

**ESPER (Ensemble pour la
Sécurité et la Paix à l'Est de la
RDC)
Final Evaluation**

Final Report

20 December 2024

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List of Acronyms

ACGS	Civil Alliance of Security Governance	Alliance civile pour la gouvernance de la sécurité
ADF	Allied Democratic Forces	Forces démocratiques alliées
ANR	National Intelligence Agency	Agence nationale de renseignement
CODECO	Cooperative for the Development of Congo	Coopérative pour le développement du Congo
CISPE	Consortium for the Integrated Stabilization and Peace in Eastern DRC	Ensemble pour la Sécurité et la Paix à l'Est de la RDC
CLS	Local Security Committee	Comité local de sécurité
CLS-E	Extended Local Security Committee	Comité local de sécurité Elargi
CORDAID	Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid	Organisation catholique d'aide d'urgence et d'aide au développement
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations	Organisations de la Société Civile
DDR	Disarm, Demobilize and Reintegrate	Désarmer, démobiliser et réintégrer
DGM	General Directorate of Migration	Direction générale des migrations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo	République Démocratique du Congo
EM	Evaluation Matrix	Matrice d'Evaluation
EQs	Evaluation Questions	Questions d'Evaluation
EKN	Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands	Ambassade du Royaume des Pays-Bas
ESPASK	Together for Security and Peace in South Kivu	Ensemble pour la Sécurité et la Paix au Sud Kivu
ESPER	Together for Security and Peace in the East of the DRC	Ensemble pour la Sécurité et la Paix à l'Est de la RDC
ETD	Decentralised Territorial Entity	Entité territoriale décentralisée
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic of Congo	Forces armées de la Démocratique du Congo
FGD	Focus Group Discussion	Discussion de groupe
IGTER	General Inspectorate of Territorial entities	Inspection Générale des Entités Territoriales
IOM	International Organization for Migration	Organisation internationale pour les migrations
KII	Key Informant Interview	Entretien avec un informateur clé
L&A	Lobby and Advocacy	Lobbying et plaidoyer
M23	March 23	Mars 23
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation	Suivi et évaluation
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo	Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en RD Congo
MoUs	Memorandums of Understanding	Protocoles d'accord
OECD-DAC	The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - Development Assistance Committee	Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques - Comité d'aide au développement
PAS	Local Security Action Plans	Plans d'action locaux en matière de sécurité
P-DDRCS	Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Rehabilitation, and Stabilization Programme	Programme de désarmement, de démobilisation, de réhabilitation communautaire et de stabilisation
PNC	National Police of Congo	Police Nationale Congolaise
PNSD	National Strategic Development Plan	Plan stratégique national de développement
RBF	Results-Based Financing	Financement basé sur les résultats
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals	Objectifs de développement durable
SECAS	Service d'Éducation Civique Patriotique et Actions Sociales	Service d'Éducation Civique Patriotique et Actions Sociales
SSJR	Security sector and justice reform	Réforme du secteur de la sécurité et de la justice
STAREC	Stabilization and Reconstruction Plan for Eastern DRC	Plan de stabilisation et de reconstruction pour l'Est de la RDC
ToC	Theory of Change	Théorie du Changement
UN	United Nations	Nations Unies

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Executive summary

Purpose and Scope

Launched in August 2020, ESPER was initiated to address the complex security and governance challenges in the eastern DRC. Funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by a consortium led by VNG International and Cordaid, ESPER aimed to improve security and justice governance, enhance accountability, and strengthen social cohesion across selected territories in South Kivu, North Kivu, and Ituri provinces.

For nearly three decades, eastern DRC has faced persistent conflict driven by armed groups, impunity, and resource competition. These challenges have resulted in widespread violence, displacement, and governance failures. Despite efforts such as military interventions, DDR programs, and decentralization reforms, stabilization has been hindered by inadequate coordination, weak institutional capacity, and systemic underfunding.

In response, ESPER adopted a holistic approach, integrating capacity building, strengthening local security governance mechanisms, results-based financing (RBF), community engagement, and lobbying and advocacy to institutionalize participatory governance practices.

This final evaluation assesses ESPER's performance through the OECD DAC criteria—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability—while providing actionable recommendations for future programming and scaling of successful strategies.

Methodological approach

The evaluation employed a theory-based, mixed-methods design. Qualitative data was collected in South Kivu, North Kivu, Ituri, and Kinshasa. Over 300 stakeholders—including local, provincial, and national authorities, security and justice providers, and community representatives—participated in key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

While the evaluation yielded valuable insights, several limitations were identified:

- **Insecurity and logistical constraints:** These restricted access to certain areas.
- **Emphasis on qualitative methods:** Although qualitative insights were triangulated with ESPER's robust monitoring data, precise measurement of impact was limited.
- **Complex intervention landscape:** Overlapping initiatives in the region made isolating ESPER's specific contributions challenging.
- **Potential bias in stakeholder feedback:** Some responses may have been overly positive or cautious due to political sensitivities. This risk was mitigated through methodical triangulation.

Conclusions

C1. While ESPER itself offers a cogent response to local needs, wider coordination gaps impede cohesive security governance

ESPER addresses the diverse security and governance needs of eastern DRC by empowering local institutions and fostering community ownership through mechanisms like CLS-E and PAS. These efforts strengthen governance structures, enhance sustainability, and ensure interventions are rooted in local realities. ESPER's alignment with national priorities and its focus on participatory governance practices—codified in Decree 44/22—help integrate local efforts into broader stabilization strategies.

However, significant coordination challenges impede the program's effectiveness, including the absence of a cohesive government-led framework and ambiguities concerning the role of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These gaps limit the potential for creating synergies across various security and governance initiatives, reducing overall impact.

C2. A tangible but uneven impact on security governance, security, and cohesion

ESPER has significantly improved security governance and social cohesion by formalizing collaborations through MoUs and performance contracts, providing coaching and capacity strengthening, engaging communities, and instituting regular program evaluations with government authorities. These efforts have strengthened institutional professionalization and accountability, boosting trust and local participation in decision-making.

Despite these successes, the program's impact remains uneven, particularly in newly integrated or persistently insecure regions. Systemic challenges like cross-border instability, entrenched gender inequalities, and limited funding impede broader progress. Matching grants effectively address local security risks and empower communities, but their sustainability is uncertain due to insufficient follow-up mechanisms and funding. Delayed implementation of Decree 44/22 and fluctuating political engagement further hinder long-term reforms.

C3. The RBF model: An effective tool for institutional performance, potentially scalable, whose long-term impact is doubtful absent continued funding

The RBF model has enhanced institutional accountability and professionalization, showing its effectiveness in Eastern DRC. By linking performance to financial incentives, the model encourages better planning and transparent management of local priorities. Stakeholders recognize lasting gains from collaborative practices fostered by the RBF approach, even in the absence of future funding.

However, the model's sustainability faces significant challenges. Without continued donor support and stable national funding, institutions risk reverting to inefficient practices, jeopardizing progress. While the RBF model holds potential for national scaling, its expansion requires robust monitoring mechanisms and political

commitment to prevent fund mismanagement and ensure effective implementation.

C4. Leveraging justice and customary practices to address impunity and promote stabilization

ESPER addresses impunity and promotes stabilization by integrating judicial systems, including military justice, into broader security governance frameworks. Initiatives like mobile court hearings and the codification of customary practices resolve land and inheritance disputes, reducing localized conflicts and mitigating broader instability risks. These efforts tackle key drivers of violence and strengthen public trust in state institutions.

However, chronic underfunding, political interference, and institutional fragmentation continue to undermine these efforts.

C5. Strategic localization and adaptive management as pillars of efficiency

Localization has been a cornerstone of ESPER's success. By placing Congolese personnel in leadership roles and collaborating with local organizations, the program has reduced costs, enhanced the acceptance of interventions, and fostered trust among stakeholders. Adaptive management, supported by donor flexibility, has allowed ESPER to respond to shifting security dynamics and emerging needs effectively.

The program's bottom-up approach has strengthened local governance structures, promoted sustainable capacity-building, and facilitated constructive dialogue with national authorities.

C6. ESPER's sustainability strategy lays the groundwork for long-term impacts, but significant challenges remain

ESPER's sustainability strategy has established robust governance structures, notably through the institutionalization of CLS-E and PAS in national frameworks via Decree 44/22. Supported by high-level political engagement, these structures are positioned for long-term sustainability and scalability.

Despite these strengths, the program's reliance on external funding poses significant sustainability challenges. Consistent donor support

and adequate national funding are crucial to maintain the gains achieved and to expand ES-
PER's governance practices more widely.

Recommendations

Note: Details on who should act and when (ESPER II timeline or longer term) are specified in the recommendation section of the report.

R1. Strengthen the Operationalization of Decree 44/22

1. Develop and adopt a realistic budget for implementing the Decree at the national level.
2. Ensure effective fund disbursement with transparent payment mechanisms, involving CLS-E in resource management and oversight.
3. Provide support to CLS-E committees for budgeting and implementing CLS-E recommendations.
4. Expand awareness of Decree 44/22 and its accompanying measures.
5. Digitize CLS-E and PAS processes to document decisions and facilitate stakeholder interactions.
6. Build digital capacities among stakeholders to ensure effective adoption of these platforms.

R2. Strengthen Local Financial Capacities to Support CLS-E Autonomy

1. Mobilize local revenues to support CLS-E activities.
2. Establish regulatory frameworks for effective and transparent revenue collection.
3. Strengthen local authorities' capacity for participatory financial management.
4. Promote financial oversight mechanisms.

R3. Align PLD with CLS-E Priorities

1. Integrate security challenges identified by CLS-E into PLDs.
2. Engage local stakeholders in prioritizing PLD actions.

3. Promote joint funding for security and development initiatives.

R4. Integrate Justice and Customary Practices into Stabilization Efforts

1. Strengthen access to justice in marginalized areas.
2. Document and institutionalize customary practices.
3. Strengthen judicial institutional capacity to engage with customary systems.
4. Advocate for inclusion of justice and customary practices into stabilization programs.

R5. Strengthen the RBF Model for Broader Institutional Performance

1. Raise awareness of the RBF model among stakeholders.
2. Institutionalize the RBF model within governance frameworks.
3. Continue building institutional capacity for RBF implementation.
4. Ensure sustainable funding for the RBF model.

R6. Intensify Coordination and Engagement Among Donors, Agencies, and Authorities to Increase Government ownership of Inclusive Security Governance going forward

1. Ensure regular representation of inclusive security governance (ESPER II) in Triple Nexus and Stabilization coordination meetings.
2. Shape the two parallel practitioner communities of Triple Nexus and Stabilization actors and donors as advocates and facilitators of sustainable, inclusive security governance.
3. Foster regular political dialogue with Congolese authorities and centralize coordination efforts.

Résumé exécutif

Objectifs et portée

Lancé en août 2020, ESPER a pour objectif de répondre aux défis complexes de sécurité et de gouvernance dans l'est de la RDC. Financé par l'Ambassade du Royaume des Pays-Bas et mis en œuvre par un consortium dirigé par VNG International et Cordaid, ESPER vise à améliorer la gouvernance en matière de sécurité et de justice, renforcer la redevabilité et favoriser la cohésion sociale dans des territoires sélectionnés des provinces du Sud-Kivu, du Nord-Kivu et de l'Ituri.

Depuis près de trois décennies, l'est de la RDC fait face à des conflits persistants alimentés par des groupes armés, l'impunité et la concurrence pour les ressources. Ces défis ont conduit à des violences généralisées, des déplacements de population et des défaillances de gouvernance. Malgré des efforts tels que des interventions militaires, des programmes de DDR et des réformes de décentralisation, la stabilisation reste entravée par un manque de coordination, des capacités institutionnelles faibles et un sous-financement systémique.

En réponse, ESPER adopte une approche holistique intégrant le renforcement des capacités, la consolidation des mécanismes locaux de gouvernance en matière de sécurité, le financement basé sur les résultats (RBF), l'engagement communautaire et le plaidoyer pour institutionnaliser les pratiques de gouvernance participative.

Cette évaluation finale analyse la performance d'ESPER selon les critères du CAD de l'OCDE — pertinence, cohérence, efficacité, efficience, impact et durabilité — tout en formulant des recommandations concrètes pour les futurs programmes et la mise à l'échelle des stratégies réussies.

Approche méthodologique

L'évaluation a suivi une méthodologie mixte basée sur la théorie du changement. Des données qualitatives ont été collectées au Sud-Kivu, Nord-Kivu, Ituri et Kinshasa. Plus de 300 parties prenantes, notamment des autorités locales, provinciales et nationales, des prestataires de services de sécurité et de justice ainsi que des représentants des communautés, ont participé à des

entretiens individuels (KII) et des discussions de groupe (FGD).

Bien que l'évaluation ait fourni des informations précieuses, elle a rencontré plusieurs limites :

- **L'insécurité** a restreint l'accès à certaines zones.
- Bien que les données qualitatives aient été triangulées avec les données de suivi d'ESPER, la **mesure précise de l'impact reste limitée**.
- Les **nombreuses d'initiatives dans la région** a compliqué l'identification des attributions spécifiques d'ESPER.
- **Certaines réponses pourraient être excessivement positives** ou prudentes en raison de sensibilités politiques.

Ces limites ont été atténuées par une triangulation de différentes sources de données.

Conclusions

C1. ESPER répond aux besoins locaux mais rencontre des lacunes de coordination

ESPER a abordé les besoins diversifiés en matière de gouvernance sécuritaire à l'est de la RDC en responsabilisant les institutions locales et en favorisant l'appropriation communautaire via des mécanismes tels que les CLS-E et les PAS. Ces efforts ont renforcé les structures de gouvernance, amélioré la durabilité et ancré les interventions dans les réalités locales. L'alignement d'ESPER avec les priorités nationales et son accent sur les pratiques de gouvernance participative — codifiées dans le Décret 44/22 — ont facilité l'intégration des initiatives locales dans des stratégies de stabilisation plus larges.

Cependant, des défis de coordination significatifs ont nui à l'efficacité du programme, notamment l'absence d'un cadre cohérent dirigé par le gouvernement congolais et des ambiguïtés concernant le rôle du ministère néerlandais des Affaires étrangères. Ces lacunes ont limité le potentiel de synergies entre les diverses initiatives de sécurité et de gouvernance, réduisant l'impact global.

C2. Un impact tangible mais inégal sur la gouvernance sécuritaire et la cohésion sociale

ESPER a considérablement amélioré la gouvernance sécuritaire et la cohésion sociale, notamment grâce aux contrats RBF et aux activités de renforcement des capacités. Ces efforts ont professionnalisé les institutions, renforcé leur redevabilité et impliqué les communautés dans la prise de décision.

Malgré ces succès, l'impact d'ESPER est inégal, en particulier dans les régions récemment intégrées ou souffrant d'insécurité persistante. Des défis systémiques persistent, tels que l'instabilité transfrontalière, les inégalités de genre profondément enracinées et un financement insuffisant. Bien que les « matching grants » aient permis de répondre efficacement à certains risques locaux en matière de sécurité et d'autonomiser les communautés, leur durabilité reste incertaine en raison de mécanismes de suivi limités et d'un soutien financier insuffisant. Par ailleurs, la mise en œuvre retardée du Décret 44/22 et un engagement politique fluctuant ont également entravé les réformes à long terme.

C3. Le modèle RBF : Un outil efficace pour la performance, mais dont l'impact à long terme reste incertain

Le modèle RBF a renforcé la redevabilité et la professionnalisation des institutions, démontrant ainsi son efficacité dans l'Est de la RDC. En liant la performance à des incitations financières, ce modèle favorise une meilleure planification et une gestion transparente des priorités locales. Les parties prenantes reconnaissent les bénéfices durables des pratiques collaboratives encouragées par l'approche RBF, même en l'absence de financement futur.

Cependant, la durabilité du modèle RBF fait face à des défis significatifs. Sans un soutien continu des bailleurs et un financement national stable, les institutions risquent de revenir à des pratiques inefficaces, compromettant ainsi les progrès réalisés. Bien que le modèle RBF présente un potentiel pour une mise à l'échelle nationale, son expansion nécessite des mécanismes de suivi robustes et un engagement politique ferme pour prévenir les détournements de fonds et garantir une mise en œuvre efficace.

C4. La justice et les pratiques coutumières pour promouvoir la stabilisation

ESPER a contribué à réduire l'impunité et à promouvoir la stabilisation en intégrant les systèmes judiciaires dans des cadres plus larges de gouvernance sécuritaire. Des initiatives telles que les audiences foraines et la codification des pratiques coutumières ont facilité la résolution des litiges fonciers et successoraux, atténuant les risques d'instabilité à plus grande échelle. Ces efforts ont permis de s'attaquer aux principaux facteurs de violence et de renforcer la confiance de la population envers les institutions étatiques.

Cependant, ces efforts restent entravés par un sous-financement chronique, des interférences politiques et une fragmentation institutionnelle.

C5. La localisation stratégique et la gestion adaptative comme piliers d'efficacité

La localisation a été un élément clé du succès d'ESPER. En plaçant du personnel congolais dans des rôles de leadership et en collaborant avec des organisations locales, le programme a permis de réduire les coûts, d'améliorer l'acceptation des interventions et de renforcer la confiance parmi les parties prenantes. Une gestion adaptative, soutenue par la flexibilité des bailleurs, a permis à ESPER de répondre efficacement aux besoins et aux dynamiques sécuritaires changeants.

L'approche ascendante du programme a renforcé les structures locales, promu un renforcement des capacités durable et facilité un dialogue constructif avec les autorités nationales.

C6. Une stratégie de durabilité solide, mais des défis importants à surmonter

La stratégie de durabilité d'ESPER a permis d'établir des structures de gouvernance solides, notamment grâce à l'institutionnalisation des CLS-E et des PAS via le décret 44/22. Soutenues par un engagement politique de haut niveau, ces structures sont en bonne position pour garantir leur pérennité et leur extensibilité à long terme.

Cependant, la dépendance du programme à des financements externes représente un défi majeur pour sa durabilité. Un soutien constant des bailleurs et un financement national adéquat sont essentiels pour préserver les acquis réalisés et élargir les pratiques de gouvernance d'ESPER à une plus grande échelle.

Recommandations

Note : Les détails sur les acteurs responsables et le calendrier d'exécution (dans le cadre d'ESPER II et/ou à plus long terme) sont précisés dans la section des recommandations du rapport.

R1. Renforcer l'opérationnalisation du décret 44/22

1. Élaborer et adopter un budget réaliste pour la mise en œuvre du décret au niveau national.
2. Assurer une distribution efficace des fonds via des mécanismes de paiement transparents, en impliquant les CLS-E dans la gestion et le suivi des ressources.
3. Fournir un appui aux comités CLS-E pour le processus de budgétisation et la mise en œuvre des recommandations issues des CLS-E.
4. Sensibiliser davantage aux dispositions du décret 44/22 et de ses mesures d'accompagnement.
5. Numériser les processus des CLS-E et des PAS pour documenter les décisions et faciliter les interactions entre les parties prenantes.
6. Renforcer les compétences numériques des parties prenantes pour assurer l'adoption effective de ces plateformes.

R2. Renforcer les capacités financières locales pour soutenir l'autonomie des CLS-E

1. Mobiliser les revenus locaux pour financer les activités des CLS-E.
2. Établir des cadres réglementaires pour une collecte de revenus efficace et transparente.
3. Renforcer la capacité des autorités locales à gérer les finances de manière participative.
4. Promouvoir des mécanismes de supervision financière pour garantir une gestion rigoureuse et responsable.

R3. Aligner les PLD sur les priorités des CLS-E

1. Intégrer les défis sécuritaires identifiés par les CLS-E dans les PLD.
2. Impliquer les parties prenantes locales dans la priorisation des actions des PLD.

3. Promouvoir un financement conjoint pour les initiatives de sécurité et de développement.

R4. Intégrer la justice et les pratiques coutumières dans les efforts de stabilisation

1. Renforcer l'accès à la justice dans les zones marginalisées.
2. Documenter et institutionnaliser les pratiques coutumières.
3. Renforcer la capacité des institutions judiciaires à collaborer avec les systèmes coutumiers.
4. Plaider pour l'intégration de la justice et des pratiques coutumières dans les programmes de stabilisation.

R5. Renforcer le modèle RBF pour une performance institutionnelle élargie

1. Sensibiliser les parties prenantes au modèle RBF.
2. Institutionnaliser le modèle RBF dans les cadres de gouvernance.
3. Continuer à renforcer les capacités institutionnelles pour la mise en œuvre du modèle RBF.
4. Assurer un financement durable pour le modèle RBF.

R6. Intensifier la coordination et l'engagement entre les bailleurs, les ONGs et les autorités pour renforcer l'appropriation gouvernementale de la gouvernance sécuritaire inclusive

1. Assurer une représentation régulière de la gouvernance sécuritaire inclusive (ESPER II) dans les réunions de coordination Triple Nexus et Stabilisation.
2. Structurer les communautés de praticiens Triple Nexus et Stabilisation en tant que défenseurs et facilitateurs d'une gouvernance sécuritaire inclusive et durable.
3. Favoriser un dialogue politique régulier avec les autorités congolaises et centraliser les efforts de coordination.

1. Introduction and scope of the evaluation

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), particularly its eastern provinces, faces persistent security and governance challenges deeply rooted in its colonial past, regional wars, and prolonged political instability. This context is further exacerbated by land disputes, customary power struggles, the activities of armed groups, and harassment by local authorities, including police, military, judiciary, and administrative services.

