC.[1] While acknowledging the importance of local initiatives for peacebuilding, the chapter argues that, in situations where national and global forces interact with local actors, local civil society actions on their own can only do so much as they remain constrained by both state failure in support for public service provision and a militarised culture of violence and intimidation, both of which are both linked to and symptomatic of a globalised political economy of extraction and violence. The experience of Ituri is that local actions need to be accompanied and supported by national and global actions which, acting in support to and in solidarity with local communities, challenge and address the globalised political economy of conflict. This means (re)politicising interventions and engaging with the global actors engaged in resource extraction, as well as working in greater cooperation with local actors in land reform, service provision and resource management. In the absence of this, local civil society initiatives remain limited to conflict containment rather than conflict transformation.

This argument is developed as follows. In the following section, I review the recent literature on peacebuilding and the role for local agency and action in this regard. I highlight the links between this literature and the earlier 'participatory' turn within development studies and suggest that, while the focus on local agency and power dynamics is welcome, there is an associated tendency to ignore the broader structural contexts of inequalities and grievances. I then go on to focus on the specific case of Ituri in North-Eastern DRC where I argue that a complex interaction of global, national and local political forces lies behind the ongoing environment of inter-ethnic tensions, distrust and hostilities. Drawing on my field research with community groups, local authorities and local CSOs in the region, in the fourth section I outline the principal activities and approaches adopted by local groups in attempts to (re)build trust and accountability, mitigating the conditions for further unrest and violence. The successes and limitations of these are discussed. I conclude

[1] The fieldwork arose from my conversations with members of three local CSOs at a conference a year earlier in Kinshasa. In particular, I was interested in local CSO's analysis of and attempted actions in relation to the internationalised extractive roots of the region's conflict.

the chapter with some thoughts on what the findings mean for local civil society agency and scope.

2 The Local Turn in Peacebuilding

The disappointing outcomes of liberal peacebuilding approaches worldwide have led to a 'local turn' in peacebuilding literature, policy and practice. Scholars such as Mac Ginty (2008), Autesserre (2010) and Richmond (2011), among others, argue that the liberal peacebuilding paradigm privileges the aims and interests of international peacebuilders over those of local communities, resulting in hierarchical, top-down approaches to peacebuilding which minimise or negate the space for local, indigenous approaches. As Autesserre, in her detailed, comprehensive and compelling analysis of the UN's mission in the DRC notes (Autesserre, 2010: 95), 'the main reason that the peacebuilding strategy in Congo has failed is that the international community has paid too little attention to the root causes of violence there: local disputes over land and power'. She, together with a range of other commentators (see, for example, Kisangani, 2006, 2010; Englebert & Tull, 2008; Larmer et al., 2013; Trefon, 2011), has called for greater support to more locally rooted, community-based peacebuilding initiatives.

This relatively recent local turn in the peacebuilding literature reflects many of the concerns of the earlier participatory turn within development literature, policy and practice in the 1970s wherein development interventions were heavily critiqued for their top-down, hierarchical, Western-driven agendas and mechanisms. Giving little attention to local agency and voice, these often resulted in inappropriate, ineffective and largely unsustainable development interventions (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2004). Again, greater support for more locally rooted, community-based initiatives were exhorted, although attention was drawn by some to the need to seek to comprehend and engage with local power dynamics and their associated inequalities, with participation being charged with the label of 'the new tyranny' by some (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

This more recent turn in both peacebuilding literature and approaches has been critiqued by a number of scholars on two principal grounds. First, it is argued that what precisely constitutes 'the local' is poorly understood and operationalised. And second, it is noted that 'the local', however constituted, always exists within the context of broader national,

regional and global dynamics (Autesserre, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2010; Richmond, 2011). Such critiques have resonances with other important associated concepts employed in the development field such as 'participation' and 'empowerment'. As Cornwall and Brock (2005) have argued, such overloaded concepts or 'buzzwords' can be spun in ways which negate the political roots of peace and development challenges, thereby ignoring some of the key drivers of conflict. In this chapter, I suggest that this is indeed the case in Ituri. My findings suggest that international approaches supporting local civil society actions, while successful, to a degree, in healing local grievances and divisions, tend to treat local actors as implementers of external agendas rather than local political actors in their own right, thereby ignoring the globalised, and highly politicised, extractive political economy which forms the context for such grievances in the long run. Such civil society capture, where international donors view local actors as implementers of their agendas rather than independent political agents (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), restricts the parameters for local civic agency, effectively reducing the civic space.

