Enlightening the Heart of Darkness

UN perceptions and their relation with local agency in peacebuilding

2020-01-13

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Abstract

Perceptions have the capacity of indirectly shaping agendas and affecting behaviours. It is a concept briefly touched upon in peacebuilding research, as a tool of tracing dominant practices of international interveners. This paper aims to contribute to this literature, by analysing how perceptions of the UN relate with lacking local agency in peacebuilding practice. In a case study of MONUC's intervention in the DRC, this link is supported by Autesserre's theories of peacebuilding cultures and knowledge hierarchies. The UN perceives peacebuilding as mainly a statebuilding mission; the DRC as inherently violent and dysfunctional; and the conflict as predominantly a consequence of illegal natural resource exploitation. Our findings suggest that these perceptions – reinstated in dominant peacebuilding cultures – reinforce marginalisation of the knowledge and opinions of local actors.

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1. Introduction

> They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. [...] I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance.
>
> (Conrad, 2015 [1902]: 85)

Conrad's quote – from back when the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was a Belgian colony – encapsulates a picture local people often paint of interveners. Blue helmets on, filled with pride of working with the United Nations, and the chance to further their international career: there is a prominent risk to appear arrogant as a UN peacebuilder. As one elderly Congolese recounted: "[w]e call them 'the humanoids' [...] because they are people full of ideals, of vigor [...] but they come from another planet. They are completely disoriented" (Autesserre, 2010: 1).

Third-party postconflict interventions have always been a main pillar on which UN ideals and practice rest upon. Following the closure of the Cold War, and the end of the paralysing lockdown by P5-members of the Security Council, UN peacebuilding activity spiked. With the momentum from successful light-touched missions in Namibia (1990) and Nicaragua (1990), Boutrus-Gahli expanded the peacebuilding course of action with his Agenda for Peace in 1992 (Sabaratnam, 2011: 14). Item 15 of the Agenda stipulated the aims of postconflict peacebuilding as: "rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife" (1992). However, regrettably close to the launch of this new peacebuilding mandate, international conflicts in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, etc. put it to the test. Results were grim, by many considered utter failures, and the UN agenda received wide international criticism (Sabaratnam, 2011: 15). Failures were mainly explained by political, economic and legal factors at the macro-level. Constraints and interests of Western states were emphasised, yet the perspectives of local agents and contexts were almost entirely overlooked (Autesserre, 2010: 15-16).

Since then, the inclusion of local agency has surfaced as a hot topic in peacebuilding. This paper aims to add to this debate by tracing underlying factors that affect local agency. By scrutinising intervention efforts in the DRC in early 2000s, we assess the impact of

perceptions on courses of peacebuilding action. Perceptions demonstrably hold the capacity to make certain actions seem suitable, while ruling out others. We adopt a critical perspective of customary international peacebuilding that often fails to suitably incorporate local actors and ideas. This tendency is potentially rooted in understandings and routines that have become privileged in UN interventions, of which the Congolese case is perhaps the most notable example. Moreover, there is substantial preconceived imagery imprinted on the DRC itself. In order to investigate the relationship between perceptions and peacebuilding, this paper will seek to answer the following question:

Have UN perceptions affected peacebuilding practice in the DRC, more specifically the inclusion of local agency?

This narrow research problem is placed in a wider context of international intervention. Descending into the Congolese case, we aim to illustrate a broader picture of perceptions affecting practice, and add to critical research on local agency in peacebuilding.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Earlier research

Until recently, the local perspective has been perceived as a non-question within the field of peacebuilding. The end of the Cold War brought along with it a new liberal era of international relations, in which democracy and strong state institutions was seen as key objectives for peacebuilding – mostly under the label "liberal peace" (Campbell et al., 2011: 1). Especially with regards to post-colonial Africa, weak or failed states were seen as a threat to international security, depicted as a major cause of conflict. The simple solution was thus to "fix" these states, "defined as failed not by what they are, but what they are not according to a Western model of a legal-rational Weberian state" (Hellmüller, 2013: 221). However, based on numerous failures of international peacebuilding during the 90s, the valuation and legitimacy of the liberal peace was challenged by critical voices (see eg. Paris, 2004; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2007). One of the main critiques was regarding local agency, argued to be entirely overlooked within the school of the liberal peace (Richmond, 2011: 227). Still a debated concept, proponents of local agency argue it to be an essential part of peacebuilding to include those directly affected by it. Its critics, contrarily, express concern over local agency being instrumentalised as a way of superimpose responsibility over peacebuilding processes to local actors (Hellmüller, 2012: 238).

Regardless, as this paper will argue, the local perspective remains critical for contextual understanding of conflicts. The effect of perceptions in peacebuilding on local agency, is a subject only touched upon (Talentino, 2007; Hellmüller, 2012, 2013; Jennings, 2019). This paper aims to augment this link.

