**Title:**

# What makes people (dis)engage in violence? A Micro-Level Analysis of Choices, Incentives, and Expectations in Eastern DRC

## Abstract

This study seeks to understand why individual combatants engage and disengage with armed groups in Eastern DRC. By combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the study reveals the motives of individuals to engage, or not, in violence as multiple and intersecting. Nevertheless, the results show that vulnerability to poverty and to violence plays an important role in armed mobilization and suggest that discontent arising from relative deprivation plays a central role. Besides abduction, self-reported motives for engaging in armed groups include: contributing to ousting political regimes considered predatory; personal and community protection; finding employment alternatives, and the pleasure of exercising agency. Whilst social desirability biases need to be considered in self-reported motives, in the Eastern DRC socio-political and security context, the results of triangulation appear to corroborate that participation in armed groups is largely grievance-oriented. However, socio-cultural diversities linked to fractionalization of ethnic communities, coupled with violence and polarization, have hindered combatants from achieving their goals and relieving their grievances in practice. Instead, grievance-oriented claims have resulted in the widespread criminalization of violence. The study first traces violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo from the colonial period onwards. The recurrence of wars and violence has both resulted from and reinforced state fragility, damaging the state's capacity to mediate and tackle the root causes of violence at individual and community micro-levels. For too long, public resources and private opportunities have been distributed among the few, enabling a tiny elite to secure and sustain political allegiances, at the expense of the well-being of the Congolese majority. As violent conflicts beget more violence, within a fractionalized and polarized socio-cultural context, the legacies of colonial forms of violence have been retransmitted and reproduced to exacerbate the tendency for recourse to violence targeting those considered the source of Congolese problems and warfare. Drawing on key colonial archives and literature that have been repeatedly transmitted from colonial times to the present, the thesis finally emphasizes the importance of decolonizing dominant ethnicity-based and greed-oriented explanations of violence. In particular, the study stresses how traditional authority informs 'autochthony' and this fuels violence based on collective victimization narratives. Although their socio-economic insecurity has not been reduced, many ex-combatants express the feeling of being tired of combat life as well as disappointed with the programs aimed at their reintegration into local communities. Considering that grievance-related motives lie behind many individual decisions to participate in armed groups, the failure to meet expectations that motivated engagement in violent conflicts, coupled with failures of DDR programs to achieve their objectives, result in three layers of discontent, described in as triple discontent.