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Access to land and land tenure security in a context of population displacement in the Kalehe territory, South Kivu

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Introduction: Forced displacement in Kalehe Territory (South Kivu, DR Congo), driven by armed conflicts, floods, landslides, and climate change, severely disrupts land access and tenure security. The coexistence of customary and state land systems (legal dualism) creates persistent uncertainty, while existing studies inadequately address how internally displaced persons (IDPs) navigate land acquisition amid prolonged settlement and elite influence.

Objective: This study explores how IDPs access and secure land under such legal pluralism, and how displacement reshapes land competition and power dynamics between IDPs, host communities, customary authorities, and local elites.

Methods: Using an inductive approach, it explores how internally displaced persons (IDPs) negotiate access to land in an environment marked by overlapping customary and state land tenure regimes, demographic pressure and ethno-cultural diversity.

Results: The study reveals that land security for IDPs depends on economic strategies, customary mechanisms such as marriage alliances, and the intervention of local elites and administrative authorities, while being constantly limited by identity tensions and institutional constraints.

Conclusion: This research fills gaps in our understanding of local land dynamics and provides a basis for reforming land governance in contexts of protracted displacement. It also highlights the urgent need for inclusive land governance to prevent conflicts and strengthen the resilience of vulnerable communities.

KEYWORDS

access to land, DR Congo, internally displaced persons, land competition, land governance, land tenure security

Introduction

Research background

In a world marked by an increase in forced displacement linked in particular to conflicts, natural disasters and climate change, the issue of access to land and land tenure security is becoming a major challenge for stability and reconstruction. In sub-Saharan Africa, these dynamics are particularly visible in post-conflict contexts where internal displacement profoundly disrupts existing land tenure structures (IDMC, 2019). Research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa shows that armed conflict and forced displacement generally cause profound

changes in land tenure systems, particularly through informal land redistribution and an increase in competing claims. Post-conflict periods are often marked by disputes over land rights, linked to the return of displaced populations and the absence of reliable land registers. These transformations weaken customary land tenure systems and make rural populations particularly vulnerable to the loss of their land access rights (Joireman and Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2023; Unruh, 2006).

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), particularly its eastern part, remains one of the areas most severely affected by contemporary armed violence. Since the regional wars of the late 1990s, the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri have experienced chronic instability characterised by the persistent presence of armed groups, massive population displacement and a profound weakening of public institutions (Vlassenroot and Huggins, 2005; Jacobs and Kyamusugulwa, 2018). Addressing the configuration of these conflicts Bitenga Alexandre et al. (2021) note that local militias and foreign armed groups play a central role in population movements, the scale and impact of which remain largely to be demonstrated.

While the war economy and the exploitation of mineral resources are often cited as explanations for the persistence of conflicts, scientific literature increasingly emphasises that land issues are a key determinant of local violence and social fragility in eastern DRC (Vlassenroot and Huggins, 2005; Huggins C., 2010; Ansoms and Hilhorst, 2014). Numerous studies devoted to crisis contexts, particularly situations of armed conflict and natural disasters, highlight the importance of securing land use rights as an essential condition for reducing the risk of conflict resurgence (FAO, 2010; Lavigne Delville and Gbaguidi, 2022).

According to Mushagalalusa Mudinga (2013), the absence of a coherent and inclusive regulatory framework fuels the risks of eviction, land grabbing and marginalisation. This observation echoes international concerns about land security for vulnerable populations, as expressed in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (United Nations, 1998). However, in Congolese rural societies, land is not only a factor of agricultural production: it is the main foundation of social reproduction, community belonging and local power (Van Acker, 2005). In a context marked by strong demographic growth and increased pressure on arable land, access to land is becoming a strategic issue for economic survival and social recognition. This centrality of land is reinforced by the duality of the Congolese legal system, where customary law and state law coexist, producing a normative plurality that maintains uncertainty about rights and encourages land disputes (Mathys and Vlassenroot, 2016; Mathys, 2021; Deininger et al., 2012). In this state of affairs, land insecurity is not only a consequence of armed conflict: it is also a structural driver that is reorganising power relations over land in areas hosting displaced persons.

Armed conflicts have profoundly transformed land relations in eastern DRC (Mugangu, 2008). Forced population displacements have led to rapid territorial restructuring, marked by land occupations, loss of land rights and recurring conflicts during attempts to return. According to Huggins R. (2010), most local conflicts in eastern Congo have an explicit or implicit land dimension, particularly when displaced populations seek to recover their land or settle in new areas. Similarly, land insecurity is also fuelled by the militarisation of social relations. In these crisis dynamics, access to land becomes a determining factor in stabilisation or, conversely, in the reactivation of social tensions. In several areas of Kivu, local actors mobilise armed groups, traditional authorities or state agents to secure or contest land rights,

transforming land into a strategic issue of local power (Vlassenroot, 2013; Autesserre, 2010). This instrumentalisation of land contributes to the reproduction of cycles of violence in which local conflicts are linked to regional armed dynamics.

The territory of Kalehe, in South Kivu province, is a particularly significant example of this intertwining of armed conflict, population displacement and land insecurity. For several decades, this entity has experienced successive waves of displacement linked to armed clashes and, more recently, natural disasters, in a context of high population density and scarcity of agricultural land. The settlement of displaced populations in areas that are already occupied exacerbates competition for land and undermines customary and state regulatory mechanisms, while displaced households often remain excluded from sustainable forms of land tenure security. As a result, land tenure insecurity is one of the most visible dimensions of the vulnerability of populations affected by crises.

However, beyond these general observations, the land dynamics at work in contexts of prolonged displacement remain insufficiently explored at the local level. Studies conducted at the local level do not sufficiently highlight how land practices are evolving in response to the prolonged settlement of internally displaced persons in areas already characterised by multiple crises. Nor do they explain how displaced persons, regardless of their profile, manage to negotiate access to land despite the constraints that limit their return to their region of origin. While armed conflict and natural disasters are often identified as the immediate causes of population displacement, it is essential to recognise that, for some displaced persons, these often-sudden events also serve as a catalyst, or even a pretext, for a strategic search for access to land in areas perceived as more attractive.

In the Kalehe territory, certain areas, particularly those along the shores of Lake Kivu, appear to be hubs of relative prosperity. This appeal is reinforced by their strategic geographical position, which gives them significant advantages in terms of connectivity and opportunities. They act as a bridge between the 'hubs of relative prosperity' and benefit from favourable access to cities such as Goma and Bukavu, making them coveted areas both for their economic potential and for the opportunities they offer in terms of integration into the urban or peri-urban fabric. Thus, displacement is not only a response to an immediate need for refuge; it can also be part of a strategy to improve living conditions and promote socio-economic integration in the medium to long term. Return to regions of origin often remains uncertain; this reluctance to return can be explained by the persistence of risks linked to insecurity and the lack of guarantees regarding the sustainable restoration of peace. In these circumstances, seeking land within host communities appears to be a preferred alternative for many displaced households. It is this dimension, which has been little studied, that this article proposes to analyse.

