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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The humanitarian class: Transformation and tension in eastern Congo

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Abstract

Humanitarianism is imagined to be a short-term response to a temporary emergency. However, in reality, both crisis and aid often become protracted. This article examines a glaring consequence of protracted humanitarian presence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo: the formation of a local humanitarian class, for whom the sector becomes a site of social mobility and identity construction. Incorporation into the humanitarian political economy, however, has been vastly unequal, exacerbating processes of social stratification. There has been a groundswell of public discontent with global humanitarianism. Framing these tensions as a story of local resistance versus international intervenors overlooks the fact that most employees working for global aid agencies in the Global South are locally hired. This article illustrates how protracted humanitarian action also generates localised tensions around access to resources and employment, and questions of material inequality and class stratification produced by humanitarian permanence itself. A focus on local class transformation and stratification challenges neat assumptions about local empowerment in the global politics of humanitarianism. Instead, the humanitarian class is at the centre of contemporary debates about the future of international humanitarianism: a lightning rod for mounting public frustration at the paradoxical consequences of protracted emergency operations.

Keywords: class; conflict; DRC; humanitarianism; identity; labour

Introduction

In the summer of 2024, Gaël[1] and I looked out over Lake Kivu. The watery horizon was visible from the balcony of his new house in Goma, the capital of North Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Gaël and his family had recently moved into the first floor. The rest of the house was in varying stages of completion: a maze of wooden scaffolding supported the mounting concrete structure. Hammering punctuated our conversation as we paused to take in the view of the neighbourhood. Gaël's house was not the only building under construction: houses were sprouting up all around us, and below, labourers weaved their way through alleys of volcanic rock with wheelbarrows and sacks of sand. Gaël pointed to the neighbouring house: 'he works for the UN', and then, gesturing to another, he added, 'I think he is with Save the Children'. Gaël continued to point out nearby houses, listing the acronyms associated with their owners. 'This is the neighbourhood of humanitarians', he concluded.

I first met Gaël eight years previously in Goma, which has become the regional headquarters of international NGOs and of one of the world's most expensive and largest UN peacekeeping

[1]Names are pseudonyms.

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missions. This city is often described as an archetypical 'Aidland'[2] or 'Peaceland',[3] home to socially and spatially segregated foreign workers who occupy bunkered worlds. However, most employees working for international humanitarian agencies are locally hired, like Gaël. As we ate lunch in his new home, Gaël reflected upon his career, which had begun when a global NGO arrived in his home village during the Second Congo War (1998–2003). Gaël was employed as a guard, and over the next two decades, he worked his way up to a post in regional management. Gesturing to his new house, he concluded, 'humanitarianism changed my life'.

Gaël referred to himself as part of the 'humanitarian class' that has formed in the Kivu provinces of eastern DRC, where both conflict and emergency operations have become the status quo. International aid agencies arrived in Goma in 1994, when 800,000 Rwandans fled across the border. During the two wars that followed, NGOs took on increasing responsibility in service provision. The peace deal in 2002 was followed by a more intractable phase of violence, which continues to this day, with more than 100 armed groups in the area. Over the last 30 years, the international humanitarian industry has become a permanent feature: Goma is a regional NGO hub. Prolonged aid presence has reshaped the political economy, and with it the lives of those employed in the sector, who now have steady salaries, new forms of mobility, and social networks. For the humanitarian class, aid has become a site of identity formation.

In this article, I examine this social consequence of protracted aid: the formation of a local humanitarian class. Global humanitarian operations have far-reaching and unexpected effects beyond their intended mandate and timespan. Humanitarian action is not merely a short-term response to a temporary emergency but radically reshapes the status quo, as both crisis and aid responses become protracted. Adopting a Weberian perspective, I show how these indirect consequences are not just economic but also profoundly social. I argue that prolonged humanitarian presence creates new economic opportunities and social identities, as well as a form of ideational change: a transformation of attitudes and outlooks as local actors appropriate and reconfigure global norms. Ultimately, humanitarianism becomes a site of class formation.

However, not everybody had a story like Gaël's. Incorporation into the humanitarian economy has been vastly unequal, exacerbating processes of social stratification: a humanitarian underclass has formed. As Gaël put it, this has created tensions: at a personal level amongst friends and family, and at a societal level, with growing frustration at 30 years of international programmes that have failed to accomplish their stated aims. As one activist in Goma explained, local workers are seen as complicit in a humanitarian system that perpetuates crisis to keep itself in business. A focus on the humanitarian class moves beyond a binary of international intervenors versus local resistance to reveal the class transformations and tensions produced at a local level by protracted humanitarian action. Amidst increased calls to shift power to local actors as a means of improving the efficiency and equity of aid, an analysis of class transformation and stratification unsettles neat assumptions about local empowerment in the politics of global humanitarianism.

This article draws on ethnographic research in eastern DRC since 2017, encompassing more than two years of fieldwork in the Kivu provinces, interviews with over 100 Congolese humanitarian workers, as well as 200 interviews with foreign aid workers, political authorities, customary authorities, civil society, and youth groups, as well as 'beneficiaries' of various aid programmes. During this period, I conducted research into how humanitarians negotiate access in conflict (2016–2020), the politics surrounding the Ebola response (2020–2022), experiences of COVID-19 (2020–2022), and inequalities in aid organisations (2021–2023). This article draws, in particular, on insights from three months of fieldwork in Goma in 2022 and 2024, when I examined public debates about the contradictory effects of international humanitarian assistance. This included 40 additional interviews with humanitarians, political pressure groups, civil society, and youth

[2]Anne-Meike Fechter and Heather Hindman (eds), *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers: The Challenges and Futures of Aidland* (Kumarian Press, 2011).

[3]Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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groups, as well as undertaking focus groups with activists in the city.[4] My inductive analysis focused on the identities, tensions, and alternatives produced by protracted international aid. I asked aid employees how they saw their own position as humanitarians, and I approached youth groups and associations in the city who had been openly critical of the international aid system to better understand their concerns, as well as any proposed alternatives. During these discussions, the humanitarian class emerged as a central theme.

Protracted presence

Global humanitarian action is imagined as an urgent short-term intervention to alleviate immediate suffering in the wake of an 'emergency': a sudden, temporary break from the status quo.[5] The priority becomes speed and urgency; the aim is often restorative rather than transformative. Despite long-standing initiatives trying to link emergency relief with development, humanitarian funding models and planning remain on short-term cycles. Humanitarians distinguish themselves through immediacy, framing their work as a short-term, technical response. Yet, emergencies are not short-term, nor are they exceptions from the norm. Instead, emergencies become protracted systems, with benefits for the various actors involved.[6] Crises become a chronic condition rather than a moment of rupture,[7] and humanitarianism, too, becomes protracted, with far-reaching effects beyond its stated aims.

So, what happens when what is imagined to be temporary becomes quasi-permanent? A set of paradoxes emerges. Much has been written about these consequences of humanitarian assistance. A political economy perspective, for example, illustrates how humanitarian aid can exacerbate conflict by feeding war economies and sparking new contests over resources.[8] Humanitarian operations can reconfigure local political authority by influencing existing power struggles and weakening states' political accountability.[9] Meanwhile, attempts to remain neutral can lead to complicity in the crimes committed by those in control.[10] Rather than transforming a deeply unequal global economy, humanitarianism can consolidate the conditions that caused suffering in the first place.

Protracted humanitarian presence, therefore, has profound *indirect* effects that are highly visible and transform political economies and social relations.[11] The presence of foreign aid agencies, for example, can create a real-estate boom, leading to the proliferation of private security companies, as well as the dollarisation of the economy.[12] A high number of well-paid international intervenors creates demand for new economic sectors, such as touristic infrastructure, luxurious hotels, restaurants, and supermarkets, whilst increasing rental prices, accelerating urban gentrification, and marginalising the poor.[13] The centrality of international agencies in service provision reduces the ability of state administrators to attach conditions to aid programmes.[14] Meanwhile, the protracted presence of international agencies shifts the local labour market, as people are drawn

[4]Conversations were in French with some Congolese Swahili. Translations are my own.

