

The Trouble with the Congo

Local Violence and the Failure of
International Peacebuilding

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1 *The Peacebuilding World*

In mid-2007, in a beautiful garden overlooking Lake Kivu, I listened to an old man named Georges recall the turmoil of the mid-1990s in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Before that time, he and his small circle of friends, all people of European descent but born and raised in the Congo, had been the only white people around, with the exception of the occasional development worker. This situation suddenly changed in the mid-1990s, when the Rwandan genocide sent 2 million refugees pouring into the eastern Congo. Two large-scale wars started in the massacre's wake, the first in 1996 and the second in 1998. Contingents of nongovernmental organization staff members and United Nations (UN) officials arrived, and eventually diplomats followed. The old white Congolese found them all quite amusing. "We called them 'the humanoids,'" Georges said. "It fits them very well, because they are people full of ideals, of vigor ... but they come from another planet. They are completely disoriented." I could not help but think that, in a few sentences, Georges had just encapsulated my six years of research on the international intervention in the Congo. International peacebuilders have their own world, with its own rituals, its own customs, its own beliefs, its own roles, its own stars, its own villains, its own rules, its own taboos, its own meeting places – in brief, its own culture. This peacebuilding culture shaped the intervention strategy in the Congo. And, tragically, as the Congo progressed through a transition from war to peace and democracy (2003 to 2006), the intervention failed.

An interview that I conducted in Nyunzu, a village in the jungle of the eastern province of Katanga, illustrates what this failure meant for the local population. There, I met Isabelle, a woman who had just brought her malnourished toddler to the local nutritional center. A couple of years before, she and other members of her community had fled to the bush to escape the fighting in her village. Local militias soon found her hiding place. "They were coming almost every week,"

she recalled, “even two to three times a week, to loot our properties, beat us, leave people naked, and make forced love to the women” – “forced love” being the standard euphemism for rape. I asked Isabelle why she did not flee again or try to find a new hiding place, and her answer has remained in my mind ever since. “We were used to it,” she said. “We were near our land. We did not want to leave it.”

I heard similar stories throughout my interviews with perpetrators and victims of violence. Two themes constantly recurred: the primacy of land and other micro-level issues in causing violence and producing anguish, and the unspeakable horrors perpetrated on the Congolese population. The first theme is crucial. It helps us to understand why violence started, why it became so pervasive, why it continued after the Congo embarked on a transition from war to peace and democracy, and why the efforts of international interveners failed to help the Congo build a sustainable peace.

The second theme should be familiar to anyone who has read or heard about the Congo in the past fifteen years. Scholars and policy makers consider the Congo wars of the 1990s and their aftermath as some of the most complex conflicts of our time. They are also the most terrible. Generating levels of suffering unparalleled in any recent war, they caused, directly and indirectly, the highest death toll of any conflict since World War II. An estimated one thousand civilians die every day, mostly due to malnutrition and diseases that could be easily prevented if the Congo’s already weak economic and social structures had not collapsed during the conflict.¹ The wars also traumatized the population of the contested eastern provinces: 81% had to flee their homes, more than half experienced the violent death of family members or friends, more than a third were abducted for at least a week, and 16% were subject to sexual violence, usually repeatedly.² The atrocities that armed groups committed against the civilian population were so heinous that the Congo became a symbol of horror, even compared to such places as Darfur and the former Yugoslavia. The wars also involved up to fourteen foreign armies; they destabilized such a large part of the African continent that U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice called them the first African World War.

¹ International Rescue Committee 2003, 2005, and 2007.

² Vinck, Pham, et al. 2008.

In order to understand how the Congo finally emerged from this disastrous and complicated situation, it is crucial to examine the international intervention conducted in support of the peace process. UN officials as well as African and Western diplomats actively supervised negotiations to end the wars. The resulting agreements produced several cease-fires and allowed for the deployment of a small UN peacekeeping force. Eventually, because of heavy international pressure, the warring parties reached a comprehensive peace settlement in 2003.

International involvement grew uncommonly robust during the three and a half years demarcated as the transitional period from war to peace and democracy, from June 2003 to December 2006 – the period on which this book focuses. The UN mission in the Congo became the largest and most expensive peacekeeping operation in the world. The European Union (EU) sent the first ever European-led peacekeeping force. The International Criminal Court chose the Congo as its historic first case, by prosecuting several militia leaders from the northeastern district of Ituri.

During the transition, diplomats and UN officials also exerted an unusually strong influence on Congolese affairs. For the first time in any conflict, the peace agreement created a specific structure, the International Committee in Support of the Transition, to institutionalize the leading role of international actors in its implementation. Foreign donors contributed more than half of the Congolese national budget. They impelled Congolese warlords through the official reunification of the country, the formation of a unified government, the preparation for democratic elections, and the progressive integration of the different armed groups into a single national army. They closely supervised the legislative, constitutional, and electoral processes. They ensured that the candidate they viewed as most able to maintain stability, President Joseph Kabila, was in the best possible position to win the elections. They made certain that troops from neighboring countries officially remained out of Congolese territory. In many places, the UN peacekeeping mission was the only force protecting the population against the remaining armed militias. During these three and a half years, the international influence was so large that numerous Congolese political leaders, international actors, and journalists equated the Congolese situation to a “protectorate.”

Thanks to this heavy international pressure, neighboring countries significantly decreased both assistance to, and manipulation of, Congolese fighters. Many national leaders also progressively switched from the violent pursuit of power to peaceful, political competition. As a result, life conditions dramatically improved for most Congolese. The changes were most striking in the eastern provinces, where the war previously had the largest impact. Families left the bush, where they had fled to escape violence, and returned home. They rebuilt their houses. Whole villages revived. Basic commodities such as salt and oil became available on the local markets again. In 2006, most Congolese enthusiastically voted for the first time in their lives to elect provincial and national representatives. At that time, Congolese and foreign observers hailed the peace process and the international intervention as major successes.

However, the situation in many parts of the eastern Congo, while significantly better, continued to remain highly unstable. Throughout the transition, unremitting clashes between various armed groups and militias, frequent massacres of civilians, massive population displacements, and appalling human rights violations, including widespread sexual violence, persisted in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, North Katanga, and in Oriental Province's Ituri district (see map in Figure 1). This localized violence carried on during the postelection period and, just as during the transition, it threatened national and regional stability. ("Regional" in this book refers to the African Great Lakes region: Burundi, the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda.) In 2007 and 2008, a conflict previously confined to a small area of North Kivu escalated into large-scale fighting, prompting 500,000 to flee their homes. Only a flurry of diplomatic activity and a forceful interposition by UN peacekeepers prevented the Congo from sliding back into a full-scale national and regional war. At the time of this writing in late 2009, however, the situation has deteriorated further. The eastern part of the Congo, especially the Kivus and Oriental Province, remains the theater of constant combat, which regularly threatens to spread throughout the region. More than 80% of the inhabitants of these places consider their living conditions to be the same as or worse than during the wars.³ The Congo also remains the largest ongoing

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

humanitarian crisis in the world. An estimated 2 million Congolese are internally displaced, and more than 360,000 linger as refugees in neighboring countries.⁴

This book is the first scholarly attempt to understand why all of the intense international peacebuilding efforts, including the largest peacekeeping mission in the world, have failed to build a sustainable peace in the Congo.

The Puzzle of Poor Strategies

The international failure to build lasting peace and security in the Congo is not unique. Most recent militarized conflicts have been internal wars, and most of these civil wars ended in negotiated peace agreements. Nonetheless, about 20% still lapsed back into large-scale violence within a few years, usually during the phase of peace agreement implementation. Recent research has shown that significant third-party involvement is critical for peace implementation to be successful, but as in the Congo case, 70% of peace processes benefiting from significant international mediation still fail to build a durable peace.⁵ Why do third-party interventions often fail to secure a sustainable peace?

Understanding the reasons for these failures is more than an academic exercise. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently emphasized the policy implications, noting that many “countries that emerge from war lapse back into violence after five years.” Referring specifically to the failures of peace agreements in Angola, the Congo, Haiti, Liberia, and Rwanda, he stated, “The tragic consequences have been all too evident. ... If peace agreements had been successfully implemented from the start in just two of those war-torn

⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2009; and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “Country Operations Profile,” <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e45c366>, accessed in October 2009.

