Underlying tensions:
South Sudanese refugees and pathways to conflict prevention in the Democratic Republic of Congo
Introduction

Between July 2016 and September 2017 approximately 73,000 refugees1 from South Sudan fled to areas of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to escape violent conflict in their homeland. This movement of people is not new – since 1990 at various times civilians from DRC and South Sudan have migrated across the border to relative safety from conflict in their respective countries. However, unless steps are taken to prevent escalation, the recent influx of refugees from South Sudan has the potential to turn existing tensions between the two communities into violence.

Based on participatory research carried out across Ituri, Bas-Uélé and Haut-Uélé provinces of DRC in August 2017, this policy brief examines the movement of refugees from South Sudan and its impact on conflict dynamics in northeastern DRC. It puts forward three recommendations for action in order to stem the potential for violent conflict.

Key recommendations

1. Humanitarian assistance needs to integrate conflict sensitive approaches to prevent further deterioration of relations between Congolese and South Sudanese communities. Current activities by humanitarian actors and local leadership are focused on refugees from South Sudan, straining refugees' relations with local communities.

2. Humanitarian action and future development assistance need to focus on all marginalised groups to enhance social inclusion. Currently, support neglects internally displaced persons (IDPs), Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) returnees and Congolese refugees returning from South Sudan.

3. Community-based reconciliation processes need support to overcome deeply entrenched and mutually negative stereotypes held by Congolese communities and groups from South Sudan. In Dungu, where some of these processes have been initiated, they are short term, ad hoc and not part of a sustainable strategy owned by local actors.

Methodology

Participatory research took place across Ituri, Bas-Uélé and Haut-Uélé provinces during August 2017 in 14 communities in Aru, Faradje, Dungu, Ango and Bondo territories. Research was conducted by a team of 27 researchers (16 male and 11 female), composed primarily of youth and local civil society staff from Haut-Uélé and Ituri province. The research has also benefitted from the experience and learning of Conciliation Resources and partners working on LRA issues in DRC for over seven years. The research is nested within two years of recent engagement related to strengthening the role of youth and women’s participation in peace and security efforts to further strengthen community resilience. Research activities included 76 focus group discussions with 331 men and 336 women, semi-structured interviews with 23 men and 7 women and a survey with 20 men and 20 women respondents. Overall, the research activities reached 737 people in the area consisting of 374 men and 363 women. The research team participated in analysis workshops in Dungu and Aru in order to identify key findings. Key informants included local civil society members, customary chiefs, religious leaders, local protection committees, refugees from South Sudan, IDPs, Congolese refugees who have returned from South Sudan, Congolese security actors, UN staff, United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in DR Congo staff among various other members of communities visited.

1. UNHCR. [31 August 2017]. South Sudan Situation – Congo (Democratic Republic). http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/country.php?id=46
Background

Historically, people from DRC and from South Sudan (formerly Sudan) have migrated across the border in search of security and protection from conflict in their respective homelands. However, the current influx of refugees from South Sudan to the northeast of DRC, which began in August 2016, is straining relationships between the two communities and exacerbating social tensions.

The recent history of formerly Sudanese refugees seeking protection in DRC dates back to 1990 when refugees fled to DRC to escape civil war in Sudan. In 1998 there were 129,304 2 Sudanese refugees in DRC when the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) arrived to forcibly conscript Sudanese youth into their ranks. Three days of looting and violence followed against the local Congolese population. Many of the Sudanese refugees present at the time are accused by Congolese community members of pointing out places of value to the SPLA in their attacks.3

When the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, Sudanese refugees returned home in large numbers. In turn, Congolese refugees arrived in South Sudan in 2008 fleeing instability caused by the LRA in DRC, and began to return in 2013 as violence once more broke out in South Sudan.

The humanitarian response to the refugee influx from South Sudan has been hampered by significant insecurity in the area and an inability to access large parts of the region in order to confirm current numbers of refugees, provide assistance, establish settlement areas and move refugees into settlements.

This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Borders, names and other features are presented according to common practice in the region. Conciliation Resources takes no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid. © Conciliation Resources

Tensions beneath the surface

In Haut-Uélé province, a traditional chief hired a male South Sudanese refugee to do some work on his compound. The male refugee who was hired came to live at the traditional chief’s compound. While he was there, he committed an act of sexual assault against a girl staying in the compound. The members of the community decided to kill the offender in response to the incident. However, the traditional chief intervened and took the offender to the police instead.

