

SPECIAL REPORT

# Building Relationships, Building Peace

**The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in  
Preventing Mass Atrocities in the Democratic  
Republic of the Congo**

*The Cases of the Grand Nord (2000–2006) and Ituri (2003–2009)*

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## Executive Summary

Cycles of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have led to fluctuating levels of large-scale, systematic violence against civilians. Two regions, the Grand Nord area of North Kivu province and the northeastern Ituri province, have featured both some of the worst violence and exceptional lulls in fighting. The roles of civil society actors in those two cases have varied—from encouraging armed-group mobilization to leading region-wide mediation efforts.

Our analysis of civilian-led efforts in those two cases demonstrates that the boundaries of civil society in the DRC are fluid and context specific. In Grand Nord and Ituri, Congolese groups that typically fall outside modern liberal definitions of civil society that emphasize non-partisanship played important roles in mobilizing civilian communities, representing their interests to political leaders, and adopting strategies to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities. Those groups included members of the business community, customary elites, the Catholic Church, and nongovernmental organizations.

We conclude that civil society actors had the most effect where they had close, personal relations with belligerents and where they had a deep-vested interest in stability. In Grand Nord, local Catholic Church leaders used their close relationships with armed groups to broker multiple peace agreements. Members of the business community in Grand Nord initially supported rebel groups such as the Congolese Rally for Democracy/Kisangani–Mouvement de libération (RCD/K-ML)—because the rebel groups provided tax relief and commercial financing to enhance their legitimacy. That relationship, however, meant that business leaders were also able to pressure rebel groups to participate in peace processes when conflict began to interfere with the business community’s financial interests. In Ituri, similar incentives led cattle ranchers and traders to play a similar role.

Those findings have important implications for the prevention and mitigation of mass atrocities in the DRC. Interpreting *protection of civilians* as requiring technical and military engagement with civilian populations has led to the relative neglect of actions by non-military actors and civil society to address the political and economic causes of the conflict. The cases of Grand Nord and Ituri show that civilians have had the greatest effect not in intervening to protect people in imminent danger but by influencing the broader social dynamics that drive the conflict.

## Introduction

This study documents and analyzes the role of civilians in mitigating violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), using two case studies: the Grand Nord area of North Kivu province—which includes the territories of Beni and Lubero as well as the towns of Beni and Butembo—and the Ituri region (now Ituri province).

Those areas have featured some of the worst violence of the Congolese conflict but have also featured exceptional lulls in fighting. Ituri was one of the most violent parts of the DRC until 2007, when violence declined abruptly even as it escalated in the Kivus region. Beni-Butembo, by contrast, remained relatively calm between 2001 and 2006, but that security subsequently deteriorated. Those fluctuations in violence raise questions and provide methodological leverage for our study. What caused the relative stability in Beni-Butembo and Ituri, and what role did civilians play in those processes?

We make two related arguments herein. First, narratives surrounding the peace process in the DRC have often focused on formal political actors, ignoring or minimizing the role of private businesses, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious and community organizations.<sup>1</sup> Although we employ the term *civil society* here, those groups require a different conceptualization from traditional civil society because they often defy the modern liberal understanding of civil society as nonpolitical and separate from the state. They often are explicitly engaged in partisan, self-interested activities and in the provision of public services.<sup>2</sup> We argue that the bias toward formal political actors by diplomats, journalists, and academics—but also the sanitized view of civil society as benign forces—has neglected the contribution of civil society.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, we argue that, although it is important to uphold the classic definition of *civilians* under international humanitarian law—an individual who is not a member of a national army or an armed group—that distinction was crafted for legal and operational purposes and creates a neat dichotomy that often breaks down in reality. As our study shows, the relations between combatants and civilians are complex and produce many opportunities—as well as pitfalls—for peacebuilding.

Our second argument is that those organizations are critical in helping us understand the ebb and flow of stability in the eastern DRC. Civil society was deeply influential in peacemaking, including through peace negotiations and pressure on belligerents in the form of monitoring and denunciations. Throughout those

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<sup>1</sup> We define the peace process as including the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (July 10, 1999), the Inter-Congolese Dialogue held in Sun City, South Africa (February 22–December 17, 2002), and the political transition (2003–2006).

<sup>2</sup> In some ways, this definition is similar to that of *political society* put forward by Partha Chatterjee. In contrast to his use, however, we do not see a clear dichotomy between civil and political society. See also Nissim Mannathukkaren, “The ‘Poverty’ of Political Society: Partha Chatterjee and the People’s Plan Campaign in Kerala, India,” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2010): 295–314.

<sup>3</sup> Autesserre makes a similar argument about a bias among peacekeepers, albeit mostly with regard to actors involved in violence. Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations Book 115 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

operations, civil society actors had the most effect where they had close, personal relations with belligerents and where they had a deep-vested interest in stability.

Civil society, however, is not inherently a stabilizing force. The same qualities that enable its positive influence—its intimacy with belligerents and its partisan behavior—can have less benign effects, as well. Some of the actors described here, such as landowners in Ituri, initially backed armed groups—only to help in their demobilization when the situation had changed and their interests had shifted.

Understanding when and how civil society can play a role in peacemaking will require a shift in peacemaking strategies. We argue that the emphasis on the protection of civilians—which has featured prominently in the mandates of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission and in the objectives of humanitarian agencies—is part of a general trend in peacemaking in the DRC toward technical and military engagement instead of explicit discussion and remediation of the political and economic drivers of the conflict.<sup>4</sup> In this study, we show that civilians have had the greatest effect not in intervening to protect people in imminent danger—the demand usually made by UN Security Council resolutions of its peacekeepers—but by influencing the broader social dynamics that drive the conflict. Taking that approach requires a different conceptualization of what a civilian is, how protection takes place, and what time span it concerns.

## Methodology

Our approach in this study has been qualitative. We have combined two types of data: first, archival research and relevant literature, which enabled us to obtain information on major actors of war and peace, their initiatives, and the major results of a number of projects conducted to support peace efforts;<sup>5</sup> second, information gathered by a team of key actors and three local researchers with deep knowledge in the field from approximately 60 interviews they conducted with members of civil society and the political class who participated in peace efforts in the two zones during the periods covered by the study.<sup>6</sup> Interview guides were calibrated according to the interviewee's presumed ability to provide credible answers because of the position he or she occupied at the time of the incident. The information was evaluated and triangulated by comparing oral and written sources.

