WHY WE NEED LOCAL PEACEBUILDERS.
CASE STUDY: NORTH KIVU, DRC.

AUGUST 2025

PEACE DIRECT

SUMMARY

- For years, local peacebuilding organisations have played a critical role in North Kivu's peacebuilding efforts.
- The complex and protracted conflicts in North Kivu require a collaborative approach that, while involving international actors, places a particularly strong emphasis on the expertise and leadership of local civil society.
- Local initiatives have proven effective in acknowledging and addressing the root causes of conflict.

Disclaimer: Peace Direct supports several organisations in North Kivu. Several 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.

North Kivu is one of the 26 provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Home to over eight million people, it is particularly rich in natural resources, and one of the largest cobalt producing regions in the world. The province has long attracted interest from neighbouring countries, powerful global players and multinational corporations.

This study traces the causes of conflicts in North Kivu, and the subsequent government-led responses. Drawing on interviews from local peacebuilders in the region, it also highlights how local peacebuilding initiatives have often been overlooked, despite their proven efficacy in addressing the root causes of conflict in North Kivu.

Causes of conflicts

North Kivu has experienced decades of conflict, tracing back to the early 1990s. The country experienced a series of civil wars following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when thousands of refugees fled across the border to the DRC.

This rise in violence has increased in parallel with the proliferation of non-state armed groups. Since 1996, an estimated six million have been killed. As of November 2024, an additional 6.9 million were internally displaced in the eastern part of the country.

Some of the most prominent armed groups in North Kivu include the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a militia that originated from Uganda and expanded to the DRC; the *Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda* (the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, or FDLR), a Hutu-majority rebel group initially comprising some of those responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide; and the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (March 23 Movement, or M23). M23 was formed after the breakdown of the ceasefire treaty between the DRC government and the Tutsi-majority armed group, the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP).

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. Shortly after the state of siege began, M23 resurfaced, seizing territories and intensifying its fight with the DRC National Armed Forces (FARDC). In late 2024, M23 increased its offensive, taking control of swathes of territory, including the provincial capitals of Goma in North Kivu and Bukavu in South Kivu in early 2025, displacing an additional 2.3 million people in North Kivu alone. Adding to the complexity, local civil society organisations interviewed for this study stated that personal and political interests were fuelling the conflict.

"Our recent analysis has highlighted how ethnic tensions are being intensified by competition over control and access to natural resources," said the Programme Manager at one of the organisations interviewed[1].

The past three decades of conflict, along with the recent assaults carried out by the M23 rebels, (allegedly backed by Rwanda and Uganda), have raised concerns about existing peace agreements. Political and international approaches since the escalation of the conflict have focused on peace agreements at the government level. Despite some including leaders of the armed groups, the agreements have mostly failed to hold all parties involved accountable. Since 1999, the UN has documented over 19 agreements and related materials to address the conflict and restore peace in the region. Most have failed to include local civil society voices. The agreement

---

[1] This organisation works to rehabilitate and enhance the role of local peace actors in building sustainable peace in the DRC.

between the government and the M23 in December 2013 following M23's defeat, for example, left local communities with mixed feelings. Some welcomed the agreement as a potential step towards peace and stability in the region. Others were more sceptical, expressing concerns about the effectiveness of dialogues and the willingness of parties to uphold their commitments. The group resurfaced in late 2021, claiming government illegitimacy and unresolved grievances stemming from the 2013 agreement.

Simultaneously, the Congolese government and UN experts have accused Rwanda of having de-facto control of M23, in pursuit of their own foreign policy interests. While Rwanda officially denied support for the group, an estimated 4,000 Rwandan Defence Force soldiers have been deployed in eastern DRC alongside M23 in recent years, and the government has been consistently involved in discussions around the conflict. In August 2024, a ceasefire agreement was signed in Luanda between Rwanda and the DRC. The agreement did not only exclude local voices, but also M23, who consequently declared that they were not bound by the terms of the agreement. This exclusion highlighted a broader issue: when key armed factions are left out of peace negotiations, they are less likely to respect or comply with the accords, undermining the prospects for lasting peace. More recent high-level dialogues with the government of the DRC, mediated by Qatar and the United States, led first to direct engagement between the DRC and Rwanda and, subsequently, between the DRC and M23.

