

Violent power, civilian exclusion and the M23

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[Zoë Marriage](#) [1] 14 November 2012

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Violence in eastern DRC is portrayed by western countries in terms of abject failure: people or events in the Congo (or Rwanda) have caused peacebuilding and development processes to fail. But the M23 is a direct result of processes that legitimate violent power.

Since the mid-1990s northern donors, in particular the UK, Belgium, USA, EU and UN, have played key roles in the development and security of the Great Lakes area of Central Africa. Northern aid to Rwanda was enthusiastic in the wake of the Rwandan Patriotic Front's victory that ended the genocide in 1994. Aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo came later, following a liberalisation programme that was promoted in 2001 by the International Financial Institutions and set the scene for donor re-engagement after ten years' absence. In the east of Congo, and especially in the Kivus, violence has continued at varying levels of intensity, the latest round being perpetrated by the M23, credibly reported to be supported by Rwanda.

The discourse of development describes Congo in terms of abject failure: from failure of the state through failures of ceasefires or peace agreements, to failures on Millennium Development Goals. Practically all reports on Congo come from institutions (of various political persuasions and – apparently – none) based in the north, rather than in Congo. Their tone is that despite the efforts made in promoting peace, democracy and liberalisation, people or events in Congo (or Rwanda) have caused these processes to fail.

These failures are not presented as a reflection on the intentions of donors who are taken to be beneficent (if frustrated), and who – despite the disappointments of development on the African continent since Independence – continue to assume roles for themselves in developing countries. Over the last fifteen years, northern donors have intertwined security claims with development policy. This has given them roles in promoting peace agreements, designing political and legal infrastructure, arranging demobilisation, and co-writing constitutions. Development and security are held to be mutually reinforcing, and security is defined in terms of shared interests.

All in the same boat?

The assertion of shared interests is problematic, as Congo has been pillaged throughout its history. The experience of its population is not one of commonality but of incompatible interests that have

been pursued through violent power. What is more, beyond the claims made, it is not obvious what has changed in the interests of power bases that would signal a fundamental reconfiguration of security.

On the contrary, there are clear continuities. In the 21st century, northern donors have reasserted their influence in the Great Lakes region and used political and economic leverage to stabilise conflicts, thereby reinforcing patterns in the distribution of power at the national level. In Congo and Rwanda, northern aid has contributed significantly to the regularisation of military leaders into political roles. This has an evident rationale in coaxing them from the battlefield, but has also crowded out civilian contenders to political leadership. In both countries, elite individuals and groups have been strengthened, excluding the majority of the population from political and economic power.

In Congo, the Transition from the peace agreement in 2002 to the elections four years later saw northern sponsorship systematically privileging those who used violence. The peace, funded and orchestrated by northern donors, appointed former belligerents to presidential and vice-presidential positions. This process implicated donors in violence since it required them to overlook both elite predation on the population and the continuing fighting in the east of the country. The promotion of the elite cadre inflicted less visible forms of violence too, in granting licence for these people to pillage aid funding and impose arbitrary and regressive taxation.

Despite major differences in the political situation in Rwanda, there too donors undercut the possibility of domestic accountability through unquestioning support of the leadership. A working relationship established between donors and President Paul Kagame in the late 1990s established conditions for extensive tolerance of his use of violence in suppressing opponents domestically and pursuing interests in Congo. The recent withdrawal of donor funding did not rectify this situation and in some ways aggravated it by attempting to manipulate the Rwandan government through aid. Meanwhile, the contribution of Rwanda to the UN mission in Darfur ties the hands of donor countries that support UN deployment in African conflicts but are reluctant to contribute troops.

Up-ending development & security

Supporting violent power in the region continually up-ends the development and security that donors purport to be promoting. Peace in Congo was pursued not by compensating the victims of war but by rewarding its perpetrators, and democratisation was arranged by closing political space. The third element of the triad of contemporary development – economic liberalisation – is contorted by these political arrangements. Collaborations of sorts have been established between the leaderships and donors that marginalise the majority of the population.

