

# Roadblocks in Masisi and Walikale

## Predation on movement in turbulent times



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# EDITORIAL

## Roadblocks in Masisi and Walikale: Predation on movement in turbulent times

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**Cover picture:** Roadblock held by Traffic Police in Mushaki, Masisi territory (North Kivu), December 2018

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**Association pour le Développement des Initiatives Paysannes** (ASSODIP) is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that defends and promotes the human rights of peasant populations in the Province of North Kivu.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ANR</b>	<i>Agence Nationale de Renseignements</i>
<b>APCLS</b>	<i>Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain</i>
<b>ASM</b>	Artisanal and Small-scale Mining
<b>ASSODIP</b>	<i>Association pour le Développement des Initiatives Paysannes</i>
<b>CNDP</b>	<i>Congrès national pour la défense du peuple</i>
<b>DGM</b>	<i>Direction Générale de Migration</i>
<b>DIIS</b>	Danish Institute for International Studies
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>FARDC</b>	<i>Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo</i>
<b>Fc</b>	<i>Francs congolais</i>
<b>FECOMIKA</b>	Federation of Mining Cooperatives
<b>FPP/AP</b>	<i>Front Patriotique pour la Paix-Armée du Peuple</i>
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IPIS</b>	International Peace Information Service
<b>ITSCI</b>	ITA Tin Supply Chain Initiative
<b>Kg</b>	kilogram
<b>M23</b>	<i>Mouvement du 23 mars</i>
<b>NDC</b>	<i>Nduma Défense du Congo</i>
<b>NDC-R</b>	<i>Nduma Défense du Congo - Rénové</i>
<b>PCR</b>	<i>Police de Circulation Routière</i>
<b>P-DDRCS</b>	Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Rehabilitation and Stabilization Program
<b>PMH</b>	<i>Police des Mines et Hydrocarbures (mining police)</i>
<b>PNC</b>	<i>Police National Congolais</i>
<b>RN</b>	<i>Route nationale</i>
<b>SAEMAPE</b>	<i>Service d'Assistance et de l'Encadrement de la Mine Artisanale et à Petit Échelle</i>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017 the International Peace Information Service (IPIS), *Association pour le Développement des Initiatives Paysannes* (ASSODIP), and Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) conducted an extensive study of the political economy of roadblocks in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Mapping almost 800 roadblocks throughout North and South Kivu, the study provided detailed evidence of the extent to which armed actors extract wealth from the movement of goods and people.

In 2023, ASSODIP, DIIS, and IPIS conducted a case study focusing on roadblocks in the territories of Masisi and Walikale in the province of North Kivu (Figure 1). This case study builds upon the 2017 study—but focuses on smaller geographic area—to explore changes over time and to get a sense of new trends with regard to the roadblocks. The study identified 110 roadblocks: 84 in Masisi territory and 26 in Walikale territory.<sup>1</sup> The team also mapped 40 roadblocks along the *Route Nationale* No. 3 linking Walikale with Bukavu, in South Kivu.

Below is a summary of key points of the 2023 case study, captured under four subheadings: who runs the roadblocks, roadblocks and mineral supply chains, impact of roadblocks, and recommendations.

## Who runs the roadblocks?

The Congolese state services have long used roadblocks throughout the country to extract formal and informal taxes, but roadblocks are also a key source of armed group financing and a focal point of conflict between armed actors. Compared to 2017, control over North Kivu's transport network is radically more fragmented and militarized (i.e., a larger number of armed actors operate roadblocks along the province's roads). It means that various non-state armed groups, alongside the Congolese army, accumulate wealth illicitly from movement of goods and people.

The national army (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* [FARDC]) remains the leading actor operating roadblocks in Walikale and Masisi with 44 percent of the roadblocks mapped (48 of 110), and non-state armed groups are present at 36 percent of roadblocks (40), a 16 percent increase compared to the number of non-state armed group roadblocks mapped in Walikale and Masisi in 2017. As a result of the counteroffensive against M23, non-state armed groups increasingly run roadblocks along national or provincial roads in 2023, whereas in 2017, their roadblocks were predominantly found along footpaths and feeder roads. In 2023 as in 2017, chieftaincies (i.e., customary or traditional authorities) are the third largest roadblock operators, and the Traffic Police (*Police de Circulation Routière* [PCR]) are fourth. A new category of roadblock operators is the *Wazalendo* ("patriotic volunteers") who joined the recent FARDC counteroffensive against M23 and are present at 10 percent of the roadblocks in Walikale and Masisi.

## Roadblocks and mineral supply chains

Roadblocks are a key mechanism that enable armed actors to skim off revenues from mining supply chains. They are often overlooked, however, because these extortions occur at a physical distance from more intensely monitored mining sites. About half of all roadblocks mapped tax minerals or mineral traders, most often alongside other kinds of traffic. One out of six roadblocks identified appear to have been established solely to tax the artisanal mining and mineral trade.

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<sup>1</sup> The real number of roadblocks is likely considerably higher, reflecting the overall militarization of North Kivu's roads, largely due to the resurgence of the March 23 Movement (Mouvement du 23 Mars [M23]).

Another set of (new) actors is operating roadblocks along mineral supply chains: artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) stakeholders. These stakeholders include mining cooperatives, traditional authorities, and the mining police (*Police des Mines et Hydrocarbures* [PMH]; who are specifically responsible for security in mining areas, but often accused of extortion).

Crucially, roadblocks near mining sites do not exclusively tax minerals and miners, but also extract revenue from other kinds of trade attracted by mining activity. By extension, other natural resources, especially agricultural products, constitute important sources of roadblock taxation.

## Impact of roadblocks

Roadblocks have a significant impact on the daily life of people living in the area or passing through. We have identified three large impacts that can be attributed to the roadblocks.

**Mixed security impact:** While roadblocks often involve illegal taxation, they do constitute a **predictable** form of “stationary banditry,” a stable form of predatory wealth extraction, which may replace less preferable or unpredictable forms of “roving banditry,” such as kidnapping, looting, and hold-ups. On the other hand, the **threat of violence** is always inherent in roadblock encounters, and checkpoint operators do not shy away from resorting to harassment, unlawful seizure of traveler’s property, arbitrary arrests, and even physical violence. Infractions, real and invented, are used to increase the amount extorted.

**Rising commodity prices:** Roadblock levies are incorporated into transport prices and often paid ultimately by people who rely on markets for their livelihoods. This means that roadblocks may have effects far away from their location, all the way up to the end-markets where consumer goods affected by roadblocks are sold.

**Restricted freedom of movement:** Roadblocks form invisible barriers to movement for travelers who cannot afford the higher prices of travel—often groups that are already vulnerable. Additionally, certain roadblock operators engage in tax discrimination, taxing specific non-autochthonous people (such as traders from different ethnic groups) disproportionately.

## Recommendations

- When seeking to address conflict financing, policymakers need to move away from a narrow focus on mineral supply chains and consider a broader range of revenue-generating mechanisms that fund conflict in eastern DRC. Armed actors certainly do discriminate between minerals and other forms of taxable wealth. As a primary and geographically specific form of conflict financing, incorporate roadblocks more systematically in conflict financing assessments, for instance through periodically updated surveys.
- When promoting more responsible mineral supply chains, pay systematic attention to, and denounce more firmly, armed interference with minerals in transit, as well as indirect taxation of the mining economy through roadblocks.
- Increase government capacity and appetite to reform security services and provide better logistics and more regular pay for FARDC. This will (i) prevent them from illegally operating roadblocks; (ii) prevent them from harassing travelers at legal roadblocks; and (iii) reinforce their capabilities in dismantling illegal roadblocks, including those held by other actors.
- Provide capacity enhancement to state agents operating roadblocks to promote human rights and to fight corruption, fraud, and gender-based violence.
- Promote transparency by urging national and provincial authorities to list legal roadblocks, as well as the services legally entitled to operate them, and the taxes they are entitled to levy.

- Provide capacity enhancement to local human rights organizations and journalists to report more systematically on roadblocks and roadblock-related violations of Congolese law and human rights.
- Conduct more research on the exact impacts of roadblocks on the most vulnerable populations, as the burden of roadblock taxes weighs relatively heavier on lower-value goods (e.g., agricultural products). With the World Bank planning to embark on an ambitious feeder road rehabilitation program in eastern DRC, careful study of the political economy of rural roads selected and the impacts of roadblocks on prices at farms and markets linked through these roads should form a baseline against which to measure socio-economic (and security) impact.

