DANGEROUS TIMES, DANGEROUS PLACES: HOW POLITICS IMPACTS HUMANITARIAN WORKER SECURITY IN DR CONGO

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Abstract:

DR Congo has experienced more than two decades of conflict and profound political upheaval, sparking humanitarian crises which have seen large-scale relief efforts to alleviate them. Aid workers and UN staff working there have been caught up in the violence, sometimes with deadly results and major disruption to aid operations. Nonetheless there has been a tendency to assume that most security incidents involving aid workers are a result either of pure criminality, or because the victims happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Is that really the case however, or are humanitarian workers perceived as political actors, and thus vulnerable to politically motivated violence? This dissertation conducts an empirical data study of attacks against humanitarian actors, UN workers and peacekeepers between 2006-2018, mapping them against political developments. Following previous work by Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, this research tests what impact the nature of the conflict or the change of peacekeeping mandate has on both aid-worker and UN personnel security, as well as exploring the different risks faced by national and international staff working for international NGOs. It also, using an interpretivist lens first proposed by Labonte & Edgerton, explores the role of the Congolese state in aid-worker security, testing whether relations between the host government and aid providers can impact individual aid-worker security on the ground. The results indicate that both conflict intensity and elections cycles could impact on rates of attacks against aid-workers, as well as clearly demonstrating that national staff are far more exposed to risk of attack, and that fatalities of UN staff since the peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) in DRC received its more aggressive mandate in 2013 have risen sharply. The research also raises questions about the potential threat posed by the Congolese state to aid-worker security, given the nature of statehood in DRC, its motives and perceptions of aid operations, and the state’s role as both the main belligerent and security provider in zones where humanitarian workers chiefly operate.

Key Words: humanitarian, security, aid-worker, governance, interpretivism, conflict, political violence, Congo, Kivu,
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo has for more than two decades been mired in conflicts which have sparked some of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, sucking in billions of dollars of aid money, and becoming “a vast laboratory of humanitarian relief, protection of civilians and state-building strategies” (Barrera, 2015, 1). A dizzying array of local and international humanitarian actors have projects underway there, tackling everything from emergency medical care to resilience building and grassroots peace initiatives. Meanwhile large numbers of foreign aid-workers pass through the country each year, housed in high-end villas and secure compounds, their distinctive white land-cruisers - emblazoned with organizational logos - often clogging the rutted streets of eastern DRC’s major towns. From these relatively secure bases, aid agencies make forays into the country’s vast interior, in some cases establishing sub-offices or local operations in remote towns and villages reached only after hours or days of tortuous travel on abysmal roads, or conducting short missions before returning to their urban offices. These operations are heavily reliant on local staff, and carried out against a background of corrupt officialdom, virtually non-existent infrastructure, and in areas controlled either by one of the region’s myriad armed groups or the Congolese army (FARDC), renowned for its brutality and indiscipline, (Paddon & Lacaille, 2011).

In this environment, replete with violence and bereft of accountability, aid workers themselves become victims of attack, often with profound consequences for those involved, for aid operations in general, and for local populations who suffer when insecurity forces the suspension or cancellation of programmes. These challenges have been brought into sharp relief in recent months by the security problems faced by relief-workers responding to the Ebola outbreak in the Beni region of Congo’s North
Kivu province. The recent murder of a Cameroonian doctor working for WHO has brought the issue of targeted attacks back to the top of the agenda (Reuters, 2019).

Violent attacks against humanitarians in DR Congo are no new phenomenon. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the large concentration of aid actors in an unpredictable and insecure environment, humanitarians (international and national, as well as peacekeepers and civilian UN workers) have regularly been victims of directed violent attacks in DRC. According to the International NGO Security Organization data for Jan 2018-March 2019, DRC saw more NGO-related security incidents than any other country worldwide, except Central African Republic (INSO, 2019). This is taking place against a background of an ever-expanding global aid sector, which is perceived to be becoming more dangerous, although the reasons for this have been relatively little probed (Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, 2017).

It is worth noting that humanitarian workers in DRC are far less likely to face attack or harassment than Congolese civilians, and there has for a long time been the perception that aid-workers were targeted more for their perceived wealth in an impoverished and crime-ridden country, than for the work they were doing, and that when incidents did occur, it was often a case of wrong place, wrong time (Mowjee, 2007, 33). Is this really the case, or simply a convenient catch-all narrative to avoid complex questions about nature of the humanitarian presence in DRC, and its interrelation to wider political currents?

This dissertation explores the relationship between aid worker security and local political dynamics, interrogating to what extent political events such as elections, flare-ups in fighting, changes in peacekeeping mandate or worsening relations between the host government (GoDRC) and aid actors, can affect aid worker security on the ground, and also how the risks differ for international and national staff. This study will be conducted through an exploration of the nature of violence against humanitarians, an analysis of the political environment in DRC where aid workers operate, with a special focus on the dominant local actor, the state. Using similar approaches to previous writings on both aid worker security, and relations between aid providers and host governments, I will use an interpretivist lens to analyse the nature of statehood in DRC.
and what implications this might have for the safety of aid-workers operating within the country, and then conduct a quantitative analysis measuring rates and severity of attacks against humanitarian workers (and peacekeepers) between 2006, when the Congolese Government achieved its first post-war sovereignty after Joseph Kabila was elected in democratic polls, and 2018. Mapping attacks against political developments in this period will add to existing empirical studies which attempt to elucidate trends that could help inform why aid workers are victims of attack whilst trying to help others, and also pose questions about the specific challenges of operating safely in the DRC.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent can local political factors, including relations between the GoDRC and the international community, election cycles, flare-ups in conflicts, affect humanitarian security in DRC?

1.3 AIMS

To answer this research question, the dissertation aims to look at the complex political space in DR Congo where humanitarians carry out their work, often alongside peacekeepers who have become active participants in interlocking conflicts with myriad actors, constantly shifting alliances, partially obscured motivations, and sometimes seemingly senseless acts of violence. In order to better understand the environment in which aid-workers operate and face possible attack, this dissertation will explore the nature of the dominant actor in that environment: the Congolese State. While Congo is regularly identified as a “failed state” or even a “non-state” (Herbst & Mills, 2013), not only is the Congolese government (GoDRC) the single largest belligerent, (Vogel&Stearns, 2018) but the business of state, encapsulated in electoral processes, battles for territorial control, issues over sovereignty, and even provision of basic services, are central to shaping the political terrain in which aid-workers operate, the role they play, and the political events that may impact their work and security. Further, the Congolese Government has in recent years adopted an increasingly bellicose tone against aid operators and their donors, blaming their
presence for weak foreign investment and contributing to Congo’s abject international standing (Moore, 2018). During the most recent general and presidential election campaign, the large-scale aid providers came in for particularly vitriolic attack from pro-government sources. It can be argued that pro-government politicians felt their political prospects were harmed by the presence of aid-workers, or at least that by scapegoating them, their prospects could be enhanced. This dissertation aims to explore the nature of governance and state failure in Congo, exploring whether aid-workers, through the nature of their work, may unwittingly be seen as political competitors to the state, rather than partners or proxies, thus exposing themselves to the risk of politically motivated attack by state sponsored actors.

A key aspect of Labonte & Edgerton’s attempt to create a typology of state humanitarian access denial – including the use of targeted violence against humanitarian actors as a deterrent – is the importance of understanding the motivations of the state, using an interpretivist lens, which recognizes that actors do not merely react to their environment, but also to their perception of that environment (Labonte & Edgerton, 2013). This paper aims to explore whether such an interpretivist approach, which attempts to understand the motives and intentions of the Congolese state, could help explain the sometimes complex and thorny relations between aid operators and their hosts, the Congolese Government, and in turn whether worsening relations between the GoDRC and aid actors could have an impact on aid-worker security.