With this in mind, this article analyses the dynamics of access to land and land security in the context of population displacement in the Kalehe territory of South Kivu. By examining local forms of land tenure security, strategies for accessing land and tensions between displaced populations and host communities, this research highlights the structuring role of land tenure in displacement trajectories and prospects for local stabilisation. In order to fill this gap in the literature, this study attempts to answer two research questions: How do internally displaced persons (IDPs) manage to access land and secure ownership in a context of pluralistic land tenure (customary and state) in Kalehe? How does the presence of displaced persons reconfigure power relations and fuel land competition in the context of local governance?

Understanding the phenomenon of internally displaced persons in the DRC

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2011), when a person is forced to flee their place of origin whilst remaining within the borders of their own country, they are referred to as a ‘person displaced within their own country’ or ‘internally displaced person’ (IDP). This definition is consistent with the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, drawn up by the United Nations in 1998, which today constitute the main international normative framework for the protection of internally displaced persons. These principles define IDPs as individuals or groups of people who have been forced or compelled to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, particularly due to armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, human rights violations or natural disasters, and who have not crossed internationally recognised borders (Mooney, 2005; Ahmed et al., 2021; Levy, 2019). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the number of internally displaced persons has risen in recent years, following the escalation of conflicts between loyalist forces and rebel groups, mainly in the east of the country. According to the IOM (2023), the DRC has recorded 6.9 million internally displaced persons, based on data from all the country’s provinces. The main cause of population displacement in the DRC is the proliferation of armed groups, particularly in the east of the country. According to AP News (2025), there are more than 100 armed groups in the east of the country. Clashes between armed groups, the Congolese army and, at times, foreign forces are causing mass exoduses of the civilian population.

The main characteristics of internal displacement therefore lie in two fundamental dimensions. The first is its coercive nature, meaning that displaced persons do not leave their place of residence voluntarily, but are forced to do so to ensure their survival in the face of direct threats such as armed violence, insecurity or natural disasters (George and Adelaja, 2022; Bradley and Cohen, 2010). The second characteristic concerns the fact that these populations remain within the borders of their own country, unlike refugees who cross an international border and are granted a specific legal status under international law (Mooney, 2005; Ferris, 2008; Ní Ghráinne, 2025). This distinction is important because it implies that the primary responsibility for protecting internally displaced persons lies with the state in which they are located. However, in contexts characterised by institutional fragility or protracted conflict, as is the case in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this protection often remains limited or insufficient (Jacobs and Kyamusugulwa, 2018; Martin-Shields, 2017).

To place this concept in its local context, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defines internally displaced persons (IDPs) as individuals who have been forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict or other forms of violence whilst remaining within their own country, often in conditions of great precariousness (ICRC, 2017). In certain regions of eastern DRC, particularly in South Kivu province, these people are locally referred to as ‘Bakimbizi’, which literally means ‘displaced persons’ in the local languages. This terminology reflects the way in which local communities perceive and name the phenomenon of internal displacement, thereby demonstrating that this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the social and cultural realities of the region.

In the territory of Kalehe, located in South Kivu province, the phenomenon of internally displaced persons occurs within a particularly complex context marked by persistent insecurity, natural disasters and land disputes. Several academic studies have shown that population displacements in eastern DRC are rarely caused by a single factor, but rather result from an interaction between several structural dynamics (Autesserre, 2010; Vlassenroot and Huggins, 2005). In this context, civilian populations are often forced to flee their villages due to clashes between armed groups, attacks on civilians or widespread insecurity.

The phenomenon of internal displacement in Kalehe cannot be viewed solely as a humanitarian crisis. It is also a major issue of territorial governance, involving intersecting concerns over security, access to natural resources and land management. In this context, displaced populations often find themselves in a highly vulnerable situation, as they must rebuild their livelihoods whilst adapting to new social and economic environments.

In summary, access to land in the context of population displacement in Kalehe can be analysed as a complex process in which several factors interact, notably conflict dynamics, natural disasters, demographic pressure and changes in local land tenure systems. Understanding these interactions is essential for analysing the challenges of internal displacement and for developing strategies for sustainable land management and conflict prevention in the region (see Figure 1).

In Kalehe, forced population displacement due to armed conflict, violence and natural disasters is severely disrupting access to land. These crises are putting increased pressure on indigenous lands, which are often claimed or shared between host communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs), generating tensions and conflicts over land resources. IDPs and host communities thus face serious challenges in securing their access to land, in a

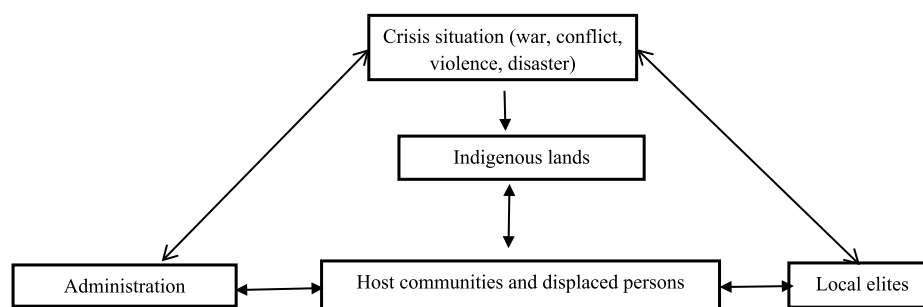


FIGURE 1

Analytical framework diagram of access to land for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kalehe.

context where local rivalries exacerbate competition. Local elites strongly influence land management and allocation, sometimes favouring certain groups at the expense of others and contributing to land grabbing dynamics. At the same time, the territorial administration is attempting to regulate access to land and mitigate tensions, but its actions remain limited by structural governance deficits and the influence of local actors, as well as by existing conflicts on the ground.

Methods

The data on which this article is based comes from a combination of several methodological tools and data collection principles. This article adopted a qualitative approach and collected data using an interview guide. Data collection was based on a qualitative approach combining individual interviews, documentary analysis and focus groups. The data for this study was collected between October 2022 and July 2023 from several socio-economic and socio-professional categories or actors, including internally displaced persons in eastern DRC. When collecting data, we ensured that we used a specific interview guide for each category of actor concerned or likely to provide relevant information in relation to our study. We conducted interviews with different socio-professional and socio-economic categories in order to gather a diversity of views on displaced persons' access to land. In total, we conducted 20 interviews with internally displaced persons, 10 interviews with host families, and 6 interviews with local NGOs specialising in land issues, including land conflicts, land mediation, land rights awareness, advocacy and research.

