

Note on International NGO (INGO)'s perspectives on the humanitarian situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The INGO Forum in the Democratic Republic of Congo is a coordination body gathering 115 International NGOs present in the DRC, implementing emergency, development and peace building programs for the benefit of the Congolese population. Bringing together the perspective of such diverse actors, we wish to underline some of the concerns and opportunities for action to alleviate the plight of the 19,6 million people in need in the DRC, as identified in the Humanitarian Response Plan 2021- an increase of four million people in just one year.¹ According to this plan, 1.98 billion USD are needed this year to respond to the most pressing needs of 9.6 million persons.²

A multitude of humanitarian crises, yet seriously underfunded

Indeed, with 5.5 million people, of which 3 million are children, internally displaced by conflict, the DRC hosts the second largest number of people displaced in the world after Syria.³ The country also currently faces the largest ongoing food security crisis in the world, with 22 million people, amounting to 20 percent of the Congolese population, facing malnutrition and starvation.⁴ Like many other crises in the country, these can be traced back to raging conflicts and ethnic tensions often fueled by international or national political and economic interests. Attacks against civilians and widespread sexual and gender-based violence give rise to serious protection concerns. Indeed, with large parts of the country affected by conflict for more than two decades, the rule of law is often non-existent, people with gun dictate their rules in villages or at barriers when women come back from the field; school years are upset and children are at the mercy of armed groups because they don't benefit from the protective space schools offer.

Adding on to conflicts and food insecurity, the country is regularly confronted with disease outbreaks, such as cholera, polio, measles, yellow fever, Ebola and, recently, the bubonic plague. In December 2020 measles resurfaced in the country, only six months after the end of the deadliest measles outbreak in the world, with 380 000 cases and 7 000 deaths.⁵ In February 2021 new cases of the Ebola virus disease were announced just three months after the last outbreak had been declared over. In addition, being no exception, the DRC has also been hit by Covid-19. While it is difficult to assess the scale of the epidemic, given the limitations of the health system, it is clear that subsequent economic decline has dragged vulnerable

¹ OCHA, Plan de Réponse Humanitaire RDC 2021, Janvier 2021, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/democratic-republic-congo/document/rd-congo-plan-de-r%C3%A9ponse-humanitaire-2021>

² Ibid

³ OCHA Services, Reliefweb, December 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/country/cod#key-figures>

⁴ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), Projection January – June 2021, December 2020, <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1152857/?iso3=COD>

⁵ OCHA Services, Reliefweb, Weekly Regional Humanitarian, February 2021, [Snapshots: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/External%20Weekly_27jan-4feb_ENG.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/External%20Weekly_27jan-4feb_ENG.pdf)

households even further into poverty. To put the needs in a global perspective, one out of twelve persons in need in the world today come from the DRC.

The country remains one of the most neglected and underfunded compared to the needs and the gap between resources required and resources actually provided is widening. Despite being rated the third largest crisis in the world today in terms of number of persons in need, it ranked 6th in terms of funding received and 32nd in terms of funding coverage in 2020.⁶ To illustrate the imbalance, while DRC received 36 percent of the required resources at year-end 2020, the Syrian response was 56.1 percent covered at the end of 2020.⁷ This is not to reduce the enormous needs of the Syrian population, but rather to emphasize the scale of underfunding of the DRC.

In this context, the international NGOs in DRC are sounding the alarm. The Congolese people, the families displaced by conflict and the children dying of hunger need continued action and support to match the severity of the needs. The DRC, with its multiple crises and a constantly renewed emergency needs to be placed high on the international agenda, as one of the worst crises of the century.

An exceptionally challenging context of operations

In their strive to reach the most vulnerable women, men and children, humanitarian organizations operate in an exceptionally challenging environment. Access constraints, due to insecurity, logistic limitations and administrative hurdles are major challenges faced by humanitarian organizations. The security situation is extremely complex and hampers humanitarian access. DRC continues to be one of the most dangerous countries for aid workers. Only in 2020, 303 incidents on NGO staff were reported, among these 42 abducted 18 injured and 10 killed, according to the International NGO Safety Organization.⁸ It was with great despair that we learnt about the attack on a World Food Program (WFP) convoy on 22 February, ending with three casualties, the Italian ambassador in the country, his security guard and the WFP driver. Yet, we must not forget that this sort of attack is the reality faced by many local communities, Congolese women, men and children, every day.

INGOs are concerned about regular and recent pressures to use military equipment or escort and continue to stress the importance of implementing existing guidelines so far as such use should only be a last resort under exceptional circumstances. In this context, it needs to be underlined that for our actions to matter and have impact, humanitarian workers need to be protected; humanitarian space needs to be insured, and access needs to be promoted for all affected populations. Ensuring aid effectiveness and impact is a collective responsibility.

The Humanitarian stakeholders have a collective responsibility in what will happen with the DRC. If a real change is to take place, the national and provincial authorities in the country need to take responsibility and tackle issues of governance. Humanitarian actors need to do more to increase accountability and collectively find efficient ways to address unacceptable practices such as sexual misconduct and fraud. Development and bilateral donors need to be

⁶ OCHA, Global Humanitarian Response Overview 2020, <https://www.unocha.org/global-humanitarian-overview-2021>

⁷ OCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/fr/operations/whole-of-syria/document/2021-needs-and-response-summary-syrian-arab-republic>

⁸ International NGO Safety Organization (INSO) 2021, www.ngosafety.org

more agile, create more linkages with their emergency aid counterparts, and take over some of the early recovery burden. It is also more important than ever to ensure that more of the funds allocated go to the people in need, by increasing funding directly to the implementing actors, the national and international NGOs.

Given the scale and multitude of crises in DRC, donors should make rational decisions based on evidence and humanitarian figures, not based on media pressure. The DRC and its people need attention that is proportionate to the needs. Understanding the economic consequences of the Covid-19 affecting all countries around the world, this year more than ever, donors need to prioritize resources to countries with the most pressing needs to be at the center of decision making. While doing so, it is imperative to also emphasize the importance of structural changes and long term flexible development funding to enable strong connections between humanitarian life-saving interventions, long term development efforts and peace building initiatives whenever possible. This requires a strong political and diplomatic commitment.

The humanitarian community in DRC is ready to come to the aid of Congolese women, men and children. To reach out to the Congolese people in need, the humanitarian community in DRC needs support and commitments from the international community.