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, "Routine Peace: Technocracy and Peacebuilding," *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 3 (2012): 287–308, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0010836712444825>.

<sup>5</sup> These documents appear in the bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> For safety reasons, we have not included the names of most of those interviewees.

## The Historical Context: Violence and Dialogue in North Kivu and Ituri between 2003 and 2008

To help readers understand the conflict dynamics in the period under study, we need to provide some historical context. The war that eventually engulfed both of those areas was launched in August 1996 by a coalition of regional armies led by the Rwandan, Ugandan, and Angolan governments under the guise of a Congolese rebellion: the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL). Their initial goal was to overthrow the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, which they achieved on May 17, 1997, when they took power in Kinshasa. Laurent Désiré Kabila became the president of the Republic of Zaire, now renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The war drew on and in turn unleashed a variety of conflict dynamics at the local level—especially in the eastern DRC, where a majority of the AFDL troops originated.

The calm that followed was brief, as Kabila soon fell out with his foreign allies, expelling Rwandan and Ugandan troops from the DRC in July 1998 and triggering an invasion along the eastern border. Each of those neighboring countries then backed new rebellions—Rwanda supported the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) in the Kivu provinces, whereas Uganda threw its weight behind the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC) in the north of the country. That phase of the conflict dramatically transformed the political and social structures in both areas of study.

The RCD set up its headquarters in Goma and was initially dominated by the Rwandan government; however, leadership disputes within the RCD and Rwandan interference resulted in a split, with a faction relocating its headquarters to Kisangani. They adopted the name RCD/Kisangani (RCD/K)<sup>7</sup> and received backing from the Ugandan government. This antagonism culminated in clashes in the city of Kisangani in August 1999, May 2000, and June 2000 between the Rwandan and Ugandan armies and led the RCD/K to move to its headquarters to Bunia, in Ituri. A leadership crisis then rapidly emerged within RCD/K-ML between Professor Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, the organization's president, and Antipas Mbusa Nyamwisi, its chief commissioner. The latter eventually orchestrated a coup in November 2000, which led Wamba to flee the country. Due to continued factionalism, Mbusa finally moved to Beni, his hometown, in early 2002.

### Beni-Butembo: 1998–2006

The period between the end of the AFDL war (May 1997) and the beginning of the RCD war (August 1998) in the area was violent, as competing belligerents fought for control. For example, a Mai-Mai coalition attacked an AFDL military camp in April 1998, killing several soldiers. In retaliation, the AFDL carried out a brutal counterinsurgency operation in the Kikyo hill, outside Butembo, killing about 250

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<sup>7</sup> The initial, official split within the RCD took place on May 20, 1999, after which the dissident faction became known as RCD/Kisangani. After the group was pushed out of Kisangani by Rwandan troops and the original RCD in 2000, it adopted the name RCD/Mouvement de libération. Only when it transformed itself into a political party did the group change its name to RCD/K-ML.

people.<sup>8</sup> Even after the local AFDL units joined the RCD rebellion in August 1998, occasional clashes continued to pit them and their Ugandan allies against a variety of Mai-Mai groups. Among those groups were Lolwako Kopokopo’s National Lumumbist Resistance (RNL); the People’s Forces for Self-Defense, commanded by Mwavita Kitambala (FAP/Vita); the Union of Congolese Patriots for Peace (UPCP), commanded by Sikuli Lafontaine; and the Popular Resistance Front of Lubwe-Rwenzori (FRPL-R).<sup>9</sup>

As the RCD and the Ugandan army consolidated control and established a working relationship with local elites and civil society, however, violence decreased significantly. Beni and Butembo became remarkably stable during that period, in sharp contrast to the dramatic violence in Ituri, to the north, and in the southern part of North Kivu. Although no publicly available data exist on displacement during that period, mortality surveys by epidemiologists from 2002, 2003/2004, and 2006 show a considerably lower mortality rate in the area—less than one-half that of the average for the conflict-affected East and far lower than the areas in South Kivu, North Kivu, and Ituri, where the violence was concentrated.

**Table 1. Mortality surveys for health zones in Beni-Butembo area**

Year	Location	Crude Mortality Rate	CMR for East
1998	Nationwide	1.2	NA
2002	Butembo Health Zone	0.4	2.1
2002	Kyondo Health Zone	0.9	2.1
2003–2004	Oicha Health Zone	1.4	2.3
2006	Lubero Health Zone	0.8	2.4

Source: Ben Coghlan et al., *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Results from a Nationwide Survey Apr–Jul 2004* (New York: International Rescue Committee and Burnet Institute, 2004); Benjamin Coghlan et al., “Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Nationwide Survey,” *Lancet* 367, no. 9504 (January 7, 2006): 44–51; Benjamin Coghlan et al., “Update on Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Results from a Third Nationwide Survey,” *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* 3, no. 2 (June 2009): 88–96; UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children 1999: Education* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1999).  
NA = not applicable.

Two factors, which we will examine in greater detail below, explain the relative stability. First, the tightly knit business community and civil society were able to act effectively as a buffer to prevent skirmishes from spiraling out of control. The Catholic Church and members of civil society remained sympathetic with the Mai-Mai, in large part due to the Mai-Mai groups’ opposition to Rwandan and Ugandan intervention. Nonetheless, those local elites intervened to ensure that conflict would not escalate to levels that could affect the general population (the Kikyo massacre had been a potent warning of the potential harm) and the vibrant local business community.

Eventually, as warring parties from across the country embarked on negotiations that would eventually lead to a transitional government, Mbusa Nyamwisi switched alliances and welcomed Kinshasa’s troops

<sup>8</sup> Claude Muhindo Sengenya, “RDC: Vingt ans après le Massacre de Kikyo par l’Armée, les victimes attendent toujours justice,” June 12, 2017, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/fr/divers/33549-rdc-kikyo-justice-armee-massacre.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Mbindule Mitono and Nissé N. Mughendi, “Géopolitique des conflits intra Maï-Maï au Nord-Kivu (1993-2002),” in Alphonse Maïndo (sous la dir.), *Des conflits locaux à la guerre régionale en Afrique centrale*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007, 147-169.

to Beni in 2002. The RCD/K-ML would integrate the new national government and army in 2003, with Mbusa Nyamwisi becoming minister of regional cooperation. Interestingly, that relative peace would then unravel after 2014, in part because the local settlements that had underwritten stability came apart.<sup>10</sup>

## Ituri: 2000–2007

During the same period, violence in Ituri escalated, driven initially by land conflicts between landowning Hema and Lendu communities anchored in the political and economic inequalities of the colonial period. On the Hema side, the RCD/K-ML mutineers eventually coalesced into the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) in September 2000, whereas the Lendu militias forged a variety of armed groups, including the Front of Integrationist Nationalists (FNI) and the Ituri Patriotic Resistance Force (FRPI). Although the armed groups articulated their grievances in ethnic terms, regional competition between Uganda, Rwanda, and the Kinshasa-based government played a critical role because those governments backed armed groups in a confounding sequence of alliances.<sup>11</sup> The bloodshed reached a peak in 2002, as Kampala moved closer politically to the Kinshasa government. Together, they managed to split the UPC into three groups and triggered a battle over the control of downtown Bunia. International pressure forced the Ugandan army to withdraw, and the UN Security Council authorized a multinational intervention force, Operation Artemis.

