

'Everyone for themselves' in DRC's North Kivu

Luisa Ryan and Dominic Keyzer

While the international donor community has been trying to engage with DRC by partnering with the government to implement the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, communities in DRC, especially those displaced in war-affected areas, continue to have to look out for themselves.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) will feature at the top of most lists for poor governance, political instability or insecurity, and at the bottom of those ranking social and economic development, social service coverage or transparent government. The distinction of 'fragile state' comes not only from hosting one of the world's deadliest conflicts and displaying relatively weakened state authority but also from the impact that the combination of these two factors has on preventing the country from managing conflict, meeting the resulting humanitarian needs and achieving a sustainable development trajectory.

Communities across DRC experience frequent and extreme disruptions to their individual physical integrity, their family livelihoods and their social cohesion. In spite of this, most communities display great resilience; in North Kivu, this resilience has been tested by prolonged outbursts of conflict and several waves of mass displacement. Mass population movement affects government services, including health, education and protection. Thus in North Kivu, the government has extremely limited capacity to take care of IDPs, resulting in local and international NGOs and UN agencies taking the bulk of the strain. While this may appear to be little different from how humanitarian operations are run in other disaster-affected countries, the Congolese government offers only limited provision of basic social services even when conditions are optimal.

The emergency in the Kivus has now stretched over two decades and the government has demonstrated little will to change. Many view the government as predatory and self-interested; indeed, aid organisations tend to operate around the government rather

than with it. In communities unaffected by recent conflict, health staff, teachers and members of the security forces are unpaid. This obviously reduces the quality of service, with the recipient population expected to cover the salaries for which the government is – on paper – responsible. As the conflict in the Kivus continues, creating more IDPs, the humanitarian and development communities need to take into account the underlying weakness of the Congolese state. Meeting the short-term needs of IDPs cannot eclipse the need to strengthen the governance mechanisms that should be contributing to their long-term support, (re)integration and well-being.

In 2012 World Vision conducted field research in three sites in North Kivu, all of which host IDP camps.¹ Unsurprisingly, the presence of IDPs and their effect on host communities were frequently discussed by focus group participants who included both the displaced and locals. The main issues raised by IDPs included their inability to return home and difficulties of integrating into their new communities. None of the participants was housed in official IDP camps. Many IDPs in the focus groups had been displaced for many years but still identified themselves as displaced even when they have no intention of relocating again. Indeed, as we were conducting this research at a time of further displacement, many IDPs commented that they are tired of moving, either lacking the will to move their families once again or simply with nowhere else to go.

Access to and use of land

Thus land was also a key issue for IDPs. Their land in their home village had often been re-allocated to those with kinship ties to the

May 2013

village elite, meaning they had nothing to return to, and – without traditional or kinship ties to the ruling family of their new village – they did not qualify for a plot to farm where they were. Although enforcing government policies securing land rights and access to justice would help, none of the participants reported any contact with elected government officials trying to resolve their displacement or support their integration into a new community. Traditional leaders appeared to have control of land regulation and some villagers reported their leaders selling their farmland without consultation. This practice, while linked to the immediate conflicts that cause mass displacement of communities, is symptomatic of longer-term weak governance.

Land rights were a concern for all participants, and some of the challenges articulated related directly to the violent unrest. Being displaced from their land removes communities from the traditional social and political structures that provide protection, and can place additional strain on the security and justice services in their host communities. Some communities reported that the deployment of the national armed forces to North Kivu had resulted in the army taking over their land. Rather than protecting the population, soldiers had commandeered farm plots and were working the fields themselves. Soldiers were preventing the population from accessing their own crops and were even selling produce back to the villagers. None of the participants reported any official intervention or advocacy on their behalf; indeed only one village had protested and was met with beatings by the soldiers.

The national armed forces themselves are sometimes implicated in displacement, as further evidence of the weak governance of the security sector institutions.

With the presence of armed groups villagers feared forced recruitment and sexual and other violence. Sexual and gender-based violence has been endemic in eastern Congo. When women are attacked, there is little recourse in a system where unpaid police and judiciary will find for the highest bidder. Participants reported not even attempting to get justice. This additional fear was preventing some women from farming whatever land was still accessible. This affected the food and money available to the family and is again the direct result of a fragile state unable to pay the salary of its security forces and judiciary.

