

How roadblocks, not just minerals, fund rebels and conflict in the Congo

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Chased from mining sites, rebels simply try to control roads in the DRC. Peer Schouten.

For over a decade [it's been widely recognised](#) that rebel financing in the Democratic Republic of Congo is firmly linked to mining.

First discovered by the Belgians in 1904, the Congolese soil harbours a huge amount of precious minerals. Subsequent industrial exploitation of copper and gold became the backbone of first Belgian colonialism and later Mobutu Sese Seko's kleptocracy.

After Cold War support for Mobutu waned, masses of ordinary Congolese invaded crumbling industrial mining concessions in the hope of digging out a livelihood. Today, hundreds of thousands of these miners persist. Knee-deep in the mud, for often little more than a dollar a day, they are the foot soldiers of the high-tech sector. With rudimentary tools, they supply not only copper and gold but also chemical elements like coltan, tungsten and tantalum.

This unregulated exploitation has fuelled conflict in the country. Part of the mining sites are controlled by either soldiers or rebels who seek to collect "rent" before minerals find their way to Asian producers and western markets.

Underscoring this dark connection between conflict and minerals, the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for the Great Lakes region in Africa [recently reiterated that](#)

the illegal exploitation of minerals remains the core cause of conflict and instability in Congo.

Donors have [set guidelines](#), companies stepped up [due diligence](#), and a myriad of [partnerships](#) labour to remove rebels and soldiers from mining sites. And important strides have been made. Over the past two years about 400 of 2400 monitored sites [have been validated as conflict-free](#). Here, artisanal miners arguably make money without submitting to coerced labour or hefty illegal taxes.

But the rebels have found other ways of making money. Chased from mining sites, they simply try to control roads. Whoever controls the transport routes can levy taxes and control economic activities.

In [a recent study](#), we mapped [nearly 1000 roadblocks](#) in Eastern Congo. It was difficult to find a road in Eastern Congo without a roadblock. I believe it's time to acknowledge the existence of these roadblocks and the support they provide to rebels and undisciplined soldiers.

Land of a thousand roadblocks

Last year deep in Eastern Congo's [conflict-ridden](#) North Kivu Province, General Mando, the leader of the Mai Mai Simba, the [oldest](#) rebel movement in Congo, and a plethora of state representatives and military officials gathered for important negotiations. The meeting's aim was to convince the rebel leader to stop occupying a profitable gold mining site. A local researcher reported that, after listening to their arguments, Mando declared

But I have always lined your pockets with the proceeds of the mine. We have all benefited. You, Misses the Territorial Administrator, have always received your cut from me. And to thank me, you come with the army—so they will simply be the ones profiting from taxes now! Give me one good reason why I should leave?

