

When the blue helmets leave: MONUSCO withdrawal from South Kivu province, eastern DRC

List of abbreviations

CLP	Comités locaux de protection (local protection committees)
CAN	Community Alert Network
CLP	Comités locaux de protection (local protection committees)
COB	Company Operating Base
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CCRCC	Commission consultative de résolution conflits communautaires
CLA	Community Liaison Assistants
CNDP	Congrès national pour la défense du peuple
CNPSC	Coalition nationale du peuple pour la souveraineté du Congo
EPIT	Équipe provinciale mixte intégrée de transition
FABB	Forces armées Biloze Bishambuke
FARDC	Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo
FDNB	Force de défense nationale du Burundi
FNL	Forces nationales de libération
GCP	Groupe de coordination des partenaires
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JHRO	Joint Human Rights Office
JPT	Joint Protection Team
LENI	Légion d'intervention rapide
MCDPIN	Mouvement congolais pour la défense du peuple et l'intégrité nationale
MONUSCO	Mission de l'Organisation des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo
M23	Mouvement du 23 mars
MSF	Médecins sans frontières
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDDRCS	Programme de désarmement, de démobilisation, de relèvement communautaire et de stabilisation
PNC	Police nationale congolaise
PNUD	Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement
RAD	Reserve armée de la défense
RDF	Rwanda Defense Force
RED-Tabara	Résistance pour un état de droit au Burundi
RN	Route nationale
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNPOL	United Nations Police

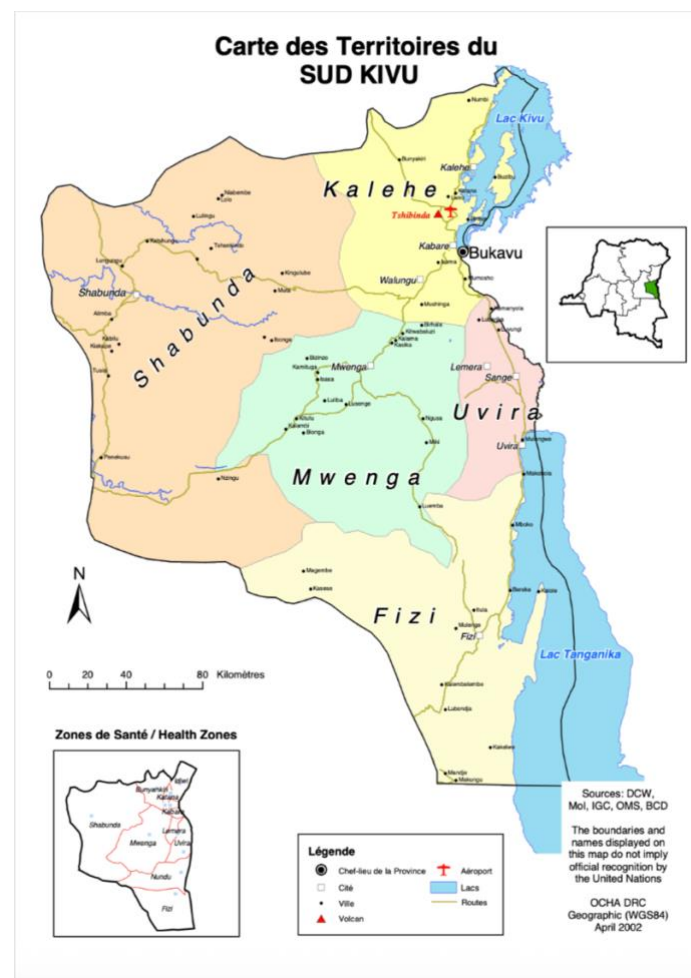
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About this report

This report was commissioned by the Conflict Sensitivity Hub (CSH). The CSH helps actors in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding (HDP) sectors to design and implement interventions that are conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive, context-sensitive and accountable to affected populations. Since 2022, CSH has been working primarily in eastern DRC to improve aid effectiveness and reduce the risk of unintended negative impacts on local communities.

This report was researched and written by Judith Verweijen and her team, Juvénal Twaibu, Lebon Mulimbi, Romain Kalivumba et Moïse Butimbushi, whose expertise and dedication we gratefully acknowledge. Following its completion, the report was shared with the government in the interest of transparency and collaborative dialogue. For the members of the DRC government within the Technical Secretariat for the Transition (at the national level), they cited a number of examples in which civil society had been engaged in the withdrawal process and underlined that they appreciated this engagement. For example, civil society actors participated in meetings held in Bukavu between December 4 – December 9, 2024, as part of a mid-term review of the transition. Nevertheless, the government welcomed the report and its findings. The government identified ways in which they might recommend that civil society could have played a greater role in raising public awareness of the withdrawal and in giving this initiative “wide coverage,” a practice that should be replicated and expanded during future withdrawals.



Executive summary and key recommendations

On 30 June 2024, the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) announced that it had completed the withdrawal of its troops from the province of South Kivu. This marked the end of the first phase of MONUSCO's accelerated withdrawal plan from the DRC, which had been agreed upon by the UN and the DRC government. MONUSCO's departure from South Kivu was followed by a 12-month transition phase. During this time, the Congolese authorities were to take over MONUSCO's tasks, supported by actions specified in a provincial road map and a UN support plan.

MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu was, in many ways, an imperfect process. It took place in a precipitated manner after the central government had paralysed the disengagement process from the DRC for months by pushing for shorter timelines and fewer conditions. Consequently, the withdrawal from South Kivu did not adhere to any benchmarks, being guided by an 'end date' rather than 'end state' approach. Indeed, MONUSCO left South Kivu at a time when the security situation was deteriorating due to a reduced Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) presence and growing control by armed groups. Approximately six months later, the transition process ground to a halt due to the spillover of the M23 crisis from North Kivu into South Kivu. This culminated in the fall of Bukavu on 16 February 2025. During this period, only a small part of the provincial transitional road map and associated UN support plan had been implemented.

This report analyses MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu and its impact on security, conflict and protection dynamics, focusing on the first six months following its departure (1 July – 31 December 2024). It concludes that the withdrawal of MONUSCO contributed to localised deterioration of the security situation around some former bases and along some roads that it used to patrol. However, these deteriorations were in most cases only temporary and affected a limited area of the province. In recent years, MONUSCO presence had already been significantly reduced in large parts of the province. Disengagement should therefore be viewed as a longer-term process rather than a single event in 2024. Furthermore, MONUSCO had limited direct influence on the core drivers of insecurity in the province, including: 1) armed group activism, 2) militarised power competition between elites, 3) the proliferation of banditry, and 4) geopolitical tensions in the Great Lakes region. For these reasons, while insecurity grew throughout the province in the second half of 2024, following a trend that started at the end of 2023, it is difficult to attribute this primarily to the withdrawal of MONUSCO.

The withdrawal of MONUSCO had a comparatively greater indirect impact on insecurity due to its effect on the civilian protection. In a context of increasing control by and clashes between armed groups, there were fewer opportunities for protection actors to address abuses committed by these groups. The withdrawal of MONUSCO further undermined protection actors' ability to raise awareness and engage in advocacy, as they felt less secure and were therefore less willing to speak out. At the same time, the withdrawal of MONUSCO led to a drop in efforts to educate the security forces on human rights and humanitarian issues and to hold armed perpetrators to account, for example, through mobile court hearings. It also hampered visits to places of detention. Taken together, these developments contributed to a growing sense of impunity among the security services and armed groups.

The effects of the withdrawal of MONUSCO on humanitarian activities varied, given that humanitarian organisations adopted very different positions towards the mission. Many organisations tried to distance themselves from the mission to protect core humanitarian principles such as neutrality and independence. However, some smaller organisations did rely on MONUSCO for transport services or security escorts. Those who used MONUSCO's transport services certainly felt the mission's absence, particularly when seeking access to the Hauts

Plateaux of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga. Additionally, the diminished capacity of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) after MONUSCO's departure negatively impacted humanitarian operations. Humanitarian operations were also hampered by the rising insecurity in the province, although the withdrawal of MONUSCO had limited overall influence on this. Ultimately, most organisations were able to overcome these constraints, and there are no signs that humanitarian activity diminished significantly because of MONUSCO's withdrawal.

In the months following MONUSCO's withdrawal, the dynamics of the conflict intensified due to increased interference from armed groups. The militarisation of these conflicts hindered their resolution. At the same time, peacebuilding activities in South Kivu diminished due to the general increase in insecurity, the failure to implement the road map, and the absence of security and logistical support that had previously been provided by MONUSCO. Nevertheless, severe cases of conflict continued to be addressed through various local and provincial actors and mechanisms.

Based on an analysis of how the transition process was organised, the report highlights five areas for improvement:

1. Planning well in advance

- The limited timeframe for organizing the transition hindered all aspects of its implementation, from the timely deployment of Congolese security services to the mobilization of resources. Future provincial transition planning should begin at least one year in advance.
- There should be particular attention to planning within the security services to ensure that the recruitment and training of personnel are factored into preparations. It is therefore crucial to involve the Ministries of the Interior and Defense, as well as the central command of the army and police, in the early stages of transition planning. For instance, joint workshops and planning exercises could have remediated this problem.
- Time pressures also undermined the ability to capitalize fully on lessons learned from the MONUSCO withdrawal from other areas of the DRC. In the future, knowledge transfer should be guaranteed through better documentation and organization of knowledge exchanges, including those involving civil society organizations.

2. Complementing a provincial with a local approach

- Ideally, the provincial approach to withdrawal would be complemented by a sub-provincial approach that focuses on different territories (sub-provincial administrative divisions). This would allow for a better adaptation of transition strategies and projects to local circumstances and enable more extensive consultation with sub-provincial actors.
- A more localized approach would also involve reinforcing local, inclusive security governance mechanisms in areas where blue helmets are withdrawing, well in advance of deploying new security services.

