



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO COUNTRY REPORT

THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN
SYSTEM 2026

ACRONYMS

AFC/ M23	Alliance Fleuve Congo/Mouvement du 23 mars (River Congo Alliance/Movement of 23 March)
COHP	Coordination Opérationnelle Humanitaire Provinciale (Provincial Humanitarian Operational Coordination)
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FARDC	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IDP	internally displaced persons
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
NNGO	national non-governmental organisation
PSEA	prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse
SOHS	The State of the Humanitarian System
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



4. POWER IMBALANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PRACTICE IN DRC

4.1 Power, corruption and gatekeeping

Power imbalances, diversion of funds, corruption, fraud and mismanagement of humanitarian resources constitute major challenges to humanitarian action in DRC. This finding, highlighted by Barbelet et al (2019), was also a dominant viewpoint expressed by people affected by crisis and by local and international aid workers we consulted.

Humanitarian response in DRC relies largely on UN agencies and INGOs, which in turn reinforces their power in the decision-making process (FAO 2023; OCHA 2025). They are the ones making funding-allocation decisions, leading clusters and setting priorities, as became clear through discussions with representatives from local organisations. Due to the ongoing conflict, and the distance between eastern DRC and the national capital, the Congolese Government is often not present in coordination meetings, aside from those involving public health measures (for

example during the Mpox outbreak, as per our interviews with Congolese Ministry of Health focal points). It does not effectively coordinate or provide guidance to humanitarian organisations and UN agencies. As a result, the UN coordinates and plans most assistance in place of the government, which significantly reduces state authority in this area, according to one government official in South Kivu.



Clientelism is evident in the selection of local partners implementing projects.

This dynamic reinforces the power imbalance in favour of UN agencies and international organisations, as many public services are provided by INGOs and they decide on funding allocations. KIs with representatives of NNGOs, INGOs and

local authorities revealed a strong perception that UN agencies and international organisations do not fully honour their commitments in many cases, as there is little pressure to do so due to the government's inability to access various resources. They thus operate in an environment of limited accountability, with many cases of misuse of funding and clientelism.

FGD participants indicated that misuse of aid often takes the form of humanitarian actors diverting assistance. Some organisational staff purportedly collaborate with local leaders to inflate beneficiary lists or include fictitious names. After distribution, the aid allocated to these fictitious beneficiaries is then shared among those involved. In other cases, clientelism is evident in the selection of local partners implementing projects in collaboration with international organisations or UN agencies (Biferd, 2025).

In some cases, poor participation of local representatives in humanitarian governance reduces their influence in decision-making on aid delivery. A local leader in Goma stated: 'Local leaders do not influence decision-making in the humanitarian sector'. This practice reduces the effectiveness of interventions, as they often fail to adequately address the needs of populations affected by crisis. It also limits the influence of local actors in shaping and implementing humanitarian action.

'Yes, let me talk of what we have been observing regarding maize flour and beans distribution. Some partners used to bring spoiled beans and expired maize flour. Then the affected population had no choice than receiving them. Some used to distribute farming seeds, which will not produce anything. People complained to OCHA and various partners.'

INGO representative, Goma

However, some established accountability mechanisms demonstrate effective feedback systems that translate the inputs of people affected by crisis into tangible operational changes.

'Nowadays, during distributions, elderly people, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities have their own queue. That is already a response to our complaint.'

FGD participant, Don Bosco, Goma

Although measures such as adapting distribution queues have been introduced, in many cases these mechanisms do not enable communities affected by crisis to report complaints effectively, particularly when they are not well known, trusted or adapted to the local context.

'Many beneficiaries do not report their complaints because they fear that their information might be shared with authorities, leading to adverse effects, including exclusion from aid provision. Others do not report because they are not well informed about accountability mechanisms.'

FGD participant, Bukavu

The implication of police and local authorities in corruption cases, as well as the perceived impunity enjoyed by individuals involved in such practices, are also major challenges (Rahmé and Researcher 2022).

According to an interview with a representative of a women's local organisation in Kavumu, corruption manifests through friendship and brotherhood relationships



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with people working in international agencies. This phenomenon is also documented in the literature (see Henze et al, (2020). The perceived manipulation of recipient lists of people affected by crisis was also mentioned during the FGD in Goma. Moreover, corruption is also said to manifest through the reduction of agreed amounts allocated for work, which people have to accept to keep their job.

'You agreed to be given \$15 per day of work, you were only receiving \$10 and that was happening to all members who conducted the campaign.'

FGD participant, Kavumu

FGD participants in Mugunga and a local authority also said that people sometimes accept bribes to include individuals on recipient lists, even if they are not affected by crisis, because they are friends or relatives of local actors.

