

The COVID-19 response should leave no one behind: the pandemic's implications in the Great Lakes region

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The **COVID-19 pandemic** and response to it undeniably present an era-defining challenge to public health and global economy.¹ As the EU outlined the long-awaited new EU-Africa strategy in March 2020, the ongoing pandemic represents the first major test of the EU's ambitions² as "examples like the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrate the imperative need for global action and solidarity."³

Although much remains uncertain regarding the long-term implications of the coronavirus, it is worth outlining its impact in already fragile contexts, where the risks of economic damage and social unrest are particularly high. In the Great Lakes region, the global health challenge intersects with an already dire sanitary and public health situation, weak institutions, a poorly diversified economy as well as communal and inter-regional tensions.

In this policy report, EurAc and its members wish to draw the attention of EU policy and decision-makers to the specific challenges that the coronavirus present in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in Rwanda and in Burundi, and suggest courses of action to be taken.

IMPORTANT NOTE

This policy report was written between 30 April and 26 May 2020. The situation in the three countries might have evolved since its publication.

The recommendations outlined in the present document address pre-existing social, economic, and institutional fragility of the three countries exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. They remain, therefore, relevant.

¹ [The COVID-19 Pandemic and Deadly Conflict](#), International Crisis Group, visited on 13 May 2020.

² [Towards a new Africa-Europe partnership after the Corona crisis](#), European Think Thank Group, 27 April 2020.

³ [Joint communication: Human rights and democracy in the EU – 2020-24 action plan](#), European Commission, consulted in May 2020.

1. The impact of COVID-19 on fundamental rights and freedoms in the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda

The measures adopted to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced governments in the Great Lakes and elsewhere to strike a balance between restricting fundamental rights necessary to fight the pandemic – such as the freedom of movement and assembly - and protecting those same rights and freedoms. In the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda, where shrinking space for political participation and civil society is already a concern, there is a risk for COVID-19 containment measures to facilitate further violations of fundamental civic rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the right to fair and transparent elections. In some cases, the most basic rights to life and health might also be challenged. The situation is even more worrisome with regards to the rights of prisoners, whose conditions are already questionable throughout the region.

In Burundi, the government has made a minimal response to the COVID-19 threat. It has issued general advice on hygiene to the population, and some border restrictions were put in place late in March. Still, the general elections took place on 20 May amid raising concerns of increasing contamination in a country with an already fragile health-system. While local sources speak of increasing cases in local hospitals,⁴ the president's spokesperson and other government officials have stated that Burundi enjoys protection from God,⁵ and that will keep Burundians safe.⁶ As Human Rights Watch⁷ pointed out, the Burundian government has repeatedly failed to provide fact-based information on COVID-19, a behaviour that might put lives at risk, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi.⁸ Additionally, the expulsion of the World Health Organisation (WHO) team fuelled further concerns about the government's management of the pandemic just days before the elections.⁹

The divulgation of trustworthy and fact-based information is particularly crucial in times of crisis,¹⁰ yet the government of Burundi (and of other countries, as will be discussed below) have taken active steps to obstacle accurate, professional reporting.¹¹ In Burundi, the media are lining up behind the government's questionable communication on the coronavirus crisis for fear of repercussions, in continuation of a climate of restriction of freedom of the press that has pervaded in the country since 2015.¹² On 11 April, for example, journalists from the

⁴ [Au Burundi, il y a plus de morts qu'annoncé, alertent des médecins](#), RFI, 10 May 2020.

⁵ [COVID-19/ Le Burundi est une exception car c'est un pays qui a donné à Dieu la première place](#), Iwacu, 21 March 2020.

⁶ [Communiqué du gouvernement de la République du Burundi dans le cadre de la lutte contre le corona virus](#), Republic of Burundi, 25 March 2020.

⁷ [Burundi: Any COVID-19 Cover-Up Will Put Lives at Risk](#), Human Rights Watch, 31 March 2020.

⁸ [Statement from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: transparency, compliance with human rights international standards and humanitarian assistance are essential in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic](#), UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi, 10 April 2020.

⁹ [Burundi expels WHO coronavirus team as election approaches](#), The Guardian, May 2020.

¹⁰ [COVID-19: Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support](#), European Federation of Journalists, 5 May 2020.

¹¹ [Coronavirus response takes backseat as election looms in Burundi](#), The New Humanitarian, 13 May 2020.

¹² [Burundi Tightens Screws on Media Freedom](#), Human Rights Watch, 29 March 2019.

independent press group IWACU and from Radio Isanganiro were refused access to a press conference on COVID-19 related deaths by the staff of Health Minister Dr Josiane Nijimbere.¹³¹⁴ This is only the latest in a series of abuses on the freedom of the press by the Burundian government.¹⁵

The COVID-19 situation has also impacted the 2020 general elections. Despite the concrete dangers of facilitating infections, the Burundian government, like others in the region, have decided to maintain the elections. While Burundians must be able to exercise their democratic rights, elections, by nature, involve mass gatherings in public spaces.¹⁶ In the case of Burundi holding three different polls at a time (presidential, legislative and local), concerns about the substantial risk of further spreading the virus are fully justified. At the same time, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the government has suspended the vote for Burundian citizens abroad, de facto negating the right to participate in the elections to thousands of citizens.¹⁷ Moreover, the only external electoral observation mission from the East African Community (EAC), having traveled from abroad, were only out of quarantine on the day of the elections. In absence of other independent external observation missions, this increased opacity around the electoral process. More problematically, rights groups around the world are concerned that repressive governments may exploit the coronavirus crisis to crack down on opponents and consolidate their power.¹⁸

Shrinking civic space and restricted freedom of the press have been an ongoing trend in the Great Lakes region.¹⁹ In Burundi, the DRC and Rwanda, the COVID-19 crisis seems to have represented an opportunity to intensify repressions of freedom of expression and of the rights to inform and to be informed.²⁰ This is particularly disquieting in times where trustworthy and reliable information for the population is of utter importance.

