

Youth on the frontlines: Preventing human rights abuses in violent contexts, a case study of LUCHA in the DR of Congo.

Abstract: Increasingly, Transitional Justice (TJ) mechanisms are implemented in contexts of ongoing violence where youth are often perceived as victims or perpetrators of human rights violations. This reductionist conceptualization of youth is problematic for understanding the diverse identities of youth in contexts where large-scale human rights violations occur. It also obscures the positive roles of youth as Non-State actors in advancing human rights accountability and preventing the recurrence of specific human rights violations. This article explores how youth participation in LUCHA—a countrywide youth movement born from Goma (North Kivu) that advocates for greater political and civic involvement of Congolese—influences youth understandings of justice and contributes to the non-recurrence of specific human rights violations. Using collective participation as a conceptual lens and semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted in 2015 and 2021 with LUCHA activists, the article contends that overemphasizing State actors eclipses Non-State actors' roles—including youth-led peace and justice initiatives in areas where State actors are inexistent or have weakened legitimacy. The article's central claim is that ignoring the nexus between youth participation and justice understandings, particularly in contexts of ongoing violence, limits TJ's full potential to unfold in these contexts. By zooming on the TJ pillar of GoNR, the article is an invitation to further interrogate youth's roles in TJ contexts and expand the field's toolkit to accommodate their unique contributions.

Keywords: youth, collective participation, GoNR, Justice understandings.

Introduction:

From the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to the range of student movements in South America, historically, youth have participated in longer-term processes of social and political change challenging impunity; addressing legacies of brutal regimes, and advancing an acknowledgment of dignity and respect for rights¹—all of which are the realm of Transitional Justice (TJ). However, despite their contributions to TJ, youth remain marginalized in literature and TJ policy debates or are given only a limited and predetermined space to engage².

In the DRC, like in several other contexts of ongoing violence, policymakers' dominant discourses on youth portray them[youth] as troublemakers and a problem to address³. While in these contexts indeed, youth often play a role in fueling violence, recent research in TJ literature shows that a vast majority of youth in these contexts—regardless of social stigma and constant victimization—play positive roles to deter violence and human rights violations⁴. I have chosen to study LUCHA for its contributions in advocating for the social, political, and economic rights of Congolese despite the unfavorable political and human rights context of the DRC. In this sense, LUCHA is relevant to understanding youth contributions in other TJ contexts of ongoing violence and a clarion call to

¹ Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, Kroc Institute, “Youth as Social and Political Agents: Issues in Post-Settlement Peace Building,” Occasional Paper 21:OP:2 (2001), 13.

² Ladisch, V. (2018). *A Catalyst for Change: Engaging Youth in Transitional Justice*. 2015(April), 1–16.

³ Youth bulge theory which still has influences several policies on youth in contexts of ongoing violence relies on the notion that a relationship exists between 'too many young men' and violent instability; and this presumed 'trouble with men' has often been buttressed by the contention that young men are inherently violent, or 'more prone to violence than older men' or women.

⁴ Denov, M., & Kahn, S. (2019). “They Should See Us as a Symbol of Reconciliation”: Youth Born of Genocidal Rape in Rwanda and the Implications for Transitional Justice. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 11(1), 151–170. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huz011>; Yasmin, E. (2013). Youth and Transitional Justice in Kashmir. *European Academic Research*, 1(2), 99–113.

polymakers to foster meaningful youth participation in TJ mechanisms' design and implementation phases.

LUCHA is a youth movement created in 2011 in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in response to youth frustration with the former Government of Joseph Kabila over the suppression of freedom of speech and the deteriorating political, social, and economic conditions in the DRC. LUCHA is a nonviolent countrywide youth movement committed to challenging political abuses of power and cultivating a culture of active citizenry. The one constant feature that defines LUCHA activists is a fervent love for the DRC and a shared hope for a prosperous and peaceful country. They have decided to organize a series of nonviolent actions throughout significant cities to shed light on some of the Congolese population's critical issues, including carrying out important advocacy efforts to prevent human rights abuses in the Beni and Kasai provinces. Their actions are not limited to keeping politicians in check but also focus on 'conscientizing' the civilian population to participate in social justice debates actively.

The first of LUCHA's protests to receive widespread attention focused on the 2011 presidential and legislative elections and sought the involvement of young people to ensure that vote counting was fair. Furthermore, during this period, the movement successfully mobilized the masses to contribute to critical national debates, mainly about the deteriorating socio-economic conditions of citizens and civilian killings in Beni, which had become rampant. Members organized different street activities in major cities like Kinshasa, Mbuji-Mayi, Lubumbashi, Kisangani, and Goma.

LUCHA reached national and international prominence in 2015 when some of its key members, Fred Bauma and Yves Makwambala, were arrested and jailed while attending a workshop in Kinshasa on increasing youth participation in the electoral process. This particular incident crystallized the movement's identity as a legitimate voice of Congolese youth who continue to experience various forms of victimization due to the Government's abuses of power. To date, LUCHA is a household name of effective youth nonviolent resistance in the DRC and is well integrated with universities across the country, with solid connections to the Congolese diaspora. An important trademark of the movement is its civic education workshops in universities across the DRC. They sensitize other youth to engage in social and political issues, thus encouraging youth civic engagement, inspiring a culture of peaceful resistance, and strengthening democracy.



Photo: Some LUCHA activists in Goma paying tribute to Luc Nkulula's gravesite in 2021. Source: LUCHA RDC Facebook page.

Ahead of the 2018 elections, LUCHA members played a critical role in pressuring the former president Joseph Kabila to leave power and organize peaceful polls. That same year, one of LUCHA's charismatic leaders, Luc Nkulula, mysteriously died in his home in Goma, leading to angry protests of activists

calling for an investigation into the circumstances surrounding Luc's death. While this incident shocked the movement, it also emboldened youth participation in civic and political matters. More importantly, it reinforced the notion that youth in TJ contexts can prevent specific human rights violations—using nonviolent methods to conscientize and empower the oppressed masses to pressure oppressive regimes to listen to their demands for justice. Although the human rights context has not changed significantly since then, what is different about President Felix Antoine Tshisekedi (in power since 2019) is his expressed interest in putting in place TJ mechanisms to address past present human rights violations in the DRC. Indeed, Tshisekedi's regime promised to install a new Truth and Reconciliation Commission and set up a reparations fund for victims of mass atrocities. While some Congolese TJ scholars and practitioners view the current regime's position on TJ as critical to advance the Rule of Law and support victims' rights, some critics view the regime's move as politically motivated and seeking to galvanize public support ahead of the 2023 presidential elections. The following section revisits the history of TJ in the DRC briefly to understand how current TJ dynamics link with previous TJ efforts and LUCHA's footprint in preventing specific human rights abuses, namely killings of innocent civilians, torture, ethnic violence, predatory taxation practices, and unconstitutional behaviors of politicians.