That military intervention marked the beginning of a period of stabilization. Lubanga left for negotiations in Kinshasa, where he was arrested in March 2005. On the Lendu side, internal conflict and splits soon revealed the gulf between politicians and local militia commanders in the FNI and even more so in the FRPI. The crumbling of those armed groups was reinforced by military operations launched by the Kinshasa government alongside UN peacekeepers, as well as by intensive demobilization and reconciliation programs funded by foreign donors. Although the remnants of the Lendu and Hema armed groups tried to merge into the Congolese Revolutionary Movement (MRC) in June 2005, they lacked internal cohesion and external support and eventually fell apart. From 2007 until 2015, Ituri remained relatively peaceful, with the FRPI—based on the southern shores of Lake Albert—the only major armed group remaining.

Table 2. Estimates of displaced persons in Ituri, 2003–2010

Date	Number of Displaced
January 2003	500,000
October 2005	280,000
March 2007	207,713
December 2010	130,000

Source: Quarterly reports from the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

<sup>10</sup> Congo Research Group, *Mass Killings in Beni Territory: Political Violence, Cover ups, and Cooptation*, Investigative Report No. 2 (New York: Center on International Cooperation, September 2017), <http://congoreserchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CRG-Beni-2017-report-updated.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Henning Tamm, “Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 2016), <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article-abstract/60/4/599/2669530?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.



## Contribution of Civilian Actors to the Reduction of Violence: Transforming the Social Relations Underpinning Conflict

The role of civilians in peacebuilding in these two regions can be described through their concrete initiatives, which we discuss below. Similar initiatives were undertaken by civilians elsewhere in the DRC, including in South Kivu province, where formal civil society organizations are arguably older and stronger than elsewhere in the country. What led the initiatives to succeed in Beni-Butembo and Ituri? In each area, we argue, civil society had the most positive effect where its members had intimate personal relations with belligerents and a deep-vested interest in stability. The following analysis is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Grand Nord and Ituri cases

	Grand Nord	Ituri
Period of Relative Peace	2001–2006	2007–2015
Overall Impact of Civil Society on Violence	Moderating force	Initially a catalyst for violence but later a moderating force
Role of the Catholic Church	Important role in diplomacy and mediation between the local community, the government, and armed groups and rebel leaders; supported the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process and leveraged its close relations with armed groups	Did not play a significant role in the conflict in Ituri
Role of the Business Community and Customary Elites	Backed armed groups, especially the RCD/K-ML, but also mitigated impact of conflict on local residents, who had largely felt abandoned by the Congolese state; supported peace process when it became clear the conflict was detrimental to their interests	Local cattle ranchers and traders initially supported armed groups but shifted their alliance when rebels began to paralyze business and devastate the local economy
Role of NGOs and Media	Played an important role in mediation efforts and supported the DDR process; affiliation with the Catholic Church allowed the media and human rights defenders to report on rebel activities without fear of repression or reprisal	Documented and condemned violence by armed groups; NGOs were integral in a September 2002 Congolese-Ugandan peace initiative, the Ituri Pacification Commission (IPC); supported the DDR process

## Grand Nord

In the area of Beni-Butembo, the relative stability of this period emerged out of a particularly strong social cohesion that bound civil society, armed groups, and political elites together through bonds of personal trust and ethnic belonging.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the extremely powerful business community in Butembo, together with the influential Catholic Church, was able to facilitate peace deals between the RCD/K-ML and its Mai-Mai rivals and in general restrain the belligerents from escalating violence. The relative ethnic homogeneity of local society helped as well—the large majority of the inhabitants are from the Nande ethnic community, as are most of the armed groups.

The geopolitical context also was important. Civil society’s pushback against the RCD/K-ML came on top of military pressure toward the group from several sides. It was facing attacks by two bigger armed groups, whose intention was to take over the territory the RCD/K-ML controlled before the Sun City negotiations occurred. Operation Effacer le tableau (“Clean the chalkboard”) by the MLC (from which Mbusa Nyamwisi had broken away in August 2001) weakened it from the north, and the RCD-Goma weakened it on the southern front in Kanyabayonga. Its Ugandan ally, which the RCD/K-ML had deprived of much of the customs revenue from the Kasindi border post (DRC’s second-most important land-based customs post in terms of revenue), had grown closer to the MLC. Under attack from the outside and fiercely contested internally, the RCD/K-ML was forced to strike a more conciliatory tone with local armed groups—in particular the Mai-Mai—and eventually struck a deal with the Kinshasa government.

## The Catholic Church

The most important player in the peace efforts was the Catholic Church. Its influence can be seen through local society. Since the 1970s, churches have been the main managers of hospitals, as well as of primary and secondary schools. The most important university in the area, the *Université catholique du Graben*, was created in 1989 by the local diocese, and the first initiative of organizing civil society emerged around the Catholic Church in the early 1990s. After the National Sovereign Conference in 1991–1992, those NGOs became active in mediating conflicts and pressuring the government before coming to the forefront in 2001 during preparations for a large peace conference (described below). At the time of this writing, coordination of civil society is still under the strong influence of the Catholic Church of Butembo-Beni.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Arsène Mwaka Bwenge, “Les Milices Mayi-Mayi à l’est de La République du Congo: Dynamique d’une Gouvernamentalité en Situation de Crise,” *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie* 7, no. 2 (2003): 73–94; Timothy Raeymaekers, “Protection for Sale? War and the Transformation of Regulation on the Congo–Ugandan Border,” *Development and Change* 41, no. 4 (2010): 563–87; Rachel Sweet, “State-Rebel Relations during Civil War: Institutional Change behind Frontlines” (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> This coordination body was twice presided over by Catholic priests—in 2003–2006 by Abbé Arsène Bahoterana and then in 2016–2019 by Abbé Professeur Téléphore Malonga; once by a lay Catholic, Roger Nzama Kilundo, between 1990 and 2003, with a priest as a deputy (Abbé Apollinaire Malumalu); and once by two lay Catholics—Fabrice Maghulu (2008–2013) and Fabrice Kakurusi (2008–2016)—employed directly by structures managed by the Catholic diocese.

