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Re-Thinking Development in Conflict

Lessons and Impressions from the African Great Lakes

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ABSTRACT

Based on a review of contemporary development literature and substantial experience in relief work in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, this thesis asserts the need to 're-think' development and relief work in conflict situations.

Recent 'development' has been a process of prescriptive global modernisation based on models created following World War II when periods of conflict and resolution were well-defined. Western ideas became institutionalised into the form that many international development agencies remain in today. Much development in practice is not only inappropriate, but also increases the vulnerability of poor communities and adds to the likelihood of conflict.

Colonial powers imposed western systems upon traditional orders, distorting and exploiting issues of kinship and ethnicity for short-term economic gain. With a focus on the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaïre), and recent events in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, links between power, poverty and conflict are discussed and social and economic consequences examined.

Contemporary humanitarian emergencies are complex, caused by and resulting in a multitude of social, political and economic issues. Conflict permeates society, exacts a high toll on civilian population and further impoverishes vulnerable communities. Such emergencies require comprehensive solutions. Poverty and conflict, and accordingly relief and development work, are inextricably linked.

Localised long-term 'vulnerabilities', rather than short-term 'emergency needs', should be the focus of relief assistance. Peace is essential for true sustainable development, but the international community does not act as a cohesive whole for the elimination of global conflict and poverty. Some political leaders also promote conflict to their own ends. Therefore, continued conflict is a likelihood and appropriate interim interventions to safeguard community welfare must be continued.

NGOs and individuals have a crucial role and must remain committed and open-minded in order to promote truly beneficial development in a local context. Individual recognition of the historical, social and cultural dimensions of contemporary crises and understanding of the root causes of conflict are crucial for the effectiveness of international relief and development work towards long-term peace and local prosperity.

“American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English.”

Voice of Kirpal Singh

Michael Ondaatje
The English Patient
1993:286

PREFACE

I have written this thesis as both a personal learning exercise and to highlight 'lessons and impressions' gained from experience in international relief work in a conflict situation. Thus, I hope to make a small contribution towards refining global development practice and trust that the expression of such views may aid others in similar employ. I would have liked to have better understood the issues discussed within this thesis before commencing work in Africa myself.

The thesis is specifically written from the perspective of an expatriate, transient in a complex environment of profound culture and conflict. It is a philosophical discourse following a period of further research and reflection as opposed to the many technical reports that I have produced over this period in the field. With the benefit of hindsight, the actions suggested within this thesis may be somewhat contradictory to the purely 'technical' recommendations that I have previously proposed.

Having experienced a certain evolution of consciousness during the process of compiling this thesis, I understand that the international community does not, as a whole, act in favour of eliminating global conflict and poverty. Rather, it is the good will, knowledge and respect of individuals within their associated agencies that can effectively act to influence good change and combat poverty under a shadow of prevalent and recurrent conflict.

I have been a part of the conflict described on the following pages and I have felt the loss of colleagues and personal friends. As the final words of this thesis are typed, combat continues in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Jonathan Andrews
Grafton, Auckland
25 November, 1998

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Many people from both the local and expatriate communities in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo assisted with information for this thesis. They are too numerous to name here and an attempt to list key contributors is included within references following the main thesis text.

Much information is drawn from Oxfam publications. The work of Chris Roche from Oxfam's Programme Development Team must be acknowledged and his model of 'The Changing Emphasis of Support' from his article on 'Operationality in Turbulence' has been used as a basis for Figure VII in Chapter 9 (Roche, 1994:18). The comprehensive review of 'development' by Gustavo Esteva (1992) is much referred to as a basis for Chapter 2.

Many sources of information were found to have a political bias, such as several quotes referred to by Dr. Theogene Rudasingwa, the current Ambassador of Rwanda to the United States. The author has attempted to exercise discretion in their selection and only uses quotes from the least emotive abstracts that he feels reflect the reality of the situation. Information is also drawn from American-run business data systems, and it is recognised that these sources are also not entirely objective nor complete.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section I CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
AIM	1
KEY CONCEPTS	2
STRUCTURE	3
METHODOLOGY	4
THE STUDY AREA	6
Geography	6
Populations	7
Socio-Economic Setting	7
CHAPTER 2 DEVELOPMENT AND CONFLICT	9
DEFINITIONS	9
The Changing Face of Conflict	11
THE HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT	12
The Birth of Underdevelopment	13
Development Institutionalised	15
New Thinking and the NGO Movement	21
Failed Development	23
The Relief-Development Dichotomy	23
Summary	24