Community responses to sexual violence are rarely as violent as this. However, the incident highlights the tensions simmering below the surface which could easily erupt.

Latent stereotypes and negative mutual perceptions between these groups have risen to the surface.

Latent stereotypes and negative mutual perceptions between these groups have risen to the surface as they have returned to being in close contact. At the same time, the current living arrangements – with host communities and refugees in close proximity – provide an opportunity to strengthen relationships between them and develop inclusive approaches that take the needs of various groups into account. However, as formal refugee settlements begin to open across the area and refugees are moved from host families into separate settlements, Congolese and South Sudanese populations will live further apart, making it increasingly unlikely that these tensions will dissipate.

The most recent comprehensive assessment of refugee numbers in the area dates back to late 2016 and current numbers are estimated at more than 84,000 people. However, as of August 2017 many areas remain inaccessible, so actual numbers may be higher. Women and youth comprise 84 per cent of South Sudanese refugees.

As of August 2017 there have been no reported incidents of armed violence between Congolese host communities and South Sudanese refugees. However, poor relations are manifested through verbal insults or threats traded in a marketplace or when drinking alcohol, and more rarely a physical fight by youth engaged in sporting matches.

Demography

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Refugees and asylum-seekers from South Sudan in Democratic Republic of Congo

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Findings in detail

1. The need for conflict sensitivity strategies and practices

Humanitarian efforts by Congolese and external humanitarian actors need to be based on conflict analysis and a conflict sensitivity strategy in order to bolster reconciliation between refugees and the host communities and prevent further deterioration of relations between them. The absence of this is complicating the delivery of assistance and further straining already tense relationships.

Conflict sensitivity acknowledges the conflict context in which an intervention operates and the interactions between interventions and the context. Conflict sensitive strategies and practices seek to minimise negative consequences and maximise positive outcomes, particularly with respect to inter-group relations.

Tensions in the implementation of humanitarian assistance

Many South Sudanese refugees are currently living with Congolese host families until refugee settlements are established and refugees can be transferred to new sites. Assistance measures – which are reported to include food packages or financial assistance in some areas – have been provided to some refugees, although community members report that refugees arriving since June 2017 are still waiting for this to begin, and that rations provided are grossly inadequate. In many cases, when food assistance is provided, it is exclusively provided to refugees; host families, who often struggle to provide for their own families, do not receive assistance.

“"There has been no recognition of hosts. People here must be hired, not just brought from Bunia and Goma. It is not good to only bring outsiders, there are knowledgeable people here."" - Refugee family host

Unequal assistance

One head of a household in Haut-Uélé province recounted how she had a large group of refugees living in her family's compound, and many of them had become unwell. As the illness spread among the refugees and her family members due to living in close quarters, medical assistance was delivered to the refugees but not to her family, leaving them to seek out and pay for their own health care. "I called when people were sick, but when they came they only came for the refugees." Experiences such as these have contributed to an aversion among host communities to continue in their role as hosts and a growing sense that it would be better to have refugees living in a settlement, rather than among the community.

Humanitarian actors’ strained relationship with host communities dates back to 2007 when expected infrastructure developments were not implemented, leading to the confiscation of seven United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) vehicles by community members in protest. While relations with the UNHCR have improved somewhat since then, host communities’ perception of the humanitarian principle of neutrality has been tarnished. Local Congolese continue to observe assistance measures being exclusively dedicated to refugees, and international staff or Congolese from other areas of the country benefiting from the employment opportunities brought about by the settlements. One woman hosting a refugee family remarked, "There has been no recognition of hosts. People here must be hired, not just brought from Bunia and Goma. It is not good to only bring outsiders, there are knowledgeable people here."