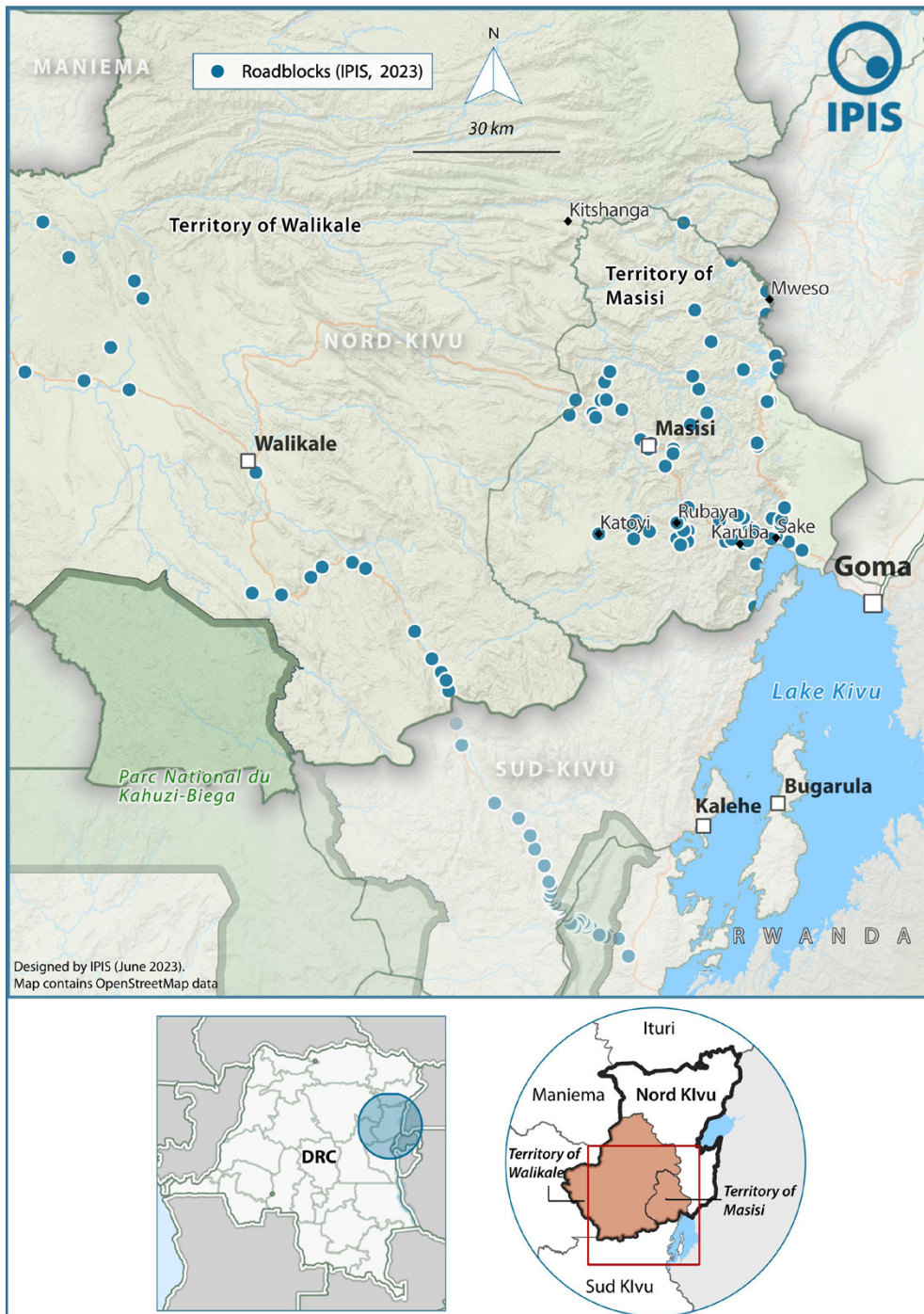


Figure 1. Roadblocks in Masisi & Walikale, 2023.

# INTRODUCTION

Minerals and other natural resources have long dominated research on conflict financing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but armed actors rely on many other strategies to generate revenue.<sup>2</sup> Roadblocks are one of them. Placed along the mineral supply chains, roadblocks—or checkpoints—are a key tool for armed and non-armed actors to extract revenues from the mining sector. But roadblock operators often do not discriminate between taxing minerals or other goods, and the extraction of wealth from other forms of traffic is just as important for conflict financing.

To promote a more nuanced understanding of the political economy of conflict in the DRC and the role of minerals in it, in 2017, the International Peace Information Service (IPIS), the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), and the *Association pour le Développement des Initiatives Paysannes* (ASSODIP) studied the phenomenon of roadblocks in eastern DRC, demonstrating the extent to which armed actors extract wealth from the movement of goods and people.<sup>3</sup> Mapping almost 800 roadblocks throughout North and South Kivu, it provided detailed evidence of how control over trade routes factors into conflicts in the DRC, demonstrating that roadblocks form a principal source of revenue for (state and non-state) armed actors, sustaining armed mobilization.

Roadblocks extract significant wealth from society, running into millions of dollars annually in the DRC alone. To illustrate, in 2017, IPIS-DIIS-ASSODIP found that just a handful of trucking companies who operate along North Kivu's roads together paid \$150,000 a month (\$1.8 million a year) in roadblock taxes.<sup>4</sup> While roadblock operators in neighboring countries mostly tax commercial bulk transport, a particularity of the DRC is the wide net that roadblock operators cast: informal hawkers, women going to rural markets, and artisanal miners coming from their day's shift are all subjected to extortion at roadblocks—hence the previous report's title, *Everything that moves will be taxed*. While bulk transporters pay much higher checkpoint fees than small-scale road users in absolute terms, the burden of roadblock taxes weighs heavier relative to the low value the latter carry.

Six years later, the present report provides a case study focusing on roadblocks in the territories of Masisi and Walikale, in North Kivu province (Figure 1). While the case study builds upon the 2017 study, it focuses on smaller geographic area to get a sense of new trends with regard to the landscape of roadblocks and explores changes over time. In 2017, it was determined that the bulk of roadblock revenue accrued to government-affiliated actors who were able to extract hefty fees from bulk transport along eastern Congo's highways, while a mix of Congolese soldiers, non-state armed groups, and traditional authorities imposed lesser fines along footpaths linking mines to main roads, and feeder roads connecting farms to rural markets. Today, state control over highways is much more tenuous, with the number of armed group roadblocks, including along main roads, more than doubling—a reflection of the conflict sparked by the resurgence of the rebel group March 23 Movement (M23) (see Section 2, The impact of recent security dynamics (2020-2022) on roadblocks). As of mid-2023, that group alone is estimated to make around \$40,000-50,000 in monthly revenue from just two of its checkpoints in North Kivu.

What has not changed since 2017 is the predominance of the Congolese armed forces at roadblocks, who continue to control approximately 44 percent of all roadblocks. In contrast to 2017, however, Congolese soldiers now operate roadblocks conjointly with non-state armed groups—the research team found 11 checkpoints staffed by Congolese soldiers and rebels together, all of them near frontlines with M23.

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2 Matthysen K. and Gobbers E. (2022). Armed conflict, insecurity, and mining in eastern DRC: Reflections on the nexus between natural resources and armed conflict, Antwerp: IPIS, pp. 7, 26-27.

3 See Schouten P., Murairi J. and Kubuya S. (2017). *“Everything that moves will be taxed:” the political economy of roadblocks in North and South Kivu*, IPIS, DIIS and ASSODIP; & Schouten P., Murairi J., and Kubuya S. (2016). *Pillage route: l'économie politique des barrages routiers à Walikale et Masisi*, IPIS, DIIS and ASSODIP.

4 Schouten P., Murairi J., and Kubuya S. (2017). *“Everything that moves will be taxed:” the political economy of roadblocks in North and South Kivu*, IPIS, DIIS and ASSODIP, pp. 28.



Following a brief description of the local security context and research methods, Section 1 describes the roadblock landscape in Masisi and Walikale, including roadblock operators, the interaction with the mining sector, and the role and impact of roadblocks on daily life in the area. Where relevant, findings from the present study are contrasted with those of the 2017 study. Section 2 discusses the interplay between recent security dynamics and roadblocks. The report summarizes the main findings and discusses the role of roadblocks in the political economy of the DRC.

## SECURITY CONTEXT IN WALIKALE-MASISI, EARLY 2023

Research for this study was conducted at a time when the security situation was extremely volatile in the territories of Walikale and Masisi, particularly the latter.

Since the end of the Congo wars, which lasted from 1996 to 2003, lingering conflict marks the local security situation in North Kivu, and involves several armed groups and has stirred up intercommunity tensions. Over the past decade, the local landscape of armed groups has further fragmented due to “inertia of the conflict:” numerous armed groups trying to survive in the absence of effective demobilization, or security sector reform programs.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the number of armed groups has risen to around 64, in the province of North Kivu alone.

In Walikale and Masisi, many of these groups have actively fought each other over the past years, including over access to resources. These groups include several factions of the *Nduma Défense du Congo - Rénové* (NDC-R), the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (*Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain* [APCLS]), the *Front Patriotique pour la Paix-Armée du Peuple* (FPP/AP), and Nyatura groups. This progressive fragmentation of armed groups, and the proliferation of self-defense movements, has contributed to an increasing number of roadblocks (see Section 2.1).

To cope with the multiplication of armed groups, especially the escalation of violence in Beni territory (North Kivu), linked to the Allied Democratic Forces, and Ituri province that involved *Coopérative pour le Développement Économique du Congo* (CODECO), the DRC government declared a state of siege in 2021.<sup>6</sup> This has led to a heavy militarization of the two provinces, which in turn sparked a notable increase in military harassment for the local population.

Despite the state of siege, the security situation further deteriorated following the revival of the armed group M23, which provoked a humanitarian crisis that displaced more than 900,000 civilians in North Kivu.<sup>7</sup> M23 first emerged in 2012 from former rebels who had integrated into the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), but defected when they were redeployed away from North Kivu (see Section 2.3). After its defeat in 2013, M23 lay dormant for almost a decade, to ramp up their attacks again in late 2021, and taking control of parts of Rutshuru territory, in North Kivu.<sup>8</sup> After a few months of relative calm, violence flared up again late 2022 and early 2023, at the time IPIS-DIIS-ASSODIP commenced field research for this case study. M23 expanded further into Masisi territory (North Kivu), and almost encircled Goma (capital of North Kivu) temporarily, controlling most transport corridors to the city. M23 also seriously impacted the landscape of roadblocks in Masisi territory, as they took over key roadblocks from the government, and the FARDC subsequently launched a counteroffensive together with local armed groups, resulting in yet more roadblocks.

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5 Kivu Security Tracker. (2021). *The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo: Missed opportunities, protracted insecurity and self-fulfilling prophecies*, p. 8.

6 Musamba J. and Gobbers E., (2023). *Armed groups, territorial control, land disputes, and gold exploitation in Djugu, Ituri, Democratic Republic of Congo*, IPIS, March 2023.

