



Addressing the impact of conflict and the humanitarian health challenges in the Eastern Regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) 2021-2025: A feminist perspective

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ABSTRACT

The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is facing a complex humanitarian crisis with significant health implications. This paper aims to provide an understanding of the cascade of humanitarian challenges in eastern DRC, stemming from decades of prolonged armed conflict. A qualitative research method was used to investigate challenges faced by humanitarian workers in the North and South Kivu regions of the DRC. This study employs a Feminist Political Economy of Health and the Responsibility to Protect framework to address the humanitarian challenges in Eastern. The findings revealed that the Armed conflict has devastated millions of lives, disrupted health systems, displaced populations, and led to food insecurity and human rights abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence. Therefore, the study recommends a holistic approach that effectively addresses these humanitarian challenges. This study deepens understanding of the difficulties that humanitarians face in delivering services in conflict zones.

Keywords: Humanitarian, Conflict, Health, Gender, Feminism, and Democratic Republic of Congo

INTRODUCTION

There is growing attention to humanitarian aid and health challenges globally, with Africa, particularly conflict-affected zones, being a significant concern. Humanitarian challenges arise from various factors, including conflict, climate change, land disputes, and natural disasters, just to name a few. These conflicts cause unprecedented humanitarian needs and protection risks, which present significant difficulties in managing and addressing them effectively. This study provides insight into addressing humanitarian challenges resulting from armed conflict in the eastern DRC. The protracted armed conflict in the DRC is one of the many issues that have plagued the Subregion and the Continent as a whole. The conflict has led to the deaths of approximately 6 million people, with 780,000 individuals forced from their homes between November 2024 and January 2025 alone.¹ More than 7 million people have been displaced, with

¹ Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo," Global Conflict Tracker, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo>.

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an additional 69,000 seeking refuge in Burundi, 29,000 in Uganda, and about 1,000 in Rwanda and Tanzania, worsening an already dire humanitarian situation.² The DRC is experiencing one of the most complex and protracted humanitarian crises in the world, which has significantly worsened throughout 2021 and into 2025 due to the escalating conflicts and insecurity, particularly in the eastern provinces of North, South Kivu and Ituri. The awful humanitarian challenges arising from these conflicts are of great concern. This study provides insights into the humanitarian health challenges, employing a feminist approach to explore the intersection of gender, health, and human rights in the eastern region of the DRC, which has been plagued by armed conflict for over three decades. Adopting an intersectional standpoint is essential for understanding the various forms of discrimination faced by those in need of humanitarian support, especially in a conflict scenario like that of the DRC. Furthermore, a feminist perspective in this study emphasizes the necessity of addressing the specific needs of women and girls in the eastern region of the DRC.

In the context of this paper, the Eastern Congo refers to the North and South, which are used interchangeably, representing a region of the country characterized by a cascade of humanitarian needs. The eastern region of the DRC has been plagued by armed conflicts for decades, resulting in severe humanitarian challenges, health crises, and the destruction of health infrastructure and schools with far-reaching implications, particularly on women's health. Due to the protracted nature of the armed conflict in the North and South Kivu provinces, humanitarian needs remain high in both areas, exacerbated by significant insecurity.³ A study by Bendavid et al. indicated that the prolonged decades of armed conflict in these two provinces have disproportionately affected women and girls.⁴ Consequently, the negative effects of these conflicts on the health and well-being of women and children are profound. This pressing demand for humanitarian assistance informs the focus of this study.

In the conflict-affected provinces of North and South Kivu, the convergence of violence, displacement, and disrupted infrastructure creates significant public health challenges. These health issues arise from the protracted armed conflict, which is fraught with humanitarian crises such as trauma, injuries, urgent medical needs, starvation, and food insecurity. This deleterious situation obstructs the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Universal Health Coverage (UHC), by preventing millions of Congolese from accessing healthcare services.⁵ Furthermore, the adverse conditions in eastern DRC also impede the fulfillment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Through this prism, this article focuses on CEDAW to address the discrimination faced by women and girls in eastern Congo, ensuring their full realization of human rights.

To cement the goals of the CEDAW and ensure their practical implementation, the DRC embarked on an ambitious journey in 1986 to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women (United Nations Treaty Collection [UNTC]). This initiative was based on a report from the CEDAW Committee, which expressed serious concerns regarding domestic violence and the lack of legal provisions prohibiting it.⁶ Additionally, addressing the issue of human rights violations in eastern Congo, the Human Rights Committee emphasized that the DRC should adopt appropriate measures to protect against domestic violence, including the criminalization of domestic violence and marital rape.⁷ However, the realization of CEDAW's objectives has been jeopardized by the recurrent escalation of conflicts and chronic

² Marium Ali, "Mapping the Human Toll of the Conflict in DR Congo," Aljazeera News, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/24/mapping-the-human-toll-of-the-conflict-in-dr-congo>.

³ OCHA/UNDP, "Innovation in Disaster Management - Leveraging Technology to Save More Lives," 2023, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-03/innovation_in_disaster_management_web_final_compressed.pdf.

⁴ Eran Bendavid et al., "The Effects of Armed Conflict on the Health of Women and Children," *The Lancet* 397, no. 10273 (February 2021): 522–32, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00131-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00131-8).

⁵ Olivier Kambere Kavulikirwa, "Intersecting Realities: Exploring the Nexus between Armed Conflicts in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Global Health," *One Health* 19 (December 2024): 100849, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.onehlt.2024.100849>.

⁶ CEDAW, "General Recommendation No. 37 on Gender-Related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction in the Context of Climate Change (CEDAW/C/GC/37)," March 15, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/general-recommendation-no-37-gender-related-dimensions-disaster-risk-reduction-context>.

⁷ Human Rights Committee, *Concluding Observations on the 4th Periodic Report of the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (para. 18, CCPR/C/COD/CO/4, 2017).

insecurity in Eastern DRC, which presents significant challenges to achieving this goal and is a matter of great concern.

