



**Joint Learning Initiative
on Faith & Local Communities**
Strengthening Evidence-Based Faith Engagement



The role of religion in preventing and combating community violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo



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Glossary

Religion: a belief, a religious conviction that defines a human's relationship with the sacred being, recognition by a human being of a principle or superior being (Wikipedia).

Community violence: Community violence is a form of violence that is perpetrated across ethnic or communal lines, violent parties feel solidarity with their respective groups, and victims are chosen based on group membership (Wikipedia).

Operation Artemis: Operation Artemis was a military mission carried out from 6 June to 6 September 2003 in Ituri by the European Union under the European Security and Defence Policy, under the authority of the United Nations Security Council, according to its Resolution 1484 of 30 May 2003 (Wikipedia).

iDove: Interfaith dialogue on violent extremism, a project launched by the African Union Commission's Directorate of Citizens and Diaspora Organisations and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Kimbanguism: a religion founded in the first half of the 20th century in the territory of the current DRC, incorporating many elements of Christianity imported by missionaries but embellished with local specificities.

Acknowledgements

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We express our particular gratitude to all the respondents to our survey and the religious organisations in the eastern DRC for their contributions and active participation in the data collection and analysis.

Finally, we address our deepest thanks and full support to all the populations of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri, victims of community violence, in particular women, girls and children, their families and all those who contributed to the outcome of this research.

1. Introduction and Research Context

The DRC has been plunged into a deep and multifaceted crisis for several decades. The eastern part of the country is particularly ravaged by community violence due to the activism of a hundred local and foreign armed groups. Here, armed militias claim to protect their lands but also defend members of their communities against attacks by rival communities and/or loyalist security forces.

Community violence caused thousands of deaths between 1999 and 2003, until the intervention of the European Operation Artemis, under French command. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022), 5.6 million people are internally displaced, in particular, due to community violence. Alas, laws and involvement of organisations have not been enough to eradicate community violence, which is a growing phenomenon. The CODECO community militia is currently presented as one of the deadliest organisations, as is the M23 rebel movement, suspected of being supported by Rwanda and Uganda. This movement has been occupying a part of Congolese territory since August 2022. Indeed, the activism of the Allied Democratic Forces, affiliated with the Islamic State organisation, risks creating a rivalry with members of the Muslim communities in the region.

Despite being a secular state, the DRC is dominated by the multiple presences of churches and a strong religious tradition, with Christianity as the most popular religion. Almost all Congolese belong to a religion, and only 1% of the population declares themselves atheists. It seems that everyone believes in a certain divine providence. This gives religions a prominent place in influencing the behaviour of their followers, yet community violence continues to increase.

Despite the ethnic and cultural diversity in the DRC, peaceful coexistence has still not been achieved. This leaves room for several questions, particularly on the religious involvement in the resolution of sociopolitical crises due to religions' position of trust and influence both locally and globally.

The objective of this analytical report is to stimulate the debate around the role of religious organisations in promoting social justice, the culture of active non-violence and living together in a context of community violence in the eastern DRC.

This study has the following specific objectives:

- Identify the efforts and obstacles of religious organisations in the management and resolution of social crises in the region
- Understand the root causes of conflicts in the DRC and appreciate the level of influence of religion in the life of the inhabitants of the region
- Identify local and regional interreligious initiatives and/or actions
- Identify the practices (attitudes and behaviours) of local religious organisations favourable to peaceful coexistence

- Collect, analyse and present data that can lead to active advocacy for religious involvement in the development process and crisis management

2. Methodology

This research was carried out based on scientific standards. Data was collected in the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri in the eastern DRC. The study was based on a random sample of 100 people aged 20–50 years old. Male and female ordinary citizens, community leaders and religious actors were interviewed as part of this work. Sources of information were triangulated through observation, interviews and the survey questionnaire.

However, identifying and reaching respondents was not easy in the context of insecurity and war in the eastern DRC. My work experience in the region has given me ease in understanding the context. The respondents and survey sites were chosen to reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the region using the means at my disposal.