The dissertation will explore whether data analysis supports any relationship between different types of political events and rates of attacks on aid-workers. If we accept that despite efforts to maintain neutrality and impartiality, humanitarian actors cannot exist entirely outside the “political box” (Pottier, 2006, 152), then it seems likely that in an area rife with politically motivated violence, political developments would have a direct impact on the safety of aid workers. The research will place particular focus on exploring whether certain types of events are linked to fluctuations in aid-worker attacks: conflict surges, in which increased levels of violence could be expected to create a more dangerous operating environment, where aid-workers might be caught
in the crossfire or deliberately targeted. Electoral periods, where as previously noted, it might suit the political interests of key actors to restrict humanitarian access through the use of targeted attacks as a deterrent (Labonte & Edgerton, 2013). Differing types of peacekeeping mandate have been linked by Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard to differing levels of risk for humanitarian workers (Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, 2017, 551). In DR Congo the UN’s peacekeeping mandate changed mid-way through the research period, from a traditional to a more aggressive, transformational model, through the creation of the “Intervention Brigade”, tasked with taking a much more active role in the conflict, working alongside government troops to “neutralize and disarm” rebel groups operating in eastern DRC, (UNSC, 2013). The research will explore whether this has impacted attack levels on humanitarian workers, and also UN workers, along the lines suggested by Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard’s existing research. Finally, recent research has mapped a rising trend of attacks against national humanitarian staff (Haver, 2007, Llorente, 2014). Has this also been the case in DRC, where organizations rely heavily on their local staff?

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In order to explore these themes, this paper will lay out the methodology and materials available to map aid-worker security in DRC against political developments. The next section will then be a discussion of the key concepts underpinning an exploration of the Congolese state, as well as a brief exploration of interpretivism, as a possible lens through which to better understand the state’s motives. A review of recent research into attacks on humanitarian actors will follow, identifying the most relevant trends which could have a bearing on humanitarian security in DR Congo. I will then provide a brief overview of the evolution of the operating environment in DR Congo, briefly charting political developments and flare-ups in the fighting which could have impacted on the security of aid-workers. Based on a review of the literature on humanitarian security as well as a review of the political environment, I will propose hypotheses, which will be subsequently tested against empirical data. The dissertation will begin its analysis with an interpretivist reading of the often
contradictory role of the Congolese Government (GoDRC), which is frequently characterized as inept or virtually non-existent, and yet also as a key actor in the insecurity which underpins the humanitarian crises that have beset the country. I will then set out key political dates in the research period, followed by a quantitative analysis of rates and severity of attacks against humanitarian workers – and peacekeepers and UN staff – during the research period. These will be mapped against political developments and the hypotheses drawn from the literature review and political analysis, to look for potential patterns. The dissertation will conclude with discussion of my findings and a conclusion.

1.5 METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

The methodology of the dissertation will have both qualitative and quantitative elements. Firstly, in the “Theory” section, will be a qualitative exploration of the nature of Congolese statehood, using the key concepts of the “absence of effective governance and that of state “failure” or “fragility”. An interpretive lens will also be deployed to better understand the motivations of the Congolese state, and the potential impact of these motivations on aid-worker security.

A subsequent quantitative data analysis will use a similar methodology as seen in Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard’s important study, which has attempted to quantitively analyze global trends in attacks against humanitarians, testing various hypotheses against factors including the intensity of conflict conditions in different countries where aid-workers are operating, and the types of peacekeeping operations present (Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, 2017). A similar approach will be applied to the Congolese context exclusively, to see if evolving political dynamics between 2006 and 2018 can be linked to changes in the number and severity of aid worker attacks. Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard’s methodology will provide the foundational model for the quantitative analysis carried out in this dissertation, testing hypotheses against attack rates during the research period, to look for patterns. There has been relatively little quantitative analysis of aid-worker attacks, as such it seems logical to maintain a
broadly consistent methodology with previous research, exploring similar themes and hypotheses, in order to maximize the possibility of meaningful comparison.

The quantitative analysis will use annual data on attacks against aid-workers, including fatal, non-fatal and kidnappings, aggregated from the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD). The AWSD uses systematic media filtering and reporting from individual NGOs and aid organizations to compile its data. It is possible that some security incidents have not been aggregated, nonetheless it seems clear that the AWSD is the most comprehensive database of its kind covering the entire period of research, and furthermore was the main source of data for the work of Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard. This data will then be visualized and mapped using Microsoft Excel over the research period, to identify possible overall trends, and also to test the pre-established hypotheses, based on previous research. The analysis will specifically focus on looking for patterns linked to electoral cycles, increased conflict intensity, and the change in peacekeeping mandate, to try to identify possible connections between rates of aid-worker attacks and external political factors.

The research will only look at attacks against workers for INGOs, UN agencies and the ICRC. Whilst there are many Congolese NGOs doing vital and often very dangerous work in Congo, this dissertation is particularly aiming to shed light on the dynamics of relations between international aid operations and the host government, and there is also a recognition that other, more localized factors (ethnicity, local tensions etc.) could play a significant role in attacks involving local NGOs, which would be less relevant to the area of study for this project. The research will however cover national staff working for international organizations, both because it would be hard or impossible to disaggregate between national and international in many cases -if both are involved in an attack, for example, or if the national staff member is travelling in a branded vehicle or wearing their organization’s logo – and also because one of the hypotheses to be tested aims to assess differing levels of risk vis a vis national and international staff. Due to the way attacks are logged in AWSD, it will be possible to map the number of attacks and the number of victims per year, as well as analyzing trends on the results of attacks (fatalities, kidnapped).
Given the important role of the UN peacekeeping operations in Congo, the dissertation will also chart annual fatalities due to attack of both peacekeepers and civilian staff within the research period, in order to map these against both the political developments covered in the hypotheses, and attacks against aid-workers. The data for these is provided by the United Nations Staff Union in New York, which releases annual figures aggregating attacks leading to fatalities of UN staff. While the data is described as not an official record, it appears to be the most complete record available and represents a relatively complete aggregation of all reported fatalities of UN civilian and peacekeeping staff, and was recommended by UN officials as the most appropriate record.

In order to measure the intensity of conflict, the dissertation will use the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, 2019), which keeps a record of logged conflict-related deaths per year in countries experiencing armed internal conflict. Attack data will also be mapped against key political events (major rebellions, elections) to look for correlation.

One consideration when looking at rates of attacks should be the possibility that they are linked to the absolute number of aid workers in-country, essentially meaning that the more aid-workers there are operating in an innately dangerous environment, the higher the number of security incidents. It is very difficult to find reliable figures relating to the numbers of aid-workers in DRC at any given time, and thus the dissertation will assume that higher levels of funding would mean more extensive aid operation and thus more aid-workers. As such I will map funding data provided by the UN’s Financial Tracking Service (FTS) against attack data (FTS, 2019), to look for possible correlation.

The dissertation also uses material generated from a questionnaire completed by four aid-workers or UN employees who are based in and/or have worked on DR Congo, to provide the insider context and hope shape both the background/context and the analysis of the data. The questionnaires were completed on the understanding that participants would remain anonymous. This decision was taken to guarantee the
professional integrity of the respondents, whilst allowing them to be as honest as possible in their responses. (A sample questionnaire is available in Appendix 2).