In Eastern Congo, the ongoing conflict has severely compromised healthcare services. Since the outbreak of hostilities in January 2025, over 70% of health facilities in North Kivu have been affected, with some destroyed and others occupied by armed groups. Additionally, many hospitals are running low on essential services due to artillery attacks from M23 rebels.⁸ The disruption of hospitals and humanitarian services has heightened insecurity and diminished access to essential health services, consequently impacting public health in Eastern DRC. Despite the significant consequences of the ongoing armed conflict, at the time of writing, humanitarian services and health impacts remain inadequately addressed. In collaboration with the above sentence, a study by the Center for Preventive Action indicates that the humanitarian situation in Congo represents one of the largest and deadliest crises in the world.⁹ Therefore, due to the insufficient attention given to health and humanitarian services, this current study aims to explore and address the humanitarian health challenges in the eastern region of the DRC from a feminist perspective.

This study is significant because understanding the humanitarian challenges and the impact of armed conflict in Eastern DRC presents a window of opportunity to develop responsive and evidence-informed strategies for addressing the deficiencies in affected communities, particularly concerning women and girls. Additionally, this study is relevant because anchoring it in a feminist perspective emphasizes the need to address the root causes of humanitarian health challenges to achieve one of the SDG goals, especially the CEDAW.

The central focus of this study is to address the humanitarian health challenges arising from the armed conflict in the North and South Kivu provinces of the DRC. The article is organised as follows: The first part examines the origins and dynamics of the conflict in Eastern DRC. The second part discusses the humanitarian health challenges exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. The third part focuses on the impact of these challenges and strategies for addressing them. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate humanitarian health challenges in the conflict zones of the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study utilized secondary data derived from published journal articles, book chapters, books, and conference proceedings. Article selection focused on relevance to the research topic, employing the following keywords: Democratic Republic of Congo, armed conflicts, humanitarian challenges, humanitarian aid, health, and feminism. The qualitative approach facilitated the gathering of data about interest from databases that significantly influence scientific literature and provided an analytical framework. The research employs thematic analysis to examine the retrieved data.

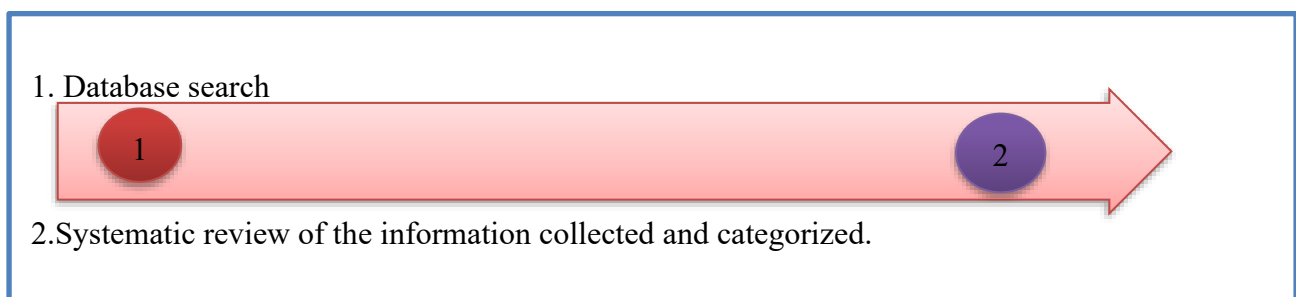


Figure 1: The two methodological phases. Source: (Researcher's own compilation)

⁸ World Health Organization (WHO)., "Dire Health and Humanitarian Crisis in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo Prompts Escalation of Efforts by WHO, Partners. ," 2025, <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-02-2025-dire-health-and-humanitarian-crisis-in-eastern-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-prompts-escalation-of-efforts-by-who--partners>.

⁹ Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo."

Inclusion and exclusion that for a paper to be included in the review set, it had to meet certain inclusion criteria. First, the paper has to address humanitarian or crisis settings, secondly, the paper has to address conflict in an African country or be focused on African people in another continent affected by disasters, and thirdly, it has to address gender and feminism as a theme and sub-theme. However, Papers that did not clearly meet all three of the above-stated criteria were excluded.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by humanitarian workers in the eastern DRC by utilizing established theoretical frameworks. Within the broader field of feminism, several theoretical frameworks are valuable for understanding and addressing humanitarian challenges in armed conflict. To identify these challenges in the eastern DRC from a feminist perspective, this study employs the Feminist Political Economy of Health (FPEH) and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) theories. The two theories and their relevance to this study are illustrated in Figure 2.