TJ context in the DRC

The interlinkages between the conflict context and TJ in the DRC are significant as protracted conflicts perpetrate gross human rights violations and significantly influence TJ responses throughout various violent episodes. The interplay of local, national, and regional dynamics has been emphasized by numerous scholarly and NGO reports – with competition for natural resources⁵ and land conflicts often pinpointed as one of the key drivers of violence and human rights abuses⁶.

In October of 1996, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (ADFLC), a coalition movement backed by neighboring countries including Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, led the first Congo war and successfully toppled Mobutu's 32-year dictatorship in 1997. Shortly after taking power, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the ADFLC's spokesperson, opted for a strict governance style that upset his foreign allies already engaged in the illegal trafficking of minerals, including gold, diamonds, and coltan, among others⁷. As tensions between the ADFLC and its allies increased, in July 1998, President Laurent Kabila cut ties with Rwandan and Ugandan troops. The immediate effect of this breach of relations was the renewal of hostilities in the Kivu provinces. After a military stalemate, a peace process was initiated but quickly stalled due to heightened suspicion and a lack of political will from all parties⁸.

⁵ Autesserre, S. (2009). Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, local violence, and international intervention. *International Organization*, 63(2), 249–280. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818309090080>; Vlassenroot, K., & Huggins, C. (2005). Land, migration and conflict in eastern DRC. *From the Ground Up Land Rights Conflict and Peace in SubSaharan Africa*, 115–194. Retrieved from <http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/Books/GroundUp/4Land.pdf>

⁶ Bøås, M., & Dunn, K. (2014). Peeling the onion: autochthony in North Kivu, DRC. *Peacebuilding*, 2(2), 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2014.910381>; van Acker, F. (2005). Where did all the land go? Enclosure & social struggle in Kivu (D.R. Congo). *Review of African Political Economy*, 32(103), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240500120984>

⁷ Queyranne, G. (2012). Enemies to allies: The dynamics of Rwanda-Congo military, economic and diplomatic relations. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4(10), 305–312.; Turner, T. (1997). Kabila Returns, In a Cloud of Uncertainty. *African Studies Quarterly*, 1(3).

⁸ Sando, C. K. (2002). Laurent Désiré Kabila. *Review of African Political Economy*, 29(93–94), 616–619. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240208704645>

These tensions culminated in the assassination of President Kabila in January 2001, further plunging the DRC into chaos⁹.

Following efforts to prevent further turmoil which threatened the gains of ending Mobutu's dictatorship, Laurent Kabila's son, Joseph Kabila Kabange, immediately succeeded him in the same year and resumed the peace process with former allies and newly formed armed groups in eastern Congo. Finally, in April 2003, his transitional Government and key warring parties and civil society leaders signed the '*Global Accord and Inclusive Agreement*' (GAIA)¹⁰ with the UN's support. Key actors of the GAIA mainly consisted of State and Non-State actors with a stake in ongoing conflicts, including representatives of the Congolese Government, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC), the political opposition, civil society leaders, the Congolese Rally for Democracy/Liberation Movement (RDC/ML), the Congolese Rally for Democracy/National (RCD/N), and the Mai-Mai, a term usually given to any type of active militia in eastern DRC¹¹.

Despite the DRC's fragile political transition within the GAIA framework, the GAIA also advanced national and international recognition of Congolese victims and implicitly positioned TJ as a necessary pillar to foster national cohesion¹². More concretely, the GAIA enabled the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was unfortunately short-lived due to several significant political and practical challenges. It [The GAIA] also provided a solid foundation for the International Criminal Court's prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the DRC from 2002 onward¹³. Analyzing the contentious development of TJ in the DRC, Arnould (2016) posits that both external and domestic actors variously acted as transitional justice promoters and resisters, and their positioning on transitional justice was strongly conditioned by their broader understandings of the nature of the conflict, the way TJ presents itself, and TJ's fundamental role in peacebuilding¹⁴. Specifically, Arnould finds that international actors' narrow focus on state-building contributed to TJ mechanisms' weak deployment in the DRC. Drawing from this insight, I argue that the lack of consensus on TJ's purpose enabled the development of various informal TJ mechanisms in North Kivu—including youth-led initiatives—to respond to the justice needs of individual and collective victims of gross human rights violations. These initiatives perceived the contestation of the GAIA's signatories as an abdication of their responsibility and accountability for human rights violations committed during the conflict, filling the institutional void with alternative bottom-up peace and justice mechanisms. This kind of local resistance to TJ, as argues Lamont (2012), may not always be countering transitional

⁹ Vinck, P., Pham, P., Baldo, S., & Shigekhane, R. (2011). Living with Fear: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Peace, Justice, and Social Reconstruction in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1447623>

¹⁰ For more insights on GAIA see <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/4526/3626.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹¹ For more information about the agreement see https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CD_021216_Global%20and%20Inclusive%20Agreement%20on%20Transition%20in%20DRC.pdf

¹² Barrios, C., & Ahamed, S.-A. (2010). *Democracy promotion vs. state-building : decentralization in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. 1–22.

¹³ Vinck, P., & Pham, P. (2008). *Ownership and Participation in Transitional Justice Mechanisms : A Sustainable Human Development Perspective from Eastern DRC*. 2, 398–411. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijn033>

¹⁴ Arnould, Valerie. 2016. "Transitional Justice in Peacebuilding: Dynamics of Contestation in the Democratic Republic of Congo." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10 (3): 321–338.

justice as such but is an attempt to advance alternative political orders and push against a narrow vision of peacebuilding¹⁵. With this overview of the TJ context in the DRC, in the next section, I explore the pillar of GoNR in TJ literature and justify its suitability for understanding youth contributions to the field of TJ in the DRC—and in this particular case, the LUCHA movement.