2.2 Our theoretical framework

Drawing upon poststructural insights and discursive ontology, we understand that language is constitutive, and discursive expressions constrain meaning and value. In the words of Hall (1997: 6), discourse "regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced, and studied". Studying discourse means acknowledging that the present narratives do not represent an

objective reality. These narratives are merely expressions of prevailing perspectives – in this paper conceptualised as perceptions – constructing realities (Devetak, 1999: 65; Taylor, 2001: 9).

2.2.1 Perceptions, peacebuilding culture and knowledge hierarchies

What this paper mainly aims at analysing is *perceptions*. Drawing upon Talentino's definition (2007: 153-156), we conceptualise perceptions as both "consciousness or observation in the sense of understanding", of which we make subjective interpretations. As hinted above, we understand perceptions and expressions of perceptions as constitutive of meaning. Importantly, the link between perceptions and practice is not a straightforward causal one. Rather, "perceptions shape both the menu of choices available and the likely selection from that menu" (Talentino, 2007: 153). Depending on existing perceptions, certain actions will appear more or less possible and suitable. In other words, they are therefore capable of affecting practical agendas (Hellmüller, 2013: 219). Notably, perceptions vary greatly between actors: international peacebuilders tend not to share the same perceptions as their local counterparts.

We also make use of Autesserre's (2010: 23-31) concept of *peacebuilding cultures*. These cultures are constituted by collective understandings that, in turn, are shaped by ideologies, assumptions and paradigms. Routinised behaviours are consolidated within cultures, and certain cultures become more prevalent than others. Autesserre has shown that "culture[s] shapes how people understand the world and, based on this understanding, what they perceive to be appropriate action" (Autesserre, 2010: 27-29). The peacebuilding exercise in itself is also important in reproducing cultures. While certain cultural understandings are initial, others evolve from and are reinforced by practice on site (Autesserre, 2010: 23-26). Consequently, cultures consolidate the peacebuilding agenda, further enhancing the link between perceptions and practice.

In later work, Autesserre (2014: 70-71) pronounces a recurrent tendency in peacebuilding, namely *knowledge hierarchies*. She notes that thematic expertise following international standards is privileged over local knowledge. Thematic expertise concerns broad competencies in themes such as political institutions, security sector and judiciaries, but also narrow technical skills as reporting, negotiating and managing computers. Local knowledge concerns contextually bound acquaintance with the area where the peacebuilding efforts takes

place; its culture, history, political structures and everyday worldviews (Autesserre, 2014: 70-71). Peacebuilding templates that are transferable and universally applicable are rewarded. Contextual familiarity with the postconflict location and culturally rooted knowledge of its population is generally disfavoured (Autesserre, 2014: 72-73, 76).

2.2.2 Theoretical framework summarised

In combining the aforementioned concepts, we seek to theorise the effects of perceptions on local agency within peacebuilding. Despite occasionally overlapping, the three theories have compound roles in our analysis. Given that perceptions form the course of action, and that peacebuilding cultures perpetuate the resulting practice and solidify its frames, this impacts what type of knowledge is privileged. The concepts are liable to interact with and mutually reinforce each other. Prevailing perceptions support peacebuilding cultures which reward certain types of knowledge. Practice also reconfirms and augments perceptions. Ultimately, in a circular manner, emerging knowledge hierarchies might reproduce perceptions and cultures. While acknowledging the interconnectedness of the three concepts, our analysis will for clarity be three-step in nature, applying each concept in stages.

3.   Method and research design

3.1   Empirical case: peacebuilding after the Second Congolese War

Our chosen case study is the early peacebuilding efforts of MONUC during and shortly after the Second Congolese War in – you guessed it – the Democratic Republic of Congo.

War-torn, collapsed state, a "heart of darkness": from colonial days to the present, the DRC has had a notorious reputation within international relations. To some degree rightfully so, but all too often for the wrong reasons. Following an already deadly First Congolese War, the Second Congolese War became the third deadliest conflict throughout history, after the two World Wars (UCDP, n.d.; van Reybrouck, 2010: 423). The wars further cemented the perception of the DRC as the archetype of a failed, war-ridden postcolonial African state (Kabamba, 2010: 270).

Accordingly, MONUC became the largest and most expensive UN mission to date. It was also given an unprecedentedly encompassing mandate as part of the transitional government effectively ruling the country between 2003 and 2006 (Autesserre, 2010: 3; van Reybrouck, 2010: 450). Altogether, the DRC and MONUC thus provide an excellent opportunity to study the work of peacebuilding missions, its effect on local agency and, as we will try to demonstrate, perceptions underlying it all.

