

Land tenure security: A humanitarian and protection imperative in eastern DRC

Based on NRC (Ituri – Aru/Ariwara, 2025) protection risk assessments and the Regional Study on the Impact of Displacement on Land in Eastern DRC (Ituri, Beni, Lubero) January 2026.

KEY MESSAGES

- Land insecurity is a structural protective risk, directly related to violence, community conflict and displacement risks, and constitutes a major obstacle to stability and durable solutions.
- Over 90% of households have no legal proof or customary recognition of their land rights, exposing internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and host communities to dispossession and eviction.
- When the land dimension is not systematically integrated into humanitarian interventions, particularly in the areas of shelter, rehabilitation and the provision of infrastructure such as schools, health centres, water points or other community facilities, beneficiary populations or communities remain at risk of occupation or loss. This vulnerability weakens humanitarian interventions, compromises the sustainability of investments made and can ultimately result in inefficient use of financial resources.
- NRC's Housing, Land and Property (HLP) approach to securing land tenure, implemented through its Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programme, seeks to ensure that people have recognised and protected rights to the land they occupy or use. This approach is a strategic lever for transforming land tenure from a driver of conflict into a tool for protection, social cohesion and durable solutions.

Priority advocacy recommendations

To national and provincial authorities

Strengthen land governance in displacement-affected areas

- Clarify and strengthen coordination between customary authorities and land administrations to facilitate the recognition of tenure rights and prevent land disputes.
- Promote simplified mechanisms for recognizing land rights, especially for displaced and returned people who do not have legal documentation.
- Develop local land mediation mechanisms to prevent and resolve conflicts related to secondary land occupation

Facilitating temporary access to land for displaced populations

- Identify, in land use plans, land belonging to the administrative domain that can be temporarily made available to displaced or returned populations.
- Encourage complementary recognition of customary and formal land rights to secure access to land in rural areas.

To humanitarian coordination and UN agencies

Strengthen integration of land tenure issues in humanitarian response

- Ensure systematic inclusion of HLP considerations into humanitarian strategic frameworks (HNO, HNRP and inter-sectoral strategies).
- Ensure relevant clusters, particularly Shelter, Protection and Livelihoods, integrate land risk analysis into response planning.

Strengthen community-based mechanisms to manage land conflicts

- Support capacity building of community land dispute resolution structures to improve mediation and local dispute management.

To technical and financial partners

Strengthen financing for land tenure security and durable solutions

- Increase funding for housing, land and property (LTP) interventions, particularly for:
 - o Legal assistance and land mediation
 - o Strengthening community land management mechanisms
 - o Reconstruction and rehabilitation of destroyed housing

Integrate land due diligence into humanitarian responses

- Support systematic integration of land risk analysis in humanitarian projects involving infrastructure construction (shelters, schools, health centres, water points) to prevent conflicts related to land occupation or ownership.

The added value of NRC's ICLA/HLP approach

The ICLA/HLP approach goes far beyond a typical sectoral response by providing an integrated intervention that combines legal information, supervised land mediation, legal assistance, land due diligence, rights documentation and institutional advocacy.

It primarily targets internally displaced persons, returnees, women and vulnerable groups, who are most exposed to risks related to land insecurity.

By acting simultaneously on conflict prevention, the recognition of rights and the protection of populations, this approach makes it possible to transform land tenure from a factor of risk and tension into a real lever for protection, social cohesion and community stability.

Investing in land tenure security is therefore an investment in peace, rights protection and the long-term effectiveness of humanitarian action in eastern DRC.



Capacity building workshop for local partners on the HLP in Goma. Photo: Gloire Munisha/NRC

Context: land at the heart of the humanitarian crisis

The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is home to one of the world's most severe displacement crises, with an estimated 6.8 million people internally displaced, mostly in Ituri and North Kivu. In 2025 alone, over 700,000 new displacements were recorded in these provinces.

These mass movements of population exert extreme pressure on land and housing, in a context characterized by an often-conflictual coexistence between customary and formal law in their application. In many rural areas, access to and use of land remains primarily governed by customary authorities, while the national legal framework provides for formal procedures for the registration and recognition of land rights.

This duality often creates situations of legal uncertainty, when the rights recognized at the customary level are not formally registered or are not recognized by the land administration. This tension manifests itself in particular when customary decisions are not recognized by the administrative or judicial authorities, when several actors claim competing legitimacy over the same plot, or when the absence of official documentation contradicts the social recognition of land rights.

