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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stabilisation in the Congo: Opportunities and Challenges

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Stabilisation is often interpreted as a matter of military interventions in so-called 'fragile states', and/or as technical and development solutions to what we argue are political problems. However, an often poorly understood stabilisation strategy is the revised International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This strategy engages communities and authorities at local and national levels in dialogues, in order to identify causes of and develop solutions to conflicts. Stabilisation in the DRC, we argue, becomes a matter of targeting deep-rooted political and economic manipulations in the country's eastern region. This strategy, if fully endorsed, provides the first coherent and thorough approach to stabilisation in the DRC, an exit strategy for the UN mission (MONUSCO) and an opportunity for learning for other UN operations.

Introduction

The term *stabilisation* is riddled with confusion regarding its meaning and its methods. Critics have rightly pointed to both problems of conceptualisation and enactment of stabilisation (Mac Ginty 2012). Part of these critiques relate to a particular discourse around stabilisation as components or strategies of peacekeeping and military interventions, leading to an understanding of 'stability' through the use of force (see e.g. Karlsrud 2015). Examples of this are taken from NATO-led operations such as Kosovo and Afghanistan, and United Nations (UN) and African Union mandated peacekeeping operations in Somalia, Mali or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As a hybrid concept, stabilisation has also been understood in peace operations as intrusive security measures as well as development measures, such as improving livelihoods. As Carter (2013: 5) notes, 'security and development continue to coalesce, and this has now been realised in praxis, as well as policy'.

This article will contribute to a specific interpretation of stabilisation that is undercommunicated, namely the International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy (ISSSS) in the DRC. As former seconded staff to the Stabilisation Support Unit in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO) who hold lengthy experience in the DRC, we argue that the new ISSSS is a holistic but targeted approach to deep-rooted and complex conflicts in the DRC; it represents something new and is potentially a model for future stabilisation approaches. Certainly, there are no quick fixes to the increasingly entrenched

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and complex conflicts in the DRC. For the last twenty years, the DRC has hosted multiple armed groups. This period coincides with the presence of MONUSCO—originating from the 1999 MONUC mission to become the UN's largest peacekeeping mission—which holds a mandate to stabilise the eastern region since 2009.

The problems identified with stabilisation interventions in general are also found in the mandate of MONUSCO. As a concept, there is a tendency to consider stabilisation as an increased 'robustness' through military means and enactments, such as technical development solutions (e.g. road construction). These are approaches that fail to address what we argue are political problems (see also de Vries 2015). However, a particular collaboration between the Congolese authorities, the international community and MONUSCO, has led to a particularly innovative approach, the aforementioned ISSSS. This article argues that scholars and practitioners should look to the ISSSS, which represents a niche in handling complex conflict situations and is a model for innovations in peacebuilding. Certainly, there is not one model for stabilisation. Rather, it is argued that by asking the right questions, such as why people are fighting, and approaching stabilisation both holistically and in a targeted manner to address core drivers of conflicts, it is possible to begin the process of breaking cycles of violence.

The article is divided into four core sections. Firstly, the article's methodology, namely a combination of first-hand participant observation and practitioner experience, in addition to the literature review is outlined. Secondly, a discussion on how stabilisation is often interpreted in contexts of state fragility and its meaning in the DRC is examined. This section argues that the issue of conceptualisation and enactment of previous efforts on stabilisation in the DRC have all failed to address the root causes of conflict. The third section examines a new approach to stabilisation, manifested in the ISSSS, which aims to be an innovative, holistic, yet targeted approach to both bottom-up and top-down measures for stabilisation. Finally, it is argued that there are a number of challenges, but also opportunities, ahead for stabilisation in the conflict-affected region of the DRC.

