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Policy Analysis

An Assessment of Sexual Violence, Conflict Minerals, and the Way Forward in the DRC

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is often viewed through a narrow, single-story perspective, one dominated by images of conflict minerals and sexual violence in the eastern region. This reductive narrative, echoed in Western and African media, overshadows the country's broader realities and potential. Rarely acknowledged are the DRC's vast natural endowments, such as the Congo River, the second most powerful in the world; its abundant forests and fertile land; or its dynamic and engaged youth population active in civil society. To meaningfully engage with the DRC's present and future, we must revisit its past and grapple with the global context it operates. The country's challenges are not static or one-dimensional but rather fluid, deeply embedded in broader global processes, including imperial legacies, sectoral privatization, and geopolitics of neighboring countries. Notably, much of the international focus centers disproportionately on a relatively small area in the east, neglecting the lived experiences and systemic issues affecting the wider Congolese population.

This paper assesses the dominant discourse surrounding the DRC and proposes actionable recommendations for policymakers seeking a more effective and human-centered approach. I argue that the prevailing Western narrative, framed around sexual violence and conflict minerals in eastern Congo, constructs a limiting binary that fails to capture the complexity of the situation. This simplification distorts the reality on the ground and marginalizes the broader struggles of ordinary Congolese citizens across the country, thereby perpetuating policy responses that overlook root causes and hinder sustainable, inclusive recovery. The paper begins with an assessment of the DRC's situation, starting with a historical and contextual background, followed by an analysis of how sexual violence and conflict minerals have shaped the dominant narrative.

It concludes with concrete policy recommendations aimed at reframing international engagement with the DRC toward a more comprehensive and locally grounded approach.

An Assessment of the Situation

1. Historical and Contextual Background

History and context are essential to truly understanding the complexities of the DRC, yet much of the available discourse neglects the human dimension of its past and present. When the Portuguese first arrived on the Congo River, they encountered an existing society with access to abundant natural resources and vast waterways. This encounter set the stage for the geopolitical events that resulted in the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, convened at Portugal's urging to formalize European claims in the Congo Basin. The resulting partition carved out what we now recognize as the Democratic Republic of Congo, a nation approximately 80 times the size of Belgium. Despite its immense scale and diversity, dominant narratives focus on the eastern region, which constitutes less than 10% of the national territory, reducing a vast and multifaceted country to a singular thread of violence.

The key point in this history came when King Leopold II of Belgium claimed the Congo not as a shared colonial possession but as his personal property. During the industrial revolution, rubber, then a critical commodity, became the primary driver of extraction, and Leopold's Congo Free State became a site of immense exploitation to meet global demand. Classical imperialism theories emphasize economic extraction and the imposition of foreign political structures as key drivers of such colonial ventures, and the Congo was no exception. The brutality of Leopold’s regime exemplifies the violent extremes of imperialism when economic greed and absolute power go unchecked.

However, many academic accounts tend to stop at the structural critique of imperialism without fully engaging with the human cost and its reverberations through Congolese society. Adam Hochschild's seminal 1999 work[1] estimated that 15–20 million Congolese died between 1885 and 1908 due to forced labor, violence, and famine under Leopold's rule. While some historians have debated the exact figures, the overwhelming consensus affirms that the human toll was catastrophic. Yet, this tragedy is too often relegated to footnotes in broader imperial historiography, overshadowed by discussions of geopolitics and resource flows. Making the sole focus on economic and political analyses could lead to many scholars inadvertently perpetuating a form of erasure that mirrors the original dehumanization of colonial subjects.

Against this historical backdrop, significant global events such as World War I and II catalyzed shifts in African perceptions of colonialism, eventually sparking nationalist movements and one-party state systems across the continent. In the DRC, these movements led to the rise of Mobutu Sese Seko, who privatized key resources, centralized power, and fostered a strong sense of nationalism. Under Mobutu's rule, investment in education and the military transformed Kinshasa into a hub of state-building efforts, giving rise to Zaire's rapid growth during the 1970s. Although Mobutu's policies aimed at consolidating national identity and economic sovereignty, they were simultaneously marred by corruption and authoritarianism, contributing to long-term political fragility[2].

Understanding this nuanced history is necessary in challenging the dominant, reductionist narratives that focus solely on the eastern DRC's conflict zones. Without acknowledging the

[1] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Mariner Books, 1999).
[2] Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*, First Edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

historical forces and human experiences that have shaped the country, policy approaches will remain incomplete and insufficient to address the fundamental drivers of underdevelopment.

