



Escaping “Perpetual Beginnings”

Challenges and opportunities for local atrocity prevention in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Executive Summary

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Published in February 2021 by Peace Direct, Second Floor, 72-74 Mare St, Hackney, London E8 4RT. Registered charity 1123241.



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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/hc2r-nw21>

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Acknowledgements

Escaping “Perpetual Beginnings”: Challenges and opportunities for local atrocity prevention in the Democratic Republic of Congo would not have been possible without the guidance, collaboration and contributions of many people and organisations. We have enormous gratitude for all those who offered their time, expertise and support for conducting this research and producing this report.

We would like first and foremost to thank the research consultants and interview participants who willingly shared their knowledge, experience and time to enable us to produce this report. Under the unprecedented circumstances of Ebola, COVID-19 and active violence in eastern DRC throughout the period of this project, your dedication and perseverance ensured the research was both responsible and possible. Our appreciation for this cannot be overstated.

We would also like to thank our project partners who have provided us with invaluable support throughout the project. Namely, Kate Ferguson, Andy Fearn, Hugo Lucas and Alexandra Buskie from Protection Approaches; Olivia Russell and Elliot Bynum from ACLED; Neil Jarman, Rosemary Forest, Gay Rosenblum-Kumar, Bridget Moix, Charlotte Melly, Jennifer Pobi-Browne and Sarah Phillips from Peace Direct; and all of the staff and volunteers at Beni Peace Forum (BFP) and Réseau des organisations des Jeunes en Action pour la paix, la réconciliation et le développement (REJA). We would also like to give additional thanks to the Bureau de Soutien pour la consolidation de la paix en RDC (Peacebuilding Support Office in the DRC) for their support with coordination and logistics. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of all project partners.

We are also grateful to all of the peer reviewers who contributed significant feedback and inputs to help shape this report, namely Ambassador Liberata Mulamula, Felistas Mushi and Daniel Levine-Spound. We also thank Christopher Dean for producing the graphs within the report, and Emma Kapusniak for the overall report design and production. Finally, particular thanks go to UK AID, as this work was made possible through the Jo Cox Memorial Grant, made available by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in memory and respect to Jo Cox.

Executive summary

Between 2017 and 2020, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) experienced a 54% increase in average reported cases of violence against civilians compared to the previous seven-year period. The United Nations has described the recent increase in violence as “characteristic of crimes against humanity” and “possibly even genocide”. However, government-led efforts to curb violence have failed, and in many cases have intensified insecurities as a result of low government capacity, high levels of direct government involvement and support of violence, and high levels of impunity for actors engaged in violence.

In the absence of effective national government-led protection of civilians, the majority of atrocity prevention (AP) activities have been carried out by local¹ and international actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs), community members and international actors, including the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and various International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs).

Despite the vital role played by these actors, a number of significant gaps exist that impact the effectiveness of local atrocity prevention work.² Atrocity prevention actors report that low capacity, under resourcing and a lack of networking or coordination significantly Local perspectives on the violence undermine effective work in the region. Similarly, there is very little available information regarding how local actors coordinate horizontally (across civil society), and how the actions of local actors inform or relate to national or external atrocity prevention systems.

This report is part of a three-year (2019-2022) project “*Strengthening Networks to Prevent and Respond to Violence*”, funded through a UK government (previously DFID) Jo Cox Memorial Grant, and led by Peace Direct in partnership with Protection Approaches, Beni Peace Forum (BPF), Réseau des organisations des Jeunes en Action pour la paix, la réconciliation et le développement (REJA), and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

The project aims to ensure that local civil society is better able to provide strategic, coordinated and sustainable atrocity prevention work in eastern DRC and Burundi. This research focused on eastern DRC and sought to identify and understand the following:

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- 1 “Local actors” or “local atrocity prevention actors” in this report refers to civilians or civil society actors engaged in prevention activities who are from the area, country, or region affected by violence. This includes social organisations or informal actors such as community or traditional leaders and religious groups and can also include local government actors.
 - 2 “Local atrocity prevention” in this report refers to any activities undertaken in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, specifically in the provinces of South Kivu, North Kivu and Ituri. Local atrocity prevention may include activities that span local areas, such as a provincial programme in Ituri comprised of multiple communities, as well as hyper-local activities that may only occur at the community level. This is distinct from “national” atrocity prevention work, but local atrocity prevention systems can include a broader range of actors beyond “local actors” as described in footnote 15. Local atrocity prevention tends to include national-level actors, the security sector, the international community such as the United Nations or various INGOs, as well as civil society and community members.

