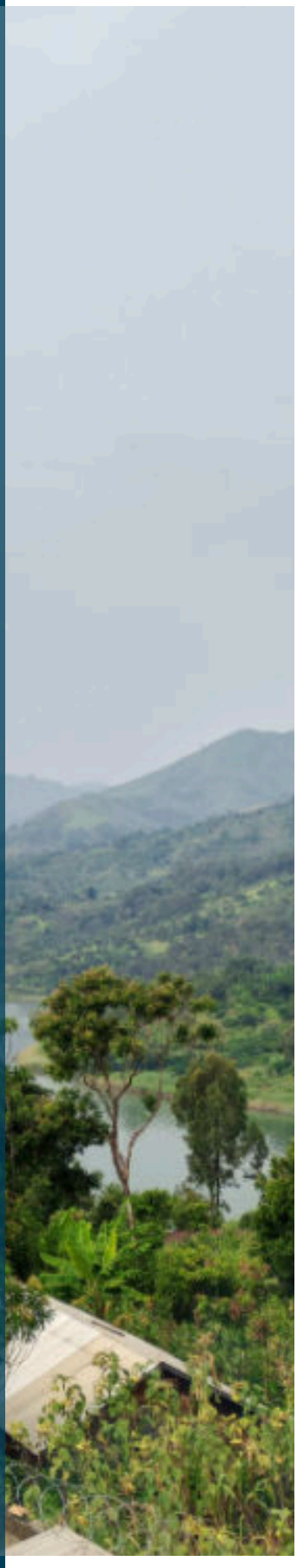
Nonviolent Peaceforce

# The Future of Civilian Protection in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

## *Strengthening dialogue between research, community experience and public policy*



**Report from the Technical Roundtable**
**Kinshasa**
**25 September 2026**

# Executive Summary

On 25 September 2026, a technical roundtable organised in Kinshasa by Nonviolent Peaceforce and its partners, and facilitated by the Ministry of the Interior, brought together representatives of public institutions, research organisations and civil society, alongside humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, to examine the future of civilian protection in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). After three decades of conflict and substantial investment in protection, civilians continue to experience widespread violence and insecurity. The roundtable helped strengthen collaboration between actors whose research, operational experience, community knowledge and public policy responsibilities too often remain disconnected. Through expert discussions, an exercise exploring future scenarios and group work, participants identified the following key findings and priorities for action.

### *Key findings*

- A fragmented and constantly evolving protection landscape: Protection risks, institutional capacities and available mechanisms vary considerably across territories and may change as conflict dynamics and territorial control evolve.
- Persistent institutional and accountability gaps: Weak judicial and security institutions, humanitarian access constraints, limited resources and changes in the international protection architecture continue to undermine civilian safety. As a matter of principle, the protection afforded to civilians must remain impartial, irrespective of territorial control or political affiliation, but these institutional gaps make this difficult.
- The essential but limited role of communities: Communities play a central role in preventing and responding to violence, but their protection mechanisms cannot substitute for institutional responsibilities, particularly amid the proliferation of armed self-defence groups that themselves constitute a new threat.
- Protection risks embedded in wider conflict dynamics: Governance failures, impunity, identity-based tensions and economic insecurity shape civilians' exposure to violence, revealing the limitations of narrowly defined protection responses.
- The need to prioritise protection outcomes: Existing knowledge, mechanisms and interventions must translate into measurable improvements in civilian safety, rather than being assessed primarily through activities delivered.

### *Six strategic recommendations*

- Establish joint, context-specific protection analysis and planning, alongside results-based monitoring.
- Implement an integrated, multi-actor protection pilot in selected priority areas.
- Develop and operationalise a national policy framework for civilian protection.
- Establish regular dialogue between research, public policy and operational actors.
- Strengthen community protection capacities through unarmed civilian protection (UCP) approaches.
- Systematically integrate civilian protection into peace, ceasefire monitoring and stabilisation processes.

# 1. Methodology

For more than three decades, eastern DRC has experienced recurrent armed conflict and successive humanitarian crises. Despite substantial investment in peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, institutional reform and community-based protection, civilians continue to face severe threats to their safety and dignity. While the reasons for these persistent challenges are complex, one important limitation lies in the fragmentation of knowledge and action. Public institutions, researchers, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, and affected communities have accumulated considerable experience and developed diverse approaches to civilian protection, yet their efforts too often proceed in parallel.

Against this backdrop, Nonviolent Peaceforce convened a technical roundtable in Kinshasa on 25 September 2026 to examine emerging civilian protection challenges and identify opportunities for stronger collaboration and collective action. Approximately 40 participants attended the event, both in person and online.

