

A woman in a yellow shirt and patterned skirt carries a large sack of chickens on her back and another chicken in her hand. She is walking on a dirt path overlooking a lake. The background shows a cloudy sky, distant hills, and some buildings on the far shore.

International Alert.

# CROSSINGS

The journey to peace

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The journey to peace

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## About this photo essay

At a time when there is renewed international attention on eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this photo essay offers a brief and compelling insight into the lives of small-scale cross-border traders in the Great Lakes region. According to our 2012 research, *Walking in the dark: Informal cross-border trade in the Great Lakes region*, at least 45,000 of these cross-border traders work across the eastern borders of DRC. Three-quarters of them are women, who, despite the turmoil and insecurity in eastern DRC, keep the local economy afloat by ensuring the supply of commodities and making a meagre but essential living.

Since 2009 International Alert has been working to strengthen women's economic empowerment and build trust across borders in a region long torn apart by violence and where tensions remain high. In 2013 we commissioned award-winning photographer Carol Allen-Storey and independent researcher Alexis Bouvy to travel to eastern DRC and document the importance and transformative potential of cross-border trade to people's livelihoods, to tell the story of the daily lives of small-scale traders from DRC, as well as Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

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The Nyiragongo volcano's eruption in 2002 only lasted one day but destroyed 15% of Goma and made tens of thousands of people homeless.  
GOMA, DRC



The military defeat of the M23 rebel group in late 2013 has led to hope that eastern DRC may be on the path to peace. Although understandable, this optimism overlooks the fact that numerous armed groups continue to control large areas in the region, creating insecurity and preying on a defenceless population. Around two million Congolese citizens have been displaced from their homes in North and South Kivu, and hundreds of thousands more have fled to neighbouring countries.

This insecurity, which is strongly linked to the government's inability to effectively govern the vast state, has left millions of people without access to the most basic public services, such as education and healthcare.

Despite the troubles, however, life goes on. People are trading with each other across the borders, hoping that one day peace will prevail. This photo essay is a story about these shared hopes.

A charcoal trader carries a sack weighing over 100 kilos to sell in the market in Goma.

PETITE BARRIÈRE, GOMA, DRC



In 2012 Alert studied the dynamics of small-scale cross-border trade in the Great Lakes region, to understand the impact that improving this trade would have on good neighbourly relations, peace and security.

We found that traders are the victims of systematic abuse and harassment at the border, including being forced to pay illegal taxes. Traders are unable to develop their businesses because they are not aware of their rights, lack access to information, are badly organised and have very limited access to markets and capital.

We are therefore providing training to customs officials and traders, lobbying for policy change, producing radio programmes to communicate information, helping traders to join cooperatives, and organising dialogue between traders, border officials and authorities. Already, traders at the four borders where this work is underway have reported a reduction in the number of harassment cases, in some instances by 60%.

Cross-border traders, with back-breaking cargo, climb high up into the hills to a local village market so they can sell their goods.

**RUSIZI BORDER, BUKAVU, DRC**



Poor governance and war have had a devastating effect on the local economy in DRC. The popular areas where the majority of the urban population live are shanty towns made of planks and metal sheeting. In such a setting, employment opportunities are rare. Finding basic necessities to provide for a family is a daily struggle, and tens of thousands of petty merchants rely on the border as a primary means for survival.

“There is no work here in Congo,” says Papa Debaba, a Congolese cross-border trader. “If we make an effort and start small-scale cross-border trade, it is just to provide the bare necessities for us and our families.”

Maman Bahati is a 57-year-old Congolese mother of six, who has been selling manioc flour, rice and beans for the last 20 years and is now president of the Nguba market committee in Bukavu, eastern DRC.

Fifteen years ago, Maman Bahati’s husband fell ill with a nerve disease and had to leave his job as a nurse. Since then, Maman Bahati has been head of the household: she provides food for the children, pays school fees, and provides clothes and medical care. But Maman Bahati was not always a trader; she spent 17 years as a school teacher. “My true calling is being a teacher,” she says, “but when the teachers were no longer paid, I had to stop.” Her husband gave her 150 dollars to start her trade, and 20 years later this money still feeds the family. “If I have chosen to trade in food products, it’s because none of us can spend a day without eating, and so I always have clients,” she says.

A trader adjusts her *tonga* to haul a sack of charcoal.

