

Joint advocacy note

For the immediate decongestion of schools used as shelters by displaced households and their relocation to safe, suitable accommodation Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu

August 2023

Since the beginning of the year and the intensification of crises in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), conflicts and natural disasters have led to waves of displacement, with the majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) using schools and/or collective centers as shelters, thus disrupting access to education for girls, boys and adolescents. 1,036 schools are still closed, including 356 schools used as shelters by displaced populations,¹ due to a lack of capacity in IDP sites and host communities, affecting more than 115,000 children, including 56,000 girls and 17,000 children with disabilities. Of the three Scale-Up provinces (Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu), North Kivu is the worst affected, with 337 schools used as shelters as of July 2023.

The use of schools as shelters by displaced households has negative consequences on children's access to education and on school infrastructure, as well as on the well-being of displaced families, forced to live in promiscuity in schools:

- The presence of IDPs disrupts or suspends classes for children.
- The prolonged presence of IDPs is often accompanied by the deterioration/destruction (partial or total) of school buildings and equipment, including blackboards, benches and desks, and the saturation and deterioration of school WASH facilities.
- This situation also has an impact on host communities, as it reduces the availability of educational infrastructures at local level, including during school vacations (organization of cultural and community activities).
- The presence of adults in educational spaces increases the vulnerability of students, both girls and boys, to protection risks, including gender-based violence (GBV).
- The lack of schooling for children (from host or displaced communities) exposes girls and boys to a high risk of recruitment or abduction by armed groups.
- The traumas of war, displacement and school accommodation can have a devastating impact on the mental and physical health of children and their families.

¹ According to Education Cluster data, July 2023



By decision of the North Kivu authorities, some collective centers located in schools in the Masisi and Nyiragongo territories will have to close, for the time being without any rehousing solutions having been found. As an indication, 108 collective centers, including schools, are to be closed, requiring the relocation of over 226,000 people, 56% of whom are women. Once households have been relocated away from schools, they need to be assured of quality accommodation, adapted to their needs, in the relocation sites (sites or host families/communities).

The main challenges related to the relocation of IDPs using schools as shelters are as follows:

- Access to land for building temporary or permanent shelters.
- Lack of accommodation in host communities.
- Massive new population movements can lead to major family separations, particularly affecting young girls, who are then much more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and violence.
- The implementation of certain survival strategies by families displaced due to lack of livelihoods, including the use of children for domestic work, wood gathering or other tasks; thus generating major protection risks, especially for young girls.

The partners of the Education, Shelter and CCCM Clusters and the Child Protection Working Group are calling on the authorities and humanitarian actors to provide a shelter response for displaced people to facilitate the release of schools as quickly as possible, and to guarantee safe, quality accommodation for displaced households, so as not to delay children's return to school: ²

If schools are decongested and displaced households relocated to safe and adequate shelters in communities or sites, and if this relocation is accompanied by family reunification activities, then the impact will be positive for the well-being and peaceful cohesion within host communities and displaced people and will help guarantee the right of all children to an education.

If schools remain closed and used as shelters by displaced households, the consequences will be critical for the well-being of these displaced children and the host communities. Out of school girls and boys are more likely to face protection risks, such as forced labor, domestic and sexual violence, recruitment by armed groups and gender-based violence. The longer schools remain closed, the less likely children are to return.

If displaced families are forced to vacate schools without support in terms of relocation to safe areas, people who are already very vulnerable will become more precarious, and risk being more exposed to protection risks or GBV, especially women and girls.

² The start of the school year for the 2023/2024 academic year is September 4, 2023.



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- The Shelter Cluster and its partners are mobilizing to provide assistance options to IDPs (i.e., upgrading or building host family shelters, building emergency shelters in sites; assistance through rent support). The cost of Shelter activities, including access to land, is \$14.5 million USD for 270,000 displaced people affected by the closure of schools in North Kivu, specifically in Masisi and Nyiragongo.
- The Education Cluster and its partners are mobilizing to rehabilitate schools used as shelters: replace school furniture (tables, benches, blackboards) damaged or used as firewood, clean and refurbish classrooms and damaged latrines. The estimated cost of rehabilitating 356 schools is \$2 million USD.
- The Child Protection Working Group and its partners are working in close collaboration with CP actors active in the response, CCCM Cluster, and all humanitarian actors involved to reduce the protection risks faced by girls, boys, and adolescents, including children with disabilities, when schools are used as shelters, as well as during the school decongesting process to ensure that children are safe during the relocation process.
- The CCCM Cluster is mobilizing to relieve congestion in schools and public buildings used by the population as displacement sites, and to ensure dignified living conditions for the population by relocating them to sites that meet minimum standards. The operation to relieve congestion in two public schools on the Kanyaruchinya axis in North Kivu has just been completed, resulting in the relocation of around 1,200 households, and we are continuing to mobilize for the continuation of this activity in other collective centers.

We appeal to donors, to the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the Ministry of Education, to humanitarian partners including UN agencies and international and national NGOs, to find accommodation solutions without delay and to guarantee the right to education for all girls and boys in the provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu, by ensuring safe accommodation that meets the needs of displaced populations.