In response, the **ESPER** (Ensemble pour la Sécurité et la Paix à l'Est de la RDC, translated in English as *Enhancing Security and Participatory Governance in Eastern DRC*) project was launched in August 2020 with the objectives of improving security and justice governance, fostering accountability, strengthening social cohesion, and contributing to stabilization. Funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN) with a budget of €20 million, ESPER has been implemented over four years by a consortium led by VNG International in partnership with Cordaid. The programme focuses on selected territories in South Kivu, North Kivu, and Ituri provinces.

Building on the achievements of its predecessor, CISPE, ESPER employs an integrated approach to address security challenges by strengthening existing local security governance mechanisms and fostering collaboration between citizens and government actors at multiple levels. The programme leverages governance structures such as the Extended Local Security Committee (CLS-E) to strengthen cooperation between authorities and communities. Key strategies include conducting inclusive security diagnostics to identify local priorities, developing and regularly updating *Plans d'Action de Sécurité* (PAS), capacity building for both state and non-state actors, Results-Based Financing (RBF) to incentivize improved security service delivery, various approaches to strengthen community engagement, and advocacy efforts to institutionalize participatory governance at the provincial and national level.

The final evaluation of ESPER aims to assess the programme's overall effectiveness, impact, and sustainability (Figure 1) while providing actionable recommendations for future programming. Guided by the OECD DAC criteria—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability—the evaluation examines ESPER's achievements in its intervention zones and its influence on national-level policy and governance frameworks. Using a primarily qualitative methodology, the evaluation incorporates interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions with communities, and an extensive desk review.

Figure 1 - Evaluation objectives and scope

Objectives	Scope		Users
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify ESPER's contribution to stability in target intervention areas Assess the conflict sensitivity, adaptiveness to volatile political contexts, and the inclusivity and ownership of key actors Review the logic and quality of the programme implementation Evaluate the sustainability of local security governance activities and local security committee member participation Identify collaboration and knowledge sharing between ESPER and surrounding initiatives and projects Evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the results-based financing component 	Spatial	Eastern DRC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ituri (Aru, Irumu, Djugu, Mahagi) North Kivu (Nyiragongo, Masisi, Rutshuru, Karisimbi Commune) South Kivu (Kalehe, Uvira, City of Uvira) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESPER management Consortium members (VNG Intl and Cordaid) EKN Other programme implementors / donors Provincial governor's offices, regulators and ministries Local security committees Legal clinics and justice representatives Community representatives
	Temporal	2020 – 2024	
	Specific thematic focus	Local Governance, Stabilization and Peacebuilding , enhancing security and judicial services, and capacity building for security challenges using a participatory approach with advocacy and results-based financing.	
Evaluation Framework			
OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability)			

2. Context and description of the ESPER programme

2.1. Context

The DRC, particularly the eastern provinces, has faced nearly three decades of continuous armed conflict, rampant impunity, and competition for lucrative mineral resources. These dynamics have fuelled the creation of over 250 domestic armed groups and 14 foreign militias according to the National Coordinator of the PDDRCS¹, making it one of the most complex and protracted global crises. The conflict has seen widespread violations against children and women, including recruitment of child soldiers and sexual and gender-based violence, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian situation with internally displaced persons (IDP) numbers surpassing 7 million in 2024, which represents over 10% of the national population.

Efforts by the Congolese State, the United Nations (UN), and regional actors to achieve military or political solutions have largely failed to stem the violence. Despite offensives conducted by the Congolese armed forces (FARDC), with assistance from the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), violence in the region has escalated in recent years amidst a surge in attacks by groups like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Cooperative for the Development of Congo (CODECO) and the March 23 Movement (M23), among others.

In response to the unyielding conflict, the government declared a "state of siege" in May 2021 in North Kivu and Ituri, implementing military rule alongside forces from neighboring states such as Uganda, the East African Community, and the Southern Africa Development Community. Initially intended as a temporary measure lasting 3 to 6 months, the state of siege has since extended into its third year with limited effectiveness. The ongoing military rule has not stabilized the region, failing to progress through the intended counter-insurgency phases of "clear, hold, and build," and has left North Kivu largely ungoverned but occupied and sporadically administered by M23. Ituri experiences sporadic control by state forces, with various groups controlling smaller regions due to persistent volatility. Public opposition has grown due to the siege's failure to restore peace, the suspension of civilian governance, and reports of harassment by authorities.

Since 2005, three national Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs have attempted to demobilize ex-combatants in the DRC, but all have struggled to achieve lasting success. Many ex-combatants were integrated into the FARDC (Armed Forces), the PNC (National Police), and the ANR (National Intelligence Agency) without adequate training or the necessary aptitude for security roles. This led to inflated service numbers which exacerbated internal disorder and poor performance by these institutions; this was met by public distrust and hostility towards the security sector. The demographic of unemployed male youth, which continued to swell despite the war, found that their subsistence needs were better met by joining armed groups, which offered not only a means of survival but also feelings of patriotism, purpose, and authority. DDR programs thus inadvertently acted as a 'revolving door,' initially providing temporary respite and remuneration for ex-combatants but ultimately leading many to return to armed groups once their integration efforts ceased, due to the lack of viable alternatives and the anonymity of village life.

Recognizing these failures, the current DDR program, the national Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Rehabilitation, and Stabilization Programme (P-DDRCS), launched in 2022, aims to address these issues with significant reforms. It features fully decentralized decision-making and management by the provinces themselves, expressly prohibits integration of ex-combatants into state security institutions, promotes transitional justice to address impunity, and focuses on community-based projects designed by the residents themselves. Although this program marks a significant reform attempt, it faces challenges in its pilot phase, struggling with operational execution and effective coordination of stabilization activities.

¹ <https://press.un.org/fr/2024/cs15845.doc.htm>

Effective stabilization in eastern DRC requires not only an end to conflict and restoration of national authority over rebel-controlled areas but also comprehensive reforms in security sector management, enhanced civilian oversight, and troop professionalization. While the Congolese state has welcomed international support for large-scale operations to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate combatants into civilian life as a peace-building strategy since 2004, it was slow to embrace security sector and justice reform (SSJR). This reluctance stemmed from a perception of SSJR as donor-driven interference in sovereign operations, contrasting with decades of 'mil-to-mil' assistance during the Cold War. This non-reformist approach, focused on training and equipping forces, often reinforced an opaque and oppressive security apparatus in exchange for political allegiance to Western allies, leaving little room for meaningful systemic change.

Following the inauguration of the 'Third Republic' and a new 2006 national Constitution, Congolese security authorities tentatively began to cooperate with donor programmes aiming to improve citizen safety by building more responsive, accountable security services. Early Reform of the Security Sector (SSR) programmes in the late 2000s primarily focused on the police and were also heavily reliant on train-and-equip strategies. These programmes provided vehicles, equipment and renovated infrastructure, but failed to achieve substantial change such as fostering a public service mindset and reducing violence and extortion against civilians.

To address deeper systemic issues, other approaches drew on principles from Public Financial Management programming to increase internal accountability and civilian oversight of the security sector. Historically, these sectors were accountable exclusively to the Executive branch, with limited transparency. Financial accountability became a key important aspect of external oversight, emphasizing the capacity of civilian institutions to carry out a sound budget process, expenditure tracking, anticorruption measures, fair and competitive procurement procedures, and proper auditing and accounting.

In the wake of the new 2006 national Constitution, the DRC undertook significant governance reforms to decentralize authority and enhance local governance. The 2008 law on Decentralization redefined the hierarchical relationship between Kinshasa and the provinces, aiming to increase participatory governance by making democratic processes more inclusive and accessible to local citizens and their representatives. The law differentiated two classes of territorial entities:

- **Decentralized Entities (ETD):** This new category includes cities, municipalities (communes), sectors, and chiefdoms. These entities have their own legal status and the autonomy to manage their human, economic, financial, and technical resources independently, although central government still handles staff salaries. This autonomy is designed to empower local administrations to better meet the needs of their communities, including public safety.
- **Deconcentrated (or devolved) Entities:** Comprising territorial administrations, neighborhoods (quartiers), groupements, and villages, these traditional entities lack independent legal powers and financial autonomy. Their decision-making remains closely tied to central authorities, which can limit their effectiveness and responsiveness to local needs.

The implementation of these decentralization reforms has led to increased competition and infighting between the newly created and previously existing administrative entities. This conflict often stems from blurred lines of oversight, reporting, and authority, compounded by weak service delivery. Despite the potential for improved local governance, these reforms have yet to fully demonstrate their intended impact and value in fostering inclusive democracy. The process remains a work in progress, indicating the need for continued refinement and support.

Particularly relevant to the security sector, community policing units have been decentralized, now reporting to the "chef d'unité" at the territory level, which enhances their accountability to local authorities. This structure contrasts sharply with the highly centralized command of the armed forces, which reports directly to Kinshasa. Moreover, certain decentralized entities such as chiefdoms have been vested with legal responsibilities to ensure public order and the safety of persons and property.

The Stabilization Coherence Fund (FCS) has emerged as a central mechanism for supporting stabilization efforts in Eastern DRC under the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS). Established in 2015, the FCS is managed by the Stabilization Support Unit (SSU), UNDP, and its government partners, with the Dutch Government as a key donor. In 2022, it managed a portfolio of \$20 million, financing projects across South Kivu, North Kivu, and Ituri. These projects were designed to address stabilization needs collaboratively identified with local and provincial actors.

Stabilization and peacebuilding have become integral to the Triple Nexus, which seeks to align humanitarian aid, development assistance, and peacebuilding initiatives. This approach has gained traction among donors and the Congolese government, emphasizing synergies between these efforts as conflict-affected areas begin to recover. With MONUSCO's anticipated withdrawal, the Triple Nexus framework has become a dominant consideration in donor planning and government discussions, underscoring the importance of integrated and complementary interventions.

The planned withdrawal of MONUSCO, however, poses significant challenges that may undermine these stabilization efforts. Despite its long-standing presence since 1999, MONUSCO has faced criticism for its inability to deliver lasting security solutions, leading to an agreement for a phased withdrawal beginning in 2024 starting with South Kivu, effective since June. At the same time, the DRC government recently requested for an extension of the MONUSCO mandate, signalling reluctance and creating confusion. Serious concerns persist over the government's ability to meet the minimum conditions required for MONUSCO's departure, which include reducing armed group threats, resolving inter-ethnic conflicts, effectively delivering the DDR programme, and conducting peaceful and inclusive elections within constitutional deadlines. These conditions highlight the complexity of transitioning security responsibilities to Congolese authorities, and likely explain government hesitation to lose MONUSCO troop presence on the ground.

This uncertainty is compounded by the Congolese military's limited capacity to address the security challenges that MONUSCO's withdrawal will create. Independent assessments conducted in 2023-2024 underscore the disparity in strength between armed groups and government forces, which undermines stability efforts. Moreover, the DDR programme's integration of ex-combatants responsible for serious crimes into the FARDC has perpetuated impunity and created additional risks to civilian safety. This situation not only weakens public trust in stabilization efforts but also raises serious concerns about the viability of the current security and governance strategies.

2.2. Description of the ESPER programme

ESPER is a four-year programme (September 1, 2020–December 31, 2024²) funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN) as part of its Great Lakes programme. Initially funded at €16 million, ESPER received an additional €4 million in January 2023. The Great Lakes programme covers the DRC, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda.

ESPER builds on the foundations laid by its predecessor, the CISPE (*Consortium for Integrated Stabilization and Peace in Eastern DRC*) programme (2015-2019). Implemented in Ituri and North Kivu by a consortium of organizations, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Cordaid, VNG International and PAX, CISPE established the groundwork for inclusive governance. It revitalized and clarified the framework of the extended local security committees (CLS-E), then dormant or not yet existing in many localities, and facilitated the development of local security plans (PAS) through a participatory diagnostic process involving state actors and citizens. Building on this progress, ESPER expanded the intervention to include two additional territories and the town of Uvira in South Kivu province, focusing on the implementation of PAS through the delivery of services, while also strengthening advocacy for higher-level support and decision-making.

The ESPER programme is guided by a primary objective: **“contribute to stabilisation through the promotion and improvement of security and judicial governance as well as social cohesion in the East of the**

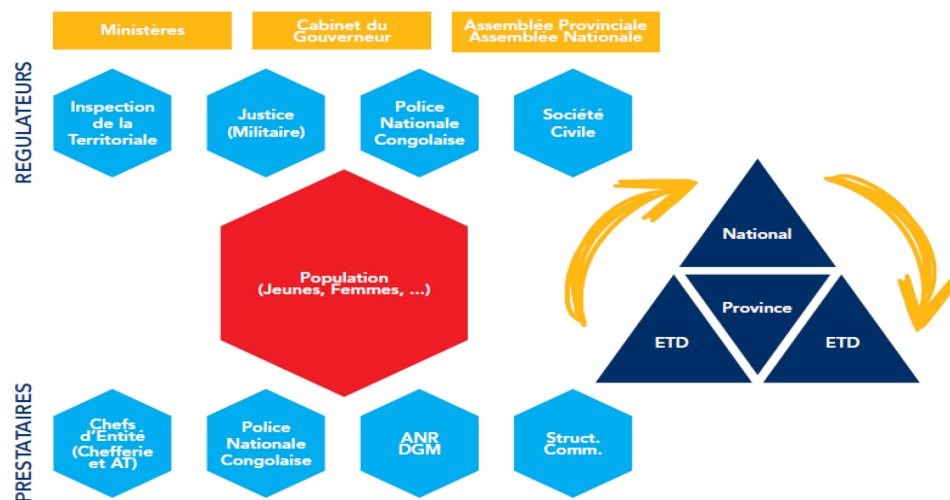
² Including a 6 months no-cost extension (ESPER Final Brochure)

Democratic Republic of Congo” (ESPER Proposal, 2020). To achieve this, it operates through three specific Outcome areas or “pathways of change” (Annex 1):

1. **Strengthened security governance:** Supporting inclusive planning and monitoring mechanisms for security and development.
2. **Effective and accessible security and justice services:** Supporting action on security priorities based on the needs of the population.
3. **Creation of an environment conducive to peace:** Influencing authorities at different levels to take action against security threats facing citizens.

ESPER collaborates directly with state authorities, civil administrators, and security services, by supporting and engaging with local security committees (CLS), which are existing state structures. As CLS primarily focuses on state security, ESPER specifically supports extended security committees (CLS-E), which emphasize inclusive governance and human security. CLS-E integrates civil society and community representatives, fostering participatory processes that align with the program’s broader objectives. The programme’s operational point of entry is the Territory, but Chiefdoms are also covered, as are some secondary towns such as Uvira. At this level, ESPER promotes the formation and strengthening of CLS-E, encouraging the active participation of community representatives to ensure local ownership and alignment with human security priorities. Beyond the territorial level, ESPER engages at the provincial and national levels by collaborating with hierarchical regulators of security and justice service providers such as the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Planning, the Governor’s offices, the Territorial Inspection , etc. ESPER operates through different stakeholders at different levels (ETD, province, national) to bring about desired results (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – ESPER stakeholders



Source : ESPER Final Brochure

Overall, ESPER uses five main strategies to achieve the three Outcomes listed above (ESPER proposal, 2020):

1. **Strengthening security governance:** Local authorities and communities identify the main security needs in their communities through inclusive and participatory security diagnostics. These needs are then listed in a PAS, which are regularly discussed and implemented by extended CLS-E. Recognizing that some issues exceed local capacity, ESPER also supports the development of operational plans at the provincial (POP, Provincial Operational Plan) and national (PON, National Operational Plan) levels, inspired by the PAS.
2. **Community engagement:** ESPER facilitates thematic, expertise-driven and occasion-specific gathering of community structures to ensure that the needs and priorities of those at the grassroots are heard. In

collaboration with these existing community structures and with local authorities, ESPER enables community involvement in the entire process of security governance, organizes community dialogues where issues of social cohesion and local security are addressed, including from a preventive perspective to mitigate potential conflicts and strengthen resilience. Some structures, notably legal clinics, contribute to the organization of civil mobile hearings where compromises can be reached between groups or individuals in conflict. Community structures also receive financial support (“matching grants”) for the implementation of community actions to address urgent security issues.

3. **Capacity Building** of actors and community organisations involved in the implementation. Capacity building efforts serve a dual purpose: preparing stakeholders for participation in the CLS-E and the conclusion of RBF agreements, while simultaneously supporting the effective functioning of the CLS-E. These efforts also address capacity needs identified during PAS implementation and throughout the RBF process. The approach balances skill enhancement with attitude transformation. For authorities and security actors in particular, capacity building extends beyond technical skills to fostering a political and behavioral willingness to embrace change, ensuring alignment with inclusive and participatory governance objectives. Central to this strategy is ESPER’s coaching approach, whereby state technicians provide content and accompaniment in line with their respective mandates. This method aims to localize and institutionalize skills transfer, embedding capacity-building efforts within existing institutional frameworks to ensure sustainability and ownership by state actors
4. **Results-based financing (RBF):** To effectively implement the actions of the PAS, ESPER sets up a results-based financing system. Based on the PAS, performance indicators are developed with members of the CLS-E, local and provincial authorities, territorial administration, security and justice, and contracts are concluded with various service providers (police, military justice, territorial administrators, civil society, etc.) based on a clear management plan and a work plan. National and Provincial level regulators are also contracted and supported to support, guide, monitor and evaluate the effective implementation of the indicators in qualitative and quantitative terms. Where performance is achieved, ESPER pays subsidies to service providers and to the regulator in proportion to the scale of results achieved. In this system, allocation amounts are differentiated between "performance bonuses", "operating costs" and "investments", which go toward achieving greater results in the next cycle.
5. **Lobbying & Advocacy (L&A):** Community structures and civil society receive training in L&A to help them articulate their demands and share these objectively and factually with specific authorities. This work occurs at local, provincial, and national levels, depending on the issue at hand. L&A serves the dual purpose of influencing specific decisions to resolve security problems and fostering broader political engagement with local security governance processes and priorities. At the provincial and national levels, ESPER seeks to formalize best practices, such as the adoption of the Decree No. 22/44 of December 6, 2022, which establishes the creation, organization, and functioning of Provincial and Local Security Committees (CLS and CLS-E) or the PON. Radio is also used as a means of publicly disseminating the different security plans and solutions.

ESPER is designed around a robust TOC that guides its interventions towards stabilization, security, and judicial governance in Eastern DRC. This TOC underpins the program’s strategic deployment of various components—each linked and phased to cumulatively build towards the overarching goal of social cohesion and improved security governance. Specifically, the program interweaves capacity building, results-based financing, community engagement, and advocacy to create a synergy that enhances both local and broader governance capacities. Each component of ESPER is not just a standalone intervention but is intricately connected to ensure that enhancements in one area support and amplify results in others. For instance, capacity building efforts are designed to improve the effectiveness of security committees (CLS-E), which in turn drive the successful implementation of local security plans (PAS). These plans are directly supported by results-based financing, ensuring that implementation milestones are met and rewarded, thereby sustaining motivation and improving performance across security and justice sectors.

ESPER was designed to address security challenges in conflict-affected areas of Eastern DRC through a phased and geographically targeted approach. The first two years of the programme focused on 7 territories and 2 cities: the Territories of Irumu and Mahagi for the province of Ituri; the Territories of Nyiragongo, Masisi, Rutshuru and the Commune of Karisimbi for North Kivu; the Territories of Kalehe, Uvira and Uvira-Ville for South Kivu (Figure 2). Unlike areas previously covered under CISPE, Kalehe, Uvira, and Uvira-Ville required an initial year of program implementation dedicated to mobilizing leverage, conducting diagnostics, and strengthening local capacities. This preparatory phase delayed the effective implementation of PAS and RBF contracts in these areas by one year compared to other territories in North Kivu and Ituri. In the third year, the territories of Aru and Djugu in Ituri were added to the program (Esper Annual Plan Y3). However, ESPER initially withdrew from these territories to align its activities with ESPAD and prioritize the strategic focus outlined by EKN, particularly given Aru's relative stability. Meanwhile, the M23 conquest of Masisi and Rutshuru in 2023 forced populations to flee to Goma and surrounding areas. ESPER adapted to this evolving context by shifting its focus to security governance and addressing specific challenges in the semi-urban setting of Goma. Decisions on this adaptation were made in close coordination with local and provincial authorities, emphasizing the unique needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and broader security concerns in the region. Although ESPER could no longer directly access Masisi and Rutshuru, it continued to support the security governance needs of displaced populations in Goma.

Figure 3 - ESPER implementation zone



Source: ESPER Proposal

3. Methodological approach and limitations

3.1. General Approach

The evaluation methodology employs a collaborative theory-based mixed-methods design. This methodological framework is grounded in the programme's existing Theory of Change (ToC) and guided by the Evaluation Questions (EQs) specified in ToR. To ensure clarity and relevance, the evaluation team has refined and reorganized the EQs in alignment with the six OECD-DAC evaluation criteria, as presented in Table 1. An Evaluation Matrix (EM) has been developed to link each EQ and its respective sub-questions to a set of indicators, data sources and data collection tools (Annex 2).