3 Ituri: A Globalised Political Economy of Conflict and Predation

Taking its name from the Ituri river, Ituri is a richly endowed province in North-Eastern Congo with a population of over four million. The province has been the site of some of the bloodiest fighting and gravest atrocities in Eastern Congo since conflict first erupted there in 1999. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced in waves of massacres and militia attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2003). During the worst years of the conflict, from 1999 to 2003, an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 people were killed and a further 500,000 were displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2003; Amnesty International, 2003: 15) as local rebel groups and warlords joined forces with Ugandan and Rwandan actors and networks to gain control of the district's mineral wealth. Following a period of relative stability in the mid-2010s (during which time the fieldwork underpinning this chapter was carried out), violence again broke out in December 2017 and has continued since. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and tens of thousands more have been displaced, many for a second or third time since the violence first erupted in the province (Human Rights Watch, 2020). With tensions and violence escalating, in May 2021 a 'state of siege' was announced

by the Congolese President in both Ituri and neighbouring North Kivu provinces[2].

Popular commentary, as with African conflicts more broadly, tends to attribute violence in the province to ethnic tensions alone, notably between the agriculturalist *Lendu* and the pastoralist *Hema*. However, the ongoing violence actually stems from longstanding issues around the control of land and natural resources, in particular, competition over the provinces' small-scale open pit gold mines. Mined in perilous conditions by locals hoping to earn a paltry few dollars a day, Ituri's gold has long been a lucrative source of wealth for ex-rebels, politicians and Congolese military officials who, exploiting local tensions to gain control of the mines, are involved in transnational networks of gold smuggling (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). This globalised violent political economy of extraction has knock on effects in terms of state failures in service provision and a militarised culture of intimidation and violence which makes daily life for many Iturians difficult and risky. Yet, international efforts aimed at stabilising the region have failed to address these issues in any way (Anten, 2010; Autesserre, 2010; Hellmueller, 2014; Tamm, 2013). As a local CSO representative[3] put it to me in 2014, 'Ituri today is a zone of neither war nor peace' with the exploitation and expropriation of the district's natural resources by new networks of internal and external '*resource entrepreneurs*' continuing apace (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004: 385). The continued failure to address the ambiguous and easily manipulated land tenure laws leaves a legal vacuum whereby powerful vested interests override the rights of ordinary Iturians seeking to sustain a livelihood for their families (author interviews CSO representatives and focus group discussions 2014; see also RCN 2009). The illegal timber harvesting in the forests of Mambasa (author interview and personal correspondence RCN 2014); the insecurity around the gold mines towards which former militias gravitate[4]; and local tensions around the secret oil deals reportedly signed between

[2] See https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210501-dr-congo-declares-a-state-of-siege-over-worsening-violence-in-east.

[3] The representative was from Réseau Haki Na Amani (RHA).

[4] Companies are reported to include the British companies Kibali Gold Mines, Ashanti Gold Kilo (AGK), Auris Gold and Kilo Gold; the British and South African company, Muana Africa; and the Canadian company Loncor—author interviews Kilo and RCN, 2014; see also IKV and RHA, 2012.

Kinshasa and a range of international oil companies for prospecting rights in Lake Albert[5] all serve to fuel local grievances. Communities witness this ongoing external appropriation of their resources in the context of poor and/or non-existent public services and widespread intimidation and violence.

This failure to address this globalised political economy of violent extraction and conflict, led to fresh outbreaks of violence and unrest in late 2017. A group of local militia from the *Lendu* community, calling themselves the *Cooperative for the Development of the Congo* (CODECO), have claimed responsibility for this[6]. Their grievances are reported to centre around two principal issues. The first is land ownership (specifically a reclamation of land allegedly stolen by the *Hema* in the context of the ongoing failure to address problematic land tenure laws). The second is the foreign exploitation of local resources (International Crisis Group, 2020). The United Nations estimate that national and transnational actors have illegally extracted billions of dollars' worth of gold over course of the war. In 2019 alone, an estimated 1.1 tonnes of gold were smuggled out of Ituri. This would have earned the province up to $1.88 million in taxes if it has been legally exported, facilitating the funding of much needed infrastructure and public services throughout the province (UN, 2020). The Africa Report (2020) also attributes the recent spate of violence to the continued exploitation and expropriation of the province's natural resources, in particular, by new networks of domestic and transnational national resource entrepreneurs supplying global chains as far as Dubai and Switzerland where gold from Ituri can end up as gold bullion bars for sale on the international market (Africa Report, 2020). Ituri's violent extractive mining economy is illustrative of both the globalised nature of what are often framed as local atrocities and the impact of this globalised economy on peoples' everyday lives and livelihoods.