Methodology

The methodology used in this article is based on first-hand experience in the DRC context. Both authors gained experience directly from UN-supported stabilisation processes, long-term doctoral research in the eastern provinces on statehood and authority-citizen relations (one year fieldwork, Solhjell), and five years of professional experience in the international NGO sector based in Bukavu, DRC (Rosland). In the UN, both authors were seconded[1] to the Stabilisation Support Unit in MONUSCO, as research and analysis specialist (Solhjell) and stabilisation expert (Rosland) in support of ISSSS processes (mid 2015 to early 2016). Thus, the authors' experiences combine insider-outsider perspectives on statehood experiences in the DRC generally, and stabilisation specifically. By being both insiders and outsiders, the authors have what Geertz (1983: 57) has termed 'experience-near', in contrast with 'experience-distant'. This means the authors cannot claim to be more 'Congolese', as they are outsiders who originate in Western Europe. Rather, they combine a unique academic and practitioner experience on state-citizen relations (statehood) and stabilisation processes in the DRC, while still maintaining an observant role of their surroundings as outsiders.

This first-hand experience also relies on participant observation of events, such as stabilisation dialogues in North and South Kivu between government officials, traditional authorities and population representatives from different ethnic groups, supported by MONUSCO. The authors have also observed many other more mundane experiences, from political rallies to negotiating taxes during their time as residents of the DRC.

This has allowed the authors to interpret both formal and informal social settings to substantiate and nuance interpretations of what stabilisation means to different people, in different times and settings. Finally, the claims made throughout the article are supported by drawing on academic and policy literature, either directly on ISSSS and the DRC, or broader discussions on stabilisation.

What is "stabilisation" in the Democratic Republic of Congo?

Stabilisation is a term that requires contextual interpretation. As Mac Ginty (2012: 24) highlights, definitions of stabilisation 'lack precision and resemble a hodge-podge of words around the general areas of peacebuilding, security and development'. Relatedly, there are underlying power dynamics and ideologies that affect perspectives of stabilisation's meaning, especially being a term originating in the Global North. In this regard, state-building or liberal peace agendas are often mixed in various practices and policies containing the concept of stabilisation.

Moreover, stabilisation is applied to debates and policies concerning so-called 'fragile states' (Curran & Hotlom 2015: 4). First and foremost, there are no unitary definitions of fragile states, and therefore no common agreement on what it means to stabilise a fragile state into a less or non-fragile state. However, a dominant discourse on fragile states is that they pose or may pose a threat to global security through the hosting of terrorist organisations, especially in the post-9/11 context (see Ghani & Lockhart 2008). In other interpretations, there are broader discussions of states that are unable or unwilling to provide basic needs to their population, such as covering health, education and socio-economic support and generally enable citizens to live better lives (for instance see Zartman 1995 or the Fragile State Index 2016). These two perspectives, summarised as a threat to global security or domestic human security, may also be linked, given that poor conditions domestically may create a breeding ground for violent extremism or armed groups seeking political, economic and/or social ends.

More critically, and although to varying degrees, debates on 'fragile states' use the term interchangeably and sometimes alongside conflating labels, such as 'weak' or 'failed' states (see especially Englebert 2009: 41–42). This creates a need to explanation what the labels 'weak' or 'failed' state refer to—how are they weak or failed in relation to other states, and what are the assumptions of how a state 'should look. There is a tendency to assume that such states, whether fragile or failed, derive from the absence of governance—a state that hardly performs its basic tasks of welfare distribution, taxation for the public interest, or the provision of internal and external security. Such a claim assumes as a starting point Weberian ideal forms of legal-rational states. As Eriksen (2011: 233–234) argues, these perspectives are defined by deviations or deficiencies according to a given norm of statehood. Instead, and as Boas and Jennings (2005: 385) propose, a relevant analytical question to ask is 'not whether the state is failing, but instead "[f]or whom is the state failing and how"', thus allowing one to understand, for instance, coping strategies and variations between actors involved in state formation. This perspective remains relevant when interpreting what stability means as a goal, and stabilization as a means to achieve this goal.