These challenges are compounded by the lack of effective mechanisms for the restitution or compensation of property and the structural weakness of local land institutions. This situation is further aggravated by the persistent exclusion of women and the most vulnerable groups from mechanisms for the recognition and security of land rights.

In the territories of Aru, Ariwara, Djugu, Irumu, Mahagi, Beni and Lubero, land has evolved beyond a basic livelihood resource to become a central issue of power, survival and conflict, shaping dynamics of violence, displacement and social cohesion. In this context, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s ICLA programme provides legal information, advice, mediation/land negotiation, legal assistance and institutional support to help displacement-affected populations secure their housing, land and property rights.

Objectives and methodology of NRC studies

The analyses presented in this note are based on two studies conducted by NRC between 2025 and early 2026 in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The first is a protection risk assessment related to housing, land and property (HLP) rights carried out in October 2025 in the Aru and Ariwara health zones of Ituri province.

The second is a regional study on the impact of displacement on land, conducted between October and December 2025 in seven territories (Djugu, Irumu, Mahagi, Aru, Mambasa, Beni and Lubero). The study combined a quantitative survey of 2,100 households, along with 32 focus groups and 42 key informant interviews, to analyse land dynamics linked to displacement, conflict risks, and disparities based on household status and gender.



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Key findings from the assessments

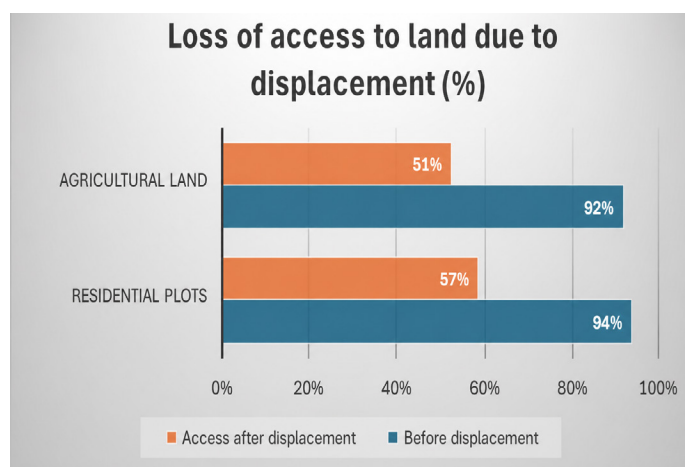
Assessments conducted in Aru, Ariwara, Djugu, Irumu, Mahagi, Beni and Lubero territories highlight several structural trends affecting access to HLP in displacement-affected areas.

- **Precarious housing conditions persist.** About 41% of surveyed households live with host families, while 19% occupy temporary shelters, often without security of tenure. Meanwhile, 60% of households identify the destruction of their homes as the main barrier to accessing safe and dignified housing.
- Significant loss of access to residential and agricultural land. While 94% of households owned a residential plot before their displacement, only 57% were able to recover it upon their return. The trends are similar for agricultural land, revealing a significant weakening of the livelihoods of displaced households.
- Widespread land insecurity due to lack of documentation. More than 90 per cent of the households surveyed do not have any legal documentation or customary recognition attesting to their land rights, which exposes them to disputes, dispossession and evictions.
- Frequent and diverse land conflicts. Assessments show that disputes related to inheritance, secondary occupations and plot boundaries are the main categories of land conflicts observed in the areas studied.

Without land tenure security, shelter interventions remain vulnerable to litigation, evictions and conflict.

Massive loss of land rights as a result of displacement

Data from assessments conducted by NRC show that protracted displacement has severely disrupted households' access to residential and agricultural land.



Land measurement. Photo: Paulin Bakulu/NRC

Prior to their displacement, 94% of the households surveyed reported owning a residential plot, but only 57% were actually able to recover it upon return, indicating substantial loss of residential land. The trends are similar for agricultural land: while 92% of households had farmland before displacement, only 51% report being able to access them upon return.

