

# Humanitarian Observatories Series | preventing crisis through reforestation: the case of Kalehe in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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Kalehe, a territory in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) located just to the north of Bukavu, has witnessed an unprecedented humanitarian crisis triggered by heavy rains in May 2023, resulting in at least 513 deaths, 5 525 people missing, 2 046 houses destroyed, many schools and health centres destroyed. However, it was possible to prevent some of the worst effects of the crisis if efforts of reforestation were undertaken beforehand to reduce risks to lives and livelihoods. The DRC Humanitarian Observatory (DRC HO) calls for more attention to prevent such crises sustainably in the future in the DRC and in other similar contexts in the world.



### **A humanitarian crisis with multiple consequences**

Kalehe is one of the territories in the province of South-Kivu located in the northern side of Bukavu city (capital city of South-Kivu province). It covers the Eastern littoral of the Kivu Lake in Eastern DRC. Decades ago, there was a large tree-planting effort to protect the environment. In recent years, however, Kalehe's population has grown rapidly due to the presence of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the territory. As a result of this, Kalehe has experienced widescale and rapid deforestation and loss of grassland in the middle and high plateaux to produce wood and charcoal without planting other trees.

In the night of 4 May 2023, heavy rains caused water levels to rise, as well as flooding in some villages of the Bushushu *groupement* in the Bukavu chiefdom of this territory. The Lukungula River of Bushushu, and the

Kamikonzi River in Nyamukubi went beyond their limits, resulting in flooding and spreading of mixture of water, large stones, and mud in four out of seven sub villages of the locality, particularly Bushushu, Kabuchungu, Nyamukubi and Musumba. The humanitarian consequences of this were dramatic and multiform: 5525 people missing, more than 513 bodies buried, more than 2046 houses totally destroyed, more than 562 families mourning, many schools and health centres destroyed, loss of household assets including tables, chairs, and loss of documents of value such as electoral cards. The DRC HO team conducted fieldwork from 29 through 30 June 2023 in the area to know more about the crisis. [WFP's emergency response to the Kalehe floods, South Kivu – Flash Report #2 \(19 May 2023\) – Democratic Republic of the Congo | ReliefWeb](#)

### **Kalehe crisis: challenges of the humanitarian assistance**

During the fieldwork, the team identified several challenges associated with: (i) people's (re-)location, (ii) deforestation, (iii) insufficient aid and, (iv) deficit of accountability while delivering assistance.

1. ***Challenges of relocation:*** four villages were totally devastated, people lacked where to reside in terms of on which land to construct houses, infrastructures such as water points, health centres, schools, churches, markets, fields for cultivation, etc.
2. ***Challenges of reforestation:*** people did fell trees without control; areas became entirely less grassy because of charcoal production and/or cultivable land. There was a clear link between lack of environmental protection and mud and landslides, which cause wide scale destruction
3. ***Challenges of insufficient aid:*** state actors (Government, First Lady) and non-state actors (churches, associations), international actors (ACTED, OXFAM, Caritas, World Vision, MIDEFEOPS, Mercy Corps), together with United Nations agencies (OCHA, PAM, HCR, UNICEF) mobilized themselves since the start of the crisis. Even though, needs remained huge in terms of food and non-food items (shelters, clothes, kitchen items, cover, mosquito nets), water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education, health, agriculture, psychosocial support, dignity kits for women, among others.
4. ***Challenges of accountability while delivering assistance:*** Some mechanisms of accountability were operational on the ground. Even though, in the vast



majority of cases, there were reporting about discrimination of true beneficiaries in the selection process, which worked in favour of those who were close relatives to local leaders, often leaving out victims. In other cases, corruption took the form of bribing assistance by some humanitarian actors and selection of beneficiaries who were not victims. They delivered assistance without necessarily involving affected people and without any intention to take into account their points of views nor did they think reporting to them. At the same time however, actors reported more to their donors than towards affected people.



*Photo 1: survival of the Kalehe crisis waiting for assistance in front of a humanitarian actor office, photo of 30 June 2023, in Kalehe*

## **Contextual factors**

Kalehe is located at 60 kilometres from Bukavu city; most of humanitarian actors have offices at in Bukavu. Local leaders created a local crisis committee in Kalehe. According to informants, it is at this stage that there were many cases of aid misappropriation in terms of weak coordination of interventions on the ground, resulting in double cases, omissions, embezzlements, falsifications of recipient lists by some humanitarian actors in complicity with some local authorities. There was not necessarily

harmony between lists of genuine victims and those who benefited aid; as a result, some received aid more than three times, while others did not receive anything. The weak involvement of affected populations in needs' identification contributed negatively. Some actors worked just with local leaders who, often less informed of categories of peoples' specific needs. Community leaders, supposed to represent the population, hardly fed back information shared in meetings to their constituency; creating an information vacuum.

## **Two recommendations**

During the DRC HO event of 15 September 2023, where they shared and discussed fieldwork findings, participants formulated two main recommendations in the sense of concrete actions to set in place:

### **1. Relocate affected people close to cultivable lands**

During and after the crises in DRC, displaced people tended to settle in the Kalehe territory. Kalehe is a zone heavily occupied by plantations of wealthy people, and so the task to find an appropriate site for IDPs became a major challenge. This recommendation abides by the tripartite Congolese State-land owners-affected populations paradigm to ensure that people can live in peace. At the same time, reforestation efforts should be intensified, especially in hilly and affected and non-affected areas.

### **2. Concentration of humanitarian aid in favour of affected populations by working for and with them.**

To maximize chances to assist the maximum of affected people, IDPs need to be at the heart of assistance interventions. Needs' identification, lists of distribution and their approval, certification of right victims are all examples of true willingness to involve them in the all process of assistance. Taking into account all relevant sectors namely health, education, reconstruction, habitat, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and socio-psychological support. The improvement of social accountability during aid delivery, in particular downward accountability rather than just upward accountability. These lessons should guide every assistance coordination similar to the Kalehe context in the DRC and across the globe.

*[1] We wrote this blog from the discussion of the DRC-HO event of 15 September 2023; we recognize active participation of Denise Shukuru Manegabe, Samuella Lukenge, Moise Amisi Ezdra, Kamos Bishindo, Darcin Ajuaye Kagadju and Innocent Assumani.*

*Opinions expressed in Bliss posts reflect solely the views of the author of the post in question.*

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