

Research on climate-sensitive programming and social cohesion in the DRC - EAST

Summary of findings



Enabling
Affected Communities to
Survive and
Thrive

Introduction

Since December 2023 and until March 2026, the **EAST** (Enabling Affected Populations to Survive and Thrive) Consortium has been implementing the project "**Strengthening the resilience and protection of vulnerable populations living in conflict-affected areas in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo**", an initiative funded by the UK Government through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to strengthen the food security and nutritional status of households affected by conflict and long-term displacement, and to ensure that vulnerable households are protected, have access to humanitarian aid and are better equipped to recover from the effects of violence.

The project is being implemented by a consortium of five INGOs: Concern Worldwide, Acted, Congo Handicap (CH), Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and Première Urgence Internationale (PUI). The consortium adopts a technical approach based on programmatic sectors, with **Concern providing leadership in food security and livelihoods**, Acted in monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, Congo Handicap in inclusion, DRC in protection and PUI in nutrition.

By combining these areas of expertise, the programme can reach significant scale, ultimately supporting 434,138 people across the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu and Tanganyika. This programme introduces inclusive livelihood practices in the communities served by the consortium partners in order to contribute to the adaptation and resilience to shocks of affected communities in eastern DRC.

The adoption of inclusive livelihood practices, which ensure equitable economic opportunities for all members of the community, can significantly strengthen individual capacities and social cohesion. By creating an environment where everyone has access to resources and opportunities, these practices can foster trust, reduce social tensions and encourage collaboration, thereby promoting a more resilient and harmonious society.

This research was conducted to analyse how and to what extent inclusive and climate-sensitive livelihood practices adopted in communities served by EAST consortium partners contribute to social cohesion or influence conflict dynamics.

Methodology

The research used a quasi-experimental design, comparing a treatment group (EAST participants engaged in climate-sensitive livelihoods and Income Generating Activities (IGAs) with a control group from similar communities not receiving programme support. This design assumed that, without the intervention, both groups would have experienced similar changes driven by normal external factors such as seasonal patterns, market price fluctuations, climate-related events, and broader economic or community-wide trends.

The process was participatory and inclusive, ensuring representation across gender, age, disability status, and socio-economic backgrounds. Using tools such as interviews, focus groups, and literature reviews, the team collected data with careful attention to accessibility, safety, and the daily constraints of participants. Data collection combined primary qualitative methods - including group discussions and key informant interviews - with secondary data such as programme documents, protection data, and existing literature. Sampling was purposive to ensure diversity, and trained research assistants were deployed across all sites.

Finally, data were triangulated and analysed thematically to ensure reliability, with continuous attention to ethical standards, informed consent, confidentiality, and conflict-sensitive practice.



Research questions and key findings

RESEARCH QUESTION	KEY FINDINGS
1. How do different social groups participate in climate-sensitive livelihood activities, such as drought-resistant crops, agroecology and early warning systems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research participants that utilised climate-sensitive activities reported engagement primarily with drought-resistant crops; none used early warning systems • Adoption varied mainly due to contextual and household conditions, not sex, age, or disability factors : non-participation is often linked poor-quality input or not-yet farming. • Some agroecological practices were used informally (composting, drainage, crop timing).
2. How do different social groups perceive the outcomes of climate-sensitive livelihood activities, such as drought-resistant crops, agroecology and early warning systems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants reported far more positive results than control groups. This was attributed to training, start-up funds, cash support, and follow-up. • Positive results included increased income, improved production, savings access, women's empowerment, and youth autonomy. • Negative perceptions came from situational factors (late planting, poor-quality inputs, unsold items).
3. What are the positive and negative spillover effects of adopting inclusive, climate-sensitive livelihoods on community members who did not directly participate in the EAST programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive spillovers included increased local availability of goods/services, strengthened economic and social ties, and sharing of knowledge, labour, and seeds. • Adoption by participants encouraged formation of new savings groups (VSLAs) and engagement in value chains. • One key negative spillover: crop and product damage caused by neighbours' livestock, creating tensions.
4. To what extent do resilience-building measures contribute to both climate adaptation and conflict mitigation in intervention areas?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In project areas, all respondents agreed that practices (season monitoring, composting, drainage, flood-avoidance cultivation) improved climate adaptation; this was almost absent in control areas. • These measures reduced conflict by bringing people together (training groups, VLSAs, joint economic activities). • Collaboration in agricultural and social activities significantly reinforced peaceful relations.
5. Have inclusive and climate-sensitive livelihood interventions led to conflict or tensions within EAST supported communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tensions arose around targeting, cash-for-work fairness, taxation, livestock damaging crops, and credit repayment disputes. • These tensions were more acute in North Kivu's context of chronic mistrust. Despite these issues, overall conflict levels decreased where collaboration increased.
6. What is the interaction between adoption rates of climate-sensitive livelihood practices and social cohesion indices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption rates were low in North Kivu and higher in Tanganyika. • Higher adoption correlated with more economic collaboration, strengthened social bonds, and greater indicators of social cohesion. • Social cohesion grew in proportion to how widely practices were adopted.
7. What are the main constraints and opportunities related to sustainable and equitable access to land for rural communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major constraints: high cost of land titles, legal complexity, limited awareness of procedures, financial barriers, and abusive practices by customary authorities (double-selling, illegal fees). • In North Kivu, insecurity further limited land access. • Opportunities exist through available arable land, rental options, and proximity to land administration offices.

