Displacement, Return and Environmental Peacebuilding

Congolese Refugees and the Potential of Ethnographic Research

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As local participation has been central to some peacebuilding efforts, the voice and role of migrants within such frameworks is seldom considered. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country qualified not only by high levels of forced displacement, but also as having one of the world's highest rate of voluntary repatriation, agency of return migrants should be further considered in attempts to strengthen peace and cooperation in the region. A fundamental step in achieving this is by recognizing that Congolese refugees have a historical, personal and cultural connection to their place of origin albeit being spatially separated from it. Challenging a 'sedentary bias' which contends that deterritorialization strips migrants from their spatiocultural roots, there is a need to investigate how memory, identity and culture play an important role in how refugees remember and plan their return to the homeland. Specifically, in the context of a region where conflict is often attributed to ethnic, land-based, and resource extraction issues, an ethnographic understanding of this group can be particularly useful in placing migrant agency within the context of environmental peacebuilding in the DRC.

Joint MONUSCO-FARDC operation against ADF in Beni
Photo: MONUSCO

Relapsing conflict in the DRC

In the case of peace and conflict in fragile states, much of the literature has asserted that natural resources have a positive correlation to local, national and regional conflicts. Many scholars and practitioners in the field of humanitarian intervention and international development have qualified the African continent as having a 'resource curse,' "whereby easily obtainable natural resources and commodities have essentially hurt the prospects of several African national and regional economies by fostering political corruption and feeding violence and rebellion." In other words, natural resources have often been conceptualized as an aggravating factor to conflict.

As a result, this understanding has "led to a growing consensus that building national capacity to properly manage high-value natural resources and their revenues must be a prerequisite to their exploitation, and is a fundamental element of peacebuilding programs." This has often materialized in a concerted effort by international actors to focus their energies on institution-building and the maintenance of 'rule of law' which attempt to establish state control in resource-rich areas. In the case of the DRC, recurring conflict in its resource-rich regions such as the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu is a testament that such strategies to control these areas have proven ineffective, where:

> "postconflict institutions [in the DRC] promoted by international stakeholders – for instance, bolstering rule-of-law infrastructure to prosecute perpetrators of wartime violence – present opportunities for armed factions to further their political, economic, and military agendas behind the scenes while maintaining the outward appearance of cooperating with peace-building efforts."

State building as the de facto 'sustainable exit strategy,' as scholar and regional expert Severine Autesserre asserts, has also failed, where state officials in the army, police and administration continue to commit the majority of human rights violations. As conflict dynamics and actors at the local scale have been largely ignored by the international community engaged in peacebuilding efforts in the DRC, both state and ex-combatants have monopolized the peacebuilding process, largely resulting in them taking on self-serving and predatory roles in the control and management of Congolese territories. In addition to the tragic outcomes this has generated, most notably through near-continual armed conflict, mass rape of women, and forced displacement in eastern DRC, it has also further reinforced the paradigm that natural resources lead to or sustain conflict.

Environmental peacebuilding

While over fifteen years have passed since the end of the Second Congo War, and with the collapse of multiple peace agreements and ceasefires since, it is evident that interventions within the scope of traditional peacebuilding approaches have been largely unsuccessful in the region. Continued and cyclical displacement is one of several testaments of this fact. Stepping aside from the assumption that resource wealth aggravates conflict, there is a need to problematize the 'resource curse' paradigm, asking instead whether resources – mineral wealth, timber, fertile land, and the like – can instead make way for peace and cooperation. This is the main tenet of an emerging field of peace research; that of 'environmental peacebuilding.' Environmental peacebuilding, sometimes called 'environmental peacemaking,' is a concept that emerged at the turn of the 21st century, stemming "from a growing realization that although natural resources can fuel conflict, they can

Artisanal mining. Digging for copper, DR Congo
Photo: Fairphone

Housing in Gihembe refugee camp in Rwanda
Photo: USAID U.S. Agency for International Development