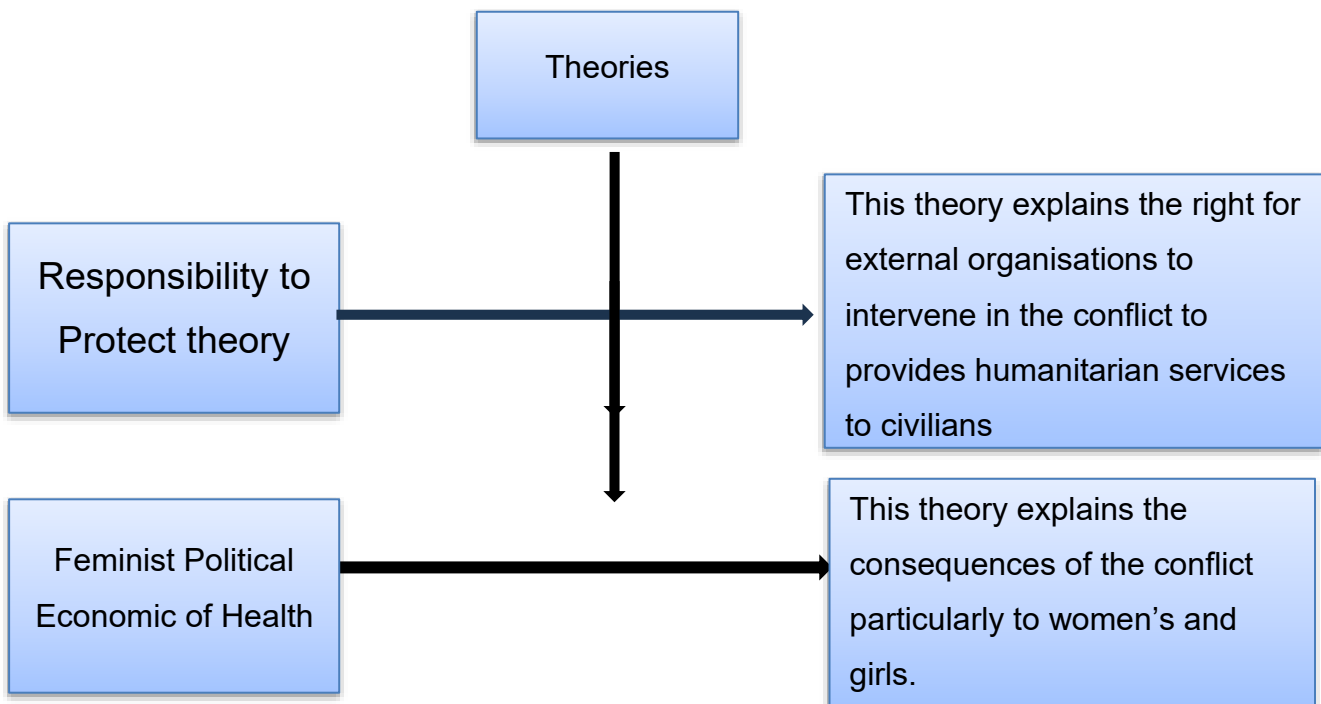


Figure 2: Demonstrates the sequence of the theories adopted for this study
Source: Researcher

Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

Since the resurgence of the M23 in Eastern DRC, various forms of violence have resulted in a significant humanitarian crisis. Consequently, there is a pressing need for external intervention to assist unarmed civilians. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) theory stipulates that the international community has a duty to intervene through humanitarian, diplomatic, or military means in situations where a state is unable or unwilling to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, or crimes against humanity.¹⁰

In the context of this study, the R2P theory is deemed appropriate because, since gaining independence, the DRC has been a breeding ground for various forms of conflict, violence against unarmed civilians, and insecurity, among other issues. Consequently, the R2P theory provides a framework for international intervention aimed at protecting civilians through humanitarian efforts. This theory is also pertinent to this study as it justifies the need for external organizations to engage in eastern DRC to address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), the displacement of populations, and the provision of health services, among other concerns. Thus, the R2P theory serves as a model for

¹⁰ International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (International Development Research Centre, 2001).

understanding the involvement of external organisations in delivering humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected areas of the DRC.

Feminist Political Economy of Health (FPEH)

According to Syed, the theory of FPEH is grounded in feminist principles and the contributions of feminist scholars.¹¹ This theory posits that discrimination against women and girls significantly impacts their social circumstances and health in conflict situations.¹² This theory further emphasizes the unequal effects on women and marginalized communities, providing a framework for understanding how economic systems and gender-based power dynamics influence health outcomes in the eastern region of the DRC affected by conflict. Arguably, FPEH highlights that while women experience health inequities within the healthcare system, they also face significant disparities outside of it due to their social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances.

The postulations of the theory of FPEH align closely with the core focus of this study, as the unfair and unequal distribution of wealth, power, and the exploitation of resources are the source of conflict in the North and South Kivu regions of Congo. Building on this foundation, the theory provides a valuable framework for critically and comparatively analyzing the causes and challenges of humanitarian health in eastern DRC Congo.

Theoretical application of FPEH to the Humanitarian Context in DRC

This paper employs the FPEH theory as its analytical framework. The FPEH theory is essential for understanding the health challenges arising from armed conflict and humanitarian crises in the ongoing escalation of conflict in the North and South regions of Congo. This theory is deemed suitable for this study because it focuses on equity for women,¹³ which aligns with the CEDAW objective of combating all forms of discrimination against women. In furtherance, this theory also addresses several factors, such as structural inequalities and economic norms, that influence discrimination against women and girls in Congo.

This theory was considered appropriate for this study because it addresses the broader political and social determinants of health for women, as well as a gendered analysis of the political economy of health, particularly in strengthening the health system in DRC Congo during times of escalating conflict. Additionally, it incorporates aspects of rape as a weapon of war and gender-based violence. Importantly, the application of this theory clarifies how gender, conflict, and structural inequality are interconnected in shaping humanitarian health in a conflict zone. Systemic changes, along with a shift toward inclusive, feminist-informed humanitarian approaches, are necessary to tackle these issues. Figure 3 below illustrates a summary of the Feminist Political Economy of Health. The framework of Feminist Political Economy is presented in Figure 3 below.

¹¹ Iffath Unissa Syed, "Feminist Political Economy of Health: Current Perspectives and Future Directions," in *Healthcare*, vol. 9 (MDPI, 2021), 233.

¹² Armstrong P. and Armstrong H., *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹³ Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorensen, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance* (Sage, 2006).

