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## The Politics of the Uganda-DR Congo Road Project

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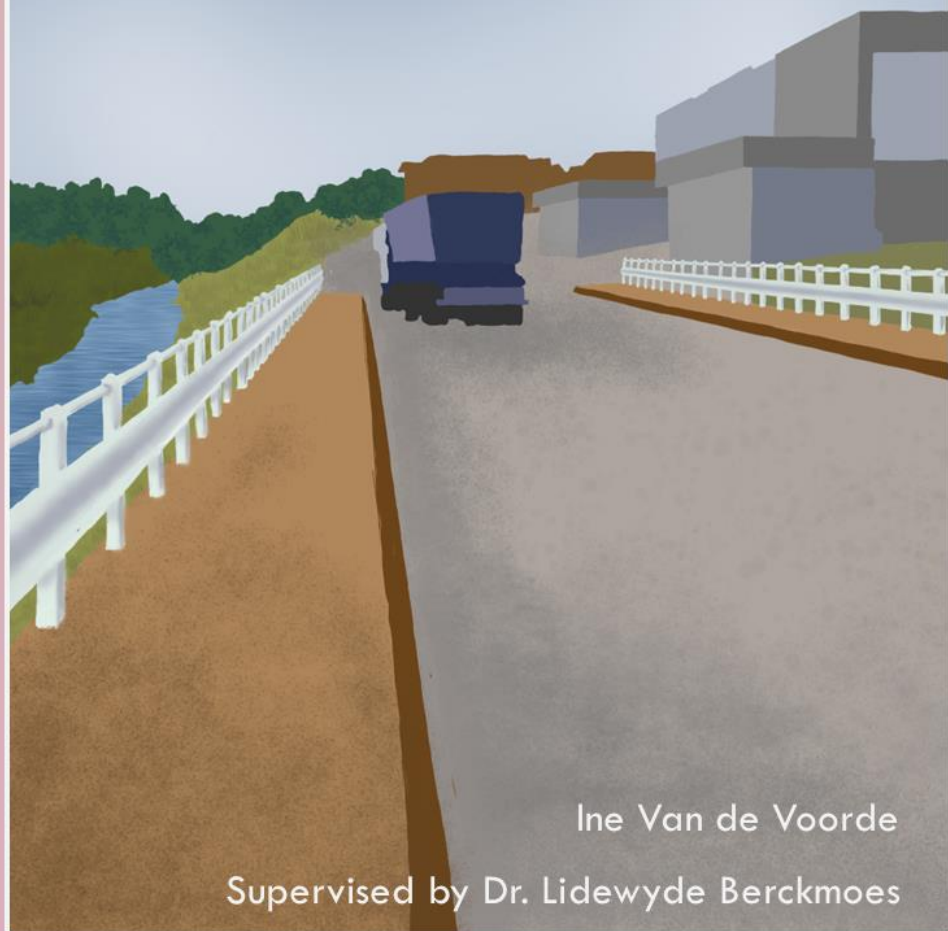
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# The Politics of the Uganda-DR Congo Road Project



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Supervised by Dr. Lidewyde Berckmoes

The Politics of the Uganda-DR Congo Road Project

By

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A Dissertation

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## **Webale**

In the early 1970s, my grandmother lived a few years in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As a result, her house is full of Congolese souvenirs and stories about “the best time of her life”. Indeed, I was born and raised in a family highly interested in the African Great Lakes Region. I started to dream of travelling myself. So, when I discovered that the University of Leiden offered a Master of African Studies in which a three-month-long research internship is part of the curriculum, I applied. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2021, I received an email stating that I was officially admitted to the programme. My adventure could start. I moved to the Netherlands, excited about what the year would bring.

A roller-coaster, that is how I would describe this year. I had to cancel an internship opportunity, figure out what I wanted to research, and the COVID-19 pandemic almost threw spanner in the works of leaving Europe for Africa. When it rains, it pours. Fortunately, everything turned out fine and on January 24<sup>th</sup> I entered the plain to get off in the Pearl of Africa, Uganda. After three months of collecting information and filling my heart with everything Uganda had to offer, I returned to the Netherlands with notebooks full of information, ready to be translated into a master thesis. During all these phases there was one person in particular, my supervisor Dr. Lidewyde Berckmoes, who helped me significantly. Therefore, I find it of utmost importance to thank her for the time she invested in the preparation of the research and, eventually, in developing this dissertation. Dr. Berckmoes gave me the freedom but the necessary handles as well to undertake my research adventure. I am immensely grateful for that.

In addition, I would like to thank Mr. Godber Tumushabe and my colleagues at the think tank in Uganda for the warm welcome, the insights they have enriched me with, and the help to reach out to respondents. I would also like to thoroughly thank my respondents for the time they have invested in my research. Without the information they offered me, this dissertation would be non-existent.

Furthermore, I want to thank my parents for allowing me to study in the Netherlands. I want to show appreciation to my aunt for drawing the beautiful image on the cover of this book. I want to thank the rest of my family as well for their support and sympathetic ear during my academic career

Finally, I want to thank everyone who has supported me during my studies in Leiden and my trip to Uganda and allowed me to become the person I am today because of that.

To all of them, Webale and enjoy.

Ine Van de Voorde

## **Abstract**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2021, the presidents of the Republic of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo met in Mpondwe to launch a 223 kilometres road project that will improve the connection between the countries. Based on information gathered through qualitative research this thesis comes up with an understanding of the politics of this road project. Alongside the theory of Technological Politics, it offers insights into the expectations of Uganda's population about the project, like the facilitation of cross-border movement and the spread of diseases, and the political ambitions that drive Uganda's government to engage in the project. The ambitions are manifold, including economic, security, geopolitical and even President Museveni's individual political ambitions.

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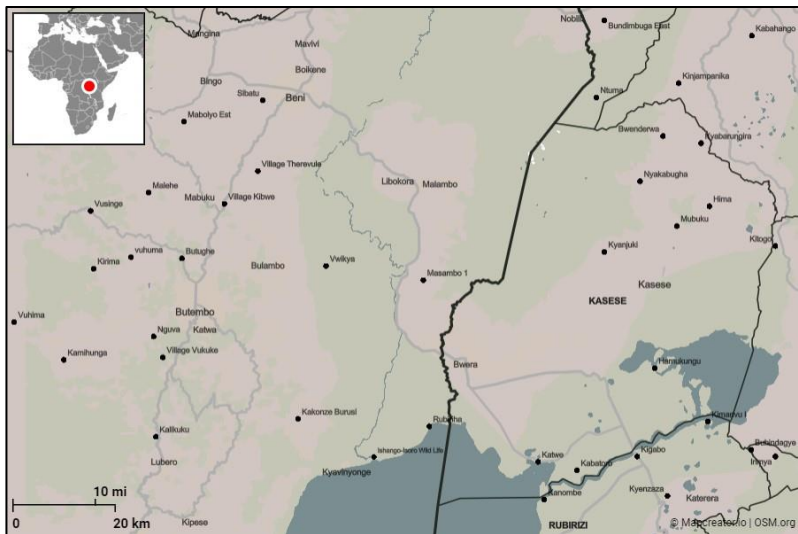
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# ACRONYMS

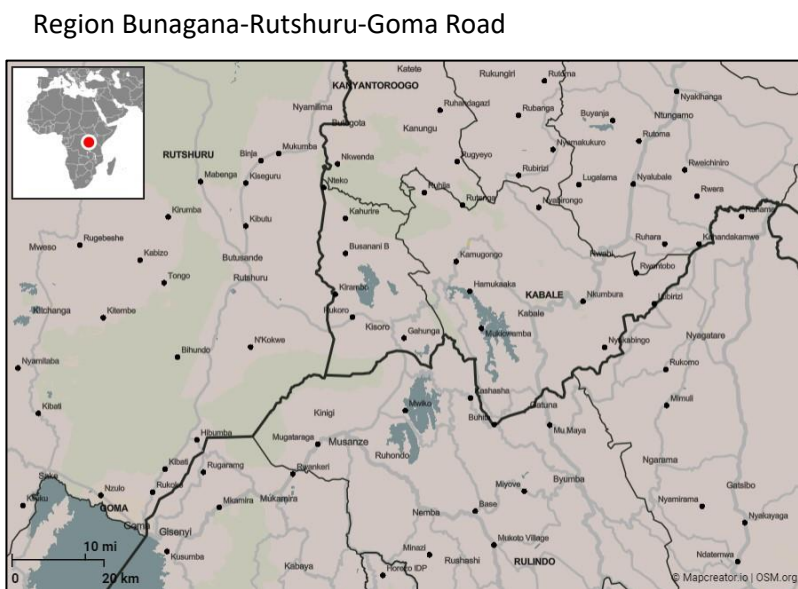
ADF	Allied Democratic Forces
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EAC	East African Community
EACOP	East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline
FID	Final Investment Decision
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICBT	Informal Cross-Border Trade
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
M23	Mouvement du 23 Mars
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NDP	National Development Plan
NRA	National Resistance Army
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
SCOT	Theory of Social Construction of Technology
TD	Theory of Technological Determinism
UNRA	Uganda National Roads Authority
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Forces
USD	United States Dollar
VHT	Village Health Team







Region	Mpondwe/Kasindi-Beni	and Beni-Butembo	Road
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Region Bunagana-Rutshuru-Goma Road

# CHAPTER 1: EMBARKING ON A JOURNEY

A spectacular ceremony, it seemed, when scrolling through newspaper articles. A red carpet was unfolded, flags and banners were flaunting, and neatly dressed military personnel were waiting for the president of the Republic of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, and the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Felix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, to officially launch the construction works that will improve the connection of Uganda with the DRC (Ssejjoba, 2021). I am writing about the ceremony that took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 in Mpondwe, a border town in Kasese district, Western Uganda. During this ceremony, the heads of state officially opened the newly constructed Mpondwe bridge, serving as the starting shot for the reconstruction of three roads, together spanning 223 kilometres, mainly located on Congolese territory. The deal to reconstruct the Mpondwe/Kasindi-Beni Road, the Beni-Butembo Road, and the Bunagana-Rutshuru-Goma Road, was made in February 2020 (Otafiire, 2021).

The governments of Uganda and the DRC will each contribute 20 per cent of the total costs, which are estimated

at 335 million US dollars (USD). The Ugandan construction firm *Dott Services* will take care of the remaining 60 per cent and its workers are assigned to construct the roads (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022).

Four official ambitions are pronounced by the Ugandan government to contribute to the upgrading of the road network. The renovation of Mpondwe bridge is symbolic of the government's first argument, namely, to expand cross-border trade. Mpondwe bridge is a trade-critical bridge on the border of Uganda and the DRC, which allows Ugandan traders and heavy trucks to travel to the DRC and vice versa. Second, the improved road infrastructure must be the trigger to allow the DRC into the East African Community (EAC). The third argument is to secure and stabilise eastern DRC (Blanshe, 2021b; Daily Monitor, 2021; Kamurungi, 2021; Otafiire, 2021). To clarify, alongside this project, troops of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) are stationed in the DRC to wipe out the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and protect the construction workers (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). Last, this project must uplift the socio-economic welfare of the Ugandan and Congolese populations (Kamurungi, 2021; Otafiire, 2021).

Uganda and the DRC have entered a new era of peace and cooperation. The relationship between the countries has in the past shifted multiple times from conflict to cooperation and hit the rock bottom during the Second Congo War which destabilised the entire African Great Lakes Region, i.e., the region surrounding lakes Victoria, Tanganyika, Malawi, Turkana, Albert, Kivu, and Edward, from 1998 until 2003.