State of the Art

Increasingly, TJ mechanisms are implemented in atypical contexts in the field of TJ. Indeed, as Nagy (2008) has pointed out, transitional justice has become a global project preoccupied not so much with whether TJ mechanisms should be implemented after mass atrocities but rather how they should be implemented. TJ development in ongoing violent contexts like Afghanistan, Mali, Uganda, Colombia, the DRC has sought to respond to some of the dilemmas advanced by the critical literature in TJ, challenging the field's backward-looking foundations. The prevalence of political violence or internal conflict as a dominant cause of serious human rights violations differentiates this transitional justice context from the traditional one¹⁶. In these contexts, Mani (2008) advocates that TJ should have a more holistic approach to address the multifaceted challenges of peacebuilding¹⁷. Drawing on this argument, I posit that one of the critical ways to foreground the relevance and legitimacy of TJ mechanisms in these contexts is with youth participation as a driving principle in TJ. ***The pillar of GoNR, because of its open-endedness to diverse initiatives seeking the redress of human rights abuses across various sectors, provides a helpful basis for exploring LUCHA youth's agency in preventing human rights violations.***

The TJ pillar of GoNR is the least developed and receives limited attention from policymakers. Ironically, the GoNR pillar is crucial, if not the most critical pillar of TJ, as it focuses on preventing specific human rights violations. This feature of the GoNR pillar is essential to contexts of ongoing violence where deep-seated causes of conflicts often lead to cycles of large-scale human rights abuses. While other TJ pillars are often past-oriented, the pillar of GoNR is the most forward-looking, open-ended, and is better understood at the intersection between TJ and Peacebuilding. Indeed, as Mayer (2017) notes, the development and peacebuilding communities heavily engage in several activities under the category of GoNR without labeling them as such. Activities such as reforming public institutions, establishing civilian oversight over security forces, and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) all fall under the broad spectrum of GoNR. Conceptualizing GoNR from a multidisciplinary lens expands our understanding of GoNR's prevention component. For this article, this conceptualization also enables a more comprehensive understanding of youth contributions in addressing specific human rights violations in conflict contexts. Considering the article's specific focus on youth roles in preventing the recurrence of specific human rights violations, similarly, the UNSCR 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace, and Security can provide a valuable and complementary lens that can enrich our understanding of what a youth-centered GoNR may look like in contexts of ongoing violence¹⁸. Indeed, the prevention pillar of UNSCR 2250 stresses the importance of institutional reforms to advance youth roles in peacebuilding efforts, including social and economic development, supporting projects designed to grow local economies, and provide youth employment opportunities and vocational training, fostering their education, and promoting youth entrepreneurship and constructive political engagement. From this angle, the prevention pillar of UNSCR 2250 is also

¹⁵ Lamont, Chris K. 2016. "Contested Governance: Understanding Justice Interventions in Post-Qadhafi Libya." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10 (3): 382–399.

¹⁶ Budak, Y. (2015). Dealing with the past: Transitional justice, ongoing conflict and the Kurdish issue in Turkey. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 9(2), 219–238. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijv002>

¹⁷ See Rama Mani, *Beyond Retribution: Seeking Justice in the Shadows of War*, Malden, MA: Polity, 2002, p 17.

¹⁸ See UNSCR 2250

concerned with advancing youth's political and socio-economic rights, an essential feature of LUCHA's activism efforts.

The GoNR pillar remains a complicated TJ component as it needs to work at various levels and involve Non-State actors to address the root causes of conflict or repression. In TJ, GoNR has taken several forms, including memorialization, constitutional reform, education reform, the demobilization and dissolution of armed groups, vetting, and institutional reforms mainly focused on the security and justice sectors¹⁹. Kinder (2020) also argues that in fragile contexts, other organizational entities besides the State can facilitate movements toward preventing the reoccurrence of armed conflict and encouraging bottom-up community engagement while broadening the scope of transitional justice work²⁰. In the same vein, the article contends that for GoNR to maximize its preventive potential in contexts of ongoing violence, overemphasizing State actors eclipses and obscures Non-State actors' roles—including youth-led peace and justice initiatives in areas where State actors are inexistent or have weakened legitimacy. Thus, the study suggests that expanding the definition of GoNR to include youth-led contributions—may prove beneficial for the backward and forward-looking GoNR deployment in contexts of ongoing violence.

It is equally worth noting that youth often play controversial roles in these contexts, assuming different identities as victims, perpetrators, and survivors' identities²¹, which are contentious. In general, youth have in many cases been active agents during armed struggles, and their agency creates special and diverse needs in the "post-war" period. Youth are intrinsic to the success of new law and order measures to prevent the recurrence of specific crimes and are also the primary actors in grassroots community development and peacebuilding projects—agile to advance initiatives seeking to prevent crimes and restore the social fabric. Understanding how these multiple youth identities coalesce is helpful to appreciate youth's diverse needs and priorities for dealing with specific human rights violations and preventing their reoccurrence²². From the Arab Spring protests to the global Occupy protests, youth have mobilized through large-scale social movements responding to injustices²³. Furthermore, in contexts of ongoing conflicts, identity markers such as gender define youth experiences of human rights violations and justice perceptions. Thus when seeking to explicate youth experiences in these contexts, it is vital to appraise ways markers such as sexual orientation overlaps with other factors to define the specific experiences of certain groups of youth in a conflict and understand what type of justice agendas matter to particular groups of youth. Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge that GoNR's ability to cover a broad spectrum of crucial challenges facing conflict and post-conflict societies is an advantage and a disadvantage for the pillar. On the one hand, it is catalyzing the convergence of efforts from diverse sectors with the potential to prevent the recurrence of human rights violations. In this way, GoNR enables multiple actors—including youth-led peace and justice initiatives—to contribute to the non-recurrence of gross human rights violations. On

¹⁹ Roht-Arriaza, Naomi, Measures of Non-Repetition in Transitional Justice: The Missing Link? (March 10, 2016). UC Hastings Research Paper No. 160, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2746226> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2746226>

²⁰ Eliscia Kinder (2020) Non-recurrence, reconciliation, and transitional justice: situating accountability in Northern Ireland's oral history archive, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, DOI: [10.1080/13642987.2020.1746649](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1746649)

²¹ Sommers, M. (2006). Youth and Conflict: A Brief Review of Available Literature. USAID & Equip3/Education Development Center.

²² Clara Ramírez-Barat, ICTJ, "Engaging Children and Youth in Transitional Justice Processes: Guidance for Outreach Programs" (November 2012)

²³ Berents, H., & McEvoy-Levy, S. (2015). Theorising youth and everyday peace(building). *Peacebuilding*, 3(2), 115–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2015.1052627>

the other hand, because GoNR is too broad and unspecific²⁴, GoNR initiatives tend to be too scattered and may lead to poor coordination among actors and little convergence in preventing specific types of human rights violations. The following sub-section provides an overview of important achievements under the GoNR pillar to illustrate some crucial formal milestones in addressing particular human rights violations in the DRC.

