Interview – Christoph Vogel

Written by E-International Relations

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Christoph Vogel is a researcher, investigator and writer with over 15 years of experience in analysing politics and conflict across Central Africa. He is a co-founder of Ebuteli, a Congolese research institute on politics, governance and violence, and runs suluhu.org, a platform promoting researchers from the Global South. Most recently, he served as Research Director of the Insecure Livelihoods Series, a collaborative project between Institut Supérieur Pédagogique Bukavu, DR Congo and Ghent University, Belgium. Christoph is the author of numerous newspaper articles, analytical reports and scholarly publications, including the book *Conflict Minerals Inc.* (Hurst Publishers and Oxford University Press, 2022) based on his award-winning dissertation at the University of Zurich. A former UN Security Council expert on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Christoph has worked for a wide range of academic and other organizations such as New York University, London School of Economics, Cologne University, Rift Valley Institute, World Bank, the United Nations, ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

That's a tough one to start with, as there are probably as many debates as there are conflicts across the globe. One of the themes that I find fascinating is to understand the multiple motivations and aspirations that participants in conflicts have – whether combatants, elites or civilians. The study of conflict is by definition a complex endeavour, and it is hard – sometimes outright dangerous – to do rigorous research in situations of violence and insecurity. To a certain extent, this has promoted a lot of remote research as well as a tendency to conduct investigations based on our assumptions rather than actual empirical data and authentic voices from the ground. Bearing in mind these challenges of access and reliability, I consider current debates on mixed methods for the sake of triangulation as well as the use of novel methodologies – such as GIS to complement ethnographic insights – highly salient.

Another aspect, somewhat linked to that but going beyond specific conflicts, concerns the broader epistemologies that guide research on conflicts and violence. Here, we often observe the persistence of fixed narratives and frameworks that can leave little space for grounded analysis. Working with both researchers that call a conflict zone their home as well as with active current and former participants of conflict, including the adoption of their own emic concepts has therefore become a recurrent focus that helps me to balance my own positionality, as well as dominant paradigms in mainstream research.

Finally, a lot of my curiosity goes into understanding the political character of conflict. We now know that most if not all conflicts in the world are rooted in a certain degree of contestation, grievances and political visions of conflict protagonists – even if they can trigger massive violence or proverbial war economies. This, in reverse, creates a challenge whereby we must make sure to explain the multiple drivers and logics of any conflict we study without succumbing to *pars pro toto* or crude generalization.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I began studying conflict in the late 2000s, somewhere half-way through my studies, the global academic community interested in conflicts and violence still depended by and large on paradigms set by classic political science, international relations and certain strands of economics. Usually white, male authors such as Collier,

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Rotberg, Fukuyama to name but a few, and their grand catch-all theories and studies had a disproportional impact on how students would approach any particular case study. Yet, almost none of them has any significant empirical experience on situations of protracted crisis and violence. Voices from the ground and dissenting theories used to have little space in syllabi and public discourse. While that remains the case until today, there is a slow but gradual opening towards more interdisciplinary and collaborative research. In my case, studying a bit of an eclectic mix between political science, area studies, geography, sociology and anthropology, as well as my initially accidental and later on more consistent engagement on the ground in different conflict zones – not just as a researcher but also as a humanitarian and UN worker – has provided a much necessary widening of my own scope and toolbox to approach and understand confusing and contradictory observations.

Yet, looking at the world from a longue durée perspective, some of the broader global changes appear rather minor. The dominant post-Cold War view in conflict studies centred much on globalisation as a key shaping force on how inter-state and intra-state conflicts evolve. However, if we look at the intercontinental entanglements in trade, politics and culture that have existed for so many centuries and even prior to what is seen as the age of colonialism and imperialism, globalisation is anything but a late twentieth century phenomenon. One thing though, that certainly changes the world rather quickly, and the ways in which we look at it, is the technological revolutions that frame late-modern capitalism in the early twenty-first century. Not only do we have an entirely different set of tools to follow on salient and less publicised world events by the minute, this type of progress also increasingly defines the conduct of warfare and the ways in which narratives are made and diffused – not only in so-called high-technology wars such as the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan but also in the so-called small wars like in eastern Congo, the Central African Republic or South Sudan often wrongly considered peripheral.

