

Basic Services and Humanitarian Support Amidst Conflict: To Whom to Turn as a Congolese IDP?

This sixth volume in our series on ‘Internal Displacement in a Changing World Order’ looks into the impact of the DRC conflict and the shift in powers on the provision of selected basic public services for Congolese IDPs in the east of the country, most notably security, justice and education. We show that basic service provision by state and non-state actors is often inadequate, yet this does not necessarily create a void. Congo’s (civil) society is often stepping in and serving as the first humanitarian actors, responding to the most urgent needs of IDPs and other fellow citizens.

9 April 2026

Carolien Jacobs, Delu Lusambya and Patrick Milabyo Kyamusugulwa

Early 2025, the often overlooked conflicts in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) hit [many international headlines](#). In this region different armed groups have been vying for control with the Congolese state for decades already, for different reasons, with varying levels of intensity, with continuously shifting spheres of influence and power. Over the years, it has resulted in the – often repeated – displacement of millions of people. In the first months of 2025, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) was estimated to be [above 7 million](#). Goma and Bukavu, the two biggest cities in the east are meanwhile occupied by the *Alliance Fleuve du Congo/Mouvement 23* (AFC/M23) for around a year, and so are large parts of the surrounding territories. Various efforts to restore peace have been undertaken: In July 2025, the DRC and the AFC/M23 signed a [Declaration of Principles in Doha](#), led by Qatar. Last December, [the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity between the DRC and Rwanda](#) were signed, reaffirming the commitment to the Peace Agreement signed in June, 2025. But

despite these efforts, fighting between AFC/M23 on the one hand, and the Congolese army and different non-state armed groups (generally referred to as 'Wazalendo' – Swahili for 'patriots') continues.

It is notable that during the 2012 advance of M23, the US, EU and regional actors jointly exerted political and economic pressure to halt the advances, but in today's world the international cooperation in this regard is weaker and less united, making efforts more scattered and less powerful and effective. Despite the various – scattered – mediation efforts, durable peace is not within reach. On the contrary.

AFC/M23 keeps expanding its zone of control, and is increasingly installing its own administration and governance structures. The humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate: In December 2025, the UN Group of Experts reported '[an alarming surge in widespread and systematic attacks against civilians, and in conflict-related sexual violence](#)' and noted that all warring parties have been implicated in violations of human rights. At the same time, humanitarian actions are largely underfunded: For 2025, the [Humanitarian Response Plan covered only 24% of the planned requirements](#). But interventions are not only hampered by a lack of funding. Actors also frequently face insecurity, [with 626 incidents reported in 2025 affecting humanitarian actors](#). Although the situation remains alarming, international attention has meanwhile dwindled.

In the absence of the state, non-state actors are often assumed to step in to provide basic public services (see for instance [Krasner and Risse 2014](#)), including justice and security, but also education, health care, infrastructure, or livelihood support. This short paper explores how the conflict affects the provision of some of these services, for IDPs, but also for members of host communities who are often among the first actors to provide humanitarian support when formal support is lacking. Yet, they are also affected themselves by the conflict and the insecurity that ensues from it. We are largely drawing on research that we have conducted with IDPs in the east of the DRC since 2014.

Security

Security is the most basic need for people in conflict settings and a primary driver of displacement. Upon AFC/M23's arrival in the city of Goma, the group was keen to give the impression of life retaking normalcy, with no need to be displaced. There were also signals that other armed self-defence groups would organise themselves from within the camps. IDPs were forced to leave the camps, and the camp infrastructures were destroyed. IDPs had to return to their villages, deprived of humanitarian assistance. Families walked hundreds of kilometers to reach their villages, emptied of inhabitants and without means of subsistence. Given that government authorities no longer exercise control over these areas, security has become subjective, despite claims by the movement that [areas under their control are peaceful](#). Supporters of AFC/M23 feel relatively safe, while those accused of collaboration or sympathy with the government army or other non-state armed groups are threatened, arbitrarily detained, disappear, and sometimes [even get killed](#). Transmobile livelihoods, [that are often indispensable for IDPs' survival](#), are constrained because people who move between areas controlled by different groups risk being seen as spies or collaborators of the other side. Areas outside AFC/M23 control are therefore not necessarily safer.

Justice

The arrival of AFC/M23 in Goma and Bukavu, led many state officials to flee. As a result, the statutory justice system has stopped functioning. Meanwhile the AFC/M23 movement established a de facto system of justice, administered by its political and military staff. Conflict-resolution centers operate as arbitration mechanisms, primarily for land and family disputes, debt matters, and acts of violence. They issue arbitral decisions rather than judicial judgments because they lack legally appointed judges, and their decisions lack legally binding force. The dispute resolution process generally lasts a few days, and the procedures are less formal than those for a court judgment. To enforce compliance, the movement sometimes resorts to policing by its armed elements.

The majority of people we met expressed a negative perception of this justice provision, believing it often favors relatives or supporters of the movement. This is quite similar to general sentiments about the state justice: [Many people believe that state justice is only for the ones who are rich or well-connected to the powerful in society.](#) As a result, some prefer to handle their problems on their own, using force, while others choose to resolve their disputes within the family. When cases are between civilians, civil society actors play an important role in dispute mediation, both in M23-held areas and elsewhere..

