Within, above and beyond: Churches and religious civil society activism in South Kivu

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Introduction

In the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and particularly in the province of South Kivu, various church actors have chosen to involve in advocacy and mobilisation in the name of peace. In part, this engagement has been channelled through the formalised civil society structure known as La Société Civile (LSC). In this article, we explore the relationship between churches and civil society organisations in Eastern DRC since the 1990s, a period marked by the end of the Mobutu Sese Seko’s 32-year long regime and two devastating wars in the region. In particular we ask why and how civil society in South Kivu has taken a formalised expression, and examine the role played by Christian churches and faith-based groups in peacebuilding activities coordinated by LSC.

This article is an empirically grounded exploration of how Congolese churches have channelled their peacebuilding activism through LSC in South Kivu. Our analysis is based on qualitative interviews with key actors in South Kivu between 2009 and 2016, including thirteen qualitative village case studies across the province during April-May 2010 and October-November 2011. Whereas church leaders and civil society representatives in the provincial centre of Bukavu have been asked to explain their role in public advocacy, we have used qualitative data at village level to examine whether civil society’s peacebuilding commitment also extends to local structures, for example through the establishment of conflict resolution mechanisms in rural areas where ethnic and clan tensions have been amplified by armed rebellion and foreign intrusion (Prunier 2009). Given the sustained levels of conflict and insecurity in the region, all interviewees are anonymised, and organisations and roles are only referred to by religious denomination or other general characteristics. All translations of quotes to English from local languages, Swahili or French are done in consultation with the authors.

Our argument is structured as follows. First, we discuss the concepts used in the analysis, and in particular we question the applicability of a civil society lens in the Eastern Congolese context. Second, we account for the emergence of the coordinating body LSC in South Kivu, and discuss the
role of Christian churches in shaping its rationale and strategies. Then we focus more specifically on
different expressions of peacebuilding activism by different civil society actors, which leads us to
conclude that the particular institutional form that the LSC has taken has allowed religious civil
society to play an important role in peacebuilding in South Kivu, but that this role is also
circumscribed by a number of political and social factors.

**Conceptualising civil society in an African context**

Before studying this expression of civil society coordination in its particular context, however, it is
worth dwelling on a critical question: namely, whether it is meaningful to employ the essentially
Western concept of civil society in South Kivu? As Lewis (2002) and others have noted, the notion
of civil society stems from a Western academic tradition inspired by Tocquevillian values of
volunteerism and community spirit, positioning civil society as a thick social fabric of associational
life operating independently from the market, ensuring the responsiveness of the state and
protecting the population from its excesses. Putnam’s (1995) emphasis on social capital embedded
in (local) horizontal networks vis-à-vis the formal hierarchies of the national state brings a spatial
imaginary to this idea. But how does this notion travel, and in what ways does it fit African post-
colonial reality? Lewis warns that both rejection and uncritical acceptance of the term has its
pitfalls. Those who outright refuse to accept the civil society concept in an African context, argue
that associational life is of an informal nature which escapes the Western academic definitions. This
position seems to overlook how postcolonial societies have appropriated and merged formal
associational cultures, as the case in question serves to illustrate.

The other pitfall is what Lewis labels ‘prescriptive universalism’, which encourages a selective
search for organisational activities reminiscing of Western European associational life (and, it
should be added, easily leads to an ‘epistemology of absence’ cf. Somers, 1996). Lewis (2002)
proposes a middle way which acknowledges the legacy of colonialism in current civil society
formations in African societies, while adopting an inclusive understanding of civil society that
acknowledges locally-relevant norms and practices (see also Mohan, 2002; Orvis, 2001). Rather
than forcing universal ideals on existing institutions (cf. Mamdani, 1996), such a starting point
allows us to recognise the “uneasy coexistence between local and imported or imposed versions of
civil society” (Glasius et al., 2004, p. 3)

Civil society in all its definitions shares the assumption that it is a sphere of social life constituted by
its relations to the state. And this is also where African societies are seen as distinct from post-
industrial Europe or the US. Carbone (2005), for instance, argues that because African states are
best described as “weak states” or “failed states”, a re-conceptualisation of different modes of state-civil society relations is required. The DRC state seems to exemplify this well. Seay (2009, p. 11) argues that the state can best be described as “‘weak’ in some areas and ‘collapsed’ or ‘failed’ in others”, which the Eastern provinces in particular lacking a meaningful state presence. The Weberian notion of statehood, with the monopolisation of violence as its core tenet, has never matched the historical realities of the Democratic Republic of Congo in general, and the Eastern regions devastated by two recent wars in particular (Larmer et al., 2013). This in turn, has implications for how we can conceptualise Congolese associational life.