2. THEORY

After two decades of large-scale international intervention in DRC, there is an ongoing debate about the exact nature and motivations of the Congolese state, with a strong body of critique suggesting that misconceptions about the nature of Congolese statehood have and continue to underpin faltering international aid efforts in DRC. All aid operations must respect the sovereignty of the Congolese state, and in the case of the UN’s peacekeeping mission there, called MONUSCO, peacekeepers liaise closely with government forces, frequently conducting joint operations. Despite the centrality of relations with the “host government”, it has been repeatedly asserted that donors, aid providers and other international actors have fundamentally failed to grasp the nature of their partner. From Barrera’s strong criticism of security co-operation between UN peacekeepers and the Congolese authorities (Barrera, 2015) to Aembe et al’s slightly dizzying characterization of the Congolese state, in quick succession, as “notoriously fragile”, “the embodiment of predatory statehood,” as well as displaying “limited statehood... too weak to exercise domestic sovereignty” while still carrying out state functions including “policy-making, tax-collection, and customs” (Aembe et al. 2019, 190-191), there seems little clarity or consensus about what the Congolese state does and why it does it. Indeed Aembe et al. note that:

“In this context, the DRC government, donors, and humanitarian INGOs have not harmonized their perceptions of fragility or reached a common understanding on intervention policy and models of engagement in order to address this fragility. This has led to dissent about policies, interventions and coalition-building. In terms of framing collective action, without a shared vision
on diagnosing problems, developing solutions and explaining a rationale for specific actions, the prospects for success are limited” (Ibid, 191)

Whilst Aembe et al are undoubtedly right about the unlikelihood of achieving positive results without coherent policies and planning, they also highlight the challenges of labelling, in which their own multi-faceted take on the nature and motivations of the Congolese state is boiled down by policy-makers to the concepts of “failure” and “fragility”, for which there are no clear definitions.

2.1 KEY CONCEPTS

THE ABSENCE OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

While the absence of effective governance is often a key characteristic of a humanitarian crisis, the definition of the absence of governance differs across disciplines, with public international law, political science and sociology using different criteria to describe the phenomenon (Akpinarli, 2009, 9). One inter-disciplinary political-sociological analysis identifies five characteristics to describe the absence of state order: armed internal conflicts, substantial abuse of human rights and humanitarian crises, an endogenous character and social fragmentation, while a public international definition identifies lapse of effective government, the increased use of privatized force and an endogenous character (Ibid). Whilst all of these characteristics seem applicable to the Congolese context and would likely have implications for the operating (and security) conditions of aid workers, more recent work has also focused on the phenomenon of hybrid governance, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa, also identified as “governance without government”. As Meagher notes, the retreat of the formal state has not, as some have suggested, created a vacuum or a slide into chaos, rather the parallel emergence of alternative non-state power structures, including businessmen, militias, and of course NGOs (Meagher, 2012). If that is the case, then in situations of apparent lack of governance, various actors, including aid providers, are essentially picking up the reins of governance, with varying degrees of legitimacy in the eyes of local populations and other political actors. This places aid workers in an inherently politicized position, at odds with their stated apolitical agenda, and quite
possibly beyond the understanding of managers charged with securing operations. Indeed some, including van Woudenberg, have compellingly argued that in complex environments like DRC, it is unrealistic to see humanitarians as existing outside the “political box”, and that whilst they can set conditionality on their political interactions, they cannot simply remove themselves from them (Pottier, 2006, 152). In such an environment, where state actors may rely heavily on proxies to wield power (Meagher, 2012), there is also the need to reposition the state, not as a monolithic top-down entity, but within the wider governance network of non-state actors (including non-state armed groups), which equally provides useful cover for states wishing to carry out crimes undetected, by the use of such proxies (Jamieson & McEvoy, 2005, 505) - including attacks against aid workers.

**STATE “FAILURE” AND “FRAGILITY”**

State failure is a categorization without clear demarcation, but one in which commentators depict such places as the “dark mirror image” to successful states, where the authorities have lost control over the means of violence, and cannot create peace or stability for citizens nor maintain control over territory (Brooks, 2005, 1160). Building on this, Barrera cites Max Weber’s definition of the state as “a human community which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” (Barrera 2014, 8) Nonetheless, such definitions only go some way to helping categorize a failed state, not least given that many states experience some of the humanitarian, governance and security crises associated with absence of effective governance, whilst avoiding the label of “failed state”. Bøås & Jennings argue that state failure, predicated as it is on the western concept that all states function similarly, is both limited, and also inherently political, in that the label tends to be given to states whose informalization and regression of state functions are seen as threatening to western interests (Bøås & Jennings, 2007). Crucially, they pose the question, “for whom is the state failing, and how? Such questioning enables the realization that the structures and power relations generally considered the consequence of state failure may in fact be deliberate” (Ibid, 476). Recent
humanitarian literature has tended to lean towards the less damning phraseology of “state fragility”, which also has the helpful inference – from a humanitarian perspective- of a state in need of assistance, or aid (MSF, 2006). Such thinking underpins the majority of humanitarian interventions, not least with the increasing focus on the humanitarian/development nexus, and the stabilization agendas. Nonetheless, the characterization of “fragility” suffers from many of the same weaknesses as that of “failed”, in that it does not address the possibility that a state might be deliberately “fragile” in certain areas, because it reinforces its strength in other areas. This dissertation argues that the terminology is of little descriptive use, or worse, misleadingly depicts the state as a largely enfeebled actor, with little agency, underplaying the influence the state can have through both conventional means (policy, exercise of sovereignty, diplomatic relations) and unconventional means (use of proxies, strategies of chaos, corruption etc.), all of which could have profound impacts on the political environment in which aid-workers operate, impacting their ability to effectively carry out their roles, and in extremis, on their security in the field, both from actors - including those of the state - pursuing political agendas, and from a populace frustrated at ongoing instability and the seeming ineffectiveness of outside intervention.

2.2 THE NATURE OF (NON)-GOVERNMENT AND THE “FAILED STATE” IN CONGO

How thus can the Congolese state, such a significant but seemingly poorly understood actor, be characterized, and its motives towards and perceptions of aid-workers elucidated? A brutal colonial period followed by decades of misrule have left Congo with a government and institutions which defy easy description, despite the fact that the country has often been held up as a textbook example of non-functioning governance, as well as state “failure” and “fragility”.

Vogel and Stearns note that “since at least 2009, donors have tried to forge stability through technical reforms of state institutions. These have included support to demobilization and various attempts to reform the army and the police. All of these
relied on the apparent, implicit assumption that Kinshasa wanted to create efficient, disciplined institutions” (Vogel&Stearns, 2018, 7). However these scholars and others have increasingly questioned such characterizations of a dysfunctional or even quasi-non-existent state, noting rather that the state is “deeply functional for a narrow elite,” (ibid, 1,) with far less interest in monopolizing violence or suppressing unrest, than in maintaining its own survival through elaborate networks of patronage (MSF, 2006, 2) in which the relationship between the military and militias resembles not antagonism but symbiosis (Vogel&Stearns, 2018, 6), while Barrera describes it succinctly as a “spoiler state” (Barrera, 2014, 9).

Furthermore, the main instrument of state authority, especially in eastern DRC, where aid efforts have been concentrated, is the FARDC, a military force identified not merely as an ineffective fighting force, but as responsible for much of the violence perpetrated in areas not under the control of militias - “the FARDC is often the single greatest threat to the Congolese” (Paddon & Lacaille, 2011, 6). FARDC soldiers are also the most regularly identified perpetrators of attacks during the research period, according to AWSD (AWSD,2019), demonstrating clearly that they do, in some cases, pose a direct threat to aid workers.

It is worth questioning whether violence perpetrated by the FARDC, both against Congolese civilians and humanitarians, can be classified in any case as “directed,” or simply the result of ill-discipline. Eriksson Baaz et al., who have conducted rare research on perceptions of violence and the role of the Congolese military, point to explanations that, whilst not specifically addressing attacks on humanitarians, are both highly instructive and also once more defy easy categorization, in their depiction of broken command structures and deeply demoralized soldiers committing violence both to provide for themselves and express their frustrations (Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2008), as well as identifying highly politicised military elites with ethnic and familial roots in the areas in which they operate, and close ties to politicians, administrators, businesspersons and armed groups (Eriksson Baaz & Verweijen, 2014). The levels of control politicians exert over the armed forces has been brought into sharp perspective in the wake of the 2017 killings of two United Nations Group of Experts
members, which Kinshasa initially blamed on militants. Last year a Congolese colonel was arrested in connection with the killings (Reuters, 2018), while an in-depth investigation has pointed to possible state involvement (Lynch, 2018), raising the possibility that the killings were targeted political assassinations by state actors.

