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Seven commentaries, three debates and one book: the author's response

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Reading the commentaries has been an exhilarating experience. Not only do the commentators generally agree with the central claims of the book, but my argument has also generated a great deal of debate. To open the response, I would therefore like to thank the *African Security Review* for putting together this book symposium and all the commentators for taking the time to offer such thoughtful comments on my work.

I have presented the book to multiple audiences since I first started drafting it. It usually draws two kinds of reactions, of which the commentaries provide a good reflection. The first response is usually experienced whenever I present the book to interveners deployed on the ground or to Congolese activists. Their reaction is usually that the analysis is correct and they then continue with brainstorming on the policy recommendations. Notably, they ask for more specifics on how interveners can overcome the challenges

inherent in helping to address the local causes of violence. In this sense, Kavanagh's review is a perfect illustration of the reactions of field-based interveners.

When I present the book to audiences more remote from the scene of ongoing violence in the eastern Congo, such as scholars, policymakers based in capital cities or headquarters, or Congolese of the diaspora, the questions focus on three main debates, on which all of the commentaries also touch. First, do top-down or bottom-up causes drive the violence in the Congo? Second, should the response to continuing violence be top down or bottom up? In particular, what should the role of the international community in the bottom-up process be? Finally, do constraints, vested interests or cultural frames best explain why international interveners have thus far neglected to support local peacebuilding?

My response addresses each of these questions in turn, focusing on the policy recommendations in the second section and paying particular attention to the commentaries that challenge my analysis. I conclude by briefly discussing the suggestions for further research present in the commentaries.

Top-down or bottom-up causes?

Nest, Seay, Matagne and Kavanagh support the central claim of *The trouble with the Congo*, namely that local factors were critical in sustaining violence during the Congolese transition from war to peace and democracy. Jackson, Mampilly and Fahey agree that distinctly local causes of violence did exist, but they insist that national and regional causes were more influential in perpetuating conflict than local agendas. Although they phrase their arguments as challenges to my analysis, a close look at their commentaries shows that their data in fact support the central assertions of the book.

It is an oversimplification to reduce my claim to the idea that only local causes of violence matter. The book, and notably most of chapter 2, demonstrates that top-down agendas also played a significant role in perpetuating tensions. My argument is therefore more nuanced than is implied by some of the commentaries: both top-down and bottom-up conflict are significant in sustaining violence. I agree that national and regional causes matter; however, I emphasise that violence is not purely a consequence of top-down tensions, as there are distinctively local motivations for violence. As Stephen Jackson puts it, the arrow of causality points both ways.

Another important nuance developed in the book is that the relative weight of top-down and bottom-up agendas depends on time and place. The introduction to chapter 4 reads:

> As will become evident over the course of the chapter, some types of
> grassroots conflicts are more salient at a particular juncture and in a

> particular locale – such as antagonisms over land in the Kivus in the 1930s …
> or struggles to control the local exploitation of mineral resources in North
> Katanga during the transition. The respective weight of bottom-up and
> top-down tensions in generating violence also varies over time and place –
> for example, while top-down tensions were particularly influential during
> the wars of the 1990s, bottom-up tensions were particularly significant
> during the transition. Some conflicts have incited more fighting than
> others, but this chapter demonstrates that both macro-level and micro-level
> antagonisms have generated and sustained ongoing violence (p 129).

All of the commentators' statements on the relative weight of top-down and bottom-up causes of violence confirm the analysis developed in this paragraph and in the subsequent chapter. In chapter 4 I demonstrate that grassroots dynamics were the most important causes of violence until 1994. All the reviewers agree with this analysis, as is most clearly evident in Jackson's history of the conflict in the Kivus and in Fahey's narration of the conflict in Ituri. Chapter 4 then explains that top-down causes became more influential during the war, as Fahey and Jackson also emphasise, although bottom-up causes continued to play a role. Even if Fahey disagrees with me and other researchers on the specifics, his description of the onset of the war in Ituri demonstrates that the roots were not only top down; they were also bottom up. From 2003 to 2006, the period that I study in the book, as national and international actors resolved the national and regional sources of tension, micro-level conflicts became increasingly more important, to the point of jeopardising the overall macro-level settlements. None of the reviewers challenges this statement. Jackson and Fahey merely insist that top-down causes were also important, a point on which, as mentioned above, we are in agreement.

