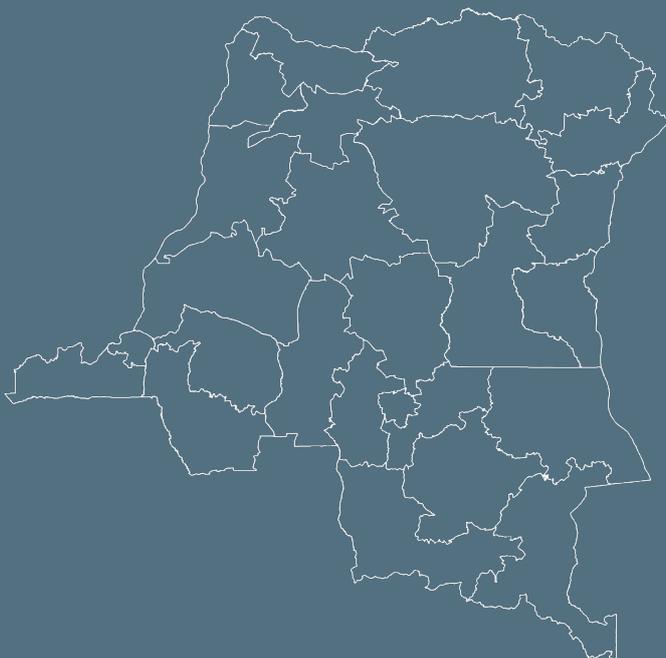


No transparency, no trust

Community perceptions of humanitarian aid

Democratic Republic of Congo • November 2023



GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS



unicef 



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Contents

Context	2
About the process	2
Summary	3
1. People do not feel heard and want direct contact with humanitarian staff	4
2. Complaints of discrimination and corruption fuel discontent	6
3. Cash meets emergency needs but doesn't offer path to self-reliance	7
4. Lack of transparency impedes planning for the future	9
5. People feel abandoned amid high levels of insecurity	11
What next?	14
Methodology	14

Acknowledgements

Lead author

Cholpon Ramizova

Research partner

Victim's Hope DRC

Bukavu, DRC

For a French version of this report, see [here](#).

For more information on GTS programmes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, visit our [website](#) or contact Marie-Françoise Sitnam (marie-francoise@groundtruthsolutions.org).

Context

Renowned for its vibrant culture, linguistic diversity and large reserves of natural wealth, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) stands true to its nickname as the heart of Africa. In high contrast to its cultural success and geo-strategic advantages, it also has one of the world's lowest GDPs, with 73% of its population living in extreme poverty.¹ Today, a crippled healthcare system struggles to contain outbreaks of cholera, malaria and measles while dealing with Ebola outbreaks and a resurgence of bubonic plague.²

In the eastern provinces, there has been a discernible shift towards localised conflicts, with these regions emerging as the epicentre of armed group violence in the DRC in recent years. More than 3.3 million people have been displaced in Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu since March 2022, bringing the total number of displaced to 5.6 million in those three provinces.³ As of October 2023, renewed and intensified fighting in North Kivu forced people to flee from their homes, with predictions of further population movements.⁴ According to the International Organization for Migration's displacement overview for DRC, 33% of North Kivu's population is currently displaced.⁵

To respond to rapidly escalating needs, the humanitarian response intensified its operations, activating a system-wide scale-up for eastern DRC in June 2023. The aim was to address food shortages, protect the vulnerable affected by conflict — including those exposed to gender-based violence — and prevent the spread of communicable diseases.⁶ The current funding for the response stands at 37%, marking one of the lowest levels of support for humanitarian efforts in DRC in recent years.⁷

About the process

Ground Truth Solutions is supporting the humanitarian response in DRC to listen to and act on the views of crisis-affected people. We do this through a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection, dialogue and advocacy with the diverse stakeholders involved in response efforts.

In July 2023, we spoke to 1,134 people in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu — the focus of the humanitarian response — to capture their perceptions of the aid they receive. Our sample included internally displaced people (IDPs) in camp and non-camp settings, returnees, and host community members. This report outlines findings from our second perception survey, conducted in partnership with Victim's Hope DRC. The first was conducted in October 2022, and a report of that initial survey is available on our website.

Read our detailed methodology at the end of this report.

¹ Concern Worldwide. December 2023. "[The DRC Crisis, Explained.](#)"

² International Rescue Committee. 2023. "[Democratic Republic of Congo: Decades-Long Conflicts Escalate.](#)"

³ UN OCHA. October 2023. "[Operational Plan for Eastern D.R. Congo.](#)"

⁴ ECHO. October 2023. "[DRC Intensification of Conflict.](#)"

⁵ IOM. October 2023. "[DRC-Countrywide Displacement Overview.](#)"

⁶ UN OCHA. October 2023. "[Operational Plan for Eastern D.R. Congo.](#)"

⁷ UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service. 2023. "[Coordinated Plan Snapshot for 2023, République Démocratique du Congo.](#)"

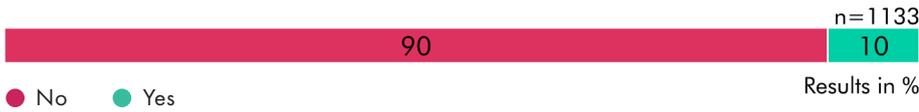
Summary: What people say about humanitarian aid