⁵ On internal wars, see Doyle and Sambanis 2006; and Fearon and Laitin 2003. On peace agreements see Woodward 2006; on their frequency see Fortna 2004a; and on their failure see Licklider 1995; Samset and Surke 2007; Walter 2002; and Weinstein 2005. On third-party involvement see Stedman, Rothchild, et al. 2002; and Walter 2002; and on its failures see Doyle and Sambanis 2006.

countries – Angola and Rwanda – [they] could have prevented millions of deaths.”⁶

Recent work in international relations and comparative politics suggests a preliminary explanation for these deadly failures. Local agendas – at the level of the individual, the family, the clan, the municipality, the community, the district, or the ethnic group – at least partly drive the continuation of violence during peace agreement implementation. For example, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, after the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, recurrent power struggles within local political parties motivated high levels of violence in KwaZulu-Natal. Likewise, in Burundi, disputes around access to land, as well as antagonisms within each ethnic group, constantly jeopardized the fragile transition to peace and democracy from 2001 to 2009. In the Maluku Islands in Indonesia, local economic, political, and ethnic agendas constantly impaired the Jakarta government’s efforts to end two years of mass intercommunal violence (1999 to 2000). In Kosovo, locally derived motivations, such as occupying neighbors’ apartments or seeking revenge for offenses directed at an individual or at the community, caused frequent incidents, severely affecting the peace settlement governing the province since the 1999 intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Similarly, during the attempted transition to peace and democracy that started in 2002 in Afghanistan and in 2003 in Iraq, even a casual observer could distinguish local, national, and regional tensions, which interacted to produce violence. In Somalia, clan tensions were – and continue to be – widely acknowledged as the main source of violence, and have contributed to the failure of the numerous peace agreements negotiated since 1991.⁷

⁶ Reported in Thalif Deen, “UN Chief Warns of Collapsing Peace Agreements,” *United Nations Inter Press Service*, July 20, 2005.

⁷ On South Africa: Krämer 2006 and 2007. On Burundi: personal communications from Hammache and Rosen; and BBC news report on Burundi by Robert Walker, broadcasted on December 26, 2005 on *BBC World News*. On Indonesia: International Crisis Group 2000a and personal communication from Youcef Hammache, humanitarian aid worker, December 2005. On Kosovo: personal communication from Philippe Rosen, humanitarian aid worker, September 2005; and author’s field observations and interviews, 2000. On Afghanistan: author’s interviews and field observations during humanitarian mission in Kabul and Hazarajat in 2002; see also Dennys and Zaman 2009 for an excellent analysis of the linkages

In the Congo as well, local antagonisms have spiraled into broader tensions before, during, and after the transition. The tensions between the Congolese of Rwandan descent (Kinyarwanda-speaking) and the so-called indigenous communities of the Kivus provide the clearest example of this dynamic. Threats against the former partly motivated the two Rwandan invasions in the late 1990s. As detailed in chapter 4, these threats were the result of a longstanding competition between the self-styled indigenous communities of the Kivus and the Congolese population with Rwandan ancestry.

After the Belgian colonizers brought people (mostly Hutu) from overpopulated Rwanda to the lightly populated Kivus in the 1930s, antagonisms over land and local social, economic, and political power emerged between a handful of villagers, with the newly arrived immigrants in opposition to the populations indigenous to the area. This grassroots conflict escalated into a national issue after the Congo's independence in 1960, because each camp recruited allies beyond the province and sent representatives to Kinshasa to advance its local agenda. These tensions caused massive violence long before the generalized wars of the 1990s started, with indigenous groups killing thousands of Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese in North Kivu in 1963, and again in 1993. The 1994 Rwandan genocide and the subsequent arrival of 2 million Rwandan Hutu refugees in the Kivus added a regional dimension to the crisis. The Congolese of Rwandan descent allied with the new Rwandan government, which intervened in Congo to preserve its national security. Indigenous groups organized themselves into militias called Mai Mai, eventually allying with the defeated Rwandan Hutu rebels and the Congolese government. All of the grassroots fighters originally intended merely to protect their kinsfolk, but they quickly started using their military might to abuse their own communities, seize land and mining sites, or capture political power. For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, local tensions in the Kivus repeatedly prompted outbreaks of violence and fed the national and regional conflicts.

between local, provincial, national, and regional conflicts in various Afghan provinces. On Iraq: review of newspaper articles. On Somalia: Farah and Lewis 1997 and review of newspaper articles (among many others, see for example Rakiya Omaar, "Somaliland: One Thorn Bush at a Time," *Current History*, May 1994, pp. 232–236). See also Kalyvas 2003 and 2006; and Sundh 2004 for a general claim.

After the war officially ended in 2003, the same micro-level antagonisms continued to fuel the insurgencies that destabilized the Kivu provinces. In North Kivu, Mai Mai militias remained allied with Congolese President Joseph Kabila, as well as Rwandan Hutu militias, and fought Congolese soldiers of Rwandan descent to consolidate their claims over land, natural resources, and provincial and subprovincial positions of authority. The Congolese of Rwandan descent refused any kind of settlement because they feared revenge killings and worried that they might lose the local economic and political power they had acquired during the previous wars. These conflicts fueled violence against the Kinyarwanda-speaking minority of the Kivus and sustained the presence of Rwandan Hutu rebels in Congolese territory, both of which remained the primary obstacles to national and regional reconciliation from 2003 onward. As became evident with the 2008 upsurge in violence, these grassroots issues also had the potential to reignite the national and regional wars.

In general, during the Congolese transition, while foreign peacebuilders succeeded in imposing settlements at both the regional and national levels, they failed to establish one at the subnational level. Throughout the eastern Congo, bottom-up rivalries played a decisive role in sustaining local, national, and regional violence after the conflict officially ended. These agendas pitted villagers, traditional chiefs, community chiefs, or ethnic leaders against one another over the distribution of land, the exploitation of local mining sites, the appointment to local administrative and traditional positions of authority, the collection of local taxes, and the relative social status of specific groups and individuals. The resulting violence was not coordinated on a large scale but was rather the product of fragmented, micro-level militias, each of which tried to advance its own agenda at the level of the village or district.

Top-down causes also sustained the violence after the generalized conflict officially ended. Congolese and foreign politicians continued to manipulate local leaders and militias to enrich themselves, advance their careers, or rally support for their causes. Thus, national and regional peacebuilding attempts were critical to deescalate some of the ongoing conflicts. Accordingly, diplomats and UN officials organized regional dialogues and conferences to ease the tensions between the Congo and its neighbors. In times of crises, they also put diplomatic pressure on the Rwandan and Ugandan governments to prevent

another invasion. At the national level, international interveners focused on reconstructing a unified and legitimate leadership through elections. They also tried to convince warlords to integrate their soldiers into the national army, supervised the payment of soldiers to prevent the diversion of funds, trained a few integrated brigades, and supported the Congolese authorities in their legislative and constitutional work. All of these actions significantly decreased macro-level tensions and assuaged many top-down causes of local violence.

However, as chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate, because the causes of the ongoing conflict were also distinctively local, they could be properly addressed only by combining action at the grassroots level with the intervention in the higher political spheres. Admittedly, there was tremendous variation among these locally motivated tensions. Certain grassroots conflicts (such as a dispute between two villagers vying for the same piece of land) may have been easier to address than others (such as seizing a gold mine from the hands of a local militia). Likewise, some decentralized antagonisms (such as a competition over local administrative positions) may have been more amenable to top-down interventions than others (such as a rivalry over traditional positions of authority between two clans). However, all of these grassroots conflicts had one point in common: They all required at least some bottom-up conflict-resolution processes in addition to top-down peacebuilding. This point is where the international intervention went awry. Only a few nongovernmental organizations conducted bottom-up peacebuilding in the most divided provinces. Apart from those agencies, there was no attempt to resolve land disputes, to reconstruct grassroots institutions for the peaceful resolution of conflict, or to promote reconciliation within divided villages or communities, even though international and Congolese actors could easily have done so with the resources at hand.

The Congo case is representative of a broader problem with international interventions. International peacebuilders often neglect to address the local causes of violence. As of this writing, none of the UN peacekeeping missions around the world have implemented any comprehensive grassroots conflict-resolution program.⁸ No more than a handful of diplomats have tried, without success, to advocate for a

⁸ Personal communications from UN officials, 2005 and 2008.

better approach to local issues by diplomatic groups. Even nongovernmental organizations tend to focus on regional and national sources of tensions, with only a few exceptions. Why do interveners neglect the micro-level causes of peace process failure, particularly when they threaten the macro-level settlements?

The neglect of local conflicts is even more perplexing in the case of the Congo, because we cannot attribute it to callousness, powerlessness, or inanity on the part of the foreign interveners. Admittedly, not all of the international actors present in the Congo were concerned about the well-being of the Congolese population. A great variety of countries and corporations took interest in the Congo primarily for its extraordinary mineral wealth and central strategic position in Africa. However, these actors were in the minority. Most foreign interveners genuinely tried to end organized violence in the Congo. Far from being callous, they usually were well-meaning individuals, who had often devoted their lives to combating injustice, violence, and poverty. The unceasing human rights violations deeply troubled them. Far from being intellectually limited, they were, on average, intelligent, well-read, and well-educated people who could have understood the importance of local conflicts. Far from being powerless, they held tremendous influence during the transition, as explained earlier. Similarly, far from being financially limited, they spent significant resources on the Congo (including more than a billion dollars a year on the peace-keeping mission and \$670 million to organize elections). Part of these resources could have been devoted to local conflict resolution.

This book focuses on these "international peacebuilders," meaning the many foreign interveners (persons, countries, or organizations) who strived to build peace in the Congo. It looks at diplomats (in embassies, as well as in the headquarters of their respective ministries of foreign affairs), other government officials (such as defense officers), staff of international organizations, and staff of nongovernmental organizations, all of whom shared a goal to supervise or support the Congo in its peacebuilding efforts. Why did almost all of them ignore the critical micro-level causes of violence?