[5] Companies are reported to include Heritage Oil, Tullow Oil, Total, Divine Inspiration Consortium, H-Oil Sud, Congo Petroleum and Gas, Caprikat and Foxwhelp (Pottier, 2003; Cafod & Trocaire, 2012; author interviews RHA and RCN).

[6] While this suggests ongoing ethnic tensions, it is important to note that this group appears to be comprised of youth militias alone and *Lendu* leaders have distanced themselves from it (International Crisis Group, 2020). This, as noted below, indicates a level of success of local civil society initiatives.

4 Local Civil Society Responses—Successes and Limitations

Reflecting the localised turn in peacebuilding more broadly, one approach in the region, in the aftermath of the 1999–2003 atrocities, was international support, channelled through local CSOs, to local communities. A number of other international actors and local and national actors also operated in the region at the time although their interventions were often focused on humanitarian assistance rather than peacebuilding per se. Meanwhile UN operations remained largely limited to peacekeeping and stability rather than broader peacebuilding (Berdal & Ucko, 2015; Hellmueller, 2014). The peacebuilding initiatives examined in this research were carried out through a number of local community groups (some previously in existence and some newly formed). The seven community groups analysed here comprised between 10 and 24 members. They are made up of a diversity of people from different ethnic groups (including *Lendu* and *Hema*, but also *Alur, Buri, Babira, Nyali* and *Wangiti*) and social classes. Four were mixed gender groups, and three were women's groups. The groups were formed at different times, from 2003 to 2014. While some members had been approached and asked to join, others had joined of their own volition. All groups continued to meet and function from the time of their establishment, although their composition varied somewhat, reportedly due to members' own changing personal circumstances.

Training workshops in conflict management and rights-based approaches (notably women's rights) were provided to all groups by local CSOs. These local CSOs, in turn, were funded by a number of international NGOs, although funding and hence training workshops have been somewhat sporadic. The fieldwork which forms the basis for this chapter consisted of focus groups and individual interviews with group members from the seven groups, together with interviews with local political authorities, CSO representatives and randomly selected community members. Focus groups and interviews with community group members sought, in particular, to explore how and why members became involved; how groups functioned; their strategies and activities; and their impacts. Interviews with other respondents sought to explore the broader context for local community actions including their interactions with local political authorities.

4.1 Civil Society Responses

Community groups carried out four principal activities, two of which reflected the priorities and strategies of their supporting CSOs and donors, and two of which reflected their own priorities and strategies of operation. One of the key activities—notably in the immediate aftermath of the 1999–2003 conflict—was a common peacebuilding approach supported by CSOs and donors in the region. In collaboration with local authorities, this involved the organisation of community *Baranzas* in different villages and jurisdictions. A *Baranza* is a traditional large-scale community meeting where issues are debated and discussed at length. These *Baranzas* focused on the causes of and mobilisation strategies employed during the conflict and aimed at mitigating the possibility for people to be mobilised and manipulated in a similar manner again. A second activity carried out—notably by the women's groups—again reflected international donor strategies for assistance and support to victims of gender-based violence. While this was a core activity in the immediate aftermath of the 1999–2003 conflict, it remained, at the time of fieldwork, a common activity still, with members of community groups offering support and advice to both victims and their partners and referring victims to appropriate services and redressal mechanisms as appropriate. These activities were now generally carried out in the absence of donor supports or assistance.

