

Reimagining diaspora humanitarianism in the digital age: exploring the near and far diaspora dynamics among Congolese refugees in Nairobi, Kenya

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The study of diasporas has traditionally focused on the relationship between the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South,’ while often overlooking the transnational and trans-local connections that exist across different territories. To date, there has been limited research on how diasporas that are geographically close to their homelands engage in humanitarian efforts and development initiatives. In this case study of the Banyamulenge Congolese refugee community in Nairobi, Kenya, we explore new forms of technology-mediated diaspora humanitarianism. We demonstrate how social media platforms, particularly YouTube, are reshaping power dynamics between the ‘near-and-far diaspora,’ especially among the youth. Importantly, we highlight how traditional support systems, such as the ‘mutuality system,’ have been successfully adapted to the digital age and integrated into platforms like WhatsApp. The impact of multiple crises — including humanitarian and economic hardships both in their home country and in exile, the COVID-19 pandemic, and legal uncertainties surrounding refugee rights — alongside increased digital connectivity has significantly altered roles and responsibilities in diaspora humanitarianism.

Keywords: digital humanitarianism, DRCongo, urban refugees, diasporic youth, mutuality system

“Nta ngenzi yigize” (‘No one is completely self-reliant’)
(Banyamulenge proverb)

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Introduction

For more than two decades, African diasporas have been recognized as ‘agents for developing their countries of origin’ in diaspora studies (Sinatti & Horst 2015). This focus on the role of African diasporas in the continent’s development has been promoted by Western actors and the African Union, which recognizes the African Diaspora as the sixth region of the continent because of its political, economic, and cultural importance. Until now, the focus on diasporas has mainly examined the relationship between one country or more in the so-called ‘Global North’ versus one country in the ‘Global South’ (often ‘the country of origin’), overlooking transnational connections and practices across different territories (*ibid.*). Few studies have examined the role of diasporas that are closer to their country of origin in the fields of humanitarianism and development; these diasporas are often referred to in the literature as the ‘contiguous’ in opposition to the ‘distant’ diaspora, the ‘near’ in contrast to the ‘wider’ diaspora (van Hear 2006; van Hear & Cohen 2017), and the ‘near abroad’ and those ‘far away’ from conflict (Kaldor 1999). Generally, the diaspora communities residing in countries in the ‘emerging economies’ are portrayed as being more passive in humanitarianism towards their country of origin than those living in wealthy countries, which, according to Bakewell (2023) are “sharing the capacity, to a greater or lesser extent, of contributing to the homeland”. In addition, as claimed by Olliff (2018, 658), the idea that refugee communities can be humanitarian actors “brings with it a dissonance that speaks to the underlying assumptions and meanings given to both ‘refugee’ and ‘humanitarian’”. This is even though much of the support that refugees depend on occurs through informal networks, which have largely remained unrecognized (Horst *et al.* 2015).

In protracted humanitarian crises, local residents, institutions (religious entities, grassroots initiatives, and businesses), and diaspora groups play pivotal roles as humanitarian actors. They are often the initial emergency responders and sustain engagement throughout complex crises. Despite recent efforts to localize the humanitarian sector and empower non-state actors and local authorities to lead and deliver aid, they continue to be marginalized in formal humanitarian responses (Minoia 2012). Implementing localization in humanitarian assistance has proven more challenging than anticipated, with its operational mechanisms still inadequately understood. To that end and in line with this special issue, we adopt a relational approach to understanding the fluidity of roles in humanitarianism — over time and space — as it provides insights about changing roles between the figure of ‘caregivers’ and the ‘care receivers’ as opposed to a professionalized system that sees the actors and beneficiaries as fixed (Brun & Horst 2023).

In addition, new ways of engaging in everyday acts of diaspora humanitarianism have appeared since the COVID-19 pandemic, with digital humanitarianism being central due to the huge usage of digital social media platforms. In many contexts, diasporas have used digital tools to provide health care, coordinate aid, and monitor and evaluate actions on the ground. As argued by Norman (2024, 1432), digital technologies have enhanced diaspora “reach into homeland affairs for purposes of conflict resolution or participation, economic development, and diplomacy.” Over the last few years, there has been an increase in studies that look more specifically at African digital diasporas, examining the role of digital media and, more recently, media apps and the ways they reshape diaspora humanitarianism, transnational migrant settings, political activism, and geographical distances (e.g. Bernal 2020; Osman 2021; Ponzanesi 2021).

Innovative uses of digital media technologies have created new opportunities for refugees, in particular the Youth, to engage in the broader system of ‘diaspora humanitarianism’ (Aden *et al.* 2021), where up to now, they occupied a marginal position. Similarly, communities in the home countries also use these digital platforms, which impacts how diasporic support is organized and leveraged (Norman 2024). Diaspora humanitarianism is often characterized in the literature by rapid mobilization and engagement that is built upon social networks, affective motivations, informal delivery, and accountability mechanisms (e.g. Kleist 2008; Sezgin & Dijkzeul 2015; Musa & Kleist 2023; Maxelon *et al.* 2024). In this paper, rather than juxtaposing the near and far diaspora, we aim to delineate their interconnected system, including communities back home, fulfilling diverse functions facilitated by

new technologies. Therefore, the discussion addresses the following questions: How does the near diaspora interact with the broader diaspora and the homeland in everyday humanitarian acts? And how has the digital realm transformed everyday diaspora humanitarianism? As Olliff (2018) argues, dispersed communities aiding their homelands in times of need are not new. However, this research seeks to delve deeper into these relationships, which can sometimes be asymmetrical, reciprocal, or independent, elucidating the central role of digital technologies in organizing this multifaceted diasporic humanitarianism.