GoNR achievements to date

Some significant achievements can be mentioned, regardless of challenges facing the development of the TJ pillar of GoNR in a context like the DRC: The body of laws adopted from 2003, including the law on the adoption of a new constitution in 2006; the law on the creation of concurrent jurisdictions between civilian and military courts; the law providing a new status to magistrates with the creation of the Superior Council of Magistrates; the law on the reform of security services (Intelligence, Police and Army), the law on the creation of courts for children and the regulation on child protection to condemn their recruitment; the law condemning sexual violence, etc. These laws have indirectly contributed to the pillar of GoNR, enabling the Congolese Government to start the transformation of abusive institutions through progressive reforms that also provided new legal tools to protect human rights to some extent and repress violence. At the national level, there are not yet many State-led initiatives explicitly targeting the GoNR pillar. Justice and security sector reforms, undertaken through partnerships with international donors such as the European Union (EU), remain the dominant approach to GoNR in the DRC. Significant efforts have already been made to advance the justice and security sector's institutional reforms—reforms heavily reliant on funding from multilateral and bilateral donors, mainly the EU and the United States (US). Since 2007 the EU has invested significant funding in support of the justice and security sector reforms. The first program, REJUSCO²⁵ (2007-2010), was intended to not only enhance the capacities of judicial institutions (police, courts, prisons) but also those professionally involved (criminal police, judiciary, lawyers, court registrars, prison officers) and to offer guarantees to other interested parties (witnesses, defendants, victims). After REJUSCO, other programs followed, including the Governance Support Program (PAG), the Justice Reform Support Program (PARJ), and the Support Program for the Strengthening of Justice in the East (PARJE/Uhaki Safi)²⁶.

From 2008-2013, USAID, in partnership with Tetra Tech DPK, implemented Pro-Justice Program in Maniema, Katanga, South Kivu, and Bandundu. This program aimed to support: strengthening justice institutions, the efficient and transparent management of the Ministry of Justice, the accessibility, transparency, and efficiency of courts and tribunals in designated sites, and improved access to justice by vulnerable populations²⁷.

Despite these critical State and international donor-sponsored GoNR achievements, the landscape of human rights violations remains generally unchanged. Furthermore, these initiatives have often lacked youth participation in the design and implementation phases, leading to serious concerns around youth's lack of ownership of these initiatives. Again, considering the proximity of most youth-led initiatives with victimized communities in areas where State actors have lost legitimacy, it is essential

²⁴ Mayer-Rieckh, A. (2017). Guarantees of non-recurrence: An approximation. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 39(2), 416–448. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2017.0024>

²⁵ Programme de Restauration de la Justice à l'est de la RD Congo (REJUSCO). For more information see http://www.diplomatie.be/oda/11178_PROGDESCR_dossier_technique_et_fianncier.pdf

²⁶ See Gentil Kasongo, *Panorama de la Justice Transitionnelle en RDC*, 2017

²⁷ For more information about Pro-Justice Program, see the final report of this initiative in 2014 <https://www.dmeformpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/USAID20Projustice20DRC20July2029.pdf>

for State-led efforts to seek greater collaboration with youth to boost Government legitimacy in meeting communities' justice demands and needs.

Research Methods:

Between May and July 2015, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions with respondents who were all LUCHA activists. LUCHA activists interviewed for this article were between 25 and 30 years old. Between May and July 2021, while doing my doctoral fieldwork, I interviewed five more activists to glean their insights on the trajectory of the movement's evolution since 2015. I invited respondents to describe their experiences preventing human rights abuses, prompting them to think of the challenges they face and share their understanding of justice. I received consent to record interviews and to take notes, which I also shared with participants afterward. The focus group discussions were composed of eight to ten participants who had at least two years participating in the movement and who had knowledge of the movement's efforts towards the prevention of human rights abuses. To promote diversity in the sample interviewed, respondents were of different ethnic affiliations and educational backgrounds. In terms of gender representation, each FGD had three female participants at the very least, making 11 female against 14 male activists. Although I only interviewed a small group of activists, their diverse inputs provided enriching insights that spoke to the core of LUCHA's vision for change.

I carried a thematic analysis of the data and a validation workshop with participants to process all critical findings. Interviews were transcribed and safely stored on Google Drive. During the workshop, other specific points were shared, such as the need to bolster international advocacy efforts, build financial autonomy for the movement, etc. Respondents did not consider these insights as most relevant for this article.

Since 2015, while doing my research activities outside of the DRC, I have closely followed the evolution of LUCHA through social media posts and remained interested in further elucidating its efforts to galvanize youth civic and political participation in the DRC. I am not a LUCHA activist. My curiosity and interest in understanding the movement grew through exchanges with friends in the DRC more familiar with the movement. To mitigate risks of bias and potential conflict of interest in the data analysis, I asked respondents to review the findings and shared them with two international researchers familiar with LUCHA to do a peer review.

While conducting fieldwork in Kinshasa and Goma from April to October 2021 as part of my doctoral studies, I interviewed five LUCHA activists to gauge their impressions of youth participation in TJ efforts during the current political context and to hear their aspirations for the future of the movement. I have included their insights in the analysis section to add some context to the evolution of the movement over time and to highlight new perspectives relevant to the role of youth in current TJ efforts in the DRC.

An essential ethical consideration that I had to navigate during the fieldwork was ensuring the personal safety of the participants. We had to change the locations of discussions to minimize the risks of being followed by intelligence and security agents. Furthermore, given the sensitivity of our conversations, participants preferred to remain anonymous. I have used non-identifiable pseudonyms in the article to indicate to the reader when quotes come from different people. An important limitation of the data collected is that I did not interview other stakeholders who interact with LUCHA, including the general population, State, and other Non-State actors involved in Goma and Kinshasa, to gauge their perceptions of the movement's contributions to the field of TJ. [Due to the pandemic situation and a volatile political environment resulting from a state of emergency in North Kivu, I could not travel to meet other actors in Goma, where the movement began.](#)

Furthermore, due to time constraints, I deliberately chose to zoom on LUCHA activists I could meet in Kinshasa in 2021. However, I recognize that interviewing other stakeholders about the movement could have added new perspectives to the analysis. Additionally, I have mostly been outside the DRC during some critical moments of LUCHA evolution(between 2015 and 2020), and I missed detailed insights into the broader context within which LUCHA was operating. Lastly, during this period, I also conducted 25 interviews with several TJ experts, both State and Non-State actors in Kinshasa, more broadly to inquire about the ongoing debates on developing a national strategy for TJ in the DRC and gleaned experts perspectives on collective participation as a working principle to engage communities in future TJ processes. The following sub-section uses the framework of collective participation and elaborates on its linkage with the TJ pillar of GoNR related to the LUCHA movement.

