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The politics of local humanitarian recruitment in DRC

*There have been growing calls over the last decade for humanitarian agencies to 'localise'— to address unjust and unequal power relations in the contemporary system by transferring power to local personnel. In 2016, for example, the UN Secretary General argued that humanitarian action should be 'as local as possible, as international as necessary', triggering a flurry of reform initiatives—a process termed 'localisation.' This was part of a growing sense that it was time to address North/South power imbalances, and remedy paternalistic interventions that marginalise local actors. Dr Myfanwy James questions, what does local **actually mean** and what happens when the meaning of local itself is up for debate?*

Who is local?

In **my new article**, I explore this question through the politics of humanitarian recruitment in **North Kivu**, a province in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** which has been at the centre of violent conflict over the last thirty years. I show how hiring locally sparks tensions. There is no uncontested local to find, because contested ideas of localness are used in competing for access to power, resources, and land in continuing political struggles.

In Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu and a bustling regional base for international NGOs and the UN, an experienced Congolese aid worker, Joel, joked that '*ressources horribles*' (horrible resources as a spin on human resources) is one of the most difficult issues in obtaining humanitarian access to different areas. This process involves complex negotiations with a range of rebel groups, political and customary authorities and civil society groups. 'Recruitment is always tense,' Joel explained, because 'everyone has ideas of who they want us to hire. It is sensitive.' While the category of being local was used widely in his line of work, the humanitarian industry, Joel stressed that its meaning was far from clear.

In practice, who counts as local? In eastern DRC, localness is a site of political struggle. Since Belgian colonial rule, ethnicity, territory and authority have been interwoven into the Congolese political order at multiple levels, and contested notions of localness have become a potent political matter. The **ongoing construction** of ethnic identities and territories has become key to political contestation. It defines who belongs where, and who has the right to access which resources. To be 'autochthonous' is to claim original belonging to the soil – a claim that confers both rights and authority. But such claims **are always contested**. For decades, discourses of autochthony have been used to exclude people from access to resources, land, employment and citizenship at territorial, provincial and national scales. Autochthony is entangled with debates about national citizenship and has become a tool for armed mobilisation. These tensions have been aggravated by a **series of Rwandan-backed rebellions** in the region led by Congolese Tutsi. In response, dozens of 'Mai-Mai' militias have mobilised, claiming to defend those 'born from the soil' from Rwandan invaders.

In this context, humanitarian recruitment of locals has become another arena for political struggles over who has a claim to positions of authority and access to resources, based on disputed claims of localness, which continue to shape, and be shaped by, violent conflict.

The Politics of Recruitment

International humanitarian agencies arrived in the Kivu region in response to the influx of Rwandan refugees in 1994 and have stayed ever since. These NGOs employ thousands of Congolese workers. Yet, the seemingly simple act of hiring locals often reignites historical tensions. While humanitarian agencies look for the local, who is local is negotiated through encounters with external organizations.

'*Rien pour nous sans nous*' (nothing for us without us) is a common refrain in the region, a critique of paternalistic interventions. Yet, localness – or the 'us' in this refrain – shifted depending on who was talking. The identities of humanitarians became politicised, reflecting discourses of belonging. These defined insiders and outsiders at different levels, as armed groups, customary authorities, and civil society groups contested recruitment decisions.

I follow the story of one NGO entangled in these struggles. When the NGO opened projects in the territories of **Rutshuru** and **Masisi**, for instance, its recruitment practices reignited historical tensions. In Rutshuru, the hiring of staff from the northern territories of North Kivu – many of them Nande – was perceived by Hutu as favouritism and a threat to the existing balance of power. Rebel groups such as Laurent Nkunda's *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) demanded that the NGO hire 'people from here,' providing a list of suitable names. These struggles over recruitment became a means for rebel groups to enforce their authority. Protests, and even attacks followed, as different groups vied for representation and access to NGO jobs.

Similar tensions unfolded in Masisi, where civil society groups periodically blocked roads to protest against the 'importation' of workers from other territories – labelled 'non-originares.' Recruitment

also fuelled historical tensions *within* the territory of Masisi between Hunde and Banyarwanda (Hutu and Tutsi). Hiring decisions sparked historical disputes over land, authority, and identity, dating back to when the Belgian regime oversaw mass labour immigration of Banyarwanda from Rwanda on land bought from Hunde.

In both territories, NGOs became part of the very conflicts from which they sought symbolic distance. Who gets hired became part of ongoing struggles over **public authority**.

Hiring for Acceptance

Facing such tensions, many aid agencies in eastern Congo developed *acceptance strategies*: efforts to build local trust and ensure security through careful relationship-building. A key part of this approach is ‘hiring for acceptance’ – in other words, considering how each recruitment decision might be perceived by local authorities, militias, and communities.

This strategy reveals a tension. NGOs stress the importance of being ‘neutral, impartial, and independent’ in the choice of candidate – recruitment decisions being based on competency, rather than who the person is. Yet, ‘hiring for acceptance’ requires careful analysis of the ethnic identities of staff to avoid accusations of partiality or favouritism.

Ultimately, by aiming to hire ‘locals’ for ‘acceptance,’ and labelling staff as a certain ethnic group and therefore ‘local’ (or not), humanitarian organisations risk reproducing contested spatial imaginaries of ethno-territorial belonging.

Contesting the local

Recent calls for a transfer of power to ‘local’ actors are an important critique of the profound inequalities in the aid sector. Yet, treating the local as a panacea ignores the fact that who is local is not rigid, but relational – a practice rather than a fixed descriptor, and ultimately, highly disputed.

In eastern DRC, the politics of recruitment reveals how aid agencies can become embroiled in existing conflicts about who belongs, and fuel social tensions because the ‘local’ category interacts with existing discourses around belonging, authority, and territory.

Going local is thus not straightforward, but deeply political.

The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Masisi in 2018, taken by author.

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