Aid Seen from the Bottom

COMMUNITY REALITIES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF AID IN EASTERN DRC

Irène Bahati and Stanislas Bisimwa Baganda

AUTHORS

Irène Bahati is a lecturer and researcher with GEC–SH at ISP-Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Stanislas Bisimwa Baganda is a researcher with GEC-SH at ISP-Bukavu and a gender and peacebuilding consultant specialising in conflict dynamics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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Executive Summary

Africa's Great Lakes region has been plagued by deadly armed conflicts for almost three decades, resulting in internal and international displacement. Marked by issues of governance, natural resource management, land grabbing, and food insecurity, Eastern DRC is at the core of these conflicts. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working to address the multifaceted crises in the region. This report investigates community perceptions of the actions carried out by these actors in Eastern DRC, in Kalehe and Uvira (Ruzizi Plain) territories. These two areas are characterized by a significant presence of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organizations (NGOs, UN agencies, etc.), along with armed group activism. This report provides feedback to stakeholders in these areas on the perceptions and representations of their actions to beneficiaries. The study addresses the following questions: What are the community's perceptions of NGO actions in a peacebuilding process and what are the possible effects?

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1 |
Introduction

Africa's Great Lakes region has been plagued by deadly armed conflicts for almost three decades, resulting in internal and international displacement of populations (Jacquemot 2009). Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the epicenters of these conflicts. The region is marked by issues of governance, natural resource management, land grabbing (Mwanawavene 2010, OXFAM 2015) and food insecurity (Ntacobasima et al. 2019, Vwima et al. 2018). Many national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have initiated humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development projects to address these multifaceted crises.

The socio-economic situation of the population stagnates despite multiple interventions in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sector. Armed groups are even more dynamic than they used to be, especially in rural areas (Verweijen et al. 2019). Given their dynamism, these groups remain a permanent threat to peace (Jacquemot 2009, Sheria Nfundiko 2015). Eastern DRC is one of the regions in the world that has long experienced one of the largest deployments of humanitarian action (Jacquemot 2009). This region, despite the implementation of a variety of NGO-led actions, remains bogged down in a plethora of unspeakable humanitarian initiatives, blocking a more endogenous development (De Vries 2016).

This study was conducted in Kalehe and Uvira territories (Ruzizi Plain), areas marked by the strong presence of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors, along with increasing armed group activism (Assumani 2020, OXFAM 2015), putting the population in a complex security environment.

While the *leitmotif* of aid actors involved is to provide assistance to local communities affected by conflict, this assistance is challenged not only by the beneficiaries but also by other NGOs active in the intervention areas. It is sometimes even a source of conflict (Grunewald and Tessier 2001). This being the case, proposing an anthropology of NGO action requires identifying community perceptions and representations of this action. These perceptions are shared as much by beneficiaries and community leaders as by local authorities.

Among the main arguments against the presence of NGOs in local representations is the idea that they reinforce poverty and that their aid is merely a pretext for external actors to pursue hidden agendas (Raymond et al. 2007). The impact of NGO action has been strongly criticized by beneficiaries (Dijkzeul and Iguma 2010, Barthold 2014). The populations perceive themselves as the target of malicious strategies from the outside. They feel that they are being offered as a sacrifice (Girard 1982) in pursuit of foreign actors' interests. It is on the basis of this perceptions that a "conspiracy" discourse towards NGOs emerged, which are said to be acting against the interests of the affected populations. Hence, Dijkzeul and Iguma (2010) believe that the perceptions of beneficiaries are important for humanitarian organizations in terms of legitimacy (doing the right thing), efficiency (doing things correctly) and security (doing things safely).

There are different viewpoints on the representations and perceptions of the actions of NGOs in the community. Our field research has taken a socio-anthropological approach, which emphasizes empirical rigor and postulates that qualitative data is produced through the interaction between researchers and their study environment in the form of interviews and observations (Olivier de Sardan 1995a). The socio-anthropological approach consists of a multidimensional empirical study of social groups and their interactions, in a diachronic perspective, and combines the analysis of practices and representations (Olivier de Sardan 1995b).

The objectives of this report are: (i) understanding community representations of beneficiaries regarding NGO actions and (ii) collecting community opinions and strategies that can be used by NGOs to review their intervention

approach. In this regard, we analyzed the statements and speeches, attitudes and behaviors of the beneficiary communities, which provide information on their perceptions and representations of the NGOs and their actions in Eastern DRC. According to perception theory, reality is always the result of an interpretation that integrates objective characteristics of reality, previous experiences of individuals and their group, and their value systems, which are themselves dependent on history and the social or ideological context in which individuals are embedded (Guimelli 1999). With this in mind, the study intends to answer the following questions:

What are community representations of the actions of NGOs and humanitarian agencies in the peacebuilding process, and what are the effects of these representations?

