



Learning Summary

Strengthening community resilience to violence in DRC

This learning summary highlights the main challenges, successes and lessons learned during a project to strengthen community resilience to violence in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The work was supported by Peace Direct and implemented by our local partner Fondation Chirezi (FOCHI) between February 2015 and September 2016.

FOCHI work on the Ruzizi plain in the province of South Kivu, in eastern DRC, and have been a partner of Peace Direct since 2010. This is a volatile area where divisions between ethnic groups have created a cycle of armed conflict and poverty that has eroded the social fabric and cohesion of communities. FOCIH's project, funded by the German Federal Foreign Office, aimed to 'strengthen community resilience to violence' through three objectives: including women and children in traditional conflict resolution, providing economic support to members of the community affected by conflict including ex-combatants, and supporting civil society to actively engage with peacebuilding in the region. FOCIH approached these aims by maintaining and building local 'Peace Courts', and training communities to mediate them. They also developed community livelihood projects including agricultural cooperatives, and revolving loan funds.

This learning summary is based on an independent evaluation conducted in August 2017, to assess the impact, efficiency and sustainability of the project conducted in 10 communities in South Kivu. In addition, the evaluation sought to provide recommendations to improve FOCIH's approach to enhancing community resilience.

Key successes:

- Five existing Peace Courts in Ruzizi and 10 in other areas of South Kivu were maintained, and five new Courts were set up.
- Livelihood support was provided to 355 vulnerable people.
- 50 community loan schemes were established with an average of 25 members each.
- 10 community development initiatives were implemented.
- When asked about the changes to their lives and communities, 100% of those interviewed reported that attitudes and relations between members of different tribes had improved.

“ When there is conflict, people do not go to the police or to the army because there they are asked to pay...people prefer the Peace Court because it is free. ”

Male participant, 41 years old, Luvungi



“ Through awareness-raising activities, the establishment of the Peace Court, community projects and the loan scheme, today we live together, we work together, we eat together and it makes me happy. ”

Male ex-combatant and project participant, 33 years old, Katogota



Evaluation of Efficiency and Effectiveness

Peace Courts

- **Representative:** The constitution of the Peace Courts requires them to be truly representative of the community groups among which they operate. As well as leading to far reaching impacts discussed overleaf, this also meant that decisions taken by the Courts were accepted by communities and solutions were sustained.
- **Accessible:** The Peace Court model was widely accepted by community members because it is an economically accessible form of justice in a region where the system is expensive, and levels of poverty are high.
- **Local:** The evaluation found the traditional mediation approaches local to the area to be significantly more effective than a punishment-based approach, which was believed to further fuel frustration and violence.

Livelihood activities

- **Bridging ethnic divides:** The collective economic activities, coupled with awareness-raising around

tolerance, were successful in bringing members of different tribes together to work towards shared goals. More unified communities also increased the capacity for community-led conflict management.

- **Lasting local ownership:** More than a year after the end of the project, communities continue to attend meetings and feel a strong sense of ownership over their successes, empowering them as agents of change and fostering sustainability.

Challenges

- **Lack of trust:** To encourage local ownership and decentralised decision making, budgets for some small project activities were held by trusted leaders within the communities. However, this led to perceptions and rumours of nepotism and misuse of funds. In some communities, this led to an erosion of trust and the suspension of activities, including some Peace Courts, where confidence is a key component of community mediation.
- **Inclusive participant selection:** Reaching the most vulnerable whilst ensuring inclusivity was challenging.



86%

of participants surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the work of the Peace Courts and have confidence in them



“ Before, we used to call those from a different tribe ‘boros’, meaning outsider or enemy. Now, we all live together and this term has disappeared.”

Female ex-combatant and project participant, 27 years old, Luberizi



Although activities were largely representative and some selection criteria was outlined, certain ethnic groups were still excluded, and other groups, such as ex-combatants, were overrepresented.