- **People do not feel heard and want direct contact with humanitarian staff.** Those affected by crisis in the DRC do not feel they can participate in decisions that dictate how humanitarian aid is designed or delivered. They doubt whether aid workers care about them and their needs, pointing to their lack of presence and direct engagement. Satisfaction with feedback handling and perceptions of fairness emerge as key factors influencing trust in humanitarian actors, highlighting the pivotal role of effective communication.
[See chapter 1](#) to learn more.
- **Complaints of discrimination and corruption fuel discontent.** Around half of those we spoke to believe aid is unfairly distributed. People are frustrated with the response's reliance on only a few powerful local authorities and intermediaries, and a lack of diversity in the people who are chosen to collaborate on decision making with humanitarians.
[See chapter 2](#) to learn more.
- **Cash meets emergency needs but falls short on offering path to self-reliance.** People want unconditional cash and food assistance, and some people sell aid to get by. Those who receive cash or vouchers appear better off — at least in the short term — but they are not necessarily more equipped to plan for the future.
[See chapter 3](#) to learn more.
- **Lack of transparency impedes planning for the future.** Despite wanting transparency, crisis-affected people do not know how aid is targeted, where money is being directed, or how long to expect aid to continue. This has made it difficult to make long-term plans.
[See chapter 4](#) to learn more.
- **People feel abandoned amid high levels of insecurity.** Amid escalating violence, almost half say they experience threats or risks daily. But humanitarian staff have not consulted people on those risks. People feel unable to count on humanitarian actors to reduce the threats and risks. They do, however, feel safe accessing aid and reporting cases of abuse or ill-treatment by aid workers.
[See chapter 5](#) to learn more.
- **There are disparities in findings between provinces.** These reflect the challenges emerging from ongoing hostilities and hard-to-reach areas. Respondents in North Kivu and Ituri feel less informed on certain matters, experience higher security risks, and have different information needs compared to those in South Kivu.

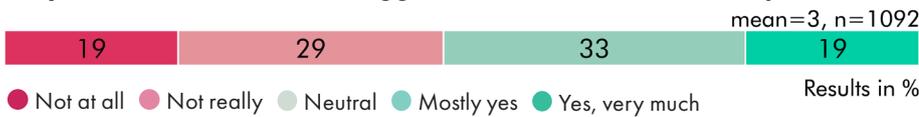
01 People do not feel heard and want direct contact with humanitarian staff

Of the people we spoke to, 10% say they have participated in some way in how aid is delivered, monitored or decided upon. Only one of four thinks aid providers act on community suggestions. Around half (48%) are still unsure how to raise suggestions or concerns with aid providers, despite 96% of all respondents finding it important to be able to do so. Those with disabilities feel more negatively about being able to share suggestions.

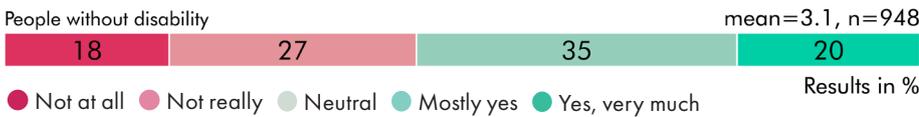
Have you participated in decisions, implementation or monitoring of aid or services, or participated in any other way?



Do you know how to share suggestions or concerns with aid providers?



Breakdown by disability:



Do aid providers act on the suggestions your community shares?



A minority (34%) of respondents say they have submitted feedback to aid providers and primarily through suggestion boxes, despite an overwhelming preference for face-to-face, direct interaction. A majority (69%) of those people never received a response to their feedback. For some, not closing the feedback loop contributes to a breakdown in trust: **“Whether or not humanitarians are in direct contact with the displaced without intermediaries, they must always provide feedback on their field surveys”**, a male returnee in North Kivu told us. **“The fact that humanitarians limit themselves to surveys without follow up, [aid and service recipients] are starting to lose interest in humanitarians.”**

Have you shared a suggestion or concern about aid and services?



Did you receive a response to your suggestion or concern?



It would be better if humanitarian actors consulted members of the local community when implementing assistance, in order to avoid sowing discontent.

– Woman in North Kivu, returnee



Humanitarian actors must be honest and transparent in their affairs and carry out field visits so that they can experience the reality on the ground. They should also recruit locally so that they can better create a long-term plan.

– Man in South Kivu, IDP

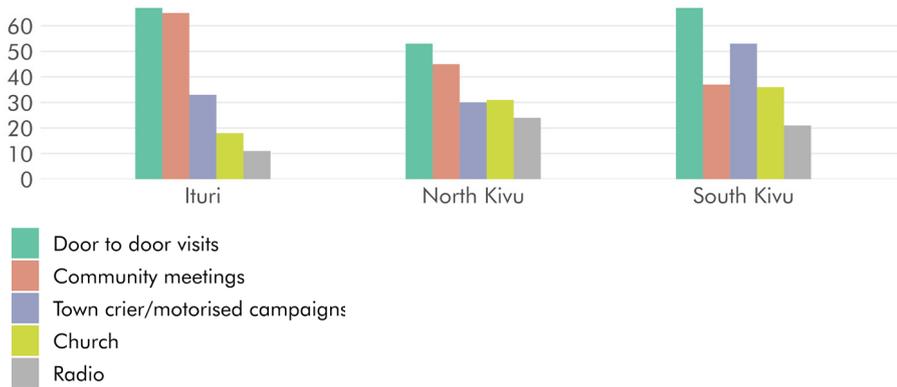
Over half of those who did get a response are satisfied with how their concerns were handled (60%). Around a quarter (24%) of respondents say aid providers act on community feedback, even though 97% find it imperative that they do so.

