

IFP MEDIATION CLUSTER  
COUNTRY CASE STUDY: DRC

# STRENGTHENING LOCAL MEDIATION EFFORTS: Lessons from Eastern DRC

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## ACRONYMS

<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>IfP</b>	Initiative for Peacebuilding
<b>ILPs</b>	Local peace initiatives
<b>LPI</b>	Life and Peace Institute
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-governmental organisations
<b>PRA</b>	Participatory Action Research
<b>RHA</b>	Réseau Haki na Amani

## INTRODUCTION

Mediation is an important component of successful peace processes. In the past, mediation was considered to be an almost exclusively high-level track-one process. Today there is much greater emphasis on mediation processes that include civil society and local concerns. There is both great potential and necessity for such an approach which is responsive to the realities of conflict and which recognises that conflicts exist at various levels within a given society; conflicts change over time to include new issues and actors; conflict drivers and causes are often local, but require interventions and decision-making at higher levels where local peacebuilders may have limited access and influence, and finally that local dynamics can fuel conflict at higher levels and vice versa. This complex conflict dynamic implies the need for flexible, nuanced and multilevel mediation initiatives which actively link grassroots to “official” initiatives.

This short briefing paper is aimed at those who are likely to assist local-level mediation efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in understanding the limits, possibilities and opportunities for supporting mediation efforts. It seeks to provide insights into the practice of local mediation and into the multiple challenges involved in achieving resolution. The paper presents lessons learned from local mediation efforts to assist international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), their funders and development agencies to strategically position themselves to enhance peacebuilding efforts in the DRC.

## BACKGROUND

Research for this paper was conducted in parallel to two mediation trainings that was conducted on behalf of International Alert for local civil society organisations in South Kivu and Ituri regions in Eastern DRC. In South Kivu, Congolese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) collaborating with the Life and Peace Institute (LPI) underwent training on the principles and practices of mediation. In Ituri, the Réseau Haki na Amani (RHA) benefited from similar training. These training processes were designed to strengthen theoretical knowledge and practice via locally inspired simulation exercises. The aim of the training was to build on participants' experiences and to offer formal frameworks within which they could reflect on their mediation practice. During the training, participants were constantly encouraged to seek links between their perceptions and local realities and to collect and analyse individual case studies from their local mediation efforts. Thus, trainers were able to help participants gain insights into how mediation at the local level was developed and shaped by the realities facing local organisations undertaking mediation at grassroots levels. Interviews were held with members of lead organisations and their Congolese partners to nuance and confirm findings. The trainers played a dual role, acting also as researchers and drawing together knowledge from both training and mediation efforts. Local organisations involved in the project reported that their mediation skills needed improving, one of which noted, 'we thought we were doing mediation, but we realised we weren't and now we are'.

It is important to note that the international and local organisations involved in training and mediation also worked on a range of other themes and were not confined exclusively to mediation. This helped deepen their understanding of the issues, actors and responses, allowing the organisations to contextualise their mediation efforts more fully. This is an area where local mediation can be seen to diverge from track-one processes, which tend to be focused solely on establishing formulae for political resolution. The fact that local mediation initiatives were integrated into broader development and peacebuilding objectives would potentially lead to more grounded and sustained outcomes.

## THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL MEDIATION INITIATIVES IN EASTERN DRC

These few paragraphs do not attempt to provide a general context for South Kivu and Ituri, but rather seek to explain the environment in which local grassroots mediation efforts took place.

While South Kivu and Ituri differ greatly, there are common features relating to the consequences of violent and volatile instability. The political and security contexts of both regions change swiftly. Events unfold and are interpreted rapidly and it is therefore possible for information and knowledge to be manipulated and misinterpreted and for this to trigger mobilisation for violent reaction. Mobilisation occurs among trusted networks such as clans, “communities of interest” (religious, cultural, etc.), ethnic groupings and livelihood groups (mining, pastoralist, farming groups, etc.).

In both regions, the lack of widespread access to clear, verifiable and precise information means that rumours are pervasive and conflicts often erupt because of hearsay and/or biased presentation of information. This creates an environment where conflict often mirrors the stereotypes and prejudices that prevail between and within groups, and where the positions and perceived interests of conflict parties may be far removed from reality. Moreover, in this situation of instability, people often feel that they cannot depend on state institutions to intervene successfully or fairly. Nor do people necessarily have access to institutions which could intervene. In both South Kivu and Ituri the institutions of the state designated to deal with conflict resolution, such as courts, police and local authorities, can be far removed and disconnected from communities and their needs. There is also a high degree of mistrust towards state institutions which are frequently perceived (often correctly) as corrupt, biased or influenced by narrow interests. Local and traditional leaders, who could play a role in dispute resolution, are often powerless when violence and high tensions flare and some may indeed be corrupt, biased or influenced by narrow interests, or be parties to the conflict.