- The status and composition of current atrocity prevention efforts in Ituri, and North and South Kivu, including key actors and means of coordination;
- What approaches to atrocity prevention are considered most effective by local, national and international actors;
- The primary challenges faced by local, national and international actors engaged in atrocity prevention work; and
- The forms of support from regional and international actors that are required to improve current atrocity prevention outcomes.

The report is based on interviews and focus group discussions with 169³ individuals, including civil society and community members, DRC government actors, local academics, UN staff, INGO staff, foreign donors and foreign government actors involved in atrocity prevention work in eastern DRC, which were carried out between February and June 2020.

Key findings

Local perspectives on the violence: the research highlighted that, although violence in eastern DRC is highly complex, ongoing problems can be clearly linked to issues of land, identity and power. Issues of chronic fragility in the country, including lack of land tenure and reliable justice systems, are undermining opportunities for peace and reinforcing the conditions that facilitate the perpetration of atrocities. Victims of violence are normally targeted along ethnic lines, often when specific ethnic groups have claims to a particular piece of land or resources. As such, contestations over land and power are a significant factor underpinning incentives for violence. State and non-state actors alike were identified as perpetrators of violence, with non-state actors normally being aligned with specific ethnic or identity groups.

Current local atrocity prevention activities:

Local actors undertake a range of work, with early warning and early response activities (EWER) being most commonly reported. However, activities suffer from a significant lack of coordination and are not tied to formal atrocity prevention systems. Interviewees cited eight primary atrocity prevention activities that they carry out:

1. Early warning and response.
2. Dialogue and building relationships between key conflict stakeholders.
3. Building community resilience - local dialogue groups
4. Research, conflict analyses and mapping
5. Advocacy by NGOs (local and international) on themes such as human rights, civilian protection, land tenure reform and security sector reform

6. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)
7. Alternative justice mechanisms and mediation
8. Awareness raising and sensitisation

Success factors for effective atrocity prevention:

Beyond the need to address state fragility, interviewees noted five key factors that they believe are required for success in atrocity prevention work. Adequate financial resourcing and effective coordination and collaboration were discussed in the greatest detail, as these two factors were considered to present the most opportunities for improving the success of atrocity prevention work.

³ A breakdown of interview participants can be found in the Introduction section of the main report. This includes a breakdown of the number of individuals by interview group.