Interestingly, Leinweber (2013, p. 111) argues that state collapse has not led to complete withdrawal and privatisation of social services in Eastern DRC, but to forms of ‘hybrid governance’ where “[faith-based organisations] in particular play a vital role in reproducing the idea of the Congolese state”. A neo-Gramscian (1971) approach to civil society, as called for by Lewis (2002) and Hutchful (1995), is arguably well-suited to approach the intimate, complex and conflictual relationship between civil society and the state in Eastern DRC. Gramsci’s understanding of the relationship between the state and civil society contrasts to liberal approaches before him, by assuming that civil society is a “contested terrain for influence over the way state power is exercised, as well as a scene of power and domination in its own right” (Hutchful, 1995, p. 65).

It can be argued that this approach challenges the inclusive notion of civil society we started out with. At the very least, it is by rebuffing the assumption that all associational forms hold the same analytical significance. By considering “almost all non-state actors as civil society” (Spurk, 2010, p. 12), one is left with a concept that holds little explanatory power. Blaney and Pasha (1993, p. 11) rightly warn us against “lacking an appreciation of the structure and process definitive of civil society”. We must therefore ask who are the key drivers and institutional foundations in particular contexts. Generalising across African societies, Bratton (1989, p. 426) noted that “associational life on this continent most often manifests itself in informal rather than formal linkages, in affective as well as instrumental forms”. But Bratton also draws attention to dominant structures in African civil society, observing that churches represent the “largest and most rapidly growing voluntary associations […] federated from parish to national and international levels” (ibid., p. 426). Again, the description seems to capture some essential characteristics of Eastern DRC society, and in what follows we will examine the relationship between the state, churches and civil society in DRC from the viewpoint of the South Kivu province.
Religious civil society in Eastern DRC

It is hard to over-emphasise the importance of churches in Eastern Congolese civil society. Leading scholars of current Congolese politics have described the Roman-Catholic Church (hereafter ‘the Catholic church’) and the many Protestant churches as playing an “enormously important role” in the country (Prunier, 2001, p. 155), being the “dominant agents of social service delivery in the eastern Congo” (Seay, 2009, p. 44), and among “the most important institutions sustaining society” during times of war (Mushi, 2012, p. 31). Whetho and Uzodike (2009, p. 63) even argue that religious networks “may rival (or even surpass) that of the state in view of the enduring state incapacitation arising from years of misrule and protracted conflict”. In fact, the ‘proto-state’ qualities of church networks in Eastern Congo place them in an ambiguous position in a state-civil society dichotomy. Congolese religious networks (including Muslim) represents a ‘reproduction of statehood’ through their role in service provision (Leinweber, 2013), while at the same time being part and parcel of civil society. In Carbone’s (2005) analytical framework, churches are included in the definition of civil society, but under the sub-category of welfare associations which he contrasts to advocacy groups (such a trade unions and human rights groups). As this article will show, this represents a too simplistic categorisation in the case of South Kivu.

To allow for a systematic analysis of the relationship between church networks and civil society structures in our case, we also draw on the relational and functional civil society conceptualisation of Paffenholz and Spurk (2010). This involves moving from a discussion of which actors belongs to a particular definition, to assess the functions performed by a range of actors in relation to a specific outcome. In the research presented here, as in the framework of Paffenholz and Spurk (2010), this outcome is identified as peace-building. While the role of churches in local service provision in Eastern DRC has received systematic scrutiny (Barrios, 2010; Leinweber, 2013; Mushi, 2012; Seay, 2009, 2013), analyses of religious peace-building efforts have either been focused on national and transnational relations (Jordhus-Lier & Braathen, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2008; Whetho & Uzodike, 2009) or, in the case of Autesserre’s (2006, 2010) seminal work on peacebuilding and local conflicts, minimised the role of religious civil society (a point also noted by Seay, 2011).

Paffenholz and Spurk (2010) define peacebuilding in a wide sense, and identify seven basic civil society functions relating to peacebuilding, of which three will constitute the main concern of this article: i) advocacy and public communication, which includes the articulation of interests of marginalised groups in the public agenda; ii) socialisation, and in particular development of democratic attitudes and conflict resolution mechanisms among people; and, finally, iii)
intermediation and facilitation between citizens, and between citizens and the state. The latter point speaks directly to the emergence of La Société Civile, as the authors place emphasis on the “composition of civil society” as a key factor in determining the ability of non-state actors to contribute to peacebuilding (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2010, p. 2).