Building on the concept of ‘relational humanitarianism’ as developed by Brun and Horst (2023), this paper looks at the case of the Congolese refugee community in Nairobi and the role they play in diaspora humanitarianism through the lens of the digital. Within this theoretical framework, it is essential to note that the social status of the ‘Helper’ and the ones who are ‘helped’ are often intertwined within the same life world, and the roles of those in need of assistance and those providing may shift over time and space. There is also a recognition of humanitarian aid as an act deeply embedded in people’s everyday practices, particularly in times of crisis. Finally, humanitarian assistance is often grounded in solidarity, responsibility, and justice, relying on different ethical frameworks than those in classical humanitarianism, with other forms of power relationships at play, such as between the elders and the youth in this particular case. For the Banyamulenge Congolese refugee communities, we can comprehend how these technologies are utilized — and how they reshape diaspora humanitarianism itself — through the lens of the ‘mutuality system’. This paper highlights how multiple ongoing crises — such as the protracted conflict back home, the humanitarian and economic situation in both the homeland and in countries of exiles, and the pandemic—combined with the increased use of digital devices have reshaped ‘communitarian practise’ understood as “mutual assistance networks, relational support systems, and local accountability frameworks” (Horst *et al.* 2025, 1) and altered social relationships between diasporas and non-diasporas.

The Banyamulenge Congolese refugees in Nairobi and the ‘mutuality system’

The ‘Banyamulenge’ people, sometimes referred to as Congolese Tutsis, live mainly in the Hauts Plateaux and Moyens Plateaux areas, located at the intersection of the territories of Uvira, Fizi, and Mwenga, in the province of South Kivu in Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter DR Congo). Banyamulenge’s territorial aspirations have been contested ever since the colonial period, and this contestation has led to protracted conflict (Stearns *et al.* 2013; Verweijen & Vlassenroot 2015). As a result, many ‘Congolese Tutsi’ from both North and South Kivu had to flee to neighboring countries, including Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Kenya.

The majority of Congolese refugees seek protection in camps in neighbouring countries. Still, many have tried to escape refugee camps either because of fear of a lack of security or based on past experiences in previous countries of refuge. For instance, on August 13, 2004, at least 166 Congolese civilians were massacred, and 106 were wounded at the Gatumba refugee camp near Bujumbura in Burundi (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2004; Davey *et al.* 2022). The majority of the victims were Banyamulenge refugees. Following that event, many refugees who had left for Burundi took to the road again to reach Kenya. Even now, for many, the memory of what is often referred to as the Gatumba massacre is still very fresh, making the city of Nairobi the best place to seek protection. In Kenya itself, similar events occurred in 2008 at Kakuma refugee camp when several Banyamulenge refugees decided to flee the camp as a result of growing tensions between Congolese communities. At the time, this group of Congolese refugees demonstrated outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offices in Nairobi. They were arrested for 21 days before being released. This decision was challenged in court, and after winning the court case, these Congolese refugees — who came to be known as the ‘21-comrades’ — were issued with mandate documents to reside in the city of Nairobi legally. Thus, this marked the date upon which Congolese refugees living in Kenya, mainly Banyamulenge, started to make consider Nairobi as their new place of refuge. As a result, the numbers have risen, with people moving not only from the camps in Kenya but also from the other countries in the region where they had first sought refuge.

Since 2017, the Banyamulenge community in the DRC has increasingly suffered a series of renewed attacks, and many have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Ntanyoma & Hintjens 2022). The emergency is defined as “one of the most complex humanitarian crises in the world” (UNHCR 2024a), with nearly seven million people who have been internally displaced due to the threat of violence and atrocities, extreme poverty, and mining expansion (IOM 2024). This protracted conflict situation has also led to more than one million Congolese who have sought asylum, mainly within the continent. Those with the most resources have managed to flee to Nairobi, where some of their relatives were already living, which has led to an increase in Nairobi’s Congolese refugee population. Today, the population of refugees in the urban areas of Kenya is 102,378, compared to 285,238 in the Kakuma refugee camp and 382,639 in the Daadab refugee camp. Congolese refugees are 60,095 countrywide, with the majority, 36,719 Congolese refugees, living in Nairobi (UNHCR 2024b). This makes it the first largest refugee nationality in the city followed by the Somali (24,757 living in urban areas compared to 371,009 residing in Dadaab camp and 38,262 in Kakuma camp, see UNHCR 2024b). The statistics of the refugees being resettled show that, as of June 2023, since January, 7,251 Congolese refugees were resettled in the Global North from Kenya (UNHCR 2023).

Over the years, international humanitarian aid has been snowed under by inefficiencies, marked by insufficient funding and inaction rooted in the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence within the formal humanitarian system (Autesserre 2012; Ntanyoma & Hintjens 2022). In response, the diaspora has begun to mobilize, relying on traditional structures of aid and support known as ‘Mutuality’ (or ‘mutualités’ in French), a form of Community-Led Organisation (CBO). In Kenya, the *Communauté Banyamulenge Réfugiés au Kenya* (CBRK) was established in 2008 by the people who fled from the Kakuma refugee camp and others already living in Nairobi. As the number of community members increased in the city, the community created a centralized system of ‘mutualities’ that are constituency-based committees under the umbrella of the CBRK. Therefore, this organization seeks to draw on effective relations to leverage support across refugees in Nairobi and the broader context of Kenya. To run this organization, a constitution was developed by Congolese law experts in the country and made per the constitution of the Republic of Kenya 2010. Moreover, the constitution explicitly referred to the provision of the Refugee Act of Kenya 2006, as well as Article 15 of the Convention of 1951 and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention of 1969. The constitution uses different categories to differentiate between the problems refugees must address in the refugee community. For instance, the community will intervene to support the funeral of a member or sibling of a member. The CBRK will also help if one of their members is arrested by security officers or the police and will also support members who cannot pay their medical bills, such as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a participation hierarchy whereby a problem must first be addressed at the nucleus family level. If they fail to solve it, it is referred to as an extensive family that refers to the clan level. It is not until the problem addressed can be solved that mutuality gets involved in collective fundraising. In addition, all the negotiations should be led by the family or clan leaders to ensure legitimacy and accountability. The following quotes illustrate quite nicely what mutuality is:

There are events where you need people to be with you. These are times of joy and times of sorrow. During times of joy, we call it ‘to support’, which translates as ‘Gufashanya/Inkunga’ which literally means to support each other in Kinyamulenge. During times of sorrow, we call it ‘to assist’, which literally translates as ‘Gutabarana’ in Kinyamulenge. (Interview with a community leader who lives in Kasarani in Nairobi since 2015, community leader, April 2023).