Closely linked to this is the “slippery concept” of state crime by proxy - as part of wider strategies of state denial – allowing states to pursue their political objectives, target their opponents and protect their interests, whilst maintaining distance between themselves and actors conducting illegal activities (Jamieson & McEvoy, 2005, 504-505). It is no secret that politicians in Kinshasa have maintained strong links with armed groups – indeed many of them are ex-rebels themselves, undoubtedly providing opportunities to pursue political – even governmental - objectives through the instrumentalization of non-state armed actors, a factor that has repeatedly been put forward to explain persistent violence, most recently the upsurge in conflict in the north-eastern province of Ituri ahead of 2018’s elections, where local leaders blamed Kinshasa politicians for stirring up ethnic tensions for their own ends (Congo Research Group, 2018). As such, it is far from improbable that non-state actors could be utilized by state actors to target aid workers, if they were perceived to threaten state interests.

Intriguingly, such is the reputation of ill-discipline within the Congolese armed forces themselves, they seem to inhabit a liminal zone where they are both the main instrument of state authority, but also on occasion criminal elements whose actions are entirely deniable by the state, a potentially useful ambiguity if political actors wished to utilize it to covertly pursue their political ends.

If we thus accept that the Congolese state has been widely misconceived as failing, when in reality it is the most important belligerent in the country (Vogel&Stearns, 2018, 6), fiercely protects its own interests, has overall responsibility – via its armed forces - for security in large swathes of territory where aid operations take place, has a long history of using violence (including extrajudicial) to target perceived threats and opponents, and shares poorly understood but in some cases close links to armed groups, this could indeed have implications for the security of aid-workers. This seems
particularly relevant to certain times during the period of study, specifically in the run-up to the 2018 elections, where the Congolese state went to great lengths to distance itself from and decry humanitarian relief efforts, suggesting, as previously noted, that humanitarian actors were part of a campaign to discredit the country, whilst also rejecting all outside interference in the electoral process, which was subsequently strongly criticized by, amongst others, the international community and the Catholic Church, who hinted at massive fraud. If, during this electoral period, the GoDRC wished to ratchet up humanitarian access denial, Labonte and Edgerton’s typology points towards security factors, including direct and indirect violence towards humanitarian workers as a way of achieving this, including through the use of proxies (Labonte & Edgerton, 2013, 51-53). As such it could be assumed that during this period, attacks on humanitarians might increase, partially as a result of the GoDRC’s temporary perception of humanitarian operations as a threat to their political objectives, namely the conducting of elections (both in 2011 but more pertinently in 2018) which resulted in ensuring the continuity of state functionality in favour of the elite. In short, the state, often depicted as a partner to aid operators or invalid in need of assistance, has potentially solid motivations and means for posing both a direct and indirect security threat to aid workers.

2.3 INTERPRETIVISM

The failure to grasp the perspective of the host state, its perceptions of the political environment it is operating in - and helping to create - and thus what it is trying to achieve, is a problem that is already recognized by scholars looking at why host governments sometimes work with and sometimes against aid providers. As previously noted, Labonte & Edgerton’s typology for humanitarian access denial uses a broad interpretivist lens to attempt to explore the relation between host states and humanitarian actors, and the way the former perceives the latter within the political environment in which they exist (Labonte & Edgerton, 2013). Further, they note that “despite its prevalence, and knowledge about how it occurs, our understanding of why states constrain humanitarian space and deny humanitarian access to populations in need of life-saving assistance and protection is far less developed” (ibid, pp39-40).
Such a failure of understanding seems equally relevant here, in the narrow focus on attacks against humanitarian workers - at least in those examples where state actors or proxies are implicated - given Vogel & Stearns position, that rationalist assumptions are routinely upended by the failure of donors, policy-makers and aid operatives to grasp exactly what Congolese state actors wish to achieve (Vogel & Stearns, 2018). Improving that understanding is where an interpretivist approach could prove useful:

Interpretivism, as a response to positivism, allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Than & Than, 2015), but until recently such approaches have largely existed outside the realm of political studies. This is beginning to change, as different schools of thought challenge the unquestioning acceptance of the form of the modern state and its institutions which in turn direct the shape of social science inquiry, based on unsupported presuppositions (Turnbull, 2011). While Turnbull was writing in this case about the British Government, it seems reasonable to suggest that the same interrogatory approach about assumptions of what a state is and does would apply equally relevantly to Congo, with its uniquely troubled history set against its staggering potential wealth creating a model of statehood which is particularly resistant to easy categorization. Turnbull explores the work of Bourdieu, whose work on “practical reason” posits that, over time, individuals operating in a particular context get a “feel for the game” which enables them to act without being conscious of their actions (Ibid, 258). The challenge in Congo appears to be that external actors have consistently failed to fathom what Congolese state actors are attempting to gain from the game, or arguably what game they are even playing, making it especially hard to understand and predict their actions. Interpretivism is of course an academic theory, and whilst it may prove a useful tool in trying to analyze the motives of the state for the purposes of this article, it is probably not realistic to expect that an interpretivist approach could be applied by aid organizations at field level as they attempt to manage risk. Nonetheless, the broad principle of better understanding how you are perceived as an actor in a political environment by other actors who pose a potential threat, is surely something the aid community can improve upon. Recent violence against responders to the Ebola crisis in North Kivu precisely highlight the danger of failing to comprehend and manage how
local communities and political/armed actors perceive interventions, with potentially catastrophic implications.

The next section will explore recent research on violence against aid workers, as well as contextualizing the political environment in which aid workers operate in DR Congo. From this, I will establish a series of hypotheses, based on previous research, to test against attack data in DRC, 2006-2018.
3. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

3.1 ATTACKS AGAINST HUMANITARIANS – RECENT RESEARCH AND TRENDS

Significant data has been collected on attacks on aid-workers, painting an alarming picture of apparently spiraling risks, but it is less clear how effectively this data has been used to understand the phenomenon. By 2008, fatality rates for international aid workers were higher than for UN peacekeepers, while rates of attacks against all NGO workers (NGOs, UN agencies and ICRC) had increased from 4 per 10,000 in 1997 to 9 per 10,000 in 2008 (Childs, 2013, 64). In 2010 Fast argued that an epistemic gap existed between the collection of data on attacks against humanitarians and proposed explanations and causes, which were often unsupported by empirical evidence (Fast, 2010, 365), causing profound challenges for organizations attempting to understand and mitigate the phenomenon. Gode notes that the inability to probe motives, specifically by speaking to individual perpetrators of attacks against aid-workers has led to the emergence of various and sometimes contradictory theories on why aid-workers are attacked, ranging from the blurring of the definition of “humanitarian”, the erosion of the perception of humanitarian “neutrality” and the changing nature of modern conflict (Gode, 2014, 1).

Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard’s work has attempted to remedy this lack of clarity with a broad quantitative analysis of risk factors for humanitarians, with some useful findings: the nature and severity of the conflict where humanitarians are operating significantly impacts their security – the higher the number of battle deaths, the greater the risk of humanitarian fatalities, although other factors, although the nature of the conflict appeared to have far less bearing (Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, 2017, 551). Meanwhile they also found evidence suggesting that the presence of peacekeeping operations increased attacks on humanitarians, with the risks increasing further as the budget for the peacekeeping operation increased, although they also noted that the type of mandate was significant: traditional peacekeeping operations were associated with higher levels of attacks, but this was not the case when PKOs had transformational mandates (Ibid, 551-555), something that is relevant for DRC, as the
UN’s peacekeeping force there, MONUSCO, adopted a substantially tougher mandate in 2013, with the creation of the UN’s first ever offensive combat force, tasked with “neutralizing and disarming” armed groups (UNSC, 2013). As such, it could be assumed that this mandate change towards something more transformational would have had the effect of reducing the level of security incidents against humanitarian workers. This will provide the basis for my first hypothesis:

**H. The change of MONUSCO’s mandate from traditional to transformational would lead to a reduction in attacks on humanitarian workers**

The fact that Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard’s work does not discern an increased risk for aid-workers where civilians are targeted is interesting for a situation like DRC, which is essentially a series of low-intensity conflicts where civilians have massively borne the brunt. The implication is that either combatants deliberately avoid the perceived or actual risks of targeting aid-workers, or that they are harder to target than civilians, due to the additional security protocols they benefit from (Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, 2017, 558). What is unclear is to what extent this protection would extend to national staff working for international aid organizations. There are strong indications globally that the risks for local staff are rising, likely a reflection of the fact that international organizations are increasingly using local operators to carry out work in the most dangerous areas (Haver, 2007, Llorente, 2014). Indeed, the proportion of national to international victims rose from 2016 to 2017 to 91 percent in the latest figures collated in the Aid Worker Security Report 2018, which noted that the figures reflected the “near universal reliance on national staff and organisations to take on the riskiest operational roles in the most insecure areas” (Aid Worker Security Report 2018). One aid-worker interviewed for this dissertation and with extensive experience in DRC appeared to support this analysis, noting that “Certainly local staff are more exposed to security risks because they are more in the field on average.”

While this paper will only look at attacks against workers for international organisations, UN agencies and the ICRC, it should still be expected that the proportion of national staff victims should both be high and to have increased, in line with global trends.
H. The proportion of attacks against national rather than international staff would be expected to rise during the analyzed period

Traditionally there has been heavy reliance on the principles of neutrality and impartiality which are seen to underpin modern humanitarianism, and are seen as crucial to distinguishing humanitarian action from “the actions and objectives of political, military and other actors” which help build the acceptance that ensures “safe and sustained access to affected people” (OCHA, 2006).

Elsewhere Childs questioned humanitarian aid agencies’ traditional reliance on acceptance-based security strategies – essentially the protective effect of being seen to be doing good work as a way of mitigating against being targeted - suggesting that it is becoming an increasingly ineffective strategy (Childs, 2013, 64-66). Some of the weaknesses of the strategy that Childs identifies are the lack of control aid agencies have over how their work was perceived by communities and potential attackers, and the distance between those two actors, all of which could significantly impact the efficacy of the strategy (Ibid, 65). This has potentially profound implications for aid operations in DR Congo, many of which have been underway for years, and where questions over what benefits aid has brought loom large.

It is certainly true that the efficacy and motivations of aid operations in DRC have been called into question not just internationally by donors, but also within the country itself. Nonetheless, at least one recent report noted that aid agencies still enjoyed positive relations with local (as opposed to national) actors, who recognized the work they did as making up for the shortfall in state provision (da Silva, 2018). It is however true that the failure of aid organizations to provide the “magic formula” to help bring an end to Congo’s humanitarian crisis has bred a degree of cynicism in many quarters – often visible in caustic political cartoons in national newspapers, depicting western aid as variously ineffectual and corrupt. On the ground the impact of this skepticism has been equally real, and much more dangerous, with the recent spate of attacks against aid-workers tackling the Ebola outbreak in North Kivu and Ituri linked to profound local hostility and lack of engagement (Belluz, 2019). Nonetheless, one aid worker interviewed for this dissertation who has worked in or on DRC since 2010 said hostility
was more place dependent than time dependent, with certain areas of the country prone to high levels of hostility against aid-workers (including North Kivu, where the most recent attacks have been reported).

“In areas like North Kivu, with so many humanitarian operations ongoing, there is a remarkable hostility towards aid workers by local communities, in my opinion due to the lack of understanding of what we do by community members... the discrepancy between the high cost of our vehicles and equipment and what is distributed to communities, and the presence of vast pockets of unemployed youth and armed groups that are looking for an “enemy”. This level of hostility did not significantly change in the 9+ years I have been involved with DRC,” the aid worker stated.

Equally, another interviewee who held various senior positions within MONUSCO from 2010-2014 noted that sentiment towards UN peacekeepers in eastern DRC deteriorated sharply during the period he was there, particularly due to the perception that the UN aligned itself with the by then increasingly unpopular Government of Joseph Kabila by supporting allegedly fraudulent elections in 2011, and then failed to stop the advance of the M23 rebels on the city of Goma in 2013. “We were loathed after those two happenings. None of the roads we rebuilt could make up for that,” the staffer noted.

Clearly, local sentiment can have a direct impact on the operating environment for aid organizations, and very likely the security risks as well. Based on Childs’ research and these two observations by practitioners in the field, we can assume that levels of community frustration can drive attacks against aid-workers. As such it seems likely that while attacks on humanitarians would remain relatively constant throughout the period of study – or at least unaffected by community-level hostility, attacks on peacekeepers and UN staff would increase after 2011 and 2013, as their reputation in particular plummeted in the eyes of the local population.

*H. Attacks on humanitarians would remain constant through the analyzed period, but attacks against UN staff and peacekeepers would be expected to rise post-2011 and post-2013.*
3.2 CONTEXT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONGO CONFLICT

The current Congolese state has evolved through the experience of Congolese citizens of more than a century of extreme turmoil. The following is a necessarily superficial overview of some of the key moments of that history: Annexed and brutally colonized by the Belgian King Leopold in the late 19th century, Congo became independent in 1960, and following a period of political upheaval, the country – which in 1971 changed its name to Zaire – endured nearly three decades of kleptocratic rule under the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Conditions in the country steadily declined, with rampant corruption, spiraling inflation and growing tensions between ethnic groups, particularly in the eastern Kivu provinces, as Mobutu attempted to cling onto power by playing groups off against each other. It was however an external cataclysm which set a match to the political tinder box that the country had become, when in 1994 the aftermath of the genocide in neighboring Rwanda saw more than a million Hutu refugees flee across the border into Zaire to escape the advancing forces of the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front, following an unsuccessful attempt by the extremist Hutu Rwandan Government to wipe out the Tutsi population, which nevertheless left an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus dead. Mobutu’s apparent backing for genocidal Hutu forces became the deciding factor in the decision of the governments of Rwanda and Uganda to heavily back the AFDL, a Congolese rebel group led by the long-time insurgent Laurent Desire Kabila, to topple Mobutu.

Although Mobutu’s dictatorship collapsed swiftly, the country descended into successive periods of conflict and political instability from which it is yet to fully emerge. The internationalization of the conflict saw neighboring countries drawn into what Prunier described as “Africa’s World War” (Prunier, 2011), in which more than 3.3 million excess deaths linked to the conflict were estimated between 1998-2002 (IRC, 2003) and political objectives increasingly became subsumed by economic interests, through the exploitation of the country’s staggeringly rich natural resources. The establishment of a transitional government in 2003 following successful peace negotiations in Sun City in South Africa saw an amelioration of the security situation in some areas, reducing insecurity and allowing some of an estimated 2 million internally
displaced persons (IDPs) to return home. Since then localized violence, much in the eastern Kivu provinces which have been the stage for numerous rebellions, often with the backing of neighboring countries including Rwanda and Uganda, has seen regular new displacements of populations, provoking fresh humanitarian crises, and by the end of 2017, when national politics had been poisoned by President Joseph Kabila’s refusal to step down and the non-organization of timely presidential and parliamentary elections had emboldened armed groups and provoked uprisings in previously peaceful parts of the vast country, an estimated 4.5 million people were registered as displaced from their homes (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019). In recent years, there has been a decrease in the interference of neighboring countries (Rwanda and Uganda) in DRC, leading to a provincialization of the conflict (Vogel & Stearns 2018, 8) but also a networked fragmentation of armed groups, which has led to a dizzying proliferation, with at least 120 armed groups operating in the two Kivu provinces alone (Ibid, 9).