In almost all research on perceptions of NGO actions, the term perception is used as a synonym for "views," sometimes with related terms such as "beliefs," "interpretations," or "critical opinions" (Dijkzeul and Iguma 2010). Community representations cover the set of beliefs, knowledge, and opinions that are produced and shared by communities in the same group, regarding a given social object (Quilliou-Rioual 2014). In this report, "community perceptions and representations" refer to the discourses, opinions, and interpretations of the Kalehe and Ruzizi Plain communities, considered the beneficiaries of several interventions conducted by organizations with humanitarian, peacebuilding or development objectives. These communities are represented in this work by their local leaders, "aid beneficiaries" and other stakeholders.

2 |
Methodology and
overview of the
research areas

The methodological approach of this work is presented in this section, as well as the target areas. Through a socio-anthropological approach, qualitative social science tools were mobilized (Van Campenhoudt 2011). One of the main principles of this approach is to look for contrasts between the information collected in various documentary, discursive and observational sources. We conducted semi-structured (Kaufman 2008) individual and focus group interviews with the targeted stakeholders of the study.[1] Field data were then triangulated with other sources of information, including previous studies that have been conducted in relation to our research focus (Dijkzeul and Iguma 2010). Random sampling of interviewees included beneficiaries, community leaders, local government officials, security officials, and some local NGO workers.

Fieldwork was conducted in July 2021 in Kalehe and the Ruzizi Plain. Two reasons led to the selection of Kalehe and Uvira (Ruzizi Plain) territories. First, these two areas, unlike the other territories in South Kivu province, are characterized by significant cultural diversity, particularly due to the coexistence of a multitude of communities. This cultural diversity is accompanied by the development of certain attitudes that reinforce an indigenous-allochthonous divide. Secondly, for the past ten years, these two regions have hosted a high number of aid interventions NGOs. It is clear that, despite the means at their disposal, peace has never been achieved and these regions sometimes fall back into intense violence with identity-based overtones.

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[1] Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with the population and community leaders in July 2021

Kalehe was first created by the Belgian colonial authority on 28 March 1912. It is one of the eight territories of the province of South Kivu with an approximate area of 4,000 square kilometers and an estimated population of 750,000 inhabitants.[2] Since then, several changes have been made to the geographical boundaries of the area. The most important was the administrative decision that created the Idjwi territory in 1972[3]. Kalehe is bordered by Masisi and Walikale territories (North Kivu) to the north, Lake Kivu to the east, Shabunda territory to the west and Kabare territory to the south. The population of Kalehe is divided into six communities: Havu, Tembo, Rongeronge, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa/Mbuti. The "Rwandophone" populations (Hutu and Tutsi) live mostly on the *Hauts Plateaux* (highlands) where weather conditions are suitable for cattle breeding. The Tembo and Havu generally live on the *Bas Plateaux* and on the coast of Lake Kivu. The Twa/Mbuti are scattered throughout. Finally, the Rongeronge live in the Kalonge grouping.

Uvira territory consists of three chieftaincies: Bavira, Bafuliiro and the Plain chieftaincy also known as the "Barundi chieftaincy." The Ruzizi Plain is subject to customary power conflicts (especially between the Fuliiro and the Rundi), as well as land conflicts involving local armed groups. The Ruzizi plain is a strip of land with an area of 1,750 square kilometers located at an average altitude of 800 meters (Furaha et al. 2016), its largest part being in the DRC, but stretching to Burundi and Rwanda too. The Plain is named after the Ruzizi River, an outlet of Lake Kivu that joins Lake Tanganyika and also forms the natural border between these three countries. Uvira territory has not enjoyed stability since the AFDL war (1996-1997). The prevailing insecurity was reinforced by the arrival of the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD)* in August 1998. The violence perpetrated by the RCD triggered the resurgence of Mai-Mai resistance movements.

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[2] Kalehe Territory Annual Report, 2014.
[3] During the RCD rebellion (1998-2003), Bunyakiri was established as a territory and abolished again in 2007.

3 | Humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and development

Lamartine and Chateaubriand, two 19th century French poets, first used the word humanitarian in a philanthropic sense, i.e., benevolence towards "humanity considered as a great collective being" (Brauman 2000: 30). Nevertheless, the definition of humanitarianism depends on the approach used. The International Court of Justice in the Hague, in its decree of 27 June 1986 in the case of Nicaragua vs. the United States, gives a legal definition of humanitarianism as "aid in the form of food, medicine, clothing, as opposed to supplies of arms, ammunition, vehicles or materials likely to cause damage or death". Ryfman (1999) defines humanitarianism by integrating several interdependent factors in a non-hierarchical way: movement, actor, operator, time, humanitarian space, beneficiary, assistance and its nature, reference to values and ideals, respect for ideological principles and ethical rules. The term humanitarian has evolved conceptually to refer more and more specifically to the action that is now precisely called "humanitarian action" (Barthold 2014).