Given their privileged position—having relations of trust with and influence over all belligerents—the church was able to provide the necessary brokerage and pressure that was absent from conflicts in the southern part of North Kivu and in South Kivu.

According to interviews with civil society leaders, in 1999, the archbishop of Butembo, Monsignor Sikuli Melchisédech, appointed the priest Apollinaire Malu Malu to manage contact with the government in Kinshasa—which was, at that time, at war with the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and RCD—as well as with local armed groups. One source reported that, to this end, “[Malu Malu] had a commission of 22 members. They were longstanding members of the Kyaghanda [a Nande customary association]. This commission had as a mission to contact the armed group commanders and even to meet with [Ugandan President Yoweri] Museveni as part of their shadow diplomacy. The church invested a lot in this kind of diplomacy with all the armed group commanders.”<sup>14</sup> That quote shows the importance of both the church and of ethnic organizations.

Another source, a former Mai-Mai member, spoke of the intimate relationship between Sikuli Lafontaine (no relation to the archbishop)—arguably the most important armed group commander—and the Catholic Church. “Lafontaine slept at the diocese and was protected by the bishop when Mbusa was looking for him due to his involvement in [UPDF] Colonel Ikondere’s assassination in Beni in 2001.”<sup>15</sup> Several sources also recall how the church helped smuggle Lafontaine out of the region to represent the Mai-Mai in the peace talks in South Africa.<sup>16</sup>

A former senior member of the RDC/K-ML confirmed those accounts. “When the moment to go to Sun City [the venue for peace talks in South Africa in 002] came, Mbusa sent invitations to all the warlords in his area. . . . For Mbusa, they all had to go to South Africa as a united front. But even though Lafontaine was invited by Mbusa, he left for Sun City in secret, disguised as a priest.”

Another example of how the church stepped outside the traditional remit of civil society came on the eve of the Sun City peace talks in South Africa, as belligerents were preparing their delegations to attend. Wary that the RCD/K-ML would be the only party to represent the concerns of the Grand Nord, the church tried to broker talks between the RNL and FRPL-R rival Mai-Mai groups, intending to create a coalition before going to participate in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. Talks were held under the auspices of the Catholic Church on September 6, 2001, in Bunyuka, under the mediation of Abbé Honoré Mbafumojja and his secretary Somo Mwaka. The attempt ended in failure, because the two delegates of the RNL—Major Ndungo Siviri and Mr Kopokopo Nduyi—were ambushed on their way back and two members of the mediation team were kidnapped and tortured.<sup>17</sup>

The Catholic Church was able to pivot, however, using its influence with armed groups to broker peace. The most important initiative it undertook in that arena was an international symposium, organized

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with civil society leader in Butembo, May 23, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a former member of Lafontaine’s armed group, Butembo, July 17, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Interviews with a journalist, Butembo, February 11, 2020; a former member of RCD/K-ML, Butembo, February 11, 2020; and a former member of Lafontaine’s Armed Group, Butembo, February 11, 2020. One of the sources recalled how Lafontaine was taken out in a priest’s cassock.

<sup>17</sup> Mgr Sikuli Melchisédech, “Déclaration de Condamnation du meurtre du Major Ndungo Siviri du RNL,” communiqué destiné à la Radio Butembo et à la RAMEBU, Butembo, September 14, 2001.

between February 27 and March 1, 2001, in Butembo. Nearly all the sources we interviewed who were active in armed groups or civil society at the time recognized the symposium as key in bringing about peaceful conflict resolution in the RCD/K-ML–controlled zone between 1999 and 2006. In a room specifically built for this purpose, the symposium brought together more than 500 key participants representing the country’s major belligerents, as well as civil society actors from several conflict-affected provinces of the DRC and other African and European countries.<sup>18</sup> Apollinaire Malu Malu, a priest and professor of political science at the Catholic University in Butembo and the vice president of local civil society, was the principal facilitator.<sup>19</sup>

The symposium had a clear intent: it put the region’s main belligerents in the same room for the first time since the beginning of the war: Jean-Pierre Bemba on behalf of the Congolese Liberation Front (FLC), a coalition between Bemba’s MLC and Mbusa Nyamwisi’s RCD/K-ML; representatives of the Congolese government; and representatives of all major Mai-Mai groups in the area. Those belligerents then committed to work toward creating peace; they even signed a document to that effect.<sup>20</sup> The symposium shifted the course of action of those belligerent factions, de-escalating hostilities through moral suasion and by brokering trust where it previously had been lacking. Eventually, that momentum led to the demobilization of some of the groups.

This account of the church’s involvement points to both its intimacy with armed groups and its interest in stability—a fine line to tread, as it saw the church both siding with and restraining armed actors. That ambiguity stemmed from its mixed motives: on the one hand, the church aimed to prevent a violent escalation that would have a disastrous impact on the local population. There is little doubt that such an event was perceived as the priority in the minds of most members of the church, and it was most frequently mentioned by our sources.

On the other hand, the church was worried that it could lose its influence in local society to the RCD/K-ML. The church is one of the largest landowners in the area and has extensive influence in society and business through its schools, charitable organizations, and businesses. Malu Malu would later become the president of the National Independent Electoral Commission—an appointment he obtained thanks largely

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<sup>18</sup> “Occupants, rebelles, et société internationale appelés à agir,” Agence de presse internationale catholique, March 5, 2001, <https://www.cath.ch/newsf/congo-symposium-international-sur-la-paix-en-afrique/>. According to the diocese, 25,000 delegates attended, including 400 from Europe.