When displaced families cannot farm, either because of insecurity in their home locations or inability to access land in their host communities, they begin to suffer from increased malnutrition and cannot earn money. Without money, they cannot pay for school or medical fees. When fewer people can pay, the price may go up so that teachers' and health workers' salaries can



Congolese refugees return to DRC in March 2013 after fighting between rival M23 factions calms down. Years of experience have taught them to flee with as much as they can carry.

continue to be paid. When children are forced from school because their parents cannot afford to pay, they may be easy targets for recruitment into armed groups. While the immediate humanitarian needs of IDPs must be addressed, for aid to have a lasting impact the ability and interest of the Congolese state to provide basic services to its citizens, including IDPs, must be increased. Land inaccessibility, service provision and government fragility are interlinked.

Hosted or hosting

Those not identifying themselves as displaced said that hosting displaced people could be a major drain on communities which already have very little. Participants in this research reported little to no contact with elected officials, and corrupt and ineffective traditional systems. As local service-providers are rarely paid their government salaries, it is up to the communities to provide for them by paying informal fees. Some participants described themselves as “orphaned” by the state, a heavy indictment in this kinship identity-orientated society. While some IDP camps are located alongside established communities, those in the camps can get access to high-quality services through the international community that are not available to local villagers. This great imbalance between what the international community can provide to the displaced and what the government service providers routinely offer causes the local population to feel disadvantaged; some people reported pretending to be IDPs to access health and education.

Some IDPs hosted in communities rather than camps may receive preferential treatment from government services. For example, participants from some villages indicated that IDPs received free medical treatment, free education for the children or were even housed in the community school. It is not clear, however, whether the decision to provide IDPs with free care came from the service providers themselves or their international partners. Conversely, in other communities state health and education

staff know that IDPs, especially recent arrivals, cannot afford fees and so do not allow them access. There is no functional governance infrastructure for IDPs to appeal to when this occurs. Adding to the difficulties arising from this aspect of state fragility, the government had a very limited response to the latest humanitarian crisis, and even these distributions of assistance were further limited by a lack of government access to vulnerable areas.

Conclusions

The latest waves of IDPs cannot be seen in isolation. Indeed, they join countless numbers of their kin who have fled their villages only to be integrated, more or less, into existing communities. But increased competition for access to basic services, and aid directed solely to IDPs in very poor communities can then lead to intra-community tension. The local government seems incapable, and often unwilling, to lead and to provide solutions. A comment often repeated by focus group participants was “*Chaqu’un pour soi*” (‘Everyone for themselves’).

Displaced populations highlight the government’s inability to provide services and leadership but can also draw focus away from the underlying gaps in governance when donors focus on emergency aid. Basic government services have been weak for a long time, deteriorating from a low starting point during the Mobutu regime. Political capital has been exhausted by the conflict, which means there is very little room left to focus on actual service delivery and improvements in governance. Due to ongoing insecurity, instability and fragility, Congolese citizens rarely look to their government for help or leadership. The international community’s interventions in North Kivu must therefore take a two-pronged approach: both addressing the shorter-term humanitarian needs of displaced populations and improving governance mechanisms and accountability. The government and UN Stabilisation strategies have attempted to address these longer-term governance issues but have collectively failed to address the key

May 2013

governance reforms necessary for successful stabilisation. Revisions of these strategies must reflect the principles of the New Deal, or they will continue to have little impact on the long-term situation of insecurity and displacement.

In a region where the population and international community both have very low expectations of government officials, and the government itself makes little effort to change this, consecutive periods of internal forced migration can set back meaningful state-building. The Congolese government already demonstrates limited accountability to its people, and successive waves of displaced people may have exacerbated this, as the focus of both the population and international donors is on shorter-term humanitarian relief.

Continuing displacement can magnify the international community's tendency to replicate, side-line or take over the

responsibilities of fragile governments, effectively letting them off the hook. Addressing the development needs of the people of North Kivu will require a great deal of time, commitment and political capital. In the end, the Congolese state must show will and build capacity not only to resolve and manage conflict amongst its population and end the causes of displacement but also to consistently improve services and lead humanitarian interventions to reinforce these services when needed.

Luisa Ryan luisa_caitlin@hotmail.com is an independent consultant. Dominic Keyzer domkeyzer@gmail.com was Advocacy Manager for World Vision DRC, Eastern Region. www.worldvision.org

1. The aim of the study was to determine if a project called Community Voice and Action (CVA), successful in other African countries, could also be applied in the Kivus. CVA works with communities and local service providers (health, education and protection) to jointly evaluate their social infrastructure and advocate to local government for improvement.