In some areas of the DRC, there have also been restrictions on the freedom of the press. Théo Ngwabidje, the governor of the South Kivu province has ordered the media to undergo screening by his services before reporting on COVID-19 cases. Information is only tolerated if related to raising awareness on compliance with the measures. In Kinshasa however, criticism seems to be more tolerated. A certain openness towards civic space has been noticed since President Felix Tshisekedi came to power, with mostly isolated cases of intimidations. However, poor or deficient communication by the government on the situation of COVID-19 has opened the way to speculation and rumours, sometimes making the work of journalists and civil society actors more difficult. At the same time, parallel communication channels such as WhatsApp

¹³ [Couverture du COVID-19 : les autorités burundaises « trient » les journalistes](#), SOS Media Burundi, 12 Avril 2020.

¹⁴ [Le ministère de la Santé se trompe de combat](#), Iwacu, 11 April 2020.

¹⁵ [The Cruel Irony of Burundi's Media Awards](#), Human Rights Watch, 7 May 2020.

¹⁶ [Coronavirus and upcoming elections in Africa: what are the options?](#), SAIIA, 19 March 2020.

¹⁷ [Burundi suspends diaspora voting in general elections over COVID-19 outbreak](#), The East African, 17 April 2020.

¹⁸ [Burundi vote campaign begins in shadow of violence and COVID-19](#), Reuters, 27 April 2020.

¹⁹ [Democratic processes and political stalemates in the Great Lakes region](#), EurAc, June 2017.

²⁰ [World Press Freedom Day: COVID-19 is making the media in Africa's Great Lakes region sick](#), RFI, 30 April 2020.

developed extremely quickly without the same quality controls and fact-checking of professional sources, facilitating the spread of fake news and disinformation.

Criticism towards the Congolese government's COVID-19 measures have on occasion been met with reprisals. In Bukavu, human rights defender and spokesperson for the opposition party Heri Kalemaza was arrested by the governor of South Kivu for his critical attitude towards the governor's policies, including on COVID-19.²¹ Mr Kalemaza is now looking at a prison sentence of up to 5 years for "insulting public authority".²²

In Rwanda, which adopted early lockdown measures, there have been reports of arbitrary arrests by the police, threatening to detain people found in violations of the measures even though no legal basis for detention were provided in the government's decision.²³ On 15 April, journalist Cyuma Hassa, who was preparing a report on the impact of lockdown measures on impoverished districts, was arrested together with his driver for violating the same measures.²⁴ At least four bloggers were arrested. Cyuma's case was one amongst a series of arrests of bloggers and journalists for violation of lockdown measures, the legitimacy of which has been questioned by human rights organisations.^{25,26}



Picture © Frederic Triest

In the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda, the situation of detainees is of major concern

as (political) detainees are being held in dire conditions and with serious health risks, particularly in the COVID-19 context. An outbreak in prisons could be catastrophic, due to the overcrowding in small and poorly ventilated spaces and often in unsanitary conditions. Considering this, human rights defenders and journalists such as Germain Rukuki, Nestor Nibitanga

and the Iwacu journalists detained for political reasons, risk their lives in prison. As was stressed by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet: "governments should release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners." The Commission of Inquiry on Burundi²⁷ has already alerted the government to put in place the

²¹ [Sud-Kivu : Le porte-parole du Parti Congolais pour le Progrès transféré à la prison de Bukavu pour "outrage au gouverneur de province"](#), Actualite.cd, 5 April 2020.

²² [Code Pénal Congolais](#), pp. 19.

²³ [Rwanda : Lockdown Arrests, Abuses, Surge](#), Human Rights Watch, 24 April 2020.

²⁴ [World Press Freedom Day: Covid-19 is making the media in Africa's Great Lakes region sick](#), RFI, 30 April 2020.

²⁵ [Confinement au Rwanda: arrestation de plusieurs blogueurs et journalistes](#), RFI, 15 April 2020.

²⁶ [Covid-19 in Africa: RSF joins a coalition of civil society organizations to demand the release of imprisoned journalists on the continent](#), Reporters Without Borders, 6 April 2020.

²⁷ [Statement from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: transparency, compliance with human rights international standards and humanitarian assistance are essential in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic](#), OHCHR, 10 April 2020.

guidance provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the issue²⁸, which remain particularly relevant for Rwanda and the DRC.

Recommendations

- **The EU and its Member States must ensure support to local and international human rights and women’s rights organisations**, as well as other organisations defending human rights in the region.
- **Member States – the Council of the EU – the EEAS** should use their diplomatic dialogue with governments in the three countries to **question restrictions** posed on the freedom of expression and of freedom of the press.
- **DG DEVCO and Member States should strengthen their support to the independent press** in the three countries. EurAc believes that the work of journalists and reporters is to be considered essential and should be allowed to continue in compliance with hygienic and security measures.
- **European diplomats in the three countries must attend trial proceedings** of journalists, human rights defenders, and political prisoners, and must visit them in prison in line with the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.
- **Member States – the Council of the EU – the EEAS** should use their diplomatic dialogue with governments in the three countries to **push for the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners**. Those in provisory detention should also be released.
 - The EU should support the funding of measures to improve and humanise conditions of detention, especially for the most vulnerable detainees. This could be done by supporting the development and implementation of a penal policy limiting prison overcrowding by promoting, in particular, the speedy processing of cases and the use of non-custodial sanctions and measures.
 - Governments should put in place measures to contain the spread of the virus in prisons, such as increasing their capacities for diagnosis and medical monitoring but also ensuring protective measures for both prisoners and prison staff, as requested by the WHO.

²⁸ [Interim Guidance. COVID-19: Focus on Persons Deprived of Their Liberty](#), OHCHR and WHO Inter-Agency Standing Committee, March 2020.