During this war, which was mainly fought out on Congolese territory, human rights were violated, Congolese property was destroyed, and actors from neighbouring states, among which Uganda, were suspected of looting the DRC's valuable minerals. To clarify, the DRC is the richest country in the world in terms of natural resources such as fertile land, forests, oil, and minerals (The African Great Lakes Information Platform, n.d.; United Nations. Department of Political Affairs & United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.). The country is most known for its richness in minerals like diamonds, gold, copper, coltan, and cassiterite, to name a few. These are often extracted for economic purposes and travel the world in mobile phones, jewellery, computers and so on. The DRC's mineral wealth is estimated at 24 trillion USD (Ecovadis, n.d.; Global Edge, 2022). Whereas the Congolese population has mainly suffered from its mineral wealth, other actors have profited from trading in Congolese minerals (Clark, 2001). In the early years of the war, 1999 to be specific, the government of DRC accused Uganda at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of purposefully destabilising the country and looting Congolese minerals. In 2005, the ICJ handed down its judgement and stated that Uganda had unlawfully intervened in the DRC without ensuring the safety of the local population. In addition, the ICJ found evidence for the plunder of Congolese resources by UPDF soldiers and judged Uganda's government guilty because it fell short in curtailing these activities. After failed negotiations between Uganda and the DRC on the amount of reparation owed by Uganda, the DRC approached the ICJ again. On February 9, 2022, the ICJ decided

that Uganda must pay, next to fines for the violation of property and human rights, a compensation of 60 million USD to the DRC for looting of natural resources (International Court of Justice, n.d.).

This troubled past, the recent developments, and growing domestic debates on why Uganda's government is carrying the financial burden of improving the road network in the DRC given its own poor infrastructure, raise questions about the political ambitions that drive Uganda's involvement in the road project, including the four officially pronounced arguments (Byaruhanga & Basheka, 2017; Development Policy and Performance Portal, 2022; Otafiire, 2021). Since the project is not implemented in a vacuum and affects the local population, this study sees it essential to study what the people living in the vicinity of Mpondwe expect the project to give rise to as well. This Master dissertation aims to answer the following questions:

*What are the expectations and interests of Uganda in the Uganda-DRC road construction project launched with the opening of Mpondwe bridge in June 2021?*

*a) What expectations do the people living in the vicinity of Mpondwe bridge have about the project, and to what extent are they included in the project?*

*b) What does the project tell us about Uganda's national and regional political ambitions?*

The answer to the subquestions will convey insights in the extent to which the expectations and interests of the people align with those of their government regarding the road

project or whether there is a discrepancy. Furthermore, the politics of this road project can only be understood when considering both the citizens and the government.

## **The means to the end**

To find the answer, I conducted qualitative research, designed to explore experiences and perceptions, in Uganda from February to April 2022 (Kumar, 2019). I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews, organised two focus group discussions, and did participant observation on Mpondwe bridge and in the adjacent marketplace. To find out what the official narrative was of Uganda's government to invest in the road project, I searched for online articles especially from Uganda's dominant newspapers using keywords like 'Mpondwe' and 'road project'. I collected the data in Kampala and, to a lesser extent, in Mpondwe and Bwera, i.e., a town on approximately five kilometres distance from Mpondwe. During the research, I was an intern at a think tank in Kampala. The staff of the organisation helped me to negotiate access to the people in their network to conduct interviews.

Given the sensitivity of studying the political ambitions of the Ugandan government, the respondents are kept anonymous, and their positions sufficiently vague. The data is stored on a password-protected computer. I made no recordings of the interviews as a safety measure. Information about anonymity, confidentiality, and the purpose of the research was communicated when reaching out to the respondents by email or text message and was repeated at the

beginning of each interview after which verbal consent was asked. The final product will be shared with the people I interviewed.

For the interviews, I reached out to experts in Kampala in the field of Economics, Politics, and History including researchers, university professors, journalists, and so forth. I made use of expert sampling, which is “a form of purposive sampling used when research requires one to capture knowledge rooted in a particular form of expertise” (Crossman, 2020), and snowball sampling, referring to the selection of respondents based on the recommendation of other respondents (Titeca, 2022). These interviews were conducted in English. Furthermore, I approached a doctor, local councillors, a shop owner, and her daughter in and around Mpondwe to get an understanding of the expectations of the Ugandan communities living along the road. These respondents were selected by a local health care provider whom I was brought in contact with by the head of my internship organisation. The interviews were either taken in English or Ihukonzo, the language of the Bakonzo. Since I do not speak nor understand Ihukonzo, I was assisted by the health care provider and a high school graduate to translate.

Additionally, I organised two focus group discussions in Bwera respectively of seven and ten people, to gather information on the expectations of the population living in the vicinity of the bridge regarding the infrastructure project. The participants of the first focus group were all women, many of them active as traders. I intentionally organised a focus group discussion with exclusively women to create a comfortable



atmosphere where women, often differently impacted by large-scale infrastructure projects, could voice their thoughts. The second group was composed of members from the Village Health Teams (VHTs) operational in and around Mpondwe, which are found by the Ministry of Health to “empower communities to take part in the decisions that affect their health” (Ministry of Health, 2010). VHT members work closely with the local communities. Consequently, I expected them to have a thorough understanding of the viewpoints of the communities regarding the road project. The health care provider helped me to get in touch with local translators, including a high school graduate, the daughter of a local trader, and a local leader, because most of the people felt more comfortable communicating in Ihukonzo.

To understand the significance of the project for Uganda better, I visited Mpondwe bridge and the adjacent marketplace. Mpondwe bridge is crucial for crossing the river which splits Uganda from the DRC and is one of the busiest border crossings functioning as well as a point for border control (FEWS NET/WFP/FAO, 2011). The market next to the bridge is an important site for the local population to make money. I walked for three to four hours in this market during which I spoke with, roughly estimated, twenty traders about their perceptions of the road project and its impact. I decided not to take pictures in the market because it felt inappropriate to do so because of the poor circumstances traders worked in and, more so, because some traders were not amused by my presence. To clarify, the traders in Mpondwe had to sit on the ground in between the same goods the neighbouring traders

also tried to sell. The traders I saw in the market depended for a large part on the sale of these goods to sustain their families. Many of them, as I was told, were not well-off.

Apart from some unwelcoming reactions I experienced in Mpondwe market, being a young, female, Western researcher shaped my research in several other instances as well. Whereas my Western background helped me to get prominent Ugandan people interested to participate in an interview, being a young woman challenged my research. During some interviews, respondents tried to intimidate me and delegitimise my academic qualities because of being a young woman. They did so by turning the topic into a sexually related one. In these situations, I tried to underscore my professionalism by not reacting to these intimidations. Although this happened only during a few interviews, it shaped my study because, as much as I tried to ignore the comments, I felt uncomfortable due to which I did not purposefully extend the interview to get access to more information. Still, I did manage to reach a point of saturation in terms of knowledge at the end of the research period.

## **The theory to navigate through the data**

The research questions assume that the Uganda-DRC road project is politically loaded. Yet, “we all know that people have politics; things do not” (Winner, 1988, p. 20). It appears wrong to argue that technologies hold political power, however, Langdon Winner (1988) counters this statement and argues with his *theory of Technological Politics* that modern politics is

not only influenced by and relies on technology, but that technologies can be political (Schraube, 2021). The theory is used to navigate through the gathered information and serves in the following chapters as a framework to interpret my research findings.

To theorise about the relationship between technology and politics, it is important to first define these concepts. This dissertation makes use of the writings of Allan Dafoe and Langdon Winner to define what is meant by the concept of *technology*. Dafoe argues that technology can either refer to sociotechnical systems, i.e., systems that require both technical and human factors, or to specific artefacts. The key feature of technology is its functionality and not its materiality (Dafoe, 2015). Similarly, Winner (1988) sees technology as “all modern practical artifices”, and thereby also emphasises the functionality of technology. Roads can be included in this conceptualisation (Winner, 1988, p. 22). *Politics* in this dissertation is understood as “the arrangements of power and authority in human associations as well as the activities that take place within those arrangements” (Winner, 1988, p. 22).

Furthermore, to understand the theory of Technological Politics, it is essential to succinctly throw light on the theories Winner’s theory is complementary to, namely, the *theory of Technological Determinism* (TD) and the *theory of Social Construction of Technology* (SCOT). The first argument of TD is that the dynamic of technological change is found within the technology itself and not in the society in which it is implemented. Second, the effects of a technological artefact

are not influenced by social, cultural, or political factors (Adler, 2006). In other words, TD argues that technology shapes the society in which it is deployed unmediated by external influences, and in doing so creates the atmosphere for further technological development.

SCOT is a reaction to TD. Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker, two key figures within social constructivism, explain the theory in their article on the social construction of artefacts of 1984. Pinch and Bijker counter the idea that the social surroundings of technology are irrelevant. The thinkers construct the theory alongside four components: interpretative flexibility, relevant social group, closure and stabilisation, and sociocultural and political context. Interpretative flexibility refers to the idea that there are different ways to interpret a technological artefact. The concept of relevant social group refers to the people who are affected by the development and implementation of technology. The theory underlines the agency of the affected people in giving meaning to a technological artefact. A social group in this theory refers to a group of people that shares the same understanding of a particular technology. When all relevant social groups find a consensus about the meaning of a technological artefact, closure and stabilisation are reached. This means that the technological artefact is developed to its final form. Pinch and Bijker only limitedly acknowledge the importance of the sociocultural and political context in which technologies are developed but disagree with the idea of TD that technologies are unmediated by its surroundings (Klein & Kleinman, 2002; Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Winner, 1988).

Critics of SCOT argue that the limited attention given to technology's sociocultural and political context is a shortcoming because the context shapes the interests of the decision-makers. Moreover, the theory fails to address the importance of the social consequences of technological decisions. Whereas attention is given to the role of human beings in the design of the technology, its implication for the broader context, i.e., human beings, societies, the quality of living, and the distribution of power, is given close to no attention. In addition, the theory falls short in explaining the varying degrees of power between social groups, hence their unequal amounts of bargaining power (Klein & Kleinman, 2002; Winner, 1993). In line with this, Winner (1993) proclaims that SCOT excludes the "*Irrelevant*" social groups, i.e., groups that lack a voice but will unquestionably be impacted by technological change. Indeed, SCOT fails to recognise the elitism that favours the interests of certain social groups over others (Klein & Kleinman, 2002).

Because of these shortcomings, Winner wrote in 1988 the article *Do artefacts have politics?* in which he explicates the theory of Technological Politics. The key argument of this theory is that technological artefacts can be political in two ways. Either the design of technological artefacts is intentionally used to shape a social structure and settle issues in society, or technology is inherently political because it requires, or is highly compatible with, specific kinds of power relations (Winner, 1988).

I briefly paraphrase the real-life example Winner uses to explain how technologies can shape the social structure. A

few bridges over parkways on Long Island, New York, are designed with a particular purpose in mind. Robert Moses, the architect of these overpasses, drew in the early twentieth century the overpasses too low for busses to pass under. The aim was to keep black and lower-class citizens, being the main users of this means of transport, away from public spaces where white and rich people used to hang out. This fitted into the political and social reality of the time, underlining the importance of taking technology's sociocultural and political context into account (Winner, 1988). Indeed, this technological artefact embodies a political function "because particular political ideas, needs and interests are projected in the process of creation and inscribed intentionally into the devices" (Schraube, 2021, p. 115). The intent is not necessarily to do harm even though the design is purposeful, and the consequences serve the interests of some over others. In addition, the, often unintentional, effects of the design on society make the technological artefact even more politically loaded. This reflects and reinforces the social order, which is the result of the fact that society consists of various groups with different degrees of power and awareness. Consequently, some people will be at the decision-making table, whilst others are not (Winner, 1988). To put it briefly:

The issues that divide or unite people in society are settled not only in the institutions and practices of politics proper but also, and less obviously, in tangible arrangements of steel and concrete, wires and semiconductors, nuts and bolts (Winner, 1988, p. 29).

