

# Youth Participation and Non-violent Resistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo: The Case of LUCHA

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## 1

# Introduction

Since its colonisation in 1885, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been plagued with violence, conflict and underdevelopment. Joseph Conrad described the country's colonial history as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience',<sup>1</sup> and much of its post-independence period in the 20th century was spent under the brutal dictatorship of President Mobutu Sese Seko. At the turn of the 21st century, the country was embroiled in its second civil conflict since 1996. The Second Congo War (1998–2003) has been described as the deadliest war since World War II<sup>2</sup> and, because of the high number of neighbouring countries both directly and indirectly involved in the fighting, is often referred to as Africa's First World War (Prunier, 2008).

Although DRC has not officially relapsed into civil war since 2003, it has experienced an extremely negative post-war peace. As Timothy Raeymaekers argues, 'International involvement in the vast arena of militia demobilization, security sector reform, political power sharing and post-war democratization have not been able to turn the tide of enduring armed conflict and violent corruption' (Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 601). Since 2008, armed groups have proliferated in the country, and today around 70 different armed groups operate in its notoriously troubled eastern provinces of North and South Kivu. In 2012, one of the strongest armed groups of recent times—the M23 movement—captured Goma, the capital of North Kivu province. It was finally defeated by a joint offensive by the Congolese army and a special UN Force Intervention Brigade with an unprecedented mandate to fight armed groups in the country.

Around this time, a small youth-led movement emerged in Goma. This called itself LUCHA, a portmanteau of the French phrase *Lutte pour le changement* ('struggle for change'). According to some of its members, the name was also inspired by the Spanish *La lucha*, meaning 'fight'. However, what set LUCHA apart from many other movements that had emerged in the eastern DRC was that it was explicitly *against* the use of violence. Rather, LUCHA sought to use peaceful protest to hold the Congolese government to account and agitate for change for Congolese citizens—particularly with regard to improving the dignity of the people through service delivery and social justice (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2014). In the past five years, LUCHA has grown into a nationwide youth movement, with branches in every major city in DRC. It continues to attract a strong following, both within and outside of DRC, and in 2016 was co-recipient of Amnesty International's prestigious Ambassador of Conscience Award.<sup>3</sup>

This paper presents a case study of LUCHA as an example of leadership for transformational change in DRC. It finds that bringing about political change—both at the elite level and in terms of the civic empowerment of the Congolese people—is one of the guiding principles of LUCHA, and seeks to unpick how the movement has brought about this change. It finds that LUCHA's horizontal leadership structures and collaborative form of leadership have been instrumental in its success, although at times its leadership style has also created certain divisions within the movement. While the study focuses primarily on the single case of LUCHA in DRC, it draws on literature that examines youth, horizontal leadership and social movements from around the world, as well as literature on similar African youth movements, such as *Y'en a marre* in Senegal and *Le balai citoyen* in Burkina Faso. It is hoped that this case study of LUCHA will add to the empirical body of evidence on youth as drivers of social change in Africa.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. Section 2 discusses the emergence of LUCHA and the extent to which it has brought about transformational change in DRC. It argues that LUCHA has changed the rules of the game of political participation and civic empowerment in DRC, and that this change has transformed the role young people play as political actors in the country.

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1 Cited in Meredith (2006, p. 96).

2 For example, Time Magazine called the Congo conflict 'the world's most lethal conflict since World War II' (Robinson, 2006). Indeed, the frequently cited survey by the International Rescue Committee on excess mortality in the Congo (International Rescue Committee, 2007) led to a widespread belief that the 'the four and a half year war in the Democratic Republic of Congo has taken more lives than any other since World War II and is the deadliest documented conflict in African history' (International Rescue Committee, 2012).

3 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/05/ambassador-of-conscience-award/>

Section 3 then analyses how this change has taken place, focusing specifically on how LUCHA has led the change and how the movement has organised itself to bring it about. This section also explores LUCHA's horizontal, or collegial, leadership style, and discusses why movements such as LUCHA are increasingly drawn to this type of leadership, which avoids concentrating power in individual leaders.

Section 4 examines the contextual factors that have both enabled and hindered LUCHA over the past five years in its attempts to bring about change in DRC. It finds a complex relationship between enabling and disabling factors, arguing that factors that may have enabled certain aspects of LUCHA's mission have, at other times, become obstacles to its progress.

Section 5 presents the conclusions and key findings of the paper.