Understanding LUCHA through "collective participation."

Growing up in eastern Congo, I have always been passionate about youth civic engagement. Having lived through a large part of the Congo conflicts, I have been privileged to be part of several grassroots youth-led peace and justice initiatives in the DRC, but none has left an indelible impact on me in terms of its potential to influence political change like LUCHA. This section attempts to conceptualize LUCHA's engagement practices through the framework of collective participation. It is an appeal for the field of TJ to expand its paradigm on participation from individual to collective forms of participation, which are quite present and relevant in contexts of ongoing violence. Furthermore, while TJ literature puts more weight on individual participation, there is still a scarcity of research on collective participation in TJ mechanisms, especially in ongoing violence contexts. In these contexts, collective participation becomes a de facto alternative for individuals' quest for justice. Thus, it is paramount to explain whether and how collective participation contributes to TJ interventions' specific and general objectives, in this case, GoNR and victimized groups²⁸.

Expanding the individual's notion of participation to the collective has several benefits for TJ, and three are particularly relevant for the LUCHA case study. First, collective participation may increase TJ mechanisms' relevance by recognizing human rights abuses committed by security actors. Particularly pertinent for the DRC—in the context of potential development of a national strategy on TJ to account for legacies of human rights violations from 1996 to date—an essential aspect of ongoing debates among TJ experts in Kinshasa has focused on how to organize victim participation. Several TJ experts already agree on collective participation as a valuable lens to conceptualize the meaningful contribution of victims to future TJ efforts and prevent future human rights violations²⁹.

Second, in contexts of ongoing violence, while individual participation in TJ is inadequate to advance institutional reforms, collective participation of oppressed masses may pressure State actors to undertake needed reforms aiming to deter specific human rights violations. In this way, collective participation is a catalyst of the GoNR pillar In these contexts due to its ability to mobilize masses over a sustained period around a specific justice issue. By so doing, collective participation increases the relevance of GoNR, bringing its prevention component from the periphery to the center of policy debates seeking to address legacies of gross human rights abuses. As notes Sharp (2013), an essential feature of what the author refers to as the 'fourth generation' of TJ is its ability to move to the center of TJ concerns that are implicitly or explicitly ignored in the periphery of the discourse's

²⁸ Bonacker, T., & Buckley-Zistel, S. (2013). Introduction: Transitions from violence - Analyzing the effects of transitional justice. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 7(1), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.4119/UNIBI/ijcv.359>; Sikkink, K., & Walling, C. B. (2007). The impact of human rights trials in Latin America. *Journal of Peace Research*, 44(4), 427–445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343307078953>

²⁹ Fieldnotes doctoral fieldwork in Kinshasa 2021

development—the prevention aspect of the GoNR pillar being one of those concerns³⁰. In the DRC context, an excellent example of how collective participation brought to the center a prevention agenda is through the 2006 law punishing rape as a 'weapon of war.' Among the critical factors that influenced the design and implementation of this law was the collective outcry of victims of sexual violence in the eastern DRC, notably through several years of advocacy campaigns coordinated by civil society organizations, including the PANZI Foundation and the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Denis Mukwege. These collective efforts of women denouncing rape by armed actors and demanding a law punishing rape advanced critical legal reforms to deter this human right abuse from constantly recurring³¹.

Third, foregrounding participation through collective participation may complement and enhance formal TJ mechanisms³² by underscoring GoNR measures undertaken by victimized masses to harness agency and assert their demands for justice. While the prevention of human rights violations is primarily a Government's responsibility, in contexts of ongoing violence where State authority and legitimacy are weak in some places, the responsibility to prevent violations is shared by non-State actors - including youth-led peace and justice initiatives. In this sense, collective participation galvanizes and increases youth's self-determination to prevent human rights violations. It may also enable the empowerment of the broader society by conscientizing the oppressed masses to define local obstacles or problems, conceptualize, initiate, design, and implement programs to address these problems sustainably, even when donor funding runs out³³, thus fostering local ownership of mechanisms. Relevant for the case study is the unique place LUCHA youth occupy in denouncing abuses of power and using their resourcefulness to contribute to solutions. Over the years, LUCHA activists have built the confidence of oppressed Congolese masses to recognize they are the real power and can contribute to meaningful change. This feature of collective participation, which elicits the empowerment of oppressed groups, is relevant for TJ in general and GoNR, in particular, as the field aspires among its key objectives to restore the agency of victims.

Another important feature of collective participation relevant to this article is nonviolent resistance. For this article, collective participation in the form of nonviolent resistance encompasses using disruptive strategies that challenge power structures to pay attention to the needs of the masses. These strategies are often leaderless but with a powerful mobilizing capacity engaging large numbers of diverse citizens to speak up for individual and collective rights. In this sense, a 'collective' is not a monolith of one ethnic group but is a participation structure of multiple identities interrogating the politics and limits of oppressive ruling and its effects on people. The article's collective participation framework draws from the social movement theory of the 1960s, which was formed as part of the Global South's critique of the failure of the Global North's top-down approaches to development³⁴. Bottom-up movements such as Paulo Freire's education programs in Latin America foregrounded 'conscientization,' a critical state of consciousness rooted in popular experience and people's knowledge of their structural conditions of oppression. As a movement of thinking, conscientization rests on the premise that for people to change their living conditions, they need to develop critical

³⁰ Sharp, D. N. (2013). Interrogating the Peripheries: The Preoccupations of Fourth Generation Transitional Justice. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 26, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijz018>

³¹ Banwell, S. (2014). Rape and sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A case study of gender-based violence. *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 23, pp. 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.726603>

³² See Mayer-Riech, 2017 above.

³³ Lundy, P., & MCGovern, M. (2008). *Whose Justice ? Rethinking Transitional Justice from the Bottom Up*. 35(2), 265–292.

³⁴ Rossner, M., & Bruce, J. (2016). *Community participation in restorative justice : rituals , reintegration , and quasi- professionalization*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2015.1125980>

abilities to identify the problems and define collective actions based on their shared understanding³⁵. This pedagogical conceptualization of conscientization is crucial for collective participation as it explains the internal dynamics contributing to the formation of collective awareness of a group's abilities to shift power towards meeting collective rights and justice demands.