Starting fittingly with the appointment of MONUC in 1999, our time frame continues until the presidential election in 2006, officially ending the war. However, it is very simplified and problematic to say that the war ended with the election of 2006 as violence persists well over a decade later (UCDP, n.d.). Nevertheless, in line with Autesserre (2010) and van Reybrouck (2010), the election of 2006 still constitutes a reasonable end point; being an event of such magnitude as to disrupt what this study wishes to analyse.

3.2   Research method

In aiming to unpack underlying perceptions behind UN peacebuilding interventions in the DRC, we use qualitative text analysis. Using components of the fourth approach of discourse analysis as described by Taylor (2001: 9-10), we understand that the way things are

represented through language frames possible courses of action. We seek content, messages and expressions in UN material (see section 3.3) that reflect perceptions and entangle them in the peacebuilding agenda. Studying discourse in this manner means acknowledging that existing representations are "language in use" and do not represent an objective reality. Rather they embody perspectives and perceptions that are prevalent in constant struggles for recognition, and subjectively design the directions of conduct (Taylor, 2001: 9).

We aim to navigate the content by means of the following guiding questions: What underlying perceptions of peacebuilding and the mandate of peacebuilding are manifested? What underlying perceptions of the DRC and its people are seen? What underlying perceptions of root conflict causes are prevalent? Thereby we seek to highlight and assess relevant UN perceptions that may impact practice. The analysis is reliant on our subjective interpretations of the content and found understandings. This applies both in determining what we conceptualise as perceptions and in linking these with peacebuilding cultures and practice on the ground.

After delineating UN perceptions we proceed to analyse the connection between perceptions and peacebuilding practice. More specifically, impacts on *local agency* will be the core focus. Local agency can be defined as the degree to which the knowledge and opinions of local people influence decisions and agendas. For our purposes, the theory of knowledge hierarchies will help to measure and deduce local agency: the influence of local knowledge will be the guiding determinant for local agency. It is important to recognise that there are different levels of "local". We therefore address a range of local actors, from politicians, civil society and grassroots with the term. Similarly to the first part of the analysis, determining local agency and its connection with underlying UN perceptions is a subjective endeavour requiring our interpretations of content and discourse.

3.3   Material

The material adopted in this study is of both primary and secondary nature. In the first part, we make use of UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) and other reports. In the case of UN led peacebuilding missions, this type of first hand source documents delimit and decide the operational mandates. We use UN documents from between the years 1999 and 2006, which address the DRC, its conflict and proposed solutions. More importantly, the documents

also stipulate the mandate, missions and focus areas of MONUC. The material is a case in point of when language in use is closely related to practice. From our discursive ontological point of view, it contains written expressions that constrain perceptions about peacebuilding, and thereof shape the frames of its practice.

In the second part, we use secondary data material illustrating key aspects of peacebuilding efforts in the DRC during our time frame. This fills the function of deducing linkages between perceptions and practice, accordingly with our theoretical framework. The material has its basis in interviews with local Congolese people and individual MONUC interveners, carried out in ethnographic research by Autesserre (2010; 2012; 2014), van Reybrouck (2010) and Hellmüller (2012; 2013). The material we use is presented in both extracted interview quotes and summaries of essential messages and narrations based on interviews. The former are straightforward in use and portray the views and opinions of one individual. As for the latter, they are, on the one hand, exposed to subjectivity and interpretive modifications of what the interviewees say. On the other, summaries of recurring similar expressions might contribute quantitatively to a more general view among the public.

4. Analysis

4.1   A costly UN peacebuilding mission

The United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) was appointed in late 1999. MONUC was a peacebuilding mission with the primary mandate of supporting conflicting parties in implementing the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, which had entered into force the same year. The Agreement was the result of a mediation process fronted by neighbouring countries affected by the conflict and witnessed by the UN. Resulting engagements were far-reaching, addressing much of what was appreciated as root causes of Congolese and regional insecurity (Reyntjens, 2010: 248-249, 251). Accordingly, MONUC is to be seen as perhaps the most integral part of a broad UN peacebuilding scheme, and in the context of the Agenda for Peace. The mission consisted of personnel in a wide range of areas, among these human rights and humanitarian affairs, public information, medical support, child protection, political affairs and administrative support. Its stated tasks initially included establishing communication with signatory parties, facilitating humanitarian assistance and mapping out the security situation throughout the DRC (UNSCR 1279).