In most cases, humanitarian action is understood from a purely practical and material perspective (Barthold 2014), as is the case in our research. In crisis situations, whether caused by armed (political) conflicts or natural hazards, humanitarian action is governed by "humanitarian principles." These principles are anchored in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which regulates the conduct of armed conflicts and aims to limit their nefarious effects. These principles include: humanity, neutrality and impartiality. Thus, IHL also delimits the conditions that parties to a conflict may impose on actors seeking to provide assistance to populations in need. The birth of humanitarian

organizations is rooted in the history of colonization as well as in the context of western wars. Since the end of the 1960s, emergency relief and assistance to vulnerable, distressed, disaster-stricken populations, victims of natural disasters or armed conflicts have grown dramatically, creating a wide range of actors (Ryfman 2004).

The humanitarian organizations featured in this research have been operating in the DRC in Kalehe and Uvira territories, as well as in many other areas, for over two decades. Their activity is a result of increased population movements and insecurity since the escalation of conflicts in Eastern

DRC. The presence of armed groups in Eastern DRC, as well as conflicts between communities, constitute an omnipresent threat to the population (Jacquemot 2009, Sheria Nfundiko 2015). Despite several peace agreements, armed clashes persist and are intertwined with other factors that expose people to vulnerability, such as malnutrition, the recurrent epidemics, chronic poverty, volatile politics, competition for natural resources, climate change and natural hazards (Lagrange 2005).

Peacebuilding is a concept worth defining for this research as several organizations are involved in "peacebuilding" in the DRC. The concept of peace is thousands of years old and has been defined in several ways throughout history, none of which has been unanimously accepted. Peace is a multifaceted concept and is therefore defined in two ways: negative peace and positive peace. The former expresses the simple absence of direct and organized violence between human groups or nations; whereas the latter is part of a longer-term perspective that allows for the construction of a lasting peace through cooperation between these groups or nations and the eradication of the root causes of conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2006). Thus, it is in light of this distinction between negative and positive peace that a new dimension of peace has been formulated, namely, post-conflict peacebuilding (Sanbèlè Dominique 2015). Peacebuilding creates a new dynamic around peace that aims to make it more stable and sustainable. Thus, peacebuilding involves not only the United Nations (which has primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security according to the UN Charter) and other international organizations but also NGOs.

Finally, development can be defined as a set of social processes induced by voluntary operations of transformation of a social environment, undertaken through institutions or actors external to this environment but seeking to mobilize this environment, and based on an attempt to graft resources and/ or techniques and/or knowledge (Iliassi 2012). In most cases, development NGOs focus on longer-term projects or programs of assistance in the social and economic sectors, including the most essential areas such as health, education, water, agriculture, public sector capacity building, policy and institutional reforms (Sékouna Keita 2009). Over time, the dichotomy between development and humanitarian NGOs is becoming less and less relevant. It is less relevant because humanitarian NGOs conduct medium- to long-term programs (Ryfman 2013) in addition to emergency assistance programs – in situations of natural disaster or armed conflict – which are their primary area of intervention. In sum, it should be noted that this report looks at all three types of NGOs at once, i.e., humanitarian NGOs, peacebuilding NGOs, and development NGOs.

4 |
Analysis

Our research conducted in Kalehe and the Ruzizi Plain, revealed the existence of several (inter-)national NGOs and UN agencies working in several areas, including education, health, agriculture, fighting gender-based violence, rehabilitation of agricultural feeder roads, environmental protection, conception of development projects based on local development plans, shelter, child protection, peacebuilding, security, socio-economic reintegration, supervision of the demobilized, etc. This research is based on the observation that, despite the interventions of these actors in these areas, local communities expect more or different approaches. Interviewees expressed a range of complaints and dissatisfaction with aid interventions in their communities.

4.1 Diversity of perception of the "NGO" concept

Similarly, the classic definition of an NGO is not unanimously accepted in the literature (Perroulaz 2004), and the people interviewed for this study have different perceptions of the concept. The interview excerpts below provide a better understanding of these perceptions. Individual understandings of the NGO concept result in a number of definitions. For example, the territorial administrator of Kalehe defines an NGO as

a government partner that supports government plans. Even though the reality proves that NGOs work for themselves first and do not support government plans as they should.[4]

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4   Interview with Kalehe territorial administrator, July 2021.

On their side, agricultural operators in Buhavu chieftaincy think that an NGO is above all

a structure, a way of making some people richer, and not a support for grassroots development. If it is true that they work for the public welfare, they would involve local community people in their management because the structures at the grassroots are the ones who know the real local problems.[5]

According to a Panzi Foundation worker

an NGO is an organization that appears to be helping people, but in reality, it is not. It is an organization that has a hidden agenda to plunder the natural resources of the DRC.[6]

According to the prefect of the *Institut Supérieur de Kalehe*

NGOs are traders who come to mislead the community for the interest of facilitators and donors. Yet, they are supposed to be structures that address and solve problems of the population. Moreover, they are highly segregated in their interventions.

