

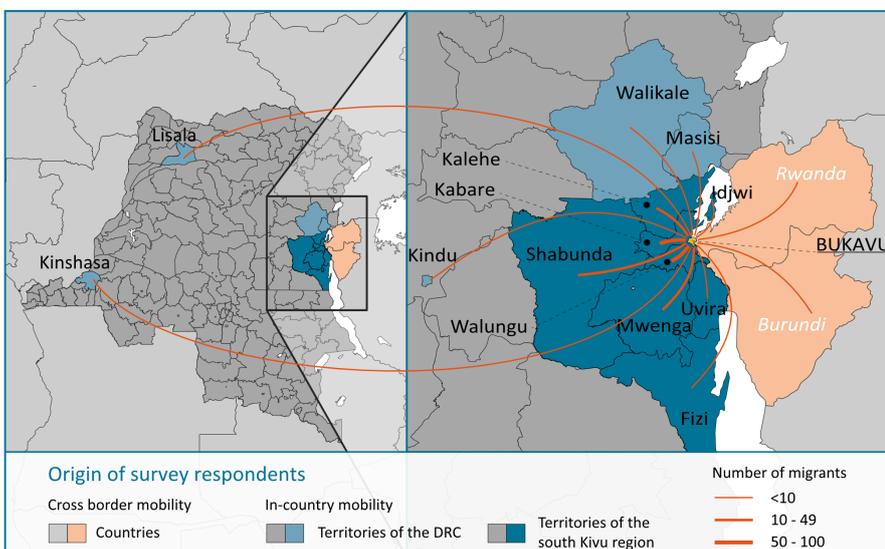
Transnational Figurations of Displacement

Bolstering resilient connections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Due to prolonged conflict, millions of people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have fled their homes to seek refuge elsewhere, especially in the east of the country. The majority of these Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) flee to cities and other local communities rather than to displacement camps. Bukavu, the capital of the South-Kivu province, is a case in point. In recent years, Bukavu grew rapidly due to the influx of IDPs and other migrants – mostly from the nearby districts. Yet, in the city, IDPs largely fend for themselves, and many experience socio-economic precarity.

Connectivity is one of the ways in which IDPs can improve their situation. The first and most important connection that IDPs mobilise upon arrival are familial ties. It is from here that they start a ‘chain of connectivity’ on the road towards local integration. Our research in Bukavu shows that many people depend on others in being or becoming self-reliant: They get access to employment, housing or basic services through their networks.

IDPs in the DRC



Source: OpenStreetMap 2020, Natural Earth 2020; Origin of survey respondents and number of migrants according to TRAFIG survey (n=300); Layout: Vincent Glasow, BICC, November 2020

“I still have my fields in [home community]. I go there regularly, I would say at least once every month. I bring the seeds myself. When the harvest is done, I organise myself to transport everything and sell part of the harvest [here in Bukavu]. The other part is for my own consumption in the house and to share with my children [...]” Ntama, a 54-year old woman who fled to Bukavu in 2003).

But IDPs are not only connected through local networks. Trans-local connections to their home communities enable people to mobilise resources that could help them build up their lives in displacement. Many IDPs rely on close or trusted contacts to monitor their resources while they are absent, and to prevent others from taking them over. Such translocal connections need to be well maintained, even when no return is planned: Mobile phone calls, physical visits of the IDP to the village or visits of relatives to the city are options used.

Quality matters

Local and translocal connections are important, but certain connections are more helpful than others. For example, many urban contacts of IDPs lack stable lives and are vulnerable to external shocks themselves. The quality of connections matters more than the quantity. For example, how easily disrupted is the connection between an IDP and the contact? Is it a close and trusted tie (resilient), or is it rather distant and unfamiliar (reliant)? Does the contact come from a similar socio-economic situation as the IDP (horizontal connection) or is he/she in a stable position of power with the ability to provide new opportunities and network contacts (vertical connection).

Understanding the quality of displaced persons’ connections can show prospects to move out of protracted displacement. Horizontal connections can increase IDPs’ self-reliance, but if the informal support network collapses, there is no institutional state or non-state actor in Bukavu to step in and provide formal support. Vertical connections are more useful but are also quite rare. Close contacts are reliable but not necessarily needed to build effective alliances that lead to economic integration and the feeling of being at home in the city. But relying on distant others to rebuild your life makes IDPs vulnerable as these connections are more easily disrupted.

Connectivity is needed for displaced persons to overcome protracted displacement, dependency and vulnerability to external shocks. But the strength of these connections makes all the difference.

The following matrix is a template to map the quality and the spatial dimensions of a displaced person’s connections. It helps to identify what types of connections individuals may need (and which can be supported in practice) to move out of protracted displacement, for instance from a state of precarious integration to sustainable integration, or from translocal reliance to translocal resilience.

Connectivity to move out of protracted displacement

	Local connections	Translocal connections
Vertical connections	<p><i>sustainable integration</i> Close connections across social hierarchies enhance livelihood security, future options and support the move out of protracted displacement</p>	<p><i>translocal resilience</i> Embeddedness in multiple and complementary networks and access to cyclical mobilities enlarge person’s livelihood choices and future pathways</p>
Horizontal connections	<p><i>precarious integration</i> Local connections within one’s peer group are often not enough to overcome socio-economic precarity</p>	<p><i>translocal reliance</i> Home-bound connections among peers and cyclical mobility help to enhance livelihood security, but state of protractedness remains</p>

The matrix underlines that bolstering strong connections within host communities and with those at ‘home’ can help IDPs to move out of protractedness.

Some IDPs rely on individual contacts, while others opt for more collective alliances. People who work in a certain sector unite in associations to offer services collectively to be able to bargain a better price and to attract larger jobs. One example from Bukavu is an association of women carrying sand for the construction sector in the city. Being part of such an association makes it easier for people to obtain clients and access the labour market. The reverse is also true: If all stalls in a market are distributed among members of an association, non-associated people would have little chance to compete in the market. Associations are only useful for integration if they do not set up barriers to enter, such as an initial membership fee.

Connectivity is needed for displaced persons to overcome protracted displacement, dependency and vulnerability to external shocks. But the strength of these connections makes all the difference. The absence of vertical or translocal ties can limit displaced persons from becoming self-reliant or moving out of ‘limbo’.

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