7 IOM (International Organization for Migration). (2023). *M23 Crisis Democratic Republic of the Congo*, April.

8 Source: [Why M23 is not your average rebel group](#), IPIS Briefing, January 2023.

## METHODOLOGY

As in 2017, researchers used digital data collection tools to collect data on individual roadblocks along key transportation routes, and to geo-locate them. The researchers also conducted key informant interviews to develop a better understanding of the wider context and impact of roadblocks.<sup>9</sup> The research team mapped roadblocks and their operators and collected information on perceptions of various stakeholders and affected populations, as well as human rights abuses that occurred at these barriers. Research team members, selected because of their familiarity with the target areas, conducted surveys between January and April 2023.

The geographical focus of this study is the Masisi and Walikale territories in DRC's North Kivu province (Figure 1). These territories were selected for logistical reasons (i.e., their proximity to Goma), and because of the large amount of mining activity therein. The presence of mining allows for an analysis of the interaction between roadblocks and mineral supply chains. Whereas the 2017 study captured a relatively stable moment in time in these territories, the present study reflects a more volatile landscape. The research was conducted at a time when the armed group M23 was expanding its presence and a counteroffensive was underway.<sup>10</sup> (For more information see above Security context in Walikale-Masisi, early 2023 and Section 2.3) This makes a systematic comparison between 2017 and 2023 difficult. Many roads were too dangerous to visit, and it was not always possible to identify the exact operators of the roadblocks the team encountered, as names, alliances, and military control changed on a daily basis. Nevertheless, when possible, the report will compare the 2023 data covering Walikale and Masisi territories with of a subset of the 2017 data that covers the same territories, to reveal some trends and changes. In 2017, the research team identified 134 roadblocks in Walikale and Masisi territories.



*Roadblock in Masisi, 2018.*

9 See [Editorial](#) for composition of the fieldwork team.

10 Source: [Why M23 is not your average rebel group](#), IPIS Briefing, January 2023.

# 1. OVERVIEW OF ROADBLOCKS IN MASISI AND WALIKALE

In total, IPIS-DIIS-ASSODIP identified 110 roadblocks in these two territories in early 2023: 84 in Masisi and 26 in Walikale. The real number of roadblocks in this geographic zone is considerably higher, but many roads could not be visited, in part due to the security dynamics mentioned above. Nevertheless, the number of roadblocks in North Kivu seems to have increased compared to 2017, reflecting the overall militarization of roads in the province linked to the deterioration of the security situation. We also mapped 40 roadblocks along the *Route Nationale* (RN) No. 3 that links Walikale with Bukavu in South Kivu, as it is an important route (e.g., for mineral traders) to access Walikale territory.

In 2017, government forces predominantly operated checkpoints along national highways and provincial roads in North Kivu, while 80 percent of armed group roadblocks sat along feeder roads, footpaths, and mining trails.<sup>11</sup> In 2023 there appears to be a shift of armed groups toward roadblocks on main roads. In 2017 only 20 percent of armed group roadblocks were along main roads, compared to 45 percent in 2023. As discussed below, the expansion of M23 (Section 2.3) and the government's counteroffensive, which relies on local armed groups (Section 2.4), is largely responsible for this trend.

## Why are there roadblocks?

Roadblocks are governmental instruments to regulate traffic, ensure security, and levy decentralized taxes. In the DRC, a host of legal taxes are collected at roadblocks, such as trade taxes by subnational administrative entities. Yet, for most roadblock operators, the (informal) expectation is that they generate their own income in a decentralized fashion and send a share upward to superiors. This is a legacy of the 1980s, when agents of faltering state administrations and security services began to make up their lagging salaries by extracting and pocketing revenues directly from society.

Militiamen that do not receive outside financial support also rely on decentralized revenue mobilization, often copying the taxation practices of local army units or traditional authorities to sustain themselves.

In some cases, (illegal) taxation at roadblocks might be regarded as legitimate, when largely unpaid military or rebel elements posted at roadblocks make informal agreements with the local population. In exchange for the roadblock taxes, which sustain their presence, the armed actors provide some form of protection (e.g., against banditry) in return (see, for example, the roadblocks between Bukavu and Miti in Section 1.3.1). However, the taxation at most roadblocks far exceeds their operators' operational and logistical needs. Consequently, people generally denounce the heavy burden of roadblocks on the local socio-economic situation,<sup>12</sup> which has occasionally resulted in public protests.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, because they are so easy to mount, roadblocks continue to figure prominently among the multiple forms of revenue generation by armed actors in the DRC, alongside taxing mines, access to farmland, households and the monopolization of trade.

11 See Schouten P. (2022). *Roadblock Politics: the Origins of Violence in Central Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 117-118.

12 For example, Radio Okapi. (2021). *La société civile déplore des barrières illégales à Masisi et Rutshuru*, May 28 ; Radio Okapi (2022) *Nord-Kivu : des barrières illégales rendent le trafic difficile dans le groupement de Kamuronza*, November 4.

13 Mediacongo.net. (2019). *Nord-Kivu : une journée ville morte hier à Masisi pour demander la suspension des barrières illégales*, March 6.

## 1.1. Who operates the roadblocks?

Regarding who runs roadblocks, there are some key continuities as well as some significant changes between 2017 and 2023. First, it is important to underscore that most checkpoints are staffed by more than one actor. In particular roadblocks at the borders of subnational administrative entities (provinces, territories) often figure multiple individuals, affiliated to local administrations, the migration services, police, intelligence services, and different branches of the army. In rural areas, roadblocks are typically operated jointly by a local detachment of soldiers and the chieftaincy, or a mining cooperative and the police. Once mounted by one actor, roadblocks often act as magnets for other entities to try and impose their own levies on road users. This means that when reporting about the number of roadblocks per actor, the total percentages can exceed 100 percent (see Table 1, for example).

Overall, the **national army** (FARDC) remains the leading actor operating roadblocks in Walikale and Masisi. Forty-eight roadblocks (or 44 percent of the total roadblocks mapped) have FARDC soldiers present, which is the same percentage as in 2017 (Table 1). The omnipresence of FARDC roadblocks (all over the Kivu provinces) suggests that every army deployment, however temporary, is instantly transformed into a point of extortion. This mode of operation, in which army units in the field have the responsibility to generate their own means of subsistence, finds its origins in the 1980s (see text box above), and makes military deployment a profitable business. It is important to note that the FARDC does not have a legal taxation mandate, and that all roadside taxation by the army is thus illicit.

All non-state **armed groups**, taken together, rose to second place in 2023, with a presence at 36 percent of the roadblocks the team encountered (40 in total). This constitutes a relative increase of 117 percent compared to the number of roadblocks with an armed group presence in 2017 (16 percent). Section 2.1 discusses this remarkable increase in detail below.

Armed groups are followed by the **chieftaincies** (i.e., customary or traditional authorities), who are present at 17 roadblocks (15 percent), compared with 17 percent in 2017. Chieftaincies in the DRC have a traditional right to collect funds for local development activities. The **Traffic Police** (PCR) are in fourth place, present at 13 percent of the roadblocks, just as in 2017. It is important to note that the PCR has a legal mandate to collect road use taxes, but it is an empirical question about how much of what they collect makes it into the state's coffers.<sup>14</sup> As one traffic policeman commented<sup>15</sup>:

*"I have this nice post at a central roundabout because I've always lined the pockets of my superiors. All traffic police agents along this road must send the commander \$50 a week—if you don't, you get sent to the repair shop, where you can't make any extra money."*



14 Also see Baaz M. E. and Olsson O. (2011). "Feeding the Horse: Unofficial Economic Activities within the Police Force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo." *African Security* 4 (4): 223-241; and Sanchez de la Sierra R., Titeca K., Xie H.S., Malukisa Nkuku A. and Amani Lameke A.A. (2022). *The Real State: Inside the Congo's Traffic Police Agency*, NBER Working Paper No. w30258, July.

15 Interview with traffic policeman, Goma, March 2023.

**Table 1. Roadblock operators in Walikale and Masisi territory, 2017 and 2023.**<sup>16</sup>

Actor	Frequency 2017		Frequency 2023	
<b>Security services</b>				
Government forces (FARDC)	57	43%	48	44%
Traffic Police (PCR)	17	13%	14	13%
<i>Police National Congolais</i> (PNC)	3	2%	8	7%
Mining Police (PMH)	-		8	7%
<i>Agence Nationale de Renseignements</i> (ANR)	17	13%	14	13%
<b>Other actors</b>				
<i>Direction Générale de Migration</i> (DGM)	8	6%	8	7%
Mining cooperatives	4	3%	10	9%
Chieftaincies	22	16%	17	15%
Volunteers (former Mai-Mai)	18	13%	14	13%
<b>Armed groups</b>				
Mai Mai	12	9%	21	19%
Of which Wazalendo	-		11	10%
Nyatara	9	7%	13	12%
M23	-		6	5%

A new category of roadblock operators is the **Wazalendo** or “*volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*” who joined the recent FARDC counteroffensive against M23. They are not to be confused with the “volunteers” listed in Table 1—which consists of former Mai Mai who are ostensibly engaged in road rehabilitation in Walikale, but are considered by road users to engage in simple extortion, particularly of traders and transporters of nonlocal ethnic groups (see image below).



*Roadblock by volunteers in Walikale, 2023 © ASSODIP.*

<sup>16</sup> As indicated in the Methodology section above, due to insecurity, many roads were too dangerous to visit in 2023, and it was not always possible to collect all the information that the researchers sought. As the roads covered were not exactly the same in 2017 and 2023, it makes a systematic comparison between the two years difficult. Nevertheless, both samples cover the same territories and a decent number of roadblocks, notably 134 in 2017, and 110 roadblocks in 2023. These samples make it possible to observe some trends with regard to the number of roadblock operators.

The research team mapped 11 roadblocks operated by Wazalendo in March 2023, all of which are jointly operated with FARDC. Wazalendo factions may or may not hail from an existing armed group. Around Sake, for example, many Wazalendo from the Hunde community are not associated with an armed group. But others are from known armed groups; three of the eleven Wazalendo encountered at roadblocks were identified as APCLS, of the self-proclaimed Colonel Kipfumu, and two of them included APCLS elements sharing the roadblock with rebels from NDC-R's Bwira faction.

