

BRIEFING NOTE FOR HDP STAKEHOLDERS WORKING IN THE SHABUNDA TERRITORY

Period: July 2025

1. General Guidance

The Conflict Sensitivity Hub produces informational notes on context monitoring designed to help Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) actors better integrate conflict sensitivity into their actions and organizational practices. Since the context in eastern DRC can change rapidly, these notes are most relevant and useful shortly after their publication. However, they remain useful in the long term for documenting changes in the context and for preserving a record of events that can inform a learning process. This brief aims to provide HDP actors with information on recent developments in the conflict context in the Shabunda territory so they can adapt their interventions to the context.

2. Brief Overview of the Context

The Shabunda territory, located in an isolated area of South Kivu, faces persistent insecurity fueled by the absence of functional local authorities, the presence of armed groups, and the lack of passable roads. The limited presence of the state encourages criminal activity and exposes the population to extreme vulnerability. This territory is experiencing a complex conflict situation characterized by armed violence, intercommunal tensions, disputes over the administration of local entities, and conflicts related to the control and exploitation of natural resources—particularly gold—with serious humanitarian consequences for the population.¹ This entity is also marked by the presence of several armed groups, in particular the *Raia Mutomboki*,² which create insecurity and commit abuses against civilians.

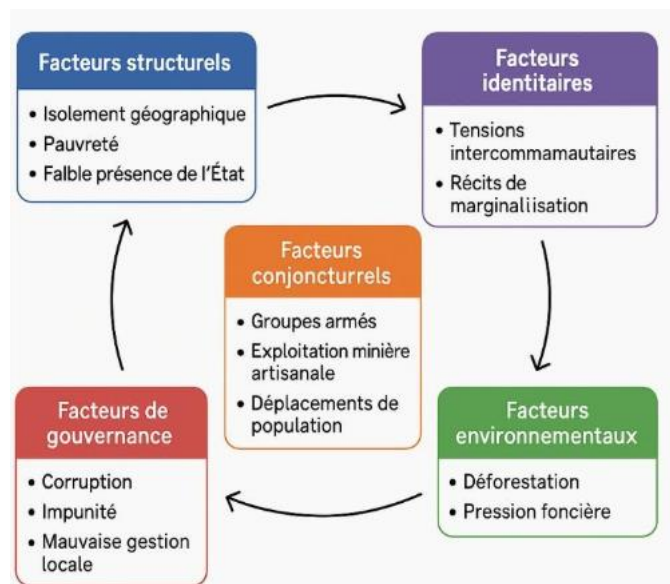
Intercommunal tensions between the Bashi mutual aid society (COMUSHI)³, based in Shabunda, and a group of individuals belonging to the Lega community of the *Kimbilikiti* movement⁴ are ongoing in this territory.⁵ As for the conflict over the status of administrative entities, it pits the Wakabango I chiefdom against those advocating for the creation of an autonomous sector within the Batali group. This conflict is complex and dates back several years.

3. Description of Conflict Factors and Causes

Structural factors: In the context of Shabunda, several factors are interrelated: geographic isolation, strict protection of the cultural rites of the Lega,⁶ customary conflicts, and weak local governance. Indeed, Shabunda's geographic isolation, coupled with limited road infrastructure, restricts access to basic services and undermines security in the area. Rivalries among traditional chiefs over control of chiefdoms or groups also fuel tensions as well. Furthermore, existing services are often ineffective and the state has a weak presence; this fosters the autonomy of armed groups and the persistence of the informal economy. The illegal exploitation of mineral resources, particularly in areas controlled by armed groups, is a major factor in the conflict. Financial resources derived from artisanal gold

mining in Shabunda have often contributed to increased corruption or supported atrocities and violence⁷ rather than helping to reduce poverty among the populations living in mining areas.