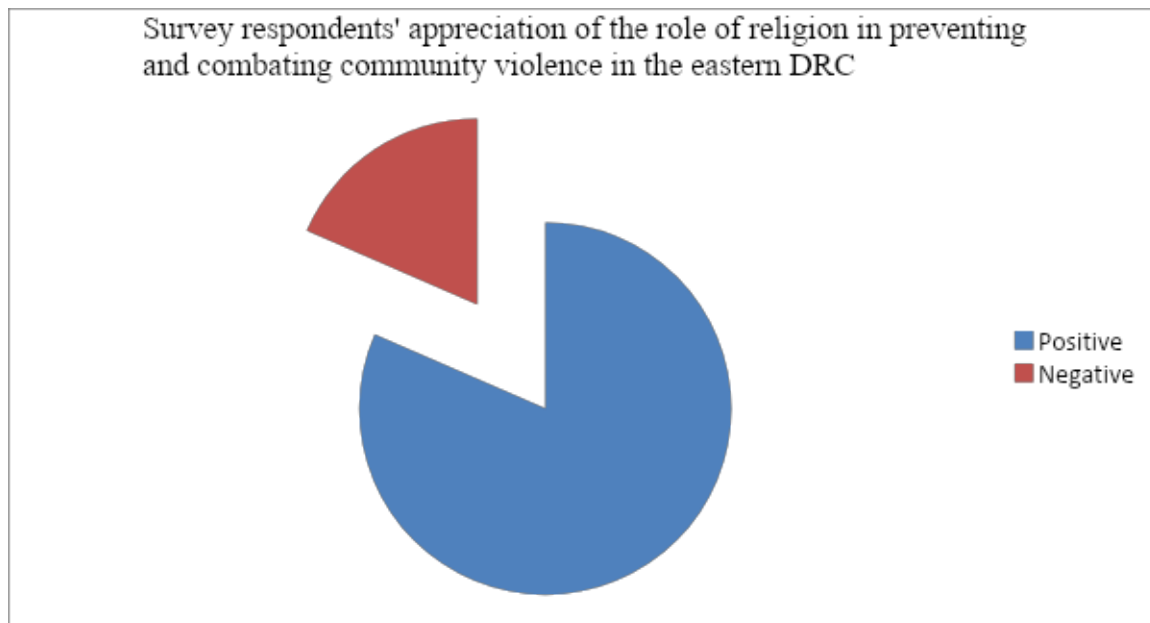
3. Presentation of Research Findings

Many ordinary citizens and actors in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors in the eastern DRC recognise the important role that religious communities play in building peace. According to the results of our research, 81.54% of those surveyed believe that religious organisations use their positions of trust and influence to prevent or better fight against community violence in the eastern DRC. Only 18.46% of respondents believe that religious communities do not play this role well. In addition, almost all of the religious actors questioned say they are open to the idea of collaborating with other local and national actors and are ready to join an interreligious programme that can facilitate their collaboration and federate their efforts in the prevention and/or fight against community violence in the DRC.

Profile and perception of survey respondents

The study was based on a random sample of 100 people aged 20–50 years old. Ordinary citizens, community leaders, religious actors and notable women and men were interviewed as part of this work. These interviewees were chosen to reflect the ethnic, religious and social diversity of the area.

Sex	Number	Religion			Provinces		
		Christian	Muslim	Animist	Nord-Kivu	Sud-Kivu	Ituri
Male	64	42	20	2	35	18	11
Female	36	28	8	0	17	10	9
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	70	28	2	52	28	20



The results presented in the table above demonstrate the inclusiveness of the study as 64 men and 36 women took part, with 70 Christians, 28 Muslims and two animists. The graph shows that 81.54% of those surveyed believe that religious organisations use their positions of trust and influence to prevent and combat community violence in the eastern DRC, and only 18.46% of respondents believe that religious communities do not play this role well.

