

POST-CONFLICT PARTICIPATION: SOCIAL DIALOGUES IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

After a decade of political crises and wars that left more than 5 million people dead from violence, famine and disease – one of the greatest disasters in human history – the warring factions in the Democratic Republic of Congo signed a power-sharing agreement and peace deal in 2002. The violence, however, continues, especially for women of eastern Congo, who have suffered immeasurable harm at the cruel hands of the remaining militias.

How can citizens participate politically in such a traumatized and fractured society? Indeed, *should* experiments in citizen participation be encouraged while the legacy of fear and hatred remains so strong?

Vincent Tohbi, from the Johannesburg-based Electoral Institute for Southern Africa, claims that when the fighting ends, not only should transportation, commerce, and basic services be a priority – but that citizen participation must be an essential aspect of reconstruction. The deep political divides, he says, will not be overcome through elections alone.

Over the past three years, he and his organisation have worked to establish “Social Dialogues” in every province of the country. These forums – which convene every three months – bring together hundreds of citizens to meet elected representatives and government officials. So far, they have provided an invaluable channel for governments to communicate, increased public scrutiny of policies and politicians, and ultimately might help to cultivate a culture of participation in a country that has long suffered tyranny.

Beyond elections

In 2005, EISA – an organisation dedicated to promoting credible elections and democratic governance in Africa – anticipated that elections the following year, the first elections in four decades, would not settle the country’s deep divisions. The election and its run-off, which maintained incumbent Joseph Kabila in power, were marred by violence, but received the approval of international monitors.

Voter turn-out in the elections exceeded 80 percent, and the results were accompanied by dancing in the streets.

EISA, however, was correct; the initial optimism was fleeting. Disillusionment began with the formation of the government. Expectations that the government would be entirely inclusive were not met. One prominent political leader refused to take his seat in parliament; one political party – with a strong constituency in the east – garnered so few votes nationally that it was not invited into the government.

The culture of leadership presented another problem, as Tohbi explains.

“How do you give meaning to grassroots democracy in a country that has emerged from years and years of crisis? When the gap between elected officials, official institutions and the people has grown? Politicians don’t understand that being elected does not give you the right to make decisions alone. They must learn to connect with their constituencies.”

Many foreign organizations dedicated to governance left the country after assisting with the elections. EISA has stayed, trying to build the links between people, politicians and officials that it believes will make the country’s democracy truly meaningful.

Opening dialogue

With funding from foreign donors, EISA first began with elected officials at the provincial level, beginning in the province of Kivu.

“The elected officials by this point were hated by the population, which was fed up by the lack of delivery,” Tohbi said. “So you had to reassure the elected officials that it was good for them to come and talk to the people.”

Once the Governor, MPs and Minister of the state agreed, EISA approached civil society organisations (CSOs) in the province. In the absence of the state over several decades, CSOs in Congo have filled the gaps in basic services. Consequently, across the country, in nearly every town, a vocal, dynamic and active set of CSOs can be found, according to Tohbi.

EISA carried out two trainings: one for the politicians on how to host and chair a public dialogue with the electorate, and one for CSOs on how to effectively engage with officials at such an event. The trainings focused on encouraging a way of speaking that would allow for respectful debate. As a final preparation, participants from both trainings were brought together to practice their skills.

"The first sessions were very heated. They were insulting each other. The CSOs were saying: 'You are a thief. You are taking our money.' Today it's very technical. They discuss agriculture, they discuss decentralization and they discuss security. It's much more focused."

EISA has repeated the process in 11 provinces, and now supports the hosting of social dialogues every three months in those provinces. Each locality has a coordination team that includes a provincial parliamentarian, local representatives from political parties and two civil society representatives. The coordination team oversees the selection of participants, taking care that different interest groups are represented. Additionally, ordinary citizens are given transportation from provincial areas to participate. The dialogues now attract as many as 300 people, filling some of the country's largest meeting venues. Each social dialogue has a few key elements: reading of the minutes from the previous meeting, presentations by officials and, of course, open discussion.

"We don't only want civil society people from a high level. We want the people who are sitting there in the street to come. And during the break, to eat at the same table with the officials."

The social forum in North Kivu, one of the most beleaguered provinces, has been especially critical. When the Congolese government signed an agreement with the Rwandese army to cooperate to eliminate the rebel group led by Laurent Nkunda, national officials travelled to North Kivu to explain the agreement at the dialogue. The troubled and complex history between Congo, Nkunda (a former Rwandan general) and the government of Rwanda made the agreement dubious in the eyes of many North Kivu residents; the face-to-face meeting helped to dispel potentially explosive rumours.

And for residents, the dialogues have been an important way to hold leaders to account. Promises are recorded in the minutes, and when these go unmet, leaders are frequently reminded. Cases of corruption have been raised repeatedly.

From dialogue to decisions

While the social dialogues have been well subscribed, according to Tohbi, much more work remains to make them meaningful and sustainable.

The cost of the dialogues has been high – supported until recently only by foreign resources. Some provinces have begun to contribute, but scarce revenues must compete with basic services. For now, the dialogues are only held at the provincial level. Extending to the local level will require a herculean effort and even greater resources. And the national level – where the most important policy decisions are made – still lacks any such forum. Perhaps most importantly, the dialogues themselves are purely "consultative." Officials are in no way obliged to heed the recommendations from the public, and as a result, public enthusiasm for the dia-

logues may quickly wane in areas where officials choose to politely attend, but later dismiss the proceedings. Tohbi hopes to resolve some of these challenges by lobbying for a law that would institutionalize the dialogues, and incorporate them officially into the policy process.

Yet another set of challenges concerns the respect for basic human rights; without which, democratic participation is endangered. Outspoken journalists and activists have been killed in Congo in recent years. There have been accounts of threats made to vocal participants at the dialogues. EISA encourages civil society groups to engage carefully in contentious issues. The tension between the ethics of protecting citizens from harm, and the imperative for open and honest discussion, requires a delicate and scrupulous balance in Congo.

"We find people that are bold enough to talk, but certain issues are simply not discussed."

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