To limit the negative impact and counter social injustice and domination, Winner argues that a debate must be organised between all impacted groups of society (Schraube, 2021).

The second way in which technologies can be political is when they require, or are highly compatible with, a particular power structure. Winner uses a metaphor from Plato to make this reasoning more comprehensible. Plato argues that for a ship at sea to drift and sail to the intended destination, there is a need for a captain who steers an obedient crew. Otherwise, the ship will not succeed in its mission. To make it more tangible, many technologies need control or maintenance to work for which a particular actor is responsible, consequently, this actor holds a more powerful position than others regarding the project. Unfortunately, these power relations tend “to eclipse other sorts of moral and political reasoning” (Winner, 1988, p. 36).

In the subsequent chapters, I first delve into what impact the people living in the vicinity of Mpondwe bridge expect to experience because of the road project. Afterwards, I zoom in on the importance of trade to boost economic growth as an ambition that has pushed Uganda’s government to invest in the building of the roads. Thereafter, I elaborate on more latent ambitions. To end, I emphasise the importance of looking at the project through different disciplinary lenses, summarise the key research findings, evaluate the theory, and offer recommendations for future research.





# **CHAPTER 2: LIVING ALONG THE ROAD**

To understand the political ambitions behind this road project it is key, according to Winner's theory of technological politics, to give attention to the context in which technologies are implemented. Therefore, I take you in the first section of this chapter to the site around Mpondwe bridge. In the second section, I introduce the expectations of the people living in the vicinity of the bridge about the project. I do so since technological artefacts are political because the consequences of their implementation often benefit those at the decision-making table to the detriment of the less powerful. So, to understand the politics of the Uganda-DRC road project it is crucial to research the expectations of the local population regarding a project their government has decided upon. This entails the impact on individual human beings, the quality of life, as well as the effect on larger communities.

## **Walking through the mud**

It was March 22, 2022, when I visited Mpondwe bridge and the adjacent marketplace. I left Bwera by motor taxi, locally called a boda boda, which is a common means of transportation in Uganda. The boda boda driver dropped me, a high school

graduate and a health care provider, on ten minutes walking distance from the marketplace. We waited there for a local leader and the daughter of a trading woman who would take us around the market. When they arrived, we walked in the direction of the market on the road which connects Uganda with the DRC, or better, next to the road. The width had shrunk after years of being used by heavy cargo. To avoid getting hit by a truck, boda boda, or any other vehicle trying to get its goods to customs or to the market it was safer to walk in the sand next to the paved road, yet also more challenging. It was raining so heavily that I could barely see in front of me, my long beige dress was instantly covered in mud. The number of trucks, boda boda's, and traders heading in the direction of Mpondwe suggested the importance of the market and the connection with the DRC. To clarify, at Mpondwe crossing point local traders buy products from large trucks to sell them in the market and large trucks use this road to transport their goods to big cities in Uganda or the DRC. The shattered roads did not only make our movement challenging, but it made especially the movement of the trucks difficult and slow. This hinted already at what improved roads could mean for the local traders.

We passed through a small alley to reach the marketplace, which covered a larger area than what could be perceived at first sight. I saw dried fish everywhere I looked. There were small fishes of only a few centimetres but also plenty of the, in Uganda well-known, big tilapia fish. When looking closely at the dried tilapia, I saw almost uniquely fish bones. Most of the meat was removed, only the head and tail

remained. The two women I was with explained that the best part of the fish was transported to wealthier parts of Uganda because the fish was otherwise unaffordable for the people living near Mpondwe. One kilogram of fish cost around 7000 Ugandan Shillings, which is slightly less than two euros. This example conveyed something interesting about the wealth of the people living in the region around Mpondwe market. As a footnote, between 2012/13 and 2016/17 Western Uganda became significantly poorer. Poverty in the region around Mpondwe increased from a poverty rate between 1 and 9 per cent to a rate between 9 and 12 per cent (UBOS, 2019). Other than fish, I noticed orange liquid in plastic bottles, palm oil, my guides clarified. Generally, palm oil is imported by traders from the DRC. The fish, on the other hand, most likely came from Uganda. These two products were symbolical for the trade in goods that were on the other side of the border difficult to find. Besides fish and palm oil, women were presenting vegetables, chicken, fabrics et cetera, on pieces of land for which they contributed small money. Dozens of similar stands were next to each other. The women needed to sell their products to earn money to sustain their families (Focus Group Discussion women, Bwera, 2022).

After roaming through the market, my guides took me to Mpondwe bridge. They first had to negotiate our access with patrolling officers because the bridge was closed as a COVID-19 measure and functions as a border check. After negotiations, I could enter the place where the red carpet had been unfolded, the flags and banners had flaunted, and the presidents had met. A notice on the bridge stated (Figure 1):

The groundbreaking for upgrading of Mpondwe/Kasindi-Beni, Beni-Butembo and Bunagana-Rutshuru-Goma roads was presided over by H.E. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, president of the Republic of Uganda, and H.E. Felix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, on 16th June 2021

As shortly touched upon, the people living in and around Mpondwe were on average not very wealthy. As a source of income, many of them depended on trading goods among each other and with Congolese people. Trade with the latter, however, became more challenging over the last few years. First, because the old bridge was unsafe for large trucks, and later because the bridge was closed to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Despite this, the people I spoke with in and around Mpondwe market celebrated the renovation of the bridge and the road project in general because they expected it to ease travelling to the DRC in the near future.



**Figure 1: Notice at Mpondwe Bridge**

## Building Bridges

The Rwenzori Mountains form the stage of a walk through Bwera. On one side of the mountain range, you find yourself in Uganda, and on the other side in the DRC. The Bakonzo people inhabit the plains and hills of these mountains both on the eastern slopes of Uganda and on the western slopes of the DRC. More than one million Bakonzo live in Uganda, including Bwera, and approximately 346 thousand Bakonzo are Congolese citizens (Joshua Project, 2022; The British Museum, n.d.). Indeed, the political border categorises these people either as Ugandan or Congolese. Yet, their ethnicity is the same. Ameliorating the connection between relatives through the reconstruction of the roads is consequently a warmly welcomed effect of the Uganda-DRC road project, argues someone of the VHTs during a focus group discussion (Bwera, 2022). The Bakonzo are only one example out of many, also “the Nandis in Congo, the Bankonjo<sup>1</sup>, Banyoro, Bahema, Banyamboga, Bamba, Hutu, Lendu etc. are the same people” states Museveni (Jumbe & Tumusiime, 2021). Michela Wrong, famous for her debut book *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, would refer to this situation as “a classic example of clumsy colonial map-drawing ignoring realities on the ground” (2021, p. 119-120). As a result, the same ethnic groups currently live in different countries. So, many Ugandans who live around the Mpondwe border crossing have relatives residing on the other side of the border. To visit their relatives, they are not only

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<sup>1</sup> Bakonjo is an alternative term to refer to the Bakonzo.

dependent on Uganda's road infrastructure but also the infrastructure of the DRC. A trip to their families in the DRC currently takes them hours because of the low-quality roads (Focus Group Discussion VHT, Bwera, 2022). For that reason, the people I spoke to were enthusiastic about the renewal of the road infrastructure in the DRC. Bridges will be built in a figurative sense as well.

Ethnic relations furthermore ease trade activities between the two regions (Awang et al., 2013; Titeca, 2009). Chicken, tomatoes, salted fish, beans, Irish potatoes and so forth find their way to the DRC and will increasingly do so when the roads are upgraded (Focus Group Discussion women, Bwera, 2022). Currently, poor infrastructure makes cross-border trade between Uganda and the DRC tough and time consuming (Focus Group Discussion Women, Bwera, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to uplift the quality of infrastructure in both countries. The 223km road project is meant to serve this goal (Titeca, 2009).

Trade between Uganda and the DRC is for a large part Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT). Informal refers to the fact that the trader, not the trade itself, is unregistered (UNCTAD, n.d.). Important to note is that along the border ICBT is perceived legitimate. ICBT is furthermore possible because no visa is required for Ugandan and Congolese citizens living within a radius of 15km from the border and on market days. This enables traders to easily cross the border making Mpondwe Station the leading crossing point for ICBT. Although statistics vary, in 2018, informal exports from Uganda to the DRC were estimated at a value of 149.3 million USD, making up

27.3 per cent of the total informal export. With imports estimated at a value of 10.2 million USD, Mpondwe was also the second-largest import destination for ICBT from the DRC in 2018 (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022; Uganda Bureau of Statistics & Bank of Uganda, 2019).

Local traders predict a boost in development because the reconstruction of the roads is believed to lower travel time, encourage customers from the DRC to come to Uganda and vice versa, increase trade, and create jobs (Focus Group Discussion Women, Bwera, 2022). For clarification, the improvement of the roads will reduce the travel time spent by traders aiming at selling their goods on the other side of the border (Shop owner, Bwera, 2022). This, in its turn, will lower the costs of transportation and increase the profits of traders (Local Councillor, Bwera, 2022). Additionally, lower travelling times will raise the number of traders and customers at the markets, especially since certain products are difficult to find in Uganda or the DRC (Focus Group Discussion Women, Bwera, 2022). The more customers market women have, the higher their incomes. The gathered money can be used for health care and education and thereby improve the people's living quality and socio-economic position (Doctor, Bwera, 2022). Furthermore, the goods local people trade across borders are generally sold at open markets like the one in Mpondwe at affordable prices. Given the region's poverty level, this is helpful for the other community members too. In short, ICBT is a source of income for local traders and their families, it creates job opportunities, reduces poverty, and ensures food security making it sequacious that the local population I spoke

with unanimously celebrated the project (Awang et al., 2013; Titeca, 2009; UNDP, 2020).

To finish Museveni's statement: "When there is insecurity, we are affected directly. We currently have four thousand Congolese refugees in Uganda camps and others in society with their relatives" (Jumbe & Tumusiime, 2021). It is key to realise that the eastern region of the DRC is still struck by violence enacted by different armed militias, in many cases backed by neighbouring countries to profit from the DRC's natural resource wealth (Batware, 2011; Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). A Ugandan professor in the field of Humanities argues that the flipside of improved connectivity is, indeed, increased crime and violence. In other words, the professor reasons that it will be easier for criminals to hide across the border, mineral violence to go up as trade increases, and terrorist attacks in the border region and beyond to skyrocket (Kampala, 2022). Studies show that wars can indeed diffuse to neighbouring regions, especially if rebel groups and neighbouring states are involved for economic benefits (Ansorg, 2011).

Given this information, I wondered whether the local population feared increased violence by armed militias in Uganda due to increased connectivity. In contrast to the analysis of the professor, the local population is not worried about the possibility of increased violence in the region because they have faith in the UPDF stationed in the DRC to fight the armed groups terrorising the region. They believe that the UPDF can pacify the region. More so, they expect that a closer relationship with the DRC will bring more regional



security. Notwithstanding, they point out that despite the presence of the UPDF in the DRC, there are still insurgencies (Focus Group Discussion Women, Bwera, 2022).

## **There is no silver bullet**

“It is a good project which has at the same time health, social, and economic costs” (Doctor, Bwera, 2022). The local population is not naïve and knows that increased cross-border connectivity and the construction of a large infrastructure project also have spin-off effects, especially for border communities, like the intensified spread of diseases, rising chances for gender-based violence (GBV) and so on (Awang et al., 2013; Focus Group Discussion Women, Bwera, 2022; Leonardi et al., 2021).