2. Sexual Violence

Sexual violence in the DRC has long been a site of global attention, but the manner in which it is addressed, especially by international NGOs, reveals a troubling pattern akin to the 'funeral parlor' analogy: an eagerness to fund interventions without genuine engagement with root causes or sustainable solutions[3]. The heightened international focus began during the wars from 1996 to 2002, when Congolese human rights defenders exposed horrific patterns of mass rape by foreign and domestic armed groups. Yet, as Douma and Hilhorst (2012) argue in Fond de Commerce? Sexual Violence Assistance in the DRC, this framing, centered almost exclusively on "wartime rape", has shaped both legal and humanitarian responses in limiting ways[4]. Their analysis underscores how this narrow narrative influences laws like the 2006 Sexual Violence Act, which fails to account for the broader spectrum of gender-based violence, especially acts embedded in customary norms that remain socially tolerated. This outdated wartime framing also invites solutions that are superficial and reactive, such as proposals to install cameras as deterrents to rape, rather than addressing the structural inequalities and gender norms that underpin the violence. Moreover, little attention is paid to how victims are reached or how trauma is addressed holistically.

However, it is important to recognize that academic discourse around sexual violence is far from unified, and there are key tensions that reveal gaps in how we understand this issue. For example, Baaz and Stern (2018) push back against dominant views that reduce wartime sexual violence to

[3] Mvemba Dizolele, "Conflict and the African Great Lakes" (Class lecture, JHU SAIS, April 8, 2025).
[4] N Douma and D Hilhorst, "Fond de Commerce?: Sexual Violence Assistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *Wageningen University.*, 2012.

instruments of power or domination, arguing that such interpretations erase the sexual element intrinsic to the harm itself[5]. The desexualization of rape in war, could risk creating an overly sanitized and simplistic narrative that disconnects wartime rape from everyday sexual violence and distorts both sexuality and conflict. This perspective draws our attention to another overlooked dimension, the complex emotional and psychological aftermath for survivors. Healthcare providers in the DRC often confront the immense mental health burdens carried not only by survivors but also by children born of rape, whose existence embodies the intersection of violence and innocence. The profound emotional challenge for mothers: navigating love, resentment, and trauma, is rarely central in policy or programming discussions despite being crucial to long-term recovery.

Taken together, these arguments expose the multi-layered and under-theorized dimensions of sexual violence in the DRC, while pointing to the structural neglect by the Congolese government. For instance, in 2011, the entire budget for the Ministry of Gender, tasked with responding to sexual violence, stood at just USD 7.9 million, of which only 40% was disbursed, and less than USD 1 million allocated to research[6]. Meanwhile, international NGOs pour in millions, often with rigid donor templates and poor contextual understanding. Where, then, is the responsibility of the Congolese state? Despite promising grassroots efforts such as Anny Modi's AFIA MAMA, which works to improve women's well-being, a real, lasting impact requires the state to step up, take ownership, and prioritize the protection, safety, and dignity of its citizens. In short, addressing sexual violence in the DRC requires moving beyond narrow wartime narratives and donor-led

[5] Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria and Stern, "Curious Erasures: The Sexual in Wartime Sexual Violence," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 295–314, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1459197.
[6] Douma and Hilhorst, "Fond de Commerce?: Sexual Violence Assistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo."

interventions to a more critical lens that foregrounds structural inequality, government accountability, and survivor-centered justice, issues that remain central to assessing broader patterns of international engagement and domestic governance in fragile contexts.

3. Conflict Minerals (Critical Minerals)

On the minerals front, it is necessary to challenge the dominant narrative that minerals themselves are the root cause of conflict in the DRC. The U.S. Dodd-Frank Act, in particular, framed minerals as the drivers of violence, yet this oversimplification ignores the more fundamental issue: how mineral resources are governed. This same mineral-rich eastern region is also where we observe heightened incidences of sexual violence, indicating that simply removing minerals from the equation does not eliminate the structural problems. The real problem lies not in the minerals but in the systems of exploitation, institutional failure, and lack of regulation that surround them. The implementation of the Dodd-Frank Act, particularly Section 1502, led to unintended consequences that harmed local communities that depend on artisanal mining for survival. As Rick Goss[7] and Mvemba Dizolele[8] argue, this well-meaning but externally imposed compliance framework failed to consider the human cost. Mining shutdowns triggered by global corporations' withdrawal from the region resulted in income loss, economic displacement, and further instability, all while failing to dismantle the networks of armed control or address supply chain corruption.