Mutuality works the best because they feed people, build houses for people, look for the welfare of all people in the community and many other things. But all the three work together. (Interview with community leader who lives in Germany since 2019).

Mutualities exist in every area where Banyamulenge lives — inside the DRC (in Goma, Bukavu, Lubumbashi, Uvira, and Kinshasa) and within the diaspora (the near and the far). The Banyamulenge proverb, *Nta ngenzi digitize* (*No one is completely self-reliant*), illustrates quite well what mutuality is. It describes each member of the community has responsibility towards one another. As one interviewee puts it:

It literally means that no one is completely self-reliant in all; we all need each other in one way or another. Even if you have more money than others, you will still need the family for many other things in life.

There is one mutuality in Kenya, but it is divided into districts and then zones for management purposes. For instance, in Kasarani, a district of Kenya, there are eight zones (Maji Mazuri, Mwiki A, Mwiki B, Ciek, Linet area, Mugumo area, Roysambu and Ruai), which means that there are eight sub-mutualities. The mutuality in Kenya is primarily mandated to support people mainly in Nairobi and other cities in Kenya. It contributes to global diasporic efforts led when necessary to work with the mutuality in the USA (called Mahoro/Peace association), in Canada, in Australia, in Europe, or via the global organization of Banyamulenge mutualites called 'Gakondo' (which means motherland in Kinyamulenge)¹. This was formerly known as GBN- Global Banyamulenge Network, which interconnected all the 'Mutualites'.

These mutualities abroad — in the far diaspora — mainly focus on supporting people in South Kivu (in the East of DRC). Monthly *cotisations* (French word for regular contribution) of around \$30/ month are requested by each family. Initiatives from the broader diaspora to the near diaspora are also taking place. Still, they are mainly led by family members who have been resettled and have kept a strong attachment to Nairobi. For many resettled refugees, home is not only located in the homeland but also where they took refuge for many years in protracted displacement and where many members of their families still live. This echoes the triadic constellation of 'home — Home — HOME' that Brun and Fábos (2015) developed, enabling an analysis of home in different contexts of protracted displacement. Therefore, diasporic aid not only takes place between a 'country of origin' and 'destination country'; it is part of a multi-sited transnational system of aid and support between 'home' (in this case Nairobi), as the day-to-day practices of homemaking, 'Home' (in this case the broader diaspora), representing values, traditions, memories, and feelings of home, and finally, the broader political and historical contexts of 'HOME' (in this case the homeland, South-Kivu). The phenomenon of multi-sitedness is a notable characteristic of extended displaced families and communities, whose members are often spread across various locations while remaining connected through different relationships and exchanges. However, formalized aid often struggles to effectively interact with the dynamics across these various localities and spatial scales. Despite this, the 'mutuality system' mentioned earlier has endured several displacement crises, successfully integrating distant and local diasporic connections with those left behind.

Multi-sited fieldwork in a connected diaspora

As mentioned earlier, numerous Congolese refugees have fled their homeland due to persistent conflicts in Eastern Congo. They have sought refuge in neighboring countries, residing in refugee camps and urban areas in the region, forming the 'near diaspora.' Additionally, a significant diaspora has emerged in the United States, Canada, Australia, and to a lesser extent, in Europe through refugee resettlement programs, constituting the 'far diaspora.' The relational lens adopted in this study has informed the research methods employed for data collection. In our research, we move away from viewing the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis and instead adopt a trans-local perspective (Brickel & Datta 2011).

This perspective allows us to examine the connections between people across different locales within a diasporic context (Norman 2022). By doing so, we enhance our understanding of how circulation, connectivity, and exchanges occur across various areas, prompting us to reconsider established ideas about globalization (*ibid.*). In total, 22 people were interviewed: 12 in Nairobi (Kenya), six within the broader diaspora (US, Canada, France, Australia, and the UK), and four residents of Minembwe in South Kivu (RD Congo). Three research guides were involved: one for participants based in Nairobi and its outskirt town of Kitengela (a municipality in Kenya's Kajiado County, located about 30 kilometers south of Nairobi, the capital city); one for participants from the broader diaspora in the USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia; and one for the people located in Minembwe, South Kivu in DR Congo. In the near diaspora, we conducted interviews in person in the following areas: Kasarani, Kayole, Umoja in Nairobi, and Kitengela. To interview people in the broader diaspora or the east of DR Congo, we used either WhatsApp or Zoom.

Most of the interviews in Nairobi were conducted by the second author, Hérítier, a Congolese refugee involved in multiple research projects related to refugee issues. Being a community member, he could easily reach out to many participants, not only in Nairobi but also abroad. Most of the interviews were conducted in Kinyamulenge — a native dialect spoken by Banyamulenge people in South Kivu in Eastern Congo — while being recorded for later transcription and translation into English. Online interviews with people in the diaspora and ‘back home’ were conducted in French and/or English, with both authors present for most of the time.

We conducted a digital ethnography, following the online and onsite digital activities of several Congolese refugees, to better understand the videos they posted on the social media platform YouTube and how they were shared via WhatsApp. Analyzing the digital artifacts and the context in which these videos are produced and consumed is essential. This involved interviewing refugees participating in YouTube activities in Nairobi and the broader diaspora. Our approach builds on the pioneering research of Miller and Horst (2012, 16), who recognize that “no one lives an entirely digital life”. As noted by Leurs and Prabhakar (2018, 252), “technologies, media, and the internet do not exist in isolation, but rather shape and are shaped by everyday social life”. Following this research tradition, we combined online research — subscribing to channels identified by the second author as part of ‘diaspora humanitarianism’ — with semi-structured interviews of the channel owners and community members with expertise on the topic.

