

Conflict In the Democratic Republic of Congo: Causes, Consequences, and Immediate Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the causes, consequences, and immediate solutions to the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), aiming to identify structural and external drivers, assess their social, economic, and humanitarian impacts, and suggest practical interventions. The study's problem was the persistent insecurity, weak governance, resource competition, and foreign interventions that fueled violence, displaced millions, and hindered development. The study was guided by three research questions: What were the leading causes of conflict in the DRC? What were the social, economic, and humanitarian consequences of the conflict? What immediate strategies or interventions could effectively address the conflict? Secondary data from scholarly articles, reports, and official publications were analysed, while realism and liberal institutionalism provided the theoretical framework to explain the drivers of conflict and potential solutions. The study revealed that the conflict was driven by resource competition, weak governance, ethnic tensions, and external interference, resulting in displacement, human rights abuses, economic disruption, and humanitarian crises. The study concluded that sustainable peace required strengthened institutions, inclusive governance, humanitarian support, and coordinated peace interventions. The recommendations emphasised governance reform, socio-economic support, and immediate security and peacebuilding measures.

Keywords: Conflict, Democratic Republic of Congo, Causes, Consequences, Immediate Solutions

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most paradoxical states in the world, endowed with vast natural resources yet plagued by chronic poverty, underdevelopment, and persistent conflict. Rich in diamonds, gold, coltan, cobalt, and copper, the DRC has the potential to be one of Africa's wealthiest nations. However, since its independence in 1960, the country has experienced political instability, weak institutions, authoritarian rule, and cycles of war, leaving it among the world's poorest and most conflict-ridden nations. This paradox has drawn global attention, making the DRC a prominent case in studies of the "resource curse," fragile statehood, and African geopolitics (Economic Commission for Africa [ECA], 2024; Al Jazeera, 2025).

The roots of the DRC crisis trace back to the colonial period under Belgian rule, when exploitative governance prioritised resource extraction over institutional development. At independence, the country inherited a fragile state, an inexperienced political elite, and deep divisions. Within weeks, the DRC faced army mutinies, secessionist movements, and political assassinations, culminating in decades of authoritarian rule under Mobutu Sese Seko (1965–1997), characterised by kleptocracy, repression, and weakened state structures (Amnesty

International, 2024). By the time Laurent-Désiré Kabila ousted Mobutu, the state was incapable of maintaining territorial control (Newsly, 2025).

The late 1990s marked the onset of what has been termed “Africa’s World War,” following Kabila’s rise to power. The ensuing regional conflict involved nine African states and over two dozen armed groups, fuelled by competition over resources and political influence. Although the Sun City peace agreements (2002–2003) formally ended large-scale war, the eastern DRC remained unstable, with militias, warlords, and criminal networks continuing to dominate the security landscape (Britannica, 2025).

At the core of the conflict is competition over natural resources. Minerals such as coltan, essential for electronics, have financed armed groups and attracted regional and international actors seeking economic gain. The dynamics of “conflict minerals” link local violence to global supply chains, illustrating that the DRC crisis extends beyond domestic and regional concerns (ECA, 2024). The humanitarian impact has been severe. Millions have died from violence, disease, and starvation, while millions more remain displaced or have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. The eastern provinces, particularly North and South Kivu, have witnessed systematic sexual violence, recruitment of child soldiers, and widespread human rights abuses, making the region one of the most dangerous in the world for civilians, mainly women (United Nations [UN], 2025).

International interventions, notably the United Nations missions MONUC and MONUSCO, have sought to stabilise the country but with limited success, hindered by weak governance, corruption, and the complexity of the conflict (Al Jazeera, 2025; ECA, 2024). These challenges underscore the difficulty of achieving lasting peace in the DRC without addressing the underlying structural, political, and economic causes. Given these dynamics, studying the DRC conflict is both academically and practically significant. Understanding its causes, consequences, and potential solutions is critical for designing interventions that promote stability, governance, and sustainable development. This study situates the DRC conflict within broader debates on state fragility, resource governance, and peacebuilding, aiming to identify pathways toward durable peace and regional stability (Newsly, 2025; UN, 2025).

Given this background, it is imperative to examine the causes, consequences, and immediate solutions to the DRC conflict. Understanding the historical, political, economic, and social drivers is crucial for designing effective interventions that address both short-term humanitarian needs and long-term structural challenges. The study seeks to explore the dynamics of armed conflict in the DRC, focusing on the interplay between internal vulnerabilities and external influences, and on their impact on civilian populations, governance, and regional stability. Additionally, the study aims to identify viable immediate solutions that can reduce violence, protect civilians, and create pathways toward sustainable peace and development.