FIGURE 1 PERCENTAGE OF INTERVIEWEES BY ACTOR TYPE

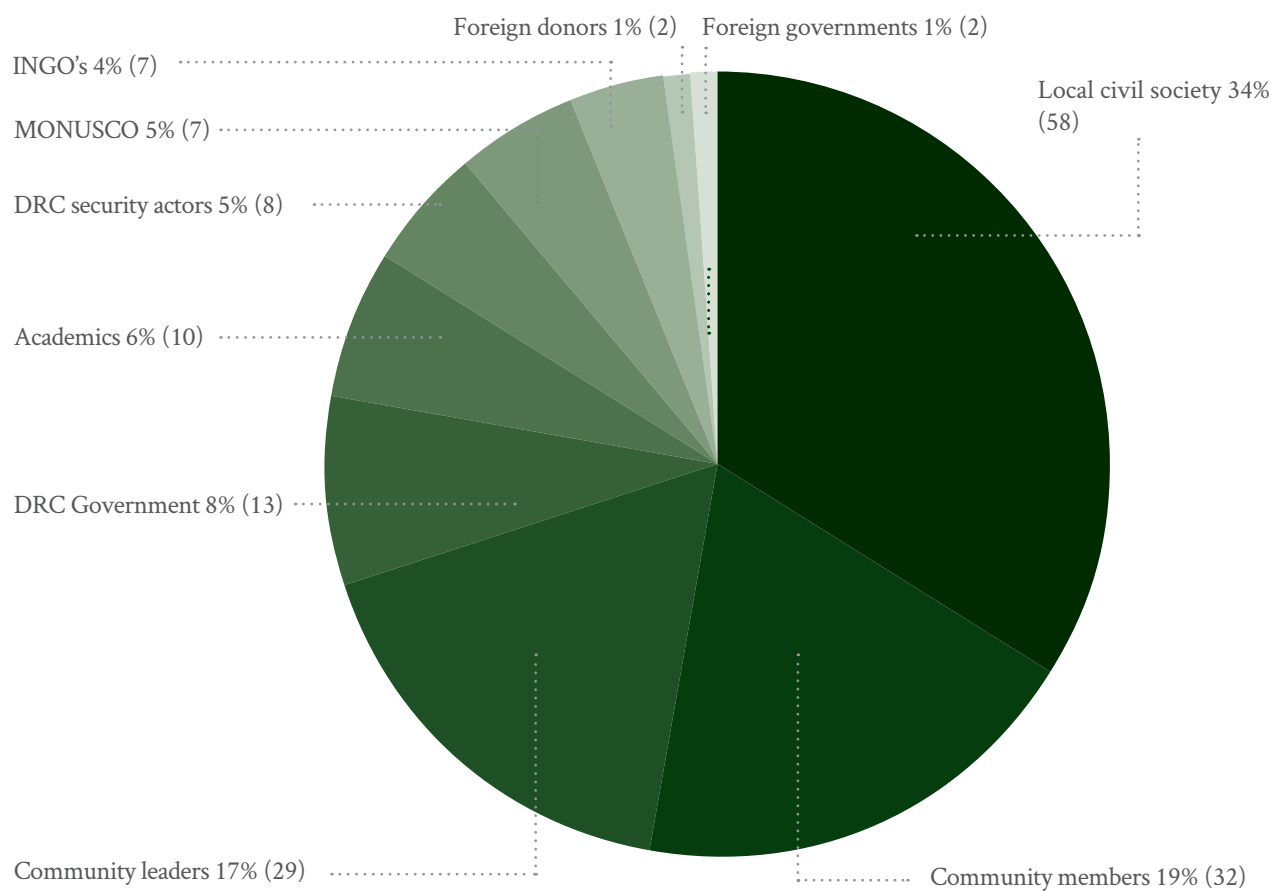