<sup>19</sup> This symposium was originally planned to be held in Bukavu, but it was moved to Butembo for at least two reasons. According to credible internal sources within the Diocese of Butembo-Beni and the symposium planners, the symposium was moved to avoid the area under control of hostile RCD-Goma forces. A member of civil society coordination in Bukavu, where preparations had begun, claims that the change to Butembo was an act of gratitude to his initiator, Monsignor Emmanuel Kataliko, Archbishop of Bukavu, who had been relegated to his diocese of origin (Butembo-Beni) following his opposition to the RCD-led war. Planners intended to hold the symposium every year, by turns, in the various dioceses of the ecclesiastical province of Kivu, which includes North Kivu, South Kivu, and Maniema.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. L’Évêque de Butembo-Beni a plusieurs fois utilisé ces Engagements solennels pour interpellier les Belligérants. Cf. Mgr Sikuli Melchisédech, “Déclaration de Condamnation du meurtre du Major Ndungo Siviri du RNL,” communiqué destiné à la Radio Butembo et à la RAMEBU, Butembo, September 9 2001; Mgr Sikuli Melchisédech, “Position de l’Eglise Catholique au sujet du procès public au stade Matokeo,” communiqué de presse destiné à la RTNC/Butembo et la RAMEBU, July 9, 2001.

to support from President Joseph Kabila’s government. Many of our sources in Butembo saw that as a sign of how important the church’s partnership with the Kinshasa government had been during the war.

Those two faces of the church—on the one hand, a humanitarian, on the other, a powerbroker and party to the conflict—point to ambiguities that often are not discussed when it comes to the role of civil society in peacemaking. Critics of internationally driven peacekeeping may idealize the benevolent nature of local actors or fail to distinguish between the various kinds of interest groups.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Catholic Church was probably able to be such an effective broker in part because it was a deeply political, even partisan, actor. Other scholars have written how “hybrid orders are better able to tap into local knowledge, to mobilize citizens and to generate legitimacy than ‘top-down’ arrangements of governance.”<sup>22</sup> The position of the church in DRC seems to be such a case.

### **The business community**

The tightly knit business community in Butembo played a similarly hybrid role, supporting the RCD/K-ML rebellion but also constraining it and acting as a moderating influence.

The cooperation between economic operators and rebels was most evident in how taxes were structured under the rebellion. Having realized that Kasindi’s customs revenue was shared unequally in favor of its Ugandan ally, the RCD/K-ML decided to drastically reduce import taxes to stimulate the local economy and enhance its legitimacy. For example, in 2001, shipping containers from Dubai could enter for \$3,000 and those from China for \$4,500, whereas ordinarily, prices could have been three to six times higher, depending on the goods being imported. As a result, the prices of basic items dropped significantly: Ugandan cement cost \$8 a bag and a piece of Kenyan sheet metal \$3; even low-wage earners were able to build houses. A prefinancing system was also created for the benefit of major importers, allowing them to prepay their customs duties in return for discounts from the rebellion group.<sup>23</sup>

That collaboration extended to joint infrastructure projects, for which the RCD/K-ML granted road maintenance licenses to entrepreneurs by instituting road tolls. It also encouraged businesspeople to invest in a large hydroelectric project—the Electrification Company of North Kivu (SENOKI)—and to contribute to the construction of an international airport in Butembo.

In the sociocultural domain, the RCD/K-ML created an institute of higher education that subsequently became a public university, the Interfaculty Institute of Ishango (IFI), which later changed its name to Ruwenzori University Center (CUR) and then to the Official University of Ruwenzori. The rebellion also raised Butembo and Beni to the administrative level of city—something that inhabitants of both towns

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<sup>21</sup> Thania Paffenholz, “Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment towards an Agenda for Future Research,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 857–74; Jason Stearns et al., “Congo’s Inescapable State: The Trouble with the Local,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/democratic-republic-congo/2017-03-16/congos-inescapable-state>.

<sup>22</sup> Maren Kraushaar and Daniel Lambach, *Hybrid Political Orders: The Added Value of a New Concept* (Brisbane, Queensland: Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2009), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283855609\\_Hybrid\\_Political\\_Orders\\_The\\_Added\\_Value\\_of\\_a\\_New\\_Concept](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283855609_Hybrid_Political_Orders_The_Added_Value_of_a_New_Concept).

<sup>23</sup> The partial archives that were accessible to us at the Center for Applied Legal Studies (CEJA) show, for the month of January 2001 alone, 31 prefinancing contracts, which totaled \$293,350.

had long been waiting for. All those initiatives created favorable conditions for the RCD/K-ML to obtain a substantial amount of local support from a population that felt largely abandoned by the Congolese state. This environment allowed the rebellion to institute a development tax in 2002, which was used to build a city hall in Butembo; other public works also received support from taxpayers and often were cofunded by the rebellion group and local businessmen.<sup>24</sup>

At times, support from the business community was even more direct. A former RCD/K-ML officer related the following: “[Businesspeople] had to pay a special tax called ‘dépotage’...to pay for our communications, food, and health care. In addition, there were ad hoc contributions. For example, the FEC [business association] used to give fuel to the battalion commander, Maison Palos [a local business] gave us Motorola radios, and Kavatsi [a businessman] supplied food for the soldiers.”<sup>25</sup>

Some businesspeople stated that they were forced to provide that support to the RCD/K-ML, but many others suggest that the relationship was mutually beneficial and they seem, in retrospect, nostalgic. Timothy Raeymakers, in his PhD study of the relationship, called it “protection for sale” and argued that businesses were so strong and well coordinated that a group of the eight most important businesspeople in Butembo, the “G8,” often seemed to be in control of the RCD/K-ML.<sup>26</sup>

In short, the RCD/K-ML seems to have been a rebel movement that, instead of stifling local business, gave businesspeople the opportunities they needed to grow. In return, however, the RCD/K-ML became susceptible to pressure from the business sector, which was intent on maintaining enough stability to continue its trade. Local businesses were particularly reliant on safety along the major trade routes between Butembo and Beni and between Beni and the Ugandan border; too much conflict would have had a significant impact on their operations.

## NGOs and the media

The main effect that nongovernmental organizations had on the conflict was through their pressure on belligerents in the form of public advocacy and denunciations, although some groups also helped broker peace talks.

Two separate civil society coordinating structures existed in this region, one for Butembo town and Lubero territory and another for Beni town and Beni territory, comprising 16 organizations together in 2001. Several other structures existed as well. One was the Group of Associations for the Defense of Human Rights and Peace (GADHOP),<sup>27</sup> which was set up as a platform for human rights NGOs to maximize joint actions outside the influence of the Catholic Church. Another coalition was set up to draw attention to the most vulnerable categories of people in the context of war: Solidarity of Women’s

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with the initiator of this tax, the former mayor of Butembo, June 13, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Telephone interview, May 29, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Raeymakers, “The Power of Protection: Governance and Transborder Trade on the Congo-Ugandan Frontier” (PhD dissertation, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium, 2007), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/55810759.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> See the group’s website at <http://www.gadhop.org>.



