

Root causes of conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

Across the globe, many countries are marooned in incessant conflicts. Since the 1960s, a number of African independent states got embroiled in interstate and intrastate conflicts that obliged the intervention of the Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) especially the United Nations and to a lesser extent, the Organization of African Unity, now African Union. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), within the Great Lakes region of Africa has since then remained a theatre of conflicts. However, despite such interventions, peace and security have largely remained elusive in the DRC. The objective of the study was to examine the root causes of conflicts in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The study was underpinned by protracted social contract theory in the construction of the theoretical framework. The study used the historical research design. The study was conducted in the Eastern DRC, an area that has experienced protracted conflict for eons. The total target group comprised 257 respondents. The sample size was 85 respondents drawn from 100 questionnaires that were administered. Out of 100 questionnaires, 85 was duly filled and successfully returned represented 85% response rate. The study relied on both primary and secondary data from United Nations, African Union, and embassy of Democratic Republic of Congo, libraries and internet and presented descriptively through narrations. Interview schedules were also administered to key informants with knowledge on the variables in the study area. Questionnaires were administered to collect data. Data was presented in graph and pie-charts. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The study found out that, of the total respondents, 90.58% indicated that transnational insurgency was a major root cause of protracted conflicts in the Eastern DRC. The study concludes that, there are a number of root causes of conflict that are prevalent in the conflict-laden area of Eastern DRC. Therefore, the study recommends improvement of governance mechanisms and local participation in the affairs of Eastern DRC and that intergovernmental organizations should modernize early warning systems by integrating satellite surveillance, community-based reporting networks and regional intelligence platforms in order to enhance preventive conflict management measures to address the root causes of conflicts in the Eastern DRC.

Key Words: Eastern DRC, Natural Resources, Protracted Conflicts, Root Causes

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world a number of conflicts have been waged. These conflicts are as a result of protracted and unresolved disputes that involved various factions across racial, political and state divides. For instance, the containment of intra and interstate conflicts has been the major focus especially of the United Nations Organization. Since early 1990s, the United Nations has been engaged in a number of simultaneous, larger and ambitious operations such as those in Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Mozambique and Somalia. International Organizations, such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have conducted several military missions, within and across continents and have emerged as a security provider on the international scene, contributing strategic visions and soft conflict management instruments (Parens, 2022). NATO, a military alliance comprising 32 members in Western Europe has played effective roles in conflict management in Europe and Asia (Garcia, 2020).

Post 2000, a new wave of conflict spread through the Balkans, Syria, the sub-Saharan Africa in Libya, Central Africa Republic (CAR), and Sudan. These conflicts sprang up due to various causes, ranging from Syrian civil war that emerged from the repression of the popular uprising with heavy sectarian component. The Malian armed crisis of 2012 was understood as the fourth Tuareg rebellion of the post-colonial era. The other conflicts in Sudan, CAR, and Iraq were caused by a heavy component of competition for power and resources between different ethnic and religious factions. This led to an increase in UN operations, in Africa and the Middle East. The United Nations [UN] had nine

peacekeeping missions in Africa, one in the Americas, three in Asia, two in Europe and five in the Middle East (UN, 2012).

In the African continent, the AU has actively engaged itself in conflict management under the auspices of the Peace and Security Council and has deployed military missions in several countries such as Comoros, Somalia, Burundi and Darfur (Sudan). It has also partnered with sub-regional organizations especially the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) in fulfilment of its conflict management mandate (Adunimay, 2023). Despite the intervention of the Intergovernmental Organizations in conflicts in the DRC and Rwanda, peace and security have largely been elusive. The DRC has experienced conflicts and instability since the 1960s. Rwanda experienced genocide of the Tutsi and moderate Hutus amidst the involvement of the United Nations Organization and AU. Burundi has experienced long term instability even after the intervention of the AU. It is in this regard that this study analyzed the role of the Intergovernmental Organizations in conflict management in DRC. The DRC, within the Great Lakes Region, has been heavily affected and inflicted by conflict (Arieff, 2014).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Great Lakes Region of Africa continues to be characterized by recurrent and protracted conflicts despite decades of intervention by key Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), notably the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) (Baregu, 2011; Day, 2022). The current situation is that the region is plagued by cross-border military incursions, political instability, massive displacement of populations, and the unregulated exploitation of natural resources by both domestic elites and foreign actors. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), remains an epicenter of such crises, indicating deep-seated structural and historical grievances that remain insufficiently addressed by external interventions (Arieff, 2014).