In interviews as well as in policy documents, representatives of Catholic and Protestant churches in South Kivu emphasise their involvement in these forms of peacebuilding, and argue that they do so independently from the state or military actors. Their claim to relative autonomy is based in their social and political legitimacy (Prunier, 2001), is also framed as a ‘scalar argument’, referring to their unique presence from local communities far beyond the reach of the Kinshasa government and the international aid organisations, combined with their unequalled legitimacy in the national political process. Of course, these scales of influence are intimately bound up in each other. For instance, in order to fulfil their important role as service delivery agents in health and education, churches have used their historical networks with missionary communities in Western countries to access to equipment, funding and expertise (Rukundwa, 2006; Whetho & Uzodike, 2009).

**The emergence of La Société Civile (LSC)**

The historical precedents of LSC can be traced back to the mid-1980s, at a point in time when Mobutu’s dictatorship effectively had erased any trace of legitimacy on part of the Zairean state. Observers point to both internal and external stimuli. A civil society leader in the Catholic church argued that the international donor community was instrumental in this phase. As a response to the accelerating state collapse and the emerging paradigm of aid conditionality in the 1980s, new approaches for effective management of donor money were being developed. Relations between non-state actors and external donors were strengthened as a result of this strategy.

As the situation deteriorated, partly as a result of the devaluation of Zaire currency, people in eastern Zaire started to openly challenge the government.

"The priests, professors, students, traders and other social actors straightforwardly wrote to president Mobutu in 1990 to express popular desire and their disapproval of the way the regime was managing the country." (LSC representative, Bukavu)

The Catholic church also published a memorandum calling for political reforms, and encouraged political activists to enlighten the people on issues of regional and national interests (PREFED, 2004).
A political liberalisation speech by Mobutu 24 April 1990 initially yielded few concrete direct results, but emboldened civil society activists. Newly formed organisations and an emerging, independent media constituted new arenas of political debate across urban centres in the country. However, many of these urban activists lacked a knowledge of the pressing human rights issues at community and village level (Héritiers de la Justice, 2004). In this context, churches and the Catholic church in particular became even more influential.

The Catholic church responded to Mobutu’s speech by creating Justice and Peace Commissions (French: Commission Justice et Paix or CJP), designed as arenas of concertation and public dialogue. Starting in the diocese of South Kivu under the progressive leadership of the archbishop, the model was subsequently set up in other provinces across the country. Through their internal structure CJP’s, the Catholic church maintained a social role in remote villages, and was able to play a coordinating role for civil society organisations across the country. The Protestant churches were also organised into a national hierarchical structure in Zaire, an organisational remnant of Mobutu’s efforts during his zairianisation campaign to centralise and control Congolese churches (Hoffman, 1992).

President Mobutu conceded to pressure from Congolese society by convening a Sovereign National Conference (Conférence Nationale Souveraine or CNS). The CNS in Zaire was part of a trend across francophone Africa to utilise national conferences as a mechanism for democratic transitions (Nzongala-Ntalaja, 2004). Representatives of non-governmental organisations were, along with political party members and members of parliament, invited as stakeholders. Through this conference, demands for democratic liberalisation were formulated in a relatively inclusive and highly visible process. The aim was to achieve a gradual and managed political transition (Lund & Santiso, 1998).

A preparatory commission was established prior to the CNS, and civil associations and NGOs were convened into regional federations known as CRONGs (Coordination Régionale des Organisations Non-gouvernementales). Of these, the CRONG in South Kivu was the most active, militant and critical of the government. In South Kivu, where associational life had been relatively well-organised since the early 1980s, churches, NGOs, business associations and trade unions, student groups and others united (Minani-Bihuzo, 1995). They organised a workshop organised at the initiative of the South Kivu NGO Solidarité Paysanne in April 1991, where it was decided to establish a formalised civil society organisation on the eve of the national CNS the following year. La Société Civile (LSC) in its current configuration was born out of that workshop.
Contesting external domination amidst ethnic tension

Despite the promise of the CNS, it would be misleading to portray a narrative of gradual, bottom-up democratisation. As Larmer et al. (2013) remind us, what eventually led to regime change was not the mobilisation of (local) civil society forces, but a political-military mobilisation with support from foreign regimes. Like the mobilisation of civil society, military revolt also started in the Kivu provinces.