Prioritising the hiring of staff from the surrounding community in the area where settlements are located, and relaxing restrictive UN hiring protocols that prioritises relocating staff from closing missions, would enhance refugee-host community contact which is at risk of decreasing once settlements in the area are operational. Furthermore, local hiring could help humanitarian actors draw upon community members’ deep contextual knowledge and open up valuable communication pathways between UNHCR and community members. In addition, it would increase the sense of ownership among communities in the area towards UNHCR’s mission of protection and care for refugees. This in turn would help align
organisational practice with what UNHCR staff have described as “reconciliation as a major building block of our humanitarian assistance”.\textsuperscript{7}

Congolese community members shared concerns that the presence of refugees exacerbates food shortages and rising land pressures, which have already been negatively impacted by insecurity in the area. Financial assistance given to refugees is seen to contribute to price fluctuations in community markets as demand exceeds capacity to increase local production. Viable agricultural land in areas with adequate levels of security to enable farming, fishing and hunting is already scarce, and the pressure on such land increases when customary chiefs in the region grant land to humanitarian actors for use by refugees.

To mitigate these tensions and prevent violence, it is critical to understand the dynamics playing out between groups, power imbalances, levels of inequality and how organisational practices potentially improve or risk worsening these relationships. A conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity review would require humanitarian actors and their partners go beyond conversations with top-level decision makers at the provincial and territorial level to consider the perspectives and experiences from a range of stakeholders, especially at the grassroots level.

### Engaging local civil society actors as partners in the conflict analysis and subsequent design of humanitarian and development programming

Engaging local civil society actors as partners in the conflict analysis and subsequent design of humanitarian and development programming is an essential part of integrating contextual knowledge.

### The potential for conflict sensitive approaches

The refugee situation requires humanitarian actors, traditional and government leaders, donor agencies and civil society organisations to pay attention to the potential conflict dynamics in this context. Community members who participated in the research suggested that conflict sensitive practices could include providing humanitarian assistance to families hosting refugees, hiring members of the community for staffing needs at refugee settlements, and consulting with community members regarding resources such as land and water sources allocated for refugee use.

Congolese authorities should work with both Congolese and international humanitarian aid providers to encourage the uptake of conflict analyses and conflict sensitive practices that take into consideration the need for a healthy relationship between refugees and host communities. Local leaders and customary chiefs should be encouraged to undertake participatory community consultation processes when allocating land and resources for refugee use to ensure they gain a thorough understanding of how communities are using proposed settlement sites and to avoid deepening tensions through uneven resource allocation.

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\textsuperscript{7} UNHCR staff, personal interview, 23 August 2017.
Donors designing funding packages should require the integration of conflict sensitivity and analysis in programme design, in order to ensure that they do not inevitably create or deepen tensions between the multiple groups in the area. International humanitarian and development actors would benefit by working closely with national and local civil society organisations in carrying out conflict analyses and in reviewing assistance strategies to determine whether these are responsive to the dynamics in inter-group relationships. UNHCR and the National Commission for Refugees (CNR) should engage their partners in conducting a joint conflict analysis in the area and carry out a conflict sensitivity review of their current strategies and their implementation.

Humanitarian strategies have evolved to include investment in long-term socio-economic development, which is a milestone to be celebrated. ReHoPE, the UNHCR’s Refugee and Host Population Empowerment Strategic Framework, is one example of this in Uganda. ReHoPE has facilitated an increase in humanitarian agencies investing in integrated community infrastructure rather than establishing separate health and education facilities for refugees. However, in DRC the same strategy has been inconsistently implemented across the provinces, as some pre-existing facilities are being utilised that cater to refugee needs independently from host community services. In addition, there are low levels of awareness among refugees and host communities about the planned integrated infrastructure. Including development components in humanitarian assistance does not necessarily ensure that such development is conflict sensitive, and these strategies need to go beyond a developmental approach to consider the impact on community-level relationships in how programmes are implemented.

Donors’ funding packages should redefine refugee assistance to also be inclusive of host communities in recognition of the fact that the long-term health of refugees is tied to that of their hosts. Development programmes are more likely to make a positive contribution when they are based on a holistic assessment of the dynamics between various groups affected by the planned programme. They should actively build in opportunities for positive relationship building, or at the very least avoid aggravating relations between groups through the inadvertent delivery of services to certain groups at the exclusion of others.