Congo's economic liberalisation in 2001, in the heat of the war, was promoted with such speed that there was no opportunity to develop supporting institutions or processes of employment or distribution. It set the stage for the fire-sale of mining concessions in 2004-5 that brought huge profits to elite politicians and was disastrous in development terms. The lack of legal or political procedure was not a limitation, though. It was functional in over-riding the involvement or protest of the population and thereby fast-tracking international access to mineral resources.

For the leaderships in the region, aid funding is a source of revenue to be negotiated with reference to control over the far greater resources of eastern Congo. The Congolese government has used the availability of aid to increase its strength domestically, particularly in areas that are uncontested. In the turbulent east, it has long-armed control of mining and the use of force to the largely unpaid army, which pays for the privilege. For Rwanda, instability in the Kivus is sufficient to allow extraction whilst managing the reputational damage resulting from its backing to militia groups. The M23 is currently heading up the violence, but its existence stems from the normalisation of violent power in the nominally democratic settings of Congo and Rwanda, and its attacks are facilitated by the lack of any political, legal or military structure to protect the population.

The pursuit of power through violence has produced winners and losers rather than shared gains or losses. The interests of northern donors have been partially fulfilled by legitimising the leaderships in Kinshasa and Kigali. This has extended northern power through the imposition of political and economic configurations that are minimally compatible with their form of neoliberal power. Regional elites have also benefited from the process. What is presented from the northern perspective as

state weakness – the inability of Congo to secure its borders and the contestation between Rwandan rogue elements – are as much indicators of state strength over a population that is so debilitated it is not able to organise self-defence or opposition.

The losers have consistently been the civilian population, particularly those in the Kivus, who are rendered vulnerable and whose existence is irrelevant or awkward to more powerful actors. The processes that nurture these forms of power in Kinshasa and Kigali have reinforced the divide between the interests of the population and those of the leadership. The M23 provides distraction from the divisive interventions of which it is a product. It focuses international attention on the Kivus, not on the sponsorship of violent power that perpetually throws up the dynamics responsible for the formation of militia groups.

The M23 – a likely upshot of violent power

Given the winners and losers, the discourse of efforts made on the part of the donors and failure in Congo is unconvincing. The areas of ‘failure’ identified from the northern perspective are straightforwardly opportunities for northern donors to assign roles to themselves – in state building, in the architecture of the peace or in aid for the Millennium Development Goals. The continuing ‘failure’ is confusing only because of the claims that these interventions are made in the name of shared interests.

By claiming security roles, northern donors tie themselves into a bind in Congo. The claim is made that interests are held in common, but what happens when interests of parties in Congo conflict with each other or with donor interests? Official aid comes from governmental departments: those departments cannot work purposefully to neglect or jeopardise national interests. The claim that security is held in common comes not from the discovery of a new form of security. Instead it is political gloss that justifies their security role by denying the pursuit of northern interests.

The aid given by northern donors has directly contributed to the formation of aggressive elite leaderships on both sides of the Kivus. These leaderships use violence to score political, military and economic points and to consolidate their power at the expense of the population in the Kivus. It may seem disingenuous to make the case that donors obscure their support for divisive politics in the Great Lakes region with security claims of shared returns. But it is much more cynical to support violent power in Kinshasa and Kigali and then point to domestic failures when states opportunistically pick at their differences through militia operations against the population.

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 About the author

Zoë Marriage is Senior Lecturer in the Development Studies Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where she teaches on Security. Zoë has researched extensively in countries affected by conflict in Africa. She is the author of [Not Breaking the Rules, Not playing the game. International Assistance to Countries at War](#) [23] (2006, Hurst & co) and more recently has focused on the relationship between security and development in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Currently Zoë is working on a political economy of capoeira; she trains capoeira with [Cordão de Ouro, London](#) [24].

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