

A FRAGMENTED EUROPE IN A FRAIL CONGO

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is home to risky contradictions: despite being very “rich” in natural resources, it remains consistently “poor” in solid and legitimate state structures. Europe conducts numerous efforts to strengthen Congolese social and economic infrastructures, offering security and governance support alongside more traditional development projects. But its actions suffer from situational ignorance, fragmentation, and policy frailty. A coherent and strategic (international) approach is urgently needed to provide valuable impetus to the most pressing Congolese needs.



France's President Sarkozy reviews an honour guard in Kinshasa, 26 March 2009 *REUTERS / POOL New*

Congo matters. As a country almost ten times the size of the UK, it is home to 71 million people and more than 200 ethnic groups speaking as many as 700 different languages. Blessed with an abundance of natural resources such as metals, minerals, forests, and oil, and strategically located in the heart of Africa, it is a lucrative commodities catch.

But all this wealth is entrenched in extreme forms of corruption, failed economic growth, on-going instability, remnants of civil war, and the enduring dangers of regional spill-overs. With a per capita annual income of about US\$189 in 2010, the country is still among the poorest countries in the world and ranks close to bottom on the UN Development Index. Meanwhile, militia groups such as the

Forces Armées de la RDC (FARDC), the predominantly Hutu Democratic Forces of the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the Tutsi-dominated Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) still imperil stability in the Kivu provinces in the east, whereas Uganda's Lord Resistance Army (LRA) has continued to severely violate human rights and brutally attacks large groups of the population in the northeast. International and regional peace agreement efforts have thus far led to little.

What the DRC needs most urgently right now are transparent governance structures to provide security and protection for its resources, as well as its people. A significant step in that direction was taken five years ago, when the country held its first multiparty and – according to internation-

al observers – credible elections for over 40 years. The upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2011 will be important markers as to whether Congolese stability and reconstruction is heading in the right direction. With domestic unrest boiling up, and delayed national preparations in terms of electoral jurisdiction, budgets, logistical arrangements, and voters' lists, hopes should not be set too high.

The international community has also had a slow start on electoral engagements. It seriously needs to step up its game to avoid the realistic risk that the elections will not only destabilise Congo, but the entire Great Lakes region, throwing away years of reconstruction work. Congo needs broad governance support – not least for resource regulation – to bounce back politically and economically. Efforts are emerging to regulate wood and minerals trade as well as the privatised grubbing of ores and oil to avoid exploitation. But finding stability in a country where President Kabila risks collapse – against a backdrop of ever-stronger opposition parties and anti-government movements – is not reserved for the half-committed. That applies on the domestic and international levels alike.

Bursting with good intentions, European actors have been actively engaged in the DRC with development cooperation, humanitarian aid, as well as institutional reforms in state and security structures. But Europe's presence in the country actually represents more loose ends than substantial progress. European engagement

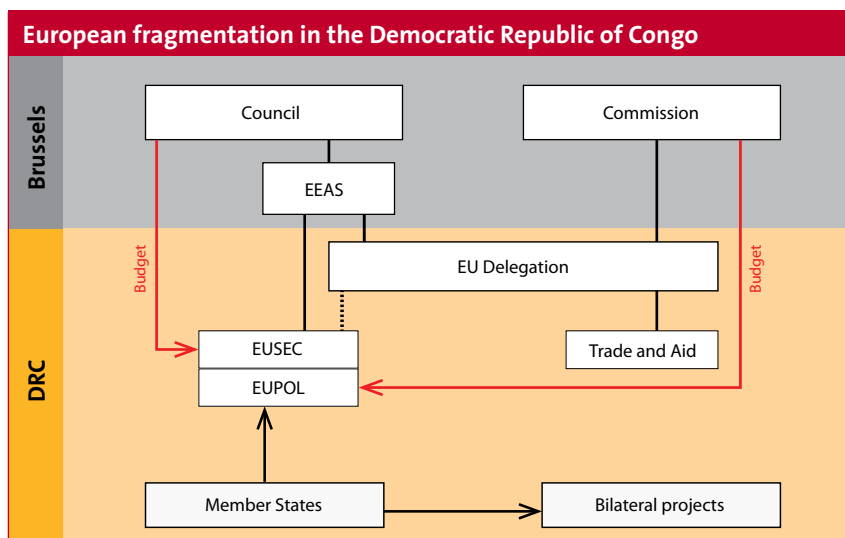
lacks coherence, lacks strategy, and leaves far too much scope for other international actors to sidestep principles of “good governance”. With elections knocking on Congolese doors, it is time for some European self-reflection, and more importantly, action.

Europe in the DRC: Much ado about nothing?

