Not going home: displaced youth after war

Timothy Raeymaekers

In preparing for a post-conflict DRC, we should be more aware of young people's aspirations, the opportunities open to them, and the challenges they face in building a decent life.

Current intervention programmes in DRC rarely focus on 'youth' as a social subcategory but tend rather to single out children or child combatants as preferable target groups. This is surprising given the current focus on 'youth bulges' in Africa and the risk such youth are believed to represent for the outbreak and re-emergence of violent conflict. Besides such negative stereotyping, very little research is done on youth employment and their opportunities for a better life in the aftermath of war.

This article outlines the findings of research undertaken in 2008 into the livelihoods of (unarmed) displaced youngsters who have settled in and around the city of Butembo in eastern DRC.[1] As in other urban African contexts, one would expect war-affected youth to face severe problems of poverty and marginalisation in eastern DRC due to precarious and badly paid work, arguably making them more vulnerable to criminal activity and recruitment by armed groups. Overall, this study confirms their

vulnerability, with close to one third of them (28.6%) forced to find a second job – mainly in petty commerce (41.6%) or agriculture (29.7%) – to supplement their daily income. As a first occupation, these displaced youngsters are employed mainly in agriculture (27.5%), petty commerce (11%) or the transport sector (6.8%); in the rural periphery these percentages expand to 70% in agriculture and 12.5% in commerce and transport together. This constitutes a major departure from their previous lives, as around half of the youngsters (52%) formerly worked as farmers and all of them come from rural backgrounds. The

majority (98%) left home because of combat and security threats.

Two observations seem particularly worth exploring. The first concerns these youngsters' aspirations to construct a home for themselves. Contrary to common belief, most displaced youngsters prefer not to return to their parental homes or agricultural backgrounds once security permits it but favour a future life in the city in, for example, commerce and services (about 40%), teaching and other forms of intellectual work (17%), artisan occupations (10%) or administrative jobs (10%). Their mentions of the city's favourable social and economic environment and potential access to work and resources suggest a fundamental shift in identity among these young people, who now consider themselves to be urbanised and detached from their rural origins. In north-eastern DRC, the combined consequences of war, rural under-development and social marginalisation have stimulated a growing urbanisation and adoption of 'modern' lifestyles by migrating youngsters – reflecting a dominant trend on the African continent as a whole.[2]

A second observation can be made, with regard to these youngsters' access to a decent livelihood. Whereas the city theoretically offers an endless array of jobs and opportunities, displaced youngsters often find themselves on the margins of the urban labour market, which continues to be delimited by sharp social divisions. A considerable segment of displaced youth in Butembo is forced to secure a daily income through petty commerce and temporary jobs, or what the city's inhabitants refer to as *bikakala* – 'through offer and demand'. Such daily labour can involve anything from digging toilets to crushing stones and carrying sand (usually done by men) to selling snacks, bananas and *aracque* (an alcoholic maize drink) on the side of the road (mostly women's work) or to loading trucks or riding traditional wooden delivery bicycles (*chukudu*) through Butembo's dusty streets. Rather than a luxury urban life full of opportunities, therefore, most displaced youngsters seem to be trapped in a daily struggle

characterised by a high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Some of this daily suffering can of course be related to their fragile social context. Even though most displaced people in eastern DRC seem to be living with host families, young IDPs are commonly only partially assisted in terms of food and accommodation, and hardly at all in terms of school fees, medical care or clothing. It might be useful to reassess the term 'host family', as it insufficiently captures the dispersed nature of Congolese households and the ways in which IDPs secure food and accommodation. A more frequent pattern among displaced youngsters is in fact that of a circular migration between their original (rural) home and their new urban home, in which the latter remains their main place of residence.

A deeper look into the mechanisms of Butembo's cash-earning economy suggests that youngsters' access to a sustainable income cannot be reduced to a simple problem of social capital, however, but is rather driven by an exploitative labour market. Access to jobs and commerce in Butembo continues to be manipulated by a closed circle of import-export traders, some of whom have a vested interest in regional conflict economies.[3] A local cartel (known locally as the 'G8') which consists of a number of family-run businesses controls the chain of imports and exports from small agricultural markets up to the border with Uganda, where commodities arrive from Kenya and the Far East. The fact that most of these businesses are organised on a family basis makes it very difficult for outsiders to gain a job in this 'second' economy (the first one – administration and services – having collapsed years ago under Mobutu). The immediate result of this is that more regular commercial jobs like book-, store- or shop-keeping are confined to a small circle of kin around these 'G8' families. Immigrant youngsters frequently refer to this mechanism as 'tribalism'.

Implications

Two conclusions could be pulled from this. On a practical level, programmes to support displaced

people in DRC might do well to single out the labour opportunities and ambitions of migrating youth. Too frequently, development interventions have been confined to either children or child combatants, disregarding the large numbers of peaceful youngsters trying to make a decent living. For some time now, the dominant tendency has been to depict urban youth in Africa as a ticking time-bomb but perhaps at least part of the problem lies in the perpetuation of the vision of African urban youth as 'alienated outcasts'[4] and their lack of social resilience.

Rather than taking for granted the economic rationale of household coping mechanisms and modes of survival, future studies should take seriously the inherently political nature of (informal) economic markets and the daily meaning that people attach to notions of access to livelihoods, power(lessness) and vulnerability. As the stories of Butembo's displaced youngsters seem to suggest, such meanings continue to be fraught with imageries and ambitions about a possible life outside marginality but inside an often closed and protectionist society.

Timothy Raeymaekers (Timothy. Raeymaekers@geo.uzh.ch) is a lecturer at the Department of Geography at the University of Zurich (http://www.geo.uzh.ch).

1. The sample consisted of 348 self-settled youngsters (190 male and 158 female IDPs) divided more or less equally between the city of Butembo and its urban periphery (Bunyuka), aged 15-36 years (with the majority aged 18-26).

2. See FMR 34 'Adapting to urban displacement' http://www.fmreview.org/urban-displacement/

3. See Raeymaekers, T (2002) 'Network War. An Introduction to Congo's Privatised War Economy', Novib, Den Haag: http://tinyurl.com/raeymaekers2002 and (2010) 'Protection for Sale? War and the transformation of regulation on the Congo-Ugandan border', Development and Change, July (41/4) http://tinyurl.com/raeymaekersDev2010

4. See Sommers, M (2003) 'Youth, wars, and urban Africa: challenges, misunderstanding, and opportunities' in Ruble, B A et al, eds Youth explosion in developing world cities: approaches to reducing poverty and conflict in an urban age, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC, pp25-46 http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/ACF1AEF.pdf