When COVID-19 hit the world, the invisible threat of cross-border movement became explicit. Diseases cross borders. So, borders were closed to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The other side of the coin is that, when cross-border movement intensifies, diseases can mushroom. A doctor from Bwera hospital voiced his fear of an intensification of diseases in Uganda when movement surges. For clarification, the Albertine region, i.e., the wider area around Lake Albert, is a hotbed of bacteria and viruses which have caused multiple epidemics of contagious diseases in the DRC (Bwera, 2022). Suk et al. (2014) show that a few drivers exacerbate the emergence and spread of diseases including “global trade and travel, the overuse of antibiotics, intensive agriculture, climate change, high population densities, and

inadequate infrastructures, such as water treatment facilities” (p. 1). The more drivers interact, the higher the risks (Suk et al., 2014). These drivers are all prevalent along the Uganda-DRC border in Mpondwe. The road project will intensify cross-border movement (Bwire et al., 2016). The inadequate health system in the DRC spurs the overuse of antibiotics provided by drug dealers (Doctor, Bwera, 2022). 70 per cent of Uganda’s working population works as agriculturalist (International Trade Administration, 2021). Mpondwe market, to give an example, is a crowded place with insufficient hygiene facilities. The fear is thus well-grounded. Not only the doctor from Bwera hospital but also the people of both focus groups acknowledge the risk of the diffusion of diseases when upgrading the connection between Uganda and the DRC. They are concerned about the spread of Ebola, Hepatitis, COVID-19, HIV/AIDS and so forth because they are aware of the dangers (Bwera, 2022). The Kivu Ebola Epidemic, which terrorised the Kivu provinces in the DRC between 2018 and 2020, for instance, took the life of 2299 out of 3481 people diagnosed with the disease (Ministry of Health Democratic Republic of the Congo, n.d.; United Nations, 2022).

On top of sickening people, diseases cause wider suffering among the population, economic losses, and social disturbance because people drop out of work, lose their source of income, women fail to take care of their families and so forth. Moreover, diseases disproportionately impact socially and economically vulnerable groups among which women (Bwire et al., 2016; Suk et al., 2014).

The construction activities will impact the lives of women differently than those of men. The doctor in Bwera hospital and the women in the focus group discussion expressed their worries about increased transmission of HIV/AIDS because large construction works come with an increased migration of male workers to the region (Doctor, Bwera, 2022). In addition, a VHT member in Bwera (2022) said: “where there is smoke, you expect fire” with which he referred to the fact that “the influx of male construction workers by extractive and large-scale infrastructure projects are linked to increased gender-based violence (GBV)” (Camey et al., 2020, p. 108). The people of the VHTs observed it with other construction projects, so expected the same to occur with this project. They saw the consequences of rape, such as unwanted pregnancies and skyrocketing numbers of sexually transmitted diseases (Focus Group VHT, Bwera, 2022). Despite the benefits, large-scale projects often come at a high human cost, having far-reaching consequences for women, families, but also communities at large because it impacts victims’ well-being, economic development, and gender equality (Camey et al., 2020). “There is no silver bullet”, as a professor in Economics described the project (Kampala, 2022).

On top of GBV, the women I spoke with were also concerned about an increase in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The women argued that violence of husbands towards their wives would skyrocket as a response to the latter trading inside the DRC without asking for consent. Trading inside the DRC creates an opportunity for more income generation. Yet, many Ugandan husbands in the region require their wives to

ask for permission because they fear that their wives will find another man they would prefer to be with. If women do not ask permission, IPV will sneak or intensify in the household (Local Leader, Mpondwe, 2022; Focus Group Women, Bwera, 2022). To limit the risks for women, a gender-inclusive approach to large-scale construction works is crucial. Both men and women should be heard (Camey et al., 2020).

To talk about inclusivity, however, it is essential to understand what the concept means for Ugandans. How do Ugandan experts define inclusivity, and what are the perceptions of the local population on the inclusivity of the project? The head of a Ugandan social justice organisation referred to inclusivity as policies that take different sections of society into account, including vulnerable groups such as youth and women (Kampala, 2022). A Ugandan professor in Economics argued that for a project to be inclusive all stakeholders must be included in the process of deciding about and creating the project (Kampala, 2022). A former parliamentarian considered a project inclusive if everyone can participate in and benefit from the intended development (Kampala, 2022). The head of a newspaper, on the other hand, said that something is inclusive when the majority of the people are included (Kampala, 2022). A journalist argued that inclusivity in Uganda does not only refer to taking women, youth, people with disabilities and so forth on board but also ethnic groups, kingdoms, and tribes. He warned not to approach it from a Western perspective (Kampala, 2022). There is no unanimity in how the experts conceptualised inclusivity. Yet, the overlapping element in all the definitions

was their focus on the Ugandan people. Hence, I asked the people living near Mpondwe about their feelings of inclusion.

A year prior to the launch of the project, local councillors visited the communities in the region to interview them about their viewpoints on the project (Local leader, Bwera, 2022). Whereas most of the people I spoke to in Bwera confirmed this information, two people said they were never approached. To exemplify, a shop owner in Bwera said she had never heard about the project before but also did not bother because the project would benefit her business (2022). Despite the conversations with the local leaders about the project, the respondents enumerated things they would like to see different in the project design or management. A doctor from Bwera hospital proposed a solidarity approach to reduce the threat of diseases. Many of the people living along the border have Congolese relatives. Since the healthcare system in the DRC is falling short due to decades of war, they argue in favour of a system in Uganda that treats both Ugandan and Congolese citizens. There is no option for the Congolese population to receive free healthcare making it very, or even too, expensive for people to seek help (Lateef, 2021). For both populations to be safe, Congolese citizens must be treated as well. Prevention and problem-solving measures including the upscaling of sanitation possibilities at markets, vaccinations, health education, screening et cetera are needed as well to battle the spread of diseases (Doctor, Bwera, 2022). In addition, to avoid GBV and IPV during the construction phase of the roads, local community members should be hired, lowering the influx of workers (Focus Group Discussion Women, Bwera, 2022). This

showed that citizens felt included to some extent, but also that a more inclusive approach would increase the benefits for the local communities.

In line with Winner's argument of 1988, the best way to deal with the disadvantageous consequences of the project is to establish multi-sided debates in public spaces to raise the voice of the social groups that are impacted by the project but have no or little bargaining power, i.e., the groups Winner refers to as irrelevant social groups. Whereas local councillors listened to the voices of the local population to some extent, the research shows that they still have little power to effectively adapt the design or management of the project and tackle the expected issues.



# **CHAPTER 3: CROSSING THE BORDER BY TRUCK**

“Artefacts can contain political properties ... [in]... instances in which the invention, design, or arrangement of a specific technical device or system becomes a way of settling an issue in the affairs of a particular community” (Winner, 1988, p. 22). Uganda wants to expand its market to increase trade, being a cornerstone of Museveni’s political and economic strategy, by improving the road network in the DRC (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). Indeed, the recurring reason experts propounded for the government to contribute 20 per cent of the total costs for the reconstruction of the road network, was the prospect of increased trade with the DRC and consequently a stronger economy which advances the country’s regional leverage (Head of Newspaper, Kampala, 2022). This intention thus implies that the project contains political properties.

The overall condition of Uganda’s roads remains poor compared to international standards, whilst 92 per cent of the passenger and cargo transport goes via road (Byaruhanga & Basheka, 2017; Development Policy and Performance Portal, 2022). Yet, quality infrastructure is essential for any country that aims to grow its economy. More investment in infrastructure such as roads will fasten the transportation of goods and facilitate access to (new) markets. The former



lowers the cost of transport, and the latter allows for economies of scale, leading to economic growth (Byaruhanga & Basheka, 2017; The Republic of Uganda, 2015).

More succinctly, this chapter argues that the manifest political ambition of Uganda's government is to increase trade, including in minerals, and to grow Uganda's economy. This is key to uplift Uganda's regional power and to contribute to the EAC's wider economic plan.

## **The lifeline of Uganda's economy**

In 2007, Paul Collier wrote the book *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Seemingly, the book has been read by the members of Uganda's government. In other words, Collier's analysis helps to understand why Uganda's government decided to undertake a road infrastructure project and, thus, what the underlying political reasoning is.

Uganda is a fast-growing, landlocked country (Collier, 2007). In 2021, Uganda had a Gross Domestic Product (GDP), i.e., the total monetary value of all produced goods and services in a country in one year, of 42.48 billion USD, ranking fifteenth of all African countries. In comparison, Kenya had a GDP of 109.8 billion USD, the DRC had a GDP of 57.09 billion USD, Sudan's GDP was 35.15 billion USD, and the GDP of Rwanda was 11.13 billion USD (Statista, 2022). Moreover, Uganda's third National Development Plan (NDP) estimates that between 2020 and 2025, Uganda's GDP growth will be

between 6.2 and 7 per cent (National Planning Authority, 2020).

At the same time, however, Uganda is a landlocked country making it dependent on its neighbours to fully achieve its economic potential. That is to say, Uganda has to negotiate access to the sea with its neighbours to get its products to the world market. Additionally, the transport costs of a landlocked country depend on the quality of the infrastructure in the neighbouring countries. It is proven that the quality of internal as well as external infrastructure drives economic growth and therefore also the population's living standards (Byaruhanga & Basheka, 2017; Collier, 2007; Shield, 2019). A landlocked country's neighbours can serve as a market as well. Some neighbours, nonetheless, make better markets than others. South Sudan, for example, is still recovering from war and the DRC's eastern region is unstable due to the presence of rebel groups. Kenya's market is already largely exploited. In 2020, for instance, Uganda exported approximately 401 million USD in goods to Kenya and Kenya exported 940 million USD in goods to Uganda (Collier, 2007; OEC, n.d.-c). Uganda traded extensively with Rwanda as well until the latter decided to close its northern border in 2019 because it suspected Uganda of harassing Rwandans and supporting dissidents with anti-Kigali ideas (Biryabarema, 2022). To demonstrate, in 2018, exports from Uganda to Rwanda made up 231 million USD dropping to 2.31 million USD in 2020. In 2018, imports ran up to 44.5 million USD but the value dwindled to 3.35 million USD by 2020 (OEC, n.d.-d). The almost disappearing market and the friction with Rwanda were, according to a researcher in

strategic minerals, the trigger for Uganda to set its sights on an economic partnership with the DRC despite the challenges (Kampala, 2022).

“Congo is a huge sleeping market. This is a strategic investment” stated Uganda’s minister of finance Matia Kasija in an interview for the Africa Report (Blanshe, 2021a). In 2020, export from Uganda to the DRC accounted for 265 million USD and imports for 17.7 million USD (OEC, n.d.-a). Informal trade is even larger (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). The DRC has much to offer as a trading partner given its large population and numerous resources (Mugume & Nattabi, 2021b; OEC, n.d.-a). Yet, to profit from a partnership with the DRC, as Collier argues, good transport infrastructure and stability, the latter elaborated upon in the following chapter, is crucial (2007). Despite the flaws, Uganda’s government has invested in its infrastructure domestically. The road sector has been reformed giving rise to the Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA). The UNRA contracts companies to execute road works, monitors construction projects, and ensures the execution of new infrastructure agreements, like the Uganda-DRC road project (Byaruhanga & Basheka, 2017; Ugfacts.net, n.d.; UNRA, 2020). Furthermore, Uganda included the upgrading of its national roads in the second NDP of 2015 (The Republic of Uganda, 2015). The national roads, for instance, had to be upgraded from 3795km to 6000km of paved roads by 2020. The UNRA upgraded 5370km (The Republic of Uganda, 2015; UNRA, 2020). Because improvement of transport infrastructure is a predominant driver of economic growth, investment in road infrastructure was also included in

Uganda's third NDP. 90 per cent of the government budget assigned for transport infrastructure will go to the upgrading of roads (National Planning Authority, 2020).