[5]Craig Calhoun, 'The idea of emergency: Humanitarian action and global (dis)order', in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (eds), *Contemporary States of Emergency* (Zone Books, 2010), pp. 29–58.

[6]David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (Polity Press, 2008); and Sarah Lischer, 'Collateral damage: Humanitarian assistance as a cause of conflict', *International Security*, 28:1 (2003), pp. 79–109.

[7]Henrik Vigh, 'Crisis and chronicity: Anthropological perspectives on continuous conflict and decline', *Ethnos,* 73:1 (2008), pp. 5–24.

[8]Keen, *Complex Emergencies.*

[9]Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1997).

[10]Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

[11]Mark Schuller, *Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).

[12]Karen Büscher and Koen Vlassenroot, 'Humanitarian presence and urban development: New opportunities and contrasts in Goma, DRC', *Disasters,* 34:2 (2010), pp. S256–73.

[13]Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'Living in the yellow zone: The political geography of intervention in Haiti', *Political Geography*, 67 (2018), pp. 88–99.

[14]Büscher and Vlassenroot, 'Humanitarian presence'.

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into the aid economy[15] – working in humanitarian operations, but also in cleaning, security, driving, and sex work.[16] The arrival of many large-scale enterprises has similar effects on the political economy. However, this presents a particular paradox for humanitarianism because of the imaginary of emergencies as temporary and short-term, and the philosophy of 'do no harm' that is at the core of the humanitarian enterprise.

Locally-hired humanitarians are not peripheral to the international aid industry, but central to how it works in practice. Much like the company towns of multi-national corporations of the past, cities like Goma have become aid boomtowns. Studies of development, humanitarianism, and global health demonstrate how, despite their universalist ethos, aid practices reproduce racialised and gendered inequalities, between international intervenors and local populations, as well as between different staff.[17] In particular, international staff have access to senior posts, salaries, job security, and security infrastructures that are not afforded to the majority of humanitarians, a diverse and heterogeneous group who are hired on local contracts.[18] As a result, the international humanitarian industry relies on local labour that remains insecure and precarious.[19]

But what about the position of this local workforce outside of the global aid system? Whilst locally-hired workers are unequally and precariously incorporated into the global aid worker hierarchy, they also occupy a particular social position in the local political economy, with access to steady monthly salaries, new social and physical mobility, language skills, social norms, and ways of working. In the process, humanitarian becomes an 'exclusive, class-based category of belonging'.[20] Protracted humanitarian presence, therefore, can also exacerbate social inequalities beyond the humanitarian sector in societies that become the sites of long-term global intervention.

Locating class

I adopt class as a theoretical lens to make sense of these social transformations. Humanitarianism is a rich site for studying the dialectical relationship between global and local actors,[21] the 'circulation' and 'vernacularisation' of global norms, and the resultant processes of identity transformation in the transnational sphere.[22] Class is an important lens for analysing this site of international politics, because class dynamics both shape and are produced within the labour of humanitarianism.[23] Humanitarianism is often conceptualised as a set of values or principles, but it is also a form of labour. The concept of class helps make sense of processes of social stratification, describing the structured inequalities in access to economic resources, power, and social status. Broadly, class refers to a group who share similar socio-economic positions, often defined by their relationship

[15]Myfanwy James, 'From rebel to humanitarian: Military savoir faire and humanitarian practice in eastern DR Congo', *Development and Change*, 53:1 (2022), pp. 166–89.

[16]Kathleen Jennings and Morten Bøås, 'Transactions and interactions: Everyday life in the peacekeeping economy', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:3 (2015), pp. 281–95.

[17]Rebecca Peters, *Implementing Inequality: The Invisible Labor of International Development* (Rutgers University Press, 2020); and Lauren Carruth, *Love and Liberation: Humanitarian Work in Ethiopia's Somali Region* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

[18]Didier Fassin, 'Humanitarianism as a politics of life', *Public Culture*, 19:3 (2007), pp. 499–520; and Myfanwy James, 'Humanitarian fables: Morals, meanings and consequences for humanitarian practice', *Third World Quarterly*, 43:2 (2022), pp. 475–93.

[19]Elisa Pascucci, 'The local labour building the international community: Precarious work within humanitarian spaces', *Economy and Space*, 51:3 (2019), pp. 743–60.

[20]Patricia Ward and Junru Bian, 'Class matters in humanitarianism', in Tobias Denskus, Bandana Purkayastha, and Silke Roth (eds), *Handbook on Humanitarianism and Inequality* (Edward Elgar, 2024), pp. 251–64 (p. 251).

[21]Adam Kochanski, Emily Scott, and Jennifer Welsh, 'Localization in world politics: Bridging theory and practice', *Global Studies Quarterly,* 5:1 (2025).

[22]Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Sally Engle Merry, 'Transnational human rights and local activism: Mapping the middle', *American Anthropologist*, 108:1 (2006), pp. 38–51.

[23]Ward and Bian, 'Class matters'.

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to labour, wealth, and opportunities. A Marxist perspective highlights the importance of material relations, control of assets, and ownership. It emphasises social changes related to labour hierarchies, as capitalism organises and produces relations of power based on one's relationship to the means of production.[24] A Weberian approach, however, illustrates how class is not just about income: individuals with similar economic means may experience different social outcomes due to variations in cultural capital, education, or social networks. Class is, therefore, determined by a combination of economic position (wealth and income), social status (prestige, education, and lifestyle), as well as political power (influence and authority).[25]

Class hierarchies are reproduced within the humanitarian sector, as careers often rely on social networks, the ability to conduct volunteering and unpaid internships, as well as cultural and linguistic capital.[26] Joining this transnational workforce requires the financial means to gain higher education, often in contexts where this is only accessible to the upper classes.[27] Humanitarianism has, as a result, been described as a middle class profession for a transnational elite.[28] In Europe, in particular, humanitarianism has often been conceived as a source of passion and purpose and an opportunity to escape lives of relative affluence.[29] Class hierarchies are then *produced* in the aid sphere: the global division of labour reinforces a two-tier system, whereby employees on local contracts remain second-class workers.[30]

Despite this focus on class *within* the humanitarian sector, as Estella Carpi highlights, 'little attention has been paid to the class-based inequality that the very presence of humanitarian agencies produces in crisis-affected settings'.[31] The humanitarian sector constitutes a major industry in contexts of crisis. Elites who already own properties, cars, and necessary licenses materially benefit from the humanitarian presence, responding to the new demand for transport, housing, and goods.[32] The local aid worker also becomes a classed position: joining the industry depends on access to higher education, the ability to speak a colonial language, or the social and cultural capital required to broker and translate between donor interests and 'beneficiary' populations.[33] The humanitarian economy becomes an opportunity for middle classes and educated youth to find steady employment with salaries that are lower than those of internationals but significantly higher than those in the local job market. Humanitarian, therefore, becomes a classed identity: defined by access to wealth and material benefits, but also social status related to prestige and lifestyle.

Class holds important social and cultural meanings. The long-term presence of global NGOs profoundly affects the experiences, identities, and aspirations of those employed in the sector. Humanitarianism has transformed people's economic but also social lives – their life trajectories and social relations. Joining the aid sector is a means of social mobility, but it is also a way for individuals to pursue a broader goal, to obtain a new identity that is middle class or 'progressive'.[34] Aellah and Geissler, for instance, examine how, through prolonged transnational medical research

[24]Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin, 1998).

[25]Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Bedminster Press, 1968).

[26]Silke Rothe, 'Linguistic capital and inequality in aid relations', *Sociological Research Online*, 24:1 (2019), pp. 38–54.

[27]Mamane Sani Souley Issoufou, 'Une nouvelle élite dans les métiers de l'international: les expatriés africains d'Épicentre et leurs rapports professionnels avec les employés locaux', *Critique Internationale*, 81:4 (2018), pp. 83–106.

[28]Issoufou, 'Une nouvelle elite'.

[29]Liisa Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Duke University Press, 2015).

[30]Ward and Bian, 'Class matters'.