The absent or dysfunctional state institutions are factors in conflicts. This combination of a weak/absent state together with the diminished and contested authority of traditional leaders creates fertile terrain for violent conflict to flourish.

While the wars in Eastern DRC are officially “over” and peace agreements have been signed (and broken), the underlying issues of the conflict remain unresolved. This explains that, while some of the outward manifestations of conflict are no longer visible, tensions still simmer and extend beneath the surface. Violence often erupts, attracting publicity and attention, yet these violent incidents usually have deep roots anchored in tensions between and within the societies of South Kivu, Ituri and beyond. Although media and international organisations’ attention tends to be short term and focused on outbursts of violence, peacebuilding efforts must address the deep-rooted, long-standing issues as well as simmering tensions. This can create problems for agencies on the ground, especially where there may be contradictions between short-term actions to stop violence and longer-term initiatives to build trust and attempt to resolve underlying causes.

Meanwhile, the active international presence in the region unhelpfully skews the picture by drawing considerable attention to the role of political and military actors. This is problematic as there is a tendency among international agencies to concentrate on the more visible aspects of power and conflict, thus inadvertently strengthening the status of elites and military actors (for example, through media and statements), while failing to acknowledge the more complex underlying elements.

## LAND CONFLICTS IN SOUTH KIVU AND ITURI

A common feature of Ituri and South Kivu is the centrality of the “land question”. High economic stakes (including mining and forestry rights), the need for means of subsistence amid extreme poverty, a traditional, at times “visceral”, attachment to land as a factor of identity for communities and individuals, and specific issues such as the return of displaced populations go a long way in explaining the prevalence of conflicts linked to land. Land conflicts are said by some to have been at the heart of the violence that spread throughout the region a decade ago and they remain a central feature of current disputes. Land conflicts cannot be considered solely as local, micro conflicts. Some of the manifestations of conflict occur at a very local level, such as violence, dispossession and displacement. Some of the causes are also very local, such as unclear administrative boundaries between communities, the lack of knowledge of land laws among citizens and local government authorities, and the inadequate capacity of as well as competition between administrative and dispute-resolution bodies, particularly between traditional and more modern juridical systems.

However, the land issues at stake go far beyond local or even national levels. Indeed, the economic, legal and political dimensions of land conflicts involve national political leaders, mining interests, and neighbouring states. This combines with the problem of weak state bodies such as police, security forces and justice systems, explaining, in part, the absence of forums that can resolve disputes fairly and successfully. The laws governing land can themselves be divisive, including in the way they are interpreted differently by various interests, from national down to grassroots levels. The lack of clear language and guidance for implementation of legislation leaves room for misinterpretation and misapplication.

## CHALLENGES FOR MEDIATION IN SOUTH KIVU AND ITURI

The complexities revealed in this short analysis of the Ituri and South Kivu regions present challenges for those attempting to promote and/or undertake mediation in these regions. It is evident that mediation can only be effective if it takes into account the perceptions, including misperceptions, that are generated in the process of mediation itself. Indeed, while formal communication media are scarce, and of relatively poor quality, much information is shared through ‘radio trottoir’, or hearsay. This implies that mediation of local conflicts will generate a flow of both information and misinformation. From the outset this will influence the credibility of mediation efforts and of citizens’ trust in those efforts.

Another challenge is the degree to which one can consider the actors at a table to be genuinely representative of the concerns and interests of communities, and, by extension, which groups or individuals are not represented (women, minority ethnic groups, etc.) at the table. While negotiating parties might be willing to make concessions or come to an agreement, they are usually linked to a wider community that will eventually have to accept and possibly implement the agreement. This is often problematic since community leaders have seen their authority eroded in recent years, partly due to their own roles in armed conflict and to their perceived links to corruption. Also, while the negotiating parties may not be perceived as representative, the perceived impartiality of mediators can also be questioned. In addition, the mediators may not have the capacity or resources to deal with issues that lie outside their field of operation and knowledge. This issue is pursued more fully in the following section of this report.