In *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth reveal strong evidence of the effectiveness of nonviolent strategies in causing regime change and peacebuilding from 156 cases worldwide from 1900 to 2006. Their research demonstrates that 53% of nonviolent campaigns achieved success against 26% of violent ones (Maria and Chenoweth:2008, 10). Elizabeth Wilson also shares cases in Greece and Argentina after the fall of their dictatorships to demonstrate how coalitions of nonviolent civic groups and victim-led campaigns contributed to TJ — despite the elites' toughness. Other examples of the role and impact of nonviolent grassroots mobilization and civil resistance actions on transitional justice exist in Chile, South Africa, Indonesia, Nepal, or Ukraine, yet none have been thoroughly documented and examined³⁶. A common denominator of these examples is that they increasingly challenge TJ's dominant bias toward top-down perspectives focused on the roles of prominent actors, institutions, and international power brokers. It underscores the activism of affected masses as a critical catalyst for transitional justice³⁷. Recognizing that these movements were primarily composed of youths, these examples demand further investigation of youth's roles in TJ contexts and expand the field's toolkit to accommodate their unique contributions.

Lastly, most contexts of ongoing violence fit the category of what some scholars have described as 'conflicted democracies,' defined as states that have 'experienced prolonged, structured, communal, political violence' even where the political structures could broadly be considered 'democratic'³⁸. These countries present some paradoxes, which come to the fore when peace and transitional political process are agreed upon³⁹. In these contexts, Sarkin (2016) emphasizes TJ's need to adopt a forward-looking approach to maintain the relevance of victims' inputs in TJ efforts⁴⁰. He also examines how TJ can play an increased role in preventing atrocities, contributing to justice, and tackling impunity. Thus, by focusing on the pillar of GoNR and understanding collective participation through the lens of nonviolent resistance, the article sheds light on LUCHA's nonviolent contributions to preventing specific human rights violations and the realistic boundaries of LUCHA in curbing human rights abuses in the DRC.

Understandings of Justice

There is a myriad of understandings of justice held by youth in the LUCHA movement, depending on the kinds of justice demands they advocate for at a given time. The movement is not defined by one or a set of issues but by multiple overlapping justice demands raised by the civilian population. Thus, the description of interview insights below is by no means seeking to magnify some justice demands

³⁵ John, W., Freire, P., & Conscientization, L. T. (1974). *Conscientization through literacy*.

³⁶ Wilson, E. (2017). *People Power Movements and International Human Rights: creating a legal framework*. Retrieved from https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/people_power_movements_intl_HR_wilson.pdf

³⁷ Gready, P., & Robins, S. (2017). Rethinking civil society and transitional justice: lessons from social movements and 'new' civil society. *International Journal of Human Rights*, 21(7), 956–975. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1313237>

³⁸ Ní Aoláin, F., & Campbell, C. (2005). The paradox of transition in conflicted democracies. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 27(1), 172–213. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2005.0001>

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Sarkin, J. (2016). Refocusing Transitional Justice to Focus Not only on the Past, but Also to Concentrate on Ongoing Conflicts and Enduring Human Rights Crises. *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 7(2), 294-329. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18781527-00702002>

over others, but rather to give a glimpse of the kinds of understanding of justice that stood out for respondents and draw the reader's attention to the movement's recent development.

Socio-economic justice

"From the beginning of LUCHA in 2012, the movement started as a social struggle. From 2015 to 2017, with elections of 2017, the battle has taken a political dimension. Problems of access to clean water, electricity, affordable health care were the primary *raison d'être* of LUCHA."
Rukundo, 25

Traditionally, the field of TJ has overlooked violations of economic and social rights and has paid more attention to violations of civil and political rights as the primary grave human rights violations to be addressed when seeking justice for past atrocities⁴¹. LUCHA started as a movement seeking to contribute to lasting social and economic justice by denouncing failures of the central Government to provide reliable water and electricity to the population in Goma. In a city where the lack of these essential services fuels insecurity and violence, LUCHA activists took it upon themselves to demand politicians to improve conditions hampering the continued provision of water and electricity. LUCHA activists also succeeded in enabling an environment of dialogue between civilians and politicians on water and electricity challenges in the city and other socio-economic challenges facing civilians, including demanding the removal of unfair telecommunication fees that big companies such as Airtel, Orange, and Vodacom impose on customers. As notes one Lucha activist I interviewed in 2021, the battle is still uphill, and increasingly, companies are paying attention to LUCHA denunciations.

"We have been carrying out a campaign against overcharging of telecommunication services by Vodacom, Airtel, and Orange, the three major telecommunication actors in the DRC. To do so, we have more recently focused efforts on a political lobby by building alliances with strategic actors such as the FEC(*Federation des Entrepreneurs du Congo*) to mediate these dialogues. While there is still more to be done to remove these telecommunication barriers, we are proud to have advanced the demands of civilian populations and to make big actors listen." Safari, 30

Furthermore, another aspect of LUCHA's efforts has been to draw political actors' attention to their campaign promises to increase jobs that alleviate youth's economic burdens. Through its workshops, LUCHA educates youth in higher learning institutions to not be gullible to politicians' speeches but to be critical of their past and present actions for their communities as well to seek to understand the underlying causes of socio-economic precarity as shared participants in this Focus Group Discussion:

"Youth are frustrated at the lack of socio-economic opportunities while the political elite pockets all of our country's resources. Within the movement, our workshops also analyze issues underlying resource inequalities affecting youth and remind powerful actors that they are accountable for improving youth's socio-economic conditions."⁴² FGD1, 2015.

⁴¹ Cahill-Ripley, A. (2014). Foregrounding socio-economic rights in transitional justice: Realising justice for violations of economic and social rights. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, 32(2), 183–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016934411403200205>; Laplante, L. J. (2008). Transitional Justice and Peace Building: Diagnosing and Addressing the Socioeconomic Roots of Violence through a Human Rights Framework. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2(3), 331–355. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijn031>

⁴² Fieldnotes, July 8th, 2015

Solidarity in human rights for all

"There is a saying that goes that when a neighbor's house is burning, you should bring a bucket of water to help extinguish the fire(translated from French). As an activist, what preoccupies my fellow citizens irrespective of their backgrounds is my preoccupation. Previously, there were a lot of inter-ethnic conflicts between students from Hunde and Hutu backgrounds to solve these challenges. What the movement [LUCHA] aims to conscientize university students to care to protect one another's rights irrespective of ethnic backgrounds." Korodi, 27.

