The Role of Emotions on Individuals Decisions to Join Armed Groups in Eastern Congo

Researchers:

Raul Sanchez de la Sierra

Sector(s): Social Protection

Fieldwork: Marakuja Kivu Research

Location: Sud and North Kivu provinces, Eastern Congo

Sample: Around 100 villages

Initiative(s): Crime and Violence Initiative (CVI)

Target group: Men and boys Rural population

Outcome of interest: Violence

Intervention type: Cash transfers Crime prevention

Partner organization(s): USAID, GiveDirectly, UK International Development

Fragile and conflict-affected states with weak government presence offer a fertile ground for armed and terrorist organizations to impose their own governing structures. In these settings, it remains unclear whether economic or personal motivations are larger drivers of individual participation in violent groups. By leveraging a unique, long-lasting relationship with an armed organization in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the researcher aims to better understand who joins armed organizations and why, as well as the effect of the participation motives on performance inside the group.

Policy issue

Fragile and conflict-affected states with weak government presence offer a fertile ground for armed and terrorist organizations to impose their own governing structures. The success of armed organizations in these settings relies on their ability to nurture popular support and continually enlist new recruits. Understanding who joins armed organizations—and why—as well as what factors determine individuals' performance and trajectories inside these groups, is crucial for deterring this form of violence. However, it remains unclear whether economic or personal motivations are larger drivers of individual participation in armed groups. This research proposes to shed light on this matter, by assessing the role of personal beliefs in motivating participation in armed groups.

Context of the evaluation

Despite the long-standing presence of humanitarian organizations in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), more than 100 armed groups remain active in the region and approximately 4.5 million people remain internally displaced.[1] Persistent conflict and weak government presence in rural communities generates a conducive environment for armed groups to install their own state structures, enlist new recruits, charge taxes, and maintain power through violence. In the provinces of Sud and North Kivu, in eastern DRC, over 100 villages are controlled by a large scale armed organization.

Armed organizations in eastern DRC often mobilize support and recruit new participants through village-level information campaigns. This mobilization strategy—aimed at shifting beliefs and shaping individuals' preferences—is not unique to violent actors. NGOs, for example, also often organize campaigns to build sensitivity on issues such as sexual violence, discrimination, or basic state governance. In the case of armed groups, they use these types of campaigns to promote their ideology, reinforce narratives of victimization, and activate underlying sentiments, especially affecting individuals whose relatives have experienced violence from other groups.



Congolese riders participate in a demonstration to demand justice for the murder of civilians killed in a protest in Goma in 2023. Photo credit: Arlette Bashizi | Reuters

Details of the intervention

Leveraging a long-standing collaboration with an armed group, the researcher will conduct a randomized evaluation to better understand who joins armed organizations and why, as well as the effects of participation motives on individual performance inside the group. The researcher will have access to monthly administrative records of the armed organization and will be able to track their operations, recruitment campaigns, and new recruits.

Policy actors and economists commonly hypothesize that the decision to join armed groups is driven by material motives and rational thinking. As a result, governments often provide financial assistance in an effort to deter participation. To test this hypothesis, the researcher will randomly provide cash transfers to a subset of households in villages under the control of the partner organization. Surveyors from the Marakuia Kivu Research Center will visit these villages after recruitment campaigns take place in order to evaluate whether cash transfers can reduce the likelihood that vulnerable individuals join rebel groups.

It is also possible that victims of armed organizations might be more drawn to join these forces as a way to avenge themselves or others. To measure individuals' exposure to victimization, the research team will collect household member data to map their social networks and establish a full history of their relationships with members of armed groups. They will also collect data on a range of psychometric measures, including anxiety, depression, and cognitive abilities.

Results and policy lessons

Evaluation ongoing; results forthcoming.

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1. "Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo," Council on Foreign Relation, accessed April 22, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo