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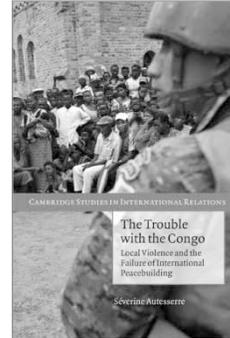
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## *The trouble with the Congo: a précis*

Séverine Autesserre

### Introduction

*The trouble with the Congo*<sup>1</sup> suggests a new explanation for international peacebuilding failures in civil wars. It analyses the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which hosts the largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission in the world, recently went through a transition from war to peace and democracy (from June 2003 to December 2006), and yet continues to be the stage of one of the deadliest conflicts since World War II. In the Congo, why did the expansive international efforts fail to achieve lasting peace and security? To solve this puzzle, the book considers two broader questions: why do so many conflicts that end in negotiated peace agreements lapse back into war within a few years? Why do third-party interventions often fail to secure a sustainable peace?

**Keywords** Democratic Republic of Congo; civil war; peacebuilding; peacekeeping; international intervention; conflict resolution; constructivism

Recent work in comparative politics suggests a preliminary answer: the continuation of violence during peace agreement implementation is at least partly driven by local agendas – at the level of the individual, the family, the clan, the municipality, the community, or the district. This in turn begs the question of why interveners nevertheless often neglect the local causes of peace process failures. Specifically in the Congo, why did foreign peacebuilders succeed in imposing a settlement only at the international and national levels and not at the sub-national level? Finally, what can the Congo case teach us about conflicts and peace settlements in the rest of Africa and elsewhere?

Understanding the reasons for the failure of peacebuilding in the Congo is critical for any person interested in current African affairs and in international politics and international security. The Congolese conflict has caused over five million casualties so far.<sup>2</sup> It has destabilised most of Central Africa for the past fourteen years. It is the largest ongoing humanitarian crisis in the world.

The international engagement in the peace process is also noteworthy: in addition to hosting the largest and most expensive United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in the world, the Congo also hosted the first European-led peacekeeping mission ever, and the International Criminal Court chose the prosecution of Congolese warlords as one of its first cases. Overall, the transition from war to peace and democracy was a period of massive international influence on Congolese affairs.

*The trouble with the Congo* is the first scholarly attempt to understand why all of the intense international peacebuilding efforts have failed to help the Congolese state build a sustainable peace.

I argue that a dominant international peacebuilding culture shapes intervention in a way that precludes action on local violence, ultimately dooming the international efforts. Western and African diplomats, UN peacekeepers and the staff of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in conflict resolution share a set of ideologies, rules, rituals, assumptions, definitions, paradigms and standard operating procedures. This common culture influences the interveners' understanding of the causes of violence, the paths toward peace, and the roles of foreign actors. It authorises and justifies specific practices and policies while excluding others, notably grassroots peacebuilding. It enables foreign interveners to ignore the micro-level tensions that often jeopardise macro-level settlements. In the Congo, the presence of this peacebuilding culture explains why the massive international peacebuilding efforts have only rarely targeted local conflicts, and therefore why the international intervention has failed to help the Congolese state to build a sustainable peace.

This analysis builds on a wealth of original data. Between 2001 and 2007, I carried out ethnographic research in various parts of the Congo. I spent fifteen months in the most violent provinces and two months in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa. There, and in

France, Belgium and the United States, I conducted more than 330 interviews with UN officials, Western and African diplomats, NGO staff members, victims and perpetrators of violence, and Congolese political, military, diplomatic and civil society actors. I also analysed multiple documents, including policy papers, agency memos, confidential reports and news articles.

This précis first describes the main argument of the book and then provides a chapter by chapter overview. It concludes by suggesting an examination of the peacebuilding culture to understand the constant neglect of local tensions and the resulting intervention failures in Africa and elsewhere.

## Main argument

During the Congolese transition, just as before and during the war, violence was motivated not only by national and regional causes (at the level of the African Great Lakes region), but also by longstanding bottom-up conflicts over land, resources and political power. Their main instigators included villagers, local traditional and administrative chiefs, and grassroots militia leaders. Even issues considered purely regional or national problems, such as the presence of foreign armed groups in Congolese territory or the tensions between indigenous people and Congolese with Rwandan ancestry, had important local dimensions. There was a constant interaction between local, national and regional causes of violence stemming primarily from alliances between local actors and national and regional actors. As a result, grassroots agendas, which have fuelled micro- and macro-level violence throughout modern Congolese history, continued to do so during the transition and eventually jeopardised the national and regional settlements. Furthermore, during the transitional period some local conflicts, notably in South Kivu, Katanga and Ituri, became increasingly autonomous from top-down developments.