Since the renewed attacks on the Banyamulenge in the Haut and Moyen plateaux of South Kivu in 2017, there has been an uprising of so-called ‘self-defence groups’ in the region — often referred to as *Twirwaneho* (Kinyamulenge name for ‘Self-defense’) — who are defined by the people we interviewed as protecting the people who felt abandoned by the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) troops. In the news, some contentious articles were published, such as the one in Africa Intelligence, “From Texas to South Kivu’s highlands, Mahoro Peace Association’s complex channels finance militia, released in January 2023, accusing the Banyamulenge diaspora of financing the war effort in South Kivu (Liffran & Rolland 2023). For this reason, many of our participants have expressed a strong desire to preserve their anonymity. Since this topic is very sensitive, we assured confidentiality and anonymity to all our respondents. It is essential to acknowledge that the distinction between ‘everyday acts of humanitarianism’ and ‘everyday acts of activism’ is not always clearly defined, which warrants further investigation on this topic in the future.

By leveraging a trans-local lens, we aim to gain deeper insights into the interplay between different localities, the increasing use of digital technology over time, and ongoing crises — such as prolonged conflicts and sudden events like the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach helps us capture how these factors have transformed traditional forms of assistance and social interactions between diasporic and non-diasporic communities and how the widespread integration of digital technologies in communities constitutes “a network of localities” linked to one another through various flows (Horst 2009, 120). Before the pandemic, WhatsApp, an online communication platform, was widely used. Still, as a social media platform, YouTube has recently been heavily invested in by refugees living in the city of Nairobi in Kenya. It became a space for raising awareness and, more importantly, sharing stories of people back home, redefining understandings of power from a relational perspective (see Horst *et al.* 2025) between the near and far diaspora and with people back home.

The empirical sections examine the manifestations of relational humanitarianism, especially in the context of new forms of technologically mediated diaspora humanitarianism. We first examine the complex relationships between near and far diasporas and their home communities. We highlight how these dynamics have evolved over time and space and cannot be easily categorized as ‘passive’ or ‘active’ roles. We then demonstrate how traditional support systems, such as the ‘mutuality system,’ have effectively adapted to the digital age, particularly through platforms like WhatsApp. We demonstrate that these support systems have effectively utilized the features of WhatsApp, resulting in enhanced communication. This shift has also created new opportunities for fundraising, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and increased transparency. Additionally, we examine how social media platforms, particularly YouTube, have altered the power dynamics between local and distant diasporas and their home communities, especially among young refugees residing in Nairobi.

Shifting Relations Between Homeland and Diasporic Communities

From Support to Dependency: Reconfiguring Relational Dynamics

Before 2016, the people back home were generally less dependent on the support from the diaspora because they relied on their livestock business. In fact, the livestock business primarily supported the near diaspora in terms of education, healthcare, and livelihoods, especially for family members residing in refugee camps. This was different from those living in cities in the near diaspora, such as Bujumbura, Kigali, Kampala, and Nairobi, who mainly depended on their own business and livelihood activities and sometimes received support from family members resettled in the US, Canada, and the UK (in the so-called far diaspora). In 2017, the conflict escalated with the livestock of Congolese people living in Minembwe, a cluster of several villages located within the Fizi Territory of South Kivu Province, being targeted and killed as part of a broader economic warfare against property (including land, housing, cattle) (Ntanyoma & Hintjens 2022). These strategies made life so difficult for people that they felt compelled to leave their homes. As a result, distant and nearby diaspora communities began mobilizing to support those remaining in their homeland. The most effective and fastest way to provide this support was to leverage the system of mutual aid ('mutuality') that had been mirrored in countries of asylum.

In our case study, the fluidity of roles between 'the helpers' and 'the helped' became even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. The near diaspora faced a financial crisis that required support from relatives and friends in the far diaspora, effectively putting a hold on the more distant forms of solidarity between the far diaspora and the homeland. Müller (2022) argues, based on her study within the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities and lived citizenship in Nairobi (Kenya), Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), and Khartoum (Sudan), that COVID-19 was not a significant cause of change in refugees' everyday lives, but rather an additional stress that re-enforced pre-existing forms of precarity. Similarly, for Congolese refugees living in Nairobi, in response to the COVID-19 crisis and since refugees could not access the government's social protection program, local mutualities alongside Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) and local churches played a vital role in raising awareness within the community about vulnerable families and organizing the collection of food and medicine several times a week at the local level (Omata 2020).

Importantly, WhatsApp groups were extensively used during the pandemic as a platform for sharing information directly with the refugee community. Before the pandemic, diaspora humanitarianism (Aden *et al.* 2021) led by members in the broader diaspora was already well-established, relying on WhatsApp and MPesa, the online money transfer system in Kenya, to raise funds for communities back in Congo, particularly for internally displaced persons (IDPs). These channels were quickly redirected and activated to support the local refugee community during the pandemic, from the far diasporas to the nearby diasporas. Most importantly, strengthening localized networks and relationships to address both the material and non-material aspects of COVID-19 within the Congolese refugee community in Nairobi led to a realization that in Kenya itself, refugee communities could mobilize collectively more effectively locally, towards those back home as well as in neighbouring countries where refugees live in camps (such as in Burundi and Uganda). The COVID-19 crisis, combined with the increased use of smartphones in the home communities and the cross-platform messaging app WhatsApp, has led to a progressive change in terms of 'positionality awareness' within the broader diasporic system of aid between the communities back home and communities in the diaspora (the far and near).