Table 1 – Evaluation Questions

Evaluation and Learning Questions
Criterion: Relevance
EQ 1. To what extent are ESPER activities relevant to achieving its objectives?
EQ 2. To what extent does ESPER account for the evolving needs and priorities of targeted communities and stakeholders?
Criterion: Coherence
EQ 3. To what extent is the project aligned with policies and plans of the national, provincial and local authorities?
EQ 4. To what extent was coherence sought and achieved with relevant projects in the Great Lakes Regional Programme?
EQ 5. To what extent was coherence sought and achieved with other relevant projects in the targeted area?
Criterion: Effectiveness
EQ 6. To what extent did the project achieve its outputs and outcomes?
EQ 7. To what extent was risk management, conflict sensitivity, do no harm and gender responsiveness adequate, and to what extent has the implementation of the project been adjusted based on regular re-assessments of conflict dynamics, impact assumptions and security risks?
Criterion: Efficiency
EQ8. How does the cost of interventions relate to achieved results and compare to other security, justice, and rule of law projects in the area?
Criterion: Impact
EQ9. To what extent has the project had positive impacts on security and justice governance and service delivery, as well as on social cohesion and stabilization in (and around) the targeted area?
EQ10. To what extent have the RBF and matching grants components contributed to the overall objective of the project? ³
EQ11. To what extent were the results of the first phase of the project (CISPE) sustained and reinforced under the ESPER programme, particularly in terms of long-lasting behavioural changes and institutional reform?
EQ12. What were the unintended (positive and negative) effects of the project?
Criterion: Sustainability
EQ13. To what extent are specific programme impacts sustainable over time?
EQ14. To what extent do relevant stakeholders demonstrate ownership and contribute to the sustainability of ESPER activities?

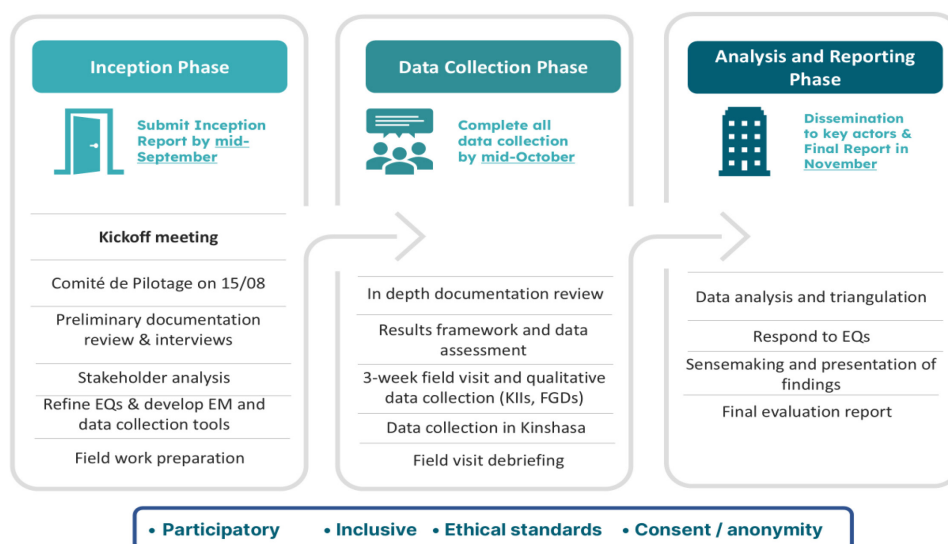
The evaluation was structured into three phases (Figure 4). The **Inception Phase** included key activities such as a kickoff meeting, stakeholder analysis, and the refinement of evaluation questions (EQs), data collection tools, and the evaluation matrix. Observing the final Comité de Pilotage meeting provided valuable insights into the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders collaborating with ESPER, as well as some perspectives on the program's key achievements and challenges, which informed the design and focus of the subsequent field visit.

³ This evaluation question specifically addresses the RBF and matching grants components due to a particular interest from the donor. It is important to remember that these elements are specific components of the program but are integrated with other strategies.

The **Data Collection Phase** involved an in-depth review of documentation, the assessment of the results framework, and a three-week field visit in South Kivu, Nord Kivu and Ituri. This visit included qualitative data collection through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), guided by generic interview protocols developed from the evaluation matrix (Annex 3). Additional data was gathered in Kinshasa to capture the perspectives of national-level stakeholders, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of ES-**PER's** multi-level implementation.

The **Analysis and Reporting Phase** focused on synthesizing and triangulating the data to respond to evaluation questions. Data was triangulated using MAXQDA software, which facilitated the systematic organization and analysis of qualitative data from diverse sources, including interviews, focus group discussions, and program documentation. Findings were translated into conclusions and actionable recommendations, which were validated in a session with EKN and ES-**PER**. This structured, iterative process ensured that the evaluation maintained participatory, inclusive, and ethical standards throughout, enhancing the reliability and utility of the findings.

Figure 4 - Evaluation Approach Overview



3.2. Data collection

Documentation review

The documentation review primarily relied on internal documents from ES-**PER**, including the programme Theory of Change (ToC), the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework, ES-**PER's** proposal, ES-**PER's** inception report, annual plans, annual and semi-annual reports, Comité de Pilotage and Comité de Suivi reports, territory letters of agreement, and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs).

External documentation has also been reviewed and analysed, including previous evaluations of ES-**PER** and CISPE, and other related initiatives.

A bibliography of internal and external reports collected during the inception phase can be seen in Annex 6.

Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholders selected for interviews and focus group discussions during field visits and remote consultations were identified through a comprehensive stakeholder mapping process. These stakeholders were categorized into the following sub-groups:

- **The donor:** The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

- **The ESPER project implementation team:** Including the lead consortium member, VNG International, and Cordaid.
- **State actors and security service providers:** Encompassing national representatives, provincial, territorial, and local authorities, as well as regulatory bodies such as the police, military justice, and the General Inspectorate of Territorial Administration (IGTER).
- **Non-state actors:** Comprising national, provincial, and local civil society organizations (CSOs) and community representatives.
- **Other stakeholders:** Primarily those involved in related programmes, such as MONUSCO and other projects within the Great Lakes programme.

Field visit

The field visit was a critical component of the evaluation process, designed to collect rich, context-specific data through tailored interviews and discussions with a wide range of stakeholders. To ensure a comprehensive and structured approach, the evaluation team developed a series of Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides. These tools were customized for each stakeholder group to capture diverse perspectives and insights into the ESPER programme's implementation and impact.

The principles of outcome harvesting were applied to identify key changes observed in governance, security, and community engagement during ESPER's implementation, with respondents encouraged to describe tangible outcomes and the pathways leading to these changes. In parallel, contribution analysis informed the data collection approach by focusing on evidence to validate ESPER's theory of change and exploring causal pathways to assess the program's contributions to observed outcomes. These two methods were not fully implemented as comprehensive methodologies but rather served as guiding principles to shape the evaluation framework.

Data collection was conducted in collaboration with [RISD](#), our Congolese partner, across all three target provinces, with site selection guided by security and accessibility criteria. The selected locations included

- **South Kivu:** Kalehe, Bukavu, Luvungi, and Uvira city.
- **North Kivu:** Nyiragongo, Goma, with additional inputs from Rutshuru and Masisi through displaced local authorities and CSOs in Goma
- **Ituri:** Aru, Bunia, and Mahagi

In addition to provincial-level visits, national-level consultations were held in Kinshasa. These meetings aimed to complement field findings and provide a broader perspective on the programme's sustainability, alignment with political priorities, and overall governance dynamics. Table 2 outlines the field visit agenda.

Table 2 - Field visit agenda

Dates	Location	Activities
29/09/2024	Bukavu	Briefing
30/09/2024 – 04/10/2024	South Kivu (Bukavu, Kalehe, Luvungi, Sange, Uvira)	Data collection (KII & FGD)
04/05/2024 – 10/10/2024	Nord Kivu (Goma, Nyiragongo, Masisi, Rutshuru)	Data collection (KII & FGD)
11/10/2024 – 18/10/2024	Ituri (Bunia, Aru, Mahagi)	Data collection (KII & FGD)
24/10/2024	Online	Debriefing
11/11/2024 – 15/11/2024	Kinshasa	Data collection (KII & FGD)

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for dynamic discussions and fostering spontaneous insights while ensuring that all key topics were covered. On average, each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. ESPER's implementation team played a pivotal role in coordinating the four-week field visit, assisting with meeting arrangements, and facilitating introductions to key stakeholders.

In total, the evaluation team engaged with around 300 stakeholders across the three provinces, alongside 24 participants in Kinshasa (Table 3), including around 40 women in total. This extensive

stakeholder engagement - at the local, territorial, provincial and national levels - ensured a robust data collection process, enabling the triangulation of findings and the generation of actionable insights for the evaluation. Most stakeholders were generally very eager to participate in discussions and expressed positive views about the ESPER program.

Table 3 – Number of participants met

Level of Authorities	South Kivu	Nord Kivu	Ituri	Kinshasa	Total
Governorates, Ministries, IGTER	11	5	11	8	35
Local Authorities (Territorial Administrations, Municipalities, Chiefdoms, CLS Members)	16	16	11	0	43
Police	17	13	23	4	57
Justice	17	8	5	7	37
CSOs & Community Structures	50	40	10	4	104
Others (Embassy, ESPER staff members, MONUSCO, Benevolencia, Legal Clinics, other NGOs...)	13	18	12	1	44
Total	124	100	72	24	320

3.3. Key limitations

The evaluation faced several challenges that influenced the scope and depth of data collection and analysis:

- Inaccessibility of certain territories:** Due to security and logistical constraints, the evaluation team could not visit all territories covered by ESPER in North Kivu and Ituri. To partly address this gap, the team conducted interviews with displaced individuals and stakeholders from Masisi and Rutshuru who are now based in Goma, ensuring that their perspectives were represented in the evaluation.
- Focus on qualitative data:** While qualitative methods provided valuable insights into the programme's processes and outcomes, the absence of additional robust quantitative data from the evaluation itself limited the ability to measure ESPER's impact with precision. However, it is important to highlight that ESPER maintained a comprehensive database and rigorous data collection system, as reflected in its annual reports and performance indicators. This evaluation complemented and triangulated these quantitative datasets by confirming trends, exploring underlying mechanisms, and identifying contextual factors through qualitative methods. The evaluation's primary objective was to understand what worked well, what worked less effectively, and to generate actionable recommendations for ESPER II. To achieve this, the team conducted extensive stakeholder consultations, engaging with a representative sample of over 300 individuals. This approach ensured that findings were well-grounded in both qualitative perspectives and existing quantitative evidence.
- Complex intervention landscape:** The presence of numerous overlapping interventions in eastern DRC made it challenging to isolate ESPER's contributions to observed changes. To navigate this complexity, the evaluation adopted a contribution analysis approach. This methodology, combined with a detailed ToC and a thorough review of programme documentation, helped attribute observed outcomes to ESPER with greater confidence.
- Positivity bias in responses:** Some stakeholders may be concerned that negative feedback might jeopardize the continuation of the project, potentially leading to overly positive responses. This bias was particularly evident in Kinshasa, where stakeholders often emphasized their engagement and the sustainability of project initiatives, even when the ground realities suggested otherwise. The evaluation team remained mindful of these dynamics, triangulating data from multiple sources to mitigate the effects of bias and ensure balanced findings.

These limitations highlight the challenges inherent in evaluating complex, multi-stakeholder programmes in fragile and dynamic contexts. Despite these constraints, the evaluation team employed adaptive strategies to collect diverse, credible data and provide actionable insights for future programme iterations.

4. Presentation of the findings

4.1. Relevance

EQ1. To what extent are ESPER activities relevant to achieving its objectives?

ESPER activities are relevant to the programme's overarching objectives of advancing security governance and community stabilization. Guided by a comprehensive ToC, the programme's design integrates interconnected strategies to address the diverse needs of communities and security governance structures. Drawing from the successes of the CISPE programme and adapting to evolving community priorities, the ToC maps clear causal links between ESPER's interventions and their intended outcomes. Each ESPER component supports a cohesive framework that engages relevant stakeholders, fostering accountability, inclusiveness, and local ownership. Through the CLS-E meetings, this integrated approach is also designed to adapt to the region's volatile operational landscape, ensuring that interventions remain responsive and impactful in strengthening both institutional and community resilience.

ESPER activities demonstrate clear alignment with programme objectives as outlined in the ToC (Annex 1), which maps causal links between interventions and their intended outcomes. Each component within ESPER is designed to contribute to broader goals of security governance and community stabilization, forming an integrated approach that includes all relevant stakeholders to promote accountability, inclusiveness, and effective governance. Additionally, the ToC reflects a sequential logic in which CLS-E meetings inform PAS development, ensuring that community input directly shapes security priorities and interventions.

Evidence from M&E reports and other programme documents confirms the causal link between activities and intended outcomes. Detailed reports and ESPER's comprehensive M&E framework, which incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data, provide robust evidence for these causalities within the ToC. Quantitative data collection for the ESPER results framework was conducted by an external consultancy bureau, ensuring greater independence following an audit recommendation. To complement the quantitative data, the M&E team prioritized capturing qualitative changes after three years of programme implementation by employing outcome harvesting. This methodological approach emphasized key elements, such as the observability and significance of changes and ESPER's contribution to them, further validating the alignment between programme activities and objectives.

As outlined in ESPER's annual reports and plans, the programme combines structured frameworks and collaborative mechanisms to align security governance with community needs. The **CLS-E meetings** are essential in building trust, accountability, and public awareness by fostering collaboration between authorities and communities on security issues. Through these meetings, security priorities are shaped directly by community input, creating a participatory model that strengthens programme coherence. The process of conducting security diagnostics, which then lead to the development and validation of **PAS**, further clarifies security objectives and engages authorities at all levels to address the diverse needs of the population and to align actions with community-focused goals. As a respondent observed:

"At present, the public is aware of its role in safety (by reporting cases of insecurity). Security is not just a matter for politicians, but for the whole community. ESPER has shown us the importance of the community approach."

Through targeted coaching and RBF incentives linked to PAS objectives, ESPER enhances the skills of local authorities and motivates them to meet their responsibilities. According to a member of another INGO operating in the area:

“VNGI is innovative and effective in working hand in hand with provincial and territorial authorities to compel authorities to do something and strengthen community awareness of accountability.”

Inspection visits by authorities and security and justice services supplement this support by assessing progress and ensuring that capacity-building efforts stay aligned with key programme objectives. **Legal clinics and mobile hearings** create accessible paths to justice, strengthening trust in security institutions and reducing perceptions of impunity.

More specifically, the RBF approach is highly relevant to addressing financial constraints at the provincial and local levels and creates a structured incentive to reduce reliance on informal income sources, potentially leading to a decrease in exploitative practices like extortion and harassment. The RBF approach, combined with coaching and technical accompaniment, is seen by programme participants and beneficiaries as one of the few effective methods for encouraging security services and authorities to fulfil their duties, promoting accountability and professionalism within security and justice institutions. While participants report noticeable improvements in professional conduct, ongoing financial incentives are viewed by many within the sector as critical for sustaining these behavioral changes, raising questions about long-term sustainability (see Sections 4.5 and 4.6).

ESPER’s multi-faceted approach empowers communities to recognize their role in security solutions, fostering a sense of public ownership and collective responsibility. Matching grants, by funding community-led projects such as infrastructure improvements and youth initiatives, are tailored to address specific, localized security needs identified through the CLS-E and provide a direct mechanism for reducing insecurity drivers while empowering citizens to actively contribute to their own security. **L&A** activities facilitate engagement at all governance levels through CSOs and community structures, supporting citizens and authorities alike in reinforcing mutual accountability. **Media initiatives** complement these efforts by educating citizens on their rights and responsibilities, thereby increasing public engagement and strengthening accountability mechanisms. These activities also educate CSOs and the public on their rights and legitimate expectations from state service providers, helping identify unacceptable behaviors such as extortion, bribes, and harassment.

Lobbying and advocacy efforts have also been instrumental in aligning ESPER’s activities with broader governance reforms and national security frameworks. A notable achievement is the development and signature of *Décret n° 22/44 du 6 décembre 2022*, which formalized the creation, organization, and functioning of Provincial and Local Security Committees. This decree institutionalizes participatory security governance and extends ESPER’s impact beyond its immediate zones of intervention, ensuring standardized approaches to security governance across all DRC territories. By embedding participatory governance into formal structures, ESPER enhances both the relevance and sustainability of its interventions within the broader national reform agenda.

ESPER’s activities and objectives are relevant to the complex and volatile operational landscape, characterized by political and social instability, weak institutional capacity and ongoing security challenges in North Kivu and Ituri. The programme’s focus on governance structures like CLS-E, complemented by RBF contracts, is particularly relevant in addressing institutional deficiencies and leadership gaps. Regular CLS-E meetings allow the programme to adapt priorities to evolving community challenges, including shifts in security needs. Feedback from community satisfaction surveys further enhances responsiveness, allowing the programme to address security service gaps identified by the population. The RBF and coaching strategies sustain performance continuity despite frequent personnel changes, though high turnover somewhat limits the long-term impact of the coaching on capacity-building. Matching grants, mobile hearings, and community support mechanisms address specific local needs like conflict mediation and community security priorities, enhancing ESPER’s relevance across intervention areas.

The consortium's strong contextual understanding, rooted in local knowledge and experience, further reinforces ESPER's adaptability to local needs and priorities. This adaptability is largely driven by the staff's deep familiarity with the local context, enabling them to approach institutions and stakeholders effectively, from the local level up to the national level. ESPER operationalizes localization by working within the existing mandates of institutions and relying on established structures such as the CLS-E. This approach ensures alignment with institutional frameworks while fostering trust and collaboration with local actors.

Challenges such as budget constraints and security volatility restrict full achievement of objectives in certain regions. For example, rising insecurity led to the cancellation of matching grants in parts of North Kivu, disappointing communities who hoped these funds might be redirected toward security measures in displacement camps. **Nevertheless, ESPER's adaptive design is reflected in programme refinements that address emerging needs, based on robust, frequently updated risk assessments.** Examples include the revision of the PAS in North Kivu and Ituri through mini-diagnostics to better respond to ongoing conflicts and the phased MONUSCO withdrawal. In Goma, ESPER played a key role in developing a security action plan for the Karisimbi commune, addressing specific security needs arising from displacement due to M23 advances. The advocacy component has evolved to tackle budget mobilization challenges critical for PAS implementation, ensuring attention and resources for key security and justice issues. Such adjustments highlight ESPER's commitment to flexibility and responsiveness, even in the face of significant operational challenges.

EQ2. To what extent does ESPER account for the evolving needs and priorities of targeted communities and stakeholders?

ESPER demonstrates a strong ability to account for the evolving needs and priorities of targeted communities and stakeholders, as confirmed by positive feedback from beneficiaries and authorities. By integrating participatory mechanisms and structured feedback loops, the programme remains adaptable to diverse contexts and challenges in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Through prioritizing activities that yield realistic, high-impact outcomes, ESPER strategically navigates trade-offs essential to achieving its objectives in challenging operational environments. This adaptability ensures ESPER's activities stay relevant while addressing both immediate and long-term priorities.

Almost all participants viewed ESPER's activities as aligned with their priorities, particularly its focus on security governance, justice access, and conflict resolution. Matching grants, which fund community-initiated projects like infrastructure improvements and youth-led initiatives, have been well-received by CSOs and community structures, though some community feedback indicated a desire for greater funding to address larger-scale issues. The L&A component has also been widely appreciated for addressing community-specific concerns and strengthening the relationship between authorities and CSOs. Authorities and security and justice service providers have valued the coaching and RBF strategies, viewing these as essential for increased service professionalization and community trust-building. They also reported that ESPER's regular technical accompaniment was a key advantage of the program, improving their operational capabilities and enabling a more responsive approach to local needs. One member of a community structure network highlighted that:

"This project truly addresses the needs of the community; it empowers us to identify and tackle the real issues."

By integrating community and CSO input from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, ESPER has created a participatory framework that promotes ownership and accountability at all governance levels. The programme has engaged a diverse range of stakeholders across various levels and conflict-affected groups, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), women and ethnic minorities. This inclusive participation is embedded in ESPER's approach through mechanisms like CLS-E meetings, which aims to ensure that participants can express their views and contribute to recommendations. However, meaningful

participation does not always translate into inclusive decision-making or the full integration of diverse perspectives into policy and programme outcomes. As noted in the 2022 Annual Report, “gender-equal participation remains a point of attention,” indicating the need for continued efforts to address disparities in representation and influence (more information in EQ11).

In collecting and integrating feedback, ESPER has developed an adaptive approach that ensures activities remain relevant across diverse contexts in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Feedback mechanisms, including community dialogues, CLS-E meetings, and satisfaction surveys, have been instrumental in refining programme activities. For instance, these mechanisms informed the refinement of RBF indicators and the creation of localized security plans. Through this structured feedback loop, ESPER is able to capture evolving community needs and priorities, allowing the programme to respond flexibly and to maintain alignment with its ToC.

ESPER’s implementation is tailored to the specific challenges and priorities of each region, balancing the needs of different communities while navigating trade-offs. In North Kivu and Ituri, ESPER’s focus has been on addressing security threats from armed groups and enhancing governance under the challenging conditions of an ongoing state of siege. In contrast, South Kivu has seen more emphasis on resolving community conflicts over land and local governance, as these are primary concerns for stability in the area.

However, strategic compromises have been necessary, such as allocating more resources to RBF and activities in Goma, while limiting matching grants in high-risk areas in North Kivu and Ituri due to operational security constraints. While these adjustments were communicated to local and provincial authorities, some CSOs and communities expressed concerns over insufficient communication about such trade-offs, particularly regarding reduced matching grants in North Kivu.

4.2. Coherence

EQ3. To what extent is the project aligned with policies and plans of the national, provincial and local authorities?

The ESPER programme aligns strongly with the Congolese government’s stabilization priorities and broader security governance frameworks. It complements the PDDRCS and aligns with the ISSSS, as did its predecessor CISPE. ESPER has introduced and strengthened an innovative participatory, bottom-up approach to security governance (“inclusive security governance”), which integrates two parallel trends of development programming—SSR and good governance. This approach fosters direct collaboration among security institutions, civilian and customary authorities, and local communities to address security concerns through increased accountability and responsiveness of state security services. However, a missed opportunity lies in the lack of integration between CLS & PAS and local development plans, which could address chronic underdevelopment—a significant driver of insecurity and youth enrolment in armed groups.