In these circumstances, why did international peacebuilders not devote as many resources or as much time and effort to assuaging decentralised tensions as they did to solving the macro-level problems? In answer to this question, most interviewees substantiated the existing scholarly explanations for peacebuilding failures, which focus on the influence of material constraints and vested interests. International actors emphasised the massive contextual, financial, legal, political, security and human resources constraints that they faced. They explained that these constraints impaired adequate treatment of the problems at the root of the violence. However, interveners could have overcome these obstacles. In fact, they faced similarly daunting constraints when organising elections, but managed to rise above them.

Congolese interviewees had a different point of view, maintaining that vested economic, political, security or institutional interests led peacebuilders to consciously ignore

violations of the peace agreements, and that some international actors even perpetuated violence to facilitate access to Congolese natural resources. In reality, though, only a few foreign individuals and companies did so. The vast majority of international organisations and foreign countries were true to their claims that their main goal was to support the Congo in its transitional efforts. Their staff implemented what they genuinely considered to be the best strategy to help the Congo on the path toward peace and democracy.

Members of diplomatic missions, international organisations and non-governmental agencies overlooked decentralised conflict because the dominant international peacebuilding culture shaped their understanding of violence and intervention in a way that precluded their involvement at the local level. This culture included norms arising from the world polity, notably the belief that the Congo was inherently violent and the view that elections were the best mechanism for building peace. It also incorporated understandings shared only by the actors of the international peacebuilding field, including, among others, the definition of the Congo as a 'post-conflict situation', the conception that war and 'post-war' violence resulted from top-down causes and the belief that the strategies used in violent environments (such as direct negotiations with local actors) were unsuited to 'post-conflict' situations. Finally, this dominant culture included elements that were rooted in the specific identities of various international organisations, especially the UN and diplomatic staff's conception of their roles as related exclusively to the macro level.

The book illuminates how this prevailing peacebuilding culture operated on the ground. This culture shaped the international understanding of violence during the Congolese transition. As a result of earlier socialisation and training processes, most international actors ascribed the continued fighting and massacres to regional and national tensions alone. They regarded the hostilities that they could not link to regional or national antagonisms as consequences of the lack of state authority in the eastern provinces, a product of decades of poor management by the central government. The interveners viewed micro-level conflicts as private and criminal and considered extensive grassroots violence to be a normal feature of life in a peaceful Congo.

The dominant peacebuilding culture also influenced the international actors' understanding of their roles and of the path to peace. This culture constructed intervention at the regional and national levels as the only 'natural' and 'legitimate' task of diplomats and UN staff. It elevated the organisation of elections to the status of the most effective peace- and state-building mechanism and established humanitarian and development programmes as the most appropriate answer to grassroots tensions. It also shaped the international view of decentralised conflict resolution as an unimportant, unfamiliar and unmanageable task. It led international actors to interpret contextual hurdles and a lack of resources as absolute constraints on their involvement at the local

level. In turn, these constraints fuelled the lack of interest in grassroots conflict, as well as the perception of bottom-up peacebuilding as a task unworthy of international attention. All in all, the peacebuilding culture oriented international actors toward an intervention strategy that permitted, and at times even exacerbated, fighting, massacres and massive human rights violations during and after the transition. Furthermore, it enabled these actors to view their intervention as a success, until war resumed in late 2008.

Without this shared culture, the interveners' vested interests and the existing constraints on international action would have led to a different outcome. International actors might have located the causes of the continuing violence at the local level. They might have contemplated intervention in local conflicts; they might even have considered it one of the priorities for a successful Congolese transition.

Various Congolese and international actors contested the main elements of the dominant peacebuilding culture and the strategies that they enabled. These individuals argued that decentralised agendas did indeed fuel violence, that grassroots conflicts were not purely criminal, and that extensive violence was not a normal feature of life in a peaceful Congo. They also maintained that the international role in a civil war situation could include local-level intervention and that organising elections shortly after the war ended would fuel violent conflict rather than assuage it. However, these dissenting voices had little influence within their organisations and on the international scene. Moreover, the strategy they advocated clashed so fundamentally with existing cultural norms and so threatened key organisational interests that the contesters' ideas were derided and they themselves were marginalised. Even the occurrence of shocking events was insufficient to prompt diplomats and UN staff to re-evaluate their understanding of violence and intervention. As a result, though they achieved some limited successes, the international actors' intense peacebuilding efforts failed to bring about lasting peace and security.