Control over and access to resources—particularly mineral resources—appear to be the main cause of conflicts related to the status of administrative entities. The transition from a chiefdom to a sector involves the replacement of a customary authority with an administrative one. In other words, the sector chief is elected, unlike the chiefdom chief, who is appointed according to custom.⁸



Contextual Factors: Since 2012, the Shabunda territory has become the hotbed of a new type of armed group: the *Raia Mutomboki*. Mobilizing rapidly, these armed groups have taken shape by recruiting members and splitting into several factions, often linked to local or ethnic interests. These groups are fighting for control of natural resources (gold, coltan, cassiterite) and transportation routes. Artisanal mining of gold and the “3Ts” (tin, tungsten, tantalum) attracts both armed and economic actors. The lack of traceability mechanisms and fair royalties fuels conflicts between miners, local authorities, and armed groups. Clashes lead to mass displacement, creating tensions between displaced people and host communities, particularly over access to land and resources.

Immediate factors: Shabunda is experiencing targeted attacks between armed factions vying for control of villages or mining sites, as well as conflicts over traditional leadership, sometimes even among members of the same family. Very often, it is difficult to find effective conflict resolution mechanisms at the local level.

4. Description of the Main Actors and Stakeholders in the Conflicts

The actors and stakeholders are diverse:

- **Local armed groups:** *Raia Mutomboki* (various factions), sometimes supported by traditional leaders. The *Raia Mutomboki* are responsible for robberies and kidnappings on roads leading to trading centers and mining sites, as well as on roads connecting this territory to the city of Bukavu, the provincial capital of South Kivu. To put an end to these robberies, the FARDC launched operations against the *Raia Mutomboki*.
- **Traditional Chiefdoms:** The conflict over the status of administrative entities primarily pits the Wakabango I chiefdom against those advocating for the creation of an autonomous sector within the Batali group. However, the situation has evolved, notably with the involvement of the *Raia Mutomboki* armed group led by a certain Jean Musumbu, who chose to support the group's leader, Mr. Mbeya, against the Wakabango I chiefdom of Mr. Kidyaba, who in turn had the support of the FARDC.⁹
- **Artisanal miners:** These miners are sometimes linked to informal networks or armed groups. They are individuals or small groups who manually extract minerals such as gold, coltan, and cassiterite. They use rudimentary tools (shovels, pickaxes, sieves) and often work under precarious conditions. Although less visible than in Mwenga or Fizi, some armed groups illegally exploit gold resources, particularly in remote areas along the Ulindi River.
- **Local authorities and security services:** often absent from the management of public affairs.
- **NGOs and humanitarian agencies:** play a crucial role in addressing humanitarian needs and in mediation.

5. Changes in the Context and Dynamics of Conflicts

a. Changes regarding the actors

As in other territories of South Kivu, with the rise of the AFC/M23 and the capture of the cities of Goma and Bukavu—the capitals of North Kivu and South Kivu, respectively—the various factions of the armed groups known as *Raia Mutomboki* operating in Shabunda Territory have become, to a greater or lesser extent, allies of the FARDC, which they had previously been fighting. These various factions now operate under the name “*Wazalendo*,” which means “patriots,” and position themselves as the primary providers of security in Shabunda territory alongside the FARDC and a reduced police force that is reportedly visible only in the district capital of Shabunda.

Civil society actors have reported instances of forced recruitment of young people into the ranks of *the Wazalendo*. Other families are said to encourage their children to join armed groups to ensure some form of protection against potential abuses. In several villages, when

a family has a child in an armed group, it is, in most cases, spared from abuses by that armed group.¹⁰

Girls are also forced into marriage, while others are raped.¹¹ Numerous cases of rape are frequently reported, but the victims' families choose to remain silent for fear of reprisals.¹²

b. Changes in Factors/Causes

With regard to the conflict over the status of administrative entities, following the emergence of the AFC/M23 and the capture of the city of Bukavu, all efforts to mobilize supporters of the creation of an autonomous sector in the Batali group, within the Wakabango chiefdom, have come to a standstill, as the protagonists' full attention is focused elsewhere—specifically on the outcome of the war between the AFC/M23 and the Congolese government.

A similar situation is observed regarding tensions between the Bashi-Bahavu mutual aid association (COMUSHI) based in Shabunda and the group of individuals presenting themselves as protectors of Lega culture. These tensions are currently on hold.