Since December 2019, the National Strategic Development Plan (PNSD) 2019–2023 has guided DR Congo’s development efforts. Among its five pillars, the second pillar—Strengthening good governance, restoration of state authority, and consolidation of peace⁴—directly aligning with ESPER’s objectives. This pillar aims to protect national territory and secure the population and its property, including through completion of SSR. This reform emphasizes the principles of Prevention, Proximity, Partnership (3P) and Accountability, Respect for human rights, and Problem-solving (3R), envisioning major performance enhancements in security management and service delivery. ESPER’s strategy and goals are closely aligned with these national reforms.

⁴ The other pillars are: Capitalization of human capital, social and cultural development; (iii) Consolidation of economic growth, diversification and transformation of the economy; (iv) Land use planning, reconstruction and modernization of infrastructure; and (v) Protection of the environment, fight against climate change, sustainable and balanced development, and also takes into account the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The December 2022 Decree 22/44 exemplifies the alignment between national reforms and ESPER's work. This Decree formally recognizes the structure and function of Provincial and Local Security Committees (CLS-E), translating PNSD principles into concrete practices for public safety and citizen security. It institutionalizes local governance, participation, accountability, and problem-solving as central tenets of security governance.

ESPER contributed significantly to the development of the decree and has since supported its implementation by engaging at the national level with relevant authorities and civil society to secure adequate national financing and finalize the 'mesures d'accompagnement'. These guidelines detail how to operationalize innovations introduced by the decree, including citizen participation, security action planning, budgeting, and performance evaluation. Once published in the Journal Officiel, these measures are expected to facilitate budget allocations for local security governance and enable financial disbursement to the provinces.

At the operational level, ESPER has adapted its approach to respond to evolving challenges. In total, 175 facilitators from national, provincial and local institutions were involved in research, mapping and lobby strategy development. ESPER collaborates directly with Congolese military authorities, who have run the provincial governments of North Kivu and Ituri under the state of siege since May 2021. In South Kivu, the program initially worked closely with the provincial government until mid-2024, when a new administration was installed. Despite the regime change, ESPER quickly established engagement with the new leadership by leveraging its contextual knowledge and existing relationships with local institutions. The programme also adapted to external challenges, such as the advance of M23, which led to the loss of Masisi and Rutshuru territories. In response, ESPER shifted its focus to addressing insecurity in Goma city, particularly in IDP camps, while simultaneously prioritizing national-level objectives, including securing funding for the CLS decree and developing an exit strategy for sustainability. In the end, 8 laws and policies (decrees, orders, decisions) related to security issues were identified in a participatory manner and were developed and disseminated over the 4 years.

ESPER's approach diverges from past and present DDR programmes by prioritizing justice over impunity. While the current DDR programme (PDDRCS) aims to incorporate communities and adopts a stabilization lens, it does not address injustices or criminal history of combatants departing armed groups. Like all previous DDR programmes, the current version is perceived by the public as rewarding perpetrators of armed violence and war crimes against civilians. ESPER, through some of its matching grants, includes ex-combatants in order to complement DDR's limited coverage, operational torpor, and few resources. Through its justice component, ESPER helps Military Justice Authorities fight impunity through trial justice (legal sanction for crimes committed by combatants), as well as infractions by FARDC soldiers. In this way it is restoring Rule of Law to eastern conflict zones, contrary to DDR which is seen to favour impunity for crimes against civilians and undermine the Rule of Law.

ESPER challenges the dysfunctional status quo by fostering governance practices that reward accountability and collaboration. As a governance reform programme, ESPER encourages lasting behavior change among officials and institutions, with some initial signs of progress observed during its implementation. For example, at the end of the programme, 31% of beneficiaries reported a reduction in incidents of corruption, and impunity of actors in different institutions in support of PAS, according to the survey report year 4. Notably, authorities and security actors involved in CLS-E processes reportedly showed greater willingness to engage with community representatives and address their priorities. Similarly, the introduction of RBF agreements, combined with coaching and technical accompaniment, was noted to encourage more structured and transparent planning practices within certain institutions. These behavioral shifts, while preliminary, suggest progress toward a governance culture that aligns with inclusive and participatory principles. If sustained, these improvements could set new policy standards, enhancing trust and collaboration between populations and security services. A Provincial Police Commissioner observed:

“Despite the ongoing armed conflict in the province, there is a noticeable difference in the police force here compared to others. Through the ESPER project, the police have shown enhanced professionalism and commitment. This initiative has uniquely motivated the police, fostering a level of collaboration with the local population that surpasses what we’ve seen even with military presence.”

ESPER did not integrate CLS & PAS initiatives with local development plans, which is crucial since underdevelopment significantly drives youth criminality and armed group recruitment. The main challenges were ESPER's limited resources and the extensive, costly process that local administrative territories (ETDs) face in creating these plans. In areas like South Kivu where such plans exist, other programs, including TRIDE, actively promote this integration.

EQ4. To what extent was coherence sought and achieved with relevant projects in the Great Lakes Regional Programme?

ESPER exhibits informal coherence with other EKN-funded Great Lakes programmes within DRC, but cross-border collaboration is limited because of ESPER's direct operations with the Congolese security sector and the political sensitivities this entails. While ESPER shares objectives and methodologies with other Dutch-funded programmes, particularly in social cohesion and peacebuilding, coordination and collaboration occur primarily within Eastern DRC and are informal. Cross-border coherence, except for the Media for Dialogue (M4D) initiative, is hindered by political sensitivities, particularly regarding regional conflicts over illegal resource extraction. ESPER's localization efforts align with governance reforms in other sectors, such as artisanal mining, showing potential for broader institutional coherence. However, systematic coordination with non-EKN programmes addressing similar issues is absent, representing an untapped opportunity for synergy. Stakeholders have called for a donor-led approach to enhance programme collaboration and communication, especially in politically or culturally sensitive areas.

ESPER exhibits informal coherence with other Dutch-funded Great Lakes programmes within the country, but cross-border collaboration is unrealistic given ESPER's direct relationship with Congo's security institutions. Apart from the Media for Dialogue (M4D) project implemented by La Benevolencia, no direct cross-border collaboration or coordination exists between ESPER and other Great Lakes programmes. Political sensitivities, particularly over Rwandan and Ugandan involvement in illegal resource extraction and ongoing conflict, make collaboration with programmes in these countries challenging.

Complementarity with other EKN-funded Great Lakes programmes in DRC is evident in shared goals and methodologies. ESPER shares objectives with other Dutch-funded programmes, such as TRIDE, ESPASK, ESPAD, and JUST FUTURE, focusing on social cohesion and peacebuilding. These programmes adopt similar methodologies, such as fostering collaboration between communities and authorities to address citizen-raised concerns regarding security, justice, and development. Some of these programmes also directly involve ESPER consortium members (VNG International and Cordaid).

ESPER's localization efforts enhance coherence with governance reforms in other sectors. Localization, defined as embedding practices that reduce reliance on external support, is a shared priority among Dutch-funded programmes. ESPER's participatory model of inclusive security governance is influencing other governance reforms, including artisanal mining initiatives like International Alert's 'Madini kwa Amani na Maendeleo' (Minerals for Peace and Development). Informal coordination and information sharing reportedly occur between these programmes.

Coherence with non-EKN-funded programmes remains informal, representing untapped potential for synergy. ESPER interacts informally with programmes by Search for Common Ground, Alert International,

and Living and Peace Institute, which address overlapping issues of peace, social cohesion, and accountability. Despite likely opportunities for shared learning and collaboration, no systematic coordination has been observed. For instance, while both ESPER and Life and Peace Institute work with the same security institutions, they lack formal coordination that could yield mutual benefits.

Stakeholders call for enhanced donor-led coordination to foster synergy and shared learning. La Bevolencija and others have highlighted the need for the Dutch Embassy to facilitate exchanges and discussions among EKN-funded programmes. Such a donor-led approach could promote harmonized messaging and communication strategies, particularly around politically or culturally sensitive issues, and strengthen programme impacts across the Great Lakes region.

EQ5. To what extent was coherence sought and achieved with other relevant projects in the targeted area?

ESPER demonstrates informal but consistent coordination with other security and justice programmes in the targeted areas, although opportunities for deeper engagement and collaboration remain underutilized. While ESPER engages with programmes like International Alert, MONUSCO Social Affairs, and IOM DDR, its participation in UN-led stabilization and Nexus coordination mechanisms is limited to basic information sharing. The programme successfully achieved synergies with ESPASK and engaged in joint lobbying efforts with the Dutch Embassy to secure the Decree, but more systematic collaboration with other programmes under frameworks like the FCS could enhance its impact. In the absence of dedicated SSR coordination platforms and in the interest of streamlining/efficiency, existing platforms such as the SCF already include donors, government agencies and implementing partners that could be influenced by ESPER's multi-pronged approach and impact. Finally, partnerships with specialized national NGOs, such as APC, SOS IJM, CREDDHO, and Justice Plus have strengthened local capacity and service delivery, particularly through mobile legal clinics and conflict mediation efforts. Still, closer analysis of potential collaboration opportunities with UNDP or EU initiatives to support community policing could multiply impact, avoid duplication, and improve security governance outcomes.

Regular actor mapping and informal coordination underpin ESPER's efforts in the targeted areas. ESPER regularly maps key actors in its intervention zones, prioritizing external programmes involving consortium members like VNG International and Cordaid. Coordination with other EKN-funded programmes, such as International Alert and Search for Common Ground (SFCG), is informal despite shared objectives and methodologies focusing on security governance and citizen participation. While UNDP and EU programmes addressing security governance and SSR in collaboration with the PNC operate in the same provinces, ESPER does not actively engage with them, potentially missing opportunities to triangulate findings and address institutional capacity gaps.

Engagement with the Stabilization Coherence Fund (FCS) is evident among ESPER's managing consortium members, but less direct for ESPER itself. Established in 2015 to support the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy for Eastern DRC (ISSSS), the FCS is managed by the Stabilization Support Unit (SSU), UNDP, and its government partners, with the Dutch Government as a key donor. In 2022, the FCS managed 11 projects worth \$20 million across South Kivu, North Kivu, and Ituri, addressing stabilization objectives developed in collaboration with local and provincial actors. In the same year, the Congolese government launched the P-DDRCS national strategy, replacing STAREC. FCS-funded programs have included ESPAD and ESPASK, which were led by VNG International/Cordaid, and these programs had some temporal and geographic overlap with ESPER. Specific instances of coordination were reported with ESPER interventions in Ituri while ESPAD was still operational there. But as stabilization initiatives struggle to find funding and FCS coordination roles oscillate between MONUSCO and UNDP, more direct engagement with these actors could generate greater interest in ESPER's problem-solving, bottom-up approach to inclusive security governance and responsive service delivery.

ESPER has sought partnerships with specialized national NGOs to provide specific services and/or field research and analysis, investing in building their capacity and reach. Based in Bukavu but active across the East, Appui pour la Paix et la Concorde (APC) works on security governance with various international partners, including ESPER. One specific ESPER partnership involved field research on state involvement with criminal economic networks in various resources including minerals, timber, coffee and cacao in Ituri. State authorities expressed interest in hearing the study's findings and recommendations because the approach is constructive and non-accusatory, and proposed ways to recover lost revenue that could be regulated and taxed by the State.

To help resolve local disputes over land rights before they turn violent, ESPER partnered with SOS IJM in South Kivu, CREDDHO in North Kivu and Justice Plus in Ituri to organize civil mobile hearings and train local paralegals that lead to compromises among community groups in conflict. Informal mediation techniques are used, after which the terms of compromise are officially recorded by the local civil court. These legal clinic facilitators or paralegals are also invited to participate in the CLS-E to share the nature and causes of these local disputes, which can turn violent if not resolved. Mobile legal clinics therefore fill an important gap in S&J service provision in hard-to-reach rural areas where police cannot quickly respond, if at all. Administrative authorities in Goma and Bukavu have shown an interest in the work of these legal clinics, according to CREDDHO in Goma⁵, realizing that knowledge of informal conflict mediation and the disputes they solve contributes to an overall restoration and maintenance of Rule of Law in areas where State services are weak or cannot always be present.

Stakeholders suggest deeper collaboration with international programmes and frameworks to maximize impact. ESPER's limited engagement with programmes like UNDP and EU security governance initiatives may represent missed opportunities to enhance coherence and synergy. Stakeholders recommend leveraging existing frameworks, such as the FCS, to align approaches, share learning, and improve the effectiveness of security governance and service delivery in Eastern DRC.

4.3. Effectiveness

EQ6. To what extent did the project achieve its outputs and outcomes?

ESPER successfully achieved its intended outputs and outcomes, demonstrating significant progress in inclusive security governance across the three provinces. The programme adopted a strategy that prioritized the revitalization and integration of pre-existing governance practices, such as CLS-E and PAS, while fostering alignment between local, provincial, and national actors. Key achievements include the establishment of CLS-E meetings, the production of PAS, and enhanced capacities of security and justice institutions through training, mentoring, and RBF mechanisms. The programme fostered public trust and engagement by improving conflict mediation, increasing awareness of roles and responsibilities of authorities, and enabling more responsive and transparent service delivery. Despite these achievements, challenges remain, particularly related to the sustainability of outcomes due to dependency on external funding, limited financial autonomy at the provincial level, and persistent insecurity in some territories.

Across its three provinces, ESPER achieved key outputs that laid the groundwork for inclusive security governance. The programme produced 11 PAS (ESPER Final Brochure, 2024) and institutionalized CLS-E meetings, creating platforms for participatory decision-making. Additionally, monitoring committees were established to track progress and ensure accountability. Capacity-building activities, including trainings, mentoring, and oversight, significantly enhanced the performance of authorities and security and justice actors.

⁵ <https://www.escr-net.org/fr/members/centre-recherche-sur-lenvironnement-democratie-et-droits-lhomme-credho/>

The signing of 83 RBF contracts incentivized service improvements through performance-linked rewards, playing a pivotal role in achieving these outputs.

ESPER's community-focused strategies, including legal clinics, mobile hearings, and advocacy initiatives, increased public knowledge of laws, rights, and duties while improving transparency in decision-making processes. Communities actively engaged in identifying and addressing security challenges, evidenced by their participation in CLSE meetings and the development of PAS. By fostering collaboration between citizens and authorities, ESPER effectively bridged gaps in trust and accountability, creating a foundation for inclusive governance. Furthermore, the programme disbursed over 72 matching grants (ESPER Final Brochure, 2024), addressing root causes of insecurity through community-level service delivery and economic initiatives, such as cash-for-work programmes that deterred youth recruitment into armed groups.

Documented outcomes over the four years highlight significant improvements in security, justice, and community well-being, which align closely with the program's TOC and underlying assumptions (Annex 1). According to community surveys, documentation and interviews:

- **Enhanced service delivery and trust:** Security and justice service delivery improved, with increased perceptions of efficiency and impartiality. By the fourth year of ESPER, 73% of beneficiaries expressed trust in formal and informal security and judicial institutions to handle their claims fairly and efficiently, compared to only 33% at the program's inception, as reported in the ESPER results framework.
- **Improved safety and reduced conflict:** The percentage of beneficiaries who noticed a reduction in violent incidents in the regions where they live increased significantly over the course of ESPER, rising from 24% at the end of the program's first year to 57% by the fourth year. This indicator showed steady progress during Years 2, 3, and 4 (ranging from 56% to 59%), exceeding the program's target of 50%. The improvement is largely attributed to a reduction in theft, public harassment, and mob justice incidents. However, isolated cases of harassment, arbitrary arrests, and illegal roadblocks by militias, including M23, persist across the three provinces. Endline community survey data collection also revealed a decline in targeted attacks, incursions, and lootings, although ongoing issues such as theft, drug abuse, and killings remain significant. Consequently, by the end of the fourth year, 63% of beneficiaries reported feeling safe or very safe in their daily activities, compared to just 33% at the start of the program, according to ESPER's results framework.
- **Increased public awareness:** Greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of authorities enhanced community participation in security planning. According to ESPER's results framework, 51% of the community members were aware of the roles and responsibilities of justice and security actors on average between 2021-2024, compared to 24% in 2020.
- **Conflict resolution:** Legal clinics and public hearings ('audiences foraines') facilitated agreements in inter-ethnic conflicts and land disputes, improving community relations. Beneficiaries reporting good or very good relationships with people from other ethnic groups rose from 51% at baseline to 57% at endline, reflecting some progress in social cohesion (ESPER's results framework).
- **Accountability and transparency:** Transparency among local authorities improved significantly over the course of the program. In 2024, 38% of beneficiaries reported that security and justice institutions were transparent and accountable, compared to 19% in 2020. Collaboration between communities and authorities also strengthened, with 82% of beneficiaries attributing these improvements to the implementation of PAS (ESPER results framework).
- **Improved collaboration with security services:** Trust between communities and security services, particularly the PNC, grew significantly. According to ESPER's results framework, by the fourth year, 73% of beneficiaries trusted security institutions to address their claims fairly and impartially.
- **Empowered communities:** Community structures became more effective, women's roles in decision-making expanded, and amicable conflict resolution promoted social cohesion and collective well-being

- **Enhanced reporting of gender-based violence:** Claims of rape and sexual violence were reported more consistently by communities indicating increased trust in justice services.
- **Infrastructure contributions to security:** Development of secondary roads improved accessibility and contributed to enhanced security in previously isolated areas.
- **Strengthened military ethics and human rights adherence:** The programme fostered improved ethical standards and respect for human rights within military institutions.
- **Increased social cohesion and well-being:** Amicable conflict resolution efforts and greater engagement from local authorities fostered collective well-being and reduced inter-communal tensions.

ESPER's core transformation lies in prioritizing and revitalizing pre-existing practices (CLS-E, inspection/oversight, and L&A). By supporting these critical practices, roles, and mandates, ESPER catalyzed sustainable change as actors re-assumed and improved upon their roles. Unlike other SSJR programmes that focus on training and equipment alone, ESPER also leveraged RBF to drive higher performance in security and justice institutions, as well as territorial administrations and civil society. One provincial inspector affirmed:

“Thanks to the ESPER initiative, the Comités Locaux de Sécurité (CLS) now meet weekly, and the Comités Locaux de Sécurité Élargis (CLSE) gather monthly. These committees have been convening for over 50 years, but it is only now, with ESPER's support, that their meetings have been formalized, enhancing their structure and effectiveness”

The programme avoided the pitfalls of traditional supply-side approaches, which often ignore the demand-driven needs of security and justice service users. ESPER avoided a common criticism of other SSJR programmes whose Theory of Change holds that professional performance is attainable through intensive training, better equipment, and improved working conditions⁶. Instead, ESPER adopted a problem-solving approach that brought citizens and state officials together to analyze and address specific local security and justice challenges. This participatory model held service providers accountable and improved their responsiveness to community needs.

ESPER is clearly effective in taking highly localized intervention results produced at territory level and translating these from the bottom up into a viable national vision, successfully realized in the form of a legislative Decree, whose full-scale promulgation awaits adequate financing. This is not only an exceptional added value compared to other SSJR programmes in the East, only one of which helped inform legislative reforms aimed at the security services (e.g., Loi organique sur la police nationale, 2013, which legalized the neighborhood policing approach/police de proximité), which ESPER remarkably achieved by concentrating resources first at the territorial level and then later publicizing its impact among national level senior lawmakers and security authorities. ESPER also works across the spectrum of political and administrative authorities on security governance at multiple levels, a highly visible engagement as witnessed by the proceedings of the annual monitoring/steering committees.

Several enabling factors contributed to ESPER's success, including its ability to build on the foundations of CISPE, the support provided by the state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri, and the strong political will demonstrated at the provincial level. The familiarity of stakeholders with CLS-E and PAS structures facilitated rapid uptake and institutionalization of practices. Although highly contested for its prolonged suspension of provincial civilian government, the state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri unified governmental

⁶https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08976e5274a31e0000c0/61623-Security_Sector_Accountability_Police_Reform-ToC_Monit_Rep_Final-Eng.pdf

decision-making processes, which for ESPER led to a more dynamic and responsive an institutional relationship, ultimately facilitating collaboration among key stakeholders. The sudden change in provincial leadership in a time of war, however, meant the potential loss of ESPER's entire investment, but effective diplomacy and relationship management prevented this potential setback. At the community level, public awareness campaigns increased understanding of rights and duties, enabling citizens to hold authorities accountable. These factors collectively strengthened ownership and accountability at the local and provincial levels.

Moreover, ESPER's robust M&E system, based on SMART indicators and mixed data collection methods, facilitated continuous documentation of successes and challenges. A distinctive feature of this approach is its integration of both internal and external expertise throughout the programme's lifecycle, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive perspective. Additionally, the M&E system was closely tied to monitoring institutional performance, not just the project itself. For example, the RBF mechanism not only tracked the performance of ESPER partners but also served as a reflection of ESPER's own effectiveness. This alignment reinforced accountability while providing valuable insights to inform adaptive management and future programme design. Furthermore, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in monitoring processes promoted transparency and joint learning, strengthening the programme's overall impact.

