

HUMANITARIAN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (HIP)

GREAT LAKES

The full implementation of this version of the HIP is conditional upon the approval of the transfer by the Budgetary Authorities.

AMOUNT: EUR 109 600 000

The present Humanitarian Implementation Plan (HIP) was prepared on the basis of financing decision ECHO/WWD/BUD/2025/01000 (Worldwide Decision) and the related General Guidelines for Operational Priorities on Humanitarian Aid (Operational Priorities). The purpose of the HIP and its annexes¹ is to serve as a communication tool from DG ECHO² to its partners and assist them in the preparation of their proposals. The provisions of the Worldwide Decision and the General Conditions of the Agreement with the European Commission shall take precedence over the provisions in this document.

While this HIP covers the five countries **Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania**, it focuses in particular on the humanitarian needs (a) triggered by the conflict in the **DRC** (b) of the **Burundian (and increasingly Congolese) refugees** in the region, as well as refugee returns back to Burundi. For both crises, humanitarian needs (caused by conflict and natural hazards) are assessed to be very high and so is the vulnerability of the crisis-affected populations. The DRC and the Burundi refugee situations are both categorised as forgotten crises.

0. MAJOR CHANGES SINCE THE PREVIOUS VERSION OF THE HIP

First modification as of 05/03/2025

Since the publication of the first version of this HIP in the last quarter of 2024, the humanitarian situation in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** has further deteriorated. The crisis in Eastern DRC has severely and rapidly worsened as the M23/Rwanda Defence Forces launched an unprecedented military offensive to extend the territory under their control to the north, west and south simultaneously. Over the course of January 2025, the M23/RDF were able to capture the key strategic towns of Masisi, Minova, Sake and Goma, causing significant casualties and injuries, mass displacement, and violations of International Humanitarian Law. Looting and restricted access have severely disrupted humanitarian operations, leaving many without basic services. The intensification of the conflict has caused additional humanitarian needs and requires urgent humanitarian action to respond. These needs are expected to continue rising as the M23/RDF took control of the city of Bukavu and are continuing their offensive in South Kivu towards Uvira, increasing the risk of further escalation and potential regional spillovers. In North Kivu, the M23 closed most of the camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) around Goma, causing forced returns of tens of thousands of IDPs towards their areas of origin, with resulting protection risks and rising humanitarian needs in these areas of return. The continued offensive in South Kivu has meanwhile caused further internal displacement, as well as increased refugee flows to neighbouring countries, in particular to **Burundi** where already around 60 000 new Congolese refugees have been registered over the past few weeks.

¹ Technical annex and thematic policies annex

² Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)

In order to respond to these massive additional humanitarian needs not foreseen when the initial HIP allocation was decided, the European Commission has mobilised an additional EUR 40 million for the humanitarian response to the crisis in the DRC and the Great Lakes region from the European Union's Emergency Aid Reserve. This additional funding will serve to respond to the most acute needs caused by the latest escalation of conflict and alleviate human suffering. Further specifications are provided in the Humanitarian Implementation Plan Technical Annex.

1. CONTEXT

Humanitarian crises in the Great Lakes region are mainly caused by violent conflicts due to geo-political and domestic reasons, increasingly with inter-ethnic dimensions. These crises are compounded by political instability and regional tensions, poor governance and corruption, structural poverty, insufficient development, and related poor service provision, as well as a high infectious disease potential.

Against this backdrop, crisis-affected people in the fragile states of the region³ generally lack livelihood opportunities and often live in extreme poverty. Access to basic social services is inadequate, especially in the **DRC**, and to a lesser extent in **Burundi** and the **Republic of the Congo**.

The **DRC**, although endowed with vast natural resources, including some of world's most important mineral reserves, and home to the second largest tropical forest on earth, remains a fragile, low-income country. Nearly 75% of Congolese citizens live in extreme poverty⁴. The generalised lack of roads accessible all around the year adds an element of isolation and precarity to many population groups and prevents their systematic access to all types of services (being public or private). This situation favours the development of local banditism and the creation of armed groups, pushed also by the feeling of impunity.

The country is facing one of the most complex and protracted humanitarian crises worldwide, which has drastically worsened throughout 2023 and since the beginning of 2024 due to the ever-worsening conflicts and insecurity, particularly in the eastern provinces (North and South Kivu and Ituri), but also in Mai-Ndombe close to the capital Kinshasa. There were 7.3 million internally displaced people in the DRC in mid-2024, most of which are sheltered by host families, placing a significant burden on the already very scarce resources of those households.

In North Kivu, fighting between the M23 armed group, supported by Rwanda, and the Congolese army FARDC (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*) and associated armed groups, displaced more than 1 million people since the beginning of the year 2024 alone, with hundreds of thousands living in precarious conditions in and around Goma (capital of North Kivu), receiving insufficient levels of humanitarian assistance. The warfare in the first half of 2024 has been very intense, using heavy weapons (artillery, air strikes) and involving numerous actors from the region and beyond. The M23 conflict in North Kivu has expanded into South Kivu and has also caused insecurity in other provinces to increase, due i.a. to various non-state armed groups exploiting the security vacuum left by the shifting of FARDC troops to fight against M23. While a ceasefire has been announced in late July 2024, it remains to be seen whether hostilities will cease on the ground.

³ Out of 179 countries assessed in the Fragile States Index 2024 by the Fund for Peace, the **DRC** was considered the 5th most fragile country in the world, **Burundi** was ranked the 24th and the **Republic of the Congo** the 29th, **Rwanda** the 46th and **Tanzania** the 62nd most fragile state globally.

⁴ 74.6% live below the income poverty line per the HDI (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview>)

In Ituri province, inter-communal violence perpetrated by many armed groups (such as CODECO, ZAIRE, FRPI) and self-defence militias accelerated with deadly, violent, and large-scale attacks against civilians, schools and health structures has forced thousands of people to displace and has severely impacted the access to land and to basic services. The humanitarian situation is becoming increasingly critical with an estimated 1.6 million people displaced in the province. Djugu remains the epicentre of the crisis. Close to one million displaced people are seeking refuge and living in the vicinity of MONUSCO bases and will likely be exposed to very high protection risks if/when MONUSCO withdraws.

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) crisis has worsened the humanitarian situation in the North Kivu and Ituri provinces, where the group has carried out brutal attacks against civilians, including massacres, kidnappings, and sexual violence. It is estimated that over 500,000 people have been displaced due to ADF-related violence. Sexual and gender-based violence has surged in areas affected by the ADF, with thousands of cases reported annually and exacerbated sexual and reproductive health needs. ADF is considered one of the deadliest armed groups in the DRC.

In Mai-Ndombe, which has been affected by armed violence since 2022, the worsening crisis and the security response by authorities and the FARDC have exacerbated protection risks for the population. Furthermore, the violence has spread to neighbouring Kwango and Kwilu provinces, and to the outskirts of DRC's capital, Kinshasa.

The DRC hosts the *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo* (MONUSCO), which is mandated, inter alia, to protect civilians under threat of physical violence. While the mission has been only partly successful in executing its mandate and is lacking credibility in the eyes of many Congolese, it nevertheless plays an important role in the protection of civilians (protection by presence), as well as in the field of human rights, the fight against impunity, and in logistics (including for enabling physical humanitarian access). However, the mission is implementing its progressive withdrawal following a request by the DRC's government. This will likely leave a massive gap not only in terms of security and protection of civilians, but also when it comes to enabling humanitarian access – which concerns both physical access in terms of environmental/logistics constraints but also security of aid workers, convoys and protection from attacks by armed groups – and supporting the local economy.

Peace initiatives such as the Luanda and Nairobi processes continue with the aim of bringing sustainable peace to the region, but the challenges are numerous.

