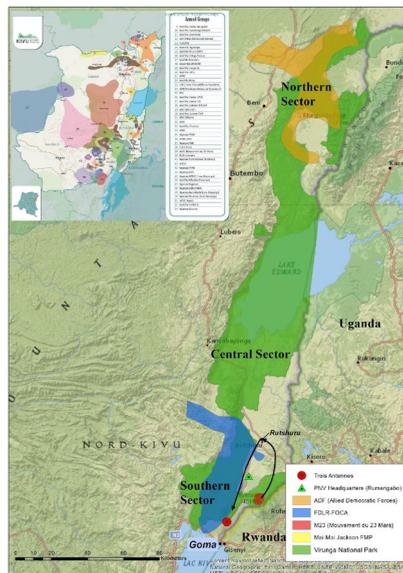


EASTERN CONGO: THE PEACE BUILDING PROCESS OF THE VIRUNGA NATIONAL PARK

Introduction: about the Virunga National Park. – Virunga National Park (VNP), in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is Africa’s oldest national park (established in 1925 as Albert National Park) and a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1976). It is located on the eastern edge of the Congo Basin, the world’s second largest tropical rainforest, in the middle of the Albertine Rift, between Uganda and Rwanda. The park area, about 7,800 square kilometers in North Kivu Province, stretches from the Virunga Mountains in the south to the Rwenzori Mountains in the north, making the VNP the most biodiverse protected area on the continent (fig.1).

Fig. 1 – *Virunga National Park, showing the locations and militias mentioned in the article. Black lines refer to M23 militia movements in October-November 2022*



Source: Elaboration by Alberto Corbino and Vincenzo Lapicciarella, based on maps from the Kivu Security Tracker and Virunga National Park

The VNP has become known as the Fire and Ice Park because of the diversity of habitats ranging from the Rwenzori peaks to the savannah and volcanic plains, which somewhat divide the park into four different sectors. The northern one covers the Semliki River region and the Rwenzori Mountains shared by DRC and Uganda, where they are part of the Rwenzori National Park. The central sector is around Lake Edward - thereby encompassing the lake sector, shared with Uganda -, the Ishasha River Valley and the Rwindi Plains, and it is characterized by the savannah vegetation of the Ishasha Plains, which extend further into Uganda's Queen Elizabeth National Park.

The southern sector stretches downward to Lake Kivu, well known for its tropical montane forests, active volcanoes such as Nyiragongo, and inactive volcanoes such as Mikeno, where one-third of the endangered mountain gorillas that are a symbol of the VNP now survive. In its most south-eastern part, the VNP borders Rwanda.

The transboundary geographical nature of the VNP should suggest that we are in the presence of a so-called Peace Park ¹, that are «biodiversity and wildlife conservation areas that straddle the boundaries of, and are managed in common by, two or more countries» (Van Amerom and Büscher, 2005). Of course,

for a Transboundary Protected Areas (TBPAs) to be recognized as a Peace Park, in addition to environmental goals, the 'establishment, creation or strengthening of international friendship' is an explicit aim of Peace Parks, as is the sustainable economic development of the communities living in or around the area (Shine, 1997).

To improve the management of this area, in 2018 the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda signed the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration (GVTC) with the goal of protecting the 13.800 km² Greater Virunga Landscape (GVL), which straddles eastern DRC, north-western Rwanda, and south-western Uganda

The Greater Virunga Landscape is abounded with both terrestrial and aquatic resources and is the richest part of the African

¹ The GVTC is not on the Peace Parks Foundation's official 2021 list, which sees no natural areas in the DRC and only one (Kagera, between Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania, listed as a conceptual TFCA - Transfrontier Conservation Area) in the region.

Continent in biodiversity species, including those that are endemic and endangered that cut across an imaginary transboundary line across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda. It is a home to over 5.164 species of mammals (including 27 Primates and 40 ungulate species), birds, amphibians, reptiles and plants. It is a home to the World's remaining Mountain Gorillas' population. More than 50% of birds, 39% of mammals, 19% amphibians and 14% of reptiles and plants of mainland Africa are found within this region².

However, these formal attempts of establishing the Virungas as a TBPA in the model of a 'peace park' have proven difficult to operationalize, being opposed by nationalist attitudes, mutual hostile perceptions, and accusations of the 'other' side by people living and working with(in) the different National Parks. This mental segregation was expressed in stories about periodic border skirmishes between different armed groups and the military from the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda carried out within or through the forest, yet official statements and media reports would only sporadically confirm those incidents, partially due to strict censorship by the government of Rwanda and Uganda (Trogish, 2021, p. 95).

In addition, in 2003 the DRC and Uganda signed a bilateral agreement for a pilot project called the Lakes Edward and Albert Integrated Fisheries and Water Resources Management Project (LEAF), supported by the African Development Fund (ADF). This agreement was reconfirmed in 2018 (LEAF II), which covers

the Lakes Edward and Albert basin, which are part of the series of Rift valley lakes shared between the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Uganda. The Lakes and their catchment cover an area of about 622,472 km² and have an estimated population of about 12 million persons. The Lakes are characterized by over exploitation of main fisheries species, deforestation, insecurity as well as climate change impact all compounding the poverty levels in these areas [...]. LEAF II aims to create an enabling environment and to strengthen the legal, policy, institutional and regulatory

² Source: GVTC's website: <https://greatervirunga.org/>.

framework for sustainable management of natural resources and protection of the environment. It will also contribute to the creation of alternative incomes opportunities and food security for men and women in the fishing communities. The project will, in essence strengthen capacity of government institutions to promote environment-friendly interventions in the use of the Lakes' resources and promote regional trade and exchange (African Development Bank Group, p. IV).

Lake Edward, as mentioned, is part of the VNP, while Lake Albert borders the Bugungu Nature Reserves in Uganda, so protected natural areas are only on one side and, technically speaking, one could not speak of TBPA, as described above. Technicalities aside, there is no doubt that any bilateral or multilateral agreement to conserve natural heritage and improve human livelihoods through it is welcome and should be considered a good sign in a region where diplomacy and politics have failed so many times in recent history.

The conflict realpolitik. – Relations between these three countries have been and still are very complicated. The past two decades were succinctly but precisely summarized by a recent African Report article (Blanshe, 2022), which points to 10 key moments in the countries' recent history, starting with the Rwandan genocide in 1994 that «ended with the Hutus' flight into the DRC and other neighboring countries as well as the capture of the state by Paul Kagame's Rwanda Patriotic Front».