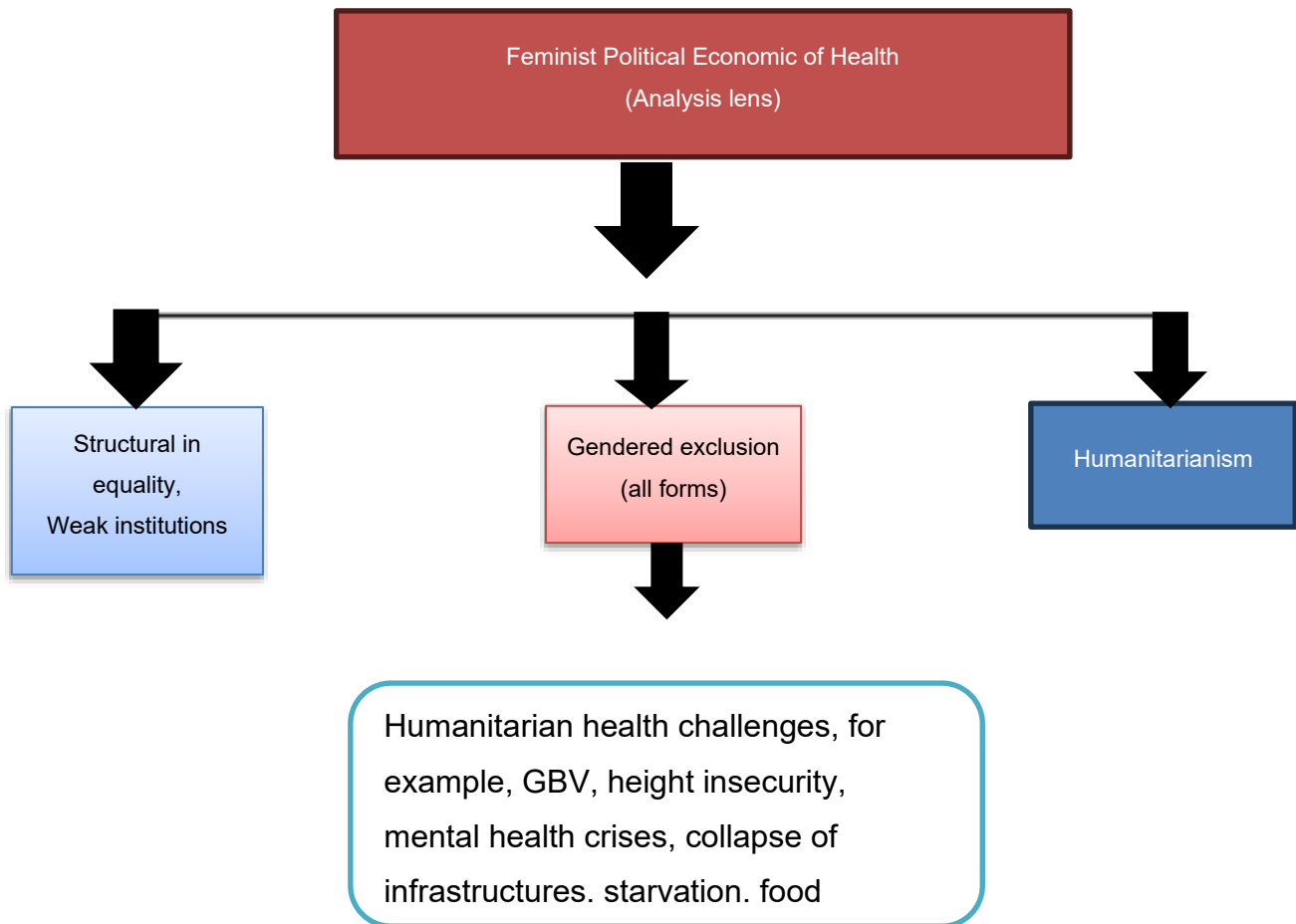


Figure 3: summary of the Feminist Political Economy of Health.
Source: researcher's own compilation

The framework outlined above is derived from the previously presented theory. The figure illustrates how weak institutions, structural inequalities, and poor governance, among other factors, fuel armed conflict, which subsequently impacts humanitarian outcomes in the eastern region of the DRC. Importantly, the system dictates the distribution of resources, which disproportionately affects women and girls. Addressing the factors that contribute to humanitarian crises is essential for achieving positive humanitarian outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Origin and evolution of the conflict in the Eastern DRC

According to Neupane, a literature review encompasses "a critical survey of academic and scholarly references, such as articles, journals, books, research reports, seminal papers, important documents, and other sources relevant to the study area selected by the researcher."¹⁴ Literature provides the current study with strong theoretical foundations and empirical evidence. In this context, this section focuses on the impact of humanitarian intervention in conflict zones. Before delving into the humanitarian challenges, the study first examines some of the causes or factors that trigger conflict in the region. Subsequently, it addresses the challenges faced by humanitarian efforts.

In this context, illuminating the origins and evolution of the conflict dynamics in DRC reveals its history and context, laying the foundation for a comprehensive exploration of the nexus between armed conflicts and humanitarian challenges in the DRC. The DRC is one of the richest nations on Earth, endowed with abundant natural resources such as cobalt, coltan, gold, diamonds, tin, tungsten, and

¹⁴ Nabaraj Neupane, "Conceptualizing the Pathways of Literature Review in Research," *Journal of Practical Studies in Education* 2, no. 1 (December 26, 2020): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.46809/jpse.v2i1.16>.

tantalum, among others. Despite this wealth, the country remains trapped in a cycle of armed conflict, political instability, and economic crisis. For nearly thirty years, the eastern regions of the DRC have been plagued by protracted armed conflict, attracting local, regional, and international actors. This complex conflict is rooted in colonial legacies, ethnic tensions, regional instability, and competition for natural resources.

The conflict in eastern Congo has its roots in the scramble and partition of Africa, as well as the subsequent colonization of Congo. This partitioning of the continent created divisions that have deteriorated into instability within the country. The colonial strategy of divide-and-rule exacerbated ethnic divisions, which were later politicized by national elites to garner military and political support. This has contributed to the long-standing ethnic conflicts, particularly in the eastern DRC.¹⁵

Besides ethnic tensions, which have fueled conflict within the country, the involvement of foreign actors, such as China, Rwanda, and the United States, with substantial economic interests, particularly in the mining sector, has further complicated the situation in the DRC. For instance, Rwanda's support for the M23 rebel group exemplifies how international geopolitics intertwines with the DRC's internal conflicts. Consequently, the involvement of neighboring countries in the internal affairs of the DRC continues to exacerbate instability. Furthermore, the resurgence of the M23 is partly attributed to the DRC government's failure to comply with its 2013 commitments to integrate and demobilize former combatants. As a result, the Congolese government's ineffectiveness in addressing the M23 issue has allowed the group to grow, transforming it into a formidable force to be reckoned with.¹⁶