Access to aid is structurally impeded by the system's failure to enforce accountability over local gatekeepers, who systematically divert resources through corrupt practices. The reliance on local power structures forces some vulnerable people to pay bribes or provide favours to get access to basic assistance. Understanding local power dynamics is therefore crucial, as existing structures can divert aid for personal gain in collaboration with some aid workers. In some cases, this has even resulted in violence against humanitarian workers.

'There are many instances where communities, especially IDPs, were turning against aid workers ...'

'The key cause of those attacks used to start when a beneficiary's name does not appear on the list, and they were amongst those who were identified and registered.'

'... and after those complaints, they used to respond back by saying "we aren't [the World Food Programme]". And that's when they could be fought.'

FGD participants, Kanyaruchinya, Goma

The humanitarian sector's performance is also threatened by armed group control measures, interference by local leaders and armed groups, and targeted attacks against humanitarian actors. For example, government forces and armed groups set up roadblocks to control the movement of humanitarian personnel. These checkpoints are sometimes accompanied by intimidation and extortion (OCHA 2026). They sometimes force organisations to pay to access operational areas (Altare et al. 2021). In many rebel-controlled areas of North Kivu and South Kivu, where the government has lost control or has limited authority, the influence of armed groups prevails over humanitarian principles, and aid delivery depends largely on armed group willingness to collaborate. In this sense, humanitarian principles – particularly of neutrality and independence – are compromised due to these political and military influences.



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'Some local authorities even forced us to provide aid in one zone while neglecting another. Sometimes we were denied authorisation to intervene in certain areas if we did not comply. For example, in Kirotshe, the authorities refused to sign our documents unless we intervened in the Rutshuru zone, even though the project was planned for Kirotshe.'

INGO staff member

'I have an example. A member of an armed group who was at the distribution site, requested for something from the aid, he was not on the list, so you can imagine you as humanitarian actor (laugh!), guns are there, what can you do? Considering that, as a humanitarian we hold the responsibility to protect lives of staffs and beneficiaries.'

NNGO representative

Participants also mentioned that local authorities and armed groups frequently impose conditions on humanitarian actors.

'When our city was still surrounded by Wazalendo, at some point they were interfering when medical equipment was being transported to rural areas. We had to consult their leaders, and to promise that their families will be prioritised during treatment, in order to advocate for those kits to be transported and allow free operation in those areas.'

Local Chief, Goma

All of these practices undermine trust between aid providers and communities affected by crisis and they also undermine aid effectiveness. They reduce the effectiveness of interventions on the ground and tarnish the humanitarian sector's reputation.

4.2 The breakdown of accountability and dignity

Concerns related to corruption, fraud and impunity persist in DRC. However, participants highlighted that such abuses, as well as other forms of misuse of humanitarian funding, are rarely reported. When they are reported, often this does not lead to satisfactory outcomes.

'In some contexts, community members are able to denounce lack of accountability with the State system. However, there are still risks of reprisal for those who denounce whenever occasions open up in favour of state actors. In a number of cases, there is no change when community members are powerless or cannot have support in the State hierarchy line or from aid organisations.'

Women's representative, Kavumu

The low reporting rate is also attributed to limited awareness among populations affected by crisis, lack of trust and insufficient adaptation of existing accountability mechanisms to local realities (KII with PSEA coordination staff in Goma; FGD in Bukavu). These findings suggest that accountability mechanisms within the humanitarian sector in DRC still face important challenges. While most international humanitarian actors interviewed for this research reported having established accountability mechanisms to enable communities to understand their activities, provide feedback on the quality of interventions and report complaints, these

mechanisms remain underutilised and poorly managed. This includes reporting hotlines with instructions in English rather than a local language, suggestion boxes remaining unchecked for several months at a time, and retaliation against those reporting incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse (Lusambya, 2024).



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INGO interventions were often perceived by FGD participants as foreign to the local context because they have been implemented without meaningful consultation with populations affected by crisis. Communities are rarely, if ever, adequately informed about how these mechanisms function or what their purpose is. As a result, the level of interaction between populations affected by crisis and aid providers remains limited, and reporting and complaint rates are low. This contributes to the persistence of misconduct in the negotiation and delivery of aid in DRC, including violations of dignity, misuse of aid, diversion of resources, clientelism, and sexual abuse and exploitation (Bifred, 2025; Lusambya 2024). Such practices

continue to manifest in various forms even though they are prohibited under international humanitarian law and various standards, guidelines, codes of conduct and the ethical principles of humanitarian actors. This undermines the effectiveness and credibility of humanitarian action on the ground.

4.3 PSEA in eastern DRC and its relationship to humanitarian aid

Closely related to a lack of accountability to affected populations is the continuing prevalence of PSEA in eastern DRC.