We also conducted 5 interviews with local government officials responsible for land registration and land titles, as well as 6 interviews with local authorities (village chiefs, traditional leaders, guardians of customs and group leaders), given the important role they play in issues of land access and ownership. Finally, five interviews were conducted with land concessionaires, i.e., individuals who own large tracts of agricultural land where livestock (cattle and sheep) are raised and where agriculture is generally practised. These interviews gave us the opportunity to delve into the complex issue of land access for displaced persons, particularly with regard to the terms and conditions of land acquisition and use. During the interviews, we asked the first people we met to suggest other individuals who could provide additional information related to our research topic. However, the various categories of participants we met were aged between 18 and 60 on average and were interviewed individually in a secure setting, as the issue of access to land is particularly sensitive. Our aim was to ensure that the respondents, like us, the researchers, were in a safe environment where they could ask and answer questions freely, without fear or constraint. We let the respondents themselves suggest the locations for the interviews. Some interviews took place over drinks in cafés, others took place at work in a strictly professional and confidential setting, while others were conducted at the respondents' homes, at their invitation.

In order to facilitate transcription for analysis, we asked participants for permission to record our interviews. It should be noted that these interviews lasted a reasonable amount of time, set in advance, generally between 45 min and an hour. In addition to semi-structured interviews, we also paid particular attention to the focus group technique for data collection. Unlike semi-structured interviews, which

involved meeting respondents individually, the focus group technique allowed participants to be brought together in small groups to answer our questions collectively. Our objective at this stage was to gather and compare participants' experiences, views and perceptions regarding access to land for displaced persons. In practical terms, we organised eight focus groups with three specific socio-professional and socio-economic categories. We conducted four focus groups with internally displaced persons, each comprising five to eight participants. The second category concerned host families, with whom we conducted three focus groups, each with five to six participants. These families were identified with the help of displaced persons and community leaders, who directed us to households that had taken them in when they fled their villages of origin. During our discussions, we explored the ways in which displaced persons request access to land, the mechanisms put in place to achieve this, and the conditions under which host families respond to these requests. Finally, one focus group was organised with local government officials responsible for cadastral and land title issues. This focus group brought together four participants and was conducted online via Zoom, as it was not possible to bring the participants together in the same place at the same time. Discussions focused in particular on issues of land security for vulnerable groups, especially displaced persons. The focus group technique proved particularly useful due to its specificity, allowing participants to collectively compare and verify information, thus contributing to data triangulation. We ensured that at least one focus group was organised in each village affected by the displacement of people. To this end, we established contacts with certain local figures, including representatives of displaced persons, in order to facilitate the organisation of the discussions.

The criteria for selecting participants included being a displaced person, having temporary or permanent access to land, and having been taken in by a host family when fleeing their place of origin. Discussions were conducted in Kiswahili for some groups who preferred this language, while other interviews were conducted in Kihavu or Kitembo, vernacular languages that we also speak. We therefore did not encounter any language barriers, as we shared the same languages as the respondents. In addition to the above-mentioned techniques, which enabled us to collect the data for this study, we also used documentary analysis. This consisted of consulting various resources, including online documents such as political statements, advocacy documents relating to assistance for displaced persons, scientific articles, press interviews and NGO reports on land issues and vulnerabilities related to access to land. These various sources enabled us to explore land issues in South Kivu province in general, and more specifically in the territory of Kalehe. The data analysis presented in this article is based on a structured approach to the information gathered from interviews and focus groups. The first step was to organise the data collected by identifying key themes such as modes of access to land, land conflicts and land tenure security strategies discussed with the various socio-professional and socio-economic categories encountered.

With this in mind, we used thematic coding to group the testimonies and observations into different categories in order to better understand the dynamics at work. We then conducted an in-depth analysis by comparing the views of the various stakeholders encountered during the primary data collection phase. In addition, we illustrated our analyses with relevant interview excerpts and compared our observations with theoretical frameworks and existing studies on land issues in crisis situations. This approach enabled us to draw several thematic conclusions, which are presented in the following sections.

As the territory of Kalehe is very large, our study focused on population movements in three specific areas, namely: the entity known as Kalehe Littoral (Kalehe Littoral refers to the area located on the shore of Lake Kivu in the territory of Kalehe, South Kivu province in DR Congo. It is its proximity to Lake Kivu that gives it the name “Littoral”), encompassing the Mbinga South group (comprising the villages of Kasheke, Tchofi, Katasomwa, Bushaku, Cibandja, Munanira, Bushushu, Nyamukubi, Nyabibwe), as well as a large part of the Mbinga North group (including Nyamasasa, Minova, Kalungu, Bubandano). This boundary was chosen because these areas are particularly affected by a massive influx of displaced persons fleeing the armed conflicts that are devastating the high plateaus of the territory and beyond, in other territories (Kabare, Walungu) and neighbouring provinces (particularly North Kivu) where militarisation and armed group activism are omnipresent, leading to widespread violence. In addition, this entity benefits from its proximity to the city of Bukavu, allowing displaced persons to relocate there in the event of a deterioration in the socio-economic and security situation in their areas of temporary or permanent residence, making it a strategic settlement entity for displaced persons. It is home not only to war-displaced persons (in the camps of Lwako and Katashola) but also to persons displaced by natural disasters (particularly in the villages of Nyambasha and Luzira in 2014, Bushushu, Nyamukubi, Kiniezire in 2014 and 2023), which provided an essential source of information for this study. In this regard, the aim of this study is to contribute to the debate on land restructuring in an era of displacement and the sustainable settlement of internally displaced persons in areas characterised by high legal and institutional insecurity. This study seeks to analyse how sudden and forced displacement of populations transforms property regimes, legitimacy of access and power relations between indigenous actors, displaced persons, customary authorities and state institutions.