This case study forms part of a larger project carried out by the Uongozi Institute and the Developmental Leadership Program, which attempts to answer the question: 'What are the enablers and disablers of leadership for transformational change in Africa?' In order to answer this larger question in relation to the case of LUCHA, the research carried out for this paper attempted to answer four over-arching research questions:

- What type of change has LUCHA effected in DRC and can this change be considered 'transformational'?
- How has LUCHA organised itself to facilitate change and who or what has helped drive this change forward?
- What conditions have led to the emergence of LUCHA as leaders for change, and what has enabled their rise?
- What has hindered LUCHA in its mission to bring about change and what obstacles has/does it had/have to overcome?

The research took a mixed-methods approach, combining desk-based literature reviews with participant observations at LUCHA events, and semi-structured interviews with around 50 LUCHA activists and members.<sup>4</sup> As we explain in more detail below, LUCHA activities have been subject to state repression, and several activists have found themselves arrested, harassed and physically harmed as a result of their involvement with LUCHA. As such, carrying out this research posed a number of risks and ethical dilemmas for both the researchers and the researched. In order to protect our informants, therefore, we have anonymised all interviews unless they have already been televised or published with the speaker's permission. Because of the sensitive nature of the research, we were also unable to speak to government officials about their opinions on the movement. What is presented here is thus a case study of LUCHA from the perspective of LUCHA members themselves, as well as international organisations working with LUCHA. It is hoped that a second phase of research will examine the way Congolese state actors perceive LUCHA.

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4 The interviews were conducted in French and Swahili. They were translated into English by Suda Perera and Victor Anas to be quoted here.



However, when drilling down into exactly what kind of change LUCHA sought to bring about, there was a slight variation in priorities and focus. For example, some respondents focused on social inequalities: 'LUCHA is a non-violent, impartial citizen movement of youth who feel they are blasted by social inequalities and wish to fulfil their civic responsibilities by fighting for a positive change.'<sup>6</sup> Others focused on government accountability, seeing LUCHA as a youth movement that is 'concerned with the problems of the country. Even if we [the young] are not the people destroying the country, we have to participate in its positive construction by demanding accountability.'<sup>7</sup> Some responses stressed that change came from the fact that the youth in the movement 'became conscious and demanded their rights',<sup>8</sup> whereas others saw LUCHA as a vehicle for bringing about change by 'helping the population understand and wake up'<sup>9</sup> to the issues of bad governance in the country.

A brief inventory of the achievements of LUCHA in the past five years may explain why respondents focused on different aspects of change when describing what type of change LUCHA stood for, and how LUCHA brought about change. LUCHA began in Goma in 2012 as a small movement of young people (primarily students) from the city who were fed up with the inaction of the state in protecting Congolese citizens and providing them with services. One of the early campaigns LUCHA organised was the #GomaVeutDeLEau (or #GomaNeedsWater) campaign, which called for improvements in water infrastructure in the city of Goma in 2013 and 2014. While there are still problems with the water network in the city, one of the key achievements of this campaign was that it raised awareness both locally and globally about Goma's problems of access to water: 'All around the world people were talking about the city of Goma. This time it was not about war as it was usual [sic] this time they were talking about water. How can such a big city near a lake not have water?'<sup>10</sup> LUCHA also campaigned for the construction of roads in Goma, and had some successes in forcing the authorities to act:

'We had some successes with petitions and campaigns in town and online, we met members of the parliament and the government. Every time we pressed for results, we noticed that 2km or 3km of roads were built, but as soon as we stopped, they also stopped building. But these little victories led us to believe that we could change some things as long as we were implicated and active and refused to endure the shortcomings of our government.'<sup>11</sup>

In 2015, LUCHA became a national phenomenon when it was a driving force behind the organisation of the #Telema (meaning 'Stand Up' in Swahili) protests. These protests, which took place in Goma, Kinshasa and cities around Congo, objected to President Joseph Kabila's attempts to alter the Congolese constitution in order to stand for a third term in office. The #Telema protests were inspired by the #Lwili protests in Burkina Faso, which had forced Burkinabe President Blaise Compaoré from power in 2014 (Cummings, 2014). While #Telema did not force Kabila from power, it did prevent him from amending the constitution and brought the issue of Congo's failing democratic process to the attention of the international community. Shortly after the #Telema protests, President Obama spoke with President Kabila and 'emphasized the importance of timely, credible, and peaceful elections that respect the DRC's constitution and protect the rights of all DRC citizens' (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

Since 2015, LUCHA activists have remained dedicated to spreading awareness about poor service delivery and governance practices in DRC, and holding the government to account. In some instances, this has led to the arrest of several LUCHA members, and LUCHA has mobilised itself to campaign for their release. For example, after Fred Bauma and Yves Makwambala were arrested and detained at a workshop to encourage Congolese youth to peacefully perform their civic duties in 2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2015), LUCHA activists raised awareness about their plight through the #FreeFred and #FreeYves hashtags. This attracted international attention, and organisations such as Human Rights Watch joined the campaign, which led to their eventual release in 2016.

