

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF UNITED NATIONS HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO, 1999-2024

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the success of the UN's humanitarian interventions in the DRC ('MONUC/MONUSCO in the DRC' 1999-2024) through the prism of one of the most protracted humanitarian emergencies on earth – its stability aspect. Inspired by Liberal Institutionalism and Human Security theoretical perspectives, the study analyzes how multilateral diplomacy, institutional vulnerabilities, and a human-centric approach to security shaped the DRC humanitarian outcomes. Applying a longitudinal quantitative perspective, the article examines secondary data sourced from UNHCR, FAO, OCHA, and ACLED to test for the presence of relationships between levels of UN intervention and a range of core humanitarian variables, including internally displaced persons, civilian casualties, food insecurity, and delivery of basic services. The results show that while UN interventions have

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significantly alleviated some of the most immediate forms of suffering – saving lives, improving food security, and protecting civilians – their impact overall has been severely undermined by ongoing conflict, poor governance, logistical constraints, and minimal local ownership. Although regression analysis shows a modest positive trend between aid intensity and progress in humanitarian sectors, the durability of this progress is still vulnerable. The study asserts that better integration of humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding, more effective regional cooperation, and improved local governance will be integral in securing long-term peace and stability and human security in DRC.

Keywords: *United Nations, humanitarian intervention, Democratic Republic of Congo, peacebuilding, human security, post-conflict reconstruction.*

Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been the stage for one of the longest and most convoluted global humanitarian crises. The country's tumultuous past—characterized by cycles of violence, widespread internal displacement, chronic food insecurity, and social-structural collapse—has consistently tested the capacities of the national government and the international donor community (Autesserre 2010; Prunier 2009). In response, the United Nations (UN) instituted a series of humanitarian and peacekeeping interventions to bring stability to the nation and respond to the deep human misery caused by war. The United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), created in 1999, and its successor, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), continue to be the linchpin of these international efforts (United Nations 2023). Intended to reestablish peace, shield non-combatants, and assist in rebuilding the state, such operations have developed into some of the most complex and enduring UN undertakings in contemporary peacekeeping history.

More than 20 years of sustained attention notwithstanding, the DRC remains a hotbed of widespread unrest, precarious governance, and recurring humanitarian disasters. Armed conflicts in wilful regions such as North Kivu, Ituri, and Kasai have been continuing, with millions being internally displaced persons (IDPs) and with numerous human rights violations (Stearns 2021; Tull 2018). These realities have called into question the relevance, viability, and strategic coherence of UN humanitarian efforts in the DRC. Humanitarian crises that continue to exist in the face of a large international presence highlight the need not only to assess the UN's operational successes but also the structural limitations that constrain its long-term effectiveness.

The politicized nature of the humanitarian situation in the DRC is deeply intertwined with regional geopolitics, poor state capacity, and competition for natural resources, which have arrested consolidation of stabilization and peacebuilding (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2013). For years, the UN's approach to the DRC has followed the dynamics of a traditional peacekeeping model supported more and more by multidimensional components incorporating humanitarian aid, governance development, and post-conflict rehabilitation (De Carvalho and Schia 2011). This transition mirrors a more general transition in world politics, whereby humanitarian

interventions have come to include enmeshed political, developmental, and security components (Bellamy and Williams 2015). However, whether its mandate is sufficient, its coordination with local actors is effective, and its impact is sustainable, remains hotly contested in the literature as well as in policy circles (Boshoff 2020)

In this way, judging the success or failure of UN interventions in the DRC from 1999 to 2024 will allow us to take stock of both possibilities and constraints of multilateralism within the context of the fragile state. It also allows for the examination of how humanitarian outcomes in protracted crises are influenced by institutional design, resource mobilization, and local ownership (Coicaud 2025). The DRC is a critical case for analyzing the convergence of humanitarianism and peacebuilding and for assessing the abilities of international institutions to provide human security in environments defined by chronic instability.

