



Research Paper **60**

Understanding Armed Groups: Violence and Politics in the DRC

Suda Perera
December 2018

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with La Trobe University in Melbourne.

DLP aims to increase understanding of the political processes that drive or constrain development. Its work focuses on the crucial role of home-grown leaderships and coalitions in forging legitimate institutions that promote developmental outcomes.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of DLP or partner organisations.

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)
International Development Department
School of Government and Society
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
+44 (0)121 414 391
www.dlprog.org
info@dlprog.org
@DLProg

Contents

Summary

1. Introduction	1
2. A history of violence and the evolution of armed groups	4
3. The failures of technocratic strategies to neutralise armed groups	10
4. 'Misunderestimating' armed groups: The unintended consequences of ignoring politics	20
5. Engagement with armed groups	26
6. Conclusion	29
References	30

About the author

Suda Perera is a Senior Teaching Fellow in Conflict and Migration at SOAS, University of London, and was previously a DLP Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham. She holds a PhD in International Conflict Analysis from the University of Kent. Her thesis examined the role of Rwandan refugees in the conflict dynamics of the eastern Congo. Suda's research focuses on the role of non-state actors in developmental leadership.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a number of people for their help with this paper and the wider research project on 'Armed groups and political inclusion in the eastern DRC': Graham Teskey, Luisa Ryan, Timo Mueller, Christoph Vogel and Judith Verweijen for their invaluable advice during the design of the project; Victor Anasa and Josaphat Musamba, who carried out a great number of the interviews with me, and who have continued to support my research in the DRC; Paul Gilbert and David Stainer who read early drafts of this paper, as well as Heather Marquette, Heather Lyne de Ver and two anonymous reviewers who all provided very helpful feedback. I could not have done this project without the support of all my colleagues at DLP.

Summary

International actors view the many foreign and local armed groups operating in the eastern Congolese provinces of North and South Kivu as one of the main drivers of the country's violence and insecurity. A well-resourced international effort to tackle the armed group problem has helped to contain this violence, and prevent a return to full-scale conflict. But armed group proliferation and violence persist. Why? This study suggests that international intervenors have seen armed groups as apolitical, predatory criminals, and have not tackled the causes of their formation and actions. It also suggests entry points for more politically informed engagement with armed groups. Direct engagement with armed groups may be possible for international actors if done on a small, carefully controlled scale. Although this would require a radical change in organisations' operating procedures, engagement with armed groups may become more palatable if they are seen as extensions of state power or as armed members of local communities.

This paper draws on fieldwork in North and South Kivu; key informant interviews with international researchers, journalists and policy makers; crowdsourced data collected from Congolese civilians and armed group members; and desk-based reviews of research on the Congo.

The Congolese government and the international community have focused on two approaches to armed groups: encouraging voluntary disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR); and launching military offensives against those that did not voluntarily surrender. However, military action and DDR have not significantly reduced armed group violence.

The patterns of state corruption, pillage, patronage, and complex migration that have plagued the Congo since its inception as a colony in 1885 continue to hamper its security and stability. Armed violence is seen by many as a quick-fix solution to the many malaises of governance that Congolese people face. It is therefore crucial to understand how armed groups operate in a wider context of land disputes and insecure livelihoods, lack of service provision by the state, and the use of violence to pursue political ends:

- **Insecure livelihoods drive armed group recruitment:** Many in the eastern Congo live off the land because of poverty, weak state distribution networks and isolation from food markets. Who owns that land, therefore, is a question of survival, yet the state has done little to resolve the issue or clarify citizenship rules. This has enabled political actors (local, national and from neighbouring countries) to manipulate citizenship and identity issues for their own gain. The pervasive insecurity has often driven farmers from their land.
- **Violence used to gain political power:** Since Mobutu, access to the top echelons of power in the Congo has come through military force rather than popular consent. This may explain why so many in the Congo see armed groups as a means to pursue political interests.
- **Lack of state services:** The Congolese people concluded during Mobutu's regime that the state was unwilling and unable to provide for them. Mobutu spent almost nothing on infrastructure and encouraged soldiers to use their weapons to provide for themselves, like Leopold's mercenaries. A system of survival emerged known as *débrouillez-vous* (fend for yourself). Armed groups enable many actors to fend for themselves in a political system that still relies on this culture. If the Congolese state is understood as chronically failing to meet the basic human security needs of its people, armed groups can be seen as a product of this failure, rather than a cause of it.

Armed groups are usually viewed as distinct from (and as having oppositional interests to) state actors, yet this is rarely the case. They are often both an extension of state power and a means through which state functions are carried out. Therefore, actors at grassroots and elite level have few incentives to remove them. Indeed, given how they are embedded in the Congolese political landscape, removing them will require transformation of the political system, which cannot be achieved by targeting armed combatants alone.

Potential entry points for engagement with armed groups

One potential entry point for engagement could be a **greater focus on livelihoods**. Interviewees agreed that **resolving local conflicts over land** would be key to reducing armed violence. This would require careful negotiations among different communities, clarification of citizenship and land tenure laws, and a robust security and justice system to uphold these laws. It is unlikely that such institutions will emerge without considerable change in the national and regional political settlement. However, it may be possible to reduce the intensity of land-based conflicts, and the violence with which they are contested.

During the research, an idea emerged that could help provide both security and infrastructure for agricultural livelihoods. When an armed group is driven away from a certain area, this often leads to mass displacement and creates a power vacuum that may just be filled by another armed group. Instead, support could be given to **encourage rank-and-file members of an armed group to start a small road-building project**. They would be responsible for building the road and maintaining its security. This could offer the armed group the incentive of increased public authority, and could give members a non-violent livelihood.

The idea was suggested as a way of contributing to two linked longer-term objectives:

- First, to reduce the intensity of conflict over land by reducing the importance of land for everyday survival.
- Second, to provide alternative livelihoods to make armed action less attractive. Several armed group interviewees said they resorted to armed action because they had no other employment options.

If donors show that they may be willing to bypass state intermediaries and work with rank-and-file soldiers, they may be able to change the incentives that encourage elites to create and sustain armed groups. Of course, unintended consequences might emerge. However, given that the status quo is proliferating and exacerbating armed group violence, a radical change in strategy is needed in eastern DRC. Removing incentives for elites to sustain armed group activity or, at least removing impunity for such support, should therefore be a priority for those who seek to break the vicious cycle of insecurity and humanitarian crises.

1

Introduction

Since the end of the Second Congo War, the eastern Congolese provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu have continued to be plagued by violence, insecurity and underdevelopment. There is a wide consensus among international actors that the main driver of this violence and insecurity is the presence of a large number of foreign and local armed groups.

The Security Council Resolution which established the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)¹ stressed 'the significant security challenges in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in particular in the Kivus and Orientale Province, posed by the continued presence of armed groups' (UN Security Council, 2010, p. 1). Several international reports have highlighted the persistent human rights abuses committed by armed groups and their detrimental effect on peace and development in the country (UN Group of Experts, 2012; International Alert, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2015).

In 2013, reflecting on the UN's commitment to addressing the armed group problem (and their concern over the invasion of the capital of North Kivu, Goma, by the M23 armed group), the UN Security Council established a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) with the 'responsibility of neutralizing armed groups' (UN Security Council, 2013, p. 6). The establishment of the FIB gave UN troops an unprecedented mandate to engage in combat with armed groups either unilaterally or jointly with the Congolese armed forces (FARDC).

The UN Mission in the Congo has been the longest mission in the organisation's history. With an approved budget of more than US\$1.1 billion for 2017-2018, and 18,953 uniformed and civilian personnel currently deployed,² it is also one of the organisation's most expensive and extensive peacekeeping missions to date. A well-resourced international effort is committed to addressing the armed group problem and ending violence in the country, and has had some impact in preventing resumption of full-scale conflict.

However, armed group proliferation and violence persists. A recent mapping of armed groups identified more than 70 – of varying size, motivation and organisation – operating in the eastern DRC (Stearns & Vogel, 2015). While it is acknowledged that many of these groups represent the fragmentation and recombination of several former groups (Stearns & Vogel, 2015; Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015), and several are very small indeed, the continued creation of armed groups is a worrying trend that is likely to have negative developmental consequences.

But what has caused armed groups to proliferate? How are they able to recruit members to fight with them? And, if current efforts to address the armed group problem are not working, where are they going wrong, and what alternative strategies are there?

This is the first of two papers on armed groups and political inclusion in the eastern DRC that attempts to answer these questions. This first paper unpacks common assumptions about armed groups. It critically evaluates the relationship between these assumptions and the strategies commonly used against armed groups. The second paper will examine why international actors are reluctant to substantially adjust their attitudes and actions in the Congo, despite knowing that the policies they pursue are unlikely to lead to effective developmental change.

While the papers can be read as stand-alone documents, each covering a different aspect of conflict and insecurity in the eastern DRC, the purpose of the overall project is to better understand the role that politics plays in creating and sustaining the present situation.

The research findings suggest that in several instances a lack of understanding of the complex political processes and relationships that underpin power in the Congo has been a key factor in the failure to address armed group violence. However, they also point to a number of entry points for more politically informed engagement.

1 In 2010 MONUSCO replaced the United Nations Organization Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) which had been established by the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement in 1999. It changed its name in 2010, "to reflect the new phase reached in the country" (MONUSCO, 2010).

2 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/monusco> (Fact sheet as of September 2018)

The research presented in this paper draws on fieldwork carried out in North and South Kivu,³ key informant interviews with international researchers, journalists and policy makers; crowdsourced data⁴ collected from Congolese civilians and armed group members; and desk-based reviews of existing and emerging research on the Congo. This paper tries to understand the *politics* of armed groups. To date, international intervenors have viewed armed groups as a relatively apolitical phenomenon, with little acknowledgement of the political processes that they both emerge from, and contribute to.⁵ As a result, attempts to deal with armed groups have not addressed the underlying causes of their formation and actions. In situating armed groups more explicitly within these processes, the paper attempts to better understand what armed groups actually *are* and, through this understanding, what can be done to reduce violence and their negative impact on development processes in the DRC.

If we are going to think politically about armed groups, we need to understand them in historical context. The paper first provides a brief history of the Congo that focuses on the political legacy of the colonial and Mobutu eras, and the two Congo Wars in which many contemporary armed groups have their roots. Thinking politically about armed groups also requires that we examine the types of actors involved in them. Therefore the paper gives an overview of the different types of armed groups presently operating in the Kivu provinces.⁶ It argues that the fend-for-yourself style of politics that has historically been promoted in the Congo can explain much about both the existence and form of present-day armed groups.

The next section discusses the attempts that have been made by both the Congolese government and the international community to address the armed group problem, outlining common conceptions of armed groups that have led to the pursuit of particular policies.

The paper then evaluates why these attempts have failed. It refutes commonly held assumptions about armed groups that have informed the policies intended to target them. It challenges the framing of armed groups as apolitical, predatory and criminal, arguing that they can be seen as both a manifestation of, and a response to, several long-standing malaises of governance. Formal attempts to remove armed groups from the east have failed to appreciate the *informal* rules of the game that underpin the political settlement in the Congo. This means that they ignore the considerable interest that both elite-level and grassroots actors have in sustaining armed groups.

The final section follows this alternative understanding of what armed groups *are* with an attempt to identify potential areas of engagement *with* armed groups. These may in turn point to new policies that can reduce their violence.

A note on methodology

This paper presents research carried out as part of a wider and continuing DLP research project on armed groups and political inclusion in the eastern DRC. The paper adopts a mixed-methods approach to gain a holistic understanding of the armed groups phenomenon. It compares and contrasts international (primarily Western) framings of conflict in the Congo with the evolving reality and understanding of the conflict on the ground. The aim of this research is to identify the effect that divergent understandings of the conflict have had on post-conflict peacebuilding, and the different incentives that drive various actors. By analysing these different incentives, the research seeks to understand why certain policies do not receive the political buy-in necessary to make them successful. It also attempts to identify areas of common interest which may present potential entry points for positive engagement.

The paper acknowledges the challenges of researching in difficult environments, which I have discussed elsewhere (Perera, 2015). A number of political and security challenges affected the in-country and crowdsourced data collection, meaning that some key actors in the conflict were not directly consulted for this study. In particular, it was not possible for me to do research with certain armed groups, and more significantly the populations under their control, because of their inaccessibility.⁷ I have attempted to mitigate these shortcomings by attempting to remotely gather data through SMS text messages from key informants,⁸ and also by gathering information from both local Congolese researchers and Western researchers

3 This fieldwork includes 200 interviews carried out in North and South Kivu between August and November 2014 with armed group members, members of the Congolese government, army and civil society, UN military and civilian personnel, national and international NGO workers, and researchers and journalists with extensive experience of working in the eastern Congo.

4 I am grateful to the British Academy for awarding me a Small Research Grant to run a small project "Crowdsourcing the Congo" (BA Award Ref: SG141762).

5 It is appreciated that the term 'international intervenors' refers to a varied group of actors, and I treat international actors in this article as those who are able to shape understandings of and programming in the DRC. In particular, I focus on those who shape understandings of armed groups in the east of the country. In the subsequent paper in this series, I discuss the heterogeneity of different international intervenors.

6 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail all 70 armed groups identified in the eastern DRC. However, I attempt to provide a brief snapshot of the significant armed groups this study draws on as examples.

7 As I discuss in *Accessing the Inaccessible in Difficult Environments* (Perera, 2015), this inaccessibility was partly due to the geography that made these populations difficult to reach by road, and partly due to continuing poor security in the eastern DRC which prevented travel to certain parts of the country.

8 I discuss this process in depth in *Accessing the Inaccessible in Difficult Environments* (Perera, 2015).

who have worked extensively in the eastern DRC with armed groups over a sustained period.⁹ The study's evolving and dynamic context presents a further obstacle, although this is also the reality in which donors and policymakers have to work, so research that embraces this complexity is necessary.

This paper draws on fieldwork and data collection relating to events that took place in the Congo between November 2013 and March 2016. At the time of publication, a number of significant events are unfolding in DRC. Presidential elections scheduled for November 2016 have been long delayed and (potentially) new political orders appear to be emerging. These are not comprehensively covered in this paper, but it is hoped that its analysis may provide a context against which future developments in Congolese politics, and the evolution of certain armed groups, can be understood.

This analysis draws on examples of specific groups on which I have been able to gather more information.¹⁰ But from an understanding of common patterns in their operations and treatment, the paper makes more general conclusions about armed groups as a whole. Although this is not an action research project, the research has relied on a process of continual learning and iterative adaptation (O'Keefe, et al., 2014). Therefore, I have attempted to test my recommendations and conclusions through a series of extended conversations with selected informants to gain feedback on my findings. The results of some of these conversations (especially with Congolese informants and armed group members) are touched upon in this paper. However, reactions to the findings will be more explicitly discussed in the second paper in this series which explores how institutional constraints on innovation hinder a more widespread acknowledgement of, and subsequent response to, the political dynamics of conflict.

A number of pertinent questions that would certainly inform a better understanding of armed groups are not addressed in this paper. This is because, inevitably, there are concerns for the safety of both researchers and informants. At the time of writing, close associates of key members of the Congolese government, including the President's twin sister, have been implicated in the Panama Papers scandal.¹¹ Researchers who have commented on those revelations have since faced difficulties in the country, and journalists have been warned by government spokesperson Lambert Mende not to report the issue.¹² Several journalists and activists have been arrested for their involvement in anti-government protests. While I have highlighted certain questions throughout this paper, there have been certain lines of enquiry that I have been unable to pursue in any meaningful way.

Finally, I have been careful in this paper to frame the developmental good that this research pursues as the reduction (and ultimately end) of armed group *violence*, and not an unqualified call for an end to armed groups themselves. This is not to say that the research supports the continued existence of armed groups. Rather it follows thinkers such as Timothy Raeymaekers who argue that in the DRC:

Peacemakers should be prepared to deal with the “messy” reality of institutional pluralism and competing power claims when setting their goals of post war development. Such challenges also increasingly force peacemakers to “think outside the box” (Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 604).

Accordingly, this research does not assume that armed groups need to be entirely removed before developmental progress can be made. It accepts, as several other commentators have observed, that ‘whatever else Congo's various armed groups may be, they are clearly viewed by large segments of some communities as de facto protectors’ (New York Times, 2012) and examines how this legitimacy can be built upon. In unpacking the nature of armed group embeddedness in Congolese society, and examining the less predatory functions that armed groups carry out, the paper aims to form the basis of a deeper conversation among researchers, policy makers and humanitarian actors about political engagement with armed groups. At the same time, the research acknowledges that armed group violence (and the insecurity that both drives, and emerges from, this violence) needs to be addressed to ensure stability and development. It therefore focuses on the *transformation* of armed groups, rather than their removal.