As the DRC’s major export trading partner for diamonds, precious metals, coffee, petroleum, and timber, the EU’s ambitions to manage the country’s political risk are not surprising - even if the EU-DRC policy discourse has deafened some of these commercial drivers. Whatever the intentions, Europe at least seems busy working to improve the DRC politically, socially, and economically. It has also come to understand that cross-sector good governance is the key to reducing poverty and triggering sustainable economic growth – both crucial factors in resource-rich, yet politically shaky countries such as the DRC.

Besides trade agreements and traditional development efforts on education, health, and transport infrastructure, the European Commission’s core focus lies with the reconstruction of Congo’s “political” infrastructure. The Indicative National Programme of the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) for 2008–2013 clearly places more emphasis on good governance than the previous one. Projects in this area concentrate on democratisation, human rights, and institutional reform. The Council is indeed meant to be a boil for the Commission on the security front within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The civilian missions EUPOL and EUSEC DRC are reforming the Congolese police and military structures, respectively, looking to enrich governance approaches with a sharper security touch.

Much of this builds on prior EU engagement in Congo. Peace, security, and stabilisation have long been the underpinnings of EU priorities in the DRC. CSDP has not left the country since the military EU operation Artemis was launched in 2003 – its first operation on the African continent. Since then, the EU has focused its civilian crisis management activities in the country on security sector reform – spanning police, army, and justice. The Commission has engaged in the training of an Integrated Police Unit in 2004, an effort that has – at least temporarily – been sustained by the CSDP police mission EUPOL Kinshasa



(2005–2007). In addition, bilateral projects – some more related to EU efforts than others – especially from France, the UK, and Belgium, have supported political and security sector reforms.

The hitch with all this is that while it *sounds* good, operational impacts have actually been remarkably limited. The DRC even seems to be slipping down the list of European political priorities, so much so that Catherine Ashton only on 2 August 2011 decided to launch a short-term Election Observation Mission to the country for the November elections. This might seem like a minor omission, but it underlines some of the broader policy areas where Europe is falling short.

Lost in coordination

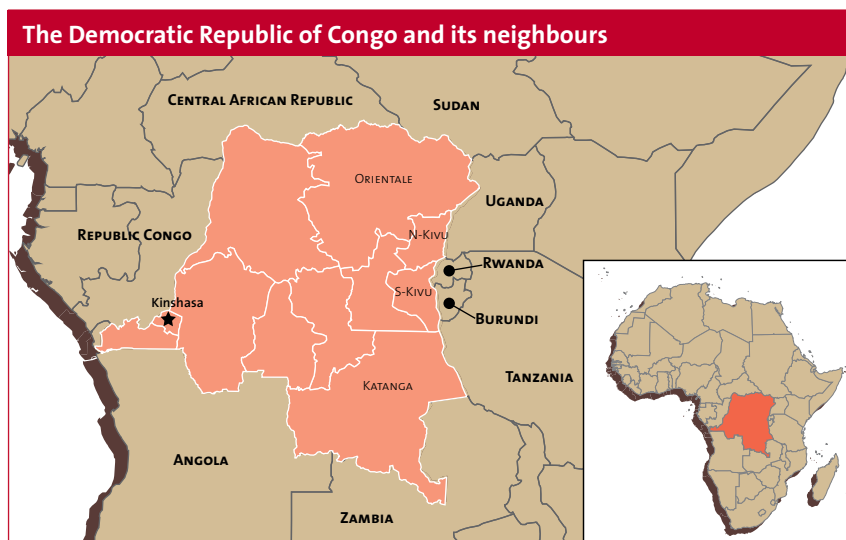
One of the major dangers is that all European activities in the DRC – however well intended – are occurring more or less independently from each other in the same territory. On a good day, that results in policy overlap; on a bad day, in utter policy contradictions. Whereas the Commission supports governance from the EU budget in a long-term framework, the Council thinks short-term and draws from a mix of budgets; civilian missions are funded by the Commission, military operations by the member states, with common costs for the latter covered by the Athena mechanism. Just to add to the complexity, EUSEC, a civilian mission with a military focus, is funded by member states’ budgets.

The EU could make this puzzle fit rather effortlessly, though. Clarity and (limited) imagination are all that is needed. CSDP should function as the short-term technical implementation of security reform,

and have the EU Delegation represent the more long-term political support of these projects. This would also make the current randomness in deciding on the extension of CSDP missions impossible. The Council and Commission should become complementary in theatre and pool (institutional and technical) resources where possible, and as such could distinguish more clearly between technical and political support – there seems to be rather little of the latter.