## LOCAL MEDIATION IN THE DRC AS A PROCESS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICTS

In international armed conflict situations, mediation is generally understood as a facilitated discussion supported by a mutually accepted third party, in order to reach agreements to end hostilities. For grassroots organisations in conflict areas, mediation is used in a different way, to enhance dialogue, to negotiate and to build peace in ways reflecting the complexity and divergence of community interests and involving the latter in decision-making. This can be difficult, however, as many local conflicts are not discussed openly, and many problems are thought too sensitive to be addressed collectively. But conflicts that remain hidden have little prospect for reconciliation.

Yet, despite all these problems, local organisations can be well placed, as a result of their continuous presence, abilities and credibility, to bring individuals, groups and communities together. When meeting with communities in conflict, such organisations can contribute to the development of a shared understanding of the differences in perception and realities experienced by local stakeholders and can help define what people can do to improve their own situation. Nevertheless, while local organisations bring strengths and capacities which may not be available to national and international actors, they are also limited by the environment in which they operate. They can also be constrained by a lack of imagination and by parochialism that often seem inevitable in protracted conflicts: their deep understanding of local complexities can be paralysing for those involved in finding solutions. In this context, in the wrong hands, mediation can inadvertently become a platform for cementing positions, e.g. against minority groups and women. When the causes or drivers of conflict lie outside the geographical area, or are beyond the capacity of local actors to mediate, their success will likewise be limited. Also, local actors can threaten the status quo and run the risk of upsetting the interests of more powerful groups such as political actors, armed groups, social elites or powerful business people. This challenge provides a potential opening for international organisations including NGOs to contribute to the resolution of conflict, by helping to address broader, higher-level issues, power dynamics and actors.

Working on local conflicts has to be part of wider peace efforts and strategic processes. For example, analysis of land conflicts in Eastern DRC may ultimately require clearer stances on laws, legislative reform and a resolution of the confusion within customary governance and statutory law. This in turn requires sensitive and difficult research related to land claims and resolution mechanisms. Here, local mediation can settle certain tensions and offer practical guidance, but, as long as wider reforms are not undertaken, land conflicts will reappear. In short, local mediation cannot solve all complex conflicts that are deeply rooted, but it can offer remedies for some of the symptoms of those conflicts, build the capacity of local actors to engage in resolving local issues and raise awareness of those issues to appropriate government and international actors.

In this respect, it is important to see mediation as part of broader peace efforts and strategies in which a variety of activities are needed. In the case of land conflicts, for instance, mediation can be – and in most instances needs to be – accompanied by research designed to separate truth from fiction, which can uncover factors such as the numbers and types of conflicts, land-reform issues, contradictions and shortcomings in the laws, documentation of cases, etc. Local mediation also needs to be coherent with and supported by the efforts of others at higher levels (e.g. state and international), based on a shared analysis (see, for example, Box 1). Without these complementary activities, mediation will be seen as “fire fighting” rather than a substantive mechanism for truly addressing land conflicts.

### Box 1. How Haki Na Amani and the Life and Peace Institute Use Mediation in the Field

In order to better grasp how these organisations use mediation techniques, it is helpful to understand the way they are structured and their goals. The Réseau Haki na Amani (RHA) was created in Bunia, with the support of IKV Pax Christi, and federates a number of local organisations<sup>1</sup> in the five territories of Ituri province. The Réseau has initiated the creation of a large number of local peace initiatives (Initiatives Locales de Paix (ILPs)),<sup>2</sup> which originate from the communities themselves and provide liaison and information flow between the communities and the Réseau. The ILPs are also being trained and supported by the Réseau to act as focal points in villages for the identification and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In turn, the ILPs can provide the Réseau with continuous analysis of the situation in each village and, where needed, call on the Réseau to intervene if a problem needs to be addressed at a higher level than the village. The RHA also employs a core number of animateurs, who cover the entire territory and implement the activities of the RHA together with ILPs. The animateurs conduct awareness-raising sessions on underlying causes of the conflict for local communities, such as information sessions on land rights, on good governance and on ways the communities can have a say in the use of natural resources in the district.