It is acknowledged that ‘armed groups’ are a heterogeneous collective of different actors with varying means, motivations and capabilities. However, I have used the term armed groups here to refer to a phenomenon whereby multiple actors in the DRC express a lack of faith in political mechanisms for resolving grievances by turning to armed violence. While this analysis draws examples from particular groups on which I have been able to gather more information,¹³ by understanding common patterns in their operations and treatment, the paper makes more general conclusions about the phenomenon of armed groups as a whole.

9 I am extremely grateful to my Congolese research partners, Victor Anas and Josaphat Musamba, for their collaboration in this research project, and also to Christoph Vogel, Timo Mueller, Judith Verweijen and Fidel Bafilemba for their invaluable input in its framing and development.

10 More has been written about larger, more organised groups such as the CNDP, M23 and FDLR.

11 See <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-05/congo-president-s-twin-sister-has-indirect-stake-in-vodacom-unit> (Date Accessed: 24 February 2017). In the event that the original URL has been removed, the webpage has been archived here: <http://archive.is/SR5KK>

12 https://in.news.yahoo.com/dr-congo-expels-us-researcher-023000893.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=fb (Date Accessed: 24 February 2017).

13 My own interviews have been triangulated against findings presented in the in-depth case studies of particular armed groups such as the CNDP, M23, FDLR, as well as several large Mai-Mai groups carried out by the Rift Valley Institute's Usalama Project.

2

A history of violence and the evolution of armed groups

At the time of writing, there are some 70 different armed groups operating in the eastern DRC (Stearns & Vogel, 2015) which have all been classified as armed groups because they are not recognised by either the Congolese state or the international community as legitimate political actors. While their legitimacy is certainly contested, they are nonetheless a product of (and a response to) a somewhat violent and predatory political settlement. It is therefore worth understanding the historical context from which these groups emerged and the creation of the 'violent marketplace' (Raeymaekers, 2014) in which they operate.

Since its inception as a colony in 1885, the territory contiguous with the modern-day state of the DRC has been plagued by conflict and insecurity. A violent and exploitative colonial period; a post-independence crisis (in which its first democratically elected Prime Minister was assassinated); more than 30 years under the brutal dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko; and two Congo Wars in which millions died. When the Congo entered the twenty-first century, there had never been a time when the state was at peace and functioning for the benefit of its citizens. 'The violence in the Congo may seem unintelligible but its roots lie in institutional practices introduced under colonialism, which 50 years of independence have only exacerbated' (Mamdani, 2011, p. 31).

The details of its troubled and turbulent past are too complex and numerous to document comprehensively here.¹⁴ But three interlinked and particularly enduring traits of the Congolese political structure warrant further explanation:

- the attractiveness and vulnerability of the Congo to external interference, and the resulting Congolese suspicion of external intervention
- a political system that advantages elites who are self-interested and often predatory
- the manipulation of citizenship and 'Congolese-ness'.

These elements have contributed to conflict throughout the Congo, but their effects are perhaps strongest in the Kivu provinces for reasons primarily linked to its geography. Firstly, the Kivus have long been a destination for mass migrations and this has created competition between many different ethnic groups for land and resources. The associated question of land ownership and citizenship rights in the Kivus remains hotly contested.

Secondly, the Kivus are both physically and metaphorically isolated from state power in Kinshasa. The relationship between the state and the individual in the Kivus is extremely weak and many easterners, as Autesserre observes, largely distrust the state (Autesserre, 2012).

Finally, the Kivus are highly susceptible to the spillover effects of conflicts in neighbouring countries, given their location on the border between the DRC and Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi. Buzan and Wæver argue that the DRC is an insulator state between the two security complexes of East-Central Africa and Southern Africa – 'bearing the burden of this difficult position, but not strong enough to unify its two worlds into one' (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 41). Similarly, the Kivus are pulled in opposing directions by the competing security concerns of the various networks of actors which interact there. An inability to unify or mediate between these competing concerns has contributed to persistent insecurity in the provinces. Tull observes that, 'To make sense of the current conflict in Kivu one has to integrate a snapshot into a longer historical perspective, by deciphering the continuities and discontinuities of political order in a region notoriously difficult to govern' (2007, p. 431).

Unlike most colonies created in the 'scramble for Africa' in the late 19th century and 'owned' by the state apparatus of their colonisers, the Congo began its colonial life as the personal property of the Belgian King, Leopold II. Such was the brutality inflicted on the Congolese people by those who administered the territory on his behalf that a high-profile humanitarian

¹⁴ In the interest of clarity, I have kept my analysis of the history of the DRC presented here at a macro-level. A number of journalistic and historical accounts of the Congo unpack these dynamics in much more detail (Hochschild, 1998; McCalpin, 2002; Prunier, 2008; Turner, 2007; Wrong, 2001)

lobby campaigned to end Leopold's ownership.¹⁵ Care of the Congo Free State was transferred in 1908 to the Belgian state, and it became the Belgian Congo. While admittedly less brutally violent in its treatment of the Congolese indigenes, the primary goal of the Belgian Congo's rulers was maximising profit for Belgian companies. Investment in extracting the Congo's natural resources took precedence over infrastructure development for the provision of public services (Turner, 2007). Workers were moved *en masse* from elsewhere in the country and from Rwanda and Burundi to the resource-rich east of the country, creating a complicated mix of ethnic identities that remain a source of conflict today. Belgian rule was enforced by the *Force Publique*, an army of mercenaries created by King Leopold who were expected to provide for themselves by pillaging from locals using the weapons Leopold, and then the Belgian state, had given them (Wrong, 2001, p. 43).

In June 1960 the Belgian Congo became independent, and its first democratically elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, took control of the new Congolese government. However, Lumumba struggled to control the 'unwieldy coalition of contradictory political forces' (Turner, 2007, p. 33) that made up his new regime. This struggle was made all the more difficult by Belgian intervention designed to protect its commercial interests,¹⁶ and the fact that the Congo was a key geopolitical location for the Cold War superpowers.

In September 1960, Lumumba was overthrown in a Western-backed coup led by his former ally Mobutu Seso Seko. In 1961 Lumumba's assassination was reputedly orchestrated by Belgian, British and American forces. By 1965 Mobutu finally managed to consolidate power over the whole country,¹⁷ and in 1971 he renamed the country Zaire.

Once more the country was in the hands of a ruling elite that had little concern for its citizens. While Lumumba has remained somewhat of a Congolese nationalist hero – a folkloric icon of the great state that the Congo *could* have been had Western powers not conspired to undermine him – the nature of politics in the Congo has always favoured self-serving rather idealistically-motivated leaders:

Lumumba certainly started off being the dominant member of the partnership, more famous, more charismatic, more politically sophisticated and far more idealistic. But he had lacked pragmatism, and that was Mobutu's forte (Wrong, 2001, p. 79).

Armed groups in the Congo today operate in this context of pragmatism over idealism, suspicion of Western involvement, the non-provision of services by the state, and the ubiquitous use of violence to pursue political ends. The Congolese political class of today have also been shaped by this period. Since Mobutu it has been clear that access to the top echelons of power in the Congo comes through military force rather than popular consent. Mobutu had been Chief of Staff of the post-independence Congolese army,¹⁸ came to power through a series of coups, and established a single-party state. When he was ousted from power in the First Congo War, he was replaced by the leader of the ADFL¹⁹ rebel movement, Laurent Kabila. Kabila's son, the current President Joseph Kabila, had also been a member of that armed movement, and rose to the presidency while the country was still at war. The origins and associations of these key political actors are rooted in armed groups, and this may explain why so many in the Congo see armed groups as a pathway to pursue political interests.

During Mobutu's 32-year rule, a number of significant policies and practices were entrenched in the Congolese political system which today shape the way armed groups operate. Mobutu's apparently paradoxical approach to regime consolidation was to superficially unite all Congolese citizens under one Zairean nationality and simultaneously exploit and exacerbate existing social divides. In particular, Mobutu and his successors have sought to consolidate power by exacerbating ethnic conflict, and this has taken particularly violent forms in the east of the country.

The two provinces that are the subject of this study, North and South Kivu, border Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. Historically, the area has been home to a variety of nomadic and settler communities. During the colonial and post-colonial period, it saw numerous waves of mass migration. Workers, traders, and armed groups arrived from other parts of the Congo and neighbouring countries.

15 Initially, Leopold justified the creation of the Congo Free State as a humanitarian mission. However, Edward Dene Morel, a clerk for a shipping company that had been contracted by King Leopold to carry all cargo to and from the Congo, noticed three discrepancies in the company's dealings: that shiploads of arms were being transported to the Congo to Belgian trading companies; that the amount of rubber and ivory being brought from the Congo vastly exceeded the amount that was declared (and therefore taxed); and that the Congolese natives were not being paid for the rubber and ivory. Realising that 'humanitarian aid' was a cover for corruption and exploitation, Morel 'began to uncover an elaborate skein of fraud' (Hochschild, 1998, p. 179). Morel's findings prompted the 1904 publication of the Casement Report and a powerful international lobby for the Congo to be removed from the possession of King Leopold. High profile supporters included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Mark Twain.

16 Belgian forces entered the Congo immediately post-independence under the veil of protecting white officers in the Force Publique, but they were primarily concerned with protecting their diamond and mining interests. To this end, they supported the secession of the diamond- and mineral-rich province of Katanga.

17 After Lumumba's death the country remained divided into four spheres of influence. The USA supported Mobutu's rule in Kinshasa, the former Soviet Union supported the remnants of Lumumba's forces fighting in the east of the country, there was a Belgian-backed secession in Katanga, and an independent secession in Kasai.

18 The Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC), which replaced the Force Publique. Mobutu had himself been a Force Publique soldier.

19 Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire.

Citizenship and land ownership laws have been notoriously unclear, and both local and national political actors manipulate citizenship discourses for their own political gain and to create support bases. A detailed history of armed groups in the eastern DRC noted that, even before the Congo Wars, 'militias were used by local authorities and politicians in long-standing disputes over land and customary authority' (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 17). The present use of armed groups to defend claims to land and authority, and to further the needs of local elites (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015), can be seen as a continuation of this practice.

Another significant and enduring legacy of the Mobutu era is that almost nothing was spent on developing state infrastructure. The Congolese people concluded that the Zairean state was unwilling and unable to provide for them. A system of survival emerged known as *System D* – the 'D' standing for *débrouillez-vous* (fend for yourself). Indeed, echoing the way that Leopold's mercenaries of the *Force Publique* were left to provide for themselves, Mobutu 'gave the nod to a system of organised looting by instructing his soldiers to "live off the land"' (Wrong, 2001, p. 43). Jackson argues that Mobutu also advocated *System D* to the wider population²⁰ because it served as 'a safety valve for discontent' (Jackson, 2002, p. 521) and kept citizens too focused on survival to concern themselves with a coup against him. Jackson observes that the 'highly ambiguous and complex relationship between *System D* and the Zairean state' (*ibid.*) only serves to underline the fact that resistance to, and collusion with, the Mobutist regime were bound together in such a way that they became almost indistinguishable. This paradox continues to manifest itself in today's armed groups which, as discussed in more detail later, are at once within and without the state. It was striking that many of the armed groups I researched were both a protest against the historic predation of the state and a replication of it.

The legacy of the political system that emerged both before and during the Mobutu era can be seen in the present-day political culture in which armed groups operate. Particularly in the east of the country, the state provides very little for its citizens and expects a continuation of *System D*. The manipulation of ethnic identities, discourses of autochthony,²¹ and questions about the 'Congolese-ness' of certain groups have also been systematically used to both propagate and undermine certain groups' demands for rights and resources.

However, the phenomenon of armed groups as they exist today has its roots in the Congo Wars of the late 1990s and early 2000s when 'the Kivus were the theatre of three intertwined and mutually reinforcing levels of conflict' (Tull, 2007, p. 123). These levels were long-standing local conflicts; struggles for Congolese state power; and conflicts from neighbouring countries. Indeed, the trigger for the First Congo War (1996-7) came from outside the country. Even after the Cold War ended and the USA withdrew its support for Mobutu's regime, an ineffective opposition allowed Mobutu to maintain power for much of the 1990s. He was eventually unseated by Rwanda's concerns about his inaction during the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, including his failure to prevent refugee camps in the Kivus from being used as a base for remilitarisation by the ousted genocidal forces, and his tacit support for the continued persecution of both Rwandan and Congolese Tutsis in the eastern Congo. As several commentators have noted, Rwanda and Uganda actively 'planned and directed the rebellion' (Dunn, 2002, p. 56) that eventually overthrew Mobutu and replaced him with Laurent Kabila.

The international community initially saw neighbouring countries' involvement in the overthrow of a brutal dictator like Mobutu as a positive move. The event was hailed as the start of an African Renaissance, spearheaded by a "new breed" of African leader' (Wrong, 2001, pp. 30-31). Once Kabila came to power, however, he was keen to dispel rumours that he was a Ugandan or Rwandan puppet, and to assert his 'Congolese-ness'. What this meant in reality was that 'Kabila was more interested in building a network of key supporters through the time-tested Mobutist methods than he was in assuring the genuine economic development of the country' (McCalpin, 2002, p. 47).

Internal grievances about Kabila's leadership, combined with his failure to live up to the expectations that neighbouring countries had of him, led to the Second Congo War between 1998 and 2002. This conflict is described by many as the deadliest war since World War Two²² and, because of the sheer number of neighbouring countries actively involved in it, is also sometimes known as Africa's World War (Prunier, 2008). When Kabila broke his alliance with the regimes in Rwanda and Uganda, they decided to back a rebel group, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), in an attempt to overthrow him. However, much like Mobutu, Kabila's flexibility in forging and breaking alliances was also key to his resilience. Although he had lost the support of Rwanda and Uganda, Kabila avoided Mobutu's fatal error of surrounding himself with hostile governments. Kabila ensured that he had the support of the governments of Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia by giving them shares in Congolese diamonds, petroleum and mining industries respectively. He exploited the fact that no regional powers

20 As well as ordering the army to provide for themselves, it would appear Mobutu recommended *System D* to the Congolese people. Jackson recounts a 1970s Mobutu speech in which he was 'winkingly baptising "débrouillardise" himself, [and] urging the population to "fend for yourselves!"' (Jackson, 2002, p. 521).

21 Several groups can claim to have been indigenous to the Congo at the time of European colonisation. However, groups that claim the same land argue over autochthony – who was there first. In autochthonous discourses, groups claim that they are 'sons of the soil' – implying that they literally sprang up from the ground, and are therefore the primordial settlers in a given area. These discourses are often violently contested (Bøås & Dunn, 2013; Verweijen, 2015).

22 For example, Time Magazine called the Congo conflict 'the world's most lethal conflict since World War II'. Indeed, the frequently cited survey by the International Rescue Committee on excess mortality in the Congo led to a widespread belief that the 'the four-and-a-half-year war in the Democratic Republic of Congo has taken more lives than any other since World War II and is the deadliest documented conflict in African history' (International Alert, 2012).

had a strong desire to overthrow the Congo's kleptocratic system. They merely wanted to benefit from it themselves. Thus, in the Second Congo War, 'Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola defended Kabila, Congolese sovereignty, and their own material interests' (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, p. 10), though the latter took precedence in determining the nature of their support.

During the two Congo Wars, three different types of armed movement emerged which form the basis of several of today's armed groups.

- *Rebel movements* such as the ADFL in the First War, and the RCD in the Second, backed by neighbouring countries, who fought against the incumbent governments with the goal of overthrowing them. After falling out over tactics and strategy, Rwanda and Uganda supported different rebel groups in the Second Congo War: Rwanda gave significant support to the RCD (Congolese Rally for Democracy) led by Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, while Uganda supported the MLC (Movement for the Liberation of Congo) led by Jean Pierre Bemba.
- *Local militias* (often referred to as Mai-Mai groups) emerged across the east of the country. Many initially had little influence beyond their locality and were formed to either support or fight against the ADFL in the First Congo War. They remained to protect community interests and fight what they perceived as 'foreign invaders' of their land during the Second Congo War. 'Over time, the Congo Wars changed the nature of armed groups, as locally rooted militias became enmeshed in networks led by business and political elites.' (Stearns et al., 2013, p.19).
- *Foreign armed groups.* Perhaps most prominent among these groups was the Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR) and its political wing, Armed People for the Liberation of Rwanda (PALiR). This group is widely seen as the precursor to the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) which remains one of the most potent armed groups operating in the Congo today. It was initially made up of former members of the Rwandan genocidal regime ousted by Paul Kagame who had fled to the eastern Congo. They were able to remilitarise in the eastern Congo, and recruit new members from the Rwandan Hutu refugee camps there.²³ Rwandan Hutu armed groups hostile to Kagame were used as Congolese state-allies by Mobutu to fight Kabila's ADFL forces in the First Congo War. They were then used by Kabila himself in the Second Congo War to fight the RCD.

While foreign armed groups such as the FDLR were not included in the peace negotiations, the end of the Second Congo War saw the implementation of an Inter-Congolese Dialogue – a transitional government that divided political power between the key belligerents in conflict. While Kabila's forces were recognised as the main government party, ministerial positions were also given to members of the MLC, the RCD²⁴ and the Mai-Mai.