Statement of the Problem

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continues to experience protracted conflict despite its immense natural resource wealth. Decades of potential instability, weak governance, ethnic rivalries, and competition over strategic minerals have entrenched a cycle of violence that has devastated the country's social, economic, and political structures. Armed groups, militias, and foreign-backed proxies remain active, particularly in the eastern provinces, perpetuating insecurity, human rights abuses, and mass displacement. The humanitarian consequences are severe, with millions of deaths, widespread displacement, and systemic sexual violence, while international interventions have achieved limited success in restoring

stability. The persistence of these conflicts underscores the failures of both domestic and regional mechanisms to address the underlying causes, including resource exploitation, institutional weakness, and historical grievances. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the causes, consequences, and immediate solutions to the DRC conflict.

Research Questions

The following research questions were extracted from the statement of the problem.

- i. What are the leading causes of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
- ii. What are the social, economic, and humanitarian consequences of the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)
- iii. What immediate strategies or interventions can effectively address the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) conflict

Conceptual Clarification

Conflict: According to Beji and Andrew (2017), conflicts are inevitable and inherent in all interdependent relationships, even in the teeth and tongue, organs of the human body that conflict with each other. Conflict is normal in human relationships, and it serves as the motor of change. Conflict has been misunderstood by many who regard it as necessarily negative. Conflict is often associated with war, fighting, anarchy, misunderstanding, stress, crisis, aggression, and arguments. People who hold such a harmful view of conflict tend to handle it destructively. The point is that most remarkable developments in the world have arisen from conflict situations.

According to Adejo (2019), conflicts have intended and unintended consequences. He further stated that the intended consequences are predictable, but the unintended consequences are nuances that actors in an unfolding conflict did not anticipate. From the foregoing therefore, most of the intended consequences of conflict will be discussed later and how to analyse those conflicts, But for the unintended consequences of conflicts, Adejo (2019) presented a scenario of Nigeria's multiple violent conflicts that have thrown up unintended consequences such as; how to explain how people who had lived so peacefully in an environment for centuries could suddenly find the mere presence of each other intolerable; the emotions which ethnic conflicts stir and the scars they paste on people are incurably deep and fundamental; the reprisals such conflicts generate with unimaginable consequences; the spate of political and social distrust; the dilemma of vulnerable groups as women, children, aged, the behaviour of peace keepers especially the unconscionable level of extortion, rape disorganised local economies etc. the spread of small and light weapons with the attendant unintended consequences.

In Africa, conflicts are often shaped by colonial legacies, artificial borders, resource competition, and weak institutions. Scholars such as Jackson and Rosberg (2011), cited by Monteh (2024) and Kasera (2025), emphasise that post-colonial states inherited fragile governance systems that failed to integrate diverse ethnic groups. In the DRC, a country with more than 200 ethnic groups, this problem is especially acute. Ethnic-based mobilisation, compounded by external manipulation, has perpetuated violence since independence in 1960 (Stearns, 2011; Autesserre, 2010).

Empirical Review

Muyingi (2013) examined the relationship between conflict and Development in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), highlighting the limited research on conflict resolution as a pathway to national development. Drawing on participatory development and conflict resolution theories, the study argues that sustainable development in the DRC depends on

collective, peaceful efforts to address conflict. The study provided a historical analysis of the political and institutional factors that shaped conflict dynamics and hindered development. The study identified discrimination reinforced by policies such as Zairianisation and radicalisation as the major driver of conflict and economic decline. Despite peace agreements in Lusaka (1999) and Sun City (2002), conflict persists because not all actors participated in the negotiations. Weak institutions, governance failures, poverty, and inequality further impede conflict-resolution efforts. The study recommended and concluded that Development in the DRC requires peace, justice, equality, and strong institutions committed to inclusive and sustainable conflict resolution.

Pellillo (2012) conducted a study on conflict and development: Evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The study's problem was to ascertain how local conflict and insecurity affect household economic welfare across the DRC. Purpose of the study was to quantify conflict's micro-level economic effects of conflict. The study used georeferenced household surveys merged with conflict event data, along with instrumental-variable and regression analyses to identify causal effects. The theory adopted was a conflict-development framework linking insecurity to asset loss and economic decline. The study found that conflict measurably reduces household durable ownership and living standards; localised violence lowers investment and asset accumulation. Persistent insecurity has long-term negative economic impacts at the household level, constraining recovery. The study recommended prioritising local security, protecting property rights, and targeting livelihood rebuilding and infrastructure to restore economic activity.

