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COMMUNITY JUSTICE THRIVES IN THE VILLAGES OF EASTERN CONGO

Luvungi, Democratic Republic of Congo: Amid the chaos and lawlessness of Eastern Congo, a local organization has developed an innovative approach to settling disputes and promoting justice, one community at a time.

[Arche d'Alliance](#), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) in Uvira, has created [Comites de Mediation et Conciliation \(CMCs\)](#), or conflict resolution committees, in 24 communities across South Kivu. The CMCs function as alternative "courts" for disputes involving property, debts, inheritances, and domestic quarrels, and take pressure off the overburdened Congolese justice system. They also provide an important source of legal help for refugees and internally displaced persons in underserved rural areas.

A CMC consists of 10 members - local municipal leaders, representatives from women's groups, a representative from the Congolese military, a representative from the police, and other community and tribal leaders. Any individual can bring a grievance to the CMC, which then investigates the matter and renders a non-binding decision. If one or both of the parties refuses to comply, the CMC will pass the case off to Arche d'Alliance to be heard in court in Uvira.



At a recent CMC hearing in Luvungi, a small town on the Rwandan border, AP Peace Fellow [Walter James](#) heard the case of [Zawadi, a young widow](#) (shown at left). Zawadi was second wife to a much older man, and after his death, his first wife's children tried to expel her from the family property - giving her very little land on which to support her own two children. After asking questions of both sides, the CMC told the first wife's son that he was in the wrong because he did not consider the potential fate of Zawadi's children.

"Even though Eastern Congo can sometimes feel like the Wild Wild West, the CMC is like the Lone Ranger, an example of justice and peace that everyone can follow and admire," Mr James wrote in his

[blog](#).

An important aspect of CMC decisions is that they follow the law. Arche d'Alliance trains the CMC members on Congolese law and the rights guaranteed marginalized peoples (such as refugees and women) by the Congolese Constitution. Luvungi's CMC has heard 80 cases since the beginning of the year, and ninety percent of the time, the parties agreed to the committee's decision.

Local CMCs also act as distribution centers for information on public health, security, the

constitution, and refugee land rights and reintegration. The CMC in Luvungi has been in existence since 2006, and it attracts villagers from as far as 30 km away.

One essential role performed by CMCs is to obtain birth certificates (shown at right) for refugee children who were born abroad. This documentation is required for the children to attend school or inherit property. Securing it normally requires a trip to the Congolese town of Uvira, extensive forms, stiff fees, and a long wait.



Instead, Arche representatives visit a CMC once a week, collect the necessary information, file for the documents in Uvira, and then bring them back to the CMC once they are completed.

"In something as small and simple as helping refugees get documents for their children, Arche is helping re-weave civil society in Eastern Congo," Mr James wrote.

Mr James, a graduate student at the University of Maryland who is volunteering with Arche d'Alliance this summer, is one of three AP Peace Fellows working with community groups in the DRC. A second Fellow, [Ned Meerdink](#), began with Arche in 2008 and now covers South Kivu for AP. [Elisa Garcia](#), a graduate student at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain, is working with survivors of sexual violence in Bukavu.

- Read the blog of Peace Fellow [Walter James](#)
- Learn more about [Arche d'Alliance](#)