Though numerous peacekeeping, diplomatic, and humanitarian efforts have been initiated, these interventions have often been reactive, fragmented, and poorly coordinated. More critically, they have largely failed to resolve the root causes of conflict, such as contested state legitimacy, ethnic divisions, resource competition (De Coning, 2010). The bureaucratic inertia and adherence to the principle of non-intervention embedded in the charters of both the UN and AU have constrained timely and decisive action, as exemplified in the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the DRC conflicts of the 1990s (Okoth, 2008; Kimathi *et al.*, 2024).

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) operates with an annual budget exceeding US\$1 billion, yet violence and cross-border tensions endure (Okeke & Williams, 2017; Day, 2022), raising concerns about IGO effectiveness. While MONUSCO has been in operation, more than 120 armed groups have been active in eastern DRC and more than 6.9 million persons have been internally displaced and conflict persists. This reality is contrary to what ought to be the case: International Organizations are expected to play a proactive, impartial, and sustained role in preventing and managing both intra-state and inter-state conflicts.

1.2 Research Objective

The objective of this study was to examine the root causes of conflicts in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was underpinned by protracted social contract theory.

2.211 Protracted Social Contract Theory

This theory was propounded by Edward Azar in 1990. This particular theory posits that long running conflicts arise where communal identity groups are denied basic needs such as security, recognition as well as access to institutions. Azar (1990) identifies four preconditions that characterizes protracted conflicts. He argues that communal context is key in understanding the nature of conflict. Further, he describes deprivation of human needs a precondition that exacerbates the conflict. He also mentions the role of state in governance. If the state governance poorly conflict is likely to ensue and lastly, he mentions international linkages, that is, the long running conflicts are associated with interferences from external forces. The strength of this theory is that it connects internal grievances to regional and international dependence which describes the state of conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. This theory was relevant in understanding how ethnic disputes and how a state that favors some groups, cross-border and international ties fits the four preconditions as propounded by Azar.

2.2 Empirical Review

From the foregoing literature, Majhi (2024) argued that new forms of conflict emerged after Cold War with global rise in violence aggravating the plight of the vulnerable populations. Sectarian hostilities in Northern Ireland were worsened by paramilitary groups and rising religious intolerance pointed to the persistence of ident-driven tensions (International IDEA, 2021). According to Okon *et al* (2023) linked colonial boundaries to citizenship disputes and contested authority, alongside patronage, militarization and unequal resource access. Thus, despite African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN) interventions, mineral competition in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo finances armed groups and perpetuate local power struggles. Therefore, whereas existing studies document conflict drivers across Africa, empirical evidence on eastern DRC remains limited especially on resource-driven and cross-border violence.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a historical research design to examine the root causes of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A historical design was instrumental in tracing the evolution and patterns of conflict and the corresponding interventions by IGOs such as the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU). This approach is particularly useful when analyzing complex, protracted conflicts whose roots span several decades (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Study Area

This study was conducted in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a subregion of the wider Great Lakes Region that remains geopolitically and environmentally significant. Eastern Congo, comprising provinces such as North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri, is marked by shared ecological zones with neighboring states, complex sociopolitical histories, and recurrent patterns of violent conflict that have warranted sustained intervention by Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU).