The book does not analyse the post-2006 period, but both top-down and bottom-up agendas continued to play significant roles at this time. Mampilly's commentary most clearly presents the top-down causes, while Kavanagh's commentary and a *Foreign Affairs* article that I published in 2008 emphasise the grassroots dimensions.[1] At that time, one of the central reasons that Hutus and Tutsis supported the rebel leader Laurent Nkunda was linked to local agendas: to maintain their control over land and political power, and to protect their families and ethnic kin. As of the time of writing this response, my ongoing research has shown that bottom-up causes are once again driving most of the violence and are proving to be more influential than top-down conflicts. Kavanagh's review confirms this tentative finding, and so does the latest report by the International Crisis Group on the Congo, which explains that the regional reconciliation has failed to translate into any improvement of the security situation on the ground.[2]

In sum, all of us agree that local, national and regional causes of violence interacted to produce the actual violence. The commentators insist that top-down causes were more influential during the war, which is an analysis that the book also explores. They highlight

that top-down causes played a significant role during the transition, which the second chapter of my book similarly emphasises. Most importantly, none of the commentators disproves the central claim of the book: that bottom-up conflict precipitated considerable violence throughout the transition, and that it became increasingly more influential during this period.

Top-down or bottom-up response?

The discussion on the causes of violence is linked to the second debate raised in the reviews: whether international interveners should have adopted a top-down or bottom-up strategy to end ongoing violence. As Jackson says, and as I set out in detail in the book, the prevailing assumption among most international interveners during the period that the book studies 'was that you could not sustainably resolve local-level conflicts in the Kivus unless you resolved the underlying disputes at the national and regional levels'. My argument is that this statement is true, top-down intervention was necessary to assuage the ongoing tensions, but the reverse is also true you cannot sustainably resolve national and regional conflicts unless you resolve the underlying disputes at the local level. Just as top-down manipulation can jeopardise peace achieved at the local level, bottom-up conflicts, if left unresolved, will annihilate successes achieved at the macro-level – as has happened multiple times since the beginning of the transition. Notably, I do not claim that national and regional tensions are unimportant and that national and regional peacebuilding is unnecessary. Instead, I argue that both macro-level and micro-level peacebuilding are needed to make peace sustainable.

I thus totally agree with Jackson's and Fahey's suggestions that the United Nations (UN) should have followed through on its macro-level strategy. However, in addition to this top-down response, international actors should have supported bottom-up peacebuilding. Without this complementary strategy, the macro-level response could not have succeeded, no matter how consistent (as Jackson wishes) or how strong (as Fahey desires) it might have been.

The commentaries by Kavanagh, Seay, Nest and Mampilly provide ample evidence in support of this claim. Seay's commentary is particularly insightful in this regard. She rightly emphasises the peacebuilding roles that local actors, sometimes in conjunction with international interveners and sometimes independently, played during the transition, and she accurately reminds us that these efforts had a significant impact on national outcomes. It is true that further developments of the brief sections devoted to successful bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives in chapter 5 would have strengthened my argument – if only I had not already exceeded the length the publisher and I had agreed on! Seay's review, as well as her ongoing research, therefore makes a critical point in agreement with my policy recommendations: that bottom-up conflict resolution

helps to make peace sustainable, and thus that international interveners should have supported grassroots efforts. The points by Jackson and Fahey about the intervention in Ituri, which did address bottom-up tensions and stemmed violence, also reinforce my argument. Admittedly, Fahey argues that although micro-level initiatives contributed to pacification efforts, the top-down intervention was the most effective, but this assertion is not convincing, as Fahey does not provide any evidence to back up his claim.

