DRC: an update on the humanitarian situation
Summary report
Round table| 14 Oktober | The Hague

Organised in collaboration with INSO

Summary
In this session, co-organised with INSO, speakers and participants shared updates on the humanitarian situation in the DRC. The presentations discussed the importance of accountability within humanitarian action. Furthermore, it highlighted that the humanitarian operating environment in eastern DRC has become increasingly complex due to the expansion of FRN (formerly known as AFC/M23)control, growing administrative restrictions, evolving security risks, and declining humanitarian funding. At the same time, speakers emphasised that effective accountability remains essential for maintaining trust, access, and legitimacy in a highly conflict-affected context like the DRC. Rather than being understood solely as a technical or bureaucratic practice, accountability was described as a process grounded in trust, dialogue, and meaningful engagement with affected communities. While formal accountability mechanisms remain important, participants highlighted the need for locally rooted approaches that reflect community realities and priorities. Failures in accountability can undermine trust, reduce community acceptance, and, in some cases, cause direct harm to affected populations.



Understanding accountability in the DRC

Accountability in the DRC as a core principle of humanitarian governance in the DRC and was explained in the session as a universal principle for information-sharing, stakeholder feedback, decision-making processes, and the responsible use of power.
Three key dimensions of accountability were highlighted in order to understand humanitarian accountability in the DRC:

- **Upward accountability** refers to an organisation's responsibilities towards donors, governments, and institutional partners. This includes transparent reporting, effective use of resources, and demonstrating results.
- **Sideways accountability** focuses on relationships among humanitarian actors themselves. It involves collaboration, mutual learning, coordination, and holding peers accountable to agreed standards and practices.

- **Downward accountability** relates to the people and communities affected by crisis. This dimension emphasises community engagement, listening to local perspectives, incorporating feedback into decision-making processes, and ensuring that humanitarian responses align with the needs and priorities of those affected.

Furthermore, there are different ways of understanding and practising accountability: the square and round approaches. The square approach represents formal and standardised accountability. These include mechanisms based on established procedures, rules, documentation, and sanctions. Round accountability refers to relational forms of accountability based on trust, listening, dialogue, and everyday interactions. It recognises that accountability often occurs through personal relationships and informal engagement rather than through formal procedures alone. Importantly, both approaches are necessary to achieve meaningful accountability.

Humanitarian governance in the DRC is not only shaped by formal coordination structures, but rather by fragmented interactions among multiple actors. While numerous coordination mechanisms exist formally, it was noted that these spaces do not always function as intended. As a result, informal relationships and day-to-day interactions frequently play a greater role in shaping humanitarian action than official governance structures in the DRC.
In hard-to-reach or insecure areas in Eastern DRC, communities are often unable to access formal complaints or feedback mechanisms. In these situations, humanitarian actors rely more heavily on informal communication channels and trusted local relationships. Accountability should be designed in ways that minimise barriers for affected populations and ensure that communities can safely communicate their needs and concerns.
A disconnect between international accountability models and local accountability practices undermines legitimacy. Accountability systems of international actors are often designed externally and may not adequately reflect local realities. Collecting community feedback alone is insufficient if organisations are unable to demonstrate how that feedback influences decision-making. Accountability requires both listening and acting on the information received. Lastly, weak accountability generates systemic harm beyond aid delivery. Examples included mistrust between communities and aid organisations, community resistance to humanitarian interventions, and risks of abuse and exploitation. It was stressed that accountability should be viewed as a safeguarding mechanism that contributes directly to protection outcomes and community acceptance.

Unlike some other countries, where the government exercises strong oversight over humanitarian actors, the DRC is characterised by fragmented humanitarian governance and limited state regulation of the sector. As a result, many international and local NGOs operate with wide independence, and accountability practices often differ between organisations. In particular, downward accountability is not consistently enforced through binding requirements in NGOs or through government oversight.

Security and humanitarian challenges in eastern DRC

The second presentation focused on recent developments in eastern DRC and their implications for humanitarian operations. Several crises in the DRC have shaped humanitarian action, with several armed groups driving insecurity and access disruption, particularly in Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu. Ebola has created a parallel layer of health related and administrative access constraints.
It was noted that the expansion of FRN (formerly known as AFC/M23) influence since early 2025 has significantly altered the operating environment. Humanitarian organisations now face a rapidly changing landscape characterised by active frontlines, competing authorities with their own sets of requirements, bureaucratic and administrative impediments, and increased politization of

humanitarian assistance. Confinement incidents remain the most common incidents affecting humanitarian personnel in 2026, affecting national staff disproportionately.

Although some areas have experienced a reduction in criminal incidents due to tighter territorial control, humanitarian organisations continue to face serious operational challenges.
These include, amongst others:

- Increased bureaucratic requirements and administrative procedures.
- Restrictions on movement.
- Multiple layers of authority requiring separate engagement.
- Rising operational costs.
- Difficulties importing humanitarian supplies and specialised medical equipment.

Furthermore, there is a growing use of drones within the Eastern DRC conflict. While drone strikes primarily target armed actors, it was noted that the expansion of drone warfare and the proximity between armed actors, civilians and humanitarians change the overall risk environment for humanitarian organisations by extending threats beyond traditional frontlines.

The DRC has been battling the deadliest outbreak of Ebola disease for six months now. Outbreak control and health care responses are undermined by incidents related to community resistance. Community resistance towards Ebola treatments and health care response relates to distrust towards external actors, since health interventions are sometimes perceived as externally imposed, top-down operationalised, and sometimes dismissing local culture and traditional burial practices.
It was argued efforts in accountability have enabled a reduction in the number of incidents. Successful responses depend on working through familiar local actors, investing in community engagement, and ensuring that information is communicated in locally understood languages.
Participants also expressed concern about recent humanitarian prioritisation that underrepresents the scale of needs in the DRC. They warned that the decline in funding risks creating highly selective approaches to humanitarian assistance that focus primarily on numerical targets. Such approaches overlook broader community needs, risk being highly prioritised in certain areas, while undermining accountability and losing trust in other affected populations. Concerning is also that many health-related programmes were cut due to budget cuts.

The session underscored that humanitarian action in eastern DRC requires continuous adaptation, coordination, and engagement with a wide range of actors. Humanitarian accountability, trust, and access are deeply interconnected while operating as a humanitarian actor in the DRC context. Humanitarian organisations must move beyond compliance-focused approaches and invest in long-term relationships with affected communities.

Picture: INSO