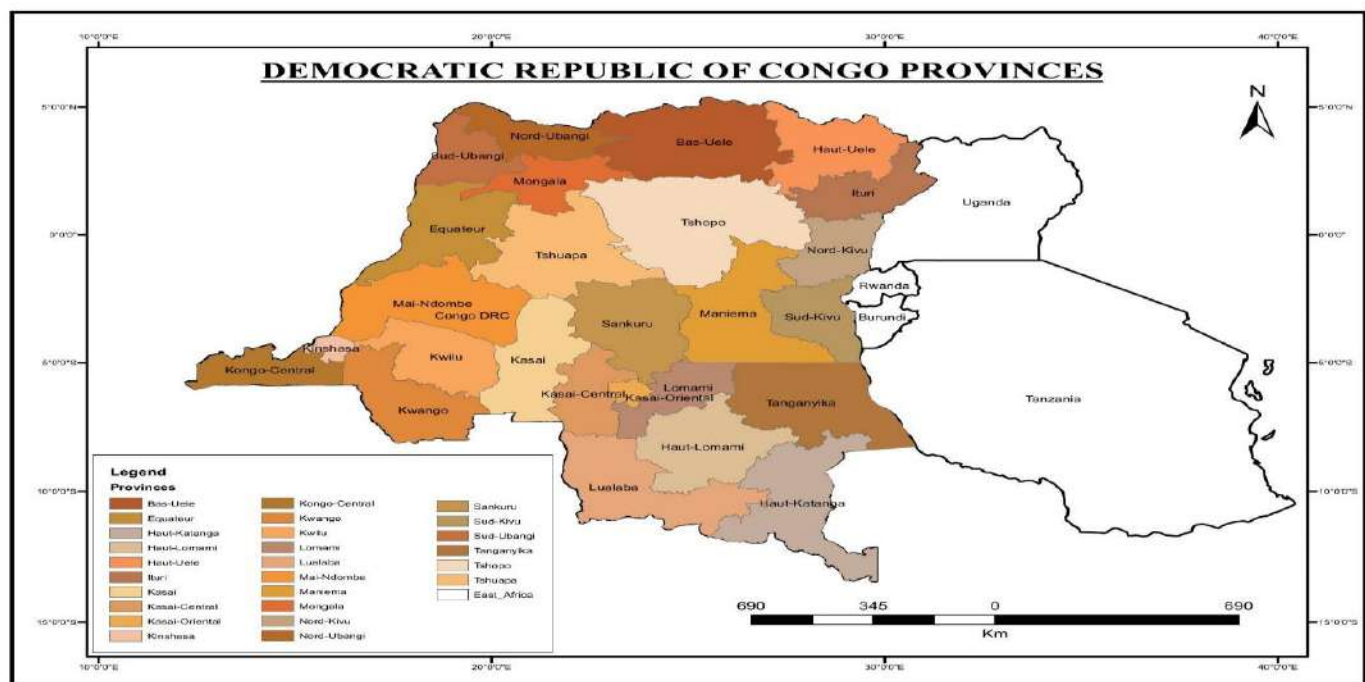


Figure 1 Map of Republic of Congo Provinces

Source: GIS,2026

3.3 Target Population

The total target group comprised 257 respondents. It consisted of official from Intergovernmental Organizations operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo(25) these entailed direct implementers and policy influencers in conflict management, Political leaders and diplomats representing the DRC(12) formed part of key decision-makers and state representatives involved in regional diplomacy, military personnel(75) provided on-ground security operations and strategic perspectives, ex-combatants(5) offered first-hand experiences with IGOs, civilians(Internally Displaced persons)(125) were the primary victims of conflict and formed part of critical

assessments from conflict interventions, from Eastern DRC especially Goma, professionals and scholars (15) with an in-depth knowledge on the study.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The study used both simple random and purposive sampling techniques. Random simple sampling was used for military personnel and civilian IDPs. Purposive sampling was used for IGOs officials, leaders and diplomats as well as scholars and civil society experts. The sample size was 85 respondents drawn from 100 questionnaires that were administered. Out of 100 questionnaires, 85 questionnaires were duly filled and successfully returned. This represented 85% response rate.