As in the case of most audiences to whom I present my book, the commentators' main questions are less about the necessity of international support for bottom-up peacebuilding than about the feasibility and the specifics of such an approach. Nest, Mampilly, Seay, Kavanagh, Jackson and Matagne all raise questions that revolve around a central theme: what should the role of the international community in local peacebuilding be, and can it play that role? The book is primarily a scholarly endeavour, aimed at building theory and developing sound analysis, but it does include ten pages of policy recommendations in an attempt to answer these questions (pp 261–271). It is clear, however, that the topic is so complex and so controversial that it would deserve a new volume, based on another multi-year research project. My book, like the bulk of scholarly monographs, only includes preliminary suggestions that aim at providing a few pointers to interested policy makers and practitioners.

It is important to note that I do not advocate direct international involvement in the resolution of local conflicts. As the commentators mention, and as I explain extensively in the book, international interveners cannot and should not do so: they do not have the capacity, and thus their direct involvement is more likely to worsen the situation than to improve it. We all agree that only local Congolese actors can successfully undertake bottom-up conflict resolution. However, all of the local Congolese peacebuilders that I have met emphasised one central caveat: they need support in the form of logistics and funding. No matter how sincerely everybody wishes that local actors, in the Congo and elsewhere, have the resources that they need to act independently, the reality of conflict-ridden settings dictates otherwise. Only international interveners such as the UN, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), diplomats and donors have the necessary assets, so they need to play a supporting role. Local peacebuilders also often emphasise that they occasionally need help from their international counterparts to resolve some of the military and political problems that they themselves are not equipped to address.

As I explain in the book, grassroots actors should be in the driver's seat, regardless of whether these actors are local NGOs, local authorities or civil society representatives, as I and Seay argue, or religious structures, as Nest suggests. The international interveners' main role should be two-fold: to identify reliable grassroots peacebuilders and monitor their actions, and to channel the funds and logistical resources to the actors identified. In addition to being more effective, this approach would also be much less intrusive than what Matagne fears, and thus much more legitimate. It would also be more feasible as,

over time, interveners can develop an understanding of local contexts sufficient to enable them to identify reliable peacebuilders, even though they can never be knowledgeable enough to intervene directly in local issues. Moreover, having expatriates act only in support of local actors instead of as direct implementers would decrease the number of foreigners needed and thus go a long way towards alleviating the financial constraints that Kavanagh and Matagne mention. One would be able to fund quite a few locally driven programmes with the cost of one expatriate. This approach would alleviate some of the concerns mentioned by Seay, Kavanagh and Matagne: the monitoring ensures that the support goes to organisations that actually promote peace instead of fuelling violence, while that support ensures that local peacebuilders have the resources they need to implement effective programmes. It would also make it possible to tailor solutions to each specific conflict. The current work of the Life and Peace Institute in the Kivus is the perfect example of this strategy, and the results achieved so far demonstrate its feasibility and effectiveness.

The other objections of Jackson and Kavanagh to my policy recommendations seem to come from a misreading of the book: it is not an analysis of the UN mission in the Congo, which means that the policy recommendations do not specifically focus on the peacekeeping operation. As I explain in the conclusion, it is evident that NGOs, UN agencies like the UN Development Programme and UN-Habitat and traditional and non-traditional donors such as the Buffett Foundation are better suited to this supporting role than peacekeeping operations. However, peacekeepers can also play a positive role, if we follow two of the recommendations specified in the book. First, high-ranking policymakers (including, in the case of the UN, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Security Council and the leadership of each field mission) should emphasise the dangers of grassroots tensions and the staffers' responsibility in local conflict prevention and resolution (p 262). This would provide local peacebuilders with legitimacy and help overcome the resistance from staff members on the ground that troubles Kavanagh and Matagne. Journalists like Kavanagh also have a significant role to play. Publicising the risks posed by decentralised antagonisms and the valuable impact of bottom-up peacebuilding projects would help reinforce nascent interest in these topics, as many interviewees acknowledged that their organisations often paid more attention to issues that were widely covered in the press. Second, the UN needs to change its recruitment patterns, and to give preference to hiring new personnel with significant experience and anthropological training or interests, in order to ensure that they employ staff better suited to the new role of supporting bottom-up peacebuilding efforts.