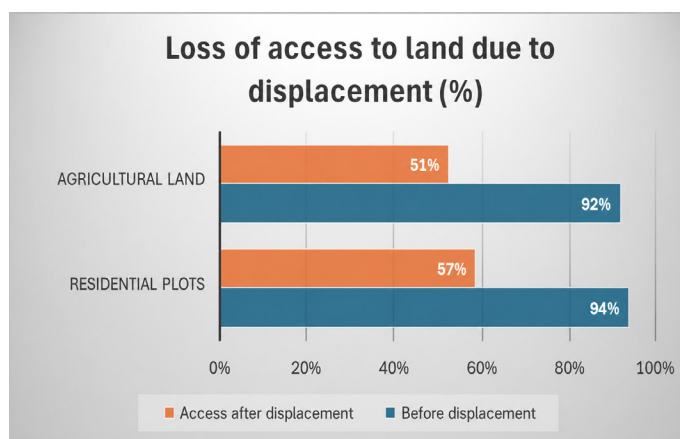
This is largely due to secondary occupation of plots during displacement, combined with the absence of effective land restitution mechanisms. Land insecurity is further compounded by weak land documentation. Nearly 90% of households surveyed do not hold any legal or customary document attesting to their land rights, significantly increasing exposure to disputes, evictions and competing ownership claims.

The analysis also reveals marked differences according to household status. IDPs are particularly vulnerable, as they often rely on informal arrangements to access land or housing in host areas. Returnees frequently struggle to reclaim original plots, which may be occupied by third parties. Host communities face increasing pressure on available land due to the large influx of displaced populations, heightening tension over land access.

Territorial variations are also evident. In some areas of Ituri, notably in Aru and Ariwara, access challenges are primarily linked to secondary occupations and boundary conflicts. In Djugu and Irumu, inheritance-related disputes are more prevalent, reflecting the importance of customary land transmission practices. In Beni and Lubero territories, property disputes and prolonged land occupations after displacement remain a major source of tension.

In this context, secondary land occupation emerges as one of the main barriers to land recovery, particularly where displacement has been prolonged and local dispute resolution mechanisms remain weak or limited. The results show in particular that this barrier mainly concerns returned households, while internally displaced people continue to face more difficulties in accessing land in host areas, often through informal or temporary arrangements with host communities.

Ensuring secure access to residential and agricultural land is therefore essential to the stabilization of households affected by displacement.



Data show a massive loss of access to land as a result of displacement: while more than 90% of households owned land prior to displacement, only about half were able to access it upon return.

Explosion of land conflicts and protection risks

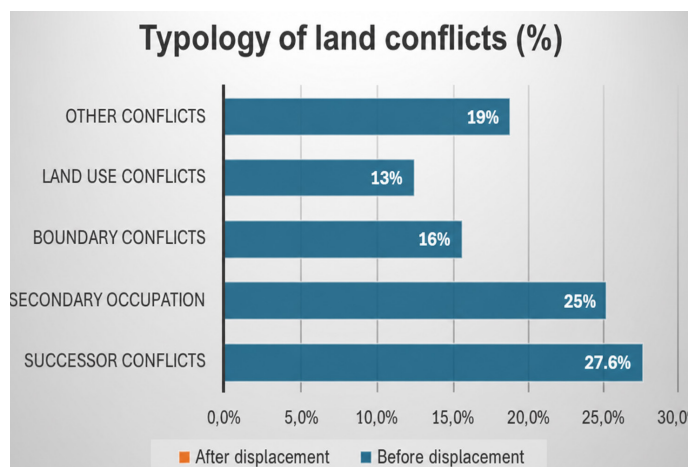
Both NRC studies confirm that land tenure is a central driver of community tensions in displacement-affected areas, with significant territorial variations. In Ituri, particularly in Djugu and Irumu, inheritance disputes remain a major source of conflict, often linked to customary land transmission practices. In North Kivu's Beni and Lubero territories, tensions are more associated with secondary occupations and unresolved property disputes, resulting from protracted displacement and temporary land abandonment.

In Aru and Mahagi, boundary disputes are more prevalent, reflecting limited formal demarcation and competing customary and administrative land tenure systems. Regionally, inheritance disputes account for approximately 27.6% of identified land conflicts, making them the most common category. These disputes are strongly linked to persistent inequalities in women's access to land inheritance.

However, analyses in Aru and Ariwara zones show that the typology of conflicts can vary at the local level, with inheritance disputes still occurring but appearing to be relatively less frequent than conflicts related to plot boundaries or land tenure, reflecting land dynamics specific to the local context. Secondary occupations account for around 25% of the land conflicts identified and are one of the main sources of disputes in displacement-affected areas. Qualitative data directly link these situations to protracted displacement, lack of land documentation and weak land restitution mechanisms.