The roundtable adopted a participatory, forward-looking methodology structured around four complementary sessions:

1. ***Understanding the current civilian protection landscape:*** An initial expert panel examined contemporary conflict dynamics, the evolving international protection architecture and the respective roles of state institutions, communities and other protection actors.
2. ***Exploring possible futures for civilian protection:*** Through a structured scenario exercise, participants considered alternative trajectories over a five-year horizon in two distinct environments: areas under AFC/M23 control and areas under state control. The aim was to identify recurring risks, critical uncertainties and vulnerabilities in protection arrangements, rather than predict how the context would evolve.
3. ***From evidence to action:*** A second panel brought together perspectives from humanitarian protection, operational practice, peacebuilding and public institutions to examine the implications of these possible futures for protection policy and practice.
4. ***Identifying strategic priorities:*** Working in mixed groups, participants developed priority recommendations and identified opportunities to strengthen collaboration between protection actors.

Discussions were conducted under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open dialogue. The findings presented below synthesise the discussions without attributing observations or positions to individual participants.




## 2. The Evolving Landscape of Civilian Protection

### *2.1. A fragmented and evolving protection landscape*

Civilian protection conditions vary considerably across eastern DRC, reflecting differences in territorial control, conflict dynamics, institutional presence and humanitarian access. In areas under AFC/M23 control, participants highlighted arbitrary detention, accusations of political affiliation, coercive taxation, sexual violence, restrictions on freedom of movement and the absence of functioning judicial institutions. In areas under state control, the presence of public institutions and security forces does not necessarily guarantee effective protection, particularly where multiple armed actors are present and accountability mechanisms remain weak.

The scenario exercise explored how these environments might evolve over the next five years. While violence against civilians, movement restrictions, economic coercion and impunity emerged as recurring concerns across several possible futures, changes in state authority, territorial control, the regionalisation of the conflict and the future of armed groups represent critical uncertainties. The discussions demonstrated that protection needs and capacities cannot be understood through a single, static analysis of the conflict.

### *2.2. Structural weaknesses in institutional protection and accountability*

Weak judicial and security institutions, limited accountability mechanisms, insufficient resources and fragmented responsibilities emerged as persistent vulnerabilities in the protection architecture. MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu has further exposed certain gaps, particularly where transition planning, institutional ownership and the capacities of remaining actors have been insufficient to sustain essential protection functions. Declining resources for humanitarian action and peacebuilding compound these challenges.

The scenario exercise showed that these vulnerabilities could persist across markedly different political and security trajectories. Even in the most favourable futures, effective early warning systems, access to justice and sustained institutional and community protection capacities remain essential. Participants also emphasised the importance of preserving the impartiality of civilian protection in politically contested environments. The right to protection cannot depend on territorial control, identity or actual or perceived political affiliation, particularly where recognised state institutions are absent or unable to fulfil their responsibilities.

### *2.3. Community protection amid institutional weakness and militarisation*

Throughout the discussions, communities emerged as essential actors in preventing and mitigating violence through local knowledge, early warning mechanisms, dialogue and other protection strategies. Their role becomes particularly important where institutional and international protection arrangements are limited or absent.

However, the discussions also highlighted the risks associated with the militarisation of self-protection. Participants expressed concern about the proliferation and potential political instrumentalisation of armed groups, as well as uncertainties surrounding the future of Wazalendo and other local armed actors, particularly in relation to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

The scenario exercise illustrated how changes in state authority could alter the balance between institutional protection, community mechanisms and armed self-defence. While the active role of communities is indispensable, participants emphasised that it cannot substitute for the state's primary responsibility to protect civilians.

### *2.4. Protection risks embedded in wider conflict and governance dynamics*

Participants emphasised that civilian protection cannot be separated from the political, security and socioeconomic dynamics that generate and sustain violence. Impunity, weak governance, identity-based tensions, displacement, economic coercion and restricted access to services contribute to civilian vulnerability, often reinforcing one another.

The scenario exercise showed how these dynamics could intensify through further regionalisation of the conflict, competition for control over territory and resources, the proliferation of armed groups and the manipulation of ethnic or identity-based divisions. Participants also raised concerns about reprisals and targeted violence following changes in territorial control, illustrating how political and security transitions may generate new protection threats even when wider conditions appear to improve.

These discussions highlighted the interdependence of civilian protection, justice, social cohesion, peacebuilding, disarmament and reintegration, and socioeconomic recovery. They also emphasised the importance of addressing the behaviour of actors responsible for threats, rather than focusing exclusively on the vulnerabilities of affected populations.

### *2.5. From protection activities to measurable outcomes*

A central theme of the discussions was the distinction between the existence of protection mechanisms and their actual effectiveness in reducing violence against civilians. Eastern DRC has an extensive range of institutions, coordination structures, research, community initiatives and operational interventions, yet their collective contribution to civilian safety is sometimes difficult to establish.

Participants highlighted the limitations of approaches assessed primarily through activities delivered rather than changes achieved. More meaningful measures of protection effectiveness include reduced violence and exposure to threats, fewer reprisals, improved freedom of movement, safer access to essential services and greater protection of civilian infrastructure.