Nevertheless, it is important to critically assess these critiques considering efforts that have sought to improve transparency and traceability. The UK's "beg and tag" initiative, for example, attempted to certify conflict-free mines, but ultimately failed when mineral tags were diverted to

[7] Rick Goss, "The Unintended Consequences of Dodd-Frank's Conflict Minerals Provision," 2013, https://docs.house.gov/meetings/BA/BA20/20130521/100910/HHRG-113-BA20-Wstate-GossR-20130521.pdf.
[8] Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, "Conflict Minerals in the Congo: Let's Be Frank About Dodd-Frank," 2011.

black markets. Similarly, the OECD's compliance-driven due diligence frameworks showed mixed results; while the smelter validation program achieved modest success in regulating the downstream market, tracking gold remained particularly elusive due to its high value and portability. NGOs have been quick to support the conflict-minerals narrative, yet this emphasis often masks more systemic issues, such as weak governance and the complicity of regional actors. This critique is echoed by Rustad, Østby, and Nordås (2016), whose research challenges the minerals-equals-conflict thesis by showing that proximity to mining sites correlates with increased sexual violence, especially in areas controlled by armed groups[9]. This finding shifts the focus from natural resources alone to the broader political economy of insecurity, suggesting that violence stems from a combination of armed presence, local power struggles, and institutional breakdown.

Therefore, it becomes evident that narrow policy responses such as the Dodd-Frank Act or the Kivu-focused mining bans are inadequate because they misdiagnose the root causes of conflict and violence. Applying a one-size-fits-all policy to a country as geographically vast and politically fragmented as the DRC was misguided. The assumption that targeting one region could produce systemic peace or stability ignored the complex, localized drivers of violence. The real questions we should have been asking revolve around the broader context of state fragility, the roles of regional powers, and the governance vacuum that allows armed groups to thrive around natural resource sites. The failure to adopt a more holistic and locally informed approach has weakened the international community's ability to support long-term peace in the DRC. If the goal is to understand and address the interplay between natural resource management and violence, then the

[9] Siri Aas Rustad, Gudrun Østby, and Ragnhild Nordås, "Artisanal Mining, Conflict, and Sexual Violence in Eastern DRC," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 2016): 475–84, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2016.01.010.

focus must shift from minerals as commodities to minerals as they intersect within power relations and governance structures.

Recommendation for the way forward

1. Engage Local Communities, Especially Women and Youth, As Central Actors in Peace and Development Policy Design

A fundamental flaw in many international interventions in the DRC is the persistent exclusion of local voices, especially those of women and youth, from the policymaking and solution-building process. Too often, policies are imposed from the top down, shaped by external assumptions rather than grounded realities. To move toward sustainable peace and development, we must flip that script. That begins with engaging the people who are most affected by the conflict and recognizing the unique strengths of the region. The DRC is a young country, and its future lies in its youth and women. These groups are not passive victims or distant beneficiaries; they are active participants, and they must be brought to the table. This is especially urgent given the rapid spread of technology: young people across the DRC are on their phones, accessing and sharing information just like their counterparts in the West. They are informed, connected, and eager to engage. Ignoring this potential is not just a missed opportunity, it is a strategic failure. Any meaningful policy must start by listening to, and building with, those already shaping the future on the ground.

Policy makers should actively include local voices in the policymaking process by establishing participatory forums at the provincial and community levels in eastern DRC. Set an end-of-first-year implementation target, to reach at least 60% of all policy dialogues and development planning committees at the local level should include representation from youth-led organizations and women's groups. Instead of relying solely on external diagnostics, policymakers should engage

directly with the people on the ground and build solutions that draw on local strengths. One of the greatest assets of the DRC is its demographic dividend: it is a young country, and women and youth are not just future stakeholders; they are present drivers of innovation and resilience. Recognizing their everyday use of technology, especially smartphones and social media, shows that this population is well-informed, connected, and more globally aware than often assumed. Policies must be designed to tap into this energy and creativity, not bypass it. This approach will lead to more grounded, legitimate, and sustainable policies because they reflect the lived realities and aspirations of those most affected by instability. It also builds trust between institutions and citizens, strengthening social cohesion and civic engagement. Initiate pilot community engagement forums within six months in three conflict-affected provinces (e.g., North Kivu and Ituri), with plans to scale nationally within two years based on feedback and lessons learned.