Main Argument

I argue that a dominant international peacebuilding culture shaped the intervention in the Congo in a way that precluded action on local

violence, ultimately dooming the international efforts. Western and African diplomats, UN peacekeepers, and the staff of nongovernmental organizations involved in conflict resolution share a set of ideologies, rules, rituals, assumptions, definitions, paradigms, and standard operating procedures. In the Congo, this culture established the parameters of acceptable action. It shaped what international actors considered at all (usually excluding continued local conflict), what they viewed as possible (excluding local conflict resolution), and what they thought was the “natural” course of action in a given situation (national and international action, in particular the organization of elections).⁹ It authorized and justified specific practices and policies while excluding others, notably grassroots peacebuilding. In sum, this culture made it possible for foreign interveners to ignore the micro-level tensions that often jeopardize macro-level settlements.

The book illuminates how this peacebuilding culture operated on the ground. This culture influenced the interveners’ understanding of the causes of violence. Because of earlier socialization and training processes, UN officials, diplomats, and the staff of most nongovernmental organizations interpreted continued fighting and massacres as the consequence of national and regional tensions. They viewed local conflicts as the result of insufficient state authority and of the Congolese people’s inherent propensity to violence. The dominant peacebuilding culture also shaped the international actors’ understanding of their role and of the paths toward peace. It constructed intervention at the national and regional levels as the only “natural” and “legitimate” task for UN staffers and diplomats. It privileged the organization of elections as the favored peace- and state-building mechanism over more effective approaches. It made diplomats and UN staff members view local conflict resolution as an unimportant, unfamiliar, and unmanageable task. The idea of becoming involved at the local level clashed so fundamentally with existing cultural norms, and so threatened key organizational interests, that neither external shocks nor resistance from certain staff members and human rights activists could convince international actors that they should reevaluate their understanding of violence and intervention.

Ultimately, this peacebuilding culture enabled foreign actors to pursue an intervention strategy that permitted, and at times even

⁹ This sentence is a paraphrase of Neumann 2008a, p. 2.

exacerbated, fighting, massacres, and massive human rights violations during and after the transition. And it made it possible for these actors to view their intervention as a success until war resumed in late 2008.

Without this shared culture, the interveners' vested interests and the existing constraints on international action would have led to a different outcome. International actors might have located the causes of the continuing violence at the local level. They might have contemplated intervention in local conflicts; they might even have considered it one of the priorities for the Congolese transition.

It is clear that international peacebuilders are not the only, or even the main, figures responsible for the failure of the Congolese peace process. Certain Congolese actors at all levels; certain Rwandan, Ugandan, and Burundian leaders; and the individuals and companies involved in arms trafficking and illegal exploitation of Congolese resources together deserve the largest share of the blame. However, the international peacebuilders missed an excellent opportunity to help build peace and democracy. They enjoyed unprecedented influence on Congolese affairs during the transition because they financed more than half the Congolese budget and controlled the only effective military force in the country (the UN peacekeeping mission). They also maintained great sway due to the Transitional Government's lack of legitimacy and because the peace agreements gave them the right to supervise the transitional process (as institutionalized by the International Committee in Support of the Transition). By all accounts, this influence sharply decreased with President Joseph Kabila's election and inauguration in late 2006. The three and a half years of the transition provided a window of opportunity; this book focuses on this specific period, referring to events that took place before June 2003 and after December 2006 only when they help explain why foreign interveners failed to seize this chance.

To develop this analysis, I build on a wealth of original data. Between 2001 and 2007, I carried out ethnography in various parts of the Congo. I spent fifteen months in the most violent provinces and two months in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa. There, and in France, Belgium, and the United States, I conducted more than 330 interviews with international peacebuilders and Congolese stakeholders. I also analyzed numerous documents, including policy papers, agency memos, confidential reports, and news articles.

There are a number of ways to read this book. For the reader involved in conflict resolution, this book offers a new explanation for the failures of third-party interventions in civil wars: Foreign interveners neglect micro-level tensions. For the reader concerned with international relations, this book improves the theoretical understanding of international action: It identifies a dominant peacebuilding culture that shapes the interveners' views of violence, peace, and intervention, and it shows how this culture operates on the ground. For the reader interested in African studies, comparative politics, or anthropology, this book presents an in-depth study of violence in the Congo. For the reader looking for historical material, this book provides primary data that are unavailable elsewhere; I was virtually the sole academic researcher examining the international intervention who actually spent time in the unstable eastern Congo during the transition. Finally, for policy makers and practitioners, this book suggests tools and ideas with which to improve their peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.

There are also two ways not to read this book. First, this book is not a criticism of the UN Mission in the Congo (the Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo, or MONUC). The "international peacebuilders" that this book studies include not only UN peacekeepers but also other UN actors, as well as diplomats from various countries and international organizations, and many nongovernmental agencies' staff members. Reducing the analysis to a mere criticism of MONUC would thus miss one of the book's central arguments – the fact that the peacebuilding culture, as well as the understandings and actions it shapes, are spread across a variety of interveners. Additionally, as the first pages of this chapter detail and as the conclusion to the book further emphasizes, the top-down international efforts did achieve many noteworthy results. They contributed to reestablishing peace in a large part of the Congo, and they helped the Congo progress on the way to democracy. As of this writing, MONUC's presence is one of the main reasons why the Congo has not (perhaps yet) slid back into a full-scale national and regional war. The Congolese population would suffer tremendously more if it did not benefit from the peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian aid delivered by various international actors. The policy implications of this book are therefore not that donors should stop financing aid programs in the Congo and in other conflict situations because

the international intervention during the Congolese transition was a resounding failure. Rather, the goal of this book is to help policy makers further boost the positive aspects of international peacebuilding interventions, in particular by including bottom-up conflict-resolution programs in their initiatives.

Second, the book does not argue that international interveners should have adopted a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding instead of their top-down strategy. Rather, it demonstrates that international actors should have used a bottom-up approach *in addition to* their top-down strategy. Just as a purely top-down intervention leads to unsustainable peace, as the following chapters show, an exclusively bottom-up strategy would only produce a very fragile and temporary settlement. Top-down explanations for violence are indeed valid and, during the Congolese transition, they were well supported by events on the ground. Top-down interventions also helped assuage some of the sources of violence on the ground. This book insists mostly on the grassroots causes of violence, because policy and scholarly writings have so far ignored them and because, like any theoretical explanation, it needs to minimize the complexity to produce a readable argument. However, this emphasis on micro-level tensions, and on the absolute need for bottom-up peacebuilding, should not be misunderstood as a dismissal of top-down causes of peace and violence.

Understanding Peacebuilding Failures

Conventional Explanations

There is a large body of literature on peace processes and, since the mid-1990s, various authors have started to analyze the implementation phase after the signing of a peace agreement. They have contributed significantly to our theoretical understanding of what determines international involvement at the stage of peace implementation, whether it makes a difference, and which types of intervention work and which do not.¹⁰ However, these accounts often reduce the study of the “international involvement” to that of peacekeeping missions. They thus

¹⁰ See especially Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2004b and 2008; Gilligan and Stedman 2003; Howard 2008; Ottaway 2003; Paris 2004; Regan 2002; Stedman, Rothchild, et al. 2002; Walter 2002; and Zartman 1989.

overlook the influence of other forms of international intervention, such as that emanating from diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian actors.¹¹ Additionally, they usually develop large-scale statistical analyses that afford little sense to how peacebuilding actually operates in the field.¹² Finally, the focus is on macro-level variables, such as the level of violence in the target country, the interests of major powers, or the presence of national capacity for peace, ignoring the micro-level elements.¹³ When looking at cases of civil war resumption, except for a few passing mentions, virtually no existing research on international interventions studies the importance of the local preconditions for peace settlements.¹⁴ As a result, we do not know how international actors approach the micro-level dynamics of violence.

Overall, most existing studies suggest two explanations for peacebuilding failures. First, international peacebuilders may do their best to establish peace, but economic, political, legal, security, or contextual constraints may impair an adequate treatment of the problems at the root of the war.¹⁵ These constraints can include the presence of high levels of hostility and low capacity for peace, a significant likelihood of spoilers (parties using violence expressly to undermine peace), the existence of hostile neighboring states or networks, a large number of warring parties and soldiers, demands for secession, the availability of disposable natural resources, a collapsed state, the lack of a peace agreement before intervention, or the presence of a coerced peace agreement. Other constraints could include the interveners' lack of credibility, the lack of financial and human resources for peacebuilding, ambiguous or confused mandates, an imperative to respect the host state's sovereignty, excessive bureaucracy, lack of sufficient advanced planning, very slow deployment, and an insufficient command and control structure.

¹¹ For example, Doyle, Johnstone, et al. 1997; Fortna 2008; Howard 2008; many of the contributors to Stedman, Rothchild, et al. 2002; and Walter 2002.

¹² For example, Doyle and Sambanis 2006; and Fortna 2008.

¹³ For example, Doyle and Sambanis 2006; and Stedman, Rothchild, et al. 2002.

¹⁴ Notable exceptions are Fetherston and Nordstrom 1995; and Lederach 1997. Lemarchand 1995; Power 2002; Richards 1996; Stedman 1997; and Wood 2000 also briefly mention such preconditions.

