

The FRPI

peace process

at an impasse

**LESSONS FROM A
COMMUNITY-BASED AND
POLITICAL APPROACH
TO DDR IN THE CONGO**

**Alexis Bouvy, Ingebjorg Finnbbakk,
Jean-Marc Mazio, Eric Mongo and
François Van Lierde**

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The Insecure Livelihoods Series publishes independent and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its reports are based on independent, non-partisan and collaborative research.

NOTICE TO READER

The authors of this report have worked in peacebuilding and stabilization in the eastern Congo for many years. All of them were involved in the FRPI peace process in different professional and institutional roles. The inspiration for this paper dates back to a four-day workshop in Brussels in October 2019, followed by remote discussions since then. This paper is the result of this process and draws from the authors' own testimonies and experiences taking part in the FRPI peace process.

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Executive summary

This discussion paper aims at highlighting the relevance, challenges and limits of the so-called “FRPI peace process” for the future of stabilization and peace initiatives in the eastern DRC. The Patriotic Resistance Front of Ituri (FRPI) peace process refers to an inclusive and multilevel dialogue initiated in 2017, which led to significant milestones for the peace and stability of southern Ituri, such as the signature of a peace agreement between the government of the DRC and the FRPI armed group, and the voluntary cantonment of more than 1,000 militiamen.

As such, the FRPI peace process has set-up a genuine dialogue owned by Congolese stakeholders, from community leaders to the provincial governor, military officials and the relevant national ministers. It has fostered mutual accountability, managed and marginalized spoilers, and led to positive changes in one of the most entrenched, violent and volatile areas of the eastern DRC.

Despite significant achievements, the FRPI peace process is today at an impasse and at risk of totally derailing, as is illustrated by the renewed fighting between FRPI elements and soldiers of the national army in October 2020 and the lack of progress in the steps toward and preconditions for a full disarmament of the FRPI.

Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION	6
2 BACKGROUND TO STAREC AND ISSSS ACTIVITIES IN SOUTH IRUMU, ITURI	8
3 ITURI'S CONFLICT BACKGROUND AND THE FRPI PROBLEM IN SOUTH IRUMU	10
4 WHAT HAS THE PEACE PROCESS ACHIEVED AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?	12
5 METHODOLOGY MATTERS: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE FOR DIALOGUE	15
5.1 The importance of participatory research and analysis of conflict dynamics	15
5.2 The right balance between bottom-up and top-down	16
5.3 Transparency and inclusivity: two key principles to maintain trust and legitimacy	18
5.4 A unique example of collaboration between civil society, STAREC and MONUSCO	20
5.5 Commitment, creativity and reactivity: uncertain processes in an uncertain context	21
6 THE CURRENT IMPASSE	23
7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED	26
8 THE NEED TO REVIVE THE FRPI PEACE PROCESS DESPITE CHALLENGES	28
9 BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

Introduction

This discussion paper aims at highlighting the relevance, challenges and limits of the so-called “FRPI peace process” for the future of stabilization and peace initiatives in the eastern DRC. The Patriotic Resistance Front of Ituri (FRPI) peace process refers to an inclusive and multilevel dialogue initiated in 2017, which led to significant milestones for the peace and stability of southern Ituri, such as the signature of a peace agreement between the government of the DRC and the FRPI armed group, and the voluntary cantonment of more than 1,000 militiamen. As such, the FRPI peace process has set-up a genuine dialogue owned by Congolese stakeholders, from community leaders to the provincial governor, military officials and the relevant national ministers. It has fostered mutual accountability, managed and marginalized spoilers, and led to positive changes in one of the most entrenched, violent and volatile areas of the eastern DRC, as this paper will show. Moreover, the FRPI peace process has helped switch the overall approach to the FRPI problem by replacing deadly and ineffective military operations against the FRPI with an inclusive community-based and political dialogue driven by civilian and military stakeholders.

Despite significant achievements, the FRPI peace process is today at an impasse and at risk of totally derailing, as is illustrated by the renewed fighting between FRPI elements and soldiers of the national army in October 2020 and the lack of progress in the steps toward and preconditions for a full disarmament of the FRPI. As they discuss and consider a new community-based DDR and stabilization (DDRCS) programme, Congolese authorities, MONUSCO and donors should put the FRPI peace process back on

the agenda and negotiate the best way to proceed to disarmament and demobilization of the FRPI militia. No matter its final result, the FRPI peace process should be considered a first experiment of a community-based DDR initiative and be capitalized on as such to define the substance of any new DDRCS effort. To that end, peace organizations and academics should study more thoroughly the many lessons learned and achievements of the FRPI peace process since its inception in 2017, and make sure to capitalize on the lessons.

