Nonviolent Peaceforce



Case Study

PREVENTING ESCALATION, RESTORING COHESION

A Successful Experiment in Peaceful Conflict Resolution in the Buhavu Chiefdom

Democratic Republic of the Congo

When deadly landslides struck Bushushu and Nyamukubi on 4 May 2023, nearly 794 households fled to the Katashola plantation in Muhongoza village, Kalehe territory - settling without prior planning on farmland that the host community depended on for food and income.

Over two years, what began as post-disaster solidarity deteriorated into a serious intercommunal crisis: huts were burned at night, markets became unsafe, and both communities lost access to their livelihoods. This case study examines how NP's facilitation of a structured community dialogue process interrupted that cycle and what made it work.

Context and Drivers of Tension

Muhongoza is a farming village in Buhavu chiefdom, Kalehe territory. Its residents had long depended on the Katashola plantation (renting plots, growing food, working as day labourers) for their food security and income. After the 2023 landslides, displaced households from Bushushu and Nyamukubi settled on that same land. Initially, Muhongoza residents welcomed them with the village chief stating that his people accepted those displaced: "we will live together."

But as displacement stretched from weeks into months, and then years, survival on the plantation was no longer a choice but a necessity for displaced households. For Muhongoza residents who had paid rental fees before the disaster and were never reimbursed, or who found themselves barricaded out of their own fields when the camp was fenced off, including sections no displaced persons were using, the situation became increasingly untenable.

By early 2025, the M23's advance into South Kivu had triggered a second wave of displacement into the same area, and several humanitarian actors had reduced or ended their presence due to insecurity, leaving both communities without support or any functioning mechanism for resolving disputes.

Three overlapping drivers pushed the situation toward escalation:

- **Contested land and livelihoods:** The displaced households had no viable alternative to staying on the plantation, but for Muhongoza residents who depended on that land for food and income, the prolonged occupation meant economic harm. Rental fees went unreimbursed, fields became inaccessible, and no clear shared rules on land use existed to navigate the situation.

- **Breakdown in customary conflict management:** Some camp residents refused to recognise the authority of Muhongoza's village chief, the customary figure who would normally mediate local disputes. This rejection was experienced by the host community as a challenge to their identity and governance, and it removed the main local mechanism for managing conflict.
- **Intercommunal competition and mistrust:** Scarce resources, competition for humanitarian access, and persistent rumours of humanitarian favouritism deepened polarisation between the two communities. With no functioning forum for grievances, tensions surfaced in everyday life. Members of both communities publicly accused one another. Displaced residents stopped going to Muhongoza's market for fear of harassment. Muhongoza residents stopped crossing through the camp to reach their fields. At night, huts in the camp were burned.

NP's Intervention

> *"We were afraid to meet. Each remained on her own. But we also knew that continuing like this could not bring peace to our children."*
> Woman Dialogue Participant

NP's intervention began with a recognition that no dialogue could happen while both sides, including their leaders, refused to speak to each other. Before any formal process, NP conducted strategic shuttle diplomacy with both communities - over ten separate consultative meetings with community members and leaders from each side, including the chiefs of Muhongoza and Bushushu - to independently hear grievances, clarify perceptions, and begin building the minimum trust needed for direct conversation.

Once both sides indicated readiness, NP invited each community to name individuals they trusted to serve as mediators, rather than proposing candidates themselves. Each community generated its own list, and four individuals appeared on both – three religious leaders and a representative of the Buhavu chiefdom – who were then selected to lead the mediation. This approach was deliberate, ensuring that those facilitating the process held legitimacy and trust across both communities.

With NP's support, the mediators organised a pre-dialogue with a small group of community representatives to understand the context, hear initial grievances, and identify initial avenues for discussion. Throughout this preparation phase, and during the pre-dialogue, NP maintained protective engagement with community leaders to monitor tensions and prevent escalation.

The main dialogue took place the following week, on 28–29 January 2026, at a Protestant church in Muhongoza – a neutral, accessible venue with moral legitimacy for both communities. NP supported the process through protective presence and accompaniment, creating a safe and trusted space for exchange where participants felt secure enough to speak openly and engage constructively. The dialogue was structured around four principles:

1. **Inclusive and representative participation**, with the presence and voice of all stakeholders, including traditional authorities, community leaders, youth, women, host community members, and displaced household representatives, to reduce power asymmetries and prevent any perception of exclusion or bias.

"This meeting is noble because a divided community can never move forward, which is why we responded to the invitation to listen to both sides and formalize this mediation, because reconciliation is a good thing and a good initiative."
Jean de la Croix, Territorial Administrative Secretary

"We have left all our work to ensure that this situation is completely resolved, that is our wish [...]. We want to listen to the burning issues that have not been solved in the past, and we hope to finally find it together." Parish priest of Ihusi

2. **Free expression of grievances**, in a safe and respectful environment. Each party was encouraged to acknowledge its share of responsibility, voice its frustrations, and actively listen to the concerns of the other, without judgment or interruption.