[31]Estella Carpi, 'Bringing social class into humanitarian debates: The case of northern Lebanon', available at: {https://southernresponses.org/2021/02/11/bringing-social-class-into-humanitarian-debates-the-case-of-northern-lebanon-part-one/}, accessed 28 April 2026.

[32]Estella Carpi, 'Learning and earning in constrained labour markets: The politics of livelihoods in Lebanon's Halba', in Juliano Fiori and Andrea Rigon (eds), *Making Lives: Refugee Self-Reliance and Humanitarian Action in Cities* (Save the Children, 2017), pp. 11–36.

[33]David Lewis and David Mosse (eds), *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies* (Kumarian Press, 2006).

[34]Ann Swidler and Susan Watkins, '"Teach a man to fish": The sustainability doctrine and its social consequences', *World Development*, 37:7 (2009), pp. 1182–96; and Celayne Heaton Shrestha, '"They can't mix like we can": Bracketing differences

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in African cities, locally-hired employees become a new class with 'immediate material gains' but also with the 'potential, imagined possibilities' of success, such as smart dress, sponsored education, and travel.[35] Humanitarian work, for many, has become a site of identity construction or subject formation.[36] Integration into humanitarian networks has, ultimately, transformed not only people's economic circumstances and social status but also attitudes and outlooks. These economic and social effects of protracted humanitarianism cannot be separated; they are deeply intertwined. Yet, not everyone benefits from the salaries and status that a humanitarian career might provide. The humanitarian industry favours those with the qualifications, cultural capital, and networks deemed useful for the programmes and priorities of international institutions.[37] Protracted humanitarian action has produced winners and losers, generating societal tensions in the process.

This focus on local class formation and stratification complicates assumptions about local empowerment and agency in contemporary debates about the global politics of humanitarianism. Over the last decade, there has been increased scholarly and policy attention to 'localisation', with growing calls to transfer power, decision-making, and funding to local actors to make aid more efficient, equitable, and legitimate. In 2020, activists and scholars highlighted the long-standing structural racism underpinning aid, calling into question how humanitarianism works, for whom, its funding and practices, and its discriminatory and paternalistic treatment of the people it is supposed to help.[38] Transferring power to actors in the Global South has been proposed as one way of 'decolonising' the contemporary system, so that it avoids reproducing 'the oppression of the current hegemonic politics'.[39] A 'local turn' has also taken place in development and peacebuilding, with the idea that local ownership and partnerships can help to improve legitimacy and effectiveness.[40]

Yet, localisation remains deeply contested and under-theorised in discussions around aid.[41] As research on peacebuilding highlights, 'the local' is often essentialised as an authentic homogeneous bloc that is 'static, rural, traditional'[42] and defined in binary opposition to the liberal international.[43] This risks romanticising the local as a bounded and isolated site of virtuous resistance against global oppression.[44] Crucially, the local is not a 'unitary actor':[45] it is a site of power struggle and an ongoing construction.[46]

and the professionalization of NGOs in Nepal', in David Lewis and David Mosse (eds), *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Development* (Kumarian Press, 2006), pp. 195–216.

[35]Gemma Aellah and Paul Geissler, 'Seeking exposure: Conversions of scientific knowledge in an African city', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 54:3 (2016), pp. 389–417.

[36]Luisa Enria, 'The Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone: Mediating containment and engagement in humanitarian emergencies', *Development and Change*, 50:6 (2019), pp. 1602–23.

[37]Carpi, 'Learning and earning in constrained labour markets'; and Jennings and Boas, 'Transactions and interactions'.

[38]Degan Ali and Marie-Rose Murphy, 'Black Lives Matter is also a reckoning for foreign aid and international NGOs', *openDemocracy* (19 July 2020).

[39]Tammam Aloudat, 'Who gets to decolonise humanitarianism?', *IFHV* (28 June 2021).

[40]Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, 'The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace', *Third World Quarterly*, 34:5 (2013), pp. 763–83.

[41]Kristina Roepstorff, 'A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action', *Third World Quarterly*, 41:2 (2020), pp. 284–301.

[42]Roger Mac Ginty, 'Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly*, 365 (2015), pp. 840–56 (p. 841).

[43]Thania Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: A critical assessment towards an agenda for future research', *Third World Quarterly*, 36:5 (2015), pp. 857–74.

[44]Meera Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace', *Security Dialogue*, 44:3 (2013), pp. 259–78.

[45]Kochanski et al., 'Localisation in world politics', p. 5.

[46]MacGinty, 'Where is the local?'; Andreas Hirblinger and Claudia Simons, 'The good, the bad, and the powerful: Representations of the "local" in peacebuilding', *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 422–39; Myfanwy James, 'Looking for the local: The politics of humanitarian recruitment in DRC', *Anthropolgoical Quarterly*, 98:3 (2025), pp. 479–506; and Luisa Enria, 'Unsettled authority and humanitarian practice: Reflections on local legitimacy from Sierra Leone's borderlands', *Oxford Development Studies*, 48:4 (2020), pp. 387–99.

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As a result, scholars have suggested reconceptualising localisation as a relational process, with shifts in power and agency *within* and *between* global and local spaces.[47] This encourages analysis into how global practices of localisation might further entrench localised power hierarchies. Drawing on this conceptual approach, I illustrate the importance of incorporating class into an analysis of how global–local interactions transform local power dynamics and identities. Localisation is supposed to 'empower local actors' – but what does this mean in practice? Integration into global humanitarian networks is often uneven and can reconstitute social norms, identities, and economic relations in ways that exacerbate class stratification. Localisation does not necessarily diffuse power but rather resettles it into new forms of power relations. While scholars have highlighted the analytical value in acknowledging that there are 'many locals', such as 'elite locals and grassroots locals',[48] I demonstrate how protracted global aid presence can, in fact, entrench the gap between the two.

'Emergency' in eastern DRC

Conflict and humanitarianism have become protracted in eastern DRC over the last 30 years. In 1994, violence became regionalised when Rwandan refugees arrived in the Kivu region, and the former *génocidaire* regime remobilised in camps outside Goma. In 1996, the rebel group *L'Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire* (AFDL), along with the Rwandan army, invaded, dismantled the refugee camps, and overthrew President Mobutu. In 1998, the war restarted when the AFDL turned against their Rwandan backers. The Rwandan-backed *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) subsequently invaded, sparking a war that involved eight countries and more than 25 rebel groups.

Although the war officially ended in 2003, conflict has continued with recurrent Rwandan-backed rebellions led by Congolese Rwandophones, such as *the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* from 2005 to 2009 and the *Mouvemente du 23-Mars* (M23) from 2012 to 2013, and since 2021. These rebellions claimed to defend Congolese Tutsi and Rwanda from remnants of the former *génocidaire* regime. In response, dozens of Mai-Mai militias mobilised, claiming to defend those 'born from the soil' from Rwandan invaders. Decades of conflict have produced a new class of actors invested in maintaining the status quo.[49] Meanwhile, there have been cyclical epidemics of measles, cholera, and Ebola, and in the north of North Kivu, since 2013, there have been a series of massacres of civilians committed by an opaque network of armed actors.

Protracted conflict has attracted a large-scale international humanitarian response in eastern DRC. During the Second Congo War (1998–2003), the RCD rebel group entirely outsourced social service delivery to aid agencies. In 1999, a United Nations peacekeeping force was established, and by 2017, the mission comprised 18,300 troops. Following the peace deal in 2003, there has been a proliferation of international humanitarian agencies. The number of NGOs in the country increased from 450 in 1990, to 1,322 in 1996, and to more than 5,000 in 2019.[50] The DRC remains one of the largest recipients of aid globally, with $1–2 billion per year in humanitarian funding, much of it spent in health and humanitarian sectors in the east. The DRC is, therefore, a particularly striking and emblematic case for examining how prolonged, large-scale humanitarian presence reshapes local political economies and society. The humanitarian sector has taken over many state responsibilities in eastern DRC and has become a key employer. Amidst protracted conflict, the state, civil society organisations, customary chiefs, rebel groups, religious organisations, and aid agencies compete for the power to manage resources and deliver services. Violence has continued, and the population has grown frustrated at the inability of the government or UN peacekeepers

[47] Kochanski et al., 'Localisation in world politics'.