As security conditions generally failed to improve, MONUC's mandate gradually expanded during the time frame of this study. Answering to rhetorics of peace desire by president Joseph Kabila and a new 2002 agreement preparing for general elections to take place, the intervening army grew from around 5500 to 8700 troops. MONUC soon became the most extensive UN operation in history, and before 2006 the number of military personnel had reached 17 000 (van Reybrouck, 2010: 449; Reyntjens, 2010: 252-254). The range of the undertakings were likewise widened. Tasks included a more thorough supervision of the Ceasefire, extended contacts with regional governments and assisting the Congolese authorities (MONUC 1, n.d.). Between 2003 and 2006, MONUC was an important part of the Committee in Support of the Transition (CIAT) which *de facto* ruled and administered key state functions (van Reybrouck, 2010: 450).

MONUC was more costly than any UN intervention effort and played the definite role of international peacebuilding in the DRC during our time frame. Its mandate was decided and constructed by international assessors and political leaders in the UN Security Council. In the

following section we identify perceptions of the DRC, its conflict and the mandate of peacebuilding – found in UN documents and interviews – that underlie the course of action in the case of MONUC.

4.2   UN perceptions and peacebuilding in the DRC

The mandate of peacebuilding

The need of a UN intervention was first stipulated by the Lusaka Agreement, written under the aegis of the UN and eventually resulting in the formation of the MONUC mandate. Already in this 1999 accord we can distinguish noteworthy – and subsequently recurring – perceptions that outline what peacebuilding is and how it should be designed.

The functioning of central state institutions within preserved internationally recognised territory is comprehended as an unconditional pivot upon which postconflict work depends. "Nothing in the Agreement shall in any way undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of Congo" (S/1999/815). State sovereignty as a necessary condition, as stipulated by the Agreement, is reaffirmed and prioritised in almost all subsequent UNSCRs on the DRC. There is a consistent promotion of independent political control within international borders on the part of the central government. "[Refrain] from the use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of any State" is stressed in numerous resolutions as a top priority (see e.g. UNSCR 1376; UNSCR 1417; UNSCR 1493). In accordance, there is also continuously strict focus on statebuilding, state control, institutions and the rule of law. UNSCR 1493 symptomatically stresses "the establishment of a State based on the rule of law and of an independent judiciary [as] among its highest priorities, including the establishment of the necessary institutions". In a 2001 Report of the Secretary General regarding the mandate of peacebuilding, it is stated that sustainable peace is dependent on state sovereignty and institution-building. In other words, "[t]he aim of peace-building is to build the social, economic and political institutions and attitudes that will prevent the inevitable conflicts that every society generates from turning into violent conflicts" (S/2001/394: 2).

The agenda of peacebuilding set out by the UN appears to reward measures of statebuilding and restitution of central institutions. Perceptions of peacebuilding as primarily an endeavour at the nation-state level becomes specifically clear in the case of the DRC. This

is manifested by the diligent role of MONUC in the *de facto* transitional government CIAT. Moreover, a perpetual UN emphasis on the importance of free and fair general elections illustrates this, pronounced as early as in the Lusaka Agreement (S/1999/815). The Pretoria Agreement (S/2002/914) decided on the 2006 elections as a closure to the transitional period. The planning of the general elections recurred as a main focus in UNSCRs until then. UNSCR 1635 and 1671, for instance, "[underline] the importance of elections as the foundation for the longer term restoration of peace and stability, national reconciliation and establishment of the rule of law in the Democratic Republic of the Congo" (UNSCR 1635; UNSCR 1671), while UNSCR 1565 underscores that "the Congolese parties honour their commitments [...] in particular so that free, fair and peaceful elections can take place within the agreed time frame" (UNSCR 1565). Fixation on rapid statebuilding and democratic elections broadly go alongside the ideas of the liberal peace. The MONUC agenda inherits much from the liberal paradigm of peacebuilding that have dominated UN interventions in the post-cold war era – stemming to a large degree from the Agenda for Peace. Nevertheless, as we proceed to outline, perceptions of the DRC, its specific context, people and political environment are likewise crucial for understanding why institution-building at the top level has been an unchanging focus.

The "heart of darkness"? Perceptions of the DRC

A state-centered approach to peacebuilding in the DRC is also explained by pre-existing perceptions of the DRC as a country. The imagery of the DRC as a "heart of darkness" in which violence is an inherent part of its identity has colored interveners' perceptions. The DRC is portrayed as "a country with a history of abuses" manifested in "a constant pattern of violence by people in power", effectively resembling the "typical state of affairs" (Autesserre, 2010: 74-75). Lack of state functions is perceived as uncivilised, chaotic and of prime concern for tackling the widespread violence within the DRC (Hellmüller, 2013: 221). This view mirrors the prevailing stereotype of the DRC as a failed state, which needs to be restored by the international community (Kabamba, 2010: 267). This could explain why the UN opted for a liberal statebuilding approach. However, the sovereignty of the DRC is handled paradoxically. On the one hand, as touched upon earlier in 4.2, nothing in the work of the UN and other international actors shall by any means impair the sovereignty of the DRC. On the

other, the perception of the failed Congolese state rests upon the nonexistence of that very state (Kabamba, 2010: 267).