As recently as May 2025, the DRC and Rwanda stated their aim to reach a 'draft peace agreement', while the DRC and M23 agreed to a temporary truce. The proposed timelines and

lack of engagement and consultation with civil society and affected communities in the east have raised questions around the feasibility of a comprehensive peace agreement.

While M23 is one of the biggest and currently most violent armed groups, eastern DRC hosts hundreds of armed groups, each with its own grievances and agendas, making their inclusion crucial for any comprehensive peace process. Additionally, the Congolese government has relied on a variety of self-defence groups and non-state actors under the umbrella title of '*Wazalendo*' (or 'patriots' in Swahili) to fight alongside FARDC against M23, raising further questions around the Congolese government's control over these armed actors, and their ability to reintegrate these groups over time.

The need to include local peacebuilders for sustainable peace

For years, local peacebuilding organisations have played a critical role in peacebuilding efforts in North Kivu. Those interviewed for this study emphasised how locally rooted the conflict is, arguing that neglecting local solutions only creates new grievances. This in turn increases the likelihood of new armed groups emerging and youth being recruited.

Without addressing the root causes of violence, peacebuilding efforts risk failing to break cycles of violence. Local civil society voices insist that sustainable solutions must come from within the communities most affected by the conflict. As highlighted by the aforementioned Programme Manager (interviewed before M23 took control of Goma in January 2025), increasing ethnic hatred had a compounding impact on ethnic divisions within the community:

> *"In Goma, there are over ten refugee camps, and it's common to see people from the Nande, Hutu, and Hunde ethnic groups living there. However, you won't find Tutsi refugees in these camps. Many Tutsis have fled to Rwanda and Uganda, where reports suggest they feel safer. The only refugee camp in Goma where Tutsi are present is where those who fled from the Masisi region reside. This situation has led to accusations from other communities, who believe the Tutsi prefer to isolate themselves, while Tutsi individuals fear staying with others due to concerns about retaliation. This division undermines social cohesion."*

Local peacebuilding organisations have long worked to build sustainable peace. Despite this, they are too often excluded from formal peace agreements, which fail to bridge the gap between the work of local peacebuilding organisations and wider peace processes. The 2013 peace agreement and the 2024 revival of the Luanda Agreement would have benefited from more tailored, locally led[2] approaches that meaningfully include the communities directly affected by the violence.

Effective peacebuilding goes beyond international agreements; it requires solutions that are informed by and responsive to the needs of those on the ground. A professor at a DRC university expressed frustration that beyond the lack of local perspectives in agreements, international interventions might also go against the interests of their country:

> *"NGOs that have a strong local presence and identity are often the most effective in peacebuilding. Unlike international*

---

[2] Locally led: 'locally led development' is an approach or process in which initiatives are owned and led by people in their own context.

organisations, which are typically guided by the policies and priorities of their donor countries. International groups are limited in how they advocate for peace, as their actions are often contingent on the directives of the countries that fund them."

Local peacebuilding organisations also play a crucial role in gathering essential information to prevent conflict, yet their contributions often remain underappreciated in broader peace efforts. As highlighted in Peace Direct and RISD's *Escaping Perpetual Beginnings*:

"Local civil society actors frequently play the role of information gatherers, and they tend to report to bodies such as MONUSCO, DRC government actors (including FARDC and National Congolese Police 'PNC'), and various INGOs, who are considered to have the necessary means for stopping large-scale violence from erupting. Information is gathered through the tracking of several different 'indicators' used for predicting violence."

Examples of effective local initiatives

Local initiatives have proven effective in being more inclusive, acknowledging and addressing the root causes of the conflict that drive individuals and communities to take up arms. These efforts help to foster a sense of community and prevent conflicts from escalating. Below are just some examples of local initiatives.

The aforementioned university professor and a study group have developed strategies to approach conflict resolution at a local level. They recently organised a conference aimed at

understanding how injustices, coupled with a contempt from governing authorities, can lead to violence. The discussions also touched on how passivity among the public, where people accept their difficult situation instead of fighting for their rights, contributes to ongoing conflicts.

