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Looking back at the deprived population of Bukavu: How do numbers matter?

Counting the dead is central in many publications on the violent conflict in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Although the numbers vary, 3.9 million (Coghlan, et al., 2006), 5.4 million (Coghlan, et al., 2007) or even 10 million (Harmon Snow & Barouski, 2006), their magnitude is always staggering and the profile given these numbers consistently suggests that such numbers matter. While Congo experts maintain that the conflict is underreported and not enough is done to bring lasting peace and development, such numbers are eagerly reprinted and reused by newspapers, NGOs and other researchers. In a conflict that is difficult to study and yet harder to explain, numbers capture the imagination. The statement that ‘5.4 million people have died between 1997 and 2007’ (Coghlan, et al., 2007) moves the heart, and perhaps the decision maker, much more than, for example, stating that ‘many Congolese have died.’

I did my PhD field research in Bukavu, the capital city of South Kivu in eastern DRC. For the year I was there I studied hybrid land governance. During that time I often encountered horrific stories of war and despair. There were times stories of death and lasting misery made me incredibly uncomfortable. My topic was irrelevant and I was utterly useless. I was obliged to act but there was nothing I could do. On more than one occasion my informants died very shortly after I had spoken to them. I believe that guilt and ineptitude drove me to contribute to the ‘Chronicle of Death’ in Eastern Congo: I was driven to find numbers that chronicled misery.

Massive displacement has put enormous pressure on access to Bukavu’s urban land. There is just not enough space to accommodate the growing population. Even more than before the war, land tenure may still be contested and the title to land is never fully secure and disputes are common. More than 80 per cent of the court cases in South Kivu deal with land disputes (IfdP, 2014). The local NGO IfdP (2011) estimates that more than 75 per cent of the Congolese population do not have secure title. Armed with this estimate, and knowing both the misery they predict and the power of numbers, I set out to count those in Bukavu who live with insecure tenure.

Academics like me, we produce knowledge that is consumed by NGOs and others who transform that knowledge into programs through which they act on others. Be damned if my promotors would say that this question was outside of my domain of research, I was going to
produce knowledge that informed policy and improved lives. What started as a little side project became one of my biggest frustrations.

For frustrating weeks I shuttled between offices stacked with dusty ledgers checking numbers. Each ledger painted a different picture. At each turn my confusion and my frustration grew. I then scheduled a meeting with an informant who, I believed, would make sense of my confusion. He would allow me to produce the certain numbers needed by development agencies. He would provide me the means to be relevant. He was the director of a government agency and I saw him as my last resort in my search for numbers, and through them, meaning. This man had the temerity to die in a traffic accident just prior to our meeting and I, well, I had the audacity to be frustrated by his family’s tragedy.

I was stuck in a developmental discourse in which numbers matter, in which I must matter, and in which I matter through numbers. Realizing that I had become trapped by precisely the sort of discourse I set out to destabilize, I became deeply frustrated with myself. I made these numbers exceedingly important. I believed that my research would make more sense once I had found the correct numbers. I believed that I would make more sense once I had the numbers. I had been sucker by myself.

This paper is about me doing a simple task, but in so doing getting stuck by my interpellation within the fantasy in which I was engaged. It explores the simple question ‘how do numbers matter?’.

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Bibliography