The DRC is more often than not labelled under one or several of these categories—for instance, the DRC consistently places high on the Fragile State Index (2016)—and more generally as a conflict-ridden country. While authors including Herbst and Mills (June 24, 2013) claim that "Congo is not a failed state; it is a non-state, incessantly at war for the last 17 years, and home to some of the world's worst violence". While the validity of this provocative statement is debateable, there is no denying that the DRC hosts multiple

armed groups, hardly provides quality and user-oriented basic services, and possesses a political class that are perceived as illegitimate among many citizens (Solhjell 2016). A recent report confirms that the DRC is now hosting over seventy armed groups; a doubling since the last estimate in 2014 (Stearns & Vogel 2015). While this does not necessarily signify an increase in combatants, it highlights the military, political and economic fragmentation occurring in eastern DRC. Politically and economically speaking, it is no longer only national or provincial elites that mobilize armed groups (e.g. the Congo wars of 1998–2003). Rather, the mobilisation of smaller armed groups is becoming a way of life for politicians, the business elite, and local authorities seeking to gain political and economic power regionally, locally and privately. Moreover, these manipulations are building on Congolese identity formations through ethnic kinships and access to land that form some of the root causes of conflicts in the East (see also Tull 2005, Turner 2007). Thus, this paper argues that stabilisation in the DRC becomes a matter of targeting deep-rooted political and economic manipulations in the eastern region.

Instead of targeting these root causes to conflicts, stabilisation measures in the DRC have too often been focused on using military strategies to fight off both local and foreign armed groups. The military strategies of the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) to end violence—in cooperation with MONUSCO—are unintentionally causing the continued fragmentation and persistence of armed groups. The policy to integrate higher-ranking members of armed groups into the FARDC has left armed group combatants seeking other commanders, and in some cases creating an incentive to continue fighting (Stearns & Vogel 2015: 7). At the same time, there has been no real demilitarisation and reintegration programme (ibid). This highlights how military approaches have contributed to an increase, rather than a decrease in violence and conflict. This paper argues that interpreting stabilisation as a need for more 'robust' peace enforcement and the combating of militarised actors leads to both a further deterioration of civilian livelihoods, and instability due to fragmentation and dispersal.

MONUSCO's experience with stabilisation has created results that clearly show that few quick fixes and no "one-size fits all" format exists. During the first phase of the international strategy for stabilisation, ISSSS (2009–2012), MONUSCO spent US$ 367 million on stabilisation interventions. These projects mainly focused on the construction of roads and government buildings, as well as the training and deployment of state officials, such as the police, resulting in little to no increase in stability (de Vries 2015). The failure of these projects to increase stability corresponds well with relevant external evaluations and research findings (e.g. Autesserre 2015, International Alert 2015). These reports have found that conflicts in eastern DRC are political, requiring socio-economic and political solutions rather than technical ones. The region's main conflict lines are structured around governance and livelihood issues, such as customary power struggles over land and conflicts with government and other public authorities. As a result, the construction of a government building or road—without having a deeper understanding of the conflict drivers an accompanying social projects—may in fact lead to an escalation of violence, rather than the creation of stability.

In 2012, the UN Security Council requested a strategic review of the implementation of the ISSSS. The review was led by MONUSCO's internal Stabilisation Support Unit (SSU), with support and input from the Congolese government and the international community. This resulted in the revised ISSSS 2013–2017 that aspires to target the root causes of conflicts and identify strategic points of intervention. The revised ISSSS is the main framework for harmonising the international community's efforts to support

the Government of DRC's Stabilisation and Reconstruction Plan for War Affected Areas (STAREC). STAREC is a government programme under the Congolese Ministry of Planning aimed initially at restoring state authority in eastern DRC, but also stabilisation efforts more broadly in partnership with the SSU of MONUSCO. Adopted in 2009, and revised in 2013, the ISSSS strategy was approved by STAREC and international donors on 29 June 2012 (ISSSS 2013–2017).