The whole process will be difficult, costly and lengthy, and it will face a great deal of organisational resistance. It is, however, the only way to ensure that international interveners will finally be able to address bottom-up causes of violence and thus build sustainable peace. It will also be cost effective in the long run, as it will lead to more successful interventions and thus to shorter deployment periods on the ground.

Two of the commentators raise interesting questions on what form the top-down strategy should take. Nest asks what role elections should play, and whether I believe that elections and democracy are good for the Congo. There is no doubt about the latter. My analysis merely questions the timing of the elections that took place during the transition: They were organised too early and without the other measures that make them meaningful, such as freedom of the press and freedom of campaigning.

Fahey suggests a very intrusive approach to conflict resolution, namely that international actors should use their military forces to crush armed groups and impose peace. It is true that some interventions are necessary in times of crisis to protect the population. However, it is impossible to reach a sustainable peace through military means only. Military interventions are helpful in a limited number of emergencies, as an immediate solution to the crisis, but long-term peacebuilding, both top-down and bottom-up, is necessary to make peace sustainable – an endeavour that military actors cannot undertake. Furthermore, in addition to questioning the legitimacy of such a large intervention in a sovereign state, I also doubt its feasibility in a guerrilla war environment where armed groups are fragmented and know the terrain infinitely better than the interveners. I also shudder to think about the number of civilians that would become part of the 'collateral damage'.

Several commentators mention potential models for the bottom-up process. While the local efforts that Seay analyses and that I study in chapter 5 present successful grassroots peacebuilding initiatives worthy of consideration, several examples that the commentators raise are much less convincing. Iraq, which Kavanagh mentions, is such a different context (that of a forceful military invasion) that it is impossible to draw a useful comparison. With regard to the Congo it would be unfair to judge the local peacebuilding capabilities of the peacekeeping mission based on the performance of its military observers (as Kavanagh suggests), as 'milobs' are recruited on criteria unrelated to their capacity to implement peacebuilding programmes: they are selected by their national armies based on their military track records. Likewise, the Goma Peace Conference mentioned by Jackson, Matagne and Kavanagh was not an exercise in conflict resolution. Instead, as I explain on page 247 and as Kavanagh and Matagne similarly emphasise, the process was driven by an assumption that the violence was national – an assumption best exemplified in Mampilly's review. Local issues were mentioned on paper, but were never actually tackled during the Conference. To me, the Goma Peace Conference is just one more example of the ineffectiveness of top-down approaches to local conflict. I also disagree with Jackson on the international intervention in Katanga: as I demonstrate in the book, there were virtually no ongoing bottom-up peacebuilding efforts in this province.

Finally, contrary to what Jackson says, local conflict resolution is hardly a priority in the Congo today. In the ten months that I have just spent in North Kivu working on a new research project, I have been dismayed to see that the international approach to local

conflict has barely evolved. The NGOs that used to support local conflict resolution continue to do so, but in the Kivus there are still no more than a handful. The potential changes in approach that Matagne mentions are more tentative than what he and I would wish. The decentralisation process has been blocked mostly because of opposition from the central government. The peacekeeping operation continues to focus on top-down causes of violence, and so do the diplomatic missions and most of the donors. All of these interveners still consider local violence, including land issues, only when it is related to top-down causes, notably the return of refugees from Rwanda. There are a few new bottom-up peacebuilding efforts, such as those of UN-Habitat, but the scope of these is so limited that they could hardly be said to represent a shift in the overall strategy.

Constraints and interests or cultural frames?