- **Climate change:** The effects of climate change in the region have destroyed fields and livestock, putting huge pressure on those who make a living from the land. This had negative ramifications on the participants of the agricultural programmes, and an increase in disputes over land and resources put additional strain on the Peace Courts.
- **Economic viability:** Some income generating activities developed by the communities could not be implemented, either due to unforeseen issues relating to supply and demand for certain products, or a lack of purchasing power in the region.

Impact

The evaluation revealed the following cross-cutting impacts from the project activities.

- **Changes in attitude and perception:** Through collaborative work, positive changes in attitude towards people from different ethnic groups or tribes were recorded.
- **Access to justice and reduction in violence:** The evaluator and project participants confirmed that the Peace Courts, as non-violent mediation platforms, reduced violence and punitive methods, and reinforced acceptance and tolerance.
- **Women’s participation:** The Peace Courts provided women with the opportunity to take part in decision-

making at a community level, and take a leadership role in conflict management through the establishment of Peace Courts run entirely by women, for women. Even in the mixed courts, in eight out of the ten communities, female participation as mediators and court members was equal or nearly equal to that of men.

- **Reintegration of ex-combatants:** Through the targeted livelihoods and community development activities, men, women and children returning from the bush were able to earn a living, provide for their families and play a positive part in their communities.

Reflections from FOCHI

The most important reflection for us has been on leadership. Certain instances of a breakdown in leadership has led us to rethink our strategy for running locally-managed activities, all the while sticking to our overall locally-led approach. Although we originally began by having no involvement in the management of finances or activities inside the communities, and encouraged groups to choose their own trusted representatives, we now see the importance of our involvement. We plan to put in place a progressive leadership mechanism through which we will strengthen community accountability of the project, leadership roles and increase empowerment by accompanying and supervising participants through the various management processes until they have the knowledge and confidence to take responsibility independently. In addition, in cases where group economic activities have broken down due to a lack of trust, there have also been significant unplanned successes with regards to the commencement of individual and household level economic activities. This demonstrates the impact on empowerment that the project has had in some communities, despite set-backs.



Reflections from Peace Direct

An important lesson from the evaluation highlighted that whilst different mechanisms to build peace exist across the region, their successes and failures are interlinked. This was clearly demonstrated by the difficulties faced in continuing the Peace Court activities after the economic activities had stalled in one community. Acknowledging the connected nature of activities will enable us to provide more comprehensive support and advice to our local partners. Taking a holistic approach will also allow us to spot patterns in success and failure that extend beyond the scope of isolated activities. The evaluation also revealed the climatic and environmental factors that can have far-reaching effects on activities. This made it even more clear that a holistic approach could allow us to better understand and prepare

for the diverse factors at play in any context which could hamper or help the success of peacebuilding projects.

Whilst all community members were invited to participate in livelihood activities, those in economic need were more likely to put themselves forward to participate. Whilst providing support to those in vulnerable situations, it is important to focus on inclusivity and representation in all projects in order to scale up the impact of the project across the whole community. We will continue our work to support local organisations to develop inclusive and representative projects that collect a variety of viewpoints and perspectives, to ensure that community rifts are overcome and tensions are not exacerbated.



Recommendations and Considerations

- Focus on transparency to avoid a breakdown in confidence and maintain important relationships. An open approach is recommended to ensure confidence and trust.
- Strengthen collaboration between other conflict management mechanisms that are available in the communities.
- Provide sustainable funding opportunities so that projects which aim to achieve significant behavioural change are able to run for a sufficient length of time. The evaluation recommends a minimum of three years.
- Use the knowledge and experience gained through the justice mechanisms developed to drive advocacy activities. Approach those in authority to raise awareness and engage local stakeholders in finding solutions to the issues they face.
- Develop targeted training and awareness-raising on activities that bring ethnic groups together, as an instrumental way to bridge divides between warring or isolated communities.
- Pay particular attention to ensure minority groups are represented and that those most in need are reached, so that the selection of project participants accurately and inclusively reflects the reality on the ground.