The activities above describe some of the tangible changes LUCHA has tried to bring about since 2012. However, in this paper we argue that the *transformational* change that has taken place as a result of the existence of LUCHA has been a change in the rules of the game (Leftwich & Hogg, 2007, p. 12) when it comes to civic empowerment and political participation in DRC more generally. LUCHA has changed what the Congolese populace has come to expect from the Congolese state, as well as the manner in which citizens attempt to hold the state to account. As one activist described it, LUCHA's has helped facilitate 'a positive change in Congolese mentality...[we seek] to educate the masses to be demanding of accountable politics'.<sup>12</sup> This type of change can be best described as change through cognitive liberation.

6 Interview #1

7 Interview #17

8 Interview #12

9 Interview #6

10 Interview with Christian Katsuva on Smart Monkey TV, 20 July 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unrzrinRxiE&feature=youtu.be&list=UUjZKApAFkRVl49mU03N5pkw>

11 Interview with Fred Bauma for Yahoo News, 29 February 2016: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/law-disorder-drc-who-fred-bauma-congos-jailed-mahatma-gandhi-1546274>

12 Interview #14



This process involves a transformational change in which, first, people begin to question the legitimacy of an institution or authority; second, people stop seeing those institutions as inevitable, realise their rights and begin to demand change; and finally, those who see themselves as powerless and hopeless begin to believe they have the capacity to change the situation (McAdam, 1988).

The rules of the game in terms of who participates in politics, and how, have also been transformed, as LUCHA is made up almost entirely of young people, and relies on young people to drive the movement forward. A key problem in Congolese politics has been an ageing and stagnant political class. Many prominent politicians in the Kabila era—in both the ruling and the oppositional coalitions—served under Lumumba and Mobutu, or were from the families of those who had been in Lumumba, Mobutu or Laurent Kabila's inner circles. For example, the former leader of the opposition, Etienne Tshisekedi, while known for standing against Kabila and being a dissident against Mobutu in the later years of the latter's dictatorship, had previously served in high-ranking positions in both the Lumumba and the Mobutu administrations. When Tshisekedi died in February 2017, his son, Felix Tshisekedi, succeeded him as leader of the opposition, in much the same way that Joseph Kabila had succeeded his father Laurent as president following the latter's death in 2001.

LUCHA is explicitly non-partisan, arguing that, while there are many problems with the present government, the movement's exposure of government impunity and corruption should not be read as an endorsement of opposition political parties. Indeed, some respondents stressed that LUCHA 'does not work with politicians... We are a citizen movement fighting for change'<sup>13</sup> and advocated for 'a new type of men and people to run the country'.<sup>14</sup> As discussed below, this does not mean LUCHA activists do not try and influence politicians and political elites, but rather there has been a concerted effort among LUCHA members to not be seen as spokespersons or advocates for specific political parties and/or politicians. By empowering young people to participate more actively in politics, LUCHA has changed the way the political classes interact with young people: 'Through the awakening of youth, politics has become respectful towards youth.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, young people are now considered an important political constituency in DRC.

Perhaps the most marked change in the manner in which the youth within LUCHA participate in the political arena can be seen in their commitment to non-violence, and several of the activists interviewed believed this was LUCHA's biggest contribution: 'Non-violence is our legacy, and we have proven that a determined youth can change the fate of the country.'<sup>16</sup> The existence of a large young population in Africa is often seen as a driver of violence and insecurity, rather than peace and development, and in the eastern DRC in particular young people have traditionally displayed their dissatisfaction with the political system by becoming a prime recruitment target for armed groups. However, LUCHA has rejected violence as a form of political expression because it 'has realised that the use of violence has failed in this country. Some armed groups had valid demands, but their methods have created others problems... Violence also requires a lot of resources and much human sacrifice... Young people keep their hopes, and are less contaminated by the vices of society... We struggle for a better and different future.'<sup>17</sup>

Finally, and linked to the fact that the movement consists primarily of young people, LUCHA is transforming the nature of political communication in the country through its use of social media and mobile phone technologies. This effective use of these technologies may also explain why, unlike other civil society groups and armed groups in DRC, LUCHA has been able to spread beyond the eastern DRC to become a movement with supporters and activists around the country, and influence in Kinshasa. The following section discusses in more detail the manner in which LUCHA has used internet and mobile technologies. However, LUCHA has changed the rules of the game in terms of how political information in DRC is communicated. The development of mobile phone infrastructure in DRC is outpacing the development of physical road infrastructure, and LUCHA has utilised technological developments to both disseminate information about poor governance practices and mobilise action to demand better governance. Access to reliable information about politics has historically been a problem in DRC, and much of that which circulates is based on rumours and conspiracy theories (Perera, 2017). LUCHA has been filming events, disseminating information and releasing statements via the internet allowing Congolese people around the country to see for themselves what is going on, and also exposing the plight of the Congolese people in the international arena, where it has gained the support of a number of donor governments and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

