

Compliance vs the ragged threat: problem-solving security in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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The securitisation of development in the post-Cold War era has introduced two security perspectives into the work of development organisations working in the global south. One is the assertion of a commonality of interests: this is espoused by some on the left who profess one-worldism and is also enshrined in neoliberal notions of security based on consensus, and consonant with the mechanics of a free market. The other is the perspective that there is a conflictual faultline that has shifted from east-west to north-south. This emanates from a critical security perspective, but makes alliance with the reactionary position that the global south poses threats: from underdevelopment and poverty, AIDS, climate change and other phenomena.

There is an element of contradiction between the two security perspectives. The first facilitates compliance with a mainstream ideology through mechanisms such as technical support and capacity-building; the second implies the existence of a ragged threat and conflicting interests, and the need to confront – or protect against – them. These two contradictory perspectives have been knitted together in neoliberal policy in efforts to address poverty and potential insurgency simultaneously through interventionary governance programmes. This adopts a problem-solving approach to security that specifies how to deal with insecurity, rather than enquiring into the mechanisms that reproduce it. This paper examines how security-oriented governance operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It finds that development organisations working there promote, but do not achieve, compliance with neoliberal ideology and order. The Congolese state has accepted extroverted processes of democratisation and liberalisation, but domestically it resists and distorts the interventionary austerity and forestalls distribution of power to the population. The upshot is that, through implementation of programmes, development organisations are increasingly implicated in the dynamics of a non-compliant and non-representative state.

The article concludes that the interventions made in the name of development and security in fact promote insecurity in two ways. Firstly, in defining the ‘solution’ to the problem of insecurity, they foreclose alternative approaches that may be identified by sections of the Congolese population or the state. Secondly, by overlooking conflicting interests, the interventions feed into regressive practices that ignore, rather than addressing and negotiating, political difference. The outcome is that there are some short term gains for some people but ultimately the programmes compromise all concerned and the legitimacy of the development organisations to intervene.