It is therefore expected that fighting and generalised insecurity will continue to trigger vast and repeated displacements in the DRC. The impact of violence on civilians is a major concern with systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including targeted attacks against civilians and high levels of gender-based violence. Sexual violence and exploitation have reached unprecedented levels, particularly around Goma, where women and girls have been forced to engage in various forms of survival sex due to inexistent livelihood possibilities and the insufficiency of the humanitarian response. All this is taking place against a backdrop of a lack of sexual and reproductive health services, which increases risks for SGBV survivors, and in a context of absolute impunity because of an ill-functioning justice system, the high-cost implications and risks for survivors to bring their perpetrators to justice, and an underperforming legal system put under pressure by the security degradation. Sixteen non-State armed groups (NSAGs) are listed in the annexes of the UN SG's 2024 annual report on Children and Armed Conflict for various grave violations against children.

Against this backdrop, there is general agreement that the humanitarian situation will continue to worsen towards the end of 2024 and into 2025 due inter alia to the general insecurity, the presence and operation of numerous armed groups (often community-based auto-defence groups) operating with impunity, the increasing number of arms and new recruits (including children and teenagers) that are widely available, and the increasingly ethnic dimension of the crisis. Unless a sustainable peace agreement is reached on a political level between the DRC and Rwanda, it is expected that the M23 conflict, violence and the resulting humanitarian crisis will continue and that the conflict may well adopt a more and more regional dimension.

The situation in **Burundi** appears to be more conducive to the return of refugees since the 2020 elections, at least in terms of relative absence of violence and conflict. Nevertheless, and in particular with the approaching elections of 2025 and 2027, political tensions are rising, and political opponents are being arrested and intimidated. A voluntary return of those who participated in the 2015 protests in this context is therefore highly unlikely, given that their personal safety would be at risk. Moreover, the country ranks 187th out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index, and over 70% of the population lives below the poverty line. There are high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in rural communities. The multiple economic shocks of recent years have exacerbated the country's structural difficulties (fuel shortages, devaluation, inflation, etc.) and exacerbated the needs of IDPs, returnees, refugees and other vulnerable groups. This situation also affects the absorption capacity of returnees for sustainable reintegration, which remains inadequate, continues to raise human rights concerns, and has the potential to cause conflicts in communities of return. 243 855 refugees have now returned, but another 260 377 are still living in the four main countries of asylum (Tanzania, DRC, Rwanda and Uganda). Although the trend of return has slowed down considerably due to the difficulties of economic reintegration and access to lands, a resumption of voluntary repatriation (VOLREP) has been observed since 2023 with the increase in the repatriation package. Finally, between 2023 and 2024, the country was severely affected by the El Niño phenomenon, which caused heavy rains and flooding and led to the highest water levels in Lake Tanganyika for several decades. Nearly 170 000 people were displaced by the natural disasters and led the Government and the humanitarian actors to face a new type of emergency.

The **Congo River basin**, the second largest tropical forest in the world, is already affected by climate change, and overextraction of natural resources, causing rapid deforestation. The east of the DRC is subject to tectonic activity and volcanic eruptions, as well as flash floods and landslides. The DRC and the Republic of the Congo lack early warning and response systems to prevent and respond to natural disasters, and floods in the Republic of the Congo affected 1.8 million in 2023. In Burundi, 93% of internal displacements are caused by natural disasters. Landslides, droughts and floods are the main causes. Despite a recent decrease, the waters of Lake Tanganyika had risen to 776.5 metres, above the historical average of 772.7 meters, causing frequent flooding. The national response to natural disasters still needs support to respond to and anticipate multi-hazards.

The region, particularly the **DRC**, is also affected by **recurrent epidemics** and emerging diseases, such as measles, cholera and Mpox, the control of which remains challenging due to weak health systems, isolation, insecurity and inefficiencies in health alert and response mechanisms. In August 2024, due to a surge in Mpox cases and outbreaks in the DRC and in neighbouring countries, a public health emergency of continental concern has been declared by the African Center for Disease Control (Af-CDC) raised the day after by the WHO at the stage of Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

It is widely expected that the political and humanitarian situation in the Great Lakes region will not improve in 2025. Despite renewed international engagement⁵, the root causes of the violence in eastern **DRC** remain, and the refugee and IDP situation in the region is likely to continue or even deteriorate. While the voluntary repatriation process of Burundian refugees is expected to continue in 2025, more and more Congolese are now seeking refuge abroad mainly due to the war in the Kivu provinces. In total, the Great Lakes region hosts around one million refugees in mid-2024.⁶

The **DRC** is structurally food insecure, importing more than 80% of its food needs. The agricultural sector is under-invested and under-developed (only 10% of arable land is utilised). The situation is similar in the **Republic of Congo**.

This results in approximately 25.4 million people being acutely food insecure (IPC 3+) in the DRC, making it the world's largest food crisis in absolute numbers.

⁵ At EU level, a new EU strategy for the Great Lakes, as well as a Political Framework for Crisis Approach (PFCA) to address violence in eastern DRC were adopted/endorsed in early 2023 and late 2022. An EUSR for the Great Lakes region started his mandate on 1 September 2024.

⁶ 1 028 584 in the Regional Congolese Refugee Plan

INFORM Risk Index 2025 & Severity Index July 2024	Burundi	DRC	RoC	Rwanda	Tanzania
INFORM Risk Index (0-10)⁷	6.0	8.0	4.4	3.5	4.3
Hazard and Exposure	5.0	8.3	2.1	1.6	2.5
Vulnerability	6.4	7.7	5.6	5.7	5.5
Lack of Coping Capacity	6.7	8.0	7.4	4.8	5.8
INFORM Severity Index (0-5)⁸	3.3	4.4	2.7	2.4	2.4
Impact of the crisis	3.4	4.5	2.9	2.5	3.2
Condition of people affected	3.3	4.5	3.0	2.5	2.2
Complexity of the crisis	3.3	4.2	2.3	2.3	2.0
Number of People in Need	1.5 m	25.4 m ⁹	0.13 m	0.12 m	1.2 m
Human Development Index (0-1)	0.420	0.481	0.593	0.548	0.532
Total Population¹⁰	13.2 m	102.3 m	6.1 m	14.1 m	67.4 m

2. HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

2.1. People in need of humanitarian assistance:

Sources ¹¹	DRC	Burundi	Tanzania	Rwanda	Republic of Congo
Registered refugees/ asylum seekers	518 389 / 6122	87 662 / 2290	234 296	134 769	71 571
IDPs	7.3 m	79 917	-	-	26 875
Severely food insecure people (IPC 3+) ¹²	25.4 m	600 000	205 000	-	1 900 000
Acutely malnourished children under 5y	4.45 m	318 000	-	6427	100 000
Protection needs (GBV; children out of school)	9 300 000	236 000 / 114 000 / 189 000	-	20000	-

2.2. Description of the most acute humanitarian needs

2.2.1. Protection

The humanitarian crisis in the DRC is a protection crisis. The conflict and violence in the east expose civilians to violations of human rights and international humanitarian law daily. The state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri since May 2021 has not reached its intended results of

⁷ INFORM Risk is a global, open-source risk assessment for humanitarian crises and disasters <https://drmhc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/INFORM-Risk>

⁸ The INFORM Severity Index is a way to objectively measure and compare the severity of humanitarian crises and disasters globally. <https://drmhc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/INFORM-Severity>

⁹ HNO 2024

¹⁰ World Bank data, 2024

¹¹ Sources: Refugees: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Other: Humanitarian Response Plans for Burundi and the DRC. RoC – IDPs: International Displacement Monitoring Centre.

