

Political actors and identity-based violence in Beni, Democratic Republic of Congo



Executive Summary

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Research Initiatives for Social Development (RISD)

is a non-profit association, with its headquarters in the city of Bukavu. With more than ten years of experience, RISD carries out its activities with the aim of supporting scientific research and responding to socio-economic development challenges facing the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

RISD collaborates with universities and national and international organisations in the implementation of studies and research in various fields, in the DRC and abroad, to respond to the challenges of socio-economic development.

Forum de Paix de Beni (Beni Peace Forum, FPB)

is a platform of 16 civil society organisations working in the field of peace and development. The member organisations, including women's and youth organisations, are divided into four specific themes, namely: 1. early warning, 2. peacebuilding, 3. psychosocial support and 4. gender. While the overall objective of Beni Peace Forum is to contribute to peacebuilding and sustainable development in Eastern DRC in general, and Beni in particular, its common vision is for a peaceful cohabitation between individuals and community groups to support the sustainable development of Beni.

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



For more information, please visit: www.risd-drc.org



For more information, please visit:
<https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/beni-peace-forum/?location=dr-congo&theme>



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The opinions and analysis presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of RISD, Peace Direct, or any other project partners.

Note for readers

You may notice throughout this report that the language and writing style is slightly different from Peace Direct's previous publications. This report reflects a new approach Peace Direct is taking to localise our research. As such, this report and the research informing it has been produced and led by local researchers. We have limited our edits of the work to retain the voice and writing style of the authors, as we believe that responsible research practice must reflect a diversity of methodologies and styles beyond dominant Western approaches. As such, non-Congolese readers may find that certain word choices do not immediately resonate or explain a concept in the manner expected. As such, we encourage readers to look into definitions of vocabulary to gain a better understanding of the precise message intended by the authors.

Executive Summary

Political dynamics in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and by extension in Beni territory, have often been subject to political manipulation. Politicians have developed strategies to conquer and influence the management of the State and its resources in their attempt to retain power. The manipulation of collective identities (regional, ethnic, political, religious, gender, etc.) is one of the major strategies used to control the masses, which, through neo-patrimonial practices, leads to ruptures in the social fabric, the superimposition of collective identities¹, growing intolerance and, consequently, to conflicts and cycles of violence. This is a result of political actors using different means to capitalise on factors such as the decay of the state, the legitimisation of ethnic entities, identity-based protectionism, identity-based withdrawal, the militarisation of ethnic groups, the hybridisation of state and customary powers, and the ethnicisation of state powers and the army. The self-interested infiltration of collective identities is simultaneously or alternatively utilised to further mobilise the masses as political levers (entrepreneurs of identity-based violence often wear several identity hats to influence the masses to their cause: they can operate under different identities simultaneously. These include, acting as a member of a specific ethnic group, a political actor, a humanitarian, a church leader, a human rights defender, a member of civil society, a merchant, etc.).

Other factors that fuel cycles of violence include uncontrolled migratory movements, land conflicts, the illicit exploitation of natural resources, illicit enrichment, as well as the internationalisation of conflicts and identity-based violence facilitated by the cross-border dispersion of ethnic groups and the collective acquisition of nationality.

This study explores the positive and negative roles of political actors in identity-based violence in Beni territory. The report is part of a three-year project (2019-2022) entitled 'Strengthening networks to prevent and respond to violence', funded by a Jo Cox Memorial Grant from the UK government (formerly DFID now FCDO). The project aims to ensure that local civil society is better able to deliver strategic, coordinated and sustainable atrocity prevention work in eastern DRC and Burundi.

The report defines political actors as individuals or collective actors who interact and invest, opportunistically or not, in the political field; they are also collective actors who often serve as levers or instruments of political manipulation for individual actors.

