

BRIEFING NOTE FOR HDP STAKEHOLDERS WORKING IN THE MWENGA 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 remain relevant and useful for a relatively short time 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 Mwenga territory, South Kivu, so they can adapt their interventions to the context.

2. Brief Overview of the Context

The Mwenga territory, located in South Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is currently experiencing a period of significant security and humanitarian instability. Rich in mineral resources, particularly gold, Mwenga attracts considerable interest, which fuels tensions. The situation in the Mwenga territory is currently characterized by armed conflicts,¹ conflicts over mining,² boundary disputes between administrative entities,³ conflicts over traditional authority, and tensions between herders and farmers.⁴ The activities of armed groups and communal tensions are consequences of the various conflicts mentioned. Other consequences include abuses and violence against civilians, such as rape, mass population displacements, kidnappings, looting, and obstacles to safe physical access to fields and local markets.⁵

3. Description of the factors and causes (immediate and structural) of the conflicts

The causes of conflict in the Mwenga territory stem from a complex combination of structural factors, such as the management of customary authority, competition over access to and control of natural resources (land, minerals), communal rivalries, and the weak state presence. All these factors interact within a circular system to such an extent that, from a systemic perspective, they overlap and influence one another, creating a context of instability and violence marked by:

- The weak presence of state authority (weak governance) gives rise to contested chiefdoms and exacerbates land grabbing, corruption, and impunity.
- The state's inability to regulate mining reinforces illegal mining (this factor is linked to the weak governance mentioned above and illustrates the intertwining of these factors)
- Natural resources (gold, coltan, cassiterite) attract armed groups that engage in the violent control of these resources, as well as illegal enterprises (and other opaque networks involving national and local politicians and foreign firms) that are believed

to finance local and foreign armed actors in order to gain easier access to the resources.

- Natural resources such as gold, coltan, and cassiterite attract armed groups that engage in violent exploitation of these materials. They are also supported by illegal companies (and other opaque networks comprising politicians at various levels and foreign firms) that finance local and foreign armed groups to facilitate their access to these resources.
- The chiefdoms in the Mwenga territory most affected by illegal mining are: Wamuzimu, Basile, Burhinyi, Luhwinja, and Lwindi.
- Conflicts over the boundaries of local administrative units in Mwenga stem from the old, poorly defined administrative divisions that continue to cause tensions today. Indeed, the administrative boundaries of the Wamuzimu chiefdom date back to the colonial era, when the borders between chiefdoms, groupings, and sectors were drawn without consulting local communities and often without taking sociocultural and geographic realities into account.⁶ Currently, certain clans are considered “enclaves” and are campaigning for their independence.⁷
- Traditional chiefdoms are often contested, with internal struggles for power and legitimacy, which further undermines local governance. In the Hauts Plateaus of Mwenga, ethnic communities (such as the Babembe, Banyamulenge, Banyindu, and Bafuliiru) frequently clash over issues of identity and territorial legitimacy. All these conflicts are further complicated by regional geopolitical issues: alleged support from neighboring countries for armed rebel groups, the presence of foreign armed groups, the internationalization of conflicts, strategic minerals (gold, coltan, cassiterite), and the presence of regional actors who are believed to be exploiting tensions and divisions among local communities. These issues further undermine the authority of the state.

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

Taking into account the factors and various dynamics of the conflicts in the Mwenga territory, the main actors and stakeholders are:

- Civilians, the primary victims of violence, who are often displaced or subjected to abuses.
- Traditional and community leaders, key mediators who are sometimes caught up in the dynamics of the conflict or accused of bias.⁸

- State actors: a) the Armed Forces of the Republic of the Congo (FARDC) are present in the area but are sometimes accused of passivity, collusion with certain armed groups, or abuses against civilians;⁹ b) the Congolese National Police, which is poorly equipped and has a limited presence in rural areas, limiting its ability to maintain order; c) local administrative authorities, who are sometimes marginalized or exploited by armed or economic actors.
- Foreign¹⁰ and local armed groups are present in Mwenga. These groups consist of a) the Mai-Mai¹¹—comprising various, often community-based factions—who claim to defend their lands or communities but are also involved in the illegal exploitation of resources; b) Banyamulenge armed groups, which are active in the highlands and sometimes in conflict with other local groups; c) regional armed coalitions, which are militias receiving logistical or political support from cross-border networks.
- Economic actors consisting of a) artisanal and industrial miners, present in areas rich in gold and other minerals, sometimes linked to armed groups to secure or control sites; b) mineral trafficking networks organized around informal, often cross-border supply chains that supply the conflicts; c) Local merchants and transporters, affected by having to pay illegal taxes to armed groups in order to travel or conduct business.
- Regional and international actors: a) Neighboring countries (Rwanda, Burundi): accused of indirect interference through networks supporting certain militias or through the smuggling of resources; b) International organizations involved in the protection of civilians, community mediation, and humanitarian assistance.

5. Changes in the Context and Dynamics of Conflicts

a. Changes Regarding the Actors

The arrival of the AFC/M23 in Mwenga territory on the evening of Monday, March 3, 2025, via the town of Kilungutwe, altered the dynamics of the armed conflicts and the actors involved in Mwenga territory. For example, the Mai-Mai armed groups, which previously fought against the FARDC, are now fighting alongside them under the name “Wazalendo”¹² against the AFC/M23.