Religion and the issue of peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo

It should be noted that the violent conflicts in the eastern DRC are not only related to resources and minerals, as usually claimed by several media organisations. There are other more important issues involved, including general poverty, sociopolitical antagonisms, land problems at the local level and corruption. Understanding this local context makes it possible to imagine an adequate peace process in the eastern DRC. Unfortunately, several organisations, the leaders of the country and their technical and financial partners seem to neglect the daily local problems that persist in the life of the populations and lead to violence.

Only religious organisations seem to have a more enriched perspective on how local communities in the eastern DRC perceive peace. This is practised in their way of acting despite internal divisions, selfishness and ideological manipulations. Indeed, religions are present even in entities outside the control of the State authority in the eastern DRC. They help maintain the social balance by highlighting the resolution of conflicts, in particular land disputes, the promotion of intercommunity reconciliation, the emergence of economic development, the promotion of human rights, civic education and the fight against corruption. All this gives religion great power to promote lasting peace in the DRC beyond the discriminatory and sometimes violent social norms promoted by certain religions regarding sexual minorities, etc.

Knowing that the country has some 250 ethnic groups and a deeply religious population – 50% Catholic Christians, 20% Protestants, 10% Kimbanguists, 10% Muslims, and 10% believers in sects and local beliefs (Symphorien, 2013) – mastery of the local context and above all consideration of local social beliefs are essential in the peacebuilding process and sustainable development.

Efforts of religion beyond daily preaching:

In the DRC, more than 71% of primary schools and 63.8% of secondary schools are managed by approved networks – more than 80% of which are the Catholic Church. If transformational leadership is internalised in these schools created by religious denominations, the DRC can hope for change and the march towards integral development.

Through the Service Civile pour la Paix programme, the Community of Baptist Churches in Central Africa, a local church member of the so-called Église du Christ au Congo (Church of Christ in Congo) community, has set up a Justice, Peace and Safeguarding of Creation programme. The programme aims to prevent and eradicate violence through conflict resolution, taking into account the pre- and post-conflict phases in the eastern DRC. Religion seems to be present in the daily life of the population, intervening in the peaceful management of conflicts, social justice, etc.

In the health sector, the majority of hospitals, structures and health facilities in the DRC belong to religious organisations, demonstrating the place of religion in solving the physical and mental health problems of the entire population. This matters a lot to building peace and sustainable development.

Religious people in the DRC are increasingly becoming key players in encouraging economic entrepreneurship among young people, especially women, to whom certain religious denominations teach basic notions of entrepreneurship and support them throughout this journey. This is already integrated into the programmes of several religions in the DRC, to the point where a Village Savings and Loan Association economic dynamic has already been developed.

In the DRC, there is no border between the political and religious worlds. Religion plays a central role in the balance of political power due to the simple fact that it directs the electoral commission and serves as a mediator to settle the biggest political crisis in the country. This is the case of the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO).

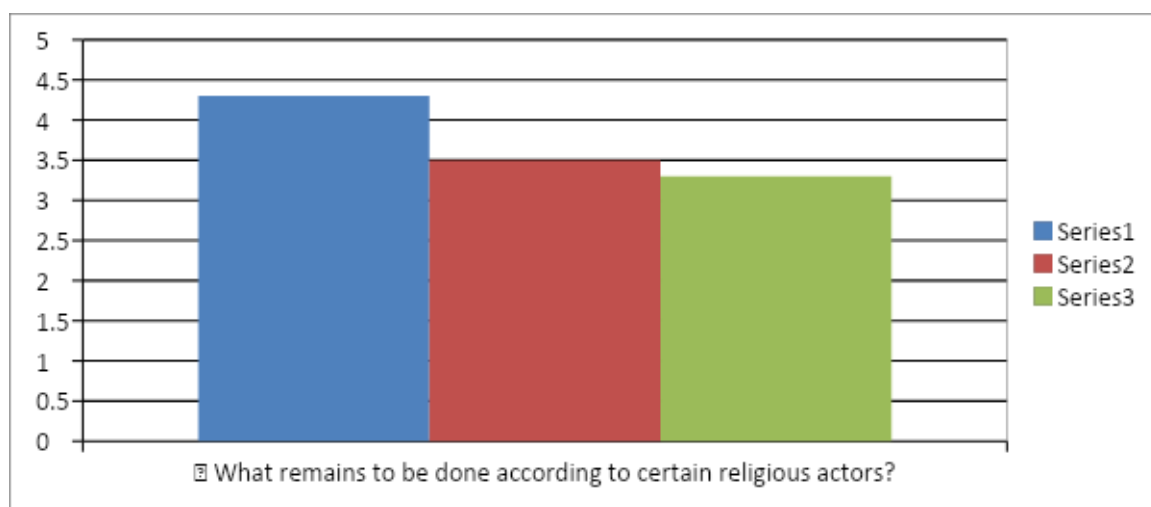
Several religious denominations in the DRC regularly organise seminars and workshops on living together, social justice, gender and equity, leadership, responsible citizenship, human rights, social entrepreneurship, economics, environmental education and, in short, life skills with the principle "Do no harm".