3.5 Data collection Instruments and Procedures

The study used both primary and secondary data collection methods. Data was collected using primary approach of administering structured questionnaires and key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The study adopted secondary approach to complement the primary findings. A combination of survey findings and qualitative interviews to provide a holistic understanding of intelligence -sharing practices was crucial. This combination enhanced evidence-based analysis by integrating institutional perspectives with respondents' experiences. Questionnaire was the principal instrument for collecting data supported by interview schedules.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics by way of cross-tabulations, bar graphs and pie-charts. This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitative analysis allowed the researcher to methodically classify, summarize and exemplify observations using the SPSS version 24. Further, it enabled the researcher to comprehend and draw conclusions about the phenomenon under study. Qualitatively, the researcher cross-referenced the transcript of all interviews to ascertain accuracy and reliability. A qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to develop themes systematically and arrange data into significant clusters

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is the foundational principle that guides all research endeavors, from the initial conceptualization of project to the completion and dissemination of the final study (Breen, 2018). This study sought informed consent of the respondents before actual data collection was done. Further, relevant authorizations were sought from Directorate of Postgraduate Studies at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. This served as formal request for research permit and authorization from the National Commission of Science and Technology (NACOSTI). This study avoided the disclosure of classified operational details and focused on analytical and policy insights. The researcher adhered to ethical principles such as voluntary participation of respondents, seeking informed consent and upholding confidentiality of the respondents before, during and after data collection phase.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Colonial Rule and Created State Boundaries

The study examined whether colonial rule and created state boundaries were a root cause of conflict in DRC. Out of the total respondents, 88.82% agreed that colonial rule and created boundaries were a root cause of conflict in DRC. The results are exemplified in Figure 2 and discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

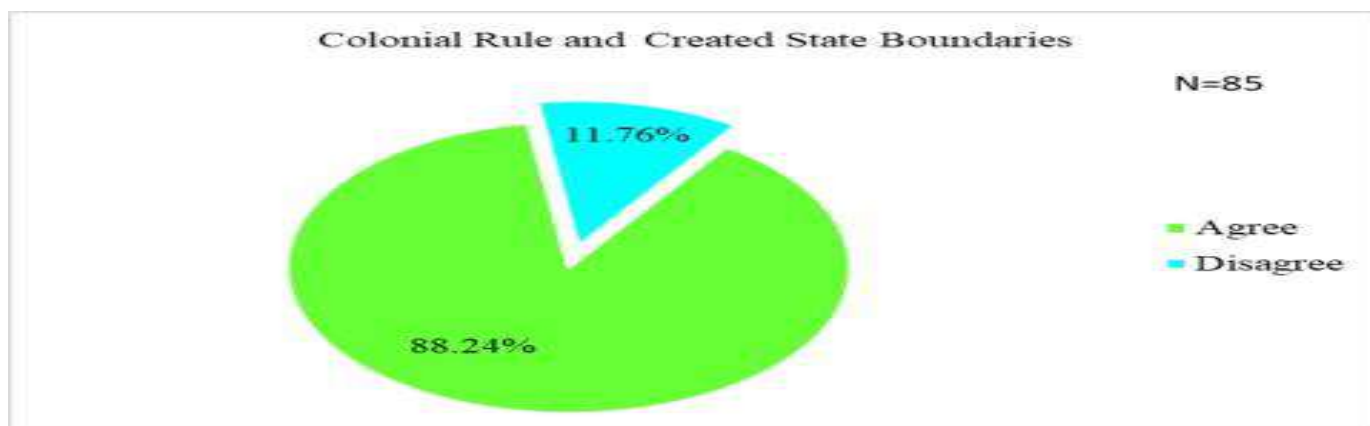


Figure 2*Colonial Rule and Created State Boundaries*

The fragmentation of European colonial empires into multiethnic governments has caused extensive intrastate violence (Adepoju, 2005), and the arbitrary nature with which European colonial powers initially drew the frontiers of African republics is a root cause of conflicts in Africa. The region has a long history of border disputes due to the imposition of artificial borders. In view of the foregoing assertion one of the respondents adduced that:

“The boundaries created have caused division amongst communities that initially lived together, by putting forth imaginary boundaries consequently one found himself in another country and in certain circumstances one ended up being a refugee or an alien in another country” (Telephone Interview with International Relations Scholar at Maseno University on 5/5/2022).