13 Interview #8

14 Interview #9

15 Interview #27

16 Interview #20

17 Micheline Mwendike in an interview with Pambazuka News, 30 October 2014 (see Iñiguez de Heredia, 2014).

## 3

## Horizontal leadership and collegial decision-making: LUCHA's leaderless leadership

LUCHA's organisation and leadership has been instrumental in its rise. However, the leadership style it has adopted does not conform to traditional forms of leadership, in which there is a clear divide between leaders and followers. Rather, LUCHA has adopted a horizontal—or, as its members would describe it, 'collegial'—leadership approach in which no individuals or groups of individuals can be considered 'leaders'. This reflects a global trend in pro-democracy social movements, which, dissatisfied with the corrupt and ineffective leadership of individual political leaders, have come to embrace the need for a more participatory approach to leadership that moves away from 'hero dependency' (Andrews, 2016) in their own organisations. Some critical leadership scholars have therefore argued that the adoption by movements such as LUCHA of horizontal leadership structures is part of their critique of the existing problems of political leadership. 'The fault lines seem clear: leaderless masses line up on one side against corrupt leaders on the other' (Sutherland et al., 2014, p. 760). As such, members of movements such as LUCHA do not seek to invest in a single heroic leader, but rather 'choose to identify egalitarian, nonhierarchical, and even leaderless leadership as postheroic' (Eslen-Ziya & Erhart, 2015, p. 473).

When studying and analysing LUCHA, the lack of a clear leadership structure made it somewhat difficult to immediately identify leadership processes. However, the research found that a number of different leaderships were driving the movement forward. This is particularly true if alternative understandings of leadership are taken into account. Sutherland, Land and Böhm, for example, argue that 'just because an organization is leaderless it does not mean that it is also leadershipless' (Sutherland et al., 2014, p. 760). Robinson argues that ideas can replace people as leaders as leadership takes place in the 'moments when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognised by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them' (Robinson, 2001, p. 93).

Indeed, in our analysis of LUCHA, it was apparent that the idea of youth as drivers of positive development served as a unifying ideal that all members could get behind. This 'vision maintains cohesion within LUCHA'<sup>18</sup>. Beyond this idea, however, LUCHA members adopted a deliberative approach to decision-making in which people come with ideas of what they want to change, and LUCHA members then decide collectively which ideas they should mobilise behind and come up with a mutually agreed strategy for bringing about change. While it is inevitable that more prominent members do emerge, particularly with regard to certain actions and campaigns, most LUCHA members interviewed maintained that these should not be seen as leaders, as it was the actions and the ideas that were driving forward their activities.

Ganz defines leadership as 'accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty' (Ganz, 2010, p. 505). In this regard, LUCHA's collegial style of leadership places collective responsibility on its members. Several informants explained that LUCHA was subdivided into different 'cells', which are responsible for different aspects of the movement. Members can pick and choose which cell they would like to be involved with at any given time. One informant described the different cells as focusing respectively on 'action, "luchology", communication, advocacy, documentation and mobilisation'<sup>19</sup> and that this was supported by a 'virtual strategic core composed of people from all over the world'.<sup>20</sup> The research found that individuals' own skill sets, commitment to the cause and specific interests within the movement determined which cell's activities different activists chose to involve themselves within. It was also clear that several members were often simultaneously involved in different cells and moved between the cells over time. The strategic core consists of both Congolese and international activists who remotely support the movement and connect LUCHA's activists on the ground to international networks.

LUCHA members represent a broad church of young people who have all come to the movement with different experiences, intentions and resources. The different cells of LUCHA described by the respondent above refer to the different types of activities LUCHA undertakes.

