

Was UN Peacebuilding Successful in Congo's Civil Wars?

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The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been in a state of political and social instability since before its independence from Belgium in 1960. Historically, leaders such as King Afonso of Kongo and other elites sold tribal members to the slave trade, dating all the way back to the 1500s. European colonization led to political dysfunction – including corrupt leadership, military abuse, and ethnic division. The democratic election of Patrice Lumumba in 1960 held promise for Congo, yet the aftermath of colonization caused lingering hardships and necessitated United Nations peacekeeping actions. A military coup led by Joseph Mobutu in 1970 caused even more polarization and violence (see Human Rights Watch, 2009). The DRC fought in the First Congo War after the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda, when the Congolese government was unable to defeat various armed groups (including some Rwandan Hutu groups who crossed the border). The Second Congo War, from 1998 to 2003, pitted government forces supported by Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe against rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda; an estimated three million people died in the conflict. A 2002 peace deal led to the formation of a transitional government in 2003, but ongoing violence by armed groups has continued – “largely due to poor governance, weak institutions, and rampant corruption” (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

Peacebuilding is a process that aims to understand why violence occurs to promote a safe, nonviolent society (International Alert, n.d.). It includes institution building, support for humanitarian organizations, democracy-building, and political reconstruction. The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) took over from an earlier UN peacekeeping operation – the United Nations Organization Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) – in July 2010. Its new mission included “the protection of civilians, humanitarian personnel

and human rights defenders under imminent threat of physical violence and to support the Government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts” (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.).

In this paper, I argue that a variety of state and non-state actors have impacted peacebuilding in the DRC. Although now a republic, Congo’s long history of outside intervention has heavily influenced and shaped its existing government. Both international and internal exploitation has made it very difficult for the United Nations to accomplish its goals. This paper will explore the DRC’s political history, including peacebuilding efforts, to better understand why well-intentioned peace processes have failed to reach their full potential.

Historical Background

The history of European involvement in Congo begins with Christianity and enslavement. Portuguese explorers first introduced Christianity to the kingdom in the early 1500s, and the religion was often used to promote the slave trade (Weisbord, 2003). King Afonso of Kongo helped the Portuguese export slaves in the 1500s. Afonso brought slaves back from various wars and sent some to Portugal to cover various expenses; he used slaves as commodity exports because they had monetary value in Portugal (Heywood, 2009). King Afonso is heavily criticized for endangering his own people, exploiting them for profit, and leading his country into civil unrest. When the British abolished the slave trade in 1839 and cut off that source of income for Kongo, the country came to rely on trading their natural resources such as ivory and rubber (Weisbord, 2003).

Later exploitation by Belgium’s King Leopold II laid the foundation for present-day instability in Congo (Johnson, 2014). The Republic of Congo was one of the two African nations once ruled by Belgium, the other being Rwanda. Before being colonized by Belgium in 1908, there were heavy slave raids and civil unrest during post-Portugal rule. Leopold promised to unify the state. To do this, he originally purchased Congo as his own property and named it a Belgian colony, but it was soon operated by the Belgian government. He was known for cruel behavior and quests to profit from natural resources such as ivory and rubber. (Ivory was used for household items, false teeth, and instruments. Since there was a growing ivory market in Europe, Leopold made sure that private companies could not benefit from his land and raised the price of exported goods.) Driven by his own economic interests, Leopold ended up sacrificing his prior promises to Congo’s people (Johnson, 2014). To protect his resources and increase production, Leopold established his own military force, the *Force Publique*. The *Force Publique*’s officer corps included only white Europeans. On arriving in the Congo, they recruited men from Zanzibar and West Africa, and, eventually, from the Congo itself. In addition, Leopold

encouraged the slave trade among Arabs in the Upper Congo in return for slaves to fill the ranks of the *Force Publique*. During the 1890s, the *Force Publique's* primary role was to exploit the natives as *corvée* laborers to promote the rubber trade (History Guild, 2022). The *Force Publique's* abusive tactics included inhumane working conditions, death, amputation, famine, and the kidnapping of village women (Johnson, 2014).