Throughout this volatile and complex period since the Rwandan Crisis, DRC has been the scene of major aid operations, and has been heavily reliant on international aid, with agencies often the only providers of essential services in some areas - and operations there have consistently received significant funding for the last two decades. Humanitarian funding in DRC has topped half a billion US dollars every year since 2009, and climbed to nearly US$1 billion in 2018 amidst the sharply deteriorating security situation (Financial Tracking Service, 2019).

The sheer complexity of the political environment in which aid-workers in DRC operate, with a huge number of governmental and non-governmental actors, all with their own, often poorly understood, motivations, creates enormous challenges for any unified interpretivist reading of the situation, and what that could say about the motivations for attacks against humanitarians, not least when many of the perpetrators of attacks remain unknown (AWSD, 2019). Nonetheless certain trends ought still to be identifiable within this morass of Congolese politics, not least that the intensity of the conflict(s) within which aid workers are operating has an impact on their security. It is worth noting that DRC is a vast country and aid operations widely
dispersed. Nonetheless, the majority of aid has focused on the eastern Kivu provinces since 2006, which have unsurprisingly also experienced the highest levels of insecurity – although the emergence of the Kasai conflict in 2016 saw the rapid scaling up of aid operations there too, to respond to the emerging humanitarian crisis in another unpredictable and violent context (BBC, 2018). Given the correlation between aid and conflict in DRC, and following Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard’s findings, there should be a correlation between conflict intensity and security risks to aid workers, particularly during the surge in insecurity in 2008-2009 as part of the CNDP (National Congress for the Defence of the People) rebellion in the east of the country, and the generalized insecurity which swept the country as part of the wider political crisis linked to delays to the most recent presidential elections, finally held in 2018 (See Appendix 1 for a more detailed timeline of key events during the research period).

_H. The higher the level of conflict intensity, the higher the levels of attacks against aid-workers._

The second constant throughout the period being analyzed, is the significance of the Congolese state as a key actor. Labonte & Edgerton’s intriguing embryonic work explores the motives of host governments for supporting or hindering humanitarian access - including through the use of violence against aid workers - using an interpretivist lens to highlight that states respond not just to their environment, but their perception of it, and this of course can include humanitarian actors, who can be variously viewed as useful service providers, neutral external actors or potential threats (Labonte & Edgerton). The latter increasingly appears to have become the case in the eyes of the Congolese state in the run-up to the much-delayed 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, with relations between the government and NGOs and donors reportedly said by one UN official to have hit a “low point” (da Silva, 2018), with “a negative portrayal of the country’s humanitarian situation a gift to the opposition” (Ibid). In light of this, it will be necessary in the next section to explore the nature of the Congolese state as a political actor, and whether this apparent growing hostility could have a direct impact on aid-worker security, especially given the vital role played by government forces in maintaining security in large swaths of territory
where aid operations are undertaken. In the meantime, the final hypothesis posits that the GoDRC could potentially use violent attacks, either through the military or proxies, to deter humanitarian operations, if this suited its wider political agenda.

H. Worsening relations between GoDRC and humanitarian actors would lead to increased attacks on humanitarian workers, as part of a strategy of humanitarian access denial

The next section of the dissertation will now begin the analysis, outlining key political developments during the research period, followed by quantitative data analysis mapping attacks on aid workers (and UN peacekeepers and civilians), to try to identify potential trends in line with the aforementioned hypotheses.
4. ANALYSIS

4.1 CONGO TIMELINE 2006-2018

This very broad overview of political events since the beginning of the research period was, in connection with conflict death data from UCDP, used as the basis for analyzing potential links between political upheaval, upticks in military action and conflict intensity, and attacks against humanitarian workers:

2006 – First democratic post-war elections, in which Joseph Kabila is elected as president. Despite being marred by clashes between forces loyal to Kabila and his main rival, Jean-Pierre Bemba, the polls are widely seen as a fresh start for the country, ushering in a period of relative stability

2007 – Tensions between the Government and Rwandan-backed rebel group, the CNDP, led by Laurent Nkunda, after failed efforts to integrate the CNDP into the FARDC, thus weakening it

2008 – Surge in fighting in late 2008 as CNDP made major advances towards the city of Goma

2009 - Laurent Nkunda captured by Rwandan forces in January, bringing an end to the CNDP rebellion. The group signs a peace deal with the government in March 2009

2011 – Contested elections held in December 2011, in which Joseph Kabila is re-elected despite widespread allegations of fraud by opposition and independent observers. Anger also directed against the international community, including MONUSCO, for their perceived support for the flawed election process.

2012 – Former CNDP soldiers that had been integrated into the army mutiny, sparking a fresh rebellion by a newly branded group named M23, led by alleged war criminal Bosco Ntaganda. In November 2012, M23 rebels pushed back
government forces and seized the city of Goma, whilst UN peacekeepers look on. The inaction of the international community in the face of M23 sparks renewed anger amongst the population.

2013 – MONUSCO’s mandate changed to enable the creation of a “Force Intervention Brigade” with a more aggressive mandate to neutralize and disarm rebel groups in eastern DR Congo. Joint offensives by the UN and FARDC force M23 back, prompting the group to lay down its arms in November.

2015 - Joint UN and FARDC offensive against various armed groups, including the FDLR and Raia Mutomboki, causing major civilian displacement in the Kivu region.

2016 - Uptick in attacks by the ADF rebel group in the Beni region of North Kivu. Meanwhile in the previously peaceful central region of Kasai, the largely Luba Kamwina Nsapu rebellion against the government breaks out.

2016 – Joseph Kabila’s presidential mandate expires in December 2016, but no elections are held, prompting opposition anger. A promise to hold them in 2017 is not kept, helping ratchet up tensions across the country.

2017 – Massive scale up of relief efforts in Kasai by international aid organisations responding to the humanitarian crisis there. Two UN Group of Experts investigators are killed and buried by unidentified gunmen. At least one high-ranking Congolese army officer has been investigated in connection with the killings, which the GoDRC initially tried to blame on rebels.

2017 – 15 UN peacekeepers killed in December following an attack by ADF rebels in the Semuliki region of North Kivu, the deadliest attack on peacekeepers since 1993.

2018 – Resurgence in violence in Ituri province, scene of some of the worst atrocities during the Congolese conflicts of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Whilst apparently ethnic in nature, some local leaders blamed Kinshasa for stirring up tensions ahead of delayed elections.
2018 – Presidential elections held in December, in which Joseph Kabila’s nominated successor fails to win, but opposition candidate Felix Tshisekedi is triumphant. Nonetheless there are widespread allegations of massive fraud, with major players including the Catholic Church suggesting that another opposition candidate, Martin Fayulu, had in fact triumphed. Speculation that Tshisekedi did a deal with Kabila’s political movement, which continues to dominate after winning most seats in the parliamentary polls.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS

During the analyzed period there appears to be a weak trend towards increased numbers of security incidents targeting aid-workers operating in DR Congo (Fig. 1), although 2017 saw very few reported attacks against humanitarians, which is perhaps surprising, given the growing political unrest in the country during that period, and the fact that aid organizations were rapidly scaling up their response in an entirely new conflict zone in Kasai, to tackle the emerging humanitarian crisis there. It is worth noting that while aid-workers reported very few attacks, 2017 was a particularly bloody year for the UN in DRC, with a total of 24 staff (18 peacekeepers and 6 civilian) killed in attacks, the worst year on record.