UN perceptions of the Congolese population in general are not clear-cut. Rather they underlie the whole mandate of MONUC, and the work of its interveners. Typical of not just the DRC, but of peacebuilding invariably, is the construction of the local – the supposed beneficiaries – as the Other. Peacebuilding is seen as an "us versus them" situation, although this is not necessarily antagonistic or patronising. Instead these perceptions are based upon the essential need for "order, meaning and social identity", requiring some form of social comparison (Autesserre, 2014: 174). As one UN official in the DRC put it:

> "You and I have millions of things in common. You and the Congolese, you have two or three things in common apart from work. This is why expats go together, [because] the expats in any country need to have a place where they can go and sit down, just so that they are in their own world. [...] It is the only thing that helps them work in a country that is not their own."
>
> (Autesserre, 2014: 165)

The quote reflects a clear perceived distinction between interveners and the Congolese. Similarly to the Congolese state, its population is also colored by perceptions of being dysfunctional, barbaric and violent. The local counterparts of international peacebuilders are seen as "uncivilized" and "indigenous". Congolese authorities reaffirmed these views, as they stated during deliberations that "[i]t is true we have done poorly in the past" and "[w]e will try to do as you say" (Autesserre, 2014: 100-101). Moreover, this also legitimised interveners' perceptions of being "here to help" the host country and its people. A narrative which, first, legitimises the mission in itself and, second, constructs an image of peacebuilders' upper hand over locals. Peacebuilding is seen as capacity- and statebuilding, since the locals already failed or lack the skills to achieve this on their own. Although the case is often that peacebuilders oversee local capabilities to do so (Autesserre, 2014: 195-198).

Root conflict causes and suitable solutions

UN documents have repeatedly made statements with reference to its perceived core causes of the conflict in the DRC. The salient attention to plundering of natural resources stands out in this respect, as it is contended that illegal exploitation upholds rebel groups' economic incentives for war. Item 3 of UNSCR 1457 makes an indicative case:

> [The Security Council notes] with concern that the plundering of the natural resources and other forms of wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues and is one of the main elements fuelling the conflict in the region [...] impeding the economic development of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and exacerbating the suffering of its people.
>
> (UNSCR 1457)

This underscores how resource exploitation is linked with criminal trade and proliferation of war material, which aggravate peaceful social and economic transformation. Resource plundering reappears in the material throughout our time span as the dominant concrete phenomenon driving conflict in all of the DRC and its neighbouring region. The general UN perception is that this is the main source, and other causes of violence are very rarely mentioned. In 2002 the Security Council deployed a panel of experts on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and wealth in the DRC. The investigation panel was tasked with monitoring and providing recommendations for coming to terms with the plundering. Thus – in the UN's point of view – the conflict essence would be addressed. This constitutes a perception of suitable resolution of a key root conflict cause. Aside from rebel disarmament and withdrawal of foreign troops, the panel's report suggests enhanced support for the transitional government and large-scale political, economic and judicial measures to disincentivise illegal exploitation (S/2002/1146: 29). The narrative of "conflict minerals" at the heart of the Congolese war is also evident in Autesserre's ethnographic research. With few exceptions, MONUC personnel that she interviews hold resource plundering as the main source. Counteracting the illegal exploitation is perceived as fundamental for transforming the conflict, and this requires extended state authority and control (Autesserre, 2014: 134).

Conclusion

Above we have delineated UN perceptions concerning three aspects of peacebuilding in the DRC. First, peacebuilding and the mandate of peacebuilding; second, of the DRC and its people; and, third, of the conflict, its root causes and possible resolutions. The emerging picture is that both the core problems and potential solutions lie at the state level, with central institution-building and sovereignty as key elements. As we now turn our attention to, current dominant peacebuilding culture and perceptions marginalise local agency. The influence of

local knowledge is largely neglected to the benefit of perceptions and perfunctory approaches of the international community.

4.3 Perceptions and peacebuilding practice: the marginalised local agency

UNSCRs and other guiding documents very rarely mention the roles of local actors, or encourage their active participation in peacebuilding. This neglect mirrors many of the perceptions we have identified. These, in turn, occur in a context of – and reproduce – dominating cultures and knowledge hierarchies. Accordingly with our three step theoretical framework, we will first illustrate how perceptions form the course of peacebuilding action and subsequently analyse the roles and impacts of cultures and knowledge hierarchies. Thereof, a picture of continual marginalisation of local people in the practice will gradually materialise.