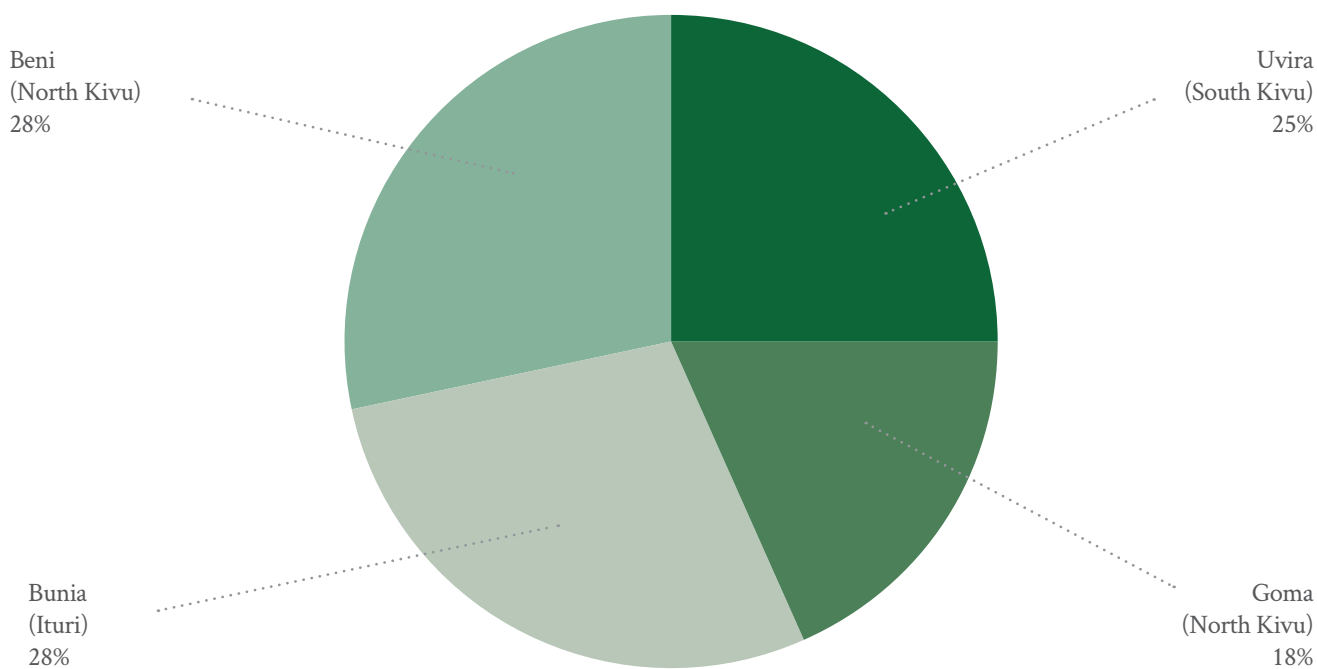
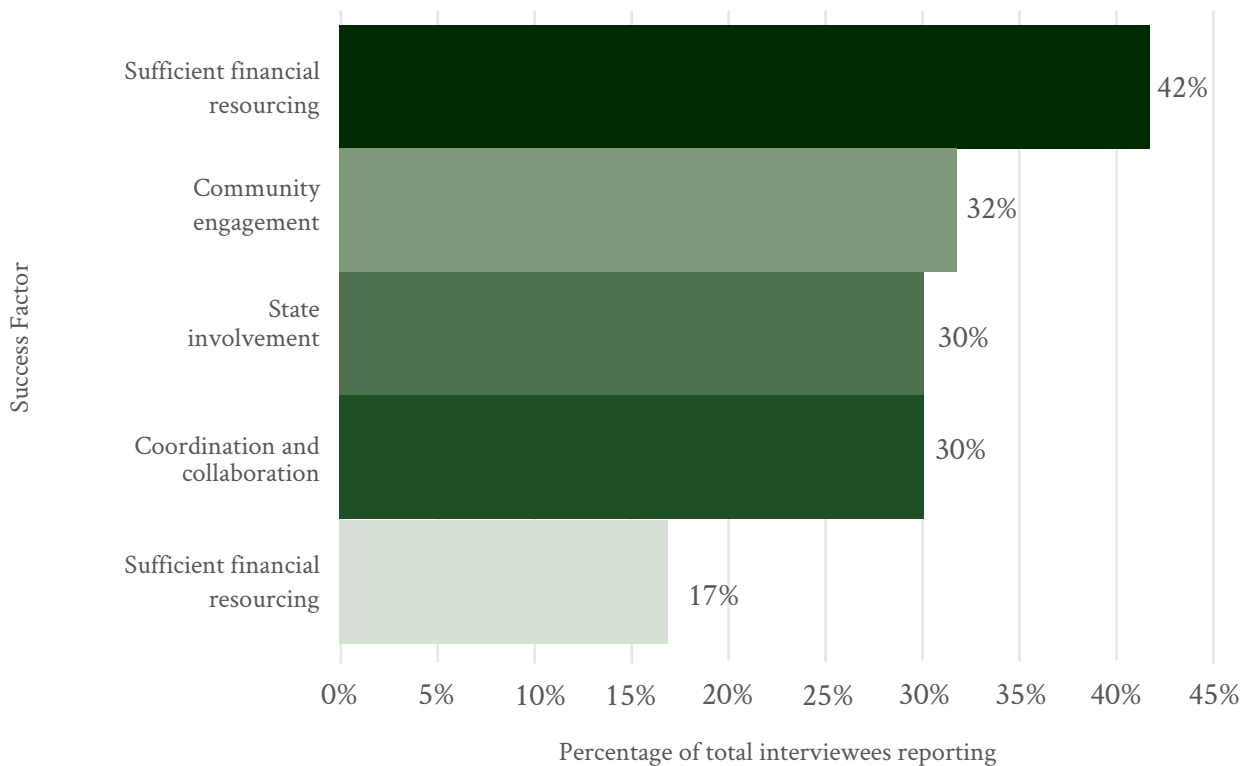


