

# ICRC: careful analysis is the key

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**In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) combines its protection and assistance activities and focuses on ‘priority zones’ where armed actors (the national army or armed opposition groups) are present.**

In order to ensure that the men, women and children affected by the conflict and displacement in eastern DRC receive the protection and assistance they are entitled to, ICRC endeavours to learn from past experience and analyse patterns of movement more precisely. Its field staff engage with communities in order to gain a better understanding of the threats they are facing, both physical and economic, and devise practical and effective ways of addressing them.

It is essential to try to take into consideration the whole context in which internal displacement occurs: those who flee, those who cannot flee or decide to stay behind for other reasons, and those who return. While displacement can exacerbate the vulnerabilities of conflict-affected communities, displaced individuals do not necessarily face greater hardship than those who are not displaced.

In the Kivus, ICRC is particularly active in territories that play host to significant numbers of displaced people. It strives to ensure greater respect for the rights of people at risk and encourages authorities and parties to the conflict to fulfil their obligations. It endeavours to prevent or put an end to violations of international humanitarian law that have an impact on civilians. It often works in partnership with the DRC Red Cross carrying out activities designed to reduce communities’ exposure to risk. And it seeks to bring people’s most pressing concerns to the attention of the authorities while also providing aid directly to those who need it most.

## Analysis is crucial

There are at least four main types of internal displacement apparent in the DRC: ‘reactive’ displacement in response to an actual attack or specific event; ‘preventive’

displacement in anticipation or fear of an attack or abuses; ‘pendulum’ displacement when people return to their home areas either in the day-time or intermittently; and ‘itinerant’ displacement when displaced people move continually from one place to another, sometimes in search of humanitarian assistance.

A thorough analysis of displacement dynamics can help humanitarian workers know for instance where the better-off tend to flee and where those with few means usually go. Their destinations are often quite different, with the former, for example, more likely to be able to seek shelter with relatives in a big town. It is easy to assume that those who have walked for days are the ones in the greatest needs. This may be true in some contexts but in certain communities in DRC the most needy have little choice but to hide in a forest or in a village near where they live. It is also important to know if people are being displaced for the first time or if they have been repeatedly displaced. Often those fleeing for the first time as a result of an attack have had no opportunity to take anything with them, and have not developed coping mechanisms.

Humanitarian workers must take care not to draw unwarranted conclusions, as ostensibly similar situations may give rise to very different consequences for people. For example, some people who have been repeatedly displaced may have built up their resilience and coping strategies while others who have also been repeatedly displaced may be exhausted, vulnerable and unable to cope.

According to a 2008 UNICEF/CARE report, an estimated 70% of displaced people are living with host families in the DRC.<sup>1</sup> The host families are often as vulnerable or overburdened as those they take in. In order to

establish priorities the analysis of displacement should not only look at the needs of the displaced but also consider all those who suffer the effects of displacement, including those left behind, those who are unable to flee, and residents taking in displaced people.

The circumstances and needs of each of these groups can then be compared with those of the overall population to determine which needs are most urgent as the basis for ensuring that action taken is impartial and needs-based. And it is of course helpful to know whether economic push-and-pull factors were a significant factor in displacement or whether violations of the law, or the fear of such offences – such as attacks upon life and property, or forcible recruitment into the armed forces – were the primary reasons for displacement.

## Consultation and participation

The best strategies are often devised by displaced people themselves who often have valuable insights into how their circumstances could be improved. In any case, in order to determine where and how to take effective action, it is essential to engage in dialogue with the communities directly concerned. This takes time.

It should be borne in mind, however, that in an area such as the Kivus, where countless humanitarian activities have been carried out over many years (some of which, inevitably, may have been ill-conceived), it is extremely important that the dialogue not be superficial. In such areas, local communities are well aware that all too often humanitarian organisations respond to problems simply by distributing aid. There is a risk, therefore, that some people might try to persuade the aid organisation to take a certain course of action while others might give answers that they believe humanitarian workers want to hear. It is necessary to listen to as many different voices as possible and to be sensitive to the nuances.

It is also important to ensure that displaced people have access to reliable information, so that they can make constructive proposals concerning action taken on their behalf or make informed decisions on how to manage their circumstances. For example, in one area of North Kivu, ICRC had planned to distribute seed, tools and household essentials to recently displaced people. Before the distribution took place, the local community became aware that operations by the national army against armed groups in the area were imminent. They requested that the distribution be cancelled for fear that it would attract armed pillaging.

Engaging in dialogue with arms carriers is also essential. ICRC's interactions with arms carriers are frequent and varied, ranging from notifying them of ICRC movements to discussing allegations of inappropriate behaviour among the rank and file and to providing training in the basic rules of international humanitarian law. Exchanges are inevitably a little less formal with armed opposition groups than with national armed forces but the issues raised with them are of a similar range and character.

### Assistance as protection

Enhancing the capacity of individuals to make themselves safer must be one of the goals of humanitarian work. To achieve this, it has to be recognised that individuals are likely to know better than anyone else how to deal with their own problems. And just as people often do not distinguish in their daily lives between what they do to protect themselves and what they do in order to assure their livelihoods, agencies too need to recognise the inherent link between self-protection strategies and subsistence activities. For instance, food for work or cash for work on road-building programmes not only directly benefits those who do the work but also results in easier (and safer) access to local markets and therefore better prices for produce. By improving the roads, communities may also reduce the risk of being looted as their trucks can move faster and therefore are less likely to be a target of ambushes.

Many of the worst atrocities occur in very remote areas. Improving transport links can make some areas less isolated and therefore more likely to have officials stationed there and to be patrolled by UN peacekeepers – which clearly is likely to make them more secure.

### Challenges ahead

ICRC has made some progress in helping displacement-affected communities in North Kivu but challenges remain. One such challenge is the increasing mobility of displaced people and the complexity of their concerns. The labels 'refugee', 'urban IDP', 'host family' and 'economic migrant' may be convenient for aid workers, policymakers and researchers but they can often be misleading in that they seldom describe a person's overall situation. For example, how do you categorise and then support a family from a village in North Kivu which has some members who commute between Goma town and Rwanda selling produce, and others who left after an armed attack and moved to Kinshasa in search of a safer and better life? Where does internal displacement begin or migration start?

Are people who share their time between Goma and Rwanda refugees or internally displaced people? What about the group of people from a village that has been looted who decide to go to a bigger town, having heard that displaced people can make money there? Are their motives economic or related to armed violence?

Both the causes of displacement and the movement of the people themselves are diverse and characterised by mixed flows, multifarious motivations and multiple labels. The challenge for the humanitarian community is to take the time to sort these out and adapt its response to the complexity it finds.

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1. See 'Internal Displacement in North Kivu: Hosting, Camps, and Coping Mechanisms', 2008 <http://tinyurl.com/McDowell-DRC-2008>