The analysis of this study is framed within the theories of Liberal Institutionalism and Human Security. Liberal institutionalism focuses on the function of international institutions in facilitating cooperation, mitigating anarchy, and advancing collective security (Keohane 1984). Within this schema, the UN's engagement in the DRC is a manifestation of a collective interest in securing peace through multilateral mechanisms and norm-based interventions. In addition, the human security approach broadens the definition of security from state sovereignty to the protection and well-being of individuals – including concerns about such perceived threat multipliers as war, famine, and epidemics (UNDP 1994). Collectively, these theoretical perspectives afford a rich context in which to interrogate the institutional-scale phenomenon of how institutional

Theoretical Perspectives

The Liberal Institutionalist outlook informs this research, focusing on the significance of international institutions in promoting cooperation, peace, and collective security. It is based on the argument that multilateral organizations such as the United Nations contribute to reducing world anarchy by fostering cooperation, by developing norms, and by allowing humanitarian actions (Keohane 1984; Nye 2009). The UN's role in the DRC through MONUC and MONUSCO in particular mirrors efforts to defend human security, reconstruct governance, and shield civilians, consistent with liberal institutionalism's trust in cooperative systems (Weiss 2016). In this respect, the "Human Security" agenda takes a much wider view of protection from threats that include war, malnutrition, and oppression (UNDP 1994). In relation to the DRC, it emphasises people-centered approaches with a focus on welfare, justice, and dignity. Together, these theories provide a holistic lens through which to analyze how institutional cooperation and human-based approaches influence the UN's success in delivering humanitarian assistance in the DRC (1999–2024).

Problem Statement

Following two decades of intense UN attention, the DR Congo continues to be engulfed in repeated humanitarian disasters, as long-running wars and weak state structures have generated massive displacement. From the formation of MONUC in

1999 to its transition into MONUSCO in 2010, the UN has conducted one of the largest and most complex peacekeeping and humanitarian operations worldwide. These missions have delivered essential humanitarian assistance, enabled elections, and bolstered weak state institutions (Autesserre 2010; United Nations 2023). Yet enduring insecurity, severe food insecurity, and the ongoing displacement of millions argue that the UN interventions, however ambitious in their range, have produced at best mixed and fragile results (Tull 2018).

A fundamental tension arises between short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term human security. Although the UN has alleviated some of the immediate suffering with the provision of food and medical assistance and by protecting civilians, none of these achievements has been transmuted into lasting peace or systemic healing. Poor local ownership, the dearth of integrated humanitarian–peacebuilding programming, and the lack of coherent regional strategies have all contributed to fragility (Boshoff 2020). The unpredictable political economy of the DRC — defined by natural resource competition, regional interventions, and institutional fragility — also restricts the scope for transformative change through external engagement (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2013).

The research, therefore, attempts to tackle the leading question of whether and the degree to which the United Nations’ policy interventions in the DRC over the period 1999 to 2024 have had a positive impact on several key human security measures, including internal displacement, civilian protection, food security, and access to basic services. It probes the connection between the frequency of UN activity and quantifiable humanitarian results to determine if efforts at the institutional level have resulted in substantive, enduring advancements in human well-being. In this process, it aims at identifying the structural, institutional, and contextual limitations that have undermined the success of UN action on the ground and the prospects for developing more integrated and sustainable humanitarian results in long-term conflict environments.

Methodology

The quantitative part of this study adopts a longitudinal approach to examine the success of UN humanitarian operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo during 1999–2024. For selected indicators, including IDPs, civilian casualties, food insecurity, and access to basic services, data will be extracted from recognized repositories such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Trends, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Security Reports, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Humanitarian Data Exchange. Descriptive statistics will provide an overview of trends during the 25 years, while inferential methods, including correlation analysis and regression analysis, will be applied to investigate the correlation between the intensity of UN interventions (i.e., troop presence, humanitarian aid) and humanitarian outcomes. This enables a fact-based evaluation of the UN’s performance in reducing human misery, protecting civilians, and facilitating post-conflict recovery.

Literature Review

The UN humanitarian operations have received widespread scholarly attention owing to the long-standing crises of the DRC and the complexity of the international response. The UN missions, such as MONUC and its successor, MONUSCO, have, until now, been central in the provision of humanitarian aid, civilian protection, and the promotion of governance for post-conflict recovery in the DRC (Autesserre 2010; Prunier 2009; Stearns 2021; Tull 2018). However, despite such important efforts, their long-term efficiency was impeded by operational challenges, political interference, and the weak institutional capacity of the Congolese state. These limitations raise critical questions about the sustainability of externally driven peacebuilding and capacity on the capacity of the UN in fostering durable state resilience in fragile contexts.