[48] Kochanski et al., 'Localisation in world politics', p. 5.

[49] Jason Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name: The Unending Conflict in the Congo* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

[50] Veronique Barbelet, *Local Humanitarian Action in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Capacity and Complementarity* (Overseas Development Institute, 2019), p. 6.

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to provide security.[51] Instead, the indirect effects of the large-scale humanitarian presence have become hyper-visible, especially in Goma.

Goma is known as the headquarters of both peace and war: *siège des rebellions*, and the regional headquarters for international agencies and the UN peacekeeping mission. The impact of humanitarian presence is particularly stark in central neighbourhoods, which are coded 'green' in the risk assessments of international agencies. During rush hour, the roads are a sea of white Land Cruisers. A plethora of logos are painted on the metal gates of aid compounds. Meanwhile, the shores of Lake Kivu are lined with expensive restaurants and luxurious houses. Kayaks are for rent, yoga and salsa classes run every week, and supermarkets sell a range of imported products. The presence of foreign aid institutions has led to a dollarisation of the economy, a real-estate boom, and a proliferation of private security companies.[52]

Amidst protracted conflict, Goma has rapidly urbanised, as people have come to the city to seek refuge. The city's population has grown substantially, from 150,000 inhabitants in the early 1990s to an estimated 1.5–2 million today. The city has also become a zone of opportunity. As Büscher and Vlassenroot highlight, the 'most direct and obvious impact' of humanitarian presence has been on the job market.[53] People work as humanitarian logisticians, medics, nurses, water and sanitation specialists, and engineers. Others work as drivers, guards, cleaners, cooks, interpreters, or security brokers. Humanitarian presence offers employment opportunities, in particular to a small class of young, well-educated people who previously migrated to neighbouring countries in search of jobs.

Class transformation

Joining the humanitarian class

Becoming a humanitarian was an attempt for many to find employment amidst uncertainty in eastern DRC. After decades of economic downturn and political volatility, people have developed improvisational methods of social navigation and muddling through, known as *débrouillardisme*.[54] Moving between different social positions is itself a form of *débrouillardisme*: people move between civilian and combatant life, rebel groups and the national army, as well as humanitarian agencies and rebel groups.[55] In rural North Kivu, the humanitarian sector became an avenue to find paid employment in the formal economy, often in urban centres. Some humanitarian recruits had previously worked in the health system, as teachers, or for rebel political administrations or civil society organisations. They were fluent in French, secondary-school graduates, or university-educated, and many were politically connected, making them ideal brokers between rural communities and global institutions.

Gaël, for instance, was living in his home village in North Kivu during the Second Congo War: 'How did I become a humanitarian? It wasn't something I planned. I was struggling to get by, doing some trading, and I saw this NGO arrive. I thought, why not try and work for them? So, it was like an adventure, a trial to see what would come of it'. After several years as a guard, Gaël was promoted to community engagement. As his foreign colleagues came and went on short-term 'missions', he explained, 'my role became passing the message, being the link, because I was good at networking'. Gaël drew on his networks to conduct this role, as well as his relevant university degree.

[51] Rachel Sweet and Noé Kasali, 'Public health intervention amidst conflict: Violence, politics, and knowledge frames in the 2018–20 Ebola epidemic in Democratic Republic of the Congo', *Social Science & Medicine*, 350 (2025), p. 116854.

[52] Büscher and Vlassenroot, 'Humanitarian presence'.

[53] Büscher and Vlassenroot, 'Humanitarian presence', p. 264.

[54] Vigh, 'Crisis and chronicity'; and Sylvie Ayimpam, *Economie de la débrouille à Kinshasa: informalité, commerce et réseaux sociaux* (Karthala, 2014).

[55] Koen Vlassenroot, Emery Mudinga, and Josaphat Musamba, 'Navigating social spaces: Armed mobilization and circular return in eastern DR Congo', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 33:4 (2020), pp. 832–52; Maria Eriksson Baaz and Judith Verweijen, 'The volatility of a half-cooked bouillabaisse: Rebel–military integration and conflict dynamics in the eastern DRC', *African Affairs*, 112:449 (2013), pp. 563–82; and James, 'From rebel to humanitarian'.

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Trésor had a similar humanitarian origin story to tell. After the end of the First Congo War, he had returned home after working for the AFDL rebel group. When an international NGO arrived in the village and began hiring: 'I applied like everyone else'. Trésor had been working as a teacher but had struggled to support himself and to pay the school fees of his siblings. 'I was earning hardly anything, so everyone said, "why not apply to the NGO? Others are earning good money there."' Trésor also began as a guard and went on to work in logistics for a range of different agencies. 'Becoming a humanitarian became a way to survive, to support my family', he concluded.

The humanitarian sector also provided new opportunities for an urban middle class, particularly in Goma. Anaclet, for example, grew up in the city, and after university had worked for the RCD rebel group, which was in control of the province during the Second Congo War. When the RCD was integrated into a transitional government after the peace deal, Anaclet found employment with a newly arrived international aid agency and was eventually promoted as an 'expat' abroad. Anaclet's political connections, his university education, and his competency in English became advantages, enabling him to progress in the sector.

Goma became a regional hub that attracted educated middle classes from across the country. Many relocated to the city from faraway provinces decades ago in order to work in the sector, and they have stayed ever since. Thomas, for example, is from another province and began his career by working for an international NGO in the mid-1990s. As his career evolved in the sector, he relocated to Goma and worked for a range of different NGOs throughout the Kivu provinces. 'My years with humanitarian NGOs really changed my life. The training, learning English, it all opened so many doors', he explained. Thomas eventually began working as an 'expat' abroad across Africa, after having brought up his family in Goma. 'They *[his children]* have become real *Gomatraciens*', he explained.

A career in humanitarianism became a means to become middle class. 'Humanitarianism has changed my social status, my means. I can't deny that', one UN worker put it. A humanitarian career provided access to a steady income and formal employment. 'When we see someone who has means, we ask where he works. And it would be a surprise to people if he worked anywhere other than for a humanitarian organisation', the leader of a youth association in Goma explained. In this city, where over 60% inhabitants reported monthly household incomes of less than $150, the average monthly salary for a Congolese humanitarian worker is approximately $500–1,000. As a result, 'the NGOs have purchasing power in the labour market', a political activist explained. In fact, the growth of a humanitarian class – rather than the direct alleviation of suffering through relief – was often described as the most visible 'impact' of humanitarianism in the region altogether. One UN employee, for instance, put it this way: 'At least, we are now financially stable … that's a real consequence of humanitarian presence'.

This humanitarian class, though, is far from monolithic. There is a great disparity in income, responsibility, and status between those who work, for example, as guards or drivers and those who occupy regional or national management positions. There are also differences between organisations. Francophone agencies like *Médecins Sans Frontières* or *Solidarités* are known for paying less. One career strategy, I was told, was to access professional training and gain experience at a Francophone organisation and subsequently move to a better-paid Anglophone agency. Indeed, human resources managers in such Francophone organisations explained that their staff were 'poached' by NGOs that paid higher salaries. The Norwegian Refugee Council and the Danish Refugee Council were known for paying particularly well: however, it was the United Nations that was described as 'at another level'. 'They are a class above altogether, the UN class', one humanitarian summarised.

Back in his new house, I asked Gaël how being a humanitarian was perceived in North Kivu. 'Well, it's not only a perception, but also a reality … it's the salary. It pays. So, it is a class that has been created in the community …. For example, you see, to come and live in this neighbourhood, very few people have the means to do that.' Indeed, Gaël and his neighbours had bought land in a particularly desirable neighbourhood of the city. For humanitarians in the city, the acquisition

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of land and the construction of houses have become vehicles for the accumulation of material and aesthetic assets, becoming central to what it means to be middle class.[56] As a humanitarian, Gaël situated himself within one of the most important economic groups in the city: 'there's the merchant class, which is also a wealthy group in the city. Merchant class and humanitarian class are the two on which this city's economy is based'.