Despite ESPER's notable achievements, the programme faced significant contextual and structural challenges that hindered the full realization of its outcomes. Persistent insecurity in conflict-affected areas, particularly in North Kivu territories lost to M23 forces, disrupted programme activities and displaced target populations. In Ituri, multiple domestic armed groups and foreign actors repeatedly attacked civilian populations and disrupted transport infrastructure to isolate their areas of control, dominated by lucrative resource extraction activities (mining, timber, protected animal species) and cross-border trafficking routes. The interruption of civilian provincial administrations in Ituri and North Kivu and replacement with new military leadership meant that ESPER had to rebuild all its provincial government relations from scratch, a resource-intensive investment with no guarantee of success. Additional governance and structural constraints undermined the sustainability of ESPER-led reforms, including:

- **Low Visibility and Accessibility of PAS:** In some communities, PAS lacked visibility and accessibility, and authorities were irregular in addressing community security needs and requests. The absence of publicly accessible PAS documents online further limited transparency and accountability. Improved public communication and accessibility through online platforms (i.e., social media) would allow project achievements and community testimonies to be easily disseminated.
- **Low Salaries for Security Personnel:** Inadequate remuneration for security personnel posed a significant barrier to improving performance, particularly in the absence of sustained RBF mechanisms to incentivize results. Although ESPER established a strong governance framework, including the architecture for inclusive security governance, this alone cannot guarantee effective service delivery. The imbalance between community demands and the limited supply of responsive services highlighted persistent gaps in implementation.
- **Persistent Insecurity:** Insecurity remains pervasive across all project areas, exacerbating vulnerabilities and complicating the delivery of security and justice services. High crime rates and violence were driven by factors beyond the scope of ESPER's mandate, including:
 - Rural exodus for employment and safety.
 - High unemployment and limited income-generation opportunities.
 - Minimal presence of state authority in rural areas.
 - Recurrent inter-ethnic conflicts over resource access, such as farmer-herder tensions.
 - Disputes over the legitimate lineage of customary chiefdoms.
 - Violence over rightful ownership of land, including through inheritance.

- Armed interference and cross-border dynamics, including illicit economic activities supported by neighbouring states.
- **Weak Law Enforcement Responses:** Law enforcement agencies often failed to act against illegal activities, such as armed group occupation of mining areas and cross-border criminal trade. Some provincial authorities were reportedly complicit, financing armed groups for personal gain, which perpetuated impunity and corruption.

EQ7. To what extent was risk management, conflict sensitivity, do no harm and gender responsiveness adequate, and to what extent has the project adjusted to regular re-assessments of conflict dynamics, impact assumptions and security risks?

ESPER demonstrated significant efforts in risk management, conflict sensitivity, and adherence to the "Do No Harm" principle. The programme implemented a conflict sensitivity strategy, provided training for its staff, and conducted regular conflict analyses to guide its operations. Mechanisms such as suggestion boxes and perception surveys allowed beneficiaries to voice concerns, fostering transparency and responsiveness. Continuous monitoring and adaptive management ensured the safety of ESPER's staff and beneficiaries, allowing the programme to adjust its operations regularly to align with evolving conflict dynamics and security risks. However, challenges related to RBF contracts posed concerns for conflict sensitivity. Despite ESPER providing clear instructions on how RBF payments should be distributed within partner institutions, there were isolated reports of self-dealing by senior officials. Such practices created tensions between leaders and subordinates, with some staff denied their rightful payments, potentially undermining institutional harmony and trust. While these occurrences were not widespread, they underscore the risk of such practices potentially undermining institutional harmony and trust, particularly in contexts where transparency and accountability mechanisms are still being strengthened.

Regarding gender sensitivity, ESPER recognizes the specific threats facing women and need for inclusive security governance to address these. However, the programme lacked a transformative agenda explicitly aimed at promoting gender equity. Efforts to increase women's participation were evident, particularly through community-level activities, but ESPER's influence on institutional hiring practices in state security and justice bodies was limited. Matching grants offered opportunities to engage female community partners, yet women interviewed for this evaluation expressed that while their concerns were partially addressed in CLS-E and PAS discussions, there was significant room for improvement in integrating gender-specific priorities.

Conflict Sensitivity and Risk Management

ESPER integrated conflict sensitivity into its design and operations. The programme conducted territory-specific conflict analyses that were regularly updated to map local conflict drivers and prioritize security needs. These analyses informed adaptive management and ensured that activities were responsive to evolving conflict dynamics. Moreover, the CLS-E and PAS processes served as platforms for communities and authorities to highlight and address local security challenges. The programme's conflict sensitivity strategy was complemented by targeted training for staff, which equipped them to navigate complex and dynamic conflict environments.

Operational safety was a cornerstone of ESPER's risk management strategy. The programme tracked risks continuously, with the security manager playing a key role in day-to-day decision-making. Safety protocols included reassessments of team security on a daily basis, particularly regarding the timing and destinations of activities. This vigilance ensured the protection of ESPER staff and beneficiaries, even in high-risk areas.

The limited visibility of RBF payments within partner institutions is one area of potential conflict that is beyond ESPER's control. While ESPER provided clear instructions on the allocation of RBF funds (e.g., between bonuses, operating costs, and investments), it cannot clearly track where the money goes after payment is received by the institution. Some respondents involved in RBF contracts reported that the distribution is not done according to ESPER instructions and that some officials arbitrarily award themselves bonuses. Such diversion is unreported and may cause tension within partner institutions.

Moreover, the exclusion of some community partners, such as civil justice actors, from RBF contracts created frustration. However, due to resource limitations, some of these omissions were perceived as unfair or preferential towards other local actors. This exclusion undermined the programme's efforts to foster inclusivity and could potentially exacerbate tensions among partners.

Localization has proven an effective risk mitigation strategy for ESPER in a highly volatile operational environment where government suspicion of international partners can be high. By investing in state security institutions and civil administration bodies from the provincial to the *chefferie* level, ESPER created a network of invested stakeholders whose improved service provision was publicly recognized. Civil servants and security officials were quick to attribute this enhanced performance to the unique modalities (RBF) and monitoring approach of ESPER. In return ESPER appears to enjoy a privileged relationship with its partners in the provincial governments, and at the Kinshasa level. And with senior technical and administrative programme staff being all Congolese, many with prior experience in governance, security and justice programmes in the East, this form of localization helped ESPER present its aims, values, systems and, sometimes, criticisms of State counterparts in a familiar Congolese fashion, improving mutual understanding and easily resolving miscommunications when they arose. Balancing this emphasis on close state relations as the basis of its state building endeavour, ESPER also invested in supporting civil society and community-based organizations to provide needed services (i.e., judiciary clinics). These local relations helped keep ESPER teams informed of evolving security conditions, needs and concerns of local communities, information that helped determine safety protocols regarding the timing of field visits, for example.

Do No Harm Principle

ESPER adhered to the "Do No Harm" principle through its emphasis on conflict-sensitive implementation and accountability mechanisms. Suggestion boxes and perception surveys allowed beneficiaries to share feedback and complaints, ensuring that grievances were addressed constructively. Additionally, ESPER's inclusive approach to activity design sought to avoid exacerbating existing conflicts. Efforts were made to ensure diverse representation in activities, including equitable participation across ethnic groups, gender, and age. These measures reinforced the programme's commitment to minimizing harm and fostering constructive engagement among stakeholders.

Gender Responsiveness

While ESPER demonstrated some gender responsiveness, its approach lacked a transformative agenda aimed at addressing systemic gender inequities. The programme acknowledged the specific security threats facing women and the importance of inclusive governance but did not actively promote gender equity within partner institutions, as it had limited influence over hiring practices. Efforts were instead concentrated on community-level initiatives, where ESPER encouraged the participation of women in CLS-E and PAS processes.

Interviews revealed mixed feedback on gender inclusion. While women appreciated efforts to incorporate their concerns into security governance, they noted that much more could be done to address their specific needs and priorities. Gender-specific initiatives, such as matching grants for women-led community projects, were limited and did not comprehensively address barriers to gender equity.

4.4. Efficiency

EQ8. How does the cost of interventions relate to achieved results and compare to other security, justice, and rule of law projects in the area?

ESPER strategically balances resource allocation to address complex security governance challenges. The project's adaptive approach prioritizes operational efficiency, with significant investments in RBF activities and capacity building. Low-cost initiatives, such as matching grants and mobile hearings, foster local ownership and address the root causes of insecurity, complementing larger systemic interventions. ESPER's adaptive financial management, ability to build strong partnerships with local organizations (localization), and effective use of existing governance frameworks highlight its cost-effectiveness. The project's bottom-up approach, starting at local and provincial levels prior to engagement with national stakeholders, proved highly efficient in building trust and securing buy-in from decision-makers, ultimately influencing national-level policy alignment. While successful, this strategy carries inherent risks tied to shifting political priorities and the sensitive nature of security and governance interventions. Nevertheless, ESPER's model demonstrates strong potential for scalability, provided that sustained funding, strengthened local governance structures, and consistent national-level advocacy are in place to support its expansion.

Note: This analysis relies on the 2024 budget, which includes Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 effective allocations and 4 planned budgets.

The ESPER project was initiated in August 2020 with an initial award of EUR 16M, later supplemented by an additional EUR 4M in January 2023. It systematically tracks its budget and expenditures through clearly defined budget lines managed by VNG International and Cordaid. These lines cover all project components and pathways of change (Outcomes), with adaptations detailed annually in the ESPER Plans.

The budget distribution reflects a strategic balance between foundational investments in operations and personnel, enabling ESPER to address complex security governance challenges effectively (Figure 5). Operational costs for conducting activities account for 41% of the budget, making it the largest expenditure category.

Throughout its implementation, ESPER underwent significant revisions to planned activities, reflecting its adaptive approach to evolving contexts and emerging challenges. Some activities were scaled down or canceled, such as conflict and actor mapping, which was deemed too sensitive due to the deteriorating security context, and anti-corruption activities, which did not progress beyond initial trainings. Legal support was integrated into RBF and public hearings ('audiences foraines'), while incident monitoring was deferred for reassessment under ESPER II. Dissemination of research at the national level and strengthening the CCRCC were also canceled due to logistical constraints and overlap with a parallel UNDP project.

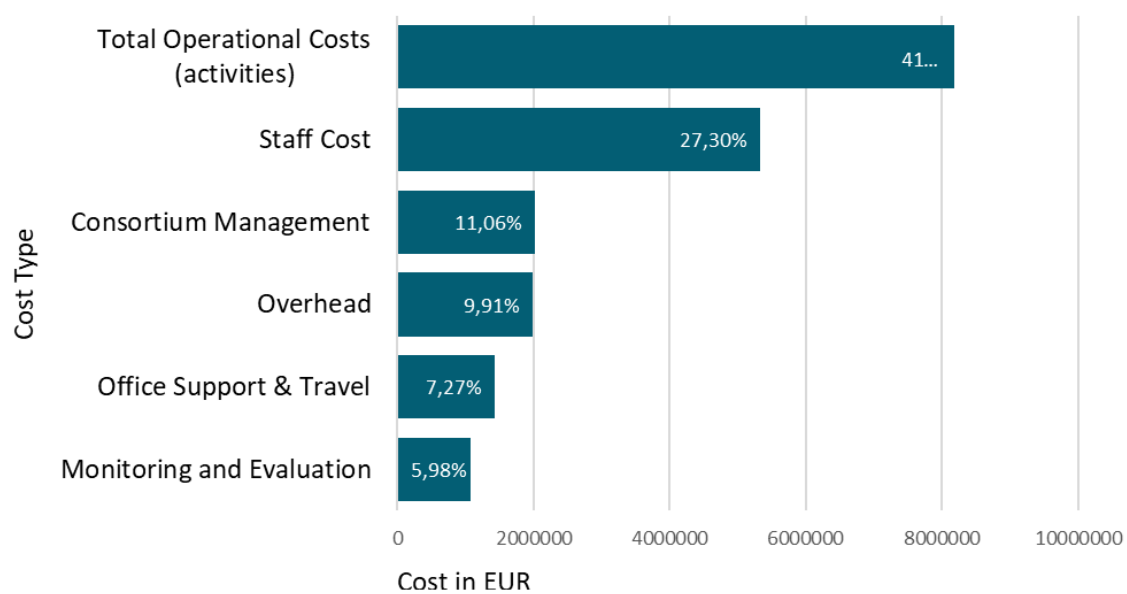
Staff-related costs, which represent 27% of the total budget, reflect the programme's heavy reliance on human resources who focus primarily on technical content and subject-matter expertise. This includes implementing activities such as technical accompaniment and capacity building, as well as in managing the complexities of RBF and engaging with high-level participants.

These activities also require significant on-the-ground presence and coordination. Consortium management costs, accounting for 11% of the budget, highlight the complexity of overseeing a multi-partner initiative involving VNG International, Cordaid, and other stakeholders. This budget line also includes the functioning of the Comité de Suivi and Comité de Pilotage, which act as key accountability mechanisms, ensuring alignment, transparency, and oversight across the program. Overhead costs (10%) and office support and travel expenditures (7%) illustrate the administrative and logistical requirements of managing a project in the

context of DRC. Monitoring and Evaluation⁷ (5%) represents a smaller proportion of the budget, yet it remains essential for tracking progress, measuring outcomes, and ensuring accountability through adaptive management practices.

The ESPER consortium, comprising VNG International and Cordaid, contributed significantly to the programme's implementation and operational efficiency. A key strength of the consortium was the strong pre-existing working relationships among partners, developed through previous collaborations including but not limited to CISPE. This familiarity facilitated a positive working dynamic, enhanced by shared office spaces and a clearly defined allocation of roles and responsibilities. Some challenges emerged, particularly in aligning on the recruitment of personnel with the appropriate expertise to implement community-based activities effectively. Despite this, the consortium's collaborative approach, combined with its ability to leverage the complementary strengths of its members, enabled it to overcome these challenges and deliver results efficiently.

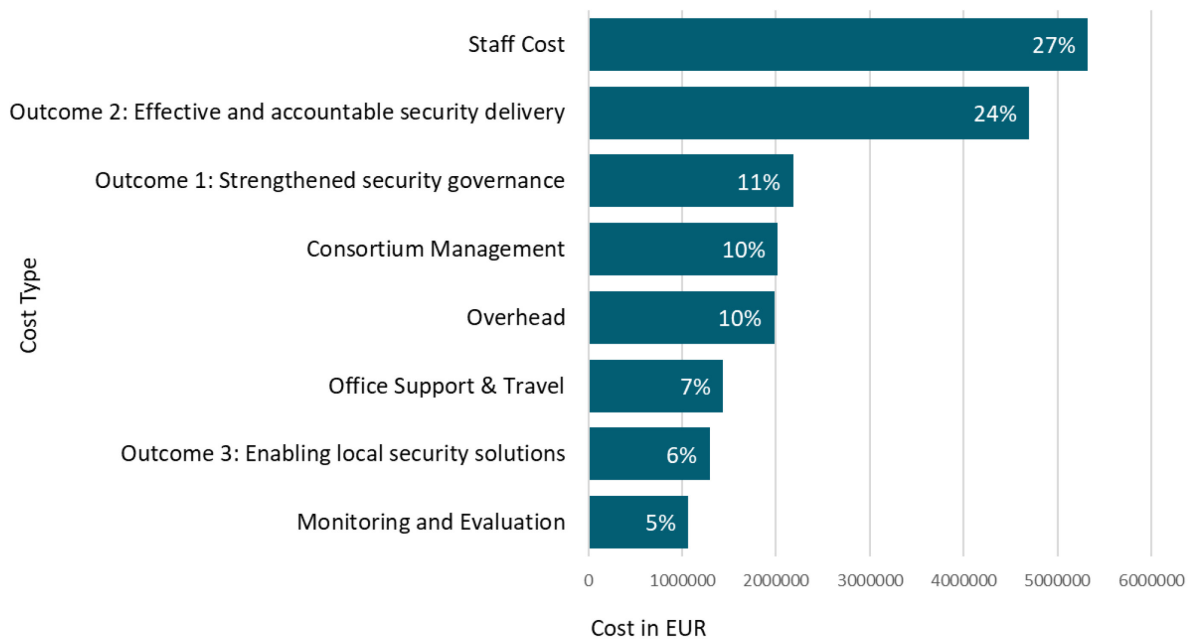
Figure 5 - Budget allocation per cost type



Within operational costs, the allocation across outcomes shows 27% for Outcome 1, 58% for Outcome 2, and 16% for Outcome 3. These translate to 11%, 24%, and 6%, respectively, when compared to the total budget (Figure 6). Outcome 1 focuses on activities that strengthen security governance, including the development and updating of PAS, matching grants, the printing and dissemination of key materials, security diagnostics, training and coaching, and the capacity strengthening of CLS structures. Outcome 2 emphasizes more effective and accountable delivery of security and justice services by local authorities (e.g., RBF activities, land concession inventories, family tree documentation, mobile legal clinics, dialogue sessions, public hearings ('audiences foraines'), and media campaigns). Outcome 3, dedicated to Lobbying, Advocacy, and Research, involves activities like conflict and actor mapping, the development of L&A strategies, the training of CSOs, and local and provincial level influencing efforts.

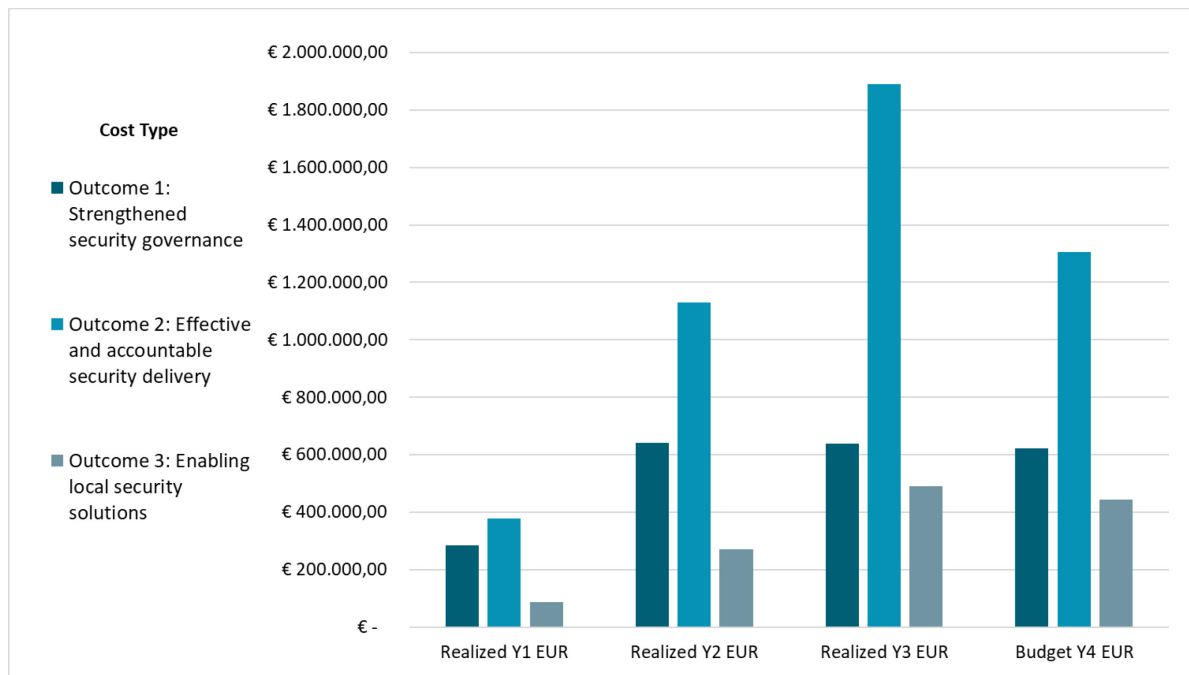
⁷ It's important to note that RBF-related monitoring and evaluation is categorized as programmatic, and therefore, does not fall under this general M&E budget segment.

Figure 6 - Budget allocation per cost type, including per outcome



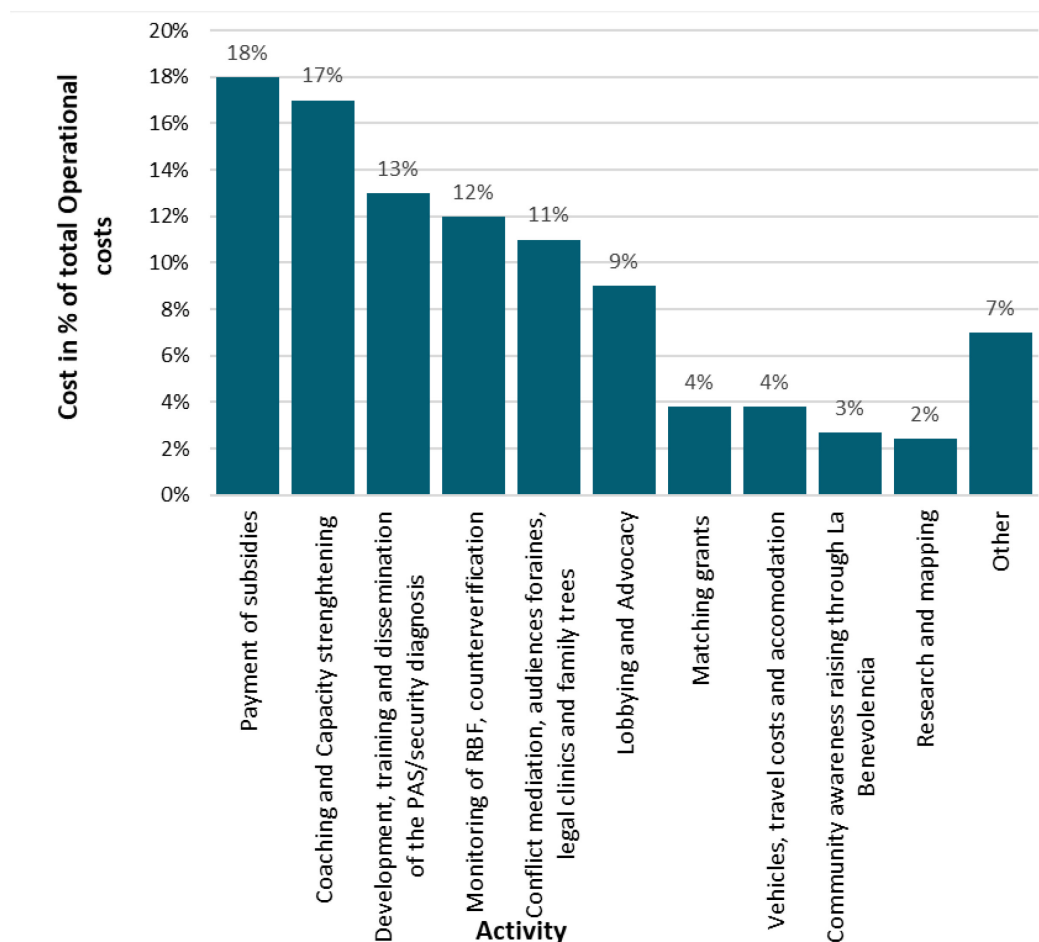
Spending across outcomes evolved strategically over time (Figure 7). Outcome 2 expenditures peaked in Years 2 and 3, reflecting the implementation of RBF contracts, while earlier expenditures focused on preparatory activities. Outcome 1 maintained consistent spending throughout the project, ensuring steady progress in its objectives. Outcome 3, focused on L&A, increased progressively as lobbying activities intensified toward the project’s later stages. These patterns reflect ESPER’s adaptive approach, where early investments in governance and community engagement established the foundation for systemic change through provincial and ultimately national-level advocacy.