However, while a temporary and piecemeal power-sharing agreement was reached, it did not change the perception in the Congo that the best way to access political power was to join an armed group. Critics felt the Inter-Congolese Dialogue had rewarded belligerency. Then, when several of the belligerent groups lost power in the 2006 elections (the first multi-party elections held in the country since the 1960 post-independence elections), they turned once again to exerting influence through armed groups. So it can be argued that the formal peace processes did not address the violence that continues to underpin the Congolese political settlement today.

Since 2003, the Congo has been regarded by the international community as a post-conflict state. However, the label of 'post-conflict' is highly misleading, and even in areas where the violence has been reduced since 2003, the so-called peace is extremely fragile. Violence flared throughout the country around both the 2006 and 2011 elections, and despite the international community's insistence that elections are a necessary step towards strengthening the state, commentators have observed that the electoral process 'cemented several of the cleavages that led to violence in the first place' (Bøås, 2008, p. 53). And though considerable resources have been committed to statebuilding, 'people often experience the state as an oppressive, exploitative, and threatening machine' (Autesserre, 2012, p. 18).

It is perhaps because of this persistence of a kleptocratic and predatory political system that armed groups have proliferated rather than dwindled since the 2006 elections. As new coalitions form and rebel movements emerge, it is evident that the patterns of state corruption, pillage, patronage, and complex migration that have plagued the Congo since its inception as a colony in 1885 continue to hamper security and stability in the country. Armed groups operate in this unstable and insecure environment. Against this context it is worth questioning the donor community's received wisdom that armed groups destabilise the state. Rather, if the Congolese state is understood as chronically failing to meet the basic human security needs of its people, armed groups can be seen as a *product* of this failure, rather than a cause of it.

23 Guilt about not having intervened in the Rwandan Genocide, and the perception that aid agencies were complicit in the militarisation of refugee camps, meant that many high-profile humanitarian agencies – for instance, the International Rescue Committee, Oxfam, Save the Children, and certain chapters of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – withdrew. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was abandoned by many of its partners in the region. In a report in *Le Soir*, Médecins Sans Frontières claimed that 'The instigators of the genocide are taking control of the camps in an increasingly systematic way' (Pottier, 2002).

24 The RCD itself had splintered into factions. The RCD-Liberation Movement (RCD-ML) is led by Mbusa Nyamwisi and RCD-National (RCD-N) is a Ugandan-backed rebel group led by Roger Lumbala that allied with the MLC.

There are a wide variety of armed groups in the Congo. It is hard to precisely classify them as they are constantly evolving – either by forming alliances with other armed groups or FARDC factions, or (more commonly) fragmenting into new groups (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015; Stearns & Vogel, 2015). However, their composition suggests the three broad categories outlined above, although these categories are by no means homogenous, and it is important to note that there are no clear links of either enmity or amity between groups within the same category. But they may help us to understand the basic identities of these different groups and they can be seen to have evolved from the types of groups that emerged during the Congo Wars. Since it would be beyond the scope of this paper to cover every armed group in detail, I have highlighted in each category armed groups of note, including those with whose members I conducted interviews.²⁵

Foreign armed groups

The prevalence of violence in the Kivus can in part be attributed to its geographic location on the Congo's eastern border. The Kivu provinces share borders with Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania and so they not only have their own internal tensions, but are also often the first to suffer the spillover effects of conflict from these countries. One of the key preoccupations of the Congolese government and the international peacekeepers in the eastern DRC currently is the defeat of foreign armed groups typically made up of rebel factions from neighbouring countries who have sought refuge in the eastern DRC. During their protracted exile they have become embroiled in both local and regional conflicts. At the time of writing, the FDLR and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF or ADF-NALU)²⁶ are the foreign groups of most concern to the Congolese government and international peacekeepers. Both have been described by the UN as 'responsible for grave human rights abuses and massive displacement' (UN Group of Experts, 2014, p. 3).

FDLR members have often been described as ex-interahamwe/genocidaires who fled to the eastern DRC in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. They are said to have a strong Hutu-Power ideology and the overarching aim of overthrowing Rwanda's Kagame regime. This may be true of the group's leadership, but many of the current FDLR rank-and-file members are too young to have participated in the Rwandan Genocide. While some members do wish to return to a Rwandan Hutu Nation, most of the FDLR's belligerency has been played out in the eastern DRC. As will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, the concerted attempts to remove the FDLR from the Kivus have not had great success. The FDLR's recruitment strategy has very effectively capitalised on the disenfranchisement and marginalisation of Hutus in the Kivus. They also understand how to navigate the complex military and political structures of the eastern DRC, and so will be difficult to defeat with traditional military tactics alone. While my fieldwork was underway, the FDLR had announced it was willing to surrender, pending negotiations about possible dialogue with Rwanda. At the time of writing, these negotiations have not been fruitful and the FDLR remain armed and active. In interviews with Congolese military personnel, it was said that the FDLR have very strong military intelligence and are often prepared for attacks against them. As a result, there is some suggestion that in certain areas there is collusion between the FDLR and the Congolese armed forces.

ADF-NALU is a coalition of forces opposed to the Museveni regime in Uganda. They are based in and around the territory of Beni in North Kivu. Unlike most other groups in the eastern DRC, ADF-NALU allegedly have links to terrorist networks, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, and many of the humanitarian workers that I interviewed singled them out as difficult to talk to. The UN Group of Experts noted that 'during 2013, ADF grew stronger and became more aggressive, kidnapping dozens of local people, targeting medical facilities, shipments and staff, abducting humanitarian workers and attacking MONUSCO peacekeepers' (UN Group of Experts, 2014, p. 19). This, coupled with the fact that the group has shown no willingness to surrender or negotiate with peacekeepers, initially made the ADF the primary target of the Force Intervention Brigade after the defeat of the M23.

The Burundian National Liberation Forces (FNL) has never been quite as influential as the FDLR or the ADF. Its members are mostly Burundian rebels and it operates in the Rusizi Plain of South Kivu. Until recently the group has been quite marginal and a lower priority for international actors than the FDLR or ADF. However, there have been suggestions that the recent conflict in Burundi has led to the remobilisation of many ex-FNL combatants, 'raising the possibility of an intensification of cross-border troubles, although probably through other inchoate groups' (Stearns & Vogel, 2015, p. 6).

25 I was able to conduct interviews with members, or former members of the FDLR, Raia Mutomboki, and various Mai-Mai groups, and former RCD, CNDP and M23 members. I did not speak with armed group members operating in Uvira, the Rusizi Plains or South Kivu, but have drawn on other research with these groups (Verweijen, 2015; Life and Peace Institute, 2011).

26 The ADF is often considered to be one and the same as its affiliated group NALU. The use of the names ADF and ADF NALU have been used inconsistently and interchangeably in both the literature and my interview transcripts. For clarity within this study, I refer to the groups as ADF-NALU with the caveat that within this group there may be differences. For example, one interviewee said that the ADF element have a stronger Muslim ideology, whereas the NALU element – associated more strongly with Ugandan nationalism – tend to be more Christian. 'They're not really together, but they both have the objective to overthrow Museveni.' (Interview, Congolese NGO worker, 5 September 2014, Goma)

Local defence groups

Although the Kivus have almost constantly been the site of armed violence since the Congo Wars, the Congolese state has been unable and/or unwilling to provide protection for Kivutian civilians caught in the crossfire. Furthermore, the 'steady erosion of public service provision under Mobutu, along with the ban on political parties, had triggered the proliferation of community-based groups throughout the Kivus' (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 16). As a result, a number of local defence groups have sprung up in response to attacks on local civilians by foreign armed groups, and out of frustration at the state's predation on and/or apathy towards Kivutian civilians. These groups vary considerably in size and character, but most 'have a limited, although variable, number of fighters, often less than 300' (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015, p. 1). These groups are also scattered throughout the eastern Congo, although Stearns and Vogel do note that 'most of the fighting is clustered in other areas where a variety of armed groups are opposed to each other, or where the FARDC conducts military operations' (2015, p. 6). I outline below some of the groups that feature in the analysis presented in this paper.

Perhaps one of the most talked-about, particularly among aid worker interviewees, was the Mai-Mai group called Nduma Defence of Congo (NDC), also known as the Mai-Mai *Sheka* after their infamous leader Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka. He has been wanted since 2011 for a number of alleged human rights atrocities. The group's members are mainly from the Nyanga community based around the North Kivu town of Pinga, where they have clashed with the FDLR and other Mai-Mai groups. Prominent among them is the ACPLS (*Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo Libre et pour la Souverain*), a Hunde group. The ACPLS have also been known to clash with a Congolese Hutu Mai-Mai group called Mai-Mai Nyatura. Many of the discussions about Mai-Mai groups that I had in North Kivu focus on these three groups. All operated in the Masisi territory.

In South Kivu, the local defence group of greatest interest in Bukavu²⁷ was the *Raia Mutomboki* – a grassroots movement that began in 2011 as a response to the insecurity created by the presence of the FDLR in Shabunda. Since then they have evolved to become 'more a franchise than a unitary force, with each of its branches rooted in a particular set of dynamics driven by local politics, its leadership, and the interests of its allies' (Stearns, 2013a, p. 8). Paradoxically, while the *Raia Mutomboki* was initially a response to local insecurity, they have since become a source of insecurity. There have been reports that once having driven another armed group from an area, the *Raia Mutomboki* then prey on civilians and extort illegal taxes from them, so replicating the predation of the armed groups and the state.

Rebel groups

I have categorised armed groups who have a stated political rhetoric of toppling and/or upsetting power in Kinshasa as 'rebel groups'. Relatively few of the armed groups currently operating in the Kivus fall into this category, but perhaps the most prominent in recent times is the March 23rd Movement (M23), which managed to invade the North Kivu capital of Goma in 2012. The M23 – along with similar precursor rebel groups such as the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) – is distinguished here from the local defence groups for two main reasons.

Firstly, these rebel groups more explicitly oppose the existing state. Although there is no strong evidence that the M23 was necessarily trying to *overthrow* the state in Kinshasa, it was explicitly against the state and tried to replace it in the areas it invaded. For example, it developed sophisticated state-like structures that included tax collection networks and international liaison officers (Stearns, 2013b). Attempts by some of the local defence groups mentioned above to establish similar state-like structures have shown markedly less capacity and drive than the efforts of these more organised rebel movements.

Secondly, while there may be individuals within the Congolese state system who support local defence groups, rebel groups tend to have much stronger and more coordinated backing, usually from neighbouring states. For example, there is strong evidence that the M23 had considerable state backing from Rwanda (UN Group of Experts, 2012). As the scheduled 2016 elections failed to materialise and President Kabila's regime continues to lose legitimacy, there is cause to fear that new, well-supported rebel groups may emerge in the Kivus.

27 The local defence groups discussed in this paper are either groups whose members I was able to interview during my fieldwork, or groups discussed in detail by informants during my fieldwork. This is why I do not discuss the conflict in Uvira. An excellent discussion of this topic can be found in a recent Rift Valley Institute Report (Verweijen, 2016b).

3

The failures of technocratic strategies to neutralise armed groups

Since the end of the Congo Wars, the presence of armed groups in the eastern DRC has been widely acknowledged as the main driver of the country's post-conflict violence and insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2007). The international community facilitated the smooth running of the 2006 election process, established what it saw as a legitimate government in the Congo and then turned its attention to stabilisation and statebuilding.²⁸

The stated objective was to remove the threat of the armed groups from the eastern DRC. The methods and focus of both the Congolese government and the international community's policies for dealing with armed groups has varied over the years, but can be summarised as containing two elements:

- encouraging armed groups to voluntarily engage in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes;
- launching military offensives against armed groups that did not voluntarily surrender.

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) of Congolese armed groups

DDR processes in the Congo have fallen into two categories: those aimed at Congolese armed groups (which fall under the responsibility of the Congolese government), and those aimed at foreign armed groups (for which MONUSCO has taken responsibility). While the first encourage Congolese armed groups to voluntarily surrender and then go through DDR, the second adds the additional step of repatriating surrendering foreign armed groups to their country of origin. The assumption is that they would then go on to either face justice or engage in their home countries' DDR programmes.

The National Disarmament and Reinsertion Commission (CONADER) was established in 2004 administer domestic DDR after the Second Congo War. CONADER was effectively called for in the 2003 Sun City Agreement and is primarily financed by the World Bank. The Sun City Agreement also set out the basis for the post-conflict national army (today's FARDC). It called for:

The formation of a restructured and integrated National Army, to include the Armed Forces of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Cong [sic.], the Armed Forces of the Congolese Rally for Democracy and the Armed Forces of the Movement for the Liberation of Congo' (Sun City Agreement, 2003, Resolution No. DIC/CDS/04.1)

CONADER gave former combatants the option to 'either return to civilian life or integrate into the FARDC via the *Structure militaire d'integration* (SMI, Military Integration Structure)' (Vogel & Musamba, 2016, p. 2). Neither option reduced armed group violence.

The DDR programmes had failed to consider a sustainable reintegration strategy for those who wanted to return to civilian life, and many ex-combatants found they had no alternative source of livelihood. Those who opted to join the national army found themselves becoming colleagues with former enemies and were then deployed to 'protect' the communities they had previously preyed on.

This caused the new FARDC many problems, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the case of the CNDP (National Congress for the Defense of the People). This was led by Laurent Nkunda and created out of defecting former RCD soldiers in 2003. By 2006 the CNDP had become one of the most powerful groups in the eastern DRC. Several commentators have noted that the CNDP's rise led to the proliferation of armed groups in the eastern DRC:

There were two reasons for this development. First, the FARDC, unsure of its own officers' competence and loyalty, often backed ethnic militias with weapons and money. Secondly, the fighting spread insecurity in the countryside, triggering mobilisation (often among demobilised soldiers) in the name of communal self-defence (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 23).

²⁸ This is reflected most strongly in the change of the UN mission in the Congo from MONUC to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)

A series of peace talks was supported by the USA, European Union and the African Union to address the threat posed by the CNDP, the FDLR (who continued to maintain a strong presence in the Kivus), and the proliferation of local armed groups. In January 2008, the Goma Peace Agreement was signed by the CNDP and several Mai-Mai groups, committing signatories to a ceasefire.²⁹ However, within six months the United Nations had documented around 200 ceasefire violations (Human Rights Watch, 2008). When Laurent Nkunda was finally arrested in 2009 and CNDP combatants were integrated into the Congolese army, it became clear that the practice of integration was failing.

Firstly, the CNDP had defected from, and subsequently fought against, the FARDC, and their reintegration was met with hostility from FARDC soldiers. And most ex-CNDP soldiers, primarily Congolese Tutsi, saw reducing the threat of Hutu-dominated groups such as the FDLR as the key priority of the FARDC. However, other elements of the FARDC had allied with FDLR forces to fight the CNDP. So, rather than uniting warring factions under the banner of the FARDC, integration (often referred to as *mixage*) had the opposite effect and created discord.

Secondly, when CNDP officers were given good positions in the FARDC as a result of *mixage*, it signalled that armed group mobilisation could be seen as a kind of 'army fast-track'.³⁰ One UN officer I interviewed described how he met an armed group leader who, he thought, had joined up because he knew that if his group surrendered and integrated into the FARDC, he would be given a rank of similar, or higher, standing:

They join and hope that when they're integrated into the FARDC they can become a colonel in the FARDC. They aren't qualified, but they can get rank because they had rank in the armed group.³¹

There was also considerable evidence that armed groups were being instrumentalised to further the career ambitions of certain military and political leaders. Following the 2006 elections, 'dozens of new armed groups were formed, backed by officers and politicians who had failed to obtain the votes and positions they had hoped for' (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 23). To counteract the strength of these groups, the government gave its support to the creation of other new groups.

My own research, carried out after 2012, did not find strong evidence that the possibility of accessing military rank or political position was a chief concern among the rank-and-file members of armed group members that I interviewed. However, many said that the armed groups they were part of, or fighting against, had been created to cement the positions of local, national and regional 'big men' (Utas, 2012). At the very least, while the potential for military rank may not have been the key reason why people *joined* armed groups, the perceived impunity associated with *mixage* upon surrender certainly did not *discourage* mobilisation.

A third factor in the failure of integration was that Congolese civilians in the Kivus were not protected and were left, once again, to fend for themselves. The FARDC was being undermined, and the *mixage* policies pursued between 2006 and 2012 offered incentives for elites to create and support new armed groups. In many cases, civilians responded by creating local defence groups, such as the *Raia Mutomboki* – meaning that, as well as gaining support from local, national and regional elites, some armed groups also cemented strong grassroots support:

While the level of popular support varied from group to group, many have sympathisers and collaborators. One reason for this is that the alternatives are often worse: an unreliable and abusive government army, or, in some cases, predatory foreign armed groups (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 34).

