Start Fund Recommendations for Anticipatory and Response Projects for Displacement in the DRC

The DRC has experienced decades of conflict which has resulted in a complex and long-standing humanitarian crisis that has resulted in millions of deaths and the displacement of over 6 million people within the country. Alongside internally displaced persons (IDPs), the DRC also hosts half a million refugees from neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2023).

Since 2022, violent clashes and civilian killings have intensified in the mining provinces of North Kivu and Ituri as non-state armed groups fight against the government and other rebel factions, forcing millions more out of their homes and temporary accommodation into refugee camps and host communities (Aljazeera, 2022).

The following recommendations are taken from 26 Start Fund Alerts and their corresponding projects raised between 2014-2022. The recommendations come from the following organisations: Action against Hunger, Action Aid, AFEDEM, CAFOD, Care, Christian Aid, Humanity, HelpAge, MIDEFEHOPS, Oxfam, Save the Children, Solidarités International, Tearfund, Trócaire, War Child and Welthungerhilfe. They took place in the provinces of North Kivu (10), South Kivu (6), Ituri (4), Maniema (2), Kasai (2) and Mai-Ndombe (1).
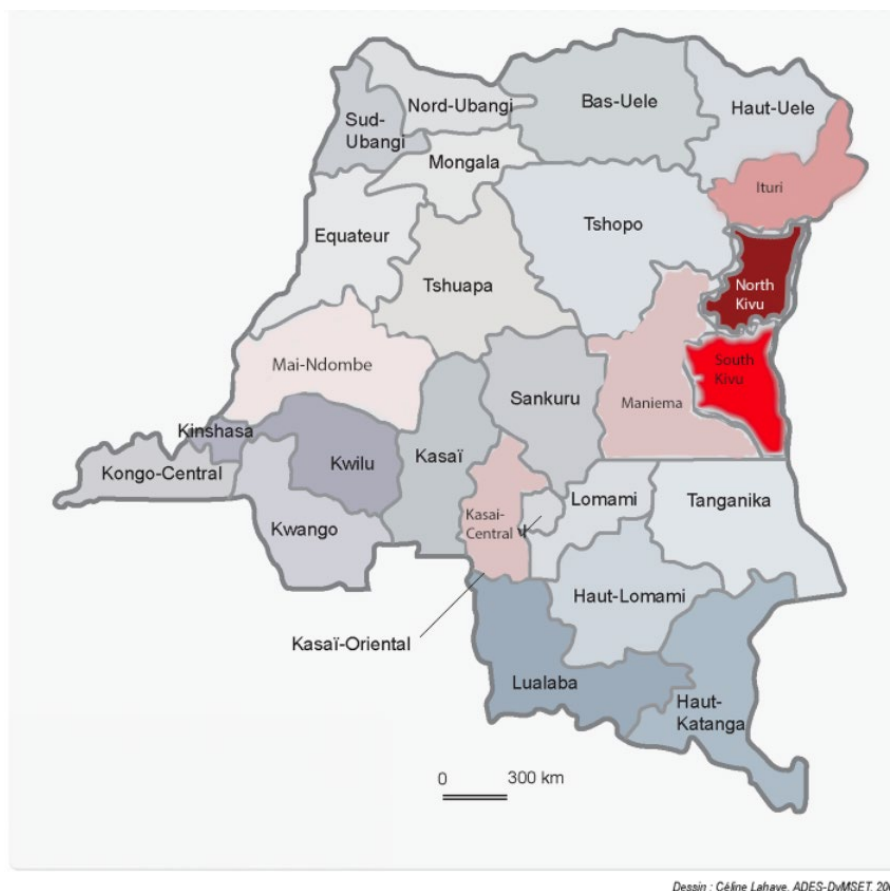

Figure 1. Heatmap of the DRC with dark red indicating the highest number of alerts and light pink the lowest.

1. A Network of Trusted Providers Needs to be Established.

A recurring thematic concern evident across various projects pertains to the imperative of relying on credible service providers when delivering services to IDP and host communities. Numerous projects discussed the challenges encountered in identifying providers capable of consistently delivering services punctually and in a secure manner. Predominantly, challenges surfaced in the domain of financial services, particularly electronic cash transfers, where selected providers failed to execute the contracted services. This lapse, in turn, compelled several projects to contend with substantial amounts of physical currency, significantly escalating the risks of theft and violence directed towards both the project team and beneficiaries.

Furthermore, complications with transportation providers manifested in the impairment, loss, or perilous delays of both food and non-food items (NFIs). Over time, there appears to be a discernible reduction in the incidence of such issues, with none being mentioned in projects post-2018, indicative of the establishment of a network comprising trustworthy providers in the geographical area. Recommendations put forth by organisations operating in the region underscore the necessity for new projects to engage providers who have undergone scrutiny and validation by other organisations, possessing a nuanced understanding of the crisis's nature and the requisite response.

> *"After being let down by two telecommunications companies, a decision was taken to change the intervention method to the provision of physical cash being given directly to chosen beneficiaries…the evening before the cash distribution was due to take place, and despite security procedures being in place, criminal action (armed robbery) was taken against Caritas Uvira, local Parish and CAFOD staff members and the cash deemed for distribution to the beneficiaries was stolen alongside laptops, cameras, personal effects and items from the parish church." (CAFOD, 2015)*

2. Don't Forget about Host Communities

The prolonged duration of the crisis in the DRC necessitates the acknowledgment of the vulnerability of host communities, thereby warranting their inclusion within beneficiary criteria. Given that specific regions bear the brunt of the protracted conflict, communities therein endure prolonged consequences of war and displacement. This extended period of hardship has led to the debilitation of infrastructure, diminished resources, and adversely affected livelihoods. Notably, certain projects have highlighted the host communities' pre-existing vulnerabilities, including high food insecurity and a dearth of clean water, which were exacerbated upon the arrival of IDPs, intensifying health challenges and escalating conflicts between host communities and IDPs.