Tackling insecurity: leveraging the near and the far diaspora from the 'Homeland'

In the high mountains of South Kivu, the use of technology is still minimal compared to urban areas such as Uvira, Bukavu, and Goma. For a long time, people back home only relied on using older technology, mainly T301 or iTel models like 2173/2160, known for their long-lasting battery life and suit the area. The low energy consumption of these old models made them effective in remote areas

without reliable electricity. It is well-known within the community that the introduction of smartphones to the Hauts and Moyens Plateaux came from within the diaspora to facilitate communication between people in the homeland and the diaspora. People back home are now expected at least to use WhatsApp to communicate with both members in the near and far diaspora. WhatsApp is easy and quick to use because audio recording does not require high digital literacy. Before 2017, young men who moved to urban areas within the country and abroad would return home and see the lack of smartphone or phone use. Therefore, nearby diaspora members often bought phones in Kenya to return them to the local villages. The most important thing for people in the diaspora is to make sure that people back home can reach out at any time, especially when the level of insecurity increases through, for instance, a system called 'flash calling'. To understand the procedure of flash call and how it can be used for seeking help in times of crisis, the following quote reflects its usage. An interviewee living in Nairobi shared a story about how he helped his father, a former resident of Bibangwa in Rurambo (in South Kivu, near Uvira), in April 2022 via the use of smartphones. He told us:

My dad was attacked last year in Rurambo while women and children had to flee first and most men remained behind to come with all the cows before the attackers could raid them. At the time, my dad didn't know where his wife was. She fled with others towards Bweyera in Plain de Ruzizi. As he fled, they got stuck in a forest and Mai Mai and Red Tabara surrounded us. Only a few of them had phones; my dad was the only one with airtime on his SIM card. They ran out of airtime, and he had only 10 Congolese francs. He could not call anyone, only flash-calling someone. Since we knew they were under attack, he just flash-called me. I immediately called back, and everyone shouted because of joy — help is coming. I called a community leader in Uvira and asked him to send them more airtime to call, and he immediately bought enough airtime for them to call for help. At the same time, he was also sharing with others all over Congo to seek help. Early in the morning, that person came to Bweyera from Uvira, and that's when my dad was told that his wife had arrived with other displaced people. It was through my help here in the diaspora that some FARDC [Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo] soldiers lobbied the community leaders who came to pick them up. They passed those ambushes via the payment of cows to the Mai Mai militias. These FARDC soldiers negotiated with them and they were able to arrive at Bweyera.

Through mobile technologies, people in the diaspora are sometimes in a better position to act more quickly than those in nearby cities, such as Bukavu and Uvira, as well as the capital, Kinshasa. People in the homeland often prefer to reach out to those living near the diaspora compared to those in the far diaspora due to time zone alignment. The proximity in time zones allows individuals living in the neighboring countries to be more responsive and readily available than their counterparts in the far diaspora. They are also the ones who can promptly connect with family members nearby. Nevertheless, people in the far diaspora can sometimes intervene, especially when connecting with key actors in the field.

One example, shared with us by someone from the US diaspora, concerned an attack in Minembwe. Having received an audio-visual recording of the events via WhatsApp, people in the diaspora were able to communicate directly with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO, a peacekeeping force that was established in 2010 to protect civilians and promote peace in the country) regional office and show them the evidence from the ground via video, images, and voice messages shared via WhatsApp groups. As a result, the regional office pressured the local MONUSCO staff, leading to a direct intervention.

This suggests that individuals in the diaspora, through their advocacy efforts via WhatsApp and phone calls, can partially influence decisions on matters concerning the security and protection of local people.

Digital Diasporic Infrastructures and Humanitarianism from Below: The Case of 'Community WhatsApp' Initiatives

In the Hauts and Moyens-Plateaux of Minembwe (South Kivu), accessing a stable connection often requires individuals to converge in specific areas, such as the weekly market. However, due to a lack of trust in airtime vendors, who commonly engage in a business called Tuvugane (meaning 'speaking to each other'), referring to public phone services or 'call air' businesses, many people prefer to utilize

their neighbour's phone for regular calls via WhatsApp. This practice has led to the emergence of 'Community WhatsApp' (also known as 'WhatsApp communautaire' in French), a shared WhatsApp connection used by residents. This reliance on communal resources is even more pronounced in activities related to mutualities. Here are a few quotes that illustrate this:

We do fundraise with transparency using WhatsApp groups where they can all see what's going on. Every district will be able to know how much they raised, and then all the contributions will be put together. The contributions will be sent, and then the treasurers will show the receipt of the money transfer. The receivers of the funds back home will then send us an acknowledgment letter on WhatsApp, or some time use WhatsApp audio to us. (Community leader of a mutuality in Nairobi, April 2023)

We communicate with them using WhatsApp groups, emails and phone calls. Once the funds are received, we must send an acknowledgment to them. And we send the reports like WhatsApp audio record or even video showing the beneficiaries receiving. (Community leader of a mutuality in Nairobi, April 2023)

There are WhatsApp groups and that's where "the matter" (issues can be raised to the mutuality without need of physical presence, but through the WhatsApp group where leaders and members can see and read the information) is taken into consideration and the president of the family explains the matter. They then put a list where people are supposed to contribute. They give a deadline so that the person is as quick as possible. They then count the money and give to the person who had the problem. The beneficiary will either send audio record thanking the family or write a text on the group using his number. (One of the refugees residing in Nairobi, May 2023)

These quotes illustrate how WhatsApp has become the most efficient tool for facilitating collective efforts. WhatsApp's features are particularly well-suited for environments affected by conflict and crisis. It uses low data, supports communication through various mediums such as text, video, and voice messages, and allows group memberships of up to 1,024 members. Most importantly, these capabilities help preserve oral traditions and bridge the gap between the "literate diaspora elites" and "illiterate rural elders" (see Norman 2024, 1433 and the concept of 'platform kinship' in the Somali territories).