Belgium's colonization of Congo hurt the country in other ways during Congo's slow path toward independence. For instance, there were negative effects of Belgian ties during World War I. Congo was tasked with providing food and soldiers for the war efforts as a European colony. There was little pay for labor and Congolese soldiers made up much of the defense line. In addition, Congo suffered from Belgium's Great Depression. Their debt was worse than any other country in Africa, and Belgium responded by increasing taxes on the Congolese people (Johnson, 2014). Congo also had insufficient health regulations and policies that led to unsanitary hospitals, a lack of hospital beds, and no health insurance. The cost of healthcare was so high and underfunded that only the elites were able to access care (Johnson, 2014).

Belgium declared Congo an independent nation in 1960, in part due to international backlash against Leopold. Uproar and dysfunction followed independence. Like many colonized nations, years of oppression had left the country without the ability to self-rule effectively. There were few people with the education and administrative experience needed to rule, and there was no military. Belgium withdrew their administrators, army officials, doctors, and many essential workers, abruptly leaving Congo without the personnel to manage the government. Meanwhile, access to education was blocked out of fear of a revolt, causing schools to close and limiting the number of graduates from secondary schools and universities. The future of Congo suffered from this denial of educational opportunities (Johnson, 2014). Many understandably turned the blame on white European citizens, which caused violence initiated by the *Force Publique* and tribal groups. Although Belgium left behind great infrastructure, they also left behind little government and political foundation for the Congolese to work with (Schatzberg, 1997).

In 1960, African nationalist Patrice Lumumba won the first democratic election in Congo and became the country's first Prime Minister. Lumumba, an anti-colonial nationalist, started the *Mouvement National Congolais* to help with the decolonization process amidst the Cold War. With ongoing civil unrest, Lumumba promised to unite Congo as a new republic while also trying to unite with the United States and the Soviet Union. Lumumba's intentions were to replace Western infrastructure and restore African culture, but many politicians felt this approach was extreme and that their parties

were being left out. This period, known as the Congo Crisis, caused tension within the government. Deputies in Katanga disapproved of Lumumba's government so much so that they seceded from Congo and continued to be under Belgian rule. Lumumba called on United Nations peacekeeping troops to intervene because of factors such as the Belgian military presence, Katanga seceding from Congo, and a dysfunctional military (Gerard & Kuklick, 2015). The first actions by UN Peacekeepers in Congo were ineffective, however, and Western nations were still largely in support of Belgium. This caused Lumumba to ask the USSR for assistance, heightening tensions between Congo and international actors. Soon after being dismissed from his duties as Prime Minister, Lumumba was captured and executed by Belgian officers in Katanga in January 1961 (World History Edu, 2020).

United Nations Peacekeepers withdrew in 1964 when Katanga reunited with Congo and Joseph Mobutu took charge as president but, like Leopold and Lumumba, Mobutu abused his power and exploited those around him. His corrupt government silenced protesters, favored the elite, and failed to build public infrastructure (Johnson, 2014). Like Lumumba, Mobutu struggled with creating a government in a politically unstable state. Such instability was the result of colonization, ethnic divisions, and international pressures during the Cold War (Schatzberg, 1997). Under these circumstances, Mobutu's response was to increase military action, crack down on resisters and political rivals, and rule with fear. Over time, the country degenerated into a dysfunctional state with predatory and corrupt officials at every level (Ilorah, 2009). Mobutu's single-party rule lost support, and small intra-state actors became more dependent on their own resources rather than relying on the federal government. With regional autonomy also came local ethnic tensions in communities. Michael Schatzberg (1997) notes that politicized ethnicity and widespread mistrust made political legitimacy difficult to attain, with localized outbreaks of violence being common.

Exploitative colonial practices left countries like Congo and Rwanda with limited ability to transition to functional governments, and authoritarian leaders who filled power gaps often committed human rights abuses. Ethnic warfare broke out in various states, including those former Belgian colonies (Ilorah, 2009). Rwanda experienced a genocide targeting the Tutsi minority in 1994, and the influx of Rwandan refugees was the downfall of Mobutu's reign and led to Congo's first civil war. The resettlement of Rwandan refugees in eastern Congo caused disorder between the refugees and the locals. Hutu perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide fled to Congo for resettlement. The United Nations Security Council struggled immensely to handle the overflow of Hutu refugees coming into Eastern Zaire and present-day Congo (Hoefsloot, 2016).

The Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) – with the support of the Rwandan government and Congolese politician Laurent Kabila – was a rebel group of Tutsi soldiers who pursued and killed Hutu refugees in the Congo’s eastern regions. AFDL soldiers consisted of Rwandan natives, Tutsi Congolese, and anti-Mobutu forces. Instead of hitting major cities, the ADFL focused on destroying refugee camps; in July 1997, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated that about 200,000 Hutu refugees could well have been massacred in a systematic, premeditated way (quoted in Hutu Genocide, n.d.). Human right abuses committed by the AFDL included belly cutting, female genital mutilation, and slaughtering with sharp objects such as knives. One of the major incidents that happened on DRC’s grounds was the massacre near the Bengamisa camp; Hutu refugees were trapped, kidnapped, had their throats cut open, were thrown alive from hilltops, or were dumped in the river (Hutu Genocide, n.d.).

With the international community watching, it is difficult to understand why the United Nations did not send peacekeeping forces to these refugee camps. Rick Hoefsloot (2016) argues that, in the beginning, the AFDL purposely used certain tactics to avoid a response from the United Nations. Those tactics included getting rid of the genocidal evidence, threatening the locals to not share what they saw, and blocking access to humanitarian aid. More importantly, with the guidance of the Rwandan military and Kabila, AFDL members were taught to dehumanize all refugees by labeling them as perpetrators and then hunting them down. Congo’s second civil war began after Mobutu was overthrown and Kabila took over as president, leading to further corruption and ethnic tensions. While the western half of the country had at least nominal state control, the eastern half was divided between Uganda, Rwanda, and respective Congolese allies. The assassination of Kabila fueled growing momentum for supporting rebel-backed groups in these regions (Steinert & Grimm, 2014).

Peacebuilding

The peacebuilding process is an evolving practice developed by the United Nations, in which the UN pilots the socio-economic and political reconstruction of a state and gives support for sustainability as a short-term and a long-term effect. The United Nations established the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) in 2005 as an intergovernmental body to help prevent war in conflicted nations. The Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Fund are two bodies of the PBC that address finances and administrative needs. Post-conflict peacebuilding includes humanitarian assistance, disarmament, refugee reintegration, crime prevention, economic assistance, and election monitoring (Lambourne & Herro, 2008).

Wendy Lambourne and Annie Herro (2008) believe the nonviolent concept of peacebuilding in failed or fragile states is more successful than Western-led interventions (which are commonly referred to as “peacekeeping” missions). Both United Nations and non-UN led interventions have been largely unsuccessful in achieving long-term state sustainability and have also been subject to criticism for forcing liberal ideologies onto countries. Peacebuilding is frequently seen as being more legitimate than intervention since the self-interests of outside actors often factor into intervention efforts. When operations focus on peacebuilding and supporting a state rather than operating a government, there is a greater chance of success. Supporting a state can include empowering communities and building relationships with local stakeholders. Peacebuilding is a dynamic process that is essentially a political task, note Lambourne and Herro (2008), but it is also a social process that rebuilds fractured relationships. Sustainable peacebuilding, therefore, requires relationship-building as well as institutional reform and reconstruction (Lambourne & Herro, 2008).

State-building, nation-building, and peacebuilding are all operations that rely upon one another. Although peacebuilding is more than just state-building, part of peacebuilding does include the definition of state-building; there cannot be a successful nation without a dependable government, leaders, and political systems. Nation-building is also an important piece of peacebuilding, because it restores the national identity and culture of an independent state. Though all three are important, peacebuilding contains all the qualities needed for reconstruction, and oftentimes, the need continues even after state or nation-building. Peacebuilding can also sometimes take decades to complete (Jenkins, 2013). During the Cold War, for instance, UN-led peacebuilding operations faced hardships because it was difficult to gain support and funds during an era that favored sovereignty and nationalism. Western states and organizations were criticized for promoting liberal ideologies, and some argue that peacebuilding must take a bottom-up approach (Jenkins, 2013).

To determine if a peacebuilding operation is successful, Robert Jenkins (2013) emphasizes three factors: humanitarian relief, building just institutions, and building a legitimate political system through the involvement of the broader international community. First, international aid that only benefits short-term goals, such as military usage, will be largely unsuccessful. Although Western actors such as the United States and the United Kingdom have both given aid that supports both short- and long-term goals, it is important for them to stay consistent in their foreign aid to promote stability even when there is no chance for democratization. Second, action will be unsuccessful if efforts neglect the promotion of justice and institution-building. Researchers found that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to women’s rights, for example, have not been active in rebuilding regimes that are

traditionally sexist and follow outdated laws. Peacebuilding must recognize the importance of institution-building, regime change, and the fight against corrupt politicians for long-term transformation. Yet this cannot be a rushed process; history shows that hurrying such change has not been successful. Lastly, there is more legitimacy and respect for peacebuilding operations led by the broader international community – that is, the United Nations – as opposed to the United States (although the United States has historically taken on harder cases). Again, concerns about state self-interests and pushing political ideologies can factor into these issues (Jenkins, 2013).

