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Leveraging networks to overcome displacement

Urban internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Caitlin Katsiaficas, Carolien Jacobs & Martin Wagner

In the quest for sustainable solutions to record global displacement, promoting displaced persons' self-reliance and supporting them alongside host communities in regions of displacement have become buzzwords in global and European policy discussions. But despite such pledges, TRAFIG research in Bukavu, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) finds that internally displaced persons (IDPs) in urban settings are largely ignored and unassisted by the state and international humanitarian and development interventions—and are proactively seeking their own solutions. The lack of institutionalised assistance means that IDPs mostly depend on the solidarity of others to be or become self-reliant. In this context, networks are a particularly important source of support and include assistance with locating housing and finding a job in Bukavu and with maintaining and harvesting crops in communities of origin. However, even with the benefits that these connections can bring, IDPs face serious challenges related to their displacement and contend with multiple types of limbo, making it difficult for many to truly overcome situations of protracted displacement. Findings thus point to the need for policies and practices that support urban IDPs in the DRC by helping them nurture and leverage their networks to unlock opportunities.

Key findings and policy implications

- 1 While networks constitute a significant source of support, for too many IDPs, such assistance is only temporary or insufficient to really overcome displacement. Humanitarian and development initiatives should aim to bolster resilient connections, which include informal (e.g. host families) and formal (e.g. churches and labour associations) networks.
- 2 Many urban IDPs leverage resources in their home communities to make a living in the city. Development actors should support IDPs' efforts to maintain ties with their communities of origin and safeguard mobility between Bukavu and the surrounding rural regions.

- 3 Not every IDP has a network—or, for fear of stigmatisation, wants to utilise their network. EU assistance should help urban IDPs strengthen and leverage their networks by reinforcing existing connections and building new ones. Current approaches to forced displacement and access to solutions need to be better equipped to support those strategies.
- 4 The complex and long-standing nature of displacement in eastern DRC calls for increased attention and assistance from policymakers in Europe and beyond to help IDPs move from temporary to more permanent solutions.

1 Introduction

2019 was yet another year of record global displacement, capping a decade characterised by surging internal and protracted displacement. Both of these trends call for increased international engagement to ensure that people can find sustainable solutions. As shown in Figure 1, more than half (57%) of displaced people do not cross an international border but instead stay within their country of origin, and are considered internally displaced persons (IDPs).



45.7m IDPs

33.8m refugees & asylum seekers



Figure 1: Record global displacement at the end of 2019, with the majority staying in their origin country

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Sources: UNHCR, 2020; IDMC, 2020

In this challenging landscape, the international community’s search for solutions has focussed on bridging humanitarian and development aid to support host countries and communities and promote refugees’ self-reliance, as reflected in the [Global Compact on Refugees](#). This language is echoed in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum that the European Commission introduced in September 2020 and which member states are now negotiating: It aims to create a coordinated, comprehensive EU approach to migration that includes “helping refugees residing in third countries,” “[scaling] up support to help those in need and their host communities” and “fostering sustainable development-oriented solutions” for displaced persons ([European Commission, 2020](#)). But while refugees are high on the global migration agenda, IDPs are less visible. Although they make up the majority of displaced persons, IDPs are assumed to be under the primary protection of their government—even though in many instances, their government is unable or unwilling to support them.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country of 87 million ([World Bank, n.d.](#)), sustained political instability, conflict and violence have led millions to flee their homes in search of safety. As of the end of 2019, approximately one of every thirteen people displaced across the globe is Congolese. The vast majority of displaced Congolese—87 per cent as of 2019—remain within their country (see Figure 2). This *policy brief* analyses the policy implications of empirical data collected in Bukavu, a major regional city in eastern DRC, as part of the Transnational Figurations of Displacement (TRAFIG) project. TRAFIG researchers who surveyed 500 IDPs found that those in urban DRC rely heavily on networks of new and old contacts, including relatives, friends and business associates. However, it is not just the size but also the quality of these networks that is particularly important for facilitating access to opportunity. Strong networks may offer sufficient support to overcome displacement, but for too many IDPs, such assistance is only temporary or unable to provide sufficient support to truly overcome displacement. This *policy brief* suggests that networks should be understood as possible tools for finding solutions to long-term displacement. It concludes with considerations for EU policymakers as they endeavour to assist displaced persons who remain outside of Europe in finding sustainable solutions, ultimately injecting life into buzzwords like ‘self-reliance’ and ‘sustainable solutions’.