Additionally, refugees are typically sent to Nairobi, Bujumbura, or Kigali for medical treatment. Local hospitals, such as those in Goma/Bukavu in the DRC, are not as well-equipped as those in neighbouring countries, and sometimes the Banyamulenge community lacks trust in the local medical team, leading to the need for treatment across borders. When this happens, Gakondo, the mutuality that connects all the mutuality of Banyamulenge comes together:

They play a big role in helping people back in Congo, but right now, the economy of Congo is in a bad state, which is worldwide, and many of our people are not working right now because of the crisis. Another one is helping people who get hurt and need treatment. Right now, all the cows were raided as they acted as wealth. The person will need treatment when we come through as a diaspora, (Representant of Gakondo, in Germany, May 2023)

Local mutualities situated along the humanitarian corridor (Minembwe – Uvira – Bukavu/Goma – Bujumbura/Kigali – Kampala – Nairobi) organize transfers through temporary WhatsApp groups that connect leaders of local mutualities. A division of humanitarian assistance often occurs with local mutualities in Nairobi, who visit patients in hospitals and help them with their legal documents and family reunification. The near diaspora provides both mental and material support, while the broader diaspora offers financial support to individuals establishing 'new geographies of refugee aid' (Pascucci 2018). The involvement of the near diaspora changed the trajectory of diaspora humanitarianism among the Congolese Banyamulenge community, as well as the narrative about the roles played by diaspora members in the Global South versus the Global North.

During periods of heightened insecurity in the DRC, nearby and distant diaspora members have played significant roles in supporting and protecting their communities in various ways. Those living in Nairobi often have a greater capacity to mobilize local resources through mutual aid systems established in nearby cities. In contrast, individuals in the broader diaspora can connect more easily with influential figures, either in the capital city of Kinshasa or at the regional level. The increasing use of smartphones in home communities has also enhanced the agency of diaspora members in

humanitarian efforts, giving them more leverage and influence. When direct assistance is required, responsibilities are shared between the near and far diaspora, resulting in diverse modes of collaboration and cooperation. Such 'humanitarianism from below' constitutes what might be called a 'transient digital diasporic infrastructure' — a constellation of mutual support networks that traverse and connect local and transnational spaces.

Diasporic youth: shifting power dynamics through digital engagement

Youth within the broader and near diaspora have consistently faced obstacles in actively engaging in the Banyamulenge diasporic humanitarian sphere due to the entrenched nature of humanitarianism in traditional systems — via the system of mutualities. However, the onset of the pandemic marked a pivotal period when certain frustrations catalyzed the emergence of new initiatives predominantly led by the youth. For example, the social media hashtag #SaveMulenge, displayed in green, emerged as a call for peace and swift intervention by the international community. Banyamulenge youths worldwide began utilizing hashtags such as #SaveMulenge, #EachOneReachOne, and #SkipaMealToSaveMulenge (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1 #Save Mulenge — Picture of the campaign

The hashtag #SaveMulenge originated from the initiative of young Congolese women residing in Canada, the United States, and Europe. It initially aimed to raise awareness about the atrocities perpetrated against their community back home. Originally conceived as a fundraising campaign to aid displaced individuals in Minembwe, Mikenke, Bijombo, Rurambo, and Bibogobogo, the movement evolved into a global rallying cry. It resonated within the Congolese diaspora and garnered attention in neighboring countries where refugees sought refuge. The inception of the #SaveMulenge campaign highlights the younger generation's inclination in the Global North to explore alternative technologies beyond the conventional use of the 'WhatsApp Communautaire'. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X (previously Twitter) are more actively utilized by youth, contrasting with the older generation's preference for WhatsApp.

This divergence facilitated broader outreach to global audiences and fostered connections among youth across borders. The campaign strategically incorporated GoFundMe links for fundraising, which

were shared across these social media platforms. However, it is essential to note that refugees in Nairobi often encounter difficulties accessing financial services due to restrictions on registering bank accounts or M-Pesa sim cards using refugee IDs. Consequently, their participation in this humanitarian initiative through contributions on the GoFundMe page was limited. Yet, the increasing involvement of the Congolese youth in the broader diaspora in humanitarian matters back home has prompted a shift in the perception of young Congolese refugees on the continent, especially in Nairobi, where they have found refuge. More specifically, since the COVID-19 pandemic, YouTube has become an extensively used social media platform among Congolese refugees in Nairobi. Whereas only a few YouTube channels existed within the Congolese refugee community before the COVID-19 pandemic, this number mushroomed during the pandemic as people were forced to stay at home (Godin & Ghislain 2024; Godin & Guislain forthcoming).

Negative experiences in the local labor market have driven the entrance of Congolese refugees into the digital world. For many highly qualified individuals, whether they acquired their skills in their home country or through the Kenyan education system, these barriers often compel them to seek alternative economic opportunities online. YouTube channels have become utilized by young refugees who are often educated not only as a means of making a living but also for pursuing life aspirations, reshaping the discourse around refugee voices, and establishing new social connections at local, diasporic, and homeland levels (Godin & Ghislain forthcoming). Positioned within complex power dynamics, Congolese refugee influencers navigate the constraints of the local and national economic environment and the limitations of the YouTube algorithm. While this social media platform has opened new economic avenues, it has also, over time — as described hereafter — transformed how diaspora humanitarianism operates by maintaining some traditional assistance methods and logic, such as the mutuality system, while simultaneously creating new opportunities, particularly for youth, through its platform capabilities. YouTube channels from Nairobi can be sponsored, led, or even co-led by someone in the far diaspora. Diaspora members located in Western countries often facilitate the registration and monetization of these channels, sometimes charging for these services, taking commissions, or offering the use of their bank accounts to make financial transfers via Western Union, WorldRemit, or mobile money. This shows how Congolese YouTubers in the diaspora are leveraging existing technology to create space for creativity, innovation, and new forms of digital-diaspora-led humanitarianism.

The case of *Umoja Wetu* ('Our Togetherness'), based in Kasarani (Nairobi, Kenya) and Minembwe (DR Congo), is particularly illustrative of these new types of digital humanitarian initiatives. Sammy, who was born in Mwenga in South Kivu (Congo), created this channel. He arrived in 2016 and is currently at university doing film production. Here he explained why he created this channel:

Usually, we interview people to ask them more about the current situation on war, and we also interview community leaders and activists. Insecurity is also there, but when you want something, you must go there to get the right news. I have loved journalism since I was young, and my family was so mad at me that I even started with a phone. I grew, and I established a studio where we did photography and videography and continued with my YouTube channel. We also chose to go home so that their stories could be heard.