It is clear that international peacebuilders are not the only, or even the main, figures responsible for the failure of the Congolese peace process. Certain Congolese actors at all levels; certain Rwandan, Ugandan and Burundian leaders; and the individuals and companies involved in arms trafficking and illegal exploitation of Congolese resources together deserve the largest share of the blame. However, the international peacebuilders missed an excellent opportunity to help build peace and democracy. They enjoyed unprecedented influence in Congolese affairs during the transition because they financed more than half the Congolese budget and controlled the only effective military force in the country (the UN peacekeeping mission). They also maintained substantial control due to the transitional government's lack of legitimacy and because the peace agreements gave them the right to supervise the transitional process (as institutionalised by the International Committee in Support of the Transition). By all accounts, this influence sharply decreased with President Joseph Kabila's election and inauguration in

late 2006. The three-and-a-half years of the transition provided a window of opportunity for bringing about peace and *The trouble with the Congo* focuses on that specific period, referring to events that took place before June 2003 and after December 2006 only when they help explain why foreign interveners failed to seize this chance.

The policy recommendations based on this analysis are straightforward. In addition to any top-down intervention, conflicts must be resolved from the bottom up. Grassroots organisations as well as local authorities and civil society representatives should be the main actors in the bottom-up process. However, there are obstacles. Local actors often lack the funding, the logistical means and sometimes the technical capacity to implement effective local peacebuilding programmes. Thus international donors should expand the funding available for local conflict resolution and they should do so either by shifting their priorities away from counter-productive foci (such as an insistence on organising rapid elections after the end of a civil war) or by increasing their aid budgets. In the Congo donors, the UN, international and local NGOs and Congolese state authorities at all levels should focus on two high-priority areas: resolving land conflict and promoting inter-community reconciliation.

Overall, there are a number of ways to read this book. For the reader involved in conflict resolution, this book offers a new explanation for the failures of third-party interventions in civil wars, namely that foreign interveners neglect micro-level tensions. For the reader concerned with international relations, this book improves the theoretical understanding of international action in that it identifies a dominant peacebuilding culture that shapes the interveners' views of violence, peace and intervention, and it shows how this culture operates on the ground. For the reader interested in African studies, comparative politics or anthropology, this book presents an in-depth study of violence in the Congo. For the reader looking for historical material, this book provides primary data that are unavailable elsewhere, as I was virtually the sole academic researcher examining the international intervention that actually spent time in the unstable eastern Congo during the transition period. Finally, for policymakers and practitioners, this book suggests tools and ideas with which to improve their peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.

There are also two ways in which this book should not be read. First, this book is not a criticism of the UN mission in the Congo. The 'international peacebuilders' that this book studies encompass all persons, countries and organisations that strived, at least in part, to build peace in the Congo. They include not only UN peacekeepers but also other UN actors, as well as diplomats from various countries and international organisations, other government officials, and many non-governmental agency staff members. Reducing the analysis to a mere criticism of the UN peacekeeping mission would miss one of the book's central arguments – the fact that the peacebuilding culture, as well as the understandings and actions it shapes, are spread across a wide variety of interveners.

Second, the book does not argue that international interveners should have adopted a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding instead of their top-down strategy. Rather, it demonstrates that international actors should have used a bottom-up approach *in addition to* their top-down strategy. Just as a purely top-down intervention leads to unsustainable peace, an exclusively bottom-up strategy would only produce a very fragile and temporary settlement. Top-down explanations for violence are indeed valid and, during the Congolese transition, they were well supported by events on the ground. Top-down interventions also helped moderate some of the sources of violence on the ground.

This book insists mostly on the grassroots causes of violence because policy and scholarly writings have thus far ignored them. However, this emphasis on micro-level tensions, and on the absolute need for bottom-up peacebuilding, should not be misunderstood as a dismissal of top-down causes of peace and violence.

## Overview

Each chapter of the book reconstructs the international peacebuilders' world to demonstrate why they failed to build a sustainable peace in the Congo, and to explain what role the dominant peacebuilding culture played in the process.