Letting the FRPI peace process collapse would be a mistake, as it would put civilians at great risk of renewed violence. It would bring disappointment to local communities and contribute to eroding confidence and trust in future stabilization initiatives, including DDRCS.

2 |

Background to STAREC and ISSSS activities in South Irumu, Ituri

The “FRPI peace process” refers to a multilevel inclusive dialogue and related activities that have been conducted in South Irumu, Ituri, since early 2017, and that were first initiated as a stabilization project within the framework of the National Strategy for the Stabilization and Reconstruction of the Eastern DRC (national STAREC) and the revised International Security and Stabilization Support strategy (ISSSS). After a strategic revision requested by the UN Security Council in 2012, the ISSSS developed an integrated approach based on five programmatic pillars.¹ The strategic revision led to a profound change of philosophy in stabilization efforts, from a rather technical and top-down approach to a more political and bottom-up approach centred around the STAREC/ISSSS Democratic Dialogue (DD) pillar, which is defined as an inclusive process where communities and authorities at local and national levels participate in a process of dialogue to identify and develop solutions to the specific conflict dynamics in a priority area, supported by extensive conflict analysis, and with the overall objective of creating mutual accountability (Solhjell and Rosland 2017; De Vries 2015).

¹ The five pillars consist of: Democratic Dialogue; Security; Restoration of State Authority; Return, Reintegration and Socio-economic Recovery; and Gender and Fight against SGBV. For more information on the revised ISSSS, see: <https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/stabilization-strategy-issss>.

South Irumu was selected as a priority area for programmes, with a specific focus on the activism of the FRPI armed group and the many and long-standing land conflicts between local communities, particularly the Lendu Ngiti and Hema. An integrated project called “Pamoja Kwa Amani” (PKA) (“Together for Peace”) was launched in August 2017 in South Irumu. It was implemented by a consortium of UN agencies, INGOs and NGOs.²

² The interventions carried under the DD pillar of the PKA project were implemented by ACIAR, a long-standing peace NGO from Ituri. ACIAR is the French acronym for “Appui à la Communication Interculturelle et à l’Autopromotion Rurale”.

3 |

Ituri's conflict background and the FRPI problem in South Irumu

Ituri has been the scene of one of the most violent conflicts within the Second Congo War from 1998 to 2003 (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2003; Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2004; Tamm 2013; Hoffmann, Vlassenroot and Buescher 2018).³ In 1999, with the Ituri district under Ugandan occupation, multi-layered and highly politicized tensions between Hema landowners and Lendu farmers escalated into a deadly armed conflict, leading to the creation of self-defence groups on both sides that later allied with and were instrumentalized by regional power brokers (Uganda, Rwanda, the Congolese government in Kinshasa) in a cycle of rapidly shifting alliances. Although the Lendu and Hema communities only represented an estimated 40 per cent of the roughly 3.5 million people living in Ituri at the time, they were considered the main protagonists in the fighting that left at least 55,000 people dead and several hundred thousand displaced in its first four years (Tamm 2013: 12). The violence during these years and today's conflict pattern must also be understood in light of Ituri's long-term history, with the colonial period having played a key role in policies based on ethnic discrimination regarding educational, administrative and territorial rights and privileges (Pottier 2010).

The FRPI was established in 2002 out of various Lendu Ngiti self-defence groups active in Walendu Bindi, South Irumu. The reason for its existence and its modes of operation are similar to a number of other armed groups

³ See also media and NGO reports, such as IRIN at <http://pictures.irinnews.org/indepthmain.aspx?InDepthId=33&ReportId=70762> or Human Rights Watch at <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/ituri0703/> (accessed May 2019).

in the eastern Congo. While the FRPI draws its authority from historical grievances expressed in the Lendu Ngiti community and claims to protect the Lendu Bindi against neighbouring communities and the government, it is also deeply involved in acts of extortion and abuse against civilians. In other words, the FRPI gradually evolved from a community protection force to a source of insecurity (Hoffmann et al 2018, 8). The interlinked connections between the FRPI and the Lendu Ngiti community in South Irumu are both complex and imperative to understand, and point to various relationships ranging from those of blood relatives, to protector and protected, to supporters and victims.