However, after the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23) entered Goma in late 2013, and in anticipation of offensive actions by FARDC and MONUSCO, further confusion on both the conceptualisation and enactment of stabilisation by MONUSCO came with the so-called 'Islands of Stability'. Despite the revised and approved ISSSS taking into account the complexities of the DRC's conflicts, these 'Islands' were established across eastern DRC as a quick response to a specific conflict in a given area. This parallel project was initiated by the former Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Martin Kobler, and was met with scepticism across a number of spheres (donors, NGOs, part of MONUSCO) due to the fact that it was too similar to an already unsuccessful strategy—namely phase one of the ISSSS. While the ISSSS was being significantly redrafted, transformed and approved for a second phase (2013–2017), the Islands of Stability projects took a very different direction—following technical interventions based on a "clear, hold, build" logic utilised by the Provincial Reconstruction Team from Afghanistan. Such counter-insurgency strategies, based on experiences in Afghanistan, are particularly ill-suited to the entrenched conflicts in the DRC, where armed groups live together or side-by-side with civilians, and where active combat is of a lower level of intensity (Vogel 2014). Following the departure of Kobler, the Islands of Stability concept has either been carefully swept under the carpet or criticised for its failure—the issues it created have however lingered.

The confusion of mixing the ISSSS's first (2009–2012) and second phase (2013–2017), along with the 'Islands of Stability', has also led to MONUSCO trying to resolve deeply entrenched political challenges through technical means, while failing to address the conflicts root causes (see for instance Barrera 2015: 4). When looking solely at the 'Island of Stability' approach or the first phase of ISSSS, this critique holds true. For example, in order to secure livelihoods, communities may be, or feel *forced* to turn to violence or support armed groups, something both of these approaches failed to address to a meaningful degree. These approaches also led to a lack of recognition that state agents in the DRC often do not serve the interests of the population, with 'restoration of state authorities' being largely and crudely interpreted as placing more police stations or FARDC soldiers in a given conflict area, without due consideration being given to how the police and FARDC networks contributed to conflict escalation. Moreover, MONUSCO took a largely top-down approach to the (at times uninterested) political elite, further alienating the interests of local populations. The mission and the international community—together with the DRC's national authorities—had already acknowledged by the end of ISSSS phase one that a shift was urgently needed in order to build stability and foster accountable political institutions. This critical revision of the stabilisation strategy is further examined in the next section.

Addressing root causes of conflict: Enter the revised version of stabilisation

It is important to emphasise that the ISSSS is the *international community's* strategy to stabilise the eastern DRC—it is not solely operated by MONUSCO. Further, it is a strategy that has been developed in close cooperation with the Congolese authorities' own stabilisation efforts, namely STAREC, as well as traditional authorities (chiefs) and civil society.

The ISSSS strategy defines stabilisation as follows:

> *"an integrated, holistic but targeted process of enabling state and society to build mutual accountability and capacity to address and mitigate existing or emerging drivers of violent conflict, creating the conditions for improved governance and longer term development."* (1SSSS 2013–2017, p. 19)

This definition does however need further interpretation due to its broadness. In essence, stabilisation is about supporting and nourishing what we interpret as a social contract between political authorities and citizens. In practice this means a minimum level of co-existence that includes mutual responsibilities, as well as a basic level of trust between political authorities and varieties of citizens. This is *not*, however, a task for the international community. Thus, the key emphasis of such programming must be placed on processes that engage both higher level authorities (top down) and local citizens and authorities (bottom up) to create solutions from within the DRC, not from external sources. Moreover, keeping processes both holistic and targeted become central to this interpretation of stabilisation. Holistic processes highlight that the DRC's conflicts can only be solved through multiple interventions in the social, economic and political spheres, while their targeted nature ensures that these solutions are tailored to take into account the conflict's impact on relevant communities.