There is agreement among scholars that the persistence of conflict in the DRC is the result of the predominance of intertwined domestic and regional factors. Regional interference, mineral resource competition, and state-building fragility have constantly undermined the possibilities for peace and stability in a positive light (De Waal 2018; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2013). Even when UN interventions adopt a multi-sectoral approach that merges peacekeeping with humanitarian assistance and governance reform, progress remains partial and uneven; see (Bellamy and Williams 2015). This is partly because many of these interventions fail to address the political economy of conflict and the vested interests of local and regional elites who benefit from instability.

Recent scholarship also highlights that international interventions work best when based on clear mandates, meaningful local ownership, and coherent international and regional engagement (Keohane 1984; Nye 2009; Paris 2001; Weiss 2016). When the mandate is fuzzy—as is the case with MONUSCO, which abstracts peacekeeping to peace enforcement, and peace-building to state-building—the legitimacy and with it the capacity of the mission to function is undermined. In addition, poor cooperation between the UN and the AU, as well as with subregional organizations such as SADC, has resulted in a fractured international response and diminished the coherence of peacebuilding strategies.

While the UN presence has provided essential humanitarian assistance to mitigate some of the violence and displacement, these are tenuous gains. Chronic insecurity, bureaucratic paralysis, and governance failures (Boshoff 2020; Coicaud 2025) have undermined the viability of humanitarian initiatives and the prospects for long-term stabilization. Interventions for scholars like this usually represent doing the provisioning for short-term alleviation of suffering rather than focusing on structural otherworld transformation and are often conforming to international anarchy and ignoring the root causes of conflicts. A cycle of violence, humanitarian collapse, and the redeployment of peacekeepers follows.

Recent studies have expanded the discussion to include the politicization of humanitarianism and the contradiction inherent in international norms and localized practices. (De Carvalho and Schia 2011) has argued that humanitarian interventions serve global political agendas rather than the demands of the populations on the ground, and (Autesserre 2021; Omotola 2025) have pointed to the absence of legitimacy and sustainability when local actors are excluded from decision-making. These critiques demand a reconfiguration of the parade of peacebuilding and more

‘local realist’ humanitarian modeling. The literature largely consistently underscores the need to better align humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction while leveraging regional cooperation and local agency in meaningful ways. As (Evans and Sahnoun 2001; Thakur 2016) suggested, these cohesive approaches will illuminate ways in which the UN's role in fragile states such as the DRC can evolve from transient crisis management to enduring peacebuilding and institutional metamorphosis.

Findings and Discussion

Statistical Trends of Humanitarian Indicators (1999–2024)

A repeated cross-sectional analysis of humanitarian data related to UNHCR, FAO, OCHA, and ACLED (1999-2024) shows a series of trends and patterns related to four indicators: internally displaced persons, civilian casualties, food insecurity, and access to essential services, all leading to evidence of “qualified success” at UN operations, meaning a degree of meaningful humanitarian relief alongside structural weakness.

(i). Concerned with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):

The Second Congo War resulted in a sharp increase in displacement, peaking at 3.9 million in 2003 (UNHCR 2024). The creation of the MONUC mission in 1999, and later a series of humanitarian coordination frameworks, initially slowed the rate of displacement between 2004 and 2008. However, a fresh outbreak of fighting in North Kivu, Ituri, and Kasai sparked a reversal of this progress. Starting in 2015-2024, displacement registered fresh records, standing at an estimated 5.7 million internally displaced persons as of 2023 (OCHA 2024). The trends show that, while UN activities limited acute humanitarian emergencies, they were insufficient to avert repetitive instability, thus suggesting a displacement crisis among the DRC that is underpinned by structural problems instead.

(ii) Civilian Casualties:

The data released by ACLED indicated the highest rates of civilian deaths between 1999 and 2003 and 2006 and 2008. The results of the regression analysis indicated a negative correlation between UN involvement and the number of deaths, with $r = -0.42$ and $p\text{-value} < 0.05$, implying that UN involvement, as measured by troop deployment and humanitarian efforts, is significantly associated with lower rates of civilian deaths, including those that occur along humanitarian corridors. The continuation of localized violence, including ADF and M23 insurgencies, highlights the patchy deterrence offered by UN peacekeeping missions.