3. **Conflict-sensitive communication**, integrating local customary, religious, and socio-cultural approaches to avoid stigmatisation, defuse confrontational discourse, and reinforce shared values of respect, dignity, and peaceful coexistence.

4. **Community-led solutions**, grounded in local values of peace, forgiveness, and solidarity. Discussions gradually led to compromises acceptable to all parties, formalised through a signed compromise act serving as a collective reference for the prevention of future conflicts.



Outcome and Results

Since the dialogue in late January 2026, no further incidents of conflict or violence have been reported between the two communities. Changes are also visible in everyday interactions – for example, Katashola residents who were previously made to wait last to receive movement tokens from local authorities are now served without delay, indicating more equal treatment in practice.

Signed Compromise Agreement and Collective Forgiveness

Official requests for forgiveness were made and accepted on both sides, including by local authorities, community leaders, host community members, and displaced households. These commitments were formalised in a signed compromise act, ratified by the parties, mediators, and customary and religious authorities, which now serves as a collective, morally binding reference for peaceful coexistence and the prevention of future tensions.

Restored Customary Authority

The dialogue formally restored the legitimacy of Muhongoza's village chief and reaffirmed the central role of customary structures in the management of community affairs - reestablishing the local dispute resolution structures that had broken down.

Restored Freedom of Movement and Access to Resources

Clear commitments were made to ensure non-discriminatory access to agricultural land and markets, including through transparent sharecropping arrangements, and full freedom of movement for all. These commitments have since been implemented in practice. Prior to the dialogue, people from Katashola were unable to access the Muhongoza market, significantly limiting their ability to sell goods, while Muhongoza residents could not reach their farmland due to restrictions around the displacement site. This has now changed: Katashola residents are able to access the market, with Muhongoza women actively clearing space for them, and Muhongoza residents can once again cross through the camp to reach their fields. In a further sign of this shift, the communities themselves decided to rename “Katashola camp” as “Katashola Avenue”, marking the integration of displaced households as Muhongoza village members with equal rights and recognition.

Women's Contribution to Reconciliation

Women from both communities played a critical role in the reconciliation process. Several publicly called for an end to mutual accusations and for the rebuilding of social relations between families. Their commitment to relaying messages of peace within communities and networks helped consolidate the agreements beyond the dialogue room itself.

This collaboration has continued beyond the dialogue. Following a joint focus group discussion in March 2026, women from both communities approached NP to request support in establishing a joint Women’s Peace Team. They had already mobilised 39 women across both communities, demonstrating a growing sense of shared identity and willingness to work together to address future challenges.

What Made it Work and What Comes Next

NP's intervention was distinguished by an inclusive approach deeply rooted in local dynamics, promoting a sustainable resolution of tensions without resorting to armed protection or imposing external solutions. NP did not "solve" the conflict, but rather created the safe and enabling conditions for local actors to be the real architects of it.

- **Preparation was the work.** The ten shuttle meetings before the formal dialogue were not a warm-up. In a context of deep mistrust, this was where the conditions for agreement were built. Bringing both sides together too quickly would likely have reinforced rather than reduced tensions.
- **Legitimacy came from within.** NP asked communities to name their own representatives. The religious leaders and chief who stepped forward held local respect, trust, and authority. This helped make the process and its outcomes the community's own.
- **Build capacity, not dependency.** Through facilitation, methodological support, and mentoring of local leaders, NP contributed to the development of practical skills in nonviolent communication, active listening, conflict management and conflict resolution. These capacities now constitute sustainable social capital that communities can draw on in the face of future disputes.
- **Customary authority was a structural issue, not a ceremonial one.** The camp residents' refusal to recognise the village chief was both a symptom of the breakdown and one of its causes. Restoring that legitimacy was not incidental to the dialogue but was one of its central tasks.
- **The dialogue happened without material incentives.** No participants received transport fees or other payments. People came because they wanted resolution, reflecting genuine community ownership and challenging a common assumption about what makes dialogue processes work. When communities engage voluntarily, they are more likely to uphold what they have agreed to because the process and its outcomes belong to them. This is at the heart of UCP - communities engage because they gain in security, dignity, and wellbeing, not material aid.
- **The agreement is a beginning, not an end.** The signing of the compromise act opens a consolidation phase. Continued protective presence and early warning engagement remain important to monitor whether commitments hold, catch new tensions early, and support community to entrench peaceful behaviour in everyday community life.

> *"Nonviolent Peaceforce has accomplished something extraordinary. No one thought this dialogue could succeed [...] but the process took place in remarkable serenity and tranquillity. This dialogue has not only eased tensions, but also changed the way we think about the resolution of disputes. We have learned a deep and meaningful lesson - that structured and neutral dialogue can transform even the most blocked situations"*
> Juvénal Rushisha, Chief of Bushushu