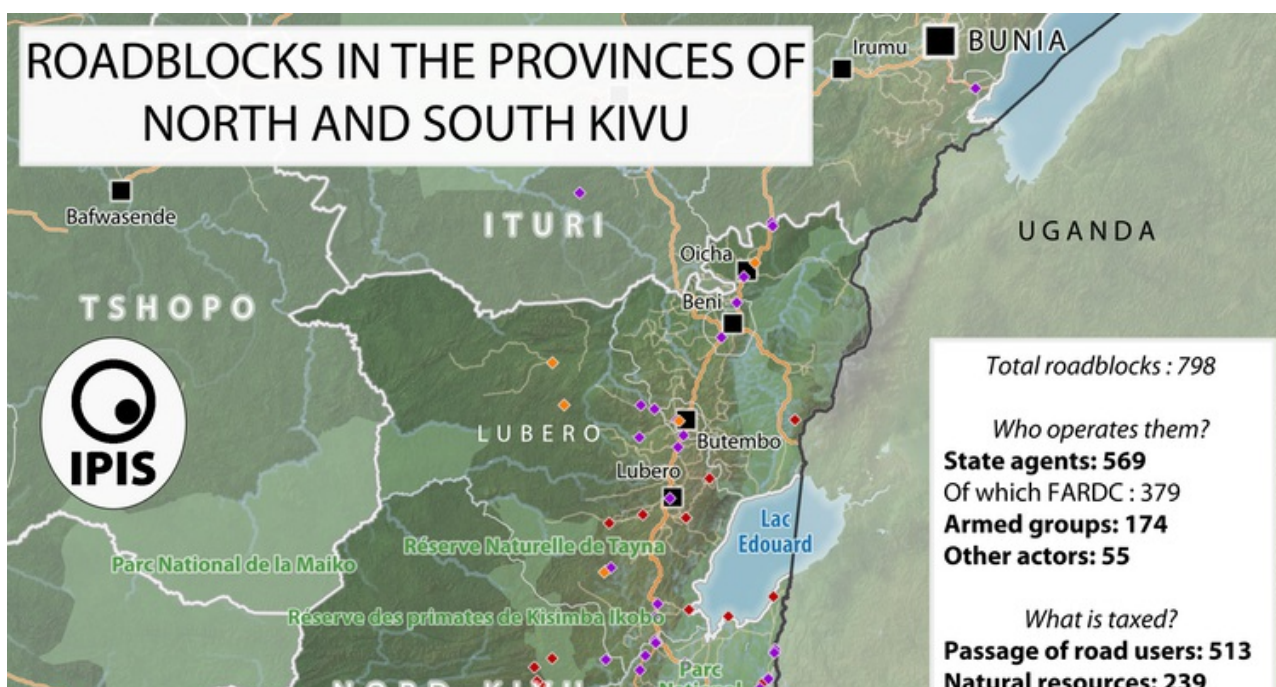
After a few hours of heated debate, a pragmatic solution was found: Mando would be allowed to simply set up roadblocks a small distance from the site, taxing entry and exit at a distance. This would be a little less profitable than directly pocketing gold production, but had the benefit of being much easier to manage and to hide.

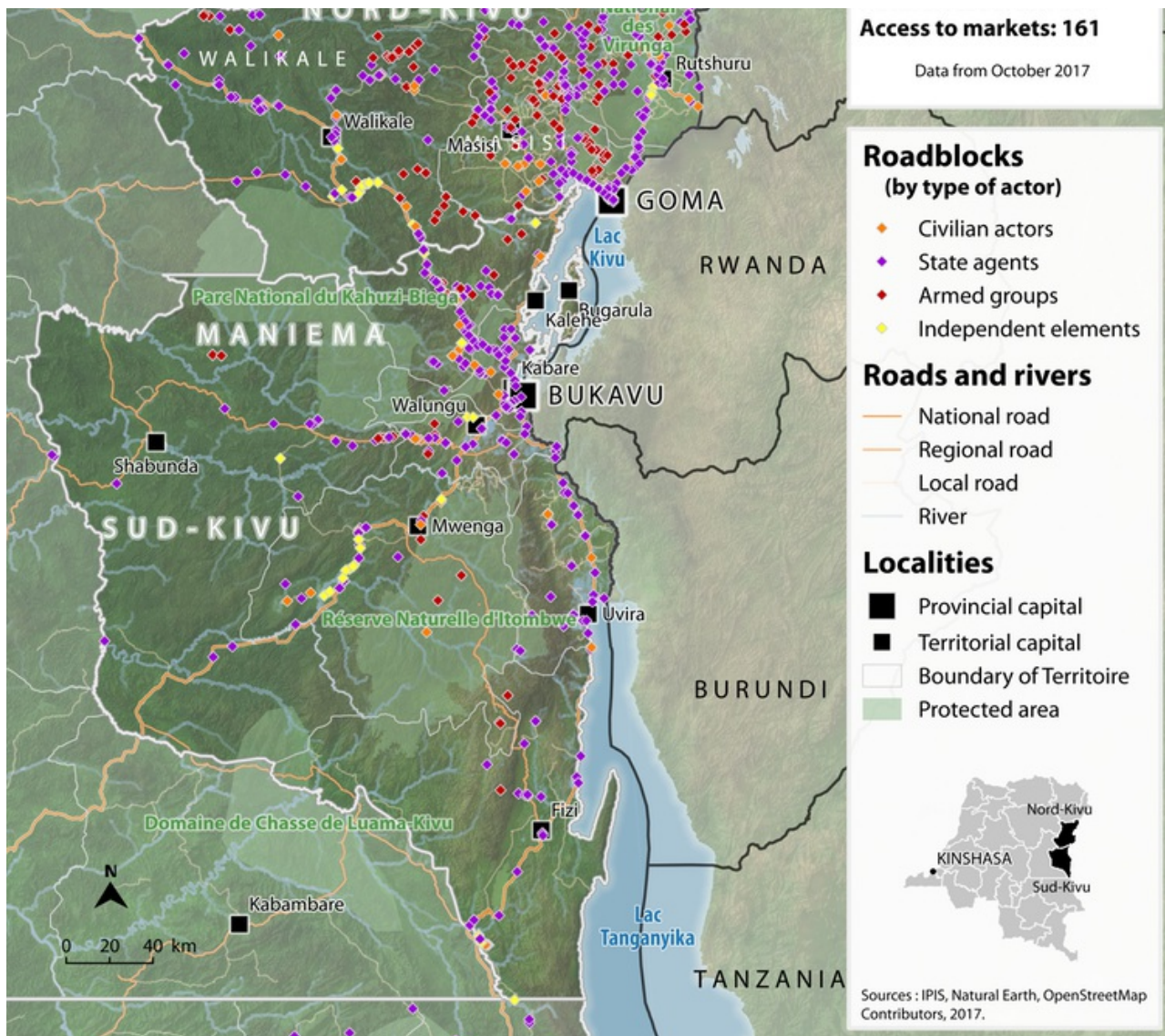
This allowed authorities to declare the site “conflict-free” to western donors, while at the same time accommodating local strongman.