2. Gender-specific impact of COVID-19

As António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, cautioned “COVID-19 could reverse the limited but important progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights”²⁹. The pandemic is intensifying existing inequalities, including those based on gender. This is particularly true for countries in the Great Lakes region which are marked by serious challenges for women and girls, ranging from poverty to participation in decision-making mechanisms, to gender-based violence. The section below briefly highlights gender-specific impacts and risks linked to the current pandemic in Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC.

2.1. Low women’s participation and inclusion in (health) decision-making mechanisms

Globally, 70% of workers in the health sector are women,³⁰ and this trend seems to hold for the Great Lakes region: in the provinces of North and South Kivu (DRC), women constitute approximately two thirds of healthcare workers.³¹ In Rwanda, 66% of nurses working in hospitals and health centres are women.³² Nonetheless, Congolese and Rwandan women in leadership positions in the health sector are only a small minority. In Rwanda, 92% of hospitals directors are men while only 33,3% of Ministry of Health top management are women³³. In the DRC, 96% of “health zone”³⁴ in South Kivu are managed by men³⁵. This lack of participation and inclusion of women in health decision-making mechanisms (as in all decision-making mechanisms) is problematic and results in women’s perspectives and needs being less considered.

Obscuring the specific needs of women frontline healthcare workers might cause interruption or the de-prioritisation of sexual and reproductive health services (SRHS),³⁶ and of services of medical responses to domestic violence. This is even more worrisome in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC where SRHS and services responding domestic violence are already poor. Moreover, the pandemic itself is also increasing intimate partner violence and reducing access to SRHS³⁷ leading to a vicious cycle and an alarming situation for women in the three countries.

²⁹ [António Guterres: “Put women and girls at the centre of efforts to recover from COVID-19”](#), United Nations, consulted in May 2020.

³⁰ [Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 countries](#), WHO, March 2019

³¹ [Vous pouvez aider à renforcer la place des femmes dans les organes de la riposte au COVID-19](#), Debout Congolaises, consulted in May 2020.

³² [Gender Profile in the Health Sector](#), Gender Monitoring Office, Republic of Rwanda, October 2018.

³³ [Gender Profile in the Health Sector](#), Gender Monitoring Office, Republic of Rwanda, October 2018.

³⁴ *Zone de Santé* in French.

³⁵ [État des lieux de la parité dans la province du Sud-Kivu en République démocratique du Congo](#), International Alert/Observatoire de la parité, 2016.

³⁶ [Overcoming the ‘tyranny of the urgent’: integrating gender into disease outbreak preparedness and response](#), Julia Smith, 28 June 2019.

³⁷ [Nakivale \(Ouganda\) : des femmes accouchent chez elles](#), SOS Médias Burundi, 22 April 2020.

2.2. Intimate partner violence and gender-based violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is particularly widespread, poorly addressed and often considered the norm in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC.³⁸ Yet, economic, social and psychological stress generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with measures of self-isolation and limited contact and movement, are deepening pre-existing gender-based violence (GBV) in these countries, especially IPV.³⁹ The latter, in fact, is one of the most frequent types of violence affecting women and girls during times of crisis.⁴⁰ The little attention paid to this issue in the Great Lakes region during “ordinary times” will likely be further reduced in the context of the pandemic, at a time when it is needed the most. Moreover, the “security approach” to the pandemic and the implementation by security forces of measures such as curfews and lockdown can lead to specific risks for women, especially sexual violence as it has been the case in Rwanda.⁴¹

2.3. Economic consequences

Most of women living in the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi are employed in the informal sector with low incomes. In particular, small-scale cross-border trade provides an income for at least 45,000 traders in the region, the majority of whom are women.⁴² Measures taken to manage the pandemic limiting the movement of goods and people hinder women’s trading activities, especially cross-border ones. Women involved in agriculture



are also seriously affected. According to a survey conducted in early April in eastern DRC, the primary concern during this health crisis is access to food for 62% of families.⁴³ Given that women are the primary purchaser of household food in the region, it befalls on them to respond to this need, as will be discussed below. Besides its immediate consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic could also have long terms impacts on women’s economic position. In fact, savings and loans associations and cooperatives, on which many women depend for their businesses, could be highly affected by the difficult loan’s recovery of their clients, which in turn will impact women’s economic activities.⁴⁴

³⁸ [Promoting gender equality : European rhetoric in view of the facts](#), EurAc, December 2019.

³⁹ [The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#), United Nations, 9 April 2020.

⁴⁰ [“Private Violence, Public Concern”](#), International Rescue Committee (IRC), January 2015.

⁴¹ [Rwandan soldiers rape women to enforce coronavirus lockdown](#), Face2Face Africa, 5 April 2020

⁴² [Making trade work for peace in the Great Lakes](#), International Alert, 4 April 2020.

⁴³ [Vous pouvez aider à renforcer la place des femmes dans les organes de la riposte au COVID-19](#), Debut Congolaises, consulted in May 2020.

⁴⁴ [The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#), United Nations, 9 April 2020.

Recommendations

- **The systematic participation of women in decision-making mechanism and especially within the COVID-19 emergency response mechanisms should be a *sine qua non* condition for the EU donors** prior to funding any COVID-19 related programs in the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda.
 - This applies to every stakeholder implementing COVID-19 responses programs: from local CSOs, NGOs and other international partners, to governmental bodies.
 - EU donors should be consistent and ensure that their dedicated staff is also gender balanced.
- **Addressing GBV (especially IPV) must be at the centre of national response plan** on COVID-19 in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC. **EU donors should ensure that their financial support to COVID-19 response in the region is not made at the expense of SRHR and GBV programmes.** Current and future support to those programmes are crucial and must be maintained, reinforced and adapted to the current pandemic context.
- **EU donors should increase their support to the fight against IPV** in the region. Funding must be dedicated to domestic violence shelters, medical, psychosocial and justice support and services but must also take attention to tackling stereotyped gender norms. Those programmes should combine activities for behaviour change at the individual level, especially in household and couple decision-making, by systematically involving men, while linking them to activities developed at community level.