How does your interdisciplinary approach, combining political anthropology, critical geography, and conflict studies, shape your understanding of conflicts and political dynamics in the Central African region?

I am very convinced in general that disciplinary boundaries help to structure the evolution of specific theoretical schools and specific frames of thought at best. There is certainly some merit in having a range of social science disciplines to make sense of the world – including on politics and conflict in particular regions – from different angles. Yet, and Central Africa is a stark example for that, any deeper understanding of social dynamics requires combining different perspectives. The conflict in eastern Congo, for instance, has been dragging on for some three decades now. By now it has become another kind of "Thirty Years War" even if it is in reality an assemblage of multiple crises and conflicts, some framed by recurrent dynamics and others rooted in specific, situated logics.

Despite wide recognition of the complexity – a word often used as an empty shell rather than an analytical category – a lot of academic and journalistic writing on eastern Congo remains guided by tired clichés and mono-causal explanations, whether due to laziness, parsimonious editors or the need to appeal to audiences with little patience for conflicting and paradoxical explanations. Two classic themes are the ideas that violence in eastern Congo is either driven by ethnic hatred or by greed. To be fair, this is not 100% plain wrong: the larger conundrum of eastern Congo's violence includes the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, and its consequences across the border, as much as instances of pillage.

However, reading genocide as purely driven by deadly hate against the Other means to underestimate the political project, the planning of the genocide and the factors enabling it – notably, international complacency. In a similar vein, seeing pillage as an isolated and unique objective of conflict fails to explain why economic accumulation has only featured prominently in certain moments throughout the 30 years of larger and smaller wars. Needless to say, the imagery of mindless greed and hatred also reconfirms broader racial, colonial stereotypes assigned to Congo's wars from foreign observers, while international corporations, governments and consumers benefit most from Congo's riches.

In your recent book *Conflict Minerals, Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviourism in Eastern Congo*, you explain the negative impact of the Western campaign against 'unethical' mining on the eastern Congo's political economy and stability. Could you briefly explain which nuances and specificities of conflict in

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the eastern Congo the Western campaign failed to recognise?

In driving the idea that Congo's conflicts are driven by minerals only, international campaigners are mistaken in several ways. First and perhaps most easily, the most important mining business in Congo is copper and cobalt in the southeastern part of the country, which has barely been affected by armed groups. Artisanal mining in the conflict-affected Kivu and Ituri provinces represents an important livelihood to communities as well as traders and smugglers but remains one among many sources of revenue for conflict actors. Secondly, eastern Congo's conflict began years before coltan or other minerals became an issue, suggesting that other root causes stood at the beginning: notably these are the politics of land and identity, the breakdown of Zaire, the geopolitics of the Great Lakes, but also the long trajectory of political manipulation and dispossession since colonial times or before.

But campaigners were not only factually wrong in how they described the Congolese conflicts. There was an intended push to break down what they saw as a messy, complicated story into something that is easy to grasp, and literally tangible through the direct link between the "digital minerals" of Congo and the smartphones of all and sundry in Europe and North America. This single story was convenient not only for PR reasons, but also for its neat link to how Central Africa has historically been constructed in global public imageries, alluding to a type of weak, permeable underbelly of global extraction that is both backwards and in need of civilisation but also savage and dangerous. This framing placed campaigners and policymakers into a text-book White Saviour role, justifying new forms of regulation aimed at cutting the link between violence and global supply chains. Yet, while this failed to recognize that violence is inherent to mining and supply chain capitalism anywhere, it was useful to implement new models of extraction and trade, forcing local producers into monopoly without addressing much of the persisting dynamics of smuggling, violence and armed mobilisation.

How have miners in the eastern Congo themselves responded to try and mitigate the disruption and structural violence fostered by Western policies?