3. Ensuring a more inclusive approach from the outset

- The short timeframe for the transition undermined the meaningful inclusion of civil society, donors and international NGOs (INGOs) in the first stages of the planning process.
- It also negatively affected the ability of the participating members of civil society and INGOs to genuinely represent wider networks. In future withdrawal processes, more attention should be paid to the selection of representatives and the manner in which their bases are consulted.
- The existence of a separate and separately funded UN transition support plans with its own monitoring and evaluation mechanism transformed the transition into a two-track process between UN and non-UN actors. This was especially true since the provincial road

map remained largely unimplemented. Future processes should take a more integrated approach.

4. Providing more targeted and sustainable transition support

- With 242 actions and a budget of US\$57 million over only 12 months, the proposed road map was too ambitious. A more targeted approach based on identifying key gaps and immediate needs would have been easier to finance, implement, monitor and evaluate.
- Transition planning should have prioritized sustainability. In several areas, tasks were transferred to newly created or reconfigured institutions that had limited functionality or were still being developed.

5. Improving protection planning

- In certain areas, such as child protection and local protection committees, MONUSCO did not adequately prepare for the transfer of knowledge, networks, and expertise. This included failing to take a phased approach. For example, the transfer of the early warning network should have been more gradual, with community liaison assistants remaining in place throughout the transition.
- A more comprehensive policy for protecting human rights defenders should have been developed in consultation with the defenders themselves and communicated clearly, especially to those in isolated rural areas.
- Human rights mechanisms should not have been downsized at a time when significant gaps in this area were becoming apparent.

Introduction

The government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has long pushed for the gradual withdrawal of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO). At the end of 2013, following the military defeat of the M23 rebel group, the government recommended reducing the size of the mission by 5,000 troops the following year, and with 7,000 the year after that. Although fewer troops were eventually withdrawn, pressure to reduce the mission continued. This pressure came from both the Congolese government, who saw the mission as interfering too much with their sovereign affairs, and the UN, which were facing growing pressure on their peacekeeping budget.

President Félix Tshisekedi, who assumed power in January 2019, made the withdrawal of MONUSCO a priority, as reflected in his first State of the Union address. In response, the UN and the DRC government collaborated to develop a “Joint Strategy on the Progressive and Phased Drawdown of MONUSCO.” This strategy was approved by a Security Council resolution in December 2020, alongside the decision to withdraw the mission from Kasai province in 2021 and from Tanganyika province in 2022. The resolution further stipulated that the reconfigured mission should focus on the three provinces most affected by armed conflict: North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri.¹

Based on the Joint Strategy, a mixed DRC-MONUSCO working group developed a Joint Transition Plan and Road map for the withdrawal of the mission in the course of 2021.² This plan comprised 18 benchmarks, each with their own indicators, and a timeline, anticipating the completion of the withdrawal by the end of 2024. However, a series of violent anti-MONUSCO demonstrations in North Kivu province in July 2022 prompted the government to call for an acceleration of the implementation of the transition plan.³ In September 2023, political pressure for an accelerated withdrawal increased further when, in an address to the UN General Assembly, President Félix

Tshisekedi called for the MONUSCO withdrawal deadline to be brought forward by one year, from December 2024 to December 2023.⁴ This declaration should be viewed within the context of Tshisekedi's campaign for the December 2023 presidential elections, which he emphasised sovereignty and freedom from foreign interference.⁵

Pressure from the DRC government led to the signing of a revised plan and timeline for the “accelerated, gradual, orderly and responsible withdrawal of MONUSCO from the DRC” in November 2023.⁶ The revised plan reduced the preconditions for withdrawal, focusing on just four priorities: 1) significantly reducing the threat posed by armed groups; 2) strengthening authorities' capacity to respond to threats to the protection of civilians and to effectively resolve inter-ethnic conflicts; (3) implementing the operational plan for the National Program for Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery and Stabilization (P-DDRCS); and 4) organizing credible, transparent, inclusive and peaceful elections within the constitutional timeframe. The plan further stipulated that the first phase of the accelerated withdrawal would be the mission's disengagement from South Kivu province before April 2024, where it would hand over several operational and military bases to the Congolese government.⁷ The plan was endorsed by a UN Security Council resolution adopted on December 19, 2023, leaving only four months to disengage and six months to completely withdraw.⁸

This report analyses MONUSCO's disengagement from South Kivu province, where it ceased the implementation of its mandate on April 30 and announced to have withdrawn all its armed personnel and most of its civilian personnel on June 30, 2024, the DRC's Independence Day. Specifically, it analyses the effects of MONUSCO withdrawal on security, protection and conflict dynamics during the first six months following its disengagement. The report first describes the transition process, or the way in which the transfer of MONUSCO's core competencies to the Congolese authorities was organized and supported. Subsequently, it zooms in on the effects of MONUSCO withdrawal on three dimensions: 1) the evolution of the security situation; 2) the evolution of protection dynamics, including humanitarian activities and human rights work; and 3) the evolution of conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts. It ends by formulating five recommendations that may serve to guide the disengagement of MONUSCO from other areas of the DRC.

Methodology

This report is based on data collected by a team of four researchers — one based in Europe and three Congolese researchers based in South Kivu — between June 15, 2024, and November 30, 2025. Each Congolese researcher covered a specific zone of the province between July 1 2024 and June 30, 2025, writing monthly reports for each zone on the most important security, protection and conflict developments. Qualitative data was collected during interviews with key informants, including representatives of civil society, community-based organisations and local authorities. To develop an understanding of the transition process in the province, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 25 key informants. These interviews included representatives from international and Congolese NGOs, as well as from humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations, provincial authorities and UN agencies. These interviews were conducted either in person or by phone.

Data collection also involved the monthly reporting of protection incidents verified by three independent sources. These incidents were then coded and logged in a database. Researchers gathered information on these incidents using a combination of focal points in remote areas, civil society sources and local media reports. This reporting focused on incidents in which armed perpetrators harmed unarmed civilians using either firearms or bladed weapons. The term 'civilians' was understood to exclude members of the armed security services (e.g. police, army,

and park rangers), as well as members of armed groups. Clashes between armed groups and forces themselves were not registered, but rather any harm inflicted on civilians during or after them. Furthermore, only direct victims were recorded, i.e. people who were killed, injured, raped, robbed or otherwise dispossessed of their money or property. People displaced by violence were not registered as victims.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to our data collection. Firstly, although we aimed to be as comprehensive as possible when recording protection incidents, our data was still subject to the biases commonly found in violent incident reporting.⁹ These include: 1) Under-reporting from remote rural areas; 2) Under-reporting of sexual violence; and 3) Under-reporting of 'less spectacular' forms of violence, such as arbitrary arrests. A second methodological challenge is that we had no baseline data on protection incidents (i.e. no overview of trends before the phased implementation of the MONUSCO withdrawal from January 2024 onwards). Despite this information gap, it is still insightful to observe trends in the months following full disengagement. A third methodological challenge lies in attributing causality to MONUSCO withdrawal. There are many factors influencing the dynamics of conflict, security and protection in South Kivu. This makes it difficult to determine how changes in these dynamics relate to MONUSCO's withdrawal, except in the areas immediately surrounding its former bases. After January 2025, these difficulties of attribution intensify as the security situation is dominated by the M23's invasion and occupation of parts of South Kivu. Given these shifts in the political and military context, we focus mostly on the first six months of the transition.

The South Kivu transition process

In May 2023, an Integrated Joint Provincial Transition Team (EPIT) for South Kivu was created in Bukavu based on the 2021 Joint Transition Plan.¹⁰ The EPIT was co-chaired by MONUSCO, the provincial government and the UN Provincial Team, an entity that brings together the various UN agencies, funds and programmes operating in South Kivu. However, the EPIT's work was suspended in November 2023 when the national government decided to revise the transition plan.

The EPIT was only relaunched in February 2024. Four technical working groups were soon created to focus on the following domains: 1) security and the protection of civilians; 2) the reinforcement of state institutions and the rule of law; 3) support for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Rehabilitation and Stabilisation programme (PDDRCS); and 4) operations, logistics, and coordination. Although civil society organisations only had observer status in the EPIT, representatives of these organisations and international NGOs were associated with the working groups to make the process more inclusive. The working groups were tasked with creating a road map to identify the priority actions required for the government to take over tasks previously undertaken by MONUSCO. These actions were then broken down into specific activities, each with a designated budget, implementation zone and timeline. The road map was finalised and validated at the provincial level in April 2024. However, its validation at the national level could only take place after a new government was formed in the wake of the December 2023 general elections. This transition did not occur until June 2024. For its part, the UN had developed a separate Transition Support Plan based on the provincial team's identification of priority areas and an assessment of needs and gaps.

In order to better monitor and assist the transition, international donors formed the Partner Coordination Group (PCG) as a mechanism for joint monitoring and assistance. This group comprises just over 20 members, including development cooperation agencies, bilateral donors, the European Union (EU) and the World Bank. At the end of May 2024, the PCG visited Bukavu alongside representatives of INGOs and the government. As the road map had largely been

developed without direct input from donors, the latter were concerned about how it would align with, complement and potentially overlap with existing programmes. They also wanted to understand how the transition process would align with the Triple Nexus approach, which integrates humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts.¹¹

On the ground, MONUSCO troops had begun to gradually disengage from South Kivu province, where their mandate was due to officially end on April 30, 2024. A total of 15 installations were closed, and nine bases were either closed or transferred to the Congolese security services.¹² MONUSCO maintained a residual presence of 34 civilians in Bukavu to assist with the transition process. The remaining delegates continued to manage community alert networks, support child protection, promote dialogue with communities, monitor human rights and support PDDRCS, judicial and penitentiary institutions. However, the team had to operate without any field presence. Consequently, the remote management strongly limited its activities.

Although the transition process in South Kivu officially started on July 1, 2024, implementation of the road map was slow to get underway. It had a sizeable budget of \$57 million USD, though its belated validation delayed the mobilisation of funds. By the time the road map was finalised in April 2024, most donors had already set their budgets for the 2024 financial year. Furthermore, donors generally believed that the Congolese government should provide most of the funding. Preference was therefore given to existing or upcoming UN joint programmes instead.