While the historical events of the Great Lakes region in the 1990s are far too complex to account for here, and has been accounted for elsewhere, the 1994 Rwandan genocide led to a refugee crisis and the establishment of militias and foreign military presence in Eastern Zaire, which in turn spurred two military campaigns and concomitant wars: the First Congo War in 1997, when Laurent-Desiré Kabila’s Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre (ADFL) successfully managed to topple Mobutu’s regime in Kinshasa, and the Second Congo War from 1998-2003, where the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) eventually was unsuccessful in enforcing a regime change. In both conflicts, foreign powers were militarily involved, and in both conflicts Kinyarwanda-speaking Tutsis of Congolese (collectively known as Banyamulenge) and Rwandan descent became the source of conflict, deeply mistrusted by the majority population in South Kivu.

While the UN peacekeeping mission has classified the period since 2002 as a ‘postconflict environment’, Autesserre (2010) finds this problematic as deep-seated local conflicts are downplayed, and Eastern DRC is still marked by violence and insecurity, as well as tensions between self-declared autochthonous people and Kinyarwanda groups (Larmer et al., 2013). According to its own members of staff, LSC in South Kivu employed a ‘war strategy’ during the conflict years, in which they emphasised putting pressure on authorities to enforce sovereignty from foreign invasion. By using their strength and legitimacy to mobilise the population, LSC representatives claim they were misinterpreted and received criticism for allegedly stirring xenophobic sentiment against Kinyarwanda people during this period. At the time, LSC tended to be conflated with the political opposition by ruling politicians.

LSC’s support among the majority in South Kivu was strong, however. Moreover, LSC representatives claim that international donors changed their attitude towards their advocacy activities in early 2000s, when the extent of Rwandese military presence and interference in Congolese mineral extraction was made known. Some of these tensions were also expressed within the church networks themselves. As the Catholic church had been vocal supporters of activism under the LSC umbrella, it was sometimes considered as an ‘anti-government church’. Here, they
differ from the Protestant churches, which were seen as government-aligned during the rule of Mobutu as well as Kabila. The difference between Catholic and Protestant churches was less articulated during the wars, when church networks in the Kivu provinces stood united against foreign interference.

Over the course of the last twenty years, La Société Civile (LSC) has sustained its positions as a counterbalance to state power. Seay (2009, p. 8) describes LSC as “a major force in Congolese political life [which is] always included in the country's major decision-making processes”. According to her and Mushi (2012, p. 14) it is also an elite-driven organisation, serving as a platform for “leaders of churches and of non-governmental organisations who are recognised as notabilities within their respective groups”.

Part of the reason for the durability of LSC undoubtedly lies in its institutionalised character. One of its former leaders explain that its formal structure was first established at the provincial level in South Kivu, for then to be replicated at the national as well as down through an intricate sub-provincial hierarchy of elected branches in eight territories and large number of village collectives (collectivités). A system of monthly reports serves to maintain information flows between the local level and office bearers in Bukavu, and is useful as an ‘early warning’ mechanism in conflict.

In Bukavu, LSC South Kivu has an office where it employs 16 staff from 10 sectorally defined components (composantes). These include human rights organisations, trade unions, businesses, scientific and academic organisations, women and gender groups, youth groups and developmental NGOs, in addition to the component for religious confessions where the churches are represented.

While this level of geographical and sectoral coordination increases the potential for LSC to coordinate peacebuilding activities in the region, it is also vulnerable to internal opposition. Several civil society factions have emerged as challengers to the broad legitimacy of LSC through organisational splits. The groups known as Société Civile du Congo (SOCICO), Société Civile Forces Vives and La Nouvelle Dynamique De La Société Civile (NDC) are recent examples worth noting, but they only poses a limited challenge to the hegemony of LSC in South Kivu.

As political opposition parties emerged in the early 1990s, they were eager to recruit political talent from the ranks of civil society organisations and NGOs. This complicated the relationship between civil society and the state considerably. Around the CNS in 1992, civic organisations associated with LSC were supportive of the opposition party of Etienne Kiskey Wa Mulumba (UPDS), who openly
fought the Mobutu regime. When Kisekedi and other leading politicians have taken positions in government, they have openly sought support from LSC to secure legitimacy from broad layers of the population.

Politicisation, understood in DRC as the co-option of leaders into party politics, is seen as a real threat to an independent civil society. The perceived threat of politicisation would later provide the pretext for the Charter of Civil Society, signed in 2006, to which all constituent parties were to subscribe.

“Being a grouping of several organisations, a charter rather than a constitution was the appropriate legal document to lead and define the actions of La Société Civile” (LSC representative, Uvira)

According to LSC representatives, this Charter gave a clear sense of direction for civil society in South Kivu, and LSC chapters in other provinces and at national level have since adopted corresponding charters.

