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## From Armchair Reading to Action: Acknowledging Our Role in the Horror of the Democratic Republic of the Congo - and Doing Something About It.

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## From Armchair Reading to Action: Acknowledging Our Role in the Horror of the Democratic Republic of the Congo - and Doing Something About It.

### Abstract

Reading Adam Hochschild's extraordinary account of ordinary people caught up in the horrific ravages of a civil war raging in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), I was struck by how incongruous my own encounter with this suffering is. I read his article over lunch, safe in the comfort of my own home. As a woman, I live largely without fear of the kind of brutal sexual violence that Hochschild opens his article with, as he related the story of a Congolese NGO worker who is herself a victim of multiple rapes.

### Keywords

Human rights, Democratic Republic of Congo, War, Sexual violence, Natural resources, United Nations (UN), Politics

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## **From Armchair Reading to Action: Acknowledging Our Role in the Horror of the Democratic Republic of the Congo - and Doing Something about It.**

by Shareen Hertel

Reading Adam Hochschild's extraordinary account of ordinary people caught up in the horrific ravages of a civil war raging in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), I was struck by how incongruous my own encounter with this suffering is. I read his article over lunch, safe in the comfort of my own home. As a woman, I live largely without fear of the kind of brutal sexual violence that Hochschild opens his article with, as he related the story of a Congolese NGO worker who is herself a victim of multiple rapes.

What can I (or anyone moved by an account such as Hochschild's) do to help end the suffering in the DRC? As Hochschild argues, the corruption and brutality experienced by the people of Congo is not new. For over 120 years, the country has endured constant economic exploitation punctuated by waves of violence-first perpetrated by its colonial overlords, and now by its own corrupt regime as well as by the congerie of rebel forces the DRC government remains unwilling or unable to control. Yet while international indifference and internal corruption may be at the root of the problems in the DRC, neither is acceptable.

The first step is to recognize our own part in the suffering. For those in the Western industrialized world, it is important to remember that this territory was a prized colonial possession of European powers and a Cold War ally of the United States. It remains a primary supplier of minerals (e.g., gold, tungsten, diamonds, coltan, copper) integral to our lifestyles today. We have benefitted from DRC's misery and we remain economically intertwined with a repressive regime today. Hence, as consumers, we need to support initiatives such as the "Kimberley Process" aimed at controlling the flow of ["conflict diamonds,"](#) while demanding the creation of similar programs to control the flow of resources into and out of the DRC to prevent fueling the war machine through our own purchasing activity.

Second, we need to collectively muster the political will to ensure that the United Nations mission and other multilateral involvement in the DRC are effective. There are already mechanisms in place to do so: the ["Sphere Project"](#) sets standards for NGO involvement in humanitarian relief efforts and the ["Good Humanitarian Donorship"](#) initiative works toward streamlined donor coordination in complex humanitarian emergencies. Both are grappling with the challenge of effectively delivering aid. But how many people are aware of these initiatives? And how many of us are willing to put pressure on our own legislators to ensure that there is accountability by the DRC Government when using donor resources? Or to ensure that the Congolese government ends its practice of appointing war criminals to official positions, in an open flouting of the spirit of international humanitarian law? How many of us are willing to press for greater efforts at addressing the roots of conflict and instability in the entire Great Lakes region?

Third, we need to recognize that internal corruption is also at the heart of the country's devastation. (The DRC is among the top ten most corrupt nations included in the 2008 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. Indeed, Hochschild describes a country plagued by official and informal corruption.

Yet, as he rightly argues, "the outside world has influence over the Congolese army"-one of the country's most corrupt institutions, its soldiers directly involved in rape as a weapon of war on a massive scale-because we're partly paying for it." But we must do more than pay for a war machine. We need to support the NGOs that provide humanitarian relief and those working creatively to shore up local groups working against corruption, fear, indifference, and violence. Hochschild attributes the extreme violence of ordinary people in Congo to "greed, fear," demagogic local leadership, and international indifference. Waking up to the horrors in the DRC and our role in them should embolden us to action.

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*Shareen Hertel is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut, jointly appointed with the University of Connecticut Human Rights Institute. She has also served as a consultant to foundations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies in the United States, Latin America and South Asia. She is the author of Unexpected Power: Conflict and Change Among Transnational Activists (Cornell 2006) and co-editor, with Lanse P. Minkler, of Economic Rights: Conceptual, Measurement, and Policy Issues (Cambridge, 2007).*