It was not until mid-August, six weeks into the transition, that the Minister of Plan and Aid Coordination announced, via videoconference, the government's commitment to contribute just over 50% of the total expected budget — around \$30 million — during a so-called “Alignment Workshop” held in Bukavu. However, he did not provide a timeline for the disbursement of these funds. During a subsequent meeting with the EPIT on November 18, it was announced that the government in Kinshasa would soon release a first instalment of \$15 million. The money was never disbursed, which further intensified the war with the M23. In January, the standstill led to a paralysis of the transition process.

For its part, MONUSCO had made \$10 million available for the UN Support Plan, which had a total budget of \$23 million. Meanwhile, the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) had committed between \$7-8 million from its 2024 allocation. Additionally, the Stabilisation Coherence Fund pledged further funds. By the end of November, over 75% of the UN Support Plan was estimated to be funded.¹³ Some of this money was disbursed to UN agencies towards the end of 2024, allowing them to start implementation. Moreover, several UN entities had mobilized internal resources to execute the UN Support Plan, implying they had already started to execute activities from the start of the transition. Finances had been distributed to pay for additional transition staff, the expanded monitoring of protection incidents and support for the disarmament, demobilisation and community rehabilitation of children associated with armed groups. However, the context of the escalating war with the M23 impeded the further implementation of activities from the end of January 2025 onwards. Discussions were subsequently held among the leadership of MONUSCO and UN agencies in the DRC about adapting to the new context, including reorienting activities focused on authorities towards local communities. Beginning in April 2025 certain activities were implemented through local partner organisations.

Due to the late disbursement of resources and the M23 war, much of the transition road map has never been implemented; only a small portion of the UN Support Plan activities were rolled out. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the transition support process. However, it is possible to analyse the way in which it was organized.

Organization of support to the transition

The time pressure under which the South Kivu transition was organised negatively impacted the process. Some of the observed weaknesses also point to design issues. For instance, some of the people contacted for this research lamented that there had been insufficient time to capitalise on the lessons learned from the MONUSCO withdrawal from the Kasai and Tanganyika provinces. The lack of accessible documentation and inadequate knowledge transfer was perceived as a missed opportunity to share best practices.¹⁴ The short timeframe also presented challenges in ensuring an inclusive and focused process, as outlined below.

Despite the time constraints, some aspects of the transition process were successful. Many participants in the EPIT working groups described the discussions as very productive. This was the first time that the provincial government, civil society organisations (CSO), UN agencies, MONUSCO and INGOs had come together. These thematic discussions covered topics ranging from the future of policy and interventions to the consequential work of each organisation. For instance, it became clear that the provincial government initially lacked an understanding of the full scope of MONUSCO's activities. Protection and development actors were not always aware of each other's activities either. This was further illustrated during a forum held by protection and development partners in Bukavu in September 2024. The aim of the workshop was to develop a map of protection and development activities to identify gaps and overlaps.¹⁵ It would have been preferable for the provincial government, CSOs, UN agencies, MONUSCO, and INGOs to have a higher level of mutual awareness of policies, projects, and priorities much earlier in the transition process, as this forms the foundation for transition planning.

Inclusivity

From the moment transition preparations in the DRC began, concerns were raised about the exclusion of civil society. Although the 2021 Joint Transition Plan was presented to and discussed with CSOs prior to finalisation, these organisations provided little input into the overall drafting process. Furthermore, CSOs were excluded from national-level transition working groups; the government considered these working groups to be primarily bilateral government–UN bodies. The DRC government felt it was inappropriate to involve non-UN actors in sensitive security planning like discussions on FARDC deployment.¹⁶ When the South Kivu EPIT was established in 2023, CSOs were not represented in its presidency or technical secretariat. The latter was responsible for preparing and convening meetings, drafting meeting notes and following up on action points. Instead, these bodies were composed of representatives of the provincial government, MONUSCO and the UN country team. Additionally, the terms of reference for the South Kivu EPIT state that civil society representatives may join the EPIT's technical working groups “in an advisory capacity.”¹⁷ To many civil society actors, this setup and wording signalled that they did not have full membership, but rather a type of “observer status,” which they contested.¹⁸

When the EPIT reconvened in early 2024, the CSOs actively collaborated with INGOs in the revised working groups. Nevertheless, some local organisations felt that their role in the transition could have been more prominent for three reasons: Firstly, the provincial government was firmly in control of developing the road map, especially translating priority actions into concrete activities. Secondly, CSOs were not given the opportunity to comment on and validate the mid-term evaluation report, which was drawn up after a team from the joint transition secretariat in Kinshasa visited Bukavu in early December. The final version had not been shared with CSOs. Lastly, the creation of a separately funded and implemented UN transition support plan with its own monitoring and evaluation mechanisms transformed the transition into a two-step process

involving UN and non-UN actors. This division was accentuated by the fact that implementation of the provincial road map barely got underway.¹⁹

The sense that their input was insufficient or not given enough consideration was even more pronounced among CSOs outside of Bukavu. Although the central civil society coordination of South Kivu is supposed to represent all CSOs operating in the province, communication with remotely located organisations is not always straightforward. The CSO representatives were selected quickly, with little consideration given to their representation or the frequency and mechanisms by which they consulted and relayed information back to their base.²⁰ Consequently, there were significant variations among CSO representatives regarding their efforts to engage their wider networks. It is perhaps unsurprising that many CSO representatives not based in Bukavu said they had not been consulted in the transition planning process; they felt it was not tailored to the specific needs of the different territories (sub-provincial administrative divisions).²¹ It would have been preferable to have a process involving local authorities and CSOs in the capitals of territories and other major cities and towns, in which they could express context-specific concerns about the withdrawal of MONUSCO and the transition, which could then have contributed to a more contextually-relevant road map.

Scope and sustainability

The road map developed by the EPIT was ambitious. The transition was to be rolled out over just 12 months. The adopted version contained 121 “priority actions” and 242 activities to implement them (see Figure 1), each with their own budget and timeline. While MONUSCO was active in many areas, implying that its departure would be widely felt, the road map gives the impression of being a ‘shopping list’ rather than a planning document that prioritizes urgent action in the areas where it is most needed. One reason for this is that almost all of the involved actors tried to capitalize on the transition as a fundraising opportunity, therefore emphasizing the domains in which they were active. The wide range of activities raises the question of whether “priority actions” should not have been prioritized

further. Additional concerns arose about whether it was feasible to execute, follow up on and evaluate this number of projects within the designated timeframe. The ambitious setup also required a substantial budget (\$57 million USD), despite much uncertainty surrounding the mobilization of resources. While some believed that prioritization would follow once the level of committed resources was clear, it would have been better to develop a more focused, feasible plan from the outset, especially since the mobilization of resources was always going to be a considerable challenge. This may have also eased the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework, for which there had not been sufficient time.

Another issue is that the road map includes projects whose feasibility and sustainability are questionable, given that they involve reconfiguring or establishing new institutions. While MONUSCO attempted to develop some of these institutions prior to their departure, many of them were still in their infancy. A salient example is the reconfiguration of the “Civil Protection Coordination” office, which is part of the provincial Ministry of the Interior. The office was tasked to take over MONUSCO’s role in managing early warning networks. The road map stipulates the creation of 1) an Operations Centre (Crisis Centre) for alert and response management within this office; and 2) Civil Protection branch offices throughout the province. As will be explained further in the section on civilian protection, the Civil Protection Coordination office never effectively took up its role. Neither the operations centre nor the local branches have become fully operational. This example raises two questions. Firstly, should any new institutions taking over core tasks of MONUSCO have been set up much earlier, well before MONUSCO’s departure, to oversee their development and provide adequate training for personnel? And secondly, will such recently

developed institutions be sustainable after transition funding dries up, given that they may not yet have taken root?

The road map also set out actions that constitute longer-term peacebuilding or state-building efforts. However, these actions do not necessarily address the immediate needs arising from the withdrawal process. One example is the implementation of a “sustainable, victim-centred transitional justice mechanism.” Another example is “reinforcing the capacities of the provincial branch of the inspector-general of the PNC”.²² While these actions are certainly important, they appear to be mid- to long-term priorities. Furthermore, some of the proposed actions fell within areas in which MONUSCO had never played a dominant role. Overall, the road map was overly ambitious. It failed to identify core tasks or distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term priorities. It also insufficiently considered the sustainability and the post-transition period. Instead, it focused on replacing all MONUSCO's tasks without clearly indicating which were the most crucial for the government to replace within the 12-month transition period.

Pillar	Priority activities	Actions	Budget
Security & Protection of Civilians	30	106	\$29,291, 228
State authority	37	87	\$17,245,136
PDDRCS	12	30	\$885,740
Logistics & operations	42	19	\$10,182,816
Total	121	242	\$57,604,920

Figure 1 Overview of the transition road map

The security situation post-MONUSCO

In this section, we first describe how the security situation in South Kivu evolved after MONUSCO withdrawal. We pay particular attention to the first six months (July – December 2024) after withdrawal. We then zoom in on the evolution of the security situation around former MONUSCO bases, and end with a discussion of the extent to which the observed security developments can be ascribed to the absence of MONUSCO.

Security developments until end of 2024

On 30 June 2024, MONUSCO announced that it had completed its withdrawal from South Kivu. At this time, the security situation in the province was becoming increasingly volatile. The intensifying war with the M23 had diverted most of the government’s attention and military resources to North Kivu province. The Congolese army had a significantly reduced presence in South Kivu; most troops had been redeployed to the frontlines of the war against the M23. At the same time, an unofficial policy was adopted to stop tracking any armed groups besides M23 and its suspected allies. Consequently, armed groups in South Kivu enjoyed greater freedom of movement and action than at any time in the past two decades. Most of these groups became known as “Wazalendo,” meaning “patriots” in Swahili, as they claimed to be fighting foreign aggression. Indeed, some of these groups sent troops to North Kivu to fight the Rwanda-backed M23, while others collaborated with the FARDC to combat armed groups in South Kivu suspected of being M23 allies.