The failure of the Congolese government to adequately address the continued FDLR threat in the wake of the 2011 elections (Stearns, 2013b) was the basis of the M23 rebellion of 2012 as former CNDP soldiers from the FARDC defected. The rebellion, which attracted international attention in November 2012 when the North Kivu capital of Goma was captured, was a wake-up call to both the Congolese government and the international community that their DDR processes were not working.³²

In 2014, in an attempt to benefit from the momentum of the defeat of the M23, a new DDR process was announced. PNDDR III (Global National Plan for DDR III) was slow to get going, and despite claims it was no longer integrating former armed groups wholesale into the FARDC, it was evident that individual former combatants were still being integrated into the army. At the time, I asked several experts about DDR III, its chances for success and whether it offered a different approach. I had this exchange with one interviewee.

Respondent: They were horribly slow in getting the programme off the ground, because it wasn't entirely clear how it would work, donors were not really forthcoming with the funding. And what seems to be the case now is that the combatants who were shipped... to centres... will be integrated into the FARDC as far as I know.

29 A copy of the Goma Agreement (in French) can be found here: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/24_01_2008northkivu.pdf

30 This phrase was repeatedly used by UN personnel when asked why they thought people joined armed groups.

31 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: Goma, 25 August 2014

32 At this point two equally ineffectual DDR processes had been implemented by CONADER.

SP: But minister Lambert Mende had said that what they were going to do differently this time [for DDRIII] is that they weren't going to integrate [former armed group combatants into the FARDC]...

Respondent: So it is different, they do not negotiate anymore, they don't hand out ranks to rebel officers, and say 'okay this group is negotiating, it's surrendered, it's integrated wholesale' so that's over. But what they do is they integrate rebel soldiers on an *individual* basis... it's a different mechanism, right? Like, as an individual combatant you don't put any demands on the table for certain ranks *et cetera*... So, in a sense, the dynamics is different of integrating them on an individual basis. But, I mean, I haven't seen anything in terms of DDR programmes being implemented. What I've seen is, you know, lots of Mai-Mai forces being regrouped... and some of these people being flown to the west, and according to sources in the military, they are now receiving military training and being integrated into the FARDC... That's all I've been seeing in terms of DDR, and even people out there don't really believe in any DDR programme anymore.³³

While the expert accepted that a move to integrate soldiers one by one does create a different dynamic, they also seemed sceptical that the DDRIII process would address any of the issues that had hindered earlier DDR programmes. For instance, in previous DDR programmes, even when individual combatants were willing to engage with the programmes, they often did not give up their weapons. They would leave their weapons with their communities or surrender useless weapons and keep the ones they actually used. This meant that while combatants were going through DDR, new armed groups recruits had access to weapons. Or, if combatants left the DDR process for any reason, they could reclaim their weapons and (re)join an armed group. I asked an official who had been involved in the planning of DDRIII about the superficiality of the disarmament process. His response was that the international community was unable (or unwilling) to grasp the reality that the disarmament element of DDR could never reasonably be expected of any armed group given the DRC's current security circumstances:

No one in their right minds would give up their weapons in an area that is characterised by the most brutal forms of lawlessness. How and why would you do that? Give up your weapons so that you can watch your family get butchered the next day... I mean, I think the person who does that *should* be shot. I'm sorry it's true. Countless experiences of DDR [ask people to] 'give up your weapons' and the stupid few who actually do end up dying. Countless experiences of that, and what do we do? [We say] 'Oh sorry, who are the ones who actually killed you? Oh wait, you can't answer because you're dead!'³⁴

This security dilemma is a factor said by several other researchers working in the Congo to partly explain the proliferation of armed groups:

Due to the linkages between inter-elite competition on the one hand, and conflict between and within communities on the other, the armed mobilisation of one group often stimulated the mobilisation of others, which feared finding itself at a comparative disadvantage (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015, p. 2).

Conversely, unless all groups disarm at the same time, it is unlikely that one group will unilaterally give up their weapons and face the consequences of being unable to protect themselves from their enemies. The DDR adviser that I quoted above argued that, even though the technical drafting of DDRIII was very good, DDRIII was never going to succeed unless assurances could be given that combatants and their wider family-networks would be safe once they had disarmed:

When it comes to a practical thing, I would say you will never ever get them to give up their weapons. I mean never, never, never, and you shouldn't. But we play the game of the emperor's new clothes, that's fine. They will keep their weapons. What we should be addressing is not to give them an opportunity to use them, or an excuse to use them, rather.³⁵

This latter point, of not addressing the 'excuse' armed groups give for having weapons has played a key role in the past failure of DDR. The fact that DDRIII, like previous DDR programmes, was not coupled with any attempt to address wider insecurity or break the vicious cycle of security dilemmas earned it very little buy-in from either armed groups or the communities that they operated within. Trust is another key reason for the failures of both past and present DDR programmes. There has been very little confidence among armed groups and their potential host communities about the reintegration process.

The alternative to *mixage* – reintegration into civilian life – has also been largely unsuccessful. There are several reasons for this, including the rather narrow focus on simply giving former combatants money rather than fostering more reliable and regular sources of income for them (Bafilemba, et al., 2014). This narrow focus is understandable, given the wider lack of

33 International expert on the Congolese army: Skype, 11 July 2014

34 DDR advisor: Skype, 14th August 2014

35 DDR advisor: Skype, 14th August 2014

availability of any sources of reliable and regular income, (discussed in more detail later), but the lack of a viable reintegration strategy has been another key reason for DDR's failure to reduce armed group violence. An administrator in Rutshuru had been encouraging armed groups in the area to surrender, and said:

Jobs are a big problem. Many of them [the armed group members] say they want to build the country. But there's no jobs. After a few months, when there is no money they return to the bush. We're trying to find them jobs but it's hard. There's no money for them.³⁶

A number of UN and NGO informants suggested that several armed groups had been using the DDR process as a 'time-out' from fighting in the bush. One UN officer described the main incentives to demobilise as being circumstantial rather than demonstrating an ideological commitment to non-violence:

[You will disarm if] the security threat is such that, for example, you have basically a high chance of getting killed if you don't demobilise...or the fact that your income is running out, or simply the fact that you're tired of being in the bush, which is mainly what happens to the older ex-combatants.³⁷

While these factors are sufficiently strong to incentivise temporary engagement with DDR processes, they are not strong enough to ensure former combatants remain unarmed or disincentivise re-recruitment into armed groups after DDR – and many do go back.

Even where ex-combatants have remained permanently demobilised, many of them still pursue income-generating activities that are violent. A number of informants I met during fieldwork in towns such as Goma and Bukavu mentioned the need to be vigilant about 'street-boys' – the gangs of petty criminals who roamed the streets (usually, though not exclusively, at night) and robbed civilians. They were often former child combatants who had been unable to reintegrate into their communities and had come to the larger towns where they saw more economic opportunities. 'Opportunities' here meant a Congolese middle class and/or wealthy (aid-worker) expatriate community that they could rob or extort money from. The advice was not to travel after dark outside major towns as groups of bandits, again thought to be made up of ex-combatants, would set up road blockades and collect illegal "taxes" from travellers.³⁸ The existence of street-boys and bandits is indicative of the high levels of everyday violence and injustice that many Congolese face beyond armed groups. So, when faced with an ineffective and corrupt security sector and justice system, many Congolese citizens turn to armed groups for protection.

CONADER has been ineffective in implementing domestic DDR because it has not addressed the wider issues of political manoeuvring, economic inopportunity and rampant insecurity that drive armed group recruitment. Similarly, international failures to address regional dynamics have hampered MONUSCO's ability to sustainably deal with the problem of foreign armed groups. MONUSCO figures say that between 2002 and 2014, their Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR) programmes repatriated 16,872 foreign armed group combatants with 12,991 dependents (MONUSCO, 2015). Yet continued reports of attacks by foreign armed groups after 2014 suggest that, at best, this has had little effect on reducing violence, and may in some cases have caused an escalation of violence.

Three interrelated factors are not captured in the MONUSCO figures and they warrant further consideration. Firstly the international and regional political status of certain foreign armed groups has meant that some groups are disproportionately the focus of repatriation efforts. For example, of the armed group combatants and dependents repatriated by MONUSCO between 2002 and 2014, nearly 25,000 were repatriated to Rwanda.³⁹ The vast majority of these repatriations were FDLR soldiers who have, throughout this period, been seen by the international community as the main drivers of violence and insecurity in the region (International Crisis Group, 2007; United Nations Joint Human Rights Office, 2011). The focus on FDLR repatriations is therefore understandable, especially given sustained pressure from the Rwandan regime to remove what they felt was a genocidal threat on their border (Kagame, 2012). (BBC HARDtalk, 2012). However, the majority of those repatriated by MONUSCO were moderate FDLR combatants.

In 2008 I worked as a researcher for the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission. It was evident that, despite the successes of the Rwandan DDR program, almost all the soldiers who had been repatriated were FDLR child soldiers and moderate fighters who had played no part in the Rwandan Genocide (and thus were not likely to face imprisonment if they returned to Rwanda). MONUSCO estimated that in 2009 the FDLR were a 6,000-strong force, and that between January 2009 and February 2011, it 'demobilised a total of 3,878 FDLR combatants which is over half the FDLR fighting force' (MONUSCO, 2011). MONUSCO's 2011 figures placed the FDLR membership at 2,500 – but these are largely the FDLR

36 Interview with Congolese administrator: Rutshuru, 2 September 2014

37 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: Goma and London, 21 July 2014

38 During my fieldwork visits, several NGO and UN civilian staff were assaulted and robbed. The UN had even banned UN staff from travelling to certain parts of town perceived to have high levels of crime. Several NGOs prevented staff from walking alone, even during the day. In general expatriates were advised never to travel alone at night either on foot or in a vehicle.

39 According to MONUSCO figures, 12,487 combatants and 12,518 dependents were repatriated to Rwanda between 2002 and June 2014

hardliners, described by one MONUSCO official as the '1% criminals'⁴⁰ that will prove most difficult to deal with. Indeed, as MONUSCO themselves noted, the increase in repatriation moved the FDLR towards more hard-line tactics such as the recruitment of child soldiers:

In 2010 the FDLR leadership attempted to boost recruitment by enlisting Congolese combatants and child soldiers. This is evidenced by a two-fold increase in the number of child soldiers extracted by DDR/RR [Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement]. *Six hundred and forty five child soldiers were extracted by DDR/RR last year compared to 233 child soldiers in 2009*' (MONUSCO, 2011).

The recruitment of Congolese combatants into the FDLR, combined with the group's integration with Congolese communities through inter-marriage and trading markets (Pole Institute, 2010), has further cemented the FDLR in the Congolese social and political landscape.

Even where MONUSCO successfully convinced moderate FDLR soldiers to engage in DDRRR processes, it is not clear they remained repatriated. Several FDLR members that I interviewed had previously been through DDRRR, but felt persecuted under the Rwandan regime and returned to the Congo. One FDLR combatant who had repatriated to Rwanda and then returned explained that 'every time someone wants to denounce Kagame he replies that they fled and did nothing to help build the country. He tries to complicate their lives.'⁴¹ While there is no coordinated way of tracking exactly how many foreign armed group members currently in the eastern Congo have been through the DDRRR process before, several MONUSCO interviewees admitted that it was entirely possible that they were repatriating the same people in 2014 that they had been repatriating before 2010.

The presence of combatants in foreign armed groups who have been through DDRRR and returned has also served to undermine trust in the process among those who have not been through it. Stories of persecution from their returning colleagues have discouraged many FDLR combatants from repatriating. Numerous rumours circulate about the fate of others who repatriated to Rwanda and did not return. Several of the FDLR combatants interviewed mentioned friends or family members who were never heard from again. The real reasons for lack of communication between those who have been repatriated and currently mobilised FDLR combatants may be quite innocent (for example, given the FDLR's roving nature and often hidden location, it is quite easy to lose touch; former combatants may not want to keep ties to their FDLR roots; or those repatriated may have moved on to a third country of settlement). However, a lack of trust in the Rwandan regime and Kagame's reputation for silencing dissenters had led many of the FDLR soldiers that I interviewed to conclude that those who had been repatriated had been killed.

While my fieldwork was underway, around 40 bodies were found wrapped in plastic in a lake bordering Rwanda and Burundi, and rumours began to circulate about who they might be.⁴² In the FDLR camp where I conducted interviews, many were convinced that these were the bodies of their friends and colleagues who had repatriated to Rwanda. Whether they are right or not, the *conviction* is that they will be killed if they return to Rwanda. While some MONUSCO officers understood this point and pointed out that high-level FDLR officers were negotiating resettlement in a third country, this option was not offered to rank-and-file soldiers who felt equally threatened. Higher-level officers were also able to manipulate rank-and-file members' fears to bolster recruitment, discourage repatriation, and convince members of the imperative to stay armed.

Despite showing unwillingness to repatriate, in December 2013 the FDLR declared a willingness to enter into an agreement with MONUSCO that would facilitate voluntary disarming.⁴³ The reasons for this decision were not clear. One FDLR officer said the reason that they had agreed to voluntarily disarm was because:

We realised there was kind of a change of mentality...we realised that the international community is slowly less compliant and accepting of Rwanda...We have decided to hold out our hand and give good will for negotiation...My commanders asked me to be among the first unit to disarm voluntarily, and I've respected the[ir] orders. This is a process...all those who disarmed wanted to give a chance to peace. We want to return to Rwanda but only after Kagame gives us certain guarantees.⁴⁴

When I asked what those guarantees might be, he replied that he wanted an 'open, safe and inclusive dialogue with Kigali.'⁴⁵ However, as several non-FDLR interviewees noted, this demand is unlikely to ever be met:

40 Interview with MONUSCO Official: Kigali, December 2010.

41 FDLR Soldier, Walungu Transit Camp, 4 October 2014

42 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/27/dozens-bodies-wrapped-plastic-lake-rwanda-burundi>

43 The awkward wording here has been chosen carefully to reflect the tentative nature of the agreement. While the FDLR were attempting to show goodwill, they required a number of conditions to be met before they would disarm, and MONUSCO could not necessarily meet them.

44 FDLR Officer: 4 October 2014, Walungu Transit Camp, South Kivu

45 FDLR Officer: 4 October 2014, Walungu Transit Camp, South Kivu

Kagame will not even negotiate with legitimate political opposition in Rwanda, never in 100 years would he negotiate with *genocidaires* in the FDLR... why would he? They're not a problem to him.⁴⁶

Indeed, in previous research on the FDLR I found that, while they are undoubtedly ideological enemies of the Kagame regime, they pose very little significant threat to Rwanda. Furthermore, their presence in the eastern DRC serves the rather useful function of 'genocidal bogeyman' to justify both tight security within Rwanda and continued Rwandan interference in the eastern Congo (Perera, 2013). When I asked Jean Sayinzoga, head of the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission, about the possibility of negotiations with the FDLR he was instantly dismissive:

What negotiations? We're open to receive everybody. If they come to Rwanda there's many possibilities. But criminals cannot negotiate... I think they [the FDLR] are buying time, they're waiting to die.⁴⁷

The belief that the FDLR's ostensible commitment to disarming was little more than a ploy to buy time to regroup and recruit new members was shared by several members of the international community. A general of one of the MONUSCO battalions told me:

They [the FDLR] are buying time to reorganise themselves, to push for negotiations with Rwanda, and cut a deal through SADC with the Government of Congo⁴⁸

This view was also held by the US Special Envoy to the African Great Lakes Region, Russ Feingold, who expressed concerns that the FDLR were not respecting the timeframe given to them. 'The group was supposed to have surrendered on May 30 2014, but only a handful turned up' (New Times, 2014). Among the "handful" were the FDLR soldiers that I interviewed in the Walungu transit camp, who had given up their weapons but were waiting (arguably naively) for negotiations with Rwanda to commence before they were repatriated. While international actors take the failure of the DDR process as evidence that the FDLR are not committed to it, the FDLR will not disarm without a guarantee of security that the international community will not provide. The result is a vicious cycle of distrust and rearmament.

Both the UN and the Congolese government's response to their failure to facilitate proper civilian reintegration for Congolese armed groups (and repatriation for foreign armed groups) has been to intern those who have surrendered. An officer from MONUSCO's Joint Mission Analysis Centre (J-MAC) argued that, since army integration was no longer an option for former armed group combatants, 'the main answer that has been given to the question of what to do with armed groups is to take them to camps'.⁴⁹ Although placing armed group members in camps did allow them to disarm with some degree of immediate safety for themselves and their dependents, the camp solution is widely regarded as imperfect. One MONUSCO officer, who was involved in discussions with the Congolese government about whether to build camps in the east of the county or fly former combatants to existing facilities elsewhere, said:

Building camps bears the risk of not having the capacity and resources to maintain and care for them [the combatants and dependents in the camps]; flying them out runs the risk of losing track of them.⁵⁰

However, with no viable alternatives, internment has been only option pursued and as the J-MAC officer admitted 'there's no real vision for what to do after that'.⁵¹

Although surrendering armed groups have been keen to stay in the eastern Congo, a lack of local capacity to deal with them meant that many armed group members were flown to other parts of the country. One Congolese researcher and NGO worker explained how combatants were moved from a camp near the North Kivu town of Minova to other provinces: 'There were 3,000 in a DDR camp in Bwerimana near Minova, but there was no food and now they've been taken to Kitona in Bas Congo, Kotakoli in Equateur and Kamina in Katanga'.⁵² While moving combatants across the country seemed to remove them from the theatre of conflict, it also ran the risk of introducing conflict to more stable parts of the Congo. In any case, relocation to other parts of the country was not part of the original DDR plan, and when armed groups realised that they might be dislocated from their communities and families, they became increasingly reluctant to engage with DDR.

