

BRIEFING NOTE FOR HDP STAKEHOLDERS WORKING IN THE IDJWI TERRITORY

Period: July 2025

0. General Guidance

The Conflict Sensitivity Hub produces explanatory notes on context monitoring that can help Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) actors better incorporate conflict sensitivity into their activities and organizational procedures. Given that the situation in eastern DRC can change rapidly, these notes are particularly relevant and beneficial when produced and used within a relatively short timeframe. Nevertheless, they remain valuable in the long term for documenting changes in the context and preserving a record of events that can enrich the learning process. The purpose of this document is to provide HDP actors with information on recent developments in the conflict context in the Idjwi territory, so they can adapt their interventions to the context.

1. Brief Overview of the Context

The Idjwi territory is geographically located between Bukavu and Goma, two cities on which it relies heavily for its supply of goods and the distribution of its agricultural and lake-based products. Idjwi Island is often described as a peaceful place, having never been the scene of armed conflict or the presence of armed groups, let alone the rising insecurity observed in other territories of South Kivu. However, it is affected by events unfolding in other territories, notably Kalehe (South Kivu), Masisi, and Goma (North Kivu). Last February, civil society organizations had counted more than 42,000 displaced people from Kalehe (South Kivu) and North Kivu. Some of them were staying with host families, while others were housed in schools and churches, which disrupted educational activities and put a strain on resources.¹ Today, that number has decreased significantly. According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 41,000 of these displaced people returned to their areas of origin in March and April 2025.²

The people of Idjwi make their living from farming and fishing. In addition to sand mining, cooperative farming of pineapples, coffee, and cassava has created opportunities, providing the ever-growing population with the means to survive.³ Land disputes also persist at the community level, although they are generally nonviolent.

2. Description of Factors and Causes of Conflicts

Structural factors of conflict:

1. **Geographical isolation:** Idjwi is an island landlocked in the middle of Lake Kivu, with no direct access to major trade routes or the mainland. This isolation limits territorial expansion and makes natural resources (land, timber, water) non-

renewable. Competition for these resources becomes inevitable as the population grows, creating latent tensions between families, clans, or communities. Furthermore, on this island, the unequal distribution of land by the colonial authorities in 1935 is the root cause of land conflicts. The land reserved for local populations—referred to as “indigenous” at the time—accounted for only 60% of the total territory. This distribution has never been adjusted, even though the population has grown considerably.

2. **Rapid Population Growth:** Idjwi’s population has exploded over the past century, reaching a density of more than 400 inhabitants per square kilometer. This demographic pressure has led to the fragmentation of farmland, a decline in productivity, and overcrowding in residential areas. Younger generations find themselves without access to land, which can lead to frustration, forced migration, or intergenerational conflicts.
3. **Agricultural Saturation:** Arable land is limited and is often inherited according to customary practices, which can be unequal. This creates a perceived injustice in access to land, especially for women and young people, and hinders opportunities for agricultural innovation. Land disputes are becoming frequent and can escalate into community or family conflicts, particularly in the absence of effective mediation mechanisms.
4. **Weak State Presence:** Public administration has a limited presence on the island, with little capacity for regulation or conflict resolution. This leaves the field open to customary authorities, which may be challenged or exploited. The absence of neutral arbitration allows conflicts to take root and escalate, especially when economic or political interests are involved.

Circumstantial factors:

5. Certain factors are situational because they exacerbate existing conflicts in the Idjwi region, albeit in a circumstantial manner: environmental degradation—such as soil erosion and declining soil fertility—which worsens food insecurity, and climate change, which exacerbates agricultural vulnerabilities and internal migration.

Underlying causes:

6. The underlying factors of the conflicts in the Idjwi territory are not isolated; they are intertwined in a circular system where population growth exacerbates land saturation, land saturation fuels social frustrations, insularity prevents external regulation or easy migration, and state weakness allows conflicts to crystallize without a lasting solution.⁴
7. Currently, tensions are arising due to the imposition of taxes on all goods entering and leaving the island. This method of taxation in an entity located in the middle of Lake Kivu is bound to create discontent among its inhabitants.
8. **Description of the Main Actors and Stakeholders in the Conflicts**

- The main actors in land conflicts in the Idjwi territory are traditional chiefs, local communities, government technical agencies, and individuals seeking to purchase land. All of these actors are often either involved in resolving these conflicts or directly involved in the disputes themselves. It is important to note that land conflicts in Idjwi frequently center on issues of boundaries or inheritance and are not highly politicized. According to Joël Baraka Akilimali⁵ and his colleagues, this could be explained by Idjwi's fairly marked community homogeneity, as well as by its status as an island, which reduces the likelihood of violent clashes.⁶
- With regard to tensions over taxes, the main actors are the political, administrative, and military authorities of the AFC/M23,⁷ merchants, and the community. In fact, anyone carrying even a single package entering or leaving Idjwi is required to pay a fee. For the current authorities, it appears that the main objective is to maximize revenue. However, from the merchants' perspective, these taxes are exorbitant because they have doubled or tripled since May 2025, which undermines their ability to make a profit in an environment where money is increasingly scarce and financial institutions remain closed.
- Traditional authorities responsible for traditional land management and local arbitration. Certain families of traditional chiefs are reportedly accused of land grabbing, particularly against Pygmy communities.⁸
- Local communities composed of Pygmies, Bantu farmers, and landless youth. They are both victims and/or stakeholders in land conflicts.
- The state and local government, which should serve as land regulators, protectors, and arbiters of justice, have a limited presence in the Idjwi region.
- Young people and informal groups who are potential agents of mobilization or protest and who remain frustrated by their lack of access to land or employment.

