

# The Challenge of Achieving SDG 16 in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Learning from Bilateral ODA Programs

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## Introduction

Between 2000 and 2014, US\$ 343 billion of official development assistance (ODA) disbursements—nearly 23 percent of total ODA—were directed to activities related to peace, justice, and institutional strengthening (Sethi et al., 2017).<sup>1</sup>In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—one of Africa’s largest recipients of ODA—donors have significantly invested in helping the country recover from the impact of two devastating wars (1996-1997 and 1998-2003) and build resilience. For example, during the period indicated above, the DRC received in total US\$ 23 billion of ODA, representing more than 12 percent of the ODA flows directed to Africa. However, despite all of the international efforts, the capacity of the state’s institutions remains severely limited, while the country continues to experience a recurrent resurgence of conflicts.

In the following analysis, I focus on one component of SDG16, namely institutional capacity. Institutional capacity is significantly related to the risks of conflict and is argued to be central for state-building in fragile and conflict-affected situations (Gelbard and Xu, 2015) like the DRC. The analysis builds on the New Deal for engagement in fragile states to discuss two questions: (1) how do donors deliver their funding in the DRC? (2) Does ODA support institutional strengthening in the DRC? For this purpose, I concentrate on aid practices of the DRC’s top-five bilateral donors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, and France, during the period from 2000 to 2016.<sup>2</sup>

The next section provides a brief discussion of the political context and offers an outline of ODA trends in the DRC. The section that follows discusses the New Deal in relation to donors’ practices for delivering aid in the DRC. The final section concludes.

## Socio-political Context

With a total surface area of 2.3 million square kilometers, the DRC is the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The DRC has vast natural wealth and agricultural potential. It has 80 million square kilometers of arable land and the world’s second largest rainforests after Brazil, and has 10 and 80 percent of worldwide resources of copper and coltan, respectively. However, a look at the DRC’s performance in almost every socio-economic metric suggests that the country has fallen prey to the resource curse.

The DRC’s recent history has been particularly marked by the organization of the country’s first and second democratic elections in 2006 and 2011. The 2006 election followed the end of the second civil war that lasted from 1998 to 2003, and which actively involved six other African countries (Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Namibia).

Starting from 2003, and in particular since 2006, the international community has supported the state-building process in the DRC through efforts to enhance capacity, institutions, and the legitimacy of the state. Donors supported a wide range of structural and sectoral reform policies,

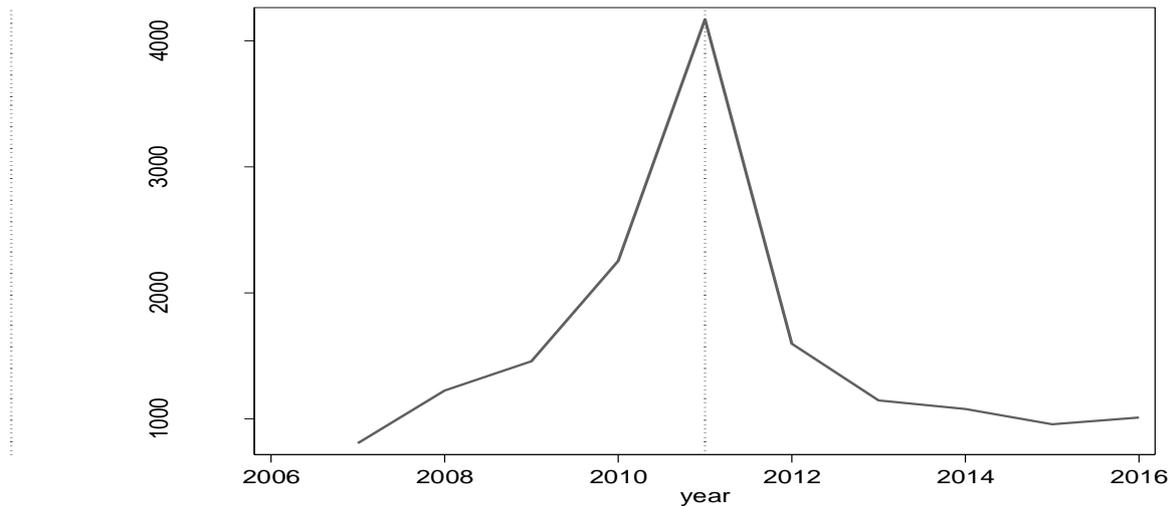
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<sup>1</sup> SDG16 aims at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

<sup>2</sup> These five donors disbursed more than 70 percent of total bilateral ODA to the DRC during the period from 2000 to 2016.

ranging from the improvement of natural resource governance, to the establishment of an investment code, and rehabilitation of public administrations at the operational level (i.e., computerization of offices, and capacity-building for civil servants). According to the OECD’s international development statistics, aid to the DRC rose gradually since 2006, reaching a peak of US\$ 4 billion in 2011 (see Figure 1). However, although there was a surge in net ODA since 2006, the DRC did not witness the same increase in ODA after the presidential and legislative elections in 2011.

