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Supporting Civilian Self-Protection

Challenges and Dilemmas Democratic Republic of Congo

Introduction

This project is about international support to civilian self-protection structures, with a focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo. The research develops a conceptual framework for understanding the dilemmas associated with supporting self-protection, and draws its findings from empirical data collected through interviews with workers from international organizations. The organizations working in the D.R.C. and used as case studies for this research are the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), Oxfam and Human Rights Watch.

Civilian Self-Protection Background

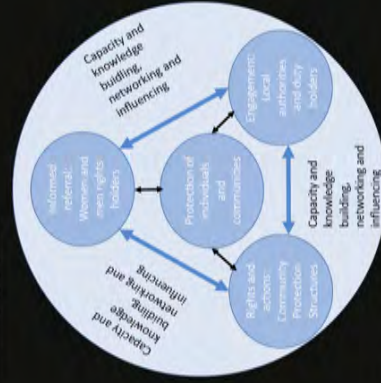
Since the end of the Second World War, there has been an increase in international interventions for the protection of civilians in conflict (led by actors such as U.N. peacekeeping missions, international humanitarian organizations etc.) Protection interventions have majorly been conducted in a top-down manner, but this has tended to disrupt or compromise the existing self-protection measures employed by civilians. On occasion, civilians have been exposed to higher risks of violence as a result of external interventions which failed to effectively protect them. As a response to the heavy costs of direct intervention and subsequent backlash against foreign involvement, many international actors have been trying to adopt **community-based** protection solutions in order to support the existing **self-protection** measures civilians engage with.

Main approaches

- Validation and enhanced visibility
- Material resources (financing, crops, technological infrastructure)
- Training (negotiation skills, leadership development)
- Information (early warnings of potential threats)

Purpose of this research

The academic literature on protection is meant to **inform** the decisions of international actors working to protect civilians in situations of conflict. Through this project, we aim to acquire an understanding of the **challenges** and potential **limits** of international support for civilian self-protection.



Theory of change
Source: Oxfam International, July 2017

The Case of the D.R. Congo

Context: Officially, the Second Congo War took place between 1998 and 2003. However, since the official end of the war, the conflict in the D.R. Congo has been characterized as a 'no war, no peace' situation. A low intensity conflict has been taking place for two decades, with periods of relative stability and others of increased violence. The conflict has been ongoing particularly in certain regions such as the North and South Kivu, Ituri and the Northern Katanga, and involves a multitude of different armed actors, including the state military, foreign and local rebel groups, local militias (called Mai Mai) and third party troops such as the United Nations peacekeepers. Throughout the conflict, violence has been directed primarily towards civilians.

Civilian Self-Protection Strategies:

'Any activities that conflict-affected communities undertake with the intention of countering, mitigating, deterring or avoiding a threat'

Women, men and children often face different types of threats, so survival strategies tend to be gender- and age-related. Self-protection measures can include forming local defence groups, information sharing, fleeing and resettlement, alert systems, avoidance and hiding, cooperation with armed groups, advocacy and other strategies.

International Support:

Oxfam:

- Supporting self-protection in the DRC since 2006
- Creating self-protection structures (asked with identifying the main threats to civilians and finding ways to address them)
- Engaging with local authorities and pushing for accountability in the protection of civilians
- Supporting communication between community members and with local authorities
- Participating in community mobilization, training, capacity building and developing action plans
- Reinforcing community-level work with provincial and national advocacy

MONUSCO

The impact of the UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo has been highly controversial. Since 2008, MONUSCO has made the protection of civilians its priority, and has been implementing new protection strategies which aim to improve communication with communities and support existing self-protection measures.

These include:

- **Anti-Protection Teams:** tasked with developing localised protection plans
- **Community Liaison Assistants:** local civilians acting as links between their communities and the peacekeeping mission
- **Community Alert Networks:** Designed to improve emergency communication between local civilians and MONUSCO soldiers

Human Rights Watch:

Advocacy-based organizations such as HRW work on monitoring conflict-related human rights abuses and publishing reports on self-protection in order to raise awareness internationally.

Acknowledgements

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Dilemmas

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Complicity:
Ties the conduct of a secondary actor to the wrongdoing of a principal actor

- By supporting self-protection, international organizations can end up enabling unlawful or immoral actions that go against their values
- E.g. violence by local self-defence militias; the targeting of certain ethnic groups, discriminatory practices etc.
- Ethically, it is critical for scholars to understand the extent to which an international organization is complicit in the actions of such external actors in order to mitigate them when possible

Unintended Consequences

- Any intervention into a socio-political system as complex as a conflict causes unforeseen consequences, whether positive or negative
- In many international organization interventions, ignorance, bias, and over-reliance on the presumed normative 'goodness' of their cause has given rise to unintended consequences

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International organizations can try to minimize

- the unintended consequences of their interventions by undertaking comprehensive evaluations of potential risks; taking into account long-term results and reflecting on their biases and assumptions