The president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe did not hide his dissatisfaction. For him:

NGOs are channels used by their donors to enrich themselves behind the backs of beneficiary populations. They put us in more trouble, and in the future all of them should be driven out of this territory. In addition to that, their role is to trick people and get rich behind the backs of others. It would be wise to disengage from NGO actions and invest in private activities.[7]

It is mainly in terms of the roles attributed to NGOs by the different interviewees that their perceptions of this concept diverge. Among the prevailing community representations of the role of NGOs, there is the idea that some NGOs are neither apolitical nor neutral as they claim, but are believed to have hidden political interests.

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5 Focus group with agricultural entrepreneurs in Buhavu chieftaincy, July 2021.
6 Interview with a Panzi Foundation worker, Kalehe, July 2021.
7 Interview with the Local Development Committee president, Kalehe, July 2021.

4.2 NGOs serving their own interests?

This section presents a three-part analysis of our interviewees' perceptions of NGO interventions and the representations they inform.

4.2.1 APPROACHES USED AND FUND MANAGEMENT

From a community perspective, NGO actions are only part of a set of strategies aimed at justifying their funds and not really at helping the beneficiaries. While several local, national and international NGOs consider their actions a success for the communities, several sources in Kalehe and the Ruzizi Plain indicate that NGOs are merely serving their own interests and that their actions have very little impact in general. With regard to the effectiveness of NGO interventions, communities believe that these interventions are not effective. For example, the interviewees denounced the following fact in a focus group discussion:

> UNOPS is subcontracting PICAGEL in the construction of agricultural feeder roads. But nothing is tangible. These NGOs claim to have rehabilitated the road sections Sange, Kaberagule, Kigoma, Kalungwe. But when it rains, not even bicycles can pass through. Thousands of dollars have been poured into these road projects.[8]

The administrative and customary authorities in Kalehe share the same damning observation:

> They [NGOs] come with projects already developed in Kinshasa or Bukavu where everything is decided. The local communities suffer the consequences of their agreements, as we are no longer able to channel them according to their interests. Therefore, we are compelled to align them with our plan according to four major pillars, including peace, security, democracy and government; micro-economic management and development of economic activity; infrastructure, environment and social welfare. But the mwami [customary chief] denounced the impoverishment of his people.[9]

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[8] Focus group with a police officer, a FARDC commander, a hospital worker and a civil society leader, Sange, July 2021.
[9] Focus group with agricultural entrepreneurs from the Buhavu chiefdom, July 2021.

Above all, it is the way in which NGOs operate and behave that gives rise to widespread disappointment among the beneficiaries of their programs. In their eyes, most of the funding goes only to the NGOs through the *opération retour* practice.[10] As for the rest of the funding, it is said to disappear into the hands of those in charge of implementing the programs: they reportedly receive a lot of money but use little of it for the real benefit of the population. In addition, NGOs would cumulate several projects into one, in other words, a single project would be used to justify several funding requests at the same time, even though there is no noticeable impact of their actions on the ground. The president of the Sange civil society testified:

> It is difficult for the beneficiary population to grasp this. They have already understood that they [NGOs] only come to justify their funds![11]

4.2.2 BENEFICIARY INVOLVEMENT

In addition to this neglect of the beneficiaries' needs and their feelings about the presence of NGOs, the latter also fail to involve local community actors. Almost all of our interviewees believe that NGOs do not collaborate with beneficiaries, local leaders and local authorities. Yet, to ensure the effectiveness and legitimacy of their interventions, these actors should collaborate closely and interact with local people. Such collaboration would allow them to capitalize on their knowledge to design more tailored projects for different local contexts. The administrative authorities in Sange point out these difficulties:

> NGOs do not involve local authorities, and certainly not the population. Neither do they consult anyone at the grassroots level to get their opinions on the need or problem to be solved. When they come to an entity, they only present civilities. And upon arriving, we realize that they had already finished the clauses from the top of the state to the province. This is a situation that makes it difficult for us to redirect them according to the local development plan.[12]

These observations are similar to those of the president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe:

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[10] Interview with a civil society leader, Sange, July 2021. The term opération retour refers to the payment of kickbacks.
[11] Interview with a civil society leader, Sange, July 2021.
[12] Focus group with administrative authorities in Sange, July 2021.

