

Livelihood strategies of internally displaced persons in urban eastern DRC

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Abstract

Over the past few years, the number of people affected by forced displacement has risen sharply in crisis contexts throughout the world. The nature and complexity of these crises make studying forced displacement relevant for understanding how people who are uprooted in times of crisis make a life and a livelihood in urban areas, as well as for understanding the changing dynamics in urban areas as a result of population movements. In general, forcibly displaced populations consist of two main groups: refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The shifting dynamics in urban populations resulting from conflicts and disasters triggered by natural hazards make it crucial to pay attention to IDPs.

IDPs have been largely overlooked by the international community, but the body of literature examining these populations is growing. Some scholars have considered IDPs to be victims, whereas others have acknowledged the ability of IDPs to rely on existing structures to survive as active agents. In my research, I adopted the approach of considering IDPs as active agents in my exploration of their experiences with displacement in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I sought to revise some of the common assumptions related to IDPs' experiences. Through my research, I hope to provide a frame of reflection for understanding IDPs' experiences in urban areas that will be used in both future research and policy orientations, to inform actors dealing with IDPs and non-IDPs regarding ways of addressing issues related to IDPs, to call for the consideration of the IDP population as part of the urban population when it comes to creating solutions and to bring attention to the IDP population at multiple levels of discussion.

Eastern DRC has experienced conflict for the last 20 years. For multiple reasons, conflicts involving different actors have erupted, placing the country in an ongoing crisis situation. Population movement, particularly of IDPs, has been a major consequence of these ongoing conflicts, placing DRC at the top of the list of countries where displacement is associated with conflict and violence. Providing assistance for IDPs has been a challenge because violence and working conditions have often hindered the delivery of aid.

The main question addressed in this thesis was ‘How do IDPs cope with the challenges of displacement and sustain their livelihoods in cities?’ Within this broad question, the following specific questions guided the research:

- How has the ‘IDP’ label been used in humanitarian assistance in South Kivu? (Chapter 2)
- How do IDPs engage through networks and use them at key moments in their displacement trajectories in Bukavu? (Chapter 3)
- What challenges do IDP women face when entering markets in Bukavu? (Chapter 4)
- How do IDPs in Mugunga 3 camp differ in terms of their vulnerability, and how does this affect the meanings of the camp for IDP residents? (Chapter 5)

Hence, with the goal of understanding the reality of IDPs’ experiences in eastern DRC through an exploration of their lives, struggles and survivals, I adopted a qualitative approach to describe the details of IDPs’ experiences and to bring light to the reality of IDPs in Bukavu and Goma. This approach was particularly useful given the lack of official records on IDPs from the Congolese authorities and the invisibility of the IDP population in some areas.

The fieldwork for the study was carried out from October 2013 to March 2015. For over 18 months, I examined IDPs’ experiences in urban areas, with a particular focus on their livelihoods and on how the concept of ‘IDPs’ was conceived. The data collection for the study was mainly conducted in South Kivu in Bukavu, but I also directed some attention to IDPs in North Kivu in Goma and carried out field visits in rural areas in both of these provinces.

The empirical findings are organised in four chapters. After this introduction chapter, Chapter 2 is an attempt to deconstruct the IDP label, with a particular look at the process of identifying IDP beneficiaries to receive assistance in urban settings. The chapter discusses the consequences of the IDP label for providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs outside of camps and examines how this relates to the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. Chapter 3 deals with IDPs’ social networks, with a specific focus on differences throughout the displacement trajectory. The chapter presents the role of networks at different points in the trajectories of IDPs, beginning with their flight from their place of origin. Chapter 4 describes the analysis of the economic life of IDP women in an urban setting and considers IDP women’s level of engagement in different types of markets, testing the assumption that the informal sector is characterised by flexibility, opportunities and accessibility—allowing vulnerable people with network ties to gain access. Chapter 5 details the types of IDPs living in Muganga

camp 3 in Goma during the fieldwork, with a particular focus on differentiating between them in terms of their livelihoods, planned destinations in case of a camp closure, vulnerability and perceptions regarding the meaning of the camp.

The main finding of this thesis are as follows:

(1) Different agencies have dissimilar tactics for identifying IDPs who merit inclusion on their beneficiary lists for aid, revealing inconsistencies among the actors dealing with IDPs in South Kivu. One striking finding is that many agencies background the displacement element, despite soliciting funds for IDPs. There is a high level of non-accordance with the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*.

(2) Whereas most literature focuses on kinship and ethnic networks that support IDPs, this thesis found that acquaintances (new friends made in the city) and vertical connections with people involved in formal institutions or in the socio-political hierarchy were increasingly important throughout the IDP trajectory in supporting IDP during their displacement in Bukavu.

(3) Whereas the existing literature often builds on the assumption that IDPs have to rely on informal markets, the present research found that many IDP women started their activities in recognised (formal) markets before moving to unrecognised (informal) markets. Depending on the period of time they spent in the recognised market and their resources (i.e. money, a good network to get goods on credit), IDP women often used recognised markets—not unrecognised markets—as an entry point. Formal markets were more accessible because of a strong relationship among sellers, emotional and financial support, and the protection they offered.

(4) Mugunga 3 camp dwellers were not a homogeneous group of vulnerable residents, but rather multiple groups with different statuses and possibilities. These groups engaged in various activities, inside or outside of the camp. Across the groups, the camp's existence was very important in residents' IDP trajectories because the camp gave them a place to recover from their (traumatic) experiences, allowed families to stay together, and provided a stepping stone to survive and integrate in the city.

Overall, this thesis finds that IDPs sustain their lives in cities with little humanitarian aid. Instead, they get assistance through kinship ties, acquaintances and organisations such as churches. Surprisingly, local authorities were also inclined to help IDPs, at least for a certain period which I call the 'window of sympathy'. Although the study findings affirm urban IDPs' agency to survive with the help of the resources they mobilise, the study also finds that the

vulnerable position of IDPs is often neglected and that assistance is rarely offered to them in a way that is in line with the *Guiding Principles*.

The thesis concludes with recommendations for three levels of actors: local authorities, national and international actors dealing with IDPs in the field, and policy makers.