In order to address both holistic and targeted approaches to conflict, the initial phase of the revised version of ISSSS was designed to focus on what the root causes of conflicts were in these communities, allowing for the development of targeted solutions. The ISSSS (2013–2017: 5–6) focuses on four major conflict dynamics, namely: security dilemma, mobilization around land and identity, exploitation of natural resources and regional dynamics. First, the security dilemma deals with the issue of the state being unable, unwilling or too fragmented to protect and address the livelihood concerns of the DRC's citizens. Armed-and self-defence groups represent a strategy to fill some security needs, although this further leads to a mentality of militarisation in order to provide safety. Second, mobilisation around land and identity reflects the issue that livelihoods are hard, and people secure access to land mainly through ethnic solidarity. Thus, land and ethnicity become inseparable. Third, exploitation of natural resources is about how some armed groups, and the Congolese army, can use minerals as a source of income and potential recruits. Finally, the regional dynamics focus on the loose regional boundaries that exist with neighbouring countries, where valuable trade and taxation affects conflicts by creating alliances between Congolese authorities, business people and criminal networks on both sides of regional borders and conflicts, resulting in a prolonging of conflict through vested economic interests.

These conflict dynamics resemble the analytical insights of Azar's (1991) model of protracted social conflict. Namely, that these intra-state, social conflicts are often a result of "prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation" (Azar 1991: 93). These dynamics are evident in the context of the eastern DRC, with particular historical and localized roots in different zones.

After close consultation with Congolese authorities, including STAREC, customary authorities, international experts and local organisations, 13 zones of instability were selected in the three provinces of North and South Kivu, and the former Province Oriental (recently divided into four provinces) (Stabilisation Support Unit 2012). In each zone, a conflict analysis was conducted (2013–2014), involving fieldwork and desk

reviews, to understand the specific historical, political and economic tensions, ongoing or past peace initiatives, and individual stakeholders.[2] These zones were selected based, among other things, on having the aforementioned presence of the root causes of conflicts; but also, and importantly, they were targeted towards geopolitical contexts where conflicts are directly intertwined (Stabilisation Support Unit 2012). In other words, stabilisation was not perceived as western liberal peace agenda, but identified and made specific to each zone experiencing very real and deadly conflicts (see also ISSSSb 2013–2017: 19–21).

The underlying intervention point is the push for democratic dialogue, followed by engagement on 'security', 'restoration of state authority' and 'return, reintegration and recovery'. Democratic dialogue is here understood as "a democratic method aimed at resolving problems through mutual understanding and concessions, rather than through unilateral impositions of one side's views and interests" (Pruitt & Thomas 2007: xiii). The focus on democratic dialogue is based on the acknowledgment that previous responses to stabilisation were too technical, and therefore incapable of addressing key political dimensions of conflicts (ISSSSc 2013–2017). As part of the dialogue process, representatives from all parts of the community are invited to identify local causes and solutions to conflicts. This includes stakeholders often termed 'spoilers'. The activities do not start before a participatory conflict analysis is carried out (ibid). If dialogue initiatives already exist, ISSSS programmes aspire to build on these, rather than construct yet another structure, and thus avoiding duplications and dialogue exhaustion.

In the longer term, these dialogues also enable women, girls, boys and men in conflict affected communities to play a key role in transforming the wider conflict environment into a mutually accountable society, alongside traditional authorities and state representatives (ISSSSc 2013–2017). This allows local actors to participate in and influence political processes involving the Congolese government and the international community, including MONUSCO. As such, not only are the solutions owned and monitored by the communities themselves, but they also crucially make the first steps towards (re-)establishing a social contract between elected authorities and their constituents.

Building on the findings and recommendations identified in these democratic dialogues, activities are implemented by UN agencies, and national and international NGOs with long-term experience in the DRC. Depending on the needs of the community, the activities can include economic recovery for at risk groups, enabling public servants to deliver quality services, or strengthening the prevention of and response to sexual violence. These activities also incorporate measures to improve and sustain mutual trust between the community members and state authorities, limiting the perceived need to rely on ethnic affiliations or violent solutions to community conflicts (ISSSSb 2013–2017: 19).

