

# #PublicAuthority through the eyes of a Dead Fish

*Duncan Green is fascinated about just how much can be learned about public authority by tracking fish – from the lake to the market.*

***This article is part of the #PublicAuthority blog series, part of the ESRC-funded [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).***

One of the highlights of the May 2018 conference in Ghent was a presentation by [Esther Marijnen](#) about her research in the Eastern Congo, conducted with [Chrispin Mvano](#). Esther is trying to understand how rebel groups (of which DRC has many) see nature – across Africa, there is a long tradition of insurgents setting up bases in national parks. To do this she looked at (il)legal fishing in [Virunga National Park](#) (famous for its gorillas, where [park rangers were recently shot](#) by rebels/poachers).

She spent time in the area, getting to know local people, including the fishing communities, who realised that unlike most of the conservationists, she is not only interested in gorillas, but also in humans. That trust enabled her to uncover how a commodity supply chain interacts with politics and rebellion.

One way she did this was by jumping in a car and followed a motor bike transporting fish from the lake to the market, for which it had to cross both rebel and government-held territory. She recorded every bribe at every roadblock and added in the costs at both ends of the supply chain, ending up with 25 separate transactions (see photo).

That's pretty fascinating in itself, but she also uncovered a chain of accumulating political impacts in terms of public authority, via the relationships triggered by the different stages of the fish's journey.

At the lake (held by rebels), the granting of licenses to catch fish creates a level of legitimacy for the insurgents, building a social contract between them and the fishing communities, who value the predictability of knowing who they have to pay off and how much. This is all accompanied by the symbols of 'stateness' – lots of rubber stamps and forms.

Taxation can also create opposition if it is arbitrary or excessive, but the rebels are largely from the local community, and Esther reckons they can judge what is an acceptable level of taxation better than government outsiders. Moreover, while people deplore the extortion by the rebels, often under gunpoint, they say, 'it is better to be extorted by my brother than by a foreigner'.

Yet, rebels are not the only ones involved in the fish commodity chain. Once the fish arrives in the villages, multiple state services also levy their official taxes. Often not making any distinction between fish that was 'legally' or 'illegally' acquired. When the fish is being transported the line between legal and illegal becomes even more blurry – government soldiers and the police also demand money at the numerous roadblocks on the way.

## **Fishermen & the women who sell at local market:**

1. **Rebel group:** 10.000 a week
2. **Customary chief** – 'his' fishing concession, 100 franc per fish
3. **State service:** Provincial inspection agriculture, fish and livestock, North Kivu. Veterinary inspection health and origins – per fish type and quantity
4. **State service:** Provincial inspection agriculture, fish and livestock, North Kivu. FPD, development and protection of fisheries.

## **Transport:**

5. ICCN, patrol post [Kinyonzo](#), 3000 – 10.000 (if mixed unit Army and ICCN)
6. FARDC, [Ishasha](#), 200 franc
7. FARDC, [Ishasha - Nyamillia](#) 200 franc
8. FARDC, [Nvamilima - Kisegoro](#) 200 franc
9. FARDC, commando in [Kasikilla](#) 200 franc
10. FARDC, [Kisegoro - Ngwenda](#) 200 franc
11. FARDC, [Ngwenda - Kiwanja](#) 200 franc
12. FARDC, [Barriere Nvangeru](#) 500 franc
13. FARDC, [Kisefero](#): irregular
14. FARDC, [Kiwania - Rubare](#): 200 franc
15. FARDC, FARDC, [Rubare - Kalengera](#) 200 franc
16. FARDC, [Kalenga - Katala](#): 200 franc
17. FARDC, [Katala - Kiruma](#) 200 franc
18. FARDC, [Kiruma - Rumangabo](#): 200 franc
19. FARDC, [Rumangabo - Rugari](#) 200 franc
20. FARDC, [Rugari - Kakomero](#): 200 franc
21. FARDC, [Mwaro](#) 200 franc, green belt
22. FARDC, [Kibumba barrier](#), 500 franc,
23. PNC, traffic police road block, some fish.

## **Women selling fish at the market in Goma**

24. Tax to authorities at the market, depending on the fish/ quantity.
25. Informal protection taxes, irregular



While this is an economic disadvantage for the fishermen and the transporters, it also allows them to continue their business, which becomes very public, and so seen as a legitimate way to gain a livelihood. It also offers them a form of protection. If so many people with public authority are implicated in the trade, it becomes very difficult for the park management to crack down on it.

At the end of the journey the fish arrive at the market and are sold to networks of market women, who are organised in associations (see photo, which when translated reads “mothers united for the good development of our village, Vitshumbi”).

Fascinating.

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**Read the [research paper](#) to find out more. This article was first published on the [From Power to Poverty blog](#).**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**