Figure 1: Total Bilateral ODA to the DRC in US\$ millions, 2006-2016



Source: OECD, *International Development Statistics* (2017) <http://stats.oecd.org/qwids>

The 2011 elections, the DRC’s second since the end of the war, were seriously flawed and led to a permanent legitimacy crisis in the post-2011 period. Two critical factors before and during the electoral period explain this legitimacy crisis. First, the amendment in 2010 by the ruling coalition of key electoral provisions ahead of the elections, which favored incumbent Joseph Kabila—in power since 2001—fueled tensions across the country. Second, the electoral process was characterized by severe irregularities, especially regarding polling and voting, and serious human right abuses by the Congolese security forces. The legitimacy crisis that followed severely affected donors’ engagement toward the DRC’s government in the post-2011 period. Thus, the sharp decrease in the amount of aid delivered in the DRC since 2011 can be linked to a crisis of state legitimacy.

## New Deal, ODA and Donor Practices in the DRC

The New Deal explicitly underlines the need for collaboration between donors and government in recipient countries. It commits donors to put national actors at the forefront of state-building activities. More importantly, the New Deal underlines the use of country systems as one core principle for aid to effectively contribute to strengthening various government capabilities in fragile states. Donors use country systems if their funding involves the recipient government as an implementing partner. In contrast, aid delivered through non-state actors (e.g., NGOs & civil society, international organizations, etc.) bypasses country systems.

Table 1 presents the proportion of ODA delivered through country systems in total bilateral ODA for each of the DRC’s top-five donors. The Table shows significant cross-donor variations in terms of ODA delivery channels. Some donors (e.g., the US and UK) rely less on public sectors, implying that they prefer delivering aid through non-state actors. Other donors (e.g., France, Germany, and to a lesser extent Belgium) provide more than 50 percent of their bilateral ODA

through the DRC’s public sector. These donor differences in aid delivery are in line with Dietrich (2016: 2), who argues that “foreign aid from governments with neoliberal political-economic policies [like the US and UK] tend to bypass when the public sector in the recipient country poses high risks for aid delivery.” Countries like France, Germany, and Belgium, where the state plays a central role in service delivery, tend to give prominence to the DRC’s public sector.

Table 1: ODA Disbursements Through Public Sector in Percent of Total Bilateral ODA in the DRC, 2006-2011

Country	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Belgium	73.49	71.83	54.66	38.36	85.5	71.1	51.44	48.53	41.07	43.13	38.62
France	18.96	64.35	54.5	39.61	83.32	99.61	85.8	92.48	91.46	96.15	95.62
Germany	44.27	74.6	56.31	50.2	66.29	69.45	94.72	57.19	65.19	72.74	59.56
UK	84.72	4.21	3.45	3.01	3.83	87.09	7.36	7.59	12.94	3.7	11.58
US	-	11.27	9.97	12.65	27.09	39.58	1.85	1.71	2.3	2.8	4.28

Source: OECD, *International Development Statistics*; Author’s calculations

## Conclusion

ODA can play a central role in strengthening the DRC’s institutional capabilities, which then can foster the state’s ability to mobilize a variety of resources for sustainable development. However, donors should deliver their funding through the country’s public sector if ODA is to assist in building strong institutions.

On the other hand, institutional strengthening remains the task of the Congolese authorities. However, the state authorities often work to ensure there is little or no reform so that they may preserve their positions of power. Furthermore, the uncertain nature of DRC politics—characterized by the lack of legitimacy of the governing regime, and popular discontent—especially since 2011, makes it difficult for international partners to engage with the DRC government. The recent December 2018 election did not necessarily solve the problem.

Thus, it can be argued that a legitimacy deficit, the lack of commitment from Congolese authorities to undertake reforms, and a lack of trust of donors toward the DRC government, undermine institutional strengthening, thereby progress on SDG16 in the DRC. Perhaps the establishment of a government with full confidence from the Congolese citizens, as well as from donors, would result in better capacity development and resilience in the DRC.

## References

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