Figure 7 - Budget allocation per outcome over time



When analyzing operational costs by activity type (Figure 7), the largest expenditure category is payment of subsidies and RBF (18%). This reflects ESPER's prioritization of improving security actor performance and local authority accountability. Capacity-building initiatives (e.g., capacity strengthening of the CLS, training and coaching on RBF, training and mentoring of CSOs) also represent a significant proportion (17%) of outcome-related costs, highlighting efforts to strengthen institutional capabilities. Spending on conflict mediation, legal clinics and family trees show that ESPER significantly invest in conflict resolution and legal support, which are essential for addressing disputes and legal matters that may affect social cohesion and stability. Lobbying and Advocacy account for 9% of operational expenditures, which is critical systemic change and sustainability. Matching grants, which started in Year 2, account for only 4% of outcome-related expenditures, underscoring their role as a low-cost activity aimed at fostering community engagement and ownership. These grants empower communities to participate in local security solutions, building trust between local actors and authorities. However, their limited budget allocation restricts their potential to drive contextual improvements in human security that are socio-economic in origin and beyond the reach of security institutions.

Figure 7 - Allocation of costs per activity type



ESPER employs several strategies to optimize resource and financial spending, focusing on collaboration with local NGOs and leveraging existing governance structures. Localization, understood here as the deliberate effort to employ and elevate Congolese staff into leadership positions, was not only cost-effective but also strategic in building relationships with local authorities and citizen stakeholders. Partnerships with local organizations, such as community groups and legal clinics (*cliniques juridiques*), have helped minimize operational costs by utilizing local networks and expertise, exemplifying another instance of localization. Leveraging existing governance frameworks, including provincial plans, CLS-E structures, and the "coaching of coaches" model, has further enhanced the efficiency and sustainability of ESPER's interventions. ESPER also coordinates closely with other programmes, such the Media 4 Dialogue (M4D) initiative – also funded by

the EKN. Through this project, *La Benevolencija* used its M4D budget to produce 112 different media productions broadcasted on 17 online media, 40 radio stations and 16 TV channels (including some in Kinshasa). According to ESPER's Y3 Annual Report (2023), approximately 80% of the populations in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri followed (part) of the broadcasts.

Among its primary outcome strategies, each offers value for money in different ways. Overall, advocacy interventions may offer the most efficient approach to achieving high-impact, lasting programme outcomes, particularly in light of the Decree. Community engagement interventions or matching grants were highly effective at generating local ownership and public buy-in at relatively low cost, although the sustainability of their impact is doubtful. The security governance strategies themselves, novel for their deliberately inclusive, participatory nature (CLS-E) and yet 'indigenous' because based on pre-existing practices familiar to security institutions, were also cost-effective. RBF contracts could be considered as the most effective strategy in terms of transformative power, as this approach rapidly generated the necessary momentum to drive local results—the core of the programme's Theory of Change.

To reinforce sustainability and reduce reliance on ESPER funding, the project provides budgetary training and financial experts to strengthen government financial management capacities. For example, collaboration with the national Civil Alliance of Security Governance (ACGS) enabled training on budgeting processes in Kinshasa, while provincial budget experts worked with governance entities such as the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Plan, traditional authorities (*chef de chefferie, chef de groupement*), and CLS members to identify and prioritize security governance needs within the annual budgeting process. These efforts have resulted in increased budgets for security governance at both the ETD and provincial levels (Y3 Annual Report).

Budget adaptation has been a critical component of ESPER's financial management, allowing for flexibility in response to changing circumstances and programme needs. This flexibility was also made possible thanks to the donor's acceptance of such an adaptive approach. EKN demonstrated considerable understanding of the program's complexity and the challenging context, enabling ESPER to adjust effectively. Annual plans are regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect evolving priorities and external challenges. For instance, while ESPAD was running, the program retreated from Aru and downsized activities in Djugu. However, these entities were reintegrated into ESPER in subsequent years and these changes did not impact staff and office budget lines but required reallocations for activity-specific budgets (Inception Report, 2021). Activities were shifted to more secure neighboring territories to ensure the effective use of resources and the continuity of interventions (Y2 Annual Report). Underspent budgets from specific years were also reallocated to subsequent years, ensuring that available funds could be effectively utilized to achieve programme goals (Annual Plan Y2). Budget updates often follow Steering Committee meetings, where activity plans and strategies are reviewed, and recommendations are made for realignment.

ESPER's model demonstrates both efficiency and scalability, offering practical solutions for implementation by local, provincial, and central governments. The RBF model demonstrates potential for sustainability beyond ESPER, as it could be adopted directly by state institutions. ESPER has introduced a compelling framework that could influence future thinking about payment modalities. Rather than relying on static or automatic disbursements, the RBF model ties payments to results, offering a flexible and dynamic mechanism that could enhance accountability and efficiency in state institutions. Low-cost activities, such as mobile hearings and genealogy tree documentation, have proven effective in de-escalating conflicts and addressing local security concerns. Matching grants further show promise in tackling root causes of insecurity through economic development initiatives and could be strategically linked to *Plans Locaux de Développement* to maximize impact.

While the successful implementation of ESPER demonstrates the potential for replication, the scalability of these approaches requires sustained funding and resource allocation across all levels of governance—central, provincial, and local. National-level policy alignment, exemplified by the inclusion of security governance in the 2024 national budget, underscores the importance of integrating these models

into broader institutional frameworks. A continued emphasis on collaborative budgeting and capacity-building strategies is essential to support the sustainable scale-up of ESPER's interventions while ensuring cost-effectiveness, safeguarding success achieved so far, and paving the way for long-term impact.

In comparison to other security and stabilization projects in the DRC, ESPER operates with a relatively modest budget. Large-scale initiatives such as MONUSCO (€1.28B annually) and STAREC (€1.2T estimated) focus on broad stabilization efforts, while projects like Madini kwa amani na maendeleo (€9.18M) align more closely with ESPER's approach but focus on mineral-rich regions. ESPER's focus on direct interaction between authorities and communities allows for cost-effective interventions, fostering accountability and governance at the local level. Unlike other stabilization and SSR programmes that focus on capacity building alone, RBF is a resource-intensive element of ESPER's budget but it clearly multiplies institutional performance and generates considerable political buy-in: much more than that observed (and experienced) in other SSR programmes, including community policing, in DRC. At the lower end of the cost spectrum, community-level matching grants are similarly high dividend in terms of generating local inclusion and citizen ownership of local safety improvements.

ESPER's (and CISPE's) strategy to prioritize engagement at the local and provincial levels before gradually extending to the national and central levels proved highly effective. Unlike the conventional approach in development cooperation, which often begins with efforts to secure buy-in from central institutions in Kinshasa, ESPER and CISPE, like many INGOs operating in Eastern DRC, chose to initiate their work directly in the targeted areas. By focusing on building trust and fostering relationships with institutions and stakeholders at the local and provincial levels, the programs established a strong foundation for collaboration and demonstrated tangible results early on. This localized approach not only reinforced credibility but also created momentum for scaling up to the national level. Stakeholders from the local and provincial levels actively supported ESPER's expansion towards central institutions, leveraging their experiences and successes to advocate for the program. This incremental strategy ultimately reached key decision-makers, including the cabinet of the Minister of Interior, facilitating national-level recognition and integration of ESPER's objectives into broader governance frameworks. Additionally, bridging the gap between local actions and national agendas is crucial for enhancing the perception and legitimacy of the program, particularly as operations focused solely in the east are currently perceived as sensitive.

This strategy was not only cost-effective but also efficient, avoiding the significant expenses and delays associated with prolonged, potentially inconclusive early engagement in Kinshasa, with no results or evidence to validate the programme's aims and approach. However, while successful, it carries inherent risks. Relying heavily on a bottom-up approach could leave the project vulnerable to shifting political priorities or reduced buy-in at the central level. Additionally, the nature of ESPER's work, which touches on sensitive aspects of security and governance, makes it inherently more vulnerable to political interference, resistance, or backlash at both local and national levels. As one stakeholder from MONUSCO observed:

"Today, the security and stabilization ecosystem in DRC suggests we are moving towards more centralized-led behaviors. This should push us, as technical and financial partners, to reflect on our approaches to political engagement. While the bottom-up approach has had its merits over the past few years, I believe it should be complemented with strong and permanent political advocacy at the Kinshasa level, both prior to and alongside any stabilization-related intervention. Central government ownership and steering are becoming key not only to the success of any stabilization project but also as a crucial risk mitigation strategy."

This evolving dynamic emphasizes the need for a balanced approach, where localized interventions are supported by consistent and coordinated advocacy at the national level to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience.

4.5. Impact

EQ9. To what extent has the project had positive impacts on security and justice governance and service delivery, as well as on social cohesion and stabilization in (and around) the targeted area?

ESPER has made contributions to community engagement, security and justice governance, service delivery, and social cohesion in target areas, laying a foundation for potential long-term stabilization. By empowering communities and CSOs to actively participate in security matters, building the professional capacity of authorities, strengthening the connections between institutions at local, provincial, and national levels, and fostering a culture of accountability, ESPER has strengthened local governance and advocacy efforts. Improvements in justice access, conflict resolution, and security delivery have fostered greater public trust and social cohesion across diverse groups. However, the project's impact varies across regions due to differing stability levels, defined by ongoing political and conflict-related factors that continue to challenge attempts to achieve sustained stabilization in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. These latter are conflict drivers and systemic factors (extreme poverty, recurrent mass displacement, etc.) over which ESPER has no direct control.

Among the stakeholders met during the field visit, there is a consensus that one of ESPER's most significant impacts has been the shift in community awareness regarding the workings of public accountability and the service role of authorities, in turn generating greater community involvement in security governance. Through CLS-E meetings, PAS processes, public forums, and media initiatives, ESPER has empowered local communities to recognize that authorities are accountable to the public and that citizens can play a crucial role in shaping security solutions. By the end of the program's fourth year, 73% of beneficiaries reported trusting formal and informal security and judicial institutions to handle their claims fairly, impartially, and efficiently—a substantial increase from 33% at baseline, as recorded in ESPER's results framework. This increased awareness has encouraged communities to voice concerns, propose solutions, seek accountability, and actively participate in identifying security priorities. Echoing this sentiment, a member of the urban civil society remarked:

" We've come to realize that both the community and the authorities play pivotal roles in addressing safety issues, which were once considered off-limits for discussion. Now, the authorities also recognize our significant contribution as part of the solution to these security challenges."

ESPER's philosophy promotes a collaborative approach to security governance, emphasizing joint responsibility between communities and authorities, which sets it apart from the confrontational or denunciation-focused practices often seen. By fostering dialogue and cooperation, ESPER has created an environment where public trust is gradually being rebuilt. This collaborative dynamic, coupled with RBF mechanisms, has led to reductions in police and military harassment in some areas, such as fewer illegal checkpoints, thereby strengthening public trust in collaborative security efforts. As this trust in authorities grows, there is a corresponding increase in denunciations, leading to more detentions and arrests, reducing insecurity in some areas. Over time, this shift in public engagement could promote broader governance reforms, creating an environment where authority figures are viewed as civic representatives genuinely answerable to the people they serve.

According to CSOs and community structures, ESPER has also enhanced their advocacy capacity, equipping them to engage effectively with decision-makers and to drive sustainable community-led initiatives. CSOs reported that prior to ESPER (and CISPE), their default advocacy stance towards authorities was adversarial, putting authorities on the defensive. This in turn led to authorities dismissing civil society as

troublemakers without solutions. Through targeted training and support, ESPER has enabled local organizations and community leaders to better prepare by identifying their audience and to develop constructive advocacy cases focused on problem-solving without divisive rhetoric. This capacity-building led to improved relationships between CSOs and authorities, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. CSOs now proactively engage with authorities rather than waiting for action, contributing to more effective advocacy and improved governance outcomes. Furthermore, some community-led initiatives supported by ESPER have sustained mediation and conflict resolution processes independently, showcasing the potential for long-term civic engagement in localized service delivery.

All security and justice service providers as well as targeted authorities mentioned that the RBF and coaching and capacity strengthening components have significantly contributed to increased professionalism and greater accountability. By providing structured financial incentives and capacity-building support, ESPER improved resource availability, infrastructure, and operational capacity within security forces, leading to increased patrols and more reliable law enforcement. Visits from higher levels of authority, such as provincial or national oversight bodies, have played a critical role in reinforcing these gains, ensuring that local authorities adhere to professional standards and remain accountable. Moreover, authorities now consider CLS-E structures as key mechanisms for coordinating with communities and building trust, recognizing these platforms as instrumental in aligning security efforts with community needs. However, these gains appear vulnerable to erosion without sustained RBF funding, as incentivized improvements in service delivery and adherence to PAS recommendations may not continue without this incentive structure. Indeed, most authorities we interviewed indicated that they would not be able to maintain the same standards of work without RBF, as they lack the internal resources to maintain service delivery and oversight functions at these levels. The reliance on RBF has raised concerns that lasting impacts on the implementation of PAS and CLS-E recommendations may be limited if funding ceases, with a risk of reverting to previous poor standards.

A major milestone of ESPER has been the development and promotion of Décret 44/22 and its accompanying measures, which formalizes the creation, organization, and functioning of Provincial and Local Security Committees. This decree institutionalizes participatory security governance, ensuring that mechanisms like the CLS-E meetings are embedded within formal governance structures. By giving legal recognition to these frameworks, the decree strengthens the sustainability of ESPER's initiatives and extends their impact beyond the immediate zones of intervention.

However, the decree's implementation faces significant challenges due to financial constraints. Although a budget for 2024 has been agreed upon (1 milliard de francs congolais out of the 11 milliards estimated as necessary for the decree's implementation), no funds have been disbursed as of November 2024. Discussions on the 2025 budget are still ongoing at the time of writing this report. Moreover, the insufficient resources and the absence of implementing regulations of broader security and judicial reforms – such as *la Loi de Programmation de la PNC* and *la Loi de Programmation Militaire* – further limits the decree's potential. These gaps are particularly critical because security and judicial services often lack the necessary personnel, equipment, and operational funding to address the security concerns and implement the recommendations emerging from CLS-E meetings.

The absence of a comprehensive awareness campaign ("vulgarization") further hinders the decree's impact. Many stakeholders, particularly at the local level, remain unclear about their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of Décret 44/22. However, this should be viewed within the context of a phased and gradual approach. With the recent signing of the mesures d'accompagnement, the groundwork is now in place for broader dissemination and awareness efforts. The next phase should focus on ensuring that stakeholders at all levels are adequately informed and equipped to fulfill their roles. This step is essential to achieving the decree's full potential in fostering participatory governance and institutionalizing inclusive security practices.

ESPER has also played a key role in strengthening connections between local, provincial, and national governance levels, contributing to the institutionalization of security governance at the national level. Over the program's four years, 175 facilitators from national, provincial, and local institutions actively

participated in research, mapping, and the development of lobbying strategies (ESPER results framework). This multi-level coordination has been particularly impactful in military justice cases, where hierarchical alignment was necessary to ensure accountability for individuals protected by powerful actors at the provincial level. By establishing clear communication and operational channels across security and civilian institutions, ESPER improved coordination in implementing PAS recommendations, addressing security challenges, and enforcing justice measures. This approach has also laid the groundwork for integrating local insights into national policy frameworks, creating a feedback loop that aligns grassroots priorities with overarching governance reforms.

ESPER's impact on justice governance has been crucial in the DRC context, where limited access to justice and widespread impunity have historically undermined trust in the legal system. Through mobile hearings and legal clinics, ESPER improved access to justice, especially for rural and conflict-affected communities. These initiatives enabled marginalized populations to access legal recourse, reducing the impunity that fuels cycles of violence and instability. By the end of the program's fourth year, 65% of community members recognized that victims of sexual violence and other crimes had access to justice, compared to 42% at the program's start, according to ESPER's results framework.

According to communities and justice actors, by reinforcing the judiciary's credibility as a viable alternative to "justice populaire", ESPER also contributed to a reduction in extrajudicial actions prevalent in regions where formal justice was unavailable or inaccessible. Seeing men in uniform face justice is a major shift that has increased public trust in the judiciary, a critical foundation for long-term stability. In a context where DDR (Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration) programmes have been implemented for decades but whose limited impact on armed groups and violence against civilians increases perceptions of impunity and public mistrust, ESPER's contributions to military and civilian justice are particularly significant. By restoring credibility to formal justice channels, ESPER offers communities a pathway to seek redress, helping to control the negative effects of weak DDR, and to support the development of a more effective and esteemed justice system.

Improvements in social cohesion are also notable as ESPER effectively promoted local conflict resolution and inclusive community dialogue, though uncertainties about future impact remain. ESPER's community-led conflict resolution sessions addressed longstanding disputes over land and resources, promoting inter-community trust and reducing tensions. Tools like genealogical trees and the codification of traditional laws played a critical role in clarifying land ownership and inheritance rights, helping to resolve conflicts rooted in familial and customary disputes. By formalizing these traditional mechanisms, ESPER strengthened the transparency and fairness of local justice processes, further contributing to trust-building within and between communities. Additionally, by involving youth and women in peacebuilding initiatives, the project strengthened the social fabric, providing vulnerable groups with constructive roles in society. Open forums have encouraged community members to voice grievances, enhancing transparency and cohesion across diverse groups. However, despite these positive changes reported in interviews and focus groups, significant uncertainties remain regarding the return of displaced populations. When IDPs eventually return, tensions over land and inter-community conflicts may resurface, challenging the fragile social cohesion that ESPER has built.

While ESPER has had meaningful impact in its specific geography of implementation, stabilization remains an elusive goal due to the complex and volatile environment in the region. Despite progress in security governance, justice, and social cohesion, regional conflicts, the realities of political instability and structural governance challenges undermine the possibility of lasting regional stabilization. Persistent insecurity due to an ineffective national military and the influence of multiple armed groups, as well as regional and cross-border tensions, limit the programme's ability to foster long-term stability in the three provinces.

In terms of regional differences, the project's impact has varied significantly across target areas, with certain locations experiencing more substantial benefits due to relatively higher levels of stability. South Kivu saw more consistent implementation of CLS-E meetings, mobile hearings, and legal clinics, fostering safer conditions along the Uvira corridor and improving justice access. In contrast, high levels of insecurity

in North Kivu and Ituri limited ESPER's ability to fully implement matching grants and legal clinics, resulting in some gaps in outcomes in these areas. Nevertheless, ESPER adapted its strategies in these regions, focusing on achievable outcomes within the security conditions available.

External factors such as the state of siege and ongoing conflicts have negatively influenced ESPER's scope and impact, affecting its ability to stabilize certain areas. The state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri simplified command structures, allowing ESPER to streamline engagements with military authorities. However, this militarized governance model presents challenges for the programme's long-term civil governance objectives because the state of siege will not be permanent; eventually, civilian authorities will resume their roles and may not maintain the same continuity or investment in security governance. Persistent armed conflict restricted ESPER's operational reach and led to delays or cancellations of key activities. These dynamics underscore the need for sustainable support mechanisms to address gaps in regions affected by instability.

Political turnover and high staff mobility affected the continuity of ESPER's capacity-building efforts, challenging sustained impact in governance and security. Frequent changes among local officials required repeated training investments, as new authorities lacked institutional memory of ESPER's objectives. ESPER's on-site supervision and oversight visits, strengthened by the continuous coaching of senior staff, will doubtless carry forward concrete improvements to institutional performance in the near term, but the wider administrative machinery and leadership within these institutions at provincial and national levels is beset by low performance, external influence, and poor execution in planning and budgets. And while regular staff turnover theoretically allows ESPER's principles to spread and reach new areas, it is more likely that the surrounding institutional environment will hinder the sustained application of these inclusive governance principles and practices.

EQ10. To what extent have the RBF and matching grant components contributed to the overall objective of the project?

The RBF and matching grant components of ESPER have been essential in advancing programme goals of improving governance in security and justice, and social cohesion, by incentivizing accountability and supporting community-driven initiatives. RBF combined with coaching and technical accompaniment led to substantial improvements in the professionalism, efficiency, and trustworthiness of security and justice services, fostering public confidence and reducing misconduct. Matching grants, while limited in scope due to security and budget constraints, have empowered communities to address local security issues independently and to tackle direct causes of insecurity through infrastructure and economic development projects. Both components, however, face sustainability challenges, with stakeholders highlighting the importance of continued funding, especially for RBF, to maintain these gains.