Perceptions forming the course of action

In the previous section we traced perceptions with respect to peacebuilding in the DRC that are prevalent. Keeping Talentino's idea of perceptions as constitutive of feasible choices in mind, we understand their potential in affecting practice. The discourse in our chosen UN documents and resolutions is a clear example of how perceptions impact practice, not least as they are intended guidelines. While this impact is not necessarily direct, the documents effectively frame the available options of peacebuilding exercise which tend to reward thematic knowledge. The competencies found in MONUC personnel – with a preponderance of protection, administration and political issues – hint of the practical orientation. Building institutions, planning elections and addressing physical security are technical measures requiring thematic expertise.

The above are indeed highly important elements of postconflict work. However, as we proceed to argue, a disproportionate emphasis on transferable templates – inherited from UN perceptions of the mandate of peacebuilding – leads to missing essential perspectives and capacities rooted in the local context. This becomes particularly clear when observing how perceptions of the main conflict causes determined agendas. In addition to rebuilding the failed state via elections, institutions and security sector reforms, large-scale mitigating

efforts against the illegal exploitation of natural resources – such as conferences and monitoring work – were made to address the violence (Autesserre, 2010: 120-121). Similarly, as we will clarify, while resource plundering is a weighty Congolese issue, other critical sources of the war are overlooked as they are not adopted by dominant peacebuilding culture and perceptions.

The same principle goes with the more general imagery of the DRC as a barbaric country and a failed state: perceptions compose a likely pattern of behaviour in peacebuilding efforts. For example, the experiences of a Congolese aid worker, interviewed by Autesserre (2014: 100), portray how preconceived understandings among interveners cause them to act as "conquerors". Such perceptions include the "[p]eople [being] unreliable", the DRC being "a very vulnerable country" with "high levels of corruption" and – therefore – "I am coming to teach you everything". Adding to the picture, one MONUC officer complained that "[w]e are dealing with people who are helpless" and that "[t]here are no real political parties here; we are trying to build this country from scratch" (Autesserre, 2014: 197). Locally based interviewees broadly share the view that these perceptions of the country play out in intervention practices, with counterproductive consequences as pre-existing capacities are overlooked (see e.g. Autesserre, 2014: 99, 105, 198; Hellmüller, 2013: 224).

The role and impact of peacebuilding cultures

Autesserre's notion of peacebuilding cultures strengthens the indirect link between UN perceptions and MONUC's on-the-ground practice. Cultures are formed by perceptions, assumptions, understandings and ideologies that conform collective behaviour and routines of conduct. Acting accordingly with what one peacebuilding culture holds as appropriate will reinforce the perceptual framework of that culture.

We argue that international peacebuilding in the DRC broadly occurs within a dominating peacebuilding culture. The culture is influenced by, partly, the globally consolidated liberal peace paradigm and, partly, other perceptions regarding the DRC in specific. As observed in section 4.2, UN perceptions regarded elections as the most desirable peacebuilding device. These perceptions are within the frames of the liberal paradigm, where reconstructing institutions and stability in a failed state pose a characteristic objective. The inherently failed and chaotic nature of the Congolese state in need of authority is a contextually specific perception also contributing to framing a culture. As a consequence, the

dominant peacebuilding culture in the DRC perceived of and stressed statebuilding as the highest priority. Statebuilding measures – in particular those supporting the elections – received by far the most financial and diplomatic support from the international community (Hellmüller, 2013: 221-222).

On the ground, MONUC acted accordingly with the dominant peacebuilding culture, containing numerous different notions and practices. The labeling of the Congolese context as "postconflict" that became more prevalent as of late 2002 is a clear example of this. On the back of various top level agreements, international actors perceived the conflict as essentially being over (Autesserre, 2010: 65-66). The Pretoria Agreement, stipulating that elections take place after a period of transitional state governance, was an important contributor of this shift in narrative (van Reybrouck, 2010: 448-449). The resulting redefinition affected practice: international donors changed priorities and began dispensing development aid not normally given to countries at war; and MONUC expanded their non-military activities. Peacebuilding actors stationed in the DRC increasingly adopted this postconflict discourse. International NGOs "act[ed] on these new interpretations in ways that verif[ied] the original interpretation" and initiated postconflict work. This in turn, reinstated interveners' perceptions of the postconflict setting of the DRC, which also further affected future agendas. It goes without mentioning that violence still persisted throughout the DRC, which several peacebuilders and people affected by the violence expressed the need to address. However, these voices were marginalised and futile in impact (Autesserre, 2010: 66-67).

The dominant peacebuilding culture in the DRC hence reaffirms itself and practices within: by framing the situation as postconflict, appropriate practices are privileged and implemented, which then consolidate the imagery of the mission itself. All in all, the perceptions behind the dominant peacebuilding culture is reinstituted. As a result, local knowledge and opinions were neglected, if even heard, and pushed out of the culture.