The list continues with a series of serious accusations against each other (DRC minerals looted and smuggled into Uganda and Rwanda) or hostile actions (Rwanda closed its main border with Uganda for almost three years) and concludes with what is happening as we correct the final drafts of this article³ with

DRC publicly accusing Rwanda of aiding the M23 rebels» and the Uganda president's son «Kainerugaba (who) expressed support for Kagame in Rwanda's row with the DRC over M23, even as he's supervising Ugandan army operations against ADF⁴ in the eastern Congo (Blanshe, 2022).

³ 24 November 2022.

⁴ Presented by the jihadist organisation Islamic State (EI) as its branch in Central

The DRC has witnessed two long and bloody wars in contemporary history. In addition, what we are witnessing today is only the latest chapter in a civil war that has been going on for more than two decades, a war that does not say its name, to use the term that gives the title to Jason K. Stearns' latest work (2021).

Serious armed conflict has roiled the DRC, through different permutations, at least since 1996. The early phase of the conflict received considerable media and diplomatic attention. The First Congo War (1996-1997) saw a coalition of neighboring countries band together to overthrow Mobutu Sese Seko, who had ruled the Congo for thirty-two years. His successor, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, then fell out with his foreign backers, triggering the Second Congo War, which split the country at least into four parts and lasted from August 1998 until June 2003 [...] A peace deal was negotiated in 2002 [...] The conflict became mostly confined to the Eastern Kivu region, where it escalated and fragmented, becoming more intractable. Armed groups proliferated to over 120 in 2021, fighting over often intensely local issues. At the time of writing, 5.5 million were internally displaced in the Congo, more than any other time and any other country in the world except Syria. Estimates of mortality from the conflict are contested, but it's fairly certain that hundreds of thousands have died from direct violence, with probably between 1 million and 5,4 million people dying due to humanitarian consequences, for the period between 1998 and 2007 – less than half the total conflict period between 1996 and today (Stearns, 2021, p. 4).

What about today? As I was writing this article, on July 4, I received a text message from Ms. Francesca Lanata, one of the two expert witnesses I was able to interview during my last trip to the region—the seventh in five years—in March 2022: «I am in Rumangabo and the situation is very tense, it is not known if we will be evacuated tomorrow. The number of refugees

Africa (ISCAP in English), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) group is accused of being responsible for the massacre of thousands of civilians in eastern Congo and of having committed attacks in Uganda (Source: Africa News, 3/10/22, <https://www.africanews.com/2022/10/03/drc-14-civilians-killed-in-attack-attributed-to-adf-rebels/>).

around here is impressive and obviously no one is looking after them, as usual». Rumangabo is a small village-actually a row of wooden and tin houses-in North Kivu province of the DRC, where the VNP headquarters is located and which, at the time, housed, in addition to rangers, civilian staff working for the Park in various capacities, including my correspondent. Continuously deteriorating security conditions and, before that, the Covid-19 pandemic and Ebola outbreak in the northern part of the region kept tourists away for a couple of years. Our small delegation⁵ as allowed to visit the area with a special permit to enable us to carry out the cooperative activities that take place a few hundred meters from the main gate of the park headquarters, thanks in part to the invaluable support of VNP itself. The chaotic situation to which Ms. Lanata referred had begun a few days earlier, when the M23 militia group-one of the most active among the approximately 120 reported throughout eastern Congo and its environs, according to the Kivu Security Tracker (2021)⁶ entered the village, terrorizing civilians and taking over the regular army's command post. This was despite the fact that, since April 2021, the army had also intensified its presence in the region, following the central government's declaration of a state of siege with the subsequent establishment of military rule in the provinces of North Kivu and neighboring Ituri further north.

The war shows no signs of stopping. The VNP is located in a region that its own website describes as a «low-intensity conflict zone, and rangers are deployed throughout the country, with the exception of its northern extremities, currently in militia hands, and the Masisi region in the far south, an area of lower ecological value». Over the past 25 years, the VNP's brave ranger corps has paid a heavy toll: more than 200 rangers have been killed in the line of duty, most often because they encountered armed rebel groups during their violent raids on poor villages in the area, or while carrying out other illegal activities within the VNP's borders.

⁵ Dr. Helen Pope and myself, volunteering for the Fondazione Cariello Corbino ETS (aka EartHeart), an Italian charity that as been working in North Kivu since 2017 (<https://fondazionecariellocorbino.org/>).

⁶ The conflict in Eastern Congo concerns North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika provinces.

Fig. 2 – Helen Pope escorted by David Nezebose (right) and another VNP ranger outside the gate of the VNP headquarters, with Mt. Mikeno in the background



Source: Corbino, 2022

In recent months (fig. 1), the situation has unfortunately worsened. After an initial retreat, M23 militias counterattacked again and, in late October, occupied the town of Rutshuru, about 25 km north of Rumangabo, and then started moving south again along the National Road (N2), the only wide road in the tangled vegetation. At the time of writing, the M23 has occupied Rumangabo again and is heading toward Goma, the provincial capital, encountering very little resistance from the official army and civilians called in to support the army. Meanwhile, the conflict is souring diplomatic relations between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which, as mentioned, accuses its neighbor of supporting the M23 rebels-and even expelled the Rwandan ambassador last week, although Kigali denies the claims.

In addition, other nations are joining the conflict, bringing back memories of the so-called African World War of 1998-2002.

There is no specific figure on the number of troops that will be deployed. What we know so far is that only four countries - Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Burundi - are sending their soldiers. One

thousand Kenyan troops will join their Burundi counterparts who arrived in DR Congo in early August for the joint mission against the rebels. It is not clear if Tanzania will deploy troops (Kagoe, 2022).

The latest news we receive from the DRC are pictures of thousands of people fleeing the outskirts of Goma and a message from the director of one of our projects «Today the EAC (East Africa Community) presidents met, and decided that either M23 withdraws from the areas they occupied, or the EAC joint military will attack. M23 answered they will not withdraw, since they were not asked to take part to the summit».

The resources curse. – Why the war continues to rage in the Kivu is no secret: the DRC has always been a major supplier of raw materials to world industry. First ivory, then rubber, then various minerals, even uranium for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. And today the mobile phone industry, electric batteries, all that high tech industry that is at the heart of the so-called digital ecological transition dreamed of by the EU and other developed countries.