Findings

Settlement strategies and mechanisms for displaced populations to access land

Access to land in the Kalehe territory is a major social, political and economic issue. It involves delegitimising land tenure rules by legitimising locally established rules, which are generally adjusted according to the most influential figures, particularly the elites. In most cases, people leave their villages of origin in masse, and their first need is to find a place to settle. They have many needs, such as shelter and space to carry out agricultural and livestock activities, as in their communities of origin, in order to ensure their livelihood and live with dignity. In the case of the Kalehe territory, the land belongs to individuals, families, schools, churches and the Congolese state. [Ansoms and Hilhorst \(2014\)](#) point out that traditionally, land management is carried out by customary authorities. According to [De Janvry et al. \(2001\)](#), access to land is not limited to formal property rights, but also includes usage rights, as well as the crucial questions of who has access to it, how and under what conditions. However, in the Kalehe territory, the actual situation reveals particularly restricted access to land for displaced populations, in the absence of dedicated land reserves and in the face of profound inequalities in land distribution. The political and economic elites control a large part of the arable land, inherited from colonial concessions, limiting access for

vulnerable populations, including displaced persons ([Baraka Akilimali, 2024](#)). In this case, those fleeing insecurity and war in their localities of origin settle directly on private or public state land that is unoccupied or less inhabited, without authorisation and too often in conditions of extreme poverty, despair and widespread violence.

These settlement arrangements are prone to conflict between landowners and internally displaced persons; the latter being guided by a logic of permanent or temporary settlement. Their resettlement in their areas of origin is often shaped by uncertainty about returning and fear of living in constant peace. Addressing the issue of resettlement, [Harver \(2008\)](#) notes that there is a lack of mechanisms and motivation to report the return of IDPs living in host communities. These resettlement difficulties and the lack of institutional support highlight the importance of examining the social relationships that develop between displaced persons and host communities, a central aspect analysed by [Kergoat \(2011\)](#). She goes on to specify that a social relationship is a relationship of material and ideal production. As far as internally displaced persons (IDPs) are concerned, their arrival places them in a completely new situation, one they have probably never faced before, where socio-economic conditions differ profoundly from those of their environment of origin. Faced with these new realities, they encounter difficulties in adapting but nevertheless deploy strategies and mechanisms of resilience to adjust to an environment that is not necessarily familiar to them. With regard to social relations in particular, displaced persons explain that access to land is generally achieved when certain concessionaires, out of a sense of solidarity or generosity, ask them, as a symbolic gesture of gratitude, to provide a goat in exchange for a plot of land where they can build their homes and carry out agricultural activities in order to become self-sufficient in terms of food production and economic independence. Displaced persons therefore gain access to land through friendly relations, kinship, ethnic alliances or community arrangements. “I had acquired land here in Nyanzi 2 months after arriving. My friend, whose house I was staying at, owns a lot of land in the highlands of Kalehe, and he gave me some of it to farm. I didn’t give him anything in return.”

Furthermore, it should be noted that this method of accessing land is not secure, as it is based on informal agreements, often passed on by word of mouth. Although there are witnesses who can attest to these transactions in the event of disputes, the situation remains problematic. In most cases, displaced persons risk losing their rights to the land they have acquired if conflicts arise with the owner who has ceded part of their land. Secondly, displaced persons access land through sharecropping. [Reyniers et al. \(2015\)](#) describe sharecropping as a complex (2011) describe sharecropping as a complex system involving relationships between traditional chiefs, notables and producers. Sharecroppers, due to their lack of secure access to land, often find themselves in situations of dependency and vulnerability. Thus, [Baraka Akilimali \(2021\)](#) also reports that sharecropping appears to be a survival strategy for landless farmers, placing them in a precarious position between economic exploitation and the absence of secure land rights.

The “Bwasa” ([Mushagalalusa Mudinga, 2021](#)), as sharecropping is known in the local jargon, is a mechanism for internally displaced persons in the Kalehe territory to access land, at least for agricultural use. It is therefore a system of sharing crops or agricultural production between the landowner and the farmer, who in this case is the displaced person. The crops to be sown are agreed upon by both parties and the size of the plot is clearly defined. The duration of the farming

is also determined by both parties. It varies from year to year depending on circumstances.

In Kalehe, where this system has certain specific features, the landowner may require the sharecropper to pay agricultural exploitation rights in cash, without sharing the harvest. These land exploitation contracts are generally concluded orally, without any written document. As a result, large-scale conflicts can erupt. Beyond the absence of a written contract governing the use of the land, these conflicts arise during harvests when yields sometimes far exceed the amount of rent. Although the contracts are verbal, in this case they are renegotiated. The farmers (displaced persons) are in a weak position and give in, despite everything. In some circumstances, certain landowners even go so far as to prohibit sharecroppers from continuing to farm the land, choosing instead to farm it themselves, growing crops of their own choosing. One example that illustrates this is that of Mr. Julian (not his real name) in the Buzi group, Mbinga-Nord chiefdom in Kalehe territory.

“In Buzi, landowners sometimes adopt repressive attitudes towards those considered to be from outside the Kalehe territory. Everyone knows that there are many displaced people here, who mainly need land to build houses and grow crops. Agriculture and livestock farming are two activities that are of particular interest to displaced persons. In fact, this is what I have been doing since I was young. You see, much of the land here is left fallow, unused for agriculture, but paradoxically, we are asking to use it, even though we are not sure how fertile it is for farming. For lack of other alternatives, we are going ahead anyway. To do so, we are investing our resources, our efforts and our time in the hope of producing quality and quantity in the future. Despite this, some landlords are nevertheless choosing to take this land back from us. Perhaps they think we are becoming richer than them, which can sometimes bother them. This is behaviour that should be condemned.”

This example of access to land illustrates the complexity of access to land for a certain category of people, especially when it comes to the exploitation of land resources. It should be noted that, despite the reforms undertaken by the Ministry of Land Affairs, local elites, who own vast tracts of land, remain highly influential in terms of control and access to natural resources, which are also a strategic issue on various levels. During the first Congo War led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila in 1996, which resulted in massive population displacement, traditional chiefs played a key role in distributing land to displaced persons. At that time, and still today in other parts of the world, traditional chiefs were able to settle land disputes and redistribute land so that displaced persons could obtain a portion of it. However, with the advance of modernity, the adaptation of traditional chiefs to new social norms and ongoing land reforms, they are gradually losing their influence in the area of land tenure. Due to the increasing difficulty of resolving disputes directly through customary authorities, displaced persons have had to consider alternatives, such as creating organisations to defend their rights, through which they can express their grievances and needs. These organisations are an illustration of the frustrations experienced and endured by displaced persons over a relatively long period of time. They are mobilising and increasing their contacts with influential political authorities in order to make their voices heard by decision-makers. These rights advocacy practices are taking shape on the ground, particularly in the Mbinga-Nord group in Kalehe, where displaced persons are using various means to ensure their survival and integration.

