

**NORDEM : THEMATIC PAPER series** provides an outlet for NORDEM secondees to discuss current practices within areas of their expertise. The authors convey lessons learned and give recommendations for alternative approaches or policy measures. The aim of this series is to enhance the practices of human rights and democratization related field work. The views and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of NORDEM. The series is available for downloading (online).

**NORDEM : THEMATIC PAPER series**

# New Strategies for Old Conflicts?

## Lessons in Stabilisation from the Democratic Republic of Congo

**BY RANDI SOLHJELL AND MADEL G. ROSLAND**

**NORDEM**

**UiO : Norwegian Centre for Human Rights**  
University of Oslo

## MADEL GUNNARSHAUG ROSLAND

- Madel Gunnarshaug Rosland (b.1981) holds a MSc in Comparative Politics and Conflict studies from London School of Economics and Political Science. She is a member of the NORDEM roster and was deployed as a Stabilisation Coordinator to the Stabilisation Support Unit in the UN Peace Operation Mission in the DRC for six months in 2015. Prior to this, she worked as the Country Director for Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in DRC. She is currently working as a senior adviser in the Central Africa Department of the Rainforest Foundation Norway.

## RANDI SOLHJELL

- Randi Solhjell (b. 1984) holds a PhD in Political Science from London School of Economics and Political Science. She is a member of the NORDEM roster and was deployed as a researcher to the Stabilisation Support Unit in the UN Peace Operation Mission in the DR Congo for four months in 2015-2016. She is a senior research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), researching mainly on statehood and access to public goods in DRC, international peacekeeping and gendered security.

## Executive Summary

- Until 2013, the International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy in the Democratic Republic of Congo focused mainly on infrastructure and the training and deployment of police officers. This did not result in more stability. The strategy has been criticised for providing technical solutions to political problems. The

revised strategy engages communities and authorities at local and national level in dialogues in order to identify causes and develop solutions to conflicts. It provides the first coherent and thorough approach to stabilisation in DRC, an exit strategy for MONUSCO and an opportunity for learning for other UN operations.

## Key recommendations

- UN missions should move away from a top down stabilisation approach focusing mainly on military response, infrastructure support and presence of state officials and instead involve communities and authorities affected by conflict in identifying the roots and solutions to conflict. Donors should prioritise funding for programmes that are in line with this approach, either bilaterally or through mechanisms such as the Stabilisation Coherence Fund.<sup>1</sup>
- A dialogue-based approach to stabilisation is demanding in terms of time and resources. It must be the responsibility of the entire mission to implement the strategy.
- The ISSSS represents an exit strategy for MONUSCO. As such, the UN Country Team can take the lead in coordination of the ISSSS when MONUSCO exits. The longer-term solutions for stabilisation in eastern DRC will need support from both development and humanitarian actors.
- Operationalising stabilisation strategies requires context knowledge of the underlying driving factors for conflict and good conflict-reducing initiatives in the area of operation. Stabilisation missions in Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia need to adapt strategies based on a thorough understanding of why armed groups fight in the first place and of which community and dialogue structures already exist and can be supported.

<sup>1</sup> See website for the Stabilisation Coherence Fund with overview of funding commitments: <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/CDS00>

# 1. Introduction

● Though largely absent from the headlines, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is still marked by conflict. The defeat of the M23 armed group and the February 2013 signing of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) agreement raised hopes that stability was within reach for the war-torn region. However, progress and reform has yet again stagnated, leaving the population disillusioned and at times even aggressive towards the international community and the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) present in the country.

In fact, after almost twenty years of war and insecurity, the conflict in the DRC is becoming increasingly more entrenched and complex. This period coincides with the presence of MONUSCO, the UN's largest peacekeeping mission. The mission arrived in DRC in 1999 as MONUC and has had a mandate to stabilise the eastern region since 2009.

A recent report confirms that the DRC is now hosting over seventy armed groups; a doubling since the last estimate in 2014.<sup>2</sup> While this does not necessarily signify an increase in combatants, it demonstrates the military, political and economic fragmentation in eastern DRC. The mobilisation of smaller armed groups is becoming a way of life for politicians, the business elite and local authorities to gain political and economic power regionally, locally and privately. The strategies of the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) – in cooperation with MONUSCO – are making the conflicts increasingly more entangled. The policy to integrate higher-ranking members of armed groups into the FARDC has left armed group combatants seeking other commanders and even created a certain incentive to continue fighting. At the same time there has been no real demilitarisation and reintegration programme. This shows that military approaches can contribute to an increase rather than a decrease of violence and conflict.

## 2. “Clear, hold, build”: The first phase of MONUSCO’s stabilisation strategy

● MONUSCO’s experience with stabilisation has clearly shown that there are few quick fixes and no one-size fits all format. This also corresponds well with relevant external evaluations and research findings.<sup>3</sup> MONUSCO has been criticised for trying to resolve deeply entrenched political challenges through technical interventions based on a “clear, hold, build” approach. MONUSCO’s stabilisation efforts in the first phase after it received a stabilisation mandate, mainly involved the construction of roads and government buildings and training and deployment of state officials, such as the police.

