



SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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Escalating violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has exacerbated displacement and the humanitarian crisis in the eastern part of the country. More than [seven million](#) displaced people face violence, hunger, and grave violations from parties to the conflict. However, in the midst of decades of hostilities, Congolese communities have taken key steps to protect themselves in the absence of protection from authorities.

Civilians and community groups have developed self-protection mechanisms that include negotiating and mediating conflict with armed actors, training women and girls on identifying and mitigating protection risks, and combating child recruitment. These efforts have been driven by communities through their leadership structures with support from local organizations and at times with technical and financial support from national or international organizations.

The United Nations (U.N.) mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) withdrew from South Kivu in April 2024 and is planning its withdrawal from North Kivu and Ituri provinces pending the security situation. This will significantly change the protection environment, leaving communities unable to rely on the direct physical protection that at times has been provided by the mission.

There is a pressing need to better understand and support community-based protection mechanisms that are crucial for so many experiencing violence and displacement both in terms of prevention and vital response to affected people. This includes humanitarian actors and donors understanding potential linkages and continuity between local community-based protection mechanisms and the community representatives interfacing with MONUSCO, known as Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs), and further embedding such community-based efforts as core mechanisms that advance the protection of civilians in the DRC.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION?

Protection in humanitarian action focuses on preventing or reducing harm to civilians and supporting the realization of their rights. It places a firm, needed focus on parties to conflict and authorities to reduce harm and protect rights. External protection actors often step in to provide support to affected communities when duty bearers fail to protect. However, the independent and unique capacities of communities to protect themselves has frequently been overlooked. This has started to shift as there is growing recognition of the importance and centrality of community participation and leadership in protection efforts.

Community-based protection focuses on strengthening the capacities and agency of crisis-affected communities to protect themselves. This approach encourages communities to self-organize and employ self-protection strategies, emphasizing the active leadership—or, at minimum, the participation—of community members in the design, implementation, and evaluation of protection interventions. This approach builds long-term protection systems by drawing on local resources, knowledge, and structures, while ensuring that interventions meet the specific needs of communities.

Different organizations are working with and empowering communities with these aims and characterize their programming under various labels, which include civilian-led protection, community-led protection, and unarmed civilian protection.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION IN DRC IN PRACTICE

Community-based protection approaches have long been ingrained in eastern DRC following decades of insecurity. Congolese communities have worked to create and carry out their own strategies to protect themselves and their families through diverse initiatives that include participative theater, help desks, and community committees that serve as interlocutors with state institutions. They have actively addressed, reduced, and mitigated the risks they face, establishing one of the most sustainable and effective ways to protect themselves in the face of violence, increased presence of armed groups, and displacement.

Community-based protection mechanisms in DRC take many forms, each with different names, compositions, and aims. These include protection monitors from the community who work in collaboration with humanitarian organizations to identify and report threats; community watch groups that alert local authorities on security incidents; and community members, designated as “*agents de changement*,” who spread awareness messages on safety and well-being.

Some committees are made up of local leaders, elders, and influential community members to mediate conflicts and promote reconciliation and social cohesion among different ethnic or community groups. Others focus on protecting children from abuse and exploitation, advocating for women’s rights, supporting survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), and increasing women’s participation in peacebuilding. Lastly, some crisis management committees assess vulnerabilities to climate-related risks and develop strategies to mitigate them.

Local and international organizations have developed and invested in these approaches that enhance the protective environment. In Uvira, South Kivu, community networks supported by the local organization CEDIER successfully negotiated with local security councils and non-state armed groups to remove illegal administrative fees and reduce the number of illegal checkpoints in the locality, including those on the way to the local market that were a frequent site of violence and abuse. This led to reduced violence and extortion for civilians at checkpoints. In Luhito, similar efforts targeted the local security council, the military, and the police to prioritize civilian protection, particularly against sexual violence and food theft, which resulted in reduced frequency of incursions from armed groups and overall violence. Similar measures were then applied to neighboring villages.

Another example is the development of a community-level crisis management committee in Malemo that was established by local organization SOPROP in response to large-scale displacement. The committee created a response plan to identify suitable locations for resettling internally displaced persons (IDPs) within local communities and facilitated the provision of initial assistance. Additionally, the committee played a key role in negotiating IDP land access with customary chiefs to support cultivation efforts and mediated land-related conflicts as needed.

The Protection Cluster in DRC and its partners have not only centered community-based protection in its 2024 strategy, but also mapped these mechanisms in South Kivu to improve coordination, avoid duplication, and build a strategy based on existing community structures.

TRANSITIONAL ENVIRONMENT WITH MONUSCO WITHDRAWAL

The protection of civilians is a strategic priority and component of the mandate of the U.N. mission in the DRC. Following decades of challenges around preventing and responding to violence to civilians, the mission worked to improve the link with local communities regarding their own protection.

Within MONUSCO’s Civil Affairs Unit sit [Community Liaison Assistants](#) (CLAs), who are national staff deployed within military contingents that serve as interlocutors between communities, local authorities, and the mission. The CLAs have worked to strengthen relations by identifying protection risks to civilians and elevating local priorities in community protection plans. They also play a critical role in managing the early warning systems (EWS) for communities to contact MONUSCO with mobile phones or radios to prevent, mitigate, or stop imminent threats.