Importantly for the sustainability of the community dialogues outputs, they are not directly carried out by UN agencies or MONUSCO. For example, in Kalehe, South Kivu, a national organisation with a long history working with community dialogues and mediation in the eastern DRC is the implementing partner in the ISSSS programme (Stabilization Support Unit 2015). As a Congolese peacebuilding organisation, the partner, 'Action pour la Paix et la Concorde', already possesses the skills and contextual knowledge necessary to navigate the conflicts terrain that MONUSCO does not possess.[3] MONUSCO and other UN agencies then provide logistical support and access to political authorities that the local communities and national organisations lack, bolstering the effectiveness of the dialogues. This illustrates how the ISSSS approach to programming is to build on the

best features of any organisation, operation or network, utilising them in a coordinated manner to target core conflict dynamics and resolve tensions—an approach that will lead to greater local ownership and improved prospects for tackling the core conflict drivers.

In Kalehe, the Congolese partner has, together with three local communities, set up and trained mediation committees and facilitated community dialogues.[4] Through the community dialogues, community representatives (140 men and 40 women) have created an action plan for what is needed to bring stability in their community. Some of the action points can be resolved at the community level, whereas others must be addressed at a higher political level—highlighting the continued importance of MONUSCO in the dialogue process. Through the mediation committees, 163 conflicts, of which 112 related to land issues, have been resolved, while several cases remain under mediation (Stabilization Support Unit 2015).[5]

As a part of the project, MONUSCO and STAREC organised a visit where community representatives had an opportunity to discuss their concerns with government officials. Specifically, competing claims over land by two communities in Kalehe were identified as the root cause of a number of local conflicts.[6] Community leaders demanded that government support the process of deciding who had the legal right to this land. While government officials communicated the concern through their hierarchy, MONUSCO supported the process through its means. With the village in question in an area without road access, leaving the communities isolated from decision-makers, MONUSCO stepped in to provide logistical support that facilitated the first ever visit by provincial level government authorities to these communities.

The revised ISSSS is still in the implementation phase, making it too early to evaluate its overall effectiveness. While its bottom-up approach and community centered solutions represent nothing new, with peacebuilding organisations utilising this approach for decades with proven results,[7] the revised ISSSS's importance should not be discounted, not only for its impact on the DRC but its relevance for future UN backed stabilisation efforts. The true innovation of the revised ISSSS strategy is that it represents the first coherent and thorough international strategy on stabilisation for the region.

The complexity of conflicts within the DRC requires a response that takes into account all levels of the conflict. This should include addressing issues of poverty, ethnic discrimination and gender relations—an overwhelming task for any one NGO. MONUSCO, being such a large actor with significant access to the political leadership in the DRC, has the potential to make a real difference to people living in the midst of conflict—*if* the mission fully adopts the approaches outlined in the strategy (High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations June 2015). Unfortunately, this has yet to happen. Kobler's initiative, 'Islands of Stability', is illustrative of the competing approaches and interests within the organisation. While donors, provincial governments and NGOs rally behind the strategy, MONUSCO can be criticised for not seriously engaging with it (de Vries 2016). The remaining sections of this article will be used to examine some of the core challenges and opportunities for this approach to stabilisation.

Challenges and opportunities for the new approach to stabilisation

To begin, one of the key challenges to succeeding in stabilisation is MONUSCO itself. There is a duality in MONUSCO's mandate; a friction between fighting armed groups, sometimes resulting in further instability and fragmentation, and addressing the reasons why armed groups and self-defence groups are created in the first place. The idea that stabilisation must result from initiatives coming from within the societies themselves is not widely understood or practiced in

MONUSCO.[8] In theory, and for MONUSCO's mission to be a success, the ISSSS strategy should be underpinning the work of the entire mission. Key to this is the role of the SSU which is mandated to *coordinate* the stabilisation efforts of the mission. However, SSU are often also held responsible for *implementing* the stabilisation efforts, a rather overwhelming task for a team of approximately 15 staff.[9] Uniting the whole mission behind the revised strategy is one of the key challenges that must be overcome to ensure its maximum impact.