Becoming a humanitarian

Yet these stories were not just professional career trajectories: they were told as accounts of personal transformation.[57] 'I am transformed from when I first joined', one humanitarian put it. 'Becoming a humanitarian' constituted not only a change in economic circumstances but also a shift in personal outlook, habits, and relations. Humanitarian became a classed identity because working in the sector provided access not only to an income but also to social prestige and a new lifestyle. Working in the global aid sphere is described as a form of 'exposure' – to new people and lifestyles, mobility, knowledge, and modes of being.[58] Aid became not only a vehicle for social mobility but also a way for many to confirm their status as educated and urban.[59] Long-term aid presence significantly influences how people see themselves, but it is hard to distinguish between conscious and strategic positioning and more profound changes in identity, because these two processes are closely intertwined.[60]

For Gaël, for example, 'the arrival of humanitarians greatly changed my life. It became my profession, but it is also something more'. 'Being a humanitarian' was central to how Gaël described his position in society. 'For instance, my children, they haven't known anything other than this humanitarian life. They know, *papa* is a humanitarian …. It is part of who we are.' Gaël also recounted a process of 'cultural change': 'I now have a culture that is a bit more international, even European. The way of working, the rigour, the transparency'. He describes the cultural divide between his lifestyle and the 'village life' that had been home. 'They *[family from the village]* look at me and they see how much I've changed.' Gaël also drew a binary contrast between a humanitarian way of working and a government job: 'In humanitarianism, we have a way of living like a family, its more horizontal, in meetings there is liberty of expression. But in government, it's so hierarchical. It's a different culture …. Now I see my friends who work for the government, and I wonder, could I work there? I think I would struggle'.

Like many humanitarians as well as people outside the sector in Goma, Gaël described this process of cultural change as '*muzunguisation*', referring to Congolese humanitarians who had worked a long time with *bazungu* and had begun to act like them. *Muzungu* refers to white foreigners, but it is also associated with the characteristics that whiteness discursively symbolises. In Kiswahili, *muzungu* translates literally as someone who wanders around, and in the Great Lakes region, it came to refer in the 18th century to European explorers who seemed to wander aimlessly. In Goma, social and professional relations are characterised by racialised inequalities. 'Expats' or *bazungu* have become a socio-economic class, benefitting not only from a particular position in professional aid hierarchies but also from access to different resources, security protection, and physical infrastructures.[61] Today, a significant number of aid workers are not white but are '*bazungu*' because of their privileged status and behaviour: *Muzungu* is used metaphorically to describe Africans who

[56]Claire Mercer, 'Middle class construction: Domestic architecture, aesthetics and anxieties in Tanzania', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 52:2 (2014), pp. 227–50.

[57]I am not suggesting that this represents a form of 'progress'.

[58]Aellah and Geissler, 'Seeking exposure'.

[59]Swidler and Watkins, 'Teach a man to fish'.

[60]Benedetta Rossi, 'Aid policies and recipient strategies in Niger', in David Lewis and David Mosse (eds), *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Development* (Kumarian Press, 2006), pp. 27–50 (p. 30).

[61]Gauthier Marchais, Paulin Bazuzi, and Aimable Amani Lameke, '"The data is gold, and we are the gold-diggers": Whiteness, race and contemporary academic research in eastern DRC', *Critical African Studies*, 12:3 (2020), pp. 372–94.

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have adopted a 'modern lifestyle' (*kizungu*) associated with wealth and class.[62] Class formation in the humanitarian sector, therefore, was understood in complexly racialised terms.

Becoming a humanitarian transformed personal economic circumstances and social capital, but it also led to ideational change. The extended presence of aid organisations produces new 'systems of signification' and markers of social difference that interact with existing class hierarchies, altering how people see themselves and their relationships with others.[63] NGO employees form new identities, often distancing themselves from 'beneficiaries' who are portrayed as 'traditional'.[64] Humanitarian agencies also provide 'new ways of thinking and doing' and attempt 'social engineering'.[65] In particular, after high-profile attacks on humanitarian workers in the early 2000s, local perception became viewed as essential to humanitarian security. The principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence were framed as important tools, which needed to be performed to onlookers through the behaviour of employees, as a matter of security. As a result, codes of conduct have become central to security management frameworks, and rules about employee behaviour apply outside work hours.[66]

In North Kivu, Congolese aid workers described the process of becoming a humanitarian not only through experience in the sector but also through the *sensibilisation* sessions that focused on these appropriate ways of behaving. Many humanitarian agencies require local staff to sign a copy of security regulations and codes of conduct, demonstrating their commitment to abide by the rules around behaviour. There was anxiety within humanitarian agencies in eastern DRC that the behaviour of local staff could be risky: illustrating partiality or ethnic allegiances in a context of violent conflict could risk organisational image and security. As a result, humanitarian agencies prioritise *sensibilisation* sessions for Congolese employees, focusing on how to be an 'ambassador' for the humanitarian principles and values. This has uncomfortable echoes of conversion, in which people are brought from 'particular' to 'universal' commitments.[67]

These trainings were indeed described by Congolese humanitarians as transformative, with almost religious undertones. Humanitarianism became a process of socialisation: 'transformation' came about through learning to adopt a certain humanitarian identity, adopting its 'values' or 'principles'. Trésor, for example, stressed that 'I've really changed. I've learnt a lot … they *[humanitarian agencies]* train you, you become, well you become professional, you become a humanitarian'. He argued that humanitarianism 'changed the way I think … it is all to do with how they teach us the humanitarian principles'. In particular, this involved learning to 'live with everyone', or 'being disciplined, but remaining humane with people'. 'Humanitarianism saved me from lots of bad things. And I am still learning new things, growing. It is about integrity', Trésor concluded.

'Being a humanitarian', in other words, involved the ability to transcend 'political attachments'. Through 'trainings', one humanitarian explained, he had come to 'understand the ideology' and 'modify' his behaviour and 'see people differently', even in his personal life. 'It changed the way I behave, changed how I see other people', he summarised. Another humanitarian described how, through *sensibilisation*, people can learn the 'humanitarian ideology', which is key to 'building national unity, to building an attitude not based on *[ethnic]* community, but one based on the nation

[62]Benjamin Rubbers, 'The story of a tragedy: How people in Haut-Katanga interpret the post-colonial history of Congo', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47:2 (2009), pp. 267–89.

[63]Stacy L. Pigg, 'Inventing social categories through place: Social representations and development in Nepal', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34:3 (1992), pp. 491–513 (p. 492).

[64]Heaton Shrestha, 'They can't mix like we can', p. 212; and Pigg, 'Inventing', p. 510.

[65]Louisa Lombard, 'General Tarzan the soccer coach: Humanitarian detours in the career of a Central African man-in-arms', in Marcia Inhorn and Nefissa Naguib (eds), *Reconceiving Muslim Men: Love and Marriage, Family and Care in Precarious Times* (Berghan, 2018), pp. 221–45 (p. 240).

[66]Myfanwy James, 'Humanitarian shapeshifting: Navigation, brokerage and access in eastern DR Congo', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 16:3 (2022), pp. 349–67.

[67]Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington (Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 46.

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with everyone as equal'. Once they had learnt to be humanitarians, some aid workers argued that their role was to teach others to 'change their behaviour' and 'mentality'. 'Humanitarianism has changed me, and now I can help change others', Trésor explained, 'I've always said that for this country to really change, it needs to be led by someone who was a humanitarian, someone who is credible, with integrity'.

Humanitarian was a meaningful identity to those in the sector: humanitarianism and its principles took on a set of normative values, inscribed with particular social imaginaries about a modern, middle class identity. Becoming a humanitarian, therefore, was not just about material reward, it was also a way for employees to 'constitute themselves as modern' – particularly in contrast to the 'local population', who remained caught up in 'inscriptive identities'.[68] Humanitarianism produced new ways of thinking politically and of conceiving morality. Indeed, the humanitarian principles were presented by Congolese humanitarians as a different vision of the world, in binary opposition to the 'tribalism' of DRC. This echoes the middle class *évolués* of the colonial era, who were seen to have 'evolved' up the civilisational ladder through their education and acceptance of 'Western' norms.[69] In effect, local actors reinterpret and 'vernacularise' global ideas, so that they fit and gain social meaning in context.[70] In the process, local identities and outlooks are transformed.[71] In this case, as global humanitarian principles were 'localised', they were imbued with social meaning – as a signifier of class. This process reconstituted norms in ways that entrenched class differentiation.

