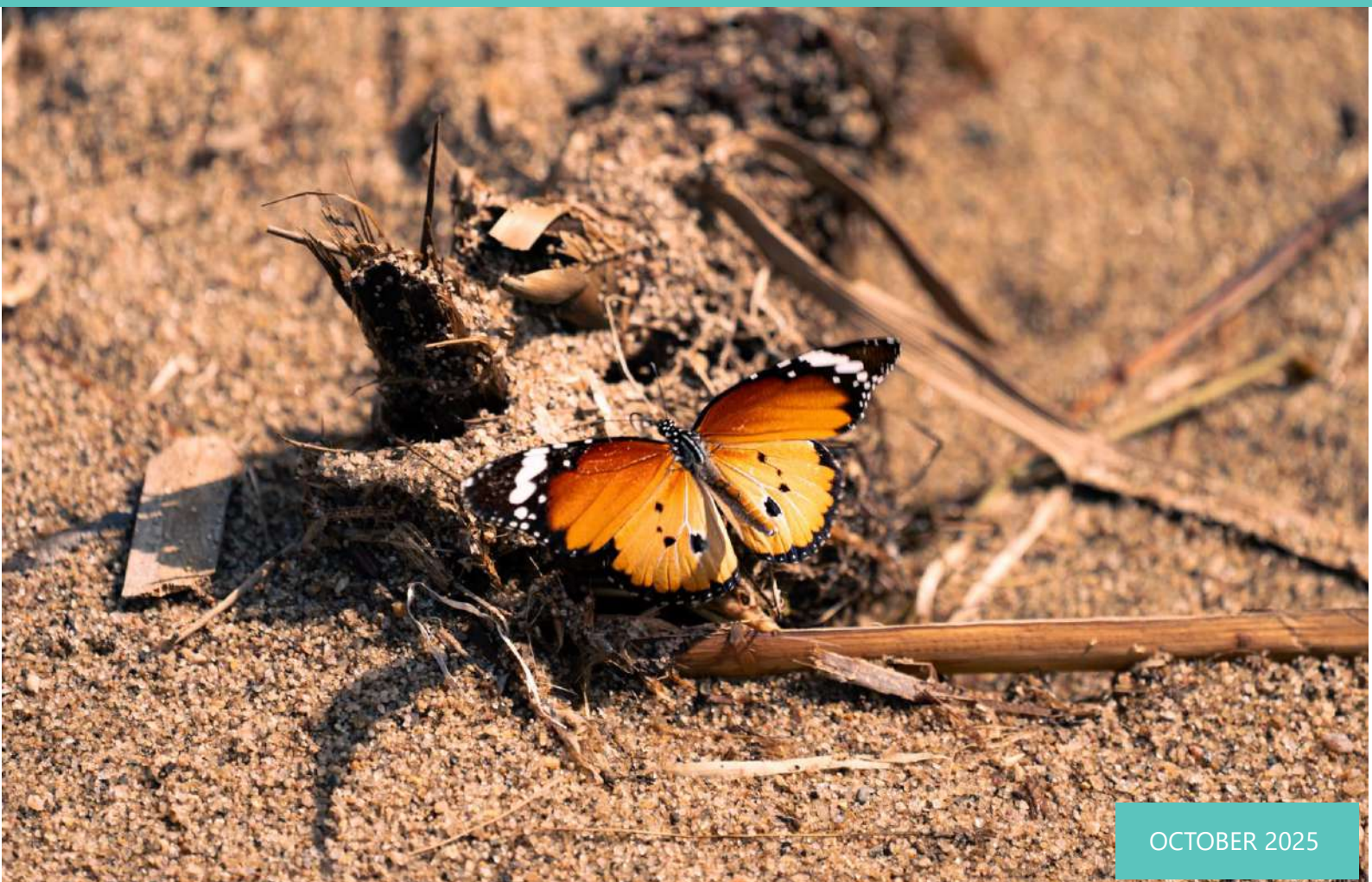


Working with the private sector for resilience in the Eastern Congo

Experiences from a livelihoods and resilience programme facilitating change in Ituri province, 2020–2025