Negotiations aiming at demobilizing FRPI remnants were carried out on several occasions between 2012 and 2015, but these attempts never served their intended purpose, essentially because of a lack of will among the main stakeholders, i.e. the government and the FRPI leadership.⁴ These failed negotiations alternated with military operations that resulted in no positive conclusion to the FRPI problem but rather contributed to a climate of insecurity conducive to violence against civilians (Bouvy 2017).

⁴ In 2007, a dozen FRPI leaders and a significant number of elements were integrated into the army or back into civilian life. However, FRPI remnants stayed in the bush and reorganized around a new leader called Mbadhu Adirodhu.

4 |

What has the peace process achieved and why does it matter?

The achievements of the FRPI peace process could be considered significant for the fact that they focused on insecurity dynamics and the presence of an important and historic armed group in Ituri.⁵ The most important of these achievements were the voluntary cantonment in August 2019 of 1,138 FRPI combatants in a camp in Azita village near Gety, the main town in South Irumu, and the signature of a peace agreement between the FRPI leadership and the national government in February 2020. In 2016, the whole area of South Irumu was marred by insecurity as combatants resorted to looting and killing civilians as their main means of subsistence. The FRPI peace process brought a drastic reduction to this violence against civilians, as local communities testified to ACIAR on various occasions during field missions in 2018 and 2019.

Many incremental steps were necessary to achieve these results, including convincing many stakeholders of the relevance and credibility of a dialogue to tackle the security issue posed by the FRPI, especially after several failed negotiations with it. Many stakeholders initially opposed such an approach. The national army was involved in military operations against the FRPI for several years, amid entrenched interests and accusations of embezzlements of military funds for operations by some high-ranking officers. Many officers in the national army opposed the idea of a civilian-driven dialogue with the

⁵ As a recent participatory evaluation of a decade of peace building efforts in South and North Kivu has shown, most civil society peace organizations, both national and international, have been reluctant to directly target the issue of armed groups in their interventions, mainly for reasons of sensitivity and mandate. See Van Lierde et al. 2020.

FRPI, as they would lose influence to the benefit of a handful of NGOs. Even the MONUSCO military at first did not know how to behave, as the blue helmets were also supporting the national forces in their military operations against FRPI. Other stakeholders, such as leaders of the Hema community, who for years have suffered from cattle-looting by FRPI elements, did not support a dialogue. Even a handful of Lendu Bindi leaders were reluctant to engage, either fearing it would lead to another failure or owing to more personal interests in relation to the FRPI's presence. Despite these initial reservations, the logic of dialogue initiated by ACIAR, with the support of the provincial STAREC and MONUSCO Stabilization Support Unit (SSU),⁶ slowly gained ground and soon created political momentum that could not be openly opposed or ignored.

From a local and community-based mobilization, the dialogue initiative transformed into a provincial and then national process involving the highest authorities. While the dialogue was initiated by a Congolese NGO, ACIAR succeeded to transfer the ownership of the process to the stakeholders themselves, which is of the utmost importance for such a political dialogue to succeed. Once commitments were made, a genuine circle of accountability was created between dialogue stakeholders, so that the peace process became a thing in itself, owned by the stakeholders themselves, and answering to its own political momentum.

⁶ MONUSCO SSU is responsible for the implementation of the ISSSS Strategy for the international community and the Fonds de cohérence de stabilisation (FCS), a joint basket fund created by donors funding stabilization initiatives in the DRC.

The agreement between the Congolese government and the FRPI

Signed during an inclusive conference held in Walendu Bindi (South Irumu) on 28 February 2020, the agreement between the DRC government and the FRPI engaged both parties to stop armed hostilities and to commit to the establishment of peace and security in Irumu territory.

The commitments of both parties can be summarized as follows:

For the FRPI:

To gather its elements into a pre-cantonment camp and to commit itself to a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process. It also stated its openness to a governmental verification mission for assessing the presence of child soldiers among its ranks.

For the government:

To organize a DDR process in Ituri; allow, on an individual basis and in accordance with the criteria set by the law, FRPI elements who express such willingness to be integrated into the national army (and to organize a special training for the FRPI elements who do not fulfil the required criteria); take into account FRPI civilian personnel for the future DDR; introduce to the Parliament a new Amnesty Law that provides amnesty for the crime of insurrection (to the exclusion of any international crime); and examine the cases of jailed FRPI leaders and possibly consider their liberation.

