

BRIEFING NOTE FOR HDP STAKEHOLDERS WORKING IN THE DJUGU TERRITORY, ITURI PROVINCE

Period: June and 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 Djugu territory, in Ituri Province, so they can adapt their interventions to the context.

1. Brief Overview of the Context

The Djugu territory, located in Ituri Province in the northeastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is one of the most persistent hotspots of tension in the eastern part of the country. It consists of seven chiefdoms (Bahema, Baguru, Bahema-Badjere, Bahema-Banywagi, Bahema-Nord, Mabendi, Mambisa, and Ndo-Okebo) and four sectors (Banyali-Kilo, Walendu-Djatsi, Walendu-Pitsi, and Walendu-Tatsi). Djugu is populated mainly by the Hema, Lendu, and Alur communities, as well as other minority groups (Bhale, Banyali Kilo, Mabendi, Mambisa, Ndo Ukebo, and Pygmies).

Although it possesses significant natural resources, notably gold deposits in the localities of Mongbwalu, Kobu, and Kpandroma, the territory remains marginalized in terms of infrastructure and basic social services, exacerbating poverty and local frustrations.¹

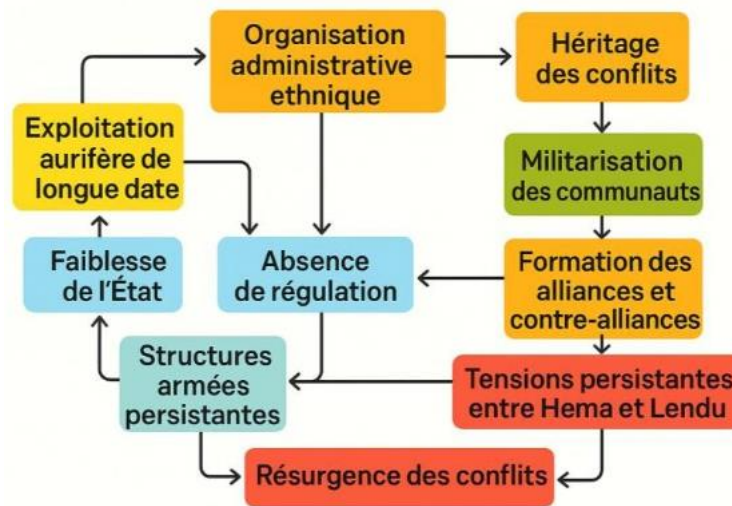
The Djugu territory is deeply marked by a persistent antagonism between the Hema and Lendu communities, the two majority groups in Ituri. This conflict, centered on land disputes, rivalries over customary power, and identity issues, has become entrenched over the years, making violence nearly constant. The clashes, fueled by competition for access to land and natural resources, have led to severe intercommunal violence, including massacres and forced displacement. Some community leaders play a key role in exacerbating these tensions by exploiting these divisions to gain influence or mobilize support.²

2. Description of Structural and Underlying Factors and Causes

✓ Structural factors and causes:

The Djugu region has been marked by a resurgence of violent conflict over the past several years. This instability stems from a combination of historical, structural, economic, and community-based factors. Tensions between the Hema communities (primarily herders and traders) and Lendu (mostly farmers) communities stem from historical rivalries over

access to land and natural resources. The colonial approach, which was based on economic exploitation through a reorganization of inter-community boundaries—designating the Hema as superior and the Lendu as inferior³ is considered by most studies to be a deep-rooted source of conflicts and other intra-community tensions.



Long-standing gold mining has led to competition over resources, inter-community rivalry, and an ethnically based administrative structure. The latter has also fostered a sense of exclusion and tensions between the Hema and the Lendu.

The state's limited presence in the Djugu territory, combined with local governance perceived as partisan, fuels a sense of marginalization within several communities. The lack of equitable access to basic services such as education, health care, and infrastructure reinforces this sense of injustice.⁴

Due to the weak state presence, impunity has taken root, and communal tensions could not be managed effectively or in a timely manner. Communities have militarized through the formation of community militias to defend their interests, and communal tensions have persisted. This led to persistent armed struggles and the formation of alliances and counter-alliances. The armed conflict from 1999 to 2003 between the Hema and Lendu communities caused thousands of deaths, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, and left a heavy negative legacy. The absence of genuine transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms has contributed to the persistence of mistrust and cycles of revenge. The Djugu territory is now grappling with this legacy and a resurgence of conflict.

✓ **Immediate causes (triggering and/or aggravating factors)**

Local and national political actors are suspected of exploiting identity-based divisions for electoral or economic gain. The spread of hate speech through community radio stations and social media fuels radicalization⁶.