RBF played a critical role in enhancing professionalism and accountability in security and justice sectors, aligning their work more closely with community needs. The RBF component, coupled with coaching and regular oversight, clarified the responsibilities of security and justice officials through performance indicators linked to the PAS, resulting in more efficient, reliable, and responsive service delivery. By the end of the program, 71% of individuals from community structures and security institutions reported being empowered to implement PAS in an inclusive and participatory manner through RBF, compared to just 11% at the program's start, according to ESPER's results framework. This professionalization pathway enabled officials to operate with clearer, more consistent objectives that directly respond to community needs. Additionally, by connecting performance goals to financial incentives, RBF fostered a proactive approach among officials to meet these standards, which would likely not have happened without RBF's direct influence.

In fact, without RBF, it is highly probable that ESPER would not have realized its goals, as financial motivation and rigorous oversight appears to have been key in overcoming critical long-standing barriers such as the entrenched institutional culture and low institutional capacities. As an independent com-

parison, multiple other security and justice reform programmes have been implemented in the same provinces with the same partner institutions, but none have achieved similar results—and none used the RBF component.⁸

The RBF mechanism, in addition to regular CLSE meetings, has played a crucial role in fostering collaboration and accountability across local, provincial, and national levels of security institutions, CSOs, and authorities. By establishing RBF contracts with ESPER, these entities have engaged in a system of shared responsibility, where meeting performance indicators is tied to financial incentives. This has resulted in greater accountability, increased institutional capacity, and a culture of learning, where achieving results and reporting them in a timely manner are integral to operations. Regular reporting to hierarchical structures has improved communication and coordination between levels of governance, reinforcing a sense of accountability that did not exist prior to RBF. This multi-level interaction has strengthened institutions and ensured that local needs and priorities are effectively communicated and addressed at provincial and national levels.

RBF also led to a reduction in police and military harassment, with community members reporting fewer instances of exploitation and illegal checkpoints. This improvement is attributed to two primary mechanisms: RBF-supported community survey checks that provide oversight, and the financial support that now allows security personnel to rely less on informal sources of income from the population. By discouraging exploitative practices and rewarding professionalism, RBF has improved the relationship between communities and security services. Some stakeholders expressed optimism that the habits formed through RBF are likely to persist because security personnel have witnessed the tangible benefits of working in this way, particularly the trust gained from the population. However, this reduction in harassment appears to owe more to RBF's financial incentives and performance monitoring and oversight mechanisms rather than a sweeping cultural shift toward activist accountability, suggesting that the improved performance and responsiveness of the security sector and authorities may not endure without ongoing oversight and funding.

Matching grants proved effective in supporting community-led initiatives through two main pathways: promoting economic opportunities for vulnerable groups and addressing direct causes of insecurity through infrastructure improvements. By funding economic activities for youth and marginalized groups, evaluators were told that matching grants served as a preventive measure against their recruitment by armed groups. In areas where the national DDR programme is stalled, unemployment and lack of economic opportunities contribute to insecurity, creating incentives for youth and other marginalized groups to join armed groups or criminal gangs. An attractive and viable alternative, matching grants were used to fund initiatives that created jobs and skill-building opportunities, thus contributing directly to stability in conflict-affected areas. Through interviews, community representatives emphasized that youth involvement in meaningful economic activities strengthened their sense of purpose and community belonging, which significantly reduced their vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups, particularly in volatile regions like Ituri and Uvira territory.

Additionally, matching grants addressed specific causes of insecurity by improving local infrastructure, such as roads and lighting, which increased community safety. In high-risk areas, communities used matching grants to construct bridges, repair roads, and install public lighting, directly reducing physical insecurity in these zones. The increased presence of infrastructure reportedly deterred criminal activities and increased police patrols, both of which contributed to perceptions of improved security. Community members noted that infrastructure improvements made travel within their regions safer and allowed authorities to respond more effectively to incidents, thereby reinforcing trust in local governance and security services.

⁸ In multiple KIIs with security and justice authorities' reference was made to other SSJR programmes over the last decade that relied exclusively on 'train and equip' models and did not address the financing gaps these institutions faced. No lasting impact was cited. Evaluators were told that donated vehicles could not be maintained and were sold to cover basic operational costs.

Although both RBF and matching grants were crucial to ESPER's success, they encountered challenges that limited their full impact, particularly in insecure areas and due to funding constraints. RBF experienced delays in payment disbursements in South Kivu, causing frustration among beneficiaries. Moreover, it lacked sanctions for misconduct, meaning that while good behaviour was rewarded, corruption or fund diversion went unpunished, reducing its effectiveness in fostering full accountability. Although reported incidents of misconduct were relatively few, their occurrence in certain partner institutions highlighted the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, matching grants faced obstacles in insecure areas, where ongoing conflicts led to project cancellations or downsizing. Budget limitations also meant that many grants could not meet the full scale of community needs, placing additional strain on CSOs that supplemented costs with their own limited resources.

Sustainability remains a significant concern for both RBF and matching grants, as both components rely heavily on external funding to maintain impact. Without sustained financial support, RBF's gains in professionalizing security services risk regression, with stakeholders predicting that, without RBF, officials may revert to previous practices. Matching grants also show limited long-term impact due to their reliance on external funding, while infrastructure projects risk becoming unsustainable without ongoing support for maintenance.

EQ11. To what extent were the results of the first phase of the project (CISPE) sustained and reinforced under the ESPER programme, particularly in terms of long-lasting behavioural changes and institutional reform?

ESPER effectively built on and reinforced the results of CISPE, sustaining its key achievements while expanding its scope to new territories and addressing challenges from the previous programme. By leveraging the foundations laid by CISPE, ESPER advanced security governance, justice, and community resilience, enhancing trust and collaboration between communities and local authorities. Building on CISPE, ESPER focused on lobbying and advocacy at the national level and introduced significant institutional reforms, such as the signing of such as the signing of a national decree (Décret 44/22) to institutionalize the Provincial and Local Security Committees across the DRC.

CISPE's foundational work, particularly the establishment of CLS-Es and the development of PAS, was continued and enhanced under ESPER. The CLS-Es strengthened by CISPE continue to operate, with ESPER expanding their scope to include proactive monitoring and reporting of local security threats. This has increased community resilience and strengthened community-government collaboration. Additionally, ESPER updated and implemented PAS in former CISPE zones while swiftly developing PAS in South Kivu, thereby extending CISPE's methodologies and best practices to new regions. This continuity ensured that the progress made under CISPE was not lost and that best practices could be replicated and scaled.

ESPER has fostered behavioral changes building on CISPE's achievements. The participatory security planning and implementation processes initiated under CISPE brought communities and security institutions closer together. ESPER has reinforced this collaboration by enhancing trust and accountability between communities and local authorities through structured dialogue and joint decision-making processes. Continued training and coaching initiatives for both community and authority representatives have contributed to a shift in attitudes and increased engagement, further institutionalizing participatory security governance.

The RBF approach, initiated under CISPE, was refined and expanded under ESPER. This approach incentivized improved performance among security and justice services, fostering accountability and professionalism. The RBF model also played a critical role in translating PAS priorities into actionable, measurable outcomes, contributing to the sustainability of PAS implementation.

Building on CISPE, ESPER placed greater emphasis on community ownership. Through structured dialogues, capacity-building initiatives, and the inclusion of local representatives in performance monitoring mechanisms, ESPER strengthened the social contract between communities and authorities. This further

deepened trust and collaboration, laying the groundwork for more sustainable security governance based on participatory principles.

ESPER's enhanced advocacy efforts targeted national and provincial authorities, creating an enabling environment for institutionalizing participatory security practices. A key achievement was the signing of *Décret n°22/44 du 6 décembre 2022*, which formalized the creation, organization, and functioning of Provincial and Local Security Committees across all territories in the DRC. By institutionalizing these mechanisms, ESPER scaled the impact of CISPE and ESPER beyond the programme's immediate zones, ensuring a standardized and sustainable approach to security governance nationwide.

Lessons learned from CISPE have been effectively integrated into ESPER's design and implementation, ensuring greater adaptability and relevance. One critical lesson was the importance of continuous political and security analysis to adapt interventions to changing contexts. ESPER also placed greater emphasis on engaging communities in the development and monitoring of PAS, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Further, ESPER strengthened its lobbying and advocacy efforts, including at the national level, ensuring alignment with national policies and securing the support of central authorities for long-term sustainability.

EQ12. What were the unintended (positive and negative) effects of the project?

ESPER's unintended effects included both positive spillovers and challenges that underscored the complexity of its operating environment. Positive spillover effects emerged in behavioral changes and increased interest from external NGOs and donors, which extended ESPER's influence beyond its direct target areas. Additionally, ESPER indirectly fostered local accountability structures and supported the creation of key initiatives like the Alliance Citoyenne pour la Gouvernance Sécuritaire (ACGS). However, the project faced some unintended negative consequences, such as a reported displacement of violence to non-target areas, increased pressures on local authorities without sufficient resources, a dependency on ESPER funding to achieve results, perceptions of inequity from matching grants, and frustrations among military personnel who felt excluded from the programme's benefits.

ESPER generated several unintended positive effects, including spillover behavioral changes and increased interest from external NGOs and donors in adopting ESPER's approach. Despite its limited geographical scope, ESPER influenced broader behavior among local leaders who were not directly targeted, partly through their involvement in the update of the PAS at the territory level (ESPER Inception Report, 2021). For example, even though ESPER targeted only some groupements in a territory, the chef de chefferie displayed improved conduct towards the non-targeted groupements. This spillover effect underscores the programme's potential to inspire change beyond its immediate reach. Additionally, the implementation of CISPE/ESPER and the establishment of CLS have attracted the interest of NGOs and donors who recognize the value of this approach, leading to the decree's popularization and eventual application in other provinces through the support of other SSJR supporters like UNDP, GIZ, and MONUSCO. Notably, MONUSCO funding enabled IGTER to lead similar diagnostics and security action planning in Kinshasa, aligned with the decree's framework.

ESPER also played a significant role in supporting the creation and strengthening of the Alliance Citoyenne pour la Gouvernance Sécuritaire (ACGS), a coalition of OSCs working on security sector reform. Although ESPER did not directly establish ACGS, it provided an impulse to its creation and crucial technical and logistical support to its development. Since its inception in August 2022 with 14 OSCs, the alliance has grown to 24 member organizations today. Prior to ACGS's creation, the lack of coordination among OSCs hindered collective action on security governance. Through its efforts, ESPER facilitated critical connections between ACGS and local structures, fostering greater cohesion and enabling a more effective and influential civil society role in advancing security sector reform.

The project inadvertently created structures that support monitoring and accountability for CLS-E recommendations, contributing to the long-term sustainability of these security efforts. Though not directly initiated by ESPER, members of certain community structures in South Kivu described the creation of a citizen committee to track the follow-through on recommendations from CLS-E meetings, an additional layer of public oversight. This aligns with the project's goal of empowering communities and institutions in security governance, and it extends ESPER's impact by encouraging local actors to be proactive in demanding solutions to the security problems they face.

Some respondents mentioned the potential displacement of violence from ESPER-targeted areas to surrounding regions. Interviewers suggested that by improving security in its focus areas, ESPER may have inadvertently pushed criminal actors to relocate to less monitored areas. While this displacement effect has not been definitively proven, it underscores the challenges of achieving isolated security improvements within a larger volatile context, where gains in one area may create ripple effects elsewhere.

ESPER also introduced new pressures on local authorities to meet community expectations, sometimes without providing sufficient resources to fulfill these demands. Through community empowerment and awareness efforts, ESPER encouraged citizens to collaborate with authorities in order to hold them accountable. However, this has put local authorities and security actors in a challenging position where they face increased demands without adequate funding or resources. This gap could lead to frustration on both sides, as authorities struggle to meet expectations, potentially eroding trust over time.

Dependence on ESPER's RBF funding emerged as a potential risk for sustainable impacts, with some stakeholders expressing concern over the continuity of services post-ESPER. Many stakeholders expressed fears that without ongoing RBF support, gains in professionalization, accountability, and service quality may not be sustained, as local budgets cannot cover the same incentives. Matching grants, for example, have been crucial in empowering CSOs and supporting infrastructure projects, yet without external funding, these achievements risk evaporating, both financially and operationally.

The allocation of matching grants sometimes led to perceptions of favoritism or inequity among community members. While matching grants were intended to address pressing local needs, their selective distribution occasionally generated feelings of exclusion among those who did not receive funding. This perceived inequity highlights a potential drawback in targeted financial interventions and suggests the need for transparent criteria and broader communication to mitigate such issues.

The exclusion of military services, particularly the SECAS, led to some frustration among military personnel who felt they, too, should benefit from ESPER's resources. Although ESPER primarily focused on civilian security services, the exclusion of SECAS (Service d'Éducation Civique Patriotique et Actions Sociales) created a sense of being sidelined among some members of the armed forces. SECAS plays a unique role in building trust and collaboration between the military and civilian populations by promoting civic education, social actions, and health initiatives within the army. Their mission aligns with ESPER's goals of fostering security and social cohesion, suggesting that their involvement could have further strengthened the programme's impact. Including SECAS might have enhanced civil-military relations and supported efforts to build a cohesive and accountable security environment. This tension indicates the importance of managing expectations across all security actors, especially in complex environments where both police and military contribute to maintaining order.

4.6. Sustainability

EQ13. To what extent are specific programme impacts sustainable over time?

ESPER invested significant effort and made tangible progress to ensure that the improved practices and policies defining inclusive security governance will continue over time, both within its territories of operation and potentially on a wider scale. Through its RBF approach, legislative advocacy and capacity-building efforts, the programme has laid the groundwork for lasting improvements in service delivery and accountability among security and justice institutions. The institutionalization the CLS-

E and PAS nationwide through the national decree (*Décret 44/22*) is a major step towards sustainability, although pending adequate funding. Evidence suggests⁹ that national government recognizes ES-
PER's principles and practices, in particular the RBF approach, with national finance institutions ac-
tively seeking resources to fund the Decree and associated mechanisms. Yet, even without future
funding to replace RBF, many reported that having seen the clear dividends of collaborative problem-
solving, citizens and security providers will not easily abandon these productive working relation-
ships. This includes constructive shifts in civil society's conduct of advocacy with state institutions,
including lawmakers at provincial and national levels. Threats to sustainability include the fact that
security and justice services historically lack the necessary personnel, equipment, and operational
funding to address local security concerns. Without effective oversight and consistent resources, it is
unclear how the institutions will be able to implement the recommendations emerging from CLS-E
meetings.

ESPER sought to ensure sustainability of impact by actively engaging stakeholders and partners – including civil authorities, security and justice institutions wider public, civil society - at national and provincial levels. The programme's strategy was to create the conditions and capacities necessary to ensure that the acquired orientations, values, and competencies would continue beyond the life of the programme. Key efforts to promote sustainability included:

1. **Advancing legislative reform:** ESPER provided evidence and advocacy that led to the development of a legislative Decree that enshrines the practice and policy of CLS-E and PAS as formal mechanisms of security governance in national law.
2. **Securing financial resources for sustainability:** Building on a record of documented results and effective citizen-security relations in its three provinces, ESPER is also investing in lobbying and relationship-building with national finance institutions and the wider donor community in Kinshasa. These efforts aim to secure adequate national resources for the rollout and implementation of the Decree.
3. **Strengthening institutional capacities through innovative methods:** ESPER invested in professional coaching and mentoring by national and provincial experts for security and justice institutions using novel teaching methods such as benchmarking best practices and ongoing peer reviews—the programme equipped institutions with applied skills and knowledge that are likely to endure beyond ESPER's lifespan.
4. **Empowering civil society for continued reform:** ESPER supported the establishment of a national level CSO dedicated to security and justice reforms, the Alliance Citoyenne pour la Gouvernance Sécuritaire (ACGS). The relationships and practices fostered through this CSO are expected to endure and contributed to sustained progress in governance.
5. **Embedding voluntary citizen participation in governance:** ESPER normalized the practice of voluntary citizen participation in regular dialog with security institutions and local justice providers as a reliable, routine method of targeted problem-solving. By promoting local agency and mutual accountability through collaborative oversight, these norms and practices are likely to continue without external donor support.

Despite significant evidence of effective knowledge transfer and institutional strengthening, the common perspective reported by many state and non-state stakeholders is that the continuation of ESPER practices and positive outcomes is reliant on RBF incentives and, by extension, dependent on donor funding. Without outside support for the RBF incentive and performance monitoring system, many asserted that CLS-E activities and actions by security and justice services will decrease or possibly cease. This concern is rooted in over more than 30 years of public mismanagement, which has eroded Congolese public confi-

⁹ "Preparatory Workshop for Exchanges between the Ministry of the Interior and Technical And Financial Partners on the Implementation of Security Governance," Vice Primature, MINISTERE DE L'INTERIEUR, SECURITE, DECENTRALISATION ET AFFAIRES COUTUMIERES, Nov 2024.

dence in the State’s capacity and willingness to serve its citizens and uphold a credible social contract. Furthermore, given the concentration of aid funding and programmes across eastern DRC since the mid-1990s—well-intentioned if not always impactful—average citizens associate positive, lasting change more with international actors than their own government.

The prospect of state ownership of the positive practices and norms of inclusive security governance becoming permanent through appropriate legislation and state financing is therefore seen as unrealistic by many. However, state financing modalities are not static and the possibility of structuring CLS Decree budget line-items in a similar format to ESPER’s RBF was raised by the Vice Primature of the Ministry of the Interior in a Kinshasa workshop with donors in November 2024. As of this writing (Nov. 2024), one billion Congolese francs have been approved for the 2024 budget (of the 11 billion requested), but no disbursement yet.

Some impacts of ESPER are likely to endure even if the funding and the program stops. It was regularly reported that stronger conflict mediation through legal clinics and coaching at local levels were noted and appreciated by local communities. Popular demand for these enhanced services is expected to continue beyond ESPER, and the service may continue without external resources as the skills do not require external funding to be applied. Local payment for services can be organised within the community.

Less sustainable, the results achieved with matching grants and local community structures are unlikely to last without continued support. Outcomes for participants involved in specific activities that were limited in time and financial duration, such as alternative employment for former combatants, are ephemeral and may not deter future return to armed groups given their lack of marketable skills and high local unemployment. Any changes achieved through such grants are not sustainable. Maintenance of infrastructure provided through this channel will also cease, compromising the longevity of these investments.

Other identified threats to future sustainability include:

- **Regular staff turnover or transfer within the civil administration and security and justice institutions:** While this could lead to positive spillovers of the norms and practices of inclusive security governance into new geographies, such expansion is unlikely without an encompassing, enabling environment. The absence of hierarchical backing from security and justice institutions in non-ESPER territories limits the realistic potential for broader adoption of these practices.
- **Loss of media coverage for CLS-E and PAS successes:** Without external funding, the promotion and documentation of ESPER’s successes will cease. The absence of an online repository for media content further diminishes the opportunity for knowledge sharing and long-term visibility.
- **Ongoing dependency for justice clinics:** While strengthened conflict mediation and negotiation practices by customary authorities (chefs de chefferies, chefs coutumiers) may continue due to public demand, justice clinics themselves require continuous support. Without external backing, their sustainability remains uncertain.

EQ14. To what extent do relevant stakeholders demonstrate ownership and contribute to the sustainability of ESPER activities?

Stakeholders at multiple levels demonstrate ownership of ESPER’s practices and objectives, contributing to the sustainability of inclusive security governance mechanisms. Local ownership was most evident among security and justice service providers and institutions that benefited directly from the RBF approach, including the national CSO responsible for Kinshasa-level advocacy in support of the Decree and ongoing efforts to secure funding for its implementation. Communities that participated in the CLS-E diagnostic process or that were members of the community structures responsible for the matching grants also demonstrated ownership through their voluntary participation in seeking security solutions and holding authorities to account. At the national level, the adoption and formalization of Décret 44/22 signify institutional commitment, reinforced by Ministry of Finance efforts to

secure resources for its implementation. While these developments reflect strong engagement and ownership, challenges persist, particularly regarding financial sustainability.

Ownership is evident at multiple levels of the programme, demonstrated both through voluntary participation and within the RBF incentive system. Territorial Administrators expressed confidence that inclusive security governance leads to better security outcomes, while RBF partners recognize the value of performance-based approaches in improving their work practices. Community structures and local CSOs also showed commitment to sustaining ESPER's impact by continuing to produce written advocacy notes.

Critical to developing close collaboration with institutional partners and local stakeholders, ESPER avoided creating new structures and instead reinforced and revitalized already existing if dormant practices, roles and structures such as CLS-E and internal oversight bodies. This also impressed provincial administrators, making it easier to gain their support as it validated their own ways of working and the staff with these institutions tasked with these roles. As a result, institutional ownership of the value and practices of inclusive security governance developed more smoothly than an external reform agenda with unfamiliar approaches, values and practices. Besides revitalizing the custom of CLS-E meetings, ESPER supported provincial inspectors in their daily work, cooperated with organizations that were already conducting informal conflict mediation and judicial clinics. CSOs and community representatives now know how to conduct advocacy as collaborators, not adversaries, and to target relevant decision-makers at the local, provincial and national level.

National level ownership was most evident in the adoption and formalization of the Decree, and in ongoing efforts by the Ministry of Finance to secure national funding for its roll-out and implementation. This accomplishment was driven by sustained advocacy and relationship-building involving ESPER staff and the ACGS, who lobbied successfully using programme evidence and documented impact at the territorial level, including testimony from provincial security leadership and civilian administrators involved with the programme.