What remains to be done according to certain religious actors?

Series 1: Establish a permanent interreligious framework to unite the efforts of various religions and take advantage of their power in preventing and combating community violence in the eastern DRC.

Series 2: Explore best practices for including faith-based actors in the development and implementation of peacebuilding policies.

Series 3: Establish a collaboration programme between religious actors and those active in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors for a coordinated intervention in the region.



4. Conclusion

This analytical report has offered an overview of the situation in the eastern DRC and the role of religion in preventing and combating community violence in this bruised part of Africa. Due to its mastery of the local context and position of trust and influence at the local level, religion seems to play a major role in maintaining the social balance favourable to the construction of peace in the region.

Religious denominations are present even in entities beyond the control of the State authority in the eastern DRC and maintain necessary social measures, such as conflict resolution, particularly land disputes, the promotion of intercommunity reconciliation, economic development, promotion of human rights, civic education and the fight against corruption. Despite all this, communal violence has still not ceased in the eastern DRC. The dead and displaced have numbered in the millions for several decades, not to mention the torn social fabric and intergenerational trauma in the region.

Finally, the action of religion in preventing and combating community violence needs to be reinforced and improved to build lasting peace in the DRC.

5. Recommendations

Based on the research above, the following recommendations are put forward:

To religious leaders and their religious denominations:

- Overcome internal divisions and strengthen the moral authority of religion by becoming true voices of communities in favour of peace
- Collaborate effectively with State actors and those active in the humanitarian sectors, development and peacebuilding beyond selfishness, dogmatism and ideological manipulation
- Stop promoting discriminatory social norms and amplifying violence against certain categories of people, in particular, sexual minorities
- Set up an interreligious programme for young people to make them responsible for peaceful action for the benefit of present and future generations

To the Government of the DRC:

- Take advantage of the power of religion to understand the real, local everyday problems that persist in the lives of the population to ensure adequate interventions
- Equip and involve religious actors in the development and implementation of policies related to the construction of peace in the region

To the technical and financial partners:

- trust the religious denominations and support them technically and financially because they have a better understanding of the local context and are present on the ground at all times

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About the Author

Joseph Tsongo is a young social change activist based in eastern DR Congo. Born in the middle of the war in 1994 in Rutshuru territory, he remained proactive and challenged himself to help the people of the region rebuild despite the traumatic ordeals they endure on a daily basis.

Joseph is currently Coordinator of the organisation Amani-Institute ASBL, a socio-cultural movement bringing together young volunteers, in particular former child soldiers working in the promotion of the culture of peace and the development of grassroots communities in DR Congo.

Since 2016, he has organised several resilience and community building activities including sports exercises and participatory forum theatre workshops under the psychodrama style to bring members of local communities to the dialogue and reconciliation through art therapy.

Active in the youth space for more than 5 years, Joseph has also been working on education issues, citizenship, combating hate speech and promoting human rights including the sexual and reproductive rights of young people living in areas of violent conflict.

About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partner-ships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

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