Umoja Wetu TV was established at the beginning of 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its inception, the channel has experienced remarkable growth in a relatively short period. What sets this YouTube channel apart from others in Nairobi is its unique ability to operate both in Nairobi and back home, reaching areas many had not covered. This distinctive feature has garnered attention from the local community where it operates and members of the diaspora in Nairobi, Kampala, Bujumbura, Kigali, the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. In August 2022, the channel boasted a total of 6,240 subscribers; today, it has grown to 49,600 subscribers (January 2024). This substantial increase reflects the impact of expanding operations to Minembwe, attracting subscribers with unique stories and covering untold narratives for global broadcast. The channel's focus on real stories depicting hardships and displacement in Minembwe has played a crucial role in mobilizing funds.

Umoja Wetu TV has become a go-to resource for people in the diaspora, both near and far, who often seek assistance in identifying the most vulnerable individuals in Minembwe. The channel

facilitates the reception and distribution of funds to support the displaced population. Moreover, it actively documents activities, whether through public videos for broadcasting or private videos and photos sent to donors, thus serving as a conduit for humanitarian efforts facilitated by digital technologies on behalf of the diaspora. They film not only when people receive aid from individuals in the diaspora but also when local mutualities worldwide are helping. Additionally, they promote individual initiatives by refugees who act as humanitarian entrepreneurs. For example, one elected 'Miss Mulenge' travelled to Minembwe to connect with the local community and better understand their daily challenges. During her visit, she recorded video footage showcasing the struggles the people of Minembwe faced.

With the support of Umoja Wetu, which has locations in both Kasarani (Nairobi, Kenya) and Minembwe (DR Congo), she documented her entire journey. This collaboration aimed to share 'authentic real-life experiences and stories,' highlighting the community's challenges and successes. As a result, it increased the number of viewers and downloads on their YouTube channel, boosting her popularity in the region. Umoja Wetu seeks to highlight the experiences of refugees in the region, emphasizing the importance of storytelling in raising awareness. During a visit to Nakivale, Uganda's oldest refugee settlement, the owner shared his vision:

I want to do it for all the people and show what they are passing through so that the world can know. I want to open a channel that will operate in Uganda because when I was there, I met with the youth, and they were telling me they have talent, but they have no means of showing it.

His YouTube channel aims to showcase these talents, serving as a platform that could create economic opportunities for the youth living in the camp. Through this initiative, he aims to empower young refugees and explore new pathways for diasporic engagement within the region (in Rwanda and Burundi) and the broader diaspora, thereby enabling refugees' stories to be heard and their skills to be recognized. YouTube's viewership engine helps redefine diasporic identities, particularly the 'Banyamulenge' identity and spoken languages (Kinyamulenge, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi). It establishes new connections among the youth in the USA, Europe, Canada, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, Australia, and the DRC (Godin & Ghislain forthcoming).

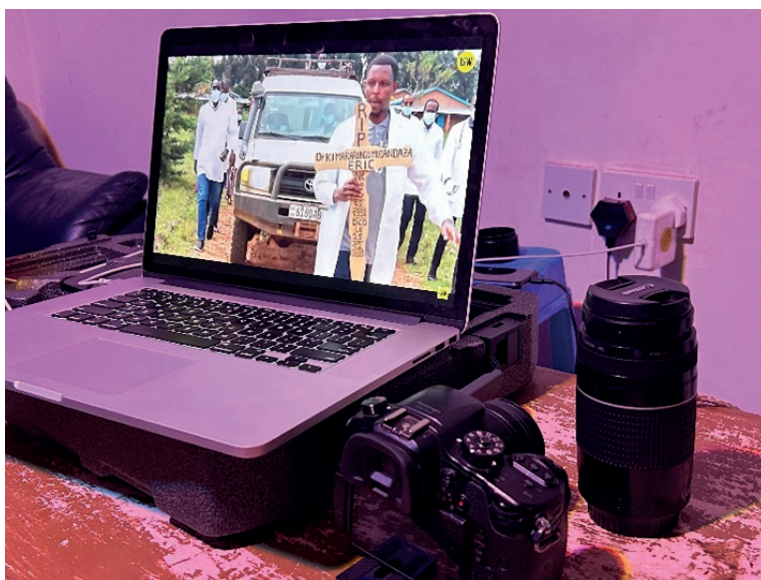


Fig. 2 Umoja Wetu TV, Congolese YouTuber in Nairobi —
Picture taken by Marie Godin

The expanded audience brings economic benefits and helps shape Congolese refugees' sense of belonging to an "imagined Banyamulenge family." This highlights the growing role of YouTube channels in raising awareness about the situations in both their home country and the countries of exile. It also creates new opportunities for humanitarian engagement within the diasporas and beyond, fostering new forms of solidarity and support beyond the mutuality system.

Situated Solidarities: Congolese Refugee Youth in Nairobi and the Reimagining of Humanitarianism through Digital Diasporic Engagement

The article presents an insightful perspective on how the expanding use of digital technologies, particularly smartphones and social media platforms accessible via these personal devices, reshapes the relationships between near and far diasporas and home communities in the DRC. By examining the dynamics within the Banyamulenge Congolese refugee community in Nairobi, the study highlights how social media and digital tools facilitate the persistence of old support systems, such as the mutuality system. This transformation is especially significant for educated youth, as it fosters a more interconnected approach to addressing needs and sharing resources, thereby bridging the gap between those who have migrated to different localities and those who remain in their homeland.

These new forms of everyday digital humanitarianism, in which the near and far diaspora intersect, are emerging and diverge from the notion that the broader diaspora, located in the Global North, is the more powerful actor. Without a doubt, the wider diaspora in which many refugees are resettled, particularly in the US and Canada, and to a lesser extent in Australia and Europe, is the one that possesses the economic capital. As a result, they provide most of the financial assistance through the 'mutualities system', which relies on the extensive use of WhatsApp groups to communicate and hold people accountable. However, as some examples have shown, the near diaspora contributes in different ways to support people back home. First, as their connections with mutuality groups at the local level are often stronger, they can mobilize these networks via WhatsApp to protect those back home. They can also provide direct material and emotional support when people require urgent or vital medical treatment, playing a central role in this diasporic humanitarian corridor between Minembwe (Province of South Kivu in the DRC) and Nairobi (the capital city of Kenya), where the majority of refugees are Congolese.