The Life and Peace Institute (LPI) is an international organisation based in Sweden, with an office in Bukavu. It operates in North and South Kivu. The LPI's work focuses on capacity-building and accompaniment of local partners to achieve long-term conflict transformation. It uses specific Participatory Action Research (PRA)<sup>3</sup> techniques to define and report on the perceived causes of conflict between communities of these provinces. Most of the activities are therefore conducted by local partners, with technical support from the LPI. This involves regular and prolonged contacts with the communities in conflict to uncover and interpret facts, as well as the claims that the communities may have. Through the process of collecting this information, communities are progressively brought together to agree on a shared analysis and identify actions to resolve local conflicts.

Both the RHA and the LPI benefit from an in-depth understanding of local dynamics through their local contacts and presence. Despite working with different methodologies, and on issues which, while related, are expressed in different ways, the two organisations share common approaches to the conflicts they work on. Rather than intervening in the local conflicts as an external actor when conflicts have been identified, ILPs from the RHA and the local partners of the LPI help communities to clarify their interests and work together to bring about a resolution. The organisations also view their work as a long-term process rather than as specific conflict-resolution 'interventions', and focus on long-term attitudes and behavioural change between communities in conflict. This can entail facilitating dialogue as well as building the capacity of key members of these communities for effective leadership, and awareness-raising on the rights and responsibilities of these communities. Both organisations frame their interventions as working on the root causes of the conflict, rather than focusing on righting wrongs. They therefore base their technique on thorough context analysis. This explains why both organisations have a range of bilateral engagements with local communities, thus meeting actors separately, as well as meetings with actors simultaneously, where broad consultation and mediation take place.

The entry points for discussion are normally the conflict dynamics on the ground and concentrate initially on the various manifestations of those conflicts. But the aim of both organisations is to work on the causes of the conflict as identified in their analyses rather than on the visible manifestations.

1 Forum des Mamans de l'Ituri (Fomi), Commission diocésaine Justice et Paix (CDJP) Bunia, ECC (Eglise du Christ au Congo, Synode de Bunia), Appui à la Communication Interculturelle et à l'Autopromotion Rurale (ACIAR), Justice Plus, CDJP Mahagi, Centre d'Initiative et de Créativité pour la Promotion Rurale (CIC), and Commission Paroissiale Justice et Paix (CPJP) Mambasa.

2 The Réseau coordinates 127 ILPs and 73 *Noyaux Pacifiques des Mamans* [Women Groups for Peace], a women-only initiative organised to promote women's participation in peace processes.

3 'Essentially Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it'. Y. Wadsworth (1998). Action Research International, Paper 2. To the LPI, this means regularly visiting communities facing a particular set of problems and working with them to identify pertinent issues. It then entails finding common definitions of these issues with other communities in conflict to come to an understanding of the various positions and interests of the parties involved.

## MEDIATION AS AN ACTIVITY, AS WELL AS AN APPROACH TO PEACEBUILDING AND PROGRAMMING

The LPI partners and the RHA both use mediation as part of their programmes. However, there are slight differences in the way they view it as a tool and in the related activities they implement.

In the case of the RHA, the ILPs can call on the core animateurs of the Réseau to intervene when they face a problem that needs to be addressed by more qualified or external actors. The RHA then analyses the situation and decides whether there is space to intervene. If its analyses conclude that there is an added value for it to intervene as an organisation, it can launch a mediation intervention in agreement with the parties involved. The second stage consists of separate meetings with the conflicting parties to identify the facts and to become aware of the understanding of each of the communities. The mediators conduct separate group meetings with each of the parties and attempt to identify areas where negotiation or common understanding is possible. The Réseau also provides the parties with additional information, such as legal documents or other elements that could bring clarity to the disputed case. Finally, and if there is space for it, a meeting is called in a neutral place for the communities to explain their positions and try to find a common solution. If this stage is successful, the Réseau, along with the ILPs, can help with monitoring the implementation of the agreement. The ILPs are systematically integrated into every stage of the mediation process. The Réseau is considered as providing a service to the parties in conflict and to the ILPs.

*In this approach, mediation is seen as a specific activity to be implemented when the need arises, and when the parties in conflict see a role for the RHA to play. Reaching an agreement, and successfully following its implementation, is seen as the main end product of the mediation.*

For the LPI, however, mediation is seen as a technique to be used throughout its activities. Participatory action research involves a number of mediation-specific aspects, such as negotiating with parties in conflict for access, or in order to understand their position more fully. Mediation techniques are used to clarify positions and to uncover unspoken or “hidden” interests. While communities may seem unified behind a common goal or a common demand, it is often the case that local communities and their leaders, or communities and the armed groups claiming to represent them, hold very different views or understanding of the same situation. Typically, the research involves convening discussion groups within each community to ensure a common approach to resolving a problem. A second stage follows that focuses on the facilitation of inter-community meetings where positions are presented and discussed. Throughout the meetings with conflicted communities, the LPI's partners use mediation techniques to separate fact from interpretation, and get the parties to understand the others' points of view and interests. Mediation techniques are also used when the parties meet, to help facilitate the meeting, and to reach acceptance of a common document describing the understanding of the issues at play, according to all the parties represented.