Door-to-door visits are the preferred information channel among respondents in all three provinces, followed by community meetings in Ituri and North Kivu, and town criers in South Kivu.

Are you satisfied with the response to your suggestion or concern?



How would you prefer to receive information?



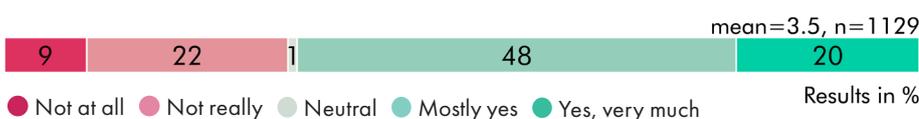
Unsurprisingly, those who have contributed to decision-making in the response are also more informed about the assistance available to them, underlining the importance of two-way communication and engagement. But there is a perception among some that humanitarian staff do not visit sites themselves or rely too much on local authorities for facilitating communication, leading to incomplete or misconstrued information on needs and preferences. According to one returnee — a man — in North Kivu, **“Corrupt [intermediaries], who receive information from certain local authorities, mislead humanitarians and skip certain [people] because they did not give or promise anything in return for aid.”**

People want aid workers to keep their word, take their preferences and priorities into account, and be more transparent. And when it comes to trust, our analysis shows that satisfaction with feedback handling, as well as perceptions around fairness, correlates with higher confidence in the humanitarian community.

Are aid and services provided in a fair way in your community?



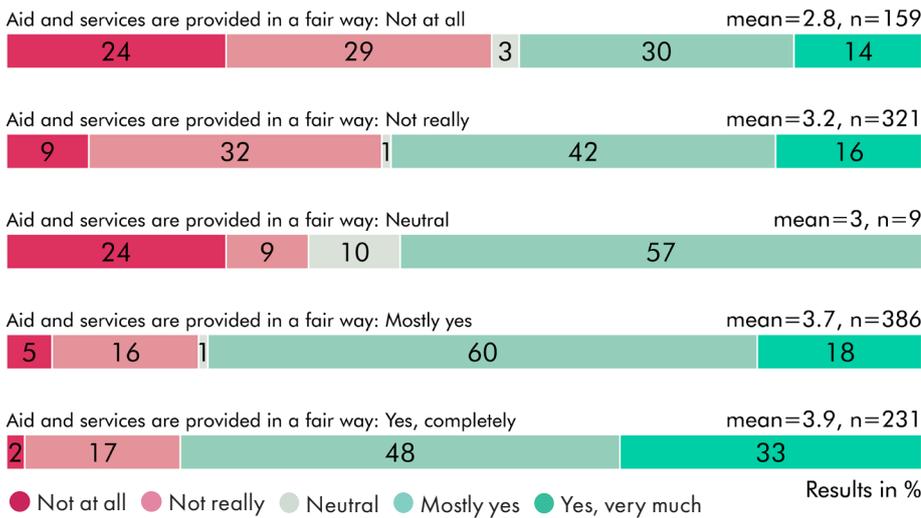
Do you trust humanitarian actors?



In the future I would like humanitarians themselves to work within the community instead of involving the village chief or local authorities, so that everyone can receive aid. Humanitarians should also go to communities before providing aid to ask for our opinion and get an idea of what we really need.

– Woman in South Kivu, host community member

Do you trust humanitarian actors? (presented by perceptions of fairness)



This bar chart breaks down respondents' levels of trust in humanitarian actors by their perceptions on the fairness of aid. A higher level of fairness tends to be associated with increased trust.

02 Complaints of discrimination and corruption fuel discontent

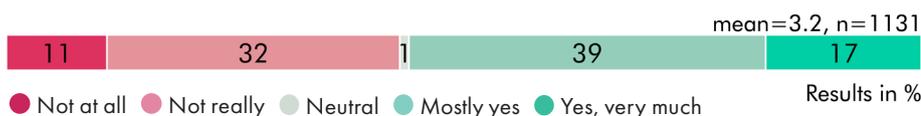
Some respondents (42%) say assistance is distributed unfairly. A similar proportion (43%) say that aid and services fail to meet their basic needs.

Several factors are likely shaping these perceptions, including:

- a volatile security situation;
- financial constraints: while the response had reached more than a third of the target population in the three provinces by August 2023, a lack of resources forced humanitarian agencies to support fewer communities, leaving millions of people without support;⁸
- inadequate shelter, with families struggling through the rainy season with nothing but wooden branches and tarpaulin.⁹

Given these challenges, it is understandable that issues around fairness feature prominently in responses to how aid could be improved. People complain of discriminatory practices, corruption and lack of objectivity in registration and distribution activities and assign blame to local authorities and intermediaries. Some implore that all members of the community be helped, while others suggest improved targeting criteria to reach people with the most acute needs. **"The selection of [aid and service recipients] must take into account those who are actually displaced, and not be influenced by corruption, which would penalise the truly vulnerable"** said a woman who is a host community member in North Kivu.

Do the aid and services you receive meet your most important needs?



Do not only select those who are displaced because host families also have the same needs as us. Seeing one person registered and the other not will cause conflict between neighbours. Everyone must be helped.

– Woman in South Kivu, IDP



Organisations should think about putting a mechanism in place that allows all kinds of people to participate in humanitarian aid, because much of the time it does not reach everyone in need of it.