However, perhaps the most damning indictment of the camps came in October 2014 when 100 people, including more than 50 children, interned at the Kotakoli camp in Equateur died of disease and starvation.⁵³ The FDLR officer at the Walungu

46 Interview with NGO workers: 28 August 2014, Goma

47 Interview with Jean Sayinzoga: 6 October 2014, Kigali

48 Interview with MONUSCO General: 9 September 2014, Goma

49 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: Goma, 25 August 2014

50 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: Goma, 27 August 2014

51 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: Goma, 25 August 2014

52 Interview with Congolese researcher and NGO Worker: Goma, 5 September 2014

53 See <http://www.peacedirect.org/uk/report-uncovers-death-former-soldiers-dr-congo/> and <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-congodemocratic-rebels-idUSKCN0HQ4X520141001> for reports on this incident.

camp quoted above had a newborn baby when I interviewed him. Some months after returning from fieldwork, when conducting follow-up interviews, I learnt that the baby had passed away. The poor conditions in the camps and the inability of armed groups to fend for themselves while interned have also reinforced the mistrust that many have regarding the DDR programmes.

Lack of basic provision in the camps, and the inability of the government or international community to provide security to armed groups who are willing to work towards non-violent solutions, has meant that few have any incentive to give up fighting. Even where armed groups are still willing to engage with DDR they have few incentives to stay. As several Congolese civilians noted, some enter the process expecting the same incentives as were offered in the past and, disappointed, leave the DDR process quickly. They think it unfair and 'officials do not always seem to make it clear to combatants what options they have within and beyond DDR' (Vogel & Musamba, 2016, p. 5).

As I have shown above, DDR processes have failed to reduce armed group violence in any meaningful way. The lack of trust generated by numerous failures has led several to suggest that wider acknowledgement of political and economic reform is needed before DDR can work (Vogel & Musamba, 2016; Stearns, 2015). However, both the Congolese government and the international community have tended to avoid this option, focusing instead on military offensives against the armed groups they see as a threat. As I discuss below, this has created new dynamics of conflict and violence and further cemented distrust in DDR processes.

Military offensives against uncooperative armed groups

Given the lack of incentives for armed groups to surrender voluntarily, the international community has supported the Congolese state, through the FARDC, to mount military offensives against armed groups. Defeated groups are then entered into the DDR programmes. While, as I have discussed above, their treatment post-defeat has not necessarily been translated into a reduction in violence, it is fair to say that (at least in military terms) FARDC has enjoyed some successes against armed groups like the M23, the CNDP before them, and some Mai-Mai groups. Other military offensives have been less successful, but the FARDC – supported by MONUSCO – continue to take military action against specific armed groups. In 2014, at the time of my fieldwork interviews, a Congolese provincial government minister told me that foreign armed groups had been given until December to surrender voluntarily:

If this isn't done by December, the [government of] Congo will take responsibility. We will hunt them by force. When we're hunting them we won't care if they're old or children because they have weapons and they're armed groups ... After hunting these foreign groups we will give an ultimatum to the small armed groups to lay down their weapons, because their pretext is that they're there because of the FDLR. If they don't accept the decision of the government, we will end them by force like we have done in history.⁵⁴

To date, however, the Congolese government has failed to remove either the foreign armed groups (like the FDLR) or the smaller armed groups from the eastern Congo. In the following section I discuss two phases of military operations designed to address the threat of armed groups: Firstly, the joint operations carried out against the FDLR between 2009 and 2012; and secondly, the operations carried out by the FARDC and supported by the Force Intervention Brigade since 2013. My focus is on the impact that they have had on violence.

It is worth first noting that – with the exception of the CNDP (and later the M23), who had considerable external backing and political ambition – most post-conflict armed groups in the eastern DRC have little interest in upsetting the ruling elite in Kinshasa. At least before 2008, the FDLR were the most potent armed group in the eastern DRC and they served a valuable purpose to Kinshasa in keeping Kagame's Rwandan forces in check. While they often preyed on Congolese communities, local defence groups emerged to protect themselves from both the threat of the FDLR and other foreign-backed forces. This meant that the Congolese government had little incentive to actively oppose or disarm most armed groups. However, a new spirit of cooperation between the Congolese and Rwandan governments followed the defeat of the CNDP. The Congolese government had to address the stated root causes of the CNDP mutiny and address the threat that the FDLR posed to Congolese Tutsi and the Rwandan regime. The solution to this imperative was a series of joint operations between the Rwandan Army (RDF), FARDC, and MONUSCO which was designed to go after the remaining FDLR hardliners. Between 2009 and 2012, three prominent military offensives were launched against the FDLR; *Umoja Wetu* (2009), *Kimia II* (2009-2010) and *Amani Leo* (2010-2012).

If only looking at the reduction in the number of combatants, the military offensives could boast some success; MONUSCO figures suggested there were 2,500 combatants fighting for the FDLR in 2011 (MONUSCO, 2011) compared to around 8,000 in 2008 (Thakur, 2008). While these figures are difficult to verify, evidently some FDLR soldiers were either killed or surrendered.

However, these figures do not capture what happened to former FDLR combatants *after* they surrendered. When I put these questions to both FDLR combatants and Congolese civilians in the Kivus, several informants reported that many

⁵⁴ Interview with Provincial Government Minister: Bukavu, 19 September 2014.

former combatants were re-recruited into the FDLR, joined new groups, or formed splinter organisations. It appeared that the offensives had not significantly affected the FDLR's ability to recruit more members and forge alliances with new armed groups. Even if the FDLR's operational capacity and numbers had been reduced, its principal threats—of belligerent activity, anti-Tutsi rhetoric and hostility towards the Kagame regime in Kigali—had not been curbed.

It can be argued that the offensives against the FDLR did not reduce violence and in fact had the opposite effect. The existential threats the FDLR faced as a result of the offensives strengthened the remaining combatants' resolve to stay armed (Perera, 2013). Several informants said that the FDLR became more violent towards civilians during these offensives and one local administrator told how in Rutshuru, where the FDLR had previously operated with relatively low levels of violence, 'the FDLR thought the people [in the community] were spies for the FARDC...they didn't trust many people, and they would kill them'.⁵⁵

The inability of military offensives to adequately reduce the threat that the FDLR posed to Congolese Tutsi in the eastern DRC was one of the motivations behind the formation of the M23. Former CNDP soldiers integrated into the Congolese army were highly resistant to government attempts to deploy ex-CNDP commanders outside of the Kivus. They 'cited security concerns, anti-Tutsi discrimination, and the fact that the campaign against the FDLR had not reached a satisfactory conclusion' (Stearns, 2013b, p. 39). In January 2012, some ex-CNDP soldiers in the FARDC mutinied. The movement was known as the M23 because the mutineers claimed that the government had failed to honour promises to the CNDP set out in the terms of the agreement of 23 March 2009.⁵⁶ While the initial mutiny was fairly inconsequential, by August 2012 the M23 had managed to recruit around 2,000 troops and was advancing through North Kivu. The M23 were different from other armed groups, not just because of their military professionalism, but also because they had quite sophisticated political structures:

The M23 also began to beef up its political wing. It named several new local chiefs, set up a tax collection network, and established a formal liaison office for humanitarians working in the area—structures reminiscent to those of the CNDP era. They also established two websites (www.soleildugraben.com and congodrcnews.com), a Facebook fan page and several Twitter accounts run by them or people close to them. On 20 October, in a move to further boost their legitimacy, they renamed their armed wing the *Armée révolutionnaire du Congo* (ARC, Congolese Revolutionary Army) (Stearns, 2013b, pp. 45-46).

There was strong evidence that the M23 was receiving both military and financial support from the Rwandan regime (UN Group of Experts, 2012; UN Group of Experts, 2014).⁵⁷ By November 2012, the M23 had captured the town of Goma, signalling to both the Congolese government and the international community that they had the potential and motivation to threaten state power:

The crisis, along with the failures of stabilisation, prompted a rethinking of peacekeeping and foreign engagement in the Congo. Donors, the United Nations, and regional bodies brokered the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) in February 2013. The deal, which was signed by eleven countries in the region, created, for the first time since 2006, a semblance of a peace process. It identified the two drivers of the Congolese conflict as institutional weakness and foreign intervention, and created domestic and regional mechanisms to address these challenges (Stearns, 2015, pp. 6-7).

One of the 'mechanisms' was the establishment in April 2013 of a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) as part of the MONUSCO mission to help the FARDC combat the M23 threat. While established under the UN banner, the FIB was in many ways a regional mechanism. Worried by the regional implications of Rwandan (and, to a lesser extent, Ugandan) support for the M23, powerful regional players – most notably Tanzania and South Africa – saw the need to intervene to stop the M23. All the 3,000-plus troops deployed under the FIB came from Africa.

The FIB, the first of its kind in any UN mission, was given an unprecedented mandate to use the threat of force 'with the responsibility of neutralizing armed groups...the objective of contributing to reducing the threat posed by armed groups to state authority and civilian security...to make space for stabilization activities' (UN Security Council, 2013, p. 6). The M23 was their first test, and in many ways they succeeded. By November 2013 the M23 had been defeated, and the remaining M23 soldiers were sent to camps to begin the DDR process. This success was seen to herald a new era in which peacekeepers could be more than passive standers-by. This was seen as crucial to the M23's defeat:

The mission leadership decided to interpret its mandate in a proactive fashion, declaring demobilised zones and carrying out offensives against armed groups who refused to disarm, in collaboration with the Congolese army (Stearns, 2015, p. 8)

55 Interview with Congolese administrator: Rutshuru, 2 September 2014

56 A full discussion of these terms and the extent to which M23 grievances were well-founded can be found in Jason Stearns' report *From CNDP to M23* (2013b).

57 While the Rwandan regime strongly denied these allegations, the UN Group of experts were able to provide compelling evidence from Human Rights Watch, MONUSCO, and several embassies in Kigali (Stearns, 2013b).

However, the FIB neither addressed the institutional weaknesses nor the problem of foreign intervention that the PCSF identified. If anything, it encouraged foreign (and in particular regional) intervention. Interviews with both Congolese and international commentators who were present at the time tended to emphasise less the capabilities of the FIB, and more the qualities of the M23 and the regional factors that facilitated their defeat. One MONUSCO officer noted that the M23 were a 'professional force, they had uniforms and walked in formation...they didn't hide behind children, so it was easy to attack them...We knew *who* they were, we knew *where* they were' (emphasis added).⁵⁸ Others pointed out that while the M23 had external backing, they didn't have the popular support within Goma to sustain their siege: 'The M23 miscalculated the level of support they'd get from the population.'⁵⁹

However, the overwhelming view of the interviewees was that the regional interests of South Africa and Tanzania had made the FIB's success against the M23 possible. In June 2013, Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete (who, it was rumoured, had connections to the FDLR leadership),⁶⁰ suggested that the Rwandan government should negotiate with the FDLR and this triggered an escalation in the regional tensions between Rwanda and Tanzania. Many of those I interviewed felt that Tanzanian involvement in defeating the M23 was, ironically, a signal to Rwanda that its interference in the Congo through its alleged backing of the M23 would not be tolerated. Several informants believed that South Africa – the chosen country of exile for a number of Rwandan dissidents⁶¹ – also wanted to send Rwanda the same signal.⁶² One MONUSCO officer suggested that South Africa's intervention was less about the politics of hegemony, and had more to do with economic cooperation between South Africa and the Congo:

On the Sunday, President Zuma meets with President Kabila to sign some big energy deal...China is building dams all along the River Congo, the energy should supply half the continent. On Sunday they sign the deal, on Tuesday the South Africans send their state of the art helicopters [to fight the M23]. Apparently the two aren't linked, but I think this is no coincidence... You see countries like South Africa, they act unilaterally in their own interests through the UN.⁶³

If the FIB's success against the M23 was driven by such regional motivations, this may explain why they have been unable to capitalise on that momentum to defeat the FDLR or the ADF – who (on paper at least) seem a much less capable fighting force than the M23. Off the record, several informants I spoke to admitted that there was no political will from the Congolese government, the international community, or regional actors to push for the defeat of such groups. They may be thorns in the side of the Rwandan and Ugandan governments and may abuse Congolese civilians but, politically speaking, they have little significant impact on the regional status quo.

Others were less cynical and argued that the unprofessional nature of the armed groups and their guerrilla tactics make it impossible for the FIB to go after them:

If we kill even one civilian in a military offensive against a group like the FDLR who, let's face it, are using civilians as shields, then it's game over for the UN, and I don't mean in the Congo, I mean that's the end of the UN altogether⁶⁴

The dangers of engaging in military action against armed groups have led some to question the efficacy of any policy that relies on armed action. As one UN official argued, the logic of interventions such as the Force Intervention Brigade is that 'we will defeat evil by using the same means but more intensely.'⁶⁵ The repercussion of this approach, however, has been to confirm the notion of the UN as a party to the conflict in the eyes of many Congolese and international observers:

The FIB is like the armed group that is supported by the UN, it's not a humanitarian force. They're not neutral... it's an armed group, even if they [the UN] tell you they're not...if they're armed and fighting people, they're an armed group, no?⁶⁶

The UN's support of the Congolese army has also been criticised by several NGOs, who find that this has created negative perceptions of intervenors among Congolese civilians and it has affected their ability to deliver assistance. One NGO worker said:

58 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: 24 August 2014, Goma

59 Interview with Perceptions Survey Expert: 1 September 2014, Goma

60 In several of my interviews, including interviews with UK government officials, UN personnel and World Bank officers informants made off-hand comments about the 'open secret' of the proximity of the Tanzanian government to the FDLR leadership.

61 Several of the former FDLR combatants interviewed were resident in South Africa, as were a number of Rwandans who were critical of Kagame and felt driven out of Rwanda.

62 For example, in 2010 Former army chief Kayumba Nyamwasa was shot in South Africa, and alleged his attackers had been sent by Kagame (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/21/rwandan-army-chief-shot-south-africa>).

63 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: 24 August 2014, Goma

64 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: 29 September 2014, Bukavu

65 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: Goma, 27 August 2014

66 Interview with NGO worker: Goma, 8 September 2014

Our work is not to convince armed groups to stop fighting, our main issue is to make sure we can protect civilians...So far it's worked as we don't have problems of armed groups disrupting our work... [But] In general, when armed groups are attacked they're less visible and the communities [under their control] become harder to reach...We have to work very hard not to be associated with MONUSCO and the FARDC because they're part of the conflict, and we're not.⁶⁷

Interestingly, many (international) NGOs' opposition to the UN's pursuit of military force against armed groups is that it amounts to the UN showing *partiality*. This, they argue, undermines NGOs' ability to be seen as impartial because they are inevitably associated with the UN, being seen as part of a larger project of (Western) intervention delivered through 'those ubiquitous white SUVs' (Smirl, 2008).⁶⁸ NGOs, however, were less critical of the fact that NGOs were accountable and responsible to the Congolese government. They argued that this didn't undermine their impartiality 'because everybody understands that we cannot operate without the appropriate authorisations from the government.'⁶⁹ My findings suggest that this view was not well appreciated by Congolese civilians or armed group members, who tended to see INGOs as motivated by not wanting to put themselves out of a job. This self-interest, they feel, is often manipulated by the Congolese government. As one Congolese lawyer noted:

Why are these NGOs not asking [themselves], why are we delivering food to farmers, to people who could grow their own food if they could go home? Why for 20 years are we doing the same thing and still people are dying?...They don't ask because if they do they'll be out of a job, and if they find a solution they'll be out of a job...Conflict in the Congo is just another resource for the West to exploit.⁷⁰

Some NGO workers did agree that their position of accountability to the government was frustrating: 'We direct criticism at MONUSCO because it's easier than directing criticism at the government.'⁷¹ Nonetheless, the pursuit of military action has been read by NGOs, Congolese civilians, and even some within the UN itself as an unambiguous symbol of UN partiality. That has had negative implications for both UN agencies' and NGOs' ability to engage in more neutral humanitarian assistance-related activities.