**Church strategies for involving in La Société Civile**

While the churches clearly exert a level of dominance over LSC, it is not done without contestation from various social actors. This influence is also relatively informal in nature, and not subject to written guidelines. If we want to move beyond references to the churches’ moral authority, closer inspection reveals a number of ways in which Catholic and Protestant churches engages with, and attempts to influence the direction of, LSC in South Kivu. These can crudely be divided into two modes of engagement: formal representation in LSC structures and support to faith-based organisations (FBOs).

Formal representation is primarily secured through actively partaking in the religious confessions component, which also have their own office bearer in the provincial office, and through general assembly, which elects and gives mandate to the staff of the provincial office of LSC. Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Revivalist churches and Kimbanguists are represented in the religious confessions component, which is referred to by interviewees as among the most influential structures of LSC. There is moreover a historical precedence for choosing the Catholic church as the spokesperson of the religious confessions component. Finally, the Catholic church has historically chaired a structure known as the Council of Ethics, which is the LSC’s internal conflict resolution mechanism. Here, disputes between the organisations are mediated and resolved. If an agreement is not reached, cases are referred to the archbishop. Typical issues reported to the Council of Ethics
are political aspirations amongst civil society leaders, contradicting the apolitical stance of LSC’s charter.

The role of the Catholic church as an impartial arbitrator finds support in (Seay, 2013, p. 87), who argues that the internal organisational cohesion of the Catholic church in Bukavu has allowed it to maintain operative through military and humanitarian crisis, and helped to “mitigate difficulties that could arise as a result of disputes that divide members on ethnic lines” – a recurring line of conflict among other Christian denominations. The all-encompassing role of the Catholic church in LSC led a Protestant pastor to comment that the position of the church was “within, above and beyond civil society”. The position of the Catholic church in Congolese society begs the question why they need the LSC at all? It is important to acknowledge the institutional influence of the Catholic church in Bukavu, an old religious centre where LSC and the faith-based organisations are parts of a much wider and more complex network of organisations and roles which also include Université Catholique de Bukavu (UCB), hospitals and other institutions. Representatives of the Catholic church explained their involvement in LSC as motivated by the need for a united organisational body championing popular interests, and by wanting to avoid parallel structures of advocacy.

But the public advocacy of the Catholic church regularly strains its relationship to the state. This also affects the workings of LSC. According to a former civil society leader in the Catholic church, the Congolese state seldom confronts the Catholic church in open conflict, but can criticise individual civil society activists or, more subtly, by actively supporting non-Catholic church actors.

The other, arguably less direct, channel of influence is through a number of faith-based organisations (FBOs). Many of these also have formal representation in the component for human rights- and humanitarian organisations. FBOs are also important in that they are able to function as recipients of donor money from international development organisations, who require trained personnel and organisational independence from their partner organisations. Both Protestant and Catholic churches have established FBOs which have proved to be influential in peacebuilding initiatives across the province.

A glance across some of the most prominent FBOs in South Kivu reveals that these organisations have different degrees of relative autonomy vis-à-vis their respective church communities. In the early 1990s, both the Protestant and Catholic churches establish human rights organisations, known as Heritiers de la Justice (HJ) and Groupe Jeremie (GJ), respectively. While HJ are loosely
affiliated to the main Protestant church council *Eglise du Christ au Congo* (ECC), GJ is not formally or morally bound to the authority of the Catholic church, although they cooperate in certain activities. In its early phase, HJ established local conflict mediation functions and trained their members to establish functioning village-level structures, but has since started specialising on human rights issues. GJ claim to be a grassroots organisation, and has also established local conflict resolution mechanisms which are loosely coordinated with the formal justice system, and with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commissions (these CJPVs run through the entire hierarchy of the Catholic church from local village *shirikas* [Swahili for ‘organisation’] and all the way to the Vatican). GJ’s conflict resolution committees are not exclusively for Catholics, they also have Protestants and Muslims involved. Both HJ and GJ have been influential in La Société Civile since its formative years and during the armed conflicts, but the post-conflict environment presents a challenge in attracting support from international donors.

In the aftermath of the Congo Wars, the Protestant ECC also established a technical service for peacebuilding known as *Reseau Innovation Organisationnelle* (RIO). RIO trains various Protestant church leaders and ECC officials in peace education and conflict transformation through participatory action research. While RIO operates within the Protestant ECC structure, they also cooperate actively with local peacebuilding NGOs across the South Kivu province, and with local chapters of LSC by training civil society leaders in conflict resolution.