Wherever there are top-down policies being implemented in contentious situations or on contested issues, there are uneven, surprising trickle-down effects. Anthropologists like Sally Falk Moore or Anna Tsing have written extensively on how this plays out in political, social and economic matters. The case of artisanal mining communities in eastern Congo is not very different. Miners and other stakeholders, such as local traders, have responded with a wide array of coping mechanisms and creative escapism. There was a lot of adherence by lip-service, as Western policies have tried hard to co-opt the very networks dominating mineral extraction. As local mineral markets found themselves hostages of a new supply chain management, many miners and traders have employed some sort of "forum-shopping", by which they pragmatically find avenues to work both inside and outside the regulatory framework.

Conflict actors, in turn, have become more ingenious in camouflaging illicit activities or turn to other opportunities to make ends meet. Taxation, preferably through roadblocks and checkpoints, as Peer Schouten demonstrates in a wonderful recent book, has long been and remains the most versatile way of financing rebellion and armed conflict. Tragically, this also shows that the fight against conflict minerals has actually less affected those apparently targeted, but rather led to the dispossession of civilian populations. If in some cases this has even prompted ex-combatant miners to return to arms, it has generally weakened mining communities who have fewer alternative livelihoods.

Do you think the failure of the campaign against 'unethical' mining will serve as a lesson learned for the international community, or do the drivers of such mistakes, like White Saviourism and colonial frames, remain too entrenched?

Unfortunately, there is not a whole lot of hope for lasting, substantial change. Colonial mindsets are a very human thing that goes far beyond racial inequality and broader international frames of Othering. They are stubborn relational logics that can exist between any groups of peoples at any level. White Saviourism as a particular form of colonial thought is as hard to tackle. It took nearly ten years of annual OECD conferences for many stakeholders to understand that not only such frames are misleading and reproduce structural violence but also that the use of ethical arguments to justify massive intervention into a complex minefield of regulatory and politico-economic questions has somewhat backfired as a whitewashing of broader inequalities that have little to do with the actual conflicts in eastern

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Congo.

Moreover, despite growing evidence that conflict minerals are not the main cause of violence and displacement in these conflicts, renewed crises such as the return of the M23 rebellion since late 2021 are now again framed by a new generation of journalists, analysts and policymakers as resource-driven – even though this rebellion does not control any mining sites. At the same time, Western governments and the global public remain selectively attentive to Congo's conflicts. Portly long-term engagements such as the UN peacekeeping mission in the region or the billion-dollar aid industry are kept on course as much as possible, while the less costly but more complicated and draining political engagement suffers from a lack of attention and competing geopolitical interests by key players of the international community. Coupled with Congo's own governance problems, this creates a powerful and stubborn form of inertia through which violence fragments but continues in essence.

How do you overcome the challenges of conducting research in conflict zones?

It's hard to do a good job in listing and explaining the entire set of challenges that comes with doing research on and in conflict zones, but perhaps a couple of points can contribute to the multiple ongoing debates around the ethics, politics, and logistics of it. Personally, after some 15 years trying to understand conflicts in eastern Congo and beyond, a big risk is to remain stuck in déjà-vu and a slowly petrifying attitude towards seemingly replicating and repeating phenomena. There is no silver bullet to avoid that but trying to remain scientifically and also personally engaged with the evolving dynamics of conflict zones – notably by regular and sustained presence – seems crucial to keep questioning oneself as well as simplistic framings by others. Yet, this comes with ethical challenges: what is my, or our, role in conflict zones far away from one's home, what about whiteness, masculinities and other positionalities? How do we interact and collaborate with the people we talk to and work with? Again, there is no silver bullet, but there is no alternative to at least pushing these reflections and debates and remaining open to new and possibly contradicting viewpoints.

Then, of course, on a more practical level, there are questions of access, safety and legality. Many conflict parties are increasingly framed as terrorist groups by governments fighting them, so engaging raises legal concerns. The global marketplace of political analysis raises serious questions as to whether research on conflict serves the cause of knowledge and peacebuilding, or rather partisan interests of governments. Similar to humanitarian action, academics face growing pressures of partiality that can restrain access to all sides of a conflict and the capacity to generate objective results. Finally, one's own safety and that of others participating in research is perhaps the most basic challenge. While I have seen cases in which a lack of caution or a deliberately daring approach have led to nefarious consequences, I am still lucky and grateful to not have encountered any major issues immediately relating to my presence or action. Nonetheless, without looking for it, there have been cases where colleagues and I got caught in crossfire and similar dangers. Needless to say that any arrogant and irresponsible approach is rather useless for analysis – there is no situation in which one can conduct a calm conversation on important matters when bullets fly. Hence, while it would only benefit propaganda and Orientalist thought if researchers scrapped any intimate engagement with conflict zones, the very first thing in any project or trip remains to carefully discuss feasibility and safety.