One common feature of peacebuilding is the promotion of democracy by both Western nations and the United Nations. Although it could be argued that the democratization of failed states is both successful and unsuccessful, there is a greater chance of democracy as a long-term solution when UN actors promote peacebuilding rather than Western nations, and that success is even more likely if they use a mixed approach (Steinert & Grimm, 2014). Because war causes extreme community distress, it is up to international actors to promote democracy and establish the foundation for rebuilding a regime. For the United Nations to be successful at this task, it must create stability in the realms of military and security, socioeconomics, and politics. This includes the demobilization of former military forces, which includes a process to train and integrate current or former military members smoothly. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration can foster confidence-building between conflicting parties and enhance their willingness to cooperate. Researchers found that post-war countries are more likely to experience democratization if it is included in the peacebuilding agenda by the United Nations (Steinert & Grimm, 2014).

A second common feature of peacebuilding is the reconstruction of legitimate political, social, and economic institutions. The legitimacy of political actors is necessary; it impacts citizens' trust in institutions and helps develop democratic systems. Laws, politicians, judges, and police all influence whether the overall system is deemed legitimate or not. Building just social institutions promotes fair, legitimate elections that voters can trust, for instance, and humanitarian relief bolsters economies. Indeed, poverty is a widespread cause of human rights abuses and is an obstacle to democratic development. Consequently, peoples' immediate and basic needs must be satisfied before they can turn into politically motivated citizens (Steinert & Grimm, 2014).

The Congolese Peace Process

In the Congo, the UN peacebuilding process was done in four major phases known as the "Four Peace Plan." The first phase consisted of creating the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement to end Congo's

second civil war and calling for a ceasefire by rebel groups and neighboring actors (Sanguma, 2012). The *Mission de l'Organisation de Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo* (MONUC) played an important role in this phase given that peacekeeping troops assisted on the ground and mediated the withdrawal process. The second phase of the peacebuilding efforts was to bring legitimacy to the new federal government, and the third and fourth phases concerned a national election (Sanguma, 2012).

Any discussion of foreign aid in Congo requires an understanding of the country's complex history of colonization and internal exploitation. As noted previously, self-rule was challenging because of slow economic and social growth – and it is difficult to imagine true reform unless Congo's debt is dismantled. Difficulties related to poverty, poor infrastructure, and corruption in local communities heightened tensions and laid the foundation for systematic oppression from various leaders and stakeholders, and they also fueled ethnic tensions in fights over resources (Sanguma, 2012).

Peacebuilders and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs made efforts to alleviate social and economic barriers, but the country still faces challenges such as poor schooling, fragile infrastructures, and slow economic development. World Bank (2022) socioeconomic data on Congo shows that the standard of living has not increased much despite peacebuilding efforts. Although economic growth reached six percent in 2022, Congo's reliance on trade with war-torn Ukraine and other international partners impacts the prices of goods, inflation, and poverty (World Bank, 2022).

Military disarmament, integration, and legitimacy are also key for successful peacebuilding. Without such positive actions, armed violence from local rebels and state militaries continued, often under the direction of rights abusive leaders. Although the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) was established to mediate and monitor armed conflict and the withdrawal of troops, the operation was unsuccessful since it did not provide a blueprint for long-lasting peace. Peacekeeping troops deployed by the United Nations and meant to work with national authorities underestimated the violence and backlash of local rebel groups. Growing emphasis on civilian protection raised expectations among locals that peacekeepers often could not fulfill, leading to a reassessment of strategy and mission objectives (Berdal, 2016). The inadequacies of MONUC and peacekeepers in small communities showed the shortcomings of military disarmament and integration.