Associations for the Defense of Women's Rights (SAFDF), which brought together well-established women's rights organizations.<sup>28</sup>

The media were also able to exercise pressure on belligerents. Radio Moto Butembo-Beni, which belongs to the Catholic Church, created spaces for sarcastic broadcasts, such as *Kikathimba*, as well as programs with debates about current political events. Some musicians also raised awareness by calling for vigilance. Among them was Mayaya Santa, a reggae star from Butembo, whose most popular hits contained political messages. They had titles such as *Ekyangaleka nitchi* (an invitation to be wary of the new war of 1998) and *Mangenda* (an expression of outrage after the massacre of players and fans of the Nyuki Football Club by Rwandan rebels in the Virunga National Park) the same year. *Mwabere muti* denounced the murder of the son of Kitambala, an important businessman. *Tukakwiraki* denounced the 1998 Kikyo massacres and called on the population of Butembo to stay at home for four days.

Other, less formal groups composed mainly of young people also contributed to actions against belligerents. Students demonstrated against the RCD/K-ML and the UPDF following the assassination of the former deputy Lumbulumbu in November 1999 and after the assassination of a student named Ali (who was later revealed to be a Mai-Mai member preparing to participate in the Inter-Congolese dialogue). More generally, students also mobilized to protest outbreaks of unrest. Several times, politicians were shouted down, such as Walle Sombo and Roger Lumbala, who had gone to Butembo to talk to students in late 1999 and early 2000, respectively.

The focus of those civil society actors was mostly the RCD/K-ML, although their Ugandan allies were also targeted: the hosts of the show *Kikathimba* on Radio Moto Butembo-Beni were severely beaten by UPDF soldiers one day upon leaving their studio. None of the radio hosts who were victims of that intimidation remembered the exact date, but all of them provided concurring accounts of the events.

Interviews with former RCD/K-ML members do not make clear whether those various forms of pressure had any effect. The presence of the Catholic Church, which has significant sway in local society, made it difficult for the rebels to ignore or repress the criticism and provided a safe space for activists. Two of the most prominent NGOs—the Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission and the Center for Applied Legal Studies (CEJA)—were directly affiliated with the church. In addition, the predominance of Nande within the rebellion and in civil society meant that activists could appeal to ethnic or family ties if they were threatened.

## Ituri

In Ituri, very different dynamics explain civil society's role in peacebuilding. International diplomatic and military pressure—which were almost completely absent in the Grand Nord—provided the space in which civilians could effect change in Ituri. The exceptionally brutal period of 2002–2003 produced foreign

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<sup>28</sup> Those groups included associations such as Women Lawyers for the Defense of Women's and Children's Rights (FDJF) and Women's Rights Defense Association (ADDF).

pressure to end Rwandan and Ugandan proxy warfare in the region.<sup>29</sup> The same impetus led to the deployment of a European Union (EU) intervention force, complete with French foreign legionnaires and Mirage fighter jets as well as robust operations by UN peacekeepers. Those actions sent armed groups into disarray, with many of them losing their commanders and external sources of funding and support. Faced with possible arrest, local customary leaders and landowners—the original backers of local militias—came to see peace as more lucrative and desirable than war. They thus collaborated with a broad coalition of business leaders, NGOs, and religious institutions in demobilizing thousands of combatants and participating in dialogue to tamp down communal tensions, as the examples in the section below suggest.

Several political realities allowed civil society to play a critical role. Despite the extreme brutality visited on the region, Ituri had never been perceived as a core interest of any of the regional governments—in contrast to North and South Kivu provinces. A former senior UN official, who advised the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch investigations in Ituri, recalled, “We pushed the ICC to focus on Ituri precisely because it was so marginal. It would be an easy first test case for them.”<sup>30</sup> Once they cut their ties to local armed groups, those groups became unmoored and easier to influence. Business leaders—especially affluent cattle ranchers and traders who had seen their profits plummet as a result of the violence—then played a key role, as did NGO leaders, who were empowered by the Kinshasa government and given important positions in local administration.

### **The business community and customary elites**

The business community in Ituri is dominated by cattle ranchers—predominantly from the Hema community—and traders. Both of those interests backed the creation of armed groups in 1999, as conflict escalated in the region. Cattle ranchers were particularly vulnerable to the predation of violence; some lost thousands of cows to militia raids, which explains their early backing of ethnic militia, often coupled with the hiring of Ugandan UPDF troops to train and work with those ad hoc armed groups.

As the violence escalated, however, those armed groups became divorced from their original backers and much more integrated into regional military and political networks—first in Uganda and then in Rwanda.<sup>31</sup> The realities of the conflict sank in: although some of the cattle and other assets had been saved, Ituri’s economy was devastated by the conflict. Besides pillaging, armed groups then parasitized trade networks; traders often had to pay multiple taxes on the same product to get it to and from markets and borders.

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<sup>29</sup> Koen Vlassenroot and Timothy Raeymaekers, “The Politics of Rebellion and Intervention in Ituri: The Emergence of a New Political Complex?” *African Affairs* 103, no. 412 (2004): 385–412, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/3518563?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3518563?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>30</sup> Telephone interview with former official of the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), September 12, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Henning Tamm, *UPC in Ituri: The External Militarization of Local Politics in North-Eastern Congo* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2013), <http://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/RVI%20Usalama%20Project%205%20UPC%20in%20Ituri.pdf>.



When the tide turned in the violence, the business community played a key role in remedying a conflict they had helped create. In the words of Petronille Vaweka, former head of the Ituri Pacification Commission,

Some businessmen and customary chiefs were at the root of the conflict, especially the ranchers. But then it was the armed groups who took over. [The businessmen and customary chiefs] didn't have a choice but to adhere to the peace process. Without them, we wouldn't have succeeded.<sup>32</sup>

Vaweka recounts how the business community helped fund the reconciliation meetings and pacification initiatives and used its clout to convince militia members to demobilize. Much as in the Grand Nord, important members of civil society were involved both in fueling and in defusing armed mobilization.