¹² Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). Phase 3 represents ‘crisis level’ and 4 ‘emergency’. Phase 5 is the highest level and represents ‘famine’.

successfully fighting the various armed groups operating there and to protect the civilian population, and despite the deployment of troops from various institutions and countries (FARDC, MONUSCO, EAC, SADC), civilian protection incidents have increased sharply.

With the intensification of the conflict and the use of heavy artillery, there is an almost certain risk that the protection situation will deteriorate in the coming months. The challenges of maintaining the civilian character of sites, the risk of ethnic tensions (notably in Ituri and North Kivu), the loss of early warning mechanisms for protection following the departure of MONUSCO in South Kivu, and the reduced presence of humanitarian actors on the ground to provide protection by presence are all further reducing what little security civilians have. Offensives and counter-offensives in the vicinity of sites and the presence of armed groups are new risk factors for the security and protection of IDPs and humanitarian actors.

The phenomenon of sexual violence against women, girls, men and boys, as well as sexual abuse in and outside of brothels continue to worsen. Although not new, the issue of the brothels, often exploited by “managers” coming from the host communities with close ties to the authorities, has exploded in recent months with more than 1,000 reported in North Kivu alone, including in the M23 zone. The number of GBV cases in North Kivu has sharply increased again during the last 12 months with some 14,860 GBV cases supported in the first quarter of 2024. With many of the survivors in the brothels being children, the consequences are even more serious, ranging from early and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and suicides.

Ratification of the 2009 Kampala Convention for the protection and assistance of IDPs is not yet concluded in the DRC. Other IHL violations including child recruitment, targeted attacks against civilians, physical violence, murder, abduction, torture, attacks on health structures and schools and looting have considerably increased since last year. The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP 2024) estimates show a total population in need of protection of 10.2 million people, while at least 4 million children need child protection services and 7.7 million people, many of whom are children, are in need of gender-based violence assistance. A further deterioration of the security context must be expected in eastern DRC in late 2024, further increasing protection risks, especially in the areas of GBV and Child Protection.

In **Burundi**, concerns over human rights violations are frequent, in a context of political polarisation causing an increase of social tensions and exposure to protection risks for the population as a whole. Moreover, Burundi hosts nearly 90 000 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from DRC. Despite improvements end-2023 allowing refugees to go freely to neighbouring towns, freedom of movement, access to labour market, access to finance, access to land, and to basic services remain very restricted, despite the fact that the protracted violence in Eastern DRC makes a safe and sustainable return very unlikely in the near future.

The asylum space for Burundians in the refugee camps in **Tanzania** remains of significant concern since the government explicitly stated its intention to reduce the number of refugee camps in 2024. The promotion of repatriation is showing satisfactory signs of a return rate in 2024, but alternative solutions remain to be found for the Burundian refugee's political caseload. Moreover, the rate of return is considered unsatisfactory by Tanzanian authorities who are threatening mass *refoulement* in a context of upcoming elections and strong politicisation of the issue in Tanzania. The authorities of Burundi and Tanzania have agreed to enter a phase of “promotion” of voluntary return, despite evidence that returnees face challenges in economic integration and access to land. Efforts are being made with development interventions to better articulate this transition between humanitarian and development interventions. The food ration cuts in camps have had a major protection impact

on refugees, who reverted to negative coping mechanisms to survive. Alternative cooking energy sources cannot be scaled up to the larger refugee population, exposing them to protection risks while collecting firewood in the host community.

In **Rwanda**, transit centres welcoming Congolese refugees from the M23 crisis are facing an increased child protection situation of unaccompanied and separated children arriving there. Furthermore, for women and girls, who make up the majority of refugees, early pregnancy and sexual and gender-based violence also pose major concerns. In addition, due to environmental degradation driven by climate change, landslides and giant ravines caused by soil erosion are becoming increasingly common. A lack of proper drainage facilities in the camps are exacerbating the problem and have led to some refugee families in high-risk zones of landslides to be relocated into new shelters or to other camps.

2.2.2. Food assistance, food security & livelihoods

In the **DRC**, **25.4 million** people are estimated to be severely food insecure in 2024 (IPC 3+, of these 3.5 million people are estimated to be in IPC phase 4). This makes DRC the world's largest food crisis in absolute terms. This situation is driven by multiple converging factors, the most significant being the protracted conflict situation in eastern DRC and the crisis in Mai-Ndombe, both of which have led to large-scale internal displacement. The lack of food leads to the use of negative coping mechanisms by the displaced and the most vulnerable people.

In **Burundi**, food insecurity remains a structural problem due to the same underlying factors with 1.2 million people projected to be acutely food insecure between June and September 2024. This situation is exacerbated by various factors, including persistent high food prices, climatic challenges, and economic difficulties that diminish purchasing power for essential food items. Furthermore, food rations in refugee camps have been cut by 50% in 2023 and the cornflour replaced by dry corn, that refugees have to pay (often by selling part of their meagre food rations) to be grounded into flour in the neighbouring towns. The food situation in refugee camps in Burundi is dire, in a context of ongoing influx of refugees from Eastern DRC.

In **Tanzania**, the influx of new asylum seekers coming from the DRC keeps rising, with a total of 14,621 Congolese arrivals by end of May 2024. Refugees residing in Nduta and Nyarugusu camps receive 62 per cent of dry food rations.

The food security situation in refugee camps in **Rwanda** remains precarious. Refugees face chronic vulnerabilities exacerbated by high inflation rates, which are forcing many to resort to negative coping mechanisms. Children often suffer from chronic diseases due to lack of nutrition and basic health care. The influx of refugees has resulted in overcrowding and limited access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation and hygiene, increasing the likelihood of disease outbreaks.

In the **Republic of Congo**, 1.9 million people or 31% of the country's total population faced high levels of acute food insecurity, including 100 000 children under five with acute malnutrition.

2.2.3. *Health*

The Great Lakes region, and especially the **DRC**, is prone to outbreaks of infectious diseases such as vector-borne diseases (malaria, plague, etc.), viral haemorrhagic fevers (yellow fever, Ebola, dengue, etc.), as well as measles, cholera, typhoid, Mpox, meningitis, poliomyelitis, etc.

The main reasons are overall poverty and inequality, isolation, prevailing natural conditions and climate change, but also rapid urbanisation, poor and very uneven access to basic healthcare as well as to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene, the consumption of bush meat, and increasingly the destruction of the natural habitat of wild animals - all of which are exacerbated by ongoing humanitarian crises. The development of these various diseases poses even greater problems in areas most affected or impacted by armed conflict.

The functionality of the DRC's health system is highly variable across the country, depending on available resources in the community as well as support provided by development and humanitarian actors. Often, access to quality health-services remains limited and comes at a high cost for those most in need. Even in areas with better functioning systems such as parts of eastern DRC, health services are disrupted due to looting and destruction, supply chain disruptions, overburdening of services due to population displacement, lack of access, departure of healthcare workers, and the challenges related to the import of medicines (which has led to important challenges in the supply of essential drugs) etc.

In case of shocks, whether displacement, violence or high impact disease outbreaks, additional services and resources are needed to deal with excess morbidity and mortality: scaling up existing services as they deal with increasing caseloads of infections such as malaria and mpox, deliveries and vaccinations as well as providing mental health and psycho-social services, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), GBV or war surgery services. However, in general, all these services are of limited availability in the health system.

In particular, the Mpox epidemiology evolved notably in 2024, with a growing number of regions affected, to a public health event of international concern in August 2024. The DRC is the epicentre of the two different mpox outbreaks in Central Africa. The endemic and most lethal mpox virus clade 1, that stayed confined in the forest areas during decades, is now responsible for a growing number of cases and outbreaks in the DRC, and in the neighbouring Republic of Congo and CAR. Another outbreak is due to a new sub-clade I.b, that appears less fatal but more easily transmitted: firstly documented in a town of South-Kivu hosting large numbers of mine workers and sex workers, it spread within eastern DRC among areas already affected by conflicts and displacements and then to Burundi, where the epidemic trend is worrying. First cases occurred in mid-2024 in other bordering or connected countries like Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya. While complications and death are less common with this sub-type of mpox virus, this outbreak of a new disease is already affecting the confidence of populations and the resilience of the health system.