¹⁵ Downs and Stedman 2002; Doyle, Johnstone, et al. 1997; Doyle and Sambanis 2000 and 2006; Kim and Metrikas 1997; Marchal and Messiant 2002; Stedman 2002; Touval and Zartman 1985; Zartman 1989; and Zartman and Rasmussen 1997. The definition of spoilers comes from Stedman 1997, p. 1.

A second reason most existing studies give for peacebuilding failures is that vested economic, political, security, or institutional interests may lead some peacebuilders to consciously encourage or ignore peace agreement violations. Major and regional powers with little or no national interest in the peace settlement will devote few or no financial, diplomatic, and military resources to peace implementation, thus failing to see the settlement through to a successful conclusion.¹⁶ The limited and specific interests of intervening parties will also determine the level of priority that peacebuilders give to certain tasks.¹⁷ In particular, policy makers may respond to political or economic imperatives linked to international political disputes or to the domestic situation of their respective countries rather than to developments in the peace process at stake, thus adopting inappropriate peacebuilding strategies. In rarer cases, interveners who are officially present to support the peace process may in fact have a stake in the victory of a specific warring party. To aid this party, they can directly fuel the fighting or support groups who use violence to undermine peace.¹⁸ Finally, international peacebuilders may have a vested interest in the persistence of instability to justify their continued involvement.¹⁹

These explanations based on constraints and interests help account for the level and effectiveness of international involvement. However, they provide us with little theoretical understanding of whether, how, or why the existing constraints and interests lead international actors to prioritize certain peacebuilding strategies, such as the organization of elections, over others, such as local conflict resolution. To answer these questions, we need a new way to look at international interventions. In Georges' words, we need to reconstruct the world from which the "humanoids" come.

The Inadequacy of Conventional Explanations

The application of these explanations based on constraints and interests to the Congolese case perfectly illustrates both their explanatory

¹⁶ Downs and Stedman 2002; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Ottaway 2002; and Zartman and Touval 1996.

¹⁷ Boulden 2001; Durch 1996; Hillen 2000; Jett 2000; and Malone 1998; as analyzed in Paris 2003, p. 442.

¹⁸ Alao, Mackinlay, et al. 1999; and Stedman 1997, p. 51.

¹⁹ De Waal 1997; and Rajasingham 2003.

power and their shortcomings.²⁰ The most popular explanation for the lack of international involvement in local conflict resolution among Congolese civilians and a handful of non-Congolese activists emphasizes Western actors' stake in the continuation of violence.²¹ Western countries failed to support bottom-up peacebuilding projects because it would have counteracted their assumed war-making efforts. Indeed, in this analysis, international interveners fueled local tensions to illegally exploit the Congo's natural resources, preserve the Francophone influence in Africa or promote an Anglophone one, or maintain opportunities for sale of arms.

Popular as it may be, this explanation is deeply flawed. Admittedly, during the war, various Western actors actively aided the exploitation of the Congolese mineral resources, and therefore contributed to the violence associated with it.²² However, no scholarly or reliable policy paper corroborates this explanation for the time of the transition. Scholars and established policy analysts rather refute it, and the data lend it very little support.²³ Six years of research and requests for supporting evidence turned up almost nothing, confirming that this hypothesis is based on a large body of unsupported accusations and only a few that are supported. The best documented charge is that, in 2005 and 2006, a handful of UN Indian and Pakistani peacekeepers struck alliances with local militias to enrich themselves through arms and resource trafficking. Some Western and African multinationals

²⁰ This section synthesizes all of the explanations for the lack of international action on local violence proposed by Congolese and international interviewees, developed in policy and academic writing on the Congo (in particular, Braeckman 2003; Nbanda Nzambo 2004; and Staibano 2005), raised by this book's anonymous reviewers, and suggested by academics and practitioners during the conferences and seminars in which I presented my research. The title of this section is a paraphrase of Carpenter 2003, p. 7.

²¹ For public sources, see, for example, "High-Tech Genocide in Congo," *Projectcensored*, 2007 (<http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/5-high-tech-genocide-in-congo>, accessed in October 2009); and "Behind the Numbers: Untold Suffering in the Congo," *ZNet*, March 1, 2006 (<http://globalpolicy.igc.org/security/issues/congo/2006/0301numbers.htm>, accessed in 2006).

²² See among many others Braeckman 2003; and Lemarchand 2008, p. 5.

²³ See, for example, Boas 2008. The UN panel of experts on arm trafficking in the Congo (UN Security Council 2004b, 2005c, and 2006a) and the vast literature on the illegal exploitation of Congolese resources identify Congolese and regional actors as those fueling violence and only extremely rarely mention individuals from countries and organizations that this book labels as international peacebuilders.

such as Anvil Mining and AngloGold Ashanti were also suspected of funding Congolese militias to secure mineral rights, and arm dealers like Viktor Bout played an active role in the illegal sale of arms to Congolese groups.²⁴ These, however, are only isolated cases, and hardly suffice to support the widespread accusation that international actors, alongside their peacebuilding efforts, also purposely fueled local conflicts.

Outside of Congolese circles, the most frequently suggested explanation for the international neglect of local violence emphasizes that none of the major powers had a key national interest in the Congo. This lack of major power interest accounted for the presence of material constraints on the international intervention. These constraints severely limited any potential action on the ground. They especially prevented international peacebuilders from addressing all of the dimensions of the conflict and from devising new, more ambitious peacebuilding strategies. In line with this explanation, when asked during interviews why they did not address local violence, international interveners usually mentioned their lack of human and financial resources, as well as the organizational, security, and logistical hurdles they faced in their daily work. They repeatedly emphasized that the peacekeeping operation was clearly too small to cover the immense Congolese territory or even the unstable eastern provinces.

This analysis is certainly correct. However, no matter how inadequate, some significant financial and human resources existed, and part of these resources could have been devoted to local peacebuilding. This money could have provided much-needed funding for Congolese and international nongovernmental organizations to implement local reconciliation projects, such as building a market, a school, or a health center, that would reestablish social and commercial links between two communities in conflict. These organizations could also have helped reconstruct social mechanisms, such as local justice institutions, for the peaceful resolution of conflict. Moreover, in each observation site, the UN peacekeeping mission could have deployed, alongside the military, a civilian staff member tasked with monitoring grassroots tensions and providing suggestions for resolution. He or

²⁴ Reviews of news items, 2003–2008, as well as UN Panel of Inquiry 2002a and 2002b; and UN Security Council 2004b, 2005c, and 2006a.

she should have had the authority to draw on existing military, diplomatic, or development resources to promote local peace.

Thus, we need to understand why international actors interpreted the lack of material and financial resources as a constraint on local peacebuilding. This book shows that it was due to the presence of a dominant international peacebuilding culture. The primary alternative answer is that international actors purposely chose to ignore local conflicts. Six distinct motivations, which draw on neorealist, neoliberal, and organizational theory, could explain why they would do so. I examine each in turn to demonstrate their shortcomings.

The first potential motivation for the international neglect of local conflicts is that foreign peacebuilders were indifferent to ending collective violence in the Congo. This explanation does not hold. It is true that no major powers had any significant national interest in the Congo, but the size and the budget of the UN peacekeeping mission underlined the presence of at least some humanitarian and geostrategic interests on the part of the UN Security Council's member states. A comparison with the 1994 UN intervention in Rwanda is illuminating. At that time, the UN leadership and the Security Council members used violence on the ground as a justification for withdrawing the peacekeeping mission. If foreign interveners had been similarly uninterested in ending collective violence in the Congo, they would have acknowledged the ongoing violence instead of ignoring it. This acknowledgment would have justified withdrawing the costly UN mission from a country in which it could never fulfill its mandated task of keeping the peace, precisely because the presence of local violence would have meant that there was no peace to keep.

In fact, chapter 6 shows that, far from being uninterested in ending organized violence, most international interveners had security, economic, and diplomatic stakes in ensuring that the instability in the Congo did not spill over its borders and contaminate its neighbors. They therefore had to contain any tension that threatened to engulf the region. Furthermore, the UN had a major organizational interest in fully pacifying the Congo. If it wanted to preserve its credibility in peacekeeping issues, it could not afford to let the Congo collapse on its watch and have its largest and most expensive mission be considered a fiasco. Most important, after the temporary deployment of European peacekeeping mission Operation Artemis to end massive violence in the Ituri district in mid-2003, Ituri and the broader Congo

were perceived as a test of the UN capacity to conduct an offensive peacekeeping action by itself – and not with the support or under the direction of a specific country, as had always occurred in the past. Many UN and non-UN interviewees claimed that a MONUC failure would have negative consequences on all UN peacekeeping missions in the world.²⁵ As a result, the UN and the states in favor of UN peace operations had to prevent the resumption of large-scale violence, which would suggest that the world organization had failed its test.