Notwithstanding the efforts domestically, the poor road network in the DRC must be improved as well to boost inter-state economic relations (Professor in History, Kampala, 2022). Similarly, Collier (2007) writes that "cross-border trade depends upon the transport infrastructure on both sides of the border, so half of the problem is outside the control of the government of a landlocked country" (p. 59). Or is it not? In line with Winner's reasoning that certain actors hold more bargaining power than others, a Ugandan journalist argues that Tshisekedi's government did not hold sufficient power to withdraw from an agreement. For clarification, Tshisekedi is elected under precarious circumstances due to which he lacks legitimacy as a president and tries to gain it by allying with stronger governments. The support of the region's most influential president, Museveni, could be a means to that end. Stepping on Uganda's toes, on the other hand, could have detrimental effects. Uganda is assumed to have propped up the secession of South Sudan from Sudan. Kinshasa, as the journalist reasons, might hold the same fear for eastern DRC (Kampala, 2022). Improving the road network, in this line of thinking, is a choice made by Uganda's government and therefore reflects Uganda's interest to grow its economy first and foremost.

Economic growth can lead to regional and national development. To clarify, more trade will surge the incomes of local traders and create jobs, which can eventually foster

economic growth. This, dependent on the actions of the government, has the potential to uplift the country's development (Fujimura & Edmonds, 2006). Nevertheless, most of the experts reason that the country's development is a warmly welcomed effect, but not the government's political ambition. Rather, economic strength enlarges a country's political competitiveness in the region vis-à-vis neighbouring states. Indeed, economic growth and innovation are key for any country that wants to compete with its neighbours because it strengthens a country's bargaining power. The more intense political competition is in a region, the more innovation countries pursue (Mugume & Nattabi, 2021b). To illustrate, Rwanda has comprehended the potential of the Congolese market as well. Between 2010 and 2018 Rwanda's export to the DRC skyrocketed from 18 million USD to 337 million USD (OEC, n.d.-a). Consequently, Rwanda's economy and, therefore its regional power, has grown. Uganda must innovate to boost economic growth and increase its capacities to compete with Rwanda (Chaudhry & Garner, 2006). Indeed, the Uganda-DRC road project uplifts Uganda's power and competitiveness in the region versus the other Great Lakes states.

More concisely, Uganda's government is interested in the expansion of the Uganda-DRC trade relation to nourish its economy. This is essential to enhance the country's competitiveness in the region. To unlock this economic potential of trading with the DRC, however, the Congolese road network must be upgraded to become the "lifeline of Uganda's economy" (Journalist, Kampala, 2022).

## **The DRC is a jewel in the Great Lakes Region**

The roads are built because Uganda's government is interested in expanding the illegal trade in gold, states the head of a social justice organisation (Kampala, 2022). More nuanced, this chapter argues that trading minerals is part of Uganda's ambition to increase trade and expand the country's economy but is not the predominant driver behind Uganda's investment in roads on Congolese territory. Moreover, it is too narrow to reduce Uganda's mineral trade to illegal trade disadvantaging the Congolese population. In the words of the head of a newspaper: "The interest in minerals is overhyped" (Kampala, 2022).

"The DRC is like a child of a king who has never experienced the benefits of being born with a silver spoon" says a former Ugandan parliamentarian to explain Congo's poor political, social, and economic condition in contrast to its resource wealth (Kampala, 2022). The DRC's mineral wealth has scarcely benefitted the Congolese population (Ecovadis, n.d.; Global Edge, 2022). More elaborately, 17 per cent of the world's production in rough diamonds and 60 to 80 per cent of the global reserves of coltan can be traced back to the DRC. The DRC is, moreover, the leading producer of copper and cobalt (International Alert, 2010; Mugume & Nattabi, 2021a; United Nations, n.d.). Indeed, the DRC is a real jewel in the Great Lakes region (Journalist, Kampala, 2022) Still, in 2022, the country ranked tenth among the poorest countries in the

world. On top of that, plunder and illegal trade of minerals continue to fuel the conflict in the East of the country (World Population Review, 2022).

It is crucial to look at the past and present developments regarding the illegal exploitation of minerals from the DRC to understand where the suspicion regarding Uganda's presence in the DRC comes from. At the end of the 1990s, during the Second Congolese War, the interests of Ugandan and Rwandan actors in the Congolese minerals became clear and mineral trade boomed. Yet, the extraction and trade of minerals by Ugandan actors was not always with the blessing of the Congolese authorities and led to frustrations in Kinshasa. The Congolese authorities brought the case to the ICJ, which found Uganda guilty of looting activities. Despite a lack of evidence for the involvement of Uganda's government, the ICJ ought it responsible for the, by evidence substantiated, looting activities of UPDF actors because it fell short in prohibiting these activities (Clark, 2001; International Court of Justice, n.d.).

Despite frustrations about the past, trade in minerals between Uganda and the DRC has remained high. In 2018, gold was the biggest export product from the DRC to Uganda accounting for 61.6 per cent of the total exports to Uganda (OEC, n.d.-a). In addition, gold is the top export product of Uganda, most of it originating from the DRC. In 2021, the export of gold was measured at a worth of 2.24 billion USD making Uganda the 28<sup>th</sup> largest exporter of the mineral resource worldwide (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022; OEC, n.d.-b).

Given Uganda's past in the DRC and its current interests in gold, the location of the road network causes speculation about whether Uganda's engagement in the road project is driven by the ambition to facilitate the smuggling of minerals and thereby avoid taxes to profit disproportionately from the DRC's wealth (Otafiire, 2021). The plan is to upgrade the roads in the mineral-rich Kivu region, the North Kivu province in specific. The region around Walikale, Masisi, Rutshuru and Nyiragongo is the richest region in terms of minerals. Rutshuru, together with Bunagana and Goma, is rich in coltan. Although fewer, in the area around Beni, Butembo, and Lubero, sites of tin, gold and diamonds can be found. Indeed, near the roads, a vast amount of minerals can be found (International Alert, 2010; IPIS, n.d.; Ojewale, n.d.). The choice to improve the connection of these places with Uganda hence raises suspicion (International Alert, 2010).

Whereas the interest of Uganda in the Congolese resources cannot be disclosed, since it is the country's key asset and a prime export product of Uganda, it would be inaccurate to argue based on this information that the driving motivation to engage in the project is to increase access to Congolese minerals to augment illegal mineral trade. The story should be addressed with more nuance.

Expanding mineral trade between the two countries is not by definition a negative thing because the DRC does, in contrast to Uganda, not have the manufacturing sector to process minerals (Journalist, Kampala, 2022). It is true that the DRCs neighbouring countries profit from the trade in Congolese minerals and that by improving its connection with



the DRC, Uganda will get a larger slice of the pie (Blanshe, 2021b; Perks & Vlassenroot, 2011). Yet, as long as the trade in minerals does not instigate crime and transparency is guaranteed, the DRC profits from mineral trade as well, argues a Ugandan professor in Economics (Kampala, 2022).

The issue of transparency and the avoidance of taxes can be reduced with the construction of the roads, argues a researcher in strategic minerals (Kampala, 2022). The presence of the UPDF will challenge the illegal trade in minerals by armed militias amongst others and boost the use of the road network for legal trade (Researcher on strategic Minerals, Kampala, 2022; Perks & Vlassenroot, 2011). Besides this, it is more interesting for Uganda's government to opt for legal trade of minerals because plundering and looting generally goes together with violence, fuelling the insecurity in the region and, consequently, boycotting trade in the region. A secure region in which the roads will be used optimally adds to the value of the project (Researcher on strategic minerals, Kampala, 2022). Next to that, more and more companies require more transparency about the origin of the minerals they use in the products they sell (Perks & Vlassenroot, 2011).

Still, it is important not to overlook the fact that the project might also have the opposite effect, namely, that officers look the other side when minerals are smuggled via the roads to Uganda (International Alert, 2010). Illegal exploitation and trade of minerals by Ugandans most probably still occurs (Journalist, Kampala, 2022). There are in the end, as stated by a Ugandan professor in Economics, "no saints in the Congo" (Kampala, 2022).

The role of two other actors, namely, Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Rwanda in the trade of minerals should not be neglected to understand why Uganda benefits more from legally trading minerals than from promoting smuggling. According to a Ugandan journalist, President Kabila was not concerned about the East's thickly forested, sparsely inhabited region from a political perspective, nonetheless acknowledged the potential of the resource wealth (Kampala, 2022). To obtain part of the profits, the government welcomed MNCs and agreed to allow access in return for a share of the profits (Hönke & Geenen, 2014). MNCs started to play a key role in the trading chain of Congolese minerals, often by positioning subsidiaries or establishing trading partners (Batware, 2011; Rapanyane, 2021). Unfortunately, local communities lost their shares of the mines (Journalist, Kampala, 2022). Clashes between MNCs and the local population about the exploitation of mine workers, land use, pollution, human rights abuses, loss of livelihoods, redistribution, and so forth occurred and still happen frequently (Hönke & Geenen, 2014). To protect themselves, the local population established "protection militias". To minimise the threat, MNCs started to support different militia groups by, for example, buying arms, in return for protection leading to clashes amongst the militias (Journalist, Kampala, 2022; Rapanyane, 2021).

The MNCs' profits from trading in minerals are the highest, according to a head of a newspaper, because they hold a large part of the mines in the DRC (Kampala, 2022). To illustrate, in 2005, De Beers, DGI Mining and Nizhne-Lenskoye

were given mining licences covering an area of 35 thousand square kilometres (Cannon, 2011). This unfortunately adds to the issue of redistribution in the DRC fuelling the ongoing conflict (Journalist, Kampala, 2022). More so, the Congolese state has become institutionally, financially, and politically too weak to confront the MNCs (Batware, 2011). In line with this, a Ugandan researcher argues that it would be too dangerous for Uganda as well to openly compete with MNCs. It is smarter to boost legal trade by imposing more control and increasing its own sphere of influence to the detriment of the MNCs (Kampala, 2022).

Besides MNCs, also Rwanda plays a key role in the trade of minerals. Its government is highly suspected of being involved in smuggling Congolese minerals (Himbara, 2021). Whereas Uganda and Rwanda are both transit routes for minerals to be exported overseas, Rwanda is the preferred transit country because, unlike Congolese and Ugandan legislation, Rwanda does not raise taxes on exporting minerals, hence minerals are smuggled to Rwanda. Moreover, Rwanda blurs the origin of the minerals once they have undergone processing in the country with a minimally 30 per cent value-added (Cannon, 2011; Ojewale, n.d.; Rapanyane, 2021). Anyhow, this makes that Uganda will only outperform Rwanda if it promotes the legal trade of minerals.

In sum, the argument that Uganda's government has engaged in the project with the ambition to loot minerals is unsustainable, rather the opposite seems true (Former Parliamentarian, Kampala, 2022). Trading minerals with the DRC can be a mutually beneficial undertaking and is part of the

incentive to increase trade and grow Uganda's economy. Moreover, the experts argue that, given the powerful competition by MNCs and Rwanda, it is more interesting to legalise the trade in minerals because then the roads will be a preferred way to drive the minerals to Uganda from where they can be exported.

## **Not an isolated project**

Winner (1993) criticises SCOT for the insufficient attention given to the sociocultural and political circumstances in which a technology is implemented, although it largely shapes the interests of those at the decision-making table. In line with the reasoning of a professor in History from Makerere University, this section argues that it is important to understand the interest of Uganda's authorities in expanding trade not as an isolated project but as a means to contribute to the economic plan of the EAC towards regional economic growth (Kampala, 2022). The last chapter elaborates on the reason why Uganda's government attaches so much importance to the EAC.

One of the official ambitions the heads of state pronounced to engage in the project was the integration of the DRC into the EAC (Otafiire, 2021). The EAC is an intergovernmental organisation established in 2001 including Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, and Tanzania until the DRC joined the community on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2022 (East African Community, n.d.; Mwangangi, 2022). Important to note is that a Ugandan researcher argues that the membership of the DRC is already the result of the agreement

between President Museveni and President Tshisekedi to improve the road network and, alongside this, send the UPDF to the DRC (Kampala, 2022).