MBUGANGARI MARKET, GISENYI, RWANDA



Dada Dorcas, aged 24, left school to work as a cross-border trader. When she was in her fourth year of secondary school, her family no longer had the means to send her to school. At the age of 20, Dorcas began supporting her parents and contributing to the upkeep of 12 siblings. Her father, a carpenter, gave her 60 dollars to start selling eggs. Since then, every week, Dorcas sits on the ground outside her small stall in Nyawera market in the city of Bukavu, eastern DRC, selling eggs for between six and nine Congolese francs. With what she earns, she helps her father provide the daily ugali (a food made from boiled and pounded cassava or maize flour) and beans for her family. Three years ago, she managed to save enough money to buy a pig, which her grandmother takes care of in her village in South Kivu, using the income from piglets to increase Dada Dorcas' capital.

“Eggs are a fragile commodity. They break easily and can get spoilt in the heat of the dry season,” says Dada Dorcas (on the left).

NYAWERA MARKET STALL, BUKAVU, DRC



“The border is like a field where everyone harvests, including civil servants,” explains Jerry Shungu, Director of APIBA, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) that supports women traders. The border is also a strange place of exceptional social turmoil that provides a daily spectacle of the human condition, from 6am to 6pm. A multitude of Congolese border agents and officials encircle the customs offices. These agents frequently yell, stop, harangue, push and grab people crossing, especially if they are carrying large quantities of merchandise.

In Goma in eastern DRC, at the border crossing known as the ‘Petite Barrière,’ civilians are from time to time employed by border agents to collect taxes on their behalf. An association of transporters impose their services on traders in Goma. “Some of these people can be really rough. They patrol the streets of the neighbourhood close to the border and if they see someone transporting merchandise, they grab the merchandise and demand payment. If you refuse, they take you into the back streets and intimidate you,” notes Maman Chantal, a Rwandan trader who sells beans.

A Congolese border policeman carefully inspects the *jetons* (passes) of a young Rwandan woman and her daughter.  
PETITE BARRIÈRE, GOMA, DRC



“There is a lot of rudeness and harassment at the border,” adds Maman Bahati. “The border agents only want money. You always have to discuss and negotiate. Refusing to pay may have them holding a grudge against you. The next time you cross, you run the risk of facing more problems,” she explains. “It is really not easy to cross the border every day. It is physically and morally exhausting.”

To get by, traders feel that they have no choice but to try to avoid paying by sneaking through. Others choose to pay the so-called ‘Chora Chora’ – women who hide the merchandise in their clothes, making arrangements with their trusted agents.

A border official leans on the barrier of the  
Rusizi 1 border bridge between DRC and  
Rwanda.  
BUKAVU, DRC



Maman Soki remembers how important it was for her to get a tricycle (the local equivalent of a wheelchair). Like most transporters at the border, Maman Soki contracted polio as a child. She was in the third grade of primary school. Aged only 12, she was forced to leave school, as her parents refused to pay her school fees. Maman Soki was hurt: "I was completely sad and desperate. One day I tried to poison myself. Life in this state seemed useless to me. It was the people from the association of the disabled who gave me courage. One day, they saw me, came up to me and explained that I could work and have a life," she recalls. At 16 years old, after difficult discussions and the intervention of her mother, her father agreed to sell some land to buy her a tricycle. Sixteen years on, Maman Soki is one of the older women transporters at the Petite Barrière in Goma.

Trapped by her girth in the tricycle, she protects herself from the sun with a rainbow umbrella. "It's when I am with my kids that I feel really happy," she says. We ask if she is married. "What man would want a woman in my state?" she asks. "I have had four children by four different men. Every time they learned that I was pregnant, they ran off. For a man, being disabled is different. He can find a woman to marry. For a woman, being disabled means remaining alone. But I have managed to survive and feed my family. It is not simple to be a woman in Congo, even less if you are a disabled woman."

Maman Soki is one of the older women transporters at Petite Barrière.  
GISENYI, RWANDA



In the past, people with disabilities, such as Maman Soki, enjoyed preferential treatment, not paying the same tax as other traders. “It was a good time for us,” recalls Damien. “We could even work in Kamembe in Rwanda. But the war ruined everything,” he adds regretfully. Political tensions in the region have forced countries to be more protective and insular. Rwanda, for example, prohibited Congolese transporters from working inside Rwanda, in an attempt to create employment opportunities for Rwandans living close to the border.