Competition over natural resources, particularly mining and agricultural resources, is one of the immediate factors driving conflict in the Djugu territory. The Djugu territory is rich in gold deposits, which are primarily mined using artisanal methods, making it a focal point for various armed groups. The towns of Mongwalu, Kobu, and Kpandroma are regularly the scene of violent clashes, driven by the struggle for control over mining sites and the associated trade routes. This dynamic not only fuels the local war economy but also complicates efforts at pacification and governance. According to several reports from NGOs and independent observers,⁵ economic rivalries between armed groups—often linked to opportunistic alliances with certain local economic operators—exacerbate instability and hinder humanitarian access.

Communal violence often takes the form of reprisals. An attack on one community triggers an armed response from the other, perpetuating cycles of violence. The absence of credible justice and traditional mediation mechanisms reinforces this dynamic.⁶

3. Description of Key Actors and Stakeholders in the Conflicts

For several decades, various actors have been directly and indirectly involved in the conflicts in the Djugu region. These include armed groups, community actors, and other institutional and civilian stakeholders.

Three major armed groups are primarily engaged in conflict: 1) CODECO (Cooperative for the Development of the Congo), a militia composed mainly of members of the Lendu community; it is reportedly involved in attacks against civilians, clashes with the army, and the control of mining sites. It is fragmented into several factions, some more radical than others. CODECO often justifies its actions as a response to the economic marginalization of its community;⁷ 2) Zaïre / Jeunesse Zaïre, a self-defense group composed mainly of Hema. This militia is also reportedly involved in violence and reprisals. It is present in several artisanal mining areas; 3) Residual armed groups stemming from previous conflicts (former UPC,⁸ former FNI,⁹ FRPI¹⁰) that have retained their armed structures.

In response to insecurity and attacks by militias such as CODECO and Zaïre, several unregulated self-defense groups have emerged in the Djugu territory. Organized on a community and village basis, these groups operate outside any legal framework, just like other armed groups. Among them, the Chini ya Tuna / Chini ya Mungu group, active in the chiefdoms of Walendu Pitsi and Walendu Djatsi, is linked to the Lendu community and is reported to have occasionally collaborated with certain CODECO factions. The Ndo-Okebo self-defense group, which is less structured, is present in northeastern Djugu and operates at the local level without any clear affiliation. Although they aim to protect communities, these groups sometimes contribute to the escalation of local violence.

- **The local Hema and Lendu communities:** These two main communities are at the heart of the tensions. Grievances related to access to land, the management of natural

resources (particularly mining), and perceived inequalities are exploited by armed groups and certain community leaders to stoke communal hatred¹³. According to several accounts, community leaders stoke tensions by using divisive rhetoric that portrays the other community as a threat. These leaders also exploit frustrations related to land shortages, competition for natural resources (particularly gold), and difficulties in accessing employment and economic opportunities.

- **Other communities:** The Alur, Ndo-Okebo, and other groups living in the territory are also affected by the conflict, although they are not directly involved in the main clashes.
- **Political actors (national and provincial) and local authorities:** Political actors and certain local authorities are regularly accused of manipulating ethnic tensions for the purpose of community mobilization. By exploiting identity-based divisions, they fuel conflicts in order to consolidate their power base. Several of them are also reportedly involved in directly or indirectly supporting armed groups, with the aim of securing privileged access to natural resources, particularly gold. Furthermore, they play a decisive role in the allocation of mining rights for mining plots, often by influencing traditional chiefs, in violation of the provisions of the Mining Code that strictly regulate these procedures.¹¹
- **Economic operators:** Local economic operators (trading posts, small-scale miners) and international ones (Chinese companies and miners) are also accused of playing a complex and often ambivalent role in the conflicts in Ituri in general, and more specifically in Djugu. Some of them are accused of—or are reportedly currently—financing armed groups to protect their commercial interests or to gain privileged access to resources. Chinese operators are accused of collaborating with armed groups to secure their gold mining operations.¹²
- Institutional and humanitarian actors must also be taken into account when analyzing the conflict context in the Djugu territory:
 - The FARDC, which is often limited in its ability to protect the population or whose legitimacy is contested.
 - Traditional authorities, who sometimes play an ambivalent role in local mediation or are involved in land disputes.
 - Displaced civilians, who are direct victims of violence, are often exploited in conflicts.
 - Humanitarian actors, present in the territory to provide humanitarian assistance, are key to documenting needs and protecting civilians; they are often forced to suspend their activities due to insecurity.