To continue, the principal goal of the EAC members is to achieve regional integration. Four milestones have been put in place for this to materialise. The first milestone is the creation of a customs union. This came about in 2005 due to which goods and services can be traded freely and a common external tariff, i.e., a fixed tariff on goods imported from outside the union, was imposed. With a common market operational, the second milestone was accomplished in 2010. This milestone contributes to regional economic growth and development. The third and fourth milestones, namely, to set up a monetary union, for which the countries' fiscal and monetary policies need to be harmonised and a single currency decided upon, and to establish a political federation with a single political authority, are still under progress (East African Community, n.d.; Mugume & Nattabi, 2021b). The EAC is praised for its close regional integration, the highest percentage of intra-regional trade, namely, 20 per cent, and the rapid GDP growth amongst its members (Mugume & Nattabi, 2021a, 2021b).

In 2019, the DRC requested to become a member of the EAC, aspiring to engage in a trade and political partnership with the other EAC members. With the membership, the DRC hopes to benefit from increased regional trade, because of simpler and cheaper travel regulations, hence a larger market, and more investment in the country coming via the EAC. Moreover, joining the EAC will ameliorate the connection with

the ports of Dar es Salaam and Mombasa and thereby facilitate access to the Indian ocean (Mwangangi, 2022). The EAC members will profit as well. The consumer market of the EAC will explode due to the large Congolese population of 90 million. Additionally, the natural resource wealth of the DRC makes the country an interesting trading partner. In line with this, trading will become easier because traders will not need to buy a visa if they want to traverse the border with the DRC (Mwangangi, 2022). Although each of the member states will gain from the DRC's entrance to the organisation, especially Uganda and Rwanda will profit due to their proximity and the ongoing trade relations. The free trade agreement and the lowering of tariffs with the DRC are estimated to expand the overall exports of Uganda with a value of 60 million USD and of Rwanda with approximately 81 million USD. In terms of trade growth, Uganda's trade with the DRC will grow by 30 per cent compared to 24 per cent for Rwanda. Export from Uganda to the DRC is estimated to increase by 28.8 million USD or 14 per cent. Overall, the export of the EAC to the DRC will grow by 28 per cent to a value of 240.7 million USD. Tanzania, Kenya, and Burundi will gain, respectively, 50 million USD, 42 million USD, and 6 million USD by the expansion of their exports. Additionally, the integration of the DRC into the EAC opens the way to extend the market to West Africa (Mugume & Nattabi, 2021a, 2021b).

The expansion of its market and economy is important for the global bargaining power of the EAC as it shows the strength of the bloc in terms of its purchasing power (Mwangangi, 2022). Yet, the road conditions in the DRC are

poor and the country is highly unstable especially in its eastern region, lowering the benefits of its membership. To fully unlock the country's economic potential of its membership and the benefits for the EAC, the transport infrastructure should be upgraded, and the region pacified. Uganda's government intends to realise the EAC's goal with this road project (Mugume & Nattabi, 2021b).





# **CHAPTER 4: THE SCRAMBLE FOR POWER**

It is important to face the complexity of the situation and dare to tell a story with overlapping causes and consequences (Professor in Economics, Kampala, 2022). The previous chapter focussed on the interest of Uganda in trade, economic growth, access to natural resources, and the ambition to serve the wider economic plan of the EAC. Some less obvious ambitions nonetheless need to be highlighted to grasp the full and complex picture of the political ambitions Uganda's government wants to realise by engaging in the Uganda-DRC road project. First, the road project legitimises Operation Shujaa, i.e., the operation of the UPDF in the DRC to protect the construction workers and eradicate the ADF. Yet, it serves at the same time as a tool to unlock the full economic potential of the partnership. Moreover, the presence of the UPDF is key to protecting the oil wells around Lake Albert from rebel groups to achieve Uganda's ambition to start extracting oil. Second, the project is a means to reinforce Uganda's status and strength in the region. More specifically, Uganda can gain status vis-à-vis Rwanda because of its manoeuvres in the DRC. Indeed, nourishing the relationship with the DRC, smoothening trade relations, pacifying eastern DRC, securing the oil wells, and thereby outmatching Rwanda, broadens Uganda's sphere

of influence and elevates its status in the Great Lakes Region (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). This advances President Museveni's personal political ambition to become the first president of the EAC (Kampala, 2022). Africa's Great Lakes Region has become the playing field for Kampala to gain geopolitical power and status, resonating with Winner's argument that technologies can be used as tools to lift the power, authority, and privilege of a certain actor over others (1988).

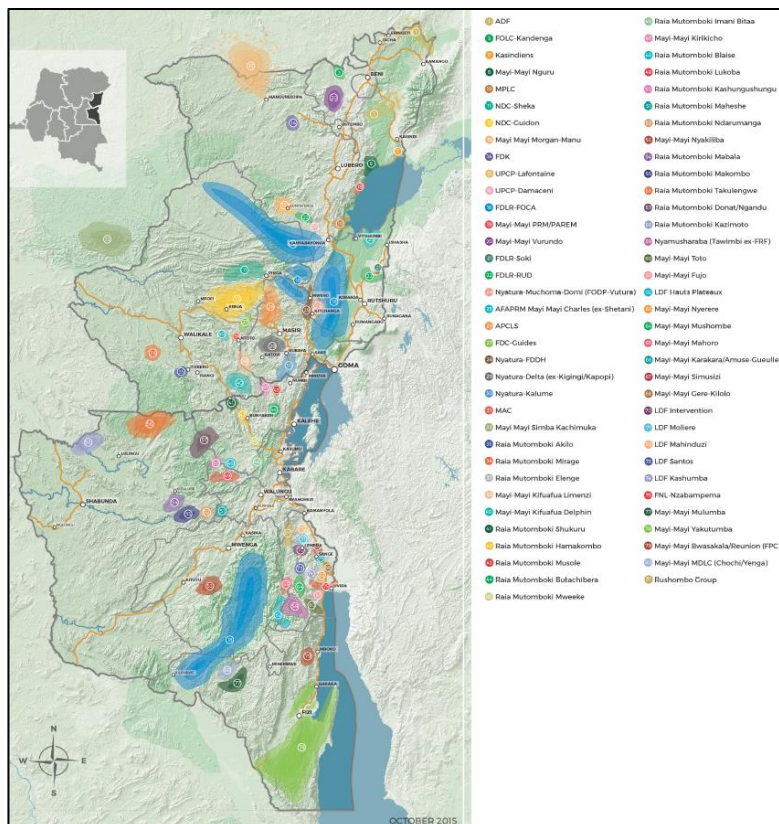
## **Building Security Roads**

In a few words, the protection of the construction workers legitimises the presence of the UPDF in the DRC enabling them at the same time to protect the oil wells around Lake Albert from attacks by armed militias. With this strategy, the Ugandan regime seeks to augment its domestic and regional legitimacy, authority, and status (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022).

Uganda's participation in the road project almost sounded like a fairy tale of building roads, strengthening its economy, and extending regional influence. Unfortunately, every fairy tale has a bogeyman. The bogeymen in this story are the armed militias concentrated in the DRC's eastern provinces. Stealing, oppressing and other activities of these groups have destabilised the DRC for decades, making the country a destabilising factor in the region (Ansorg, 2011; Batware, 2011; Head of social justice organisation, Kampala, 2022). A former parliamentarian, at the same time conflict researcher, estimates that the DRC hosts 164 armed groups

(Kampala, 2022). The North and South Kivu provinces act as a home for at least eighty armed groups but it is difficult to provide an exact number because of their multitude and internal fragmentation, visible in the plethora of similar acronyms (Figure 2). The biggest operative groups in the Kivu provinces are the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, the Allied Democratic Forces, and the Forces Nationales de Libération (Stearns & Vogel, 2015). Recent press messages state that the Mouvement du 23 Mars (M23) is gaining ground again in the North Kivu province, allegedly backed by Rwanda's government. Numerous citizens already left the DRC to seek refuge in Uganda (Sabiti & Bujakera, 2022).

The ADF is a Muslim fundamentalist militia that originated out of a group with anti-Ugandan government ideas in the early 1990s. Since 1995, the group based itself in the DRC and has over the years been pushed to the area surrounding Beni, where it is found responsible for multiple massacres (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022; Stearns & Vogel, 2015). Since 2013, the ADF has killed approximately 6 thousand Congolese people. Additionally, the group's members chase and oppress local communities to become lord and master over their territory. Uganda suffers as well. In November 2021, 4 people were killed and 33 injured due to terroristic attacks in Kampala claimed by the ADF (Daghar et al., 2022; Matthysen, 2021).



**Figure 2: Stearns & Vogel (2015) - The landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern DRC**

It would be naive to think that Uganda's government can build roads inside the ADF's and other armed groups' territory and gain strength in the region without facing opposition. To deal with this challenge, Kinshasa allowed the UPDF to enter the DRC to eliminate the ADF and protect the construction workers (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022; Murray et al., 2016). The allowance of the UPDF on Congolese territory is a ground-breaking event because it is the first time since the troops left

at the end of the Second Congolese war that the UPDF is positioned in the DRC and because the army is a protagonist in extending Uganda's sphere of influence (Mullins & Rothe, 2008; Murray et al., 2016). Under a Memorandum of Understanding between the presidents, Operation Shujaa, started off at the end of November 2021 (Kazibwe, 2022). The road construction phase began a few days later on the third of December (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022).

Notwithstanding the purpose to protect the construction workers, the UPDF would not be stationed inside the DRC without economic interests at stake (Journalist, Kampala, 2022). A former parliamentarian calls the roads "security roads" because, as she argues, they will open up the volatile forests of the Kivu region and allow the UPDF to reach and fight armed militias (Kampala, 2022). On the one hand, security in the DRC is essential for economic activities to boom domestically. "National security is a desideratum, sine qua non for economic growth and development of any country" (Azu et al., 2020, p. 231). Once the region stabilises, the people can start to trade and improve their livelihoods. Eventually, the more people have, the more likely they will choose peace over conflict, making this a sustainable strategy (Researcher on strategic minerals, Kampala, 2022). On the other hand, peace must return to the DRC for commercial activities between Uganda and the DRC to thrive (Collier, 2007; Xinhua, 2021). Violence has turned the Kivu provinces into a lawless place where people trade by the use of guns. Many foreign traders have refrained from engaging in trade with the DRC due to the volatile character of the region. The pacification of eastern DRC

is, therefore, essential for cross-border trade to flourish (Former Parliamentarian, Kampala, 2022).

The violence is also a “nightmare for the African Great Lakes Region” in general (Xinhua, 2021). For the EAC member states to profit maximally from the DRC’s integration into the community, it is crucial to bring order to the chaos. Peace must return to the DRC to augment trade because the violence scares traders. Furthermore, the DRC’s integration into the EAC eases goods, including weaponry, and people, including rebel forces, to cross borders. Radical ideologies will thrive in the region, likely to intensify crime beyond the DRC’s border unless rebel groups are eradicated (Daghar et al., 2022).

The decision of Uganda’s government to build roads and position troops in the DRC furthermore promotes its ambition to protect the oil wells surrounding lake Albert and start extracting oil (Figure 3) (Researcher on strategic minerals, Kampala, 2022). Oil exploration activities in Uganda started more than a hundred years ago but it took until 2006 to confirm the presence of deposits with commercial oil quantities (Mwanguzi, 2022). The World Bank asserts that Uganda has the capacity to be amongst the fifty largest oil producers worldwide. Indeed, oil is plentiful. Therefore, Kampala has, next to expanding trade, bet on the oil sector as an economic and political strategy. The extraction of oil will transform Uganda’s agriculture-based economy and foresees a prosperous future for Uganda’s national economy (Blanshe, 2021a; Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022; Mwanguzi, 2022; Vokes, 2012). More so, if oil is extracted by 2026, it is just in time to strengthen the campaign of the seating government

members in the 2026 elections (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022).