The specific findings of the report highlight that:

- The various forms and consequences of identity-based violence in Beni territory have led to the displacement and deaths of many victims (over 1200 since 2019)², these victims range from members of indigenous groups (particularly the Nande community), other tribal-ethnic groups, soldiers from the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), civil society actors, socio-professional groups and vulnerable groups (women, youth, people living with disabilities, etc.)

1 The quest for domination or supremacy of one collective identity over others

2 Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/rdc-plus-de-1200-civils-tu%C3%A9s-dans-des-violences-%C3%A0-beni/2108911>

- Respondents who participated in the research noted 14 different types of actors who are known to contribute to identity-based violence in Beni territory - the most cited are armed groups, people's representatives or deputies, religious leaders, security forces and political party activists and leaders.
- The crisis of the Congolese state has led to frustrations and grievances from the local population, these are exploited by conflict entrepreneurs³ through the use of identity markers in their quest for political, material and symbolic resources. Several of these dynamics are visible in Beni. Some political actors see social tensions and conflicts as opportunities to gain useful positioning on the political scene. Additionally, some commercial companies, ethnic groups, media and even artists are seen as actors who fuel identity-based violence due to their conflicting positions on issues of exploitation of resources in areas occupied by rebel groups.
- In some cases, conflict entrepreneurs have gained the support of vulnerable people by giving them food, higher salaries, promises of future benefits and money. Often, actors will encourage identity-based violence to stir up old tensions and position themselves as leaders to protect their 'communities'. Actors may also use their influence over factions in the army and the judiciary to further their interests during hostilities and to exploit natural resources. In some cases, they have used propaganda messages veiled in religious speech to achieve political gains.
- At times, these conflict entrepreneurs have worked under the guise of humanitarian workers, civil society organisations (CSOs) or religious actors to target the population and earn their trust. This trust and/or attention is then used to exert influence over these communities and sow discord.
- In terms of work on identity-based violence prevention, citizens' movements and pressure groups, local organisations/associations (youth, women, etc.), and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) were all cited by respondents as doing positive work in preventing violence in Beni.
- When probed on 'best placed actors' for working on prevention of identity-based violence, interviewees noted that CSOs are leading this type of work and that working with them increases the chances of success. However, the changing conflict dynamics and various actors who use CSOs to promote identity-based violence have created a complex environment which requires careful steps to identify positive actors/organisations to work with. Amongst political actors, interviewees pointed out that lower-level political-administrative leaders (those embedded in the community) are less likely to incite violence compared to higher level leaders (those in provincial and national institutions).

3 Conflict entrepreneurs are defined as economic and political actors who foment and fuel violence to attain economic and political power. Conflict entrepreneurs generally use tactics such as "appeals to ethnic, religious, and/or ideological solidarity; patronage; and positive or negative promises regarding security." Lyon (2002)

Recommendations

Below are the main recommendations that emerged from this research. They are addressed to specific key actors in order to better support the work of preventing identity-based violence.

To the Government of the DRC

1. Revise the provisions of the Constitution and laws that enshrine the ethnicisation of territorial entities, the collective acquisition of Congolese nationality on the basis of ethnicity and the politicisation of collective identities. In this case, Article 10, paragraph 2 of the current Constitution and Article 6 of Law No. 04/024 of 12 November 2004 on Congolese nationality should be amended as follows, “this provision should either be deleted with all the consequences for the related provisions in order to avoid ethno-nationalism (a feeling of identification with and attachment to an ethnic group that serves as an identity marker for belonging to an ethnic nation corresponding to the ethnic territory) and confusion over the nationality of members of transnational ethnic groups.”
2. Restore the authority of the state by strengthening the presence of civil state and public actors as well as uniformed services in remote areas where power vacuums have led to the proliferation of non-state armed actors and promote equitable justice in the service of integration, peace and social cohesion. This should be done by building and equipping territorial infrastructures and courts and tribunals by bringing them closer to the people. Adopt a population management policy (demographic policy) by carrying out at least a second general and scientific census of the population, and by issuing identity cards to all Congolese in accordance with the law. The need for this census is to provide a baseline for population management, given that the previous census of 1984 was rendered obsolete by repeated wars which did not facilitate updating of population movements and demographic growth.
3. Open up the territories by building road and airport infrastructures, not only to counter armed groups more effectively, but also to facilitate contact between the various social groups on the national territory, and thus dilute ‘ethno-nationalism’ in the ideal of the nation-state, which favours living together.

