

Bukavu: City research brief

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The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative research programme, seeking to tackle complex urban development challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. ACRC aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions and urban services for all city residents, especially disadvantaged communities.

ACRC's research integrates political settlements thinking with city systems analysis, to understand the dynamics underpinning infrastructure and service challenges in cities. Targeted analysis of specific urban development domains provides deeper insights into how sectoral shortcomings can be overcome and residents' needs addressed.

The city of Bukavu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging researchers, political actors, the private sector, civil society organisations and marginalised groups to co-produce knowledge and advance the adoption of reforms resulting from the research findings.

Research overview

The city of Bukavu, capital of South Kivu Province in eastern DRC, covers an area of 60 km². Its population of 1,625,785 people, according to 2019 estimates, is spread across three districts made up of 20 neighbourhoods in total. It is experiencing population growth driven by a resurgence of insecurity in rural areas and civil wars that are tearing apart the eastern area of the country.

The city's fragile colonial-era infrastructures need improvements in order to absorb immigration from rural areas (driven by recurring conflicts and the activity of national and foreign armed groups), provide commercial opportunities and address multiple land-use planning problems, especially on the outskirts, where access to water, electricity, health and road infrastructure is problematic. For example, there are issues with access to and availability of basic social services, extensively

degraded infrastructure (roads, schools), a rise in insecurity, uncontrolled construction and obstruction of easements, and natural disasters (that is, land subsidence, landslides, fires).

In Bukavu, the ACRC research framework focused on political settlements within the city. The aim was to study specific urban development domains – such as safety and security, land and connectivity, and health, wellbeing and nutrition – as well as to apply city systems analysis to understand the dynamics underpinning infrastructure and service challenges in areas including water, waste management, transportation and health.

Research summaries

Political settlement

A political analysis of the city of Bukavu and its links to the national political settlement in the DRC shows that the political situation at the national level since 2019 has been relatively stable. Clientelism is the dominant mode of governance, even though elections, whether rigged or not, are a determining factor in who gains power. Provinces and cities have de jure autonomy but very little de facto autonomy, partly because the central government seeks to control them. Despite the central government's control over cities and provinces, the latter often manage to create spaces of semi-autonomy for their own interests.



Urban systems

> Water

Water supply and accessibility is a persistent problem in many cities in the DRC, including Bukavu. Regideso, the state's main water supplier, is struggling to provide a service to all neighbourhoods, as the city's rapid expansion and population explosion are exceeding Regideso and other suppliers' production capacity.

In addition to these factors, mountainous terrain, unregulated land sales, construction on Regideso facilities, outdated pipes, landslides and other malfunctions in interconnected water systems contribute to the problem. However, the reform that opened the water sector to liberalisation represents an opportunity, provided that the central and provincial governments agree to develop an inclusive and contextualised policy, and then create favourable conditions for domestic and foreign investment.

> Health

The health system is among the most structured systems in the city of Bukavu and in the DRC in general. Health policy governing all health zones is generated centrally by the National Ministry of Health, and is based on a primary healthcare strategy. Despite this system-wide structure, there is some dysfunction caused by political interference. Insofar as the infrastructure exists, the population of Bukavu can hypothetically access the healthcare system, but many cannot afford to do so in practice.



> Transport

The privatisation of the transport system in 1977 encouraged private stakeholders to invest in Bukavu's transportation, improving its accessibility for local populations. However, several challenges remain: roads in severe disrepair, lack of parking and bus stops, weak traffic control and regulation, corruption and political interference. A reform of the system is needed; it should aim to modernise the infrastructure and traffic control systems and foster a favourable investment climate for both the state and private stakeholders.

> Food distribution

Until 1995, Bukavu relied heavily on rural areas and neighbouring provinces for its food supply. Armed conflicts, soil infertility, the deterioration of agricultural roads, climate problems and demographic pressure led to food deficits and an increasing reliance on imports. This study highlights the key actors, their roles and the challenges hindering access to and the functioning of the food system. These factors are also influenced by public-private partnerships and informal systems, often unregulated by law. An integrated approach with reforms is recommended to ensure the sustainability of food distribution.

> Waste management and sanitation

A solid waste management system and a sewer sanitation system exist in the city of Bukavu, but they are ineffective and contribute to the city's unsanitary conditions. The city produces 898 tonnes of waste per day. The research shows that while some small efforts are being made in solid waste management, the sewer sanitation system is largely broken: there are no specific initiatives for wastewater management, regardless of the source. Our observations lead us to conclude that a kind of democratisation of waste management and sanitation policies has taken place in Bukavu. In the absence of a coordinated policy, each stakeholder defines their own sanitation and waste management policy, based on their geographic location, income, plot size, season (dry or rainy) and access to disposal systems (roads, pipes, rivers, lakes, and so on).



