
The Right Way to Build Peace in Congo

Elections Are Not the Only Way Forward

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Congolese soldiers near the border with Rwanda, June 2014.

In "[What the Uproar Over Congo's Elections Misses](#)" (March 1, 2017), I argue that Congo's violence has many causes beyond the country's [political crisis](#), so it is misguided to focus on elections as the main solution to Congo's troubles. Local actors and bottom-up peacebuilding can also help stop the fighting. Jason Stearns, Koen Vlassenroot, Kasper Hoffmann, and Tatiana Carayannis reject this argument and suggest instead that only elections and top-down institutional

reforms can solve Congo's problems ("[Congo's Inescapable State](#)," March 16, 2017). Because global, regional, and national tensions drive the ongoing violence, they argue, local, bottom-up conflict resolution is largely unnecessary.

There are many mischaracterizations of my analysis in Stearns, Vlassenroot, Hoffman, and Carayannis' response. I do not argue, for example, that local peacebuilding is the only solution to Congo's problems, that grassroots conflicts are the primary causes of violence there, or that local issues in the country can be entirely extricated from broader trends, such as the dereliction of the Congolese state. As I [explained](#) and as I have [argued](#) elsewhere, local, provincial, national, regional, and [international](#) issues combine to produce conflicts over [power](#), [land](#), economic [resources](#), and [social standing](#), fueling violence in the eastern provinces.

The problem with Stearns, Vlassenroot, Hoffman, and Carayannis' proposal is that elections cannot guarantee institution building. What's more, ending the power struggle in the capital is unlikely to automatically address the "poverty, unemployment, corruption, criminality, and poor access to land, justice, and education" that I argue are at the root of Congo's problems. Indeed, my respondents' argument hinges on two [problematic assumptions](#): first, that local tensions mirror national and regional ones, and second, that peace achieved on the national or international level tends to trickle down to the local sphere.



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Congolese President Joseph Kabila in Kinshasa, April 2017.

In fact, a number of scholars, such as the political scientist [Stathis Kalyvas](#) and the development economist [Patricia Justino](#), have demonstrated that local and subnational

conflicts are often distinct from national and international ones, even if they are linked to them. (For instance, the ongoing [violence in Timor-Leste](#) is due as much to payback traditions, disputes over land, and family antagonisms as to rivalries between national political elites, ethnic tensions, and conflict with Indonesia.) What is more, establishing peace at the national level [does not](#) necessarily [end local violence](#). Only a [combination](#) of [bottom-up](#) and top-down efforts can [build peace](#). Bottom-up approaches have even contributed to prosperity, stability, and stronger state institutions in parts of [Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia](#).

Congo is no exception. Just as national actors manipulate local armed groups, as Stearns and his co-authors explain, so too do local actors [use national conflicts](#) to pursue their own agendas. Villagers in North and South Kivu Provinces, for example, regularly ally with national leaders and foreign militias to get control over [land](#).

The [massive national and international peace efforts](#) of the past two decades have clearly [failed](#) to end the violence. What Congo needs is bottom-up peacebuilding [in addition to](#) the current top-down approach: foreign interveners should not end their current focus on [Kinshasa](#) but [supplement it](#) with local peacebuilding efforts.

Of course, civilians cannot defeat armed groups single-handedly, and ordinary people do not have the networks necessary to build peace at the national level. But local actors do have far more [knowledge](#) and [skills](#) than international interveners [usually believe](#) they have—indeed, enough to have made real progress in recent years. Local people have managed to create [islands of peace](#) in North and South Kivu, [ease tensions](#) between antagonistic communities in Ituri Province, and build a [popular democratic movement](#).

Instead of [ignoring](#) such local initiatives, international

interveners should support them, and they [should consider](#) how to [connect](#) that support to peacebuilding efforts at the national level. They should [learn from the successes of local peacebuilding initiatives](#) instead of focusing on their failures. Working with national elites, local leaders, and ordinary citizens to plan international programs is the best way to build sustainable peace. Holding national elections is not the only path forward.

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