

Artful Resistance in a Theatre State

Promoting grassroots conflict transformation in eastern Congo

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Brief Summary

Recent theories of change and academic approaches suggest that grassroots art movements can be harnessed to transform conflict and promote peace (e.g. British Council 2019; Premaratna & Bleiker 2016). Conflict-ridden eastern Congo is home to a vibrant art scene—can it be harnessed to mitigate conflict? This policy brief argues that grassroots art spearheads a progressive and critical engagement with conflict and political unaccountability in eastern Congo. However, it also shows that there are important limits to what outside actors can do to strengthen the positive impacts that this grassroots movement can have because artistic expression in the public sphere is heavily curtailed by political restrictions that stem from the political manipulation of art to cement authoritarian rule.

This policy brief:

- Discusses the emerging grassroots art scene in eastern Congo and its political potential
- Describes how art and popular culture are and have been politicised in Congo
- Outlines policy options to support a larger role for grassroots artists in conflict transformation and the promotion of peace

Background

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (henceforth DRC) is home to one of the largest protracted conflicts in the world. Ongoing since the late 1990s, it has cost the lives of at least five million people and currently just as many people are internally displaced. The DRC has been home to the largest peacebuilding and stabilisation mission in the world, costing the international community over one billion USD a year. Past peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts have focused on security sector reform, DDR, ambitious state-building programmes, as well as community-based components. Despite those efforts, the conflict in DRC persists and has only become more complex, with currently over 120 armed groups active in eastern Congo. It is therefore no surprise that the popularity of international peacebuilding is at an all-time low, with recent riots targeting the United Nations (UN) out of frustration with the lack of tangible peacebuilding outcomes and a visible impact of its core mandate, the protection of civilians.

Over recent years, new theories of change have gained ground that moves beyond traditional peacebuilding activities and instead focus on the positive contribution of the arts and popular culture to conflict transformation. By stimulating artistic expression, the reasoning goes, it is possible to address trauma, channel anger and frustration and defy the status quo in a non-violent way, bring together fractured communities, and formulate alternative visions for a peaceful future in the public space. This policy brief reports on research on the potential for art to contribute to peace in eastern Congo. Eastern Congo is home to a vibrant grassroots art scene that is already politically engaged, addressing questions of peace, conflict, and political change through creative expression and popular culture. However, there are important blockages to a bigger role for art in conflict transformation, to do both with the role of art in society and the contested impact of international organisations on the art scene. This brief explains that it is important to understand these context-specific constraints to assess what meaningful pathways exist for outside support to grassroots conflict transformation through the arts.

'Artivisme': the grassroots artists that drive change in Congo

For about a decade, a more politically assertive art scene has emerged in eastern Congo. Goma and later

Beni have become home to a vibrant scene of politically conscious young bloggers, rappers, DJs, plastic and performance artists, photographers, cultural centres, activists, stand-up and theatre makers, and cultural organisers.

Its members often refer to the movement as 'artivisme', merging art and activism under a single heading. As the painter Justin Kasareka puts it, in eastern Congo's urban hub Goma, 'to be an artist is to be an activist'. The emergence of more vocal artists coincided with the rise to prominence of the nonviolent activist collective *La Lucha*, (short for 'Lutte pour le Changement', fight for change), which spearheaded a form of political activism different from traditional party politics, premised on what its militants call *la luchologie*, a set of principles to keep the movement nonviolent, non-partisan, and prevent the centralization of power. *La Lucha* also renounces funding from political parties or NGOs, on the premise that it may compromise their independence. *La Lucha* has since developed into a protest movement to reckon with, with chapters in urban centres around the country. In Goma, the style of *La Lucha* seemed to have spawned a contagious form of political awareness that spread among urban youth, leading bloggers, rappers, cultural organisers and theatre-makers to adopt 'artivism'.

