

State Fragility: Some Reflections

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Some examples

Take aways:

What we have learnt

The missing knowledge

How to do it

Research Studies in Democratic Republic of the Congo



THE LANDSCAPE OF ARMED GROUPS IN EASTERN CONGO

October 2020

ITURI

Armed Groups

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- **The question**

- Some places: absence of central state
 - People use violence, and organize it
 - Sometimes they use force for banditry/expropriation
 - Other times, they use force to create state functions
- ## the question
- When do armed actors create state functions?
 - Taxation, protection, monopoly of violence
 - Naïve conjecture: economic incentives?

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- **Challenge:** No state, no statistics
- **What the study does**
 - Recall data collection
 - Quasi-experimental (large shifts in commodity prices)
- **Answer:** Armed groups routinely develop state functions
 - When they find an economic interest in it
 - Resemble European trajectories

Flaws in the approach and later progress

- **Implications for state-building**

- “Monopoly of taxation without a monopoly of violence” (ReStud 2024)
- Implications: when the state is “weak”
 - confronting armed groups can undermine their incentives to protect
 - Bargaining with armed groups can destroy the state

- **This ignored the really existing institutions: customary chiefs**

- “From Indirect to Direct Rule” (*working paper*)
- Implications: the logic of colonial empires institutions, but also of weak state governance

- **This ignored the social origin of these armed groups**

- Community creates militias, through chiefs, to provide security
- Implication: demand and conflict theories of state formation co-exist

2. Whither Formal Contracts? (ECMCA 2021)

- **Question**

- what is the effect of expanding a weak state contract enforcement?

- **Field Experiment** (Bukavu)

- Create a market, to experiment with state contracts and observe who pays

- **Findings:** nuances notion of weak state and suggests informality has advantages

- Society has governance of transactions that compares with state (ethnic)
- The state can actually enforce contracts, but controlled by dominant groups

3. The Real State (AER, 2024)

- **Some problems that motivate the inquiry**

Traffic jams in Kinshasa



3. The Real State (AER, 2024)

- **Question:** How is Corruption organized and how does that matter?
- **The study: Kinshasa 2015**
 - Drawing on years of relationships along with anthropologist and insider
 - Commanders agree to vary (experimentally) aspects of corruption scheme
 - Civilians, Min of Fin, Transport Agency to create data collection systems (160)

3. The Real State (AER, 2024)

- **Descriptive findings**

- A scheme called “quota system” based on coalition of officers inside stations
- Generates 5 times more income than that which is visible in statistics
- Based on *extorting* drivers

- **Experiment findings**

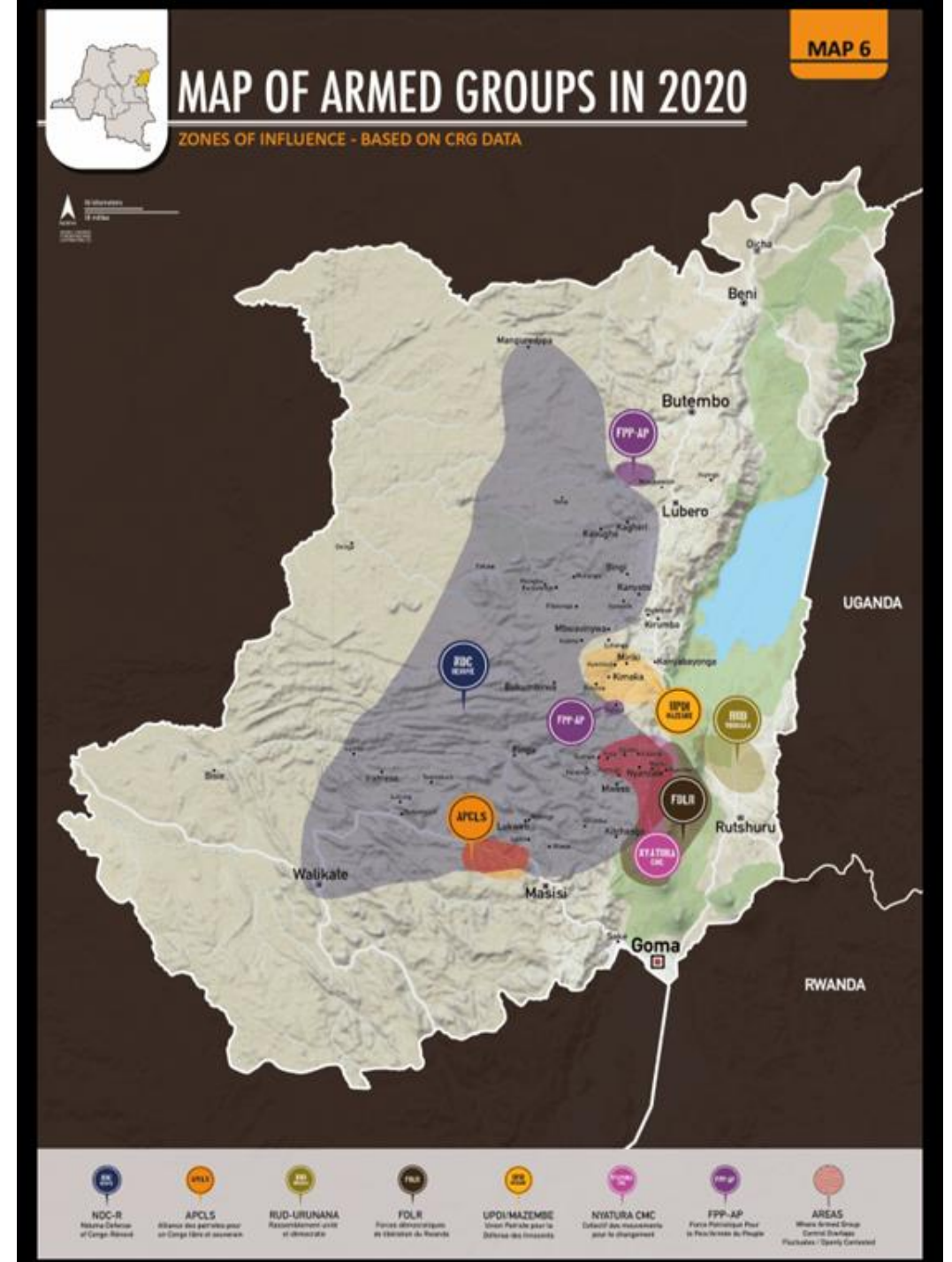
- The scheme is costly for public service (traffic jams, accidents, deterrence)