The Director of Research at one of the organisations interviewed[3], who is also an academic at a university in the DRC, said the organisation was created because political institutions at the national or international level do not focus significantly enough on research or make evidence-based decisions. With focal points throughout the country, the reach and local community relationships of organisations like this put them in a good place to be included in peace negotiations. However, despite this organisation's extensive research on local conflict dynamics, the Congolese government have never solicited their input during peace processes. Few international organisations contact them when conducting research in the region:

> *"Civil society is not included and if we don't understand the nature of the issue, we can't find a solution... peace is not random, it's planned."*

The Administrative Director of another organisation[4] interviewed works on community cohesion including activities such as sports. The organisation selects players from different ethnic groups to play together and relieve tensions between them. As he put it, "*When the players interact,*

---

[3] This organisation aims at contributing to peacebuilding and development via research and evaluations.
[4] This is a peacebuilding organisation in northeastern DRC. It works to support communities facing violence and trauma in their pursuit of long-term peace.

it helps them live together." <u>The United Nations</u> acknowledges sports as a tool for conflict prevention and fostering long-term peace and development. By engaging in sports, young people develop a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the field into daily life. In conflict-prone areas like North Kivu, where access to education is limited, sports offer a productive outlet for young people, helping them make constructive use of their free time while promoting community cohesion. Complementary to these efforts, this organisation facilitates dialogues between community, political and military leaders and others around issues in the community.

The Programme Manager mentioned earlier explains that their organisation works with local actors to strengthen their capacity in understanding local conflicts:

> *"[Our organisation] has been working closely with local actors and working groups for an extended period, focusing on building their capacity in key thematic areas related to context analysis. We believe that these local stakeholders are best equipped to analyse, advocate, and develop strategies for peace consolidation. Our efforts are currently active across eight territories, where we engage directly with these groups to enhance their skills and effectiveness in peacebuilding."*

Their advocacy efforts target key actors, so they are well positioned to be part of conversations revolving around peace agreements. The <u>UN Mediation Unit</u> asserts that even when national political processes are deadlocked, local processes may offer opportunities to reduce violence and create pockets of stability. Local processes offer a more immediate and responsive means of addressing violence, sometimes creating

safe zones or reducing tensions in specific areas. This locally produced stability can, in turn, serve as a foundation for broader peacebuilding efforts, gradually expanding outward and influencing national processes over time.

The Coordinator of one of the organisations mentioned earlier explains that they have been working with the government through the *Programme de désarmement, démobilisation, relèvement communautaire et la stabilisation* (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery, and Stabilization Programme*)* launched by the office of the President:

> *"[Under this programme] in May 2024, we hosted activities for community building such as soccer games, folklore dances, and a chief of an armed group contacted us because he wanted to return child soldiers and solicited our support to make it possible."*

Conclusion

The government holds significant responsibility in shifting its focus from reactive measures to proactive prevention. A consistent recommendation that emerged during interviews was the need to *"reinforce the presence of government authorities everywhere."* Others also recommended an honest dialogue between the government and armed groups. The approach to peacebuilding should prioritise local strategies over the international ones that have dominated for years. As one of the interviewees emphasises: *"We need to establish an inclusive dialogue mechanism that involves all parties to achieve lasting peace."*

The government in return must recognise they are not the only source of authority within communities and thus must elevate the role of local actors. By leveraging local authority figures like customary chiefs, the government can extend its reach into areas where it has historically been absent. This strategy not only strengthens local governance systems but also ensures that peace and security are restored in a way that resonates with the people living in these communities.

The complex and protracted conflicts in North Kivu require a collaborative approach that involves international actors but especially places a strong emphasis on the expertise and leadership of local civil society. Positive peace[5] can only be achieved when those living through these conflicts are not merely participants in peacebuilding processes but are at the forefront, leading the efforts to secure their own futures.

---

[5] 'Positive peace' refers to the conditions needed for sustainable peace, as opposed to 'negative peace', which refers to the absence of violent conflict.