Both parties also committed themselves to the restoration of state authority in areas previously occupied by the FRPI and to the stabilization and development of South Irumu. They convened to pursue the peace and reconciliation process and to launch a future transitional justice process.

Methodology matters: principles and practice for dialogue

The rigorous yet creative methodology applied in the FRPI peace process provided the key foundation for its success, from its initial engagements with all actors to managing spoilers and a shifting context. It was based on a reflective implementation of key requirements such as a participatory and researched approach; a balance between a bottom-up and a top-down approach; and the systemic use of inclusivity and transparency principles. We discuss here the main features of the participatory and inclusive methodology that has been applied by ACIAR, together with STAREC and MONUSCO and that provided the engine and fuel of the FRPI peace process.

5.1 The importance of participatory research and analysis of conflict dynamics

Each and every step of the FRPI peace process has been informed by a participatory research and analysis of the root causes, evolutions, fault lines and actors involved in the conflict landscape of South Irumu. For instance, the programme design was informed by an in-depth conflict analysis that was conducted in late 2016 and was repeated as part of the project planning and during the various consultations throughout the process, together with a *stakeholder mapping* that helped to map out the various enablers and spoilers at local, provincial, and national levels.

Research and analysis were performed in a participatory way with the objective to give the opportunity to local communities to define their own priorities and

peace agenda within the framework of the PKA project. Large open-ended consultations gathered more than 2,300 key community representatives in 16 different sites in South Irumu, where participants were asked about their views on conflict dynamics and priority needs in the area.⁷ In all these sessions, the participants asked for the FRPI issue to be the main priority and emphasized the need for the government to commit itself to a sustainable solution to the FRPI problem. These consultations were not only key for ACIAR to develop a better understanding and analysis of the conflict dynamics and priorities in the area but were also instrumental as a first step towards genuine local ownership of the FRPI peace process. It later proved to be of great importance for the process to gain in legitimacy and accountability.

5.2 The right balance between bottom-up and top-down

The FRPI peace process gained momentum through its ability to mobilize local communities in South Irumu and engage key authorities at the provincial and national levels. It genuinely built and maintained a bridge between the local communities and provincial and national authorities. For such dynamics to materialize, many discussions and meetings had to be held, both collectively and bilaterally, formal and (sometimes very) informal, and with the right set of stakeholders – a thorough stakeholders' mapping was instrumental to that end. Whenever doors seemed closed, creative strategies by ACIAR, STAREC or MONUSCO, often relying on informal personal contacts and relationships, helped to open them.

As we already explained above, the large community consultations were instrumental in mobilizing the many local stakeholders and building trust and ownership at the local level. Twenty local peace committees were also set up or (where they already existed) strengthened in order to maintain the dynamic at the community level as well as establish a way for ACIAR to keep track of any new security incidents in South Irumu.

⁷ Participants in these consultations were carefully selected based on their profile, influence and legitimacy in their community.

As for the engagement of political authorities at the provincial and national levels, STAREC Ituri and MONUSCO played both key roles. After a first round of bilateral meetings, a high-level conference was held in Bunia in October 2017 and brought together community leaders with provincial and national authorities (the governor, national and provincial MPs, and army representatives, for a total of 130 participants). The conference, dubbed the Cohesive Leadership Workshop,⁸ allowed local community representatives to share their security concerns with their authorities, a key demand expressed during the community consultations. It also helped forge ownership of the early steps of the process for provincial authorities, and offered a clear mandate for ACIAR to start a more formal dialogue with the FRPI leadership.⁹ As such, the Cohesive Leadership Workshop was the first key milestone in the building of this bridge between community leaders and their provincial and national authorities, and created a circle of mutual accountability between the participants for finding a peaceful solution to the FRPI crisis.

That dynamic of mutual accountability strengthened with every step of the process, and gained traction especially when the national authorities at the highest level officially stepped in. This second key milestone materialized in December 2017 when, after weeks of discreet but intensive lobbying by STAREC and ACIAR, Ituri's governor performed an advocacy mission to Kinshasa and put the FRPI issue on the agenda of a meeting chaired by then Minister of the Interior Emmanuel Shadary.¹⁰ The meeting resulted in establishing an interministerial working group on FRPI, which was tasked with developing the government's strategy and action plan for the FRPI's demobilization.¹¹ In support of the government-led efforts, MONUSCO developed its own comprehensive military and civilian action plan targeting the FRPI, led by the DSRSG Ops/RoL and the Ituri head of office.