For displaced persons, purchasing land is also a sustainable strategy for accessing land, beyond traditional mechanisms. Although

purchasing land is complex, it is a key strategy for securing their economic and social situation. After losing their possessions and enduring significant hardship, some IDPs are gradually managing to acquire land with their savings, often choosing to settle there permanently rather than return to their areas of origin, which are marked by insecurity and conflict. In this regard, in their host communities, displaced persons must use their resources to access land and find what gives them a certain legitimacy and full integration into the community. In the case of Kalehe, land is a key element that recognises a person's adherence to the values of the community or entity. For some, one is recognised as a “wise man” or “respectable person” when one has land, a home, children and a wife. This is what earns some people an invitation to participate in meetings to organise social life in the community. As in all families, purchased land is also inherited by the children, but they may end up sharecropping or renting land because what their parents have left them is not enough or does not sufficiently meet their needs for agriculture, housing and livestock. The current trend regarding access to land reflects a certain sacredness accorded to land and the place it occupies in impoverished, divided communities that are conservative in their customs and traditions. Land can therefore also be acquired through marriage. According to the definition given by [Antoine and Marcoux \(2014\)](#), the term ‘marriage’ refers to legal, religious and cultural concepts, which makes the study of marriage extremely delicate, but also particularly revealing of the changes taking place in societies. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Article 330 of the Family Code defines marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman, established by a civil act before a registrar. This union is based on the mutual consent of the spouses and creates a community of life governed by reciprocal rights and duties. Thus, with regard to freedom of marriage, Article 334 of the Family Code specifies that everyone has the right to marry the person of their choice, of the opposite sex, and to found a family.

Applied to our field of study, the territory of Kalehe, these legal provisions translate into concrete practices where marriage also becomes a means of accessing land. Mixed marriages between displaced persons and host populations are an important means of accessing land. Despite occasional family conflicts, these unions, whether celebrated civilly or recognised by traditional authorities, illustrate the local phenomenon of ‘Mapenzi haina mupaka’ (love has no boundaries) and help to overcome social barriers linked to indigenous or non-indigenous status. In some cases, marriage becomes a mechanism for land cooperation: displaced persons who marry girls or boys from families with multiple land holdings facilitate the reciprocal use of land between the two families, making it a natural arrangement arising from marriage. This bond, which forms the foundation of a family, therefore automatically provides access to land use in all its dimensions.

However, this normative arrangement is linked to gender and power relations on so-called customary land. In Kalehe, land, which is generally controlled by male heads of families, is allocated to recognised members of the descent group, i.e., men. The displaced wife, as the legitimate spouse, thus benefits from a right of use derived from that of her husband. Conversely, when a displaced man marries a woman from the host community, his access to land remains structurally limited. In a context where women inherit little or no family land, as it is assumed to ‘join’ their husbands’ land holdings, wives generally do not have transferable rights that benefit their displaced spouses. Except in cases where the woman comes from a family with significant land reserves and is able to negotiate a transfer or loan of land, the

displaced man remains in a position of dependence and uncertainty. This asymmetry reveals a complex relationship between gender, filiation and customary land tenure systems in Bushi-Buhavu. Social norms assign women the status of 'secondary beneficiaries' in their families of origin, on the grounds that they will gain access to land through marriage. Paradoxically, this same norm limits their ability to serve as a vehicle for land access for a displaced spouse. Marriage thus becomes a mechanism for differentiated inclusion: in the same situation of vulnerability, it protects displaced women more than displaced men in host communities.

The latter face a specific vulnerability, as their social masculinity, often associated with the role of provider and land manager, conflicts with the absence of recognised land rights, particularly when their purchasing power is low. Far from being a simple family arrangement, marriage therefore appears to be a space where gender hierarchies and land power relations are replayed, producing unequal effects on the economic and social integration trajectories of displaced persons. Furthermore, beyond the mechanisms mentioned above, field data show that in Kalehe, when developing their strategies for accessing land, displaced persons take advantage of less exploited plots (without housing, agriculture or livestock) belonging to owners residing several hundred or even thousands of kilometres from the host villages. In several cases, they settle there as soon as they flee their villages of origin, often without prior authorisation and without delay, until various humanitarian, state or private actors intervene to take charge of them. In this situation, the arrival of displaced persons creates a specific relational configuration: hospitality becomes inseparable from a calculation of protection. In this paradigm, the arrival of displaced households creates a specific relational configuration: hospitality becomes inseparable from a calculation of protection. This form of access to land for exploitation creates an interdependence between the assisted displaced person and the generous non-resident landowner. The non-resident landowner benefits from continuous surveillance and development of their plot, while the displaced person transforms their status from that of a beneficiary to that of a farmer.

However, local realities show that the lengthening of the displaced persons' stay on these lands, where they are also perceived as 'land sentinels', is gradually reconfiguring social representations of land legitimacy, even though they are not the owners. After one or more decades of continuous occupation and exploitation, displaced persons are no longer perceived solely as 'newcomers' or 'guests on the land', but as the main actors in the agricultural development of non-residents' land. Over time, those who were not part of the initial social arrangement that conferred legitimacy on displaced persons tend to recognise that the land belongs to those who farm it. Displaced persons thus become 'main farmers', blurring the line between temporary use and de facto appropriation. However, this mechanism of access to land reveals a particular vulnerability for displaced women who are heads of households, insofar as social representations maintain that it is not legitimate to entrust a woman with the role of "land guardian."

Conditions of access to land for internally displaced persons in Kalehe

Let us take the example of a man we met in the field, Rigobert (not his real name), originally from the Masisi territory (North Kivu), who left his village in 2012 following the rise of the M23 rebel group. Rigobert's case illustrates that, for displaced persons, access to land is both a necessity and a complex process. In addition to existing

mechanisms for accessing land, displaced persons often have to contend with cultural and identity criteria taken into account by local communities in the allocation and transfer of land. These situations are not isolated and reflect the experiences reported by many internally displaced persons in the Kalehe territory. This reality therefore calls for an examination of the cultural and identity factors that influence access to land in this territory.

It is important to examine the cultural and identity dimensions that structure access to land in the territory of Kalehe. Kalehe, one of the eight territories of South Kivu province, is characterised by significant socio-cultural diversity, including the Havu, Shi, Tembo, Hutu, Tutsi, Hunde and Lega peoples (Mushagalalusa Mudinga, 2013). In such a context, access to land is not solely a matter of economic or legal considerations but also falls within social frameworks where origin and community affiliation are frequently taken into account. For internally displaced persons, whose presence is often part of a pattern of forced mobility, access to land thus depends in part on their ability to be recognised or accepted in the areas where they settle. Consequently, before considering the sale, sharecropping or donation of a plot of land, members of host communities generally seek to identify the person wishing to acquire the land, in particular by looking at their geographical origin, local social relations and integration into community networks. These practices are part of historical land management dynamics and past experiences of conflicts over land control in certain areas of the mountainous Kivu region. They also reflect the central role of local communities in regulating access to land, in a context where formal mechanisms for registering land rights remain limited.