4. Changes in the context and dynamics of conflicts

✓ *Changes Regarding the Actors*

For some time now, the armed group CODECO, the main actor in the conflict in the Djugu territory, has been undergoing gradual fragmentation marked by the emergence of several dissident factions, such as CODECO/URDPC, CODECO/FDP, and CODECO/MZ.¹³

Some of these factions are reported to have begun reaching out to the FARDC as part of local peace initiatives. In contrast, others clearly reject any dialogue, continuing their attacks on civilians, particularly in the Drodoro and Largu areas.¹⁴

The Zaire militia, initially perceived as a Hema community self-defense group, is also expanding its activities toward the southern part of Djugu territory. Since June 2025, it has been conducting armed offensives against several CODECO militia positions in localities predominantly populated by Lendu, particularly in the Lenga and Tchomia areas. These armed operations mark a turning point in the group's strategy, contributing to a resurgence of inter-community tensions and a worsening of the security crisis in this part of Ituri.¹⁵

According to several observers and analysts, the Zaire militia reportedly engages in regular exchanges of weapons, equipment, and intelligence with the Ituri Popular Self-Defense Movement (MAPI), with the aim of coordinating their offensives. These two groups are said to share a common ideology centered on defending the interests of the Hema community. It is important to note that MAPI is viewed as an armed group composed largely of former members of disbanded or demobilized Hema militias. This strategic alliance aims to strengthen their capacity to respond to recurring attacks by the CODECO militia by presenting a united front.

Some local organizations have reported an increased FARDC presence in key localities such as Drodoro, Jiba, and Lita, as part of the launch of targeted operations against armed groups, notably CODECO. However, this initiative faces significant logistical constraints, limiting the government forces' ability to carry out sustained and coordinated actions on the ground. Furthermore, several local sources and humanitarian organizations report persistent mistrust among the population toward certain army contingents, which are accused of collusion or passivity in the face of abuses.¹⁶ The CRP (Convention for the Popular Revolution) is a political-military movement created in 2025 amid frustration over the state's failure to secure Ituri and currently led by Thomas Lubanga. The CRP is reported to have been involved in attacks carried out in the vicinity of Nyamamba, which led to a manhunt by the FARDC. Furthermore, United Nations experts point to indirect links between the CRP and the March 23 Movement (M23), adding a regional dimension to the alliances among armed groups.¹⁷

✓ ***Changes in Factors/Causes***

Between May and July 2025, a notable shift was observed in the dynamics fueling the conflicts in Djugu territory. During this period, the conflict—which was initially rooted in historical disputes with strong identity-based dimensions—became more complex as it incorporated growing economic, political, and security issues. This shift in the initial causes reflects a growing exploitation of communal tensions to serve various strategic interests.

Longstanding rivalries between the Hema and Lendu—centering in particular on land, access to natural resources, and the legitimacy of traditional authorities—remain at the

heart of current tensions and continue to fuel violence between these two communities. Since May 2025, these historical disputes have been increasingly exploited by political and military leaders, who use them to mobilize their supporters or justify targeted attacks on both sides.

Indeed, some analyses suggest that the struggle for control over natural resources—particularly gold in Mongwalu, Kobu, and Kpandroma—has become one of the main drivers of the conflict in the Djugu territory. Several CODECO factions, as well as other armed groups, are engaged in fierce competition to seize control of mineral-rich areas, sometimes with the support of economic operators. This dynamic fuels a veritable war economy, where economic interests tend to supplant traditional community claims.

According to a UNHCR report on population movements, the M23 crisis in North Kivu province and other territories in Ituri has triggered significant population movements toward the Djugu territory. These population displacements are increasing pressure on land resources, exacerbating conflicts over access to land in certain chiefdoms (notably Banyali-Kilo and Walendu-Djatsi).¹⁸ Local security reports also mention the infiltration of foreign fighters or mercenaries into certain armed groups.¹⁹

Djugu has experienced a resurgence of violence that reflects an escalation of the armed conflict, despite stabilization efforts. In June, 25 people were killed during an attack on the Djangi displacement site (Drodoro health zone). In addition, the health zones of Nizi, Tchomia, Fataki, and Drodoro were particularly affected by targeted attacks and clashes. Approximately 9,300 people were displaced in June to the Lita health zone, which is considered safer.

5. Impacts on the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace Community

In the context of Djugu, HDP actors may face several risks:

Types of Risk	Description	Mitigation / Required Sensitivity
Perception of favoritism in aid targeting	The targeting of humanitarian aid recipients may be perceived as favoring a particular community, which can fuel inter-community resentment and risks exacerbating the existing tensions. Unintentionally reinforcing structural inequalities, e.g., when infrastructure is	- Establishment of objective, inclusive, and transparent vulnerability criteria to avoid any perception of discrimination or favoritism among the communities receiving aid. - Involving representatives from all local communities in the planning, targeting, and implementation of humanitarian actions, in order to strengthen ownership and prevent tensions.

	concentrated in certain areas at the expense others.	
Exploitation of Aid by Armed Groups	Some armed groups attempt to influence the distribution of humanitarian aid or to appropriate a portion of it, which can undermine certain humanitarian principles, particularly impartiality and neutrality.	- Regular evaluation of local dynamics: understanding armed actors, their areas of influence, their motivations, and their interactions with communities. - Mapping aid flows: identifying points of vulnerability where aid may be diverted or manipulated. - Participatory monitoring by involving communities in monitoring aid to strengthen local accountability.
Increasing humanitarian needs	The violence have led to significant population movements, placing heavy pressure on reception infrastructure in towns such as Roe, Drodoro, and Bunia. This situation has led to an increase in humanitarian needs for shelter, water, health care, and nutrition, often exceeding the response capacities available on the ground.	- In-depth analysis of needs including humanitarian aid and adaptation of response efforts. - Improving and promoting humanitarian coordination, complementarity, and responsible partnership.