On the ground, the FARDC now had to cohabitate and collaborate with competing Wazalendo groups. This led to constant friction about who oversaw which areas or domains. Although they had a unitary designation, the “Wazalendo” represented a heterogeneous collection of armed groups without a central command or overarching organisational structure. Within this context, we observed four major security trends during the first six months of the MONUSCO withdrawal: 1) intensified revenue generation and predation by Wazalendo groups; 2) regular clashes between Wazalendo groups; 3) an increase in violent banditry; and 4) growing hostilities involving foreign armed groups and forces.

Intensified revenue-generation and predation by Wazalendo forces

Whereas they were historically confined to rural areas before 2023, Wazalendo groups have now become increasingly present in the outskirts of large cities and semi-urban areas. This, together with their unprecedented freedom of movement, prompted them to vastly expand their revenue-generating activities. First, Wazalendo groups multiplied roadblocks on both main and smaller roads. In some areas, the FARDC attempted to suppress these roadblocks. These efforts had limited success, which suggests that the FARDC did not have much control over the Wazalendo. Meanwhile, the army itself also set up more roadblocks. Second, most Wazalendo groups expanded and further bureaucratised their tax systems, taking advantage of the enlarged and more populated areas under their control. They imposed taxes on households, the exploitation of natural resources and shops, and issued official documents such as construction permits and *feuilles de routes vétérinaires* (veterinary road maps), which are required whenever cattle are moved from one area to another. Third, many Wazalendo groups intensified their involvement in the exploitation and trade of natural resources like minerals, hardwood, charcoal, palm oil and cannabis. Both armed groups and the FARDC also derived considerable income from securing (against payment) semi-industrial mining activities, which rely on intermediate technologies such as dredgers and pumps, and are often carried out by Chinese companies or individuals.²³

Growing clashes between Wazalendo forces

Immediately after MONUSCO’s withdrawal, frequent clashes between Wazalendo forces caused insecurity for communities. Examples include clashes between the National Coalition of the People for the Sovereignty of Congo (CNPSC) and the Ngoma Nzito wing of Forces Armées Biloze Bishambuke (FABB) in Fizi; internecine fighting between “General” N’yikiriba and “General” Ruma in Mwenga; and clashes between different Mouvement congolais pour la défense du peuple et l’intégrité nationale (MCDPIN) factions based in the Hauts Plateaux of Kalehe. These clashes were largely the result of competition for territorial control and revenue generation opportunities. In addition, they stemmed from the involvement of armed groups in inter-community, land and local authority disputes, as further detailed in the section on conflict dynamics.

These control and leadership struggles, which also prompted the emergence of new armed groups, were exacerbated by anticipated recruitment into the Reserve armée de la défense (RAD). In April 2024, representatives of Wazalendo groups were called to Kinshasa to meet with the government. They were instructed to prepare lists of their troops and officers to submit to the national coordination of the RAD with an eye to their potential integration. This prompted an increase in recruitment, as groups hoped to claim important positions based on their numerical strength. It also fed into growing competition between groups for potential leadership positions in the RAD.²⁴

An uptick in violent banditry

The increased power and freedom of movement of Wazalendo groups coincided with a surge in banditry. Ransom kidnappings, ambushes, aggravated theft and armed robbery incidents became more prevalent. These crimes often targeted phone credit shops and gold-buying offices (*comptoirs*). While most ambushes occurred in rural areas, robberies were widespread in cities such as Uvira, Baraka, Bukavu and Kamituga, as well as in larger towns adjacent to mining sites, such as Misisi. Many of the perpetrators of these crimes were “armed bandits,” yet a significant proportion were attributed to members of Wazalendo groups and, less frequently, the security services.

Hostilities and tensions involving foreign armed groups and forces

The withdrawal of MONUSCO coincided with an increase in the presence and activity of the Burundian army (FDNB) in the Fizi and Uvira territories. The FDNB has had an unofficial presence in the DRC since 2011 and has frequently carried out military operations against Burundian armed opposition groups based in Fizi and Uvira.²⁵ Their presence was formalized through bilateral military cooperation agreements signed in 2021, as well as the establishment of a joint taskforce between the FARDC and the FDNB, which was deployed to the Hauts Plateaux in August 2022.

In the months following the withdrawal of MONUSCO, the FDNB continued to carry out operations against the Burundian rebel groups Red-Tabara and FNL with the support of Congolese armed groups, including the CNPSC. These activities were part of wider geopolitical tensions in the Great Lakes region, particularly the strained relations between Burundi and Rwanda, and between Rwanda and the DRC. Burundian military leaders were suspected of maintaining contacts with armed Rwandan opposition groups.²⁶ In turn, Rwanda was alleged by a UN Group of Experts report to have resumed support for the Burundian armed group Red-Tabara, which was suspected of forming an alliance with the Twirwaneho.²⁷ The latter is an armed group composed of Banyamulenge operating in the Hauts Plateaux area of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga. By the end of 2024, it had become clear that the Twirwaneho were maintaining ties with the M23.²⁸ This resulted in increased military operations against the group by the FARDC in coalition with several armed groups.

Security developments around former MONUSCO bases

From February 2024 onwards, MONUSCO began gradually closing or handing over its bases and installations. A newly constructed helipad in Rutemba (near Uvira) was given to the FARDC (Congolese army) and PNC (Congolese police). Congolese police were required to take on the primary responsibilities of the military component of the mission, notably protecting civilians. MONUSCO also transferred equipment, including underutilized vehicles, to the Congolese security services. The deployment of security personnel to the areas vacated by the blue helmets was often late or insufficient. Furthermore, the army and police leadership failed to provide sufficient fuel for the generators and vehicles donated by MONUSCO. Consequently, most bases lacked electricity and water. Installations at former bases rapidly degraded due to a lack of maintenance. Valuable assets were also stripped and sold off. Even when security personnel were deployed, they did not necessarily carry out security. Hindered in part by the absence of fuel, they did not adopt the same patrolling routines as MONUSCO. Even where security services established an active presence, security for citizens did not necessarily improve because security personnel erected roadblocks and occasionally engaged in harassment, extortion and arbitrary arrests. The following section

further explores the security implications of these trends in the different areas where MONUSCO withdrew its personnel.

Ruzizi Plain, Uvira and Baraka

In mid-February 2024, MONUSCO withdrew from its Company Operating Base (COB) in Kamanyola. This base is in Walungu territory and provided security for the Ruzizi plain, including National Road 5 (RN5), the route connecting Bukavu to Uvira. The government subsequently deployed 115 police officers from the Rapid Intervention Legion (LENI) to assume security responsibilities. However, it is reported that over half of these officers left the area after two months due to a lack of rations and decent sleeping arrangements, having sold their mattresses.²⁹ The FARDC and PNC who were deployed to the **Sange COB** in Uvira territory, which closed on 25 May, also failed to actively patrol RN5, as MONUSCO did, partly due to a lack of fuel. In June, there was a surge in ambushes on this stretch of road, particularly between Kawizi and Runingu. Security on this part of the RN5 improved in August, however, after the Burundian army increased its deployment and established a presence in Sange.

In early October 2024, around 180 additional police officers from the LENI were deployed to Kamanyola. However, this did little to improve the security situation. Extreme confusion prohibited effective task delegation between the commander of the newly deployed LENI unit and the PNC police station in Kamanyola. Like the first wave of LENI deployed in August, many of the police personnel left Kamanyola rapidly due to the miserable living conditions. Thirdly, the deployed police undertook limited patrols and deterrence operations due to inadequate logistics. Fourthly, LENI personnel were accused of harassing the population of Kamanyola, including through arbitrary arrests, thereby becoming an important source of insecurity themselves.

In Uvira, the direct security effects of MONUSCO withdrawal were limited, as the mission only patrolled a small area of the city. Furthermore, much of the insecurity in Uvira is caused by banditry, a problem that MONUSCO was poorly equipped to address. By contrast, in the city of Baraka (Fizi territory), where MONUSCO's COB was closed and dismantled on May 6, 2024, the security situation initially deteriorated. This was, however, largely due to the growing presence of clashing Wazalendo groups in and around the city. Additionally, as Wazalendo combatants are unpaid, some began renting themselves out as assassins to settle scores and make a living, while also engaging in or facilitating armed robbery and burglary. Although the Burundian established a temporary presence in the city, it was primarily concerned with organizing operations against Burundian armed groups, rather than providing security.

Hauts Plateaux of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga

The situation around the former MONUSCO bases in Minembwe and Mikenge, in the Hauts Plateaux region of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga, was relatively calm immediately after MONUSCO withdrawal. There were no attacks on the camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) hosted in these entities and protected by MONUSCO. The Minembwe and Mikenge zones were taken over by the newly deployed 21st Commando Brigade of the FARDC. However, the Banyamulenge armed group Twirwaneho was in control on the outskirts of both zones. In line with the FARDC's new stance of not attacking armed groups, the new FARDC unit initially adopted a non-confrontational attitude towards the Twirwaneho, leading to relative calm. There were no attacks by Wazalendo groups, partly due to divisions within these groups. Despite the limited hostilities, the IDPs did not feel very secure. FARDC members engaged in harassment, extortion and torture. When clashes between the FARDC and Twirwaneho resumed in November 2024, the security situation for IDPs and the wider population deteriorated precipitously. In February 2025, the two vacated

IDP camps near Mikenge — one belonging to the Banyamulenge and the other members of other ethnic groups — were demolished and burned down by armed groups.

Bunyakiri, Kavumu, Amsar and Bukavu

The Bunyakiri area in Kalehe territory, from which MONUSCO withdrew from its COB at the end of April 2024, initially faced growing insecurity related to the increased presence of armed groups engaging in robbery, pillage and sexual violence. There was also an increase in ambushes on the RN3, which runs from Bukavu to Kisangani and which MONUSCO used to patrol around Bunyakiri. Furthermore, the transfer of the Bunyakiri COB was complicated by an ongoing dispute between the concession's owners and the provincial government, which had not paid rent for using the land.