Some of the artivists run cultural centres where they engage with youth; another branch concerns popular musicians who explicitly engage conflict and political accountability in their songs. Idinco Delcat, a young musician from Beni, is one of them. He is an active member of *La Lucha*, meaning he commits to independence from political ties or NGO funding, and most, if not all, of his reggae songs, have a strong political message. Take his song *État de Chaises* (State of Chairs). It reflects critically on the State of Siege announced by the government in the east of the country to give the army leeway to deal with the proliferation of armed groups. In his lyrics, Idinco (sometimes also spelt Idengo) criticises the government for using the pretext of the state of siege to suppress civil activism, with the refrain going like

State of Chairs:

Dictatorship, violence

Civil Society? Buried Alive!

Human Rights? Buried Alive!

Pressure Groups? Buried Alive!

He got arrested in early 2021 after releasing a song called ‘crooked politicians’, listing politicians by name—including the president—as crooks. After his subsequent release from prison, he produced a new song, ‘mad government’, a happy, uplifting melody accompanied by lyrics calling the president crazy, his entourage crazy—the whole government crazy: ‘they don’t work, they don’t care!’ Another sunny reggae tune starts with sweet voices chanting, Oo-ooh, pays de prisonniers (‘oo-ooh, country of prisoners’), and continues by explaining how everyone in Congo is captive—youth, mothers, fathers—by swindling politicians, by neighbouring countries, by bad political agreements, but the politicians themselves are also imprisoned, held captive by ties and logics they can’t escape. In Goma, the rapper Blackman Bausi also weaves social and political criticism through his lyrics, taking on the very notion of power (‘kiti’ in Kiswahili) and its pursuit as an evil haunting his country. Blackman Bausi and Idinco Delcat are very popular among urban youth in Beni and Goma, and their music circulates widely on social media.

A final branch of artists critically engages societal questions in a distinct way, by putting to use the debris that signifies the ruins of past development promises and transforming them into probing question marks. As Bob White, the anthropologist of Congolese music, put it, art can help make sense of everyday life, and in the ruins of past developmental promises that Congo is, everyday creative solutions for survival become a form of art and social critique (White 1999: 167). Thus, in reassembling and repurposing the debris of past infrastructures and technologies, these artists prompt us to consider everyday acts of survival as art, and their art as being a mirror of the broader Congolese art of fending for oneself. Reflecting on their work, artist Freddy Tsimba explains that ‘Our work feeds on chaos, given that we are a population constantly inventing new ways to survive’. Their work—which often features artworks assembled out of used bullet shells, machetes, and other waste resulting from conflict—has been received with international acclaim for providing a home-grown critical reflection on Congo’s predicament.

The four faces of art in Congo

However, there are some important blockages to the transformative potential of art in Congo. To understand these blockages, it is necessary to understand the politics of art in Congolese society.

While most people know Congo because of its history of violence, its biggest export product besides copper is music. From Dakar to Cape Town, Congolese music has been a staple in bars and clubs for decades. As the famous Congolese singer Fally Ipupa put it, ‘Congo feeds the musical planet.’ In Congo itself, music is ubiquitous, blasting out of bars, clubs, and the omnipresent speakers lining the streets of even the most modest agglomeration. There’s no celebration without dancing. Popular culture—in its musical incarnation—is thus a fundamental part of the human experience for Congolese.

So, what is the role of Congolese art in society? What is its transformative potential?

Because everyday life in Congo is for so many saturated with misery and conflict, and because politics suffuses everything, the most significant role of popular culture is that it offers people a break from that harsh reality. If war and the overbearing weight of politics and poverty is the normal condition, then paradoxically, it might be necessary to look for the subversive in the production of a ‘moment’ and ‘space’ purposefully devoid of any political content; if ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe 2003) is the order of the day, then, as the Congolese choreographer DeLaVallet Bidiefono puts it, by expressing the desire to live, ‘art is the only form of resistance’ (Kodjo-Grandvaux 2017).