Second, the political climate in the DRC is also challenging this approach to stabilisation. The country is constantly, and increasingly, in a politically turbulent situation with a lack of credible elections and transitions of power. As of January 2017, political indications seek to point to a national election being held in June 2018, instead of October 2016 as originally scheduled. However, a deal negotiated between the opposition and the government, facilitated by the Catholic Church, has given some new hope for stability. The deal, signed by all parties including President Joseph Kabila, obliges Kabila to step down by the end of 2017 instead of 2018 as first envisioned, with no opportunity for a third presidential term. The deal would put in place a transitional government, led by main opposition leader Étienne Tshisekedi, until the next national election.

In this situation, there are a number of potential impacts for stabilisation. For MONUSCO, working with a government that the majority of the population considers illegitimate threatens to further deteriorate its already strained relations with the populace in the East (Congo Research Group 2016). For the population, particularly in conflict affected communities, the risk of an escalation in violence is imminent. As a result, implementation of ongoing programmes in North and South Kivu and the former Province Oriental might be hindered by crisis on the ground. Hence, instead of stabilisation, the international community might be facing a year of crisis management, rather than envisioned positive steps to reconciliation and stability.

Furthermore, there is also the question of political will from the Congolese government in supporting stabilisation processes where individual authorities may be impacted by lost trade revenues, and where they wish to continue supporting armed groups for their own interests. The distribution of power in the DRC, broadly speaking, is regulated through loyalties rather than formal institutional systems, resulting in key authorities holding few incentives to act in the public interest (Anten 2010: 23). Influential politicians and businessmen exercise personal relations in profitable trade with Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, while benefiting from privatised armed groups that protect the import and export of goods. In this climate, the real 'push' for stability must come both from the bottom-up, where local representatives organise to question the authorities, and the top-down from international actors and MONUSCO.

Finally, a challenge also persists regarding the coherence of and coordination among donors in aligning projects and efforts under the ISSSS. 2016 was a year where programs were rolled out simultaneously, as the Stabilisation Support Unit (MONUSCO) and donors attempted to align ongoing and new projects with the common goal of stabilisation. In order for this to happen, it is essential that the concept of stabilisation (as stated above) is communicated and understood by not only MONUSCO, but also UN agencies, donors, implementing partners and communities.

Concurrently, there are also a number of opportunities for MONUSCO if its leadership seriously engages with the revised ISSSS. First, the strategy represents the most important opportunity to develop a coherent approach to stabilisation in the eastern DRC. The operationalisation of the ISSSS would be a response to the growing criticism of MONUSCO regarding a lack of community

involvement and context understanding. As Autesserre (2010: 9) has noted, "the causes of the ongoing conflict were also distinctively local, they could be properly addressed only by combining action at the grassroots level with intervention in the higher political spheres". We argue that the combination of engaging local societies in dialogue processes with Congolese customary and government authorities is one of the strongest aspects of ISSSS. In addition, and following these dialogues, the tailored approaches to socio-economic and political solutions coming from within the communities themselves are essential for the sustainability and legitimisation of these stabilisation processes.

Second, ISSSS can also be an important component of an exit strategy for MONUSCO. After more than 15 years of operation, there is considerable pressure from the DRC government for MONUSCO to withdraw. If MONUSCO succeeds in operationalising the ISSSS, it can play an integral role in a sustainable exit strategy for the mission. As Stearns (2015: 9) notes, "MONUC and MONUSCO have been most effective when they have been deployed to implement or facilitate a political process". Stabilisation is a political process, and few organisations apart from MONUSCO have the political outreach, both at the upper and lower levels, as well as the financial and technical means to push for and facilitate the dialogues required for stabilisation. The UN country team (UNCT) can also play a crucial role in ensuring a sound transition when MONUSCO eventually pulls out. Thus, the UNCT must be involved in the drafting of the exit strategy.