4. Changes in the Context and Dynamics of Conflicts

a. Changes Regarding the Actors

In the Idjwi territory, the AFC/M23 military force has replaced the police and judicial authorities in managing conflicts. No distinction is made between civil offenses—which involve disputes between individuals—and criminal offenses—which pertain to acts that undermine public order. This has already caused some fear among the population, as punishments meted out to the accused sometimes include flogging and arbitrary fines.⁹ However, this situation has nonetheless strengthened the credibility of community-based conflict management structures—including the Catholic Church through its Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission—as long as they do not involve themselves in political matters. These structures are currently sought out by stakeholders seeking a peaceful resolution to their disputes. In addition to these peace-building structures, village and community leaders also play a crucial role in

mediating conflicts within their communities when called upon by the parties in conflict.

b. Changes in Factors/Causes

The systematic nature of the taxes, coupled with their abrupt imposition—without prior consultation or public awareness efforts—appears to have exacerbated tensions between the new authorities (AFC/M23) and the population. Residents report numerous cases of double or even triple taxation. Goods purchased in Bukavu or Goma are subject to an initial tax, followed by another tax upon their arrival on Idjwi Island, with rates sometimes determined arbitrarily by tax collectors.¹⁰ This redundant taxation was poorly received by the population, who protested in May in the village of Mugoto, even going so far as to set fire to a motorcycle belonging to the new authorities.¹¹

Now, for fear of being flogged or viewed negatively by their community, individuals in conflict are increasingly turning to peace-building structures or their village chiefs to resolve their disputes, rather than approaching the new authorities. In cases of accusations or complaints, the torture inflicted on the accused is currently a factor that exacerbates conflicts within the community. For residents, anyone who files a complaint with the current authorities (AFC/M23) is perceived as an “enemy of the people” since the accused will be flogged, which further undermines social cohesion.

For security reasons, several civil society leaders have left the island. AFC/23 authorities on the ground reportedly confronted them with accusations, suspecting them of organizing protests against their movement.¹²

According to a representative of a civil society organization in Idjwi who is currently traveling, the new authorities have reportedly announced their intention to reclaim all state-owned concessions. If this announcement is carried out, it could further exacerbate land disputes in this territory, as this reclamation is taking place without any judicial proceedings.

It is worth noting, however, that there has been a decrease in thefts of livestock and agricultural produce from the fields since the arrival of the AFC/M23 in Idjwi territory.

5. Impacts on the HDP Community

Types of Risk	Description	Mitigation / Required Sensitivity
Taxes on products/inputs intended for humanitarian assistance	The systematic taxation of goods originating from or entering the island territory of Idjwi may apply to goods intended for humanitarian assistance when no specific instructions have been provided to tax officials.	Advocate with the relevant authorities, through the humanitarian affairs coordination office, to ensure that goods and services transported or delivered as part of humanitarian operations are not subject to taxation.

Inability to organize community meetings	Meetings are now prohibited throughout the entire territory of Idjwi. This decision was made by the new authorities (AFC/M23) last May following a protest organized by the population against the introduction of new taxes.	Provide advance notice to the M23 authorities regarding planned activities, emphasizing their nature, objectives, beneficiaries, and areas of implementation to avoid being targeted by those currently in power.
Criticism from the population due to a lack of adequate responses to their growing needs	Healthcare facilities are currently facing enormous difficulties in operating. Providing free maternity care and free care for children aged 0 to 1 month is becoming increasingly difficult, as healthcare facilities are no longer receiving government subsidies that made these services free. ¹³	Be transparent and accountable to the communities. Collaborate with community leaders and credible local organizations to identify and address the community's priority needs.
Criticism from job seekers for employment	Many people have ceased their business activities because of what they call a surcharge. This is leading to a rise in unemployment on this island territory. For example, sand miners have abandoned this business because of this surcharge.	Prioritize local hiring when the necessary expertise is available. Forming partnerships with local organizations to implement activities could help these organizations create jobs.

6. Recommendations

- HDP actors should refrain from organizing meetings without prior authorization so as not to be perceived as violating the rules imposed by the authorities and thereby risking the suspension of their activities.
- Package products or mark them with HDP actors' logos so that it is clearly visible that they are intended for humanitarian assistance,
- HDP actors should prioritize partnerships with national and local organizations when operating in the Idjwi area to contribute not only to promoting employment but also to fostering community acceptance,
- Develop context-specific policies and conduct weekly briefings on the local context for staff (both new and existing) to prevent them from exhibiting attitudes or behaviors that could tarnish their organizations' reputations.

7. Bibliography and Sources Consulted

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