2. The need to focus on all marginalised groups to increase broader social inclusion

The level of attention for other marginalised groups, who are absent from assistance strategies in the area, has not matched that given to refugees from South Sudan. These groups, including IDPs and LRA returnees – particularly female returnees and their children – already face social stigma, have difficulty participating in social life and accessing economic and social opportunities. Their situation does not result from the transnational migration crisis, therefore the exclusive focus on South Sudanese refugees risks their further exclusion from community social structures. The findings of this participatory research suggest that national and local level leaders should work with international donors and agencies to inform a better understanding of the local context, the specific barriers such groups face, and underline the importance of targeting assistance to them.

Within northeastern DRC, which is heavily affected by insecurity, poverty and the limited implementation of gender sensitive legislation, the economic and social challenges faced by multiple groups are significant. Distinguishing features between different parts of the population are diminished in this environment, as many groups face a substantial number of challenges.

IDPs who have fled insecurity within DRC often face similar levels of vulnerability as that faced by refugees. They arrive in an unfamiliar area with little access to financial or food resources and experience the same need to establish an income source in order to sustain themselves. In northeastern DRC, IDPs number around 210,000 and can face similar levels of social resistance from receiving communities who fear that they will claim ownership to land temporarily granted to them by individuals or customary chiefs. In some areas, community members report feeling that IDPs are outsiders with less legitimacy to reside in the community: “Displaced persons are living there but it is our property.”

Returnees from the LRA number 3,013 since the start of 2007 and face a number of social and economic barriers to participating in community life in their reintegration process. Women, who make up approximately 35 per cent of returnees, and in particular those with children, face unique

10. Invisible Children, personal communication, 10 October 2017
and heightened levels of discrimination. They are seen as ‘damaged’ and in some cases, referred to as “surunga LRA”, which means the carcass of the LRA in the Pazande language. The barriers for these women to access land and in turn, a source of financial income, are high due to the social stigma they face. Accusations of witchcraft and spreading disease to local communities limit their potential to participate in social life in a meaningful way, while similarly impeding that of their children born in captivity.

Congolese former refugees who previously lived in South Sudan and have migrated back to the area since unrest began in 2013, who number 21,360,\(^\text{11}\) face similar obstacles to South Sudanese refugees. They have fled the same circumstances as South Sudanese refugees yet do not benefit from actual or planned humanitarian assistance due to their nationality. These groups report contempt and discrimination from host communities who view them as outsiders and they struggle to access food.

Among the South Sudanese refugees there are groups facing additional barriers to participation in society. Refugees are disproportionately made up of women and children,\(^\text{12}\) with many women being the sole head of the household and responsible for multiple caring and productive roles.

Refugees report that female refugees have experienced sexual violence prior to, during and after their travel to DRC, and hint that some men may have also experienced this. Accounts from Uganda indicate that a high number of refugees arriving from South Sudan are dealing with significant levels of psychological trauma, having witnessed the deaths of loved ones prior to or during the journey.\(^\text{13}\) It is likely that those making the journey to DRC experienced similar levels of trauma. However, as local institutions lack the capacity to respond to these issues and international assistance efforts are hampered by insecurity, affected individuals are unlikely to receive psychological care in a timely manner, if at all.

Among the refugees arriving from South Sudan are multiple ethnicities with various levels of representation in different areas of northeastern DRC. Ethnic differences play out in a complex manner in the area and function as both a connective and divisive force both within the refugee population, and between host communities and refugees. Pazande, Kakwa and Dinka refugees are all present among those arriving, and Pazande and Kakwa refugees benefit from shared ethnic connections with Congolese hosts which pre-date the establishment of colonial borders. This positive connection has resulted in shared linguistic connections and both Congolese and South Sudanese communities stating a sense of shared identity.

Ethnic conflicts between Dinka and other groups within South Sudan have crossed over the border with refugees. Dinka are heavily discriminated against, both by fellow South Sudanese refugees and by Congolese hosts, at least in part due to their ethnic affiliation with the Government of South Sudan, which is accused by the UN of carrying out brutal ethnic cleansing in the country.\(^\text{14}\) They suffer insecurity in their home country, yet crossing the border also puts them at risk from other South Sudanese ethnicities, some of whom are reported to threaten revenge violence. Dinka refugees are reported to be residing near the border areas; many are likely to be reluctant to move further into DRC for fear of difficulties with other groups.