![Number of Attacks Against Aid-Workers, UN Agencies & ICRC](source: AWSD)

Figure 1: Source AWSD
There also appears to be a weak trend indicating an increased number of victims involved in attacks during the analyzed period (Fig.2), although numbers of fatalities do not appear to rise correspondingly according to AWSD data.

![Overall Aid-Worker Victims](chart1.png)

*Figure 2 Source: AWSD*

Instead, kidnappings have increased as a method of attack against humanitarian workers, although the reasons for this trend are not entirely clear, and according to the limited information provided on individual incidents, most of these kidnap situations were resolved relatively swiftly, through negotiation or the involvement of MONUSCO peacekeepers (AWSD, 2019).

![Kidnappings](chart2.png)

*Figure 3 Source: AWSD*
The increase in incidence of attacks against aid workers and the numbers of victims is interesting, as this trend does not appear to be reflected in the experiences of the aid workers themselves who responded to the questionnaire for this dissertation. There are several possible explanations for this. One is that the interviewees were in-country during a period of time when attack rates were relatively stable, or that the relatively weak upward trend was not particularly discernible to individual staff. Also, all four interviewees were international staff, who experienced far lower incidences of attack.

The analysis does suggest a possible weak trend indicating a growing proportion of national vs. international victims in security incidents (Fig.4), in line with the hypothesis that *the proportion of attacks against national rather than international staff would be expected to rise during the analyzed period*, but more noteworthy is the fact that, as expected, the overwhelming majority of victims of security incidents are national workers throughout the period of analysis.

Indeed, if 2017 is discounted (6 national victims vs. 1 international) there is not a single year from 2012 onwards in which national staff make up less than 90% of the victims, putting rates in line with global trends. The trend suggesting a growing number of national victims is more clearly identified when mapped against international victims (Fig.5), where the number of international victims has remained relatively constant (and low) for the period under analysis, whilst 2012-2018 there has been a marked upward trend in the number of national victims, again with the exception of 2017.
The data does not identify a reduction in the number of attacks on aid workers nor victims following the transformation of MONUSCO’s mandate in 2013, giving it more aggressive rules of engagement to tackle armed groups, as could have been expected from the hypothesis positing that *The change of MONUSCO’s mandate from traditional to transformational would lead to a reduction in attacks on humanitarian workers, post-2013*. In fact as previously noted, there was a possible trend towards increasing attacks against aid workers, although as also previously noted, this trend is not strong, and nor can it be linked easily via the data to the mandate change.

Perhaps less surprisingly there has been an uneven but very noticeable increase in the number of peacekeepers killed, as proposed by the hypothesis that *Attacks on humanitarians would remain constant through the analysed period, but attacks*
against UN staff and peacekeepers would be expected to rise post-2011 and post-2013. If 2013 is taken as the pivot year (in which 4 peacekeepers died), in the 5 preceding years, just 2 peacekeepers were killed, whilst in the 5 years following 2013, 29 peacekeepers lost their lives, a very stark increase, although 18 peacekeepers died in a single attack in 2017, somewhat skewing the figures.

Mapping rates of attacks against conflict deaths recorded in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program shows relatively strong correlation between numbers of conflict deaths and rates of attack, with particular spikes occurring during 2008-2009, when tensions between the CNDP and the GoDRC escalated into outright rebellion, with heavy fighting reaching the gates of Goma. There is equally a dip in both conflict deaths and attacks on aid workers in 2010-2011. These findings would go some way to support the hypothesis that The higher the level of conflict intensity, the higher the levels of attacks against aid-workers, however there is some divergence, suggesting that the widely held belief that aid-workers largely get into trouble purely from being in the wrong place at the wrong time is only partially supported.

Figure 7 Source: UCDP
The data on whether *Worsening relations between GoDRC and humanitarian actors in 2017/18 would lead to increased attacks on humanitarian workers* is inconclusive, given the very low levels of attacks on humanitarians in 2017, followed by a sharp rise in 2018, which made it the outright worst year in the period of analysis for numbers of victims, and equal worst in terms of numbers of attacks. As this was the year in which the GoDRC were organizing extremely sensitive elections, where arguably the presence of humanitarians was unhelpful, and came during a period where anti-aid rhetoric by senior government officials reached a peak, it is tempting to draw correlations, although difficult, given the limited scope of the dataset.

Interestingly, there is a sharp drop in attacks against aid-workers in both 2007 and 2012, after the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections (in December of the preceding year). Neither year represented a period of particular stability for the country, with 2012 in particular seeing the emergence of the M23 rebellion.
4. DISCUSSION

This dissertation has attempted to illustrate that the political conditions in DRC, coupled with the role played by aid-workers, would almost certainly mean aid worker security was impacted by external political events, both because of changing risk profiles in the environment in which aid-workers operate, van Woudenberg’s “political box”, but also because they are at times clearly perceived by key actors including the state to be political players, and thus subject to the some of the same violent political forces that affect other actors in the Congolese context.

Based on the analysis in the previous section, it is worth exploring to what extent the data supports direct links between specific types of political events and changes in levels of attacks against humanitarian workers. Clearly this study cannot create a conclusive link between specific political developments in DR Congo and attacks against aid-workers, and indeed drawing such links in such a complex and fractured political environment, in which every attack has taken place due to a unique set of conditions, would be improbable to achieve. Nonetheless, aid agencies’ decision to “lock down” or evacuate staff during periods of heightened political and or military tensions show a clear recognition of a possible link between political environment and security, and there are indications from the data in this study that the political environment does indeed impact the risk profile faced by humanitarians. One obvious question, is to ask to what extent attacks are intrinsically linked to the number of aid workers in the country at any given time, essentially, do more aid-workers mean more attacks? Using funding levels to test this assertion, assuming that higher levels of funding would lead to higher numbers of aid workers, only very weak correlation was found between numbers of attacks and funding levels, indicating that attack rates are more than simply a numbers game.

CONFLICT SURGES

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is moderately strong correlation between surges in conflict deaths as mapped by the UCDP and reported attacks on aid-workers. In their broader, global study, Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard found a similarly strong trend,
noting that the results were unsurprising and “For aid organizations the lesson here is clear, the more violent the situation they deploy to, the greater the risk they face,” (Hoelscher, Mikllian & Nygard, 2017, 551). It is harder to elucidate exactly why those risks might be higher. Clearly one possibility is that aid-workers are more likely to be caught in the crossfire, as they attempt to go about their work, and it is also likely that there will be more lifesaving work to be done in dangerous, volatile and confused areas, where decision-making and security management becomes particularly challenging. It is also quite likely that the further breakdown of societal norms, including law enforcement and governmental control, might mean that would-be perpetrators who saw aid workers as “off-limits” during periods of relative normalcy were emboldened by the context to target them.

ELECTION CYCLES

While there was only a very substantial uptick in attacks in the 2018 election year, this does correlate with the growing hostility of governmental rhetoric against aid operators in the run-up to the poll. While it is difficult to prove any direct link between such rhetoric and attacks aid-workers, there are potential explanations for the phenomenon: it is possible that verbal attacks were only part of a wider strategy of intimidation by government actors or their proxies, up to and including physical violence. This however is impossible to verify without hard proof for specific attacks. Equally the verbal assaults could have stirred up anger within the general population against aid workers, and eroded the acceptance-based security strategies which aid organisations have strongly relied on, and which Childs has critiqued for their weakening efficacy (Childs, 2013). It is also worth noting that the 2018 polls should have been held in 2016, thus meaning 2016-2018 was a prolonged period of political uncertainty, dominated by the electoral process. While 2017 saw very low levels of reported attacks against humanitarians, which could be seen to undermine any linkage between the electoral period and increased violence. In this context, it is worth noting that Labonte & Edgerton’s work on humanitarian access denial suggest that governments’ use of insecurity to limit humanitarian access is not exclusively linked to direct attacks on humanitarians, but can also be reflected in general insecurity, and
that during 2017, the UN suffered its worst year on record in DRC for fatalities, including the deaths of 6 civilians. Indeed, there is credible evidence that the GoDRC, which denies any involvement, was directly responsible for the assassination of two UN Group of Experts members who were killed in Kasai in 2017. (Lynch, 2018). If this link were to be proven it would identify a modus operandi of targeted violence for political ends.

