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Land issues are an example of the larger argument about conflict layers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There is need, however, to understand local as well as supra-local levels of dispute in a comprehensive analysis, not overlooking the interconnectedness and complexity between the different layers of dispute.

Why local dynamics of conflict are never only local

Koen Vlassenroot

While it is generally recognised that the Congo wars are the result of a complex interplay between regional, national and local dynamics, the local level dimensions of violence and conflict have for a long time received limited attention both in academia and in policy circles. As a result, a sophisticated understanding and critical analysis of the local drivers of conflict and their interconnectedness to larger dynamics have been lacking. More recent studies have emphasised the need to look at the local level and have argued that policy approaches have largely failed to address local conflict dynamics. Séverine Autesserre states that, in their approach to the conflict, international actors (including diplomats and UN staff) "neglect to address the other main sources of violence: distinctively local conflicts over land, grassroots power, status and resources, like cattle, charcoal, timber, drugs and fees levied at checkpoints"[1]. Other studies paid extensive attention to local conflict drivers and have produced fine-grained analyses of local grievances, and of how local networks and coalitions are shaped around localised politico-military and economic competition, in many cases affecting relations between different communities.

The advantage of such focus on the local level is that it helps us to embed expressions of violence into local society and to develop responses that promote local(ised) solutions in addition to classic top-down approaches. The downside, however, is that it risks putting too much emphasis on the local level and ignoring how local violence is shaped as much by larger power dynamics as it is informed by local grievances. In a critique to an over-emphasis on the local, some authors have therefore argued that we need to approach local violence as the outcome of dynamics and strategies that are shaped at the local, national and sometimes even regional level. Erickson-Baaz and Verweijen, for instance, argue that in eastern DRC, "political-military entrepreneurs (...) do not merely draw upon and 'voice' existing grievances, but heavily contribute to their inflation, partly under the influence of incentives derived from national-level policies"[2].

In other words, since the start of the war, local issues of contestation have increasingly become linked to larger politico-military competition and local actors involved connected to larger networks and elites. What has started as local phenomena, has over time transformed into and been informed by larger struggles for power and control.

This is also illustrated by groups such as the Raia Mutomboki, which is often described as a grassroots reaction to a lack of security and protection but should be understood as the consequence of the failure of attempts to create the necessary conditions for sustainable peace in the region. The current Raia Mutomboki started operating in 2011 in Shabunda (South Kivu) as a response to new atrocities by the FDLR, a Rwandan Hutu rebel force that has been present in the DRC since 1994. These attacks against the local population triggered the remobilisation of the Raia Mutomboki group that started a ruthless campaign against the FDLR and from Shabunda spread over a large territory in South and North Kivu. The movement could count on the support of customary chiefs, and its military success triggered a massive mobilisation of local youth.

But as has happened before with similar groups, once having chased off the FDLR, the movement started to challenge the authority of the Congolese army, which, because of its failure to protect the population, was no longer considered as a legitimate force. It also began interfering in local conflicts and providing alternative justice mechanisms. Its strength eventually represented an interesting tool for external actors in search for local power. Several army commanders that had deserted, tried to get some control over the group, and politicians saw in it a perfect device for safeguarding their local power base. So even if the group was never able to transcend local agendas, its existence was a direct outcome of a failure of the peace process. Its military successes and popular support made it connect to larger power struggles through the actions of local strongmen.

Necessary interaction between different levels

The Raia Mutomboki are but one expression of violence that cannot be reduced to the local level and that illustrates the interaction between local and supra-local dynamics and actors. It shows that what is often explained as a result of local dynamics, in most cases is the result of factors that are all but local. The practical consequence is that local peacebuilding efforts, such as the different reconciliation initiatives, can only result in sustainable effects when these supra-local dimensions of conflict are also addressed. The different inter-community roundtables, discussions, platforms and dialogues all have some positive impact in bringing local communities closer to each other, but will only have a longer-term effect on conflict dynamics when decisive leaderships are included. This

PHOTO: GUY OLIVER/IRIN



Women provide extensive labour at the gold mine workings, where all excavations are done by hand. In certain areas, land issues have been a major source of conflict between rural communities and mining companies.

becomes a real endeavour when dealing with rebel leaderships, particularly when their strategies and interests are connected to larger political and economic networks. In these cases, the impact of reconciliation efforts on conflict causes and triggers risks being rather limited.

A good illustration of the limits and pitfalls of an overly local emphasis on violence and conflict is the way we need to deal with land issues, which are increasingly recognised as a dominant 'root cause' and sustaining factor of conflict in eastern DRC. Over the years, scholars and practitioners have identified a number of critical land-related factors contributing to violence and conflict, including a huge diversity of land governance forms, the existence of overlapping legal frameworks and the weakness of the statutory land law, competition between indigenous and migrant communities, limited access to arable land in densely populated areas, the weak performance of the administration and justice system in the reconciliation and arbitration of land disputes, growing stress on local resources caused by massive displacement, the expansion of artisanal and small-scale mining, and increased competition between elites for the control over land and the consequent land concentration.

These land issues have currently taken central stage in analyses focusing on the local level of conflict, and numerous peacebuilding strategies have been developed that particularly focus on mediation of land disputes. Existing approaches, however, so far have limited effect on the underlying causes of land disputes, which in most cases are left unaddressed, either because they are considered to be too complex or because of a lack of impact on powerful actors involved in these conflicts. In many cases, these approaches also neglect the interconnectedness between local land disputes and the larger levels of the Congolese war. While it cannot be ignored that land issues are informing local conflict dynamics, it would also be misleading to reduce these dynamics to a single 'root cause'.