> This is where things get very confusing! We have no idea what is going on. The Local Development Committee in the decentralized territorial entities, the chieftaincies, has recently denounced this confusion. NGOs have other hidden agendas: they are used as intelligence by multinationals whose ends are unknown to the grassroots.[13]

As to the issue of involving local actors in project implementation, opinions diverge depending on who is interviewed, i.e., whether they are local authorities or civil society members who are either involved or not. According to both of them, NGOs come with projects that have already been developed and funded. The lack of clarity regarding their non-involvement in these interventions has led civil society actors and other local structures to be suspicious about the presence of NGOs. A civil society member in Bushushu said:

> We have a very serious problem because our population is very naive! Otherwise, we would refuse all interventions. After meeting with the authorities, they do not care about other civil society structures.[14]

In the Ruzizi Plain in Sange, for example, some community leaders believe that NGOs are more concerned with making money than with humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding or development:

> Based on their achievements, interventions, an NGO is a merchandise for those who are not employed. This merchandise is meant to share money between donors and NGO leaders and impoverish the population. But the Congolese state is responsible for this. NGOs are not working for peace: it is rather the civil society and the population that are liberating themselves so that Sange can restore security.[15]

4.2.3 INTERACTION WITH AUTHORITIES

While NGOs are perceived by some as commercial actors, others believe them to be at the root of increased insecurity in their intervention areas. Some interviewees believe that NGO actors are collaborating with "enemies of peace" and undermining peace in Eastern DRC. This is in line with Dijkzeul

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[13] Interview with the president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe, July 2021.
[14] Interview with a civil society member from Bushushu, July 2021.
[15] Focus group with a police officer, a FARDC commander, a hospital worker and a civil society leader, Sange, July 2021

and Iguma's (2010) study of local perceptions on humanitarians, including the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Indeed, this study found that some Congolese assume that IRC, because of its US origin, would support the Rwandan government. In the context of our research, a civil society member from Sange said:

> NGOs never tell the truth, they have hidden agendas! They display a humanitarian image but in reality, they are not. Moreover, they are at the root of the resurgence of insecurity and other conflicts in their areas of intervention. To sum up, their actions and expectations of the people are conflicting.[16]

In contrast, when interviewed, members of local organizations that benefit from NGO projects believe that their partners consult with local communities in the development of their humanitarian aid projects and examine their needs. In this regard, a cooperative manager in Sange said that "NGOs come to do the baseline study and local needs assessment."[17] Nevertheless, the same interviewees noticed that once the consultation phase is over, as soon as the project is funded, they are no longer involved in its implementation. According to civil society in Kalehe: "NGOs even falsify the data they collect on the ground and report something else to the donors."[18] Others, like the president of the Sange civil society, express regret that international NGOs intervene remotely and do not even have a permanent office on the ground:

> They do nothing! They have no offices in their intervention areas. They only care about sharing money with each other. These NGOs are irrelevant to the population because [their impact] is close to nothing.[19]

The interviewees also believe that the NGOs seek to maintain a paternalistic image with the beneficiaries and work according to the logic that the hand

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[16] Interview with a civil society member, Sange, July 2021.
[17] Interview with the president of the reforestation committee (CORASE) and head of a cooperative, Sange, July 2021.
[18] Focus group with territorial civil society, Territorial Youth Council, LUCHA, Territorial NDSC, Bushushu, Kalehe July 2021.
[19] Interview with a civil society leader in Sange, July 2021

that gives is always superior to the hand that receives. Thus, the Administrator of Kalehe regretfully told us that

> NGOs give the beneficiaries between 1 and 5 USD as transportation costs for a whole day; a real community impoverishment that leads to poverty. Thus, NGOs come to impoverish the population so that they maintain them in paternalism and wait-and-see attitude. NGOs have become the new form of colonization.[20]

The dominant representation of NGOs that clearly emerges from the interviewees' speeches is therefore the idea that, while claiming to provide humanitarian aid, they are in reality only serving their own interests. By not seizing the opportunity to involve local actors or make use of their know-how in order to understand local socio-economic and political dynamics, most of the NGOs active in Kalehe and the Ruzizi Plain maintain the population's suspicions about their real intentions. However, relying on local actors would help anticipate and prevent potential misunderstandings, which often result from the lack of adaptation of actions to the context and needs of beneficiaries. Previous studies on local perceptions of NGO action in many contexts attribute this weakness regarding community and local actors' involvement to these NGO actors. They are thus perceived as actors with (hidden) economic and political aims. A systematic analysis of beneficiaries' discourses shows that negative perceptions of NGO actions are numerous and pervasive and should challenge these actors more in their interventions.

4.3 The principle of "let it rot" (as long useful to justifying funds)

Some NGO interventions in security and conflict resolution in the Ruzizi Plain and Kalehe seem to be governed by an ineffective operational status quo. Everyone we interviewed emphasized that active NGOs in their area put their own interests at the forefront and were passive in the peacebuilding process. As in the Ruzizi Plain, local leaders, civil society members and many other informants believe that security problems are fueled by NGOs, as evidenced by the comments made in this focus group:

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[20] Interview with the Territorial Administrator of Kalehe, July 2021.