The combination of poverty, violence, chronic lack of access to basic health services, the threat and the impact of various severe outbreaks, the high risk of being subject to SGBV, no matter the sex or age, are all putting a severe burden on the mental status of populations and prevent them from finding positive coping mechanisms.

While the risk for high impact disease outbreaks is somewhat lower for those affected by the **Burundi** crisis, both in **Burundi** and in **refugee camps in neighbouring countries**, communicable disease outbreaks have occurred in the past. A long-term investment in health

systems is needed with built-in surge capacities and improved infection control measures as well as improved mental health and psychosocial services.

2.2.4. Nutrition

In the **DRC**, malnutrition remains the most important risk factor contributing to death and disability. Nutrition insecurity, widely shared across the country, and contributes to the vicious cycle between malnutrition and severity of various epidemic-prone diseases, such as large measles outbreaks like the one in 2023, or susceptibility to repeated and complicated episodes of common child sickness like pneumonia or diarrhoea. It also exacerbates the vulnerability of communities in eastern DRC, already severely hit by insecurity and conflict and their severe consequences; repeated and long-term displacement, broken household economy, disrupted supply and coverage in food assistance and nutrition programming.

From July 2024 to June 2025, the IPC projections are anticipating that around 4.5 million children under five and over 3.7 million of pregnant or lactating women will suffer from acute malnutrition in the DRC. Of these children, over 1 390 000 are likely to suffer from severe malnutrition, requiring immediate and appropriate intervention. Between January and June 2025, malnutrition cases are projected to rise and the nutritional situation is likely to deteriorate significantly, affected by the impact of insecurity and massive displacements, added to the aggravating factors of poor health & WaSH conditions, and limited access to care, safe drinking water, food assistance, and even to nutritional treatment.

In **Burundi**, the nutritional situation among children under the age of 5 has deteriorated over the past years. More than half of the children younger than 5 are chronically malnourished. Poor access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation facilities, a high level of food insecurity and a very limited dietary diversity contribute to the increased levels of acute malnutrition, while high levels of infectious diseases are key drivers.

2.2.5. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

In the **DRC**, access to safe water supplies, basic sanitation and adoption of personal hygiene practices are largely insufficient. The high levels of insecurity and conflict are hindering the development of WASH systems. The operation and maintenance of the existing systems are also hindered. As a result, many of the displaced populations are in dire need of minimal WASH services. SPHERE standards are rarely met and often the cost of access to safe drinking water remains a constraint for displaced people and host populations. There are high public health risks in a context of high population displacement. Cholera and Ebola outbreaks and other epidemics are common in the conflict and displacement affected areas. WASH needs remain important for refugees in **Tanzanian** camps. Major needs are noted mainly in schools and regarding household latrines.

In **Burundi**, the drinkable water coverage is estimated at about 60% and varies depending on regions. The access rate to adequate sanitary installations is only around 46%. Regarding hygiene, it is a challenge with only 6% of the population that frequently washes their hands. 23% of the 30 000 drinkable water sources are contaminated. The transport of water in inappropriate recipients also contributes to its pollution. This situation is exacerbated in refugee camps and for returnees whose shelter package does not include sanitary installation.

2.2.6. Shelter and non-food-items (NFI)

In the region, and in particular in the DRC, people displaced for years are coexisting with the newly displaced people. Most of these people are suffering from multiple displacements.

The internally displaced people (IDPs) often flee to collective centres, IDPs sites, camps and host families. Overcrowding in such places frequently leads to protection risks, including GBV and disease outbreaks (e.g. cholera and other epidemics). The displaced populations do not have most of their essential basic household items such as cooking utensils, beddings, clothing, hygiene materials, safe water collection and storage equipment, and require assistance to cater for these needs. The same holds true for the refugee populations living in camps across the region.

2.2.7. Education in Emergencies (EiE)

Displacement and conflict in the **DRC** have significantly affected the rights of children in the **Great Lakes**, including their access to education. 4 million children aged 6 to 11 are out of school in the DRC, exposing them to protection risks in the immediate term and negatively impacting on their development and their life chances in the long run. The cost for education and the lack of civil documentation often prevents children from accessing the education system, while the lack of training for teachers and teaching materials has a negative impact on the quality of education. Gender-based discrimination also significantly hamper girls' access to schools.

In the **DRC**, the policy of free primary level education which aims at guaranteeing access to school for all has also led to school saturation. Due to insecurity, many schools are no longer functional, because they have been looted, totally or partially destroyed, or because children and/or teachers have fled. In displacement areas, displaced children are often out of school and when they have the opportunity to join schools, these are overcrowded, teachers are overworked, and sanitation facilities are insufficient. Schools are also frequently used by IDPs as shelter (due to the lack of alternatives) or occupied by armed actors, in breach of the "safe school" declaration ratified by the country. Children are often traumatised and psychologically distressed by their exposure to violence and displacement.

In **Burundi**, an improvement in access to education took place in 2024 with the agreement to transition the school programme in the camps to the Burundian one (so far it had been the Congolese programme that was taught in the camps), thereby integrating the schools in the camps into the national education system.

2.2.8. Disaster preparedness

All countries in the Great Lakes region are prone to both natural-hazard and human-induced disasters. Coping capacities of communities and authorities are quickly overwhelmed. Moreover, investment in disaster preparedness and emergency response is generally weak due to conflicting priorities, political instability and lack of interest and long-term vision.

The **DRC** is at risk of multiple natural and man-made hazards ranging from volcanic and tectonic activities to flooding and landslides, a high recurrence of disease outbreaks, and on-going internal conflicts resulting in back-and-forth, protracted and short-term displacement and humanitarian needs.

In **Burundi**, around 297 746 people were affected and more than 100 000 internally displaced between September 2023 and May 2024 mainly because of El Niño phenomena (recurrent floods, landslides, and other natural disasters). Such disasters are expected to increase in frequency and severity with climate change.

It is important to build in-country capacity to respond to low- and medium-scale disasters, to strengthen local actors' disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, to develop and operationalise community-based contingency planning and to strengthen first line community capacity for early warning and action. For flooding linked to the rising level of Lake Tanganyika, close coordination between the authorities of countries on its borders is essential, and a joint early warning mechanism system should be promoted.

Rwanda has also been affected by floods and landslides throughout 2023 and 2024.

Floods in the **Republic of the Congo** in recent years highlighted the authorities' lack of preparedness and capacity to respond. The damage and destruction caused by recurrent flooding leads to displacement, rising food insecurity, reduced water quality and an increase of water-borne diseases.

3. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND COORDINATION

3.1. National / local response and involvement

National and local authorities in the **DRC** lack sufficient capacity and structures to address the root causes of the humanitarian crises. Local coordination systems do not provide adequate decision platforms and lack efficiency.

The highest management system for coordination and streamlining of the humanitarian action is the CNCH (*Cadre National de Concertation Humanitaire*). This platform has been reactivated in July 2023 with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action and Solidarity (MASAH). The focus of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) is to build up a stronger relationship with the MASAH and to work towards a more meaningful and effective involvement of the Government in the humanitarian action.

Efforts to address the root causes of the multiple multi-causal crises are limited. Government expenditure on social services and physical infrastructure remains very low compared to the huge scale of needs and the size of the DRC. Setting up a national plan of universal health coverage and free primary education are part of the government's priorities in the DRC, but without secured funding so far. An effective decentralisation remains an important bottleneck in emergency response.