According to a textbook implementation of Lisbon, the EU Delegation in the DRC – now under the framework of the newly established European External Action Service (EEAS) – escorts CSDP missions politically. But integrated structures remain precisely that, textbook material, not operational realities. Even where European or international coordination platforms do exist in the DRC, they usually involve representatives from the EU Delegation, but invariably overlook the Heads of ongoing CSDP missions.

Rather, it is other international organisations (e.g., MONUSCO) and countries operating bilaterally in Congo that tend to attend such platforms, which presents another serious problem: EU member states with big budgets for the DRC are reluctant to contribute to any of the CSDP missions. The UK is the best example on this front; a budget of about £60 million earmarked largely for good governance far outstrips EU commitments. Yet conversely, member states such as Belgium and some of the Nordic countries use EUPOL and EUSEC DRC to let their own foreign policies shine. Everybody is playing national games in Congo; they just have very different ways of going about it.



Wanted: Strategy

Here lies one of the core problems of Europe’s presence in the DRC: diverse agendas, and a lack of strategy. Long- and short-term thinking are not aligned, let alone embedded in matching frameworks that correspond to Congolese needs. What is perhaps worse is that this lack of strategy originates from European ignorance of Congolese political, security, and cultural contexts.

Despite frequent references to “local ownership”, Congolese authorities seem to be largely lukewarm to keeping EU initiatives going. Especially the difficulties faced by Western actors when executing (sensitive) security sector reforms have highlighted the distrust of the Kabila government towards pan-European initiatives. A good example: The Integrated Police Unit (successfully set up by the EU in 2005) no longer exists. The reason: a 1,000-man strong organised police force in a chaotic country like the DRC appeared far too large, too forceful, and thus too threatening to public, well, disorder. Although established to support the transition government in 2005 (with a microcosm of Congolese political membership populating its ranks), it became unclear which authority could hold them responsible.

The Commission’s efforts in the eastern provinces would also benefit from an integrated approach. The EC’s Humanitarian Aid Department ECHO represented in Goma has, over the past years, faced many problems in tracing internally displaced people to provide them with required aid. ECHO personnel work irrespective of political associations and ethnic backgrounds – so outside of formal state structures, often

in collaboration with rebels. But one of the major challenges they face are logistics and infrastructure – allegedly a priority under the 10th EDF – to get the aid where it is most needed.

The effect of all this is clear; good intentions and admittedly some serious efforts in the field are not enough to fix states such as Congo. What is needed is a far more ambitious approach that combines a thorough understanding of the local situation with a strong dialogue between Congolese authorities and all relevant European actors from the planning phase onwards. There is no point in fixing a state without a strategic approach that is built on well-defined realistic objectives.

The good news is that Europe has “strategic promise”, but it desperately needs to rethink the division of labour between various EU institutions, as well as between the EU and member states. Merely putting an EU Special Representative for the Great Lakes region in place for coordination purposes is not going to do the job, in particular when he is given a mandate with a wobbly future. Only by bringing actions together in one coherent package will meaningful and sustainable progress be made. National and institutional agendas have to stop going it alone and start aligning interests, and they need to do so relatively quickly.

Congo beyond Europe

While Europe is pre-occupied with the obvious symbolic value of showing, or wanting to show, that it is good at fixing states, other actors, perhaps less concerned about good governance, are finding their way to the country’s resources. The presence of

commodities – especially copper – makes the commercial interests in Congo considerable. That explains why China is investing in infrastructure to get resources out, and why the US and South Africa are not letting go of DRC exports.

But it will take massive amounts of support, political will, and hard work to properly develop resource-rich provinces such as Katanga to manage political risk effectively and to allow for mature trade relations to develop. This does at least offer considerable scope for international cooperation. Ensuring macroeconomic stability in the DRC via greater transparency and sound economic management will be crucial to underpin sustainable growth. Broader cooperation between the EU, China, and the US is clearly needed to manage fluctuating commodity prices and private debt buyers hindering macroeconomic stabilisation – conditions that European policy makers today have come to understand within their own borders.

But broader governance reforms and underlying political stability are the foundations upon which the DRC’s success will ultimately be built. Europe remains a crucial player in this arena, with an overall aid budget that still outstrips development investments of other “emerging” actors operational in the region. Europe cannot politically afford failure in the DRC any more than the Great Lakes region can muddle through without stability emanating from Kinshasa. Unfortunately, in the absence of any serious strategic rethinking, both between EU Member States and political actors in the DRC itself, this is exactly where we are heading. The upcoming elections will be critical: if European electoral involvement flops, the wheels will fall off. If things go well, the really hard governance work needs to start once the ballot boxes are put away.

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