Two other activities came from the community groups themselves. One was assistance and support to local authorities[7] in both managing local disputes and conflicts, and in implementing local development projects and activities. Another involved attempts to reduce the additional costs and 'fees' associated with everyday life. Examples in this area included attempts to secure reductions in school 'fees', together with attempts to reduce road 'taxes' at military blockades. Among the many immediate economic difficulties faced by families is managing to pay local school 'fees'. The lack of state investment in education, as in all other social sectors, means that teachers' salaries remain extremely low and sporadic and there is no public infrastructural expenditure. Education has

[7] Local authorities in Ituri comprise a hybrid of traditional (hereditary) and modern (appointed) leaders. Little distinction is made between both by local communities, and, in the absence of functioning state structures, these are the sole political authority in the province.

consequently been, de facto, privatised. In the sites visited, primary school 'fees' are approximately $3/month; secondary school fees approximately $6/month; and university fees approximately $450 per annum. Group members attempted to negotiate these fees to bring about a reduction and greater affordability. An additional daily expense is that of road 'taxes'. All roads in and out of towns and villages are blocked by armed military who levy a tax on travellers (typically 50c-$1), reportedly discharging their weapons if they attempt to pass without paying. For women selling produce in local markets and regularly travelling, the costs quickly escalate. Again, attempts were made, notably by female group members, to negotiate these costs to make travel to markets more affordable and possible.

4.2 Successes

Three main successes of these activities can be identified. First, support to and solidarity with victims of gender-based violence was, at the time of field research, ongoing and a much greater awareness of the egregiousness of the issue and the need to support victims appeared prevalent.

> There are men who refuse to live with women who have been victims of sexual violence. Even though they have followed their [medical] treatment. So we have identified these men and we would like to invite these men and to speak to them so that they will not abandon their women. It is not these women who wanted to be victims but it is just the consequence of war. (Individual interview, Female community group member, Site D)

This is apparent in relation to broader gendered inequalities and violations within the community in the time of relative peace as well. There was some evidence of challenges and resistance to traditional gendered norms and discriminations.

> I am a widow. After the death of my husband, following the custom, they [husband's family] had prepared a brother of my [late] husband who was now to be my husband. But thanks to the training, on the rights of the widow, I defended myself in front of the family who wanted to give me a husband by force and I defended my own rights and those of my children. (Female FGD participant, Site A)

Second, there is evidence of a transformation of relations (both ethnic and gendered) among group members. This is due, in part, to diverse group compositions and the impact this has had on members and broader communities alike. It is noteworthy in this regard that *Lendu* local community leaders—who actively mobilised their communities during the 1999–2003 conflict—are reported to be distancing themselves from the current *Lendu* mobilisations (International Crisis Group, 2020). The possibilities for mobilisation along ethnic lines alone therefore now appear significantly reduced.

A female FGD participant explains how her experience within her local community group changed her views on and attitudes towards the ethnic 'other'.

> When X [local CSO] came here, there was a training in the form of a seminar. They asked the local authorities to bring women and men from this area. There were also the two ethnic groups [Hema and Lendu]. Up until then the two ethnic groups didn't work together. At this meeting I was one of the ones that prepared the food, and I participated in the meeting. And when I saw that the two groups were sitting together - we sat together and ate together which I never saw before, working together which did not happen before – that gave me the courage and the inspiration to join the community group. (Female participant FGD, Site E)

In relation to impacts on gender relations, a female group member explained…

> What forced me to be involved is that the Village Chiefs are very violent towards women. If there is a problem that concerns that woman, they do not judge that clearly [justly]. Even if the fault is with the man, the fault is always said to be with the woman. That always shocked me. And it motivated me to be one of the defendants of the women in the face of the men at a local level. (Female participant FGD, Site D)

And third (and related), there appears to be evidence of a reduction in perceptions and attitudes of fear and powerlessness towards local authorities, together with possibly increased responsiveness and accountability in this regard. One of the key benefits of community group membership identified by members is the enhanced status and prestige accrued from these closer relations to authorities. This derives from the strategy

of working with local authorities—in some cases seeking (traditional) office—to secure local peace and development. Success in this area needs to be tempered by the danger that this is merely reinforcing existing hierarchies, however (see below) although such hybridised processes are necessarily complex and messy…

> What impresses me the most is the relationship with the authorities. At the start I was afraid of these people. But when I am at the head of the group, in meetings for example, I speak. People know me. And even people when they meet me on the road, they say '[name of group] how are you?'. I am very proud of that. (Individual interview, Female community group member, Site E)
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> The advantage of being a [group] member is that we are closer to the power… As a member of [group G], I am given an honour on the road [I am respected], by the military people, the police. I am known as a member of this association. (Male FGD participant, Site G)

4.3 Limitations

A number of limitations of the strategies and activities employed can also be identified. Group members themselves identified three principal limitations. First, although significant improvements in local relations were reported, land disputes remain. Continued state and donor failures to reform the ambiguous and easily manipulated land tenure laws continue to result in serious and sometimes violent disputes. While, working with or on behalf of local political authorities, group members at times have managed to settle some of these disputes in relation to land ownership and occupation, others have not and land issues remain, according to many interviewees '*the most thorny form of conflict*', notably when the displaced return. This is likely to recur in the future following the current round of violence.