3. Food security and agriculture: the urban poor will suffer the most

As mentioned above, providing food for their family seemed to be amongst the main concerns of citizens in the Great Lakes region. In this section, we will briefly look at the impact that measures to fight COVID-19 have had on food security and agriculture in Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC, where the overwhelming majority of the population relies on agriculture as their main source of income. Moreover, transborder food trade within and outside the region represents an important contributor to regional food stocks. COVID-19 containment measures adopted by governments risk having an important impact on local food and agricultural systems, which call for the attention of international donors. A first look at the immediate impact of COVID-19 and its containment measures reveals that smallholder farmers operating in short, local, food supply chains might respond better to COVID-19 related shocks than urban dwellers and citizens relying on international supply chains for their access to food. Overall, in Sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural production is expected to experience a contraction of output between 2.6 and 7%.⁴⁵

In the three countries, food insecurity will likely affect the urban poor the most.⁴⁶ Urban low-income workers, including casual labourers, the self-employed and those in informal sectors of the economy are already experiencing loss of income due to restrictions on the movement of people and the suspension on non-essential economic activities. This is already the case in **Rwanda**, where the suspension of most construction works and the limitations to non-essential economic activities, public transport and assembly mean that those living of small trade, transport (moto-taxi, public transport, taxis) and casual labourers are already experiencing food insecurity.⁴⁷ The government, with support from donors, the private and NGO sector, has started food distribution for vulnerable households outside Kigali and in the city's popular neighbourhoods,⁴⁸ but concerns remain, especially given the reduced capacity of food supply chains.

Anecdotal reports from the DRC highlight high economic insecurity in Kinshasa, especially in the informal economy, where workers have had to suspend activities.⁴⁹ In the Eastern city of Bukavu, prices for basic foodstuff have skyrocketed,⁵⁰ as stricter controls at the borders have slowed down the import of foodstuffs from Rwanda and North Kivu, on which the city and the area rely to cover basic food needs. As mentioned above, this trade is mostly carried out by

⁴⁵ [Africa's Pulse. An analysis of issues shaping Africa's economic future. Assessing the economic impact of COVID-19 and policy responses in Sub-saharan Africa](#), World Bank, April 2020, vol. 21.

⁴⁶ [Impact of COVID-19 outbreak on livelihoods, food security and nutrition in East Africa](#), World Food Programme, 15 April 2020.

⁴⁷ [Coronavirus: dans le Rwanda confiné, l'absence de revenus durement ressentie](#), RFI, 29 March 2020.

⁴⁸ [Rwanda: How COVID-19 Relief Distribution Will Work](#), KTPress, 29 March 2020.

⁴⁹ [COVID-19 : l'impossible confinement de Kinshasa. Perte de revenus, absence d'aide de l'État, pressions familiales : plongée dans le quotidien de ces travailleurs invisibles de Kinshasa](#), Le Point, 20 April 2020.

⁵⁰ For example, the price for one kg of Irish potatoes has gone from 600 to 1000 CFD, beans are currently at 1800 CFD/kg (30 April 2020).



women crossing the local borders daily, thus the economic impact that is being felt along the whole supply chain is gender specific. Inconsistent policies in the region also involve that, in North Kivu, local producers are unable to get their produce to local markets, but basic foodstuff from Tanzania and Uganda is still entering the country. Local organisations have tried to invert this trend to favour local producers, but with no success. Once again, women, who are often the ones populating local food markets and selling produces along transport routes, are experiencing a lack of customers, and lamenting no support from local authorities in keeping hygiene measures in market areas.⁵¹ In the DRC, rural and urban households' capacity to purchase food may also depend on the price of minerals on the international markets, as primary commodity prices are set on a downward trend that will likely persist in the near future⁵² (cfr. following section).

The situation might be different in **Burundi**, where COVID-19 containment measures have been kept at a minimum.⁵³ The situation of food insecurity in the country remains alarming, especially outside Bujumbura and must also be linked to internal political as well as climatic events. In fact, political turmoil has impacted Burundi's food system since 2015, and importantly in 2017-2018.⁵⁴ According to reports from the country, poor harvests during the previous agricultural season coupled with restrictions in the region due to COVID-19 has led peasants to distress sales of agricultural stock and capital (seeds, land etc) to face urgent household needs (education, healthcare, etc).⁵⁵ Local cooperatives and producers' organisations continue distributing seeds and inputs, but support from the government is lacking.

In the countryside, in the three countries, food-producing households are seeing a significant reduction in their capacity to access markets. In both countries, transport frequency has decreased while prices have increased. Reaching urban markets means additional strain on rural food producers. Agricultural activities have continued,⁵⁶ but seasonal sales are already being hampered. However, rural households are likely to experience much less food insecurity,

⁵¹ « COVID 19 : conséquences pour le secteur agricole et le droit à l'alimentation : cas du Burundi, République Démocratique du Congo et du Rwanda », internal note, CCFD – Terre Solidaire, 17 April 2020.

⁵² World Bank, *ibidem*.

⁵³ [Burundi: Any COVID-19 cover-up will put lives at risk](#), Human Rights Watch, 31 March 2020.

⁵⁴ [Agriculture and food security in Burundi: European donors must support agricultural production and resilience of the population](#), EurAc, 29 May 2018.

⁵⁵ CCFD – Terre Solidaire, *ibidem*.

⁵⁶ [COVID-19: Agric activities continue during lockdown](#), The New Times Rwanda, 26 March 2020.

as they rely on their own production for consumption,⁵⁷ except for the landless rural poor who rely on seasonal wage labour and other sporadic activities. The situation might be particularly worrying for women-headed households in the three countries, who generally own less land and resources on which to fall back in times of crisis.