FIGURE 2 PERCENTAGE OF INTERVIEWEES BY LOCATION



REPORTED FACTOR REQUIRED FOR SUCCESS IN ATROCITY PREVENTION



Key challenges facing atrocity prevention

The research identified a number of key challenges facing current local atrocity prevention work. Interviewees noted four main areas requiring attention:

- 1) low coordination and collaboration between AP actors;
- 2) physical safety risks for AP actors;
- 3) issues of state fragility (including lack of secure land tenure, low state capacity, delayed or absent interventions and state complicity in violence); and
- 4) under-resourcing and over-projectisation of activities.

The research found that the ability of atrocity prevention actors (both international and local) to collaborate and coordinate effectively was significantly undermined by a number of factors. First, a lack of formal prevention mechanisms, either locally, regionally or nationally, significantly undermines information sharing, coordination of response, and the approaches to atrocity prevention

work, namely EWER. This is reflected in the use of inconsistent EWER indicators amongst AP actors. Second, there exists high levels of mistrust between all atrocity prevention actors, both vertically and horizontally. However, mistrust can be addressed through the use of dialogue events to facilitate cohesion and re-build relationships between actors.

Complex issues of state fragility were identified as having compounded negative impacts on local atrocity prevention work and on the root causes of atrocities more broadly. The misalignment of customary and state land tenure systems, in addition to a general dearth of knowledge regarding Congolese legal rights and systems, was considered as a primary factor fuelling violence.

State actors' complicity in atrocities was shown to reduce opportunities for a united front between all atrocity prevention actors, particularly when state actors benefit from the outcomes of such violence. The overall low capacity of the state

has also made it difficult to exercise control of eastern DRC, including the application of laws, reducing impunity and addressing the root causes of violence.

Finally, many actors cited short-term funding, projectisation of work and a lack of direct funding as major challenges to local atrocity prevention work. Interviewees noted that there are significant risks that stem from CSOs having to operate in line with external actors' interests and project designs, particularly when pre-designed funding and projects do not understand or account for local realities.

Challenging current conceptions on IBV and AP

The research also explored how the concepts of identity-based violence and atrocity prevention are understood and experienced at the local level. Interviewees noted that this terminology often fails to encompass the realities of complex violence and ongoing conflict dynamics and argued for more nuanced narratives.

Interviewees noted that external framings of "identity-based violence" and "atrocities" tend to place too much emphasis on identity as a key issue, whilst failing to acknowledge underlying issues that lead to IBV and atrocities. As such, external actors' priorities for addressing violence in DRC tend to overlook significant issues such as insecure land tenure and political contestations that drive violence.

Atrocity prevention activities were considered to be relatively indistinguishable from what interviewees also referred to as 'violence prevention', 'conflict prevention' and 'peacebuilding' work, signalling a need for atrocity prevention stakeholders to revisit the current prevention silos and assess the value of maintaining a distinction between these fields for local prevention work.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, there are a number of pertinent recommendations for the Congolese Government, MONUSCO, local civil society, and international donors:

DRC Government

The capacity deficits of the current DRC government, both in terms of its organisations and institutions, has ultimately facilitated an environment that is at grave risk for atrocities. Consistent with the majority of research on the DRC, this report notes the urgent need for the Congolese government to take immediate steps to: improve the capacity of state actors and institutions,⁴ reduce government complicity in violence and crimes, and promulgate consistent laws regarding land tenure, human rights and impunity.

Specifically, this research finds the most effective step the government can take to support current atrocity prevention efforts is to **build linkages locally and regionally to resource and facilitate the sustainable implementation of the DRC's National Committee for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, War**

Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and All Forms of Discrimination. Recognising the financial constraints and legitimate competing pressures on the DRC government's current resources, we have identified several approaches for both national and provincial government to undertake in collaboration with international partners and civil society:

National government

1. Strengthen the DRC National Committee for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and All Forms of Discrimination by developing:
 - a. vertical channels for communication, connection, and provision of technical and policy support to sub-national atrocity prevention bodies to ensure that local and provincial issues are translated to national policy makers and back to provincial level;
 - b. horizontal communications channels so that provincial atrocity prevention bodies can dialogue, exchange information, and share good practices across the provinces and regions.
2. Allocate financial, material and human resource support to local government bodies and local civil society organisations to facilitate long-term dialogue activities between all relevant conflict actors (e.g. security actors, community members, civil society, private sector and local government);
3. Proactively engage with the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region to strengthen regional relationships to learn about successful practices for strengthening state-society relations via a national prevention mechanism, for instance by collaborating with foreign bodies such as Tanzania's National Committee on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes and all Forms of Discrimination.

⁴ Improving capacity of state actors should prioritise the resourcing of security forces (PNC and FARDC), including ensuring reliable salaries and sufficient equipment for carrying out their duties, such as adequate transportation and reliable telecommunications infrastructure.

Local and provincial government

4. Allocate financial, material and human resource support to facilitate the creation of formal local and provincial prevention mechanisms to strengthen the foundations of the national prevention mechanism and ensure consistent and coordinated practice across all actors.

