

POLICY BRIEF

Climate Adaptation, Local Governance and Social Cohesion

Lessons from Gatumba, a Fragile Border Setting in Burundi

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THE ISSUE AT A GLANCE

Gatumba, a flood-prone peri-urban border zone in western Burundi facing the Democratic Republic of the Congo, has endured recurrent and increasingly destructive flooding for the past decade. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in 2025 and 2026, this brief examines how climate change interacts with governance, land politics and regional conflict — and what role local institutions and actors play in adaptation. Its central finding is that climate resilience here is, above all, a **political and not a mere technical challenge**.

Taken together, the findings confirm that climate adaptation in Gatumba is fundamentally a governance challenge: efforts that strengthen local ownership, institutional legitimacy and social cohesion are the ones most likely to build lasting resilience.

The central message is clear:

It is important to stay engaged in conflict-affected, fragile settings like Gatumba. Climate responses in Gatumba should foreground **locally legitimate, conflict-sensitive and flexible governance, rather than imposed, top-down measures**. Emergency relief and relocation may sometimes be necessary, but unless they are built on local legitimacy and rights, they risk deepening the very tensions they aim to resolve.

A core test for climate interventions

Every intervention in a fragile setting should answer four questions clearly: Who decides? Whose land and livelihoods are affected? Does it reduce risk or merely shift it? And does it widen or narrow the space for local action?

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER

Climate change rarely causes conflict directly. It acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. In Gatumba, recurrent flooding interacts with poverty, land insecurity, displacement and broader regional instability linked to developments in eastern DRC. The most immediate and effective responses to flooding were organised not primarily through formal state structures, but through a hybrid landscape of local authorities, community leaders, religious leaders, diaspora networks and local inhabitants. Because climate interventions inevitably touch land, authority and legitimacy, they are never purely technical.

KEY FINDING 1 — LOCAL INSTITUTIONS MATTER

Communities relied on the actors they perceived as accessible, trustworthy and able to respond to immediate needs: local administrative authorities, community notables, faith leaders, diaspora networks and an Association of Gatumba Natives, mobilising shelter, mediation, advocacy and improvised flood adaptation. In particular, local authorities found themselves balancing the implementation of central government directives with responding to the preferences and concerns of local communities, many of whom wished to remain in the affected areas.

Policy implication. Invest not only in infrastructure and technical solutions, but in the locally legitimate institutions and social networks through which communities respond collectively to environmental shocks.

KEY FINDING 2 — ADAPTATION IS NOT ALWAYS POLITICALLY NEUTRAL

Centrally driven managed relocation following the 2024 floods was widely perceived as insufficiently consultative and at odds with the preferences of much of the local population, whose preferred option was to remain in place and adapt to the changing environmental conditions. The relocation plans therefore generated widespread resistance and became a rare instance of public engagement in Burundi's otherwise constrained civic space. Public meetings became sites of open protest.

"Any mention of relocation was met with anger from the residents ... they made a racket to stop them speaking."
— Respondent describing a high-level official visit announcing the imposed relocation

Climate governance in Gatumba is not technical but political: relocation became an arena of competing claims over land, authority, and belonging.

These tensions are not new. They are layered onto a long history of state-led displacement — from Kajaga to Kinyinya to Gatumba — and of contested land.

Policy implication. Reducing environmental risk does not automatically reduce vulnerability. Prioritise participation, consultation and rights-based safeguards — such as the Peninsula Principles — in any relocation, treating it as a last resort after in-situ options are exhausted.

KEY FINDING 3 — SOCIAL COHESION IS A CRITICAL ADAPTATION RESOURCE

Households relied on informal support networks, community solidarity and mutual assistance to absorb shocks, share information and shelter affected neighbours. This social capital is a genuine — but under-resourced and unevenly distributed — base for resilience. Prolonged crises risks exhausting these mechanisms altogether.