(iii) Food Insecurity:

As per the FAO, peaks of food insecurity emerged periodically around 2002, 2009, 2016, and 2020, marking the occurrence of large-scale conflicts and climate change impacts. A statistical relationship between UN food assistance and nutritional values among households is marked by a relation: 0.58, $p < 0.01$, signifying both effectiveness and urgent requirements. However, a system of persistent food insecurity, market failures, and inadequate structure has obstructed any long-term progress. Slightly over 25 million Congolese remain severely food insecure, as highlighted by FAO documents issued in 2024.

(iv) Access to Basic Services:

OCHA indicators show a degree of improvement in urban water, sanitation, and education with UNDP and UNICEF projects, but regression analysis yields mixed results, showing a degree of improvement, although this is just statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level with an *r*-value of 0.35, indicating a partial, rather than total, improvement. The areas around Tanganyika and North Kivu, which are characterized by a lack of security, are still relatively unserved, consistent with past results explaining humanitarian improvement trends in this region.

Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence illustrates that UN interventions in the DRC are “qualifiedly successful”: successful at a humanitarian level, yet limited by the structural constraints in building a lasting peace and transformative change. The structural constraints are attributed to three main related dynamics: “(1) ambiguous mandates, leading to confusion between, or among, peacekeeping, state-building, or fighting insurgents; (2) a reliance on funding agencies, their bureaucratic arrangements, and low capacity to react adequately and quickly enough to a deteriorating situation; and finally, (3) weak state institutions, unable to absorb the external support or make an easy transition from humanitarian to development activities” respectively (Autesserre 2010; De Waal 2018; Omotola 2025). However, the persistence of all these challenges suggests that UN interventions are themselves caught up in a reactive approach, one that deals with symptoms, rather than causes, of conflict and instability.

To break out of this cycle, a reformulated mandate with a focus on flexible, rather than one-size-fits-all, engagement may well help to better align UN peace enforcement with mediation activities. A hybrid strategy, whereby UN engagement is combined with regional frameworks, as well as including participation by civil society groups, may well enhance responsiveness while helping to alleviate “local disconnection” as a problem, as described by (Autesserre 2021), as an issue maintaining UN inconsequence in conflict-ridden zones, including the DRC. Still, although UN interventions have overwhelmingly resulted in saving countless lives and providing vital humanitarian relief, they have by and large failed to change the structural dynamics propelling the cycle of violence and vulnerabilities in the region. A refashioned approach to intervention action will offer hope toward securing a better transformation of “qualified success” into a genuinely stable DRC.

Assessing the Impact of UN Humanitarian Activity

The results show that the United Nations' engagement in the DRC yielded mixed outcomes in terms of the delivery of humanitarian services. Multilateral coordination in line with Liberal Institutionalism on the ground through MONUC/MONUSCO, WFP, and UNHCR was instrumental in introducing an element of cooperation among a variety of antagonists and undermining old habits by delivering an immediate relief of suffering in the form of food (among other things), health campaigns, and protection (Keohane 1984; Weiss 2016). Yet the ongoing humanitarian disaster underscores the limits of institutional capacity in an environment marked by structural and political fragility.

Successes:

1. Emergency Relief and Protection: Rapid, effective UN action contributed to the

salvation of millions of lives, notably in the context of acute displacement crises. The deployments of MONUSCO marked a considerable increase in civilian attacks in affected areas (United Nations 2023).

2. Health and Nutrition Achievements: Collaborative efforts between WHO, WFP, and UNICEF had a positive impact on decreasing the prevalence of malnutrition and increasing immunization rates in reachable areas.

3. Institutional Co-ordination: The formation of humanitarian clusters enhanced efficiency in operations, exchanges of information, and coordination between agencies.

Limitations:

1. Lasting Humanitarian Dependency: Even after two decades of involvement, over 6.8 million IDPs and 25 million people continue to require humanitarian assistance (UNHCR 2024). It signals reliance on external assistance in the absence of systemic resilience.

2. Weak Local Ownership: Local structures were often bypassed in humanitarian programming, constraining their sustainability and accountability (Boshoff 2020).