At the time of fieldwork, MONUSCO were pursuing a strategy in the eastern Congo which involved containing armed conflict through an 'Islands of Stability' approach. According to the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Martin Kobler, the approach 'is meant to act as a quick response to a specific conflict in an attempt to stabilize the area and ensure the protection of civilians' (MONUSCO, 2014). In correspondence with Christoph Vogel, a researcher who has worked extensively in the Congo, Kobler explained that:

The overall objective of the "Islands of Stability" is to prevent an immediate relapse of the communities concerned into a cycle of violence after armed groups have freed an area – either due to successful FIB and/or FARDC clearing operations or negotiations with armed groups, through an integrated – multi-dimensional and multi-stakeholders, holistic but targeted 6-month initial response. (Vogel 2014)

However, several informants and analysts at the time noted that the policy might do more harm than good (Cooper, 2014), and had created 'swamps of insecurity' (Vogel, 2014) by pushing armed groups out of certain towns and further into the surrounding bush areas. The communities in these areas were often more vulnerable to armed group violence. As neither the Congolese army nor MONUSCO were able to protect the civilians in these (often more inaccessible) areas, communities now vulnerable to attack attempted to protect themselves by creating local defence forces. So instead of reducing armed group violence, the Islands of Stability approach displaced armed groups and inadvertently created security dilemmas which sparked the creation of new armed groups.

The failure of both DDR and military action to curb armed group violence and stop their proliferation has recently led several prominent commentators to suggest there is a need to think more politically when devising strategies and policies to tackle these problems (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015; Vogel & Musamba, 2016; Stearns, 2015). While a new, more politically informed, approach is necessary, what this would mean in practice is not clear. As a starting point, this research suggests that it means radically changing how we think about armed groups. First we need to understand how armed groups are often deeply embedded within a plethora of political and social dynamics. The following section refutes some commonly held misunderstandings about armed groups and explains how, by looking at these groups in a different way, we can open avenues for engagement with them.

67 Interview with NGO worker: Goma, 4 September 2014

68 Many interviewees from both NGOs and UN agencies said that few Congolese on the ground understood the difference between the different organisations. Some Congolese interviewees said they understood the differences very well but saw very little difference in motivation.

69 Interview with NGO worker: Goma, 8 September 2014

70 Interview with a Congolese Lawyer: Goma, 17 August 2014

71 Interview with NGO worker: Goma, 8 September 2014

4

'Misunderestimating' armed groups: the unintended consequences of ignoring politics

Military action and DDR processes have failed to significantly reduce armed group violence. A key reason for this is that neither approach attempts to address the powerful top-down and bottom-up processes that have driven and continue to drive the creation of armed groups. In this section, I will focus on two interlinked observations from the research. Both are widely known (at least to practitioners on the ground) but are insufficiently acknowledged when designing development programmes and pursuing policies related to armed groups.

The first observation is that the creation of, and recruitment into, armed groups serves a number of significant functions that enable many actors to fend for themselves in a political system that still relies on a *débrouillez-vous* political culture. The second observation is that armed groups are characterised as distinct from (and as having oppositional interests to) state actors, yet this is rarely the case. It is often a mistake to think of armed groups as 'rebel groups', though it is common to use the two terms as if they are interchangeable. These two observations undermine the mainstream narratives that shape policies pertaining to armed groups.

While donors are undoubtedly constrained by their own domestic attitudes and interests, these attitudes have themselves been shaped by a strong media-aid complex (Verweijen, 2016a) that perpetuates a view of armed groups as criminal and predatory. This is done by focusing on issues such as rape as a weapon of war, and the exploitation of conflict minerals (Autesserre, 2012). While these are pertinent issues relating to conflict more generally, they give a false impression of the motivations and tactics used by armed groups. Indeed, the UN's own assessments find that 'only 8% of the DRC's conflicts are linked to minerals, and specific motivations vary greatly across the vast array of different armed groups' (Vogel et al., 2014). While sexual violence is certainly used as a weapon of war, the nature and form of this sexual violence is much more messy and complex than the dominant war-rape narratives would suggest (Perera, forthcoming).

In their discussion of politically informed programming, O'Keefe et al. argue that it 'requires extensive ongoing empirical knowledge and analytical skills of how local change actually occurs' (O'Keefe, et al., 2014, p. 3). The media-aid (mis)reading of what motivates armed groups, and how they operate, portrays armed group actors as greed-driven and apolitical. This view obscures a number of very important issues that must be acknowledged if donors are to engage in a politically informed way. In the title of this section I have used the Bushism 'misunderestimating', which I think is a useful term for understanding the repercussions of media-aid framings: because international intervenors have fundamentally *misunderstood* why armed groups exist, and who their members are, they have *underestimated* their ability to persist and resist operations against them.

To help better understand this phenomenon, more than 200 interviews were conducted for this study with UN agencies, (I)NGOs, local and national government representatives, local business elites, community leaders, armed group members, and civil society representatives. The aim was to build up a picture of how local and international actors conceive the problem of armed groups in the North and South Kivu provinces. While the form of these interviews varied,⁷² they all tried to answer three overarching questions:

- Why do people join (and, in some cases, why do civilian communities support) armed groups?
- Why are armed groups still being created, and why do they persist?
- Why have both international and national attempts to curb armed group violence in the east not been successful?

The responses to these questions were extremely divergent, and often raised more questions than they answered. However, in the responses to the first two questions – why armed groups are created and why people join them – it was possible to

72 Ranging from short one-hour briefings focusing on specific policies or operations against armed groups to longer conversational interviews conducted over several days.

see why efforts to curb their violence had failed. The geography and security situation cut different communities off from each other (including the international community) and there was a dearth of reliable media communication between different groups. Therefore all actors, both on and off the ground, suffer from a lack of objectively accurate and verifiable information. As a result, everyone (myself included) relies heavily on stories, rumours, or partial data.

As part of an iterative research process, I presented narratives from different actors to my interviewees.⁷³ When competing narratives were presented, actors often tailored their responses to these narratives to reinforce or reify their *own* existing ideas, action plans and perceptions. Many of the actors I spoke to treated the stories and rumours that they presented to me as objective truths, and frequently dismissed different views as illegitimate or based on 'wrong' perceptions. There was a tendency for informants to appreciate their own need to adapt and change to context, particularly among international (primarily UN), state, and armed actors, but no appreciation that other actors may be doing the same for equally valid reasons. Therefore, despite the continually changing political, economic and social landscape, actors treated this landscape as static when interpreting others' actions. This meant that changes in certain actors' actions were read as revealing greed-driven and predatory motivations that demonstrated the insincerity of their outward rhetoric, rather than as sensible or necessary responses to circumstances.

As a result, international actors, by and large, did not think or work politically. By this I mean that they did not take into account 'complex and evolving political and power processes'; they failed to identify the 'affiliations and interests of diverse political actors' and, as a result, missed 'exploring windows of political opportunity and anticipating political outcomes and their implications' (O'Keefe, et al., 2014, p. 3).

In a subsequent paper, I will discuss the perceptions and political economy driving international engagement in the Congo, and the unintended consequences that this has had on conflict dynamics. Here, however, I will focus primarily on how armed groups are characterised by Kivutian citizens and by armed groups *themselves*. These insights highlight issues that need to be more explicitly acknowledged if donors are to use politically informed programming to address chronic insecurity and underdevelopment in areas where armed groups operate.

Within and without the state: The creation of armed groups

As discussed earlier, both NGO and UN engagement in the DRC requires support from, and accountability to, the Congolese state. Several international actors noted that this relationship can be problematic. But to operate in this way, international actors have to perpetuate a narrative that distinguishes between armed group actors and state actors. Usually this comes with a corollary that armed groups' interests oppose the state's, with the former usually seen as anti-development and the latter seen as ostensibly pro-development. It should be noted that international actors working on the ground *did* acknowledge that the Congolese state could, and did, at times block development activities.⁷⁴ However, as one former MONUSCO worker told me:

That the state and the armed groups collude, that is no secret in the Congo, you are not telling me anything new. But it is not helpful to tell me this, because we have to keep up this pretence, this necessary lie, to work.⁷⁵

However, it is precisely this 'necessary lie' that has, I argue, hindered past efforts to reduce armed violence. By ignoring the linkages between state and armed actors, the international community has overlooked the significant incentives state actors have for perpetuating armed violence. During interviews it was common for armed group members to allude to the fact that they were often supported by powerful figures both at the provincial and national level: 'Here we are in the bush... [but] our weapons do not grow on trees... you have to ask yourself who helps us, who tells us to fight?'⁷⁶

Further research into this issue revealed the names of a number of local administrators and politicians in Kinshasa who had been linked to certain armed groups. These links were both direct and indirect, and could encompass a range of activities. These included, but were not limited to, engaging in rhetoric that exacerbated feelings of insecurity and division (so creating desire for armed protection); giving financial support to existing armed groups to maintain their control over certain communities; and creating armed groups to challenge the existing power in certain areas or gain new political leverage. Recent research has shown that 'elites often exploit xenophobic fears and use militias to bargain for political posts' (Vogel & Musamba, 2016, p. 3) and that 'by having leverage over armed groups and being able to mobilise local followers, politicians and businesspersons become people to reckon with' (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015).

Indeed, we can see that armed groups tend to proliferate around elections. Stearns et al. (2013, p.26) note that after the 2006 elections 'politicians fell back on armed groups to obtain electoral support and, when unsuccessful at the polls, to

⁷³ To protect the anonymity of all interviewees, they were presented with questions that began with phrases such as "What do you think about the view that...?" Specific views were not attributed to any particular group of actors.

⁷⁴ The next paper in this series discusses how international actors on the ground reconcile their knowledge of the anti-development interests of certain state actors with their imperative to work with these state actors.

⁷⁵ Discussion with former MONUSCO worker: ECAS Conference Paris, 5 July 2015

⁷⁶ Interview with armed group member: Bukavu, 30 September 2014

maintain influence'. The planned November 2016 elections should have marked the end of Kabila's presidency. The present proliferation of armed groups can be read as a reflection of both the uncertainty that incumbent political elites in Kinshasa face over their future, and the power plays being made by emergent elites seeking political office. Several studies have shown the considerable political prestige that politicians can gain from supporting armed groups (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015; Stearns, 2013b; Vogel and Musamba, 2016). Some even suggest the political power goes both ways: 'While politicians can gain in stature and influence through connections with armed groups, armed groups actively seek out politicians to represent them in negotiations with the government' (Stearns et al., 2013, p. 32).

The network of state actors who use armed groups to create and maintain political positions involves elites at all levels of government; from national ministers in Kinshasa, to provincial leaders, town mayors and customary and local chiefs. Several reliable Congolese sources were able to give me the names of local businessmen, customary chiefs and administrators who were known as the patrons of specific local defence groups.⁷⁷ It was also suggested that these elites were themselves supported by multinational corporate interests.⁷⁸ While there was very little concrete evidence to support this, it seemed a feasible explanation for the extremely opaque manner in which armed groups are funded and supplied with weapons.⁷⁹

Armed groups are often part of larger coalitions working together to further certain elites' interests, and instances of the Congolese army working with certain armed groups to achieve these ends have also been widely reported. While the international community was aware of the shifting alliances between different armed groups and the Congolese army, they nonetheless treated the Congolese army as a partner who shared their objective of removing armed groups. When it became apparent that some army elements, especially those who had previously been members of armed groups, had little incentive to fight against potential or former allies, the international community was still reluctant to acknowledge that military and political elites may have been facilitating these alliances.

Instead, the international response was to focus on 'brute' rather than 'root' causes (de Waal, 2014; de Waal, 2007). That is to say, rather than addressing the political culture that incentivises elites to create armed groups and facilitate the collusion between armed actors and state actors, the international community decided to declare that the rank-and-file soldiers in the armed groups (who they view as criminals and violent human rights abusers with poor discipline) were the main problem. It was decided that armed groups would no longer be incorporated wholesale into the army. While this may have affected some middle-rank armed group combatants who had expected to gain rank in the FARDC, it did not affect the elites behind armed groups, and certainly did not discourage the creation of armed groups. This may explain why 'the very policies adopted to tackle armed groups have become a source of their proliferation' (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015).

State actors not only use armed groups to garner and bolster political positions; they also rely on certain armed groups to provide security when the state hasn't been able to. Many armed groups therefore see themselves as part of the state. Some members of the *Raia Mutomboki* argued that when they protected themselves from the FDLR, they were doing the work that the government *should* have been doing. They believed they were owed some kind of 'compensation' for this. Since the government didn't compensate them, they were compensating themselves:

Many of us were hurt and can't work, many wives lost their husbands and children lost their fathers. They need help now, the government needs to help us, so we are staying armed until the government helps... we need to receive some compensation for our sacrifices.⁸⁰

Indeed, many armed group members I spoke to described the government's stated aim of removing armed groups from the eastern Congo as both unfair and ungrateful because it ignored the government's frequent use of them as proxy forces. Even ostensibly 'foreign' armed groups, such as the FDLR, found the government's rhetoric hypocritical.

Why [are we called "rebels"]? When Kagame came to attack father Kabila⁸¹ it was *us* fighting the RCD. When the CNDP, M23, when they all come to attack the President he is not here, he is in Kinshasa. Who is fighting for him? It is us. We are the ones who have been representing the government⁸² (*emphasis added*).

77 For the protection of my interviewees, and because I was unable to interview those implicated, I have not included the names of these individuals here.

78 Often interviewees would mention that certain armed groups and/or armed group leaders were funded by mining companies and prominent businessmen who had dealings in the Congo.

79 Several members of both the FARDC and armed groups suggested that I probe further into how armed groups located in fairly inaccessible areas are able to arm themselves and resupply. This was impossible for a lone researcher without sufficient resources or protection. This information is, however, essential for a full understanding of the networks and processes within which armed groups are embedded.

80 Interview with Raia Mutomboki member: Bukavu, 19 October 2014

81 It is common in the Congo to distinguish between Laurent Kabila and Joseph Kabila by referring to the former as "father Kabila"

82 Interview with FDLR soldier: Walungu, 4 October 2014.

Government use of armed groups in this way should also remind us that there is a much more direct link between armed groups and political power in the African Great Lakes region. Most of the influential politicians in the region – including Kabila in DRC, Paul Kagame in Rwanda, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda – were once in armed groups that were transformed into the political parties that form the foundation of today's regimes. Given this undeniable history, many armed groups are confused by international actors who feel they 'simply cannot work with armed groups'⁸³ now, when they have obviously done so in the past.

Armed groups have also been convenient scapegoat for the failures of the state to provide services despite considerable development assistance. In the east of the country, the state has been allowed to enjoy international recognition and a certain degree of state legitimacy (Raeymaekers, 2014), despite lacking the core foundations of a state in any Weberian sense of the term, and barely meeting any of the obligations implied by a state-society contract. While NGOs have borne the brunt of dealing with humanitarian crises (through the delivery of food and medical supplies), the state has been able to blame the presence of armed groups for its own failures to provide basic services. While armed groups potentially create security concerns that need to be overcome when delivering services, the delivery of services has not been the state's priority. And, given the role of state actors in creating the armed groups they claim prevent the delivery of such services, it can be argued that the state itself creates these obstacles to service delivery.

Why people join armed groups

While armed groups may be created by political, military and business elites, there is a need to make a distinction between those who *create* armed groups and those who *join* them. A common view among the UN workers I spoke to was that resource exploitation and greed drive armed group recruitment. In particular they focused on armed groups' interests in conflict minerals. One UN worker told me: 'If you look at a map of where the armed groups are, and a map of where the gold, coltan, tin and mines are, you'll see it's the same map.'⁸⁴ However, there was very little evidence to support this claim and recent research on artisanal and small-scale mining had refuted this (Vogel et al., 2014).

In contrast, Congolese actors had a much more grievance-driven view of why people join armed groups. The dominant media-aid narrative posited that eliminating armed groups is a necessary first step to ending conflict more generally, but several of the Congolese people I spoke to did not believe this was the priority in addressing insecurity in the Congo. They argue that armed group violence cannot be addressed without addressing the governance failures that are driving armed group recruitment. This view sees armed group violence as instrumental, a response to a much more pernicious structural violence:

There is a governance deficit and the basic social services are not assured by the state. There is no water, health, education... But the state is very present in collecting taxes and fighting people when they try to make demonstrations and demand more. There is no space for people to make requests, to address their problems, and to allow them to express and get a response to their needs... The justice sector is corrupt. If you ask for police services the police ask for money, or they themselves are the perpetrators. Me, if I see a policeman tonight, I will change my route to avoid them, or return to where I came from... It's not for nothing, they're bandits who commit crimes. Citizens' demonstrations are responded to with guns by the police. They don't shoot in the air; they shoot directly at citizens... This is to say that citizens are both politically dominated and economically exploited.⁸⁵

At the time of writing, several prominent non-violent pro-democracy campaigners have been imprisoned. Protests have been met with state brutality and repression. In the context of a predatory and repressive state, and a non-existent justice system, many Congolese citizens have turned to armed groups to protect themselves.

