

Looking for DRC peace in the wrong place

By Ben Radley | October 29th, 2013



Miners in eastern Congo © Ben Radley/Obama's Law

To be fair to some of the main advocacy organisations behind the campaign to 'clean up' eastern DRC's minerals, such as Global Witness and the Enough Project, they do not (when you take the time to read their publications) claim that this will be a panacea for the conflict. However, they do – by prioritising the subject above all others – promote it as the most pressing and urgent conflict-related issue requiring attention in the eastern DRC today. And many governments have responded to their clarion call for action, with the US and Canada passing conflict mineral legislation specifically on the eastern Congo and the European Union set to follow suit in 2014.

The lens of the international community is firmly focused on this issue as a priority peace-building strategy for the region. This poses a serious problem, as cleaning up the mineral supply chain in the eastern DRC has nothing to do with achieving or contributing to peace.

Firstly, armed groups are not (as is often portrayed in sensationalist media headlines or advocacy campaigns) fighting over access to and control of minerals as an end in itself, but as a means to finance their operations to address other grievances, such as unresolved political issues pertaining to land, citizenship and territorial boundaries. Minerals do fuel the conflict, but – to paraphrase Congo expert Jason Stearns in a recent interview – they are not what the conflict was about at the beginning, and they're certainly not what the conflict is about today.

Secondly, the entire economy in the eastern DRC is militarised, not just the mineral sector. It is a war economy. Anything and everything that makes money is a target for armed groups. Timber, charcoal, palm oil, cannabis, poaching, illegal taxation of populations, road checkpoints. The list is seemingly endless. Evidence of this is to be found in the fact that armed groups' reliance on the mineral trade is widely acknowledged to be decreasing, but the level of conflict is not. So you can clean up

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the mineral supply chain, but – if you don't address the conflict's root causes – the violence and extortion will simply be shifted elsewhere. You may have a mining site producing 'clean' minerals, but as soon as the money generated by those minerals seeps into the local economy and other sectors, armed groups will find ways of getting their share. It's naïve and simplistic to assume or hope otherwise.

Thirdly, putting mining sector reform before governance reform is to put the proverbial cart before the horse. As Séverine Autesserre, a leading academic on the Congo, has pointed out, Congolese state officials – including members of the army, police, and administration – are today responsible for the largest part of all human rights violations. [1] Yet it is these very officials who are currently empowered and entrusted as the ultimate arbiters in determining whether a mine's minerals are fit for export to the international market or not. In the context of Autesserre's observation, this is to replace one rotten apple with another. Until wider governance reform takes place, it is difficult to see how mining sector reform focusing on punitive measures will lead to an improvement in the daily lives of the Congolese.

Is cleaning up the mineral supply chain in the eastern DRC a worthwhile endeavour? Yes, of course it is. Ensuring mining sites conform to fundamental human rights and labour rights standards is important work, and in any case, whether the country likes it or not, it must now conform to international norms and standards for mineral exportation. However, it should not be confused or conflated with bringing peace to the region or diminishing levels of conflict and violence. Ultimately, the conflict is profoundly political in nature, and will require political – not technical – solutions. Solutions that must be sought and found thousands of kilometres outside of the eastern DRC itself, in the country's capital, Kinshasa.

As long as the camera of the international community remains focused on the relationship between the mineral sector and the conflict, the rest of the picture is lost, and it's possible to fool oneself into believing in the centrality of the conflict minerals agenda to resolving the conflict and lowering levels of violence. But if we widen the lens and bring the whole picture into focus, the work to 'clean up' the eastern Congo's mineral supply chains begins to look less like a priority peace-building strategy, and more like Nero fiddling while Rome continues to burn.

This article was originally published as part of the Amani Itakuya series on christophvogel.net

Ben Radley is a British researcher focusing on the Great Lakes Region of Africa with a particular interest in labour rights and the labour movement. He is also a producer of the upcoming, feature-length documentary Obama's Law (<http://www.obamaslaw.com>), a film to explore the impact of the conflict minerals campaign on communities, the economy and the conflict in the eastern DRC.

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