You also lead suluhu.org, a platform for open-access publishing, decolonial consulting and current affairs analysis. What motivated you to start this platform and what are its main objectives and goals?

This platform has somewhat organically emerged from an erstwhile blog that I mostly ran between 2008 and 2015. Back then, there was little nitty-gritty and day-to-day analysis beyond the international mainstream media, and writing about current events did not only contribute to a narrow space of conversation with Congolese and international colleagues, but also helped me understand things better and ask questions I would not otherwise have asked. Many of today's online media in Congo and its neighbouring countries did not yet exist and social media still largely had a blind spot when it comes to the region. At some point, my own regular blogging began leaving me in want of reading more of what others think. Together with friends from a local internet radio that had just emerged a few years earlier in Goma, we set up a blogging project called Amani Itakuya – "peace will come". In two series, 50 different contributors – from youth activists and fellow researchers to artists and even ambassadors – chose their respective

angle to write about. No strings attached except some link to questions of peace and conflict. From trauma and arts to business and legal questions, authors were diverse and covered an even more diverse set of issues that mattered to them.

After that, it became somewhat an automatism that researchers and activists from the region would regularly pitch ideas, allowing me to train how to edit and to keep the platform alive as I lacked time to blog due to hunting my doctoral degree and stints in jobs where I could not regularly blog. Other than that, the platform also benefitted from a number of collaborative projects, such as on mapping armed groups or open letters on the conflict minerals issue. Finally, the glaring absence of young Congolese colleagues in international academic journals led Ben Radley and I to set up a kind of modest and makeshift open-access, online journal. Although we were probably a bit optimistic as to the workload and vision, there are as of now 8 Suluhu Working Papers that have gone through a self-organized, barrierless process of publication, and are cited by other works. In parallel, a small Great Lakes-heavy crowd has conducted a couple of research consultancies under the banner of suluhu.org and under a clear framework of equal pay and equally distributed influence and participation in both data collection and research as well as drafting and recommendations. Currently, alas, the platform lies a bit fallow owing to reasons as mundane as the cycle of life, with families taking over more of our time and dedication, but the objectives and ideas around suluhu.org remain issues that keep echoing elsewhere.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of conflict studies?

There are many 'old' scholars that may consider me a 'young' one, so I should try to be not professorial. It is really important to be hungry without eating others. Hungry in the sense of never be satisfied with the knowledge one can have, and always look for new things and understand old things better – but not at the expense of others. This is not about polite-seeming altruism, it is respect and a portion of egoism. Respect your colleagues, especially those called "assistants", publish with them. Epistemic erasure is now finally a topic, but barely a decade ago this was not the case. A comprehensive approach to collaboration – from data collection to final paper – is not only a way to recognize and respect the hard work of others, it makes for better research and contributes a substantial part to one's own intellectual development. The shoulders on which you stand don't always immediately appear as giant.

Also, take every-day and laypeople concepts seriously. Embracing what may sometimes seem little scientific at first sight is not only an invitation to understand things outside one's own analytical frames, it is also useful to control existing theoretical ideas by juxtaposing emic perspectives. Also, even if it is often recommended not to be emotionally attached, try to develop a reasonably passionate relationship with the places and people important to your work, but regularly check yourself (and have yourself checked by peers) so as to not develop partisan or extremist views. And finally, conflicts are deeply political. Good research on conflict ideally is apolitical with regards to partisan differences, but this does not mean it should not be political about values and rights of anyone affected by violence. Some of this is very bad advice, because it is virtually impossible to fully apply it, but it has helped me to remind myself of it whenever I can, and to keep trying.