The country has no functioning disaster management body, only a poorly functioning civil protection mechanism. Disaster preparedness activities are not prioritised, resulting in missed opportunities to prepare and strengthen local capacity and resilience.

While the **Republic of Congo** is prone to natural-hazard and manmade disasters, it lacks basic infrastructure, social services and a working system to manage natural or man-made disasters, rendering its population extremely vulnerable to any disaster. A national strategy and action plan for the prevention and reduction of risks was developed but has not been fully implemented due to lack of technical expertise and financial resources.

In **Burundi**, disaster preparedness needs to strengthen a risk-informed approach and adequate multi-hazard early warning and early response mechanisms to enhance the capacity to prepare for, anticipate and respond to a crisis. The country has introduced reforms to deal with disease outbreaks (decentralisation).

3.2. International Humanitarian Response

Due to the scale of humanitarian needs, the lack of funding and the diversity of partners present on the ground, strong and reliable humanitarian coordination is necessary. A concerted involvement in the sharing of information, in particular data, as well as active and dedicated participation in coordination forums, including clusters, should guide the type of humanitarian response in compliance with standards.

Coordination and advocacy are key to address the protracted complex emergencies affecting the Great Lakes and protect humanitarian space. Moreover, due to the regional nature of some of the displacement, the need to further strengthen cross-country and regional coordination and analysis remains relevant. Close involvement of regional organisations with the mandate to act on these issues, such as the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), is essential to ensure ownership by the states of the region and to give legitimacy to the actions taken.

Out of 25.4 million Congolese identified as needing assistance, the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for the **DRC** targets the 8.7 million most vulnerable people and required USD 2.6 billion. 37.4% of the funding requirement were met in early September 2024.¹³ Due to the sharp increase in unmet humanitarian needs in 2023, a system-wide scale-up was declared in June 2023 and ended in December 2023. The UN works as an integrated mission in the DRC, and the response is led by a Humanitarian Coordinator – who is also the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and UN Resident Coordinator – and his Deputy. The humanitarian coordination system includes a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) of which the European Commission (DG ECHO) is a member. Inter-cluster coordination consists of nine clusters. Donor coordination includes the European Commission, EU Member States and other donors such as Canada, Norway, Switzerland, the UK and the USA. The NGO Forum covers over 100 international aid organisations, while CONAFOHD (*Conseil National des Fora des ONG Humanitaires et de Développement de la RDC*) is the main coordination platform for national NGOs. Since late August 2024, DRC is hosting the incident management team responsible for the coordination of preparedness and response to the Mpox continental outbreak.

In **Burundi**, the presence of OCHA has led to a better coordination of the humanitarian actors in situ. UNHCR's regional approach to Burundian returnees is strongly focusing on durable solutions to allow the sustainable reintegration. Several development programmes for returnees and communities of return are being launched, which will help to operationalise the nexus between humanitarian and development actors.

¹³ Financial Tracking System (FTS) by UN OCHA. HRP funding requirements do not include appeals by the ICRC and MSF.

There is no HRP for the **Republic of the Congo** nor for **Rwanda** and **Tanzania**, but the latter two are included in the Burundi Regional Refugee Response Plan.

3.3. Operational constraints in terms of:

3.3.1. Access/humanitarian space:

Restricted, shrinking and highly complex access, due to insecurity and/or administrative requirements by authorities, as well as context-specific difficulties, such as remoteness and logistical challenges, are major constraints in the region, especially in the **DRC and, to a lesser extent, in Burundi, the Republic of the Congo and Tanzania**. This may be amplified with the progressive withdrawal of MONUSCO in the DRC. In the **DRC**, the severity of security incidents involving humanitarian continues to increase. The use of heavier weaponry, clashes moving closer to urban areas (and IDP sites), the expansion of M23 controlled areas, the no-fly zone, the high number of proliferating active non-state armed groups (also without a clear chain of command), the ongoing withdrawal of MONUSCO but also repeated attacks or retaliation on local populations impede humanitarian access and expose civilians and aid workers to increased safety, security and protection risks and jeopardize physical and principled humanitarian access. This reinforces the need for enhanced and coordinated safety and security awareness, access negotiations as well as strictly neutral, impartial, and independent actions.

Preserving humanitarian space depends on the acceptance by communities, weapon bearers and authorities, and on the delivery of humanitarian assistance based on independently assessed and verified needs, as well as a principled, conflict-sensitive and ‘do no harm’ approach. In that respect, coordinated advocacy efforts for the respect of humanitarian space, principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as well as dialogue with all parties needs to be pursued and IHL dissemination ensured.

The complex nature of the conflict in the DRC and the presence of many military groups and Non-State Armed Groups with different mandates and objectives puts the humanitarian community in a critical situation. A clear distinction is needed between independent humanitarian aid and the instruments for political stabilisation. Civil-military humanitarian coordination (UN-CMCoord) is increasingly essential, as well as clear respect of civil-military guidelines. Concerted efforts of humanitarian actors to advocate for principled actions are vital, to ensure access to conflict-affected populations, and to build a positive understanding of humanitarian actions and principles, as well as of International Humanitarian Law. Systems of Civil Military coordination are essential to optimise access and acceptability. Advocacy and engagement with development actors to cover gaps and plan more sustainable investments is crucial to enable humanitarians to focus on emergency needs.

In addition, humanitarian organisations working in the Great Lakes regularly face administrative hurdles, such as obstacles to import supplies and equipment, obtain visas or work permits and/or recruit international staff for the humanitarian response.

Finally, logistic impediments are particularly severe in the DRC and may even further increase with the MONUSCO retreat. There are very few paved roads or cleared waterways; many aircraft and airport infrastructures are in appalling conditions, and most of the flight companies are not reliable.

In **Burundi**, administrative requirements impact on humanitarian access and space. However, an increased collaboration with national authorities has been noted since the lifting of appropriate measures under article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement in February 2022. During the “big” rainy season (January to May), access is limited inside the country due to the flooding of rivers and landslides that block many of the main roads. This was particularly striking in the 2024 season and is likely to be more frequent with the effects of climate change. Access to basic services by returnees as well as potential violations of their rights should be carefully monitored in order to maintain a protective/conducive environment in areas of return.

In **Tanzania**, the shrinking of the humanitarian space (including access issues to refugee camps for international staff, especially in camps hosting Burundian refugees) as well as the restriction of movement (for refugees) by authorities remains a serious concern for the quality of service delivery. The strict encampment policies continue to negatively impact living conditions of refugees, who continue to be exposed to protection risks and a dire economic situation.

3.3.2. Partners (presence, capacity), including absorption capacity on the ground

DG ECHO has an extensive partner network, guaranteeing a sufficient absorption capacity, in most of the countries of the Great Lakes' region, in particular in the DRC. This group of partners ensures high quality of programmes, with adequate implementing capacities (financial and human resources), an open mind for the potential negative effects of their humanitarian action, as well as for supporting the capacity-building of local humanitarian non-governmental partner organisations, when possible. Local actors also play an important part in disaster preparedness.

3.3.3. Other:

The costs of operating in the DRC are very high, linked to access challenges, high insecurity, the vastness of the country and lack of adequate transport infrastructure, as well as fraud risk.

The risk of instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid is extremely high, particularly in the context of the M23 crisis. This non-state armed group has set up some basic elements of an administration, with the aim of legitimising its presence and exerting continued influence over occupied territories. It only allows certain sectoral interventions in the territories under its control and requests payment of fees from humanitarian actors. M23 also tries to prevent the establishment of new settlements for IDPs and the launching of protection programmes.