In eastern DRC land issues[3] are closely connected to dynamics of violence and conflict. Historical processes have territorialised identity, have created a context of intensified competition between different communities for access to land, and have turned land into the key asset of political power. In the early 1990s, when a democratisation process was announced, these processes and dynamics came together and produced a context of violent conflict that until today has not found its resolution but has transformed during the war, with land being one of the underlying causes, yet also an instrument of contestation, mobilisation and violence.

Weak governance and growing confusion

For decades, the poor governance of land allocation and transfers has been a source of structural violence in the country, and small politically-connected and wealthy elites have tended to gain control over land for speculation and enrichment at the expense of the subsistence livelihoods of the poor majority. A context of multiple and often contradictory land rights, a weak governance framework and a failing justice system have had a dramatic impact on the socio-economic and legal position of rural populations and have led to growing confusion over land rights and access. In most cases, the consequent disputes and disagreements have remained limited to the individual level, including disputes over plot boundaries, inheritance, the validity of contracts, illegal occupation of plots belonging to absentees, illegal acquisition of land rights etc.

But in certain areas, land issues have been a major source of conflict between farmers and large-scale concessionaires, between rural communities and mining companies, between pastoralists and farmers (transhumance conflicts) or between the National Park administration and rural populations that want to force access to land in these parks. In most cases, these conflicts include very low levels of violence. However, when conflicts are linked to identity and have an inter-ethnic dimension, they tend to produce large-scale violence. This is amply illustrated by events in Masisi, Kalehe, Lubero, Walikale and Ituri.

The Congo wars have only reinforced the importance of land issues in local conflict. Land has become a key ingredient in mobilisation efforts by armed groups. These dynamics have reconfirmed the particular links between identity, political representation and customary rights. But the Congolese wars have also radically changed land access patterns through a number of processes and dynamics, including forced displacement, shifts in the level of authority enjoyed by different customary and administrative leaders, and changes in the various social, economic

PHOTO: LPI



Transhumance, that is, the seasonal migration of pastoralists with their livestock from high- to lowlands, is a recurrent cause of conflict between herders and farmers. Efforts have been made by LPI's partner organisations to settle the conflict, for example by demarcation of special livestock paths.

and political structures that allow people to enjoy the benefits of agricultural and pastoral production. The Congo wars have produced new competition for land, as part of a wider renegotiation of the local economic space and have been re-drawing ethnic, class and other 'boundaries' within local society.

Access to land – access to power

At the local level, access to land has thus become one of the main currencies of power. It has informed local struggle, yet conflict has also had a crucial impact on the wider institutional network organising land control and access. Rather than being a single cause of violence, land, as a resource with multi-dimensional aspects (as a community territory, as an economic resource, as a source of administrative revenue, as a social asset, for example), plays a significant role in terms of ethnic identity-formation, the powers and revenue-streams of customary and politico-military elites, and larger networks of profit and protection. Even if the effects of these dynamics tend to vary from place to place, depending on the local history, the composition and density of the population, the local governance context and administrative organisation, and the implication of politico-military elites, land serves as a material basis for processes of inclusion and exclusion, political and economic competition, mobilisation and conflict.

These elements explain why land is a crucial component of claims to political autonomy and power, yet at the same time gives meaning to local claims and grievances. It would be misleading, though, to limit land competition to the local level or to read the conflict in eastern DRC as mainly driven by local land claims. Structural elements of land competition and exclusion have provided a conducive environment for local, national and regional actors to strengthen their control over territory, social mobility and natural resources. Land, in this sense, has become an objective of armed struggle, while at the same time land insecurity is manipulated to mobilise rural populations.

What does all this tell us about the Congo war? Land plays a crucial role on a local level, but there is need to integrate it into a nuanced analysis that recognises the complexity of conflict dynamics, the creation of armed actors and the production of violent strategies. The current focus on land issues thus illustrates two potential risks: while it would be a critical mistake to reduce the conflict to single narratives (such as land competition), a perspective only focusing on micro-dynamics neglects the larger dimensions of the conflict. As one observer said, this "leads to downplaying of a range of interlocking supra-local factors that are especially of importance for understanding when and why conflicts translate into violence"[4]. It is only when we have a clear understanding of the different layers of local disputes, and the complex networks connecting those involved in it, that we can start developing the right responses and tackle the supra-local factors affecting or determining local conflicts.

1 Autesserre, Séverine, The Only Way to Help Congo, Op-Ed, *New York Times*, 22 June 2012.

2 Erickson-Baaz, Maria, and Verweijen, Judith, The Volatility of a Half-Cooked Bouillabaisse: Rebel-Military Integration and Conflict Dynamics in the eastern DRC, in: *African Affairs*, vol. 112, issue 449, p. 582.

3 Some of the next paragraphs are based on Vlassenroot, Koen, *Land Issues and Conflict in Eastern DRC*, New York: Social Science Research Council, 2013.

4 Verweijen, Judith, Anatomy of a Feeble Analysis: A Critical Reading of Crisis Group's Latest Report on the DR Congo, blogpost, July 30, 2013.