

Between Two Spaces

This research discusses the social mobility of combatants and introduces the notion of circular return to explain their permanent state of movement between civilian and combatant life. This phenomenon is widely observed in eastern DRC, where Congolese youth have been going in and out of armed groups for several decades now. While the notion of circular return has its origins in migration and refugee studies, we argue that it also serves as a useful lens to understand the navigation capacity between different social spaces of combatants and to describe and understand processes of incessant armed mobilization and demobilization. In conceptualizing these processes as forms of circular return, we want to move beyond the remobilization

discourse, which is too often connected to an assumed failure of DDR processes and tends to ignore combatants' agency and larger processes of socialization and social rupture as part of armed mobilization.

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Between two Spaces

Movement between civilian and combatant life in Eastern DR Congo



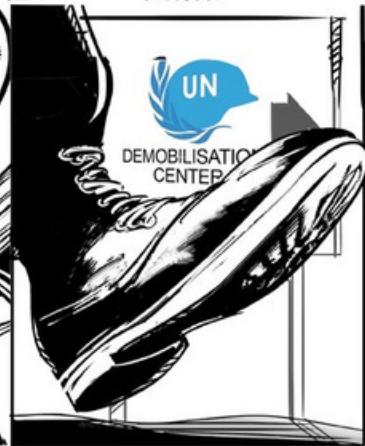


THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC) HAS SEEN MUCH CONFLICT IN ITS PAST, MOST NOTABLY IN THE CONGO WARS, BETWEEN 1996 AND 2003. SINCE 2003, HIGH LEVELS OF VIOLENCE CONTINUE TO BE PRESENT.



IN EASTERN CONGO, RURAL YOUTH HAVE JOINED ARMED GROUPS, REBEL MOVEMENTS OR LOCAL DEFENSE FORCES IN SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS.

SINCE THE PEACE AGREEMENT OF 2003, THERE HAVE BEEN ONGOING ATTEMPTS TO DISARM THESE COMBATANTS, WITH LIMITED SUCCESS.





EASTERN CONGO'S MILITARY LANDSCAPE REMAINS HIGHLY FRAGMENTED AND VOLATILE, WITH ARMED GROUPS DISINTEGRATING OR JOINING FORCES AND NEW GROUPS FORMING.



OVER THE LAST 25 YEARS, THE NUMBER OF ARMED ACTORS HAS SHOWN A STEADY INCREASE. LARGE SCALE REBEL MOVEMENTS AND COALITION FORCES HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY 120 LARGELY LOCALLY ROOTED AND OFTEN SMALL-SCALE GROUPS.

DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION (OR DDR, AS THE PROGRAMS ARE OFFICIALLY CALLED) CAUSED FRUSTRATION AND DISAPPOINTMENT WITH FORMER COMBATANTS.

IT DID NOT ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITIES, OR TAKE THE COMBATANTS' PERSPECTIVE INTO CONSIDERATION. AT BEST, IT JUST PROVIDED A 'REINTEGRATION KIT'.



DDR WAS EVEN USED AS A MEANS FOR ECONOMIC GAIN



ARE THEY GIVING OUT DDR AGAIN?

YES!

I'VE RECEIVED MY DEMOBILIZATION BENEFITS. NOW TAKE MY CLOTHES AND GIVE ME YOUR UNIFORM AND YOU CAN HAVE GO. AFTER THAT, I'LL GO AGAIN!





OF COURSE LIFE AS A COMBATANT WASN'T EASY EITHER.

'TO BE OR NOT TO BE?'

BUT THESE ARE NOT THE ONLY FACTORS, AND OVERALL DDR FAILED TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE COMPLEXITY OF THE DECISION TO JOIN OR LEAVE AN ARMED GROUP.

COMBATANTS NAVIGATE BETWEEN DIFFERENT SPACES, BASED UPON A MULTITUDE OF INCENTIVES, INCLUDING ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES, STATUS, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS.

'I WANT TO PROTECT MY COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY!'

ME TOO!

ME TOO!

IN THE EARLY 1990S, MOBILIZATION IN RURAL AREAS WAS MOSTLY A COLLECTIVE EFFORT GUIDED BY CUSTOMARY AUTHORITIES.

NOWADAYS, PEOPLE JOIN AN ARMED GROUP BECAUSE OF COMPLEX INTERPLAY OF MOTIVES, SENTIMENTS AND INTERESTS, A LOT OF THEM ALSO INDIVIDUAL.

'I WANT MORE OPPORTUNITIES!'