A career in humanitarianism provided access not only to travel but also to a 'cosmopolitan lifestyle'. Indeed, this intertwined social and physical mobility was central to why many people wanted to join the sector in the first place: as an opportunity to see the world and the vast country. Travel is expensive in the DRC, but humanitarians have access to the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service flights, which run between major cities in the country. Daniel, for example, was a newly recruited humanitarian from Goma who wanted to see his own country. After we first met, he sent me photographs from his travels, including from his first trip to the capital Kinshasa (2,600 km from Goma) with the wry caption, 'The humanitarian life!'. As Lauren Carruth highlights, most humanitarian workers do not travel from the Global North to the South but instead travel within and between crisis-affected areas in the Global South, forming new identities in the process.[72]

Indeed, a career in humanitarianism was a means of connecting to 'the international': aid agencies were seen as environments where it was possible to forge global connections. Becoming a humanitarian, especially in senior posts, involved travelling for workshops, conferences, or 'missions' abroad. Aid workers recounted their trips to Belgium, France, and the UK. Many humanitarians appeared focused on 'becoming an expatriate', on joining a transnational workforce abroad with salaries that could support their families at home. Congolese nationals now constitute a major part of international humanitarian workforces in global NGOs. Many humanitarians, whom I originally met in Goma a decade ago, have since worked abroad in Chad, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia. One of these aid workers, Amani, began his career in rural North Kivu and then worked in regional operations. When I bumped into him in Goma almost a decade after we first met, he had just spent a year in Europe, working at 'headquarters', and told me that he was on a 'field visit home'. Home was now 'the field'.

[68]Heaton Shrestha, 'They can't mix like we can', pp. 212–13.

[69]Gertrude Mianda, 'Colonialism, education, and gender relations in the Belgian Congo: The Evolué case', in Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (eds), *Women in African Colonial Histories: An Introduction* (Indian University Press, 2002), pp. 144–63 (p. 148).

[70]Merry, 'Transnational human rights and local activism'.

[71]Acharya, *Constructing Global Order.*

[72]Lauren Carruth, 'Humanitarian nomads: The mobilities and disjunctures inherent to aid work in the Global South', in Meron Zeleke and Lahra Smith (eds), *African Perspectives on South–South Migration* (Routledge, 2024), pp. 93–111.

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Stratification

Aspirations

The humanitarian sector, however, was not an avenue of social mobility for everyone. Humanitarianism reproduced socio-economic inequalities, and the division between the humanitarian haves and have-nots was particularly omnipresent in Goma. Take the example of a popular, locally-run hotel in the city centre. This hotel is approved by the security protocols of many humanitarian agencies, which means that humanitarians often stay here whilst passing through the city. The hotel's function rooms host a range of NGO workshops and trainings, and the garden has free Wi-Fi. As a result, this has also become a popular place for remote working for Congolese humanitarians in the city who are in transit to 'the field' – nearby rural areas. Dotted around the lawn, these humanitarians peered down at their screens and talked to colleagues around the world. The hotel is also an ideal place for interviews. One afternoon, I met several humanitarian hopefuls who had made use of the hotel's free internet while having their online interviews with international NGOs. As they told me about their job searches in the humanitarian sector, several of the hotel waiters and guards came to join us. Several of the hotel staff had university degrees in rural development and had initially hoped to join the sector themselves. Confronted with a hypercompetitive job market and a lack of contacts, they had failed to find humanitarian employment and had eventually found jobs in the service industry that caters for the humanitarian presence in the city. All three were anxious to find 'real' humanitarian jobs.

Humanitarian organisations do not just influence the subjectivities of their employees but also capture the imaginations and aspirations of those outside the sector. 'The job market that is most attractive is the international NGOs. Everyone dreams of working for them', a doctor put it in Goma. Academics in Goma described the growing demand for courses in development and project management. The website of one university, for instance, lists the types of jobs that its degrees prepare students for: 'management of development programmes (NGOs, UN); humanitarian worker' are at the top of the list. Humanitarianism is invested with social imaginaries of success and status, including amongst youth from poorer areas of Goma. One young man from Goma's northern periphery, for example, described humanitarianism as 'one of the most important markets here', and most people 'wanted in'. He described how people in his neighbourhood aspired to the life of '*le bic*' (a biro pen). This referred to the lifestyle with an office job and a monthly salary. This aspirational humanitarian imaginary shaped how young people envisioned a potentially middle class future.

Yet, there was also some ambivalence about the position of humanitarian institutions in the job market, particularly within *Jeunesse* groups – youth associations which represent people within the formalised political structure in the region and help youth find employment opportunities. The leader of one *Jeunesse* group, for example, argued that 'the state doesn't have the capacity to hire these people, and because they've grown up here, they just think ok this is how it is, NGOs hire and pay well, so that's what we all need to do … and they don't even know what mission they are meant to be executing'. A member of another *Jeunesse* group described his own experience working for a foreign NGO, not as his dream job, but as the best he could hope for: 'Everyone wants to be a humanitarian, not always to help people, but because it's a job'. In the context of prolonged 'waithood', unemployment, and uncertainty, humanitarianism has become a potential avenue of opportunity for a new generation who have come of age amidst humanitarian permanence.

Circuit fermé

Given the need for specific qualifications and training, top humanitarian posts are occupied by a small class of well-educated recruits. In contrast, in Majengo, a *quartier populaire* in northern Goma, young men stressed the difficulties of becoming a humanitarian without access to further education or contacts in the sector. Members of *Jeunesse* associations highlighted the number of 'big names' in the aid sector who come from customary families or have political connections.

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Many in Goma objected to the number of people from the neighbouring province of South Kivu in senior humanitarian positions. The large presence of people from Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu, is explained by the specific training in the city for an educated middle class, who apply for senior positions in NGO posts in North Kivu.[73] Young people in Goma objected to the lack of transparency in recruitment processes and argued that humanitarianism had become a '*circuit fermé*' – a closed circuit – partly because of favouritism in hiring. The only way to secure employment, many told me, was to have the right connections within aid agencies. Ultimately, this competitive labour market and the importance of social and cultural capital meant many humanitarian hopefuls have remained excluded. Others have been unequally incorporated into a humanitarian political economy, instead working as guards for private companies, or as waiters and cleaners in the tourist infrastructure that has transformed Goma's urban landscape. Extended aid presence has also produced a humanitarian underclass who are left to navigate a political economy transformed by protracted humanitarian presence.

To take one example, Baraka grew up on the northern periphery of Goma. Despite this distance from the aid bunkers of the city centre, Baraka had always been surrounded by stories about humanitarians, because his father was employed as the housekeeper of a property occupied by foreign aid workers in the city centre. When his father fell ill, Baraka took his place, cleaning the house, making beds, and washing clothes. Baraka hoped for a humanitarian job as a way of improving his life and perhaps facilitating travel abroad. After a few years of working as a housekeeper, one of Baraka's foreign employers agreed to pay for his studies at university. Baraka chose a degree that would help him to prepare for a humanitarian career. However, after graduation, Baraka struggled to find employment. 'I don't have the networks', he put it. Baraka ended up not far from where he had begun: working as a guard for a private security company outside a house of foreign humanitarians. He described gruelling night shifts, being woken up to let the 'expatriates' back in after a late night's drinking. Baraka concluded that through his studies, he had simply travelled from inside an expatriate house to outside it.

Humanitarian presence creates a range of economic opportunities, but incorporation into this political economy was vastly unequal. For youth from the urban periphery of Goma, like Baraka, opportunities for social mobility seemed slim. This stratification is spatial in Goma, where protracted humanitarian presence has radically reordered urban space and deepened a centre-periphery divide. The central and eastern neighbourhoods are home to luxurious houses, NGO offices, UN compounds, hotels, and bars: they have become perceived as 'centres of power and modernity' that represent a global cosmopolitan lifestyle.[74] The aid sector's demands for urban infrastructure as well as housing and office space have transformed these neighbourhoods into *quartiers riches*, with electricity, tarmacked roads, and access to water. These dynamics have, however, also deepened the spatial divide between the rich and the poor: the prices of houses, rents, and land have soared.