<sup>18</sup> Interview #31

<sup>19</sup> Interview #37

<sup>20</sup> Interview #37

- 'Action' refers to members who attend demonstrations and protests in order to pressurise the political elite into bringing about change.
- 'Luchology' refers to the development of LUCHA's ideology and the decision-making process through which it selects areas on which to campaign. LUCHA has evolved over time to address a number of different causes as they emerge. As one member noted, 'If the problems are there, we are there, when the problems disappear, the movement disappears.'<sup>21</sup> Luchology cell members help identify these problems and the extent to which they fit into LUCHA's wider objective of bringing about positive change. Several members mentioned that they tried to address problems that have impacts on social justice, human rights and human dignity.
- The communications cell focus on publicising LUCHA campaigns and ensuring members are aware of the work LUCHA is doing and the ways in which they can help.
- Linked to this, the documentation cell seeks to record political events and LUCHA actions in order to create a repository of information.
- The advocacy cell seeks to identify whom LUCHA needs to target in order to bring about change. As discussed below, there is disagreement within LUCHA over the extent to which the movement should be engaging with national and international elites, but at least some LUCHA members have sought to advocate LUCHA's cause to international human rights organisations and both local and national politicians.
- Finally, the mobilisation cell work towards recruiting LUCHA members and getting people to participate in LUCHA activities.

These are the cells that LUCHA members interviewed in Goma identified; the organisation of LUCHA may be different in other parts of the country, and even in Goma some members did not see the organisation as being along these lines. Therefore, while the cells described above may be a useful way of describing the different activities LUCHA carries out, they do not tell us a great deal about how the movement is organised.

Part of the problem with clearly identifying the organisational structures of LUCHA is that the demographics and levels of involvement of LUCHA members are highly varied, and this heterogeneity has increased as the movement has grown. Initially, LUCHA consisted primarily of urban, middle-class students from large towns and cities, but as the movement has grown young people from poorer backgrounds have also joined. However, the most prominent activists still tend to be middle-class students who have the education and resources to be able to commit more fully to LUCHA. Poorer, less educated, members tend to confine their activities to mobilising their networks and attending protests, and their interests tend to be focused on pushing for better service delivery and employment opportunities. In contrast, more middle-class activists are more willing to dedicate themselves to realising larger-scale or longer-term projects, such as political reform and democratic accountability. They are also more likely to engage the cells of LUCHA that focus on building up long-term visions and strategies, although they are of course also involved in direct action to agitate for changes to meet immediate needs, such as for water and roads.

Among those interviewed, we were able to identify three different types of LUCHA members: organisers, mobilisers and supporters. While there is a tendency to think of organisers—who typically devote more time and resources to the movement, and organise events—as 'leaders', this was not the way they were seen within the organisation. Indeed, organisers are reliant on mobilisers—who utilise their networks both to spread information about LUCHA's activities and to get people to take part in LUCHA's events. These people we identify as 'supporters', who are essential to giving LUCHA the grassroots momentum needed to succeed as a mass movement. LUCHA supporters take different forms. While some supporters attend protests and demonstrations, others share LUCHA's message on social media and make sure the outside world understands the plight of the country and what LUCHA is doing. Similarly, while some mobilisers are people on the ground within communities, where they are able to recruit large numbers of supporters, others may do so through their social media networks and their online influence. In this way, as one informant explained, 'Everyone is a leader and has [their own] capacities, so there are no leaders, we complete each other.'<sup>22</sup>

The horizontal leadership style and diverse organisation of LUCHA allows for the inclusion of a broad church of people in the movement, and enables LUCHA to cater to multiple needs under the umbrella of 'positive developmental change'. However, as the movement has grown, fractures and divisions have emerged. We discuss these divisions in more detail in the following section, but suffice it to say here that there are some concerns that some people have used LUCHA's inclusive membership structure to further agendas that are not necessarily in keeping with the overall ethos. For example, some informants were concerned that people with personal political ambitions were infiltrating LUCHA: 'Now a lot of the politicians are sending their children to join LUCHA so they can know what's going on, and so they can get support from LUCHA.'<sup>23</sup>

21 Interview #11

22 Interview #40

23 Interview #32

Consequently, there is a certain contingent within LUCHA who are sceptical of LUCHA members' attempts to engage with politicians and international NGOs. While other members tend to dismiss this contingent as overly preoccupied with conspiracies, this group feels that neither the international community nor the Congolese state can be trusted to act in the best interests of the people, and therefore prefers LUCHA to remain an underground protest movement. In contrast, there is also a contingency within LUCHA of young, politically savvy communicators who seek to engage in dialogue with state actors to bring about change, and who are also keen to take advantage of the resources that come with recognition from the international community. This latter contingency sees LUCHA's future as a high-profile pressure group that is able to speak truth to power by gaining access to the political arena. While the movement has remained relatively cohesive to date, it is not yet clear how long it can continue to accommodate both contingencies within the same movement.