Chapter 1 underscores the pressing need, both from an academic and a policy perspective, to explain why international interventions so often fail to end violence. It also argues that the Congo case can help us analyse peacebuilding failures in Africa and elsewhere. This chapter then presents the theoretical approach of the book: it explains why conventional explanations fail and it develops a new approach that studies the dominant international peacebuilding culture. After a brief exposition of the research methodology, chapter 1 provides an overview of the subsequent organisation of the book.

Chapter 2 focuses on how international peacebuilders understood the continuing violence during the Congolese transition. UN staff and diplomats were – and continue to be – trained to analyse conflicts from a top-down perspective. As a result, they identified national and regional tensions as the causes of the continued fighting and massacres in the eastern Congolese provinces. They notably focused on the disputes between the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda and their different insurgent groups, on the struggle for power between President Kabila and former rebel leaders, and on all of these actors' involvement in the illegal exploitation of the Congo's mineral resources. The main difference between the war and the transition period was the meaning of continued violence in this dominant narrative. From 2003 onward, UN staff and diplomats defined the Congolese context as a 'post-conflict' environment in which various bouts of large-scale fighting became mere 'crises' rather than evidence that the war was continuing.

To explain the violence that they could not relate to any national or regional antagonisms, international peacebuilders used several interrelated frameworks of analysis. In their view, local violence was private and criminal, and was the consequence of the lack of state authority in the Congo. More importantly, because the image of the Congolese's 'inherent savagery' had persisted since the Belgian colonisers constructed it a century ago, foreign actors usually saw extensive local violence as a normal feature of life in a peaceful Congo.

Chapter 3 explains why the international peacebuilding strategy used during the Congolese transition made perfect sense in the eyes of its implementers, even though its inadequacy quickly became apparent. In addition to their assessment of violence detailed in chapter 2, UN staff members, diplomats and NGO officials shared three beliefs that shaped their views of what constituted the most appropriate type of foreign intervention. To start with, international actors perceived themselves as working in the face of multiple and almost insurmountable constraints, which severely limited their peacebuilding options. As a result, they had to prioritise. Two other dominant understandings oriented which strategy took precedence. First, diplomats and UN officials are trained to work on superstructures such as national and international negotiations, and they are socialised into focusing on predefined tasks and performance guidelines that fail to consider local violence. They therefore believed that their only legitimate role was to intervene on the macro level. Second, because they labelled the Congolese transition as a post-conflict situation, they concluded that they should adopt different strategies from those that they had used when the Congo was at war.

These three beliefs shaped the intervention strategy. International peacebuilders approached all of their tasks in a top-down fashion. Influenced by the ideological environment of the post-Cold War era, diplomats and UN staff members focused especially on organising general elections. They saw other state- and peacebuilding tasks as secondary and still approached them, if at all, in a top-down fashion. There was only one exception to this top-down approach: humanitarian aid, which interveners perceived as an apolitical solution to an apolitical problem (the continuation of violence on the ground).

Chapter 4 develops an alternative analysis of violence, which in part explains why the international efforts failed to build a sustainable peace. Local violence was motivated not only by top-down causes, regional or national, but also by bottom-up tensions. Local agendas have exerted a tremendous influence throughout modern Congolese history and they have often been intertwined with macro-level dimensions. Likewise, during the transition many conflicts revolved around political, social and economic stakes that were distinctively local. These decentralised conflicts often jeopardised the national and regional reconciliation processes, for example by motivating violence against Congolese of Rwandan descent or by allowing a strong Rwandan Hutu presence in the Kivus.

In its final section, this chapter analyses the situations in the most violent areas of the Congo during the transition – the two Kivus, North Katanga and Ituri – to explain how local dynamics interacted with the national and regional dimensions. I demonstrate that, after a national and regional settlement was reached, some local conflicts over land and political power became increasingly self-sustaining and autonomous from the national and regional developments, most notably in South Kivu, North Katanga and Ituri, while in North Kivu they fuelled the existing tensions to the point of jeopardising the broader settlements.