MONUSCO

While MONUSCO needs to take steps to address long-standing criticisms of the mission that have undermined their ability to collaborate effectively with civil society, such as issues of low accountability and a lack of flexibility in their approaches; the imminent withdrawal of MONUSCO from several provinces in DRC highlights a number of vital actions in need of immediate implementation.⁵ First and foremost, **MONUSCO should develop and implement a robust and comprehensive transition strategy that specifically includes plans for enhancing the capacities and agency of civil society to contribute to their own protection, violence prevention, and peacebuilding.** This includes the following:

5. A detailed plan to support the functioning of the DRC's National Committee for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and All Forms of Discrimination, including direct actions to support links between civil society and DRC government actors such as the national government, the FARDC and the PNC;
6. A clear mandate for how Civil Affairs Chiefs and Heads of Office (JHRO) should coordinate with local civil society and local government to ensure systems, knowledge and resources are transferred to relevant actors who will take on the majority of atrocity prevention work after the UN's exit. This should include the hosting of exchange/dialogue forums to work with civil society and government actors to identify needs, risks and opportunities.

Civil society

Civil society currently functions as the primary provider of atrocity prevention and broader violence prevention work; thus, it is **essential that civil society actors support the Congolese government to address the root causes of atrocities, develop and fortify prevention networks both vertically and horizontally, and consolidate prevention practices and efforts.** This should involve the following actions:

7. Facilitate the development and implementation of local and provincial prevention mechanisms that provide standardised mechanisms for tracking predicting and preventing violence and atrocities. This should include integrating new indicators within existing early warning systems that can better predict violence and facilitate response, including indicators specifically on:
 - a. *Identity factors* that may indicate increased targeting of particular groups (e.g. gender and ethnicity);

⁵ Significant financial and human resource support from member states will be an essential part of ensuring these actions are both timely and successful.

- b. *Land issues* (land tenure disputes, land reform implementation, etc.) that might pinpoint when particular groups are at risk of being targeted based on their relationship with land;
 - c. *Behaviour and perception of public officials and security actors*, including tracking when actors fail to reinforce state justice and land tenure systems, in order to hold state actors to account for complicity in potential violence and identify when potential grievances may arise between state actors and communities.
- 8. Host recurring dialogue activities and partner with key actors (local and provincial government, PNC, FARDC, private sector and international actors) to support the (re)building of trust between state actors and society;
 - 9. Advocate for the Congolese government, regional power holders and international actors to provide technical and financial support for local prevention efforts, revisit and amend existing silos in prevention work, and conduct further research to better understand the micro-dynamics of conflict in the DRC. “Strengthening Networks to Prevent and Respond to Violence”

International donors

To enable and support the Congolese government, MONUSCO and civil society actors to achieve the above, international donors should prioritise the following actions:

- 10. Provide significantly increased financial and human resource support to the MONUSCO mission to facilitate a smooth transition over the next 3+ years;
- 11. Provide financial and technical support for local actors (civil society and local authorities) to establish local and provincial atrocity prevention mechanisms, including direct funding for recurring and locally led dialogue events to facilitate vertical and horizontal trust building between domestic actors;
- 12. Provide financial and technical support to local and provincial state actors to establish clarity around the application of land tenure laws; better establish the rule of law and systems of justice;
- 13. Support local atrocity prevention actors to set their own strategic direction, priorities and programmatic focus through the provision of *flexible and long-term funding* (directly or indirectly through local intermediaries);
- 14. Invest in evidence-based strategic actions that are grounded in locally led research on:
 - a. the relationship between atrocities and complex violence/conflict (including interrogating existing silos between peacebuilding, conflict prevention, violence prevention and atrocity prevention);
 - b. land conflicts, power relations and politics underpinning the conditions that lead to atrocities.
- 15. Be conscious and conflict-sensitive to terminology like ‘atrocity prevention’ and ‘identity-based violence’ and be guided by local actors’ analyses, insights, and formulation of appropriate responses to ensure prevention work is not siloed and does not undermine broader strategic efforts at violence prevention



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Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. They believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts.


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Research Initiatives for Social Development are a local organisation based in the DRC. Their aim is to contribute to peacebuilding and development via research, training and evaluations.

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This report is part of a project that aims to ensure that local civil society can provide strategic, coordinated and sustainable atrocity prevention work in eastern DRC and Burundi.

It presents the key findings on the challenges facing atrocity prevention work, current activities, and success factors. It also presents recommendations to support atrocity prevention efforts for the Congolese Government, MONUSCO, local civil society, and international donors.