In that sense, attacks against non-local actors in general were extremely high during 2017-2018. Whether this is overall a reflection of specific targeting for political ends or the general deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in the country in this period to become a “mega-crisis” (Zarocostas, 2018) is harder to decipher.

**MONUSCO’S MANDATE CHANGE**

This research does not appear to support Hoelscher, Miklilin & Nygard’s research linking peacekeeping mandate-type to aid worker security. It does however document a sharp rise in fatalities of UN peacekeepers and civilian staff post-2013, indicating a possible link to the mandate change, as MONUSCO became more embroiled in the country’s conflicts, and/or an erosion of public patience with the UN’s role in the country, which have in turn created additional risks for peacekeepers and UN staff. As the UN staffer previously quoted noted: “The Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) was an attempt to claw back some of that credit, but never fully made up for it... When the FIB didn’t chase the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) and other groups afterwards, it confirmed many peoples’ suspicions that we were just trying to get back in Kabila’s good books.” This trend has potentially serious implications for MONUSCO and its security planning.
ATTACKS AGAINST LOCAL VS. INTERNATIONAL STAFF

Perhaps unsurprisingly, but shockingly, the proportion of national victims vis a vis international victims is extremely high, over 90% for every year barring one in the last 7 years, raising serious questions about the risks run by local staff employed by international agencies. This increased risk was recognized by the aid-worker interviewees who contributed to this dissertation, and put down to the fact that local staff were, on average, in the field more often and in more remote locations than international staff, something that fits into recognized aid agency practice worldwide. This required additional layers of decision-making on the part of the agency, according to one interviewee who held senior management roles for an INGO for several years in eastern DRC. “In terms of mitigating specific threats – we had to be a bit careful which local staff we sent to which areas, considering local ethnic tensions.” The continued high proportion of national victims, and the fact that the absolute number has been on a seeming upward trend, would raise serious questions over the effectiveness of this strategy and/or the ability of aid agencies to read the political situation in a particular area before deploying their (national) staff there.

A FAILURE OF UNDERSTANDING?

Whilst it is difficult to quantify the extent to which donors and aid providers may have failed to evolve a more nuanced understanding of the political environment in which aid operations in DRC take place, and the state as an actor therein, there are factors to explore: Broadly speaking, security and other constraints mean that aid-workers (and diplomats, international journalists etc.) live a very sheltered existence, with only very limited interaction with Congolese people, beyond aid delivery, the obligations of managing local political relations, and the tiny proportion of the local population lucky enough to find jobs working for international aid organisations. As one UN official with nearly a decade of experience in Congo put it, “situational awareness and good relationships are often overlooked in security procedures, as the tendency is often to “bunker in” people and let security professionals run the show.” Furthermore, the sector-wide challenge of rapid staff turn-over, which is often blamed for reducing the effectiveness of programming and the loss of institutional knowledge (Loquercio,
Hammersley & Emmens, 2006), likely plays a significant role in DRC, where the difficult working environment and harsh conditions mean that many remain in-country for only a few years or even months, undermining an organization's ability to maintain its contextual knowledge on the operating environment. While this research has explored possible links between national politics and the GoDRC and aid worker security, paradoxically it may very well be a failure to understand local dynamics that most impacts the risk profile for aid workers. All interviewees heavily emphasized the importance of local political figures on the security of aid operations. As the senior INGO manager noted,

“Relations with local government are very important. In terms of day-to-day safety for NGO workers, they are even more important than relations with higher level of governments. NGOs work at community level and that’s where they need to get buy-in. The definition of local government should include also community chiefs / community leaders. In an area with open conflict, relations with guerrilla leaders are also important, especially to negotiate access to all areas.”

In reality a major factor may simply be the dizzying complexity of the political environment, where informal patronage plays as important a role as formal institutions, and the sheer number of political and armed groups makes the reading of the situation highly challenging. It is no coincidence that Vogel and Stearns continue to refer to the insecurity in eastern DRC as a conundrum, after years of scholarship by them and others to attempt to understand the dynamics. What this and previous research does highlight however, is the need for deeper interrogation of the links between aid workers, their security and the political environment they operate in. While a greater understanding of the political dynamics at play, and the motivations of the key actors, including the state, will not completely eliminate risks in an inherently dangerous profession, it seems critical that aid organizations recognize that they too are political players, whether they like it or not, and in places where violence is a key tool for the achieving of political objectives, that this violence can be turned against aid-workers, above and beyond simply being caught in the crossfire or becoming the victims of criminality. To properly assess how at risk they are, aid organizations need to
look beyond the work they are doing, to more properly understand and address the perception of the work they are doing, and how that perception fits into wider political trends and objectives in that environment. This issue remains highly current, as evidenced by recent targeted attacks on aid-workers responding to the Ebola crisis in northern North Kivu.
5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation aimed to explore to what extent local political factors, including relations between the GoDRC and the international community, election cycles, flare-ups in conflicts, affect humanitarian security in DRC.

The data has shown relatively strong links between conflict intensity and aid worker attacks, supporting previous research, and reinforcing the sense that aid workers are far from immune from attack during dangerous times, and in dangerous places. The data also points to a credible link between electoral periods and increased risks, and conversely, reduced risks for aid-workers in the post-electoral context. It also raises important questions about the impact of hostile political rhetoric and worsening relations with the GoDRC on aid worker security.

The data also highlights once again the serious issue of safety for local staff, a problem recognized in the aid sector, but clearly unaddressed, given indications that the proportion of local staff attacked continues to rise globally. There are also clear indications that, while the change in MONUSCO’s mandate appeared to have little impact on attacks on aid workers, it did appear to have a relatively dramatic effect on the numbers of attacks against peacekeepers and UN civilian staff, posing security questions for other UN peacekeeping missions endowed with a more transformative and aggressive mandate. It is hoped that this research can prove a small addition to the relatively limited number of empirical studies which attempt to unpick the reasons for attacks against aid workers generally, whilst also raising areas of discussion for aid operators in DRC, given that they are likely to continue operating in-country on a significant scale for the years to come.
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APPENDIX 1: DRAFT QUESTIONNAIRE

DR Congo Humanitarian Security Questionnaire

Please answer each question in a couple of paragraphs, and any specific examples to illustrate your point are very useful. All answers will be kept strictly confidential, with no information used that could identify you or the organization you work(ed) for. Thank you so much for your help!

Briefly spell out your role in DRC, including the dates you were there.

Did you ever have direct or indirect experience of a security incident that appeared to be directed at you because of your work?

Broadly speaking, how did you perceive that humanitarian workers and the operations they ran were viewed in DR Congo? Did this change during your time there and did that impact your perceived sense of security?

To what extent did you feel that the tone of the public discourse vis a vis humanitarian operations in DRC helped or hindered your work?

To what extent were good relations with local and/or national government important to the smooth and safe running of your operations?

Were there internal factors (training, security procedures) which you felt significantly impacted the safety of you and your colleagues?
Did criticism from high-level political players ever increase your perception of risks to humanitarian workers?

Did perceived risk go up during periods of high political tensions, such as elections?

Over the period of time that you were in DRC, did you feel there was a marked change in the way humanitarian actors were viewed, and did that change have any impact on security?

Was your experience that local staff working for INGOs were more at risk from security threats, and if so, why?