

CONFLICT AND HUNGER IN EASTERN DR CONGO: BUILDING RESILIENCE WITHIN COMPOUNDING CRISES

THE ISSUE

FIGHTING AGAINST HUNGER: A HUMANITARIAN LENS

Mercy Corps is one of the largest humanitarian organisations working in Eastern DRC, operational since 2007, and providing urgent relief to people displaced by violence and extreme weather events, while working with communities to build long-term food security, water access and stability to address some of the underlying causes of conflict and violence.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is host to one of the world's most complex and long-standing humanitarian crises. Despite its vast human and natural resources, including more than 80 million hectares of arable land, it remains home to the world's largest number of people in need of urgent food assistance. More than a third of the population, or 27.3 million people, are considered acutely food insecure. The food security crisis in DRC reflects deeper issues, including over two decades of conflict in the country's east, coupled with economic instability, dilapidated infrastructure, high food prices impacted by global crises, compounding epidemics, and low agricultural productivity. At the same time, more systemic challenges such as crop theft and lack of access to land and capital negatively affect food production, while child-feeding practices, contaminated water and poor sanitation facilities lead to high levels of malnutrition.

In the country's east, home to more than [120 active](#) armed groups, food insecurity is as much a driver of conflict as it is a consequence. More than 5.5 million people are displaced, with new displacements happening continuously. Many of the battlegrounds in the east are home to rural communities reliant on **agriculture for subsistence and income**. While estimates suggest more than 70 per cent of the employed population is engaged in agriculture, the majority remain subsistence, small-scale farmers. When forced to flee, they leave behind their livelihoods. When fighting calms, they often return to find their crops or livestock have been stolen or have else failed in their absence. With every new displacement, they return to zero.

Mercy Corps' emergency programme provides one-time cash or voucher assistance to help displaced families meet their most urgent, life-saving needs. This is followed by interim emergency assistance to ensure



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families have access to a predictable supply of nutritious food, alongside water and sanitation facilities, to be able to restart their lives and livelihoods.

Cash and voucher programming has been proven to be an effective type of response in areas where markets are still operating, providing displaced families with choice, while stimulating economic recovery by supporting local markets and vendors.

Funded by ECHO, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and delivered by five NGOs with Mercy Corps as consortium lead, SAFER project operates through mobile teams that deploy to hard-to-reach areas allowing for timely assessment of displacement alerts and relief for populations in need. Balancing the timeliness of the response and sound understanding of the situation, SAFER aims to include, consult with, and create opportunities for participation and leadership for affected communities. In addition, protection mitigation plans and rapid assessment of markets ensure the response is safe and appropriate

to the needs of the community and the capacity of the market. With an average intervention size of more than 4,200 households, Mercy Corps reached more than 82,000 conflict-affected people in the last twelve months.

What is needed from donors? Further investment in both multi-sectorial humanitarian response as well as longer-term approaches that can address medium and long-term effects of food security crises and build resilience and, stability.

For Mercy Corps, a comprehensive response to DRC's food security challenges will require a coordinated effort across sectors, including life-saving humanitarian response, agriculture, nutrition and health, as well as a recommitment to a resilience approach.

➤ At just 24 years-old, Grace Ganisikale, mother of two, knows what it is like to rebuild one's life from scratch. In April 2021, violence broke out in her village, just 45km from Ituri province's capital, Bunia, forcing her and thousands of others to flee into the hills to seek safety. Despite returning just five months later, she remained cut off from her fields due to ongoing insecurity on the outskirts of her village. After an initial round of SAFER voucher assistance, in which Grace bought essential food and household items for her family, Mercy Corps taught Grace and other families how to grow vegetables in permagardens set up at their homes. "We eat vegetables regularly now, which helps us not just survive but also to live better," she said.



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Given the complex combination of threats facing communities in DRC, solutions must include bold, multisectoral humanitarian response, as well as medium, and longer-term development approaches that address the underlying drivers of food security and fortify communities to cope with and withstand future shocks, create sustainable food systems, and prevent future food crises.

Mercy Corps' seven-year food security programme funded by BHA since 2016 in South Kivu province demonstrates that it is possible to achieve long-term food security improvements in areas with relative stability. With an integrated approach that builds resilience while addressing the underlying causes of malnutrition, the Food Security Project program saw a 16% decrease in the prevalence of severe food insecurity in the Kabare and Kalehe intervention areas between 2020 and 2021, where Mercy Corps works hand in hand with more than 175,000 community members. Improving agricultural production, market access, resource management, governance, water sources and nutrition while adapting to climate change puts communities at the forefront of building more resilient food systems.

For Mercy Corps, a comprehensive response to DRC's food security challenges will require a coordinated effort across sectors, including life-saving humanitarian response, agriculture, nutrition and health, as well as a recommitment to a resilience approach. Ultimately, we will continue grappling with these crises until we find a way to meaningfully address the underlying drivers of conflict and help prepare communities to weather future shocks.

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