It is important to note that an increasing number of reports denounce Wazalendo-operated roadblocks in Rutshuru and Masisi territories (North Kivu), and Kalehe territory (South Kivu). Congolese media speak of the "Wazalendo business," accusing these groups of focusing more on self-enrichment through roadblocks than on combatting M23.<sup>17</sup> Yet, it has become exceedingly difficult to identify the Wazalendo: the term has become a catch-all term encompassing militias fighting M23, new self-defense groups, bandits, as well as a label that army soldiers at roadblocks may use to perpetrate predation while disguising their identity.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2. Roadblocks in the mining sector

The study sample found that 16 percent (18) of the roadblocks identified are located along roads used primarily, if not solely, for artisanal mining-related activities. Along these roads, roadblock levies can target minerals, access to mines for artisanal miners, as well as trade of consumer goods—roadblock operators generally do not discriminate between taxing individuals and people who transport minerals or other kinds of cargo.

Minerals and mining-related activities are also taxed at roadblocks further away from the mines, along main roads where minerals and consumer goods travel to and from the mines. Consequently, 50 percent of the roadblocks in the survey sample tax minerals or mineral traders, along with other road users. This means that ores mined at sites that are considered "conflict free" may still finance conflict actors further downstream the supply chain.

In 2017, for instance, the research team identified a pattern in Walikale whereby government-affiliated actors and soldiers would tax mineral supply chains at roadblocks strategically placed at the junctions of main roads with the paths leading up to individual mines, whereas armed groups and traditional authorities maintained roadblocks along these same footpaths, but closer to the mines. In 2023, additional roadblocks can ostensibly be observed along these tracks leading to the mines, as ASM stakeholders (notably mining cooperatives) are also increasingly active as roadblock operators. They are often placed at the entry/exit points of artisanal mines, which are strategic locations to monitor the flow of people and goods to impose taxes (see text box below).

In 2017, mining cooperatives<sup>19</sup> had just begun copying state services by erecting their own checkpoints and taxation points. Today, this practice has undeniably become more common. Where in 2017 researchers found their presence at four roadblocks, in 2023 researchers found them at ten. Or, as an informant in Walikale put it:

*"At the entrance of every mine site, there is a roadblock."*

17 Jambo RDC. (2023). *Nord-Kivu: Suite à la présence du mouvement "Wazalendo Business" à Rutshuru, les habitants du groupement de Binza vivent dans un calvaire*, June 16.

18 Zaidi Zanem N. (2023). *Des habitants de l'est de la RDC dénoncent des harcèlements*, Deutsche Welle, August 28.

19 "Since 2010, artisanal miners in DRC are obliged to group themselves in mining cooperatives. (Arrête ministériel n° 0706/CAB.MIN/MINES/01/2010 du 20 septembre 2010 portant mesures urgentes d'encadrement de la décision de suspension des activités minières dans les provinces du Maniema, Nord-Kivu et Sud-Kivu.) Ever since, such cooperatives have mushroomed all over the eastern part of the country. Unfortunately, instead of promoting collective action among artisanal miners to further their interests, in practice, cooperatives have become vehicles to exploit the miners." (Source: Matthysen K. and Gobbers E. (2022). *Armed conflict, insecurity, and mining in eastern DRC: Reflections on the nexus between natural resources and armed conflict*, IPIS, p. 28).

Mining site owners and customary authority representatives are also increasingly present at roadblocks along mining routes in Walikale, taxing a share of incoming goods and minerals leaving the mine site (see text box below).

The presence of roadblocks operated by the mining police (PMH) is also a novelty. This police force is specifically responsible to guard security in and around mining sites, but is regularly accused of extorting miners. It is now permanently present at eight barriers, up from zero in 2017.

### Case study: roadblocks along mining supply chains in Walikale territory (North Kivu)

This case study describes two roadblocks in mining supply chains in Walikale territory that are representative of what is commonly found at other sites.

#### A roadblock at the entrance of a site

The **Mutiku** mining site in the Bakano sector is a cassiterite and coltan mine, administratively managed by customary authorities and the mining cooperative COMIDE. The presence of armed actors is not reported on the site, but the PMH regularly visits the site, ostensibly to monitor compliance with mining regulations, during which it regularly receives illegal “tokens of appreciation” and “fees for displacement.” Remarkably, the government classifies Mutiku as “green” (i.e., considered free of armed interference, no illegal taxation, etc.), and it is covered by ITA Tin Supply Chain Initiative (iTSCI) traceability<sup>20</sup>.

At the entry point to the site sits a virtual roadblock,<sup>21</sup> where the collection of duties takes place. A 20 percent taxation rate on all products and goods leaving and entering the site, including minerals, is payable in kind or in cash. Revenue is shared between the mining cooperative and customary authorities.

#### A roadblock on a track leading to the mine site

**Kalay Boeing** is a large artisanal cassiterite mine located in the *groupement* Wassa, in Wanianga sector (in Walikale territory). Since the relocation of artisanal miners from Bisie and their installation in Kalay in 2016, the site is managed by two mining cooperatives, COCABI and COMIMA. The Mining Division, *Service d'Assistance et de l'Encadrement de la Mine Artisanale et à Petit Échelle* (SAEMAPE), PMH, and FARDC are present on site, the latter with a mandate from the National Commission for the Fight against Mining Fraud (CNLFM).

A roadblock operated by the cooperatives, TRANSCOM, and the landowners has been installed at the Osso river crossing, where a motorized canoe shuttles people and goods across the river. The *chefferie* and TRANSCOM charge 1,000 Fc per person (\$0.5, which is a considerable amount as a miner earns on average between \$2.7 and \$3.3 per day<sup>22</sup>) and 2,500 Fc per parcel of merchandise to gain access to the site. While not present at the roadblock, the FARDC detachment is entitled to 500 Fc per person as a “security” fee—a way to circumvent the regulation whereby the army is prohibited to extract revenue from the mineral supply chain.

Each 50 kg cassiterite bag ferried across the river is taxed by the mining cooperatives at 11,000 Fc. Afterward, the cooperatives share the 11,000 Fc as follows:

- 3,500 Fc for the cooperatives;
- 3,500 Fc for the landowners;
- 2,000 Fc for SAEMAPE, the Mining Division, and PMH; and
- 2,000 Fc for the FARDC.

While neither mining site directly finances conflict, this does not mean that the ensuing rents are distributed equitably or in service of local development.

- 
- 20 The International Tin Association (ITA)'s program iTSCI monitors mineral supply chains in eastern DRC. It implements traceability by tagging 3T (tantalum, tin, tungsten, and gold) mineral production at the mine site and along the trade route to verify the origin of the minerals further down the chain.
- 21 A virtual roadblock is an “obligatory crossing point known to passersby, but without any physical reflection in the built environment.” Schouten P., Murairi J. and Kubuya S. (2017). “Everything that moves will be taxed:” the political economy of roadblocks in North and South Kivu, IPIS, DIIS and ASSODIP, p. 13.
- 22 de Brier G., Jorns A., Geray M. and Jaillon A. (2020). *The Miner's Revenue and Basic Needs Study* IPIS, March.

Moreover, since artisanal mining often involves large movements of people (ranging from the artisanal miners themselves, to small-scale traders supplying the miners with food and tools, and mineral traders) and goods along the routes to a given mine, the erection of a roadblock becomes attractive for reasons other than the direct taxation of minerals.

This is particularly the case for areas where concentrated high-value minerals such as gold are mined because these minerals are easy to conceal and difficult to tax directly. In gold mining areas, therefore, one is more likely to encounter barriers taxing traders' and artisanal miners' access to the mines. Larger, lower-value minerals such as cassiterite are easier to tax, although here too, taxation at the barriers may focus on vehicles (motorcycles), people (passengers and pedestrians), and the (other) goods they carry.

Roadblocks on mineral supply chains may also function in more subtle ways, as literal trade barriers to uphold and enforce informal trade monopolies on consumer goods that reap handsome profits. The Congolese army is widely known to hold a monopoly over the trade in cannabis in eastern Congo, and with artisanal miners constituting an important consumption market for cannabis, army roadblocks near mining sites can double as points to enforce that monopoly, levy transit taxes, and sell cannabis. Similarly, customary chiefs or mining pit bosses may uphold a monopoly on the purchase of ores or the sale of moonshine or cigarettes, using checkpoints to enforce the monopoly or to impose transit taxes on people competing in the same markets.

In sum, it is important to recognize that multiple forms of taxation—not simply taxes on minerals extracted—occur at roadblocks near mine sites. More generally, also other goods, especially agricultural products, constitute important sources of roadblock taxation, as described in the text box below.

#### The key importance of other natural resources

Even though minerals are taxed at 50 percent of all roadblocks identified in this study, by far the most important natural resources in the political economy of roadblocks are agricultural products. These are taxed at 70 percent of the roadblocks (either in cash or in kind), indicating that farming products are more important as a stable source of checkpoint revenue, even if the value of taxes levied on these goods may be less. Yet, the impact of even minor roadblock taxes on farmers is large. For example, for a farmer carrying 20 kg of beans on her back to the local market, the difference between two or three roadblocks each extracting a kilo of her wares is significant. It is important to underscore the outsize but often invisible socioeconomic impact that roadblock taxes on farming products have, given that eastern Congo's population relies disproportionately on farming for its livelihood.



*Roadblock in Hombo, on the border between North Kivu and South Kivu, that is erected on market days. Bridges are typical locations for roadblocks. © ASSODIP*



### “Conflict milk:” a new tax introduced by M23

In Mushaki, M23 created a new tax called “Tax on fresh milk.” Mushaki is one of the dairy zones in Masisi territory, supplying the cities of Sake, Bweremana, Goma, and Bukavu. Bukavu-based traders purchasing fresh milk in Mushaki have to pay 1,000 Fc (\$0.5) per 5 liters of fresh milk at M23’s roadblocks when exiting the town: *Thousands of liters of milk are produced every day in Mushaki and its surroundings and they all have to pass through this roadblock*, said a resident of the area, thus generating thousands of dollars for M23.