The second potential motivation for international neglect is that the permanent members of the Security Council, which mandate the peacekeeping missions, have no interest in involving the UN missions in the messiness of local conflict. Under this assumption, the Secretary-General constrains his staff from getting tied up in local strife. The data do not support this explanation. The only mention of local conflict resolution in official UN and diplomatic documents on the Congo is in a couple of 2002 and 2003 reports of the Secretary-General on MONUC. Here, Kofi Annan officially endorsed a short-lived local peacebuilding initiative promoted by the then Deputy Special Representative for the Congo.²⁶ Otherwise, the issue was never on the agenda in high-level meetings, either to support or to proscribe it. During interviews, diplomats and UN officials based outside of the Congo presented local conflict resolution as an insignificant issue that had to be dealt with only in the field.

The third potential motivation is that international actors considered local conflict resolution to be an internal Congolese affair and consequently within the exclusive competence of the sovereign Congolese state. This explanation raises more questions than it answers. UN staff and diplomats overlooked Congolese sovereignty whenever they deemed it necessary to the success of the transition. For example, they closely supervised the writing of the new constitution, a matter of national sovereignty above all else. Thus, we need to understand why

²⁵ For public sources, see Refugee International 2008; “Breaching the Peace,” *Africa Confidential*, June 27, 2003; Dominic Johnson, “Overburdened soldiers,” *D+C*, March 2006; and Anneke Van Woudenberg, Human Rights Watch Representative, interviewed in “Can the U.N. Keep the Peace?” *PBS*, broadcasted on May 15, 2009 (transcript available at <http://www.pbs.org/shows/520/transcript.html>, accessed December 2009).

²⁶ See, in particular, UN Security Council 2003c. See also chapter 5 for further details.

foreign peacebuilders interpreted sovereignty as a constraint in the case of local peacebuilding and not in the case of writing the constitution. This book shows that it is because the dominant international peacebuilding culture constructed local conflict as significantly less important than national or international issues.

The fourth potential motivation for the purposeful nonengagement in local peacebuilding is that international actors pursued only specific and limited goals in the Congo, which elections could entirely achieve. Elections serve as symbolic endpoints for international interventions. They provide diplomats, international financial institutions, and bilateral donors with the partners they need, in other words, “‘normal,’ internationally recognized government[s]” able and willing to implement international norms and obligations.²⁷ In the Congo, elections also ended an ineffective transitional arrangement. This analysis is correct, but it helps explain the strategies of only some of the international actors, such as China and Russia. The most active states in the Congo during the transition (Belgium, France, South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom) needed to build not only an internationally recognized government but also a lasting peace, to enhance their business opportunities and protect their allied governments in the region. Similarly, as mentioned previously, because the Congo was a test case for UN peacekeeping, UN staff members knew and often emphasized that fully stabilizing the country was of the utmost importance to their organization.

A fifth and related potential motivation is that the standard operating procedures of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations led to reasonable successes without involving the peacekeeping missions in local tensions.²⁸ However, we still need to understand how “success” could be defined in a way that accommodated the continuation of violent local conflicts in parts of the country.

The last potential motivation for intentional disregard is that UN and foreign diplomatic teams had a strong organizational interest in downplaying the importance of local conflict. They needed to maintain their credibility by concealing potential evidence of failure. They wanted to avoid being drawn into a situation that could become a quagmire such as Somalia. They also believed that acknowledging

²⁷ Lyons 2004, p. 37; see also Woodward 2006.

²⁸ This explanation builds on Doyle and Sambanis 2006.

local violence would provide a pretext for belligerent parties to walk away from and cause a collapse of the peace process. These motivations were real, but we still need to understand why Belgian, British, French, South African, UN, and U.S. officials clung to elections when faced with overwhelming proof that this strategy was failing to end organized violence and thus jeopardizing their national and organizational interests. We also need to understand why human rights and humanitarian activists so rarely contested the focus on elections as the measure for success. This book shows that all the processes detailed in this paragraph could happen only because of the presence of a dominant peacebuilding culture. This shared culture made staff working in very different institutional spaces share an understanding of elections (as a workable and legitimate peace- and state-building strategy), of local violence (as normal), and of the persistence of localized fighting (as unrelated to the success of the transition).

Scholars familiar with the international intervention in the Congo sometimes raise what they believe to be an alternative explanation, based on organizational constraints, for the international neglect of local tensions. They emphasize that foreign and national interveners have no choice but to generalize and simplify: Interveners cannot know dozens of different local situations in depth and they have at their disposal only policies framed in general terms. This organizational issue is clearly significant and, in fact, it plays a large role in the analysis developed in this book. However, acknowledging the weight of the organizational constraint is only part of the analytical process. Instead of taking this constraint as a given, we need to study the process through which it has been constructed. Chapter 3 presents the cultural understandings that shape the international actors' views of their roles as "naturally" focused on the macro level, therefore requiring them to design and implement general policies and templates. Chapter 5 challenges this construct by showing that it would actually be possible for foreign interveners to address the myriads of local situations, as long as they worked primarily in support of Congolese grassroots actors. This chapter, then, explains the persistence of the organizational constraint and roots it in cultural issues. Overall, the book shows that explanations based on organizational constraints and cultural influence are not separate; instead, various cultural elements explain why the organizational constraint was constituted,

why it persisted, and why it could hinder international action at the local level.

In sum, material constraints, lack of national interest, and organizational constraints and interests did play roles in preventing international action on local conflict. However, the following chapters demonstrate that these constraints and interests were not given, pre-existing, and objective. They were rather constituted by the dominant international peacebuilding culture. This culture shaped the international understanding of violence and intervention in such a way that international actors interpreted their lack of material capabilities as obstacles to grassroots peacebuilding and viewed their national and organizational interests as compatible with continued local conflict.

Understanding How Culture Shapes Action on the Ground

For the scholarly reader, a focus on culture has the potential to answer questions and solve puzzles that other academic approaches cannot address. For this reader, and for policy makers and practitioners, the focus on culture has an added benefit: It helps us question and problematize elements that are usually taken for granted (such as that a diplomat should not work at the local level). To do this, a few theoretical remarks are necessary to explain how a dominant peacebuilding culture can shape international action on the ground. The broad process I detail in this book is that the dominant culture shapes the international understanding of the causes of violence and of the interveners' role, thus allowing for certain actions while precluding others.²⁹

A culture is a social object. It is not only inside individual heads (the focus of psychological approaches), but also embedded in social routines, practices, discourses, technologies, and institutions.³⁰ A culture is composed of an interconnected set of collective, intersubjective

²⁹ This analysis builds on Finnemore 1996b and was largely inspired by Ferguson 1990 and Mitchell 2002. In addition to the works cited in the subsequent footnotes, Kuper 1999 provides a very helpful overview of the use of the concept of culture in anthropology, and Lapid and Kratochwil 1996 and Walker 1984 do so for international relations. See Autesserre 2009 for a preliminary version of this section.

³⁰ Adler 1997, p. 327.

understandings. These understandings can consist of ideologies (such as liberalism), rules (for example, international organizations should respect the sovereignty of the countries in which they intervene), rituals (national and regional conferences), "assumptions and definitions taken as given" (Congolese are inherently violent), and paradigms (the liberal peace). Paradigms often include standard operating procedures (organization of elections) and "shared definitions of the environment" (the Congo is a postconflict situation).³¹

The concept of culture does not refer only to ideas. Collective understandings frame people's interpretations of behaviors. These interpretations generate habitual actions, usually referred to as "practices." A combination of language and techniques, usually called "discourses," maintain these understandings.³² These techniques include both ideational and physical elements. Consider the example of organizing elections. Chapter 3 shows that the liberal peace paradigm generated both an intellectual and a material toolkit with which to organize elections.³³ This paradigm spurred the development of a large body of expertise in electoral democracy building. It led to the creation of agencies and departments for electoral assistance in many international organizations and in most foreign ministries. These intellectual and physical elements constantly reinforced and co-constituted one another: The expertise informed the work of the various organizations, which in turn developed data and theory to enrich the electoral expertise. Similarly, this book shows that all of the cultural elements that influenced the peacebuilding intervention in the Congo were both intellectual and physical devices.

Cultures are not biologically given; they are socially constructed over long periods of time.³⁴ Anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists have written countless books and articles on the sources of various cultures. Two findings are especially relevant for this book. To start, collective understandings can either precede action or emerge from practice.³⁵ This book shows that, during the Congolese transition, the dominant international peacebuilding culture was mostly an instance of the former, except for one of its central elements: the

³¹ Weick 1995, chapter 5. Quotations from pp. 113 and 118.

³² This is a paraphrase of Klotz and Lynch 2007.

³³ See also Swidler 1986 on the idea of culture as a toolkit.

³⁴ Berger and Luckmann 1967.

³⁵ See Weick 1995 for an overview of the sociological literature on the topic.

labeling of the Congo as a postconflict environment. Although the “postconflict” label per se, as well as the strategies it authorized, existed before the transition, it was only applied to the Congo beginning in late 2002. Through repeated interactions, UN officials and diplomats based in Kinshasa and foreign capitals constituted this shared description of the Congo as no longer at war; it had entered a “postconflict phase.” Then, during the first few months of the transition, extensive communication between these actors and those deployed in the violent provinces helped to spread the label to all members of the peacebuilding field. Once applied, this label allowed for the adoption of a new set of strategies that were not necessarily appropriate for the situation on the ground. By contrast, other elements of the peacebuilding culture existed before the international intervention in the Congo. Before the transition started, a combination of training and socialization processes had already helped to spread, reproduce, and reify them.