DRC Congo is a country rich in natural resources, including tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold, among others. Studies, such as those conducted by Vlassenroot and Huggins, suggest that these natural resources, which are often viewed as a blessing for the Congolese people, have instead become a curse.¹⁷ This highlights the detrimental effects of natural resources, which frequently transform the eastern region into a theater of violence, crime, and conflict, rather than providing sufficient benefits for the population. Unfortunately, the struggle for these natural resources by various actors has played a pivotal role in fueling instability in the DRC and can be identified as one of the root causes of violence and conflict. Consequently, the competition and control over Congolese resources by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) serve as a significant driving factor fueling conflict in that region of the country that has been significantly affected. Therefore, competition over resources has significantly contributed to the persistence of conflict. Additionally, political instability is a crucial factor in the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Research by Dizolele & Kambale provides insight into the numerous military takeovers, authoritarian governments, and leadership transitions that have all failed to establish a stable political system in the nation.¹⁸ Furthermore, the state's ability to meet the needs of its citizens has been undermined by corruption, weak institutions, and ineffective governance. Compounding these issues is the rise of warlords and rebel organizations, such as the M23 rebels in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The political elite, often fragmented and divided, struggles to maintain control over the nation, particularly in the eastern regions, which are fiercely contested due to their mineral wealth.

Furthermore, the conflict in DRC has an ethnic dimension. Territorial disputes and ethnic tensions are significant factors contributing to the armed conflict in eastern Congo. Cross-border migration from Rwanda has exacerbated these tensions, entangling the nations in border violence.¹⁹ This situation is based on the fact that ethnic groups migrating to eastern Congo exploit existing ethnic networks. A notable example of such a group is the M23, which is ethnically identified as Rwandan Tutsi. Consequently, the presence of M23 Tutsi in Congo has fostered ethnic animosities in the region. Unfortunately, these animosities, stemming from the presence of various ethnic groups in the provinces of North and South

¹⁵ D. Tembo, "An Examination of the Causes and Perpetuation of Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo," 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389478249_An_examination_of_the_Causes_and_perpetuation_of_Conflict_in_the_Democratic_Republic_of_Congo.

¹⁶ Crisis Group in Eastern DRC, "Fall of DRC's Goma: Urgent Action Needed to Avert a Regional War," *Statement*, January 28, 2024.

¹⁷ Koen Vlassenroot and Chris Huggins, "Land, Migration and Conflict in Eastern DR Congo," *Eco-Conflicts* 3, no. 4 (2004): 1–4.

¹⁸ Mvemba Phezo Dizolele and Pascal Kalume Kambale, "The DRC's Crumbling Legitimacy," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3 (July 2012): 109–20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0045>.

¹⁹ Mary McCartin, "Complex Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Good Governance a Prerequisite of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) Peacebuilding. Accord," Accord, 2013, <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/complex-conflict-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>.

Kivu, have created a climate of fear, instability, and insecurity for civilian populations caught in the crossfire.

Furthermore, in terms of the evolution of the conflict in the DRC, the nature of armed conflict has changed significantly over the past few decades. The conflict environment in the DRC has become increasingly complex and unmanageable due to the proliferation of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and decentralized, fragmented, yet internationalized insurgencies. These developments pose new challenges for peace negotiations.²⁰ Consequently, the ongoing armed conflict in eastern Congo has resulted in death, the displacement of individuals (internally displaced persons, or IDPs), and a severe humanitarian crisis.

The framework of Humanitarian challenges in the eastern region of the DRC

The post-independence Democratic Republic of the Congo has witnessed a surge in conflicts. These conflicts manifest in various forms, including armed violence, ethnic strife, and land disputes, and are accompanied by unprecedented human rights abuses. Foreign nations have reacted to these conflicts and abuses with military or humanitarian actions, as well as peacekeeping efforts, all aimed at halting violations of fundamental rights and assisting the government of the DRC in restoring peace and security in the eastern region.²¹ Notable examples include the deployment of the Southern African Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (SAMIDRC) and the United Nations Stabilization Mission (MONUSCO), among others. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the humanitarian challenges facing the DRC, it is paramount to define the concept of humanitarian intervention before exploring the associated challenges.

For this study, humanitarian interventions, as defined by Kabia, are non-forcible or forcible measures undertaken by state or non-state actors in response to human rights abuses perpetrated by repressive regimes or during conflicts.²² Similarly, Willitts-King et al. argued that humanitarian interventions occur in conflict scenarios when a government fails to protect and ensure the safety of its citizens, thereby necessitating intervention.²³ Building on this premise, there is a pressing need for humanitarian assistance in the conflict zone of eastern Congo due to the cascading effects of armed conflict, including a high death toll, food insecurity, and critical health crises, among other issues.

The most recent escalation of violent armed conflict occurred in January 2025 when the M23 movement, backed by Rwanda, launched a significant offensive in the eastern DRC, capturing Goma and other areas, which ignited a humanitarian crisis. As the conflict intensifies, civilians are caught in the crossfire due to hostilities in both the northern and southern regions of eastern Congo, which are experiencing a rapidly worsening humanitarian situation. The persistent insecurity stemming from armed conflict disheartens the population, particularly women and girls, who are more vulnerable and face barriers to accessing essential health services due to fears of attacks when seeking such care. The inability to access basic services, such as healthcare and sanitation, further impedes and exacerbates the challenges of achieving CEDAW in DRC.

Considering the above, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) establishes that as insecurity becomes prevalent in eastern DRC, crimes against humanity are being reported, displacement is skyrocketing, and the country's healthcare system is overwhelmed by illness.²⁴ In line with this, Meagher et al. maintain that as fighting continues, issues such as hunger, starvation, extreme poverty, food insecurity, rape, gender-based violence, and the inability to access essential services such as education, healthcare, and sanitation are mounting.²⁵ A study by Choi et.al. in East Africa on humanitarian aid

²⁰ Brian Mcquinn and Laura Courchesne, "Armed Group Proliferation Origins and Consequences," 2020, 14–18.

