



**WHY WE
NEED LOCAL
PEACEBUILDERS.
CASE STUDY:
ITURI, DRC.**

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**PEACE
DIRECT**

SUMMARY

- Local and community-based organisations can influence local communities, monitor the implementation of agreements, and engage directly in negotiations.
- Local and community-based organisations offer a more immediate and responsive means of addressing violence than international interventions, such as creating safe zones or reducing tensions in specific areas. These efforts can serve as a foundation for broader peacebuilding efforts.
- By prioritising the inclusion and empowerment of local actors, peacebuilding processes can become more relevant, sustainable, and effective in addressing the root causes of conflict.

Disclaimer: Peace Direct supports several organisations in Ituri. Many organisations were interviewed for the purpose of this study. All names of individuals interviewed for this case study and of their organisations have been anonymised for security purposes.

Ituri Province, one of the 26 provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is rich in gold, biodiversity, and fertile land. The current conflict in the province primarily stems from ethnic tensions between Hema¹ and Lendu² communities, which trace back to the colonial period (1885–1960).

This study traces the dynamics and causes of conflicts in Ituri, and the subsequent government-led responses.

¹ Hema: an ethnic group made up of pastoralists; rival to the Lendu.

² Lendu: an ethnic group made up of farmers; rival to the Hema.

Drawing on interviews from local peacebuilders in the region, this study also highlights the crucial role that local and community-based organisations can play in building relevant, effective and sustainable peacebuilding processes.

Causes of conflict

Historically, land disputes, political opposition, and economic inequalities have fuelled intermittent clashes in eastern DRC. While conflict in Ituri remained relatively dormant until the 1990s, it was reignited during the Second Congo War (1999–2003). The resulting power vacuum allowed various non-state armed factions to emerge.

The most prominent armed groups in the province include the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO), the Zaïre militia, the Ituri Patriotic Resistance Force (FRPI), and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

CODECO and its associated factions are pro-Lendu and oppose the pro-Hema Zaïre militia. The FRPI are a subgroup and ally of the Lendu, while the ADF and its factions originated in Uganda before expanding into the DRC.

Government-led responses and the exclusion of local voices

In May 2021, the Congolese government declared a ‘state of siege’ in Ituri and North Kivu, aiming to secure the region and eliminate armed groups. This emergency measure is usually implemented in response to severe internal threats, such as conflict and unrest, and involves temporarily suspending or limiting certain civil liberties while

transferring authority from civilian to military control. Civilians in the region have protested the measure, stating that it has not resulted in any significant changes over the past three years.

The Coordinator of a peacebuilding organisation based in Ituri, when asked in a recent interview about the security situation in the province, stated that the ADF typically attacks civilians around the major cocoa harvest season –usually from April to September. This is a tactic to force farmers off the land, allowing the group to steal the cocoa and resell it. In 2020, CODECO agreed to a ceasefire mediated by a group of former warlords in Ituri, following a call from President Félix Tshisekedi. Despite this, the violence persisted, eventually emboldening the group to assault military targets, particularly the FARDC (DRC National Armed Forces).

In 2022, CODECO participated in the Nairobi Process Dialogue, alongside representatives from other armed groups in DRC, to end hostilities between security forces and local communities. However, the involvement of local peacebuilders was highly limited. The Executive Secretary of a youth peacebuilding organisation said during an interview that lobbying was their organisation's primary method for participating in the Nairobi talks. This is because their organisation was not directly invited to participate at the table. The talks therefore did not benefit from the organisation's experience working in local communities affected by the conflict, or their insights and analyses on the impact (or lack thereof) of different peace agreements since 1999.

The exclusion of local and community-based civil society organisations is a pattern all too common in many peace processes. This status quo is failing to produce sustainable

peace, as evidenced by the unabated continuation of CODECO's attacks, despite these latest peacebuilding efforts. As recently as June 2024, CODECO killed more than 20 civilians in a village raid. A week after this attack, they killed six Chinese nationals and two Congolese soldiers at a mining site.

Many local and community-based civil society organisations have initiated projects aimed at fostering harmony between Hema and Lendu groups, as well as efforts to deter young people from joining the armed groups. One organisation for example, organises football tournaments, among other activities, to improve cohesion between the two ethnic groups.

“When the players interact, it helps them live together” said the Administrative Director at this organisation. This is just one of a plethora of local and community-based organisations working on local solutions with and for their communities.

Despite their long-standing efforts and commitment to peace in the region, local and community-based organisations are typically ignored during formal multi-stakeholder processes. The Peace, Security and Cooperation framework for the DRC and the region, signed in 2013, highlighted concerns regarding the persistent violence in eastern DRC. It offered a window of opportunity to address the root causes of the violent conflict. However, it failed to mention the involvement of local organisations in either the process or its execution. While the framework outlined the responsibilities of national, regional, and international actors to end violence, none were obliged to collaborate with local or community-based organisations to address the conflict.

Such was the case until October 2020, when Secretary-General António Guterres approved the United Nations (UN) Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention, and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes region. Developed by the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes region and regional stakeholders, this strategy emphasised the importance of ensuring that a broad cross-section of the population – such as parliamentarians, women’s groups, human rights organisations, youth, business groups, trade unions, faith-based organisations, academics, and others – are aware of the details of the Peace, Security and Cooperation framework agreement. This sentiment is echoed by local organisations, who often express frustration at being excluded from peace processes. The Programme Manager at a local peacebuilding organisation emphasised in an interview that “*local organisations are crucial for peace consolidation. Living within conflict-affected communities, we tailor our responses to address the specific needs of each area.*” Despite pleas for inclusion, their voices continue to be overlooked by decision-makers.

The exclusion of local voices in peace agreements is deeply rooted in the legacy of colonialism. In Peace Direct’s *Race, Power, and Peacebuilding*, consultation participants highlighted that peacebuilding concepts and strategies are often developed through the lens of the ‘White Gaze’. This concept describes a process whereby people and societies are viewed under the scope of White ethnocentrism. Thus, the experiences, knowledge, and practices of people from non-Western or Global South contexts are marginalised or devalued, despite the rich, context-specific wisdom they hold, and their deep connection to the communities they serve.

The need to include local peacebuilders for sustainable peace

The expertise of local and community-based organisations is crucial for sustainable peace, given their proximity to conflicts and extensive understanding of local dynamics. However, current frameworks too often reinforce global power imbalances, by positing international and national actors as the primary architects of peace, leaving local and community-based actors relegated to the role of beneficiaries or, at best, collaborators. Such approaches are steeped in White saviourism. They undermine the potential for genuinely inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding efforts that are responsive to the needs and realities of the communities most affected by conflict. The Administrative Director at a local peacebuilding organisation pointed out that:

“The approaches to peacebuilding must be context-specific, as there will never be a one-size-fits-all solution for a region where prolonged conflict has given rise to additional grievances. Unfortunately, decision-makers, who are often detached from the realities of these communities, tend to propose generalised solutions that fall short of addressing the unique challenges on the ground.”

The Peace, Security and Cooperation framework, for instance, demonstrates how the international community took nearly seven years to recognise that civilians, as the primary beneficiaries of the framework, should have been included from the outset. The lives lost, atrocities committed, and the worsening of the situation over those seven years are

irreversible. A locally led³ approach would have both honoured the dignity of these communities, and produced more effective strategies, fostering greater trust and collaboration between all actors involved. Including local organisations at an earlier stage of agreements, not merely as consultants but as active creators and implementers of their recommendations, would position civilians as catalysts for change and help break the cycle of violence.

A peacebuilding Coordinator in Ituri tells us:

“[Their organisation] works directly with the government on the disarmament programme launched by the Office of the President. Being on the ground, we support the programme by interacting with the population and armed groups, and by listening to their grievances. In May 2024, we met with a leader of an armed group in a territory north of Bunia, who was willing to reintegrate child soldiers into civilian life and sought the organisation’s support to make it happen.”

Unlike standard approaches typically outlined in international agreements, including those seen in the 2013 framework, such locally driven efforts are more adaptable and sensitive to the realities on the ground. Approaches like this foster a deep sense of trust within the community, as people feel confident in those working with them. Pétronille Vaweka, the recipient of the United States Institute of Peace’s (USIP) 2024 Women Building Peace Award, shared during the reception that she used to negotiate ceasefires by personally going to armed group hideouts and speaking to them:

³ Locally led: ‘Locally led’ peacebuilding and development is an approach or process in which initiatives are owned and led by people in their own context.

“At one point, I played the role of Governor in the province, and rather than turning over their weapons to the government or the United Nations (MONUC/MONUSCO), armed groups would actually bring them to my house instead, where they were collected and traced.”

This kind of cultural, social, and political sensitivity is often overlooked when agreements are made without involving local leaders or considering the local context. The dynamics in Ituri are incredibly complex, especially as the government is struggling to maintain control across the entire country. Local and community-based organisations can influence local communities, monitor the implementation of agreements, and engage directly in negotiations. After all, local communities trust individuals who share similar backgrounds, understand their trauma, and genuinely have their best interests at heart.

Conclusion

By prioritising local insights and expertise, peacebuilding efforts can become more sustainable and align with the realities on the ground. The UN Mediation Unit asserts that even when national political processes are deadlocked, local processes may present opportunities to reduce violence and create opportunities of stability. Local and community-based organisations offer a more immediate and responsive means of addressing violence, sometimes creating safe zones or reducing tensions in specific areas. These efforts can serve as a foundation for broader peacebuilding efforts.

The Executive Secretary at a local youth organisation suggested that consulting various stakeholders from different villages is a crucial strategy to end the violence:

“This approach leverages local knowledge of the area, language, context, and nuances necessary for effective implementation.”

If this strategy were incorporated into international agreements, it would enable local organisations to receive the financial and material support needed to implement peace agreements.

In the end, this work is not just about understanding the root causes of conflict but committing to the ongoing work of uprooting them. Local civil society organisations in eastern DRC expressed deep frustration over the absence of government presence, particularly in the eastern regions of the country.

“[There is a need] for negotiations and mediations, restoring state authority. There are methodological steps to be taken before achieving peace,” says the National Director of a non-profit peace association in Goma. They emphasise that authority must be felt even in its physical absence, through a pervasive sense of law and order that can deter potential conflicts. In remote villages, for example, customary chiefs could perhaps embody the role of authority, if empowered by the state to take on certain justice and security responsibilities.

The complex and protracted conflicts in Ituri require a collaborative approach that not only involves international actors but also places a strong emphasis on the expertise and leadership of local civil society. Sustainable peace can only be achieved when those living through these conflicts are at the

forefront, leading the efforts to secure their own futures. By prioritising the inclusion and empowerment of local actors, peacebuilding processes can become more relevant, sustainable, and effective in addressing the root causes of conflict.



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