Nevertheless, support for security governance budgeting will be needed post-ESPER because this is a new practice envisioned by the Decree. Provincial security institutions will need support to mobilize local revenue (without retrocession), and to create and maintain budgets with clear priorities. Future iterations of ESPER can provide such support. As stated by the 'Inspection Générale des Entités Territoriales' (IGTER): "We welcome initiatives from (provincial) entities themselves that seek to take charge" of their budgeting and planning needs.

Contextual developments negatively affecting ownership and sustainability include:

- **The prolonged *state of siege* in Ituri and North Kivu**, originally declared for three months, is now in its third year. While it simplified decision-making by consolidating command within the provincial government and therefore benefited ESPER by reducing the number of partner stakeholders and creating a single chain of command across provincial government, the eventual return to civilian leadership may require restarting efforts to familiarize new leaders with inclusive security governance practices.
- **The loss of Rutshuru and Masisi territories to M23** in 2023 generated mass population displacements to Goma, forcing ESPER to adapt its approaches to this new and uncertain context, which involved significant trade-offs.
- **The continued lack of national funding** for the promulgation of the Decree fuels concerns about the viability of inclusive security governance in ESPER provinces and beyond.

5. Conclusions

C1. While ESPER itself offers a cogent response to local needs, wider coordination gaps impede cohesive security governance

The ESPER philosophy of working directly with appropriate institutions to support their mission and mandate, ensures their relevance to local needs. By empowering local institutions, ESPER also fosters local ownership, enabling the program to tailor effective interventions that tackle specific challenges per area of intervention. Through the CLS-E and PAS mechanisms, ESPER demonstrated a strong capacity to adapt to local contexts and respond to realities on the ground while fostering widespread acceptance and sustainability. The active involvement of local stakeholders, including service providers, authorities, and communities, further reinforces this legitimacy by ensuring that governance structures are responsive and rooted in local realities.

A major achievement of the program is its strategic alignment with national priorities and its complementary role in stabilization efforts. By institutionalizing participatory governance practices through Decree 44/22, ESPER created a durable framework that integrates local governance structures into national strategies. Additionally, the program complements other stabilization initiatives, such as the P-DDRCS and SSR, by addressing governance and community dimensions that are often overlooked by military- or infrastructure-focused programs. This alignment ensures that ESPER not only integrates local-level initiatives into broader national strategies but also expands the scope of stabilization to include participatory governance and institutional accountability.

However, significant coordination challenges persist, limiting the program's overall impact. The absence of a robust government-led framework for aligning efforts among key actors reduces the potential for synergies and creates inefficiencies across the many governance and security initiatives currently underway. Further, the unclear role of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the donor has led to misunderstandings around the intentions and delivery of bilateral and regional projects.

C2. A tangible but uneven impact on security governance, security, and social cohesion

ESPER aimed to enact tangible change in public service delivery, particularly within national security institutions responsible for public safety, and decentralized administrative entities overseeing public order and rule of law. To achieve this, ESPER developed a working methodology that prioritized coherence and constructive dialogue, engaging communities and public institutions across strategic areas such as local governance, security and justice, RBF, community engagement, and lobbying and advocacy. To ensure alignment both internally across thematic areas, and externally with Congolese institutions' mandates, ESPER closely coordinated with state priorities and collaboration with public authorities. This collaboration was formalized through MoUs, letters of intent, and performance contracts. Coherence and dialogue were further reinforced by including government authorities in regular programme evaluations, and in helping to define the aims and outcomes of specific ESPER interventions.

ESPER achieved significant progress in strengthening security governance and fostering social cohesion by supporting institutional accountability and professionalization. These efforts have enhanced trust between citizens and institutions and encouraged direct involvement of local populations in decision-making processes. In its intervention areas, ESPER has facilitated the resolution of customary and land-related conflicts through participatory approaches that empower communities and foster collaboration. A key aspect of this success is the program's ability to help local populations understand that authorities are accountable to them, strengthening the foundations for participatory governance. At the national level, ESPER leveraged these many local achievements to advocate for systemic change, notably through the institutionalization of participatory governance via Decree 44/22 and its accompanying measures.

Yet the program's results have been uneven, reflecting the inherent limitations of its scope and resources in addressing systemic threats such as regional instability and gender inclusion. In regions that were integrated late or face persistent insecurity, including areas subject to cross-border conflict and the presence of armed groups, tangible security outcomes have been limited. Given these constraints, ESPER cannot reasonably aim to address the entrenched dynamics driving regional instability or to achieve long-term stabilization in such contexts. Similarly, while ESPER made progress in fostering women's inclusion within its activities, a program of this nature cannot be expected to transform the deeply rooted institutional and societal structures that hinder gender equity in the DRC. These limitations highlight the importance of complementary initiatives to address broader challenges while maintaining realistic expectations of ESPER's role and impact.

While ESPER's matching grants have effectively addressed some local causes of insecurity, their impacts are unlikely to endure without sustained support. These grants achieved multiple localized successes, such as improving infrastructure and providing economic opportunities for young men and women, which directly contributed to reducing specific security risks. They also empowered communities by fostering a sense of agency and demonstrating how citizens can actively contribute to security at their own level. However, the limited grant budgets and the absence of follow-up mechanisms severely constrain impact durability. Without additional funding and continued support, the positive outcomes achieved are unlikely to last over time.

At the institutional level, the lack of national funding and inadequate dissemination of Decree 44/22 have hindered its effective implementation. Beyond its publication in the Official Journal, limited efforts have yet been made to operationalize the decree, reducing its potential to drive and sustain meaningful reform. Moreover, the political dynamics surrounding elections, such as the low engagement of the outgoing cabinet and the delay in establishing a new, more engaged cabinet post-election, have further complicated these efforts.

C3. The RBF model: An effective tool for institutional performance, potentially scalable, whose long-term impact is doubtful absent continued funding

The RBF model introduced by ESPER proved itself an effective tool to achieve results by incentivizing performance, which in turn strengthened institutional accountability and professionalization. This approach has proven its relevance in eastern DRC, where mechanisms to promote institutional accountability are often absent. Beyond financial incentives, the collaborative and professional practices established through the RBF model and capacity building, such as better planning and more transparent management of local priorities, are considered lasting gains by many stakeholders, even in the absence of future funding.

However, significant challenges to sustainability remain. The continuation of these gains relies on financial incentives and stable institutional support. Without these elements, security and justice institutions, as well as local authorities, risk reverting to previous practices characterized by poor performance and economic predation. Moreover, these institutions often lack the financial resources necessary to fulfil their mandates effectively or to respond to recommendations emerging from CLS-E meetings. The likelihood of a financial shortfall will undermine long-term sustainability and the ability of local actors to build on the progress achieved through the RBF model.

Despite these challenges, the RBF model offers potential for scaling and sustainability beyond the ESPER program. While initially reliant on donor funding, discussions could emerge about the feasibility of national institutions adopting this mechanism, given sufficient political will and resources to support its integration. It is also critical to address risks of fund mismanagement or diversion, which could threaten its effective implementation at scale. Such risks highlight the importance of establishing robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of the RBF approach as it expands.

C4. Leveraging justice and customary practices to address impunity and promote stabilization

ESPER's explicit integration of judicial institutions, including military justice, into its security governance mechanisms represents a critical step toward addressing impunity as a key driver of instability in conflict-affected areas of the East. The program's focus on justice is grounded in the recognition that impunity is a key driver of violence and instability in the eastern provinces. By strengthening judicial mechanisms and integrating them into broader security efforts, ESPER has addressed a structural challenge undermining public trust in state institutions and fuelling hostilities in conflict-affected regions. The inclusion of military justice has also proven critical in addressing crimes committed by members of armed groups and security forces, ensuring that justice is not selective but inclusive of actors often seen as untouchable.

The program also demonstrated the importance of improving access to justice as a means of addressing localized grievances and strengthening the social contract. Initiatives such as legal clinics and mobile court hearings brought judicial services closer to communities, particularly those in marginalized and underserved areas. These mechanisms not only facilitated conflict resolution, including land disputes, but also helped reduce tensions between communities.

Complementing these efforts, ESPER successfully integrated customary practices into its justice framework, recognizing their centrality in local conflict resolution. By documenting and codifying genealogical trees and customary rules, the program clarified property rights and inheritance disputes, which are frequent triggers of hostility. These efforts are particularly significant as unresolved land and inheritance conflicts often escalate into larger, more protracted conflicts, mobilizing entire communities. By addressing these issues at their root, ESPER not only reduced localized disputes but also mitigated risks of broader instability.

However, the sustainability of these achievements remains uncertain in the face of systemic challenges within the country's judicial system. Chronic underfunding, political interference, and institutional fragmentation continue to weaken the judiciary's capacity to consolidate and expand on ESPER's successes. While initiatives like legal clinics, mobile court hearings, and the codification of customary practices have demonstrated significant impact, their long-term viability is constrained by the lack of financial and institutional support.

C5. Strategic localization and adaptive management as pillars of efficiency

ESPER demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt its activities to contextual challenges, showcasing the program's flexibility in response to evolving security dynamics and local priorities. By reallocating budgets and focusing its interventions in safer zones, the program effectively maximized the impact of available resources, ensuring that its efforts remained relevant and impactful despite fluctuating conditions. This adaptive management was also made possible thanks to donor flexibility and deep understanding of the context, which allowed for swift adjustments and alignment with emerging needs, further enhancing program efficiency and relevance.

The strategic localization of resources has been another cornerstone of ESPER success. The active involvement of Congolese personnel in key roles, combined with close collaboration with local organizations, significantly reduced operational costs while enhancing the acceptance of interventions by local stakeholders. The "coaching of coaches" strategy, which leveraged the expertise of local and provincial specialists, ensured the sustainability of capacity-building efforts, enabling the transfer of skills and knowledge to local actors for lasting impact.

Additionally, ESPER employed a bottom-up approach to strengthen legitimacy and amplify impact. By prioritizing the creation and reinforcement of local governance structures at the provincial and community levels before extending its efforts to Kinshasa, the program established strong foundations for its initiatives.

This strategy not only built trust with local actors but also facilitated constructive dialogue with national authorities, ensuring that lessons learned were integrated into institutional frameworks, most notably through Decree 44/22.

C6. ESPER's sustainability strategy lays the groundwork for long-term impacts, but significant challenges remain

The program implemented key structural mechanisms that lay a solid foundation for sustainable governance. A cornerstone of this effort is Decree 44/22, which institutionalizes the CLSE and PAS structures and ensures their integration into national frameworks and formal budgeting processes. Recent active engagement from key political figures, including the Vice Prime Minister addressing the need to operationalize this Decree in the conseil des ministres, and the President referencing it in his nation's speech, underscores a critical shift towards securing the necessary political and financial support to sustain these reforms. These mechanisms aim to embed participatory security governance practices into the national system, providing local and provincial authorities with a framework for action.

By institutionalizing these processes, ESPER not only enhanced their legitimacy but also positioned them as replicable models for scaling elsewhere. The formalization of such structures ensures that they are no longer perceived as temporary or externally driven initiatives but as integral components of governance at all levels.

ESPER also demonstrated the potential for sustainability through gains that are less dependent on external funding. The program strengthened local capacities and fostered collaborative relationships between authorities and communities, supported by tools such as the RBF model. These efforts have empowered communities to hold authorities accountable and reinforced the understanding that governance can—and should—be participatory. Additionally, practices like customary conflict mediation and collaborative problem-solving within CLS-E have proven impactful, showing potential for self-sustainability driven by community demand and demonstrated results.

However, reliance on external funding continues to present a major hurdle to achieving long-term sustainability. The continuity of gains made through ESPER depends heavily on continued donor support, as national funding mechanisms remain limited and unreliable. This financial shortfall will impact not only the continued practice of CLS-E but also the ability of local authorities and institutions to act on the recommendations generated by these frameworks. This financial dependency poses a substantial challenge to the full realization and lasting impact of the mechanisms developed by ESPER.

6. Recommendations

Note: This section provides actionable recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of ESPER. Each recommendation includes detailed sub-actions with the following elements:

- **Who Should Act:** Specific stakeholders responsible for implementing each sub-recommendation.
- **Timeline:** Whether the action is a focus for ESPER II (18 months) or requires a longer-term perspective.

Key Consideration: This framework aims to clarify responsibilities and ensure alignment with immediate programmatic goals and broader, sustainable outcomes for ESPER II. It emphasizes establishing inclusive security governance as a Congolese-owned and led initiative. While operationalizing Decree 44/22 is a critical step, its success depends on substantial investments in training, resources, and engagement at provincial and territorial levels. These investments are necessary to replicate the localized problem-solving, institutional accountability, and public engagement achieved through CISPE and ESPER over the past eight years. Moreover, extending these practices to all national territories will require equally significant resources. Developing cost estimates for the Decree’s national roll-out, as recommended below, represents only a starting point and does not fully account for the resources needed to establish inclusive security governance nationwide.

R1. Strengthen the Operationalization of Decree 44/22

Based on: C1, C6

1. **Develop and adopt a realistic budget for implementing the Decree at the national level.** The adoption of a budget for the implementation of CLS-E activities, including staffing, operational costs, and monitoring, is crucial to institutionalize participatory governance mechanisms across the three provinces. This should involve a participatory budgeting process to ensure feasibility and alignment with local priorities in each territory.
 - **Who Should Act:** Congolese authorities (Ministry of Budget, Ministry of Planning), territorial administrations, relevant provincial ministries, with the support of ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months).
2. **Ensure effective fund disbursement with transparent payment mechanisms, involving CLS-E in resource management and oversight.** Establishing transparent mechanisms for resource allocation and payments will reduce delays and misuse while empowering CLS-E committees to manage their own budgets effectively.
 - **Who Should Act:** Congolese authorities (Ministry of Budget, Ministry of Finance, relevant provincial ministries), with the technical support of ESPER II in collaboration with the ACGS and political engagement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months).
3. **Provide support to CLS-E committees for budgeting and implementing CLS-E recommendations.** Train and assist CLS-E committees in the targeted territories in developing budgets for the resources they receive to implement CLS-Es, to improve their capacity to allocate funds effectively and align spending with local priorities.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) in the targeted areas; longer-term for nationwide scaling.
4. **Expand awareness of Decree 44/22 and its accompanying measures.** Conducting provincial-level advocacy and territory-level outreach will ensure that stakeholders understand the Decree’s objectives and implementation mechanisms, boosting implementation and ownership.

- **Who Should Act:** Congolese authorities (Ministry of the Interior, Security, Decentralization and Customary Affairs), supported by project implementers and donors.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II for remaining territories in the three provinces; longer-term for nationwide scaling.
5. **Digitize CLS-E and PAS processes to document decisions and facilitate stakeholder interactions.** Piloting a digital platform will enhance transparency, ensure accountability, and simplify interactions between CLS-E members and the population.
- **Who Should Act:** Congolese authorities (Ministry of the Interior, Security, Decentralization and Traditional Affairs), supported by ESPER II and donors.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II for pilot digitization in targeted areas; longer-term for nationwide scaling.
6. **Build digital capacities among stakeholders to ensure effective adoption of these platforms.** Providing targeted training for CLS-E members and local authorities on digital tools will help integrate these platforms into everyday governance practices.
- **Who Should Act:** ESPER II (and other project implementers on digitization/digitalization).
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II for pilot digitization in targeted areas; longer-term for nationwide scaling.

R2. Strengthen Local Financial Capacities to Support CLS-E Autonomy

Based on: C6

1. **Mobilize local revenues to support CLS-E activities.** Collaborate with local governments and local security services to identify new revenue streams, such as community contributions, local taxes, or fines, to sustainably fund CLS-E operations.
 - **Who Should Act:** Congolese authorities (ETDs, PNC, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of the Interior, Security, Decentralization and Customary Affairs), supported by ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) for pilot in targeted areas.
2. **Establish regulatory frameworks for effective and transparent revenue collection.** Developing and publicizing clear guidelines for collecting and managing funds will build trust and ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and fairly.
 - **Who Should Act:** Congolese authorities (national, provincial and territorial levels), supported by ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** 18 months for pilot in targeted areas.
3. **Strengthen local authorities' capacity for participatory financial management.** Equip local authorities with tools and training on transparent budgeting and financial management practices, ensuring accountability to communities.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) for pilot in targeted areas.
4. **Promote financial oversight mechanisms.** Introduce external auditing and community-led monitoring to enhance accountability and prevent misuse of funds.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II in collaboration with CSOs.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) for pilot in targeted areas.

R3. Align Local Development Plans (PLD) with CLS-E Priorities

Based on: C1, C3

1. **Integrate security challenges identified by CLS-E into PLDs.** Aligning PLDs and provincial development plans with CLS-E recommendations will ensure that development initiatives match and complement local security concerns, such as poor transport infrastructure or high unemployment, to create synergies between stabilization and development.
 - **Who Should Act:** Local authorities (ETDs), supported by ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) for pilot in targeted territories.
2. **Engage local stakeholders in prioritizing PLD actions.** Facilitate participatory planning sessions where community members and CLS-E representatives can co-develop strategies for integrating security into development.
 - **Who Should Act:** Local authorities in collaboration with local CSOs, supported by ESPER II, and alignment from other (I)NGOs active in the area.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) for pilot in targeted territories.
3. **Promote joint funding for security and development initiatives.** Advocate for donor alignment and pooled funding to support integrated approaches that combine stabilization, humanitarian action and development objectives.
 - **Who Should Act:** Donors, Congolese authorities (Ministry of Planning, Ministry of Finance).
 - **Timeline:** Longer term.

R4. Integrate Justice and Customary Practices into Stabilization Efforts

Based on: C4

1. **Strengthen access to justice in marginalized areas.** Expand initiatives like legal clinics and mobile court hearings to bring justice closer to underserved populations. Prioritize resolving land disputes and other conflicts that significantly impact local stability.
 - **Who Should Act:** Judicial authorities (Ministry of Justice, provincial courts), customary leaders, supported by implementers and donors.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) in targeted territories.
2. **Document and institutionalize customary practices.** Support the documentation and codification of genealogical trees and customary rules to clarify property rights and inheritance processes. Align these practices with formal legal frameworks to reduce conflict and create cohesive justice systems.
 - **Who Should Act:** Customary authorities, Secretariat of Customary Affairs, Ministry of Justice, supported by implementers and donors.
 - **Timeline:** Longer term.
3. **Strengthen judicial institutional capacity to engage with customary systems.** Provide training to judicial actors on working with customary systems, enabling better integration and understanding of local conflict resolution mechanisms.
 - **Who Should Act:** Ministry of Justice, judicial training institutes, supported by implementers and donors.
 - **Timeline:** Longer term.

4. **Advocate for inclusion of justice and customary practices into stabilization programs.** Conduct advocacy targeting donors and policymakers to promote the integration of justice and customary systems into broader stabilization efforts.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II, supported by CSOs and donors.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months).

R5. Strengthen the RBF Model for Broader Institutional Performance

Based on: C3

1. **Raise awareness of the RBF model among stakeholders.** Conduct targeted campaigns to explain the principles, benefits, and applicability of the RBF model to institutional managers and policymakers within key national and provincial security and justice institutions.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months).
2. **Institutionalize the RBF model.** Work with national institutions to calculate a cost estimate of the RBF model for security and justice institutions per province and per territory, and then extrapolate this estimate to remaining territories of the three ESPER provinces. National level adaptation could follow. Embed it within official frameworks for sustained use.
 - **Who Should Act:** Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Planning, supported by ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) and longer term.
3. **Build institutional capacity for RBF implementation.** Continue providing technical support and training to public administration actors within targeted territories to design, monitor, and implement performance indicators suited to their institutional context.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) and longer term.
4. **Ensure sustainable funding for the RBF model.** Advocate for dedicated budget lines in national and provincial budgets to fund the RBF model in security and justice institutions across those territories covered under ESPER in all three provinces. Explore co-financing opportunities with other donors or private partners.
 - **Who Should Act:** ESPER II in collaboration with CSOs.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) and longer term.

R6. Intensify Coordination and Engagement Among Donors, Agencies, and Authorities to increase Government ownership of Inclusive Security Governance going forward

Based on: C1, C6

1. **Ensure that inclusive security governance (ESPER II) is regularly represented in Triple Nexus and Stabilization coordination meetings at national and provincial levels.** Actively integrate the inclusive security governance philosophy and methods into Nexus and Stabilization perspectives to influence donor and practitioner thinking on improving local security, justice, and government accountability. Sharing ESPER reports with donors, UN agencies, and implementing partners can deepen their understanding of how inclusive security governance is practiced, not just conceptualized.

- **Who Should Act:** ESPER II senior staff, EKN staff in Kinshasa/Goma, potential representatives from participating security agencies, as appropriate.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) and longer term.
2. **Shape the two parallel practitioner communities of Triple Nexus and Stabilization actors and donors as advocates and facilitators of sustainable, inclusive security governance.** Promote shared learning between ESPER (I & II) and key operators (donors and agencies) in Stabilization and Triple Nexus by organizing workshops and data-sharing initiatives to exchange insights, best practices, and lessons learned.
- **Who Should Act:** EKN in Kinshasa and Goma, senior ESPER staff where appropriate
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) and longer term.
3. **Foster regular political dialogue with Congolese authorities and centralize coordination efforts.** Establish structured discussions with national and provincial authorities to align national stabilization strategies and Nexus developments with emerging local priorities, while promoting necessary institutional reforms in line with the model of inclusive security governance. Develop leadership role of Congolese authorities as the rightful representatives and owners of inclusive security governance, reducing the EKN's role as its primary proponent and advocate. Centralize leadership efforts under the Presidency and the Ministry of Interior to ensure a cohesive approach and clear direction in advancing inclusive security governance.
- **Who Should Act:** EKN in Kinshasa and Goma, senior ESPER staff where appropriate, and the Presidency and the Ministry of Interior.
 - **Timeline:** ESPER II (18 months) and longer term.