In this social configuration, community membership is often a key factor in determining how displaced persons gain access to land. People whose origins are known or who have social connections within host communities generally seem to have easier access to land arrangements, while those who are perceived as outsiders to local networks often have to take additional steps to obtain a plot of land. Access to land thus appears to be closely linked to mechanisms of social recognition and community integration, which play a decisive role in local land allocation processes. As one of the local leaders interviewed during the field survey explained: "In the beginning, when the children played together, there were no tribal distinctions. Today, when they play and one of them gets hurt, we no longer say that so-and-so's child hurt my child. Nowadays, we try to associate each act with a community affiliation." This testimony highlights the importance of community affiliation in the process of accessing land and shows that land relations are part of social frameworks in which collective identities are important reference points. Ultimately, cultural and identity dimensions appear to be one of the main conditions for access to land for displaced persons in the Kalehe territory, insofar as they influence both the possibilities of obtaining a plot of land and the forms of land tenure security available to displaced households.

Beyond cultural and identity considerations, economic conditions are a key determinant of access to land for internally displaced persons in the Kalehe territory. In this rural context, characterised by high population pressure and limited availability of agricultural land, access to land is largely based on arrangements involving financial compensation, including purchase, rental or sharecropping. These mechanisms require the mobilisation of minimal economic resources that not all displaced persons are able to muster. Consequently, the financial capacity of displaced households directly influences their opportunities for access to land through ownership and the nature of the

plots to which they can lay claim. The interviews conducted show that displaced persons with relatively greater economic resources find it easier to access agricultural land, either through purchase or through seasonal or annual rental. On the other hand, the most economically vulnerable households encounter greater difficulties in integrating into local land access systems and often have to settle for small plots or precarious contracts. In some cases, insufficient financial resources limit displaced persons' ability to renew rental contracts or improve the productivity of the land they farm, which contributes to maintaining their vulnerable situation. As such, access to land does not depend solely on customary rules or social or community affiliations, but also on the ability of displaced persons to mobilise sufficient economic resources to negotiate a loan, lease or other form of land arrangement. Economic conditions therefore appear to be one of the main conditions for diversification and choice of the mechanism through which to access land.

As a result, these conditions, which are very restrictive given the socio-economic situation of displaced persons, can influence different possibilities for land use, particularly intensive use in order to maximise yields, in a context of scarce land. As one of them said during our interviews: "When I was at home, I could cultivate at least four hectares a year and leave other plots fallow; I also had space for livestock. Today, things have changed since I arrived in this village, in addition to the perceptions associated with displaced persons." This testimony highlights the changes in conditions of access to land and agricultural practices following an influx of internally displaced persons, revealing both intensified competition for land, a restructuring of social relations around land, and a forced adaptation of agricultural production systems in the face of demographic pressure and the increasing scarcity of available resources.

Land tenure security in Kalehe: issues, mechanisms and challenges

Land security is a concept that has been defined in many ways by various researchers. In the local context, this concept can be understood as 'Bulanzi b'weshwa' (a local expression in Kihavu used in the Kalehe territory to refer to land security and all formal or informal security measures that define the security landscape in the land sector). The internally displaced persons we met shared with us their perceptions and knowledge of land security practices acquired from various prominent figures in the Kalehe territory. They mentioned one of several common practices, including those falling within the remit of the customary authorities. These practices are based on traditional norms widely implemented by customary chiefs, village chiefs and Baganda (among the Bahavu, the singular form of Muganda refers to a notable figure close to the customary court or an influential personality whose main role is to demarcate and control land boundaries in rural areas), as well as by the Bakungu among the Batembo, who act as intermediaries in the processes of land access and security. They are also based on the formal legal framework established by the Congolese government to govern land tenure at the national level, which defines the principles for land allocation, management and security, and provides a legal framework for the rights and obligations of the various actors involved.

In most cases, traditional authorities have the power and knowledge necessary to control and demarcate rural land. According to one traditional chief we met: "Land transactions are

still mainly carried out according to custom. The boundaries are recognised by neighbours and local dignitaries, but there are not always written documents. This is why the parties generally turn to the customary authorities when a dispute arises." It should be noted that only land acquired in accordance with customary rules falls within the jurisdiction of customary authorities for demarcation, as these practices are generally overseen by structures associated with the customary court. However, customary estates or land directly owned by traditional authorities are becoming increasingly rare in the Kalehe territory.

This development can be explained in particular by the gradual transfer of large tracts of land to local populations to meet agricultural and pastoral needs. Growing pressure on land resources, linked to population growth and the diversification of economic activities, is contributing to a reduction in land reserves under the direct control of customary authorities. Nevertheless, despite this gradual reduction in customary domains, customary chiefs continue to play an important role in local land management. They are particularly involved in the processes of land access, plot demarcation and land dispute resolution. As such, their authority remains central to local land regulation mechanisms and practices for securing usage rights within their respective entities in the Kalehe territory. For people who have acquired land outside the customary framework, plot demarcation is carried out by the "Bashamuka" or "elders," who perform an operation called 'Kurambagira', which consists of visiting the plot to establish its boundaries. The Bashamuka are not necessarily affiliated with a customary court, although they maintain regular relations with customary authorities in order to confer a certain legitimacy on their interventions. They also participate in certain important discussions with customary, political and administrative authorities at the local level, particularly at the village and community levels. Despite these various procedures, no official document recognising land rights is issued to owners by the customary authorities, which perpetuates legal uncertainty and exposes rights holders to subsequent challenges, particularly in the event of disputes, successive sales or changes in the local balance of power. Land transactions are still largely based on verbal agreements, which limits the prospects for sustainable land security, which is necessary to prevent disputes within communities. Although this system often provides an immediate practical solution, it has certain limitations, particularly for displaced populations who, in the absence of alternatives or sufficient information, frequently resort to it.