- **Implication**

- The *really existing* state actually has capacity
- Funds officials income, operating costs, but also undermines some service

4. Moral Violence (2025)

- **Question:**
 - Do social preferences fuel violence?
- **What the study does**
 - Major armed groups of DRC
 - Real-time monitoring system inside HR division
 - 10-year long personal friendship
- **Answer**
 - Joiners are more prosocial than the rest
 - Joiners suppress their empathy to enemy
 - Environment of morality of war
 - that justifies joining and killing enemy (genocidal)



Some take-aways I: What we have learnt

- **Better to think of state functions than of “states”** (state system)
 - The provision of those is deeply embedded in informal institutions
- **Formal state can undermine stability of informal state functions**
- **Nuances notion of weak state**
 - Not that it can't do, but that it does not want to (society has taken over)
 - Not weak actually, but you just can't see how it works (real governance)

Some take-aways I: What we have learnt

- **Historically**, most societies have been in a form of “fragile states”
 - The “Weberian” state is an anomaly in the historical process
- **Intellectually**
 - There is a gap: since Douglas North, economists study institutions (again)
 - But how those work in “weak” state is poorly understood
- **Contribution to humanity’s experience**
 - “the contribution of this tradition to the general experience of humanity” (Paths in the Rainforest, Vansina, 1990).

Some take aways II: Three types of questions

- **Can “we”? Policy**
 - Technocrat advice: long-run vs short-run trade off (applicable?)
- **Understanding fundamentals of human collective behavior**
 - Social democratic mission: consultant for the people of fragile states
- **Understanding causes and effects of events of historical importance**
 - Eg. Effect of the slave trade today
 - Important for social justice but also for implications of critical junctures

Some take aways II: The missing knowledge

- **Descriptive studies**

- “We” don’t know anything about how society organizes itself in a fragile state (only the participants do, which are rarely the researchers)

- **Quasi-experimental studies**

- Critical junctures

- **Experiments about institutions**

- More than about what works – inductive research to contribute to cumulative knowledge about how fragile state institutions work

Some take-aways III: How to?

- **Creation of measurement where there isn't**
 - Extremely high reward to creative measurements
 - Creation of data collection capacity (e.g., Marakuja)
- **Personal friendships/relationships**
 - For the efficiency of data collection (labor relations)
 - To develop the questions in the first place
- **Ethical and legal risks** (IRB is not prepared, legal counsel, local actors)

Some Take-aways III: How to? *Positionality*

Some Take-aways III: How to? *Positionality*

- Who are the “fragile states”? European Imperialism
- Who are the “researchers”? Typically from US/Europe
- Who is the audience of the researchers: Typically from US/Europe

“We”: who is we and who is we talking to and what for?



Some Take-aways III: How to?

- **Implications**

- Research on Fragile States is at its infancy
- This is precisely why the “anthropological” side
- This is also why must reflect on relationships of power
 - Who you want to be as a human being
 - But just as important for quality of research

Some Take-aways III: How to?

- **Fielwork and qualitative human-centered work**
 - You cannot do social science without doing qualitative work. It is the very basis of it.
- **Embracing subjectivity:** « *Subjectivist social science* »
 - Physics: cannot talk to apples or ask them how they feel
 - Social science: infinite ways of acquiring knowledge (body language, probe, spend time together, share experience)
- **Social Science Technology: Empathy**
 - Affective empathy
 - Emotional empathy
 - Cognitive empathy