The discussions confirmed one of the core observations underpinning the roundtable: despite the considerable knowledge and experience held by institutions, researchers, practitioners and communities, these resources remain insufficiently connected and translated into coordinated action. This fragmentation limits opportunities for collective learning, adaptation and improved protection outcomes.



# 3. From Analysis to Action: Strengthening Civilian Protection

Building on these findings, the second half of the roundtable focused on the implications for future protection policy and practice. The second panel discussion and group work generated a range of proposals, synthesised into the following six recommendations, framed as strategic priorities.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1

### Establish joint, context-specific and results-oriented protection planning

Bring together public institutions—including the police, the military and government programmes with protection responsibilities—humanitarian and protection organisations, civil society actors and community representatives to jointly analyse priority protection threats, vulnerabilities and existing capacities in different conflict environments.

Use these analyses to identify the actors best placed to address specific threats, define complementary responsibilities and agree on coordinated responses. Establish shared indicators to measure changes in civilian safety—including reduced violence and reprisals, improved freedom of movement and safer access to essential services—rather than relying primarily on monitoring activities delivered. This process could be coordinated by the Protection Cluster.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2

### Implement an integrated, multi-actor protection pilot in priority areas

Translate the joint analysis and results-based approach outlined above into concrete action through an integrated protection pilot in selected conflict-affected areas. Bring together community protection mechanisms, relevant public institutions, humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations, research bodies and actors able to engage in dialogue with those responsible for threats to civilians. Establish shared protection priorities, clearly assigned and complementary interventions, and mechanisms for joint monitoring of results.

Engage research organisations in documenting implementation, assessing protection outcomes and generating lessons to inform adaptation and potential replication in other contexts. Such a pilot would provide a practical opportunity to test how different protection capacities and approaches can complement one another to achieve measurable improvements in civilian safety.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3

## Develop a national policy framework for civilian protection

Advance the development of a national civilian protection policy that establishes common principles, clarifies institutional responsibilities and strengthens coherence between national, provincial and local protection arrangements. Ground this framework in existing legal provisions, research, operational experience and the perspectives of affected communities. Prioritise the harmonisation and strengthening of existing mechanisms rather than creating unnecessary parallel structures, and improve the accessibility and dissemination of relevant legal frameworks and protection evidence.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4

## Establish regular multi-stakeholder dialogue on civilian protection

Build on the September roundtable by establishing a regular space for exchange between public institutions, research organisations, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, local civil society and representatives of community protection mechanisms.

Use this platform to share emerging analyses of protection risks, exchange operational lessons, identify gaps and opportunities for joint action, and follow up on strategic priorities. Connect discussions across local, provincial and national levels, drawing wherever possible on existing coordination and learning mechanisms. The objective is not simply to sustain dialogue, but to establish more systematic connections between evidence, operational experience and public decision-making.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 5

## Strengthen community protection capacities through unarmed civilian protection

Invest in strengthening the capacities of local civil society organisations, community protection structures and relevant public institutions to prevent and respond to violence through civilian, nonviolent approaches.

Expand access to training and practical accompaniment in unarmed civilian protection (UCP), conflict analysis, early warning and rapid response, mediation, protective presence and other context-appropriate strategies for reducing threats to civilians.

Ensure meaningful participation by women, young people and affected communities in protection risk analysis and decision-making. Strengthen connections between community mechanisms and wider protection arrangements while preserving their civilian character and recognising the responsibilities of public institutions.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 6

**Integrate civilian protection into peace, ceasefire monitoring and stabilisation processes**

Integrate explicit civilian protection objectives and safeguards into ongoing peace, security and stabilisation initiatives, including ceasefire monitoring arrangements and processes for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of armed groups.

Prioritise measures to prevent reprisals and targeted violence during changes in territorial control, address abuses committed by armed actors and security forces, and ensure that community protection concerns inform political and security arrangements.

Explore opportunities for civilian participation in ceasefire monitoring and strengthen coordination between protection, peacebuilding and stabilisation actors. Across these processes, uphold the principle of impartiality in protection, which must apply to all civilians, irrespective of territorial control, identity or actual or perceived political affiliation.

## Conclusion

The roundtable highlighted both the complexity of civilian protection in eastern DRC and the wealth of knowledge, experience and capacities already available among institutions, communities, researchers and operational actors. Its principal contribution was to bring these perspectives together and identify opportunities to translate them into more coherent and effective collective action.

The findings underscore the importance of protection approaches that respond to differentiated and evolving risks, address persistent institutional and accountability gaps, recognise the active role of communities and prioritise measurable improvements in civilian safety.

The six recommendations offer ways to advance these priorities, from strengthening policy coherence and sustaining multi-stakeholder dialogue to testing integrated protection approaches in priority areas. They are intended to inform ongoing technical and policy discussions, including forthcoming high-level exchanges on civilian protection in DRC, and contribute to more collaborative, adaptive and effective protection efforts.




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