In the area around Kavumu (Kabare territory) where MONUSCO had a base and guarded the airport, there was a slight deterioration in security after the blue helmets left. This was partly due to the security services' limited commitment to fulfilling their duties, as well as their occasional misconduct, such as extorting people during patrols. Unidentified armed youths entered areas of Kavumu that were formerly jointly patrolled by MONUSCO and the FARDC. Near the former MONUSCO base in Amsar (Kabare territory) close to the centre of Mudaka, cases of banditry were also reported after post-withdrawal, though it was difficult to substantiate a significant increase.

In Bukavu, the effects of the MONUSCO withdrawal on security were limited. MONUSCO mostly patrolled main roads and neighbourhoods that house MONUSCO staff, such as Nguba, La Botte and Muhumba. It did not have a presence in most of the city's other neighbourhoods, which are more insecure. Although Kinshasa announced the deployment of 450 LENI police officers to Bukavu as part of the transition,³⁰ this deployment never materialized.

Following the withdrawal, we observed localized deterioration in security around certain MONUSCO bases (e.g. Kamanyola, Sange, Bunyakiri and Baraka), as well as along the roads where they used to patrol. However, there were no immediate effects around other bases (e.g. Minembwe, Mikenge, Kavumu and Rutemba near Uvira). Furthermore, some of these deteriorations (e.g. in Sange) were only temporary. Despite these notable shifts, not all of them can be attributed primarily to the absence of MONUSCO. What did play a role in all cases, however, was the inadequate deployment and performance of the Congolese security services during the transition process. Clearly, if these services are not well prepared and do not deploy sufficient personnel capable of performing their tasks effectively in time, the transfer of security tasks cannot succeed. The December 2024 joint midway assessment report also identified the presence and performance of the defence and security forces as a key weakness in the transition process.³¹ This was partly due to late planning. For example, there are not enough police officers in the DRC. This means that any increased deployment requires additional recruitment and training, both of which need to be budgeted for and planned well in advance. In addition, as decisions regarding army and policy deployment are made centrally in Kinshasa, any transition planning at provincial level must closely align with decisions and actions at headquarters. This does not appear to have occurred sufficiently in the South Kivu transition.

Evaluating the security effects of MONUSCO withdrawal

MONUSCO withdrawal took place amid an already volatile situation and deteriorating security conditions from the end of 2023 onwards. When looking at the core drivers of insecurity in this first six-month period, it is difficult to find evidence to suggest that MONUSCO had more than a

limited influence over them. This suggests that the mission's continued presence would not have significantly reduced the mounting insecurity.

The first driver of insecurity was armed group activity, notably the decision not to attack armed groups and instead prepare them for integration into the RAD. Over the years, the Congolese government has made major decisions related to armed groups. The government integrated the CNDP into the Congolese army in 2009. This unilateral decision indicates that the mission had little influence on this area of government policy.³² A second key driver of insecurity is the militarized power competition between political elites. MONUSCO generally did not successfully manage to structurally alter political dynamics in the DRC, which demonstrates its limited political influence and ability to influence political elites.³³ The third major driver of insecurity was the proliferation of acts of banditry, which has become a widespread form of revenue generation from which many groups in society benefit directly and indirectly. Like most peacekeeping missions, MONUSCO was poorly equipped to address banditry, which is a matter more suited to law enforcement agencies than military ones. However, MONUSCO's police unit (UNPOL) supported the creation of proximity policing and developed "Operational Strategies to Combat Insecurity" in various cities. UNPOL also supported mixed units comprising Congolese army, police, intelligence and migration services personnel in conducting patrols.³⁴ Ultimately, these efforts failed to systematically reduce levels of urban banditry. A final core driver of insecurity was geopolitical competition in the Great Lakes Region. MONUSCO's focus on a single country meant it was not well placed to deal with diplomatic tensions and politics at the regional level. Although it was involved in various cross-border activities, including the repatriation of foreign combatants and their families, it did not influence the higher-level diplomatic and political dynamics that drive regional insecurity.

When considering the security implications of withdrawal, it should also be noted that MONUSCO's presence in South Kivu had already substantially decreased in recent years. At its peak, the mission comprised 5,000 peacekeepers and 32 military bases in the province.³⁵ By early 2024, this had decreased to nine bases and approximately 2,500 troops. Notably, MONUSCO's mobility in South Kivu was severely restricted by the Memorandums of Understanding under which several national contingents were deployed. These stipulated that troops from certain contingents could only conduct vehicle-based patrols within a radius of a COB that would enable them to return the same day. This severely limited their ability to deploy quickly to remote areas, implying they only had a meaningful military presence in a very small part of the province.³⁶ The most direct security effects of their withdrawal were therefore visible around their former bases. In some cases, such as Baraka, the deteriorating security situation after withdrawal was mostly related to the presence and practices of Wazalendo groups, on which MONUSCO had limited influence.

It is challenging to determine to what extent a MONUSCO presence would have been able to mitigate the level of insecurity caused by M23's occupation in January 2025. Yet examining North Kivu can provide some insight. Despite supporting the FARDC, MONUSCO was unable to prevent the fall of Goma or stop the atrocities committed against civilians. This calls into question whether it could have prevented the advance on Bukavu and its subsequent capture. It is plausible that its presence would have made the capture of Bukavu more costly. Furthermore, the hostility of the M23 and the RDF towards MONUSCO has made it very difficult for the mission to operate in zones held by the M23 in North Kivu, where it faces severe restrictions on its movements.³⁷ It is unlikely that the situation would have been any different in South Kivu. Given that the airports in Goma and Kavumu remain inaccessible and crossing Rwandan territory has been a challenge for MONUSCO, it is difficult to envision how the mission could have functioned logistically had it remained in South Kivu during the M23 occupation.

An analysis of the number of protection incidents per month in the first year after MONUSCO withdrawal (see Figure 2), supports the conclusion that withdrawal had a limited direct impact

on the evolution of the security situation. First, there has been no linear increase in incidents in the first months of the transition. After an increase in August compared to July, there was a drop in September. This was followed by two months of increase and again a very slight decrease in December.

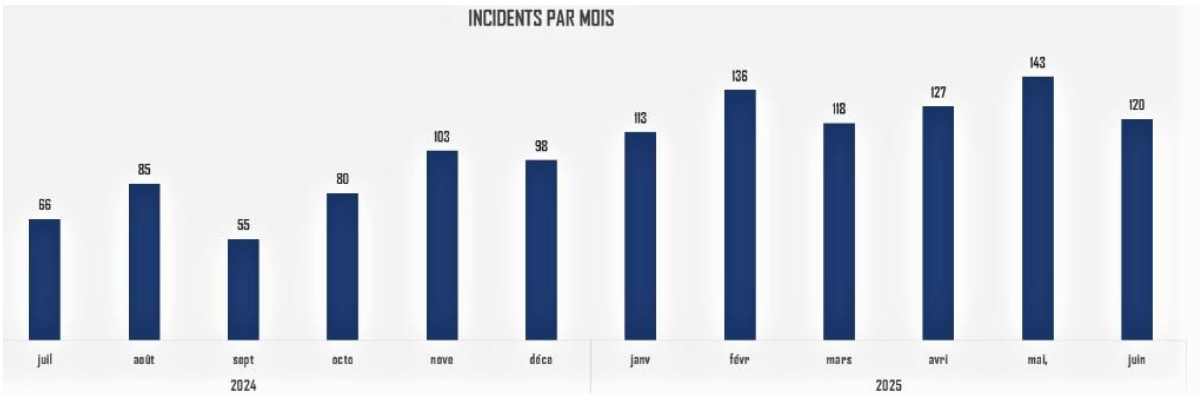


Figure 2 Monthly protection incidents after MONUSCO withdrawal

Secondly, examining the types of violence most frequently committed (see Figure 3) reveals that these were primarily acts of banditry, which MONUSCO had little influence over. These acts included aggravated theft (VTYP 210), extortion (VTYP 250), and ambushes (VTYP 220). MONUSCO did influence the level of ambushes on the road axes it patrolled; however, these covered only a small part of the total road network in the province. Another common form of violence was torture (VTYP470). MONUSCO indirectly influenced the occurrence of torture through training and sensitization, visits to places of detention, advocacy, and support for prosecution, mostly where the perpetrators were state security forces. According to our data, most torture occurred during banditry activities such as armed robberies, ambushes and kidnappings, and was committed by non-state actors.