Knowledge hierarchies and local agency

Here we contend that UN perceptions relate with knowledge hierarchies that permeate the culture and practices of peacebuilding in the DRC. In uplifting the experiences of grassroots and local peaceworkers, UN perceptions will be contrasted with suppressed knowledge enjoying little influence.

First, this applies to how the country is framed and represented. Visibly in the DRC, thematic expertise of international standards – following the liberal paradigm and constituting an essential aspect of the dominating peacebuilding culture – rewards skills of institution-building at the level of the sovereign Weberian state. According to many local voices, contrarily, the DRC functions in very different ways from the Western Weberian template. Most reliable authority structures are local and province based, whereas authorities at central level are seen as corrupt and far-off from the everyday lives of citizens. The state has never been seen as an entity which provides security and services for the Congolese population. Based on a dictatorial past, the state is instead perceived as predatory and repressing (Hellmüller, 2013: 221, 224), rendering statebuilding a rather misfitting notion. After the 2006 elections the cleavages between international expectations and Congolese realities were manifested. Joseph Kabila's government and a redesigned constitution promised territorial control and new central institutions. Several provinces instantly erupted into violent protests as the emerging order was perceived to enforce an undesired national Kabilist agenda and intrude on the traditional provincial autonomy (van Reybrouck, 2010: 484-485). Corruption, clientelism and state violence did not cease after the attempted imposition of democracy – a history which the interveners should have acknowledged. Indeed, Hellmüller's findings (2013: 224) contend that many Congolese viewed "the elections as legitimizing the government's authoritarian rule rather than legitimizing the government itself". Meanwhile, MONUC and the international community expected the new government in Kinshasa to bear the main responsibility for continued peace and stability (see UNSCR 1671). A finding from Autesserre's research similarly illustrates a misconception of the Congolese state and the importance of local governance. Several local authorities stated that they were never consulted on whether the MONUC forces were allowed in their area. Their presence was hence experienced as unwanted intrusions (Autesserre, 2014: 104). This is a symbolic illustration of the lack of *local* agency, as international interveners' consultation with national actors often only reached as far as central and regional governments. Overlooking local knowledge – whether concerning historical experiences of elections or attitudes about the horizontal distribution of power – has unintended and potentially counterproductive side effects.

Second, local knowledge of the causes of violent conflict are likewise marginalised, impacting local agency in peacebuilding negatively. Accordingly with the UN perceptions

delineated in section 4.2, consulted MONUC interveners frequently stressed that "ending violence required first stopping the illegal exploitation of resources" (Autesserre, 2012: 211). These perceptions were also responded to in practice: consider the large-scale investments in monitoring the resource exploitation. On the contrary, local people from affected eastern regions such as Ituri and Kivu frequently point to ancient land conflicts between farming communities as the root cause. These historical feuds over land between rivaling communities have been aggravated by ethnic tensions, clientelistic local governance and, more recently, resource exploitation and structures of "war economy" (van Reybrouck, 2010: 452; Autesserre, 2010: 150). Above all, they have been overlooked by the scope of international peacebuilding. Interviewed local inhabitants of Ituri emphasised reconciliation between antagonising communities, trauma healing and resolution of local land conflicts when asked about preferred priorities in peacework (Hellmüller, 2013: 223). These are aspects that have been completely absent in the UN guidelines and mandate, which maintained a steadfast focus on statebuilding. Neither were grievances over land deprivation ever mentioned in UNSCRs deciding MONUC's mandate. What is more, Hellmüller's research (2013: 222) finds that ethnic divides were not root causes, but yet an important "polarizing factor" in Ituri. Local perspectives thus generally emphasise the need to enable peaceful coexistence and restoring social relations, based on their cultural and historical experiences of the conflict context. Nevertheless, local knowledge and its agency was depreciated. Despite extensive MONUC intervention in their province, Ituri inhabitants perceived reconciliation as a "spontaneous" and "profoundly local" activity as it received no international support (Hellmüller, 2013: 225-226).

In addition to UN perceptions of the DRC, its conflict and appropriate peacebuilding expertise being privileged, local agency is also oppressed in other ways. The dominating peacebuilding culture and its routines – and this is the third point – reproduce the marginalisation of local knowledge and capability. As one Congolese interviewee recounted to Autesserre: "[when interacting with foreign interveners you are] imprisoned in a sort of cliché that makes you feel uncomfortable: You are incompetent, corrupt, inefficient, and you cannot work in a group" (Autesserre, 2014: 201). Others highlight the arrogance and self-proclaimed enlightenment of interveners: "just like the colonizers, foreign interveners 'know what is best for local people' and come to teach host population what to do" (ibid, 2014: 202). Routinised and culturally tied behaviours, such as those stated above above,

implicitly reproduces a hierarchical connection between the intervener and its primary Other – the local person. Consider also the self-perceived status of interveners as the "helper", with local people as their beneficiaries. This relationship further consolidates the customary prevalence of thematic knowledge and corresponding undervaluation of local knowledge.