Mediation is therefore seen more as an integral approach to the conduct of the LPI's activities. Rather than reaching an agreement, the aim of the process is to come to an understanding of the situation that is common to all the parties and dissipate negative prejudices, rumours and myths that can cloud specific conflicts. This in turn facilitates dialogue between the communities, who see themselves as tackling a common problem rather than competing to impose their own solution.

## COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE OF THE LOCAL, LONG-TERM MEDIATION APPROACH

For both organisations, mediation is seen as part of long-term programming (see also Box 2). Prolonged contact with the communities and parties to conflicts allows both organisations to aim for long-term change. Indeed, through their local contacts and the trust they have built with the communities, they are able to conduct thorough research on the positions and interests of the conflict parties, carry out shuttle mediation before bringing the parties to the table, and facilitate dialogue between them. They can also follow up on decisions reached at the table and be seen as impartial witnesses to an agreement, therefore providing a “friendly watchdog” function – by virtue of their moral authority and local credibility – to monitor the implementation of action plans. Moreover, they also provide logistical and research support, such as supplying venues and transport facilities for meetings and finding authoritative sources to inform discussions, such as maps from land registries and official documents found in archives.

### **Box 2. Mediation as Part of Wider Participatory Activities**

Since November 2007 the LPI has initiated a process of participatory action research with some of its local partner organisations (ADEPAE, Arche d'Alliance and RIO), to contribute to the transformation of conflict in the southern part of South Kivu. Members of partner organisations visited the various communities in Uvira and Fizi nine times, and also the region. In total, they interviewed more than 840 people on the causes and nature of the various conflicts among the five communities concerned. After this phase they organised meetings to provide feedback on what the research team had learned. In order to confirm their findings, they were written up and shared with those who had been interviewed as well as other members of the communities. The process took place initially within each community and then was expanded to include members of other communities in conflict. Ultimately, the various outcomes were synthesised into a single report.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LOCAL MEDIATION EFFORTS

One element which seems to be important for the successes of local mediation is to consider the communities themselves to be the main actors in the mediation. Communities decide which problems need to be resolved and this choice is then confirmed by the RHA and the LPI, which do not impose themselves on the parties in conflict. Sometimes, external organisations are interested in tackling a problem they have themselves identified, and imposing it on the agenda of the communities affected by the conflict, possibly inflaming conflict by drawing too much attention to it, or compelling communities to adopt positions they would not normally have considered. When local communities themselves decide on the agenda, the local organisations called to facilitate the mediation do not generally influence this choice. For instance, in Ituri, issues deserving attention are identified through regular meetings, either *barzas* (large community meetings of 200 or 300 people) or *Cadres de concertation* (meetings facilitated by the Réseau to give the various local authorities an opportunity to answer queries from the population).

The communities in conflict also benefit from a long-term approach. Both organisations introduce mediation only after having established contacts with the communities for a number of months, or years, and will be present long after the mediation takes place. This allows for the conflict parties to gain greater confidence in the mediators. It also helps the organisations practise a patient build-up to the mediation, as well as a long follow-up during implementation. For instance, the conflict between the Banyali community and the Walendu grouping of Kilo and Kobu in Ituri first came to the attention of the RHA in the summer of 2009. Part of the mediation process of this conflict was scheduled to take place in late 2010 – after work had been carried out throughout the intervening period to bring the parties together, identify the resources needed (such as maps of the administrative boundaries between the communities) and identify the positions and interests of both communities.

Finally, the involvement of local authorities in mediation efforts also contributes to capacity-building of local actors (chiefs, judges, local administration), who benefit from the organisations' experience and skills. All mediation and activities organised by the RHA and the LPI require the presence, and the authorisation, of local authorities. While this does influence the freedom of mediators to play their role (and sometimes constitutes an obstacle to effective mediation), it also implies that local actors benefit from the trainings and the accompaniment of the external interveners. Both organisations also make use of traditional actors and mechanisms to ensure the mediation process is rooted in local practices, which ensures wider participation by the parties concerned.