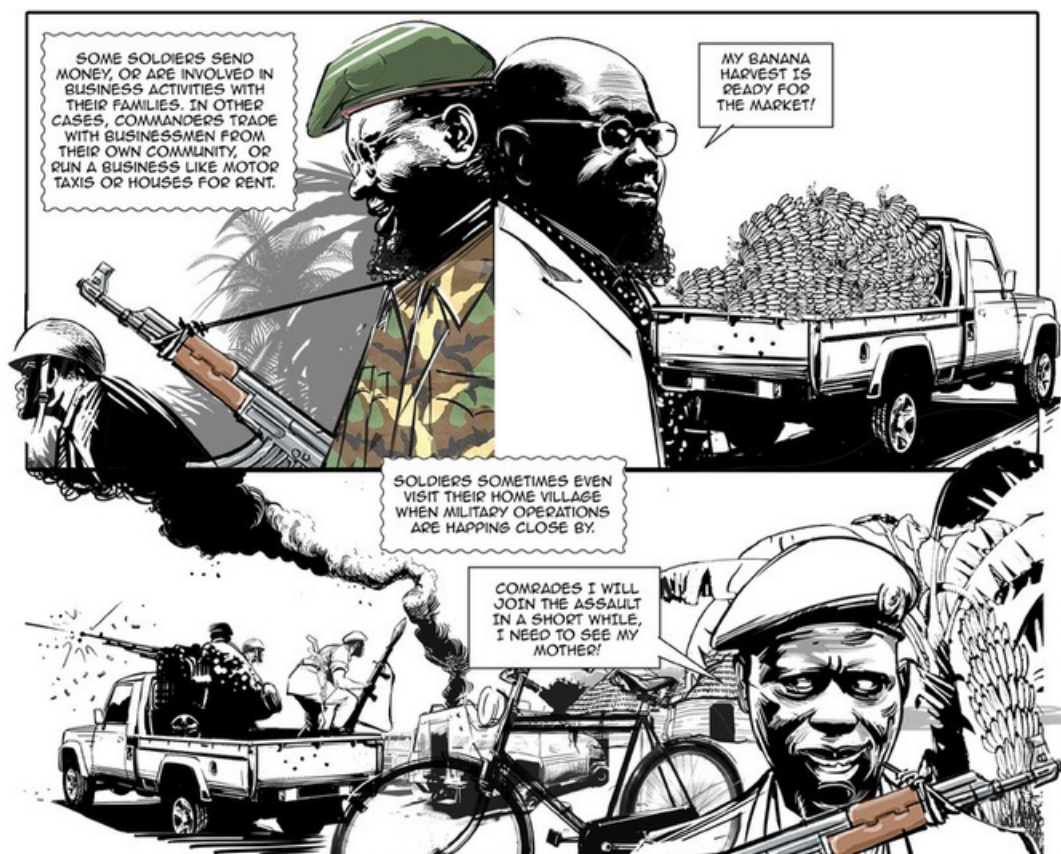
'I WANT TO PROTECT MY COMMUNITY!'

'I WANT TO BECOME RICH!'

DESPITE THE AMBITION TO PROTECT THE COMMUNITY, ARMED GROUPS NOW ARE OFTEN CONSIDERED A REFUGE TO DEAL WITH JOBLESSNESS AND A SPACE OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND SELF-REALIZATION.

SUFFERING WAS THERE, BUT ARMED GROUPS HAVE ALSO BEEN A SCHOOL TO ME. WE HAVE LEARNT TO BE PRUDENT BEFORE ACTING, WE HAVE LEARNT HOW TO LIVE IN GROUP WITH PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS. THE SUFFERING WAS A SCHOOL TO US.'





KEEPING LINKS WITH THE LARGER SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IS NOT WITHOUT RISK THOUGH. STATE SECURITY FORCES CAN HARASS FAMILY MEMBERS WHEN THEY KNOW THEY ARE IN CONTACT WITH A COMBATANT.

THE SIMPLE NARRATIVE OF
DENOBILIZATION OBSCURES
THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE
DECISIONS COMBATANTS
MAKE TO JOIN ARMED
GROUPS OR LEAVE THEM.

ALTHOUGH THEY PLAY
A ROLE, INDIVIDUAL
INCENTIVES GO BEYOND THE
SEARCH FOR ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN
ARMED GROUPS PLAYS VERY
IMPORTANT ROLE.

WHEN REINTEGRATION
PROGRAMS DO NOT
COMPENSATE FOR WHAT IS
LOST BY LEAVING AN ARMED
GROUP..

..BUT LEADS TO A MARGINAL
POSITION IN SOCIETY...

THE DECISION TO
TAKE UP ARMS AGAIN
IS ATTRACTIVE.