While this is sorely needed, the interventions have failed to address the root causes of the conflicts. For example, in order to secure livelihoods, communities may be forced to turn to violence or

support armed groups. Also, state agents often do not serve the interest of the population.<sup>4</sup> “Restoration of state authorities” was largely interpreted as placing more police stations or FARDC soldiers in a given conflict area, without considering how the police and FARDC networks contribute to conflict escalation. Moreover, MONUSCO took largely a top-down approach to the (at times uninterested) political elite.

The \$367 million spent on stabilisation interventions between 2009–2012, when stabilisation was introduced in the mission’s mandate, did not lead to increased stability. The mission and the international community – together with the DRC national authorities – acknowledged that a shift was urgently needed in order to build stability and accountable political institutions.

3 See e.g. Severine Autesserre (2015). “Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention” and International Alert (2015). “Beyond Stabilisation: Understanding the conflict dynamics in North and South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo.”

2 Jason Stearns & Christoph Vogel (December 2015) “Understanding Armed Group Proliferation in the Eastern Congo”. London/Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute

### 3. Addressing root causes of conflict: The revised International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy

● The UN Security Council in 2012 requested a strategic review of the implementation of the International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy (ISSSS), led by the Stabilisation Support Unit (SSU) in MONUSCO with support and input from the Congolese government and international donors. This resulted in the revised ISSSS 2013–2017 that aspires to target root causes to 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).<sup>5</sup>

It is important to emphasise that the ISSSS is the *international community’s* strategy to stabilise the east of the DRC, it is not owned by MONUSCO alone. Further, it is a strategy that has been developed in close cooperation with the Congolese authorities (STAREC) and the civil society. The strategy<sup>6</sup> defines stabilisation as

*“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.”*<sup>7</sup>

Acknowledging that previous responses to stabilisation have been too technical and incapable of addressing key political dimensions of the conflicts, the new ISSSS programmes have “democratic dialogue” as the underlying mechanism of all programming.<sup>8</sup> 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. If dialogue initiatives already exist, ISSSS programmes aspire to build on these rather than construct yet another structure.

These dialogues are intended to enable women, girls, boys and men in conflict affected communities, traditional authorities and state representatives to play a key role in transforming the wider conflict environment into a mutually accountable society for the longer term. Through the dialogue mechanisms, local actors are able 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 include the first steps towards (re-) establishing a social contract between elected authorities and their constituents.

4 Hugo de Vries (2015). “Going around in circles: The challenges of peacekeeping and stabilization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”. Haag: Clingendael.

5 Adopted in 2009, and revised in 2013. The revised version was approved by the Congolese Government and international donors 29 June 2012. Ref: ISSSS 2013–2017.

6 For the revised strategy in full, see: [http://www.unpbf.org/wp-content/uploads/ISSSS-2013-2017-Strategic-Framework-FINAL\\_EN.pdf](http://www.unpbf.org/wp-content/uploads/ISSSS-2013-2017-Strategic-Framework-FINAL_EN.pdf)

7 ISSSS 2013–2017. “International Security and Stabilisation Support Strategy 2013–2017: Executive Summary”. Goma: Stabilisation Support Unit, MONUSCO.

8 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 B and Thomas P; “Democratic Dialogue – a Handbook for practitioners,” International IDEA and UNDP (2007).

Building on the findings and recommendations identified in the democratic dialogues, activities are implemented by national and international NGOs with a long-term experience in the DRC and UN agencies. Activities can include economic recovery for at risk groups and enabling public servants to deliver quality services. They also incorporate measures to improve and sustain mutual trust between the community members and state authorities, which will limit the need to fall back on ethnic dimensions or violent solutions to community conflicts.

The community dialogues will not be carried out by MONUSCO. For example, in Kalehe, South Kivu, a national organisation with a long history working with community dialogues and mediation is the implementing partner in the ISSSS programme.<sup>9</sup> They have the skills and the contextual knowledge to navigate in a conflict terrain that MONUSCO does not have. At the same time, MONUSCO has logistic support and access to the political authorities that the local communities and the national organisations do not have.

In Kalehe, the Congolese partner together with the local communities set up and trained mediation committees, and facilitated community dialogues. Community representatives created an action plan for what is needed to bring stability. Some of the action points can be resolved at the community level, whereas others must be addressed at a higher political level. MONUSCO and STAREC organised a visit where community representatives had an opportunity to discuss their concerns with the government officials.

Specifically, the competing claims over land by two communities was identified as the root cause of a number of conflicts in the area. The community leaders demanded government support in deciding who had the legal right to this land. While the government officials communicated the concern through their hierarchy, MONUSCO supported the process through its means. The village in question is in an area without road access and the communities are isolated from decision-makers. MONUSCO provided logistics to facilitate the visit. Importantly, this was the first time the government at the provincial level had ever visited these communities.