Third, the ISSSS can demonstrate how the recommendations from the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations report (HIPPO Report June 2015) can be operationalised. The key recommendation from this report was that political solutions rather than technical and military solutions, combined with a knowledge of local context and partnerships with local, national and international organisations were essential to securing lasting peace and stability. A successful implementation of the ISSSS would provide valuable lessons for other stabilisation missions, such as in Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia, on how to integrate bottom-up approaches and community led initiatives within a peacekeeping structure. As such, the ISSSS can play a role in informing the reform process of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Concluding remarks

This article argued that in order to transform societies after decades of conflicts and mistrust between groups and economically distraught populations, there are few "quick wins" without a real transformation among the communities themselves—citizens and authorities, at the local, provincial and national levels. However, there are streams of light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to a specific interpretation of stabilisation, provided through the ISSSS's second phase.

Stabilisation under the new ISSSS framework does not mean using all necessary military means to end armed conflicts, particularly given that armed groups in the eastern DRC are often engrained in the communities where they reside. An exclusive military response increases rather than reduces conflicts in the region, making them intrinsically more complex—highlighted by the increase in armed groups in the DRC. Nor does the new approach to stabilisation mean bringing stability mainly by increasing the physical presence of state authorities—with the provision of services of quality, on a legitimate basis, seen as more important to maintaining stability than a physical government presence. Instead, we have argued that the communities themselves need to be involved in finding solutions, together with elected politicians and the coordinated support of international actors. This is labour intensive work, both from international and national actors. However, if sufficiently supported, it can provide longer term solutions to break cycles of violence in the DRC.

This article closes by promoting the revised ISSSS strategy as providing an opportunity for encouraging trust and accountability between Congolese citizens and public authorities (both state and traditional), creating space for the resolution of some of the protracted conflicts in the DRC. It also presents an opportunity to show the way for other UN missions tasked with stabilising other complex conflict areas. It is fully recognised that achieving stabilisation in protracted conflicts in the DRC is challenging. The ISSSS should not, and cannot be used to solve all conflicts in the eastern DRC at the same time. Additionally, the ISSSS is not a blueprint for stabilisation interventions in other so-called fragile states worldwide, given that states like Mali and Somalia have profoundly different political and historical contexts. Instead, this article promotes the revised ISSSS strategy as a targeted roadmap for increasing stability, by encouraging different actors directly or indirectly involved in conflicts to engage with each other and address the root causes of conflict. This engagement could also provide important lessons for other peace operations tasked with a stabilisation mandate.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Notes

[1] Both authors were seconded by the Norwegian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights (NORDEM).

[2] Due to their use of sensitive information, such as identifying individuals related to specific conflicts, these conflict analyses are internal documents for those directly involved in ISSSS implementation.

[3] For more information on APC and their experience in conflict transformation, please visit their website: http://apcasbl.org/. The project is called « Projet d'appui aux Cadres de Dialogue et de Médiation (CDM) pour la prévention et la résolution des conflits fonciers en Territoire de Kalehe ». The project is financed using ISSSS funds through UNHABITAT. Internal documents (SSU 2015) http://apcasbl.org/2015-2/.

[4] The project is called « Projet d'appui aux Cadres de Dialogue et de Médiation (CDM) pour la prévention et la résolution des conflits fonciers en Territoire de Kalehe ». See http://apcasbl.org/2015-2/. The project is financed using ISSSS funds through UNHABITAT (Internal documents, SSU 2015).

[5] The results are outlined in internal report submitted to the SSU 2015 but an overview of results from the projects can be found at https://un-peacebuilding.tumblr.com/post/144297514481/sud-kivu-initiatives-variées-pour-la (accessed 2 November 2016).

[6] Participant observation as staff (Rosland) of SSU during project visit to Ziralo, Kalehe 2015.

[7] There is a growing literature on the subject of dialogue, a good data base with publications relevant to this body of practice is available under "Democratic Dialogue Documents" in the learning library at http://www.democraticdialoguenetwork.org/app/section/view/en/library.

[8] Participant observation as staff members of the Stabilisation Support Unit 2015–2016.

[9] Ibid.

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