Autesserre (2010). *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. The study's problem was why international peacebuilding in the DRC repeatedly fails to stop violence. The Purpose was to explain the persistence of violence despite significant international interventions. Extensive fieldwork (330+ interviews), multi-site case studies, and qualitative analysis of local dispute dynamics were used. The study is anchored in local-level conflict theory, emphasising grassroots drivers over top-down explanations. Findings from the study show that international actors overlooked local disputes (land, authority, resources); peacebuilding models were overly national/institutional and missed local conflict drivers. Sustainable peace requires addressing local grievances and adapting interventions to everyday politics. The study recommended reorienting interventions toward local dispute resolution, strengthening local governance, and adapting peacebuilding practices to on-the-ground realities.

Lubunga (2016) investigated the impact of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Purpose of the study was to explore causes of mass sexual violence and broader humanitarian impacts. Field interviews, NGO/UN reports review, qualitative synthesis of conflict patterns and victim testimonies. Gendered conflict and wartime sexual-violence frameworks linking war economy, impunity, and social breakdown were adopted. They uncovered that sexual violence is widespread and systematic; conflict dynamics, weak rule of law, and militia economies drive atrocities and social disintegration. In conclusion, humanitarian, social, and development outcomes are severely undermined by gendered violence and impunity. Strengthen the rule of law and accountability, expand survivor services, and disrupt militia financing (natural-resource traceability and anti-illicit trade measures) were recommended.

From the related studies reviewed, the paper found that little had been said about the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo: its causes, consequences, and immediate solutions, which is the gap the paper intends to address.

Methodology

The paper adopted secondary sources for data collection, including published and unpublished publications, internet documents, and textbooks. The data gathered from these secondary sources were analysed qualitatively using a thematic approach or content analysis.

Causes of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The following causes were identified as the main drivers of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Competition over natural resources: The DRC's vast deposits of minerals like coltan, cobalt, gold, and diamonds make resource-rich areas battlegrounds. Armed and rebel groups fight to control mines and smuggling routes to finance their operations (Bongomin, 2010).

Weak governance and poor state authority: Chronic corruption, weak institutions, and failure to provide services have created "power vacuums" that militias exploit. The state's inability to enforce law and order encourages the growth of armed groups (Englebert & Tull, 2008).

Ethnic and historical divisions: Colonial-era border-drawing and "divide and rule" policies grouped diverse ethnic communities, often along historical rivalries. Those inter-group divisions remain a significant source of tension over land, political representation, and identity (Amnesty International, 2024).

Regional and foreign interventions have significantly contributed to conflict in the DRC, as conflicts in neighbouring states, particularly the 1994 Rwandan genocide, triggered massive refugee inflows and the entry of armed groups into eastern Congo, deepening insecurity (Autesserre, 2010; Prunier, 2009). External actors have also supported rebel groups in pursuit of political or economic interests, further fueling instability (UN Group of Experts, 2012; Stearns, 2011).

social, economic, and humanitarian consequences of the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Humanitarian and Social Consequences

Widespread violence against civilians: armed clashes have led to mass killings, injuries, torture, enforced disappearances, and targeted attacks on non-combatants (Amnesty International, 2024)

Gender-based and sexual violence: conflict-related rape and sexual violence, including against women and children, has been systematically used as a weapon of war (Amnesty International, 2024)

Displacement and refugee crisis: millions of Congolese have been forced from their homes. As of recent years, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees is among the highest globally (UNHCR, 2022)

Breakdown of health, water and sanitation services: many displaced persons and host-communities lack access to clean water, sanitation, shelter, and health care leading to disease outbreaks, maternal-health risks, and deteriorating living conditions (Oxfam International, 2024) **Threats to children and education:** children in conflict zones face heightened risks of

violence, abuse, displacement, and disruption of schooling undermining their well-being and prospects (UNICEF, 2024)

Economic Consequences

Widespread poverty and food insecurity: conflict disrupts agriculture, markets and livelihoods. Many households lose assets, employment opportunities decrease, and food scarcity rises, leaving millions in deep poverty (UNDP, 2024)

Collapse of basic economic infrastructure: destruction of roads, markets, farms, and service infrastructure reduces trade and economic activity, stalling Development and increasing dependence on humanitarian aid (UNDP, 2024)

Economic stagnation and shrinking GDP: ongoing instability strains the national economy; businesses and supply chains are disrupted, discouraging investment, reducing growth, and limiting economic resilience (UNDP, 2024).

Immediate Strategies or Interventions can Effectively Address the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Conflict, these strategies include;

Rapid protection of civilians and secured humanitarian access expand civilian-protection patrols, safe corridors, and negotiate humanitarian pauses so aid can reach IDPs and besieged communities (humanitarian corridors, medical & WASH services, GBV support). (UN OCHA, 2025; UNICEF, 2025).

Immediate, intensive, high-level regional diplomacy (AU, SADC, UN, bilateral mediators) to secure a ceasefire and constrain foreign interference; intensive, high-level regional diplomacy (AU, SADC, UN, bilateral mediators) to end external backing of proxies and obtain troop withdrawals or stand-downs. (UN experts; Reuters reporting on Security Council actions, 2025). (Rationale: stopping external support lowers rebel capacity and creates space for stabilisation).