An important element highlighted by the impact of COVID-19 is the expected **higher resilience of small-holder farmers and local small-scale farming systems**. As mentioned above, the **urban poor are more likely to be affected by the crisis**, as are those rural producers highly dependent on markets for their consumption, and small traders in the middle of the chain. Peasant farming households, on the other hand, can count on some relative advantages. First, as the virus first started spreading in the more crowded urban areas, containment measures might have limited its spread to rural areas. Second, food-producers in the region mostly operate on a small-scale model where a significant part of household food consumption is sourced on small family farms, which also depend mostly on family labour. Thus, smallholder households are likely to experience less food insecurity – although, as mentioned above, many of them might still lose some of the non-agricultural income streams. This is particularly true for the DRC, where dependence on imported foodstuff is higher than in the other countries. Peasant organisations have already taken notice, with the Congolese National Confederation of Agricultural Producers issuing a statement alerting the government of “the need to support family farming as the pandemic has proved that strong dependence on foreign imports may open the country to a food security crisis that will surely lead to political destabilisation”.⁵⁸ As we have seen, rural producers face a similar situation Burundi and in Rwanda.

EurAc and its member organisations⁵⁹ have long pleaded for investment in smallholder farming rather than in large-scale agricultural farming in the Great Lakes region, based on its efficiency in terms of food production, resilience, and environmental sustainability. Post COVID-19 cooperation programmes in the field of agriculture must take this into account.

⁵⁷ A trend that has been noted throughout the continent, see World Food Programme, *ibidem*.

⁵⁸ [La CONAPAC appelle le Gouvernement à soutenir les agriculteurs dans les conditions d'urgence dues à la pandémie de COVID-19](#), CONAPAC, 13 April 2020.

⁵⁹ For example, Action de Carême: <https://voir-et-agir.ch/semences/> or <https://actiondecareme.ch/droit-a-l-alimentation/>

Recommendations

EurAc calls on DEVCO and Member States to:

- **Support countries in the region in offering economic assistance** to the socio-economic groups more exposed to economic loss due to COVID-19 containment measures, while prioritising development policies that prioritise socio-economic rights over market integration.
- **Intensify existing investments in resilient, short food supply chain** with the leadership of smallholder farmers.
- **Decisively abandon approaches to rural development centred around market access**, and an output increase towards models that favour resilience to shocks, food security and environmental sustainability. They should use their political dialogue with partners in the region to advocate for such approaches.
- **Coordinate to evaluate the resilience and proclivity for food insecurity of marginal urban populations**, including those in the informal sectors of the economy. Discussion with development partners in the Great Lakes region should be centred around the creation of strong social safety nets for the self-employed, those working in the informal economy and the urban poor.

4. COVID-19 exposes fragility and insecurity in mineral supply-chains

The economy of the DRC relies largely on the export of minerals highly coveted on international markets such as tungsten, tantalum, tin, gold (to which is often referred as 3TG) and cobalt. The COVID-19 crisis has had an immediate impact on international commodity markets. For instance, prices for refined cobalt fell of 9% between February and March 2020. Similar trends are noted for other battery metal prices.⁶⁰ While gold prices initially plummeted internationally, they have re-acquired momentum as investors and consumers look for haven goods.⁶¹ Trends on the global market doubly affect actors of supply chains in the DRC. On the one hand, changes in international prices will affect supply chains locally, pushing artisanal actors on the ground to engage with the materials that offer the most revenues at a specific time. On the other hand, export shortage from the DRC (especially in key materials like cobalt) may impact international supply chains.⁶² Locally, COVID-19 containment measures in the DRC have had a differentiated impact on mineral supply chains, depending on the minerals being exploited. In Eastern DRC, which mostly exports 3TG extracted by artisanal miners, border closures and low prices have resulted in minerals being stocked in local warehouses and not reaching the market. As local trading houses are often not operating, there is a risk of an increase in smuggling.

Reports from North and South Kivu show that in some areas (such as in Biholo, Nalucho and Kalehe) mining activities have been suspended until further notice since 19 March. In other artisanal sites they continue as normal.⁶³ In Uvira, as in Walungu, it is reported that artisanal miners tried to respect the interdiction on gatherings of more than twenty people. On a few sites, CSOs have taken the initiative to spread awareness regarding COVID-19 containment measures but there have been reports of workers entering mining sites at night.⁶⁴ Reports from other provinces, like Haut Uele, indicate that gold mining activities have gone on uninterrupted.

Important is that many of the artisanal miners who have suspended their activities will likely be either **migrating back to their hometown** to engage in agriculture **or to the urban centres of Bukavu and Goma** (in the case of North and South Kivu) looking for occasional employment. This will likely increase pressure on land and on the already impoverished urban labour market which, according to the Ministry of Mines, might cause security concerns⁶⁵ (see also previous section on the urban poor). Other artisanal miners might abandon one material

⁶⁰ Such as lithium and nickel, see [Standard & Poor Global Market Intelligence, COVID-19 Impacts To Metals Prices: Volatility Is Here To Stay - Part 1](#), 15 April 2020.

⁶¹ [COVID-19 Impacts To Metals Prices: Volatility Is Here To Stay - Part 2](#), Standard & Poor Global Market Intelligence, 15 April 2020.

⁶² [China's cobalt salt producers likely to face supply disruption amid raw material shortage in Africa](#), SMM News, 26 March 2020.

⁶³ Save Act Mines, La situation de pandémie de coronavirus dans les zones minières à l'Est de la RDC, 23 April 2020.

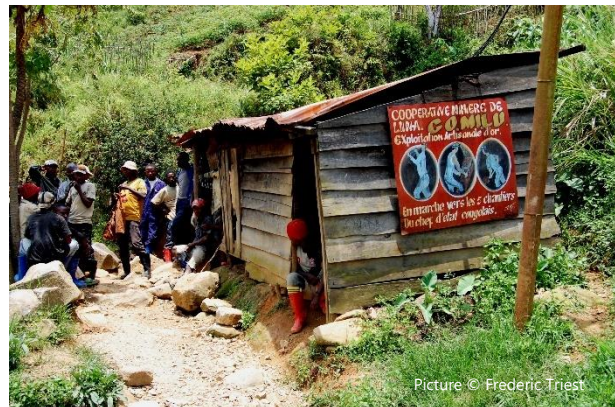
⁶⁴ Save Act Mines, *ibidem*.