Mando's story is one of many. Congo is home to [about 120 different armed groups](#), and roadblocks are key to their survival. This is particularly true for rebel leaders in areas where no minerals can be found.

Everywhere across Eastern Congo, as mining sites become cleared of armed actors, rebel leaders and military conflict entrepreneurs simply set up roadblocks to finance their activities. Congo's roads are a magnet for extortion because everyone has to take their products to markets.

It is an easy strategy compared with robbery or controlling a mining site. It's a lot easier to sit next to the road, tighten a string, and simply wait for the money.





Map showing roadblocks. IPIS

Roadblocks are also a crucial strategy for government actors. Congo is as large as western Europe but has only 2000 km of paved road. Given that the DRC state collects few taxes, remote government or military outposts are largely “self-financing” – government agents collect taxes to pay their salaries (or daily bread) locally – through roadblocks. Their commanders frequently impose a weekly quota of sums to make along the road.

As a result, everything that moves, will be taxed. Every item that goes between field and village, and then village and market, is subject to a host of little roadside impositions.

Roads to peace?

One piece of cord strung between two palm trees isn’t much more than a nuisance. But multiply it by a thousand and you get a significant source of conflict financing.

Congolese roads are a crucial space where conflict, illegal taxation, and conflict financing entangle. Ask anyone in Eastern Congo how conflict affects her life, and she probably won’t mention remote mining sites but rather start complaining about roadblocks and food prices. For ordinary Congolese, the cumulative burden of roadblock taxes form a key problem of the current conflict, leading to outrageous prices on even the most basic consumer goods in urban areas – and that for a population trying to survive on [a dollar a day](#).

Roadblocks aren't easy for the international community to fix. Whenever a well-intentioned United Nations patrol passes, roadblock rebels simply stand aside and set up shop again by stringing a cord over the road as soon as the blue helmets have passed.

But a way needs to be found. One possible solution is to turn conflict data into a tool to fight abuses. For instance, the development of an app to monitor abuses and hold authorities accountable for the panoply of illegal taxes. However seductive the "conflict mineral" story, the systemic exploitation of Congolese on the move shouldn't be ignored. Roadblocks are sapping the ability of ordinary Congolese to trade in goods – and to survive.

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