Despite the early discovery of oil in the Lake Albert Basin, no single drop has been extracted due to disputes over taxes, strategies, and lacking infrastructure (Boschee, 2022; Muwanguzi, 2022). Finally, early February 2022, the two leading companies behind the development of oil, TotalEnergies and CNOOC Ltd, took the Final Investment Decision (FID) to spend 10 billion USD on infrastructure to extract and transport oil. The Tilenga Project, the Kingfisher Project, and the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), a heated pipeline of 1443km from Uganda to Tanga in Tanzania, are included in the FID (Matsiko, 2021b; Reed, 2022). Part of the crude oil will be refined in Uganda for its domestic market and the remainder will be transported to the international market. Uganda will export 216 thousand barrels a day (East African Crude Oil Pipeline, n.d.). With the FID set, the extraction of crude oil is close to becoming reality.

Be that as it may, the oil fields are located near the border with the DRC, hence the infrastructure risks to be destroyed or taken over by rebel groups (Researcher on strategic minerals, Kampala, 2022). “The ADF terrorists had been explicitly promoted as a threat to the oil due to their location in DRC across from the oil wells” (Walsh, 2020, p. 314). Therefore, these costly projects need protection through strict military control (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). The roads will ease the movement of the army to impose peace (Blanshe, 2021a; Matsiko, 2021a, 2021b). Moreover, if peace returns to the DRC, the Congolese oil fields can be integrated

into the EACOP project as well. This will further the integration of the DRC into the EAC and boost the region's economic development, argues a researcher in strategic minerals (Kampala, 2022). This explains also why the UPDF is allowed to stretch its tentacles further than the Kivu provinces and target groups other than the ADF (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022).

Given the importance of peace for the EAC and for the extraction of oil for Uganda, it is understandable that if the UPDF succeeds in its purpose, Uganda's regime, and President Museveni in specific, will become more powerful in the region. This is comprehensible in line with Winner's argument (1988) that "technologies can be used in ways that enhance the power, authority, and privilege of some over others" (p. 25).



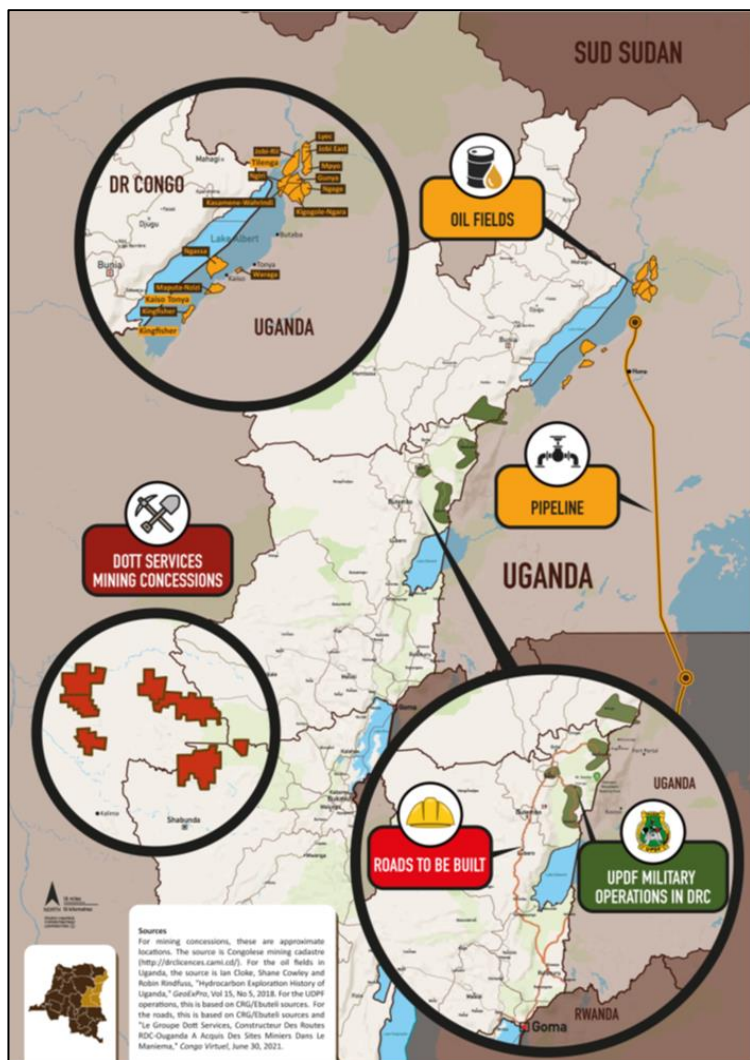


Figure 3: Congo Research Group & Ebuteli (2022) - Link between the Road Project, the UPDF Operation, and the Oil Development

## **Fighting about a Banyamulenge woman**

It is no secret that Uganda and Rwanda are at odds with each other, think about the closure of Rwanda's northern border in 2019. It was, however, not always like that. Building on the information of two Ugandan professors from Makerere University, one in History and the other in Humanities, this chapter argues that the Uganda-DRC road project and Uganda's interests should be grasped in the context of the troubled relations between Uganda and Rwanda. To clarify, the road project is a means to support Uganda under President Museveni in its struggle for regional hegemony with Rwanda under President Kagame (Kampala, 2022).

To understand the relationship between Uganda and Rwanda, I need to go back to Rwanda at the dawn of its independence. In 1959, after decades of suppression, the Belgian colonisers turned their tide and started to support the Hutus in gaining ground in Rwanda. To clarify, when Tutsi intellectuals heard about the independence struggles in other countries, the Belgians saw the benefits of supporting the overall lower-educated Hutus, being a consequence of the colonial system, to take power. In 1961, when Rwanda held its first presidential elections, a Hutu seized power. The administrative posts shifted from Tutsis to Hutus, which spurred violence between the ethnic groups. Many Tutsi families fled from the brutalities. From 1959 to 1964, approximately 40 to 70 per cent of Rwanda's Tutsi population left the country in search of a new place to call home. 50 to 70 thousand of them crossed Rwanda's border with Uganda. The

two-year-old Paul Kagame, carried on the back of his fleeing mother, would become a protagonist in the politics of Uganda by supporting Museveni's rebellion (Wrong, 2021).

Fast forward, in 1981, Museveni, the rebel leader of the National Resistance Army (NRA), started the Ugandan Bush War to counter the presidency of Milton Obote. Museveni, amongst many others, believed that the presidential elections of 1980, during which Obote became president, were rigged. A quarter of NRA troops were Banyarwanda who were no longer welcome in Hutu-led Rwanda and felt, after years of relative acceptance by President Idi Amin, again discriminated by Obote. Amongst them was Kagame acting as a bodyguard for Museveni. In 1986, Museveni took power in Kampala with the NRA. Whereas feelings of inferiority vanished among Rwandans during the civil war, they appeared again a while after Museveni became president. These feelings encouraged Kagame and some other key figures to form the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and to return to Rwanda. The RPF entered Rwanda in 1990 with the logistical and material support of President Museveni. After disastrous bloodshed, also known as the Rwandan genocide in which thousands of Hutus and Tutsis died, they took power in 1994. Kagame became President in 2000. Many Hutus fled to the DRC (Mwakikagile, 2012; Oloka-Onyango, 2004; Tamm, 2019; Wrong, 2021).

Once in power, the regime in Kigali was, at least theoretically, equal to that in Kampala. Yet, during the First Congolese War (1996-1997) the regimes in Kampala and Kigali started wrestling for regional superiority. For clarification, President Museveni and President Kagame supported rebel

leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila in the First Congolese War to track down the Hutus hiding in the DRC under the veil of helping to bring President Mobutu Sese Seko down. Kabila took power. Theorists argue that Rwanda's role in this war should be looked at as a manifestation of its power and regional importance vis-à-vis Uganda (Tamm, 2019). Only a few months later, Uganda and Rwanda turned their tides due to quarrels and wanted Kabila to resign, leading to the Second Congolese War. It was around the turn of the century, that Uganda and Rwanda, having always pulled together, started to fight each other physically. In Kisangani, a city in the northeast of the DRC, Ugandan and Rwandan troops clashed for weeks (Reid, 2017).

A rumour is told that two generals, a Ugandan and a Rwandan, were close friends until they met a female Banyamulenge bartender. Both men were interested in the woman. So, the woman was given the choice of who could visit her first. Her choice for the Ugandan general frustrated his Rwandan counterpart, who began to blackguard the Ugandan man. This got out of hand and resulted in the clash at Kisangani. Although a captivating story, it is most likely that there was a more deep-grained reason, argued the Ugandan professor in History from Makerere University who told me the story. The professor claimed that this clash came out of Rwanda's frustration of always being treated as the 'little brother' of Uganda. The professor argued that Rwanda wanted to take control over the Congolese territory and its diamonds to be taken seriously by Uganda and uplift its regional status (Kampala, 2022).

Since the end of the 1950s, there is a status issue between Ugandans and Rwandans, which translated into the national realm when the once-migrated Rwandans returned home and grabbed power. The battle in Kisangani was about regional dominance. Ever since, Uganda and Rwanda have been at loggerheads for the “leadership of the Great Lakes Region” (Tamm, 2019, p. 513). Important to note is that the issue cannot be separated from the presidents. A former parliamentarian argues that the presidents consider the status of their countries to reflect their own status, therefore not being a conflict between the population of Uganda and Rwanda, but one among former friends (Kampala, 2022).

This status issue is important to understand Museveni’s manoeuvres in the DRC. Uganda is currently the hegemonic power in the region says a History professor from Makerere University, yet Rwanda is lurking (Kampala, 2022). Increasing its stake in the DRC is for numerous reasons, among which the increase in trade, the improved partnership with Tshisekedi, access to oil and so forth, of strategic interest for Uganda’s regime because it adds to its status and power in the region (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022).

Whereas the road is not intended to anger Rwanda, it is likely to do so because it will enlarge Uganda’s status and sphere of influence within the DRC to the detriment of Rwanda. This can be noticed already in the (alleged) support of Kigali for the M23. Additionally, Uganda’s government crossed a red line for Rwanda by locking the latter’s border in with the Bunagana-Rutshuru-Goma Road, hence cutting off Rwanda’s influence in the DRC. That is to say, Uganda will have control

over the roads and can therefore enlarge its own sphere of influence at the expense of Rwanda's leverage (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). Indeed, the design or location of the technology seems carefully thought through, being one of the features Winner addresses when he describes how a technological artefact can be political. More so, whereas the roads will clear the way for Uganda to access the Congolese minerals, they are likely to lessen Rwanda's access. If Rwanda smuggles minerals from the DRC, the increased (military) presence of Uganda will not be favourable, reasons a researcher in strategic minerals (Kampala, 2022). More generally, Uganda will outperform Rwanda in terms of trade with the DRC, because it will become easier and cheaper to use the renovated roads leading to Uganda's border.

In sum, Uganda and Rwanda are quarrelling over status and position in the region. This is the heritage of a long relationship of unequal power in which Uganda's regime took the upper hand. Yet, the regime in Kigali is fighting the status quo. To preserve hegemony, Uganda's regime engages in projects, such as the 223km road project with the DRC, to boost its power and authority. The road project reflects Uganda's political ambition to remain the predominant power in the African Great Lakes Region (Nakaweesi, 2021; Ojewale, n.d.). In line with Winner's theory, this road project is likely to shape and reinforce the power structures between Uganda and Rwanda.

## **Towards a new Chwezi Empire**

President Museveni is trying to recreate the Chwezi empire, says a Humanities professor from Makerere University during an interview (Kampala, 2022). Despite the scarcity of sources, researchers presume that the Chwezi empire was the predecessor of the empire of Bunyoro Kitara and covered a region stretching as far as Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and the DRC (Jenkins, 2011; Kakembo, n.d.). The professor adds that the empire also consisted of modern-day Rwanda and Burundi. The composition of the Chwezi empire resembles the EAC. Indeed, the Chwezi empire is used as a metaphor for the EAC which President Museveni wants to fully integrate and, eventually, lead (Kampala, 2022).