The revised ISSSS is still in the implementation phase and it is too early to conclude as to its effectiveness. One might say that its bottom-up approach and community centred solutions represents nothing new and that peacebuilding organisations have been doing this for decades with proven results.<sup>10</sup> The 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 the DRC conflicts requires a response that takes into account all levels of the conflict. This might include addressing issues of poverty, ethnic discrimination and gender relations – an overwhelming task for one NGO.

MONUSCO, being such a large actor and having access to the political leadership in DRC, could make a real difference to people living in the midst of conflict- *if* the mission fully adopted the approaches outlined in the strategy.<sup>11</sup> This has yet to happen. While the donors, provincial governments and NGOs are rallying behind the strategy, MONUSCO is criticised for not seriously engaging with it.<sup>12</sup>

---

**9** The partner, “Action pour la Paix et la Concorde” (APC), has a longtime partnership with Life & Peace Institute and is also a key actor in the peacebuilding domain in the DRC.

---

**10** 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>

**11** This is in line with the recommendation of the High-level Independent Panel on Peacekeeping Operations, the so-called “HIPPO report”: [http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO\\_Report\\_1\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf)

**12** Hugo de Vries (2016). “The Ebb and Flow of Stabilisation in the Congo”. London/Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.

## 4. Challenges and opportunities for the new approach to stabilisation

● 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. In theory, the ISSSS strategy should be underpinning the work of the entire mission. The SSU is mandated to *coordinate* the stabilisation efforts of the mission. However, SSU staff experience that the responsibility to *implement* the stabilisation efforts is left to the unit, a rather overwhelming task for a team of approximately 15 staff. Bringing the whole mission behind the revised strategy is one of the key challenges that must be overcome to ensure maximum impact of the strategy. Other challenges are whether Congolese authorities are willing to change the conflict dynamics, the need for targeted funding such as through the Stabilisation Coherence Fund, and coordinating different international and local actors in supporting implementation of ISSSS programmes.

However, there are a number of opportunities for MONUSCO if its leadership seriously engages with the revised ISSSS. First, the strategy represents the most important opportunity to 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 part in a sustainable exit strategy for the mission. The UN country team (UNCT) can play a crucial role in ensuring a sound transition when MONUSCO eventually pulls out. Thus, the UNCT have to 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 can be operationalised.<sup>14</sup> A successful implementation 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 also play a role in informing the reform process of the UN Department of Peace Keeping Operations.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Severine Autesserre (06.10.2015), "Trouble in Peaceland". *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>14</sup> See full report: Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership and people (June 2015), [http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO\\_Report\\_1\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://www.un.org/sg/pdf/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf)

## 5. Conclusion

- Stabilisation under the new ISSSS framework does not mean using all necessary military means to end armed conflicts, as the 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 and consequently makes them intrinsically more complex, as the increase in armed groups in the DRC clearly demonstrates. Neither does the new approach to stabilisation mean bringing stability mainly by increasing the physical presence of state authorities. The communities themselves need to be involved in finding solutions together with the elected politicians and with the coordinated support of international actors.

This paper has argued that the revised ISSSS strategy provides a great opportunity for encouraging trust and accountability between Congolese citizens and official and traditional authorities to resolve some of the protracted conflicts reigning in the DRC today. It also presents an opportunity to show the way for other UN missions tasked to stabilise other complex conflict areas.

# This is NORDEM

**NORDEM**, the Norwegian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights, is a civilian capacity provider specialising in human rights and democratisation support.

**NORDEM**'s main objective is to enhance the capacity of international organisations and national authorities to promote democracy and human rights.

**NORDEM**'s expertise includes good governance, democratic institutions, independence of the judiciary, judicial and legal reform, human rights, election observation and election assistance.

**NORDEM** recruits, trains and deploys qualified personnel to roughly 15 international organisations and operations that work in the field of human rights and democratisation.

**NORDEM** aims towards gender balance in recruitment and deployment. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN and the EU are some of **NORDEM**'s main partners.

**NORDEM** manages a standby roster of approximately 250 experts who have completed more than 2,000 assignments since 1993.

**NORDEM** publishes special reports and manuals.

**NORDEM**'s annual courses on human rights, democratisation and election observation integrate both practical and academic perspectives. **NORDEM** also develops and conducts specialised courses.

**NORDEM** supports several international mechanisms and collaborates with a number of organisations that provide civilian capacity. In addition, **NORDEM** offers advice, supports the transfer of knowledge and experience and contributes to research.

**NORDEM** is fully financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is a programme at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights at the University of Oslo.

## Contact NORDEM:

NORDEM email: [nordem-programme@nchr.uio.no](mailto:nordem-programme@nchr.uio.no)

Follow us:

NORDEM Twitter: [@NORDEMCivCap](https://twitter.com/NORDEMCivCap)

NORDEM LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/company/nordem\\_civcap](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nordem_civcap)

NORDEM web: [www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/programmes/nordem](http://www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/programmes/nordem)

# NORDEM

UiO  Norwegian Centre for Human Rights  
University of Oslo