To the provincial government of North Kivu

4. Support local organisations working in the field of reconciliation and inter-ethnic cohabitation by creating, while taking accompanying measures, a framework for consultation, socialisation for citizenship and inter-ethnic dialogue.
5. Fight against ethnic favouritism in the distribution of posts in provincial institutions.

To the political and administrative authorities of Beni

6. The city council and the territory of Beni, in collaboration with the sectors, chiefdoms and communes, should take advantage of their reputation in the community to raise awareness among grassroots leaders (heads of neighbourhoods, avenues, villages, ten houses) and other groups (associations) of young people, women, etc., about the fight against the spread of messages of tribal-ethnic hatred and the detection of information intoxicating tribal hatred, and if necessary, to suspend the media that disseminate these messages.

To MONUSCO⁴

7. Given the dissatisfaction and mistrust of the local population towards MONUSCO, it would be beneficial to use Chapter VII of the UN Charter to support the FARDC in prioritising civilian protection in their interventions in Beni.
8. In the MONUSCO withdrawal strategy, capitalise on the achievements of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo by integrating the training of the FARDC, the allocation of MONUSCO logistics to state structures and by creating a structure for monitoring and sustaining these achievements in close collaboration with the UN. Request independent and impartial investigations to assess the possible cases of misconduct by MONUSCO peacekeepers in the accomplishment of their mission, in order to reassure the local population that its units are not involved in the violence perpetrated in Beni.
9. The Civil Affairs Section of MONUSCO should strengthen its system of communication and collaboration with local populations, civil society organisations and grassroots leaders through community outreach activities and sensitisation on the role and missions of MONUSCO, as the expectations of the local populations seem to be out of sync with its roles and missions. Specifically, MONUSCO should strengthen their two-way communication and engage in direct, regular, on-going consultations where local actors can share their information and be part of decision-making that affects them.

4 The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic

To civil society

10. Raising awareness of political citizenship instead of identity-based and/or ethnic citizenship, by familiarising social groups with citizenship education and socialisation in republican values.
11. Avoid the politicisation of civil society by reducing the control of politicians over it by abolishing the logic of quotas in favour of the civilian society in the distribution of political positions or public mandates.
12. Coordinate the actions of civil society in the prevention of and fight against identity-based violence in order to mitigate the infiltration of identity-based conflict entrepreneurs within it.

To the World Trade Organisation

13. Regulate the cocoa trade in eastern DRC by requiring certification and traceability of cocoa and other raw materials from Beni to discourage exploitation as a result of violence.

International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs)

14. Take into account the principles of “Do no harm”, inclusiveness and conflict sensitivity in their areas of intervention during the implementation of development projects;
15. Consider sustainable impact components in each project, especially those that create local skills and employment.

To international donors

16. Enhance, through funding, independent research and careful analysis of actors working in the prevention and fight against conflict and violence based on identity in Beni, in order to eliminate any possibility of funding organisations that are subservient to identity-based entrepreneurs. The analysis of data collected in the field by means of surveys, interviews and observations will make it possible to identify local, national and international organisations that have a positive impact on the implementation of interventions to prevent violence in general, and identity-based violence in particular.

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. This work is led by a research consortium consisting of Peace Direct, Research Initiatives for Social Development and the Beni Peace Forum. This work is supported by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The first report in the series, "Escaping Perpetual Beginnings", is available here: <https://www.peacedirect.org/publications/escaping-perpetual-beginnings/>

This second report analyses the role and degree of political actors' involvement in conflict and identity-based violence dynamics in the Beni territory of DR Congo.