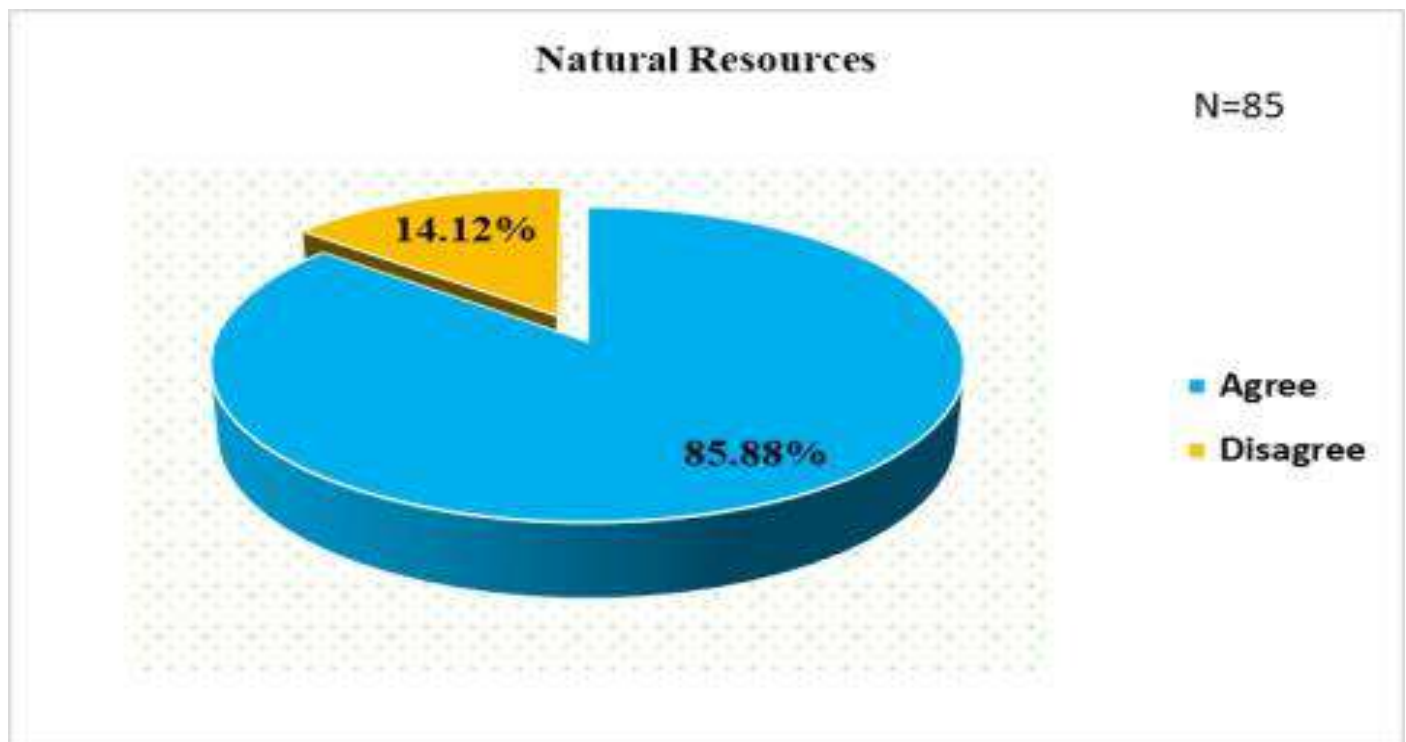
Another respondent echoed the preceding sentiment by stating that:

“There are several causes to conflict in DRC, these include ethnicity as clearly evident in Rwanda between the Tutsi and Hutus and in DRC at the dawn of independence. The fight for control of resources in DRC has been a key contributor to conflict. Minerals have evidently been used to finance the conflict in DRC as minerals are sold for arms” (Telephone Interview with International Relations Scholar at Masinde Muliro University on 10/5/2022).