In addition, humanitarian organisations operate in a context where corruption and fraud are widespread, and must take adequate prevention and control measures, in relation with the anti-fraud minimum engagements validated by the Humanitarian Country Team in February 2021. Since decades, sexual exploitation and abuse is widespread in the DRC and further aggravated due to increased conflict, poverty and vulnerability. The proliferation of informal brothels in eastern DRC (particular in North Kivu) requires reinforced PSEA measures as a matter of priority.

The delivery of humanitarian assistance through cash in the DRC can address some of the operational challenges faced in providing humanitarian assistance in the DRC, but only with the appropriate risk management mechanisms in place, including do-no-harm Beneficiary modality preferences should systematically be assessed, and context and market analysis included.

Strengthening logistics in the Great Lakes region will require a clear understanding of the context and access constraints due to, for example, active armed conflict or natural hazards, and provide the best suitable support for an efficient and cost-effective distribution of humanitarian aid to people in need. In order to address the logistics challenges, a strategic approach to the supply chain set up in every country should be treated as a key priority in all humanitarian projects and humanitarian organizations should promote cooperation in this sector. DG ECHO has a stockpile with NFIs for shelter and WASH prepositioned at IOM in Nairobi to support partners' response in the region.

The EU Humanitarian Aid Flight (EUHAF) with its two aircraft in Ituri and the Kivus gives ECHO partner organisations and the wider humanitarian community the opportunity to access deep field destinations. United Nations Humanitarian Air Service has been providing essential access by air to the humanitarian community in DRC, very often under difficult prevailing conditions. Support to supply chain platforms and common services such as the Logistics Cluster as well as others (HULO) is also important, notably to cover the essential logistic lines allowing the overall response to be delivered, to cover some of the last mile delivery (if air transport means are not sufficient) or to mutualise logistics efforts.

4. HUMANITARIAN – DEVELOPMENT – PEACE NEXUS

Complementarity between peace and security, humanitarian and development policies and interventions, following a nexus approach, allows to link urgent relief with longer-term and sustainable solutions, in a people-centred and rights-based way. This approach must be addressed and implemented in full respect of the humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – and abide by the principle of 'do no harm'. It needs to be done by delivering practical solutions through dedicated and enhanced coordination, in a pragmatic but principled approach and simultaneously aiming at crisis response, stabilisation and early recovery.

Nexus opportunities in the DRC

The humanitarian-development-peace nexus is not systematically operationalised, despite increased efforts by the EU and other actors. Poor governance, lack of political engagement, a very low national budget in relation to the size of the population, competing spending priorities and the poor capacity of social services are serious obstacles for a nexus approach and durable solutions to the ongoing crises in the DRC, in particular because there are few exit strategies available. Considering these challenges, the nexus approach needs to be adapted to the context, to secure longer-term commitment and work towards a more sustained delivery of basic services and a peaceful environment for crises-affected populations to return to.

Congolese authorities and the UN country team (and other stakeholders) have identified Kasai, Tanganyika and Ituri provinces as focus areas for a nexus approach, with Tanganyika being the "pilot province" for sustainable solutions for IDPs. DG ECHO continues to focus on the eastern part of the country, in particular conflict-affected provinces (mainly Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu).¹⁴

¹⁴ This geographical focus does not apply to DG ECHO's support for emergency responses to high impact communicable disease outbreaks.

DG INTPA¹⁵ is managing the 2021-27 Multi-Annual Indicative Programme for the DRC that aims at fostering stabilisation, reinforcing public institutions and consolidating the social contract, reducing inequalities and preserve biodiversity and global public goods. The three priority areas are: (i) governance, peace, and security; (ii) human development; (iii) alliance for sustainable development. EUR 424 million are allocated until 2024, while the amounts for 2025-2027 are currently being defined. The cooperation between DGs ECHO and INTPA and the EEAS follows a comprehensive approach, especially in Eastern DRC DG INTPA is implementing development interventions for the 2023-2025 period in the health sector in Ituri and North Kivu¹⁶ and in the education and vocational training sector in North and South Kivu.¹⁷

FPI¹⁸ has so far invested 39 MEUR in crisis response actions for DRC since 2021. Support has been mainly directed towards conflict prevention, peacebuilding and conflict resolution through mediation, reconciliation, dialogue, enhancing social cohesion and addressing disinformation.

Given DG ECHO's ongoing support to health and nutrition as well as education in emergencies' (EiE) and WASH projects in these provinces, further advances in a nexus implementation are being rolled out since 2023 (education) and 2024 (health). While these nexus efforts will be continued in 2025, with a view to establishing the lessons learnt and continuing nexus pilot actions, further nexus opportunities may be sought especially regarding GBV, whereas DG ECHO implements its holistic GBV response strategy since 2024 and for which cooperation with development partners and authorities will be essential to ensure success.

In this context, DGs ECHO, INTPA, FPI and the EEAS are looking into ways to identify geographical areas of convergence in Eastern DRC that allow to create synergies between their respective programmes to improve the resilience of the population. Ituri and North Kivu provinces (without excluding other provinces) would need to continue benefitting from a focus of humanitarian, development, and stabilisation projects, in the sectors of health (including SGBV and MHPSS responses), education and food security/resilience, water, hygiene and sanitation. These should be carefully selected, based on a profound needs analysis, feasibility considerations and the geographical scope of current actions or planned for the coming years by ECHO, INTPA, FPI, and EEAS in order to promote a continuity of services in the different sectors. This should also include dialogue and cooperation with other EU and non-EU donors. Synergies will also be sought with other upcoming DG INTPA-funded projects notably on resilience building for improved food security and economic opportunities.

The root causes of the conflict and humanitarian crisis in the DRC ultimately need to be addressed politically. Joint initiatives – also at Team Europe level – are therefore important. At EU level, the European External Action Service (EEAS) is overseeing the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Great Lakes, as well as a Political Framework for Crisis Approach (PFCA) to address the root causes of violence and lack of stability in eastern DRC. FPI has

¹⁵ The European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA).

¹⁶ The DG INTPA annual action plan 2023 includes the action "*Unis pour la santé*" with a budget of EUR 35 million to support the health sector, focusing on the quality of care and the access to care for the most vulnerable. It will also target the determinants of health (e.g. birth registration).

¹⁷ The DG INTPA annual action plan 2022 includes the action "*Unis pour l'éducation*" with a budget of EUR 19 million and a focus on the return and maintained presence of children in schools in areas affected by crisis, in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and the DG INTPA action plan "*unis pour l'éducation et l'emploi*", 2023-2025, with a budget of EUR 30 million focussing on vocational training.

¹⁸ The European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI).

been critical in supporting political processes related to the Nairobi and Luanda peace processes, as well as promoting the demobilisation of armed groups through the P-DDRCS. The EU committed in its recent Strategy on the Great Lakes to “continue to provide humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable and crisis-affected populations, including for the region’s many IDPs and refugees, whilst seeking to foster durable solutions for these populations”.

Nexus opportunities in the Burundi regional crisis context (Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania)

Nexus opportunities will focus on durable solutions for refugees and returnees in the context of the “*EU regional action to provide durable solutions for the Burundian refugee crisis in the Great Lakes region*”, and the “*Protection, Assistance and Durable Solutions for Populations Displaced by Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa*” implemented through DG INTPA and with a budget of EUR 40 million and EUR 90 million (of which EUR 55 million for the Great Lakes countries) respectively, financed under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe). Benefitting countries are **Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania** and **Uganda**. The specific objective of the regional action is to address the protection and long-term needs and support durable solutions for forcibly displaced populations – refugees, returnees and IDPs and their host communities. The action aims at providing regional comprehensive and multi-sectoral sustainable response to the Burundian and Congolese refugee crisis following a nexus approach combining humanitarian, development and peace and security components in the Great Lakes Region. The assistance will include targeted protection and durable solutions for refugees, IDPs and host communities; institutional capacity building for local authorities on IDPs/refugees management and contingency planning; and support to voluntary return in safety and dignity when the conditions allow. Synergies with the health, education and resilience programmes, implemented under the national MIPs¹⁹, will also be sought.