Often complementing roadblock taxes along rural roads are in-kind taxes that local authorities impose for access to fields and markets in rural areas. In the survey sample, access to markets is taxed at 27 percent (or 30) of the roadblocks mapped. Some of these roadblocks exist only on biweekly market days, disappearing in the intervening days. This is an old practice, a customary prerogative now copied by other actors. At seven roadblocks, six of which are in the Bahunde chiefdom, the military and armed groups levy a tax on farmers' access to their fields.



Timber being loaded on a truck in Bitale, South Kivu. © ASSODIP 2023



Other natural resources taxed at roadblocks in Masisi and Walikale are charcoal and timber, at 17 percent (charcoal) and 31 percent (timber) of the roadblocks in the study.

### 1.3. Impact of roadblocks

Whether run by state agencies, mining cooperatives, or armed groups, roadblocks have a significant impact on the daily life of people living in or passing through the area. This impact varies according to the local context and an individual's social position. A roadblock may harm a trader coming from a larger city, while at the same time have a positive impact on a local villager by improving security.<sup>23</sup>

The research team observed three different forms of roadblock impacts: on security, commodity prices, and freedom of movement. One form of impact does not exclude the others and often a roadblock will influence its surroundings in multiple ways.



One of the 32 army roadblocks in the Kahuzi-Biega National Park. © ASSODIP

#### 1.3.1. Mixed security impact



Curbing the movement of alleged or real armed groups, bandits, and other criminals is often cited as a key reason for erecting a roadblock. Government security forces, and non-state armed groups, often cite this rationale. In some cases, government security forces and non-state armed groups point to inadequate security provided by the state to justify why they ultimately seek self-help strategies, like erecting roadblocks to protect their community/locality against insecurity. Yet roadblocks have a mixed track record of bringing security on the one hand, but also constituting sites of harassment under the pretext of mistrust on the other.

23 Also see Muzalia G., Mukungilwa B., Bisimwa S., Hoffmann K., Nalunva A., Batumike E., Mapatano J., Dunia O., Cirhuza E. and Muderhwa V. (2021). *Roadblocks "at the rhythm of the country:" Predation and beyond in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo*, Ghent: Conflict Research Group.

While overall security is certainly important for traders and transporters, roadblocks also have the advantage of instilling a certain predictability of travel costs compared to more ad hoc forms of wealth extraction by armed actors. The case of Kahuzi–Biega National Park, discussed hereafter, is a good example.

The Goma–Masisi–Walikale road has become impassable due to insecurity and the road’s deterioration. Trade of minerals, farming products, and manufactured goods between Goma and Walikale have been rerouted toward Kisangani via Lubutu, and Bukavu via Miti. Between Miti and Walikale center, the research team encountered at least 50 roadblocks (Figure 2). Most were concentrated along a short stretch of the road crossing the Kahuzi–Biega National Park: 34 roadblocks, of which the FARDC operated 32, and park guards operated two (Figure 2).

In 2017, by contrast, there were only 13 barriers along the same section of the road passing through the park. At that time, people using this road were often victim of robberies, kidnappings, and murders.<sup>24</sup> Negotiations were held in 2021 between the transporters’ association and the FARDC to find a sustainable way to secure this short stretch of road. As a result, the number of roadblocks has more than doubled. Information gathered from road users indicate that since then, the number of incidents has significantly decreased, thus contributing to improved security on this section of the road. Some transporters surmise that the increased security is largely due to rogue elements of the army trading their previous ambushing practices—which were profitable, but demanding—for the more sedentary and less straining source of income of roadside taxation.<sup>25</sup> This is a good illustration of the “positive” relationship between roadblocks and insecurity more generally: at best, roadblocks constitute a predictable form of “stationary banditry,” which is preferable to “roving banditry” that armed actors may otherwise engage in, including for instance, kidnapping and looting. The latter option is clearly more dangerous and becomes more widespread when the balance of power between armed actors is upset.<sup>26</sup>

This improved security and predictability comes at a price: securing this small stretch of road has become a very profitable business. At each of the 32 roadblocks held by the FARDC, each passenger pays 100 Fc. Most of these roadblocks are virtual, meaning that the soldiers do not use a rope or other device to block the road. Instead, passengers on the back of motorcycles throw the required bills to the handful of soldiers along the road. The total for one trip through the park comes to 3,200 Fc per passenger. Although this is a considerable sum, travelers seem to accept the situation, as is confirmed by an informant:

*“The charge of 100 Fc ... has become a habit for passersby. This is for the safety of the passengers and their property.”*

Of course, what is not known is how many potential travelers must refrain from undertaking the trip because of the increase of transport costs— 3,200 Fc equals the cost of living for most people for a day.

Despite a more predictable security situation, the threat of violence is always inherent in roadblock encounters, and checkpoint operators do not shy away from resorting to harassment and the use of force. Infractions, real and invented, are used to increase the amount extorted, as a passerby at Matanda roadblock explains:

*“There was a time ... when the traffic police at this place bothered the motorcyclists not wearing a jacket and made them pay as a penalty a lump sum between 5,000 Fc and 10,000 Fc to obtain passage.”*

24 See, for instance, Desk Nature. (2021). *RDC: le Parc de Kahuzi-Biega confirme la présence d’hommes armés mais pas dans la zone touristique*, April 27.

25 Interview with transporters, Bukavu, March 2023.

26 The metaphor here comes from Olson M. (1993). “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development,” *The American Political Science Review* 87 (3): 567-576.

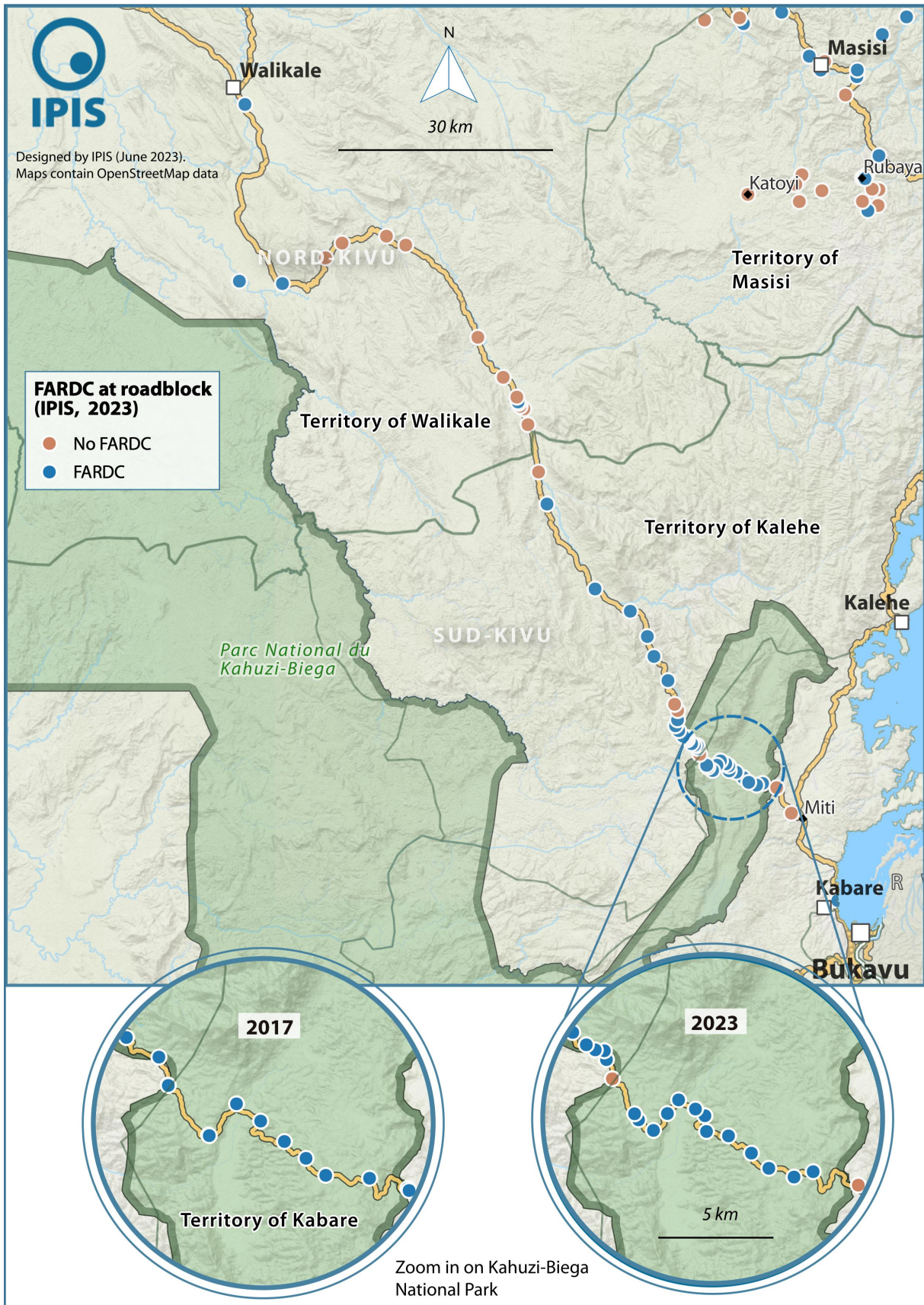


Figure 2. Strong increase in roadblocks along the Walikale–Miti–Bukavu road.

In other cases, unlawful seizure of traveler's property has been reported. An informant at the Humule roadblock said that "...if someone doesn't have the money to pay, they take the phone". And at the Matanda barrier, drivers explained that police would "... take away the ignition key in case of the least resistance."