⁶⁵ [Analyse de l'impact de la pandémie du COVID-19 sur le secteur minier de la République Démocratique du Congo](#), DR Congo's Ministry of Mines, 2020.

for the other, for example moving from the 3T to gold, both crowding the gold sector and opening opportunities for new artisanal operators in the sector.

Worryingly, in some areas of South Kivu, as in Shabunda, the suspension of school activities seems to have resulted in increased presence of children on the mines.⁶⁶ Moreover, the combined effects of low mineral prices and containment measures will put further strain on an already precarious and often impoverished sector of the population, likely triggering negative effects on the economic activities gravitating around mining sites (i.e. food catering and petty trade), often conducted by women. The rise in the cost of basic foodstuffs and disruption to food chains (as mentioned above) will likely further deteriorate artisanal miners' living conditions.

The situation in the cobalt-producing provinces of Lualaba and Haut Katanga is different, mostly due to the greater role played by industrial mining operations. In industrial sites, companies have adopted one of two strategies: on-site confinement or the suspension of activities.^{67,68} In the case of the *Société d'Exploitation de Kipoi* (SEK, Haut-Katanga) and Kamoto Copper Company (KCC, Kolwezi, Lualaba) a variable proportion of workers have been staying at the facilities since the beginning of April.⁶⁹ The continuous presence of a limited number of workers who decided to be confined on-site is resulting in increased exploitation through the non-respect of official working hours and the obligation to perform the same amount of work with less personnel. Moreover, crowded, and unsanitary living conditions on working sites, and insufficient food ratios are common. In some exploitations, like Chemaf in Kolwezi, there have been significant layoffs.⁷⁰ In the near site of Tenke Fungurume Mining (TFM), many agents have been temporarily laid off as well.



Picture © Frederic Triest

Although they are in small numbers compared to North and South Kivu, artisanal miners in Lualaba and Haut-Katanga have also felt the impact of COVID-19, as they have been struggling to find traders to buy their products. The Congolese organisation Africa Resources Watch

⁶⁶ Save Act Mines, *ibidem*. Information also confirmed by multiple sources in the South Kivu.

⁶⁷ [Coronavirus threatens cobalt supply chain in the DRC](#), Argus media, 23 March 2020; [DRC: Mining Minister warns against the social and economic impact of mine closures during the Covid-19 pandemic](#), Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 1 May 2020.

⁶⁸ *Etat des lieux sommaires des impacts de la pandémie de COVID-19 sur le secteur minier en RDC. Cas des provinces du Lualaba et du Haut Katanga*, Afrewatch, May 2020.

⁶⁹ Afrewatch, *ibidem*.

⁷⁰ Afrewatch, *ibidem*.

(Afrewatch)⁷¹ reports that Chinese buyers are nonetheless buying artisanal products and stocking them for future sale.

As the Minister of Mines recognised, the DRC “would not be able to withstand an abrupt halt in the mining production of flagship projects.”⁷² Cobalt and copper alone contribute to about 25.4% of the national GDP.⁷³ There are about two million artisanal miners in the DRC and much of the Congolese economy depends on activities connected to the mining sector. The COVID-19 outbreaks **highlight already existing fragility both within the larger Congolese economy and within the artisanal and industrial mining sector.** Because of the already precarious conditions of artisanal miners, their health and their livelihoods are even more at risk in times of crisis, while the lack of economic alternatives in mineral-rich regions will likely lead to further impoverishment. Migration to urban areas and a possible increase in smuggling due to the suspension of official supply chains might increase insecurity, especially in the Eastern provinces. The temporary vacation of mining sites might represent an opportunity for armed groups in North and South Kivu to take control of production. Workers for industrial mining projects, as in the cobalt supply chain, are faced with even worse working conditions, or with unemployment.



⁷¹ *ibidem*.

⁷² [Congo mine closures would cause economic and social crisis, minister says](#), Reuters, 17 April 2020.

⁷³ [Analyse de l'impact de la pandémie du COVID-19 sur le secteur minier de la République Démocratique du Congo](#), DR Congo's Ministry of Mines, 2020.

Recommendations

EurAc calls on:

- **The EU and its Member States to reinforce their cooperation with the DRC**, especially in support of artisanal miners and low-wage workers in mineral supply chains, through initiatives aimed at the formalisation of the sector and the support of local cooperatives.
- **DG DEVCO and the EEAS to support local civil society initiatives for the implementation of health and safety practices** both in industrial and artisanal mining sites.
- **DG DEVCO and the EEAS to strengthen their commitment to supporting the Congolese state services** in formalising, supporting, and strengthening artisanal workers and their cooperatives.
- **The European Commission, and particularly DG Trade, to urge European importers** of cobalt and 3TG to consider their suppliers' COVID-19 response measures in their due diligence reports.
- **The EEAS and the EU Delegation to the DRC** to use their political dialogue with the Congolese government **to promote and adopt hygiene and security measures throughout the supply chains** to guarantee the health of operators at all levels.
- **The EEAS, DG DEVCO and Member States** to engage with governments **to coordinate the management of border-trade in compliance with COVID-19 related security measures**.
- **DG DEVCO and Member States** to take active steps **to investigate the impact that COVID-19 related measures might have on the supply chains and particularly on artisanal miners**. The latter, and their cooperatives, should proactively be involved in monitoring of local supply chains and health measures.
- **DG DEVCO** to intensify cooperation with the Congolese government **to diversity economic opportunities in mineral-rich regions of the country** so to increase the resilience of the population.
- **The EEAS and the European Commission** to use their political dialogue with Member States of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) **to stress the importance of coordination of regional mineral exports** (especially regarding harmonising taxation levels) with the governments of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, given the opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemics is offering to illicit mineral trade.