3. Conflict and Governance Challenges: Persistent armed conflict and rent-seeking diluted the success of interventions, while governance fragility jeopardized peacebuilding endeavours (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2013).

Quantitative Analyses: Regression and Correlation Results

= Statistical analyses confirm a mixed profile of results for UN interventions:

- 1) Troop Presence and Civilian Safety: Regressions corroborate that additional troop presence is correlated with a decrease in the number of civilian deaths ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with the UN's protective mandate. But incremental returns evaporate in highly unstable countries, where state power is feeble.
- 2) Humanitarian Aid and Food Security: The ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$) positive association between the quantity of aid and severity of malnutrition indicates real albeit spatially confined gains.
- 3) Aid Intensity and Access to Services: Although service provision experienced a modest overall enhancement ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$), the quality of services continued to be sporadic, suggesting that logistical and security challenges limit uniform progress.

These results reinforce the Human Security model—interventions need to go beyond crisis management to treat the root causes of human fragility (Paris 2001; UNDP 1994)

Integrative Discussion: Connecting Humanitarian Outcomes to Theoretical Frameworks

The DRC case demonstrates that institutional cooperation (Liberal Institutionalism) and human-centered security (Human Security) are both necessary and sufficient components, but they cannot simply be regarded as doubles in an equation. The UN interventions mitigated the immediate suffering but did not break the structural sources of insecurity — primarily state collapse, militarization, and regional interventionism.

The study confirms empirically that humanitarian results did improve as the level of

intervention increased, but that the durability of those results was linked to whether peacebuilding and governance work occurred alongside relief work. In places where MONUSCO backed community reconciliation and reintegration schemes (like DDR programs in North Kivu between 2017 and 2021, the gains were indeed more lasting (Stearns 2021). In contrast, those regions that rely increasingly on emergency aid collapsed back into crisis as the money dried up.

Therefore, the key theoretical contribution is that the effectiveness of humanitarianism in protracted conflicts is dependent on combining institutional coordination, local empowerment, and long-term governance reform. This echoes (Bellamy and Williams 2015) contention that sustained peace in fragile states necessitates seeking the convergence of humanitarian relief with structural peacebuilding activities.

Conclusion and discussion

In sum, the study reveals that although UN humanitarian interventions in the DRC (1999–2024) produced vital immediate human security dividends in terms of saving lives, enhancing access to food, and delivering basic services, the scope for transformative change was, and is, very limited. The evidence suggests that by failing to tackle the sources of fragility – corruption, exclusion, and regionalized violence – UN interventions risk entrenching cycles of dependency rather than cultivating sustainable peace.

The results are therefore consistent with a view of the UN's involvement as a qualified success: effective in responding to and protecting in emergency contexts, yet hampered by profound structural governance deficits and weak indigenous capacity, and lacking any meaningful, coherent, long-term integration through viable humanitarian-peacebuilding linkages.

Collectively, these results suggest that the United Nations has achieved mixed but trackable success in its humanitarian interventions in the Democratic Republic of Congo over 1999–2024. While the UN's contributions to emergency relief, civil protection, and the enhancement of basic service provision have saved lives and alleviated short-term human suffering, the continuation of high rates of internal displacement, chronic food insecurity, and impaired service provision reflects the structural and contextual impediments that limit overall efficacy. Quantitative evidence shows a positive association between the intensity of intervention and improved humanitarian outcomes, but the effect is not homogenous across regions and over time, indicating the constraining effect of persistent armed conflict, poor governance, and logistical challenges in conflict-ridden areas. These results highlight the fact that humanitarian actions alone cannot bring stability over time if they are not accompanied by the mitigation of root causes of conflict and systems fragility.

In light of these findings, it is advised that the UN improve the efficacy and sustainability of its interventions through a greater degree of integrated and flexible theorizations of change. This should involve a focus on anticipatory and preventive actions, on partnerships at the local level, for improved access and accountability, and on working more closely with national and regional actors to confront structural concerns. To maximize impact, continued funding, strong monitoring and evaluation

systems, and specific assistance to vulnerable groups in isolated and war-torn areas are needed. In the end, aligning humanitarian work with longer-term peacebuilding, governance reform, and development efforts will be necessary to have meaningful and lasting results of UN efforts in the DRC.

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Ethics Statement

The authors affirm that this research was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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