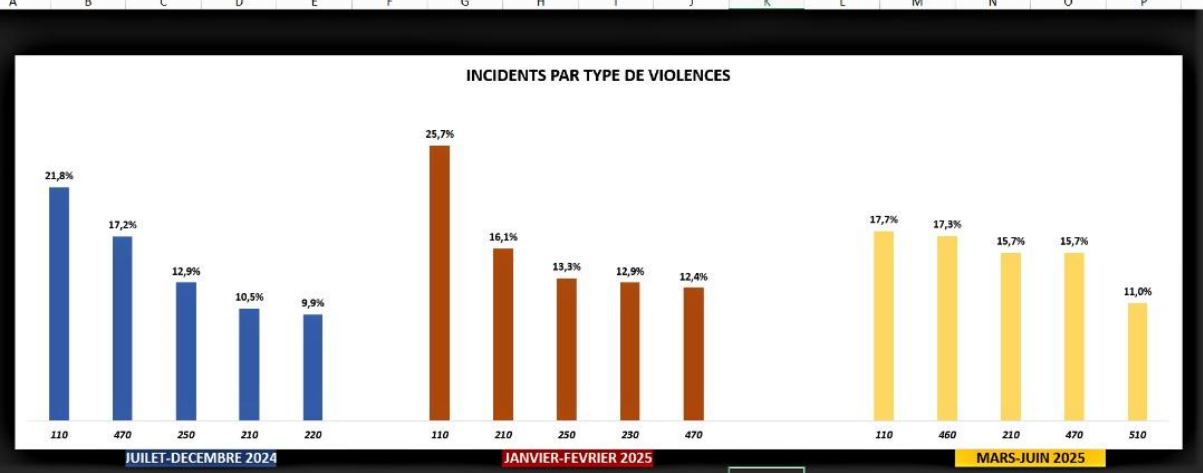


Figure 3 Types of violence occurring after MONUSCO withdrawal

Legend: Types of violence (VTYP)

VTYP110 Murder	VTYP210 Theft VTYP220 Ambush (for burglary) VTYP230 Looting (other than large livestock) VTYP250 Extortion	VTYP460 Shooting without apparent intent to kill or stray bullet VTYP470 Torture	VTYP510 Kidnapping
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As discussed in the next section, the mission's withdrawal had important indirect security effects, primarily through its influence on civilian protection efforts. Another indirect security effect was that MONUSCO disengagement undermined the DD phases of the DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) process. MONUSCO's DDR section often played a key role in processing voluntary surrenders among combatants of armed groups, including providing logistics and monitoring the security and wellbeing of those who surrendered. While these tasks were transferred to the FARDC and the PDDRCs they were not effectively taken over. On August 19, 2024, Raiya Mutomboki leader Kafuma surrendered to the 3403rd regiment of the FARDC in Luliba (Bakisi chiefdom in Shabunda), bringing with him around ten soldiers and seven AK-47s. However, the FARDC provided them with very little food, leaving them largely to their own devices. Given the limited operational capacity of the PDDRCs, the departure of MONUSCO created a gap in the provision of immediate support to surrendered combatants. Yet the PDDRCs was allocated a very small amount in the road map: just \$885,740 of a total budget of \$57,604,920 — representing 1.5%.³⁸ Nevertheless, it remains unclear how much influence deficient DD had on deterring voluntary surrenders. There were strong pressures on youth to mobilize in the context of the escalating war with the M23 and anticipated RAD integration.

Humanitarian and protection work after withdrawal

The withdrawal of MONUSCO forces affected humanitarian activities and had an even greater effect on other protection efforts, including the security of internally displaced persons, early warning mechanisms, local protection committees and human rights work. Below, we will discuss the effects of the withdrawal on these different areas, focusing on the first six months after withdrawal.

Humanitarian activities and access

It is difficult to generalise the impact of the withdrawal of MONUSCO across the humanitarian landscape. Humanitarian organisations have divergent views on how closely they should coordinate and interact with the mission, particularly about information sharing and the use of armed escorts or MONUSCO transport. Most large humanitarian organisations, such as Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), did not collaborate with MONUSCO to maintain their neutrality and independence, preferring to use their own security and logistics systems. However, some occasionally used MONUSCO helicopter transport as a last resort for emergency medical evacuations of their own staff. Often smaller national humanitarian organisations did use MONUSCO logistics like air transport. Many organisations also used MONUSCO to enhance the security of their operations, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. For example, some included UN bases in their security and contingency plans as assembly points prior to relocation. More generally, the mere presence of a UN base enhanced the security of their compounds and provided reassurance that assistance would be available in case of emergencies. In addition, roads patrolled by MONUSCO were considered safer for humanitarian organizations, while the latter also benefited from the maintenance and bridge repairs that MONUSCO effectuated on certain axes.

For organisations that used MONUSCO transport, its departure hindered their operations. These difficulties were particularly strongly felt by organisations trying to access the Hauts Plateaux area of Fizi and Itombwe following the closure of the Mikenge and Minembwe bases.³⁹ The withdrawal of MONUSCO further undermined humanitarian access to remote areas by negatively impacting the operations of UNHAS (the UN Humanitarian Air Service, managed by the World

Food Programme). MONUSCO helped to secure landing sites, some of which were located inside UN bases and used by UNHAS. A number of these bases were closed, and some helipads became inaccessible as they were located on privately owned land where the owners did not renew the lease after MONUSCO's departure. As UNHAS decided not to land on helipads inside FARDC-controlled bases, the number of landing sites available overall decreased, which also made refuelling more difficult. In addition, there were issues with sites where the FARDC provided security. On September 24, 2024, FARDC elements delayed the departure of a humanitarian flight from Mikenge by explaining that essential checks on the helicopter needed to be completed. Subsequently, UNHAS temporarily suspended flights to the area.⁴⁰ This forced NGOs to find alternative ways of transporting cargo to isolated areas over land or by boat, creating longer delivery times, higher logistics costs, and increasing their exposure to security risks.

When assessing the overall impact of MONUSCO on humanitarian access, it is important to bear in mind that MONUSCO was no longer present in many remote areas of South Kivu. For instance, it left Shabunda in 2022 and closed most of its bases in Fizi, such as Lusenda in 2021 and Bibokoboko in 2022, as well as in the Hauts Plateaux of Uvira, such as Bijombo in 2023. This meant that humanitarian organizations operating in these areas already had to adapt. MONUSCO's departure was a gradual process rather than a sudden exit in 2024, implying that many adjustments had already been made before it ceased operations entirely. Furthermore, MONUSCO was unable to make much of a difference about one of the biggest obstacles to humanitarian access: the growing influence of armed groups, which increasingly complicated humanitarian activities from the end of 2023 onwards. The rapidly shifting territorial control of these groups, their mutual clashes, their tense relations with the FARDC, and the sheer multitude of groups made negotiating access increasingly difficult.

Approximately five months after MONUSCO ceased operations, UNOCHA surveyed several INGOs, NGOs and UN agencies as part of their quarterly monitoring of perceptions of the intensity of humanitarian access constraints. The September 2024 results showed that, "the perception of access constraints among NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies is broadly consistent and stable compared to the previous quarter." Therefore, no linear deterioration in humanitarian access can be detected following the withdrawal of MONUSCO. In fact, there was a slight improvement in access reported for certain health zones by both national NGOs and UN agencies.⁴¹

Other areas of protection

MONUSCO played a crucial role in many areas of protection. While its military component provided physical protection for IDPs and the Joint Human Rights Office (JHRO), its Civilian affairs section (CAS) collaborated with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to support local protection structures and engage the Congolese security services on protection issues. Following its departure, the absence of MONUSCO's support and initiatives was widely felt, particularly as the transition road map which had envisaged numerous activities in the protection domain was never implemented.

One such area was raising awareness among the Congolese security services of humanitarian and human rights issues like sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). However, these sensitization efforts extensive but eventually project implementation decreased. Furthermore, Joint Protection Teams (JPTs) ceased to operate. These involved multi-day missions by multi-sectoral teams comprising UN staff and Congolese military, police and civil society representatives. Their mission was to collect information, identify protection needs, and develop community protection plans.

MONUSCO supported child protection agencies by helping to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate children associated with armed groups and forces. Specifically, it provided vital logistical support and security during operations to extract, receive, assess, and transport children. It also

maintained relations with FARDC commanders to coordinate activities and with many armed group commanders to advocate for and arrange the removal of children from their ranks. Its withdrawal was strongly felt in these areas, though UNICEF, PDDRCS, and other child protection organizations attempted to fill the void. For instance, they strengthened their collaboration with the authorities via the Technical Joint Working Group, established as part of the 2012 UN-DRC action plan to reduce child recruitment. PDDRCS also tried to takeover contacts with armed group commanders, although there was only a limited handover in this domain.⁴² The Joint Note on the Transition recognizes the progress made around DDR for minors, emphasizing the strides taken in transferring these responsibilities to UNICEF, the Congolese government, and child protection NGOs. Together, these organizations freed 1,936 children formerly affiliated with armed groups between July and December 2024.⁴³ Nevertheless, local child protection actors still experienced increased logistical and security difficulties resulting from the MONUSCO withdrawal. They also claim that they received limited additional support for disarmament and demobilization activities during the transition.⁴⁴

Situation of IDPs

MONUSCO provided security for three IDP camps in South Kivu, two in Mikenge and one in Minembwe. Security for the IDP population in these camps clearly deteriorated after MONUSCO left the area. This was mainly because the FARDC unit in charge of these areas committed human rights violations. From November to December 2024, hostilities between the FARDC and armed groups intensified and the increasing IDP population became further destabilised. On December 22, displaced persons from the Mikenge camp fled the site due to panic caused by an armed group attacking the FARDC position in Kabara, only to return the following day.

While the deterioration of security around the IDP camps in the Hauts Plateaux was serious, it is important to bear in mind that, according to figures from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 93% of IDPs in South Kivu live with host families rather than in camps.⁴⁵ MONUSCO generally had little influence over the security of IDPs living with host families, who were often located outside of MONUSCO's areas of daily operation. Yet, these IDPs are exposed to all sorts of insecurity. For example, displaced women staying with host families are at significant risk of sexual violence when they go long periods without assistance or income.

Local protection structures and actors

The withdrawal of MONUSCO significantly affected the network of Local Protection Committees (LPCs) and Community Alert Networks (CANs), which were maintained by the Civil Affairs Section (CAS). The CANs constituted an early warning system whereby communities could contact MONUSCO via mobile phone or high-frequency radio to prevent or mitigate threats. In 2023, MONUSCO began the process of progressively transferring management of the early warning systems to the Civil Protection Coordination of South Kivu, a body within the Provincial Ministry of the Interior. In February 2024, MONUSCO handed over a new building to the provincial government to house the Civil Protection Coordination office.⁴⁶ That month, MONUSCO also organized a training workshop to develop a centralized mechanism for managing early warnings and coordinating responses.⁴⁷

However, the transfer to the Civilian Protection Coordination has been slow to come off the ground for various reasons. Firstly, this unit was originally established to protect civilians from natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and urban fires.⁴⁸ Consequently, it lacked expertise in relation to threats emerging from armed conflict. Secondly, the unit was plagued by poor management and conflict between the leadership and staff. In mid-August 2024, staff wrote

a letter to the Governor denouncing “the politization, impasse and administrative disorder” within their service.⁴⁹ This crisis has seriously undermined the agency's functioning. There were also reports of corruption. For example, of the nine vehicles donated by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to the agency in December 2023 to be distributed among its local branches in different territories, the two intended for Fizi and Uvira were reportedly embezzled.⁵⁰ Thirdly, several activities in the road map aimed at supporting the coordination office were not implemented, or only partially so. These activities included developing local branches in the territories and setting up an Operations Centre involving the FARDC, PNC and other state services to manage early warning messages and responses. Fourthly, many protection actors disliked the idea of handing central control of the alert networks infrastructure to a government agency, given that government actors, particularly the security services, tend to be responsible for many protection incidents.⁵¹ As a result, trust that reports would be acted upon diminished, which in turn undermined the incentive to report.