Disruption of development initiatives	Chronic instability hinders the implementation of recovery and community development projects. Many initiatives in the areas of infrastructure, agriculture, and economic empowerment have been suspended, postponed, or even abandoned.	- Integration of participatory approaches the from the design and planning of development projects, by involving local communities in identifying needs and establishing a local development committee (including all Hema and Lendu communities) that will decide on priorities for social infrastructure. - Building community resilience in the face of shocks and violence.
Restriction of humanitarian access	Widespread insecurity, marked by regular clashes, roadblocks set up by armed groups, and unstable road conditions, severely compromises access to the most affected areas. Some organizations have been forced to suspend their operations to protect their staff from the risk of attacks and kidnappings, leaving local communities isolated and exposed to violence.	- A combination of security measures, negotiation, and strategic coordination by analyzing security risks, negotiating access, and developing networks of local informants to anticipate risks.
Weakening of peace dynamics	Repeated cycles of violence undermine efforts at intercommunity dialogue and hinder reconciliation processes. Some local mediation initiatives are co-opted by politico-military groups for the purpose of legitimizing themselves or manipulation, which undermines their credibility and acceptability among the affected communities.	- Identifying peace actors and understanding their relationships and alliances. - Involvement of recognized community leaders (youth, women, local authorities) in peace processes. - Establishing a link between dialogues and concrete actions such as access to livelihoods or basic services. - Regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of

		various peacebuilding actions on the ground.
Increased exposure of actors	Humanitarian workers and peace actors are increasingly exposed to direct security risks (kidnappings, looting, threats). This climate of insecurity restricts their mobility and complicates their presence on the ground. Local staff, often from affected communities, are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization, intimidation, and reprisals.	- Regular monitoring of local dynamics related to conflict and development and community-based monitoring to anticipate the movements of armed groups. - Impartiality regarding the community alliances and counter-alliances that exist in the Djugu territory. 1. Regular training for teams on conflict sensitivity and local dynamics, so that they can avoid or minimize the negative impacts of interventions on cohesion among communities.

6. Recommendations

In the context of persistent ethnic tensions between communities, here are some key recommendations for HDP actors in the Djugu territory:

In the face of inter-community mistrust, HDP actors must incorporate a conflict sensitivity analysis into all stages of the project (before, during, and after interventions). These contextual analyses must be participatory, involving community actors and peace-building structures.

To address negative perceptions of humanitarian, development, and peace aid, actors should adopt an inclusive and equitable approach in selecting beneficiaries and partners, and develop mechanisms for community monitoring and accountability.

In light of aid shortfalls stemming from various causes (security concerns, social factors, and a high volume of needs), all stakeholders must strengthen coordination and dialogue among humanitarian, state, and community actors by

ensuring the effective operation of local, conflict-sensitive (multi-stakeholder) coordination platforms.

In response to perceptions of favoritism in aid targeting, humanitarian, development, and peace (HDP) actors should inclusively engage and involve all local communities (including the Hema, Lendu, Ndo Okebu, Alur, and others) in committees responsible for targeting and selecting beneficiaries, and transparently publish the eligibility criteria for aid, specifying that it is allocated exclusively on the basis of objectively verified needs, and not on the basis of ethnicity, in accordance with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and humanity.

In light of the armed group's exploitation of aid, HDP actors should strengthen coordination with local authorities and security actors to ensure the security at distribution sites, diversify and increase the number of distribution points to facilitate equitable access and reduce the risk of tensions, thereby promoting rapid recovery activities such as cash-for-work, agriculture, and vocational training—which tend to reduce total dependence on aid, which is often exploited.

In light of the increasing humanitarian needs in the Djugu territory, HDP actors should prioritize the *Nexus* approach, promoting complementarity in the delivery of aid, in order to strengthen joint needs assessments and ensure a proportionate and equitable response by prioritizing integrated multisectoral interventions (food security, protection, health, education, shelter) and strengthening coordination with local authorities and communities.

In light of the weakening of peace dynamics, HDP actors should promote inter-community activities that facilitate the creation of spaces for and collaboration between communities; for example, income-generating activities (IGAs), community gardens, and cultural activities.

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