Figure 2: The vast majority of displaced Congolese remained within the country at the end of 2019
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Sources: [UNHCR, 2020](#); [IDMC, 2020](#)

2. Root causes of displacement in the DRC

“The first time I came to live in Bukavu was in 2014. [...] Five months later, the Congolese Army had regained control in many of the villages [...]. So, I returned with my family. In 2015, our village was again invaded by rebels [...]. Together with some others, I was forced by the rebels to transport the looted goods and thus became a slave in the bush for six months. [...] My two friends and I decided to take the risk and escape instead of returning. [...] I decided to go to a maternal aunt who lives close to the airport. [...] After consultation with my aunt and my parents, I decided not to return to [my village] but instead to join my elder brother in Bukavu and await peace there.”
40-year-old divorced father of two and former farmer

Political instability, conflict and violence have spurred displacement in the DRC since the early 1990s. Despite an end to full-scale civil war in 2003, insecurity and violence in parts of the country continue, with the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri in the east of the country particularly impacted in recent years. Violence and insecurity have led to multiple and continuing waves of displacement: In the first half of 2020, the [International Displacement Monitoring Centre \(IDMC\)](#) reported more than 1.4 million new displacements related to conflict and violence. It is not uncommon for people to be displaced multiple times.

Despite the high level of violence in the DRC, seven in eight displaced people do not cross an external border and remain internally displaced. As of the end of 2019, approximately one in eight IDPs worldwide was Congolese¹ Rather than living in camps, most IDPs in the DRC self-settle and live in host communities such as in Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province and TRAFIG’s primary research site in the DRC. Bukavu, a city of over one million,² is home to IDPs and migrants from different territories in the province (as well as a few in North Kivu) and international humanitarian and United Nations agencies. Yet, nearly all of the assistance these organisations provide is given to those who live outside of the city.

Protracted displacement in eastern DRC

TRAFIG found that IDPs face multiple, interconnected kinds of limbo that can result in a protracted state of displacement (see Figure 3). Even though IDPs, who by definition remain in their country of origin, are able to work and move elsewhere in the country (security conditions permitting), many find it difficult to obtain a secure and long-term place to settle. Most IDPs have been displaced multiple times before coming to Bukavu, lacking a stable residency and moving in response to evolving circumstances outside of their control, such as changes in security conditions or their housing arrangements. This results in a spatial limbo with which many contend: IDPs may stay on the move for

1 This constitutes the third-highest number of IDPs in the world, after Syria and Colombia ([UNHCR, 2020](#); [IDMC, n.d.](#))

2 Based on population data provided from the mayor’s office in Bukavu.

years with only temporary housing. Meanwhile, returning is difficult or not an option for many. Related to this spatial instability, IDPs often experience socio-economic limbo. Many have lost resources due to the violence, including land, livestock, crops and/or houses, requiring them to start over. However, the challenge in starting over is to earn enough money in Bukavu to rent accommodation or provide for their family without support from others. Socio-economic precarity can lead young IDPs to wait to settle down and start a family, as they feel they will not be able to support a family or because prospective spouses view their situation negatively. This can result in a state of relational limbo, in which conditions hinder people from creating strong relationships or reuniting with nuclear family members. Hence, different types of limbo are interconnected and can make IDPs feel that their life is put on hold. To overcome protracted displacement, IDPs must surmount all of these limbos and attain more stability. One way out of limbo—or one way to compensate for some of this instability—is to leverage personal networks.

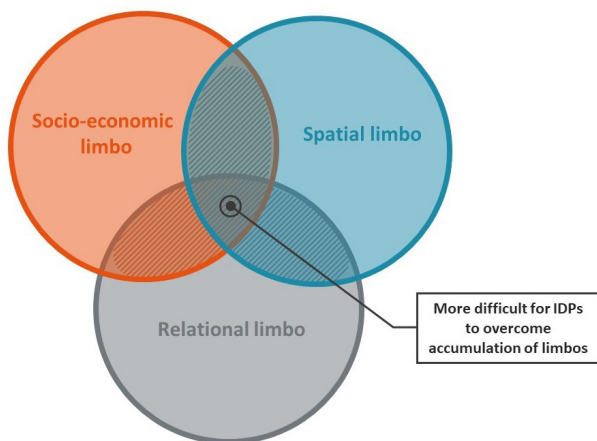


Figure 3: IDPs contend with multiple kinds of limbo
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3. How Congolese IDPs use networks to escape protracted displacement

“Upon arrival, we were first hosted by relatives of our neighbours from the village for a month.”
45-year-old mother of 11 who joined relatives in Bukavu