This can go as far as arbitrary arrest and physical violence, as is the case in the following incident, reported via the Kufatilia incident reporting mechanism:<sup>27</sup>

*"The armed group Nyatura Abazungu has erected three roadblocks at Nkonkwe, Miole and Mungoti towards Katoyi in the Kibabi groupement. Each passerby is charged 1,000 Fc at each roadblock. ... Apart from this illegal payment, elements of this armed group regularly commit violence at the roadblock by beating anyone who refuses to pay the 1,000 Fc."*

Finally, roadblocks are also magnets of violence, in particular in places where the authority of the state is contested. Since 2022, for example, the territories of Beni and Lubero have seen a worrying increase in attacks by Mai Mai groups against police and army checkpoints.

### 1.3.2. Rising commodity prices

Roadblocks contribute both directly and indirectly to rising prices. Roadblock taxes are indirect taxes on the local population, meaning that many road users can pass on the costs imposed on them by roadblock operators to others, by incorporating them in transport prices. As we observed before, "every additional tax is incorporated in the price and thus passed on to the final consumer, the Congolese citizen."<sup>28</sup> This means that roadblocks may have effects far away from their location, all the way up to the end markets where goods affected by roadblocks are sold. Roadblock taxes make up an estimated 25 percent to 50 percent of transport costs in eastern DRC, and up to 25 percent of the retail price of commodities traveling the region's roads.<sup>29</sup> In general, the burden of roadblock levies is lowest for high-value manufactured goods and highest for low-value bulk goods such as farming products, affecting, in turn, the terms of trade for farmers seeking to sell their produce and purchase manufactured goods in rural markets.

The M23 crisis has exacerbated the weight of roadblocks on travel costs. On the one hand, M23 imposes heavy transit taxes on passing traffic. At roadblocks held by M23, the research team mainly registered taxation of cargo transport. On the stretch of road between Sake and Mushaki, and between Sake and Karuba, a motorcycle pays \$8 to \$10 per trip, while a truck, commonly called *Fuso* in reference to the Japanese brand, pays according to its size. A small *Fuso* pays between \$300 and \$400 and two bags of potatoes, while a large *Fuso* pays \$1,000 and 3 bags per passage—sums much higher than the average amount of between \$20-50 usually levied on such vehicles at government-held checkpoints. Transporters lament these price increases but can invoice them onward to their clients.

Transporters also complain of the proliferation of army roadblocks, which function both as operational points of surveillance, as well as a way for the army to compensate for lagging supplies of rations to the front. Army roadblocks typically do not issue any receipts.

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27 By sending the keyword "Kufatilia" via text message, members of mining communities, civil society actors, or any other informant can anonymously report mining-related incidents occurring in the extraction, transport, or trade of minerals. The information collected is compiled in an online database where incidents are processed by a network of civil society organizations who work together to validate and follow up on the reported incidents. This incident was reported on 27 January 2023 on the Kufatilia platform. For more information see [https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/kufatilia\\_app](https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/kufatilia_app).

28 Schouten P., Murairi J. and Kubuya S. (2017). "Everything that moves will be taxed:" the political economy of roadblocks in North and South Kivu, IPIS, DIIS and ASSODIP, p. 53.

29 Interviews with transporters and traders of farm produce, Goma, 2022 and 2023.

Table 2 below illustrates the evolution of prices for certain basic foodstuffs in Goma, before and after M23 expanded its territory in Masisi (North Kivu) in February 2023. After this expansion, M23 controlled (a part of) all the roads leading from Goma to different territories of North Kivu. This made it temporarily impossible for Goma’s local food provision to avoid M23-controlled roads, and reportedly increased the number of roadblocks along the newly captured roads—notably Sake-Mushaki and Sake-Kitchanga—by both M23 and FARDC-Wazalendo.

**Table 2. Evolution of food prices in Goma after M23’s expansion in Masisi territory, capturing Mushaki and Kitchanga in February 2023. (Interviews by ASSODIP at Goma markets, March 2023).**

Product	Before Masisi expansion (February 2023)	After Masisi expansion (March 2023)
Potatoes/kg	Between 800 and 1,000 Fc	1,400 Fc
Maize (1,2 kg)	1,000 Fc	1,500 Fc
Beans (1,2 kg)	2,500 Fc	4,000 Fc
Charcoal (Bag)	\$25	\$50

Of course, roadblock taxation is only one element influencing commodity prices in an area where an active conflict occurs. Other factors, such as accessibility, road conditions, and inflation also affect prices, and certainly have also affected prices in Table 2.<sup>30</sup> The burden of roadblocks along Congolese feeder roads means that key consumption markets like Goma and Bukavu may purchase staples and vegetables cheaper from neighboring countries than from nearby domestic producers.

### 1.3.3. Restricted freedom of movement

Even if roadblocks usually do not close a road, their presence can *de facto* block a certain route for travelers who cannot afford the higher prices. For example, travelers on the Mweso–Kitshanga–Goma road paid huge sums during M23’s occupation of Kitshanga. A mother who left Mweso for Goma in March 2023 told researchers:

*“We had to pay 200,000 Fc (\$100) to reach Goma (by motorcycle), me and my little sister. In addition to this sum, we also paid 1,000 Fc per person at each of the three roadblocks operated jointly by FARDC and Wazalendo between Mushaki and Sake. That’s a lot.”*

Before the M23 war, she paid only 10,000 Fc (\$5) to travel from Goma to Mweso in a truck or \$10 on a motorcycle.

This woman managed to find the considerable sums required to make the journey. Still, the cost of the roadblocks particularly impacts those without sufficient financial resources, generally depriving the more vulnerable, poorer people in the Kivus of freedom of movement.

Passengers on motorcycles have always paid between 500 Fc and 1,000 Fc per person at military roadblocks. Yet the cost of any displacement is measured in terms of the string of roadblocks one encounters along a given trajectory. The proliferation of FARDC-held roadblocks, in response to the resurgence of M23, has meant a steep rise in the costs of movement. According to local sources, the

30 Some local press articles have also reported on the sharp price increases in Goma, following M23’s expansion, i.e., Radio Okapi. (2023). *Goma: les habitants soulagés après la réouverture du trafic sur les routes de desserte agricole*, March 2.

proliferation of FARDC/Wazalendo barriers in the area under the control of “loyalist” forces has led to a sharp rise in prices on all typical travel trajectories:

- Goma–Ngungu: 8 roadblocks, along which travelers pay 32,000 Fc (roughly \$16);
- Goma–Rubaya: 8 barriers, costing travelers 32,000 Fc to 40,000 Fc (\$16-20); and
- Goma–Masisi: 9 roadblocks, costing travelers 40,000 Fc to 50,000 Fc (\$20-25).

In the marginal economy—in which most of the rural population functions—such amounts correspond to monthly earnings, meaning that only relatively privileged people can afford to travel.

In addition to this, certain roadblock operators tend to target “non-natives” and impose higher taxes on them than on so-called “natives.” In the Bakano sector of Walikale, for example, Bashi traders from Bukavu are subject to mandatory crossing taxes on the barriers of demobilized Mai Mai “volunteers” (discussed above). In contrast, locals do not have to pay them. Such discriminatory taxes are widespread and may be levied by imposing higher tax rates on commodities largely traded by people not from the area.

To avoid having to pay these taxes, vehicles will often wait for the moment roadblock operators leave their post for the night, which is usually after dark:

*“The opening of the barrier is from 6:30 am and the elements of the PCR who are there leave at 5:30 pm. Some motorists prefer to hang out in the surrounding villages while waiting for the departure of these agents to avoid these levies.”*

This means, of course, that they are obliged to travel in more difficult and dangerous circumstances, as it is dark by 5:30 pm and there generally are no lights on the road in DRC.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF RECENT SECURITY DYNAMICS (2020-2022) ON ROADBLOCKS

Some roadblocks perform legal functions (traffic regulation, safety assurance, collection of legal taxes such as road tolls and provincial taxes), but in reality, few are placed in response to an official mandate. Rather, roadblocks have emerged as a key strategy for decentralized self-financing by a range of (state and non-state) actors.

Since the 1990s, roadblocks have become pervasive in eastern DRC, constituting a primary mechanism of illicit accumulation and economic survival for rebel movements and state agents. While in the 1990s there were a handful of armed groups, by the time of our first roadblock study in 2017, that number had risen to nearly 70.<sup>31</sup> Since then, there have been significant changes in the political-security context in Walikale and Masisi, each leaving its mark on the roadblock landscape in these territories.



31 Stearns J. and Vogel C. (2017). *The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo: Fragmented, politicized networks*, CRG/HRW: Kivu Security Tracker.

## 2.1. Fragmentation and multiplication of armed groups

The first dynamic comprises the fragmentation of existing armed groups and the creation of new factions, which have led to a significant rise in the number of armed groups present in eastern DRC (Figure 3). According to the Director of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Rehabilitation and Stabilization Program (P-DDRCS),<sup>32</sup> this number has risen to more than 260 armed groups in 2023, including 64 in North Kivu.<sup>33</sup> Numerous reasons explain this fragmentation, and explanations vary from one area to another. For example, operations from militia from neighboring countries (e.g., Burundi) have increased tensions in some hotspots, and the international response against Ebola (2018-2020) fueled violence in the northern area of North Kivu. The Kivu Security Tracker underlines the “inertia of the conflict:” numerous armed groups trying to survive in the absence of effective demobilization, or security sector reform programs.<sup>34</sup> The continued existence of many rebel groups is marked by internal rivalry, which regularly leads to splinter groups, and in its turn galvanizes its opponents. In the territories of Walikale and Masisi, local security has been heavily influenced by NDC-R’s activities: its fights with other groups (such as APCLS and the FPP/AP), its alliance with FARDC, and its internal rivalry and eventual implosion that once again reinvigorated other groups (such as APCLS).<sup>35</sup>