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITS FACED BY LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

The very nature of the approach practised by the RHA and the LPI and its partners implies challenges and constraints to their effectiveness as mediators.

One obvious constraint is the sensitivity of issues tackled. Most of the problems addressed in mediation activities touch on highly contested issues; otherwise there would be no need for external mediation. For the LPI, for instance, questions arise around the relationships between ethnic militia groups, the communities they claim to be defending or representing, and “enemy” communities. Acting as a local mediator in these circumstances exposes organisations to accusations of partiality and naiveté. There are additional risks in tabling issues that are too difficult to tackle, therefore risking exposing problems and leaving them unresolved.

Another problem is the issue of the perceived legitimacy of the organisations as mediators. In the majority of cases, the organisations act as focal points for the resolution of problems which should ideally be addressed by a combination of informed, responsive state structures and effective and inclusive local structures (traditional or otherwise). While the legitimacy of local organisations may be recognised in local communities, they do not benefit from any legal or structural support from the state apparatus, which in turn does not provide them with protection should the conflict parties contest the proposed resolution.

### THE BACKGROUND OF THE RHA AND THE LPI PARTNERS

Most staff of the two organisations and their partners originate from the communities in which the organisations are called upon to intervene. The conflicts to be mediated often take an ethnic dimension as they spin outside of individual conflicts and into the public sphere. The identity and ethnicity of the staff may be perceived as an indicator of a bias, and their impartiality as mediators may be called into question. The RHA attempts to tackle the problem by forming multi-ethnic teams. This is sometimes not easy for some of the LPI partners, each of which is linked to certain interest groups or identity bases. That said, communities in conflict choose to call on the RHA or the LPI. The organisations are believed to be as effective as and less costly than state structures such as tribunals or local chiefs, who charge fees and costs when called upon to resolve conflicts. This begs the question of the longer-term sustainability of the mediation interventions of the RHA and the LPI, and of the risk of their replacing or duplicating inadequate state structures. It also explains opposition by some of the local chiefs to their intervention, who see the organisations’ presence as weakening local, customary authority and taking away income opportunities.

Finally, the question of the reach of these organisations is crucial. The RHA, and to a lesser extent the LPI, have neither the reach nor the mandate to change some of the deeper causes of the conflict they seek to address. For instance, influencing national land reform or security sector reform in South Kivu is beyond the capacities of these organisations. The organisations also feel endangered by tackling these problems overtly, as it could expose them to accusations of insubordination to the state, or raise their profile in sensitive and volatile contexts. This means that local organisations can be confined to intervening at the local level, effectively “fire fighting”, while core issues remain unaddressed, e.g. taxation and citizens’ rights, violence against women, absence of the state, the governance of natural resources and poverty. This points to a fundamental ambiguity for local mediators: to a very real extent, local mediation efforts mitigate the symptoms of very deep conflicts, which

are linked to the role and capacity of the state, imbalances and inequalities between communities, clashes of traditional and modern laws, etc. Local mediation can appear to make the visible manifestations of these deeper problems acceptable and manageable. This risks diverting attention away from the need to address the causes and drivers of the conflict and the long-term efforts that are needed to handle them.

## CONCLUSIONS

Local mediation can play a crucial role in resolving local disputes and building trust and peace in Eastern DRC, particularly on local issues around land. However, many factors continue to obstruct long-term sustained peace. The absence of effective, impartial, responsive state institutions means that wider processes to ensure sustained peace are not supported, resourced or implemented in a systematic manner. The existing land laws, which are perceived by many as biased and inadequate, can spark conflict rather than provide guidance for the resolution of conflicts over land. National and regional conflict dimensions create challenges that cannot be dealt with at a purely local level. This is particularly true of mining, military and political interests that span internal and international borders, but are manifested at a very local level in both Ituri and South Kivu. Local structural factors also obstruct long-term mediation and peacebuilding efforts. These include the culture of rumour and misinformation that can entrench positions, harden prejudices and create mistrust in peace processes. In this context, local organisations have been able to find ways to integrate mediation into their strategies and activities and to address the visible dimensions of conflict. They have built the capacity of individuals and communities to tackle their own conflicts and to find enduring local solutions.