David Van Reybrouck (2010) writes in this regard that in the late 1800s and early 1900s:

no country in the world has been as fortunate as the Congo in terms of natural wealth. In the last 150 years, whenever there has been a pressing demand in the international market for a certain raw material - ivory in the Victorian era, rubber after the invention of the inflatable tire, copper in full military and economic expansion, uranium during the Cold War, alternative energy during the oil crisis of the seventies, coltan in the age of mobile telephony. - Congo has always shown that it possesses gigantic reserves of the coveted commodity, and that it is able to satisfy the request without any problem (Van Reybrouck, 2010).

The book we cite was published in 2010. In the past 12 years, two new drivers have made their way into the world economy, that of sustainable mobility and that of the mobile phone industry. Over the same period, the share of electric cars in the global market has increased from 0% in 2010 to 8.57% in 2021, and so has the demand for cobalt, about 25% of which is used to make lithium batteries, while the rest continues to fuel the metallurgical (including military) or electronics industries.

Over 70% of the world's cobalt is produced in Kivu, and 15-30% of this is produced by artisanal and small-scale mining (Campbell, 2020). The region is also the world's largest producer of coltan (40 percent production, 60 percent reserves (Ojewale, 2021), which is essential for the cell phone industry, the number of which has increased from 122 million in 2007 to over 1.5 billion in 2019⁷.

Not to mention the presence of gold, copper, tin, manganese, diamonds, and even uranium and oil, a geological scandal, as Jules Cronet, the young geologist who first discovered the huge copper deposits in 1892, called it, as Van Reybrouck recalls in his masterpiece.

The illicit exploitation of natural resources in the DRC and the resulting gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law

could not have taken place on such a large scale had there not been customers willing to trade in these resources. Indeed, there was never any shortage of foreign buyers willing to handle these goods, despite the existence of reports denouncing the serious violations of international law committed by their trading and financial partners. Buyers included not only traders in the DRC and neighboring countries, but also private companies registered in other countries, including multinationals. Foreign companies rarely controlled the source of the minerals, and sometimes paid the armed groups directly, in a number of cases, foreign or multinational companies were directly involved in negotiations with perpetrators of serious human rights abuses, paying armed groups or providing them with facilities or logistics in order to exploit natural resources. Trafficking of natural resources in the DRC, particularly during the conflict, was closely intertwined with other criminal networks, those involved in arms trafficking. Connections with these networks enabled the perpetrators of human rights abuses in the DRC to smuggle natural resources out of the country without any difficulty, using the profits to purchase arms and commit yet further human rights abuses. The impunity for crimes committed in the context of natural resource exploitation in the DRC reflects the broader absence of justice for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law throughout the country (UN, 2003).

⁷ Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263437/global-smartphone-sales-to-end-users-since-2007/>.

The reason for this endless *war that does not say its name*, seems now evident: War suits everyone except civilians who continue to pay, for more than two decades, for the unbearable level of corruption of the political class and the almost total indifference of the international community. The world thought that the problem could only be solved by the establishment of the largest and most expensive of the U.N. blue helmet missions, MONUSCO (the United Nations Organization Mission for the Stabilization of the Congo, established in 1999 as MONUC and reconfirmed in 2010), which has now clearly proven to be totally ineffective in resolving the security situation, where violence is apparently not the exclusive preserve of rebel forces. As highlighted in several UNJHRO reports, human rights violations committed by the DRC army against civilians are indeed frequent. The reason for this endless war that does not say its name, seems now evident: War suits everyone except civilians who continue to pay, for more than two decades, for the unbearable level of corruption of the political class and the almost total indifference of the international community. The world thought that the problem could only be solved by the establishment of the largest and most expensive of the U.N. blue helmet missions, MONUSCO (the United Nations Organization Mission for the Stabilization of the Congo, established in 1999 as MONUC and reconfirmed in 2010), which has now clearly proven to be totally ineffective in resolving the security situation, where violence is apparently not the exclusive preserve of rebel forces. As highlighted in several UNJHRO reports, human rights violations committed by the DRC army against civilians are indeed frequent.

In the villages of Bushani and Kalambahiro, in eastern Masisi territory, North Kivu, on 31 December 2010 and 1 January 2011 47 women, including one minor, had been subjected to sexual violence and 12 others to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment by men in uniform identified by several sources as FADRC soldiers. During the same incident, two people were abducted (and released the next day) and at least 100 houses were looted. The incident ostensibly began as a search for weapons in the context of a joint FADRC-MONUSCO military operation, code-named “Hatua Yamana”, against a nearby FDLR stronghold at Kimua, but was perceived locally as reprisal for assumed collaboration with FDLR. The report did not positively identify the individual perpetrators but expressed concern at the slow progress of judicial investigations and the limited

cooperation between FADRC and military justice. In addition, a judicial investigation was opened, but this had not led to prosecutions at the time of reporting (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

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Local communities are totally distrustful of men in uniform, which should not be surprising considering that the absorption of rebel groups into the regular army has been one of the policies used by the DRC government to weaken the enemy, as was the case with more than 10,000 CNDP members in 2009⁸, and that there are continuous defections by regular soldiers to join rebel groups.

At the same time, as hundreds of thousands of combatants have cycled through armed groups and the security forces, a new elite of violent entrepreneurs has emerged – which I call a military bourgeoisie, controlling large part of the economy in Eastern Congo and with deep links to political elites across the country. This

⁸ At that time the CNDP (Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple) consisted in 5,276 members, but submitted an inflated list of more than the double to the Congolese army. The CNDP even integrated some Rwandans into the Congolese army, who have never been part of CNDP (Stearns, 2021).

bourgeoisie is endowed with engrained habits and vested interests, further entrenching the conflict [...] War has become a social condition, an outcome that may not have been the intended objective of any of the protagonists, but that has produced its own actors, cultures, and interests (Stearns, 2021).

Distrust also affects the UN blue helmets, who are accused of failing to fulfill their mandate. In August 2022, the international news agency *Pressenza* wrote: «on July 26 in Goma, responding to North Kivu people's protests against MONUSCO, the UN peacekeepers opened fire at head height against the crowd. At least 12 demonstrators and 3 UN soldiers died, about 50 people were injured» (Capanna, 2022). About the same episodes, CNN posted

since July 25, anti-UN protests have raged on in the DRC's eastern region, with 36 people – including four peacekeepers – dead and 170 wounded. Protesters are demanding the withdrawal of UN forces from the central African country for failing to rein in rebel groups in the east who mastermind lethal attacks against civilians (Princewill, 2022).

In this chaotic and entrenched situation, the only institutional entity that stands in defense of legality, peace, and hope for a different and more sustainable future seems to be the Virunga National Park.