International actors need to take a more nuanced view of the issue of community if they are to understand how armed groups work. Especially among NGO interviewees, there was a tendency to suggest that armed groups were not 'true' representatives of their community. The suggestion was that armed groups preyed on communities, and were therefore a distinct entity. These narratives emphasised the forcible nature of armed group recruitment from vulnerable communities. While not denying that some armed groups may forcibly recruit members, my findings echoed those of several other researchers; that armed groups' memberships are often initially (non-coercively) drawn from certain communities in the eastern DRC and prey on *other* communities. This process can itself be extremely divisive, and it is common for armed group members to eventually become ostracised by their own communities.⁸⁶ But treating armed groups' interests as divorced from civilian interests and focused only on exploitation closes off a number of avenues of engagement.

83 Interview with UN Officer: Goma, 28 August 2014.

84 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: 29 September 2014, Bukavu

85 Interview with Congolese civil society member: Bukavu, 25 September 2014

86 Several informants said that former armed group members who have tried to reintegrate into their original communities have struggled to readjust to civilian life and often end up returning to fight, or turning to other forms of violence.

It is simplistic to think of armed groups as purely military organisations standing apart from society: they are embedded in civilian networks, and inputs from elites and communities are often essential for their survival (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 11).

In my own interviews with members of local defence groups, the nature of how they recruit and mobilise was key to understanding how they could be convinced to lay down their arms. One spokesperson for the *Raia Mutomboki*, discussing the issue of integration into the Congolese army, explained: '... But we do not want to be integrated into the army, we are not military, we are civilians. We need the government to give us back our civil [sic] lives.'⁸⁷ A member of a local defence force claimed his armed group had no support from political or military elites and said the community supported his armed group:

People join us because they're convinced by our ideology. They're convinced that the country is being exploited for its resources by foreign interests and that the government is unable to defend its values. Congolese people have involved themselves with us to defend themselves ... No politicians, no military or soldiers have supported us, it is only the populations under our control who are determined to support us.⁸⁸

Understood in this way, present-day armed groups can be seen as a continuation of the old Mobutist *débrouillez-vous* system. In response to a state that offers no security for communities constantly under threat, whether from Congolese or foreign invaders, armed groups can be seen as the embodiment of communities 'fending for themselves'. A UN official acknowledged that 'armed groups aren't an evil empire, they are a symbiosis between a militia and a community'.⁸⁹ Indeed, I spoke to some Congolese civilians who admitted that although they had never formally joined an armed group, they had previously supported certain armed groups with whom they felt a certain degree of solidarity; some had delivered ammunition and food supplies to groups fighting in the bush.

In reflection on her research into the political underpinning of rebel governance, Carla Suarez noted that community support for armed groups has both material and ideological dimensions: 'Civilians are not only supporting the *Maï-Maï* by providing them with material and logistical supplies, as is common in other cases, but they are also propagating their discourse' (Suarez, 2016). This is also observed by other researchers in the field who note that, 'while the level of popular support varies from group to group, many have sympathizers and collaborators' (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 34).

Several of the armed group members I spoke to said they were supported by the communities. It was common for respondents to say that 'Mamas sent their sons,' and fighters were being given special *dawa*⁹⁰ powers by those in the community able to bestow them. Indeed, some degree of legitimacy appeared to be granted to certain armed groups who made concerted efforts to appeal to public authority and present themselves as community protectors (Hoffmann & Vlassenroot, 2014). Several interviewees said armed groups were more trusted than the Congolese army and some gave examples of the security gaps they could fill:

In [one case in] Rutshuru, The FARDC drove the FDLR out from the village. But then suddenly there was loads of banditry on the roads, and civilians were getting robbed and attacked. So the villagers asked the FDLR to come back and stop the banditry.⁹¹

Joining an armed group may also offer a livelihood when there are few other options. While reliable employment figures are hard to come by, several informants said that unemployment is very high, especially among young people.⁹² In the absence of reliable employment data, it is useful to look at the types of employment available in the region to consider whether joining an armed group may be a more viable source of livelihood.

Subsistence agriculture is the primary source of income for most Kivutians. The main industries in the eastern Congo – agriculture and mining – require constant and secure access to land, but persistent and pervasive insecurity makes such livelihoods extremely risky. Even state-supported jobs such as civil servants, teachers, police, and the army are rarely paid, and these workers often rely on corrupt practices or extortion from civilians to earn a living. Several armed group interviewees claimed that they originally joined an armed group as a way to access security so that they could resume their old (agricultural) work and reclaim their source of livelihood. Others believed that they were creating a safer environment for other income-generating activities. However, many had found that being in an armed group itself became their source of livelihood. Some members of armed groups had previously been employed by the state but had not been paid. This was acknowledged by a UN official:

87 Interview with Raia Mutomboki member: Bukavu, 19 October 2014

88 Interview with Provincial Government Minister: Bukavu, 19 September 2014

89 Interview with MONUSCO Official: Goma, 27 August 2014

90 A kind of Congolese magic, *Dawa* plays a very important role in the creation and recruitment practices of armed groups, and should be taken into account in attempts to understand the military strategies of certain armed groups.

91 Interview with NGO worker: Skype, 10 July 2014

92 Most of the Congolese informants who mentioned unemployment figures cited the unemployment rate as being somewhere between 75-85%.

I spoke to these M23 officers who had previously been teachers. They had education, but they said that they were eating their chalk. So they joined the M23, and they got command positions because they brought their students with them.⁹³

Several researchers have noted discrepancies in the rhetoric of certain armed groups. Some claim they are fighting because of land grievances, others for identity and citizenship rights (Verweijen, 2015; Suarez, 2016). It is common to view these discrepancies as proof that the rhetoric is not sincere and groups are really motivated by greed. One MONUSCO official was keen to justify his framing of the *Raia Mutomboki* as little more than criminal bandits:

'They say they're protecting communities, but if you steal from your community how are you protecting them? They don't have tactics... They don't have a [political] plan... In my mind, I don't see your point [that they may have legitimate grievances], they're just criminals.'⁹⁴

Yet if rank-and-file members of armed groups join simply to meet their immediate economic needs, this may well explain why armed groups' actions do not necessarily reflect the political rhetoric put forward by their leaders. In many ways, the MONUSCO official's reading of the armed group in question was understandable. Before this comment, the interview had focused on the brutal manner in which the *Raia Mutomboki* had driven the FDLR away from Shabunda. The MONUSCO official felt that the *Raia Mutomboki* 'got lucky' – the FDLR combatants were elsewhere at the time of their attack and they had massacred the FDLR's families. This, said my interviewee, should not be seen as a carefully calculated 'tactic' but as an example of the savagery of an aimless 'group of bandits'.

He dismissed an alternative explanation; that the *Raia Mutomboki* may have waited until the FDLR combatants (who were far more experienced and better armed) were not able to defend their families. Rather than getting lucky, the *Raia Mutomboki* may have deliberately targeted unarmed and vulnerable women and children to show the FDLR combatants, and other armed groups in the area, that they were willing to use any means to defend themselves and resist invasion. If so, then this strategy was effective – the FDLR left Shabunda.

There is insufficient evidence to confirm this alternative understanding of why the *Raia Mutomboki* operated in the way that it did.⁹⁵ But the alternative interpretation of the group's strategies presented to the UN official drew on the fact that the rank-and-file members of many armed groups (especially local defence groups) come from extremely poor backgrounds. Hughes et al. (2013) describe poor people's politics as being extremely constrained by their structural disadvantages and, consequently, defensive, instrumental, short-term and opportunistic. Armed groups certainly display these traits, but intervenors tend to see such traits as signs of (apolitical) criminality instead of considering whether they are the only strategies available to marginalised and resource-poor populations.

Several of the international intervenors that I spoke to assumed, or implied, that armed groups had access to alternative forms of livelihoods. Many pointed out that lots of people in the Kivus do not resort to violence. However, there are more than one million internally displaced persons in the eastern Congo (Stearns & Vogel, 2015), and the east remains in a state of humanitarian crisis. It might be that those who do not resort to armed violence become the victims of it.

Faced with this choice, and knowing that neither the international community nor the Congolese state have been able to assist them so far, it seems plausible that groups with few long-term political objectives, but significant short-term survival needs, would turn to armed action. It is therefore worth considering whether armed group brutality is a function of the type of people who join them, or whether violence is the only strategy available to them.

93 Interview with UN Official, 25 August 2014

94 Interview with MONUSCO Officer: 29 September 2014, Bukavu

95 In order to be able to gain the trust of, and therefore secure interviews with, certain members of armed groups, armed group members were deliberately not asked to comment on any past human rights violations. I was therefore unable to ask armed group members of the *Raia Mutomboki* why they adopted the tactics they used to defeat the FDLR.

5

Engagement with armed groups

In the previous section, I have put forward an alternative understanding of armed groups that attempts to unpack some of the political processes in which they are embedded. The aim was to illuminate aspects of the armed group phenomenon that are often unacknowledged or overlooked when policies to remove armed groups are designed. Ignoring these factors, I argue, has presented a number of barriers to politically informed work in the eastern Congo. These barriers need to be overcome if donors and policy makers are to work towards more sustainable and transformational developmental change.

As I have shown, armed groups are often both an extension of state power and a means through which several state functions are carried out. Consequently, there are few incentives for actors at either grassroots or elite level to remove armed groups from the eastern Congo. Indeed, given how they are embedded in the Congolese political landscape, removing them will require total transformation of the political system and this cannot be achieved by targeting armed combatants alone. Such an enormous task will be difficult to programme for and will certainly require adaptation and flexibility on the part of donors.

However, the research reveals some potential small steps that could reduce armed group violence in a more sustainable and meaningful way. This section outlines some areas of potential engagement with armed groups.

If such areas of engagement are to be successful and withstand spoilers' attempts to rail-road them, they need to be combined with efforts to disincentivise and punish high-level elite creation and capture of armed groups. It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify the actors who provide the funding, weapons and ammunition to set up an armed group or to speculate on their interests and incentives. However, several informants did urge me to investigate these networks. Understanding who supplies the means of violence, and what incentives they have for doing so, is imperative to stopping the supply chain.⁹⁶

Several of my interviewees claimed that weapons were supplied by multinational enterprises seeking to defend business interests. I am unable to validate these claims and it may even be impossible for international intervenors to investigate these companies. However, transnational business interests⁹⁷ undoubtedly affect the political settlement in the Congo and cannot be ignored when it comes to addressing armed groups. In the meantime, efforts can be made to engage with the more easy-to-identify lower-level leaders and rank-and-file members of armed groups, and give them incentives to disengage from violence and work towards developmental transformation. More than a decade of working through state actors who have few incentives to stop armed group violence has had little success.

Potential areas of engagement have emerged from the interviews that I conducted with Congolese civilians and armed group and military actors. They are presented here as possible entry points rather than fully-elaborated programmes, but they have also been discussed with a number of policy makers and practitioners on the ground.⁹⁸

One potential entry point for engagement could be a **greater focus on livelihoods**. In a comprehensive study of the insecurity caused by armed groups in the eastern Congo, Stearns et al. argue that any strategies towards ending insecurity 'will have to address both the incentives that drive elites to take up arms, and local conflicts over land and local governance that are liable to feature an ethnic dimension' (2013, p. 9). Indeed, several studies have shown that much of the local violence in the eastern Congo is fuelled by identity-based conflict over land, usually along ethnic lines, and related to the unresolved citizenship and ownership status of many areas in the Congo (Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, et al., 2013; Verweijen, 2015). Indeed, there was a common consensus among interviewees that **resolving locally driven land-based conflicts** would be key to reducing armed violence. However, this would require a fundamental change in the rules of the game. It would need careful

96 In March 2016 Jean Pierre Bemba, the Congolese former leader of the MLC armed group was convicted by the International Criminal Court of crimes against humanity and war crimes for offences committed in the Central African Republic. The ICC found Bemba guilty of acting as a military commander 'who knew that the MLC forces under his effective authority and control were committing or about to commit the crimes charged' (International Criminal Court, 2016, p. 2). This could serve as a precedent for determining the culpability of armed group leaders, and they should also be encouraged to reveal who their patrons are.

97 For example, several informants mentioned in passing the names of international businessmen such as Avi Mezler and Dan Gertler. Gertler, a close friend of President Kabila who was named in the Panama Papers, has already been linked to Congolese state controversies (Global Witness, 2014). In 2012, the International Monetary Fund suspended its loan programme to the Congo, citing serious concerns about irregularities in the sale of state assets to various off-shore companies owned by Gertler's company. There have been several allegations that these business interests have played a role in creating armed militias to help achieve their aims (Sundaram, 2013).

98 I discuss international intervenors' responses to these suggestions in the next paper in this series.

negotiations between different communities; a clarification of citizenship and land tenure laws; and a robust security and justice system to uphold these laws. In the current climate, it is unlikely that such institutions will emerge without considerable change in the national and regional political settlement.

However, by looking at *why* land ownership rights are contested with such deadly force, it may be possible to reduce the intensity of land-based conflicts, and so reduce the violence with which they are contested. Access to land is contested in many other countries, and indeed other areas of the DRC. So why is this so ferociously contested in the eastern DRC?

A number of studies have shown how dependent many in the eastern DRC are on agriculture for their livelihoods (e.g. Mallett et al., 2015), and have argued that limited access to both land and markets creates a vicious cycle of food insecurity (Lecoutere et al., 2009). Indeed, many in eastern Congo literally have to live off the land because of poor state distribution networks, high levels of poverty and geographic and economic isolation from wider food markets. The question of who owns that land then becomes a question of survival. Lack of clarity about ownership and the importance of having access to land leads groups to promote discourses of autochthony (claims about who was on the land first) and to contest them with armed violence (Bøås & Dunn, 2013; Verweijen, 2015; Suarez, 2016). Lecoutere et al. (2009, p.43) talk of a food insecurity trap in which 'households get into a vicious circle whereby they have to forsake food security in the long run in order to avoid acute destitution'. This is in part because citizens, who live day-to-day, and who constantly face the danger of being driven from their land whenever armed conflict erupts, cannot risk long-term thinking.

At the time of writing, more than a million people are internally displaced in the eastern DRC. Many are in IDP camps supported by humanitarian NGOs who are running out of resources. As one NGO worker noted:

We've been here for more than 10 years, PAM [The World Food Programme in the Congo] are running out of money, people are on one-eighth rations or less... They're declassifying people as vulnerable because they just can't feed them anymore... You have to ask yourself, why are these people starving? There's a saying that you drop an orange peel in the Congo and the next day a tree grows there, it's volcanic soil, there's good rainfall... It's the most fertile land in the world... it's not a desert. *Why are people starving in the most fertile land in the world?*⁹⁹

This frustration was expressed by many: 'Food is so expensive here. We grow rice in Shabunda, but the rice is stuck there, and we're importing rice from India and China. Why?'¹⁰⁰ The question of why is easy to answer, if not easy to solve; pervasive insecurity means that farmers are routinely driven from their land and so can't tend to their livestock and crops. Even where people can stay on their land for long enough to grow food, poor infrastructure means that it is often difficult for them to connect to wider markets (Raeymaekers, 2014; Ferf, et al., 2014).

During the research, an idea emerged that could help provide both security and infrastructure for agricultural-based livelihoods so that they could benefit from more long-term development without sacrificing the short-term needs of vulnerable populations. In essence, FARDC (and UN) forces should not try to drive a particular armed group away from a certain area, since this often leads to mass displacements and creates a power vacuum that might be filled by another (potentially more predatory) armed group. Instead support could be given to **encourage rank-and-file members of an armed group to start a small building project such as a road**. They would be responsible for building the road and maintaining its security. This could offer the armed group the incentive of increased public authority, and could give members a non-violent livelihood. And if an armed group was able to deliver a small project efficiently, there might be potential in the future to entrust it with slightly larger infrastructural projects.

Such an idea may seem like uncharted territory, yet research on 'rebel governance' around the world has shown that certain armed groups are able to provide considerable public services. Writing about the FARC in Colombia, Mampilly notes that:¹⁰¹

'During the high point of rebel rule, the insurgent administration provided substantial services to the inhabitants of its territory, including health and education systems, a police force to maintain stability, courts to adjudicate civil and criminal disputes, and even loans to farmers and small businessmen. It also engaged in extensive public works projects such building roads and other infrastructure construction' (Mampilly, 2011, p. 2)

Especially in the African Great Lakes region, organisations very much seen as armed groups *during* a conflict have been trusted as service providers, or been transformed into political parties *after* the conflict. Indeed, many of the Congo's present-day political elite, including President Kabila himself, have come to power through armed action. It is not suggested here that current armed groups in the eastern DRC necessarily be transformed into either state actors or political parties.¹⁰² But it is important to note the precedent of engaging with armed groups in the DRC.