It is important to acknowledge the distinction between churches as ecclesiastical structures and these faith-based organisations, as they were often seen to play quite different roles at the village level. Even in the urban centre of Uvira, civil society activists claimed that faith-based organisations were far more active in peace-building activities than the churches themselves:

“Theoretically churches collaborate with LSC, but empirically much still needs to be done to materialise interactive collaboration for peace-building between churches and La Societe Civile in the region of Uvira.” (NGO representative, Uvira)

In more remote villages, the lack of engagement from local churches is even more acute, and the local branches of LSC are very unevenly established in their presence and capacity. While some territories, like in Kalehe in the north of the province, had LSC structures led by experienced activists, other territories did not have well-functioning LSC structures. Maintaining an organisational presence at the village level is reliant on local funds, and is ultimately heavily dependent on the skills and engagement of resourceful individuals.
Peacebuilding efforts by religious civil society in South Kivu

Having spent time looking at the institutional architecture of church-civil society relations, we will now turn our attention to some concrete expressions of religious civil society activism in South Kivu, to better understand how these relations can translate into tangible community interventions. For the purpose of the argument, and in line with the peacebuilding dimensions of Paffenholz and Spurk (2006), we have chosen to emphasise socialisation activities during the two recent elections, advocacy during military rebellion and forms of intermediation linked to repatriation of refugees and local conflict resolution mechanisms.

Popular mobilisation during the 2006 and 2011 elections

An important element of the peacebuilding efforts of churches and LSC is to secure accountability and popular legitimacy for the national political process, which continues to represent the main obstacle to security reform, social welfare and economic development in South Kivu. Therefore, religious civil society has involved actively in the contested elections of 2006 and 2011. The elections contrast on several points: whereas the first post-war election in 2006 was driven by the international community providing financial, technical and logistical support (Dizolele & Kambale, 2012), the 2011 elections were largely controlled (and manipulated) by the government of Joseph Kabila (Larmer et al., 2013).

Churches and LSC took active part in the preparations for the 2006 elections through civic education activities across the province, with funding from external donors. This was critical to ensuring the popular legitimacy in a political event “[t]hat marked the first time most Congolese had ever voted in a democratic election” (Seay, 2009, p. 177). Civic education hence involved registration and voter education, and many churches took responsibility for educating their own members to prepare them for the task. LSC also functioned as a consultative body for sensitive questions, not only with provincial authorities but with the national Independent Electoral Commission.

The relative success of the 2006 elections prompted LSC, the churches and FBOs to shift their strategies from short-term interventions to more medium- to long-term peacebuilding efforts (Whetho & Uzodike, 2009). However, it gradually became clear that the momentum of democratisation stalled in the preparations for the 2011 elections, when the international community chose to disengage and Kabila’s government pushed through constitutional reforms marginalising the opposition. Church leaders in Bukavu chose different strategies amidst political
crisis. While the Catholic Church openly opposed the 2011 constitutional reform, expressed concerns over the transparency of the electoral process and questioned the validity of the election results, the Protestant churches chose a supportive and cooperative stance towards the incumbent regime. Importantly, LSC representatives from South Kivu engaged in national consultations around the mandate of UN’s peacekeeping force (MONUSCO), which civil society leaders argued remained passive during the elections. The announcement of incumbent president Kabila as the winner was widely discredited, and was criticised, sparking civil society demands for an audit of the Independent Election Commission (Dizolele & Kambale, 2012).

Approaches to national politics within LSC do not simply diverge along a Catholic versus Protestant split, however. One Bukavu LSC representative argued that civil society leaders from all denominations have pursued political positions, and that the inability to steer clear of political patronage makes it hard for LSC to effectively champion popular grievances against the regime. The principle against ‘politicisation’ in the LSC Charter is constantly being debated and reinterpreted, and one LSC representative claimed that the current approach to engagement – where civil society leaders were allowed to work with politicians, but not as politicians – jeopardised the legitimacy of LSC, as it was increasingly seen as a conduit to political positions. At the time of writing, the recruitment of LSC into state positions was again causing concern ahead of the planned 2016 elections.

**Opposition against the M23 rebellion**

While their role in national elections is crucial, it is by no means the only peacebuilding efforts of religious civil society. Representatives of churches and FBOs are eager to emphasise that the key obstacles to peace are to be found in the continued presence of (foreign and Congolese) military groups in the province, causing widespread insecurity. The M23 rebellion in the Kivu provinces in 2012 serves as an illustrative example of how churches confront military mobilisation. When soldiers of the rebel group National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), who had been integrated in the Congolese army since 2009, decided to mutiny in April 2012 in what became known as the M23 rebellion, this sent ripples throughout the Eastern DRC and threatened to destabilise Bukavu and South Kivu. Church and LSC leaders in Goma and Bukavu were outspoken in their criticism against the rebellion, as they feared undue interference from neighbouring states (M23 was widely regarded as a proxy force for Rwanda and Uganda). The Catholic episcopal conference (CENCO) initiated a national petition collecting in excess of 10 million signatures
country-wide against outside invasion of the DRC, which was handed over to UN general secretary Ban-Ki Moon.