2. Recognizing, Investing, and Empowering Civil Society Organizations

Policymaking in the DRC must begin with a fundamental recognition: the true strength of the country lies not in its institutions but in its people, especially in the resilience and innovation of its civil society. When the state has collapsed or withdrawn, it is civil society actors who have stepped up to fill the vacuum, often without recognition or adequate support. A powerful example of this is the role civil society played in advancing transparency in the extractive sector through the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in the early 2000s. Despite operating in a context of widespread corruption and weak governance, these local actors not only brought themselves into policy discussions but influenced real change in resource management. Similarly, during the 2013 mining contract reviews, civil society groups uncovered discrepancies in reported revenues, holding the state accountable and pushing for reforms. Their work has extended beyond economic issues to the social frontlines, where grassroots organizations lead the response to sexual

violence, offering both services and advocacy in the face of systemic neglect. These efforts underscore one clear truth: civil society is not a supplementary actor but central to any effective policy strategy for the DRC.

To achieve this, policy makers should establish a formalized partnership framework between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the DRC's Ministry of Planning and international donors to co-design and implement development programs, particularly in the extractive sector and gender-based violence prevention. By 2026, ensure that at least 50% of government and donor-funded policy initiatives in these sectors include a documented civil society consultation process and at least one CSO as a co-implementing partner. Create a Civil Society Engagement Platform with funding support from the World Bank and the African Development Bank, which includes quarterly stakeholder meetings, training sessions for CSOs on policy engagement, and transparent public reporting on contributions made by these groups. This approach will strengthen policy legitimacy, improve resource accountability, and foster more contextually grounded, people-centered solutions, eventually leading to service delivery and trust in governance. Launch the platform by Q1 of 2026, with the first round of policy consultations and co-design sessions completed by Q3 of 2026, and a formal evaluation conducted by the end of 2027.

3. Promote Multidisciplinary, People-Centered Policy Research and Design

Policymakers must urgently move away from one-dimensional, overly technocratic approaches to understanding and responding to the DRC's challenges. The issues facing the country, whether framed as conflict minerals, gender-based violence, or poor governance are deeply interconnected, and cannot be properly addressed through siloed or binary lenses. A more holistic, multidisciplinary, and data-driven approach is essential, one that takes both qualitative and quantitative insights and critically interrogates how the data itself is produced. For instance, are

researchers collecting data through distant, elite institutions, “Ivory Tower” offices, or are they grounded in the communities, engaging directly with the people whose lives the policies are meant to affect? This distinction matters, because evidence produced without local input tends to reinforce superficial narratives and distract from root causes such as institutional weakness, limited civic freedoms, role of reginal actors, and widespread socio-economic exclusion. Similarly, focusing solely on macro-level indicators like GDP growth ignores critical human questions: can people afford food, access education, or participate meaningfully in society? A failure to adopt a more layered approach risks producing policies that only treat symptoms, such as conflict over minerals or sexual violence, while leaving the underlying conditions unaddressed.

Institutionalize a policy review and design framework that mandates the integration of multidisciplinary data sources, including ethnographic studies, participatory research, and community consultations, into all major government policy proposals related to resource governance, education, and human development. By 2026, ensure that at least 75% of all new national development and resource-related policies include a publicly available methodology appendix outlining both qualitative and quantitative data sources, fieldwork methods, and community engagement processes. Establish a National Research Consortium on Inclusive Development (NRCID), with representatives from government, universities, civil society, and international partners, tasked with producing annual “People’s Reports” that track human development indicators alongside economic metrics. This approach will ensure that policymakers address root causes, such as weak governance, inequitable land reforms, or exclusion from education, rather than symptoms alone, resulting in more targeted, inclusive, and sustainable interventions. The consortium should be formally constituted by Q2 of 2026, with the first People’s Report released by Q1 of 2027, and integrated into policy reviews starting Q3 of 2027.

To conclude, DRC's challenges are too often reduced to single-issue narratives that overlook the complexity of the situation on the ground. This paper has argued that to understand the persistent cycles of violence, particularly sexual violence and the role of conflict minerals, we must go beyond surface-level explanations and interrogate the structural and institutional conditions that enable exploitation. It is not the minerals themselves that perpetuate violence, but the governance vacuum, institutional failure, and regional political dynamics that shape how resources are accessed and managed. Moreover, existing international interventions have often failed precisely because they excluded the human dimension, neglecting the people who live in these contexts and reducing them to passive recipients of externally imposed solutions. Therefore, centering the voices of women, youth, and civil society, and taking a more grounded, interdisciplinary, and data-conscious approach, policy can begin to move from reactive to solution-based. The future of the DRC depends not on more top-down initiatives but on solutions that recognize local strengths, confront institutional fragility, and treat prosperity and human dignity as inseparable goals. Only then can sustainable peace and development become a reality rather than a promise deferred.

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