99 Interview with NGO worker: Goma, 22 August 2014

100 Interview with Congolese civil servant: Bukavu, 27 September 2014

101 Other examples of 'rebel governance' can be seen in Lebanon with Hezbollah, the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the SPLM in Sudan.

102 Many of these armed groups do not have nationwide or larger political agendas, and formally incorporating armed groups into the state is likely to further exacerbate the present malaises of the state.

Many of my Congolese interviewees felt that a different approach to addressing armed groups was needed, one that would acknowledge the everyday dilemmas and grievances held by rank-and-file armed group members. When, in some of my extended interviews, I suggested initially asking armed groups to work on small-scale infrastructural projects such as roads, this was welcomed by both non-armed group and armed group interviewees as a potential first step.

The idea was suggested as a way of contributing to two linked longer-term objectives:

- First, to reduce the intensity of conflict over land by reducing the importance of land for everyday survival. This demands a shift in the economic focus of the Kivus away from a *débrouillez-vous* style of agriculture towards a more diversified economy. Using armed groups to help build the level of development infrastructure that a diverse economy needs could begin wider economic transformation to help address the effects of 'population pressure, the diminishing availability of arable land, and problematic land governance [that] have all contributed to conflict' (Stearns, et al., 2013, p. 34).
- Second, to provide alternative livelihoods to make armed action less attractive. Several armed group interviewees said they resorted to armed action because they had no other employment options. One armed group member explained: 'If you build a road, I can drive a taxi, I can sell things in town, but there is no road. If I had another job, I would not be in an armed group.'¹⁰³

It was clear that many were willing to work with international actors to achieve developmental goals *if* they believed that doing so would somehow benefit them. 'Benefit' in this context was conceived primarily in economic or security terms. They welcomed moves towards peace talks but most did not feel that such initiatives were sufficient to encourage them to lay down their arms for good. Their past experience of peace negotiations was that their grievances were not properly addressed and other signatories regularly broke the agreements they made.

The road building idea was welcomed by some of the armed groups that I spoke with, not least because past road building projects have had such limited success. The research revealed two key reasons for the region's lack of roads. Many donors and/or international organisations were unwilling to build roads in areas deemed too insecure for development projects. Most roads in North and South Kivu had been built by mining companies in and around areas where companies had calculated that the benefits (to their company) outweighed the risks. Most informants were concerned that Congolese natural resources were being exploited by these companies, but they acknowledged that at least the companies were providing roads.¹⁰⁴ However, when local power brokers did not buy in to road building projects, they would almost certainly fail.

The second hindrance to road-building was bureaucracy. At the time of research, for example, the UK's Department for International Development had committed funding to a road-building project that was being delayed by a lengthy authorisation process in Kinshasa.

The needs of the grassroots base that sustains and supports armed groups are quite short-term and instrumental, and this should make them relatively easy to address.

Of course, engaging with armed groups to encourage road-building, for example, would be likely to upset elites whose power would be challenged by such a shift in armed group activity. A politically informed approach is therefore necessary.

If donors first show that they may be willing to bypass state intermediaries and work instead with rank-and-file soldiers, they may be able to change the incentives that encourage elites to create and sustain armed groups. It is possible, of course, that such changes in the political settlement and shifts in incentives might produce unintended consequences. However, with a status quo that is proliferating and exacerbating armed group violence, it is clear that a radical change in strategy is needed in the eastern Congo. Removing incentives for elites to sustain armed group activity or, at the very least, removing impunity for such support, should therefore be a key priority for those who seek to break the vicious cycle of pervasive insecurity and recurring humanitarian crises.

¹⁰³ Interview with Mai-Mai member: Bukavu, 30 September 2014.

¹⁰⁴ In particular, several informants alluded to the fact that BANRO had built several roads near mining areas which had "brought some good things".

6

Conclusion

This paper has shown that armed groups are an integral part of the Congolese political landscape. They exist and persist because the rules of the game underpinning the Congolese political settlement rely heavily on the leveraging of armed groups to create support bases. Further, beyond formal politics, the persistence and proliferation of armed groups represents a culture of *'plus ça change ...'* in the everyday politics that maintains state power in the eastern DRC. Given these factors,¹⁰⁵ few powerful actors have any immediate incentives to remove armed groups from the eastern Congo. Several key actors have significant incentives to maintain them.

However, the human rights and developmental cost of armed group proliferation and violence has been appalling for the people of the eastern Congo, including many rank-and-file members of the armed groups themselves. The elections that had been scheduled for November 2016 – the tenth anniversary of ostensible 'democracy' in the Congo – have been long delayed. They are currently planned for December 23, 2018. Meanwhile, there has been a rise in the number of non-violent protest movements attempting to hold the state to account. This suggests a critical juncture is imminent for the eastern Congo in which the international community will play a key role. It will be crucial to understand who armed groups are and explore how they can be transformed into enablers of positive change.

This paper suggests that direct engagement with armed groups may be possible for international actors if done on a small, carefully controlled scale. This would require a radical change in certain organisations' operating procedures. But engagement with armed groups may become more palatable if they are seen as extensions of state power or as armed members of local communities, rather than only as predatory criminals. I was told of several instances in which communities turned to armed groups for assistance. For example:

In [one case in] Rutshuru, the FARDC drove the FDLR out from the village. But then suddenly there was loads of banditry on the roads, and civilians were getting robbed and attacked. So the villagers asked the FDLR to come back and stop the banditry¹⁰⁶

Of course, working with armed groups would not be a straightforward or risk-free process. But if intervenors are committed to resolving armed group violence, they will need to acknowledge that considerable power lies both within, and in the networks around, armed groups. It is also evident that tackling the issue requires politically informed programming that takes account of these networks and the strong incentives that some elites have to maintain the *status quo*.

The political dynamics of the eastern Congo are complex, ever-changing and rather opaque. This presents difficulties for both research and practice. For the sake of clarity this paper has discussed international and regional intervenors in relatively peripheral terms to the political settlement explored here. However, as the research also shows, much of the Congolese political settlement has been enabled and influenced by international actors, who themselves are driven by some interests and incentives other than pure development outcomes.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Some rather perverse incentives that drive international actors like the UN also contribute, and these will be discussed in more detail in the next paper in this series.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with NGO worker: Skype, 10 July 2014.

¹⁰⁷ In the next paper in this series, I explore these interests and incentives and discuss the challenges and opportunities facing international actors who seek to think and work politically in the eastern DRC.

References

- Autesserre, S., 2010. *The trouble with the Congo: Local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Autesserre, S., 2012. 'Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences'. *African Affairs*, 111(443), pp. 202-222.
- BBC HARDtalk, 2012. *Interview with Paul Kagame*. 13 July.
- Bafilemba, F., Hall, A. & Muller, T., 2014. *Crafting a viable DDR strategy for Congo* (Goma, The Enough Project), Washington D.C.: The Enough Project.
- Bøås, M., 2008. "'Just Another Day': The North Kivu Security Predicament After the 2006 Congolese Elections'. *African Security*, 1(1), pp. 53-68.
- Bøås, M. & Dunn, K., 2013. *Politics of origin in Africa: Autochthony, citizenship and conflict*. London: Zed Books.
- Buzan, B. & Wæver, O., 2003. *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cooper, H., 2014. *More harm than good? UN's Islands of Stability in DRC*, Oxfam Policy and Practice Blog, available at: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2014/05/islands-of-stability-in-drc>. Accessed 17 January 2017.
- Dasandi, N., Marquette, H. & Robinson, M., 2016. *DLP Research paper 37: Thinking and working politically: From theory building to building an evidence base*. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.
- de Waal, A., 2007. *War in Darfur and the search for peace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- de Waal, A., 2014. When kleptocracy becomes insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan. *African Affairs*, 113(452), pp. 347-369.
- Dunn, K. C., 2002. 'A survival guide to Kinshasa: Lessons of the father passed down to the son'. In: Clark, J.F. (ed.), *The African stakes of the Congo war*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 53-74.
- Ferf, A., Hilhorst, D. & Mashanda, M., 2014. *Rural road (re)construction: Transport and rural livelihoods in the conflict-affected and fragile state environment of South Kivu*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Global Witness, 2014. *Glencore and the gatekeeper: How the world's largest commodities trader made a friend of Congo's president \$67 Million Richer*. London: Global Witness.
- Hochschild, A., 1998. *King Leopold's ghost: The story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa*. Oxford: Pan Books.
- Hoffmann, K. & Vlassenroot, K., 2014. 'Armed groups and the exercise of public authority: the cases of the Mayi-Mayi and Raya Mutomboki in Kalehe, South Kivu'. *Peacebuilding*, 2(2), pp. 202-220.
- Hughes, C., Hutchison, J. & Wilson, I., 2013. *Poor people's politics: A structural political economy approach*. Birmingham, Developmental Leadership Program.
- Human Rights Watch, 2008. *DR Congo: Peace Accord Fails to End Killing of Civilians*. 17 July. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/07/17/dr-congo-peace-accord-fails-end-killing-civilians> accessed 17 January 2017.
- Human Rights Watch, 2015. *DR Congo: Wanted rebel's troops instill fear*. 6 January. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/06/dr-congo-wanted-rebels-troops-instill-fear>; accessed 17 January 2017.
- International Alert, 2012. *Ending the Deadlock: Towards a New Vision of Peace in the Eastern DRC*. London: International Alert.
- International Criminal Court, 2016. *The Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo: Case information sheet*. The Hague: International Criminal Court.
- International Crisis Group, 2007. *Congo: Bringing peace to North Kivu*. Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group.
- Jackson, S., 2002. 'Making a killing: Criminality & coping in the Kivu war'. *Review of African Political Economy*, 29(93/94), pp. 516-536.
- Lecoutere, E., Vlassenroot, K. & Raeymaekers, T., 2009. 'Conflict, institutional changes and food insecurity in eastern DR Congo'. *Africa Focus*, 22(2), pp. 41-63.
- Life and Peace Institute, 2011. *Beyond armed groups: Local conflict and sub-regional connections - the example of Fizi and Uvira (South Kivu)*. Bukavu: Life and Peace Institute.
- Mallett, R., Hagen-Zanker, J., Slater, R. & Sturge, G., 2015. *Surveying livelihoods, service delivery and governance: baseline evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Uganda*. London: SLRC/Overseas Development Institute.

- Mamdani, M., 2011. 'The invention of the indigene'. *London Review of Books*, 20 January, pp. 31-33.
- Mampilly, Z. C., 2011. *Rebel rulers: Insurgent governance and civilian life during war*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- McCalpin, J. O., 2002. 'Historicity of a crisis: The origins of the Congo war'. In: Clark, J.F. (ed.), *The African stakes of the Congo war*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 33-52.
- MONUSCO, undated. *MONUSCO Facts and Figures*. Available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monusco/facts.shtml>. Accessed on 17 January 2017.
- MONUSCO, 2010. *MONUSCO Mandate*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monusco/mandate.shtml>
- MONUSCO, 2011. Over 1800 FDLR armed rebels in DR Congo surrender to UN peacekeepers in 2010 [9 February 2011]. <https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/over-1800-fdlr-armed-rebels-dr-congo-surrender-un-peacekeepers-2010>
- MONUSCO, 2014. *North Kivu: MONUSCO Chief Martin Kobler visits Rutshuru; Assesses progress on "Islands of Stability"*. 26 August. Available at: <https://monusco.unmissions.org/node/100043587>, accessed 17 January 2017.
- MONUSCO, 2015. *MONUSCO Facts and Figures*. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monusco/facts.shtml> [Accessed 21 October 2015].
- New Times, 2014. *No negotiations with FDLR, says US envoy*. 6 August.
- New York Times, 2012. *To Save Congo, Let It Fall Apart*. 1 December.
- Nzongola-Ntalaja, G., 2002. *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A people's history*. New York: Zed Books.
- O'Keefe, M., Sidel, J.T., Marquette, H., Roche, C., Hudson, D., Dasandi, N., 2014. *Using action research and learning for politically informed programming*, Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.
- Perera, S., 2013. 'Alternative agency: Rwandan refugee warriors in exclusionary states'. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13(5), pp. 569-588.
- Perera, S., 2015. *DLP Research Paper 34: Accessing the inaccessible in difficult environments: The uses and abuses of crowdsourcing*. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.
- Perera, S., forthcoming. 'Bermuda triangulation: "Messy truths" and "simple lies"'. *Journal of Conflict and Cooperation*.
- Pole Institute, 2010. *Guerillas in the mist: The Congolese experience of the FDLR war in Eastern Congo and the role of the international community*. Goma: Pole Institute.
- Pottier, J., 2002. *Re-imagining Rwanda: Conflict, survival and disinformation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prunier, G., 2008. *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Raeymaekers, T., 2013. 'Post-war conflict and the market for protection: The challenges to Congo's hybrid peace'. *International Peacekeeping*, 20(5), pp. 600-617.
- Raeymaekers, T., 2014. *Violent capitalism and hybrid identity in the Eastern Congo: Power to the margins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smirl, L., 2008. 'Building the other, constructing ourselves: Spatial dimensions of international humanitarian response'. *International Political Sociology*, 2(3), pp. 236-253.
- Stearns, J., 2013a. *Raia Mutomboki: The flawed peace process in the DRC and the birth of an armed franchise*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.
- Stearns, J., 2013b. *From CNDP to M23: The evolution of an armed movement in eastern Congo*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.
- Stearns, J., 2015. *Can force be useful in the absence of a political strategy? Lessons from the UN Mission to the DR Congo*. New York: Congo Research Group.
- Stearns, J., Verweijen, J. & Baaz, M. E., 2013. *The national army and armed groups in the Eastern Congo: Untangling the Gordian knot of insecurity*. London: Rift Valley Institute.
- Stearns, J. & Vogel, C., 2015. *The landscape of armed groups in the Eastern Congo*. New York: Congo Research Group.

- Suarez, C., 2016. *The underpinnings of rebel governance in the eastern DRC*. 26 April. Political Violence @ a glance. Available at: <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2016/04/26/the-underpinnings-of-rebel-governance-in-the-eastern-drc/> Accessed 17 January 2017.
- Sundaram, A., 2013. *Stringer: A reporter's journey in the Congo*. New York: Doubleday.
- Thakur, M., 2008. 'Demilitarising militias in the Kivus (eastern Democratic Republic of Congo)'. *African Security Review*, 17(1), pp. 52-67.
- Tull, D. M., 2007. 'The Democratic Republic of Congo: Militarized politics in a "failed state"'. In: M. Bøås & K. C. Dunn (eds.), *African guerrillas: raging against the machine*. London: Lynne Rienner, p. 113 – 130.
- Turner, T., 2007. *The Congo wars: Conflict, myth and reality*. New York: Zed Books.
- UN Group of Experts, 2012. *Addendum to the Group of Experts of the DRC's interim report*. New York: United Nations.
- UN Group of Experts, 2014. *Letter dated 22 January 2014 from the Coordinator of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council*. New York: United Nations.
- UN Security Council, 2010. *Resolution 1925*. New York: United Nations.
- UN Security Council, 2013. *Resolution S/RES/2098*. New York: United Nations.
- United Nations Joint Human Rights Office, 2011. *Final report of the fact-finding missions of the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office into the mass rapes and other human rights violations committed by a coalition of armed groups along the Kibua-Mpofi Axis in Walikale territory, North Kivu, from 30 July to 2 August 2010*. Goma: OHCHR/MONUSCO Joint Human Rights Office.
- Utas, M., 2012. *African conflicts and informal power: Big men and networks*. London: Zed Books.
- Verweijen, J., 2015. 'From autochthony to violence? Discursive and coercive social practices of the Mai-Mai in Fizi, eastern DR Congo'. *African Studies Review*, 58(2), pp. 157-180.
- Verweijen, J., 2016a. 'Coping with the Barbarian Syndrome: The challenges of researching civilian-military interaction "from below" in the eastern DR Congo'. In: Nakray, K., Alston, M. and Whittenbury, K. (eds.), *Social science research ethics for a globalizing world: Interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 243-257.
- Verweijen, J., 2016b. *A microcosm of militarization: Conflict, governance and armed mobilization in Uvira, South Kivu*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute
- Verweijen, J. & Wakenge, C. I., 2015. *Understanding armed group proliferation in the eastern Congo*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.
- Vogel, C., 2014a. *Islands of stability or swamps of insecurity? MONUSCO's Intervention Brigade and the danger of emerging security voids in eastern Congo*. Brussels: EGMONT Royal Institute for International Relations.
- Vogel, C. & Musamba, J., 2016. *Recycling rebels? Demobilization in the Congo*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.
- Vogel, C. et al., 2014. *Conflict minerals: An open letter*. Available at: <https://ethuin.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/09092014-open-letter-final-and-list-doc.pdf>. Accessed 19 January 2017.
- Wrong, M., 2001. *In the footsteps of Mr Kurtz*. London: Fourth Estate.



The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)
International Development Department
School of Government and Society
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
+44 (0)121 414 3911
www.dlprog.org
info@dlprog.org
@DLProg