The last main point of debate raised in the commentaries centres on the reason for the lack of international support for local peacebuilding. Was it due to the presence of vested interests, insurmountable constraints or cultural frames?[3]

While most commentators agree with some or all of my explanations based on the influence of the dominant international peacebuilding culture, Nest, Kavanagh and Mampilly also raise the issue of state interests. Mampilly argues that the realist explanation, that states pursue their own interests, is the most useful lens through which to analyse the intervention strategy. To me, the realist explanation would satisfactorily account for the lack of attention to local violence if powerful states had wanted war or instability to continue in the Congo. However, the Western states that Mampilly mentions had security, economic and diplomatic stakes in ensuring some stability (see my arguments in chapter 6). Thus, the puzzle remains: why did they overlook local agendas, since bottom-up conflict regularly jeopardised the macro-level settlements?

Kavanagh argues that the explanation for the lack of attention to local violence is the international indifference to the Congo. To me, this analysis would be convincing if there had been no international peacebuilding efforts whatsoever in the Congo. However, no matter how inadequate, there had been and still are significant financial and human resources for conflict resolution, and part of these resources could have been devoted to local peacebuilding. The questions then remain: why be indifferent to some of the Congo's problems (such as local conflicts) and not to others (such as national and regional tensions)? Why interpret the lack of material and financial resources as a constraint on local peacebuilding, and not as a constraint on the organisation of elections? The book shows that it was due to the presence of a dominant international peacebuilding culture. Certain tasks, such as organising elections, have been progressively constructed as the proper response to conflict, while others, such as support for local peacebuilding, have not.

Nest argues that state interests with regard to regime type may shape international peacebuilding, and influence the behaviour of international and non-government organisations. It is true, but interests are not a given; they are instead progressively constructed over time. My book looks at this process of construction in order to understand why state interests became centred on the promotion of certain regime types and certain responses to conflicts, and why the staff of international and non-governmental agencies reflected such a consensus.

Jackson and Fahey also raise a classic argument based on constraints, namely that interveners had too many things to do and thus could not focus on local peacebuilding. I agree that international peacebuilders were overwhelmed and that they thus had to prioritise their actions. However, we still need to understand why they deemed certain tasks (such as the organisation of elections) more important than others (such as support for local conflict resolution). Constraints did exist, but why interpret them in a way that precludes action on local peacebuilding? Jackson argues that 'this was less a case of unconscious blindness … than a deliberately and consciously "narrowed focus"'. This argument is not supported by the data. As I set out in detail on pages 92 to 94 of the book, it was a conscious decision only for a handful of high-level policymakers to ignore local conflict, while the rest did not even think about supporting local peacebuilding – grassroots issues were not even on their mental radar. No constraints or vested interests can account for such a pattern; only an explanation centred on knowledge production can do so.

A similar argument can be made regarding the lack of skills and expertise that Jackson flags as one of the main obstacles to international support for local peacebuilding. Why does this lack of skills exist and why does it persist? The book explains why skills, standard operating procedures and other tools and expertise have been developed to address certain issues (such as the organisation of elections) and not others (such as local peacebuilding).

In sum, material constraints, lack of national interest and organisational constraints and interests did play roles in preventing international action on local conflict. However, the book demonstrates that these constraints and interests were not given, pre-existing or objective. Rather, they were constituted by the dominant international peacebuilding culture. This culture shaped the international understanding of violence and intervention in such a way that international actors interpreted their lack of material capabilities as obstacles to grassroots peacebuilding and viewed their national and organisational interests as compatible with continued local conflict.

Finally, Jackson and Kavanagh argue that the culture I study was one of 'peacekeeping' rather than peacebuilding. This is a nuance frequently brought up by UN staff members, who define peacebuilding in a different way than I do in the book. Following Boutros

Boutros-Ghali, I use the concept of peacebuilding to refer to all efforts to strengthen and solidify peace, which includes peacekeeping. More importantly, the peacekeeping mission is only one of the many actors that the book studies, and it would be erroneous to claim that diplomats, NGOs, donors and various outside observers all adopt a culture of peacekeeping.