Baregu (2011) supports the foregoing claims by noting that the colonial legacy of artificial boundaries erected in the Great Lake Region makes conflicts there long-lasting and difficult to resolve. Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) can be traced back to the time of King Leopold II and the subsequent colonial governments. Unchecked personal power, the use of national resources for personal enrichment, brutal repression of the people's demands for political freedom, and social divisions along ethnic and regional lines all have their roots in the policies of the various Belgian regimes (Kisangani, 2012).

4.2 Natural Resources

The study sought to examine whether natural resources was a root cause of conflict in DRC. Out of the total respondents, 85.88% agreed that natural resources were a root cause of conflict in DRC. On the contrary 14.12% of the total respondents disagreed with the examination. The results are exemplified in Figure 3 and discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

**Figure 3***Natural Resources*

Gebrewold (2016) states that as a result of colonialism, the DRC became a seriously malformed state, and that the bloodletting which has troubled the country ever since, is due to individuals and governments advancing their own economic and political aims (Gebrewol,2016). Thus, the exploitation of the DRC's natural resources is nothing new, because it has been going on ever since the country was invaded by Belgium in the 1870s. Westing (1986) asserts that the likelihood of conflict over natural resources depends on how dependent the military and industries are on the resource in the short to medium term, how the resource crosses political and ideological lines during its supply, and how competitive the territory in which the resource is located is.

Massive gold and diamond reserves, the majority of the world's columbite-tantalite reserves, numerous silver, cadmium, copper, and zinc mines, and rare minerals including cobalt, nickel, niobium, tantalum, beryl, cassiterite, and wolfram are only some of the DRC's abundant natural resources. The DRC is rich in resources, but these are not allocated fairly across the country. Seventy percent of the nation's copper and cobalt come from Katanga. Ndikumana and Kisangani (2005) state that during independence, the province accounted for 75% of national output and 20% of government financing.

4.3 Transnational Insurgency

The study also examined whether transnational insurgency was a root cause of conflict in the Eastern DRC . Out of the total respondents, 90.58% agreed that transnational insurgency was a root cause of conflict in the Eastern DRC . On the contrary 9.40% of the total respondents disagreed with the examination. The results are exemplified in Figure 4 and discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