> The Ruzizi Plain situation is sustained by NGOs, they are behind the creation of a parallel power between the Rundi and the Fuliiro. In their activities they invite the authorities of the Kabunambo and Luberizi groupings, each of which has two chiefs. This is seen as an endorsement of the government's weakness and does not contribute to solving the problem. NGOs follow the "let it rot" principle because they benefit from it.[21]

Still in the Ruzizi Plain, several people testify that most of the NGOs involved are not rooted locally to help the population get out of the security impasse in which they live, but for financial reasons. This is the case, for example, of the members of the Tuungane ("let's unite") rice producers' cooperative who believe that:

> NGOs are not here to help the population but are looking for a way to justify their funds: it's a deal, a business. For example, a facilitator in one organization was asked by his supervisor for $50 each month from his salary. But when he declined it, he was kicked out of the job.[22]

The members of this same cooperative explained their point of view through a concrete example:

All the NGOs have their projects already developed and funded. A certain organization [...] showed up only in the final stages of its project. As it did not also have any achievements on the ground, it presented the activities of others (farmers) as its own achievements. This is the case with what happened in Runingu. Surprisingly, the government recognizes its achievements and promotes its projects. In addition to this, the same organization also appropriated the production of another organization [...] which supplied Mapendo with 10 tons of rice on 27 February 2021. But, while the marketing officer was already in Gihamba, he noticed that his rice was already published as a production of this organization, yet they have never collaborated with them before.[23]

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[21] Focus group with a police officer, a FARDC commander, a hospital worker and a civil society leader, Sange, July 2021.
[22] Focus group with members of COPRITU (Tuungane rice producers' cooperative) in Ruzizi, July 2021.
[23] Focus group with members of COPRITU (Tuungane rice producers' cooperative), Ruzizi, July 2021.

According to other sources, some NGOs involve customary chiefs, including the Mwami himself, to ensure their financial interests and credibility. The Mwami would use his power and influence within his community to help these NGOs, thus becoming an accomplice to a form of arrangement that is unfavorable to the population. This is what one of the agents of the Kalima grouping office in Bunyakiri reports:

> This is the case of an NGO [...] that relies on the Mwami (chief of the Buloho chieftaincy) and that advocates to donors for activities that have never taken place in his entity. Moreover, this chieftaincy chief has become the main chief in Bunyakiri. This project, funded through the *Fonds de Promotion pour l'Industrie* (Industry Promotion Fund), has never taken into account the needs of the population.[24]

In Kalehe, in addition to this financial deal (which the community seems convinced is in place), there is a belief in the existence of another deal of a political nature, which would constitute the main motivation for the presence of NGOs. This political deal made by NGOs allegedly supports and nurtures armed groups. For the Kalehe local authorities interviewed, certain NGOs are far from being apolitical:

Other NGOs are suspected of supplying weapons to militias. This allegation is supported by the fact that in 2019, an unknown NGO docked at the port of ATRACO with the mission [to] identify vulnerable people from the Kalehe Highlands. In 2020, they distributed funds to Batembo and Bahutu. However, the Banyamulenge were the only ones targeted. And in 2021, an organization [...] came to build houses for these same [Tutsi] targets in the highlands. But the territorial administrator imposed himself and forced them to help other vulnerable people in Kalehe because all [the populations] were in the same situation. Curiously, all these NGOs are run by Tutsis. What correlation is there in these interventions?[25]

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[24] Interview with an agent from the Kalima grouping office, Bunyakiri, July 2021.
[25] Focus group with a range of civil society actors in Bushushu, Kalehe July 2021.

4.4 When interventions leave wounds in the community

Conflict sensitivity is one of the guiding principles of the peacemaking process for NGOs working in the field of peacebuilding in addition to their interventions in local communities. Yet communities in the Ruzizi Plain and Kalehe Territory are almost unanimous in their belief that some NGO interventions create conflict, while others exacerbate it and still others do nothing to address it. As a member of the Sange civil society stated:

> Their [NGO] interventions leave wounds in the community. We have noticed that some of them have inclinations! Moreover, if nothing is done, in the days ahead, more deaths may be recorded in Mutarule because of the poster, or better yet, the writings that have been found at the Barundi chiefdom. An urgent intervention by the Ministry is therefore necessary since the worst is already predictable in this part of the Plain.[26]

However, once community conflicts are identified, some human rights activists, local NGOs, and other community leaders organize mediations that in most cases result in a peaceful resolution of these conflicts. This is reported by some human rights and justice activists, such as the *Héritiers de la Justice* in Sange. In Kalehe, however, community members believe that NGO interventions only generate conflict in their area:

> NGOs can exacerbate conflict in communities. Examples of displaced people from the *Hauts Plateaux* and *Moyens Plateaux* in Kalehe were given as evidence that there was a great deal of segregation in the way they were treated: the Tutsi received $120, which they withdrew from the COOPEC. While the native Congolese received a mat, flour (of poor quality), beans, etc., all of which had a value of $70. This led to division and to several conflicts among the displaced people.[27]

In addition, it was reported by the community in Kalehe that several organizations are in open conflict with the beneficiaries of their activities. One beneficiary was upset that such a conflict existed between an organization and the population of Kalehe:

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26 Interview with a civil society member, Sange, July 2021.
27 Interview with the prefect of the Kyamate Institute, Kalehe July 2021.