At the time of the interviews in 2015, there were some ethnic skirmishes between the Hunde and Hutu communities, which escalated into targeted violence among students from these communities in certain higher learning institutions in Goma. Interviewed participants echoed the notion of standing in solidarity with everyone, irrespective of background, whose elemental abusive powers undermine human rights. Indifference to the abuse of power and suppression of someone else's rights is a threat to one's rights. In this sense, prevention is working together to address these abusive powers collectively. GoNR measures aimed at preventing specific human rights violations, including ethnic profiling, should be driven by solidarity for human rights for all. Therefore, through solidarity, prevention is also about establishing the ground for inter-ethnic understanding and should broadly include a chain of proactive activities sequenced to mitigate and eliminate the risks of future relapses. By showing solidarity for human rights to all those that experience ethnic violence, LUCHA activists take a step further to educate youth in higher learning institutions about preventing ethnic violence in university environments.



Photo: LUCHA activists in Kalehe(South Kivu) organizing distribution of collected clothes and food items for displaced populations after the Nyiragongo volcanic eruption of May 2021. Source: LUCHA RDC Facebook page.

While developing strategic partnerships with multiple actors aligning with the movement's goals has been a successful approach in LUCHA's evolution, it has also led to a perception from the general public of LUCHA softening up and losing its pertinence. This perception has been a critical moment of reflection for the movement, as notes Biri, 29:

"Between 2018-2019, our main interlocutor, the Congolese Government, changed its oppressive tactics against LUCHA and became more pacific and accessible to engage in civil dialogues. Recently, however, we have seen political actors who were once sympathizers of the movement at the beginning of their mandates radicalize with time, which has moved rethink its partnership approach altogether."

Addressing the root causes of human rights violations

"Violence against certain ethnic groups does not start on campus but rather in deep-seated, unaddressed grievances in the history of our communities. Time and again, ill-intentioned politicians take advantage of youth's lack of knowledge of these serious challenges and manipulate them into committing violence. Through workshops, the movement [LUCHA] counters this trend by inviting youth to question politicians' motives and to look for the root causes of interethnic violence⁴³." Bokilo, 26.

Participants in the interviews asserted their efforts in mobilizing youth to learn about the history of ethnic tensions in North Kivu to not be a victim of political manipulation, especially during electoral periods. GoNR measures need to tackle the root causes of human rights violations and go beyond the superficial responses to symptoms of violence. Furthermore, GoNR measures seeking to prevent specific human rights violations often focus on macro-components (e.g., vetting of the police). However, these measures often overlook micro-factors (e.g., unresolved tensions between two business owners from opposing ethnic communities) whose ripple effects can fuel distrust and suspicion between communities and potentially lead to inter-ethnic violence.

Tackling illegal detention and torture of activists

"In 2013, some of the movement members [LUCHA] were illegally detained and tortured by secret agents of the former regime. Most youths in this country feel suppressed in their right to congregate and speak up their minds on different issues concerning our country's governance. It is an ongoing challenge that undermines democracy and one that we hope will soon be eradicated with people demanding Government accountability.⁴⁴" Banta, 28

During the Kabila regime, arrests, illegal detention, and torture of youth activists protesting against abuses were common. Often those illegally detained ended up dead or disappeared. LUCHA activists braved these challenges, knowing that their own lives were on the line. Preventing the recurrence of illegal detentions and torture of its members has been one of the top priorities of LUCHA and one of the ways youth in the movement perceive justice.

Local solutions for local problems

⁴³ Fieldnotes, June 26th, 2015.

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes, June 30th, 2015

“ Banasemaka maji ya mbali haikatake kiu (Swahili for “water from far does not quench one's first”). Since the beginning of conflicts in eastern Congo in 1996, our local leaders have tended to rely on Kinshasa or international actors to solve our disputes. In this way, they [local leaders] deflected responsibility in conflicts and were equally less resourced to provide solutions to address them. Violence prevention should also have a local anchorage because imported solutions can only go so far and sometimes create new problems⁴⁵.” Lota, 27

An interviewed LUCHA activist underscored the need for the localization of human rights prevention through mechanisms deeply grounded in people's lived experiences of conflicts. Unlike relying on tools designed elsewhere, the activist encouraged a more significant focus on local solutions. Similarly, the TJ pillar of GoNR needs to be locally defined, as in most cases, there is a disconnect between local initiatives working on the prevention of human rights violations and international norms on GoNR. Although the LUCHA movement uses nonviolent strategies and mass conscientization of civic engagement responsibilities, they rarely refer to their work as GoNR. My interpretation of this reality is that because of the dynamic nature of conflicts, and their multifaceted causes and effects, most local justice and peacebuilding initiatives are not categorized according to a specific international normative framework like GoNR. However, instead of civil society, actors view their initiatives as responding to sometimes multiple and overlapping community needs beyond TJ and peacebuilding discourses. For most industries, these international norms are essentially fluid. In this way, initiatives may simultaneously encompass a combination of several normative frameworks ranging from GoNR to development to peacebuilding, etc.

Developing politically engaged citizens

Nine years into existence, LUCHA has expanded throughout the country with tens of thousands of engaged supporters. When prompted whether the movement ever thought of becoming politically engaged as a party, one of the activists shared:

" We now consider ourselves as a political dynamic of the country. We may not be an active political actor for fear of risking breaking the movement's internal cohesion. However, what we want is to inculcate and invigorate a culture of active citizenry which will revive the Congolese civil society currently crippled by political manipulations." Zali, 28.

For this activist, a culture of active citizenry is a vital tool to maintain the accountability of political actors for power abuses. Learning from manipulations of civil society leaders by influential political actors, LUCHA members are increasingly aware that their legitimacy and sustainability over the long run lie with their ability to remain constant in advocating for people's rights—without political undertones. It is in this spirit that when prompted about what legacy LUCHA would like to pass to future generations, one LUCHA activist answered:

"In 10, 20 years, I want LUCHA to be a school forging useful citizens for the DRC. Such is the future I would wish for the movement." Dade, 30.

Discussion session

The central question is how does youth participation in preventing human rights abuses shape their understandings of justice? Three discussion areas are relevant to highlight, drawing on the articles' findings. First, while it is evident that youth are actively involved in preventing human rights violations in several TJ contexts of ongoing violence, in the DRC, their justice understandings are overshadowed and made invisible by TJ dominant discourses, which stress criminal accountability.