5. Humanitarian interventions in times of COVID-19

Conflict-affected countries are in a worse position to respond to COVID-19 related pressures on their healthcare systems and their economies as a result of conflict and instability.⁷⁴ The trajectory of the outbreak will largely depend on “the complex interplay of demographics, socio-cultural strengths and disparities, the prevalence of other diseases, the density of the living conditions, environmental and potentially other different factors.”⁷⁵ **In the Great Lakes region, the pandemic intersects with a socio-political context of weak institutions, communal tensions but also the lack of trust in governments.** Moreover, humanitarian aid in the region is already a contested field, where issues of legitimacy and lack of community involvement make the issue even more challenging for providing protection and assistance to displaced people. The next few paragraphs will outline some key elements that need to be considered by humanitarian actors working in the region.

5.1. Collision of public health crisis and the importance of continuity of care

COVID-19 might put a particularly heavy burden on countries with greater potential for unrest and conflict. Socio-political instability, mismanagement and corruption have left national healthcare systems particularly weak and unprepared for COVID-19.⁷⁶ However, the capacity for epidemiological monitoring and testing differs in the three countries. In Burundi, for example, there is only one laboratory for tests needed for both malaria and COVID-19, with a capacity of 200 tests daily⁷⁷ and only a dozen respirators for nearly 12 million inhabitants.⁷⁸ The lack of testing and the delay in the response could increase the number of cases. As previously highlighted, governments’ reluctance to reveal credible figures on the sanitary situation risks compromising the response to the pandemic. This is even more worrying in Burundi, where medical staff alert that there are much more deaths caused by the coronavirus than officially announced.⁷⁹

The high prevalence of other diseases in these settings, including malnutrition, malaria, measles, cholera, or Ebola,⁸⁰ is another important factor to consider. Combining the COVID-19 response with existing health needs is crucial for an appropriate response to the crisis.⁸¹ In Burundi, the epidemic situation remains worrying as a new outbreak of cholera was declared in January this year, along with high numbers of measles cases.⁸² Malaria remains the first

⁷⁴ [COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch](#), International Crisis Group, 24 March 2020.

⁷⁵ [Interim guidance on Public Health and Social Measures for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Operations in Low Capacity and Humanitarian Settings](#), Inter-Agency Standing Committee, May 2020.

⁷⁶ [COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch](#), International Crisis Group, 24 March 2020.

⁷⁷ [When health crises collide—tackling malaria, COVID-19 and Ebola in Burundi](#), ReliefWeb, 1 May 2020.

⁷⁸ [Coronavirus : la pandémie progresse, l’Afrique centrale en proie au virus](#), Caritas International, 8 May 2020.

⁷⁹ [Au Burundi, il y a plus de morts qu’annoncé, alertent des médecins](#), RFI, 10 May 2020.

⁸⁰ [Interim guidance on Public Health and Social Measures for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Operations in Low Capacity and Humanitarian Settings](#), Inter-Agency Standing Committee, May 2020.

⁸¹ [When health crises collide—tackling malaria, COVID-19 and Ebola in Burundi](#), ReliefWeb, 1 May 2020.

⁸² [Burundi Humanitarian Situation](#), UNICEF, 28 April 2020.

cause of death in the country, with nearly half of the population infected. In the DRC, COVID-19 comes on top of an already large, complex and prolonged humanitarian crisis as March 2020 marked two years since the Ebola outbreak.⁸³ However, In April 2020, new Ebola cases were confirmed in Beni (North-Kivu) just days prior to the expected end of the outbreak.⁸⁴ The country is already fighting a measles outbreak silently killing numbers of children.⁸⁵ In this context, health authorities must juggle Ebola and COVID-19 responses, while treating people affected by measles and also cholera.⁸⁶ In Rwanda, while the health situation is relatively better than in the DRC and Burundi, according to UNICEF only 64% of the population has access to basic sanitation services, while only 5% of households have a place to wash their hands with soap.⁸⁷

The COVID-19 outbreak could rapidly create extra barriers to continuity of care. Humanitarian organisations such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warn that a too narrow focus on COVID-19 could overshadow important pre-existing public health issues in Burundi and in the DRC. In this sense, the response to the pandemic should not prevent health workers and humanitarian actors, both local and international, to continue carrying out vaccination campaigns, nutrition support or malaria prevention, or else, the situation risks sowing the seeds of other major health crisis.⁸⁸

5.2. Displaced people in the Great Lakes region

Internally displaced people and refugees in the region already find themselves in a desperate situation that may well further deteriorate. While necessary from a public health standpoint, the possible limitations on movement impact those fleeing persecution to seek protection.⁸⁹ Border closures might lead to increasing or changing migration patterns and potentially increasing transmission, while making tracking more difficult and putting displaced



Picture © Frederic Triest

⁸³ [COVID-19 and the displaced: Addressing the threat of the novel coronavirus in humanitarian emergencies](#), Refugees International, 30 March 2020.

⁸⁴ [New Ebola cases confirmed in DRC days before expected end of outbreak](#), MSF, 23 April 2020.

⁸⁵ [Measles is a steady, silent killer among COVID-19 in DRC, CAR and Chad](#), ReliefWeb, 5 May 2020.

⁸⁶ [Coronavirus Humanitarian Aid Response](#), The New Humanitarian, 7 May 2020.

⁸⁷ [Water, sanitation and hygiene](#), UNICEF, visited on 11 May 2020.

⁸⁸ [Measles is a steady, silent killer among COVID-19 in DRC, CAR and Chad](#), ReliefWeb, 5 May 2020.

⁸⁹ [The COVID-19 excuse? How migration policies are hardening around the globe](#), The New Humanitarian, 17 April 2020.

people at risk of being blamed for carrying the disease. As highlighted above, women risk to be disproportionately affected by such dynamics.