Another critical way Congolese refugees, particularly the educated youth in Nairobi, have engaged in everyday acts of humanitarianism is by creating YouTube channels. As this paper demonstrates, Nairobi holds a unique position in the world of Congolese Banyamulenge YouTubers. Several factors seem to have contributed to this blossoming activity within the community. COVID-19 has played a significant role by leaving people unable to continue their economic activities for long periods. This time at home has pushed refugees to reorient themselves, especially the youth. The digital infrastructure in Kenya/Nairobi is relatively good compared to other neighbouring countries where refugees have found protection, such as Uganda and Burundi. With one of Africa's most advanced digital infrastructure networks, Kenya offers increasing digital economic opportunities for refugees and young people. Young refugees — some who came at an early age or were born in Kenya — could access education in the country, either at university or through training, and therefore have some digital literacy skills.

Additionally, the refugee community living in Nairobi has maintained stronger and more frequent connections with their communities in South Kivu and refugee camps in Kenya and neighbouring countries. With the support of community elders, youth are using their YouTube channels to create a space where people in Minembwe and other refugee communities residing in camps in neighbouring countries can communicate directly and share their stories. As a result, the local and global diaspora youth have been re-engaging by learning more about the everyday lives of the Banyamulenge living in Minembwe and/or other exile corridors. This has led to more donations being given within the mutual support network and from outside it. These humanitarian exchanges have become more transparent through videos, images, and audio recordings, making those in leadership positions more accountable for their actions. As a result, the increased transparency in diasporic humanitarian efforts

has fostered greater trust within these trans-local diasporic networks. Despite the benefits, several drawbacks are associated with the combined use of WhatsApp and YouTube channels.

Firstly, 'Competition' arises as YouTube channels showcase daily acts of humanitarianism funded by individuals alongside actions supported within the mutuality system. This dynamic can lead to competition between individuals and mutualities, sometimes leading to a 'PR-isation of humanitarianism' (Hopkins 2017) within both the broader and near diaspora. Secondly, the perception of a 'Duty to help' within families can be compromised when aid actions are made overtly visible. Displaying individuals receiving aid, although common in the international humanitarian sector, has been replicated by some people within the Banyamulenge diaspora, potentially mobilizing funds through emotional appeals. However, some diaspora members resist succumbing to this trend, indicating how different forms of humanitarianism are embedded into social practice. Thirdly, the role of YouTubers as a bridge between donors and receivers may sometimes adopt an 'Only for business' approach. While this business model need not solely focus on profit, it can be profit-oriented. This can create internal tensions between the elders and the Youth, taking some decisional power away from the former. Fourthly, 'Digital risks' emerge as people expose themselves publicly in videos. The permanence of digital footage raises concerns about consent, as it is not always clear whether the featured local individuals have given their consent. Unlike traditional interactions, digital context retains footage indefinitely, posing potential problems for individuals when their identities are disclosed online. Fifth, posting stories online may lead to disturbances and conflict within the Congolese diaspora and back home. Social media platforms have become a new battlefield characterised by polarisation, disinformation that can lead to hostility both online and offline, in particular, in of information warfare in eastern Congo (see Ndahinda & Mugabe 2022; Vogel & Musamba 2024).

While new forms of collaboration have emerged, they have also led to increased social divisions and tensions within the diaspora, which may result in heightened surveillance among community members. Additionally, the humanitarian efforts of the Congolese Banyamulenge digital diaspora cannot be reduced to mere local or global mutual support; rather, they are part of a more intricate system of digital kinship, families, and churches that spans various locations (Norman 2024). Other factors contributing to social stratification — such as race, age, class, ethnicity, urban/rural disparities, and legal status — also significantly influence the landscape of Congolese Banyamulenge digital diaspora humanitarianism and its associated infrastructure. Consequently, this article does not present a complete picture and highlights the need for further research to capture this diversity and complexity accurately.

The Congolese Banyamulenge diaspora has creatively adapted to the digital era by utilizing platforms like WhatsApp and creating YouTube content through their channels (also shared via WhatsApp), which are dedicated to events back home. This engagement not only preserves traditional systems of support and solidarity, known as the mutuality system, but also transforms the social relationships that traditionally defined this 'humanitarian system.' Specifically, these digitally mediated support structures have altered the power dynamics between diaspora members and those in their home communities over time and across different spaces. The home communities now hold more leverage as they activate far and near diasporic networks for protection, security, humanitarian aid, and development. Social media platforms have also created new roles and opportunities for educated youth, particularly young Congolese refugees living in Nairobi, a key 'near' diaspora hub.

Like other cases of digital diaspora humanitarianism explored in the literature (e.g. Osman 2021; Norman 2022, 2024; Kleist *et al.* 2025), the use and effectiveness of digital platforms are rooted in new social imaginaries, kinship obligations, and trust. Traditional norms and structures that define specific systems of support and solidarity are incorporated into the digital realm, influencing the technology itself and how it is utilized. The effects of multiple crises, such as humanitarian and economic hardships at home and in exile, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with increased connectivity, have contributed to reconfiguring roles and agencies in diaspora humanitarianism. This article also contributes to rethinking the roles that diasporas (both near and far) can play in reimagining "humanitarianism as plural, situated, and shaped by those most directly affected by crisis" (Horst *et al.* 2025, xx). This is particularly evident among Congolese youth refugees living in Nairobi.

Notes

¹ There are also different political approaches within the system of mutuality, which can lead to intra-community tensions. For instance, Mahoro/Peace Association is deeply involved in collecting funds to support people back home. However, its leadership does not openly criticize the interference in Eastern DRC's conflicts. Whereas the 'Banyamulenge mutuality', which is another association in the US, was formed in response to the non-critic behaviors of the Mahoro/Peace association.

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