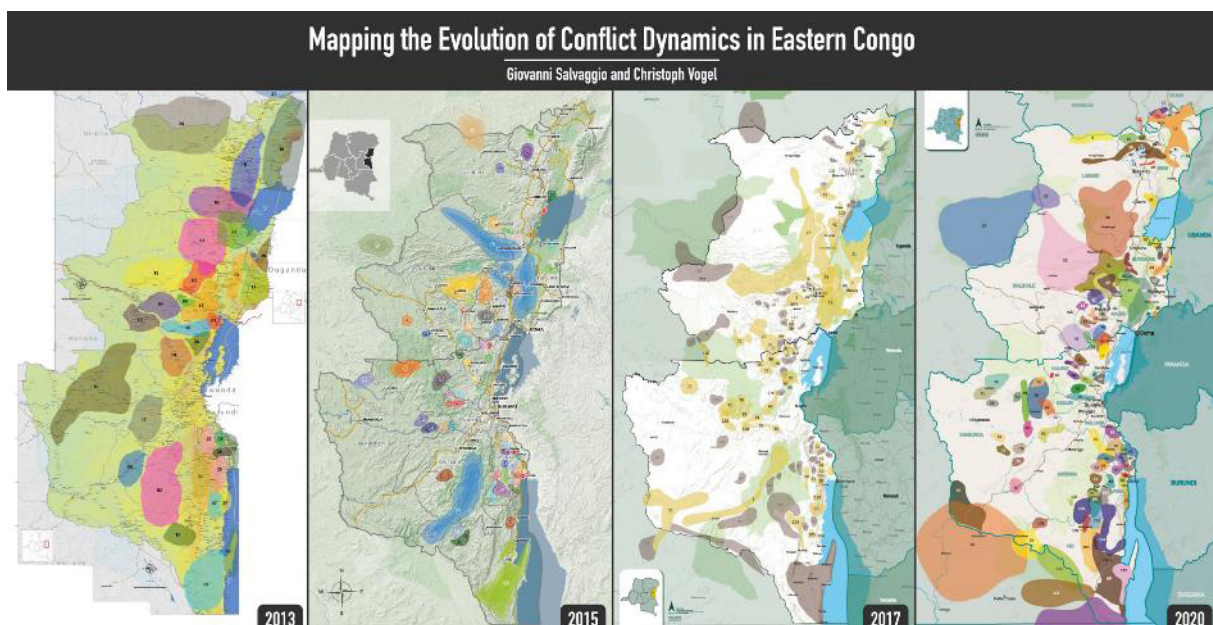


Figure 3. Evolution of armed groups in eastern DRC. Map made by Giovanni Salvaggio and Christoph Vogel.

This progressive fragmentation of armed groups and the proliferation of self-defense movements have led to increased roadblocks and competition over other sources of revenue (e.g., fierce fighting between NDC-R and FPP/AP over control of gold mines near Bunyatenge [Lubero territory])<sup>36</sup>. In early 2017, the research team identified 21 roadblocks in Masisi and Walikale operated by three non-state armed groups; in 2023, the team found 40 barriers operated by at least nine rebel factions. The percentage of checkpoints with a presence of armed groups increased from 16 percent in 2017 to 37 percent in 2023

32 In July 2021, President Félix Tshisekedi announced the creation of a new demobilization program, which was intended to respond to the failures of the previous Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs. The P-DDRCS is the result of merging existing programs. (Source: Matthyssen K. and Gobbers E. (2022). *Armed conflict, insecurity, and mining in eastern DRC: Reflections on the nexus between natural resources and armed conflict*, IPIS, pp. 7, 26-27).

33 Swiss Info. (2023). *RDC: 266 groupes armés actifs dans cinq provinces orientales*, April 19.

34 Kivu Security Tracker. (2021). *The Landscape of Armed Groups in Eastern Congo: Missed opportunities, protracted insecurity and self-fulfilling prophecies*, p. 8.

35 *ibid*, p. 13.

36 Matthyssen K., Muller T., and Bulakali N. Z. (2022). *Analysis of the interactive map of artisanal mining areas in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*, 2022 Update, IPIS, pp. 28-30.



(Table 1). The armed group most often found at roadblocks was Nyatura Abazungu, who was present at nine roadblocks<sup>37</sup>.

The team also witnessed a disturbing increase in the number of roadblocks operated by armed groups on the main axes. Today there is not a single main road in North Kivu that is fully under government control. This is a recent phenomenon, as in 2017, government largely controlled the *routes nationales et provinciales* and armed groups operated on footpaths and feeder roads. Much of this is no doubt attributable to the counteroffensive against M23, as the FARDC and Wazalendo fighters have established new roadblocks jointly (discussed below, Sections 2.3 and 2.4). Nevertheless, for some roads, this situation preceded the M23 crisis. In August 2021, for instance, Radio Okapi reported the existence of several roadblocks operated by the NDC-R-Bwira and the APCLS on the Masisi–Walikale axis, a road that had firmly been under state control in 2017.<sup>38</sup> At that time, however, there were already intermittent reports of temporary incursions by armed groups on the main road, occasionally extorting money from transporters; these have morphed into static positions in the intervening years. On the Mweso–Pinga road, similarly, members of the NDC-R and elements of the APCLS dominate the roadblock landscape and primarily engage in taxing agricultural products.

### Armed groups in Walikale and Masisi territories

The P-DDRCS director identified 64 armed groups in North Kivu. The main groups discussed in this report, and currently active in Walikale and Masisi (besides M23, discussed under Section 2.3) are the following:

The **Nduma Défense du Congo - Rénové** (NDC-R) is the largest remnant of the division of the original NDC movement of *Sheka Ntabo Ntaberi* that emerged from the Nyanga community in Walikale territory. The NDC-R has now split into two factions, one belonging to Commander Bwira and the other to Guidon. The research team found roadblocks operated mainly by elements of the Bwira faction, often mixed with APCLS elements of Commander Mapenzi Likuwe.

Several **Nyatura** groups traditionally operate in the territories of Masisi and Rutshuru, in southern North Kivu. They claim to protect the Congolese (Rwandophone) Hutu population against threats from the Mai Mai or the army. In previous reports, IPIS discussed the challenges that Nyatura's presence and interference pose to the mines around Rubaya (Masisi), which were actually classified "green" by the government—meaning that they are certified to be free of armed interference and illegal taxation. The team found several roadblocks from Nyatura Abazungu and some from Nyatura CMC.

The **Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain** (APCLS) is one of the oldest and most powerful Mai Mai groups in eastern DRC. Under the command of Janvier Karairi, it claims to defend the interests of the Hunde population in the Masisi territory. In recent years, it has engaged in various alliances and confrontations with other regional armed actors.

In Masisi, armed groups not only impose transit taxes, but also impose household taxes called *Lala Salama* ("sleep well" in Swahili) or *contribution au développement local* on the local population, sometimes imposing tokens (so-called "*jetons*") on inhabitants to monitor compliance with taxation. All male residents are required to possess this token during their movements, otherwise, they must pay fines of 10,000 Fc or more.

## 2.2. The state of siege

Partly in response to the proliferation of armed groups, the Congolese government has declared a state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri since May 2021, replacing the civilian government with a military one. This has led to a heavy militarization of the two provinces, which in turn sparked a notable increase in military

37 Nyatura Abazungu is one of the numerous Nyatura groups in Masisi and Rutshuru territory. Table 1 shows that the team encountered 13 roadblocks operated by Nyatura, of which 9 are held by Nyatura Abazungu. Mai Mai were present at 21 roadblocks in the sample, but also consist of many different factions, such as APCLS and Mai Mai Kifuafua.

38 Radio Okapi. (2021). *Militaires et miliciens tracassent les usagers de la route Masisi – Walikale, selon un député*, August 1.

harassment along the roads through the erection of new military roadblocks<sup>39</sup> and the replacement of militia and civilian actors on existing barriers with military personnel (see text box below). Additionally, as an informant in Masisi civil society observed:

*“There is a significant rise in the number of [FARDC] soldiers at each roadblock.”*

#### Plus ça change... Roadblocks pass from one actor to another

In the Bashali chiefdom, many roadblocks now operated by the FARDC were under Nyatura control in 2017. For example, the roadblocks at Busihe, Katanga, Kirumbu, Mpati, and Kasura were all operated by the Nyatura in 2017 and continue to exist in 2023, but are now in FARDC hands. The soldiers largely impose the same taxes the rebels did. Some roadblocks (such as Kirumbu and Mpati) were “pop-up roadblocks” that the Nyatura ran on biweekly market days. The FARDC not only took these over, but copied this practice.

This example shows a broader tendency of roadblocks persisting and outliving the local actors who mount them. For the most part, roadblocks in existence today have a long history of twists and turns in who runs them. Once installed, a barrier tends to survive or reappear even if operators change. This convergence on illicit rent-seeking, by extension, increases the similarities between the FARDC and non-state armed groups as predatory actors in the eyes of the population—even if outsiders view roadblocks run by the army as an “extension of state authority.” Roadblocks often serve multiple purposes, while they can improve security (see Section 1.3.1) and increase territorial control, they also enable the accumulation of illegal rents, for both state and non-state actors.

### 2.3. M23 resurgence

The resurgence of M23 and its expansion into Rutshuru, Masisi, and Nyiragongo from October 2022 onward has significantly impacted the security situation, and provoked a humanitarian crisis. IOM reported in April 2023 that more than 900,000 people were forced to flee areas affected by the conflict in North Kivu.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, large-scale human rights violations, such as M23’s atrocities in Kishishe victimized many.<sup>41</sup>

The March 23 Movement, often abbreviated as M23, is a rebel military group led mostly by ethnic Tutsi. M23 first emerged from former CNDP<sup>42</sup> rebels who were integrated into the FARDC but rebelled in 2012 when they were to be redeployed from North Kivu. Their rebellion, which lasted until 2013, led to the displacement of large numbers of people. In 2022, M23 started a new offensive, which eventually resulted in the capture of the strategic Congolese border town of Bunagana. After the M23 attacks of 2022, the Congolese government and United Nations expert reports blamed Rwanda and accused President Paul Kagame’s government of supporting the rebels. In November 2022, M23 rebels got close to the city of Goma, causing nearly 200,000 people to flee their homes after the Congolese Army had withdrawn from advanced positions in surrounding areas.