Section II HISTORY

CHAPTER 3 SOUTH KIVU IN THE GREAT LAKES	27
A BRIEF HISTORY	27
Pre-Colonial Times	27
EXTERNAL INFLUENCE	29
The Congo Colonised	29
Ruanda-Urundi	32
THE COMING OF INDEPENDENCE	34
Independent Congo	34
Rwanda and Burundi	35
POST INDEPENDENCE	36
Zaire and the Reign of Mobutu Sese Seko	36
Post Colonial Rwanda and Burundi	39
Summary	41

CHAPTER 4	SOUTH KIVU IN THE 1990S	43
	ONE DECADE. ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF CATASTROPHE COMPOUNDED	
INTRODUCTION		43
DECADE OF DESPAIR		43
THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE		44
The International Response		47
A New Phase of Conflict in the Making		48
TUTSI, BANYARWANDA AND BANYAMULENGE		50
Alienation of Tutsi : Conflict Cause and Effect		51
The Banyamulenge Revolt		52
Conflict Continues		56

CHAPTER 5	POVERTY AND CONFLICT SUPERIMPOSED	59
INTRODUCTION		59
SOUTH KIVU IN 1990. INITIAL CONDITIONS		61
Agriculture and the Rural Life		61
Nutrition		63
Health		63
Education		64
Water and Sanitation		66
Infrastructure		66
Social Factors		67
SOUTHERN KIVU HOSPITALITY		67
KIVU AT WAR		69
POVERTY AND CONFLICT: SOUTH KIVU TODAY		72

Section III DEVELOPMENT ACTORS

CHAPTER 6	THE INSTITUTIONS	75
TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT MECHANISMS		75
CHURCHES		77
STATE INSTITUTIONS		78
NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS		79
International NGOs		79
Local NGOs		80
THE UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES		81
INTERNATIONAL DONORS		83
SUMMARY		83
CHAPTER 7	CASE STUDIES	85
OXFAM		85
Seeds and Tools Distribution		87
Water supply projects in refugee affected areas		88
THE MWAMI OF KISEKA		89
Road Development Projects in Kiseka		90
Emergency Assistance to High Plateaux Displacees		91
GIHAMBA COMMUNITY		92

Community Appraisal	93
Summary	95
UNHCR	96
Relationship with Local Authorities	97
The Expanded Humanitarian Programme	99
SUMMARY	102

Section IV SYNTHESIS

CHAPTER 8 PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	103
INTRODUCTION	103
PERSPECTIVE	104
ZAÏRE	106
THE AFDL ATTACK	110
WORKING WITH THE REBELS	114
THE HIGH PLATEAUX MISSION	119
END NOTE	122
CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION	123
MAIN ISSUES	123
Contemporary Emergencies are Complex	123
Relief and Development are Interrelated	124
Sustainable Development Needs Peace	125
Focus on Vulnerability	126
Individual Agencies have a Crucial Role	127
LESSONS AND IMPRESSIONS	130
Types of Projects to Support	131
Socialising Projects	135
PROPOSALS FOR ACTION	137
For Governments and Donors	137
For UN Agencies	138
For International Relief Workers	141
FUTURE PROSPECTS	142
Conflict and Population Dilemmas	143
Leadership and Ethnicity	144
The Importance of Individuals and NGOs	146
REFERENCES	149
FURTHER ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	155

APPENDICES

- A. Glossary
- B. Figure VIII. Map 4 Refugee Movements, 1996
- C. Figure IX. Map 5 Repatriation Activities, 1997

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

		page
Figure I.	Map 1. The Democratic Republic of Congo	vii
Figure II.	Map 2. The Study Area: South Kivu	5
Figure III.	The 1949 (post-war) view of Conflict and Development	14
Figure IV.	The Institutionalisation of Development Philosophy	16
Figure V.	The Consequences of Poverty and Conflict Superimposed	59
Figure VI.	Map 3. Refugee Camps and Population Movements, 1997	71
Figure VII.	The Changing Focus of Humanitarian Support	124
Figure VIII.	Map 4. Refugee Movements, 1996	Appendix B
Figure IX.	Map 5. Repatriation Activities, 1997	Appendix C
Table I.	Gihamba Community. Perceived Needs and Responsibilities	94