– Man in South Kivu, IDP



During distributions of aid and other services, we should employ people who are not from our area so that there is transparency.

– Man in North Kivu, IDP



During distributions, humanitarians themselves must distribute aid in a transparent manner without the influence of authorities.

– Man in North Kivu, returnee

⁸ WFP. September 2023. "Situation Report no. 51."

⁹ Ibid.

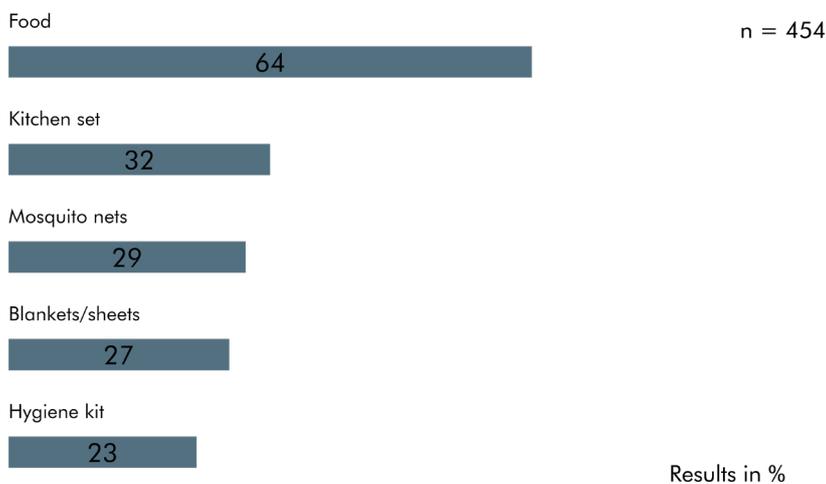
03 Cash meets emergency needs but doesn't offer path to self-reliance

People call for unconditional cash and food assistance, with some (40%) selling aid in exchange for more preferred food items, medicine, clothing and money to settle debts. Consultations with aid workers indicate that selling food to buy other food items is done to diversify diets and provide alternatives to staples like flour.

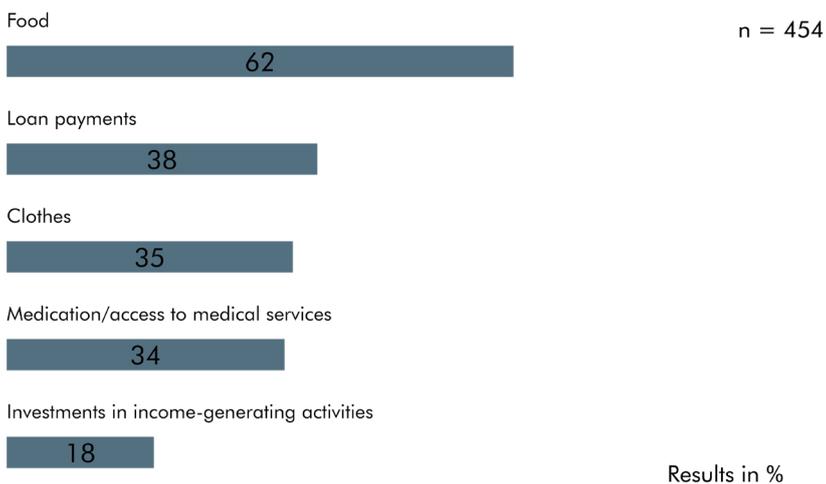
Do community members sometimes sell the aid they obtained in order to cover their most important needs?



In your opinion, what has been the most commonly sold item over the last six months?



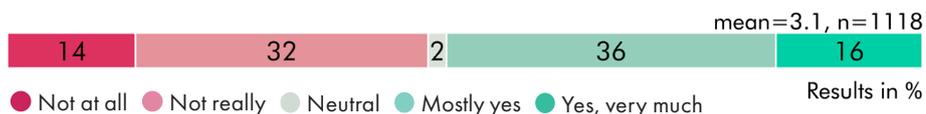
How do you think members of your community use the money from the sale?



Around half (46%) believe aid does not go to those who need it most, noting that older people, people who have lost their spouses, and unaccompanied children are often left out. We found that people who receive cash or vouchers are better able to cover their necessities. The more relevant they perceive aid, the fairer and better targeted they find it. But there are limits. Our data does not suggest that cash improves perceptions around self-reliance, for instance, contrary to other findings in the response.¹⁰

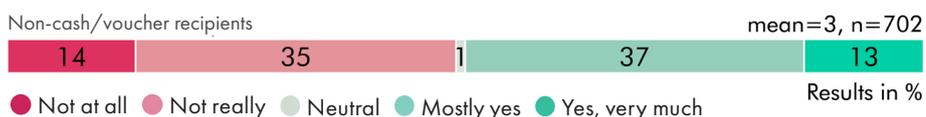
¹⁰ UN OCHA. October 2023. "I'm Not Looking to Get Rich, Just Save Lives."

Do aid and services go to those who need them most?

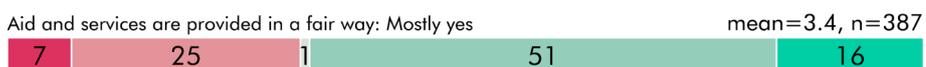


Do the aid and services you receive meet your most important needs?