⁸ It drew a lot on Michel Kassa's "Initiative pour un Leadership Cohésif" (ILC) methodology.

⁹ A first meeting with the militia was held a month later in the bush with ACIA, only after it was agreed to and authorized by the provincial governor and the national army hierarchy in Bunia.

¹⁰ Among the participants were the ministers of defence and planning, ten national Members of Parliament, top-level state army officers, the MONUSCO head of political affairs division, and the head of MONUSCO's Bunia field office.

¹¹ The GoDRC Strategy and Action plan was later adopted in June 2018.

These new milestones and the public statements made by national authorities regarding the FRPI process created momentum despite the continued existence of spoilers who felt marginalized. The momentum and traction of the new-born FRPI process took hold, not even six months after the official launch of the PKA project. In South Irumu, hopes for a peaceful resolution of the 20-year FRPI crisis were high.

5.3 Transparency and inclusivity: two key principles to maintain trust and legitimacy

Transparency, inclusivity and participation constituted key principles that were applied with the utmost rigour in all steps of the FRPI peace process. Only such a strict methodology allowed the process to maintain progress in front of the many challenges it had to face, and to maintain the trust and legitimacy among the various stakeholders who were included and owned the process.

Many examples of how these principles were systematically applied can be shared. The first meeting between ACIAR and the FRPI leadership, for instance, in November 2017, was not held behind closed doors, but the opposite. First the governor and the national army hierarchy in Bunia were informed and consented to having the meeting happen. Then ACIAR consulted with community leaders and representatives, including local chiefs, civil society, youth and women, who chose delegates to participate in the meeting. Such inclusivity and transparency drastically helped forge trust and confidence first towards ACIAR as a facilitator of the dialogue process, and then towards the dialogue process itself.¹²

ACIAR and STAREC Ituri continuously kept all stakeholders informed of the meetings, discussions and decisions that were undertaken in other places, in a bid to maintain the bridge between local communities and political

¹² As a result of this first meeting, the FRPI leadership's demands were drafted and signed by four of its key leaders, including its overall commanders, which constituted another key milestone, as these demands formed the basis for the negotiation between the armed group and the government.

authorities. Many missions in South Irumu were therefore organized with the objective of keeping community representatives informed of the discussions held in Bunia or Kinshasa, but also to keep track of the latest developments in the security situation in South Irumu and make sure the right information was shared with provincial and national authorities and MONUSCO.

Such transparency measures helped deal with spoilers who tried to disseminate fake information (for instance to the FRPI leadership) in order to weaken the process or position themselves for personal gains. ACIAR and STAREC Ituri both vigilantly kept all key stakeholders well informed of the process and reacted swiftly in countering any disinformation campaign.

Inclusivity and participation were also paramount to keeping disinformation campaigns under control and spoilers at bay. That was especially the case as soon as funding became a key topic of discussions with the FRPI: when the cantonment of the 1,138 FRPI militiamen was initiated in Gety, the government allocated \$80,000 per month to accommodate them. This soon created the impression that NGOs and authorities were enriching themselves on the back of the FRPI. Thus, ACIAR set up two local committees that would include FRPI elements but also community leaders to find an inclusive, participatory and transparent way to manage everything in the camp from food to medical care to logistical issues. The same strategy was implemented when the national intelligence service (ANR) accused ACIAR, STAREC and even MONUSCO staffs of plotting with an illegal insurrection group: the ANR was then systemically invited to all meetings in Bunia and South Irumu and soon transformed from a threat to the dialogue process into one of its staunchest supporters.

The systematic application of the principles of transparency and inclusivity at all stages of the process provided the necessary safeguards to build and maintain the minimum trust and confidence and thus ownership of the process by the key stakeholders, and secure it from the negative influences of spoilers and unpredictable changes in the context. With time, this made the process less vulnerable to internal and external shocks, as the cost for spoilers to block the process became greater than that of joining it, even on a minimal basis.

5.4 A unique example of collaboration between civil society, STAREC and MONUSCO

The FRPI peace process would not have materialized without the unique collaboration between key persons from a local civil society organization (ACIAR), STAREC Ituri and MONUSCO. Such collaboration allowed a division of labour between the three organizations in accordance with their mandates, which proved very efficient and successful in engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. ACIAR thus focused on community mobilization in South Irumu (including engaging the FRPI leadership), while STAREC was responsible for engaging provincial and then national authorities. MONUSCO was charged with supporting the process where it could best, especially by opening doors to the highest authorities, as well as providing legitimacy to the process.