The VNP in the conflict. – Why the war continues to rage in the Kivu is no secret: the DRC has always been a major supplier of raw materials to world industry. First ivory, then rubber, then various minerals, even uranium for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. And today the mobile phone industry, electric batteries, all that high tech industry that is at the heart of the so-called digital ecological transition dreamed of by the EU and other developed countries.

In 1994 VNP was placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger after civil war in Rwanda and the influx of 1.5 to 2 million refugees into Kivu province. This led to massive uncontrollable poaching and deforestation: 9,000 hippopotami were killed; fuelwood cut for refugee camps was estimated at 600 metric tons/day, depleting and erasing the lowland forests. The staff lacked means to patrol the

650 km-long boundaries, were often unpaid, and between 1996 and 2004, 105 out of the Park ranger force of 500 men were killed. The north and center of the Park were abandoned, and protective soldiery turned to poaching. Fishing villages on Lake Edward threaten the integrity of the Park. The 2002 eruption of the stratovolcano Mt. Nyiragongo above Goma, added greatly to the difficulties caused by civil war⁹.

Today about 5 million people live within a day's walk of VNP's borders and compete for its natural resources, especially charcoal for cooking food, and fertile land, drastically reducing the gorillas' natural habitat.

As a result of poverty, but also out of a sense of entitlement related to past and current grievances, people enter the park to cultivate land and access other natural resources, including fish and wood. The most destructive forms of resource exploitation, in particular charcoal production and illegal fishing on Lake Edward, are 'protected' by armed groups and the Congolese army. Many people depend on these activities for their income and for fuel. Efforts to combat these illegal practices should simultaneously address demand and supply, combining pressure on armed actors with providing alternative opportunities for livelihoods and cooking fuel.

In certain areas, people who cultivate close to the park see their crops regularly destroyed by wild animals. They receive no compensation for the lost harvest. This drives poor smallholder farmers further into poverty. It also fosters a negative image of the park. While the park has built nearly 100 kilometers of electric fences to keep animals in the park, the farmers we contacted believe the park is not doing enough to prevent or address the issue of crop destruction. Efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict must be intensified, including by building more fences and supporting vigilance and deterrence techniques (Verweijen et al., 2020, p. 5).

The VNP is thus constantly threatened by both the demands of local communities, pressure from multinational corporations to exploit its territory, and violence from rebel groups.

⁹ UNEP World Heritage Datasheet.

In April 2014, VNP director and Belgian ranger commander Emmanuel de Merode was shot and seriously wounded in an ambush after attending a meeting with a state prosecutor in Goma, to whom he allegedly handed over sensitive information about oil exploration in Virunga.

According to the VNP website, 14 armed groups, with an estimated 1,500-3,000 members, infest the Park and surrounding areas. These small but very violent groups engage in criminal activities including charcoal (makala) trafficking (see Photo 2), poaching for ivory and bushmeat, illegal fishing and farming, kidnapping, and extortion (with illegal barriers to block vehicle transit for the latter purpose).

Civilian populations are the first victims of armed groups, including through kidnappings and attacks. As of 2017, the Kivu Security Tracker reports: 17,932 casualties, 6,342 incidents, 8,838 abductions and kidnappings, and 8,874 violent deaths in the province.

Over the past three years, despite the pandemic, things have not improved: just along the highway (N2) that runs along the eastern side of the VNP—the same road we all travel escorted in convoy by rangers equipped with AK47s—in February 2021, Italian Ambassador Luca Attanasio, Carabinieri Vittorio Iacovacci, and Congolese driver Moustapha Milambo were killed while traveling from Goma to visit a UN WFP project in Rutshuru, in what appears to be an attempted kidnapping at the height of the infamous *Trois Antennes*¹⁰.

David Nezhose is the leader of VNP's Congo Hounds, a special anti-poaching ranger unit created in 2011 with financial and technical support from world-renowned Swiss trainer Marlene Zähler. The dogs are also trained to find abducted people and to detect weapons and drugs. Mr. Nezhose tries to explain the complex security situation, speaking with pride about the Park and the work he and his companions do for wildlife and the most vulnerable people in the communities around the Park.

Virunga's territory is affected by serious security problems because it is the center where many armed groups have established themselves and thus come into conflict with the rangers' mission to defend the Park. Although it is not the rangers' job to directly counter rebel groups, clashes occur when, as has happened, rebels want to take possession of something guarded by the rangers, or cut down trees to make charcoal, or threaten

¹⁰ The security responsibilities of this tragic event are under investigation by the Italian judicial authorities.

one of the Park's protected species. Things have gotten worse since armed groups started targeting our vehicles in May 2018, when two British tourists were kidnapped and the young escort ranger was killed and the driver injured, and the Park was closed to tourism for almost a year.

The northern sector is now very difficult to reach¹¹. That's because ADF¹² militia have often raided villages and killed people, since 2014. The local population does not support the rebels, but rather fears them, because their only interest is to take over the people's property by force, including the cocoa plantations in the North, where, thanks to the support of the Park, excellent chocolate bars are produced. But since January 2020 the rebels have gone further south, and since 2021 there is also the problem of the M23 attacking our posts in the Mikeno sector in Bukima, where they struck to take the weapons that the rangers were protecting and killed one in December 2021; since that time it has not been possible to visit the gorillas, so tourist activity has been suspended; but now we have sent hugo¹³, to search for their tracks and ascertain their location and status. The army has begun a very harsh campaign to crack down on rebel activities, and hopefully all this use of force will allow the VNP to reopen and become a world destination again.

Unfortunately, what is happening today belies the young ranger's enthusiasm, or perhaps only confirms that time is a relative concept and that "the times" of this war have accustomed those who suffer it to think in terms of the long term and to never stop hoping.

¹¹ In fact, I was denied access to Rutshuru, as I should have needed 8 escort rangers, instead of one as in the years before.

¹² The Allied Democratic Forces – ADF is an Islamist rebel group active in Uganda and the DRC.

¹³ HuGo (Human Gorilla for Conflict Resolution) are rangers who play a crucial role in mountain gorilla conservation in DRC. These rangers not only carry out essential patrols to locate gorilla families, but also act as a bridge between the park and local people, ensuring community support for conservation activities and de-escalate possible conflicts.

Fig. 3 – *The confiscated makalas at the VNP headquarters in Rumangabo. They will then be distributed to poor families in surrounding villages.*



Source: Corbino, 2022.

An old Park with a modern vision. – The contribution of protected areas to local economic development is certainly not new, nor is it unique to Africa. In an increasingly densely populated planet-at the time of writing, the world population has just reached 8 billion people-the goal is to implement a management model that can effectively combine conservation and development, and this can be envisioned from the beginning of the legislative process or in the subsequent planning tool.