⁴⁵ Fieldnotes, July 5th. 2015

However, as argued Herremans & Destrooper (2021), who did a study on countering erasure and invisibilization of Syrian victims' justice narratives, many justice actors are not only interested in criminal accountability but also seek to stretch the limits of what is imaginable in terms of justice, beyond existing mechanisms and even beyond the judicial realm⁴⁶. Although youth I interviewed consider criminal accountability critical to preventing human rights abuses, their primary motivation for participation in LUCHA emanates from a shared desire to address the political and socio-economic causes of the underlying day-to-day violations of civil rights. They are driven by a desire to keep duty bearers accountable to pains collectively experienced by the masses. In these contexts, TJ should also pay attention to the voices of marginalized groups whose justice narratives remain unheard. By exploring alternative justice pathways suitable for mass justice, TJ may elicit local ownership from the majority of the oppressed masses who still feel left behind despite the increasingly growing emphasis on the centrality of victim participation in TJ mechanisms. In this sense, developing the pillar of GoNR and the logic of attending to the masses' immediate and long-term justice demands is promising for TJ in DRC. More concretely, this could mean, for example, that TJ initiatives are decentralized and that existing local mechanisms of conflict mediation are strengthened to foster the participation of oppressed masses in all phases of TJ development. Mubiala (2021) noted that local peace committees, which are critical for inter-communal reconciliation after conflicts, can strengthen TJ's preventive dimension and complement the healing function of the truth and reconciliation commissions⁴⁷. While these structures also face several challenges, developing their capacities to be vehicles of the masses' justice demands is also one way for TJ to build proximity and relevance with all segments of populations, including youth.

Second, while this article sheds light on a small microcosm of youth justice understandings in contexts of ongoing violence, it also exposes the disconnect between formal and informal TJ mechanisms, State and Non-State actors, between top-down and bottom-up justice efforts in these contexts. Arnould (2015) notes that TJ in the DRC has advanced accountability, but progress is slow and fragmentary⁴⁸. Although there are ongoing debates on developing a national strategy on TJ in the DRC—a policy framework that seeks to advance TJ efforts through the Government's leadership decisively—youth inputs to this process remain missing. A unifying TJ policy framework for the DRC—that incorporates different approaches in a complementary manner—is vital and urgent to organize TJ initiatives and advance victims' justice meaningfully. Additionally, such a unifying vision by the Government would inevitably carry a dominant top-down discourse that would be problematic for inclusive youth participation in TJ.

Third, the fields of TJ and Peacebuilding can mutually benefit and enrich each other through cross-pollination of best practices and lessons learned from various contexts of ongoing violence on how to advance the Localization Agenda. This discourse has been more rhetorical and aspirational rather than a reality on the ground. Researching this conundrum and seeking to bridge the divide between the two fields, her seminal article (Lambourne, 2009) draws insights from practical experience and theories of peacebuilding and transitional justice to develop a framework of transformative justice that supports sustainable peacebuilding⁴⁹. The innovativeness of this model is that it focuses on civil society

⁴⁶ Herremans, B., & Destrooper, T. (2021). Stirring the Justice Imagination: Countering the Invisibilization and Erasure of Syrian Victims' Justice Narratives. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijab025>

⁴⁷ Mubiala, M. (2021). *Towards a renewed transitional justice in the D . R . Congo*. (34), 1–10.

⁴⁸ See *Transitional Justice's Uneven Path in the DRC* by Valerie Arnould 2015, a policy brief by Egmont Institute <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/transitional-justices-uneven-path-in-the-drc/>

⁴⁹ See Lambourne, W. (2009). *Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding*. 3(January), 28–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijn037>

participation in the design and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms, which I contend are critical ingredients for TJ's localization in contexts of ongoing violence. The focus on the broader civil society participation is particularly relevant in the DRC in light of the continuing efforts to develop a TJ strategy, which coincides with MONUSCO's gradual rolling of its exit strategy by 2024. For a long time, MONUSCO has been one of the most extensive and expensive UN peacekeeping operations worldwide and an important symbol of international interventionism in the DRC. In recent years, MONUSCO has faced backlash from local communities for its failure to prevent the repetitive killings of innocent civilians, mainly in Beni and the Kasai province. Although developing a TJ strategy in the DRC aims to be locally-driven with fewer international actors, TJ carries a strong perception among Congolese as yet another internationally-driven discourse that echoes civilians' mixed experiences of MONUSCO. Leveraging lessons from MONUSCO's gains and failures in the DRC on localization will prevent the slowly growing field of TJ from making similar mistakes. They[lessons] may enable the field to develop approaches that elicit participation and ownership of future TJ initiatives by the broader Congolese masses. Lastly, the findings shared in this article provide a glimpse of LUCHA youth justice understandings and motivation for participating on their terms in preventing human rights violations. While being a small representation of Congolese youth perceptions of justice, they are indicative of the majority of Congolese youth's justice priorities, and as such, should serve as a mirror helping to realign the essence of future TJ initiatives in the DRC seeking to be relevant to the youth.

Conclusions

We are living in the century of youth. The overall worldwide youth proportion and population today is like no other before in the history of humankind. Approximately half of the 1.8 billion youth worldwide live in conflict and post-conflict contexts and seek creative ways to prevent violence and human rights violations. In these contexts where TJ is increasingly expanding, policymakers hold a generally negative perception of youth roles as producers of violence, leading to limited or no spaces to meaningfully engage youth in all phases of dealing with the aftermath of past and ongoing large-scale human rights violations. This simplified conceptualization of youth is problematic for understanding the diverse identities of youth in contexts where large-scale human rights violations occur and obscures their contributions as Non-State actors in advancing human rights accountability and preventing the recurrence of specific human rights violations in these contexts.

Using the TJ pillar of GoNR as the main foundation of analysis, this article has explored how youth participation in LUCHA influences understandings of justice and contributes to the non-recurrence of specific human rights violations in the DRC from 2015 to date. By so doing, the article has foregrounded the critical importance of meaningful youth participation in TJ processes contending that overemphasizing State actors eclipses and obscures Non-State actors' roles—particularly youth-led peace and justice initiatives in areas where State actors are inexistent or have weakened legitimacy. A vital implication of the article's findings is that it questions and stimulates further investigation on the extent of articulation of bottom-up youth-led TJ initiatives with State-led efforts in contexts of ongoing violence. With the myriad of human rights challenges facing most countries today, compounded with a global pandemic that has further reduced the capacities of countries already dealing with protracted violence, a failure to consider youth as allies in the human rights movement is a missed opportunity towards advancing TJ in a tumultuous global environment. The clock is ticking.