Project recommendations underscore the imperative of ensuring the equitable consideration of host communities. This entails the inclusion of community members in beneficiary assessments, incorporating host families into the distribution of rations, cash, or NFIs. A favourable approach involves leveraging local markets when feasible, contributing to the stimulation of the local economy and providing tangible benefits to host communities, thereby mitigating tensions.

Integration initiatives and peace-brokering sessions emerge as crucial components, fostering mutual understanding of perspectives and challenges between host communities and IDPs. The analysis discerns that projects which implement longer-term activities, such as constructing Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities and enhancing water infrastructure, garner heightened support from host communities, thereby contributing to more impactful overall projects.

> *"The host population, like the IDPs, had the same issues of a lack of clean water and basic sanitation, but as a result of the project this has been solved. They were both exposed to water borne diseases but with the project, they are reduced."*
> *(TEARFUND, 2018)*

3. Choice is Key!

The denial of choice emerges as one of the initial hardships during and immediately following a crisis, compelling individuals to make decisions based on survival rather than personal preference. Humanitarian projects, cognisant of this predicament, ought to incorporate choice into their programming, thereby reinstating a semblance of normality and dignity into the lives of IDPs. Notably, various projects in the DRC have endeavoured to facilitate choice by organising NFI and food fairs. These events empower both IDPs and host communities to independently select the items they require, a departure from predetermined allocations. Beyond mitigating duplication concerns, this approach contributes to imbuing a sense of normalcy among IDPs.

An illustrative example underscoring the consequences of neglecting choice was a project implemented in 2015. In this instance, IDPs were allocated a ration of cornflour without beneficiary consultation, resulting in its unfamiliarity and unpopularity. Subsequently, the cornflour was traded for less nutritious but more familiar food alternatives. The significance of choice is further evident in beneficiary selection processes. Recommendations from organisations operating in the DRC advocate for fostering collaboration between IDPs and host communities to identify individuals deemed vulnerable and most in need of support. This collaborative approach serves to mitigate animosity towards those selected and ensures that less-visible segments of the population are not marginalised.

4. Security needs to be Prioritised.

2023 has witnessed a resurgence in the intensity of conflict and terror within Eastern DRC, Greater Katanga region, Mai-Ndombe and Tshopo provinces, with the notorious M23 rebel group actively perpetrating atrocities against civilians, including murder, rape, and other human rights abuses (UN News, Dec 2023). Those compelled to seek refuge in IDP camps or safer host communities carry the burden of trauma and the constant fear of further attacks. In response to this dire situation, it is imperative for organisations conducting projects in the DRC to allocate resources to security, safeguarding both project workers and beneficiaries. Neglecting this imperative not only jeopardises safety but also denies traumatised individuals the opportunity to experience a sense of security.

Security insights derived from previous projects include the following recommendations:

1. **Safe Distribution Spaces:** When distributing cash or NFIs, it is crucial to conduct these activities in secure locations, preferably in proximity to the camp or host community, and to schedule distributions during daylight hours.
2. **Means of Distribution:** Where feasible, the distribution of money should be done electronically rather than in cash. Alternatively, vouchers or providing cash in instalments are considered viable options. Leveraging existing security measures in banks and government facilities, if available, is also advised.
3. **Contextual Security Analysis:** Conducting a comprehensive context analysis is essential to comprehend the security situation at the project site. This enables organisations to design projects with a focus on safety considerations and engage trusted security providers.
4. **Confidentiality of Beneficiary Information:** To mitigate risks, organisations are advised not to publicly post beneficiary lists, as doing so exposes named individuals and families to potential targeting.

5. Sensitisation and Psychological Support Activities are Essential.

Several projects emphasised the imperativeness of conducting sensitisation and awareness-raising sessions to provide empowering information to IDPs. Information dissemination encompassing budgeting, communicable diseases, and nutrition has proven instrumental in enhancing the impact of cash and NFI assistance. This became particularly pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic, where sessions around how to utilise WASH facilities effectively helped to curb the spread of the virus. Certain projects, in addition to in-person sessions, employed visual information sharing methods and utilised community radio platforms.

In addition to sensitisation sessions, psychological support emerges as an essential component to facilitate the recovery process for IDPs and host communities grappling with intense trauma. The omission of this critical aspect can engender further challenges for project teams, as exemplified by a 2017 project which aimed to repatriate individuals to their homes; however, fear and psychological trauma deterred people from staying in their homes at night, prompting them to choose public spaces or forested areas instead. Recognising this need, some projects

incorporated awareness-raising sessions and established safe spaces where individuals could seek support. Children were accorded particularpriority in several projects, integrating psychological support and play into their initiatives.

> *"The project has demonstrated the positive role that Child Friendly Spaces can have in contributing to better consideration of the psychological and emotional health of children"*
> *(AFEDEM, 2021)*

6. Cooperation and Collaboration are Key.

Several of the projects underscore the importance of fostering collaboration with local authorities, organisations, and populations to optimise the impact of initiatives while ensuring that they are grounded in experiential learning. Organisations emphasise the value of conducting thorough assessments before implementation to ensure that projects are not duplicating activities or resources whilst also helping to ascertain possible local partners in the area. Additionally, engaging preestablished providers is recognised as a strategic measure to mitigate instances of corruption or project failure, as delineated in point one. This collaborative and informed approach ensures that projects are not only well-informed but also strategically aligned with the context and needs of the communities they aim to serve.