The international community is also caught up in the complexity of conflict in Eastern DRC and their presence has the potential to destabilise fragile peace or to strengthen local efforts. Their ability to communicate quickly to the wider world can distort local dynamics but could potentially be an important tool in promoting positive mediation processes and for disseminating “neutral” information in advance of and in parallel to peaceful mediation, such as through peace radio, as evident in Liberia for instance. The following section outlines how members of the international community, especially international NGOs and donors such as the EU who support them, could positively promote peace in Eastern DRC.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN SUPPORTING LOCAL MEDIATION EFFORTS

Local mediation activities can have discernible impacts in troubled regions, such as Eastern DRC. They can defuse tensions and contribute to preventing local, minor incidents spilling over into larger, more violent conflicts. However, it is clear that mediation activities should not be seen as short-term, quick interventions. They require long-term presence, trust-building and follow-up. For these reasons, mediation and other initiatives cannot and should not be considered in isolation; they must inform each other and build on common analysis and shared understanding. In this regard, international organisations can contribute to local mediation efforts, though not necessarily by practising direct mediation activities or acting as mediators themselves. They can implement complementary activities that help support such initiatives and which can then contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding in Eastern DRC. In this regard, international organisations engaged in peacebuilding in Eastern DRC could take the following actions:

### ACT AS INTERLOCUTORS AND ADVOCATES AT THE POLITICAL LEVEL

The credibility, reach and capacities of some international organisations allow them to influence actors that are beyond the reach of local organisations. While local actors might be very well informed of individual cases and be able to monitor occurrences of specific types of conflict on the ground, they sometimes do not have the capacity, scope, reach or influence to address actors and causes underlying local conflict. International organisations can make use of local knowledge and relay conclusions gathered at grassroots level to inform broader peace processes.

### UTILISE LOCALLY DERIVED ANALYSIS

The information gathered by local organisations stems from their long-term presence with communities. Local organisations often have a thorough understanding of conflict dynamics and of the complexities of the issues at play. This knowledge is invaluable but can be difficult for external actors to access. International organisations should develop a strong local presence and networks to allow them to draw on locally derived analysis to inform and support discussions and policy development at national and regional levels.

### UNDERSTAND THE RISKS OF UNDERMINING LOCAL MEDIATION EFFORTS

One of the risks for international organisations involved in local dispute resolution is to influence dynamics that they do not fully understand. This in turn can fuel new conflicts, or inadvertently escalate existing conflicts, if the intervention is not based on a fundamental understanding of local conflict and power dynamics. They may also duplicate or undermine local initiatives which are better placed to intervene. While international actors can play an important role, they must be cognisant that some issues need to be resolved at the local level, by those with a stake in peace.

## **SUPPORT LOCAL MEDIATION EFFORTS LINKED TO BROAD PEACEBUILDING STRATEGIES**

It is possible to invest in building the capacity of local organisations for mediation. While local organisations are active in mediation activities, they often lack a systematic approach that would make their interventions effective. Building skills for staff and partners of small, grassroots organisations can help them to be more effective by improving their practice. The capacity to act in local mediation settings should be supported as part of longer-term peacebuilding activities. This implies that the much-needed support the international community can bring should be tailored to both the needs and priorities of local groups.

## **BUILD STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE GRASSROOTS TO NATIONAL LEVELS**

Establish long-term relationships with local organisations which allow the sharing of information for converging strategic priorities. International organisations can make use of local knowledge and relay the conclusions gathered at the grassroots level to inform broader peace processes.

## **PROVIDE PREDICTABLE LONG-TERM SUPPORT TO LOCAL ORGANISATIONS**

International organisations can also assist local mediation efforts by providing logistical and research support. This has been done with great success by the LPI in South Kivu, and by Pax Christi which supports the RHA in Ituri. Both the LPI and Pax Christi have been able to provide their local partners with materials to ground their decisions, such as maps from the colonial era or legal research papers, which help shed light on land disputes. International NGOs can accompany local organisations engaged in mediation over the long run, and offer support in terms of logistics, methods or research. Such support is invaluable as it provides local organisations with the means to carry out their work.

## **HELP WITH EVALUATION AND THE LEARNING OF LESSONS**

International and local organisations can learn from mediation efforts in ways that allow them to analyse their synergy with and added value to other peacebuilding initiatives. Much can be done to reinforce, support and legitimise local mediation initiatives. By avoiding the duplication of efforts, which can have deleterious effects, and by filling strategic resource gaps in local efforts, international organisations can make valuable, long-term contributions to the resolution of conflicts in Eastern DRC.

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