Policy implication. Invest in social cohesion and local solidarity alongside physical adaptation infrastructure, with explicit attention to who is included and who is excluded.

KEY FINDING 4 — FRAGILE SETTINGS REQUIRE FLEXIBLE APPROACHES

Climate impacts intersected with displacement, economic disruption and insecurity. The M23 capture of Uvira in December 2025 triggered border closures, militarisation and an influx of over 27,000 displaced people into Gatumba's transit camps, diverting attention and resources away from flood preparedness while scarcity drove prices sharply upward.

"Rents and the prices of essential goods almost doubled within a week."

— Host-community respondent, Gatumba

Flooding has also generated entirely new local disputes, reshaping social relations as much as livelihoods.

"I have had to intervene on numerous occasions to mediate between families in conflict over fishing grounds in the flooded areas; this is a new form of conflict."

— Hill chief, one of the most affected areas

Policy implication. Adaptation programming in fragile settings must be flexible, conflict-sensitive and able to adjust to rapidly changing displacement, security and market conditions.

TAKING LOCALLY LED ADAPTATION SERIOUSLY

These findings speak directly to the growing international commitment to locally led adaptation (LLA). The Gatumba case shows that adaptation in fragile settings cannot be separated from governance, land politics and regional stability. LLA is widely endorsed but barely financed; in centralised, conflict-affected Burundi, the core challenge is not an absence of local agency but the political and financial conditions that constrain it. Without flexible finance, rights-based safeguards and the genuine inclusion of local actors, LLA risks becoming a way of shifting the burden onto communities least responsible for the crisis.

Belgium and the European Union — both committed to locally led adaptation and to integrating climate, development and peace — are well placed to translate those commitments into conflict-sensitive, locally legitimate practice in contexts such as Gatumba and the wider Ruzizi Plain.

A LOCAL CRISIS WITH REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

The Gatumba case also demonstrates that climate change impacts cannot be understood solely through a local or national lens.

The Ruzizi delta sits at a regional crossroads and is part of a broader ecosystem which spans across Burundi, DRC and Rwanda. The area is deeply embedded in a broader regional context characterised by cross-border mobility, economic interdependence, environmental interconnections and, more recently, the spillover effects of renewed conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Climate-related flooding, displacement and livelihood disruption interact with these wider dynamics, creating complex and overlapping vulnerabilities that transcend national borders.

At the same time, the research also points to important sources of resilience strongly linked to cross-border economic activity and social exchange.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ▶ **Stay engaged, conflict-sensitively.** Maintain long-term support in the Ruzizi Delta despite insecurity, and begin every intervention with continuous analysis of local power relations, land dynamics and differentiated vulnerability, so adaptation does not redistribute risk onto the marginalised.
- ▶ **Invest directly in locally legitimate institutions and actors.** Support not only local authorities but civil society, community leaders, informal mediators, faith networks and women's and youth groups — the actors which are already doing the heaviest lifting.
- ▶ **Make adaptation finance flexible and locally reachable.** Provide small-grant, low-bureaucracy, patient funding able to operate through shocks, displacement and security disruptions, while building long-term local institutional capacity.
- ▶ **Apply rights-based safeguards to any relocation.** Treat relocation as a last resort after in-situ options are exhausted; follow the Peninsula Principles; secure tenure, consultation, compensation and grievance mechanisms; protect livelihoods, social networks and belonging.
- ▶ **Prioritise in-situ adaptation where feasible.** Support livelihood measures and locally rooted flood protection for infrastructures that matter in people's everyday lives, rather than imposing displacement on residents who wish to stay.
- ▶ **Invest in coordination, not parallel action.** Back joint platforms that include rather than bypass informal actors and local government, and balance localisation with the continued role of national institutions — avoiding both responsibilisation and fragmentation.
- ▶ **Integrate climate change considerations with initiatives to support regional stability and peace.** Regional, national and international actors should strengthen cross-border cooperation to reduce climate-related vulnerabilities.