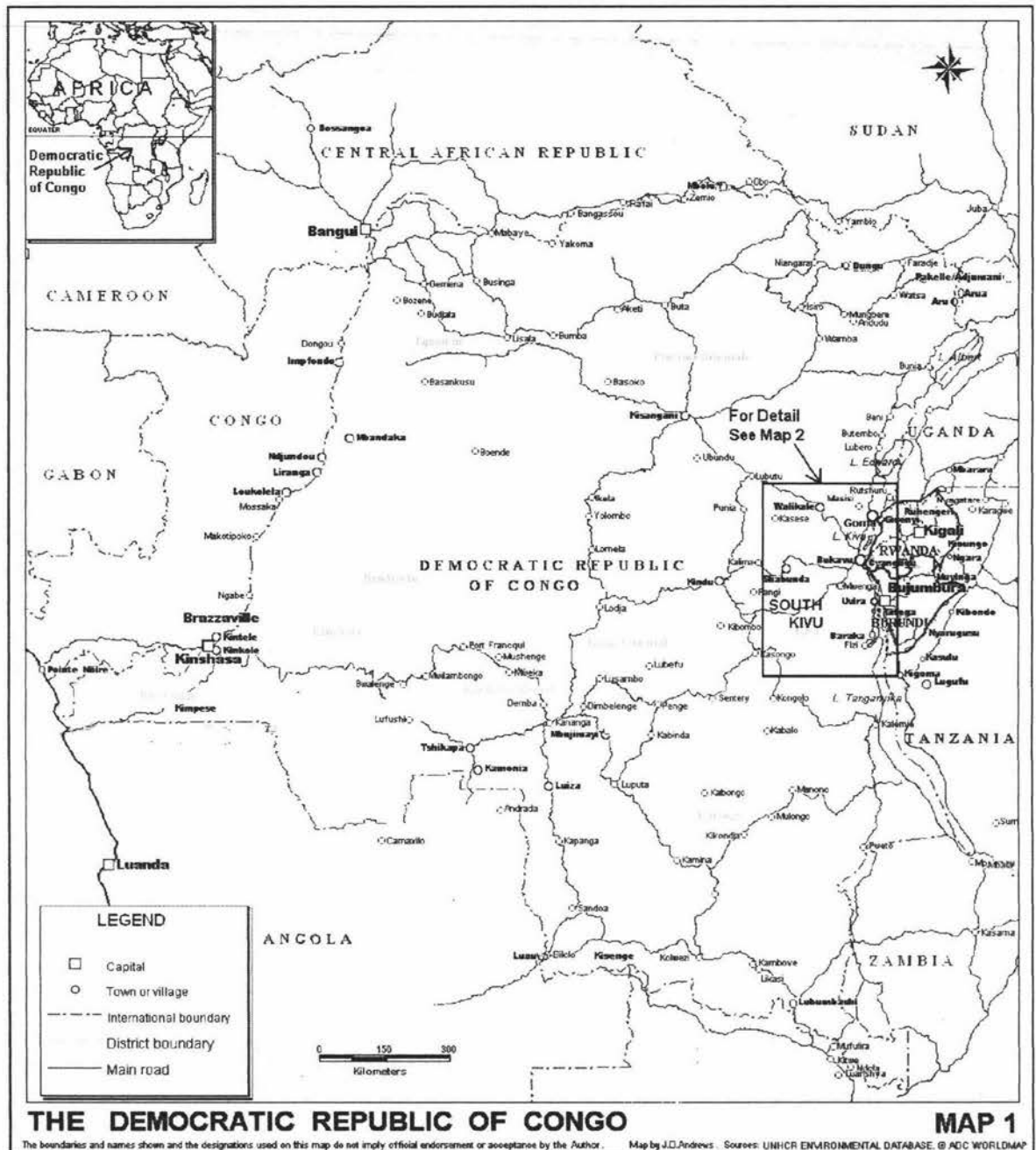


Figure 1. Map 1. The Democratic Republic of Congo