As the head of a civil society organisation put it, 'they [*humanitarians*] made life expensive!'. Former inhabitants of central neighbourhoods have been forced to move to cheaper, peripheral districts on the outskirts of Goma. The poorest residents live in the city's western and northern extremities and remain excluded from this new urban infrastructure in the city centre. In the northern *Quartier Populaire* of Majengo, one afternoon, a group of men working as guards in the centre of the city drew me a map. They highlighted one of the central tarmacked roads starting at *Rue Sake* that ran through the city. This group indicated the significance of the demarcation: 'south of this, that is their *[the humanitarians]* city'. Pointing to the north and western areas, he added: 'and this is ours'. As we pored over the map, I saw that the 'neighbourhood of humanitarians' where Gaël had just moved was, indeed, south of this line.

Humanitarians also described a sense of social distance, as they became invested in a particular kind of urban lifestyle in Goma's central districts. One humanitarian described a particularly tense

[73]Büscher and Vlassenroot, 'Humanitarian presence'.
[74]Büscher and Vlassenroot, 'Humanitarian presence', p. 268.

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conversation with friends, 'they ask: "but what has happened?" They find that you are in a different world. They say: "he has changed". It's significant enough that with friends, people we love who we have grown up with, there is a real separation of class, lifestyle'. Humanitarians became viewed as 'notable' by their social networks from home, with associated pressure to support family and friends financially. Increasingly, many kept to themselves. 'Because of that social aspect, it becomes enough that you stop, well we try to isolate ourselves and we create our own world with our own class, people who work for humanitarian organisations', Gaël summarised. This did not go unnoticed. As a member of a civil society organisation put it, 'they *[humanitarians]* don't mix anymore'. The leader of a political pressure group similarly saw humanitarians as somehow 'floating above society': 'You don't see them out and about. They probably don't remember how to take buses back out to our neighbourhoods!'.

Tension

Recruitment

These processes of class transformation and stratification have also produced tensions. In the hypercompetitive labour market, the recruitment of local staff has generated conflict over access to newly introduced resources and professional opportunities.[75] In North Kivu, societal tensions are often reflected within the organisations which, since the 1980s, have come to substitute for the state as key repositories of resources and the 'chief vehicle of upward mobility'.[76] '*Rien pour nous sans nous*' (nothing for us without us) is a common refrain in the region, a critique of paternalistic aid programmes that do not include ownership from locals. Yet, hiring locals is more complex than a question of local empowerment because localness – or the 'us' in this refrain – shifted depending on who was talking. Far from a straight-forward transfer of power, hiring locally is politically fraught. It becomes an arena for political struggles over who has a claim to positions of authority and access to resources, based on disputed claims of ethnic localness, which continue to shape, and be shaped by, violent conflict.[77] As a result, humanitarian agencies become embroiled in existing conflicts about who belongs in contexts where slippery notions of local belonging have long been used as a political resource in power contests and as a strategy for armed mobilisation.[78]

At a territorial level, humanitarian agencies were accused of favouring one ethnic group over another in recruitment. At a provincial level, humanitarian agencies faced criticism from *Jeunesse* groups, civil society organisations, and rebel groups for the 'importation' of staff from other provinces or territories. In 2016, for example, the *Jeunesse* of Masisi territory installed a roadblock on the road from Goma that refused to let humanitarian vehicles pass. The leader held up a list of recommendations for NGOs, explaining that if they want to work in Masisi, they need to 'recruit here'. Recruitment was so controversial that 'balanced' recruitment procedures have become central to humanitarian security management in the region. The humanitarian class ultimately has access to wealth, social status, and authority through positions in the agencies that dominate the local political economy. As a result, inclusion into the humanitarian class is contested – an explosive political subject.

Complicity and dependence

The humanitarian class was accused of complicity with a global aid system that had failed to alleviate further suffering and was widely seen as a self-serving system driven by the priorities of former colonial powers. Activists and civil society organisations all pointed to the contradictions

[75]James, 'Looking for'.

[76]Denis Tull, *The Reconfiguration of Political Order in Africa: A Case Study of North Kivu* (Institute of African Affairs, 2002), p. 247.

[77]James, 'Looking for'.

[78]Kasper Hoffmann, 'Ethnogovernmentality: The making of ethnic territories and subjects in eastern DRC Congo', *Geoforum,* 119 (2021), pp. 251–67.

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of 30 years of humanitarian operations underpinned by the notion of emergency and providing immediate relief. This short-term focus, they argued, helped maintain the status quo, rather than providing meaningful structural change. As one member of the civil society movement *Lutte Pour Le Changement* put it, this emergency model misses the big picture: it helps the state retreat, and it does not address the structure of the global economy that causes suffering. 'What we want is real change, humanitarianism won't get us that', he told me.

To make sense of this ineffective short-term focus, many in Goma have concluded that humanitarianism perpetuates crisis *by design*. For some, the global humanitarian system was a Western tool to maintain the DRC's dependence. A university professor, for example, concluded: people in humanitarian agencies are 'not idiots, they must know that their emergency model doesn't work. Humanitarianism means dependence, it keeps DRC in its place, ensuring our crisis continues'. Far from emancipatory, local integration into the global humanitarian system was described as furthering this dependence. One doctor put it simply: 'They *[humanitarian agencies]* took the best of us'. Members of the humanitarian class were not seen as exemplars of 'local ownership' or 'empowerment' – instead, civil society activists voiced concern about a brain drain that weakened civic mobilisation in the country: 'it kills the energy of our political movements', one summarised. As a former aid worker himself put it, this suspicion of the global system reflected the widespread concern in Goma about dependence on global institutions and their Western donors. At a macro level, 'we will not develop by working for other people. The state needs them, we need to reorientate all the talent back into DRC', he put it. At a micro level, working for humanitarian agencies had made this workforce 'lazy', dependent on foreign donors and focused on the short-term. 'As citizens, we need to take up our responsibilities, think about the future generation, rather than always going to humanitarian agencies', this former aid worker summarised.

For others, foreign intervenors were '*pompiers pyromanes*' (arsonist firefighters) who exacerbate or even create a crisis to keep themselves in business. As one political activist put it, humanitarians 'have a vested interest in continuing the status quo of crisis, so they can continue benefitting from it'. For instance, in 2008, the slogan 'No Nkunda, No Job' referred to the main rebel commander and the fact that violence had become a source of employment for foreign aid workers and local militia. There was widespread suspicion that peacekeepers were collaborating with Nkunda to ensure that the conflict continued, whilst illegally extracting minerals. When an Ebola epidemic began in 2018, the billion-dollar humanitarian response produced an industry of rental contracts at inflated prices, job kickback schemes, and security contractors – some of whom stoked violence to increase demand for their services.[79] The term 'Ebola business' was coined for this, and the situation led many to conclude that humanitarian responders had incentives to invent Ebola altogether as an opportunity for enrichment.[80] In the context of another Rwandan-backed M23 rebellion since 2021, many in Goma pointed to the fact that the same international donors – in particular, in the EU – were providing support to Rwanda whilst financing the humanitarian response in eastern DRC. In his office, the leader of one civil society group drew a diagram of the DRC/Rwanda border: 'the same donors are helping finance the aggressor on this side of the border, whilst financing the response to suffering created on this side of the border – it's a good business plan for them!'. Tensions were particularly high in Goma during successive waves of protests against the United Nations peacekeeping mission in 2022 and 2023, sparked by a widespread frustration at the failure to prevent civilian massacres or prevent another M23 rebellion.

The elite Congolese humanitarian class was widely accused of complicity in this system of profit-making, to the detriment of their own country. As a member of the *Jeunesse* summarised,

[79] Congo Research Group, *Rebels, Doctors and Merchants of Violence. How the Fight against Ebola Became Part of the Conflict in Eastern DRC* (Center on International Cooperation, 2021).