## 4

## The enablers of transformational change

LUCHA's leadership style and organisational structure has allowed the movement to bring together a wide range of different actors to work together for positive developmental change in DRC, and transform political participation in the country. However, a number of contextual factors and features of the movement itself have also enabled it to become a driver of positive change. Interestingly, the research found that some of these factors had simultaneously been both enablers and disablers. Four factors in particular stand out as being both enablers and disablers:

- The increasingly authoritarian and corrupt nature of the Congolese political system;
- Violence fatigue and LUCHA's commitment to non-violence;
- The rise of access to social media and mobile technologies in DRC;
- The informal and inclusive nature of membership to LUCHA and its non-professional status.

Although LUCHA was formed in 2012, as discussed above it really rose to become a large-scale national movement in 2015 following the #Telema protests against President Kabila's attempt to change the Congolese constitution to allow him to stand for a third term as Congolese president. Although Kabila was unable to formally change the constitution, he has been able to delay elections indefinitely, which has effectively allowed him a *glissement* (slippage) to stay in power for a third term (Perera, 2016). Indeed, although the Congolese constitution guarantees that presidential elections will be held every five years, with no single person being allowed to serve more than two consecutive terms as president, Kabila's failure to hold elections in 2016 means that, a decade on from DRC's landmark post-conflict elections in 2006, its democracy is now in crisis.

Furthermore, the Congolese government's response to pro-democracy protestors has been increasingly authoritarian and the police and army have been deployed to violently repress peaceful protests. LUCHA members themselves have often been subject to this repression. Several activists have been arrested, killed and injured as a result of attending LUCHA protests and demonstrations, and some have reported being harassed and threatened as a result of their affiliation with LUCHA.

Paradoxically, LUCHA has been simultaneously helped and hindered by the Congolese state's willingness to use coercive force against unarmed civilians. Coupled with Kabila's loss of his democratic mandate, it has become abundantly clear to the Congolese population and the international community that post-conflict state-building around Kabila and his inner circle has failed to produce long-term peace and development. At the same time, both the Congolese population and the international community do not want to risk returning the country to civil war, and many Congolese people have realised that recourse to violence is unlikely to change the fundamental problems of governance facing the country. With their firm commitment to non-violence, and their strong rhetoric of promoting good governance, LUCHA has been able to gain widespread international and national support.

Many of those interviewed spoke of 'indignation' as driving them to join or support LUCHA: 'When LUCHA members get arrested unfairly, more people join, because they are angry and they know we are standing up for injustice, which is why they arrest us.'<sup>24</sup> Similarly, international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have been very vocal in their support for LUCHA, and have brought international attention to campaigns like #FreeFred and #FreeYves.

At the same time, however, fear of the consequences of association with LUCHA has meant that, while, privately and in principle, many people support LUCHA, there is growing concern about *being seen* as a LUCHA activist. While we were gathering the data for this project, several informants were worried about talking about their association with LUCHA and

<sup>24</sup> Interview with JS at ECAS, 1 July 2016.

required assurances that they would not be personally identified. They were also reluctant to meet or conduct interviews in places where they felt 'spies'<sup>25</sup> might be listening. As a result, while LUCHA has a large and informal grassroots base, it has a much smaller group of activists who are willing to take the risk of speaking truth directly to power.

Furthermore, a number of prominent activists have left the country for their own safety, and, while they continue to be active in both organising and campaigning, they cannot do this easily from outside. Even expatriates working for international NGOs who have been vocal in their support for LUCHA have been subject to harassment. For example, Human Rights Watch's Central Africa Director, Ida Sawyer (who had been reporting on the repression of LUCHA activists), has twice had her Congolese visa revoked (Human Rights Watch, 2017), and several expatriate NGO workers who have been supporting LUCHA have reported harassment by the Congolese authorities. Even activists who have remained committed to LUCHA activities in the face of this repression have noted that it is a considerable obstacle that they have had to overcome: 'Being militant [i.e. a LUCHA activist] is not easy as we face the hardness of the authorities that have the power to make us shut up.'<sup>26</sup>

LUCHA's firm commitment to non-violence has also simultaneously been an enabler and disabler of its ability to bring about change. This highlights a problem that frequently affects change agents in DRC—namely, the trade-off between making short-term gains with quick-fix high impact and ensuring more profound change to the rules of the game in the long term. By strictly adhering to non-violence, LUCHA has shown that democratic participation does have the potential to influence politics in DRC. Several informants noted that politicians had become, in rhetoric at least, more respectful of the place of youth in politics, and they believed LUCHA's non-violence had been key to making this happen.