Some Chinese mining companies have ceased operations and their executives have left, abandoning their equipment at the sites. This is the case in the Balobola cluster in the Basile chiefdom and in the Luwhinja chiefdom, where Twangiza Mining suspended its gold mining operations following the arrival of AFC/M23 rebels in that area.¹³ However, other mining companies are still operating: Yellow Stone continues to mine gold in Luguswha, and Misenga Mining maintains its mining operations in Kitutu, in the Banampute group, within the Wamuzimu chiefdom.¹⁴ It is important to note that even though industrial gold mining has ceased at several sites, artisanal mining continues in areas under the control of the Wazalendo or the AFC/M23.¹⁵

Conflicts between herders and farmers persist; however, the parties involved no longer turn to the courts (which are virtually inactive at the moment) or to local chiefs, but now prefer to appeal to the Wazalendo, who offer them so-called quick solutions. For example, the person who filed the complaint first is sometimes given preferential treatment.¹⁶ This situation poses major risks, such as human rights violations and increased instability. It can also create inter-community conflicts and exacerbate tensions.

b. Changes in Factors/Causes

The causes and factors remain the same. However, certain factors contributing to the conflicts (poverty, lack of access to land, community tensions) are exacerbated by the illegitimate roadblocks erected by the Wazalendo on National Highway No. 2. According to accounts from civil society groups in Mwenga, some 60 roadblocks have been set up along the Kilungutwe-Lwino route and in surrounding areas. These *checkpoints* have become sites of extortion and, at times, torture. At each checkpoint, all passengers are required to pay between 5,000 FC and 20,000 FC, and those who refuse are subjected to various forms of torture.¹⁷ From an economic perspective, The prices of basic necessities have doubled or tripled, and these items are becoming increasingly scarce.¹⁸

6. Impacts on the HDP community

Types of Risk	Description	Mitigation / Required Sensitivity
Physical Security	Presence of armed groups¹⁹ leading to clashes, ambushes, crossfire, and landmines. Registration²⁰ of individuals coming from areas controlled by the AFC/M3.	- Regular updates to maps of armed groups and high-risk areas. - Restrictions on movement in red zones.

Arbitrary arrest	Leaders of armed groups have assigned themselves titles and ranks, establishing their own operational methods that operate outside any administrative, legal, or even political structures. This could hinder the actions of HDP actors.	- When engaging in discussions with these leaders, strictly respect their titles. - Analyze the potential impact of engaging with methods established by the leaders of armed groups on the organization's image and values before taking action. - Postpone or cancel activities when an intervention in such a context is deemed harmful to the organization's image and values, and especially if it is considered dangerous for both staff and beneficiaries.
Limited humanitarian access	Several roads are inaccessible due to fighting, preventing the delivery of aid.	- Strengthen discussions and information-sharing regarding humanitarian access within the Access Working Group and through FONGI so that these platforms can define the advocacy strategies to be pursued and the targets of their efforts.
Extortion and looting	Theft of humanitarian supplies or kidnapping of personnel by armed groups or opportunistic individuals.	- Discreet and secure transport of resources. - Engage with community leaders to ensure the protection of goods, especially in areas controlled by community-based armed groups.

Political or community-based manipulation	Risk of being perceived as partisan or of exacerbating interethnic tensions. Escalation of community tensions.	- Strict application of humanitarian principles and conflict sensitivity. - Conducting interventions that reduce community divisions. - Equitable distribution of aid, without any perceived favoritism. - Development of inclusive and unifying messages likely to strengthen social cohesion during aid distribution. - Integration of conflict analysis into project implementation.
Sexual violence and gender-based on gender (GBV)	Increase in cases of rape, sexual exploitation, and sexual abuse in conflict zones.	- Establishment of community-based protection mechanisms. - Creation of safe spaces for survivors Awareness-raising and training on GBV.
Becoming a scapegoat during a shortage of medicines	Increase in deaths due to a lack of medication and failure to care	Collaborate with the provincial health inspectorate to support the Mwenga health zone with medicines and health supplies

7. Recommendations

The security context in the Mwenga territory requires regular adaptation of strategies, as the area is exposed to armed conflict. To ensure a conflict-sensitive response in the Mwenga territory, and in accordance with the mitigation measures outlined above, HDP actors must:

- Conduct regular contextual analyses by mapping conflicts with a focus on dynamics, actors, and armed alliances in order to adapt objectives, intervention areas, and beneficiaries.
- Adapt implementation mechanisms to local realities by prioritizing flexible and decentralized approaches capable of quickly adjusting to security changes, and by expanding local capacity-building to ensure service continuity in the event of a temporary withdrawal of HDP actors.
- Ensure neutrality, impartiality, and fairness 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 programs.
- Create spaces for inter-community dialogue in intervention areas to anticipate tensions and promote peace by supporting local initiatives for reconciliation and collective memory.
- For health sector actors, prioritize the operation of health facilities and patient care in Mwenga.
- Protect teams and beneficiaries by training staff on conflict sensitivity and personal safety, raising awareness among all staff about gender-based violence (GBV), and implementing clear safety protocols tailored to the context of Mwenga.
- Strengthen coordination and information sharing by actively participating in humanitarian clusters, security forums, and regional consultation platforms, and by regularly exchanging information with other stakeholders (NGOs, authorities, local leaders) on risks, incidents, and best practices.
- Document and share lessons learned to improve future interventions.

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