For many IDPs, personal contacts are the entry point into easier lives—yet not everyone has or wants to leverage a network. Most IDPs coming to Bukavu seek connections with relatives, friends, business associates or other contacts, as they believe that these connections will help them to find housing and employment and integrate into the community. Family members are particularly important in this regard, and IDPs may move to the city because they have a relative there. Many IDPs have limited contacts upon arrival, but one connection

can offer an entry point into further connections that may provide assistance. Again, it is not only the size of one’s network but also the quality that matters, as contacts may (or may not) be in a position to offer opportunities or further acquaintances. Following and building networks is not without its challenges. For instance, when arriving in the city, IDPs often depend on host families for housing—but these hosts often lack stable housing themselves, leaving IDPs in a vulnerable situation. Additionally, some IDPs, such as former rebels (including those forcibly recruited), victims of sexual violence and those accused of witchcraft, may avoid mobilising their networks out of fear of stigmatisation. Moreover, members of some ethnic groups may find it more or less challenging to establish ties and a source of support in the city.

For many IDPs, network support reaches far beyond the city of Bukavu to their home communities. Connections in the community of origin can be a significant source of support for IDPs, as they may help IDPs maintain and utilise assets. For instance, family members back home may cultivate land owned by their absent family member (the IDP) and share the harvest with them. IDPs may use this resource as sustenance for themselves or sell it in the city. They may visit their home community frequently to mobilise these rural assets. While these can be an important source of revenue and sustenance for IDPs with land to cultivate, IDPs must be able to stay connected to this land and receive support in cultivating it while they are in Bukavu. Security, logistical and other practical challenges may limit this option, as can the strength of their ties in their home community. The strategy of leveraging origin community assets also highlights the critical role of mobility between Bukavu and the origin community as a tool for securing such support.

African solidarity

How do longer-term Bukavu residents perceive IDPs? How willing are they to welcome newcomers, including those beyond one’s close relatives, friends or ethnic group? In explaining why they provide support, people in Bukavu often refer to a moral obligation deeply rooted in ‘African solidarity’.

-  Former IDPs who fled to Bukavu earlier may feel it is their duty to welcome newcomers, based on their own experience.
-  Long-term city residents who had been displaced when fighting took place in Bukavu may wish to reciprocate the hospitality they experienced.
-  Some cite a moral obligation to welcome strangers, including due to cultural or religious norms.

Source: Jacobs, C. et al. (2020)