> The case of Ziralo is an example where the NGO TPO is in conflict with the population because of the registration of beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. During the distribution, they favored one community [over others] (the Batembo). This led the local population to file a complaint against the organization. This situation led the Territory Administrator to convene all the administrative staff in the territory to reconcile the conflicting parties.[28]

The president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe also mentions that:

> The surprising thing, besides their dishonesty, [is that] these 'so-called' humanitarians have as their slogan *"No war, no job"* This has amplified armed groups and other criminals in our area.[29]

In addition, just as there are conflicts between NGOs and communities, conflicts of interest also exist between NGOs, as deplored by a Panzi Foundation worker:

> Some organizations get involved in certain areas despite their lack of expertise. The example is CDJP with CORDAID support. They kicked out the Panzi Foundation psychologists involved in the NCA project because the hospital is owned by BDOM and the Archdiocese. Now the nurses are involved in the psychological care of the victims. Therefore, this represents a conflict of interest and a tendency to appropriate the actions and/or results of others.[30]

It is worth noting that conflicts between NGOs do not go unnoticed, especially since they also fuel community tensions. It is becoming increasingly clear that NGO actors do not constitute a single unit, nor a homogeneous group, but rather form spaces of power where several dynamics clash. These dynamics (practices) often result from different perceptions. These perceptions and contrasting dynamics are self-perpetuating and may even shape the attitudes of beneficiaries about NGOs. It was reported by beneficiaries and local leaders that these conflicts, often open, stem from the interventions themselves and from the duplication of NGO actions in the same area. Such conflicts between NGOs only reinforce the negative perception of their

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[28] Interview with a beneficiary of a humanitarian action, Kalehe July 2021.
[29] Interview with the president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe, July 2021.
[30] Interview with a Panzi Foundation worker, Kalehe July 2021.

actions in their intervention areas, as beneficiaries and other community members constantly wonder whether these NGOs are really concerned with providing assistance or whether they are simply competing with each other. The prefect of the *Institut Supérieur de Kalehe* illustrates this problem with an example:

> For example, in the case of the Panzi Foundation and Heal Africa, operating in Minova. They caused conflict at the hospital; CORDAID and AAP are also in conflict even though they are partners; there are more than 4 NGOs at Kalehe hospital which are all involved in the legal and health care management of gender-based violence.[31]

Other interviewees reported cases of confrontation between NGOs in their intervention areas. They also added that some NGOs active in their areas pit the beneficiaries of their actions against each other for unknown reasons, for example by organizing specific training for a certain ethnic group at the expense of others. This exacerbates community tensions. These interviewees also mentioned that while they intervene in new areas, some NGOs present the achievements of other NGOs as their own, sometimes even those of the farmers. This is the case for NGOs working in the water, sanitation and hygiene, and food security sectors.

4.5 Perceptions that generate resistance against NGOs

While in some areas NGO workers do not experience community resistance, such phenomena are reported in our study areas. There is a feeling among these communities that NGOs have become the official interlocutors of states and international aid agencies, to the point of witnessing a tendency to institutionalize social movements in order to attract and secure funding, a tendency that ultimately drives them away from popular concerns. For example, in the routine of humanitarian action, there is a dominant tendency to impose aid on communities. This encourages suspicions of instrumen-talization, westernization, substitution, and fomenting conflict, and these negative perceptions foster resistance. But perceptions are not based on objective reality, but rather on subjective interpretation (Dijkzeul and Iguma

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[31] Interview with the Prefect of a Higher Institute, Kalehe July 2021.

2010), and they shape behavior in either acceptance or rejection. These community perceptions can therefore have serious unintended consequences, such as resistance. This being the case, first, the political functioning that characterizes NGOs generates community resistance. One example is given by the president of the Sange civil society:

> When the population realized that NGOs policy was to take advantage of their resources, they rose up and all the plants were uprooted and thrown into the water because the analysis was that it is a strategy to identify themselves as being in charge of these villages after these plants grow.[32]

Secondly, the irregularities observed in NGOs interventions prompt resistance among communities. In a focus group in Sange, the community said:

> As a matter of fact, the president of the civil society had kicked out NGOs when they were piling up the bags in the road. They came to see him, but he turned them away with great violence.[33]

In contrast to this open resistance, in Kalehe, for example, warnings are used. A good example is given by the president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe:

> Sometimes we issue alerts and warnings to NGOs that establish themselves in our area when we notice that they are not fulfilling their mission. But I must point out that if they fail to change their intervention methods, we will kick them out. As an example, the case of ZOA in the Lemera grouping, Bafuliiro chieftaincy, is quite revealing. This organization involved in land tenure security only registered land without giving titles to the owners. But when the youth found out that it was handing them over to Rwandophones, they took two ZOA workers hostage on the condition that they hand over their land certificates. This approach was successful. This showed that their interventions had a hidden policy.[34]

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[32] Interview with the president of the Sange civil society, July 2021.
[33] Focus group with a police officer, a FARDC commander, a hospital worker and a civil society leader, Sange, July 2021.
[34] Interview with the president of the Local Development Committee in Kalehe, July 2021.