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OCTOBER 2025

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The whole SLR team deserves credit for the insights in this document. In particular, Clarisse Mageza, Jaël Mbale, Gédéon Wanadi, Siméon Androva, Pépin Mugisho, and Léon Zabiti were each essential to collecting and contextualizing those stories. SLR's first programme director Jonathan Greenham heavily influenced my thinking about what good development is – and how team leaders can (and can't) shape their programme's 'approach' – through many humbling "Jesuit" dialogues over tea and biscuits.

Additionally, Lindsay North, Vishalini Lawrence, Mike Field, and other colleagues and collaborators worldwide shaped the ideas in this piece by posing challenging questions about the responsibilities of MSD programmes working within conflict systems. USAID's MarketLinks site, DAI's Developments newsletter, and the Vikāra Institute's MSDhub.org blog series deserve credit for hosting earlier versions of some portions of this content.

Cover image:

A plain tiger butterfly (*Danaus chrysippus*), a relative of the North American monarch, alights on detritus near a water-taxi landing at Nyamamba in early 2021.

This region of Ituri's Djugu Territory is accessible only by foot or by boat. In 2023, the picturesque lakeside town became the site of a brutal militia attack that left mass graves in its wake. Plain tigers like this one are commonplace throughout the Great Lakes region of Africa, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo's north-eastern Ituri Province, where the USAID Strengthening Livelihoods and Resilience (SLR) team worked from 2020 to 2025.

Metamorphosis, vulnerability, resurrection, biomimicry, chaos theory, transient perfection, perception–reality koans, beauty in small things: pick whichever butterfly metaphor suits you today.

(Cover and section-break photos: Dan Langfitt)

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Foreword

This learning document draws on the experiences of the Feed the Future USAID Strengthening Livelihoods and Resilience (SLR) activity implemented by DAI in Ituri province during 2020–2025. One challenge SLR faced was engaging local businesses in economic and resilience outcomes in a remote north-eastern part of the DRC, where militia groups often seemed more numerous than any recognisable private sector. SLR was designed by USAID (and bid on by DAI) in 2019 before the Ituri peace process broke down, but its staff only began work in December 2020, after the militias had taken up arms and returned to the field. A programme meant to be a post-conflict recovery effort was forced to attempt economic development programming in a province intermittently at war, without meaningful changes to the original design to accommodate the change in circumstances.

Consequently, SLR was experimental. Although it borrowed from market-systems development (MSD) paradigms about systems change and its emphasis on private-sector partnerships, SLR was pluralistic. Its programming also focused on non-market systems (such as public health systems, land-governance systems, and conflict systems) and household-level resilience factors (such as hygiene and childhood nutrition). This required the SLR staff to juggle facilitation with direct delivery, long-term development with urgent needs, and commercial mindsets with humanitarian optics. Instead of following a top-down orthodoxy, the team developed their engagement tactics through an inductive, bottom-up process of individual experimentation and imitation, incorporating feedback from businesses and communities about what language and framing resonated – and what didn't. Its results are therefore measured both by business revenues grown or community mentalities shifted, and by what SLR itself learnt about engaging the private sector in a conflict zone where an average North American or European observer would object, "What private sector?" (And then, "Wait, what am I doing in Ituri!?")