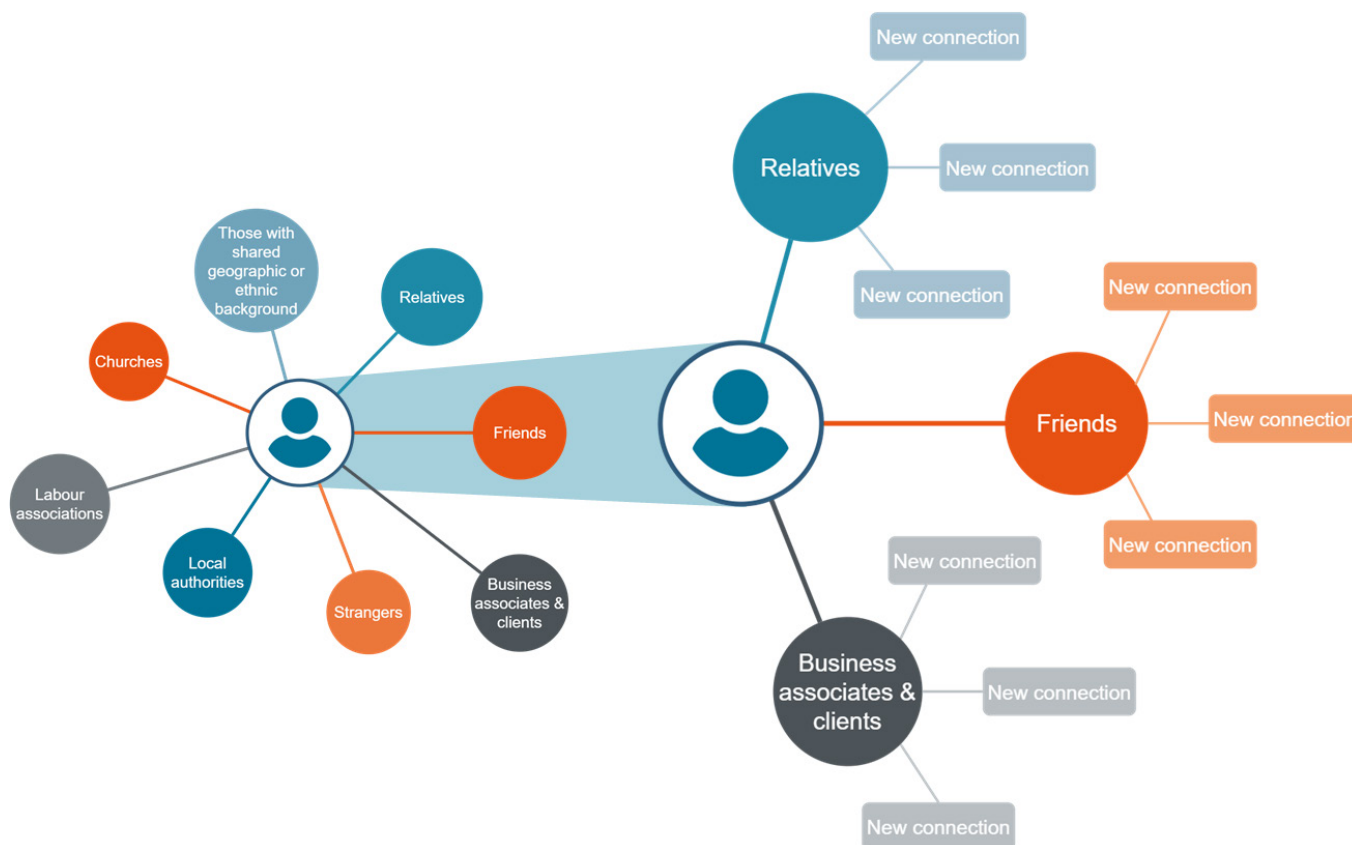


Figure 4: Networks and a chain of connectivity, whereby one connection can lead to others and ideally unlock opportunities
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“I have built up relationships with friends I met on the spot, neighbours. One of them helped me to join a group of workers (mason’s helpers) on construction sites. And I make a living from this work.”

One of many similar examples from respondents during focus group discussion

Over time, IDPs expand their networks by strengthening existing ties and building new ones; these alliances are key for accessing opportunities but can easily be ruptured. While close relatives frequently were the first connections that IDPs utilised upon arrival, these contacts catalysed a chain of connectivity that expanded and helped support their local integration. Solidarity among fellow IDPs from the same community of origin or whom they met when they fled may also help IDPs make their networks stronger once in Bukavu. IDPs often work to strengthen the weaker ties in their network, such as clients of their small businesses, with the aim of increasing the opportunities available to them. They might also build new ties: Several IDPs reported that (near) strangers helped them to find work, housing or education. While these alliances are an important part of IDPs’ survival strategies, there are difficulties inherent in depending on the support of others—especially when ties are rather distant—that underline the limitations of these connections and informal arrangements. For instance, if a source of support sees their circumstances change or even passes away, this can have considerable repercussions for the IDP they are assisting and can throw them back into a more vulnerable situation. Moreover, there are limits to the generosity of non-family ties as well as a possible danger of exploitation.

Beyond individual connections, more formalised networks can also help IDPs unlock opportunities. Churches, for instance, may provide some assistance to IDPs, and are both relatively easy for newcomers to connect with, and many IDPs trust in them. Meanwhile, labour associations can enable IDPs to expand their economic opportunities. In the Bukavu labour market, workers in a particular sector often form an association to provide services and obtain a higher price, better labour conditions and a larger customer base. Joining an association helps members access the labour market, find clients and understand how business is done in the local context—and, in doing so, helps IDPs to economically and socially integrate. While membership in such groups can be a valuable tool, many charge fees, which means that more vulnerable IDPs (i.e. those without enough capital to afford a fee) may be unable to access them.

The research findings show the importance of networks and mobility for overcoming protracted displacement. However, these strategies have their limits—and beg the question: How can European policymakers help more people find more sustainable solutions?

4. How can EU policymakers support Congolese IDPs and host communities in finding sustainable solutions?

In eastern DRC, the lack of government protection in rural areas has led people to move to places like Bukavu that offer more security. However, as illustrated, support is still needed for IDPs

in the city to find sustainable solutions to their displacement. But despite the long-term presence of humanitarian aid agencies in eastern DRC—and the fact that Bukavu serves as a hub for these organisations—nearly all interventions take place outside of the city. Meanwhile, in a 2018 report, IDMC noted that development actors have been “all but absent” in the DRC (IDMC, 2018). IDPs who reported receiving aid in Bukavu did so mainly through individuals or churches. Urban IDPs largely have to fend for themselves, which means relying on personal connections in Bukavu and communities of origin. TRAFIG’s research findings highlight the crucial role that EU humanitarian and development aid can play in helping urban IDPs overcome protracted displacement. An injection of assistance would be particularly helpful given that aid to the DRC has been chronically underfunded, with the country among the world’s most under-resourced crises (UNOCHA, n.d; CERF, n.d.).

