Insecurity and Local Governance in Congo’s South Kivu

For more than 15 years, Congo’s South Kivu province has experienced recurrent war and violence. But while the state collapsed during this time, governance did not entirely disappear. This paper examines how and why local systems of governance survived, and draws lessons for how to rebuild human security.

Democracy and lasting peace depend on how local communities are re-integrated into the larger Congolese nation.

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Evidence was gathered through unstructured interviews with people involved in various aspects of local governance throughout the province. The author wanted to look at state reconstruction from the ‘bottom up’, rather than ‘top down’ as in discussions on core central government functions.

The paper studies the background to the conflict. Communities tend to view violence as imposed upon them, chiefly by organised groups’ clashes with armed forces. The presence of exploitable minerals attracts further external interference. Disputes between communities typically centre on jurisdiction over plots of land. Tension also arises over how far any single ethnic group is integrated into state structures.

The paper discusses communities’ mechanisms for coping in wartime. Despite great difficulty, pre-war traditional leadership structures remained intact and provided a degree of governance, as central state apparatus disappeared. The Catholic Church played a major role in sustaining institutions and offering a channel to the outside world. Self-defence movements, supported by diasporas and traditional chiefs, sprang up to provide security. While efficient in destabilising the Rwandan army in the province, these movements increased the...
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In the absence of a state, life in South Kivu was precarious, poverty severe and conditions ripe for external exploitation. But governance did not disappear. Its structures were hidden but ready to spring back into life.

Post-conflict, the social contract between the state and society has been largely re-established in the DRC. But in South Kivu the situation remains volatile. Underlying tensions remain, the army and police are ineffective and undisciplined, and unemployment is high. Local communities mistrust international and national institutions. Fears abound of another sectarian war, fuelled by the behaviour of various groups.

Policy lessons

• Multi-layered, networked governance exists in the absence of a state, and needs to be harnessed in post-conflict reconstruction, not viewed as a threat to it.

• Local tensions underpinning larger national and international conflicts have not been addressed so far in the state reconstruction process in Kivu.

• Ruandan and Ruandaphone influence should not go unchecked, particularly within the army in Kivu, which is seen as a predator not a protector by non-Ruandaphones.

• Local communities want the UN’s force (MONUSCO) to show greater commitment to protecting them.

• Soldiers, police, magistrates need to be properly paid to lessen corruption and violence.

Credits

Ferdinand Mugumo Mushi (2012) Insecurity and Local Governance in Congo’s South Kivu, IDS Research Report 74, Brighton: IDS

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