The problems with the Civil Protection Coordination compounded a broader problem in the protection domain that manifested after the withdrawal of MONUSCO, namely, that a part of the interface between local communities (including local protection actors) and the authorities fell away. MONUSCO had often acted as an intermediary in this area, including through its Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs). These were Congolese staff members embedded in MONUSCO military units who often assisted with relaying alerts to the security services.⁵² The withdrawal of MONUSCO left a void in this respect, especially since the CLAs, along with their valuable contacts, knowledge and expertise, disappeared. Consequently, people in the CANs often did not know who to transmit information to and had limited knowledge that their information was being acted upon. Problems were also reported in areas without mobile phone coverage, where high-frequency radios were previously used. Furthermore, those who had acted as Focal Points in the CANs tended to report most of the information, but they were less motivated to do so as they no longer received phone credits. Consequently, the information provided became more haphazard and fragmented.

MONUSCO CAS also played a role in building the capacity of, and providing training to, the Community Protection Committees (CPCs). These forums enable local leaders, civil society organisations and community groups to identify and discuss protection risks and appropriate measures and actions. This includes drawing up Community Protection Plans. The MONUSCO-supported CPCs operated within a landscape of numerous similar or overlapping initiatives supported by various national and international NGOs. Although the transition process offered the opportunity to harmonise these initiatives through discussions held in the working groups to prepare the road map, this did not happen. To start with, MONUSCO did not clearly arrange to hand over its CPC support tasks.⁵³

Furthermore, no harmonization was achieved between local protection and key local security governance initiatives, notably 1) provincial and local security committees, and 2) local proximity security councils, which were established as part of local police reform. The extent to which these committees and councils operate on the ground and their effectiveness remain highly variable, depending in part on donor support.⁵⁴ However, these structures, especially the “enlarged” provincial and local security committees that include civil society actors, provide the type of interface between protection actors, security services, and local authorities that weakened in some areas due to MONUSCO's withdrawal.

As part of the transition, some UN agencies decided to invest in reinforcing unarmed civilian protection and self-protection by communities.⁵⁵ This involved training civil society and community leaders in relevant bodies of international law and teaching them how to engage with authorities and armed actors. While these activities are useful, it is unclear how they relate to CPCs, local security governance structures, or the transfer of tasks previously executed by MONUSCO to provincial and local authorities. Additionally, some protection actors questioned the

expediency of introducing new protection actors and approaches instead of building on or scaling up existing initiatives, particularly those already anchored in Congolese law.⁵⁶

Evidently the MONUSCO withdrawal strongly undermined the operation of local protection and security structures. Throughout the province, civil society and community groups involved in these structures found it increasingly difficult to raise protection issues with the security services, particularly regarding abuses committed by these services. This was partly due to the general rise in insecurity and the growing influence of Wazalendo groups. These groups became de facto security authorities in many areas and started to participate in local security meetings. While there were important variations between groups, most Wazalendo were poorly informed about international humanitarian law and human rights. They were also less willing to interact with civil society and local leaders, especially when these tried to engage them regarding their behaviour. This scared off and discouraged protection actors, who felt that their work was becoming more dangerous and less effective. Indeed, we recorded a significant number of incidents involving protection actors, including threats, violent attacks and even killings, in the months following MONUSCO's withdrawal.

The absence of MONUSCO also contributed to increased difficulties with protection actors. Previously MONUSCO provided crucial transport services to rural areas for many protection actors. More importantly, whenever MONUSCO—often CLAs—were present at meetings between security authorities and community and civil society actors, grassroots organisers felt emboldened to speak up and speak out. Local communities felt able to address complaints to the state security services and hold them accountable. The security services, for their part, were said to be more defensive and reluctant to accept any wrongdoing or mistakes in meetings without a MONUSCO presence. Consequently, civil society and community actors felt that their recommendations to the state security services were less likely to be acted upon. Even when MONUSCO representatives rarely participated directly in meetings, local protection actors reported having more inhibitions about confronting state and non-state security forces after the MONUSCO withdrawal. This is because they commonly believed that, if they got into trouble, they could always rely on MONUSCO to help them out as a last resort. In this way, the presence of MONUSCO functioned as a type of assurance that bolstered the work of local protection actors.

Human rights activities

Human rights defenders and local media reported a similar chilling effect resulting from the confluence of the departure of MONUSCO, the general decline in civic space throughout 2024,⁵⁷ and the increasing insecurity and control exerted by Wazalendo groups. The result was that they often imposed a type of self-censorship, becoming very careful in their actions. MONUSCO used to provide crucial protection for human rights defenders and journalists at risk. Due to their presence in the field, they were generally the first point of contact for those receiving threats. Through their extensive logistical capabilities, they could rapidly extract defenders and journalists at risk from unsafe areas. When such actors were arrested, MONUSCO would sometimes intervene with the authorities to secure their release. Other organizations active in defending human rights defenders do not have the same field presence or capacity for rapid intervention as MONUSCO. Therefore, it is remarkable that the road map did not include specific actions relating to the protection of human rights defenders and local journalists.

MONUSCO also supported human rights work by monitoring cases of human rights abuse. This included advocating with the authorities and supporting legal proceedings, often via mobile court hearings, which had a deterrent effect on the security services. However, the failure to implement the transition road map, which included several initiatives to ensure legal follow-up, including mobile court hearings, created a significant void in this area. While mobile court hearings were

held in Walungu and Fizi, activity in this domain slowed down considerably. Thus, when a delegation of provincial Members of Parliament met with the Governor of South Kivu in December 2024, they listed reinstating mobile court hearings as one of their top priorities.⁵⁸

Another area in which difficulties increased after the withdrawal of MONUSCO was the monitoring of places of detention. MONUSCO regularly carried out and facilitated visits to these places to verify the status of prisoners. This included checking whether there were legal grounds for detaining them and assessing their state of health, for instance access to medical assistance and signs of torture. Since MONUSCO's departure, visits to places of detention have reportedly dropped throughout the province, which is a concerning trend. Human rights defenders reported that, in the absence of a MONUSCO presence, it was more difficult to gain access to places of detention, particularly those on FARDC premises, carry out effective checks, and obtain information.⁵⁹ Although the road map included several actions to promote visits to and monitoring of places of detention, these were never implemented.

The growing challenges in the field of human rights, the reduction of OHCHR personnel in South Kivu, and the OHCHR's inability to mobilize more resources was unfortunate. The number of UN human rights officers was reduced from 15 to 7, and they also had fewer resources and reduced access to the field. OHCHR found it more challenging to conduct pre-arrival safety and security checks, arrange security escorts, and use armoured personnel carriers in unsafe zones.⁶⁰

Overall, the withdrawal of MONUSCO had a gradual and cumulative effects on protection efforts. These effects reinforced each other and were inextricably linked to the deteriorating security situation caused by the increasing control and competition of Wazalendo groups. The difficult coexistence between Wazalendo groups and the FARDC contributed to the deterioration in the behaviour of both armed groups and the armed forces, who were competing for control and income. Meanwhile, civilian protection actors had less opportunity to address abuses committed by armed actors, who often targeted them in retaliation for their advocacy efforts. MONUSCO's withdrawal further undermined their advocacy capacity as they felt less secure and less inclined to speak out. At the same time, MONUSCO's withdrawal led to a decrease in efforts to educate the security forces on human rights and humanitarian issues. Efforts to prosecute abuses also diminished, contributing to a growing sense of impunity among the security services and armed groups.

Evolution of conflict dynamics and peacebuilding efforts

MONUSCO used to support mediation and dialogue efforts in South Kivu, providing logistics, security and financial support for such initiatives. One example is inter-community dialogues in areas of tension, often engaging with local authorities and leaders to defuse the situation. Additionally, MONUSCO supported the Consultative Commission for the Settlement of Customary Conflicts (CCRCC), which deals with conflicts affecting customary authority. From late 2021 onwards, a consortium of donors collaborated with MONUSCO to establish CCRCC in different chiefdoms and sectors and at the provincial level, in Bukavu.⁶¹ What effect did the withdrawal of MONUSCO have on these peacebuilding initiatives, and on the evolution of conflict dynamics?

Conflict dynamics post-MONUSCO

In the months following MONUSCO's disengagement, conflicts in South Kivu intensified. A key driver of this development was the presence and competition between multiple Wazalendo groups linked to different parties in the conflict. The result was the militarization of conflict dynamics, whereby conflicts are informed by and aggravated through clashes between armed groups. Examples include:

- Tensions between the Babembe and the Bafuliiru in the Fizi region, exacerbated by fighting between the CNPSC, led by Babembe, and the FABB (Ngomanzito wing), led by Bafuliiru.
- Contestations and clashes in the Nindja chiefdom, which are linked to a power struggle between two sons of the former chief that broke out after his death. One son is supported by the FARDC, while the Raiya Mutomboki of Gaston Lukisa Blaise supports the other.
- A succession conflict in Kalima *groupement*, where each party is supported by a different Raiya Mutomboki faction (either Mungoro Matafali Bernard or Bwaare Hamakombo David).
- Tensions in the Hauts Plateaux of Fizi, Uvira and Mwenga between the Banyamulenge on the one hand, and the Babembe, Bafuliiru, Banyindu and Bavira on the other. These tensions are inextricably linked to clashes between the Banyamulenge-led Twirwaneho and various Wazalendo groups operating in different coalitions, some of which collaborate with the FARDC.
- Frictions in the chiefdoms of Wamuzimu, Basile and Luindi, located in Walungu and Mwenga territories, which stem from conflicts between civil society, Chinese-owned mining companies and the provincial government. These tensions have exacerbated violence. There has been an increase of attacks on Chinese entrepreneurs and property by armed groups, and abuses and killings committed by military personnel responsible for guarding Chinese companies.