A second debate relevant to this book is that the few authors working on the influence of discourse on peacekeeping strategies locate the sources of the dominant collective understandings at different levels. Barnett and Finnemore root them inside international bureaucracies.³⁶ This book similarly identifies a powerful organizational element in the peacebuilding culture: the UN and embassy staffs’ understanding of their role as exclusively concerned with national and regional peace settlements. However, Barnett and Finnemore’s organizational approach would expect different organizations to behave differently. It cannot explain why different actors with very distinct identities, internal cultures, and interests show puzzling behavioral similarities.³⁷ (Realism and liberalism, the standard approaches to international relations, similarly fail at explaining behavioral similarities for disparate actors or actors with dissimilar interests.³⁸)

Therefore, I also locate the sources of the dominant peacebuilding culture beyond the organization, at the levels of the world polity and the field. Following Paris and the world polity school of sociology, I argue that, for analytical purposes, we can “treat the entire world as a single society” and identify a “distinct global culture” dominant on

³⁶ Barnett 2002; and Barnett and Finnemore 2004.

³⁷ This criticism builds on Finnemore 1996b. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 334–337.

the international scene.³⁹ This world polity culture “comprises the formal and informal rules of international social life,” which defines “whom the principal actors in world politics should be, how these actors should organize themselves internally, and how they should behave.” In the early twenty-first century, the global culture included two elements that significantly influenced the international intervention in the Congo: a veneration of elections and an understanding of violence as intrinsic to the Congo.

I also identify an intermediary level between that of the individual organization and that of the world polity: the level of the field. Following DiMaggio and Powell, I define a field as an increasingly structured set of organizations that “in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life.”⁴⁰ More specifically, a field is a “semi-autonomous ... sphere of action,” which is “governed by largely implicit ‘rules’ or ‘principles of action.’” These rules and principles produce “a certain homogeneity” within the field and give it significant coherence.⁴¹ I propose that, in the early twenty-first century, embassies based in conflict areas, parts of international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank, and nongovernmental agencies such as the International Crisis Group all belong to the same field: that of peacebuilding. Building on Bourdieu, I also show in chapter 5 that this field is structured in terms of power relationships, with dominant actors (in particular, high-ranking diplomats and UN managers), less influential ones (especially nongovernmental organizations), and actors excluded from access to the discursive space (in the case of the Congo, the inhabitants of its violent provinces).⁴²

In this book, I demonstrate that cultural and normative understandings shared by the members of the peacebuilding field (such as the “postconflict” label and the perception of local conflict resolution as an unimportant task) and of the world polity (such as the understanding of extensive violence as normal for the Congo) explain why actors as different as the UN, the United States, South Africa, and many nongovernmental agencies could adopt the same understanding of the situation and similar intervention strategies. Collective

³⁹ Paris 2003, p. 442. See also Finnemore 1996b; and Richmond 2002 and 2005.

⁴⁰ DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 148.

⁴¹ Benson 2006, p. 188; and Bigo 2006, p. 22. ⁴² Bourdieu 1979.

understandings coming from the culture external to these organizations were translated into specific routines, rules, and procedures in different institutional spaces.

It is important to acknowledge that this peacebuilding culture was not spread across all international interveners to the same extent. Many organizations and subunits had different subcultures and distinct priorities, and some individuals or agencies actually contested various elements of the peacebuilding culture. The collective understandings that I study were thus not the only existing ones. They were the dominant ones, however, and they were dominant not only within each international organization and diplomatic mission but also across them. As a result, despite organizational differences and despite internal contestation, most of the staff located in various organizations or subunits showed a remarkable uniformity of views on two topics: the causes of violence and the appropriate strategies to end it.

For added clarity, Table 1 summarizes the sources of the peacebuilding culture that are central to the argument of this book. It shows whether these elements were – or became – part of a culture that was located inside or outside of organizations. In the latter case, the table indicates whether the culture was truly global (at the level of the world polity) or restricted to the peacebuilding field. In all cases, I distinguish whether these elements preceded the international intervention in the Congo or emerged from practice during the time of the Congolese transition.

Identifying the sources of the various collective understandings is important for better analyzing the culture studied and problematizing it, but it is only one of the many steps necessary to explain how culture shapes international action. Analyzing this process in the case of international interventions in conflict zones is especially critical because, despite a growing body of research on this topic, we still lack detailed ethnographic analysis explaining how culture operates on the ground to influence peacekeeping or peacebuilding practices. Paris leaves this topic open as an area for further research.⁴³ Richmond concentrates on the influence of various theoretical and ideological paradigms on peacekeeping and peacebuilding strategies in general, at a macro level.⁴⁴ Barnett focuses on elites at the UN and,

⁴³ Paris 2003. ⁴⁴ Richmond 2002, 2005, and 2008.

Table 1. Sources of the Dominant Peacebuilding Culture's Elements

		<i>Preceded intervention</i>	<i>Emerged from practice</i>
<i>Sources external to the peacebuilding organizations</i>	<i>World polity</i>	Violence innate to Congo Veneration of elections	
	<i>Peacebuilding field</i>	Top-down understanding of violence Postconflict label Strategies appropriate for postconflict environments Appropriate actors for local peacebuilding Local peacebuilding as unimportant and unmanageable task	Labeling of the Congo as a postconflict environment
<i>Peacebuilding organizations' internal cultures</i>		Focus on national and regional realms	

by extension, on the representatives of the few countries present in the Security Council.⁴⁵ Anthropologists have studied the influence of culture on intervention practices in the field, but they overwhelmingly focus on only one group of peacebuilders, namely, military actors. They thus often overlook the multiplicity of international interveners present on the ground.⁴⁶

These studies provide us with fascinating insights, but explaining how culture influences action in the field also requires a consideration of all of the peacebuilders involved in a postwar setting, including the staff of various international and nongovernmental organizations, diplomats of Security Council and non-Security Council countries, and top policy makers based in headquarters as well as embassy secretaries and peacekeepers deployed in the field.

⁴⁵ Barnett 2002.

⁴⁶ See, among others, Avruch 2004; Duffey 2000; Fetherston and Nordstorm 1995; and Rubinstein 2008.

To explain how culture operates on the ground, I build on previous research on culture, norms, and frames. I show that people draw on collective understandings to construct roles and interpret objects.⁴⁷ In more accessible terms, culture shapes how people understand the world and, based on this understanding, what they perceive to be the appropriate action.⁴⁸

One of the most enlightening insights in the extensive literature on culture and related concepts is that problems are not given; they have to be constructed.⁴⁹ Cultural norms shape peoples' views on what counts as a problem and what does not. For example, the understanding of significant violence as normal for a peaceful Congo prevented international actors from constructing continued fighting in the eastern provinces as a problem. Culture also affects which events will be noticed and which will not, as well as how they will be interpreted.⁵⁰ For instance, because diplomats believe that they should focus on the national and international realms, they found (or privileged) information confirming that the sources of violence lay at these macro levels.

That cultures organize knowledge in part through categories is another insight. These categories are often arbitrary and dichotomous, such as man/woman, war/peace, or barbarian/civilized. These distinctions shape how people interpret and understand objects or processes and how they act toward or within them. For example, labeling the Congo a "postconflict" situation instead of a "war" situation made a specific set of policies and procedures (such as the organization of elections) seem natural and appropriate while another set of strategies (such as work on local conflicts) seemed inappropriate and illegitimate.

Thus, while culture neither "causes" nor "determines" action, it does make some actions possible and others improbable.⁵¹ It "establish[es] the conditions of possibility for objects or events."⁵² To emphasize this point, the aim of this book is not to develop a "linear, causal analysis between independent and dependent variables" to provide law-like statements.⁵³ The aim is rather to document a dispersed process,

⁴⁷ Weick 1995, p. 109.

⁴⁸ This sentence builds on Adler 1997, pp. 329–330.

⁴⁹ Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Eden 2004; and Weick 1995.

⁵⁰ Barnett and Finnemore 2004, pp. 32–33; and Weick 1995.

⁵¹ Finnemore 1996b. ⁵² Fearon and Wendt 2002, p. 58.

⁵³ This approach builds on Finnemore 1996b; and Klotz and Lynch 2007, p. 36.

where social objects have multiple sources, and where ideas, actions, and environmental constraints mutually constitute each other.

This book shows how the dominant peacebuilding culture constitutes specific actors (such as the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations), identities (such as “a diplomat,” as understood in the early twenty-first century), interests (such as UN organizational interests), and assumptions that are taken as truths (such as “the Congo is inherently violent”).⁵⁴ Together these identities, interests, and assumptions define “legitimate or desirable goals” for the actors to pursue. They authorize, enable, and justify specific practices and policies while precluding others (for example, diplomats should work on international dialogues and not on local conflict).⁵⁵ These actions in turn reproduce and reinforce both the dominant practices and the meanings upon which they are predicated, which together constitute the dominant culture. Over time, the collective understandings and the practices that they authorize come to be taken as “natural,” given, and the sole conceivable option.