In Ituri, however, business leaders and customary elites were much more marginal players, reacting to circumstances and only assuming a lead role in the consolidation of peace. "Once the armed group commanders had been arrested, their combatants became disorganized and leaderless, often tired of fighting. That is when, along with money from foreign donors, local businesspeople and customary chiefs saw an opportunity to reassert the power they had lost," said a local academic.

Sources we interviewed disagreed, however, about which groups were the most important players in peacemaking. Some saw human rights NGOs and local churches as key drivers of the peace process, whereas others saw them as marginal, "always talking, never doing much."<sup>33</sup> Almost everyone saw the initiative for peace coming from the international community, but some attributed greater importance than others to civil society in the final consolidation of peace.

In sum, parts of civil society played a critical role in the peacebuilding process, although in retrospect it seems almost fortuitous. In the Grand Nord, the business community and the Catholic Church had the initiative and, for all of their opportunism, were always a moderating influence. In contrast, in Ituri, the business leaders and customary elites were initially complicit in the violence, only to later play an important role in peacebuilding. Foreign donors seemed to have little understanding of those nuances. A UN source, who worked both in Ituri and around Goma, commented:

We were just lucky in Ituri that the constellation of power was different than in Goma. Around Goma, the business elites profited from the conflict; they saw little reason to compromise their status by pushing for demobilization. In Ituri, local elites were really hurt by the conflict, so they played a positive role. But did we have a good analysis for who they were and what their agendas were? No.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview in Bunia, June 23, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Interview in Bunia, June 29, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Interview in New York, June 15, 2019.

## NGOs

The largest peace initiative in Ituri, the Ituri Pacification Commission (IPC), was launched following an agreement signed in Luanda on September 6, 2002, between the Congolese and Ugandan governments.<sup>35</sup> That agreement pushed civil society to center stage and gave it a lead role in peacemaking.

The IPC was intended to bring together armed group leaders, civil society representatives, and representatives from the Congolese and Ugandan governments to resolve armed conflicts in Ituri. In the opinion of one former Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) official, the IPC ran into three problems.<sup>36</sup> First, the Luanda agreement sparked mistrust between the UPC and its Ugandan allies. Second, the UPC objected to being treated as a militia group on par with the other armed groups rather than as a rebellion with legitimate claims and its own reconciliation program. Third, the tensions and mistrust that characterized the representatives of ethnic communities hampered the IPC's effect.

Tanzanian president Benjamin Mkapa mediated among the delegates of the Ituri armed groups, Uganda, and the Congolese government in February 2003 in Dar-es-Salaam. The goal of that meeting was to forge a peace deal and to discuss the deployment of EU troops in Bunia. Soon thereafter, on February 25, 2003, the IPC was set up—including representatives of the Congolese and Ugandan governments, armed groups, the UN, and civil society—to ensure impartial moderation in the midst of tension and mistrust between the communities in conflict.<sup>37</sup>

The IPC played a critical role in providing the political framework for the various military operations taking place against armed groups during that period. Although the dramatic escalation of violence prevented much dialogue, our interviews suggested that the IPC laid the groundwork during that time for the calm that ensued. At the end of the commission's work, as a direct result, the Interim Special Administration of Ituri (ISAI), a government institution, was set up.

The ISAI had an executive body and a deliberative body, the Interim Special Assembly. With a mandate from all parties to the peace talks, backed by the United Nations, and with outside military and diplomatic pressure, the administration paved the way for greater involvement of civil society in reconciliation work.<sup>38</sup>

From the beginning, civil society played a key role. Petronille Vaweke, leader of the Ituri Mothers' League, chaired the Interim Special Assembly; other civil society actors were involved in the Conflict

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<sup>35</sup> The peace initiative was Article 1 of this agreement.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with former UPC leader, Bunia, June 4, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> This work involved the Congolese (represented by Ntumba Luaba) and Ugandan (represented by Kale Kaihura) governments, the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUC, represented by Behrooz Sadry), the various communities and ethnic groups in Ituri, women's associations, cultural associations of people not native to Ituri, corporations, religious denominations, the Federation of Congolese Businesses (FEC), youth groups, NGOs, journalists, and armed groups.

<sup>38</sup> The composition of the Interim Executive Body took ethnic balance and representativity into account. It was headed by an interim special commissioner assisted by three deputy commissioners in charge of administration (from Djugu territory), infrastructure and reconstruction (from Irumu territory), and human rights and social affairs (from Mahagi), respectively. It also had a finance and economic officer (from Aru). Delegates from armed groups and civil society joined the Interim Special Assembly.

Prevention and Verification Commission and in the Human Rights Observatory. The latter group collaborated with the International Criminal Court, providing it with a local foothold.

The work of those interim bodies was short lived, but the general pattern of military operations followed by diplomacy and reconciliation work—with heavy civil society involvement—persisted. In 2004, the interim administration was dissolved when President Joseph Kabila appointed Vaweke as district commissioner of Ituri by presidential decree. Following that appointment, special police units were deployed, followed later by the deployment of the newly formed national army. At the same time, the United Nations Development Programme established community forums (*baraza intercommunautaire*) for grassroots dialogue between the Hema and the Lendu as well as to support local development projects. Finally, the European Union established the Ituri Land Commission (CFI) out of the remnants of the interim administration, with a view to managing the land conflicts in Ituri, particularly in Djugu territory. All of those bodies prominently featured members of civil society, even though the main impetus for their creation clearly came from outside Ituri.

More than churches, Ituri’s human rights NGOs were at the forefront in pressuring belligerents and denouncing their abuses. Their reporting—especially that of *Justice Plus*—contributed directly to prosecutions of militia leaders by the International Criminal Court.<sup>39</sup> Other human rights organizations included CARITAS, Haki na Amani Network (RHA), Support to Intercultural Communication and Rural Self-help (ACIAR), Anti-Bwaki Mothers’ Association (AMAB), Association for Social Development and the Safeguarding of the Environment (ADESSE), and Forum of Mothers of Ituri (FOMI).