Such close collaboration also allowed the three organizations to speak with one voice while attending meetings with stakeholders, which conferred consistency to the process. For instance, close collaboration included MONUSCO SSU in Bunia and Goma, which was informed of all activities and meetings at the local and provincial levels and was therefore able to accurately and promptly inform the senior leadership of its mission with important notes prior to meetings with ministers in Kinshasa. The close collaboration facilitated an easy flow of accurate information and messages to the right persons and stakeholders in a timely and consistent fashion, which made the process credible. MONUSCO also assumed key support regarding the logistics and secularization of the FRPI process: MONUSCO built two DDR camps for the disarmament and demobilization of FRPI elements (one camp has unfortunately been destroyed since then), and blue helmets secured various meetings in the field.

5.5 Commitment, creativity and reactivity: uncertain processes in an uncertain context

The conduct of a dialogue such as the FRPI peace process is full of uncertainties, not only in relation to the process itself but also to the national and provincial political and security context. Such a degree of uncertainty means the potential for derailing the peace process is great if its facilitators do not deploy a strong and continuous commitment to it and are not creative and prompt when confronted with external shocks. The team of facilitators for the FRPI peace process has been able, to a certain extent, to maintain such a level of commitment, creativity and reactivity, thus helping to manage many of the external and internal shocks that pressure the process.

A first external shock came with the string of massacres in Djugu territory, which began in December 2017, during the very first months of the FRPI process. Speculation of FRPI involvement in the massacres was rampant. ACIAR and STAREC Ituri promptly conducted an informal investigation in the circles close to the FRPI and within the communities of South Irumu and Djugu (where ACIAR also facilitated local peace committees), and it soon seemed clear that the violence in Djugu had no relation to the FRPI or the launch of the FRPI peace process. FRPI Commander Mbadhu Adirodhu issued a public statement to express his condolences to the victims in Djugu and praise the importance of peace between all communities in Ituri. South Irumu community leaders also expressed their wish to continue dialogue despite the violence in Djugu. ACIAR and STAREC Ituri capitalized on both expressions to diffuse the pressure that the massacres had exerted on the FRPI process.

An even greater uncertainty weighed on the FRPI process in the aftermath of the December 2018 national elections, which prompted a change of president (the first peaceful one in the country's history) and of national and provincial governments. These major political changes had a drastic impact on the FRPI process and virtually put it on hold for almost a year. Nevertheless, the facilitators again deployed all their energy in order to maintain the dynamic in the field and succeeded in launching a first attempt at

creating a cantonment of FRPI elements near Gety.¹³ Continuous advocacy towards the new elected authorities in Kinshasa and Bunia, especially the provincial governor *ad interim*, as well as maintaining contact with FRPI leadership and community leaders in South Irumu helped keep the process alive during this uncertain period. In June 2019, new President Felix Tshisekedi visited Bunia and, through Provincial governor, STAREC, MNS and MONUSCO advocacy efforts, publicly expressed his support for the FRPI peace process. Two months later, the cantonment of the FRPI elements was successfully launched. After such uncertainty, momentum was recreated, but only for a short time.

¹³ This first cantonment eventually failed. A second better prepared attempt eventually succeeded several months later.

The current impasse

Despite its many milestones, the FRPI peace process has slowed since mid-2020 and has been on the verge of collapsing on several occasions. Lack of progress in the discussions between the government and the FRPI regarding the preconditions to effectively launch the group's disarmament and demobilization has stalled the whole process.¹⁴ While the cantonment of the FRPI elements was supposed to be a temporary step, it has been ongoing since August 2019 – more than 18 months – a situation that is not without risks to civilians' security.

The stagnation of the process could be explained by a lack of will by both parties (the government and the FRPI) to advance on key steps of the process. For example, the FRPI leadership showed no sign of good will on the issue of the liberation of child soldiers, as it denied their existence (i.e. child soldiers being a major risk to the leadership's goal of amnesty). It seemed to drag its feet on any progress towards disarmament, while the government grew reluctant of continuously funding a pre-cantonment phase that was costly and seemed never-ending. The FRPI was perceived as aiming to maximize its benefits out of the process while not providing much in return. The government was also slow to deliver on several key issues mentioned in the peace agreement, such as the amnesty law (which the Parliament has never passed), and to provide a clear position on the specifics of the DDR process

¹⁴ A lack of clarity and agreement especially regarding the practical modalities for DDR, army integration, the issues of military rankings for the FRPI leadership and the finalization of an amnesty law for insurrectional crimes. All these issues were broadly defined in the Peace Agreement, but their details and practicalities remained to be defined.

and the integration of FRPI elements within the FARDC. Too many grey areas remained, as neither party seemed eager to clarify its position on key issues.