Targeted sanctions, arms-control measures and disruption of the war economy. UN/UNSC or partner states should impose targeted asset/visa sanctions, arms embargoes, and financial measures against leaders and networks profiting from mineral trafficking; strengthen mineral-traceability and anti-smuggling measures. (UN Group of Experts / Security Council briefs; World Bank recommendations on conflict finance).

A temporary multinational stabilisation force with a clear protection mandate deploys a neutral, well-resourced regional or UN-mandated force focused solely on civilian protection, securing humanitarian routes, and preventing mass atrocities (with strict rules of engagement and accountability). (Security Council discussions on MONUSCO transition; Crisis Group analyses).

Rapid scaling of humanitarian response and cash-based assistance fund, and prioritise lifesaving food, shelter, WASH, health (including treatment for GBV survivors), nutrition and temporary cash transfers for displaced households. (UNICEF; IOM Crisis Response Plan; Global Humanitarian Overview).

Immediate support for rule-of-law actions and accountability fast-track investigations of grave abuses (attacks on civilians, sexual violence, attacks on aid workers), protect witnesses, and refer priority cases to national or international mechanisms to deter impunity. (OHCHR / UN experts).

Fast-track Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and short-term livelihoods programs offer secure and credible exit packages (cash, skills, community reintegration, and immediate small-scale livelihoods) to reduce incentives to rearm. (AU/World Bank SSR & DDR guidance).

Scale community-level protection and local mediation, funding local peace committees, customary authorities, and civil-society actors to mediate disputes, protect returnees, and restore local social cohesion while national negotiations proceed. (Autesserre; humanitarian protection guidance).

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted both realism and liberal institutionalism as a theoretical framework. The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) can be explained through a dual-theoretical lens. Realism and liberal institutionalism Realism as advanced by Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979), which explains its causes in terms of power struggles, resource competition, and external interventions helps understand the causes of the conflict, highlighting how competition over natural resources, ethnic tensions, weak state authority, and foreign interventions reflect actors pursuing power and security in an anarchic environment. Conversely, Liberal Institutionalism, as proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), highlights the role of international institutions, peace agreements, and humanitarian programs in promoting conflict resolution and stability. This theory provides insight into potential solutions, emphasising the role of international and regional institutions, peace agreements, humanitarian interventions, and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programs in mitigating conflict and promoting stability. By combining these perspectives, the study captures both the structural drivers of violence and the institutional mechanisms necessary for conflict resolution and sustainable development in the DRC.

Discussion of Findings

In the course of the research, the following were discovered;

The study showed that a combination of structural and external factors drives the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Key causes include competition over mineral resources, weak governance, corruption, ethnic tensions, and foreign interventions that support armed groups and fuel instability. These drivers collectively create a persistent environment of insecurity and state fragility.

The study further revealed that the conflict has severe social, economic, and humanitarian consequences. Millions have been displaced, communities suffer widespread human rights abuses, and essential services such as health, education, and water systems have collapsed. Economically, constant violence disrupts agricultural production, destroys infrastructure, restricts investment, and entrenches poverty and food insecurity. Humanitarian conditions remain dire, with civilians facing disease outbreaks, hunger, and limited access to basic services.

The study also found that addressing the conflict requires immediate, coordinated interventions. Priority strategies include strengthening civilian protection, securing humanitarian access, promoting ceasefire agreements, and halting external support to armed groups. Additionally, targeted sanctions, improved governance, accelerated disarmament and reintegration (DDR), and community-level peacebuilding are essential for stabilising affected regions and restoring state authority. Together, these measures can create the foundation for sustainable peace and development in the DRC.

Conclusion

Competition over natural resources, weak governance, ethnic tensions, and interventions by external actors fuel the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its devastating social, economic, and humanitarian consequences underscore the urgency for practical solutions. Sustainable peace and development in the DRC depend on coordinated international and regional efforts, inclusive peace agreements, strengthened institutions, and targeted programs such as disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration, alongside humanitarian support to protect civilians and rebuild communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the paper recommended the following;

- i. Strengthen governance and institutions enhance state capacity, promote transparency, equitable resource management, and inclusive political processes to address the root causes of conflict.
- ii. Scale up humanitarian and socio-economic support provide immediate relief to affected populations, restore livelihoods, rebuild infrastructure, and offer psychosocial support to mitigate social, economic, and humanitarian consequences.
- iii. Implement coordinated peace and security interventions. Enforce ceasefires, support disarmament and reintegration programs, restrict external support to armed groups, and promote community-level peacebuilding to stabilise the DRC and create conditions for sustainable development.

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