In short, refugees and other displaced people, who already lack access to the most basic services, could be even worse affected,⁹⁰ especially when government keep aid organisations from operating in the context of COVID-19.⁹¹

5.3. Conflict-sensitive approach and local ownership are essential in the response

Peacebuilders have highlighted that COVID-19 related responses may exacerbate conflict dynamics. The implementation of repressive and inequitable public health measures on the part of governments, the potential spread of harmful “fake news” about the virus⁹² pose a dangerous threat to public health. Responses to the pandemic that are insensitive to humanitarian and security crisis may create more conflict and violence, especially for more vulnerable groups like women, displaced people and refugees.⁹³ Considering the potential deterioration in conflict dynamics, **humanitarian actors should be careful to adopt a conflict-sensitive, human security-driven and gender-sensitive response to the pandemic.**⁹⁴

Lessons learnt from the management of the Ebola outbreak highlight the importance of trust. Deep-rooted mistrust of government, security forces and health workers has been indicated as one of the primary reasons for the rapid spread of the disease.⁹⁵ Such lack of trust may undermine the effectiveness of public health directives, especially when personnel engaged in the COVID-19 crisis management are mono-ethnic and/or have a history of committing human rights abuses.⁹⁶ In turn, this could lead to tensions and violence. Such was the case with the Ebola outbreak in the DRC in 2019⁹⁷ and could potentially lead to serious consequences in the electoral context in Burundi.

International organisations and humanitarian actors must leverage the strengths of local structures and systems through social mobilisation and community engagement,⁹⁸ in line with existing Grand Bargain commitments. Given the current restrictions on mobility, the

⁹⁰ [COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch](#), International Crisis Group, 24 March 2020.

⁹¹ [Burundi: Any COVID-19 Cover-Up Will Put Lives at Risk](#), Human Rights Watch, 31 March 2020.

⁹² [COVID-19 and conflicts: Views from peacebuilders](#), EPLO blog, 9 April 2020.

⁹³ [Interim guidance on Public Health and Social Measures for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Operations in Low Capacity and Humanitarian Settings](#), Inter-Agency Standing Committee, May 2020.

⁹⁴ [COVID-19 and conflicts: Views from peacebuilders](#), EPLO blog, 9 April 2020.

⁹⁵ [The role of community peacebuilders in a pandemic: what we learnt from the Ebola crisis](#), Conciliation Resources, April 2020.

⁹⁶ [COVID-19 and conflicts: Views from peacebuilders](#), EPLO blog, 9 April 2020.

⁹⁷ [COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch](#), International Crisis Group, 24 March 2020.

⁹⁸ [Interim guidance on Public Health and Social Measures for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Operations in Low Capacity and Humanitarian Settings](#), Inter-Agency Standing Committee, May 2020.

role of local and community-based actors becomes even more important.⁹⁹ International actors should build on pre-existing networks and platforms with links to communities, rather than creating new structures. Experience from the Ebola outbreak shows that behaviour change is stronger when people receive information from trustful sources.¹⁰⁰ Hence, trusted and respected community members, peacebuilders, media, women’s organisations as well as youth-led organisations could bridge between health workers and humanitarian organisations working to prevent the spread of the pandemic.¹⁰¹

Recommendations

The European Commission, in particular DG ECHO, should:

- **Call on the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi to fight the pandemic transparently and in compliance with international standards.** When imposing quarantines, governments need to respect their obligation to guarantee access to adequate food, water and health care without discrimination.
- **Call on the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi to facilitate the movement of humanitarian actors** and allow them access to operate independently and deliver assistance to those in urgent needs without discrimination and with full transparency. Humanitarian interventions should build on national capacity and using existing systems, which could lead to more localised humanitarian governance, in line with the existing Grand Bargain commitments.
- **Support local structures raising awareness about COVID-19 and put them at the centre of humanitarian operations,** while ensuring coordination between international and local actors. To ensure local ownership of the response to the pandemics, leverage the strengths of networks comprised of trusted community members, peacebuilders, media, women’s organisations and youth-led organisations:
 - Provide more flexible and reprogrammable funding to local structures in order to enable rapid adjustments to the response;
 - Foster participation and leadership of local actors in humanitarian coordination mechanisms to enable complementarity between international and local actors;

⁹⁹[COVID-19: Global Humanitarian Response Plan demonstrates the need for effective and efficient humanitarian response](#), Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 25 March 2020.

¹⁰⁰[Using lessons from Ebola response to address COVID-19](#), Search for Common Ground, 15 April 2020.

¹⁰¹[The role of community peacebuilders in a pandemic: what we learnt from the Ebola crisis](#), Conciliation Resources, April 2020.

- Support the localisation of humanitarian action by creating, for example, community-level cluster structures, including local leaders.¹⁰²
- **Call on the governments of DRC, Rwanda and Burundi to respect the right of refugees to access protection** despite COVID-19 travel restrictions.¹⁰³ Humanitarian actors need to remove barriers of access to health care and ensure the provision of basic health services to refugees and displaced people, and women and girls in particular.
- **Inject essential COVID-19 related funding into humanitarian support for the region**, especially for refugees and displaced people, while providing enough flexibility for humanitarian organisations, both international and local, when addressing the pandemic.
- **Ensure that humanitarian interventions are implemented with a clearly defined conflict sensitive, human security-driven and gender-sensitive approach**, and invest efforts in training response actors in conflict sensitivity in the humanitarian context.¹⁰⁴

6. For more information

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¹⁰² [Local humanitarian action in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Capacity and complementarity](#), Humanitarian Policy Group, March 2019.

¹⁰³ [Key Legal Considerations on access to territory for persons in need of international protection in the context of the COVID-19 response](#), UNHCR, 16 March 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Follow the Interim guidance on Public Health and Social Measures for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Operations which outlines how to adapt humanitarian interventions in low capacity and humanitarian settings.