DG INTPA will also be implementing a new regional initiative for the Great Lakes, with which nexus opportunities will be sought on Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Displacement in the Tanganyika region (EUR 50 million). The “*Regional Responses to Climate Displacement in Sub-Saharan Africa (RE2CLID)*” action adopted in June 2024 aims to improve disaster forecasts and management, improve governance of natural resources and improve self-reliance of displaced persons in the Lake Tanganyika basin areas spanning across the border areas of DRC, Burundi, Tanzania. DG ECHO partners are encouraged to seek synergies with this programme as it will target both displaced and host communities.

¹⁹ Multi-annual indicative programmes

5 ENVISAGED DG ECHO RESPONSE STRATEGY AND EXPECTED RESULTS OF HUMANITARIAN AID INTERVENTIONS

5.1 ENVISAGED DG ECHO RESPONSE

5.1.1 PRIORITIES

General principles of intervention:

The Great Lakes' region is affected by extreme structural poverty as well as acute humanitarian crises, especially in the DRC. Given the limited funding availability compared to identified needs, the response funded under this HIP will focus only on most severe humanitarian needs. In the humanitarian response, a strict geographic prioritisation will be made and, in the DRC, only interventions in Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema and Tanganyika, as well as Mai-Ndombe, will in principle be eligible for funding²⁰.

Furthermore, interventions particularly in areas controlled by armed groups such as M23-controlled territories must be based upon demonstrated compliance with humanitarian principles and the do-no-harm principle, as well as based on a sound contextual, conflict and risk analysis and coordinated with other humanitarian actors intervening in those areas and following Access working group recommendations. Interventions must also demonstrate the specific and reinforced measures to address the increased sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) risks, including reinforcing confidential, safe and dignified avenues for age- and gender-appropriate assistance for survivors.

DG ECHO-funded humanitarian interventions should be based on a continued focus on life-saving assistance to the most vulnerable – those affected by recent conflicts and/or epidemics, natural-hazard induced disasters and/or new displacements. To maximise the impact, priority will be given to interventions covering basic services through an integrated multi-sectorial response (including Food assistance, NFI, protection, Health and Nutrition). Such responses should also enhance the fast tracking and direct referrals system to other sectors, notably through the signature of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU's) between humanitarian actors and/or authorities, the standardisation/harmonisation of processes and methodologies, such as registration forms and data sharing agreements for interoperability.

The nature of the crises in the region requires an integrated approach, protection centred programming, protection/gender mainstreaming and a conflict sensitive approach (“do no harm”) to be applied in the strategic needs analysis and in all activities. DG ECHO is keen to support integrated Protection programming with multi-sectorial outcomes, including concrete Protection outcomes to improve the safeguarding of persons of concern. DG ECHO will pay attention to existing and/or possible synergies with other ongoing activities implemented by the same partner or others, including development actors.

Needs assessments and coordination:

The analysis of needs is expected to be holistic and following a basic needs approach. A detailed multi-risk needs assessment should explain the response (sectors and modality of

²⁰ This focus does not exclude potential support to those affected by new, emerging conflicts and/or new displacements in other parts of the DRC.

interventions). The added value of the response (e.g. in terms of reduction of excess morbidity and mortality) and comparative advantage of aid modalities needs to be documented throughout the response, when possible. A thorough risk analysis should be applied to all possible delivery modalities, followed by monitoring to ensure that the assistance has not exacerbated risks. For cash-based responses, preference will be given to interventions based on use of digital payments and innovative technologies, including the expansion of mobile money where technically and operationally feasible and practical.

Close field coordination with other humanitarian actors intervening in the same geographic area/camps/IDP sites is expected. This should, as a minimum, cover the coordination of the response in each location but should ideally also involve joint or shared needs assessments.

DG ECHO supports the coordination of the humanitarian response to the respective crises in the Great Lakes to maximise the impact and timeliness of the action as well as humanitarian access. This includes civil-military coordination, which is essential given the increased needs, supporting operational coordination (clusters, working groups, coordination fora etc.), and humanitarian advocacy in line with humanitarian principles. DG ECHO also supports organisations engaging in a contextualisation of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law and humanitarian standards to improve the situation of conflict-affected people. Given the volatile security context especially in the DRC, DG ECHO supports the provision of essential security coordination and information services that help to understand the operating environment and reduce the risks for humanitarian staff and operations.

Sector-specific considerations:

Furthermore, interventions aiming at promoting respect of IHL (International Humanitarian Law) with state and non-state armed groups may be supported, in order to prevent and address protection risks and violations, including gender-based violence and child recruitment and use by armed groups.

As MONUSCO has withdrawn from South Kivu and prepares for its withdrawal from North Kivu and Ituri (although this withdrawal is currently on hold), DG ECHO aims to support partners in setting up protection monitoring and early warning systems at community level to monitor the protection situation and maintain local capacity to enable communities to access security and preventive measures.

In terms of response to gender-based violence, DG ECHO will continue the rollout of its holistic SGBV response strategy launched in 2024 and will prioritise actions that address the harmful effects of GBV in the DRC on populations at risk and survivors of GBV. Priority will be given to interventions in which GBV is responded to **holistically** (all four pillars: Pillar 1 Health, Pillar 2 MHPSS, Pillar 3 legal, and Pillar 4 socio-economic response) and as part of an **integrated response** to the humanitarian needs in the DRC. A strong **prevention component** to combat the prevalence of GBV is essential. Special attention will be paid to adolescent and child survivors and at risk of GBV as they are amongst the most vulnerable population groups and require integrated specialised response services. Working with adolescent survivors and those at risk will also be considered, ensuring that this often-overlooked group is part of a holistic approach to addressing and preventing GBV. Furthermore, all DG ECHO partners engaged in humanitarian action must demonstrate how they will ensure that their actions do not further contribute to GBV through solid GBV risk mitigation actions to be assessed at proposal stage and during monitoring.

DG ECHO will consider actions that respond to the needs of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG), including safe identification, referral, and reintegration. DG ECHO will carefully consider approaches that take into account the contextual dynamics of working with CAFAAGs to include the understanding that children and their families are individually and collectively impacted differently depending on their unique set of circumstances. DG ECHO will only consider the comprehensive response to the needs of CAAFAG and with partners accredited for DDR-Enfant by strong partners recognised and active in clusters.

Specific attention will be given to Education in Emergencies (EiE) for the most vulnerable children either displaced and/or conflict affected, including CAAFAG. The aim is to increase their access to primary education (formal and non-formal). The EiE response should target areas affected by humanitarian shocks and, when relevant, integrate the Nexus approach. Integrated EiE and child protection programming is strongly encouraged, as well as integration with other sectors where relevant.

In terms of response to WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) needs, DG ECHO will in particular aim to support interventions aiming at improving the sustainable access to water for the most vulnerable people by supporting interventions offering more durable and cost-efficient alternatives to water-trucking, with a focus on Goma.

DG ECHO will systematically address emergency preparedness and early response through a) flexibility tools embedded in other actions – including the use of “crisis modifiers” that partners are encouraged to develop and b) emergency/rapid response mechanisms (ERM/RRM) as standalone actions when no other solution is possible or in support of other actions (last resort principle) and c) disaster preparedness (DP) investments reinforcing local response capacities, and hence increasing resilience.