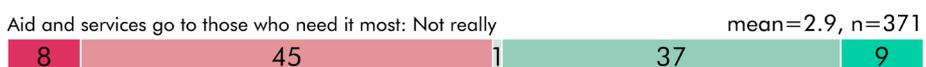
Breakdown by assistance type:



Breakdown by fairness of aid:



Breakdown by aid distributed to most in need:



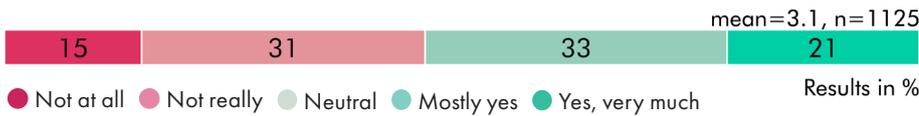
This bar chart breaks down respondents' ability to meet their most important needs by their perceptions of the fairness of aid. A higher level of fairness tends to be associated with a belief in meeting most important needs.

This bar chart breaks down respondents' ability to meet their most important needs by their perceptions on aid targeting. A higher confidence in aid reaching those who need it most tends to be associated with a belief in meeting the most important needs.

04 Lack of transparency impedes planning for the future

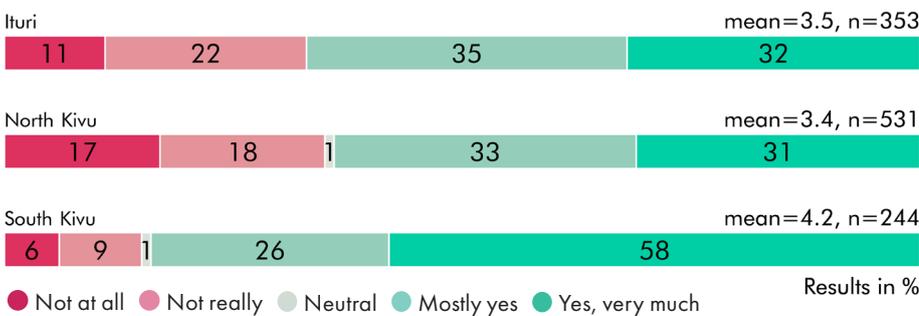
Some of these negative perceptions around fairness, relevance and targeting come back to information. Around half (46%) still do not know how to access aid and a minority (30%) remain unaware of distribution dates and times. People in South Kivu seem to be better informed than those in North Kivu and Ituri. Respondents say they have received some information on timing and sites of distributions, but they suggest it is not enough. Aid targeting also features prominently in information needs, especially for North Kivu.

Do you feel informed about how and where to register for aid and services?

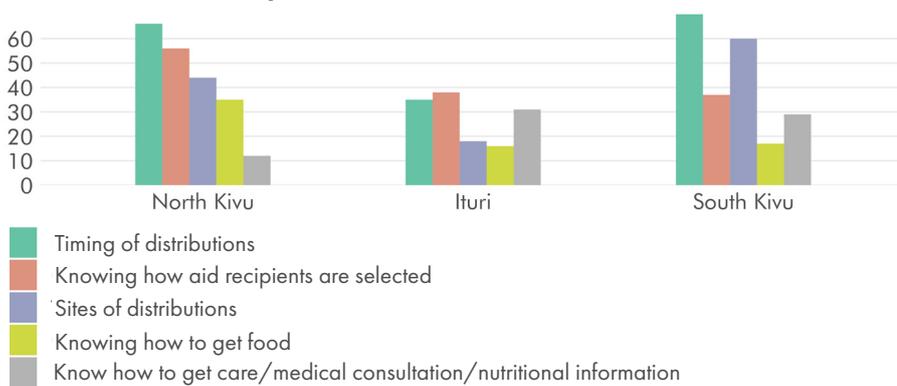


Do you feel informed about distribution dates and times?

Breakdown by province:



What information do you need?



This may in part have to do with who is involved in communication with humanitarian actors: some respondents (41%) do not believe local leaders are sharing necessary information about humanitarian activities. In the words of one man from a host community in South Kivu, **“Humanitarians should ask the community for their opinion before giving aid, and not solely involve local leaders in decision making when selecting aid recipients because they only think of their families, not those who are truly in need of aid.”**

IDPs living in makeshift settings feel worse off compared to those living in official sites or among host communities.



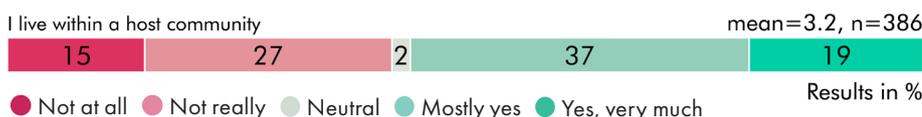
Continue to help us, and especially those of us who are displaced and living in informal sites. Because sometimes we are forgotten and the displaced who live in camps are more privileged!

– Woman in North Kivu, IDP

Do you believe that community leaders share necessary information about humanitarian activities?



Breakdown by status:

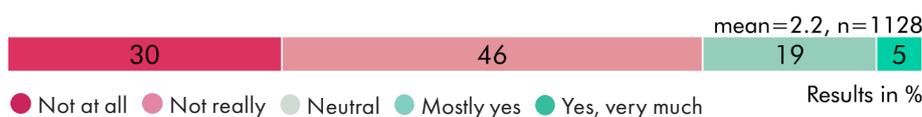


People crave transparency. They find it important to understand aid interventions, but a majority do not know how aid is targeted (82%), how resources are being spent (75%), or how long to expect assistance to continue (69%). This is coupled with the fact that future outlooks are largely negative: only 24% of respondents believe that aid will help them make long-term plans, and fewer still (14%) say it will help them become more self-reliant.