Thus, policies guiding protected areas, at least in countries of older socioeconomic growth, are inspired by two basic paradigms: the “integrative” (Depraz, 2008; Phillips, 2003) and the “holistic” (Council of Europe, 2000). Referred to protected areas and landscape, respectively, these two paradigms, which are fundamental for the conservation and enhancement of heritage, are increasingly inserted and intertwined in current policies, favouring an approach to protected areas that looks not only within their boundaries, but also beyond them (Gambino, 2013), paying more and more attention to the surrounding territory and landscape (Gavinelli, Zanolin, 2021).

In Italy, according to Law 394/91 and the numerous practices of national and regional parks,

the park is imagined as a place for experimenting with a new relationship between society and nature, between culture and natural cycles, between history, traditions and modernity, according to a profoundly different conception from the North American one of the reserve park [...] This different vision, which favors the intertwining of conservation and innovation, has directed Italian parks towards a practice of social, cultural and economic promotion of the populations living in the territories concerned and towards compatible local development strategies, demonstrating that the environment can turn into a great opportunity to find new internal balances and can also become a point of reference for the external areas of the park (D'Aponte, 2006)¹⁴.

It is well known that protected areas are very often a source of conflict between the central/regional government and local communities who, as in the case of VNP, may have no alternative to the immediate and selfish exploitation of natural resources to meet their daily needs.

The balance between virtuous paths of local development and the ambiguities that lie behind conflicts and power relationships imposed from above varies significantly from state to state. Significant, among many others, is the example of protected areas in Great Britain where the creation of National Parks, Regional Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Areas of Great Landscape Value, National Scenic Areas, Country Parks and National Trails took place and according to extremely diversified and heterogeneous paths, arousing mixed approval according to whether these protected areas were perceived as an impulse for the development of the territory and of productive activities, services and tourism, or as excessive limits imposed on the local community (Gavinelli, 2007)¹⁵.

The VNP was built at a time when conservation was the only priority and local community involvement was not on the agenda because the very

¹⁴ Translation carried out by the author of this article.

¹⁵ Translation carried out by the author of this article.

dialogue between the then-ruling colonial authority and the people was-if it existed-very limited. In its nearly 100 years of existence, the VNP has experienced alternate fates at the mercy of an indolent - when not heavily corrupt - central government, the greed of foreign interests over the rich subsurface resources, as well as the very conflicts that almost led to the Park's extinction.

A real turning point in the vision and management of the VNP occurred in 2013. That is when the Congolese Authority for National Parks (ICCN - Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature), the public authority in charge of the DRC's wilderness areas, and the Virunga Foundation (a U.K.-based charity founded in 2005) have established a public-private partnership to manage the park, thus creating the Virunga Alliance (VA), which consists of a long-range strategic plan whose drafting involved more than 100 local stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, as well as public authorities and government agencies in North Kivu. Together, they pursue three goals: conservation of the Park's natural resources, poverty reduction, and promotion of peace. The three pillars of Park policy should be considered interdependent and of equal importance, because the success of one is essential to the success of the others.

Instead of financing small-scale local development projects, as it did in the past, the park now prioritizes the Virunga Alliance, 'an intersection of civil society, the private sector, and state institutions', as the main vehicle through which to promote socio-economic development. The Alliance focuses on creating economic growth through three components: tourism, hydroelectricity and agriculture. The main theory of change informing its programs is that economic growth will result in job creation, leading people to gain greater benefits from the park, which will in turn encourage them to help protect it. By reducing unemployment among youth, including former and potential armed group members, the Alliance also aims to contribute to peacebuilding in the region (Verweijen et al. 2020, p. 43).

The VA has proven to be very efficient over the years. All external and internal resources are deployed within a transparent framework designed in consultation with the Park's neighbouring communities and managed according to best corporate governance practices. The Park is the largest

and most generous employer in the region, employing not only more than 750 rangers, but also hundreds of hired and highly trained civilians: the tourism and administrative staff, the huggos, the brave drivers who risk their lives every day with the rangers, and the workers committed to improving the area's infrastructure network. Focusing on three key areas: hydropower, sustainable agriculture and fisheries, and tourism, VNP is working, economically speaking, to transform the region-creating jobs and reducing poverty rates. As is obvious, this innovative, community-centered approach to conservation is also working to reduce the pressures that park rangers currently face from armed groups, illegal poaching, and land encroachment.

As mentioned, in addition to the great conservation success, VNP has been working hard to promote socio-economic development in the region.

Energy and electricity supply. In terms of infrastructure, the VA program is implemented by an experienced team of Congolese and international experts through Virunga Energies (VE), a fully integrated subsidiary company that builds its own power plants (four already completed, a fifth under construction) and distribution networks, and transmits, distributes, and markets clean electricity at affordable prices to end consumers living in and around Virunga National Park through riverine hydropower plants.

VE plans to supply hydropower to nine towns in North Kivu, home to some 3.8 million people, including 70 percent of Goma, a fast-growing city of nearly a million people, which lies outside the VNP borders. VE already has a generating capacity of 30MW and - as mentioned - a new 13 MW hydropower plant is currently under construction. In addition, on the VNP website, VE Virunga Energies announces plans to produce up to 100 MW by 2040. Through this activity, VE has been able to connect 20,400 households, 1,305 businesses, and improve the water supply of 300,000 residents. In addition, and this is especially important in a region where women's safety is a serious issue, VE provides free public lighting in 20 villages and towns and in the city of Goma.

Water. Although water is not scarce around Virunga but only for a few months of the year, accessibility is a year-round problem because, especially in rural areas, there is no pipeline of any kind to make it available to the population. VE has therefore dug and in some cases electrified

many wells, especially along the main road route, making fresh water accessible to 900,000 people.

Access to credit. We all know that access to credit is essential for local development and how difficult it can be in less developed countries, especially in rural areas. In the DRC, the percentage of people with a bank account in 2017 was 15 percent, while the global average based on 142 countries is 58.52 percent¹⁶. Through a partnership with Equity BCDC Bank - VE has disbursed microloans to 465 green economy partners, while several larger enterprises have benefited from this program to date with loans of up to \$200,000; available credit depends on the size and sector of the enterprise. Repayment is through electricity recharges, meaning that for each electricity purchase, a portion of the payment goes toward repayment of the loan and the rest goes toward paying for electricity at the rate agreed upon in advance between Virunga Development and the customer, with a monthly interest rate of 0.8 percent of the outstanding amount. In addition, as was the case with the Children and Community Centre premises that we built and operate in Rumangabo, connection fees are negotiated and set on a case-by-case basis, depending on the materials needed to make the connection, the amount of electricity required, and the location of the business in relation to the source of electricity.

