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Gaps in the peacebuilding process

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Why have local and international actors failed to bring lasting peace in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo? Most responses to this question highlight the lack of good will from local and regional authorities and disparate economic interests. There is need for a greater role to be played by religion and traditional practices in the peacebuilding process.

Eastern DR Congo

Gaps in the peacebuilding process

Symphorien Pyana

This article underscores the role of public narratives and their negative impact on local and international responses to the crisis. It demonstrates how dominant narratives are precluding alternative discourses on the root causes of the crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and advocates for a peacebuilding perspective that is less externally-driven and more enriched by local understandings, knowledge and social beliefs.

In June 2013, I participated in an international conference entitled “Peace From the Ground Up”. I was asked to share my views on “Grassroots Peacebuilding in (Eastern) DR Congo: The Role of Religion and Local Culture” and to highlight what seem to be gaps in the ongoing peacebuilding process. I argue that any discussion seeking to explain the persistence of violence and advocate for sustainable peace and democracy in the DRC must take care to avoid the numerous pitfalls associated with such analyses. Chief among such pitfalls is the fact that the dominant narratives framing international and national responses to the conflict are precluding alternative discourses on the root causes of the conflict. The major gap in the ongoing eastern DRC’s peacebuilding process is its continued focus on widely known macro symptoms rather than untold macro and micro issues and root causes of the crisis.

The 2006 elections were a moment of hope for the DRC and particularly the eastern region, where the country and its population were rising from the most intractable, deadly and violent conflict since World War II. Since then the international community has committed significant investments to local development, reform of state institutions and support to democracy. For instance, pub-

lic development aid to the DRC since the end of the transition of what some called the ‘African World War’ has exceeded USD 14 billion. External funding represents almost half of the DRC national budget. The financial support to the United Nations peace mission in DRC, MONUSCO, has reached USD 1 billion per year. International institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund significantly supported the DRC’s economy in a way that led to the cancellation in 2010 of the USD 13.2 billion country’s external debt. In addition, it is worth mentioning the various trade deals, such as the Chinese mining contract (Eastern Congo Initiative, 2012).

However, an appraisal of the country’s profile and life conditions highlights appalling concerns and frustrations. Although the country organised its second local and national elections in November 2012, fear-based identity issues and political patronage often drive the agenda. Many Congolese politicians exploit their constituents’ historical distrust of their neighbours to win elections and avoid accountability. Most importantly, the eastern region never overcomes its security dilemma. Foreign and local armed groups, including the M23 and the Democratic Force for the Liberation of Rwanda continue to kill civilians, commit sexual abuses against boys and girls, men and women, and create humanitarian problems. About 1.7 million Congolese are nowadays internally displaced and 500,000 are refugees in neighbouring countries and beyond. The DRC is listed last in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2012). Despite some improvements observed in the last two years, high child mortality remains an appalling concern. The DRC government has acknowledged that it

will not reach any of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

A number of recent research reports (Institute for Security Study, 2010; Eastern Congo Initiative, 2012) have appreciably explained the persistence of the crisis as due to lack of good will from local and regional authorities and economic interests. A few studies (Séverine Autesserre, 2006 and 2009) have explored why international support to peace and democracy in the DRC have failed to reach its expected results. Drawing from the latter perspective, this article intends to recognise the power and underscore the particular role of dominant narratives about local and international responses to the crisis.

Dominant narratives and security dilemma

By ‘narrative’ I simply mean a ‘story’ that people, deliberately or not, create to make sense of their personal or community lives and environments. H. Porter Abbot (2008) would call it a ‘frame’, an idea or a combination of ideas that help to shape the way people perceive the reality and how they react upon and within their environment. Narratives or frames are determinant to the social world, because social problems are not just given but have to be constructed. Frames shape the way we see the world and affect the way we prioritise social problems. They also determine the values we provide to social events, including which eventually should be taken care of and which should be neglected. In this way the most dominant frames become the central points and/or backgrounds from which we judge social problems and take actions to solving or maintaining them.

A recent study by Séverine Autesserre (2012) highlights three interconnected



PHOTO: REUTERS

People fleeing after fighting has erupted in their home village is an all too common sight. At present, 1.7 million Congolese are internally displaced and 500,000 are refugees in other countries.

narratives currently motivating efforts to address the crisis in the DRC. The first is a broadly held belief that the single root cause of violence is the illegal exploitation of natural resources. Second, most people believe that the major manifestation of violence is the sexual abuse of women and children. Third, the primary solution to these issues is seen as reconstructing state authority. Taking up these dominant narratives, the government, international diplomats and advocates have succeeded in placing the eastern Congo crisis much higher on the agenda of major world actors, giving a great deal of publicity to what has often been characterised as a forgotten conflict. These narratives have also underscored and/or orientated international and national responses to three major areas: regulating the trade of minerals, providing care to victims of sexual violence, and pouring money into state and security infrastructure.