This overview shows that the general increase in insecurity in South Kivu was both a cause and a consequence of the intensification of conflicts involving armed groups and forces. As explained in section I, this rise in insecurity was not primarily the result of MONUSCO withdrawal. Therefore, the intensification of conflict dynamics cannot be predominantly ascribed to it either. While the drop in peacebuilding efforts following MONUSCO's withdrawal may have had some impact, it appears to have been overall modest.

Effects on peacebuilding initiatives

The militarization of conflict dynamics in South Kivu hampered their resolution. Numerous studies identify the implication of armed groups as well as the challenges of influencing political elites as key obstacles to local conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives and to the sustainability of such initiatives.⁶² These challenges became even more pronounced as Wazalendo groups were emboldened in large parts of the province. The formation of first a new national and later a new provincial government in the course of 2024 further compounded involving elites in peacebuilding, as they were preoccupied with positioning themselves in power struggles. These same challenges also raise questions about the effects of MONUSCO withdrawal. One of the problems of MONUSCO was that it is not the most effective tool or strategy to sway armed groups and political elites, specifically those at the root of instigating or exacerbating conflict. In fact, it was precisely for these reasons that MONUSCO could not prevent the proliferation of armed groups, despite their presence, nor sustainably mitigate conflicts, despite localized and temporary successes.

Peacebuilding activities in South Kivu diminished in the wake of MONUSCO withdrawal, reflecting the general rise in insecurity, the non-implementation of the road map, as well as the fact that MONUSCO security and logistical support often facilitated the implementation of such activities. There were however continued interventions by a range of actors, including various (I) NGOs and provincial politicians, such as the Vice-Governor of South Kivu and provincial members of parliament. It is however unclear how effective and sustainable these interventions were, as they often did not scale up or remained limited to one-time events, rather than structural efforts. One of the most significant actions involved the efforts to mitigate the conflict between Babuyu and Babembe which had flared up in the month of December 2024 in Fizi on the border with Maniema province and was aggravated by the implication of two competing armed groups (the CNPSC and a Babuyu self-defence force). These efforts involved an official visit by the territorial authorities of Fizi and Kabambare to Lwiko and several actions from the South Kivu CCRCC. These actions contributed to a renewed sense of conviviality following negotiations between the two leaders of these armed groups, which led to them smoking the peace pipe through traditional rituals. After that, no new outbursts of violence were recorded. This example demonstrates that while peacebuilding activities were hampered after MONUSCO's departure, severe cases of conflict continued to be addressed through a range of local and provincial mechanisms.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The M23 crisis has made the timeline for MONUSCO withdrawal from North Kivu and Ituri uncertain.⁶³ Meanwhile, on October 14, the Congolese government and M23 agreed on a cease-fire monitoring mechanism with the African Union, Qatar and the United States as observers, while MONUSCO is designated to provide logistical support. This could herald its return to South Kivu. Whether the mission will withdraw further from the eastern DRC or, conversely, reinforce its presence, the South Kivu disengagement and transition process holds important lessons regarding MONUSCO's strengths and weaknesses. As this report shows, the direct security impact of MONUSCO's military presence was ultimately limited, particularly given the military assets deployed. However, MONUSCO had a significant indirect impact on security through the cumulative effects of its multidimensional protection activities and its direct and indirect support for protection and conflict resolution activities. Certain gaps in relation to both security and the protection environment became visible directly after MONUSCO's withdrawal. These were partly overcome through readjustments and new arrangements by other security, protection and peacebuilding actors. Nevertheless, these gaps testify to shortcomings in the transition process, partly resulting from the fact that road map remained largely unimplemented and the way in which the transition process was organized. In this regard, we make the following recommendations:

Planning well in advance, including within the security services

The limited time frame for organizing the transition hampered all dimensions of its implementation, ranging from the timely deployment of the Congolese security services to the mobilization of resources. Six months was insufficient for organizing the transition. Planning should start at least a year in advance and pay particular attention to security services.

As emphasized in the mid-term evaluation of the transition process, the timely deployment of well-equipped and well-trained security forces to former MONUSCO positions is crucial for the effective handover of security tasks. Considering personnel shortages among the police and the multiple demands placed on the army, this means that recruiting and training personnel needs to be factored into the process. It is therefore crucial to involve the Ministries of the Interior and

Defense, as well as the central command of the army and the police, in early stages of transition planning. This could be achieved by holding joint workshops and planning exercises and would have advantage that it improves communication and coordination channels with provincial EPITs and governments.

The speed with which the process was organized also undermined building on the knowledge and expertise obtained from prior withdrawal processes, notably from Kasai and Tanganyika province. To ensure that lessons learned are capitalized on, it is important to further document the South Kivu transition process and to organize opportunities for knowledge exchange with civil society, INGOs, UN agencies and provincial authorities in North Kivu and Ituri. This is even more important given that the short timeframe prohibited the development of a monitoring and evaluation mechanism for the road map.

Adopting simultaneously a localized and a provincial approach

Due to the highly uneven situation in different sub-areas of South Kivu, it would have been better to complement a provincial with a local approach. This would have allowed transition strategies and projects to be tailored more effectively to local circumstances and to facilitate consultation with sub-provincial actors. A provincial focus will certainly remain necessary, as the provincial authorities play a key role in taking over tasks formerly executed by MONUSCO. However, this could be complemented by an area-by-area approach. In fact, the DRC government is currently requesting such an approach, likely to enable further withdrawal from North Kivu and Ituri.⁶⁴ This could provide an opportunity to reconsider the disengagement process in a more bottom-up manner and to build more effectively on locally differing institutions, actors and initiatives.

A more localized approach would also involve reinforcing inclusive security governance mechanisms well in advance of deploying new security services in areas where blue helmets are withdrawing. Such mechanisms constitute an interface between local protection actors on the one hand and Congolese security service and local authorities on the other, which is precisely a role that MONUSCO used to play. Moreover, these mechanisms will be crucial for helping ensure that newly deployed security services are being held to account and will work towards securing the population.

Ensuring a more inclusive approach from the outset

The short timeframe of the transition undermined the meaningful inclusion of civil society, donors and INGOs in the first stages of the planning process. This made it more difficult to align transition activities with existing programmes and to harmonize aid efforts. Ideally, transition planning is preceded by profound consultation among all stakeholders, including the provincial government, UN agencies, CSOs, MONUSCO, INGOs, and donors, to develop in-depth awareness of existing programmes and projects, how they overlap and align, and where they are implemented.

Time pressures also negatively impacted the ability of the participating members of civil society and INGOs to genuinely represent wider networks, as they were rapidly selected and there was no clear guidance regarding how and how often they should consult and report to the wider networks they were representing, including members based in the interior. In future withdrawal processes, the selection of representatives and how they communicate with and consult their base merit more attention.

To ensure greater inclusivity, it would have also been desirable to avoid the emergence of a two-track process between UN and non-UN actors. The existence of a separate and separately funded UN Support Plan, with its own monitoring and evaluation mechanism, created a divide between

these two sets of actors, especially since the provincial road map remained largely unimplemented. While it should be acknowledged that UN funds, programmes and agencies have distinct requirements and challenges in the context of UN mission withdrawal, a better connection with other stakeholders, for instance by creating an integrated monitoring and evaluation mechanism, should be ensured.

More focused and feasible transition support

With 242 identified actions and a budget of just \$57 million for a 12-month transition, the proposed road map was overly ambitious given the availability of resources and ability to raise this money. A more focused road map that identified core gaps and immediate needs would have been easier to fund, implement and evaluate. Ideally, the proposed tasks and projects would have been divided into those that needed to be completed immediately and those that could be completed in the medium and longer term. There would also have been a distinction made between tasks where MONUSCO's disengagement would leave a significant gap and those where its role was more modest because other actors were active in these domains too. While maintaining the focus on longer-term peacebuilding and capacity-building needs is important, it should be recognised that a 12-month transition requires clear prioritization.

Additionally, transition planning should have paid more attention to sustainability. In some areas, tasks were to be handed over to provincial institutions that had been created or reconfigured relatively recently. In certain cases, these institutions were barely functional. In other cases, transition activities in the domain of unarmed protection required extensive training of new actors on new approaches. Transition planning should prioritize building on existing institutions, as it is questionable how viable recently created institutions or approaches will remain after transition funding stops. Important lessons can be learned here for North Kivu and Ituri: the sooner these structures become fully operational and effectively take over the attributed tasks, the better. There is no need to wait for the mission's actual disengagement.

Better protection planning

The withdrawal of MONUSCO left several gaps in protection that could have been partly avoided with better planning but also with more attention to handover. In certain domains, such as child protection and local protection committees, MONUSCO did not prepare well for actively transferring knowledge, networks and expertise, or should have planned for a more phased approach. For example, the transfer of the early warning networks should have been more gradual, with Community Liaison Assistants being attached to another UN agency for at least the duration of the transition and possibly beyond. Additionally, given that the protection previously offered by MONUSCO to at-risk defenders was withdrawn, a more comprehensive policy for the protection of human rights defenders should have been developed, in consultation with defenders themselves. This policy should have also been communicated effectively to them, to defenders in isolated rural areas. Finally, there is scope for questioning the growing emphasis on (unarmed) self-protection in the context of a deteriorating security situation, where protection actors were increasingly intimidated and sometimes subjected to violence by both state and non-state armed actors. While self-protection by local communities is important, the limitations and risks in a context of increasing militarization and violence must be clearly acknowledged.



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