Examining culture also helps explain change and resistance to it. Two mechanisms explain the latter. First, people usually tend to interpret new information as a confirmation of existing, dominant beliefs.⁵⁶ In particular, Watzlawick demonstrates that “once a tentative explanation has taken hold of our minds, information to the contrary may produce not corrections but elaborations of the explanation.”⁵⁷ Second, large-scale bureaucracies (such as the UN, which was the most powerful international actor in the eastern provinces during the Congolese transition) are notoriously resistant to change because they rely on routines and stability to function and because change usually “threatens entrenched organizational culture and interests.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, organizations can and do change. Several recent studies have shown that “probably the most likely impetus to reinterpretation of the environment, or organizational mission within it,” is when key actors interpret “external change or shock” as threatening organizational survival.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ This paragraph builds on Klotz and Lynch 2007, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Finnemore 1996b, p. 326.

⁵⁶ See Weick 1995, chapters 4 and 6, for a review of the sociological and psychological literature on this topic.

⁵⁷ Watzlawick 1976, cited in Weick 1995, p. 84.

⁵⁸ Barnett and Finnemore 2004, p. 2; Eden 2004; and Weaver 2008.

⁵⁹ Eden 2004, p. 57.

As I show throughout this book, diplomats, international organization managers, and most international nongovernmental agencies constantly reproduced the various collective understandings constituting the dominant peacebuilding culture. There were only a few exceptions. A handful of UN staff members and diplomats, as well as certain nongovernmental agencies, questioned the dominant collective understandings. These people and agencies escaped the all-encompassing influence of the dominant culture because of various idiosyncratic elements, such as organizational or personal background, interests, and knowledge of the local language and culture.

Along with some inhabitants of the eastern Congo, these few exceptional individuals and organizations contested the strategic choices that other interveners viewed as self-evident. Their efforts succeeded only when shocking events, such as unexpected, genocidal, or particularly horrific violence took place. In these cases, UN officials reinterpreted the continued violence. It was no longer a "normal" feature of a peaceful Congo; rather, it was evidence that the war was continuing. As such, it threatened the survival of the UN peacekeeping mission and UN officials had to address it immediately.

However, this recategorization of parts of the Congo as war environments affected only one element of the peacebuilding culture (the labeling of the Congo as a postconflict environment and the strategies this labeling authorized); it did not influence the other, preexisting elements. Diplomats and UN staff members usually interpreted shocking violence as a confirmation of their beliefs that Congolese were violent by nature and that violence was a consequence of macro-level tensions. They still conceived of their role as inherently focused on the national and regional realms, and especially on elections. They never considered that micro-level conflict could be a main cause of the problem or that working at the local level could be an appropriate strategy. Thus, when they intervened to stop shocking violence, they mostly tried to bring violence back to a "normal" (meaning, less horrific and nongenocidal) level, at which point they could recategorize the targeted area as a postconflict environment.

Methodology

To show how the international peacebuilding culture shapes action on the ground, this book draws on a multisited ethnography,

semistructured interviews, and document analysis. Overall, I spent a year and a half in the Congo, first as a humanitarian worker during the war (in 2001) and the first few months of the transition (in 2003), and then as an academic researcher (in 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007). I spent most of my time in the provinces that violence continued to affect. I conducted in-depth ethnographic research in the four main towns of the eastern Congo (Goma in North Kivu, Bukavu in South Kivu, Kalemie in North Katanga, and Bunia in Ituri) and in five rural territories located in South Kivu and North Katanga (Uvira, Shabunda, Baraka, Fizi, Nyunzu, and Pweto; see map of the Congo in Figure 1). I selected these towns and villages based on their contrasting experiences of violence, the presence of different political, ethnic, and military groups on their territories, and their accessibility. I went back several times to most of these places between 2001 and 2007.

When in the Congo as an academic researcher, I remained loosely attached to various humanitarian agencies to benefit from their security backup – which became helpful many times during the course of my research – and to reach rural villages that only aid workers and military groups had the logistical means to access. I adopted various measures to minimize the extent to which this affiliation could bias my findings, notably by always making clear that I did not work for these aid agencies, by triangulating my sources, and by conducting research independently whenever security conditions allowed. I also analyzed my data in light of these potential biases.

I alternated this fieldwork in the eastern Congo with interviews in Kinshasa and in Brussels, Paris, New York, and Washington. This research design enabled me to contrast my firsthand observations of the evolution of the transition in the eastern provinces with data that showed how international peacebuilders based in Kinshasa, Europe, and the United States perceived the situation in the eastern Congo.

Thus, I marshal various kinds of evidence to support my argument. My most useful material comes from the more than 330 interviews I conducted with UN officials, Western and African diplomats, staff members of international and nongovernmental organizations, victims of violence, foreign observers, and Congolese political, military, diplomatic, and civil society actors in the Congo, France, Belgium, and the United States. Most of these interviews lasted more than two hours. When selecting my interviewees, I strove to gain exposure to the broadest possible spectrum of cultural and national backgrounds, affiliation (military or civilian), political opinions, experience of

violence (as victims and as perpetrators) and, most important for this research, views on local conflict and bottom-up peacebuilding. I intentionally sought out people who were usually silent or silenced, such as indigent women in isolated rural areas and members of foreign ministries or international organizations ostracized by their colleagues. I interviewed dozens of my informants repeatedly over time, allowing me to probe more deeply into sensitive topics and to contrast the different phases of the fast-changing political environment. From 2005 onward, I disseminated my draft findings to various policy makers, practitioners, and Congolese actors, to make sure that my analysis accurately captured their understanding of their own situation. I used their feedback to revise and refine my findings on a number of critical points.

Most of my interviewees preferred to remain anonymous because of the personal risks involved in providing information on the dynamics of sustained violence in the Congo. Diplomats and UN staffers were also wary to voice their opinions openly because of the culture of secrecy pervasive in their professional circles. For this reason, I fully reference only the data obtained through on-record interviews or in public sources. In characterizing anonymous interviewees, I list only their status (such as “diplomat,” “Congolese civilian,” “humanitarian worker,” or “UN official”) and the year that the conversation occurred. Whenever it is necessary to use their names in the text, I replace them with pseudonyms.

I also draw on field observations that I conducted during the war, the transition, and the postelectoral period. During each visit to the eastern Congo, I observed how the evolution of the peace process affected the living conditions there. I specifically focused on identifying the sources of the remaining conflicts and on tracing the reasons for the various outbursts of violence. I also attended dozens of coordination meetings among international and Congolese actors and conducted numerous informal conversations with Congolese citizens and expatriates (foreigners deployed abroad, as opposed to local staffers).

Finally, I checked all this field data against public and confidential documents, such as policy papers, nongovernmental organizations’ and UN reports, agency memos, and news sources. Several contacts leaked restricted documents to me and allowed me to use their contents under the condition that I would not identify my source. I treat such documents as author’s anonymous interviews to protect confidentiality.

It is important to note that most of the book draws on confidential sources, be they interviews, field observations, or documents. To avoid constantly referring to my sources as “author’s confidential interviews and field observations” without being able to provide more details (a practice that would rapidly make footnotes annoying to the reader), we made the editorial decision to reference only open sources. This book should therefore be read with the understanding that any information or quotation for which I do not provide a footnoted reference is based on confidential data (documents, interviews, informal conversations, and field observations). Whenever possible, I provide in the text any piece of nonconfidential information that is useful to fully appreciate the quotation or piece of information, such as the status of the interviewee I quote or the year the conversation occurred. Additionally, for the reader’s convenience, I also provide references to publicly available sources when feasible, even when the information and analysis developed in the text is primarily based on confidential data.

When studying international peacebuilders, I focused my research on representatives of the countries and organizations most involved in the Congolese peace process. In terms of states, the primary actors were Belgium, France, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In terms of organizations, key agents included the UN – and especially its peacekeeping mission, MONUC – and, to a lesser extent, the EU. Mozambique, Zambia, Canada, Gabon, the World Bank, the African Union, numerous nongovernmental organizations, and UN specialized agencies such as the UN Development Program also contributed to peacebuilding in agreement with their respective interests or mandates.

Notwithstanding the dominant cultural elements analyzed in this book, staff working in these various structures, and even different branches of the same state or organization, had very different approaches, means, goals, and work ethics. To explore and expose these differences, this book looks at both top policy makers and lower-level peacebuilders, such as embassy secretaries or peacekeepers deployed in remote areas. Thus, my analysis goes beyond the official statements and documents, to the actual practice of peacebuilding, which is often very different from the formal record. This book documents how elite instructions are contested, reinterpreted, and translated into action on the ground. It builds on the experience related by

people coming from all continents and from many different national, social, and economic backgrounds, thus allowing me to claim that the culture I identify is truly a global (or field-, or organization-specific) one, and not merely a Western culture. The book also gives voice to Congolese actors, to show how they received and interpreted this international action, and why they welcomed or fought it.

