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 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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