<p>8. What is the level of secure access to agricultural land for rural communities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure access is low across both provinces and groups, limiting long-term livelihood stability. • Threats include insecurity (especially in North Kivu), parallel customary land claims, and high registration costs.
<p>9. How can community data transform climate action and disaster risk reduction planning, including with organisations of persons with disabilities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities possess rich, practical knowledge on local hazards, seasonal shifts, high-risk zones and group vulnerabilities. • This knowledge can significantly improve climate and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) planning when systematically captured and integrated. • Inclusion of people with disabilities (PWD) organisations in generating and using this data enhances equity and relevance.
<p>10. What aspects need to be considered to ensure that persons with disabilities and the organisations that represent them can continue to engage sustainably and independently in climate action and disaster risk reduction in the medium and long term?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PWDs require structured organisation, stronger capacities (this involves training, awareness-raising, and skills development tailored to their needs) and accessible climate information (visual, audio, symbolic). • Their participation depends on removing communication, mobility and representation barriers. • PWD inclusion adds crucial lived experience that improves community-wide resilience. • Financing the participation of people with disabilities in local–global climate fora is key for long term autonomy.
<p>11. How does social cohesion manifest itself in specific areas, and how do climate-sensitive livelihoods influence these dynamics – strengthening or weakening them – within the community?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social cohesion was widely visible through mutual aid, labour sharing, seed exchange, and support during life events. • Climate-sensitive livelihoods reinforced cohesion by creating shared economic and social activities (joint value-chain work, community labour etc.). • A small minority reported no cohesion due to unresolved tensions (credit non-repayment, livestock damage, drainage disputes).

Operational recommendations

- 1. Conduct analysis of the potential negative impacts** of the adoption and development of climate-resilient agricultural practices and livelihoods in the localities covered by the projects and put in place measures to mitigate these impacts. *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 2. Strengthen monitoring and support for the development and implementation of IGAs** to increase the chances of success for these activities. The research results showed that some participants were unable to make progress in developing their IGAs due to challenges such as delays in support, poor-quality or insufficient inputs, administrative barriers or limited coaching. *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 3. Ensure that participants benefit from IGA-related interventions at least six months before the end of the project** to allow time to monitor and support them and provide them with advice and guidance as needed. *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 4. Harmonise the approach** to implementing the cash-for-work programme between the different organisations (number of days, payment amount, etc.) *(recommendation for consortium members, in particular Congo Handicap)*
- 5. In future programming, include other types of disability** (blindness, visual impairment, deafness, hearing impairment, albinism, etc.) and provide appropriate equipment (earphones for the deaf, products to protect the skin of albinos, white canes for the blind, etc.). *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 6. Support IGA beneficiaries who open businesses** (hairdressing, sewing, sale of various products, etc.) in obtaining operating licences. *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 7. Include participants in the cash for work programme in IGAs** by giving them starter kits. The results of the study showed that their exclusion from the IGAs creates a certain amount of frustration and suspicion about the selection methods and contributes to the creation of tensions and conflicts in the communities. *(recommendation for donor and consortium members)*
- 8. Prioritise the use of cash transfers to provide starter kits**, enabling beneficiaries to purchase the requested products in their respective markets. *(recommendation for consortium members)*

Strategic recommendations

- 01** Include a component on peaceful conflict management and social cohesion strengthening in the design phase of a potential second phase of the programme for improved results in conflict mitigation and social cohesion strengthening. *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 02** Adopt a systematic agroecological approach during the design phase of a potential second phase of the EAST programme to enable livelihoods to contribute to the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity, improve economic performance, develop synergies, and be socially beneficial. *recommendation for consortium members)*
- 03** In future programming, include interventions related to the establishment of early warning systems and climate information to enable community members to make decisions based on reliable data. *(recommendation for consortium members)*
- 04** Expand interventions to other conflict-affected areas and, in areas already covered by the project increase the number of beneficiaries in localities where conflict and the effects of climate change have increased the vulnerability of many households. *(recommendation for donor and consortium members)*

Policy implications

1. Policymakers and donors should integrate climate adaptation, livelihood strengthening, and social cohesion as mutually reinforcing pillars.
2. Community-led data and local knowledge should become central to DRR and climate planning, especially for groups often left behind.
3. National and provincial authorities must address land insecurity through accessible titling processes and awareness-raising on land rights.
4. Disability-inclusive climate governance should be mainstreamed across humanitarian and development policy

The EAST project demonstrates that climate-sensitive, inclusive livelihood interventions can significantly improve resilience, reduce tensions, and strengthen social cohesion, even without explicit cohesion-building components. With more intentional design - particularly in agroecology, early warning systems, and disability inclusion - future programming can deliver even stronger outcomes for peace, resilience, and social well-being in crisis-affected regions in DR.