

POLICY PAPER

Troubled waters on Lake Albert: conflict dynamics and prospects



Photo taken by Trócaire at the Kasenyi fishing camp, South Bahema Sector, Irumu Territory.

As the parties to the Doha, Washington and Lomé/African Union peace processes¹ strive to negotiate a path towards stability in the Great Lakes, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that there are many levers for bringing about broader peace and prosperity across the region. Cooperation on the joint management of natural resources, migration and the movement of people and goods – including labour – and on other common challenges facing the entire region, notably climate security and environmental protection, are all essential measures that can build trust.

Management of Lake Albert, situated between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda, is an excellent example of how important it is for countries to find ways of working together to manage

joint resources. Situated along a major trade route linking the north-eastern forests and gold mines of the DRC to the booming markets and ports of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, this area has, over many years, seen large communities of fishermen and cross-border traders create an ecosystem of regional integration, fostering social cohesion and bringing benefits to communities on both sides of the border. Working together can also work to protect the wider environment around Lake Albert – environmentalists have identified more than 45 species of fish endemic to Lake Albert, as well as 400 different species of birds across the region. The area is also home to populations of endangered elephants and crocodiles, as well as Murchison Falls National Park, which welcomes 50,000 visitors annually. However, instability on the DRC side

of the border, nourished by cross border illicit activities, as well as poor communication and engagement by security services on both sides of the border with fishing communities, risks undermining this fragile and important balance.

Updated conflict analysis

In 2026, International Alert and Trócaire joined forces to update the analysis of conflict dynamics around Lake Albert and to formulate recommendations for policy-makers and development donors to support an environment conducive to peace and prosperity in the Great Lakes region. The report concludes that the conflicts around Lake Albert do not result from isolated events; security gaps, institutional constraints, socio-economic pressures, governance issues, political instability, environmental shocks and social fragmentation are intertwined in a cumulative, mutually reinforcing cycle. Three main structural drivers of conflict are perpetuating instability in the region:

- Difficulties accessing resources, in particular fishing resources;
- Weak governance characterised by alleged abuses by security forces and state services, and accompanied by high levels of militarisation;
- Conflict over access and ownership of land, an increasingly precarious and precious resource across the region.

The struggle for access to resources — fisheries, fertile land and oil — fuels fierce competition between communities and economic actors. Added to this are governance failures: security forces accused of abuses, informal taxation that undermines communities, and institutions too weak to mediate conflicts. The ambiguity of borders, particularly around lake areas, leads to arbitrary arrests and clashes. Finally, increasing militarisation focuses protection on economic corridors, leaving many civilians exposed.

Faced with this complexity, government, the private sector and civil society are called to work together, across borders, to address conflict dynamics that impede regional economic development. The governments of the DRC and Uganda should make better use of existing frameworks and mechanisms to harmonise their regulations, clarify borders and jointly monitor tensions. Oil and fishing companies, could positively contribute to a reduction in tensions by ensuring greater transparency and fair engagement with communities impacted by their activities, whilst supporting community-based peace structures. As for civil society and NGOs, there is a great more to be done to build resilience programmes, raise awareness of rights and combat illegal practices.

Recommendations

The risks are tangible: an escalation of violence, the ecological collapse of fisheries and biodiversity, and increased control by armed groups. Yet opportunities do exist to prevent this and bolster stability. Regional integration through trade and shared resource management could transform rivalries into cooperation. Sustainable growth is achievable through transparent governance of the oil sector. Finally, the protection of biodiversity could pave the way for eco-tourism that offers hope to communities both in DRC and in Uganda.

For national and provincial authorities

To reduce insecurity and strengthen governance:

- Encourage both states (DRC and Uganda) to review the various bilateral agreements on the management of Lake Albert, particularly the 2018 bilateral agreement on the sustainable management of fishery resources and the 2022 operationalization of this agreement. An evaluation framework could be created and updated priority areas for improvement that need to be addressed urgently;

- Strengthen oversight and coordination arrangements for security actors operating in the fisheries sector, including mechanisms and or designated bodies/ structures to support accountability, clarify roles, and enhance civil-military coordination;
- Harmonise DRC–Uganda regulations and clarify lake boundaries; governments in the region should make the most of existing regional mechanisms around Lake Albert and wider Nile Basin to engage in bilateral negotiations to align their fishing regulations and clearly define lake boundaries. This would reduce cross-border tensions and secure economic activities;
- Establish institutional mechanisms for conflict monitoring and resolution, and inter-agency coordination: Create monitoring and coordination units bringing together security, justice and local government services. These mechanisms would enable a rapid and coherent response to crises;
- To the Congolese State:
 - Promulgate a new law regulating the fisheries sector (artisanal and industrial) without delay, taking into account current realities in the DRC’s lake and maritime sectors;
 - Restore security and state authority in conflict zones (Mahagi, Djugu and Irumu) in the DRC to facilitate the return of displaced populations to their places of origin, whilst developing resilience-building alternatives such as agricultural revitalisation to reduce the heavy pressure exerted by communities on Lake Albert.

For economic actors and businesses

To strengthen social cohesion and mediation:

- Promote and formalise local peace committees and community dialogues: it is in the interest of businesses to support the creation and operation of peace committees by facilitating community dialogues on resources and economic activities; reach out to NGOs and community leaders who can support businesses to navigate this.
- Systematically include women, young people and displaced persons/ returnees in decision-making bodies: Economic actors must ensure equitable representation within their governance and mediation structures.

To secure livelihoods and ensure equitable access to resources:

- Support adherence to designated fishing zones and the adoption of sustainable practices: Companies should collaborate with communities to ensure adherence to established fishing zones and apply environmentally sustainable practices in their operations, particularly in ways that minimize impacts on fisheries and lake ecosystems;
- Companies should enhance transparency in contractual and operational arrangements, ensure fair and timely compensation for affected communities, and contribute to equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms that support local development and livelihoods.



Photo of a farmer from the village of Katho in the South Bahema Sector, taken by Trócaire in April 2026

For NGOs and civil society organisations

To support vulnerable populations and strengthen community resilience:

- Implement targeted programmes for women traders, young people and displaced persons/returnees: develop economic and social projects tailored to these vulnerable groups to reduce their dependence on high-risk activities;
- Support training and information on rights, conflict management and the prevention of gender-based violence: organise awareness-raising campaigns and practical training to build local capacity;
- Conduct information and awareness-raising activities for community members on legal obligations in the fisheries sector;
- Support evidence-based community advocacy and dialogue with local authorities – Facilitate structured engagement platforms on priority issues including the collection of informal or non-regulated taxes and fees alongside other priorities to promote transparency, accountability, and adherence to existing legal frameworks.

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions:

- Combine security, governance, economic development and sustainable resource management: Interventions must be coordinated and multi-sectoral, in order to address the various causes of insecurity simultaneously;
- Regularly map conflicts, social vulnerability and the concentration of power: Establish monitoring and evaluation tools to measure changes in tensions and adjust strategies.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Doha, Washington and Lomé processes are three separate peace initiatives aimed at resolving the conflict between the DRC on the one hand, and the M23/AFC and Rwanda on the other. The Doha process (2025) focuses on restoring peace between the DRC government and the M23/AFC rebels. The Washington process (2025) addresses tensions between the DRC and Rwanda. The Lomé process represents a new national process officially launched in January 2026 with the support of the African Union, which aims to broaden the peace process and work towards creating an enabling environment, including at community level, for the implementation of a potential peace agreement (it focuses on the broader dynamics of the conflict, particularly the resolution of local, social and structural conflicts).

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