This account of SLR's private-sector engagement efforts builds on a series of blog posts originally written in 2023 and published in early 2024 on the Vikāra Institute's MSDhub.org site, DAI's website, and the (now defunct) MarketLinks.org site. It rearranges and edits the original posts to create a more coherent narrative and adds outcomes and data from SLR's work in 2024–2025. International development is currently in the midst of a profound shift, and market systems development practice is evolving more rapidly than ever. Some of the USAID-centric lexicon (like country 'Missions', 'host countries', and 'local staff') that felt stale or paternalistic in 2023 is already outdated. As paradigms around aid and development change, other terminology will doubtless grow unpalatable or unintelligible ('in the field', anyone? how about 'fragility'? what does a 'development practitioner' even look like?). In editing and reassembling the original posts, the author has therefore: simplified some unnecessary terms and insider debates (whether 'market systems resilience' is an 'approach' or a 'lens' hardly seems relevant anymore); offered brief parentheticals to explain useful jargon like 'complexity' and 'facilitation' to readers less indoctrinated in MSD; retained less useful jargon only when it is in direct dialogue with contemporaneous documents (like the USAID/MSP Primer on private-sector engagement that gives the "fragile and conflict-affected" part of this document's title); and unapologetically indulged the tongue-in-cheek wordplay in the subtitles and playful pretentiousness that characterised the voice of the original blog posts – a subjective medium, after all – not with the aim of alienating the reader, but instead to provoke alternative interpretations and productive disagreements.

The work described in this case study is a result of the efforts of the entire SLR team and its many exceptional partners in business, government, civil society, and the humanitarian and development sectors. In particular, **Clarisse Mageza, Jaël Mbale, Gédéon Wanadi, Siméon Androva, Pépin Mugisho, and Léon Zabiti** each made major contributions to the thinking behind these examples of working with the private sector for resilience, and they deserve much of the credit for the insights therein. That said, the interpretation of those ideas (and any defects therewith) as expressed in this document is the sole responsibility of the author (SLR's former Director of Partnerships, Finance, and Operations during 2020–2023) in his current capacity as an independent contributor to the BEAM Exchange.

Acronyms

ADF	Allied Democratic Forces (an originally Ugandan militia with loose ties to radical Islam active in northern North Kivu and southern Ituri provinces of the DRC)
BEAM	Building Effective and Inclusive Markets
CODECO	<i>Coopérative pour le développement du Congo</i> (collection of Lendu militias in Ituri Province of the DRC)
DCED	Donor Committee on Enterprise Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo ("Congo – Kinshasa"; "RDC" in French acronym)
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (UK Aid agency)
FEC	<i>Fédération des Entreprises du Congo</i> (analogous to Congolese Chamber of Commerce)
GMO	genetically modified organism
LINK	Feed the Future Leadership & Collaboration for Better Policy Systems ("Policy LINK")
M23	<i>Mouvement du 23 mars</i> (March 23rd Movement, the Rwandan-backed Congolese paramilitary group that reoccupied territory in the Kivu provinces beginning in late 2023)
MSD	market systems development
MSP	Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnership Activity
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SLR	Feed the Future Strengthening Livelihoods and Resilience activity (2020–2025)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development (1961–2025)

Table of contents

Foreword	3
Acronyms	4
Table of contents	5
Executive summary	6
Fig. 1: Map of Ituri Province, DRC, with place names of interest and approximate locations	9
Working with the private sector for resilience in the Eastern Congo	10
Introduction: results from a resilience activity's private-sector engagement in fragile and conflict-affected Ituri	10
1. Considering social entrepreneurship as a commercial strategy	13
The case for conflict-sensitive business models	13
From non-profit organisation to social entrepreneur: an example	15
2. Using co-creation and self-selection to choose the right partners	19
Co-creation with communities in the shadow of conflict	23
Self-selection with partners in the penumbra of fragility	24
"Who you calling a 'bad actor'?: revisiting labels	25
3. Vetting private-sector partners in unfamiliar settings	27
Lowering the bar for private-sector partners in Ituri	27
Making sense of deceit and incompetence... or just unfamiliar business norms	28
Face to face with wild cards: implications of 'unknown unknowns' for MSD teams	30
4. Looking at non-financial support to the private sector through a systems lens	32
Contextualising the need for non-financial support... with humility	33
Searching within the market system for providers of non-financial support	37
Harnessing serendipity with human nature... and human judgement	39
5. Balancing 'Do No Harm' with economic development	41
Patient partnerships and value-chain finance: a case study piloting seed sales on credit	41
The system responds: backlash in a refugee context	49
A fragile economy in transition: knowledge systems, disinformation, and rethinking how to approach 'spoilers'	51
Conclusion: sense-making and serendipity	55