Boundary conflicts (16%) and land use disputes (12.5%) are also prevalent, reflecting overlapping and weak articulation between customary and administrative land tenure regimes, generating competing claims and persistent legal uncertainty. These land dynamics generate serious protection risks, including forced evictions, land dispossession and violence. Women are particularly vulnerable, particularly because of persistent discrimination in access to inheritance and land ownership.

In some situations, land conflicts escalate into communal violence, secondary displacement and long-term loss of agricultural livelihoods. By undermining access to housing and productive land, these dynamics contribute to prolonging the dependence of displaced households on humanitarian aid and to weakening social cohesion in displacement-affected areas. Land tenure security is therefore a cornerstone of protection and stabilization efforts in DRC.



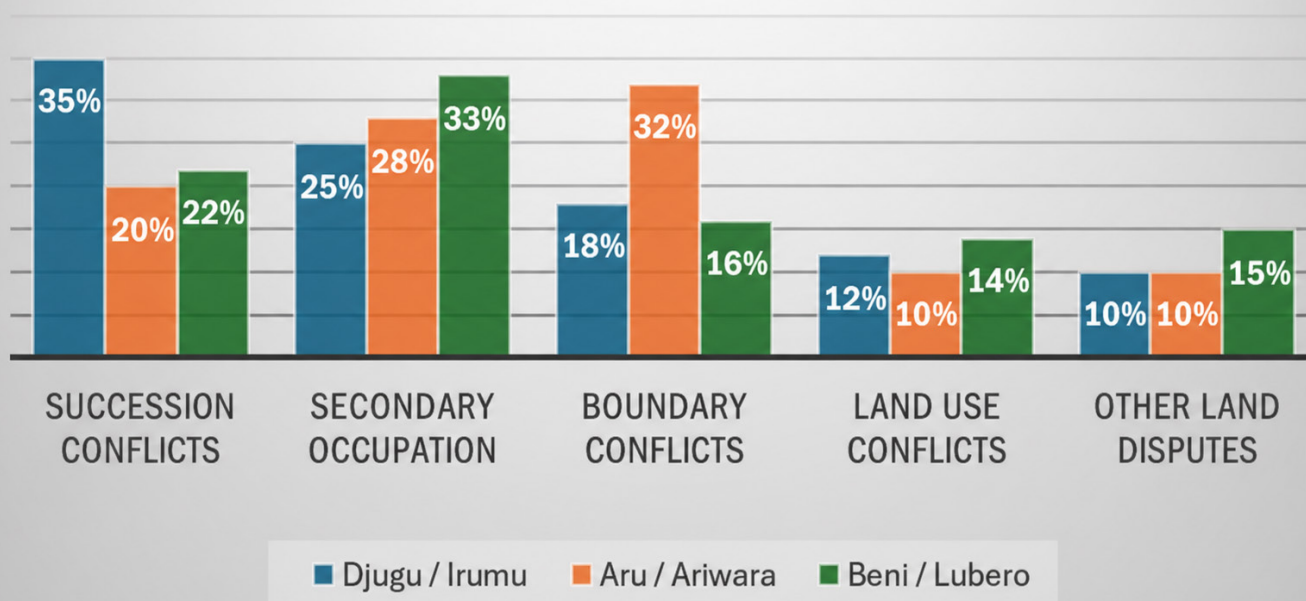
Why land tenure is a cross-cutting humanitarian issue

The evaluations converge on a clear conclusion: HLP issues critically shape the effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Without land tenure diligence and adequate legal assistance, shelter and recovery interventions, including housing reconstruction, infrastructure rehabilitation and livelihood recovery support, are vulnerable to blockages, contestations and conflicts related to land tenure or ownership.

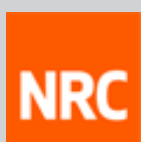
Community infrastructure, when implemented without prior verification of land tenure rights, may reinforce existing inequalities and exacerbate tensions between IDPs, returnees and host communities. Insecure returns can lead to further cycles of violence, evictions and forced displacement.

Conversely, an inclusive and legally structured land approach can prevent conflicts, strengthen social cohesion in the long term, protect humanitarian investments and create the conditions for durable solutions rooted in rights protection and community stability.

Typology of land conflicts by territory (%)



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