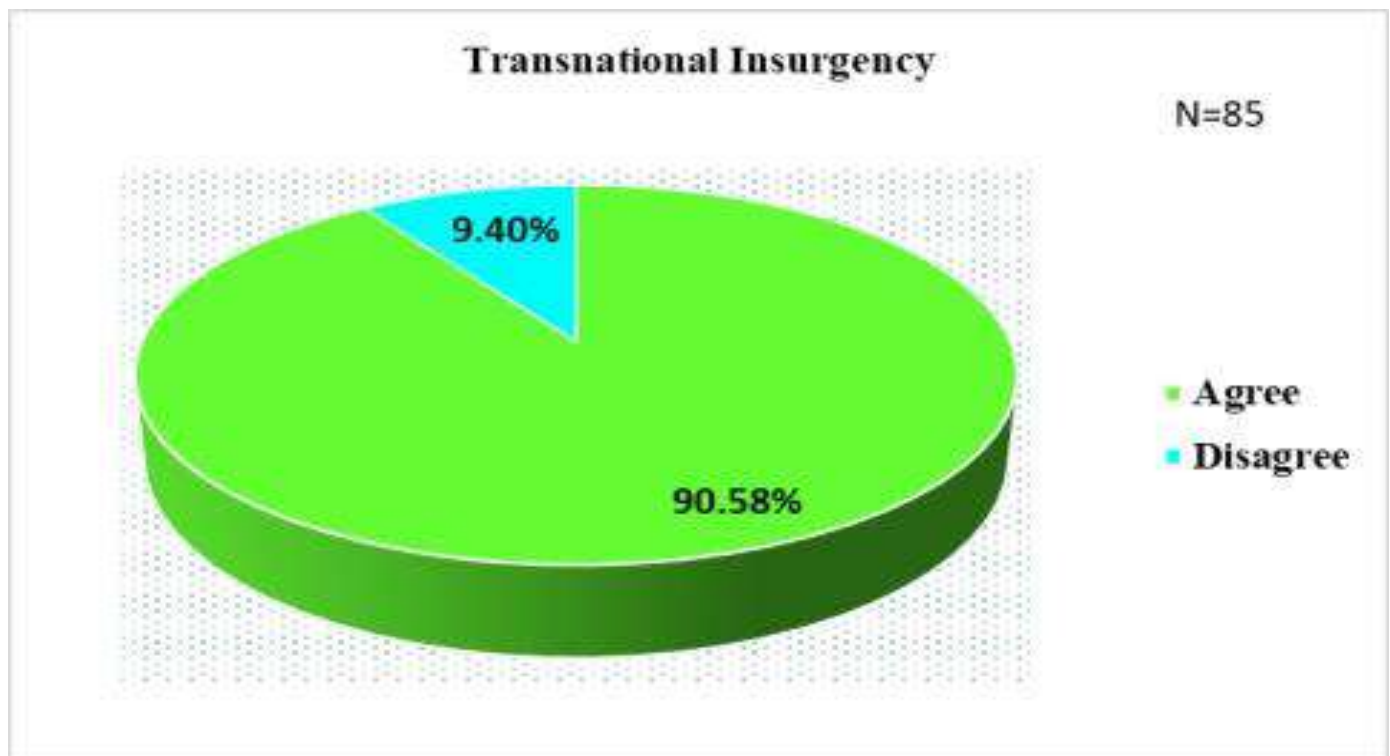


Figure 4
Transnational Insurgency

The largest African war in modern times occurred during the Second Congo War. The armed forces of eight African governments were involved in the conflict within weeks of its commencement in August 1998. The leaders of Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi all played a role in starting a rebellion in eastern DRC with the goal of toppling Congolese President Laurent-Désiré Kabila, whom they had installed a year prior during the First Congo War. However, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Sudan, and Chad quickly came to Kabila's aid, foiling their plot and resulting in a military standoff that lasted for years (Prunier, 2009).

Kisangani (2012), and Prunier (2009) agree that the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath were a major regional trigger factor for the anti-Mobutu war of 1996–1997. Ethnic hostilities broke out in the DRC as a direct result of the Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsi and its repercussions (Ndikumana & Kisangani, 2005). As it turns out, ethnic tensions in Rwanda were a major contributor to the bloodshed that followed the end of the Cold War in the Congo. Rwandan Hutu refugees, including perpetrators of the massacres, fled in the hundreds of thousands to the

eastern part of the DRC (then called Zaire) in 1994, leaving the Rwanda Patriotic Front (FPF), which was led by Tutsis, in control of the country. With the intention of destabilizing Rwanda, ex-FAR and Interahamwe (Hutu extremists) militias quickly crossed borders and launched armed incursions into Rwanda from bases in refugee camps (Ngwabo, 2016).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that there are several root causes of conflict that are prevalent in the conflict-laden area of the Great Lakes Region of Africa, Eastern Congo. These causes being colonial rule and colonial boundaries, natural resources and transnational insurgency are hardly stand alone causes but most circumstances intertwined causes of conflict in the Great Lakes Region of Africa.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends improvement of governance mechanisms and local participation in the affairs of DRC and that intergovernmental organizations should modernize early warning systems by integrating satellite surveillance, community-based reporting networks and regional intelligence platforms in order to enhance preventive conflict management measures to address the root causes of conflicts in the Eastern Congo.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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