²¹ Oluwaseyi Emmanuel Ogunnowo and Felix Chidozie, "International Law and Humanitarian Intervention in the Syrian Civil War: The Role of the United States," *Sage Open* 10, no. 2 (April 12, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020919533>.

²² John M. Kabia, *Humanitarian Intervention and Conflict Resolution in West Africa* (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315587592>.

²³ Barnaby Willitts-King, Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, *Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Action: An Agenda for Inquiry* (ODI Global, 2016).

²⁴ International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Conflict in the DRC: What You Need to Know about the Crisis," Rescue, February 6, 2025, <https://www.rescue.org/article/conflict-drc-what-you-need-know-about-crisis>.

²⁵ Kristen Meagher, Bothaina Attal, and Preeti Patel, "Exploring the Role of Gender and Women in the Political Economy of Health in Armed Conflict: A Narrative Review," *Globalization and Health* 17, no. 1 (December 4, 2021): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00738-9>.

distribution found that infrastructure damage, capacity shortages, and service interruptions are primary impediments faced by humanitarian organizations in their operations in the region.²⁶ This study argues that due to the persistent nature of armed groups, there is a need for a peace mediation process to prevent a spillover of the humanitarian crisis and to mitigate instability within neighboring countries and across Africa in general.

Another humanitarian challenge in the eastern region of the DRC is the issue of human rights violations, as well as breaches of international humanitarian law. Humanitarian actors and civilians have faced attacks, torture, recruitment of children by armed groups, and the forced closure of displacement sites.²⁷ For instance, the destruction of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Goma has caused people to flee once again, leading to heightened insecurity and limited access to essential services.²⁸ Reported abuses include sexual violence, executions, and arbitrary arrests. In addition to the aforementioned issues, insecurity is another challenge faced by humanitarians in the eastern region of DRC Congo. The security situation in this area has deteriorated to the extent that humanitarian organisations and aid workers are being targeted, making the delivery of services extremely difficult. This perilous security has led to the forced evacuation of humanitarian personnel.

Consequently, the attacks on humanitarians have made the delivery of services extremely dangerous.²⁹ This study argues that if the conflict persists, insecurity will increase, leading to further displacement and escalating humanitarian needs. In line with the above, Kavulikirwa concurred that the long-lasting and complex series of armed conflicts in the eastern part of the the DRC makes it one of the most persistent humanitarian crises in contemporary history.³⁰ Consequently, the conflict has triggered a range of humanitarian crises, including widespread food insecurity, displacement, and severe violations of human rights, such as sexual violence, which have profound health and psychological repercussions for both individuals and society.³¹ Amidst the chaos and violence, civilians are caught in the crossfire and must fight for their lives every day. Regarding food insecurity, the World Food Program (WFP) revealed that 28 million people in the DRC are facing acute food insecurity.³² A study by Pusterla and Pusterla further highlighted the challenges faced by humanitarians but focused on the European Union's role in Africa.³³ The study indicated that the European Union's commitment to humanitarian assistance has encountered significant obstacles following the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a notable increase in the number of people worldwide affected by humanitarian crises. While Pusterla and Pusterla acknowledge the presence of challenges within the humanitarian landscape, they do not specifically address the difficulties faced by humanitarians in the eastern regions of the DRC. Consequently, there is a pressing need for research that focuses on the challenges faced by humanitarians, specifically in the eastern regions of the DRC from 2021 to 2025.

In addition to the above, the ongoing conflict creates unstable conditions that pose a significant threat to the health system, resulting in serious problems for both regional and international health systems. Due to the conflict, health services are frequently interrupted during times of violence and displacement, making individuals more susceptible to disease outbreaks and exacerbating existing health inequities. The displacement of populations can further heighten the spread of diseases. Supporting this assertion, UNICEF reported a 54% increase in mpox cases as noted by the provincial health authority in Ituri.³⁴ Meanwhile, cholera continues to spread across eastern and other provinces. Unfortunately, the breakdown of health units has severely impacted the population, particularly women, girls, and children, who are the

²⁶ Andrew K-Y Choi et al., "Humanitarian Aid Distribution in East Africa: A Study in Supply Chain Volatility and Fragility," *Supply Chain Forum: An International Journal* 11, no. 3 (January 9, 2010): 20–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16258312.2010.11517237>.

²⁷ International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Conflict in the DRC: What You Need to Know about the Crisis."

²⁸ Sida, "Humanitarian Crisis Analysis: Democratic Republic of the Congo," 2025.

²⁹ International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Conflict in the DRC: What You Need to Know about the Crisis."

³⁰ Kavulikirwa, "Intersecting Realities: Exploring the Nexus between Armed Conflicts in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Global Health."

³¹ Kavulikirwa, "Intersecting Realities: Exploring the Nexus between Armed Conflicts in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and Global Health."

³² World Food Program, "Democratic Republic of the Congo," 2025, <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/drc-emergency>.

³³ Francesca Pusterla Piccin and Elia Pusterla, "The Future of Humanitarian Aid in a New Context Full of Challenges," September 21, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2861/859658>.

³⁴ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "UNICEF DR Congo Humanitarian Situation Report No. 4 (Upsurge in Conflict)," April 30, 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/organization/unicef>.

most vulnerable, thereby compromising their health and well-being.³⁵ A study by Ager et al. further emphasizes that, due to the armed conflict in DRC, basic health system functions are distorted, access to essential healthcare is minimal, health outcomes are poor, and some hospitals are overwhelmed.³⁶ For instance, Ndoshoh and Charité Maternelle General Hospitals are among those overburdened by the influx of injured civilians and are operating well beyond their capacity. Similarly, a report by ReliefWeb indicates that as violence in Goma continues to escalate, the humanitarian response faces critical challenges that need to be addressed urgently.³⁷ Moreover, another humanitarian challenge in the DRC, in addition to health issues, is the attacks on refugee camps by M23, resulting in civilian casualties.