Furthermore, while the government has been able to successfully sell the narrative that the violence that armed groups have deployed in the past has been the key obstacle to peace and development in the country, they cannot say the same of LUCHA. Indeed, through non-violence, LUCHA has been able to present itself as a positive force in the country, and the government's willingness to use violence against LUCHA has shown that the government itself may be an obstacle to peace and development in the same way that armed groups are. This has brought into question the state's use of violence and the place of violence in politics. 'It has given politics an image of non-violence, it has shown [everyone from] students to motorcycle taxis that the voice alone can make things move.'<sup>27</sup> This has very much helped LUCHA achieve its long-term aim of showing that violence is not a solution to the problems of bad governance in the country, and that democratic participation can bring about sustainable change.

On the other hand, in terms of effecting immediate changes in the Congo's political landscape, LUCHA has been relatively unsuccessful precisely because, when confronted with the violence of the state, it is relatively powerless. This has resulted in LUCHA members and other dissidents being killed or injured. It has also meant that, in some places, those who have found themselves frustrated by the government's action, but who are not members of LUCHA, have resorted to violence. Since 2016, frustrations over Kabila's failure to step down from power have led to the escalation of violence in parts of the country that were previously thought of as peaceful (Mema, 2017). Furthermore, supporters of dissident politicians who have been arrested have felt the need to fight violence with violence. For example, in May 2017, supporters of Ne Muanda Nsemi, leader of the Bundu Dia Kongo movement, who had been arrested earlier in the year, stormed the prison he was being held in and freed him and 50 other prisoners (BBC News, 2017).

Given the dangers of on-the-ground protest, and the exposure of LUCHA activists to state violence, LUCHA's online presence and ability to organise and communicate using mobile phone and internet technologies has been one of its key strengths driving it forward. In part, LUCHA's use of technology has been born of necessity. In a country notorious for its poor road infrastructure and education system, LUCHA has taken advantage of the fact that 'mobile networks have grown exponentially, bypassing all other infrastructure development on the continent in terms of speed and widespread use' (Bott et al., 2014, p. 4). Nonetheless, LUCHA has been at the forefront of using these technologies as a tool of political communication in DRC.

In this sense, LUCHA can very much be seen as a leader in the field as 'the existence of a certain number of people willing to start a mobilisation at the point when there has been no media coverage, no time for formal organisation to play much of a role, and no reassuring evidence of other substantive support, is essential to viability' (Margetts et al., 2015, p. 280). Indeed, LUCHA's extensive online presence has encouraged those who might have otherwise been afraid to support LUCHA to feel like they are part of a mass movement and 'This confidence helps us to be united.'<sup>28</sup> As Poell et al. argue,

25 The term 'spies' as used here refers both to members of the Congolese intelligence service, but also to people who may pass information on to the Congolese authorities that could put the interviewee in danger.

26 Interview #21

27 Interview #28

28 Interview #18

the administration of sites of collective online mobilisation (such as Facebook groups) can exert considerable influence over a movement (Poell et al., 2016). LUCHA has been able to effectively use online mobilisation both to communicate its message and publicise its activities and to organise its events and inform members of its strategies.

However, although LUCHA has been able to effectively utilise social media, some of its experiences reflect the concerns of those who question its efficacy and warn of its dangers (Morozov, 2012; Duffield, 2015). LUCHA's young, urban educated student activists—who are typically the members who are most capable of using social media as a tool of political communication—have effectively used social media to publicise LUCHA's vision and activities. However, these activists are not IT professionals or experienced online activists (such as the hackers in organisations such as Anonymous, for example). As a result, LUCHA activists do not necessarily have the skills or experience to protect themselves online, and they may expose themselves to repression from the state as a result of their online activism.

Furthermore, as happened after the #Telema protests in 2015, when the government realised that protests were being organised through social media, it simply turned off the internet in the country. This had several repercussions, not only for LUCHA's ability to spread information and organise protests but also for civilians whose livelihoods relied on access to the internet and mobile money transfers. Furthermore, just as LUCHA has been able to use social media to spread information, the Congolese government has also been able to use these technologies to spread counter-discourses and misinformation. It is important to be aware of the danger of technology-induced echo chambers and siloes of understanding, which may give a false impression of the realities on the ground (Perera, 2015).

Finally, LUCHA has been enabled to grow into a mass movement because its members are united by a loosely defined core belief (positive developmental change in DRC) and it has an inclusive attitude to accepting anyone who wants to join to the cause. This has enabled LUCHA to draw on a wide range of change agents who are able to bring different skills and experiences to the movement. As a result, LUCHA has been able to achieve a considerable amount of change and launch large-scale national campaigns with relatively few resources and no official sources of income. However, as the movement has grown, the diverse nature of its membership has also led to some divisions.