Infrastructure and security governance. Improving local infrastructure and local governance are two “enabling” factors through which the Park intends to unlock the economic potential that hydropower brings to the region. Economic development in the Virunga region, as in eastern Congo, is hampered by two key factors: inadequate roads and a very unfavorable business climate. In the absence of a quality road network, small-scale farmers cannot reach urban markets, or can reach them only after a very long journey on foot, by thsukudu (a kind of large and very heavy wooden scooter), or by bicycle, which results in a great loss of time and energy and could cause products to spoil. At the same time, small or large middlemen who can afford faster means of transportation (sometimes just a rented motorcycle) can buy the crop at a very low price and maintain profit margins. This is one reason why many products that could be produced within the DRC are imported and sold at much higher prices. VA is working to address these problems through the construction

¹⁶ Source: Global Economy.com (<https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/>).

and maintenance of 1,000 km of link roads. And when the Nyriagongo volcano erupted in May 2021, covering part of RN2 and burning down many wooden houses in the suburban area of Goma, local authorities, unable to address the problem due to lack of organization and resources, asked VNP to restore the roads and large water pipes near the city of Goma.

The second problem concerns local legal insecurity and excessive taxation, which also hinder small and medium-sized entrepreneurship. Corruption is another serious obstacle to business growth: in 2021 the country ranked 169th out of 180 total countries¹⁷. VA also consolidates the rule of law by leveraging the judicial authority enshrined in its Rangers' charter and providing legal and tax advice to local entrepreneurs.

Agriculture: VA promotes the sustainable exploitation of agricultural production by working on the value chain: production by small farmers and fishermen, agro-industrial processing to add value to products, and distribution to local, national, and international markets. Access to electricity has enabled the creation of a network of 30 cold rooms to support the fishing and vegetable growing industries. The system allows fresh produce to be stored and placed in the urban market after harvest periods. This system increases the selling price for small producers and provides consumers with higher quality products, often replacing imported ones.

VA has patented a logo, which is then made available to cooperatives seeking to ensure the reputation of their products. Virunga Origins, the trademark for some food products: chocolate, coffee and chia seeds, produced at source. This is how 6,000 small producers sell Virunga-branded coffee in Europe, Australia and the United States. The entrepreneurial approach is to ensure that profits from its operations are shared fairly throughout the supply chain, thus helping to create and safeguard the livelihoods of local farmers and other actors involved in the process. This is how Sicovir, a soap factory that employs 100 people, generates income for 3500 smallholder palm farmers, supplying 10 tons of soap to local markets every day. Virunga Enzymes uses papaya to produce papain, a high-quality enzyme for the European pharmaceutical industry, and provides 15 full-time jobs, as well as supporting 300 papaya

¹⁷ Source: Transparency International Corruption Index, 2021.

farmers. The profits go back to the people who plant, harvest and process the agricultural products. What scholars call shared value (Porter, Kramer, 2011), here they call shared happiness!

The Virunga Alliance's initiatives should prove worthy of emulation. They show that large-scale agricultural development is feasible in the province. This is particularly evident in the milling industry-for wheat, maize and cassava flours-which is booming. This new and intense economic dynamism is having a profound impact in the rural areas where it is occurring.

Economic empowerment of women. In a rural region where about 95 percent of women are illiterate and where the state has only recently guaranteed free access to primary education for all children, more than 8.000 fishermen, members of women's cooperatives, and local transporters live off the Lake Edward fish value chain in the lake sector. The fishing sector is very important because, in Vitshumbi as in other coastal villages, communities rely on the lake's resources to make a living.

Tourism. For any wilderness area, sustainable tourism is a major source of income. Rwanda knows this well, where, just before Covid-19, the price to see gorillas in the wild was \$1.500 (tripled in about 10 years). Despite security problems, the VNP also relies on international tourism. In the late 1980s, Virunga was awe-inspiring. Today 3.000 square miles and 44 endangered species are preserved, but the two Congo wars, 1996 to 1997 and 1998 to 2003, nearly caused its destruction. Probably the park's lowest point was the killing of a family of mountain gorillas on July 24, 2007, by members of an illegal charcoal harvesting syndicate. In 2008 a new director, Emmanuel De Merode, was appointed and a new era began. To date, the VNP website announces that more than 17,000 tourists have visited Virunga and its main attractions. One-third of tourism revenues will be used to support socio-economic projects in the local community.

Virunga National Park in the nation and international scenario. – The public-private partnership gives the Virunga Foundation an official mandate and the management freedom necessary to implement a conservation-focused peace-building program quickly and efficiently. In addition, the Virunga Foundation is accountable to the central government and, most importantly, to foreign donors.

This means that, since 2011, economic power has been taken away from the politicians and bureaucrats in Kinshasa. Not surprisingly, the

relationship between the central government and the VNP has experienced alternative phases.

In 2010, the Congolese state awarded several companies oil exploration permits on concessions straddling large portions of Virunga. Following an intense international and local mobilization, the DRC suspended these permits but associated the British oil group Soco with a “study” intended to estimate the effects of a possible oil exploitation on the environment. To this end, Soco carried out seismic tests in 2014 in which opponents of drilling saw a hidden oil exploration program. Soco is expected to deliver the results of this study to the government in the coming weeks and has indicated that after this it no longer intends to be “involved in any way” in the concession awarded to it. Some opponents of oil exploitation in the park fear that the government will cede its license to another operator¹⁸.

The threat of oil drilling in the VNP (as well as Salonga National Park) has never gone away for good and periodically resurfaces, as in 2018.

The recent revelation by the British NGO Global Witness of Kinshasa’s intention to authorize oil exploitation in two parks classified as World Heritage by UNESCO, arouses an outcry among Congolese NGOs. In a statement published on May 4, 19 civil society and active forces organizations in North Kivu say they are “scandalized” by the project to decommission part of oil blocks 4 and 5 in the Virunga National Park and blocks 1 and 2 of Salonga Park, presented to the government on March 28, 2018 by the Minister of Hydrocarbons, Aimé Ngoi Mukena. A total of 2,767.5 km² is expected to be decommissioned in the Salonga, Bonobo Monkey Sanctuaries, in addition to 400 km² of Block 5 of the Albertine Graben and the whole of Block 4 (1320.75 km²), representing 21.5% of the total area of the Virunga Park¹⁹.

