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Conflict and Displacement in Eastern DRC: From "Conflict Minerals" to "Displacement Minerals"

Since the end of the Second Congo War in 2003, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been characterized by a state of protracted crisis. Despite the extraordinary mineral wealth, that could foster economic development, the regions of Nord-Kivu, Sud-Kivu, Ituri, Maniema and Tanganyika systematically face persistent conflict and population displacement. This study investigates how the nature of violent events and global mineral prices can shape where people flee and whether endowment of natural resources drives displacement from interested areas rather than development.

I analyze monthly population flows between administrative units across eastern DRC from 2016 to 2024, combining four data sources: displacement figures from the United Nations humanitarian office (OCHA), geolocated conflict events from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED), mining site records from the International Peace Information Service (IPIS), and World Bank commodity prices. Because most pairs of locations record no movement in a given month, I employ Poisson-Pseudo Maximum Likelihood (PPML), a statistical model suited to handle data with many zero observations.

The results point to three main findings. First, conflict produces asymmetric push-and-pull forces acting on displacement patterns: armed clashes and civilian attacks push people out, but the strongest incentive to flee arises when non-state armed groups seize territorial control.

Second, the destination choice responds differently to routine insecurity and deeper shifts in territorial control: general violence does not strongly reduce inflows, but areas where territory is actively contested between armed actors (i.e. rebel groups against Congolese military forces) attract far fewer internally displaced people (IDPs).

Third, increases in international gold prices push people out of gold-rich areas, consistent with the hypothesis that increasing value of gold intensifies armed competition around gold mines. By contrast, prices of tin, tantalum, and tungsten (3Ts) show no effect on displacement patterns, plausibly due to the stabilizing impact of international due diligence frameworks and supply chain traceability.

The paper builds on the recent literature, introducing the concept of „displacement minerals“: natural resources whose global price booms trigger forced migration rather than economic development. The analysis extends the established “conflict minerals” framework by revealing its humanitarian downstream effect: when minerals fuel violence, local populations pay the price through displacement. The contribution of this paper is the focus on how different mineral commodities influence displacement patterns, underlining the relevance of differential local resource endowments and area specific configuration of conflict. For policymakers and researchers, this reframing highlights how global commodity markets can inform efforts to anticipate and mitigate humanitarian crises in resource-rich conflict zones.