Second, and flowing from the first, given widespread poverty and adversity, ‘emancipation’ for many artists in Goma simply means advancing in life. As one artist stated, ‘Art is to make a living; if people anywhere—Europe, Japan—buy it, all the better! Like for all artists anywhere, there’s nothing wrong with making a living’. Perhaps more than in some other contexts, money is power in Congo, and emancipation means getting rich; it is a way to obtain power—whatever the way. Thus, again, notions of personal or collective emancipation cannot be analyzed outside of the context within which they operate.

The third face of art in Congolese society is its political face. As a legacy carried over from colonial times, the ‘public space’ in Congo is often a stage, a site of scripted interaction between art ‘from above’ and the public. Performances in the public sphere in Congo were a key tool of power for Mobutu, whose programme of cultural ‘authenticity’ hinged on a ‘society of spectacle’ (White 1996): what was called *animation politique* entailed mass music and dance

performances that were carefully staged by, and subservient to, Mobutu's rule. Indeed, Mobutu was fond of saying that 'happy are those who sing and dance', and even at the height of the crisis, his public appearances were always accompanied by 'happily' dancing *citoyens*. Even the most famous of Zaire's legendary rumba singers could not escape this and had to 'sing the praise of power' (White 2014), singing songs specifically to support Mobutu.

Today, Congo still has some trappings of what Clifford Geertz famously called a 'theatre state' (Geertz 1980), in which the ritual and scripted performance of statehood is central to the production of the spectacle of power and the political subject as a 'big man'. Consequently, public performance is heavily politicised and policed. To organise a performance or meeting in a public space, one must apply for many permissions that will be scrutinised by all matters of political and security agents and carefully surveilled by the police. As a result, many artists would think twice before being too critical in public space or even calling their work 'political'. Instead, their work is often targeted at elite cultural consumers and foreign audiences. Over the past years, several musicians who have been too critical of the regime at home, have been arrested. Many are émigrés.

The fourth face of art in Congo is patronage. Also, a legacy of the subservience of culture to power, musicians must have important patrons and are embedded in patronage networks. As a result, many artists feel compelled to carefully tread the relations of power in Congo and nationally, to avoid stepping on the toes of the powerful and be sure to publicly compliment their benefactors, to ensure future work. In a context where art is not a salaried job or a sector with public funding, artists are dependent on their patrons. This also defines the way in which international NGOs who have funded Congolese artists are perceived: yet another 'patron' funding artists who thereby lose their critical potential to the incentive to 'sing praise to power'. This should be understood within a larger critique of aid in Congo, where one strand has been to reproach Congolese government officials from staging a 'masquerade' to Western donors—publicly performing compliance with reforms while subverting them in practice (Trefon 2011) and another strand has instead critiqued the aid industry of retaining top-down control over programmes that claim to support bottom-up initiatives by local civil society (de Heredia

2017, cf. Vogel 2016). It is for this reason that one observer posits that aid-funded art in Congo is haunted by 'Mobutu's ghost' (Ndaliko 2020), because it is subject to the same problematic relation to power as cultural production was in Mobutu's Zaire, only now with different centers of power as the point of reference for the dynamics of cultural patronage and silence.

Recommendations

This brief has provided the reader with an understanding of the transformational potential of art in Congo, outlining which grassroots art initiatives exist that engage conflict and peace. It has also provided an overview of the—often structural—challenges that 'artists' face in engaging difficult topics. This leads to the following implications for efforts to support the transformational potential of the arts in Congo:

- Donors interested in supporting the art's critical potential in Congo should be aware that there is a big risk that outside financial support for local grassroots artists will reflect negatively on the supported artists, as a form of co-optation limiting their freedom of expression, because of engrained patterns of patronage.
- Furthermore, financially incentivising artists to publicly engage in contested issues should be subject to due diligence scrutiny because it may put them at risk of being framed as 'foreign agents' or even arrestation by government forces.
- Funding can be leveraged by contributing to core funding for already existing public institutions such as the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Kinshasa, which has played a big role in spawning the new generation of critical artists.
- To enlarge the potential of art to contribute meaningfully to the public space, donors should engage the Congolese government to respect its commitments to free expression in the public sphere, thus helping to support the conditions that allow grassroots initiatives to thrive.

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The Project

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