Closer to this study is the research conducted by Quintana-Domeque and Rodenas-Serrano, which revealed that women who experienced armed conflict during pregnancy are at a higher risk of giving birth to infants with lower birth weights; even more concerning is the increased risk of premature birth.³⁸ This current study contributes to the literature addressing humanitarian health challenges from a feminist perspective. Reasoning along the same lines, the conflict has also intensified a surge in rape and sexual violence, putting women and girls at extreme risk.³⁹ To support this sentiment, a study by Goleorkh conducted in Ukraine and Venezuela revealed that women and girls face heightened risks of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in humanitarian situations due to the collapse of existing protection structures and a lack of services and resources.⁴⁰

In a nutshell, the ongoing armed conflict in eastern Congo continues to exacerbate the severe humanitarian crisis, making it the worst in contemporary history. Since 2025, there has been a marked increase in gender-based violence, forced displacement, food insecurity, health crises, and environmental degradation. Meaningful relief efforts are hindered by structural factors, including resource exploitation, the impunity of armed groups, and weak governance, as well as persistent access constraints, despite ongoing actions by the UN and NGOs. Therefore, addressing these urgent humanitarian challenges is crucial to preventing spillover effects into neighboring countries. The next section will examine strategies for addressing the humanitarian crisis in DRC Congo.

Strategies for addressing Humanitarian challenges in Eastern DRC

The protracted conflict in Eastern DRC Congo has led to one of the most complex and enduring humanitarian crises in the world.⁴¹ As a result, the region is experiencing widespread displacement, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), food insecurity, loss of life, trauma, and the collapse of essential health and public services, exacerbating an already dire situation for millions of people. As violence persists among the M23, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and local militias, the following strategies, aligned with the region's needs, are being implemented to alleviate suffering and promote resilience.

Protection of Civilians and Interventions Against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

The protection of civilians, particularly women and children who are disproportionately affected by the conflict, is one of the most pressing humanitarian needs in eastern DRC. To improve civilian protection in conflict-affected areas, the United Nations peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, has established community alert networks and joint protection teams.⁴² In a similar vein, NGOs have also provided psychosocial support, legal aid, and health services for survivors of SGBV.

³⁵ Andreas Halgreen Eiset and Christian Wejse, "Review of Infectious Diseases in Refugees and Asylum Seekers—Current Status and Going Forward," *Public Health Reviews* 38, no. 1 (December 8, 2017): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-017-0065-4>.

³⁶ Alastair Ager et al., "Health Systems Research in Fragile Settings," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 97, no. 6 (June 1, 2019): 378-378A, <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.19.233965>.

³⁷ Reliefweb, "The Humanitarian Lifeline in DR Congo Under Threat: We Need Urgent Action," 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/humanitarian-lifeline-dr-congo-under-threat-we-need-urgent-action>.

³⁸ Climent Quintana-Domeque and Pedro Ródenas-Serrano, "The Hidden Costs of Terrorism: The Effects on Health at Birth," *Journal of Health Economics* 56 (December 2017): 47-60, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2017.08.006>.

³⁹ International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Conflict in the DRC: What You Need to Know about the Crisis."

⁴⁰ Lara-Zuzan Goleorkhi, "Regional Refugee Response Plans and Violence Against Women: A Comparative Analysis of the Humanitarian Situations in Ukraine and Venezuela," *Feminist Economics* 30, no. 4 (2024): 209-39.

⁴¹ Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo."

⁴² United Nations Security Council, "Adopted by the Security Council at Its 9512th Meeting, on 19 December 2023," *Resolution 2717*, 2023.

Enhancing Community-Based Approaches and Engagement

Local communities, in conjunction with faith-based organizations, should be empowered to enhance community engagement and gather feedback from affected populations. This empowerment is essential because, according to Barbelet et al., local organizations are better positioned to lead aid delivery, thereby increasing trust and understanding of the people's plight.⁴³ A study by Büscher revealed that community-based protection committees in Ituri and South Kivu have been successful in reporting threats, mediating disputes, and supporting early warning systems.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Büscher emphasizes that localization strategies have involved empowering Congolese NGOs and faith-based organisations to take the lead in aid delivery, which enhances trust and cultural relevance.⁴⁵

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support: As the conflict in eastern DRC remains tense and volatile at the time of writing, the health needs are immense. Given that psychotherapy has been shown to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been providing essential health services, including lifesaving medical supplies, support for health workers, and coordination of the emergency response.⁴⁶ Additionally, the WHO has implemented community-based trauma healing programs in North Kivu that integrate traditional practices with clinical interventions, which have demonstrated promise in restoring social cohesion.⁴⁷

Enhancing Community-Based Emergency Response Systems: This includes local development plans that consider the unique needs and circumstances of displaced and returned populations. There is a need for more inclusive and protective economies, as well as support for national structures to better safeguard rights in an environment that fosters sustainable solutions. These measures are essential for strengthening response systems, promoting self-reliance, and facilitating effective solutions.

Humanitarian Access and Protection: It is essential to ensure physical and secure access for humanitarian aid personnel and convoys to provide support to those in need. Additionally, it is crucial to protect civilians from armed attacks by armed groups and to address forms of gender-based violence in the conflict-affected areas. The strategies outlined are consistent with the framework for protecting the population. However, these strategies are by no means trivialized in comparison to other approaches documented by different scholars.

Discussion Summary

The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing the challenges faced by humanitarian workers in conflict-affected zones. The study has demonstrated several obstacles encountered by humanitarians in their efforts to assist victims of conflict. This study uncovered multiple challenges that hindered the effective implementation of the humanitarian services in the eastern DRC. These challenges include overlapping health crises, human rights violations, service disruptions, abuses, insecurity, scarce resources, and political pressures. These identified challenges reveal significant drawbacks associated with humanitarian efforts in eastern Congo. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Pusterla and Pusterla, which highlights the substantial challenges faced by humanitarian workers.⁴⁸ Therefore, these findings emphasize the necessity of addressing the challenges encountered by humanitarians in eastern DRC, as well as tackling the root causes of the conflict, which is consistent with the theory of Feminist Political Economy of Health.