Some Congolese community members remarked that “the Dinka refugees are viewed as dangerous because of the Dinka–Pazande divisions. The refugees will kill the Dinka if they come here”. While many Dinka refugees reported being verbally insulted in their new communities, others reported death threats made towards Dinka by other refugees and towards Congolese families who host Dinka refugees, indicating that families face significantly higher levels of insecurity and potential violence simply for harbouring these individuals. In addition to protection measures, efforts to improve the relationships between ethnic groupings will be necessary to avoid ethnically motivated discrimination.

Freedom of movement has been compromised for multiple groups in northeastern DRC, which impacts their ability to participate in economic activity, including fishing, farming and hunting. The risk of a sole focus on refugees and their relationships with their communities overlooks existing patterns of exclusion, risks further isolating marginalised groups and entrenches negative attitudes towards refugees among Congolese who do not see themselves represented in broader efforts towards reconciliation.


\(^{13}\) The AIDS Support Organization staff, personal interview, 4 September 2017.

\(^{14}\) UN News – South Sudan (14 March 2017). ‘UN expert urges action to end rights abuses in a country where “impunity is the norm”’ www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56353&Kw1=South+Sudan&Kw2=&Kw3=
3. The need for support to community reconciliation practices in overcoming entrenched stereotypes

There have been some recent positive developments in the relationships between South Sudanese and Congolese citizens and, while the groups remain in close proximity, community-based reconciliation processes are needed to preserve and enhance these. Events such as the recent apology ceremony in Dungu offer an example on which to build, but continued efforts are needed to sensitise host communities and refugees to each other’s experiences and perspectives.

Reconciliation should be seen as a process of improving and transforming relations rather than a final goal to be reached. Congolese and South Sudanese have a long history of living alongside one another and persistent efforts in reconciliation processes on the part of community leaders should be actively encouraged, so that communities can live without the fear of violence and build new social relationships.15

This will require efforts to bring together religious leaders, customary chiefs and leadership figures within refugee committees who have already demonstrated a commitment to making progress on these issues, in addition to local civil society actors. Local actors should be supported to identify and coordinate culturally specific and community based reconciliation opportunities. Given the predominance of women and youth among refugee population, youth and women’s groups will also need to be brought into these spaces and given equal roles and participation, to ensure that the leadership surrounding reconciliation processes does not solely rest with adult men but is inclusive of all.

Young refugees speak about being especially vulnerable to living on the streets due to their, “limited ability to reach our full potential here in a new country. At home we would be able to push more, but here this is not the case.” Local government along with local and international civil society groups should support leadership roles for young people.

Dealing with the past

The violent events of 1998, including the forcible recruitment of youth into SPLA ranks and the violent looting of health and community facilities in the area, were small in relation to the large-scale violence taking place in eastern DRC at that time. As a result no investigation was conducted: national attention was focused on conflict elsewhere. The fluidity among migrating populations means that many of the South Sudanese refugees who are present in DRC now were not present during the events of 1998. However, this is not recognised by many Congolese community members in the area, who view current refugees as responsible for the 1998 violence and looting. This turbulent past now looms large in the collective memories of Congolese citizens in the northeastern part of the country and has recently been awakened by the arrival of South Sudanese refugees in Congolese communities.

Stories of this event have been told and re-told on both sides of the border, which in northeastern DRC has shaped an image of the South Sudanese as violent and criminal. This has reinforced powerful negative perceptions of the South Sudanese and has made it difficult for Congolese hosts to

remain cognisant of the grim circumstances that drove refugees from their homes. The influx of South Sudanese refugees into the area in 2016 has stoked fears among community members of potential future violence as they witness prices of food increasing along with land prices. Many Congolese citizens in the area accuse refugees of participating in prostitution, spreading disease and disrespecting Congolese law.

Refugees originating from Central African Republic (CAR) arriving in Bas-Uélé province number 11,730 in Bondo territory alone, though in comparison to the South Sudanese refugees they fare slightly better due to increased levels of linguistic similarities and slightly lower levels of discrimination as a result of not having the same history of violence.

