

# **Conflict, state failure and urban transformation in the Eastern Congolese periphery. The case of Goma**

Karen Büscher

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*Supervisor: Koen Vlassenroot (1)*

*Co-supervisor: Théodore Trefon (2)*

Conflict Research Group, Department of Third World Studies, Ghent University  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren

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This dissertation analyses the dynamic relationship between on the one hand processes of state failure and violent conflict and on the other hand processes of urban transformation in the eastern periphery of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The case study is the city of Goma (North Kivu province, at the Congolese-Rwandan border) and the form is a political-anthropological urban ethnography that starts from the city as it is today. The central aim of this PhD is to offer an urban perspective on the Congolese crisis, on the one hand by revealing the particular urban outcomes of conflict dynamics, and on the other hand by demonstrating how these particular urban dynamics again produce and influence political processes. The emerging forms of urbanisation and urbanism in a conflict and crisis setting are thus the central focus of this dissertation.

I start from the central hypothesis that dynamics of violent conflict in combination with a historical process of state failure, have generated alternative forms of urbanity that are reflected through processes of political, economic, social and spatial transformations. This study offers an original contribution to the academic research on processes of urbanisation and urbanity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Africa in general.

With the start of the new millennium, in the context of the rapid urbanisation process on the African continent, came a renewed academic interest in urban issues in the DRC. In the significant political and anthropological contribution to this academic research, one can identify two main gaps: its restriction to large, 'primary' cities (such as Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, for example), and the absence of urban studies in Congo's conflict areas. This dissertation forms a modest contribution to fill these gaps. It focuses specifically on urbanity emerging in secondary, peripheral cities, located at the margins of the nation state out of the direct scope and influence of the political centre. In addition, the main case study of this analysis is a city occupying a central position in the regional conflict in Eastern Congo. As such, this PhD also forms an original contribution to the academic micro-analysis of violent conflict in Eastern Congo, by starting from a particular urban perspective. Within research on conflict dynamics in the DRC, the urban focus has remained largely underdeveloped. The centrality of cities in conflict dynamics is however obvious, as they constitute important political and administrative centres, points of

economic exchange, zones of concentrated military power, the focal points of human conflict displacement and of international humanitarian response.

In order to analyse the political, socio-economic and spatial transformations resulting from a situation of state failure and violent conflict, I have used a conceptual framework built on four core concepts or analytical tools: 'governance', 'navigation', 'identity' and 'landscape'. Throughout the dissertation they serve as parameters to investigate processes of urban transformation in Goma; they thus appear as a red line throughout the different chapters.

For this political-anthropological urban monograph, I used ethnographic research methods. My analysis is based on ethnographic data (obtained from interviews, focus-group discussions and a few surveys), collected over a total of twelve months of fieldwork, spread over seven research periods in Goma. In this dissertation, I tried to provide an urban ethnography that is as 'complete' as possible, presenting a comprehensive and integral picture of the city of Goma as it is today.

A theoretical introduction (presenting the literature review as well as the conceptual framework), is followed by a historical chapter, in which I present the evolution of the city from the pre-colonial period onwards. A next chapter contains a detailed 'city report', in which the general demographic, economic and administrative profile of Goma is presented. In the following five chapters, I then proceed to the analysis of the mutual impact of processes of urbanisation and dynamics of state failure and violent conflict. Each of these chapters is built up around a central theme. Each theme represents a particular aspect of the current urban configuration of Goma, as perceived by its inhabitants.

The first of these five chapters starts from the image of the city as a **zone of opportunity** and it analyses the paradoxical evolution of Goma into a dynamic and attractive centre of economic and political expansion. A next chapter presents the city as a **zone of political and socio-economic contestation**. Here I analyse how violence and state failure have reinforced local political and social fault lines within urban society. In the following part, I then focus on the city's character as a **centre of rebellion**, an image stemming from the period of the second Congolese war (between 1998 and 2003), when Goma functioned as the headquarters of the rebel movement. This chapter elaborates on the urban impact of dynamics of protracted violence, militarisation and the dominant behaviour of armed actors in urban governance. In the next chapter, Goma is presented as a **city of refuge**, receiving large waves of internally displaced people who flee war and violence in the rural surrounding areas to find protection in town. This chapter analyses how these 'newcomers' integrate themselves in the city and how they construct their urban livelihoods. A last chapter then focuses on the **city as a borderland** and analyses the role of border dynamics (trans-border trade, socio-economic transactions and exchange...) in a context of state failure and war.

In this research I demonstrate that processes of state failure and violent conflict on the one hand have resulted in a dynamic transformation of urban governance, local livelihood strategies, landscapes and identities, and on the other hand have changed the role and function of urban centres in political and socio-economic processes, on the regional

and national level. Through a turbulent history of state failure and successive violent conflicts, the city of Goma developed from a marginal, dormant border post into a dynamic regional centre. I present the city as a 'laboratory of change', in which the context of state failure and war have produced new forms of urbanity.

These emerging forms of urbanity are characterized by a profound informalisation, hybrid forms of urban governance, patterns of intense political-economic competition and conflict, and urban livelihoods that are extremely instable, provisional and uncertain in nature. This urbanity is the result of dynamic processes created from within rather than directed from above. It is the outcome of the daily survival strategies of the urban inhabitants themselves rather than of a centralised and coordinated urban planning. The Congolese state appears to play a rather weak role in these processes of urbanisation and urban development. Gradual state decline reinforced different non-state actors (from armed groups to economic elites to international humanitarian organisations) to take over state responsibilities on different levels of urban governance. This has resulted in a fragmented, unequal and conflictual urbanisation, where particular groups in urban society could significantly benefit from emerging opportunities, and where other groups are confronted with political, economic and social exclusion.