Beyond the book

My book started with a puzzle: even though the Congo hosts the largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission in the world, and even though it recently experienced a transition from war to 'peace and democracy', it continues to be the stage of one of the deadliest conflicts since World War II. Why did the international efforts fail to help the Congo achieve lasting peace and security? I proposed a straightforward answer. Bottom-up rivalries over land, resources and political power explain in large part why organised violence persisted in the eastern provinces after the Congo was supposedly at peace. However, a dominant peacebuilding culture shaped the intervention strategy in a way that precluded action on local conflicts. Most international actors interpreted 'post-conflict' fighting as the consequence of regional and national tensions alone. UN staff and diplomats viewed intervention at the macro level as their only legitimate responsibility. Local peacebuilding was such an unimportant, unfamiliar and unmanageable task that even the magnitude of the disaster could not impel international peacebuilders to augment their efforts at the local level.

Overall, most commentators agree with the central claim of the book: that local conflicts were significant causes of violence during the transition to peace, the period on which the book focuses. Most commentators also agree that a bottom-up approach would have been an essential complement to the top-down strategy. Finally, most of them support some or all of my argument that the presence of the dominant international peacebuilding culture explains the lack of international support for grassroots conflict resolution.

My argument, however, has generated a great deal of debate, both in this symposium and elsewhere. I believe that the book already contains well-grounded answers to many of the questions raised, and I hope that this paper has offered a convincing reply to outstanding questions. Ideally, *The trouble with the Congo* will evoke in its readers the same reaction as it did from the participants in this symposium: a willingness to debate, question and engage with its central arguments, to deepen and refine its contributions and to reflect productively on how to apply its policy recommendations.

Nest says that the hallmark of a good book is to suggest avenues for further research. I am glad that my argument has suggested so many avenues, both for policy-oriented

experts and for political science and anthropology scholars. In this symposium most of the commentators' doubts and questions centre on the specifics and feasibility of a bottom-up approach to conflict resolution. Developing policy recommendations with the level of specifics demanded by the commentators would require a new multi-year research project, preferably conducted by a policy analyst rather than by a scholar like myself. This is, to me, the most important future research possibility that the book suggests since, to use Matagne's striking phrasing, it would enable the advocates of a new approach to peacebuilding, as the 'former losers,' to become 'paradigmatic winners'.

Other suggestions resonate particularly strongly with me, as they touch on the core topics of my new project. As of the time of writing this response, I am conducting a one-year ethnographic investigation into a community of interveners deployed in the most violent province of the Congo. This ethnography, which is very similar to what Jackson calls for, enables me to consider several of the questions raised in this symposium. For instance, as Nest wonders, how do people from countries that do not adhere to Western and liberal norms adopt, adapt or subvert the liberal character of the instructions they receive from their headquarters? What are the consequences of the schism between capital and field locations that Mampilly mentions? Can we dig deeper into the international peacebuilding culture, including the social customs, rituals, informal interactions and relationships with local populations that Mampilly and Seay emphasise? The preliminary findings from this new project so far confirm and refine the analysis presented in *The trouble with the Congo*.[4]

Notes

1 Séverine Autesserre, The trouble with Congo: how local disputes fuel regional conflict, *Foreign Affairs* 87(3) (2008), 94–110.

2 International Crisis Group, *Congo: Pas de stabilité au Kivu malgré le rapprochement avec le Rwanda*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2010, http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-centrale/rd-congo/165%20Congo%20Pas%20de%20stabilite%20au%20Kivu%20malgre%20le%20rapprochement%20avec%20le%20Rwanda.aspx (accessed 4 May 2011).

3 This section considers the counter-arguments presented in the commentaries. For my answer to other alternative explanations, see *The trouble with the Congo*, pp 16–23.

4 At the time of writing this response I have summarised these preliminary findings in two publicly available papers: Constructing peace: a review of the scholarly literature on collective understandings of peace, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, *Critique Internationale* (52) (2011); and When the West meets the rest: understanding how international interventions operate on the ground, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, March 2011.