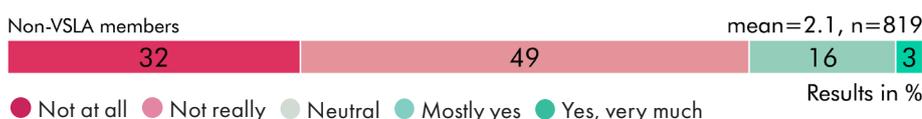
People who are part of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA, or AVEC in French)¹¹ feel more capable of planning for the future (38%), providing further proof that the response could benefit from looking to and supporting community-led initiatives. If supported in concert with other solutions, VSLA initiatives might have the potential to bridge the gap between short-term emergency assistance and self-sufficiency, building resilience, and fostering trust and cooperation among community members.

Across the board, there is high demand for income-generating activities to bolster long-term resilience. People in Ituri request agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilisers, while those in South and North Kivu want access to professional training programmes.

Do you think the aid and services in your community help you to make long-term plans?



Breakdown by VSLA members:



These humanitarian actors must take our priorities into account because we are suffering a lot, and above all remember the victims who neither have clothing nor shelter. And we must be given employment and aid that will help us make long-term plans.

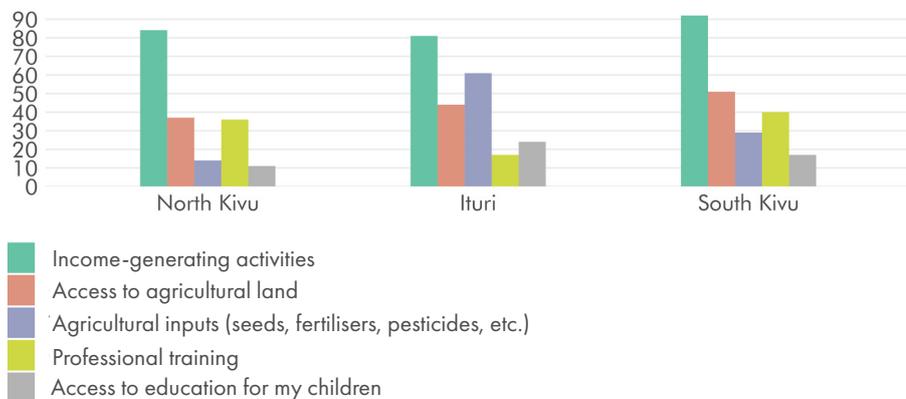
– Woman in South Kivu, host community member

¹¹ VSLA (in French, “Associations Villageoises d’Epargne Crédit”, or AVEC) are formed at the community level, consisting of members who pool their savings into a common fund. Often supported by humanitarian cash programmes, these savings are then used to provide small loans to members who need financial assistance for various purposes, such as starting or expanding small businesses, paying for education, or covering emergency expenses.

Do you feel the support you receive enables you to become autonomous?



What would be most helpful for you to become autonomous?

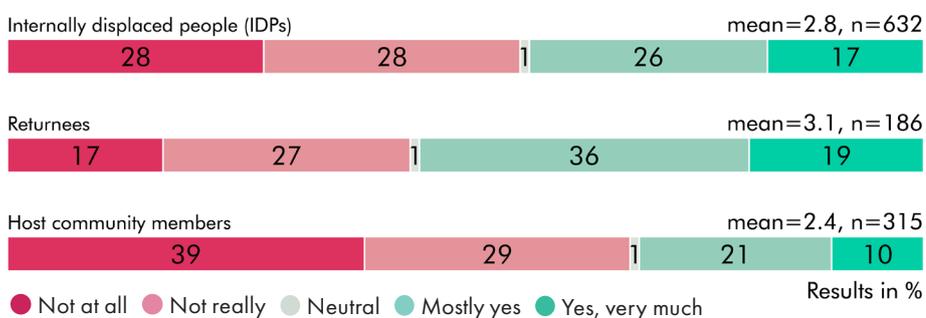


05 People feel abandoned amid high levels of insecurity

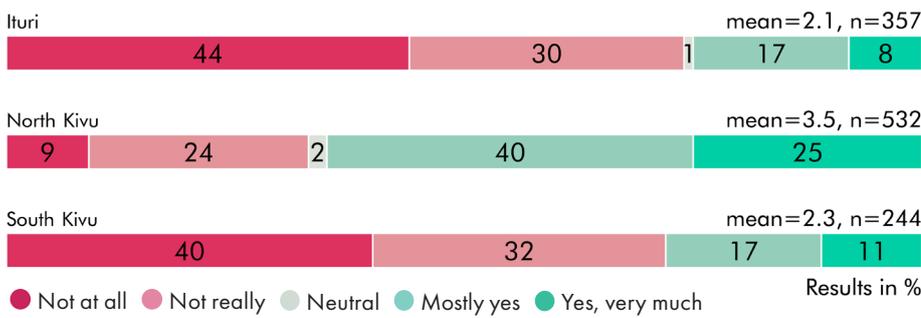
Some of those we spoke to (44%) say they are exposed to threats or risks in their daily lives. Returnees and IDPs feel less safe than host communities, and people in North Kivu feel less safe than people in the other provinces. Most (70%) do not feel humanitarian actors are helping reduce these risks. Respondents in Ituri are least positive on this question. Well over half (59%) have not been consulted about their safety, with people living in makeshift sites being the least consulted group. However, 45% mention that humanitarian actors have helped them with risk reduction in the past, through covering basic needs, offering protection assistance, and awareness-raising activities.