This research objective presents an inherent dilemma, which Peter Uvin perfectly expressed in the introduction to his famous study of humanitarian aid in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide.⁶⁰ His words, only slightly modified, say it best: No matter how much I tried to delve into the idiosyncrasy of each organization, it is likely that for any statement I make, there have been people who acted or thought differently. Any claim about “the diplomatic community” or “the UN” is bound to do injustice to some people or organizations. The same holds true, for that matter, for statements about “Congolese politicians,” “traditional leaders,” or “rural inhabitants of the eastern Congo.” I sought to respect the variation that exists in each group, but I probably failed to do so for everyone involved. My analysis focuses on the peacebuilding world at large, and it is therefore bound to generalize and simplify. It is my hope that what this approach offers in terms of enhanced theoretical and policy insights will offset the loss of factual minutiae.

Three last important points still need clarification. First, following the report that first popularized the concept, Boutros-Ghali’s *An Agenda for Peace*, peacebuilding refers to any “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace.”⁶¹ Building on this report, this book defines “peace” as the lasting absence of organized, collective violence to attain political, social, or economic goals (see the end of chapter 2 for a further elaboration of this concept). Bottom-up peacebuilding, which I use interchangeably with local conflict resolution, entails the implementation of peacebuilding actions at the grassroots level. This strategy includes, for example, setting up local courts to adjudicate competing ownership claims over land, organizing a workshop to reconcile two villages in conflict, or building an enterprise in whose success two warring communities have a stake (see chapters 5 and 6 for more details).

⁶⁰ The entire paragraph paraphrases Uvin 1998, p. 9.

⁶¹ Boutros-Ghali 1992, para. 21.

Second, for consistency, this book uses the name the Congo throughout, even though the Democratic Republic of the Congo – not to be confused with the neighboring Republic of Congo – changed names several times in recent history (the Belgian colonizer called it the Congo Free State and then the Belgian Congo; at independence the country kept the name of Congo; in 1971, President Mobutu renamed it Zaire; and finally in 1997, President Laurent-Désiré Kabila switched the name back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo). To avoid confusing the reader, this book also uses modern maps (as of the period of the transition) as well as the modern names of Congolese provinces and cities even when referring to colonial and postindependence times.

Third, apart from passing mentions, this book does not discuss the 1960–1964 UN Operation in the Congo (best known by its French acronym ONUC) because none of my interviewees ever referred to it, and none of the documents analyzed devoted more than a few sentences to it. The lack of influence that the first Congo mission had on the second one is surprising at first, given the apparent similarities between the two operations.⁶² The UN also deployed the 1960s mission to help the newly independent Congolese state address civil war and remove foreign military elements (Belgians at the time). Just as its successor, ONUC was also a very large and costly mission, with up to 20,000 troops. Though it occurred during the vastly different political climate of the Cold War and the early years of Africa's decolonization, it faced challenges remarkably similar to those of the early 2000s, including restoring "the legitimacy, territorial integrity, and internal sovereignty of the state."⁶³ Finally, as with MONUC forty years later, many observers considered ONUC a major failure. In the UN Secretariat and among the UN member states, ONUC in fact became *the* example of what peacekeeping missions should not do. UN missions should not become a party in a war and interfere in the domestic affairs of UN member states. Peacekeeping missions should not engage in combat operations, because doing so jeopardizes the lives of UN troops and staff members.

⁶² For more on the ONUC and the history of peacekeeping, see Carayannis forthcoming; Daase 1999; Mortimer 1998; and the official Web page of the mission (<http://www.un.org/depts/DPKO/Missions/onuc.htm>).

⁶³ Lemarchand 2008, p. 249.

These lessons persisted until the end of the Cold War removed some of the impediments to peace enforcement missions. In the early 1990s, the Rwandan and Somali disasters replaced the ONUC fiasco in the UN's hall of shame. These failed interventions became the reference points that UN officials and various diplomats mentioned during interviews, when they discussed what UN missions should or should not do. Eventually, by the time the UN deployed a new mission in the Congo once again, ONUC was forgotten history, with virtually no influence on the collective understanding of the causes of violence and the role of foreign interveners.

Overview of the Book

The following chapters reconstruct the international peacebuilders' world to illuminate why they failed to build a sustainable peace in the Congo, and to explain what role the dominant peacebuilding culture played in the process.

Chapter 2 focuses on how international peacebuilders understood the continuing violence during the Congolese transition. UN staff and diplomats were – and continue to be – trained to analyze conflicts from a top-down perspective. As a result, they identified national and regional tensions as the causes of the continued fighting and massacres in the eastern Congolese provinces. The main difference between the war and the transition period was the meaning of continued violence in this dominant narrative. From 2003 onward, UN staff and diplomats defined the Congolese context as a “postconflict” environment; the various bouts of large-scale fighting thus became mere “crises” rather than evidence that the war was continuing. To explain the violence that they could not relate to any national or regional antagonisms, international peacebuilders used several interrelated frameworks of analysis. In their view, local violence was private and criminal, and was the consequence of the lack of state authority in the Congo. More important, because the image of the Congolese's “inherent savagery” had persisted since the Belgian colonizers constructed it a century ago, foreign actors usually saw extensive local violence as a normal feature of life in a peaceful Congo.

Chapter 3 explains why the international peacebuilding strategy used during the Congolese transition made perfect sense in the eyes of its implementers, even though its inadequacy quickly became

apparent. In addition to their assessment of violence detailed in chapter 2, UN officials, diplomats, and nongovernmental organization officials shared three beliefs that shaped their view of what constituted the most appropriate type of foreign intervention. To start with, international actors perceived themselves as working in the face of multiple and almost insurmountable constraints, which severely limited their peacebuilding options. As a result, they had to prioritize. Two other dominant understandings oriented which strategy took precedence: Diplomats and UN staff members are trained to work on superstructures, such as national and international negotiations, and they are socialized in focusing on predefined tasks and performance guidelines that fail to consider local violence. They therefore believed that their only legitimate role was to intervene at the macro levels. Additionally, because they labeled the Congolese transition as a postconflict situation, they concluded that they should adopt different strategies from those that they had used when the Congo was at war.

These three beliefs shaped the intervention strategy. International peacebuilders approached all of their tasks in a top-down fashion. Influenced by the ideological environment of the post-Cold War era, diplomats and UN staff members especially focused on organizing general elections. They saw other peace- and state-building tasks as secondary, still approaching them, when at all, in a top-down fashion. There was only one exception to this top-down approach: humanitarian aid, which interveners perceived as an apolitical solution to an apolitical problem (the continuation of violence on the ground).

Chapter 4 develops an alternative analysis of violence, which in part explains why the international efforts failed to build a sustainable peace. Local violence was motivated not only by top-down causes, regional or national, but also by bottom-up tensions. Local agendas have held tremendous influence throughout modern Congolese history, and they have often been intertwined with macro-level dimensions. Likewise, during the transition, many conflicts revolved around political, social, and economic stakes that were distinctively local. These decentralized conflicts often jeopardized the national and regional reconciliation processes, for example by motivating violence against Congolese of Rwandan descent or by allowing a strong Rwandan Hutu presence in the Kivus. In its final section, this chapter

analyzes the situations in the most violent areas of the Congo during the transition – the two Kivus, North Katanga, and Ituri – to explain how local dynamics interacted with the national and regional dimensions. I demonstrate that, after a national and regional settlement was reached, some local conflicts over land and political power became increasingly self-sustaining and autonomous from the national and regional developments, most notably in South Kivu, North Katanga, and Ituri, while in North Kivu they fueled the existing tensions to the point of jeopardizing the broader settlements.

Chapter 5 considers why attempts at promoting the analysis developed in chapter 4, and at adopting a bottom-up peacebuilding strategy in addition to the top-down one, failed throughout the transition. I first show how international interveners could have boosted local peacebuilding initiatives with the resources at hand. I next trace how isolated members of MONUC and of diplomatic missions, as well as certain nongovernmental organizations, tried to convince their colleagues to adopt such a bottom-up approach, and I show that these attempts were largely unsuccessful. I explain that the largest peacebuilding bureaucracies rejected these opportunities for change because the potential reforms clashed with deeply entrenched cultural norms and jeopardized numerous organizational interests. As a result, neither contestation nor the occurrence of unexpected, genocidal, or particularly gruesome or spectacular events ever became sufficient to prompt diplomats and UN staff to reevaluate their understanding of violence and intervention. Instead, a vicious circle developed, in which the perception of local conflict resolution as a long-term, unfamiliar, and illegitimate task turned local level “constraints” on international action into insurmountable obstacles, a process that in turn reinforced the perception of bottom-up peacebuilding as a negligible issue.

The concluding chapter starts by explaining why the intervention strategy could not build either peace or democracy in the Congo. It presents the standard macro-level arguments, insisting on the drawbacks of the electoral tool. It then suggests a new theoretical approach to the study of international peacebuilding failures in the Congo, in the rest of Africa, and beyond. The dominant international peacebuilding culture shapes the interveners’ understanding of peace, violence, and intervention in a way that overlooks the micro-foundations necessary

for sustainable peace. The resulting inattention to local conflict leads to unsustainable peacebuilding in the short term and potential war resumption in the long term. The book ends by briefly detailing the policy implications of this analysis and offering recommendations to improve international interventions in civil wars.