Given that logistics represents a very high proportion of humanitarian operational budgets, and in order to support partners’ ability to overcome access challenges, DG ECHO is keen to support a more efficient and effective response especially in the **DRC**, where access and logistics are particularly challenging. DG ECHO’s ‘Humanitarian Logistics Policy’ (also known as Humanitarian Strategic Supply Chain and Logistics – SSN) provides useful guidance.²¹ The humanitarian response in the DRC already benefits from EU Humanitarian Aid Flight (EUHAF) air service and EUHAB operations. It is expected that the logistics situation will become even more challenging as a result of the withdrawal of MONUSCO. Therefore, DG ECHO may also continue supporting logistics results within larger humanitarian actions (e.g. for physical light rehabilitation of roads and bridges to enable physical humanitarian access) or support specific logistics actions with the above-mentioned objectives. DG ECHO may also envisage supporting strategic projects that embrace collaborative approaches and/or technology and/or environmental sustainability, e.g. common services and/or the digitalisation of supply chains.²² The Commission and its partner organisations in the Great Lakes will also be able to draw upon the **ReliefEU HIP**, if an emergency situation requires it and if activated by the Commission.

The Great Lakes region is prone to communicable diseases. In the **DRC**, DG ECHO will support the emergency response to high impact communicable disease outbreaks. In addition, a strong linkage between the health sector and nutrition programmes will be encouraged.

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/sectoral/humanitarian_logistics_thematic_policy_document_en.pdf

²² For example, DG ECHO co-finances a two-year project for an online platform for humanitarian organisations to do joint procurement, including in the DRC.

COVID-19 as well as recent Ebola and cholera outbreaks have highlighted the need for a multi-sectorial approach (beyond a pure health response) right from the start, and even before at preparedness stage.

Regional response in the Great Lakes region:

In the context of the regional **Burundi refugee and return situation**, DG ECHO will continue its regional approach while encouraging and advocating for longer term solutions, working with development actors – in particular DG INTPA – to develop strategies to address protracted refugee situations and find durable solutions, and allowing refugees to work towards self-reliance and resilience. In **Burundi**, DG ECHO will focus mainly on protection activities, including for returnees. While advocacy for the voluntary character of any refugee return will be pursued, interventions in the context of this response should consider exit strategies and avenues for voluntary returns from the DRC, Tanzania and Rwanda to Burundi as a priority. In the context of the regional refugee crisis, DG ECHO may also consider support for interventions responding to the increasing number of Congolese refugees in the region.

Given the Great Lakes vulnerability to man-made and natural hazard-induced disasters, DG ECHO supports ongoing disaster preparedness (DP) actions in **the DRC and Great Lakes region** and will provide additional funds for the DP response in Burundi in 2025 to help overcome the lack of preparedness and response capacity due to the absence of early warning systems, disaster preparedness at all levels by enhancing such capacity of national and local stakeholders and first responders and other local actors.

For targeted preparedness actions particular attention will be paid to the principles laid down in the DG ECHO's Disaster Preparedness Guidance Note²³, which will form the basis for the assessment and selection of partners.

Humanitarian projects should aim at building resilience of local communities and to be well coordinated with relevant actions carried out in the development sphere. DG ECHO partners should strive to ensure this complementarity, including on funding.

Co-financing projects with the implementing agency or other donors contributing to the cost of the action should be the norm.

Consortia, including for example national and/or local NGOs, are welcomed, if they benefit the action. As part of the localisation agenda, implementation by local actors/partners when feasible and upon compliance with the ECHO localisation policy, and anti-fraud regulations, will be encouraged.

DG ECHO's minimum environmental requirements must be systematically applied for all interventions in the Great Lakes region funded under this HIP, to minimise the negative impact caused by the operations and reduce their environmental footprint.²⁴

²³ [dg_echo_guidance_note - disaster_preparedness_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/sectoral/thematic_policy_document_no_3_cash_transfers_en.pdf)
(europa.eu)https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/sectoral/thematic_policy_document_no_3_cash_transfers_en.pdf

²⁴ Guidance on the operationalisation of the Minimum Environmental Requirements and Recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations:
https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/climate-change-and-environment_en

5.1.2 PROGRAMMATIC PARTNERSHIPS

In the logic of multi-annual, strategic humanitarian projects, DG ECHO also supports Programmatic Partnerships and considers such an approach within the Great Lakes HIP if partner organisations – NGOs with a DG ECHO programmatic partnership certificate, UN agencies, the Red Cross/Crescent family and Member States’ Specialised Agencies – demonstrate the strategic and/or innovative character of the action and the added value being achieved through such a longer-term partnership, in particular in terms of efficiency and effectiveness gains as described in the Guidance to Partners – DG ECHO Programmatic Partnerships 2024. The longer-term horizon of a programmatic partnership is also beneficial for projects that not only include national/local partners (NGOs), but also strive to strengthen the capacity of the latter.

Furthermore, the health, education and protection (GBV) sectors in a geographical area also targeted by a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, such as the **DRC**’s Ituri and North Kivu provinces (without excluding other provinces), constitute a relevant opportunity for programmatic partnerships (with a strong linkage between the health sector and nutrition programmes). Programmatic partnerships would also be considered for humanitarian action that aims at environmental sustainability in an innovative and more strategic (mainstreaming) way.

5.1.3 MULTI-YEAR FUNDING

While DG ECHO receives an annual budget and most of the projects it funds are within that timeframe, the DG continues to support multi-year funding (with an initial funding allocation for 24 months or more) in case the partner demonstrates the efficiency gains and the operational logic of a longer-lasting project, as is for example already the case with EiE and disaster preparedness projects that usually run for (at least) two years. Similarly, protection actions that envisage a longer engagement to achieve protection outcomes may be considered, in particular in the context of the GBV response. DG ECHO may consider multi-year funding particularly for actions where integrated / multi-sectoral programmes that include a GBV component would benefit from a longer duration, i.e. where partners engage in pillar 3 and pillar 4 or on prevention.

Non Programmatic Partnership multi-year funding may also be considered for the health, education and protection (GBV) sectors in a geographical area also targeted by a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, such as the **DRC**’s Ituri and North Kivu province (without excluding other provinces), as well as for humanitarian action that aims at environmental sustainability in an innovative and more strategic (mainstreaming) way.

5.2 OTHER DG ECHO INTERVENTIONS

The HIP ReliefEU streamlines and simplifies the specific ECHO emergency response instruments and integrates them into a unique emergency response tool. It includes ReliefEU Funding (the formerly known as “Emergency Toolbox”) and ReliefEU Capabilities (formerly known as “European Humanitarian Response Capacities – EHRC”). This will ensure a more coherent framework that would include both operational emergency response tools and funding for a fast response or anticipation of the response action to emergencies.

The aim of the ReliefEU Funding is to provide humanitarian aid to vulnerable people affected by disasters originating from human-made and natural hazards and comparable exceptional situations and circumstances, that have led or are likely to lead to major loss of life, physical, psychological or social suffering and/or material damage.

The objective of the ReliefEU Capabilities is to complement the funding provided by DG ECHO, and support humanitarian partners via the provision of services and capabilities. The operational tools are designed to provide rapid but temporary support to partners to fill operational gaps in the humanitarian response where the humanitarian community struggles to provide timely support, thus helping to cover immediate needs of the affected population and to strengthen humanitarian access with the provision of safe and reliable transport, logistics and supply chain solutions.

Moreover, and equally important to the above instruments, DG ECHO encourages further cooperation among DG ECHO partners on strategic humanitarian supply chain and logistics initiatives at country level by sharing information and pooling resources, actions that are highly recommended based on the adopted Humanitarian Logistics Policy. In particular, strengthening joint approaches such as common services, shared services or joint procurement, as they are key to achieving efficiency and effectiveness gains. This requires humanitarian actors to collaborate instead of having parallel supply chains with individual warehousing, transport, or procurement solutions. Other important stakes behind supply chain and logistics for which a strategic consideration is key are greening, digitalization or localization.