Churches in South Kivu argued for a political settlement of the conflict based on dialogue between the government and armed factions. This set them apart from some strands within Congolese civil society, in particular North Kivu church leaders who threatened with general strike and demanded neutralisation of the M23. South Kivu representatives claimed that they had support for their dialogue stance supported by the majority of the population, with a clear condition that political settlement should neither lead to impunity, nor jeopardise Congolese sovereignty and constitution.

"Yes to inclusive dialogue for national cohesion. But not dialogue for the sake of modifying the constitution – of power for the sake of power. These are personal gains. And no to balkanisation of the DRC" (LSC representative, Bukavu)

LSC representatives held that the continuous reintegration of rebel combatants into the FARDC had failed as a peace-building method. In the Uvira region of South Kivu in particular, there was widespread fear that Banyamulenge soldiers stationed in the area would defect to join the Tutsi-dominated rebellion, much in the same way they had done during the Congo wars in the 1990s. Consequently, members of civil society worked out a plan to engage with Banyamulenge soldiers to discourage them from defection. This plan was the initiative of the Protestant RIO network, who had set up a framework for inter-community dialogue. This enabled church leaders, soldiers and leaders of different ethnic organisations (mutualités) to meet and engage in dialogue. Members of various civil society organisations and ethnic groups in the Uvira area interviewed for this research project played a decisive role in stopping the M23 rebellion from spreading in South Kivu. Arguably, this initiative also contributed to improve relations between the Banyamulenge community and other ethnic groups in the province.

**Repatriation efforts at local and translocal level**

It is also relevant to mention how the collaboration between church structures and LSC has facilitated voluntary repatriation of Hutu refugees from remote villages of South Kivu to Rwanda. While the initiative came from Protestant church activists in Bukavu, it has succeeded to draw on other churches and has coordinated their activities with LSC, as well as the international Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio. Heavily reliant on skilled ground staff, both paid and voluntary facilitators, project managers explained that they had worked together with local LSC structures, local chiefs and pastors. The project adopts a holistic approach to repatriation, including
‘sensitisation’ activities between host communities and refugees, and direct dialogue with representatives of the refugees in facilitating their return to Rwanda. These trust-building exercises are essential to facilitate a voluntary return throughout the Kivu province and across the Rwandese border. Interestingly, the project also included cooperation between Protestant networks in DRC and Rwanda, in order to follow up the returnees once they returned to reintegration camps and (eventually) villages in Rwanda (Boëthius & Ånderå, 2011).

Repatriation efforts have been initiated in several locations across South Kivu, in particular in Kalehe, Mwenga and Fizi district where the presence of FDLR rebels has caused widespread insecurity. Securing the active cooperation from local church communities, community-based organisations and traditional leaders, the project appointed an officer in charge of liaison with civil society. Church buildings and premises of both Protestant and Catholic local churches have been used for various repatriation activities, sometimes also as accommodation for refugees. While the numbers of repatriated soldiers and civilians are unclear, and most likely relatively limited, the ability to coordinate these sensitive in collaboration with local communities testifies to the peacebuilding capacity of religious civil society in South Kivu.

Conflict resolution mechanisms in villages

The final expression of peacebuilding mentioned here is perhaps the most crucial, but also the most complex, namely the ability of religious civil society to establish effective and legitimate structures of conflict resolution across the province. The need to address local conflict dynamics as a prerequisite for peace has been identified in a seminal study by Autesserre (2006, 2010), who argues that the international community has adopted a one-dimensional strategy toward democratisation, through equating democracy with elections, which has been prioritised before security reform and local conflict resolution. Local conflicts in South Kivu are shaped by, but not identical to, the wider regional conflict. Old conflicts over land and ethnicity are intensified by the presence of migrant populations, the illegal mineral economy, the politics of citizenship, and tension between traditional and modern forms of political authority (Autesserre, 2010).