[80] Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka, Koen Vlassenroot, and Lucien Ramazani, *From Biolegitimacy to Antihumanitarianism: Understanding People's Resistance to Ebola Responses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (SSRC Congo Research Bries, 2021); Myfanwy James and Shelley Lees, '"Are you sure it's not the Corona vaccine?" An Ebola vaccine trial during COVID-19 in DRC', *Medical Anthropology*, 41:5 (2022), pp. 503–17; and Congo Research Group, *Rebels, Doctors and Merchants of Violence.*

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'unfortunately, there are Congolese people involved in this business too'. 'They want … to get employed in an international organisation and enrich themselves. They want the country to remain as it is, so things continue', a teacher told me. A youth activist put it this way: 'they are not real humanitarians, they are doing it for money'. As she described, 'humanitarians are the rich people of the neighbourhood. We are at war, there is economic crisis. But you will see, houses are under construction everywhere. Where does this money come from? Humanitarians are getting rich off the back of their compatriots' suffering'. This activist is part of a grassroots aid initiative, and in her words, she would never become a 'formal' humanitarian, as this was a means of 'selling out' and compromising her patriotic values.

Popular idioms in Goma addressed the moral corruption of the humanitarian class. Humanitarianism was described as a 'COP', or corporation, in which Congolese employees were primarily motivated by enrichment, and were invested in ensuring that the crisis continued. *Sehemu yangu?* ('where is my slice?') referred to the aid system as a pie, of which national elites and employees were primarily interested in getting their part. Humanitarian salaries were often referred to 'money from the devil' or 666. This referred to scripture from the Book of Revelation, when a malevolent antichrist is predicted to arise in the end times and try to tempt people away from God, including through material means. This allegory of an external corrupting force enticing people through material reward to betray their values drew on widespread suspicion of the international aid system. As a leader of a grassroots aid group summarised, 'they *[humanitarian organisations]* can easily buy us, because we have nothing!'.

These accusations of complicity caused tensions. Faustin, for example, is a member of a *Jeunesse* movement and has been active in civil society movements since he was a teenager. He described the suspicion and disappointment amongst his friends in the *Jeunesse* when he took a job with a foreign humanitarian organisation: 'There are some who say that we *[humanitarians]* are already corrupt. We were trained and became politically active through the *Jeunesse*, calling for change, and now we've gone and joined them *[Western NGOs]*, we can't change the system'.

Being associated with *muzunguisation* was a sign of status, but it was also viewed with some hostility. The humanitarian class was accused of standing apart from society and adopting 'cultural values' that were at odds with 'tradition'. In a discussion with civil society leaders, for instance, they voiced their concerns about the nuanced 'cultural effects' of humanitarian presence. They pointed to people sitting in cafes all day on their laptops, waiting for their monthly salaries to arrive. There were tensions around questions of gender and LGBTQI+ rights, as some expressed anxiety that Western humanitarian organisations were trying to 'change cultural values' in DRC. As one humanitarian explained, 'there are tensions because people think humanitarians have come here to exploit our minerals, but also weaken "our values", to weaken us further so we lose "our culture"'.

Humanitarians explained how even their friends and family thought that they had changed since working in the sector: 'They say I've become too *muzungu*', one put it, which meant acting 'superior'. Gaël pointed to tensions surrounding 'themes that are promoted by NGOs. Let's consider the example of inclusion of women, that has created tensions. Some people say that we are trying to promote something that is not culturally acceptable'. Gaël described a recent visit, 'you receive visitors who come from the village here, so see the way you are taking into consideration your wife, your children, daughters, and so on …. They say to themselves "he has already become *muzungu*"'. Humanitarianism, then, produced tensions. As another Congolese humanitarian described: 'if I try to talk about … humanitarianism in a nuanced way, friends say I've spent too much time with whites, they say I have been brainwashed by the people who brought war here in the first place'. The humanitarian class became an elite associated with the corrupting power of whiteness and societal changes that were understood in deeply racialised terms. Far from being seen as examples of legitimate local ownership of aid, the humanitarian class was often accused of elite distance and complicity in a system that perpetuated Congolese suffering and dependence.

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Conclusion

Long-term humanitarian presence has social consequences, shaping life trajectories and economic opportunities, and also political subjectivities and societal tensions. Extended aid presence produces a new humanitarian class, for which the sector becomes a site of social mobility and identity construction. I argue that becoming a humanitarian is not just a new social status and economic position for local employees: it also has rich cultural meaning as a middle class identity. Integration into global humanitarian structures has led to ideational change in ways that interacted with, and ultimately entrenched, social class distinctions. Meanwhile, incorporation into the humanitarian political economy has been vastly unequal, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. Extended aid presence has also produced a humanitarian underclass. This has fuelled tensions around the social, economic, and also cultural effects of protracted humanitarianism. These personal stories of transformation and tension provide insight into what social identities and relations look like when crisis and emergency assistance become the status quo.

This has important implications for understanding humanitarianism as a site of international politics, where global–local interactions shape identity formation and class transformation in transnational environments. Amidst a perceived crisis of legitimacy in the Global South, it might be tempting to depict tensions around global aid as a story of local resistance versus international intervenors. Yet, this risks homogenising the local as a unitary and romanticised bloc – an isolated site of resistance against global oppression. A binary of local/international misses the fact that most of the employees working for international aid agencies in the Global South are locally hired. Meanwhile, growing recognition of these local actors in global development, peacebuilding, or humanitarian programmes has led to renewed calls for 'localisation': the transfer of power, funding, and responsibility to local actors, making aid more equitable and legitimate. In these discussions, however, there is often insufficient attention given to local power asymmetries, or to how these might be influenced by aid presence itself: as a result, the local risks becoming a 'romanticised power-free space'.[81]

Class is a productive lens to better understand how global–local interactions transform local power dynamics and identities. A focus on class transformations produced by prolonged humanitarian presence demonstrates how protracted humanitarianism generates not only *local* tensions around access to resources and employment but also questions of material inequality, class stratification, and cultural change produced by humanitarianism itself. This unsettles ideas about local empowerment because, while some proponents of localisation might see the humanitarian class as exactly what the global system needs more of (increased representation from affected societies working in senior posts in international aid agencies), this does not mean they are always viewed as such at home. Instead, the humanitarian class is at the centre of contemporary debates about the politics of international aid – a lightning rod for mounting public frustration at the widespread effects of protracted emergency presence.

The political context has radically shifted since Gaël and I looked out over Lake Kivu. Two events took place in 2025. In January, the rebel group M23 rapidly expanded its territory in eastern DRC, taking control of much of North Kivu – including Goma – after violent clashes. Residents began adjusting to a new reality. Banks remained closed, and new taxes increased prices. At that moment, the Trump administration announced USAID cuts: over 70% of the Congolese aid budget is US-funded. Projects started to close, and redundancies began in the regional NGO-pole. Thomas, the experienced Congolese humanitarian of 20 years, lost his job at the end of 2025, and described the difficulty of living off his savings, when the prices of food and fuel have risen. Many of his former colleagues are in the same position. Others, like Gaël and Trésor, remain in post. Humanitarian agencies with diversified funding have so far proven comparatively sheltered from the funding cuts. Meanwhile, some UN relief agencies have responded to cuts by reinstating their commitment to

[81] Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding', p. 863.

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strengthening the role of national actors, in a logic of 'localisation and cost optimisation'.[82] The fall-out of the aid cuts is still unfolding and uncertain. The quasi-permanence of humanitarianism in Goma has received a jolt, but the humanitarian enterprise continues, revealing the durability as well as fragility of the local humanitarian class in political economies that depend on the continuous but often unpredictable flow of external funding.

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[82]UNOCHA, 'Note d'analyse détaillée sur le déficit de financement humanitaire en RDC et ses impacts opérationnels 15 January 2026', available at: {https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/democratic-republic-congo/rd-congo-note-danalyse-detaillee-sur-le-deficit-de-financement-humanitaire-en-rdc-et-ses-impacts-operationnels-janvier-2026}, accessed 28 April 2026.

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