This situation also seemed connected to discussions that developed during 2019 and 2020 in Kinshasa about a nationwide community-based DDR programme, a new type of DDR that would be fully implemented locally, and without sending the FRPI elements to the infamous DDR camps of Kamina and Kitona, where no combatant wants to go, owing to their awful living conditions. Discussions on the community-based DDR approach were initiated in part by the FRPI peace process, when the idea of a locally and community-driven reintegration of FRPI elements became widely accepted in Ituri and Kinshasa as a key condition for the process to succeed. It then opened a wider discussion on the place and role local communities should play in DDR processes, at every stage. These discussions on community-based DDR were later used to delegitimize the FRPI process on the ground that no specific negotiation should be offered to any armed group since a new nationwide approach to their disarmament and demobilization was imminent. This new stance within the government contradicts previous agreement with the FRPI, but it took hold after the 2018 elections in a context where suspicions towards STAREC were growing at the national level for its alleged closeness to the former regime of Joseph Kabila. The stance was further supported by an argument that the FRPI process fuelled a vicious circle of impunity, by opening negotiations on amnesty, military integration and ranks. Such arguments seemed unfair given that the peace agreement does not provide all FRPI elements full and automatic integration into the army, but rather provides integration only on an individual and conditional basis, and that the amnesty is limited to the crime of insurrection, thereby not applying to war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity, and therefore does not preclude any possibility to prosecute committers of such international crimes.

As expected, the impossibility for the parties to push the process further has led to tensions and eruptions of violence in South Irumu, which in turn has increased stakeholder mistrust and disaffection regarding the peace process. On 30 September 2020, fighting between FRPI elements and the national army led to 11 deaths (including two civilians) in Gety, and to the burning of the DDR camp that was built by MONUSCO and in which the demobilization was

supposed to start the same day.¹⁵ One month earlier, Walendu Bindi (South Ituru) community leaders had been warning about the lack of progress and the risks of renewed violence, and asked for MONUSCO and the government to further commit themselves.¹⁶ It was also reported that more than half of the FRPI elements had abandoned the cantonment camp and were roaming villages with their weapons,¹⁷ after the government had stopped funding the cantonment in response to the FRPI's reluctance to fully disarm. In the last months of 2020, security incidents involving FRPI elements against civilians, including looting, kidnapping and in some cases killing, were on the rise in Walendu Bindi.¹⁸ When a second attempt to launch the DDR process took place on 30 October 2020, only 31 FRPI elements joined and handed in ten weapons, a rather feeble show of good will by the FRPI.

Despite these setbacks, the provincial government attempted to relaunch negotiations in December, but these dramatically failed, with the FRPI leadership threatening that any of its elements who joined the demobilization would face consequences. Since then, discussions have stopped.

¹⁵ See Radio Okapi at <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/10/01/actualite/securite/ituri-11-morts-et-10-blesses-dans-les-affrontements-entre-fardc-et-les-> , <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/09/21/actualite/securite/ituri-la-frpi-exige-des-garanties-pour-le-desarmement-officiel-de-ses>; accessed on 29 January 2021.

¹⁶ See Radio Okapi, at <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/08/13/actualite/securite/ituri-les-walendu-bindi-demandent-limplication-de-la-monusco-dans-le>; accessed on 29 January 2021.

¹⁷ See Radio Okapi, at <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/09/10/actualite/securite/bunia-environ-50-des-miliciens-de-la-frpi-ont-deserte-le-site-dazita>; accessed on 29 January 2021.

¹⁸ See Radio Okapi, at: <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/11/25/actualite/securite/ituri-les-notables-de-gety-accusent-le-gouvernement-dabandonner-le>; <https://www.radiookapi.net/2020/12/30/actualite/securite/ituri-au-moins-20-personnes-kidnappees-par-des-elements-de-la-frpi>; accessed on 29 January 2021.