Local media and musicians also played a role in peacemaking. An album titled “Music for Peace” was produced by two bands in Bunia (Ngenge Musika and Amani Musika) made up of former child soldiers; Radio Channel Revelation played an important role in that mobilization.<sup>40</sup> At the end of 2003, the NGO ADESSE also organized a peace concert attended by several local music groups; one of those groups, Alain Ng’assa’s God’s Peace for International Music (GPM International), was subsequently funded in 2004 to produce an album dedicated to peace in Butembo, with six popular songs.<sup>41</sup>

A former Ituri district commissioner<sup>42</sup> also testified to the existence of much less structured lobbies, bringing together community members in Aru and Mahagi. He cited, in particular, the actions of Eneko

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<sup>39</sup> The ICC prosecutor opened investigations in June 2004 to charge Thomas Lubanga, Germain Katanga, Bosco Ntaganda, and Mathieu Ngudjolo Chui. Lubanga, who was convicted of conscripting and enlisting children under 15 years of age and actively involving them in hostilities, was sentenced on July 14, 2012, to 14 years in prison. Katanga, for his part, was sentenced on May 23, 2014, to a total sentence of 12 years’ imprisonment. He was found guilty as an accomplice on one count of crimes against humanity (murder) and four crimes of war (murder, attack on a civilian population, destruction of property, and looting) on February 24, 2003, during the attack on the village of Bogoro, Ituri district. The two prisoners were transferred to the DRC on December 15, 2015, to serve their sentences. As for the other open cases, ICC Trial Chamber VI, unanimously, sentenced Bosco Ntaganda to a total of 30 years of imprisonment for 18 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity” (<https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1494>), and Ngudjolo was acquitted by Trial Chamber II.

<sup>40</sup> Its director even won two prizes: the “Special Solidarity Prize for Community Radio in Congo” in 2003 and the “Special One Word Media Awards” in 2004. Interview with a journalist from RTR (radio station), Bunia, May 29, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with a local musician, Bunia, May 24, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with former district commissioner, Bunia, May 22, 2019.

Nguwaza, a former governor of the province who worked tirelessly to spread messages of peace. Another source, a former member of the Ituri Interim Special Assembly, said that given the threat of armed conflict, there was little public space for mobilization or criticism and that almost all human rights workshops or demonstrations were organized by MONUC or (often couched in more cautious language) by international NGOs.<sup>43</sup> Two rare spontaneous street demonstrations took place in March 2003 in protest of the violence—a sign that the population was fed up with the war. As a result of the pressure they exerted on belligerents in Ituri, some human rights activists were persecuted. For example, the coordinator of the NGO Justice Plus, which provided copious evidence for ICC trials, had to go into exile in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

An early proponent of “the local turn in peacebuilding,” John Paul Lederach, wrote in 1997 that “the greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and their culture.”<sup>44</sup> Since then, numerous other authors have emphasized the importance of anchoring conflict resolution in local initiatives and civil society structures, pushing back against the dominance of external actors in conflict resolution.

This study reinforces but also adds nuance to those findings. We argue that the initiatives undertaken by civil society as part of peacebuilding could only be successful through their influence on social relations and power dynamics. This approach requires a conceptual shift in how we understand protection taking place. The concept “protection of civilians” (PoC), which has become the predominant lens through which the UN peacekeeping mission has approached dealing with conflict, tends to depoliticize the context out of which the violence emerges, framing the drama as one played out between a perpetrator and a victim. Framed thus, the solution necessarily has to be either to stop the perpetrator or to allow the victim to flee. That concept—and its limitations—can be seen in the way the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC has interpreted its mandate in recent years. In one sense, it is seen as a “laboratory of PoC,” having incubated a variety of technical innovations: Joint Protection Teams, Community Alert Networks, Community Liaison Officers, and various PoC coordination bodies.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, however, since

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with a former member of the interim district assembly, Bunia, May 29, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1997): 94, <https://pestuge.iliauni.edu.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/John-P.-Lederach-Building-Peace.-Sustainable-Reconciliation-in-Divided-Society.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> J. Arthur Boutellis, “From Crisis to Reform: Peacekeeping Strategies for the Protection of Civilians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 2, no. 3 (2013): 1–11, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290974598\\_From\\_Crisis\\_to\\_Reform\\_Peacekeeping\\_Strategies\\_for\\_the\\_Protection\\_of\\_Civilians\\_in\\_the\\_Democratic\\_Republic\\_of\\_the\\_Congo](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290974598_From_Crisis_to_Reform_Peacekeeping_Strategies_for_the_Protection_of_Civilians_in_the_Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo).

about 2010, the mission has been marginalized from national politics, prevented from playing a prominent role in conflict resolution or negotiations between belligerents.<sup>46</sup>

In the end, the PoC framework as defined by the UN mission has three characteristics that we critique here: It is (1) individualistic: the focus is on the immediate protagonists, usually men with weapons and their victims; (2) apolitical: by assuming an objective—protecting the civilians in danger—it narrows the focus to figuring out the most efficient means to attain that end; and (3) short term: it is concerned with the immediate imperative of halting ongoing or impending violence.

In contrast, we see initiatives to protect civilians as sharply circumscribed and empowered by their social and political context. Without an understanding of those social forces that give civilian initiatives their heft and durability, we would be providing a somewhat predictable catalogue of activities. We thus redefine *PoC* in a more expansive way than is usually done, focusing on the social and political dynamics that undergird the dynamics of violence and expanding the time horizon to focus on the long-term effect that initiatives can have. That requires also adjusting the way we understand concepts such as *civil society* and *civilians*, highlighting their complex and shifting relations with armed actors.

Indeed, those relations should not be seen as purely detrimental or negative. The actors with the greatest influence on conflict dynamics have been those who had influence over the belligerent—at times even bordering on becoming conflict actors themselves. The Catholic Church’s ability to restrain Mai-Mai groups and to also act as a moderating influence on the RCD/K-ML came in large part from its clout in local political and economic circles. Similarly, cattle ranchers in Ituri were probably the most important “local” peacebuilding actors precisely because they had previously been involved in fueling the violence. That observation raises familiar dilemmas, as discussed by Ken Menkhaus in his study of statebuilding in Somalia; he argues that statebuilding can only succeed through the construction of a “mediated state” that builds on partnerships with already-existing local informal polities.<sup>47</sup>

It also requires us to take a different approach to the protection of civilians, a discourse that by its very focus and assumptions places an emphasis on the short term, the technical, and the individual. Here, we suggest that the most successful peacebuilding processes have been outside that framework.

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<sup>46</sup> Jason Stearns, *Can Force Be Useful in the Absence of a Political Strategy? Lessons from the UN Missions to the DR Congo* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2015), <https://cic.nyu.edu/publications/can-force-be-useful-absence-political-strategy-lessons-un-missions-dr-congo>.

<sup>47</sup> Ken Menkhaus, “Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping,” *International Security* 31, no. 3 (2006): 74–106, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137508?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137508?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

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