⁴³ Veronique Barbelet et al., *Interrogating the Evidence Base on Humanitarian Localisation* (London: HPG literature review ODI, 2021).

⁴⁴ K. Büscher, "Urban Humanitarian Challenges in Conflict-Affected Eastern DRC: The Case of Goma," *The Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2020): 45–58.

⁴⁵ Büscher, "Urban Humanitarian Challenges in Conflict-Affected Eastern DRC: The Case of Goma."

⁴⁶ World Health Organization (WHO), "Dire Health and Humanitarian Crisis in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo Prompts Escalation of Efforts by WHO, Partners. ."

⁴⁷ B. A Kohrt, R. M. Mpanano, and D. Muteba, "Healing in the Midst of Crisis: Community-Based Mental Health Support in North Kivu, DRC," *Global Mental Health* 8, no. e20 (2021).

⁴⁸ Pusterla Piccin and Pusterla, "The Future of Humanitarian Aid in a New Context Full of Challenges."

The study collectively found that the intensity of armed conflict is positively associated with incidents of rape, property destruction, intimate partner violence, child abuse, the use of child soldiers, and emotional abuse, among others. Consequently, women tend to suffer disproportionately from all forms of violence, despite the efforts of the CEDAW convention to combat violence against women in all its manifestations. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Golesorkh in Ukraine and Venezuela, which revealed a high rate of gender-based violence.⁴⁹ However, it can be asserted that the violence against women and girls in Eastern DRC Congo does not adhere to the procedures outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Therefore, there is an urgent need for immediate resolution to the conflict to end gender-based violence (GBV).

It was also found that there are multiple pathways through which the intensity of armed conflict impacts women. Evidently, women are particularly vulnerable in terms of abuse and access to social services. Regarding sexual abuse, the likelihood of being coerced into non-consensual sex and the chance of being compelled to engage in other sexual activities increase. The study further revealed that due to the ongoing conflict in eastern DRC, coupled with challenges in accessing humanitarian aid, women, children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities are especially at risk. They often live in filthy, overcrowded housing with limited access to food, water, and medical care.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the study found that armed conflicts can lead to the acceptance of violence as a means of resolving issues, making pathways to peace very difficult to establish. In conclusion, despite multiple peace accords and the presence of international troops, the conflict in eastern Congo remains volatile, exacerbating humanitarian challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendation derived from the study provides insight into addressing humanitarian challenges. This study recommends that integrated strategies centered on systemic reform, civilian protection, and conflict resolution are urgently needed. This study further recommends that the DRC government, in collaboration with the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN) and Regional Economic Organisations (RECs) Government should create robust legal and judicial frameworks to hold perpetrators of violence accountable and ensure justice for victims. An increase in humanitarian assistance is necessary to address the needs of displaced and conflict-affected communities. The study further recommended that human development is a crucial approach for enhancing an individual's capacity to implement and sustain projects beyond their designated implementation periods.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to comprehensively address the humanitarian challenges in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It employed the Responsibility to Protect and Feminist Political Economy of Health (FPEH) framework to examine the causes of the conflict and to provide an understanding of how economic systems and gender-based power dynamics disproportionately affect women and girls in conflict situations. The findings revealed that the nexus between armed conflict in eastern DRC and heightened humanitarian challenges poses significant threats to health, property, sanitation, livestock, and human rights. This situation undermines the achievements of the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The disruption of infrastructure such as hospitals, refugee camps, schools, and other facilities has forced population displacement, exacerbating vulnerabilities and highlighting the need for comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and collaborative approaches. The study also finds that humanitarian workers are providing diverse forms of assistance across the region, including in healthcare, education, sanitation, and environmental initiatives, among others.

The challenges identified encompass humanitarian issues, heightened insecurity, infrastructural damage, human rights abuses, service disruptions, logistical obstacles, resource constraints, and insufficient capacity within local organisations, all of which further compound the difficulties faced. Despite these obstacles, the study revealed strategic approaches to address the identified challenges. These

⁴⁹ Golesorkhi, "Regional Refugee Response Plans and Violence Against Women: A Comparative Analysis of the Humanitarian Situations in Ukraine and Venezuela."

⁵⁰ World Food Program, "Democratic Republic of the Congo."

strategies include the protection of civilians and interventions for gender-based violence, enhancing community-based approaches, providing mental health and psychosocial support, revisiting risk acceptance thresholds, collaborating with local organisations, and safeguarding humanitarian workers. Importantly, the findings emphasize the need to develop the capabilities of partner countries, coupled with proactive and adaptable methods through diplomacy, flexibility, and strategic planning, which are essential for effective implementation.

To effectively address the humanitarian challenges in DRC Congo, stakeholders across various sectors must collaborate to develop integrated strategies that acknowledge the interconnectedness of human rights and health systems. This requires prioritizing investments in healthcare infrastructure, road construction, the promotion of human rights, and community engagement at the grassroots level. By addressing the underlying drivers of conflict and promoting sustainable conservation practices, stakeholders can mitigate humanitarian challenges in all forms in conflict-affected regions such as the eastern DRC and beyond. By adopting this holistic approach, humanitarian efforts will be more effectively realized.

Addressing the humanitarian crisis in eastern DRC requires a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the region's unstable security situation. While efforts in protection, localization, and innovative delivery methods have improved response effectiveness, ongoing challenges persist due to continued insecurity, a limited state presence, and inadequate resources for humanitarian initiatives. It is crucial to strengthen the connections between humanitarian, development, and peace initiatives, as well as to invest in local capacities for sustainable impact. The study also identified unexplored opportunities to enhance the efficacy of humanitarian interventions, emphasizing the importance of collaboration among stakeholders to promote integrated strategies that acknowledge the interconnectedness of human and health systems. The identified challenges, along with strategic approaches and untapped opportunities, provide a solid foundation for making informed decisions and developing effective policies.

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