Are you or your community exposed to threats or risks in your daily life?

Breakdown by status:

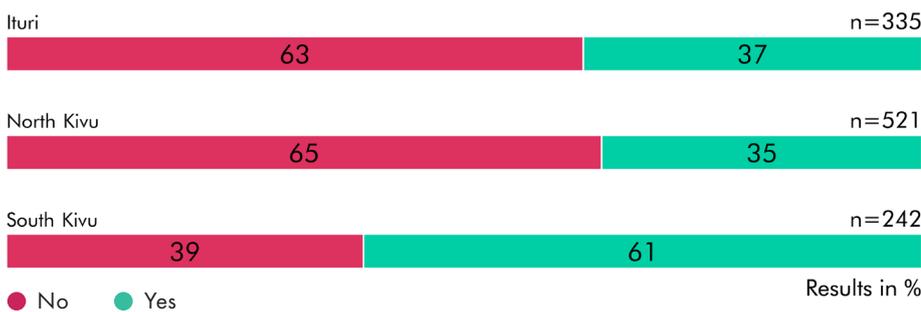


Breakdown by province:

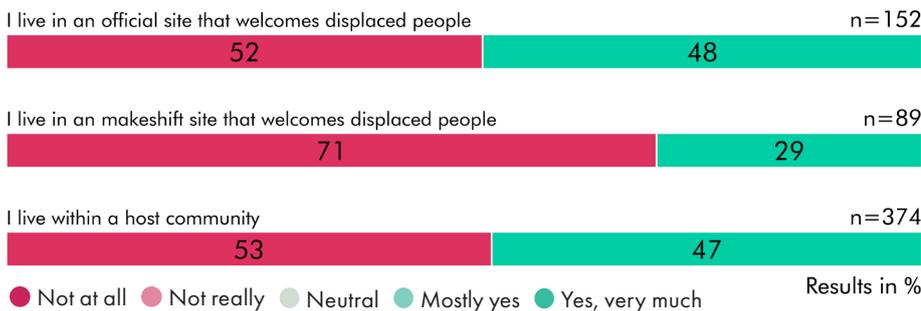


Have you or your community been consulted about your security risks?

Breakdown by province:

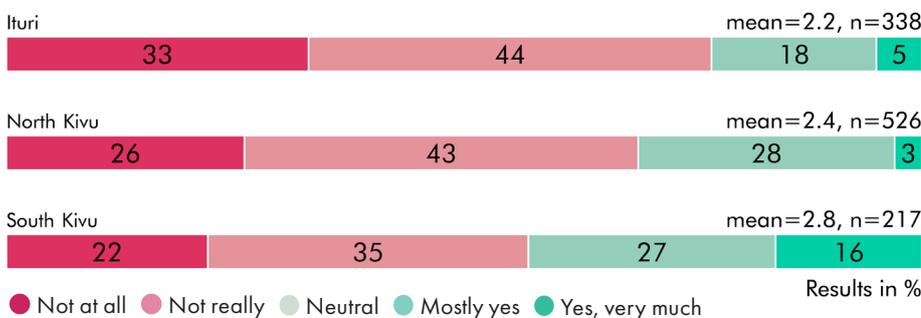


Breakdown by IDP site:



Do you feel that humanitarian actors are trying to reduce exposure to security risks?

Breakdown by province:



Our findings around safety, especially concerning the discrepancies at the province level, reflect the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Ituri and North Kivu, where clashes and armed conflict have caused unprecedented humanitarian need.¹² UNICEF reports eastern DRC is “one of the worst places to be a child”, with the world’s highest recorded numbers of grave violations against children.¹³

¹² UNICEF. August 2023. “Situation Report no. 3.”
¹³ Ibid.

There has also been an increase in reports of sexual violence in the region in 2023, with the response reporting that the number of registered gender-based violence survivors had already surpassed 2022 figures by mid-year.¹⁴ According to UNFPA, displaced women and girls report that the need to travel outside of camps to find jobs and basic supplies has exacerbated the situation. Some are turning to sex work to survive, against a backdrop of limited medical and psychosocial support for assault survivors.¹⁵

85% of respondents feel safe when accessing aid and there are few concerns apart from overcrowding and long distances to distribution sites. Most respondents (72%) feel comfortable reporting cases of abuse or mistreatment by humanitarian personnel and would trust local authorities, humanitarian actors themselves, community leaders and village chiefs to handle such complaints. There is some variation between provinces: Ituri residents feel less comfortable reporting in general, and specifically to humanitarian actors, compared to other provinces, whereas residents of North Kivu have less trust in their village chiefs. Those less inclined to report cited fear of reprisals and feelings of powerlessness as reasons.

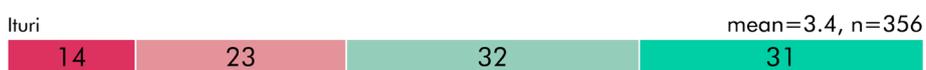
Do you feel safe accessing humanitarian assistance?