Kiziba refugee camp
Photo: Jean Claude Uwihoreye

Learning from Congolese refugees
The UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) has long considered voluntary return as one of its 'durable solutions.' Yet, as evidence from a vast number of contexts suggests, including the case of the DRC, returnees are often subject to new events of displacement. Where such cyclical patterns of displacement become common and normalised, it also becomes clear that voluntary return must be part of a larger trajectory of peacebuilding if it is to be considered a durable solution. The voice and role of displaced persons, however, has seldom been considered in peacebuilding. Although the reasons for this are unclear, it is perhaps the result of a well-documented 'sedentary bias' which largely considers forced migrant populations – the internally displaced and refugees – as powerless and apolitical victims who have been stripped of territorial and cultural identity. As research has shown the ability for migrant communities to mobilise on issues relevant to their homeland, there is a need to acknowledge the

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also provide a focus for cooperation." This approach has been applied to several contexts, around issues of water access between Jordan and Israel, land issues involving El Salvador and Honduras, and nature conservation in Southern Caucasus, Southern Africa, Altain Mountains, and between Rwanda and the DRC. There is credible evidence to believe that this approach has been successful in reducing conflict, but "there are still many questions and much to learn." For instance, nearly all analyses and implemented policies

have taken place within an interstate context, rather than focusing on its ability to build intrastate peace. Noting that the majority of security threats emerging in the 1990s were within states, Erika Weinthal suggests that we should potentially explore this lower level of analysis, asking "could we use the environment as a peacemaking tool *within* states and along tenuous border regions?"

Similar to those critiques of traditional peacebuilding efforts, which tend to exclude a wide array of stakeholders at a range of

geographic scales, established scholars in the field of environmental peacebuilding have underlined the importance of considering the voices of non-state actors such as civilians and civil society in building a practical understanding of how natural resources can be productive for peace. As the next section will outline, ethnographic studies exploring refugees' lived experiences and memories in a region with high levels of voluntary return can be particularly valuable in giving voice to a larger breadth of stakeholders.

role of forced migrants in the development of peacebuilding efforts in their places of origin.

A fundamental step in achieving this is recognising that refugees have a historical, personal and cultural connection to their places of origin albeit being spatially separated from it. The need to acknowledge such connections has been recognised by some working in the field of refugee studies. Anthropologist Liisa H. Malkki has challenged both the assumption that "in becoming 'torn loose' from their cultures, 'uprooted' from their homes, refugees suffer the loss of all contact to the lifeworks they fled," and that becoming uprooted necessarily leads to the loss of identity, traditions, and culture. In the case of the DRC, a country known to have one of the world's highest rate of return migration, it is evident that refugees maintain a strong connection to their places of origin. There is, then, a manifest need to understand the many constellations – abstract and concrete – involved in how such connections materialize in practice, and within the domains of individual-spiritual and cultural-collective. Where displacement and return in the DRC occur at the intersection of ethnic, land-based, and resource extraction issues, outputs and understandings gained from ethnographic research can be critical in developing foresight vis-à-vis the relevance of and potential for environmental peacebuilding in the region. Furthermore, this may help identify signposts as to how returnees can participate in and sustain peacebuilding efforts.

A more targeted rationale for ethnographic research involving Congolese refugees emerges from their unique position to comment on peace, conflict and the environment. Firstly, given their situation as individuals who have been failed by nationally and internationally-led peacebuilding efforts, their lived experience of these efforts – recounted through memory – may bring to light how traditional

peacebuilding may aggravate resource and land issues at the local level. Secondly, as a result of living in 'warehoused situations' and 'vast zones of asylum' which are arguably outside of the 'state' as is typically understood, the voice of Congolese refugees may generate interesting ideas which stray from statist interpretations about peace. Thirdly, while it can be expected that refugee camps will comprise an assemblage of individuals of various ethnocultural backgrounds (Hutu, Tutsi, Mai Mai, Banyamulenge, speakers of several different languages, etc.), distance from the conflict and relationships within the camp may assist in mediating ideas of cooperation between various ethnic and cultural identities. Fourthly, as it has been recognized that a great deal of academic work has focused too greatly on post-1994 Rwandan Genocide causes of conflict in the DRC, "as if regional conflict starts from scratch with the genocide," the collection of life stories may prove fruitful in gaining a deeper temporal understanding of root causes of conflict. Lastly, as Laura Hammond recognizes refugees as 'highly politicized symbols,' research within a refugee community may draw out pathways of how they themselves can become agents of environmental peacebuilding in the future. All told, this approach comes from a recognition that there is a need for this type of ethnographic research within the context of peace and conflict in resource-rich regions.

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