[In areas that are formally still administered through state justice, the situation is equally challenging.](#) In one rural community with a strong presence of another armed group, a traditional chief told us that he is unable to administer justice in cases that involve members of armed groups, as they do not accept his authority. Many of the IDPs we meet assume that no justice can be found for the human rights abuses they have faced by armed group members, and fear acts of retaliation if they would speak out: *'The only option for a civilian, is to get away from them'*, a respondent explained to one of our researchers (interview, April 2024).

Education

Due to a lack of shelter opportunities, displaced families sometimes resort to schools or churches. Classrooms are converted into temporary accommodation. Teaching continues in the same rooms after the partial evacuation of the room by the displaced occupants. This happened in the outskirts of Goma for instance at the primary school of Kanyaruchinya prior to AFC/M23's take-over: Pupils attended classes from 7:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., while in the afternoon and at night, the classrooms were occupied by displaced families. This situation severely disrupted school activities for both displaced children and those from host communities. In some schools, schedules were shortened, while in others, classes were organized on a rotational basis. Extracurricular activities were almost entirely suspended.

The situation worsened when AFC/M23 rebels occupied the cities of Goma and Bukavu, as well as all IDP sites located in Goma's outskirts.

Although some school authorities have fled, the majority of teachers remain in the occupied areas. They are still paid by the central government and continue teaching. They need to meet requirements set by the Ministry of Education in Kinshasa, while they are also supposed to hand over school fees to the rebel authorities. Whereas the central government introduced free primary education for all Congolese children from 2019 onwards, AFC/M23 obliges parents to pay 10,000 Congolese francs (around 4.2 \$) per child per month. Of this amount, the movement takes 20%. Schools are obliged to pay this amount for all enrolled students, including those whose parents are unable to pay. A school principal in Goma interviewed on January 8, 2026, stated:

'We are required to pay the 20% of the free education bonus for every child, [...] even when parents cannot pay. Sometimes we have to draw from the school's funds to cover these expenses, because they are mandatory. [...] For them, it is also a way to survive.'

The situation is particularly difficult for displaced and returned children whose parents have no or limited livelihood opportunities. When parents are unable to pay these fees, their children are expelled from schools and deprived of their fundamental right to education.

Congolese (civil) society as service provider

Conflict and insecurity - just like displacement - are protracted in the east of the DRC. The intensification of conflicts throughout 2025 has reduced the presence of and possibilities for foreign aid actors to engage in the provision of basic services. Large areas of the eastern provinces are not under government control, and a number of aid organisations have withdrawn or suspended their activities due to insecurity or funding limitations. Joint and consolidated efforts by international actors to end the conflict are largely lacking.

In this short piece we have shown that the provision of basic services by both the state and non-state armed groups is often inadequate. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that Congolese IDPs are fully deprived of services and lack assistance. In our research we come across numerous

informal initiatives at grassroots levels that contribute to the provision of basic services and the realisation of fundamental rights: Civil society actors mediate in conflicts, neighbourhood guards gather to provide protection, schools and churches offer shelter to displaced, and fellow Congolese step in to share their resources and provide support to people who are more in need than they are themselves. In the conflict settings of the DRC, [as in many other crisis settings](#), they are the indispensable providers of services and of the (humanitarian) assistance that is needed to realise these services.

Caroliën Jacobs is assistant professor at Leiden University, the Netherlands. She conducts socio-legal research on displacement related to conflict and climate change.

Delu Lusambya is a PhD researcher in Humanitarian Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He is currently finalizing his PhD thesis on humanitarian governance and accountability in the DRC.

Patrick Milabyo Kyamusugulwa is professor at the Higher Institute of Medical Techniques – Bukavu, DRC, and director of the Social Science Centre of African Development-KUTAFITI. He conducts research on local governance, community participation and humanitarian issues.

This topical paper is part of the special series on ‘Internal Displacement in a Changing World Order’, led by the [Internal Displacement Research Programme](#) at the RLI. The experts contributing to this series assess how rapid shifts in contemporary politics, plummeting levels of humanitarian aid and escalating global crises are impacting displacement-affected communities. The series ties into the launch in April 2026 of a 45-chapter [“Handbook of Internal Displacement”](#) that comprehensively addresses this issue.

Selected Bibliography

Jacobs, C. *et al.* (2020) *Figurations of Displacement in the DRC*, TRAFIG Working Paper. 4. Bonn. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5841860>

Jacobs, C., *et al.* (2024). *Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and access to justice in eastern DRC*. Just Future DRC Report no 3. Leiden University and KUTAFITI

Krasner, S.D. and Risse, T. (2014). "External actors, state-building and service provision in areas of limited statehood: Introduction," *Governance* 27(4): 545-567. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12065>.

Posada, A. and Ahimbisibwe, L. (2025). *Supporting mutual aid: what the evidence tells us*. ALNAP paper. London: ALNAP/ODI Global. Available at: <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/supporting-mutualaid-what-the-evidence-tells-us-pdf/>.

UN Group of Experts (2025). *Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. UNSC, 30 December 2025. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/858>.