While LSC and the Catholic church often has upheld the presence of foreign military influence as the main source of the conflict, this research has also revealed a number of different local conflict resolution initiatives. Given that many local conflicts are fuelled by ethnic tension, churches and LSC established inter-ethnic committees as a strategy for conflict resolution and peacebuilding (see also Kabati, 2008). Both Catholic and Protestant churches have tried to institutionalise local conflict resolution mechanisms. Anecdotal statements gathered from our fieldwork in selected villages are
not sufficient to properly assess the use, capacity and legitimacy of this conflict resolution infrastructure in practice across the entire South Kivu province. Still, it is clear that these mechanisms have been mobilised in concrete cases.

One such case was the *Comité de Coordination des Actions des Paix* (CCAP), a grouping of NGOs and LSC components working to build inter-community cohesion among ethnic groups in the Uvira, Fizi and Itombwe/Minembwe regions. These regions have in common a recent history of warfare and political instability severely threatening social cohesion, with the above-mentioned tensions around the Banyamulenge ethnic group at the centre of conflict dynamics since the 1990s. The effectiveness of the CCAP engagement was observed in the aftermath of the assassination of 12 NGO workers members of Banyamulenge origin in 2011. Though the perpetrators were not identified, inter-ethnic tension soared and threatened to destabilise the region of Fizi-Minembwe. Under these circumstances, CCAP organised consultations in order to avoid violent confrontations between members of the Banyamulenge and Babembe communities. With a committed involvement from a local Methodist church, a peace and reconciliation meeting was held between the two ethnic communities in Baraka. According to several representatives involved in this process, this meeting was instrumental in restoring peace and trust between both communities.

But the conflict resolution dimension also reveals major weaknesses of local church-led peacebuilding. First, a widespread problem was the lack of sufficient skills among local church leaders. Conflict resolution and reconciliation activities requires a level of formal training which local pastors in many cases simply did not possess. Protestant pastors in particular often suffered from a lack of relevant education which would enable them to function as a conflict mediator. Moreover, many pastors were living in abject poverty, making it hard to initiate meaningful social engagement. Second, many of the local churches were themselves based along ethnic lines. In several of the villages studied, different local churches found themselves in direct conflict with each other as a result of ethnic and clan divisions and political rivalry. This point is well elaborated on in by Seay (2009), who argues that the Catholic church differs from Protestant churches through its internal cohesion and ability to transcend ethnic lines. Our findings, however, serve to complicate this picture as even local Catholic churches could play a part in cementing social divisions. This is supported by Kabati (2008), who explains how the archbishop in Bukavu differed from his peer in Uvira diocese on regarding the Kinyarwanda-speaking minority in the province on the eve of the military rebellion in 1996. There is also a long-standing tension between the Bashi elites in Bukavu
and the Barega-dominated Mwenga and Shabunda territories. These ethnic dividing lines permeate the organisations of the Catholic church and the LSC in South Kivu.

**Conclusion**

The formalisation of South Kivutian civil society organisations into the coordinating body *La Société Civile* might seem like an anomaly in an African context, with its particular historical origins in the final stages of Mobutu's centralised state. Still, it has proven a potent associational form which has managed to play different roles during critical times in DRC's recent history. In the crucial period of the Sovereign National Conference, LSC in South Kivu served an important coordinating function for activists and organisations in a region marked by a vital associational life. Then, during the wars, LSC became a power vehicle for public advocacy and as a mouthpiece for popular grievances. Finally, in the subsequent (so-called) post-conflict phase, it has been a key driver for democratisation in locally and at a national level. Even though LSC has maintained a relative organisational unity, its politics resonate with the inclusive notion of civil society as a ‘contested terrain’ as set out in the introduction. More specifically, LSC in South Kivu is both a platform for public advocacy, social intermediation and the mobilisation of local communities and a battleground for different interests within civil society. This article has shown that the relationship between churches, civil society organisations and the state is contested, with activists and religious leaders being drawn between the principle of autonomy, on which the Charter of LSC is based, and the various opportunities for influence (and co-option) that is presented by party politics and positions in state bodies.

As have been shown in the above discussion, religious civil society has been particularly active in channeling their interests through this coordinating structure. While the Catholic church have involved through its powerful ecclesiastical structures as well as its affiliated network of faith-based organisations, the Protestant churches involvement has been mainly limited to the latter strategy.

The churches, whose networks and presence range from the national political arena to the remotest of villages. Although their actual influence over LSC can be discussed, churches in South Kivu have placed themselves within, above and beyond civil society. Interestingly, this has presented LSC with a potential channel to reach conflict-torn local communities across the province. This potential has only been exploited to a limited extent, as this article has shown. The reason why peacebuilding activities at the local level has not been developed further is a combination of limited...
resources and skills among clergy, the limited scope of faith-based organisations relying on external donors, and the lack of social and ethnic cohesion that continues to haunt South Kivu.

References