Indeed, the increased isolation of Shabunda resulting from the closure of the airports in Bukavu and Goma has made living conditions in this territory even more difficult, affecting all communities living in Shabunda without distinction. It can therefore be argued that, under such conditions, any escalation of the problem due to intercommunal tensions would be destructive for everyone.

Furthermore, the majority of essential goods available in Shabunda—such as salt, medicine, soap, and other manufactured goods—are sold by members of the Bashi-Bahavu community.

Mining continues under the control of the Wazalendo armed groups. However, with the change in authorities in Bukavu, the gold-buying outposts have almost all closed, leaving only miners and a few buyers who continue to keep the mining operation running. The gold that used to be transported to Bukavu before being exported has changed its route and is now headed toward Kindu in Maniema Province via an impassable road controlled by the Wazalendo.

6. Impacts on the HDP Community

The analytical matrix of vulnerabilities among HDP stakeholders in relation to risks will take into account risks to staff, limited access, disruption of activities, mistrust, rejection of interventions, delays in implementation, and high costs.

Types of Risk	Description	Mitigation/Sensitivity Required
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Physical security (kidnapping, arbitrary arrest or kidnapping)	Most of Shabunda's territory is controlled by armed groups that operate according to their own rules. Humanitarian workers are exposed to (attacks, abductions), psychological risks (trauma related to violence), and legal risks (accusations or local pressure).	- Update conflict analyses with a particular focus on mapping the actors, their interests and relationships, and the areas most affected by insecurity - Monitor the security situation
Humanitarian access is severely limited	The Shabunda territory is landlocked (roads are virtually nonexistent, there is no airport, and the airfield that used to receive small aircraft from Kavumu is not maintained; flights from Shabunda to Bukavu have been suspended since the AFC/M23 seized Kavumu). Armed violence and illegal roadblocks hinder the free movement of humanitarian teams and the delivery of aid. Furthermore, the risk of human rights violations is very high.	- In collaboration with the Access Working Group, establish a system for monitoring for humanitarian access constraints, and develop advocacy initiatives in support of the opening of airports. - Communicate with, train, and raise awareness among local authorities and communities about the humanitarian principles.
Mistrust toward HDP actors; Misperception and misinterpretation of the presence of HDP actors	The ethnic and intercommunal tensions fuel conflicts and complicate efforts toward social cohesion and peacebuilding. The Shabunda General Referral Hospital is facing operational difficulties due to a fuel shortage and of medicines.¹³ This is increasingly endanger patients' lives.	NGOs must tread carefully to avoid being perceived as partisan or being exploited. Communicate clearly with the authorities and local leaders regarding the mandate and the intervention strategy of HDP stakeholders.

7. Recommendations

The isolation of the Shabunda territory, the intensification of activities by various armed groups, fear of the AFC/M23, and the growing needs of the community are all factors that

complicate the work of HDP actors in this territory. To operate with confidence, these actors should:

- Conduct regular contextual analyses by mapping conflicts focused on current dynamics, actors, and their relationships, in order to adjust activities, intervention areas, and beneficiaries.
- Involve community leaders in prioritizing urgent needs to avoid spending resources on needs that are not a priority for the community.
- Suspend or halt any intervention that could harm the image of HDP actors or create problems for staff or beneficiaries.
- Ensure the promotion and respect of humanitarian principles—particularly neutrality, impartiality, and equity—by establishing transparent and participatory criteria for beneficiary selection and by avoiding any actual or perceived affiliation with armed groups or partisan local authorities.
- Promote community dialogue and social cohesion by incorporating mediation and conflict resolution activities into all interventions.
- Prioritize partnerships with local organizations while ensuring that they are not linked to the various factions of armed groups active in the territory.
- Establish complaint management mechanisms and effectively utilize information gathered from the community through these mechanisms, ensuring that feedback is provided to the community after analysis.
- Protect teams and beneficiaries by training staff on conflict sensitivity, personal safety, and GBV management, and by establishing clear security protocols tailored to the context of Mwenga.
- Strengthen coordination and information sharing by actively participating in humanitarian clusters, security forums, and local consultation platforms, and by regularly exchanging information with other stakeholders (NGOs, authorities, local leaders) on risks, incidents, and best practices.
- Document lessons learned to improve future interventions.

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