Furthermore, the administrative organisation of the Buhavu chiefdom and other customary entities in the Kalehe territory provides a relatively accessible level of local authority for vulnerable groups such as internally displaced persons. In terms of land conflict management, legislation gives customary authorities a conciliation role, enabling them to settle disputes between different land users. In addition to the above-mentioned actors, NGOs are also involved in land disputes as part of their projects. With this in mind, civil society organisations have set up mediation centres to prevent and resolve land disputes. This is particularly the case with the NGO Action pour la Paix et la Concorde (APC asbl), which created the Centre de Dialogue et de Médiation (CDM), a space designed to support people involved in land disputes. Today, with the evolution of legal standards and the gradual transformation of customary practices, written law is tending to take on a greater role than customary law, which is based essentially on oral agreements

that are not formalised in writing. However, despite these changes, customary practices continue to adapt to new legal requirements. It is in this context that the practice of customary certification has developed, complementing traditional land commitments and aiming to reduce the risk of disputes in the event of litigation. In addition, displaced persons who have acquired land have told us that the physical demarcation of plots is also a commonly used strategy to secure their access to land, particularly when they do not have formal documents attesting to their land rights. This practice consists of marking the boundaries of plots using visible markers such as stakes, stones, hedges or trees planted along the boundaries of the land. These markers make it easier for neighbours and local authorities to identify land boundaries, thereby helping to reduce the risk of overlapping or disputed plot boundaries. Furthermore, physical demarcation provides local evidence of land occupation, which can be used in the event of a dispute to prove the prior occupation of the land. For displaced persons, this technique represents a relatively accessible strategy for securing land rights in a context where access to formal mechanisms remains limited.

Alongside customary mechanisms, land registry services also provide a formal means of securing land rights, which some displaced persons use to guarantee their rights over acquired land. The use of land registry services makes it possible to obtain written documents certifying the occupation or ownership of a plot of land, which is generally perceived as a more reliable means of preventing land disputes. In the Kalehe territory, however, access to land registry services remains limited for a large part of the rural population, mainly due to the financial costs associated with administrative procedures, the distance between villages and administrative centres, and a lack of information on the steps to be taken. A cadastral service agent stated: “We also receive displaced persons who wish to secure the land they have acquired. Most request a cadastral document in order to avoid potential disputes, but the process remains difficult for some due to the costs and administrative procedures involved.” That said, only certain displaced persons with sufficient economic resources or institutional support are able to take steps with the land registry services to secure their land. For these households, holding land registry documents is an important element of land security, insofar as it strengthens the recognition of their rights in the event of local disputes. However, the majority of displaced persons continue to rely mainly on customary land tenure security mechanisms, as recourse to the land registry remains limited and unevenly accessible in the Kalehe territory.

Internally displaced persons as actors in land competition in Kalehe

The land situation in the Kalehe territory is characterised by intense pressure on access to land, linked to several factors, including: the presence of internally displaced persons (IDPs), the plurality of land tenure systems (customary and state) and the limitations of land administration. IDPs, having been forced to leave their homes, often find themselves in precarious conditions as they seek to settle on new land. In this context, access to land in arrival areas becomes a crucial issue for food security, housing and access to other essential services, while local communities and IDPs have to cope with limited land resources, which can generate tensions and conflict. Faced with intense competition for land involving a variety of actors, displaced persons are sometimes forced to remain on the move, or to move

again to new sites, often poorer and more overcrowded, in search of alternatives, further deteriorating their living conditions. This is what Robert Malthus asserts in his Malthusian theory, which states that rapid population growth leads to a scarcity of resources, including land, and therefore to increased conflict (Rutherford, 2007). For example, in certain localities in the Kalehe territory, around 2011, 2012, people displaced by war settled on private land belonging to indigenous people, often used as pasture or fallow land for agriculture, without prior authorisation, causing tensions with landowners, herders and local farmers who consider them intruders. In this case, as the land is not freely accessible, the displaced persons are exposed to the risk of eviction and conflict with the owners.

Land competition is particularly evident in the Kalehe territory, where access to land appears to be a central issue in relations between the various local actors. During our discussions with displaced persons, it became clear that access to land is one of their main concerns after settling in host areas. For most of the people we met, the possibility of having land is essential to ensuring agricultural production and household stability. However, the settlement of displaced persons in host communities is gradually changing the existing balance of power around land control and allocation. Several respondents explained that obtaining a plot of land often depends on relationships with local authorities or land rights holders, which places displaced persons in a position of dependence on these actors. According to some members of the host community interviewed, since the arrival of displaced persons, the price of land has increased, with plots in commercial centres near attractive areas doubling or even tripling in value, showing that the number of inhabitants in the area has had a significant impact on these aspects. On this subject, a member of the host community interviewed during the survey explained: “Before the arrival of displaced persons, it was easier to find large plots of land at lower prices. Today, demand has increased significantly and prices have risen sharply. Even for those of us who have lived here for a long time, it is becoming difficult to obtain land because everyone is looking to settle in the same place.”

During interviews, displaced persons described an environment marked by increasing competition for access to agricultural land and living space. In several of the localities visited, the arrival of new displaced households has contributed to increased pressure on available land and a rise in requests for land allocations. According to some displaced persons, ‘land that was once less attractive has now become the target of many’. During our discussions with residents of host communities, some explained that the increased presence of displaced persons has transformed local practices for accessing land, making allocation procedures more frequent and sometimes more selective. This situation has led to a gradual redefinition of the role of local authorities, who are increasingly called upon to arbitrate requests for access to land and to intervene in the management of conflicts related to land boundaries.

The interviews conducted also show that traditional authorities play a central role in these dynamics. During our discussions with certain local chiefs, they explained that the arrival of displaced persons has increased the number of requests for land, but also for the resolution of land disputes. In this dynamic, the allocation of plots appears to be an arena for negotiating relationships of influence and recognition between the various actors. Several displaced persons indicated that access to land often depends on the support of certain local intermediaries or on established relationships with traditional authorities, which helps to strengthen the role of the latter in local land governance.

Furthermore, during our discussions with displaced persons, some respondents mentioned the difficulties they encountered in maintaining their rights to the plots they had obtained, particularly when other actors claimed these lands. In several cases, displaced persons explained that the plots they farmed remained subject to disputes, forcing them to regularly appeal to local authorities to have their rights of use recognised. These situations contribute to increasing the involvement of customary and administrative authorities in land regulation, while strengthening their position in local power relations. Field observations also show that competition for land involves a variety of actors operating at different levels. Local communities participate in the recognition of usage rights, while customary and administrative authorities play a central role in the allocation and demarcation of land. At the same time, several displaced persons mentioned the influence of actors with greater economic resources, who find it easier to access land or retain control over it. In these situations, access to land appears to be closely linked to social relations and the influence of different actors. Thus, in our discussions with displaced persons, competition for land appears to be a process through which relations between local communities, authorities and new arrivals are gradually being redefined. Land is both a resource essential for survival and a space where power relations are expressed, contributing to the transformation of local land governance arrangements in the Kalehe territory.