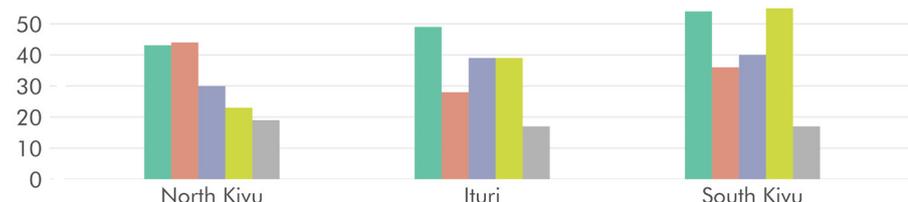
Would you feel comfortable reporting cases of abuse, harassment, or ill-treatment by humanitarian personnel?



Breakdown by province:



Who do you trust to report cases of abuse, harassment or ill-treatment by humanitarian personnel?



- Local authorities
- Humanitarian actors
- Community leaders
- Head of village
- Religious leaders

¹⁴ UN OCHA. October 2023. "Operational Plan for Eastern D.R. Congo."
¹⁵ UNFPA. September 2023. "D.R Congo Situation Report: Humanitarian Response Scale up – Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces."

What next?

This report is part of a broader process of dialogue with communities and humanitarian partners in DRC. It aims to help humanitarian staff understand and incorporate community perceptions into response decisions. Using indicators within the Humanitarian Response Plan,¹⁶ we will track progress and changes over time, learning how aid is faring from the community's perspective and seizing opportunities for improvement. In collaboration with OCHA, we initiated sessions within cluster meetings to address community recommendations post-perception survey. Action points emerged, setting the course for suggested improvements to the approach of humanitarian aid delivery in 2024. We also returned to the communities in the three provinces to discuss survey results and commitments made by humanitarian actors during cluster engagement sessions. Through focus group discussions, we obtained feedback from women, men, community leaders, and other influential figures on the results from our survey as well as the suggested adjustments put forward by humanitarians. This iterative process aims to ensure that community voices shape our contributions to the humanitarian response in the DRC throughout the year 2024.

Methodology

Survey design

The sample covers aid recipients in three provinces of eastern DRC (Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu). According to UNHCR around 90% of the total number of displaced people (IDPs, refugees and returnees) in DRC in 2023 live in these three provinces.¹⁷

The sample was stratified by province and territory and then proportionally allocated by the number of displaced people in each territory, according to 2023 Displacement Tracking Matrix data from IOM.¹⁸

We only considered territories covering more than 70% of aid recipients, based on OCHA data over the same period.

Given the larger number of IDP sites or communities hosting IDPs, in each province, we randomly sampled accessible locations in each of the three provinces in the first stage. We used probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling and then sampled individuals at the site level at the second stage. In each locality, we aimed to interview 20 people. The final sample comprised an average of 22 interviews per site.

At site level, interviewers used a random-walk approach, whereby they went to each nth dwelling, n being calculated based on the number of aid recipients in the locations and the sample size. This random-walk approach cannot always be implemented precisely since the exact number of aid recipients within the sites is not always known.

Weighting

We used design weights to reflect the two-stage sample design (considering also the number of displaced people in the territories). The design weights were raked to marginal totals by age group and status based on the demographics specified in the Humanitarian Response Plan. The raking step ensures that the survey respondents, when weighted, represent their proper proportions in the population with respect to age groups and status.

¹⁶ UN OCHA. 2023. "Humanitarian Response Plan DRC." P. 39.

¹⁷ UNHCR. October 2023. "République démocratique du Congo : La RDC en bref (Situation au 30 septembre 2023)."

¹⁸ IOM. May 2023. "Baseline Assessment — Ituri — Round 9."; IOM. June 2023. "Baseline Assessment — Nord Kivu — Round 44 (Cycle 9)"; IOM. April 2023. "Baseline Assessment - South Kivu Round 10.".

Coverage and exclusion

The territories we initially planned to cover in our sample were:

- Irumu, Djugu and Mahagi, which cover 83% of the people in need in **Ituri**;
- Nyirangongo, Oicha, Rutshuru, Masisi, Beni and Goma, which cover 80% of the people in need in **North Kivu**;
- Fizi, Kalehe, Kabare, Uvira and Walungu, which cover 77% of the people in need in **South Kivu**.

The access to Rutshuru was not possible due to the security situation. That dropped the coverage in North Kivu to 68%.

Precision of estimates

To calculate margins of error per region we used the package “survey” in R, specifying the exact survey design as outlined above. Note that the precision varies from question to question and sample size per question (as some of the questions are just follow up questions asked to a sub-set of the total sample).

For questions that we asked all recipients, margins of error per province were between 1.8 and 4.7 percentage points for binary questions (with a mean of 3.7 percentage points). For Likert questions, the margins of error on our scale of 1–5 were between 0.03 and 0.14 (with a mean of 0.1).

Demographic information

Gender

-  Women: 628 (55%)
 -  Men: 506 (45%)
-

Age

-  18–30 years old: 358 (31%)
 -  31–45 years old: 429 (38%)
 -  46+ years old: 347 (31%)
-

Disability

-  People with disabilities: 146 (13%)
 -  People without disabilities: 988 (87%)
-

Status

-  Host communities: 315 (28%)
 -  Internally displaced people: 633 (56%)
 -  Returnees: 186 (16%)
-

Province

-  Ituri: 357 (31%)
-  North Kivu: 533 (47%)
-  South Kivu: 244 (22%)



Join us at groundtruthsolutions.org