¹⁸ Associated press France release, 15 June 2015

(<https://www.connaissancedesenergies.org/afp/parc-des-virunga-le-ministre-de-lenvironnement-de-la-DRC-oppose-au-petrole-150615>)

¹⁹ Source: La libre Afrique, 11 May 2018

(<https://afrique.lalibre.be/18973/DRCEnvironnement-tolle-de-la-societe-civile-face-au-declassement-du-parc-des-virunga/>)

A few months ago, Environment Minister Ève Bazaïba dismissed for “mismanagement the interim director general of the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN) and his deputy, appointed a year ago”²⁰. This could be a good sign for Virunga future, since Mrs Bazaïba also denounced

the inaction of the international community (UN) and environmental defense organizations in the face of the situation of insecurity that has prevailed in Virunga National Park for decades following the activism of armed groups. In a way, she believes that it is the international community that is at the root of this insecurity that has become a custom in eastern DRC. Because, she justifies herself, it is because of the request of the international community to the DRC to open its borders to Rwandan refugees in 1994. Which not only caused insecurity but destroyed the environment. “Virunga Park has become a sanctuary for uncontrolled armed groups, a sanctuary for terrorists while this park is a UNESCO protected area. What do international NGOs say? What does the United Nations say? What does the international community say? If the Democratic Republic of the Congo is incapable of rooting out these terrorists, is the international community also? The United Nations is also incapable of rooting out these terrorists?”²¹.

This positive attitude of the Kinshasa government toward the VNP could be interpreted as a sign of awareness of how this governance model, which combines private sector efficiency with public interest objectives, has been decisive in gaining the trust of international private and public donors and in helping local communities affected by the conflict.

The EU supports the construction of hydroelectric power plants and distribution networks around the National Park of Virunga, already supplying 70% of Goma’s electricity needs. Power cuts are life-threatening for the local population as they lead to water

²⁰ Source AFP /VOA, 18 September 2022 (<https://www.voafrique.com/a/DRC-les-dirigeants-de-l-iccn-r%C3%A9voqu%C3%A9s-pour-mauvaise-gestion-/6751807.html>)

²¹ Source: Desknature.com 22 August 2021 <https://desknature.com/2022/08/01/affaire-blocs-petroliers-en-rdc-eve-bazaiba-demande-des-comptes-lonu-et-aux-ong-sur-la>

shortage, the spread of diseases such as cholera, increased inequalities, and poverty.

The EU is its longest and most important donor, supporting the Virunga National Park since 1988. Since 2014, the EU has supported ongoing actions with a total of €112 million in grants. The EU's financial contributions support the day-to-day operation of the Park, inclusive growth and sustainable development initiatives in the area, the hydro-electrification of North Kivu and the development of sustainable agricultural practices. These activities have contributed to creating 2,500 direct jobs, 4,200 jobs in connected small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and 15,000 indirect jobs in value chains (EU Commission press release, 2021).

It has been argued that

the 'development' projects the EC supports around the park have militarizing effects as they are based on a soft counter-insurgency approach to conservation and to address dynamics of violent conflict. This amounts to the 'green militarization' of development aid (Marijnen, 2017, p. 1566).

But in my experience over six years, VNP rangers are not part of the problem of violence, but part of the solution, as their commitment to protecting local communities and supporting the workers of subcontractors, as well as the staff of the very few NGOs that operate near the Park's borders, such as the one I have the honor to lead, is invaluable.

Moreover, as we will explain in detail in the article, the VNP constitutes a best practice so much so that in December 2020 the European Union

launched an initiative to safeguard the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This type of initiative exemplifies the EU's commitment to delivering the EU's Green Deal around the world [...] The EU's integrated approach links nature conservation with economic development while improving the living standards of local populations. It contributes to prevent poaching and supports sustainable forest management, including efforts to combat illegal logging and deforestation. Virunga National Park is already well-known as the most biodiverse

protected area in Africa, notably with its wild mountain gorillas. In parallel, the EU invests in value chains such as chocolate, coffee, chia seeds, papaya enzymes for the cosmetic industry, making sure that resources reach small community-based farms and cooperatives while promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development (EU, 2021).

Not only has the trust of the EU been won by the VNP's governance model. On its website, BII - British International Investments - the UK's development finance institution, explains the reasons and objectives for its support of Virunga Energy, in a country that,

in 2018, was ranked 184 out of 190 in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index. Our commitment to hydro-electricity company Virunga Power in 2016 was the first investment in the area from a development finance institution (DFI) in twenty years.

We backed Virunga Energy to help bring clean energy to communities living in and around Virunga National Park. Our aim is that reliable electricity supply from Virunga will boost business activity to provide sustainable livelihoods. We also recognized the potential to work with the company to support it to implement international environmental and social standards. Implementing such standards in conflict-affected areas is a challenge. It can be difficult to attract and hire specialists with the relevant technical skills. Often businesses need to rely upon expatriate international specialists, which does not necessarily result in direct and long-term skill development for the company or the economy [...] We supported Virunga Energy to develop and grow its own Congolese E&S team, with the goal of creating local employment and building a sustainable E&S management function for the long term. Engagement with the local community has considerably improved²².

BII was so committed to the collaboration with VA that it emphasized the importance of the capacity-building program of this cooperation that was supposed to lead the Virunga Energy team to develop

new skill sets which allow them to better analyze and manage the

²² Source: <https://www.bii.co.uk/en/story/virunga-energy/>

environmental and social aspects of their projects. Capacity building represents a long-term investment in people, and it can take time to see significant benefits, especially in fragile settings, such as Eastern DRC. Our work has helped to unlock local talent and create a long-term, sustainable E&S management function for Virunga Energy. Our hope is that implementing international environmental and social standards will make the company more attractive to other investors in the future, which in turn will help to bring much-needed additional stability to the business and local economy²³.

The latest example of the Park's positive relationship with foreign donors that I would like to mention here is the collaboration with the Botanical Garden of Mez (Belgium), whose local manager for all reforestation projects, botanical garden restoration, environmental education, and more is Dr. Francesca Lanata, an Italian citizen, in DRC since 2004. Francesca Lanata, Italian citizen, in DRC since 2004.

At the time of the interview, Francesca was in eastern DRC on reforestation projects in degraded areas of the VNP.