Chapter 5 considers why attempts at promoting the analysis developed in chapter 4 and at adopting a bottom-up peacebuilding strategy in addition to the top-down one failed throughout the transition. I first show how international interveners could have boosted local peacebuilding initiatives with the resources at hand. I next trace how Congolese activists, isolated members of the peacekeeping operation and of diplomatic missions, and certain NGOs, tried to convince their colleagues to adopt such a bottom-up approach, and I show that these attempts were largely unsuccessful. I explain that the largest peacebuilding bureaucracies rejected these opportunities for change because the potential reforms clashed with deeply entrenched cultural norms and jeopardised numerous organisational interests. As a result, neither contestation nor the occurrence of unexpected, genocidal or particularly gruesome events ever became sufficient to prompt diplomats and UN staff to re-evaluate their understanding of violence and intervention. Instead, a vicious circle developed in which the perception of local conflict resolution as a long-term, unfamiliar and illegitimate task turned local-level ‘constraints’ on international action into insurmountable obstacles, a process that in turn reinforced the perception of bottom-up peacebuilding as a negligible issue.

The final chapter starts by explaining why the intervention strategy could not build either peace or democracy in the Congo. It presents the standard macro-level analyses, insisting on the drawbacks of the electoral tool, and then synthesises the main argument of the book. It then uses short case studies of various peace processes around the world to demonstrate how an examination of the dominant peacebuilding culture can help to gain an understanding of other cases of international intervention failures in the rest of Africa and beyond. *The trouble with the Congo* ends by briefly detailing the policy implications of this analysis and offering recommendations to improve international interventions in civil wars.

## Conclusion

Disruptions in peace processes often have catastrophic consequences, as in Afghanistan in 1992, Rwanda in 1994, Sierra Leone in 1996, Israel and Palestine in 2000, and Sri Lanka in 2005. In the Congo, the violent transition to peace caused, directly and indirectly,

two million deaths in addition to the three million victims of the generalised conflicts, and war resumption in 2008 produced tens of thousands more casualties. International interventions can help prevent such disruptions, but they often fail to do so.

*The trouble with the Congo* suggests a new explanation for these deadly failures. The Congolese case is indeed representative of a broader problem with international interventions. Other recent research emphasises the importance of local tensions in fuelling violence in most war and post-war situations.<sup>3</sup> However, the neglect by UN staff members and diplomats of local conflict resolution is a recurrent pattern of third-party interventions. According to a number of UN officials, none of the UN peacekeeping missions around the world implement any comprehensive bottom-up peacebuilding programmes. Only a handful of diplomats have tried (albeit without success) to advocate for a better approach to local issues.

This dearth of locally oriented programmes should not be surprising, since most elements of the dominant peacebuilding culture documented in the book come from the world polity, the peacebuilding field or the internal culture of international organisations, and are therefore not specific to the Congo. In many conflict and post-conflict situations, the dominant international peacebuilding culture shapes the interveners' understanding of peace, violence and intervention in a way that overlooks the micro-foundations necessary for sustainable peace. The resulting inattention to local conflict leads to unsustainable peacebuilding in the short term and the potential resumption of war in the long term.

## Notes

- 1 This paper has drawn upon material from Séverine Autesserre, *The trouble with the Congo* (2010), copyright Séverine Autesserre, published by Cambridge University Press, extracts reproduced with permission.
- 2 International Rescue Committee, *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: an ongoing crisis*, New York: International Rescue Committee and Burnet Institute, 2008, [http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/2006-7\\_congoMortalitySurvey.pdf](http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/2006-7_congoMortalitySurvey.pdf) (accessed 4 May 2011).
- 3 Christian Dennys and Idrees Zaman, *Trends in local Afghan conflicts*, Synthesis paper, Cooperation for Peace and Unity, 2009, [http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/CPAU\\_TrendsInLocalAfghanConflicts.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/CPAU_TrendsInLocalAfghanConflicts.pdf) (accessed 20 April 2011); Lee Ann Fujii, The power of local ties: popular participation in the Rwandan genocide, *Security Studies* 17(3) (2008), 568–597; Stathis Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Jacqueline Klopp and Prisca Kamungi, Violence and elections: will Kenya collapse? *World Policy Journal* 24(4) (2007/08), 11–18, [http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/WPJ\\_Kenya\\_violenceandelections.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/WPJ_Kenya_violenceandelections.pdf) (accessed 4 May 2011); Mario Krämer, *Violence as routine: transformations of local-level politics and the disjunction between centre and periphery in KwaZulu/Natal (South Africa)*, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe, 2007; Scott Straus, *The order of genocide: race, power, and war in Rwanda*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.