Discussion

This study shows that population displacement in Kalehe is not only a consequence of natural disasters and security crises, but also a structuring factor in the restructuring of local land tenure systems. The results reveal a simultaneous transformation of land access norms, social power relations and agricultural practices, in a context marked by legal plurality and the increasing scarcity of land resources. The data collected indicate that the massive influx of internally displaced persons is increasing pressure on arable land, which is already limited by the population density and ecological constraints of the Kalehe territory. This situation is leading to increased competition between host households and displaced persons, particularly in the localities of Mbinga Nord, Mbinga Sud and Kalehe Littoral. These findings are consistent with the analyses of the [IDMC and NRC \(2025\)](#), which highlight that prolonged internal displacement in sub-Saharan Africa often contributes to exacerbating tensions over access to natural resources. These recurring tensions over land occupation highlight the fact that the land issue is not only a matter of local rivalries, but also part of a power struggle in which the land-owning elites play a decisive role.

As shown by the results presented above, demographic pressure is a key factor in land pressure in the Kalehe territory. The increase in the number of households, combined with the recurring arrival of internally displaced persons, exacerbates the scarcity of arable land and intensifies tensions over its control and exploitation. In a context where land represents both a means of subsistence, social capital and a symbol of community belonging, this pressure is reflected in an increase in latent or open land conflicts. In this regard, [Ostrom's \(1990\)](#) work shows that access to limited common resources, such as land, can generate conflicts when effective collective governance mechanisms are lacking. In this vein, [Bayart \(2006\)](#) argues that local elites (traditional chiefs, territorial authorities) exploit the land issue to consolidate their power by distributing or withholding land from displaced persons according to political

and economic interests. Similarly, [Pantuliano \(2009\)](#) shows that in contexts of prolonged displacement, land becomes a central issue of negotiation and conflict, particularly when institutional mechanisms are fragile. In Kalehe, this competition does not systematically result in open conflict, but rather in an increase in latent tensions, informal disputes and ongoing renegotiations of usage rights. As [Lavigne Delville \(2017\)](#) points out, debates on land security essentially pit two positions against each other: one that highlights existing land relations as an obstacle to investment and advocates land privatisation and liberalisation of the land market, and the other that insists on the recognition of local land rights as a tool for the social and economic integration of populations, both in peripheral urban neighbourhoods and in rural areas.

This is what [Lefebvre \(1967\)](#) emphasised in his theory of the “right to the city,” explaining that displaced persons or new land actors claim a right of use even in the absence of formal recognition. The results also highlight a gradual weakening of customary land regulation mechanisms. Traditional chiefs, local dignitaries and other local intermediaries continue to play a central role in land allocation and security. However, the absence of formal documents issued in these transactions increases legal uncertainty for beneficiaries. This situation illustrates what [Benjaminsen et al. \(2009\)](#) describes as “fragmented institutional authority,” where several bodies simultaneously claim the power to recognise land rights. It is also part of the dynamic of legal pluralism analysed by [Moore \(1973\)](#), according to which customary and state norms coexist without necessarily being coherently articulated.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the legal framework established by the 1973 land law enshrines public ownership of land, but its application remains limited in rural areas. Thus, the practices observed in Kalehe confirm the gap between formal law and effective local regulations, already documented by the [International Crisis Group \(2013\)](#) in eastern DRC. This normative plurality creates a space of legal uncertainty that is conducive to disputes and conflicts. As [Mulendevu Mukokobya \(2013\)](#) points out in his analysis of legal pluralism and land conflict resolution in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the overlapping of distinct legal systems undermines the coherence of land tenure security mechanisms. The land transformations observed are accompanied by a change in agricultural practices. The reduction in accessible land area has led to the intensification of short-cycle food crops, the gradual abandonment of certain perennial crops and the diversification of income-generating activities. These adaptation strategies confirm the livelihood-based approach also advocated by [Bebbington \(1999\)](#) and [Ellis \(1998\)](#), according to which households adapt their production strategies in response to structural constraints and access to resources. However, in a context of continuing land pressure, these adjustments can lead to increased environmental degradation, particularly through the overexploitation of available land.

Conclusion

This study shows that, in the territory of Kalehe, land issues are at the heart of displacement and social restructuring dynamics. Land is not only a factor of agricultural production: it represents economic capital, but a marker of community also belonging and an instrument of local power. Thus, internal displacement caused by armed conflict and natural disasters is not limited to population movements; they actively contribute to the transformation of land tenure systems, social

relations and local governance mechanisms. The results reveal that access to land for internally displaced persons (IDPs) is based on a variety of formal and informal mechanisms: solidarity donations, sharecropping (bwassa), leasing, progressive purchase, marriage alliances or occupation of unexploited land. These strategies demonstrate the adaptability of displaced households, which mobilise their social networks, economic resources and local norms to integrate into host communities. However, these modes of access remain largely precarious, often based on verbal agreements and dependent on asymmetrical power relations. Land competition appears to be a direct consequence of demographic pressure and the increasing scarcity of arable land in the areas studied in North Mbinga, South Mbinga and Kalehe Littoral.

The massive influx of displaced persons exacerbates existing tensions and alters the local balance surrounding the allocation of plots of land. Traditional authorities continue to play a central role in land regulation, particularly in demarcating land and resolving disputes. However, the absence of written documents and the coexistence of customary and state law maintain persistent legal uncertainty. This normative plurality creates a space of uncertainty where land rights are continually renegotiated, exposing displaced populations in particular to the risks of dispute and dispossession. The study also highlights the gender dimension of access to land. While marriage is a vehicle for land integration, its effects differ according to gender. Displaced women married to members of host communities may benefit from a derived right of use, while displaced men face greater constraints due to patrilineal inheritance norms. Land thus appears to be a space where social and cultural hierarchies are reproduced, with inclusion remaining differentiated. Furthermore, the prolonged settlement of displaced persons is gradually helping to transform local perceptions of land legitimacy.

The continued use of a plot of land over several years tends to confer social recognition on the occupant, blurring the line between temporary use and de facto appropriation. This development opens up prospects for sustainable integration, but it can also fuel new rivalries, particularly in a context of rising land prices and increasing commodification of land. Ultimately, the sustainable stabilisation of displaced populations in Kalehe cannot be separated from inclusive land governance reform. Effectively securing usage rights, clarifying the respective powers of customary authorities and state services, and ensuring access to formal registration mechanisms are essential conditions for preventing tensions from escalating. Land in Kalehe is both a refuge and a strategic issue: its management will largely determine the paths to peace, integration and social cohesion in this territory marked by repeated crises.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human samples in accordance with the local legislation and institutional

requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because as no personally identifiable data was used in this study. The quotes and information presented in the report come from anonymised interviews and do not allow participants to be identified directly or indirectly. Consequently, publication of the results poses no risk to the privacy or security of the interviewees.

Author contributions

CC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GM: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JN: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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