Francesca explains that:

Region, which in the middle of Covid19 lock down donated a large amount to plant a forest (1500 hectares) around Lake Edward, where there are pecherie, a fishing community, but due to insecurity due to the presence of rebel groups (Mai Mai, see pic.1), the group had to suspend and move to VNP headquarters, further South. There, in the Rumangabo territory, they are reforesting 600 hectares for energy timber, and they are creating a small community forest (150 hectares), since the chimpanzees, colobus monkeys and other species are today settling inside the 92 hectares of the Park Headquarters, because there is nothing to eat outside, since the population has cut down all the fruit trees. This is why, with the Kisigari community, they are creating a forest that belongs to the community itself; the project is carried out with the chefferie and seven associations, thanks to the support of the traditional leaders who have embraced the idea. Once the forest is alive, tourism will be able to visit it, and the revenues will go to the population.

²³ Source: Stone N., on BII website (<https://www.bii.co.uk/en/story/virunga-energy/>).

In this regard, we like to mention that one third of tourism revenues in the VNP is used for projects to support the community.

The task of his team, which is composed of all local technicians, is to prepare the nurseries (100,000 plants already made) and also give the people small economic resources to plant (as compensation for termination of work). Each association signs a kind of agreement, committing itself for three years to plant and care for the new plants so that they are not smothered by lianas. In addition to this work, Francesca's team also does administrative support work to obtain community forest title from the state.

The other hectares are planted with fast growth, so that the charcoal (makala) can be cut and produced from sustainable wood, and not from the protected essences of the Park. The reason is that there is a huge energy problem here; despite the new hydroelectric power plants, people do not have the ability to cook except with charcoal. This new strategy will hopefully reduce the pressure on the Park because otherwise people are forced to make illegal cuts. Francesca points out that:

when we talk about fast growing we are not talking about Eucalyptus. In neighboring Rwanda they have totally destroyed biodiversity to solve erosion problems from the 1980s onwards, a very large population needs wood and coal: it is useless to be hard and pure ecologists, these people need to live they need resources. Primum vivere deinde philosophari.

Francesca's group has also been carrying out projects with churches, schools, associations for years: they give away plants so that people can reforest their homes near the fields.

The Park is also engaged in the restoration of degraded areas, on which studies are being carried out on degraded areas invaded by the population, especially in the savannas, because after the exploitation there is an invasion of alien invasive plant species that prevent the growth of grass (shrubs very invasive, such as the lantana, already a huge problem in Uganda where it has invaded the savannas), which prevent the growth of the herbs that large herbivores graze, thus interrupting the food chain typical of this areas. We are investigating on the possibility that animals are

migrating to Congo from Queen Elizabeth in Uganda. The botanical garden team also supports the construction of the tourist camps, with the arrangement of green areas to make pleasant and interesting sites for tourists. For example, Tcheghera island in lake Kivu has recently been given back to the Park and it had been invaded by agricultural (bananas) and alien species, and the Park decided to make it an original forest again, in order to bring there responsible and quality tourism coming from the city of Goma, where there are the headquarters of various NGOs and international organizations.

About peace Francesca Lanata reminds me this:

This reforestation is not only for biodiversity but is helping economic development and therefore peace. The Park is very committed to maintaining peace, because peace is built and maintained with the development of the region. In addition to the great political and economic interests, there is also the fact that people have no access to food, school, etc. We realize that when power stations are built, for example, there is a decrease in vandalism, petty crime, tensions are reduced, because people are hired as workers, etc. And reforestation in a touristic vision can help in this direction. The Park distributes a part of the income to the community activities they develop, such as schools, agricultures, dispensaries: now at this moment there is no tourism and millions of dollars no longer enter - and instead enter Rwanda; therefore here in the VNP we have had to reduce the staff in the lodges, which increases the level of social tension and the attractiveness of the rebel groups - those who pass to the rebel groups want to eat and fight against the system (a sort of revolution also driven by hunger, as it has happened in Italy for mafia syndicates), so that these rebel groups sometimes become some sort of villages protectors so that, it's possible that the communities help the proliferation of the activities of these rebel groups.

Conclusion. – The conflict in eastern Congo does not see an easy solution. From my personal experience, the result of 7 field missions in North Kivu province and daily monitoring with local staff working in our development projects, from what can be learned from good books and

the media-the subject is very little covered-it is possible to draw some conclusions.

The conflict is deeply rooted in the recent history of East Africa, so it is essential to arrive at a solid and lasting peace treaty, especially between DRC, Rwanda and Uganda.

The costly pacification process conceived so far-MONUSCO plus militarization of the region-has failed for several reasons, the first of which is the population's lack of trust in both the FADRC and the blue helmets.

To effectively combat militia groups and enable development, Kinshasa should make every effort to root out corruption at all levels in local institutions and the military. A strong and well-organized military attack-with the help of a foreign military coalition-could probably defeat the rebel group and "solve" the situation for good, at least in the short term. But peace needs more than that to last.

Multinational corporations exploiting the rich subsoil should make every effort to meet international labour standards by improving workers' conditions; in addition to paying royalties, these companies should support the DRC government in building basic infrastructure networks in the region.

As we wait for these four utopias to become reality, we strongly support Virunga National Park and its innovative planning and management models that involve the community in decision-making and development. This shows that, even in the worst conflicts, it is possible to imagine and implement different geographies of peacebuilding.

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Eastern Congo: il processo di peace building del Parco Nazionale Virunga. – Sebbene la guerra in Repubblica Democratica del Congo sia ufficialmente terminata nel 2002, nella regione del Paese il conflitto è ancora in corso. Dal maggio 2021, nel Nord Kivu sia stato dichiarato lo stato di assedio e instaurato un governo militare, ma i ribelli sono oggi alle porte di Goma, capoluogo della provincia.

In tale contesto si inserisce il Parco Nazionale del Virunga, le cui attività non si limitano alla tutela delle risorse naturali, ma invece si sostanziano in un’incessante opera di peace-building, attraverso la costruzione di occasioni di sviluppo socioeconomico per la comunità locale.

Metodologia: oltre sulle più aggiornate pubblicazioni - saggistica, reportistica e media - l’articolo si basa sull’esperienza sul campo maturata dal 2017 dall’autore in quanto cooperante presso progetti di sviluppo nel Nord Kivu, uno dei quali situato a pochi metri dal quartier generale del PNV. È qui che sono state realizzate le interviste a due testimoni privilegiati: David Nezehose, ranger del PNV, per un’analisi sui profili di sicurezza; e Francesca Lanata, Africa project coordinator del Jardin botanique Meise presso il PNV.

Keywords. – Governance, Congo orientale, Parchi nazionali.

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