Second, possibly the biggest limitation, and one which has reportedly led to the return of widespread violence and displacement since 2017, is the inability of local groups—by virtue of their very localism and powerlessness in the face of broader structural constraints—to address these same constraints. The main issues here are the lack of investment in basic services and facilities in the context of an extractive political economy which thrives in a context of non-transparency, insecurity and chaos. This lack of services in a militarised culture of intimidation and violence makes daily life difficult and dangerous. Efforts to alleviate this situation

have yielded little success. For example, local group members' actions to reduce both the school 'fees' and road 'taxes' described above, both attributable to a, at best negligent and, at worst, predatory state, have failed to produce any positive results. Education leaders blame the lack of state funding for the necessity for school 'fees', while the armed forces blame unreliable and inadequate remuneration for their 'taxes'.

Third, the continued exploitation and expropriation of the district's natural resources by new networks of internal and external resource entrepreneurs continues apace. Although one CSO interviewed, in particular, has made great efforts to uncover and challenge the murky, if not illegal exploitation of oil resources in Lake Albert, members have been stymied at every turn. Even when, working with local communities, the CSO has managed to uncover who some of the global and national actors involved are and where they are based locally, it has proven impossible to secure any meeting or to gather any further information on their activities. Moreover, local communities and the CSO in question have received little support or cooperation from either regional political authorities or international donors for its work in this area. A CSO representative outlines the problem.

> Because the company in Block One and Two [oil divisions in Lake Albert], it is a company that is very in flux [constantly moving]. It is very hard to know who is responsible. They opened an office here even. But if you go to the office you will find a Guard, but there are no people inside. And each time we called them to try to have a meeting, we got no response. (Local CSO representative)

Clearly local CSO actions on their own are powerless in the face of such faceless, nameless networks of power. They need to be accompanied and supported by national and global actions which, acting in support to and in solidarity with local communities, expose and challenge these globalised networks.

5 Conclusion

The remarkable achievements of the community groups and CSOs analysed here deserve recognition. Operating in extremely difficult and challenging circumstances, they continue to render important and, in some cases, life-saving services to friends and neighbours. In collaboration

with local political authorities, their actions and activism in both challenging and transforming local gender relations and in mediating disputes over land ownership and access demonstrate their capacity to tackle some of the underlying drivers of conflict and to make life more livable for some. Moreover, their work within communities, through *Baranzas* and through community groups themselves, appears to be effective in reducing levels of fear and distrust of the ethnic 'other', thereby reducing possibilities for ethnic mobilisation as in the past. These are significant achievements. They demonstrate the important role local civil society groups play in mitigating the circumstances and conditions of local unrest and the critical role they play in peacebuilding more broadly.

However, as the material presented in this chapter also demonstrates, there remain significant constraints to local civil society agency in this regard. Chief among these is the persistence of an exploitative and violent globalised political economy. As long as this political economy prospers, so too will many of the underlying drivers of conflict including ongoing land disputes, failures in service provision, and a militarised culture of intimidation and violence. One of the principal lessons from Ituri therefore is that local civil society actions need to be accompanied by national and global actions which, acting in support to and solidarity with local communities, challenge and address the globalised political economy of conflict. Specifically, this means moving beyond viewing local actors as mere implementers of initiatives driven by external actors and/or donors to working in cooperation and support in areas prioritised by local actors such as land reform; service provision; and natural resource management and oversight. The divisive and sometimes violent political roots of these issues cannot be denied and the risks—to local communities, CSOs and donors/INGOs alike—are real. However, as this chapter has hopefully demonstrated, local communities and CSOs have already demonstrated their willingness to take on such risks. They know this is necessary if peace is to be achieved. In the absence of international supports for such actions, local civil society initiatives will remain limited to conflict containment rather than conflict transformation and ongoing violence and unrest will be inevitable.

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