However, the mission withdrew from South Kivu in April 2024 and will pull out from North Kivu and Ituri in the future pending the security situation, which puts the future of the CLAs into question. In this context, there are a range of

protection risk mitigation efforts necessary for sustaining and enhancing community protection that are centered in community leadership and capacities.

While the CLAs have been central in ingraining the alert system, there is a question of who will maintain the EWS and which body communities will report their protection concerns and international humanitarian law (IHL) abuses to. MONUSCO is handing over this system to the Provincial Coordination body—a branch of the Congolese Ministry of the Interior—as it is the most viable government entity to transfer the protection of civilians tools and mechanisms to. Some actors have voiced a significant lack of confidence in this approach considering that some violations originate from national authorities, which means that communities will not be able to consistently depend on this for their protection.¹

Additionally, there is no strategic plan in terms of transferring the knowledge, expertise, and trust that were developed between CLAs and communities. In South Kivu, none of the approximately 30 CLAs were retained within the residual capacity following MONUSCO's withdrawal. Further, the Government of DRC has not yet announced a plan to absorb the CLAs in any province. Some actors have been able to hire CLAs in their protection programming; however, this has occurred sporadically due to lack of funding and awareness levels of community-based protection programming and its impact.

Thus, some organizations in the DRC advocate for a full investment in communities to strengthen their own self-protection mechanisms in this context. A variety of actors are training civil society and community leaders—ranging from religious leaders to medical and educational personnel—to capacitate them on IHL and human rights and how to negotiate with armed forces. This would empower communities to discuss key protection issues themselves and negotiate directly rather than reporting through the former system.

Other humanitarian and peacebuilding actors are working to capacitate communities while simultaneously working with government authorities to ensure there is ownership and integration of EWS and protection plans in local structures. Capacitating government officials is critical as the primary responsibility for protecting civilians lies with duty bearers and community-based protection approaches do not replace that responsibility. Nonetheless, third-party monitoring and strengthened community self-protection mechanisms to supplement this developing system would be critical to balance the real protection risks. In addition, supporting self-protection mechanisms would simultaneously prevent the “projectizing” of systems across international NGOs and U.N. agencies and ensure government accountability.

There is thus a necessity for donors and NGOs to invest in community-based protection mechanisms—particularly with local actors—that not only fill a gap in alert systems and reporting, but also serve as a bridge between communities and local authorities. Further, there is an immediate need for planning around North Kivu and Ituri withdrawals to consider how to best capacitate CLAs in their handovers while there is adequate time, such as in the form of securing continuity of EWS phones alongside community-based efforts and holding training of trainers (ToTs) with community members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the role that community-based protection has played in the DRC and the necessity of supporting these initiatives in the wake of the MONUSCO withdrawal, the following recommendations outline next steps:

Security Council Members:

- Center unarmed, community, and civilian-based protection in the MONUSCO mandate renewal in December 2024 and recognize the role that community self-protection approaches play in the transitional environment.
- Direct MONUSCO staff to enhance their capacity building and transition planning with communities and local partners, as well as undertake community perception monitoring with partners that links to decisions for withdrawal planning.

¹ Key informant interviews took place in September 2024 with international organizations, civil society organizations, and MONUSCO Civil Affairs Unit.

- Ensure that lessons from South Kivu applied to North Kivu and Ituri withdrawal planning include measurements and analysis of the absence of CLAs and the impact this has had on communities and relationships with local authorities.
- Advocate for transparent, planned, and inclusive processes around handover of CLAs to government and community bodies in future withdrawals.
- Encourage DRC authorities to develop a national protection of civilians action plan that includes recognition of, coordination with, and support to community-based protection.

Donors:

- Provide more direct, flexible, and quality funding and capacity building to local protection actors and groups involved in community-based protection through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Importantly, such funds should support and enable local actors to further invest in relationship building and dialogue with duty bearers; strengthen peaceful cohabitation between communities; meet the costs and requirements of safely operating in high-risk environments; and advance risk-sharing in relation to partnerships and advocacy.
- Invest in tools or materials that address gaps in the functioning of early warning systems and support basic security measures, such as phones, walkie-talkies, phone cards, generators, and other necessary items.

MONUSCO:

- Use leverage to advocate to the Government of DRC to put forth a systematic plan to support and transfer knowledge and skills of CLAs to communities in addition to the Provincial Coordination body.
- Continue to train and capacitate the Provincial Coordination mechanism on IHL, human rights, and protection of civilian tools and work with other government bodies to ensure community-based protection is central in dialogue and strategies around disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR).
- Proactively seek solutions to logistical and administrative gaps in EWS in North Kivu and Ituri, namely securing funding for handover of telephone systems.
- Coordinate with NGOs on placement of former CLAs in their programming in South Kivu and in advance of withdrawal for North Kivu and Ituri.

International NGOs and U.N. agencies:

- Prioritize equitable partnerships with local actors leading on community-based or community-led protection programming and ensure decision-making power sits with local organizations and communities themselves.
- Elevate visibility of and support for locally-led action in protection coordination mechanisms and processes, including Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and pooled funds.
- Facilitate formal partnerships with former and existing CLAs through trainings, hiring processes, or within coordination mechanisms to support community-based protection programming.
- Develop a joint strategy for the management of existing early warning and response systems and community protection mechanisms.
- Implement all necessary measures to prevent the transfer of risks to community structures while equipping them with skills for effective risk mitigation.