As discussed above, there is a division among those who feel LUCHA should actively engage with the formal political arena and seek assistance from international interveners, and those who feel the organisation should be a stand-alone protest movement. Those belonging to the latter group are also sceptical of certain members' rise to prominence. For example, in Goma, the research found there was a split between LUCHA activists 'who supported Fred Bauma'<sup>29</sup> and those who did not. Those who support Fred have argued that he has been instrumental in bringing international attention to LUCHA's cause, and his ability as a political communicator has meant that he is often called upon to give international press interviews and negotiate with political elites. Those who do not support him question his commitment and have concerns that foreign forces are using him to pursue their own interests: 'Talking of Fred, he wasn't a truly engage militant, and he was not very active in LUCHA's actions. However, the circumstances of his arrest have given him a legendary profile. Foreign institutions have elevated him to a certain level to add weight to their own interests. I would say that Fred is a prized commodity these days.'<sup>30</sup>

While all those who noted the divisions within LUCHA remained hopeful that the organisation could overcome these problems and remain united, as the movement has grown there have been questions about the interests and incentives of particular members who have gained social capital as a result of their association with it. Certain members have been invited to attend international conferences and have gained places on various scholarship programmes abroad, which other members have felt reflect a desire to personally enrich themselves through the movement rather than campaign for change in DRC. Furthermore, although LUCHA does not formally receive payment for its work, it does receive informal funds from prominent supporters to assist with campaigns. Some members have expressed concerns over the lack of transparency surrounding this funding and other LUCHA activities: 'We received funds from different environments but the people who administered the finances did not want to talk about it, the same with correspondences with foreign embassies, it was managed in secret.'<sup>31</sup>

So far, it is not clear what impact these divisions may have, as they are considered relatively small issues within the movement, and LUCHA activists who have been responsible for these funds and dialogue with international actors are trying to address these accountability issues. However, a lack of trust among members and these kinds of internal divisions may affect LUCHA's ability to drive forward political change in DRC. As one of LUCHA's core aims is to hold the Congolese political elite to account, if it is beset with its own internal accountability issues this is likely to undermine its credibility as an advocate for good governance and accountability.

29 Interview #44

30 Interview #38

31 Interview #38



# 5

## Conclusion

This case study of LUCHA has found that the movement has led to a transformational change in the nature of political participation in DRC. These changes can be regarded as changing the rules of the game in three significant ways that are likely to have a lasting impact on Congolese politics.

First, they have facilitated the cognitive liberation of Congolese citizens. Through the organisation of high-profile service delivery campaigns, and democratic protests that have garnered international attention, LUCHA has empowered citizens to realise their rights through the state and hold DRC's political elite to account. Furthermore, LUCHA has shown that young people in the country can be a force for good. By moving away from the image of youth (especially young men) as a source of violence whom politicians can mobilise and manipulate to serve their own interests (either through armed groups or street gangs), and showing that young people are a political constituency in their own right who have political interests and aspirations about the country's future, LUCHA has made it clear that politicians need to take the concerns young people have about the country's governance seriously.

Second, LUCHA has shown that it is possible to gain access to the political arena in DRC, and exert political influence, without resorting to violence. In a political settlement in which political violence underpins the elite bargain (Perera, 2017a), and where non-violent civil society groups tend to have little or no leverage to effect change, the fact that LUCHA members have been able to gain access to political elites and prevent constitutional changes through peaceful protest can be seen as a positive change in political participation in the country. At a time when the power and influence of armed groups is waning, and Congolese civilians have reached a level of conflict fatigue (Phillips, 2013), LUCHA presents an attractive alternative to violence that has proven itself capable of effecting change with less loss of life and bloodshed than armed struggle.

Finally, LUCHA has been one of the most effective proponents of a new form of political communication, which by-passes the limitations of DRC's poor infrastructure and traditional media to make better use of social media and the spread of communication technology. Not only has this allowed LUCHA to reach out beyond its borders and gain international support for its cause, but also it has allowed members to efficiently and rapidly organise and mobilise masses of protestors and activists in response to a rapidly evolving political context. LUCHA has been able to expose the increasingly authoritarian and ineffective nature of the Congolese state both to Congolese citizens and to the outside world. This is an important first step in holding to account a state that has been predatory and corrupt for decades.

LUCHA's informal organisational structure and horizontal leadership style has allowed for the involvement of a broad range of different actors, helping it grow from a relatively small protest movement in Goma to a large national grassroots movement with thousands of national and international members and supporters. However, as the section above outlined, its strengths have also been its weaknesses, and, as the country moves into a period of intense political uncertainty, it will be interesting to see whether the movement will remain united and what direction it will take. Nonetheless, over the past five years, LUCHA has exercised leadership for transformational change in DRC, and built the foundations for grassroots civic participation that will empower the citizenry to demand better governance and accountability if/when a new political regime comes to power



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