Despite his disability, Damien commands respect. His eyes shine with confidence; his words are calm and measured. “This is my bike,” he says while climbing into his tricycle loaded with merchandise and ready to be pushed by three young men. For 3,000 Congolese francs or more, depending on weight, transport can be arranged in a couple of minutes. When Damien started the association for transporters with disabilities 20 years ago, his goal was to allow people with disabilities working at the border to help as well as advise each other. They called the association *Mapendo* (Swahili for ‘love’). Damien explains: “The name bears witness to the brotherhood and solidarity that we, the disabled, have with each other.” If a person with a disability wants to work as a transporter at the border, they have to join the association and pay the fees. The fees are used as a social fund: if one of the members faces a particular difficulty or has an exceptional expense such as an illness, birth, baptism or wedding, they can receive assistance through this fund.

“I command respect as a transporter; if I begged that would not happen,” says Damien.

RUSIZI BORDER, BUKAVU, DRC



Harassment at the border is not the only challenge that threatens the small enterprises of merchants. The fighting and tensions that continue to scar the region have a negative impact on small-scale traders, sometimes destroying their trade completely. “The war always robs us of everything,” says Maman Bahati. “During the war, the first things to be looted are the food depots. For us small-scale traders, that means that each time you have to start from scratch,” she adds.

The presence of various armed groups and recurring clashes between different factions often make it difficult for farmers to access their fields. In December 2013 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that there were 1.1 million displaced persons in DRC’s North Kivu province alone. Because of insecurity, a sharp drop in agricultural productivity and completely dilapidated roads, the provinces of North and South Kivu rely on staple food supplies from Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

This interdependence, the need to trade with each other, keeps people from the different countries attached to each other, regardless of the politics of their respective governments. “The Congolese are among our most important clients,” notes Maman Shalom, a Rwandan potato seller in Mbugangari market in Gisenyi, western Rwanda. Furaha, a Congolese tomato seller, confirms: “We collaborate well with our Rwandan counterparts. There is not a problem between us. We even help each other if difficulties arise.” But Furaha adds: “So why aren’t our politicians able to do the same? They must always aggravate the tensions between us. Our governments would do better to follow our example.”

A trader dispenses palm oil ready for sale.  
PETITE BARRIÈRE, GOMA, DRC



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For Esperance, a chicken seller, every day is a struggle. She is the head of a household, the sole economic provider, as her husband does not work. Uniquely, the family work as a team. Kalembo, her husband, does domestic chores and admits he enjoys cooking (which is fairly unorthodox for a Congolese man). Esperance, meanwhile, crosses the border to purchase the chickens. Her eldest siblings manage the stall in the market.

Esperance takes a rest following her return from a long day's work.  
MUHANGU VILLAGE, BUKAVU, DRC



International Alert's work on cross-border trade helps traders become more confident in demanding that their rights be respected. Today, there is an improved climate of trust at the border, between women traders and border officials, and between women traders from different countries. Traders collaborate more freely with one another, provide each other with credit, devise common strategies to deal with emerging problems, and are exhibiting solidarity. Traders have also gained better business skills and knowledge, such as when to save, buy or sell stock, thus increasing their ability to switch to goods with higher profit margins.

But not everything has changed. A lot of issues remain. "One of our principal demands is that taxes be posted publicly at the border, so we can know what we have to pay and to whom; but the authorities have not done this yet," says Maman Chantal, a Rwandan trader. "My biggest problem is capital," says Dada Dorcas. Traders need capital to start trading, but most traders have ridiculously low capital, as low as 50, 20 or sometimes even 15 dollars. Access to affordable microcredit through group loans to cooperatives could give the traders the capital they need to develop their business. A group of 'Chora Chora' women in Goma laugh together: "If we had a little capital ... we would become the bosses!"

[Assya, a flour vendor and president of a cross-border cooperative of flour vendors, speaks about her daily challenges.](#)  
**GISENYI, RWANDA**



Traders are beginning to hope that things *can* change. Maman Chantal explains: “In the past, it could be difficult for a Rwandan trader to cross to Congo. If you had a problem, no one would help you. Some of us were even afraid to cross. But the other day, a Rwandan trader had an accident in Goma, and the Congolese women took her to the hospital. This never happened before.” Maman Bahati adds: “There is real reciprocity between us. The Rwandan traders need us like we need them. When you have been clients for a long time, you become sisters. Over there in Rwanda, they say ‘*Turikumwe*’ – we are one.”

From Goma to Gisenyi, Bukavu to Cyangugu, the common wish of Rwandan and Congolese women and men cross-border traders is that, one day, there will be security and good collaboration between countries in the region and that their trade will be able to lift them and their families out of their poverty.

Maman Bahati, a Congolese trader, takes time to play with one of her grandchildren.  
BUKAVU, DRC



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