Key lessons learned

Many lessons have to be learned from the FRPI peace process, no matter what its final result eventually will be. The FRPI peace process has proved that, if properly set in motion, the participatory and multilevel methodology promoted by the Democratic Dialogue pillar of STAREC/ISSSS has great potential to help the parties achieve key milestones for peace and stability in the eastern DRC. It is a methodology that can bring together a wide range of stakeholders, from local communities to provincial and national authorities, and initiate with them a process of mutual accountability with genuine ownership. It is the cornerstone for the development of a relationship based on better accountability between authorities and their constituents, and as such it can serve a long-term strategy to promote good governance, transparency and democracy, in addition to mobilizing stakeholders to find solutions to entrenched security and conflict issues.

Democratic dialogue is no panacea and requires a rigorous methodology. It works only when the core principles of participatory analysis, inclusivity and transparency are implemented with rigour, professionalism and neutrality. These principles require high-quality research and analysis (you need to know the issues and conflicts that matter, and the influential stakeholders, including enablers and spoilers), participation (both of community representatives and high-level civil and military authorities, and also armed groups), inclusivity and transparency. Only when rigorously applied can these principles help build trust and confidence and induce a genuine sense of ownership of the process among the stakeholders involved.

Key to the FRPI peace process was also the very close collaboration between a civil society organization (which was proficient in mobilizing local communities and the FRPI leadership), STAREC Ituri (which was able to negotiate access and support among state authorities), and MONUSCO (which was key in backing the process through good offices, the ISSSS program and targeted logistics and security support). Without close collaboration between these three organizations and strong commitment by their staff, the FRPI process would have never achieved results.

The institutional architecture of STAREC and ISSSS has been instrumental to the success of the FRPI peace process, as it conferred legitimacy and instilled credibility among the government and its international partners from the very start. It also helped engage key stakeholders within the government and MONUSCO, as both institutions have a mandate to support STAREC and ISSSS initiatives. Whenever a state official or a military officer wanted to block the process, STAREC and ISSSS mechanisms and MONUSCO were immediately mobilized and provided a strong official incentive that regularly prompted spoilers to back down or state officials to show their support.

A final lesson learned from the FRPI peace process is that dialogue is defined by its inherent uncertainty: it does not conform to typical project planning and funding schemes and requires a flexible funding and planning approach. STAREC and ISSSS, through the Fonds de Cohérence pour la Stabilisation (“Stabilization Cohesion Fund”), provide a flexible funding mechanism that can mitigate the uncertainties of dialogue and allow funding to be managed in a more flexible way without impeding progress.

The need to revive the FRPI peace process despite challenges

Because the FRPI peace process created hope for peace and stability among local communities in South Irumu and achieved key milestones, it should be revived and finalized rather than go to waste. Not doing so would most certainly mean renewed violence against civilians and indefinitely postpone any prospect for peace and stability in an area that has been suffering from armed conflict for more than two decades. It would also violate the trust and confidence that have been so difficult to build between the government, the FRPI and local communities during the FRPI peace process.

The main parties to the FRPI peace process, the national government and the FRPI, should restart the dialogue, clarify their current positions, and together define possible steps forward and conditions for the FRPI's full disarmament and demobilization. MONUSCO and donors should fully support such efforts for a peaceful dialogue. All parties should seek to avoid a relapse into military hostilities, which would have harmful consequences for local civilians.

The new community-based DDR and Stabilization programme (DDRCS) should not be seen as counter to the FRPI peace process: the latter provides an opportunity to clarify the definition of the DDRCS and bring substance to it. Many stakeholders, including donors, continue to wonder in what sense the DDRCS is really new, beyond the fact that it is implemented at the local level. The FRPI peace process teaches lessons on how to develop and manage a multistakeholder process that is genuinely owned by local communities: any DDRCS initiative should gain inspiration from this and make sure local communities have a say in the new DDRCS and are truly considered

stakeholders and not mere beneficiaries. Otherwise, the community-based DDR will be nothing more than another top-down approach that will not be able to meet the many difficult challenges of armed group demobilization, especially the complex phenomenon of combatants' circular return (Vlassenroot, Mudinga and Musamba 2020). The FRPI peace process provides an initial experiment in a community-based DDR process – although not yet finalized – and should therefore be considered as such.

To that aim, the FRPI process should be more thoroughly studied and researched in order to further develop the lessons learned that could be used for future peacebuilding and stabilization initiatives, including DDRCS.

Finally, it is worth remembering that beyond the activism of the FRPI and any other armed groups, Ituri and the broader eastern DRC need a thorough transitional justice and reconciliation process that focuses on the many long-term grievances that continue to divide communities. Here again, as an example of an effective bottom-up, multistakeholder process, the FRPI peace process offers valuable lessons.

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