“Since we arrived in Bukavu, we have never received any help from either the state or an organisation.”

37-year-old father who shifted from farming to driving a motor-bike taxi to selling palm oil

IDP protection frameworks exist or should exist on paper—but are hardly applied in practice in Congolese cities. The DRC has signed the 2006 Great Lakes Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons, which is legally binding and meant to lead to national legislation. This Protocol declares that states have the main responsibility for ensuring the protection of IDPs, but that if governments lack the capacity to do so, they shall accept assistance from the international community. The country has also signed and authorised the ratification of the Kampala Convention on the Protection and Assistance for Internally Displaced Persons in Africa; however, it has not yet submitted all the required paperwork, for reasons that are unclear. Despite these pledges, the DRC still lacks dedicated national legislation on IDPs (a draft law was published in 2014 but has yet to be adopted), although IDPs are mentioned in the 2006 Constitution and 2009 Child Protection Code. Notwithstanding these laws and commitments—as well as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement—self-settled IDPs in urban DRC are largely overlooked.

Sources: Great Lakes Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons; Jacobs, C. et al. (2020)

“Helping refugees residing in third countries” and “fostering sustainable development-oriented solutions” are important components of EU efforts to address global displacement. In this context, EU assistance should include helping IDPs to find durable solutions by strengthening and leveraging their networks. Despite the significant role that personal networks play in supporting self-reliance, they are often overlooked in policy discussions (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Some ways to strengthen existing connections and forge new ones are:

- **Supporting host families to foster stability for new IDPs that can help them to become self-reliant in their new community.** Many host families have themselves been

displaced to Bukavu and may also be living in unstable conditions. Assisting them would not only increase their capacity to house and support new arrivals, it would also benefit a broader group of IDPs, helping them to avoid a protracted situation of precarity.

- **Tapping into the important role of churches in providing support to vulnerable persons, including IDPs.** Churches are particularly significant actors in this regard because membership does not depend on pre-existing ties (via one’s community of origin, ethnic group, etc.).
- **Leveraging the potential of associations and networks to help IDPs enter the labour market.** Microcredit schemes or other assistance could help IDPs pay for labour association fees or the small amount of capital often needed to start engaging in petty commerce (as little as US \$10). Having had positive experiences with loan and savings associations in rural areas, many IDPs are keen to participate in or even set up such associations in the city.
- **Facilitating mobility to enable IDPs to leverage resources in their communities of origin.** One way to help IDPs to cultivate their networks—and the support they can provide—is to facilitate mobility by improving infrastructure and security conditions along the roads, which also benefits locals.
- **Improving IDP—host community relations to strengthen connections between newer and long-term residents that can unlock opportunities.** This could include promoting a more positive narrative of IDPs and internal migrants as contributors to the city’s economy, with IDPs transporting resources from their communities of origin to sell in Bukavu’s markets and taking up jobs that existing residents do not want. Additionally, providing programming that also reaches the host community, and its vulnerable members in particular, is important for strengthening relations between the two groups and improving longer-term residents’ attitudes towards newer arrivals. While such programming might also include efforts to improve the city’s infrastructure, an area of concern for local officials, development assistance can play an especially important role in easing challenges faced by host communities.

Conclusions

Urban IDPs in the DRC are flying under the radar and not benefitting from assistance. As a result, they are largely left to their own devices in finding a solution and are contending with several types of limbo, resulting in a protracted state of displacement. Just because IDPs remain in their country of origin rather than crossing a border—and live in a city instead of a camp—does not mean that they are not in need of protection. Supporting displaced persons requires that policymakers do not neglect IDPs—on the contrary, they should increase efforts to support governments in addressing internal displacement.

The DRC is among the top three countries with the highest number of IDPs, most of whom go unnoticed. It is difficult to imagine how sustainable development goals can be reached when so many people can only cope one day at a time. The complex and long-standing nature of displacement in eastern DRC

calls for increased attention and assistance from policymakers in Europe and beyond to help IDPs move from temporary to more permanent solutions. These actors should investigate and support solutions that IDPs are creating themselves by building and leveraging their networks. Such an approach is in line with European pledges to find sustainable, development-focused solutions for displaced persons and their hosts in third countries. The Commission was relatively vague in its New Pact about the external dimension of its refugee policy, focussing instead on affairs on the continent. As relevant EU policies and measures are negotiated and developed in the coming months, it is an opportunity not to be missed to address urban IDPs' needs in the DRC and elsewhere and to better address those in protracted displacement situations.

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