In this chapter, I shed light on the reasoning of experts who argue that the road project is next to a means to realise Uganda's economic interest, pacify the DRC, and increase the country's leverage amongst neighbouring states, a way by which Museveni seeks to reinforce the country's power and position to achieve his individual political ambition, namely, becoming the first president of the EAC (Murray et al., 2016). President Museveni utilises this project to enhance his personal authority over that of others, comprehensible through the theory of technological politics (Winner, 1988).

As mentioned in chapter three, one of the four pillars of the EAC is the creation of a political federation with a leader (East African Community, n.d.). Museveni's key goal has always been to integrate East Africa because he realises the importance of international economic relations for Uganda

(Murray et al., 2016). More so, rumours circulate that President Museveni like President Kagame wants to become the first president of the EAC once the federation is established (Professor in Humanities, Kampala, 2022). Museveni sees himself as the adequate and legitimate leader of this prominent political organisation (Oloka-Onyango, 2004).

It is important to understand Museveni's domestic grip on power to understand his interest in becoming a regional leader. Since President Museveni took power in 1986, he has shown himself powerful, but also power greedy. From 1995 onwards, the Ugandan constitution prescribes that every five years presidential elections must be organised, a president can only stay in power for as long as two terms, and every Ugandan citizen can participate in the elections unless older than 75 years. Museveni managed to circumvent these rules. He won the first two presidential elections. When after two mandates he had to make place for a successor, he was convinced to run for president again. To be allowed to, he cancelled the term limit. Museveni won the elections of 2006, 2011, and 2016. In 2021, Museveni was 76 years old, so he adapted the constitution once more to be eligible. He won. In 2026, President Museveni will be Uganda's president for four decades (Doornebal, 2021).

During these years, the president has shown to be a political and military talent in terms of foreign policy and has successfully cemented his position and reputation as the regional giant. The regime under President Museveni has forged alliances with regional actors and showed its willingness to act militarily if deemed necessary to build regional leverage.



To illustrate, Museveni has for long been involved in the complex history of South Sudan. When the civil war broke out in 2013, he decided to intervene in the country, not only to protect its southern border but mostly so to outweigh the influence of Sudan and secure Uganda's regional dominance (Murray et al., 2016; Walsh, 2020). Museveni forged these alliances to obtain the reputation as a go-to leader within the region in case of security issues and more (Oloka-Onyango, 2004). His talent to nourish relationships with different partners and construct a strong regional image has proven useful as the EAC still lacks institutional oversight making a strong position vis-à-vis other members essential to pursue interests (Walsh, 2020). Indeed, Museveni has stretched his tentacles through strategic relations owing him influence, power, and prestige in the region and beyond (Oloka-Onyango, 2004). "The personality of Museveni and role he has carved himself in both Uganda and within East Africa is unique: he has moved Ugandan importance and agency beyond what one might expect from the material and ideational factors afforded merely by being Head of State of Uganda as a nation-state construct" (Walsh, 2020, p. 318).

Given the belief that Museveni wants to expand his power through the presidency of the EAC, several experts, including a former parliamentarian and opposition politician, argued that the road project must be understood with this individual political ambition in mind (Kampala, 2022). President Museveni is extending his influence beyond Uganda, which so far has worked out for him (Head of Newspaper, Kampala, 2022).

If the 223km road project, and Operation Shujaa, are driven by President Museveni's personal political ambition, this would mean that Museveni controls the decisions of the government to some extent to secure its support for the project (Kampala, 2022). Indeed, the president's interests are intertwined with those of the government institutions through personalisation and patronage (Bareebe & Titeca, 2013; Murray et al., 2016). Important to note, however, is that the project does not uniquely serve President Museveni's political goal, but also strengthens the country's economy, aims at securing Uganda's oil development, and so forth as elaborated upon before. Hence, it is a concurrence of interests.

How can the project serve President Museveni's goal to lead the EAC? First, the EAC will benefit in terms of trade from the improved network in and with the DRC. The export rates will increase amongst the EAC member states, boosting every single economy. Furthermore, the EAC fears that the insecurity sewed by Congolese rebel groups will diffuse in the region and, on top of that, negatively impact trade relations. If the UPDF, positioned by Uganda's government under Museveni, can eradicate the threat, the EAC member states will reward the president with respect and status, enhancing his chances to be seen as the future leader of the EAC (Murray et al., 2016). This will reinforce his leverage vis-à-vis other regional power-seekers like Kagame (Professor in Humanities, Kampala, 2022).

In conclusion, the engagement of Uganda's government in the road project must not only be understood by looking at the interest of the country at large but also by

inspecting President Museveni's personal ambition to lead a new Chwezi empire (Professor in Humanities, Kampala, 2022). "Museveni's particular philosophy and interests weigh heavily in the development of foreign policy. These include his pan-Africanist philosophy, his long-standing suspicions of Sudan, his complex relationship with Paul Kagame and Rwanda, and his aspirations to govern East Africa" (Murray et al., 2016, p. 21).



# **CHAPTER 5: THE END OF A JOURNEY**

## **Finding my way**

Notebooks full of information filled my suitcase to fly back home. After three months of field research, I had to find my way through interlinking thoughts and insights. I had to figure out how to turn the information into a narrative. Warned by a Ugandan professor in Economics, I knew that this would not be a story as easy to tell as a fairy tale, rather one of interlinking interests, perceptions, and actors (Kampala, 2022).

So, to build an understanding of the expectations of the people living in the vicinity of Mpondwe bridge and the political ambitions Uganda's government aims to achieve, I had to put up different pairs of glasses, making this an interdisciplinary project. Given the goal to unravel the political ambitions behind the project, I started to look at the undertaking from a political sciences perspective. I found that regional power politics is an important factor to understand the investment of Uganda in the Uganda-DRC road project to reach its ambition to remain the regional hegemon. Moreover, it helped to understand that also President Museveni's personal interest, namely, becoming the first president of the EAC, is at play in the decision to start this infrastructure

project. I realised that also history and economics play an important role in the decision of the government to engage in the project. To grasp the regional political structure, it is crucial to get an understanding of the historical relationships between the different countries and actors in the region like, for instance, Uganda and Rwanda. Additionally, historical knowledge is essential to understand the suspicion about the manoeuvres of Uganda in the DRC regarding minerals. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Uganda would have reached out to the DRC to cooperate in the upgrading of a road network without economic incentives. The road network will evidently impact trade between Uganda and the DRC aimed at Uganda's economy to thrive. Strengthening its economy is, in its turn, the key to having political power in the Great Lakes Region and beyond. Indeed, economic and political ambitions overlap. Finally, to grasp the expectations of the Ugandan population living near Mpondwe bridge of the road project, I used participant observation, a prime method used in anthropology.

The ambitions driving the project are manifold, including the expansion of trade for the Ugandan and the EAC member states' economies to thrive, enhancing security to eradicate the ADF and safeguarding the oil development in Uganda, all these feeding Uganda's status and power which cements Uganda's position as the regional hegemon. More so, these ambitions contribute to the personal power of President Museveni whose interests to integrate the EAC and become the organisation's first president also shine through in the decision to engage in the road project. The ambitions and

perceptions are all important to understand the politics of the Uganda-DRC road project.

Like a map to undertake a journey, I used Winner's theory of technological politics to navigate through my research findings. Winner argues that technological artefacts are political if they are purposefully designed to shape society or if they need some form of power relation to function. In the second chapter, the research findings, namely, that the people expect to experience unintended consequences like diseases and GBV, to name a few, and lack sufficient negotiation power to design the project according to their wishes, shows how irrelevant social groups, like Winner calls them, have little stake in the design and implementation of technologies. The third chapter reasons that the Uganda-DRC road project has been decided upon with an economic interest in mind rather than just a means to facilitate movement, hence demonstrates that the technological artefact serves government ambitions. Both chapters indicate imbalances in bargaining power vis-à-vis Uganda's government. The local communities hold less power, but also the Congolese government is assumed to be subdued by the Ugandan authorities. Although limitedly focused on, the control over the roads is also beneficial for Uganda. That is to say, the one who controls the roads will benefit most, for example, in terms of access to minerals. The sociocultural and political context is indeed crucial to grasp. Congolese mineral wealth, the wider economic plan of the EAC, Uganda's oil development, and the security issues in eastern DRC are all part of the rationale for Uganda's government to engage in the road project. Additionally, the

road project is a means to increase the power, authority, and privilege of Uganda's regime, and President Museveni in particular, compared to other actors in the region. This reinforces the social structures of the Great Lakes Region.

Yet, whereas the theory addresses how technology serves a particular purpose, it does not elaborate on what happens if the technology fails to achieve this purpose. In Winner's theory, it appears as if the intended purpose, although with some unexpected consequences, will always be fulfilled. Therefore, the theory needs to be complemented with a section on how, despite the design and power of the decision-making group, the social reality can throw spanner in the works. For example, a researcher in strategic minerals argues that international organisations are closely connected to rebel groups in the DRC. They might not be so keen to see Uganda enter the country, expanding its sphere of influence and eliminating their partners, and therefore might boycott the entire project. Furthermore, there is no certainty that Uganda will be able to pacify the region (Kampala, 2022). Operation Shujaa has until now had the opposite effect pushing the ADF closer to the Ugandan border intensifying more violence (Congo Research Group & Ebuteli, 2022). In addition, with trade cooperation there is also an increasing chance for trade wars, i.e., wars in which a country retaliates against another because it judges trading practices unfair and therefore imposes restrictions on the country, to erupt (Chen, 2022; Professor in History, Kampala, 2022). A trade war in the region would jeopardise the ambition to push trade and grow Uganda's economy and status.



## **Roadblocks and Recommendations**

During the journey to find answers to my questions, I bumped into roadblocks as well. Amongst the limitations of this research was my inability to speak Ihukonzö in Mpondwe and Bwera. Whereas I worked with translators who did great work, I felt that I could have captured more of the conversations if I would have understood what the respondents said. A second limitation was the difficulty to get complete information about the project. On the one hand, there existed uncertainties about several topics, for instance, whether the project was passed by the parliament of Uganda, where the budget came from, and whether local community members would be included in the construction works (Former parliamentarian, Kampala, 2022; Local leader, Bwera, 2022). On the other hand, I tried to access the agreements signed by the presidents regarding this project. Impossible, it appeared when I tried to get access through the internship organisation. Researching the political ambitions of the government did not always go smoothly. Some knowledge stayed in the dark, raising questions about what was hidden.

Since the project is still in its infancy, there is much potential for future research. In a few years, research can be conducted on whether the expectations of the population have become reality. Additionally, this research did not delve into the underlying interests of the construction firm Dott Services paying 60 per cent of the total cost. Future research can explore the company's interests and to what extent these are related to the interests of the Ugandan or Congolese

authorities. In the words of Anaïs Nin (1932) “The possession of knowledge does not kill the sense of wonder and mystery. There is always more mystery”.

Answering the subquestions gave away something about the alignment of the population’s expectations and interests with those of the government. The intention of the government to amplify trade is expected and liked by the Ugandan border community as well. There is a discrepancy in the concern of the government and the local population about the unintended consequences of the project, nevertheless. Whereas the local population is willing to act, they seem not to receive the necessary support from Kampala to tackle the difficulties, despite the interviews with the local councillors. This suggests that the project is rather aimed at serving the ambitions of the government than driven by the concern to improve the livelihoods of Uganda’s population. That is not to say, that the project cannot uplift living standards significantly. Although for that to happen, the economic profits should trickle down and the issues regarding the road project should be reacted upon now by Uganda’s government.

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