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Navigating systemic resilience trade-offs in conflict settings: examples from Ituri, DRC



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Good facilitation is crucial - focusing less on what you do and more on interventions that can catalyse positive systemic change.

Market systems beset by armed conflict are susceptible to contradictory impulses when it comes to resilience programming: on the one hand, communities and businesses appreciate the importance of being able to rebound and adapt to shocks and stressors; on the other, they naturally are prone to focus on the more immediate crises.

The Feed the Future Democratic Republic of the Congo Strengthening Livelihoods and Resilience (SLR) project works in Ituri Province in the DRC's northeast, where these immediate conflict-related shocks take the form of unpredictable attacks from over six armed militia groups, crossfire with the Congolese and Ugandan armies, and flare-ups of interethnic violence.

The systemic challenges go beyond this, however, and include familiar stressors like drought and floods that shift suitable areas for staple and cash crops, cross-border trade issues, and all the psychosocial consequences that decades of a weak state, humanitarian dependence, and ongoing civil strife have had on important resilience capacities like trust, communication and collaboration.

The SLR project is a development activity with a long-term, resilience focus, but it does much of its work in chaotic contexts where the team needs to act quickly, before patterns in the system change again (if, indeed, they could even be

discerned in the first place!). In practice, given the emphasis on partnerships with communities and smaller system actors, the project risks losing credibility with its partners if it cannot act fast.

During the first year of implementation SLR has built momentum for long-term resilience while responding quickly to immediate shocks without compromising its role as facilitator. Here are three examples of how we have done it.

Let humanitarian or permanent system actors focus on the short-term crises

The most straightforward tactic to work on immediate needs is to partner with other actors in the system who are better equipped than SLR to engage on immediate shocks and urgent needs. This way, the team can focus on how the solutions to short-term needs can help foster longer-term, systemic results

In late 2021, Ituri's provincial government approached SLR seeking support for the rehabilitation of 112 kilometres of road between the villages of Nduye and Apodo in northeastern Mambasa territory. The road was impassable in the rainy season except by motorcycle, which cut off many communities in the area from markets in Mambasa in the south, and Haut-Uélé Province in the north.

The project team helped the provincial government identify and plan out the mechanics of engaging a private toll-road operator to negotiate a concession for the repair and ongoing management of the road. And although SLR paid for some of the travel and reconnaissance costs, it focused on advising the government on how to vet the toll-road operator and negotiate a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership. The government is currently finalising the agreement and the operator plans to begin (re)construction when the road dries out. This way, local government and its private-sector partner remained responsible for both road rehabilitation and maintenance, and the project remained focused as facilitator.

Accommodate expectations for quick action, but remaining in the background

When SLR arrived in Kasenyi on Lake Albert in mid-2021 to begin co-creating solutions to shared economic opportunities that would bring together farming and pastoral communities with a history of violent conflict, local organisations expected to begin with formal training and workshop events. The team recognised the importance of the need for public discussion to air grievances and reach consensus on a way forward but was also reticent to position the project as a *paterfamilias* in the community by holding a large multi-day event with transportation allowances, meals, and other elements communities are used to.

Instead, we flipped the script on this type of workshop and advised the community on how to organise and facilitate it themselves. The workshop space was provided by the local government, the planning and moderation by a local women-led community finance organisation, and the midday meal was pot-luck style, with every participating organisation bringing something. SLR's only material contributions were fish and soft drinks.

At the end of the workshop, the farmers and herders developed and signed a memorandum of understanding focused on peaceful cohabitation. This was an unexpected result for SLR, and a useful first step towards co-creating lasting land-tenure solutions. However, another important result for the project was a success at the optics level: the community saw that SLR was able to act quickly, but it did so without compromising its role as a facilitator.

Emphasise relationship and intellectual capital instead of financing

During the spring 2022 agricultural season, several of the communities most beset by militia attacks in Irumu, Djugu, and Mahagi territories were referred to SLR for assistance to plant a crop in time for the rainy season.

Most had no improved seeds and no cash resources to buy them. SLR wanted to help these communities to build trust and explore opportunities for new strategies. However, we knew that directly providing seeds or even offering a visible subsidy could compromise how we were perceived in the future, and that working unilaterally was a missed opportunity, even at such short notice, to build valuable long-term business relationships.

Instead of deploying its financial capital, SLR used its relationships and networks to make connections between these communities and local and international seed suppliers. And it advised farmers on how to aggregate their orders and negotiate seeds on credit. With the right framing, some of the input suppliers were willing to provide 100 per cent of the seeds on credit, to be repaid at harvest.

To facilitate this deal, SLR focused on where the seed companies perceived risks of non-repayment - for example, use of good agricultural practices, post-harvest storage, and the farmers' access to markets - and promised to work with the communities on how to address these risks. That de-risking exercise also helped SLR expand the scope of its resilience strategy in those areas - and it did so in a participative and iterative way with the community farmers and their business partners. And it did so without getting SLR directly involved as an actor in the seed deal.

As of this writing, a panic about a resurgence of ethnic violence in one of these communities caused both parties to back out of the deal at the last minute, and the

other two are still tentative, awaiting the arrival of the rains. This is a sobering reminder of the unpredictable, chaotic nature of the systems where the project operates, but it takes heart from the proof of its ability to deploy relationship and intellectual capital over and above its financial capital.

Remaining a facilitator of systemic resilience in a place like Ituri has required discipline for project staff and patient communication efforts with project partners, but the experiences so far show signs that it is possible to focus on long-term objectives in a conflict-affected place with many urgent needs.

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