Despite UN perceptions holding local agency irrelevant, several attempts have been made at emphasising the import of including local perspectives. Reaffirming the goal of an encompassive and inclusive peacebuilding – as set forth by Boutros-Ghali's Agenda for Peace (1992) – Kofi Annan stated:

> [Domestic peace] can only be achieved by the local population itself; the role of the United Nations is merely to facilitate the process that seeks to dismantle the structures of violence and create the conditions conducive to durable peace and sustainable development.
>
> (S/2001/394: 2)

Undeterred by earlier shortcomings in including local actors during the Lusaka Agreement and other deliberations, Inter-Congolese Dialogue talks in Addis Ababa 2001 and afterwards did include local representations to a larger extent. A multitude of civil society actors such as traditional chiefs, local militias, religious groups etc. got invited to coordinate strategies and put forth a joint statement. Withal, the effective impacts of these voices were marginalised as national elites overtook the talks. Likewise, the UN mostly discounted civil society and grassroots in favour of more powerful Congolese actors (Hellmüller, 2012: 243; Hellmüller, 2013: 224). This goes in line with previously discussed UN perceptions of peacebuilding as a state- and institution-building process, which entails national elites to be the main actors to interact with.

In other words, there seems to exist an understanding within the UN of the need of local agency for peacebuilding to be sustainable. Yet, this is rarely, if ever, materialised. As in the case of the DRC, where the voices of Congolese largely remain unheard. Essential aspects of conflict resolution and construction of peaceful social relations are missed as a consequence. MONUC's practice is influenced by a dominating – relatively inaccurate – set of preconceived perceptions and takes place within peacebuilding cultures that furthers the downgrading of local agency.

5.   Conclusion

The wartime environment of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has for decades been one of paramount complexity. A history of hardy unrest, international involvement and myriads of armed groups over vast territory make the tasks facing the UN peace agenda intricate. Correspondingly, there is a great deal of perspectives of what the DRC and its conflict is and needs. Nevertheless, there are patterns in this miscellany as certain perceptions tend to win recognition over the others. As an outcome, the local people affected by war have little say in how to counteract it.

This paper has contributed to a body of research on the DRC and local agency in peacebuilding. Directing attention to marginalised local voices, it has critically assessed the relationship between UN perceptions and peacebuilding practice. These perceptions, stemming largely from the guiding discourse in UNSCRs, frame the mandate of peacebuilding as predominantly an activity of institution-building at the level of the Weberian state. Moreover, they paint simplistic images of the DRC as inherently malfunctioning and they represent its conflict as completely centralised around one source; illegal resource plundering. Perceptions also compose fundamental elements of peacebuilding cultures that deepen the routines and set the frames of practice. In the DRC, the interveners' culture consisted of components of the liberal peace paradigm which emphasises the importance of statebuilding, but also of contextually specific perceptions and discourses. By collective understandings, cultures consolidate certain patterns of behaviour.

Ultimately, UN perceptions and its peacebuilding cultures consist of – and reinforce – knowledge hierarchies that reward thematic expertise of internationals over local knowledge. Hence, local agents are chiefly left out of decision making and agenda setting. From the local viewpoint, the eagerness to impel general elections and state institutions was a grave misprioritisation. Most important – and reliable – governance traditionally happens at local level. Furthermore, no MONUC emphasis was placed on land conflicts and social reconciliation at community level, which many Congolese saw as root causes and main priorities in peacework. Cultural routines cement the relationship between intervener and

local person as one between "helper" and beneficiary, enhancing the prevalence of outside knowledge. As a result, arrogance abounded.

Our findings do not implicate discarding UN third-party intervention. Given host countries' sparse resources and the insecure conditions for the population, it is unlikely that purely local peacebuilding would see any success. Neither is navigating the multitude of local actors and contradictory perspectives, by any means, an easy task. Instead, we shed light on preconceived perceptions that cause interveners to turn to simplified transferable models and practices. As in the case of MONUC, this means routinely disregarding from attaining knowledge of host contexts. "With all their self-confidence, [interveners] think that they can construct the Congo without the Congolese", as emblematically phrased by a Congolese intellectual (Autesserre, 2014: 89). Ignoring existing capacities and key dynamics of the conflict context – while sparking resentment among local people – aggravate the already difficult task of building peace.

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