As M23 expanded the territory under its control, the group took over key roadblocks from the government, and the FARDC subsequently mobilized together with Wazalendo, resulting in new roadblocks along and behind shifting frontlines. M23 advanced along strategic routes (as in 2012), with each offensive followed by the erection of roadblocks along the occupied roads. Most often, M23 took over preexisting checkpoints, including checkpoints the group had already operated in 2012. Thus, the M23 roadblocks

39 See, for example: Radio Okapi. (2022). *Nord-Kivu : les habitants de Biruwe dénoncent les tracasseries militaires*, May 12; Kahambwa P. (2022). *Nord-Kivu : Tracasserie militaire à Buhene*, Hapamedia.net, January 2; Sabuni, Jonas A. (2022). *Nord-Kivu : vers la fin des tracasseries militaires sur des tronçons routiers à Beni*, radiomoto.net.

40 IOM. (2023). *M23 Crisis Democratic Republic of the Congo*, April.

41 Human Rights Watch. (2023). *DR Congo: Mass Graves Tied to Rwanda-Backed M23*, June 14.

42 National Congress for the Defence of the People (*Congrès national pour la défense du peuple*).

mapped in early 2023 in Mushaki, Kitchanga, and around Kilolirwe and Kalengera existed in 2017, albeit under the control of other actors. As of mid-2023, the group occupies various major towns in eastern North Kivu including Bunagana, Kiwanja, and Rutshuru, and controls vital portions of roads leading to Goma. While M23's presence is mainly concentrated in Rutshuru, the team found six roadblocks operated by M23 in Masisi, all in the Bashali chiefdom.

As discussed in Section 1.3.2, M23 imposes heavy transit taxes on passing traffic. The survey results mainly registered taxation of cargo transport at M23 roadblocks. Civil society reports from Masisi suggest that M23 earns between \$40,000 and \$50,000 monthly on taxes levied at the roadblocks in Mushaki and Kilolirwe alone.<sup>43</sup> At the Kilolirwe roadblock on the Sake–Kitshanga axis, for example, a small *Fuso* truck pays \$420 while a large one pays \$520. If it travels without cargo, the payment is \$200.

## 2.4. Counter-offensive

The FARDC counteroffensive against M23 also involved creating a series of new roadblocks. These include military positions along the roads and roadblocks jointly operated by the FARDC and Wazalendo fighters that sometimes hail from preexisting armed groups.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the team found barriers operated by alliances of different armed groups that have set aside their differences to unite against M23. For example, the team mapped 11 roadblocks in Masisi jointly operated by the FARDC and Wazalendo. This trend is especially apparent in Rutshuru, where offensives are concentrated. Since the capture of Mushaki by M23 elements and their allies on February 24, 2023, there has been a roadblock in almost every small village on the Sake–Masisi road. Most were held either by the FARDC, by Wazalendo, or by both, but some by only one or two armed persons who were difficult to identify. Contrary to the general principle whereby roadblocks tend to stay once established, such pop-up roadblocks have proven less stable, moving or (dis)appearing according to local circumstances. A passenger who traveled through this area told one of the investigators that:

*“Sometimes these people can appear from a small path and stop the motorcycle to quickly ask for 500 or 1,000 Fc, after which they return to the bush.”*

A source in the military leadership told the team that these roadblocks are not only for tactical reasons, but also to complement insufficient military rations for soldiers and allied “volunteers” at the front.<sup>45</sup> The general mobilization for the counteroffensive against M23 has, however, allowed armed groups like APCLS and Nyatura to expand the number of roadblocks under the pretext of patriotism.<sup>46</sup> For example, the area around Rubaya and Katoyi was taken by M23 for a short period in late February 2023. When they withdrew afterward, Nyatura elements quickly deployed roadblocks, allegedly securing the area around Rubaya, and later expanding south toward South Kivu. This implies that all routes previously used to evacuate minerals certified “green” from Rubaya now have a consistent armed group presence.

43 *Le Volcan News*. (2023). *Masisi: Le M23 gagne entre 40.000 et 50.000\$ par semaine aux points de péages de Mushaki et Kilolirwe (société civile)*, March 23.

44 Zaidi Zanem N. (2023). *Les Wazalendo, ces jeunes qui combattent le M23*, *Deutsche Welle*, April 14.

45 Interview with an army officer, Goma, March 2023.

46 Also see Shukrani J. (2023). *Wazalendo, faiseurs de rois et lois*, *Kivu Morning Post*, May 22.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the territories of Masisi and Walikale, the movement of people and goods faces a multitude of roadblocks operated by state and non-state actors alike. Roads are highly militarized spaces and subject to a variety of taxes.

In comparison with IPIS- ASSODIP-DIIS's large-scale mapping of roadblocks in 2017, the first key finding in 2023 is that the DRC military remains the dominant roadblock operator, present at 43 percent (in 2017) and 44 percent of the roadblocks (in 2023). By contrast, the percentage of roadblocks operated by non-state armed groups more than doubled in this timespan, with rebels present at 36 percent of the roadblocks found in 2023. It is also worth noting that armed groups now occupy a significant number of roadblocks on main roads, which was not the case in 2017. This might be a direct result of the counteroffensive against M23—a rebellion that advanced in 2022, as it did in 2012, along roads. The counteroffensive included myriad new military positions along the roads, but also the joint FARDC–Wazalendo roadblocks. It remains to be seen what this rebel mobilization means for security dynamics in North Kivu in the middle term. In general, most predatory rebel roadblocks started out as ad hoc forms of community self-protection, so governance through proxy (notably collaborating with local self-defense militias) is a risky strategy, because it empowers proxies to pursue their own agendas, irrespective of the initial grand objective.

In sum, compared to 2017, control over North Kivu's transport network is radically more fragmented and militarized. It means that all overland movement becomes a source of illicit wealth accumulation by various non-state armed groups, alongside the Congolese army. This is reflected in the ubiquity of roadblocks and frequent, sometimes violent, disputes over control of strategically located crossing points. Roadblocks are devices for the decentralized and informal financing of legitimate state services and to expand territorial control, but they are also an object of greediness and an important source of conflict financing.

Secondly, roadblocks are an often-overlooked form of armed interference in mining supply chains, because it takes place at a physical distance from more intensely monitored mining sites. Thorough responsible sourcing schemes need to pay closer attention to armed interference with minerals in transit.

More broadly, policymakers interested in addressing conflict financing need to move away from a narrow focus on mineral supply chains and consider a broader range of revenue-generating mechanisms that fund conflict in eastern DRC. Roadblocks, while certainly not the only source of conflict financing, have low entry barriers for aspiring rebels and should be incorporated more systematically in conflict financing assessments.

This focus on roadblocks is all the more important as more than the mining sector suffers from roadside predation by armed actors. Roadblocks weigh heavier on the marginal gains that form the precarious livelihoods for the many Congolese that rely on subsistence farming. More research is needed on the exact impacts of roadblocks on the most vulnerable—do local militia roadblocks, for instance, also protect rural livelihoods against looting by outside actors? Along this line, careful preliminary studies of the political economy of rural roads selected for rehabilitation programs are crucial, to assess socio-economic and security risks and impact.<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, it is still an open question as to what extent the proliferation of armed group roadblocks along main roads compromises the activities of international aid organizations and the supply chains of multinational corporations. In the past, sporadic incidents of multinational companies paying M23 have surfaced, and commercial transport contractors to aid organizations in 2017 were subjected to systematic roadblock taxation along Congolese roads.

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<sup>47</sup> See, for comparison: Schouten P., Verweijen J., Murairi J., and Kubuya Batundi S. (2022). "Paths of authority, roads of resistance: Ambiguous rural infrastructure and slippery stabilization in eastern DR Congo," *Geoforum* 133: 217-227.

Finally, it is important to recognize that while roadblocks are by and large devices to illicitly extract wealth from society, they may constitute the least of all evils in the short term. There seems to be little government capacity and appetite to reform security services, in which armed actors are either not paid or underpaid, and alternative revenue generation strategies may be more violent and less predictable.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- When seeking to address conflict financing, policymakers need to move away from a narrow focus on mineral supply chains and consider a broader range of revenue-generating mechanisms that fund conflict in eastern DRC. Armed actors certainly do not discriminate between minerals and other forms of taxable wealth. As a primary and geographically specific form of conflict financing, incorporate roadblocks more systematically in conflict financing assessments, for instance through periodically updated surveys.
- When promoting more responsible mineral supply chains, pay systematic attention to, and denounce more firmly, armed interference with minerals in transit, as well as indirect taxation of the mining economy through roadblocks.
- Increase government capacity and appetite to reform security services and provide better logistics and more regular pay for FARDC. This will (i) prevent them from illegally operating roadblocks; (ii) prevent them from harassing travelers at legal roadblocks; and (iii) reinforce their capabilities in dismantling illegal roadblocks, including those held by other actors.
- Provide capacity enhancement to state agents operating roadblocks to promote human rights and to fight corruption, fraud, and gender-based violence.
- Promote transparency by urging national and provincial authorities to list legal roadblocks, as well as the services legally entitled to operate them, and the taxes they are entitled to levy.
- Provide capacity enhancement to local human rights organizations and journalists to report more systematically on roadblocks and roadblock-related violations of Congolese law and human rights.
- Conduct more research on the exact impacts of roadblocks on the most vulnerable populations, as the burden of roadblock taxes weighs relatively heavier on lower-value goods (e.g., agricultural products). With the World Bank planning to embark on an ambitious feeder road rehabilitation program in eastern DRC, careful study of the political economy of rural roads selected and the impacts of roadblocks on prices at farms and markets linked through these roads should form a baseline against which to measure socio-economic (and security) impact.

*Independent research and  
capacity enhancement for durable peace,  
sustainable development  
and human rights*