Indeed, Congo's abusive military history and corrupt politicians led to major backlash against peacekeeping efforts (Berdal, 2016). In a state struggling with civil war, it was impossible for peacekeepers to stand with the state government and not face opposition from rebel groups such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo. The complications of local/ethnic violence – including

fighting over resources and food security – were not considered before intervention, causing military integration and weapon disarmament to be unsuccessful. Local violence over land and political power went unaccounted for, which led to massacres and human rights abuses (Autesserre, 2007). Today, violence by armed groups continues in migrant-heavy communities and those facing scarce resources. Competition among different groups and communities then extends beyond civil war, since locals learn to act in their best interest – which means protecting their identities and protecting themselves against perceived threats. In the case of Congo's first civil war, for instance, local Congolese alliances with Rwandan militias divided groups along ethnic lines, which destabilized Congo. Peacebuilding without attention to ethnic tensions is unlikely to succeed, highlighting the need for a bottom-up approach to ending conflict (Sanguma, 2012).

A major shortcoming of peacebuilding operations in Congo is the lack of accountability for abusive regimes and militias. "The lack of proper accountability, coupled with the sometimes passive response from intimidated and manipulated citizens – many of whom lack the willpower to speak out for fear of harassment – results in monopolization of power, abuse of privileges, arrogance and waste of resources by the political leadership," writes Richard Ilorah (2009, p. 695). The lack of accountability in present-day Rwanda has impacted Congo and its recovery. Congo is commonly associated with the Rwandan genocide, but it is assumed that Tutsis were all victims and Hutus were all perpetrators. This leaves little room to discuss genocidal violence perpetrated against Hutu refugees in Congo (Hoefsloot, 2016). The International Criminal Court investigated six individuals responsible for crimes against humanity in Congo, yet there are many perpetrators still unaccounted for. Addressing these problems today is the responsibility of organizations like the African Union, set up to protect human rights among marginalized groups (Ilorah, 2009).

Political stability is an additional key component of successful peacebuilding, but Congo continues to struggle with corruption and abuses of power. Government corruption and dictatorships have been engraved in Congo's politics for far too long and, despite calling national elections, the country has not fully adopted democratic rule. The liberal international agenda did not align with local actors and focused solely on national elections, which was not the proper response to end ethnic polarization at the time (Jenkins, 2013). The mere idea of holding elections did not legitimize the government itself and did not gain the trust of citizens who have been exploited and unaccounted for in years past. Although a top-down approach is necessary for peacebuilders to create political stability and legitimate institutions, the inclusion of diverse ethnic groups remains at large.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that by prioritizing the government, peacebuilders within the international community lacked necessary understanding of Congo's conflict – particularly how it has silenced and exploited smaller communities (Sanguma, 2012). “The international intervention exclusively focused on the national and the international sphere because the international community saw holding elections as a workable solution for state building and peacekeeping; neglecting the importance of local conflict resolution,” writes Wilita Sanguma (2012, p. 29). Local struggles in Congo encompass human and identity needs; human needs include the need for security and belonging, while identity needs are a threat to one's identity (Sanguma, 2012). Identity-based conflict is often triggered by the privileging of a group that has been deemed “more valuable” than other identity groups. This allows certain groups to benefit (politically and economically) more than others, further establishing the dichotomy of privilege and oppression. Various militias and rebellion groups gained community support following histories of regional and ethnic conflict (Sanguma, 2012).

Notably, peacebuilding efforts often failed to incorporate a gender perspective into their actions, thereby allowing barriers for participation to endure for Congolese women. The underrepresentation of females in peace deals at the local and national level lead to a lack of female participation in socio-economic and political spheres. (Selebogo, 2020). To have a successful economy and culture, respect for and involvement of women is needed. According to Petunia Selebogo (2020), female participation not only keeps women safe but can also promote long-lasting governing structures that promote human rights.

The political history of Congo uncovers the exploitation of citizens by elites from early on, which highlights why ethnic tensions have remained a lasting issue and why peacebuilding was unsuccessful following the country's recent civil wars. Reeling from the misuse of power over generations, the country is in dire need of unity and stability at both state and local levels. Competition for scarce resources, combined with ethnic divides and corrupt military and political leadership, represent challenges for peacebuilding initiatives that are difficult to overcome. The international community has failed to adequately consider these obstacles, especially in pursuit of successful humanitarian relief, military disarmament, and political stability. Efforts to promote democracy have failed to account for years of distrust in government. To move Congo forward, it is necessary to hold rights abusers accountable and pursue a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding. By restoring trust in government and respect for human rights, Congo may gain lasting peace.

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