

The Only Way to Help Congo
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The situation in Congo keeps deteriorating even though its civil war has officially been over for years and the United Nations' second-largest peacekeeping mission is based there. The international community has failed to help Congo achieve peace and security because it fundamentally misunderstands the causes of the violence.

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Since the end of the country's transition to peace in late 2006, living conditions in the country (formally the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire) have become the worst in the world, according to the most recent Index of Human Development.

Average life expectancy at birth is 48 years, and close to 80 percent of the population survives on less than \$2 per day. Various armed groups, including the Congolese army, are committing horrific human rights violations, especially in the eastern part of the country. About 200,000 people have fled their homes since late April to escape the fighting and abuses.

The civil war in Congo was the deadliest conflict since World War II, and it created the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. More than five million people died from 1998 to 2007 as domestic and foreign armed groups fought to control the territory, destabilizing much of Central and Southern Africa. Babies and elderly grandmothers were raped. Some two million people — and as many as 80 percent of the inhabitants of Congo's eastern provinces — fled their homes to escape the violence.

African and Western diplomats, along with U.N. officials, actively supervised negotiations to end the war. In 2002, they brokered a peace deal, and in 2006 they organized the first democratic elections in Congo's history. To this day, the peacekeeping mission they set up is the only force capable of protecting the population from the ongoing violence.

But it has been a case of misguided intervention. One reason is that foreign diplomats, U.N. peacekeepers and many NGOs tend to view the fighting exclusively as a consequence of national and international tensions — especially power struggles among Congolese and foreign elites — and a spillover from the Rwandan genocide. And they typically consider intervention at the national or regional levels to be their only legitimate responsibility.

They 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. Most of the violence in Congo is not coordinated on a large scale. It is the product of conflicts among fragmented local militias, each trying to advance its own agenda at the village or district level. Those then percolate and expand.

Consider tensions between the Congolese of Rwandan descent and the so-called indigenous communities in the eastern provinces of South Kivu and North Kivu. These have roots in a longstanding competition over land and traditional and administrative power that began in the 1930s under Belgian colonial rule.

The conflict escalated after Congo's independence in 1960 as each camp recruited allies outside the province. With the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the crisis in the Kivus took on a regional dimension: local actors forged alliances with various Congolese and Rwandan armed groups, all in the interest of promoting their own agendas.

Rather than address these issues, though, international peacemakers have lately singled out three features of the ongoing conflict: as a primary cause of violence, the illegal exploitation of natural resources by Congolese and foreign armed groups; as a main consequence, sexual abuse against women and girls; as a central solution, reconstructing state authority.

International programs have thus emphasized three priorities: regulating the trade of minerals, providing care to victims of sexual violence and helping the central government extend its authority. This approach has provided a simple narrative that was easy to sell to audiences and donors in the West.

It has also backfired. Perversely, attempts to regulate the trade of minerals — like Section 1502 of the U.S. 2010 Dodd-Frank Act and a temporary mining ban imposed by the Congolese government from September 2010 to March 2011 — have enabled armed groups to strengthen their control over mines.

These measures focused on stopping the illegal trade of minerals but did nothing to destroy the actual power base of armed groups. In the absence of any broader political, economic or social reforms, local military leaders have managed to remain the principal power brokers in the rural areas of eastern Congo. In some cases, they have even expanded their mining operations while vulnerable populations lost their livelihood.

The international community's disproportionate attention to sexual violence has also raised the status of sexual abuse in a dangerous way. Some combatants now use it as a bargaining tool by threatening to commit mass rape if they are excluded from negotiations. And state-reconstruction programs have done little more than boost the capacity of the authoritarian central government, and of administrative officials at all levels, to oppress the population.

Addressing the consequences of sexual violence and these other abuses is important, of course, but donors should do more to address their underlying causes. Most important, they should approach the resolution of conflicts in Congo from the bottom up. They should assist local groups — official authorities, NGOs and civil-society representatives — with the funding, logistical means and technical capacity necessary to implement narrowly tailored programs.

For example, it's worth supporting the work of the Life and Peace Institute and its Congolese partners. After extensive field investigations in South Kivu, including interviews with some 800 local actors, LPI and its partner Action pour la Paix et la Concorde set up intercommunity forums to discuss the specifics of local conflicts over land and manage the violence.

And in cooperation with other Congolese organizations, LPI has helped broker precise agreements among pastoralists, traditional chiefs and state authorities to regulate the seasonal movement of livestock, including by establishing pathways to guide the cattle through the lowlands with minimal disruption to farmers.

As the U.N. Security Council convenes this coming week to renew the mandate of its peacekeeping mission in Congo, it should refocus its efforts on supporting grassroots projects directed at resolving local conflicts, especially over land. If the international community continues to address the consequences of the violence in Congo rather than its most important causes, it will only add to the death toll.

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