'Before the implementation of PSEA coordination in 2022, the reporting rate was 0.8%, suggesting a dysfunctional system rather than a lack of cases. With the establishment of the coordination mechanism, however, the reporting rate increased to 145%.'

PSEA coordination staff, Goma

While the significant increase in reported cases led to the development of a new PSEA Plan for 2024 and 2025 (PSEA Network DRC 2025), the USAID funding cuts have since affected PSEA coordination activities in DRC.

'The funding cuts resulted in an 80% drop in capacity and all five regional sub-coordination and 26 sub-networks were closed at the beginning of 2026.'

PSEA coordination staff member, Goma

The PSEA Coordinator position was affected, as it is no longer permanent, therefore interviewees questioned the validity and longevity of PSEA efforts. In addition, the five regional coordination networks and all sub-networks closed, meaning regular meetings and trainings were cancelled. Although well-trained personnel are available, they cannot operate without funding. Funding cuts, plus the reduction in PSEA Coordination positions and related activities, have dealt a serious blow to an initiative that had just emerged in DRC. They dashed hopes of strengthening PSEA support and services, not only in DRC but also globally. According to PSEA-focused staff in Goma, the coordination mechanism in DRC had been, until then, the only one with a well-structured coordination strategy and a collaborative strategic plan between humanitarian organisations. The prospects for effective implementation remain limited now, which could result in significant negative consequences in the future.



Dignity is structurally compromised in service delivery due to the persistence of abusive power dynamics.

Dignity is structurally compromised in service delivery due to the persistence of abusive power dynamics. For instance, FGD participants in Mugunga reported that some frontline staff committed physical and psychological violations (such as verbal abuse or denial of shelter or basic security). This highlights a critical gap between high-level policies and their implementation in practice. Humanitarian actors sometimes use recipient verification methods that undermine dignity and safety too. For example, cases were reported of IDP verification conducted in camps at night or early in the morning, which was perceived as prioritising administrative accountability over people's dignity and security. While such strategies may help prevent the inclusion of ineligible individuals, they may be interpreted as going against the principles of 'do no harm' and respect for individuals' dignity. Additionally, aid recipients perceived the challenges they face in accessing aid – including the injustices, the effort required and the hardships endured – as factors that negatively affect their sense of dignity.

4.4 Localisation as an unfulfilled or stalled transformation

Since the Grand Bargain and the signing of commitments for the localisation of aid, some humanitarian organisations operating in DRC have expressed their intention to make their commitments effective on the ground (Karume and Muke 2024). Actors have mobilised efforts and resources to advance the localisation agenda, while some funding programmes have revised their policies to comply with these commitments. This is the case for the Humanitarian Fund/Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF), whose funding allocated directly to local and national actors increased from 23% in 2019 to 46% in



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2022 (Development Initiatives 2023). Actors from UN agencies and INGOs organised several training sessions to strengthen the capacities of local actors. And the number of local NGO representatives in humanitarian coordination was to increase: from two to five in the HCT and two per province affected by crisis (Karume and Muke 2024).

However, despite these efforts, localisation remains largely a rhetorical commitment for most international agencies and NGOs. The reality on the ground shows that many UN agencies and international organisations remain reluctant to transfer power and resources to local actors. Local organisations and local authorities reported stringent reporting and earmarking procedures, and being shut out of decision-making structures (see also Desrosiers and Swedlund, (2025). In terms of funding, very few organisations and programmes have revised their policies around pooled funds or lump sum grants to local partners. Although some programmes

such as the DRC Humanitarian Fund reached 53% allocation to local organisations (OCHA, 2023), when combining all direct and indirect funding for local and national actors, only around 2.1% of humanitarian aid in the DRC reaches local actors (UNOCHA 2025).



Projects and funds belong to the international organisations, which employ local NGOs as subcontractors – a dynamic often referred to as ‘risk dumping’.

Given the global funding cuts, there is competition with UN agencies and international organisations over funding opportunities that should benefit local NGOs. Since the latter lack expertise, they collaborate with international organisations that have the required experience. Unfortunately, however, such relationships remain largely dominated by subcontracting rather than pure partnership (Barbelet et al, 2019). Projects and funds

belong to the international organisations, which employ local NGOs as subcontractors – a dynamic often referred to as ‘risk dumping’ and as creating unequal partnerships (Hassounah 2024; InterAction 2024). This practice reduces the rights and decision-making power of local organisations in terms of the use of funds and resource allocation.

Furthermore, although staff of local organisations may be trained, they often do not remain permanently in these structures. Once these personnel are skilled, the international organisations that trained them tend to hire them (James 2026). This practice maintains a brain drain from local NGOs.