Yet, there have been unexpected harmful effects as a result of the prioritisation of these dominant narratives. First, an emphasis on resource and mineral conflict has resulted in other root causes being overlooked: corruption,

local political and social antagonisms, land conflicts, and general poverty. Second, while valuable efforts have been launched in attending to the survivors of egregious gender-based violence, scarce resources have resulted in the neglect of funding for other serious human needs such as food security, health, etc. Finally, a concentrated focus on reinforcing state authority has led to the neglect of other necessary measures, including resolving land conflicts, promoting inter-community reconciliation, jump-starting economic development, promoting human rights and civic education, and fighting corruption. Each of these responses highlights a major weakness in current peacebuilding efforts, which are overwhelmingly “top-down”, focusing on issues that are salient to donor audiences while overlooking the local everyday problems that persist in people’s lives, many of which have deeper roots and a structural background.

Role of religion and local culture

We now know that, even though the three dominant narratives have resulted in programmes that direct significant attention and resources into eastern

Congo peacebuilding efforts, the results are negligible and/or slight. The country profile and life conditions highlighted above are vivid and call for new perspectives. The recent national consultations initiated by the DRC government (September 2013) provide an additional explanation why there must be a paradigm shift in the ongoing DRC peacebuilding process. Opponents of these national consultations argued that it was a waste of time and resources. Others stressed that it was another political game from the ruling party. But beyond this criticism, it is worth mentioning that, to some extent, the government realised that the majority of the people were left out of the peace efforts and felt that it was necessary to consult with grassroots and even with the Diaspora.

From this backdrop, and if the international community wants to be relevant and really support sustainable peace in the DRC, it must be open to this paradigm shift. Likewise the DRC government must learn from past mistakes and opt for new approaches towards peace and security in the country. In order to address the above-mentioned weaknesses in the ongoing peacebuilding process,

there should be a more sophisticated understanding of how local Congolese understand peace and how they envision a peaceful society. Adopting a perspective that is less externally-driven and more enriched by local understanding, knowledge and social beliefs also allows a greater role to be played by religion and traditional practices in the peacebuilding process.

This is vital for a country with more than 200 diverse ethnic groups, where almost 65 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and traditional beliefs about self and the other, power and authority, land and belonging, etc. strongly influence how local communities understand peace and conflict. People in the DRC are generally very religious: 50 per cent are Roman Catholic, 20 per cent Protestant, 10 per cent Kimbanguist, 10 per cent Muslim, and 10 per cent adhere to syncretic sects and indigenous beliefs. Too often religion and traditional practices are ignored by the secular community and government actors, without noting that religious communities and local culture possess enormous potential that could be used for peacebuilding. Religious communities, mosques, churches, temples, and other religious structures are virtually located throughout the entire country in provinces, districts, villages and cities. These structures and organisations range from assemblies designed for worship and reflection to those dedicated to education, health and communication.

When properly mobilised and equipped, religious communities and

traditional leaders can serve as effective avenues and actors for promoting participatory governance and peace education. This goes a long way in curbing social vices and instituting democratic values among them. Such a perspective provides a common ground in promoting peace and justice by establishing consensus regarding common challenges. Although religion is one of the major factors that needs to be taken seriously in promoting sustainable peace in the DRC, it is not enough merely to recognise its importance. Religious groups and their leaders also need to transcend their internal divisions and strengthen their moral authority by becoming the real community voices in favour of peace, moving beyond dogmatism, self-interests and ideological manipulations.

Conclusion and recommendations

Any analysis tending to explain human crisis as the result of a single cause and neglect other factors is doomed and can lead to wrong and ineffective solutions. Illegal exploitation of natural resources and weak state authority are only a few among the many factors that explain the persistence of violence in (eastern) DRC. This article underscores the role of public narratives and their negative effects on local and international responses to the crisis. It demonstrates how dominant narratives are preventing different discourses on the root causes of the crisis. The ability to reach sustainable peace depends on the country's determination to address the root causes of conflict and engage the society as a whole by mobilising institutions that

can bring together all human experiences, including religious groups and traditional practices.

One recommendation would thus be that advocacy organisations working in the DRC highlight other causes and consequences of violence, such as corruption, food insecurity and lack of civic education. This could help raise funds to address these other issues, while reinforcing the existing contestation of the dominant narratives (Autesserre, 2012). In addition, the reconstruction of state authority may put an end to sexual violence and the problem complex with conflict minerals. But for this to happen, there must be strong community peace education and economic development programmes for all Congolese. 🌿

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"Vote for competence. Vote for experience. Vote for efficiency. Vote for candidate no. 41", says the text on the banner of a candidate for the presidential election in 2006. This was the first multiparty elections in the country in 41 years.



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