> Law and order

The predominance of informal practices, corruption and a lack of professionalism fuel distrust of the judicial system in Bukavu. Dysfunctions of judicial institutions – due, for example, to their precarious working conditions and lack of transparency – exacerbate issues such as a lack of knowledge of the law, complex procedures, high costs and the infrequent enforcement of court decisions. These obstacles limit access to justice and favour political and economic actors. As a result, the population turns to certain civil society organisations for support in safety and legal matters.

Domains

> Safety and security

This study addresses the persistent problems of insecurity and safety in Bukavu. The research favoured a qualitative methodological approach. The results confirm the persistence of insecurity and inadequate safety, due to complex problems, including theft, armed robbery, kidnapping, burglaries, killings, extortion and mob justice involving various actors.

There are formal and informal mechanisms that attempt to reduce insecurity, but with limited results. The study suggests far-reaching reforms of security mechanisms, based on collaboration between the state and non-state actors.

> Land and connectivity

Bukavu is divided into three zones: the city centre, working-class neighbourhoods and informal settlements. Population growth has led to a strong demand for housing and soaring land and rent prices, which vary, depending on the location of plots and their connectedness to the rest of the city.

Real estate is a prosperous sector which serves as a means to reinvest capital and confer prestige on its owners. Political arrangements have facilitated the violation of urban planning standards and the deterioration of the city. This is visible in the settlement of 60% of the population on unsafe sites, the obstruction of public thoroughfares, unsanitary conditions, the city's isolation and lack of regional connectivity, and conflicts.

Potential strategic interventions

Research conducted in the first half of 2023 identified eight complex priority issues:

- > Overcrowding of housing resulting from the excessive fragmentation of residential plots in certain neighbourhoods.
- > Vulnerability of low-income households, due to rising prices for rents and land.
- > Settlement of more than 50% of the population on sites unsuitable for construction, exposed to risks of subsidence, erosion or flooding.
- > Insecurity of land title in neighbourhoods where hybrid land governance prevails (interference between the government land administration and customary authorities).
- > Unsanitary conditions in the city.
- > Land disputes, both individual and collective.
- > Obstruction or non-existence of public thoroughfares in certain neighbourhoods that are subject to irregular settlement.
- > The city's isolation caused by a lack of maintenance of national roads and rural access routes.



> Health, wellbeing and nutrition

Access to healthy food is hampered by wars and conflicts, which have displaced farming communities and accelerated Bukavu's population growth. This is compounded by the poor condition of agricultural roads, low field yields, rural and urban poverty, a lack of state planning, dependence on imports, inflation and other factors.

High prevalence of child malnutrition causes and coexists with non-communicable diseases. Although many actors are working to promote healthy food, their interventions remain curative rather than preventative. The political elite also exploit needs around improving health and nutrition in order to get elected, but do very little to address them. The main priority identified by the project is thus improving and balancing the diet of families experiencing child malnutrition in informal settlements.

Potential strategic interventions

This proposed action research project targets child malnutrition in the suburbs of Bukavu, focusing on accessible and nutritious food for vulnerable families. The intervention aims to address high levels of undernutrition and nutritional deficiencies among children through seed distribution, small-scale livestock rearing and comprehensive awareness campaigns.

The approach, anchored in collaborative efforts across government, health, education and agriculture sectors, seeks to address the underlying causes of malnutrition, emphasising local agriculture and food education. It aligns with DRC national laws and international commitments, advocating for policy reform and stakeholder collaboration to improve health and food security.

By integrating non-communicable disease prevention and promoting local food production, the project supports urban reforms and sustainable development goals, aiming for long-term nutritional improvement and improved economic productivity in Bukavu.



About this brief

This brief was produced by ACRC's Bukavu team to outline research findings and potential interventions, in preparation for the final city uptake workshop in the programme's Foundation Phase (2022-23).

Photo information (by order of appearance): 1. Transportation in the city of Bukavu - APC; 2. Transportation in the city of Bukavu - APC; 3. Community-led water supply in Funu in the Cimpunda neighbourhood - Diana Mitlin; 4. View of the city of Bukavu - APC; 5. A landslide in Bukavu - Diana Mitlin; 6. Neighbourhood residents transporting water - Diana Mitlin.



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