However, refugees coming from both countries suffer from being associated with armed groups penetrating the porous border with DRC, including Mbororo, the LRA, ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka from CAR and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition in South Sudan. The associations made between refugees and armed groups due to similar geographic movements of uncontrolled border crossings have influenced the common attitude that they do not have a legitimate right to occupy land. In Bas-Uélé province, one account details how refugees from CAR are not seen as entitled to use Congolese land, similar to the Mbororo, because they are “illegally occupying the land.”

While many Congolese in the region relate how they welcome South Sudanese refugees, levels of friendship between these groups are low. Congolese men, in particular, are less comfortable entering into friendships, employment and romantic relations with South Sudanese refugees. Both Congolese and South Sudanese refugees report a sense that DRC is not a welcoming environment for refugees. This is likely attributed to the mistrust of refugees felt by the Congolese host population, and the struggle of CNR and UNHCR to provide adequate services to refugees resulting from poor access to outlying areas due to security concerns.

Participants in the research cited the shared ethnicities and indigenous linguistic connections among Pazande and Kakwa groups as an enabler of positive relations between South Sudanese refugees and Congolese citizens. However, it is clear in discussion with Congolese host communities that underlying fears and mistrust of refugees are felt deeply and “in our hearts”, as people are uncertain what actions will be taken by South Sudanese refugees when they eventually return home.

Host community–refugee relations were strengthened by a recent apology ceremony in Dungu territory, held on the International Day for Refugees, in June 2017. The ceremony was initiated by a group of South Sudanese refugees who approached the customary chief and requested the opportunity to formally apologise for the 1998 violence. The ceremony was organised by refugees and attended by the customary chief, local government officials, refugees, members of the host community and various humanitarian agencies including CNR and UNHCR.

The event included the participation of men, women and youth in drama performances based on past events, oral testimonies given by community members in Dungu, an acceptance of the apology by the customary chief, the sharing of a meal and a football match for youth. While further action is needed to support progress towards reconciliation between these populations, this important first step was described as an “emotional release” for those present in moving beyond a violent past, and it offers a potential starting point for other communities in the area.

“Reconciliation needs to be built, it will not just come.”

Community member, Haut-Uélé province

The widespread support of the event by leadership figures has encouraged community members of the Dungu area to extend initial goodwill to refugees in the area. The ceremony also resulted in the creation of a Garden of Peace in the community, intended to be visited by Congolese and South Sudanese groups and available for refugee agricultural activities.

Similarly, the symbolic value of the apology clearly played a crucial role among South Sudanese refugees in developing more positive relationships. One young refugee, born after 1998, who participated in the recent ceremony, remarked, “I will apologise forever if I need to.” Yet, to transform superficial goodwill into trust will require a continued reconciliation process going beyond symbolic gestures to long-term relationship building.

Reconciliation itself will need to become a long-term and broad-based undertaking in order to make progress on social relationships. As one community member remarked, “Reconciliation needs to be built, it will not just come”.

Acknowledgements and disclaimer

This policy brief was written by Kerri Leeper for Conciliation Resources with guidance and support from Kennedy Tumutegyereize, Teresa Dumasy, Nyeko Caesar Poblicks, Lisa Heinzel and David Elliot.

It was produced by Conciliation Resources in partnership with Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), Commission Diocésaine de Justice, Paix et Récconciliation (CDJPR) and Réseau de Organisations Féminines des Uélés (ROFU).

This publication has been produced with generous financial support from Folke Bernadotte Academy, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Conciliation Resources and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of Folke Bernadotte Academy, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, or European Union.

Folke Bernadotte Academy has supported a project over the past two years in northeastern DRC focused on the capacity building of grassroots women to participate in issues of peace and security in their communities in support of further implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is currently supporting community resilience and dialogue efforts to reinforce local capacities for peace in northeastern DRC.

The European Union is currently supporting efforts to strengthen the involvement of youth in conflict prevention and community strengthening in northeastern DRC.

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Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We believe that building sustainable peace takes time. We provide practical support to help people affected by violent conflict achieve lasting peace. We draw on our shared experiences to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

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Cover photo: Prior to the outbreak of violence, boys from South Sudan provided the main import-export services to Doruma from across the Sudanese border, including all sorts of products including petrol, foodstuffs, clothing and alcohol. © Tom Bradley

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