4.6 What about peacebuilding?

A recent report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2021) estimates that humanitarian access, both physical and security, remains a major constraint for field actors to reach the most vulnerable populations in the DRC. Some of our interviewees believe that most NGO workers choose to remain silent and inactive when an area is experiencing insecurity or instability. In doing so, silence and inactivity reinforce negative community perceptions and representations of organizations whose primary mission is peacebuilding. A representative of the local administrative authorities in Sange explained (while respecting the anonymity of the NGOs involved) that in the Ruzizi Plain, for example, NGOs that are involved in peace, and stability do not engage in peacebuilding at all, while pretending to do so during periods of insecurity. According to these administrative authorities, NGOs do not do much for peace, which leads civil society and young people to organize themselves to emancipate themselves and seek local solutions (voluntary night patrols, for example) to ensure security and contribute to peacebuilding. Nevertheless, other sources, such as some beneficiaries of humanitarian actions in the Ruzizi Plain, believe that humanitarian workers participate in peacebuilding and in raising awareness about conflicts and their peaceful resolution:

> Some humanitarians are making efforts to promote peace. But to achieve peace, everyone has to be involved. Even if these organizations are committed to peacebuilding, without the support of communities, peace will not materialize.[35]

Furthermore, all of our interviewees agree that peacebuilding in Eastern DRC must be a collaborative effort between beneficiaries, local actors, national authorities, and NGOs that are committed to sustainable peace in the DRC. They all believe that the justice system should tackle NGOs that, behind the scenes, participate in destabilization, particularly in Eastern DRC. For these interviewees, many farmers are fleeing their own lands in Kalehe as well as in the Ruzizi Plain because of insecurity. This is why peacebuilding should be given priority over any other actions that NGOs might consider.

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[35] Interview with veterinarian and humanitarian aid beneficiary, Sange, July 2021.

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Conclusion

This report is based on field research to analyze community representations and perceptions of NGO actions (humanitarian, peacebuilding and development) in the Eastern DRC's Kalehe territory and the Ruzizi Plain. This fieldwork was conducted using a socio-anthropological approach, mobilizing qualitative social science methodological tools, including semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews with selected key informants and focus groups. In result, community perceptions of NGOs are highly diverse. They sometimes emerge from rumors or suspicions, but are also based on real-life experiences, or on the interviewees' detailed knowledge of how NGOs operate. These informants notably point out the gap between the work planned by the NGO projects that attract funding, and the practical reality of their implementation on the ground. A climate of mistrust prevails among the beneficiaries with regard to NGO actions. They accuse NGOs of working for their own interests and of justifying all the funds they receive with small, low impact interventions. Several sources in Kalehe and the Ruzizi Plain believe that NGO interventions are not based on the needs of the population and that these NGOs should review their approach in order to achieve lasting peace in the eastern DRC.

While a few testimonies acknowledge the positive effects of the presence of NGOs in target areas and their importance in peacebuilding, no conclusion can be drawn from this study that the effects of NGO actions are positively perceived by local communities. On the contrary, our study suggests that most interviewees have negative perceptions of NGOs. They believe that NGOs have a hidden political and/or economic agenda and use the resources

allocated to their projects as a springboard to achieve their goals. Almost all of the communities suggest that NGOs should review their interventions by focusing on the needs of communities, collaborating with them, and, most importantly, working towards peacebuilding. These communities also want the Congolese government to do an in-depth follow-up of NGO actions with the beneficiaries.

The study highlighted the existence of diverse perceptions and detailed criticism of NGOs by local communities. We therefore recommend that NGOs be attentive to these criticisms and perceptions, even when they are expressed by individuals or groups of people who may not have sufficient knowledge of their interventions. These recommendations are addressed to NGOs in the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding fields. Applying them will allow NGOs to achieve objectives such as: (1) working in accordance with humanitarian principles, in order to avoid the escalation of conflicts in intervention areas; (2) capitalizing on local knowledge in order to set up projects that are better adapted to the local context; and (3) improving communication with local communities in order to demonstrate their major common concern, which is peace and development. Finally, as a follow-up to this report, further research would be necessary in the same areas as those targeted by this study, which would look at the NGOs' self-perception of their activities. This would help assess the gap between this self-perception and the perceptions of beneficiaries and thus refine a strategy to improve NGO interventions on the ground and reduce the negative representations and perceptions that beneficiaries have of them.

6 |
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