Executive Summary

USAID's [Strengthening Livelihoods and Resilience \(SLR\) activity](#) operated in Ituri Province in the north-east Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from 2020 to 2025. The international development contractor and services firm DAI implemented the activity. SLR blended market systems development paradigms for facilitating systemic change with strategies for working alongside humanitarian organisations to build the resilience of low-income Congolese households in a conflict-affected setting.

Based on the hypothesis that inclusive economic development can be a stabilising force, SLR combined community development work with private-sector engagement to generate \$1.1 million in co-investment in its partnerships, stimulate commercial credit facilities and value-chain financing arrangements (which, by 2025, had already helped almost 6,000 farming households access improved agricultural inputs) and improve household nutrition and land governance throughout Ituri. Because the impetus for these results came from SLR partner communities and depended on commercially viable business models, many of these direct results were already showing signs of magnifying themselves after SLR's closure.

However, working with the private sector in Ituri was not simple. As the USAID Market Systems and Partnerships (MSP) activity's [Primer on Private-Sector Engagement for Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations](#) puts it:

- 1) A third dimension based on conflict-sensitivity must be added to traditional shared values like competitiveness and inclusion.
- 2) Not all companies are alike in fragile and conflict-affected situations, and some may be invested in maintaining the conflict system.
- 3) Upfront prospecting is more important than ever in fragile and conflict-affected situations.
- 4) Development initiatives in fragile or conflict-affected settings must be prepared to go beyond financial support in their engagement with the private sector.

Part 1 of this learning document reflects on **social entrepreneurship as a commercial strategy** – one way SLR incorporated the first lesson about “a third dimension of shared value” from the MSP Primer into its activities – and through the example of a Mambasa organisation exploring a commercial business line in honey sourced from indigenous people in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, it observes that:

- In fragile and conflict-affected situations, it is essential to incorporate special considerations like interethnic grievances and perceptions about moral economy into private-sector partnerships, and social enterprises or market-oriented non-governmental organisations may be calibrated to meet that need.
- Social capital (like reputation and trust) may be as important a prerequisite as financial capital for sustainable market-oriented programming in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

Part 2 – **choosing the right partners** – describes how SLR used self-selection tactics and community co-creation to differentiate between potential partners, both validating and nuancing the recommendations of the MSP Primer's second lesson “not all companies are alike”:

- While the private sector has a natural stake in growth and stability, in fragile and conflict-affected situations, some firms may profit from instability and make poor partners for development programmes.
- Transparent and consultative co-creation with communities is a departure from traditional MSD approaches to private-sector partnership development, but, paired with ongoing self-selection ‘filters,’ it can be a powerful tool for avoiding partnerships with ‘bad actors.’
- A black-and-white attitude toward ‘good’ market actors sharing our values versus ‘bad’ market actors invested in ongoing conflict may oversimplify a more complex spectrum of potential partners.

Part 3 explores the challenges of **vetting private-sector partners** outside familiar business environments, contextualising the third lesson from the MSP Primer, “private-sector engagement best practice is more important than ever,” within the operational choices SLR leadership made when dealing with the inherent murkiness of small enterprises in Ituri:

- Extremely fragile markets often entail low business standards and irregular norms, which makes it difficult for development programmes to do upfront prospecting of private-sector partners.
- Private-sector engagement initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected contexts may need to accept inevitable ‘unknown unknowns’ when evaluating potential partners, lower their own standards, keep an open mind, and embrace the messiness of complex systems to get the most out of their efforts.

Part 4 of this document follows the fourth lesson from the MSP Primer and **thinks systemically about non-financial support to businesses in fragile settings**, concluding that:

- Basic skills like negotiation or business plans should not be taken for granted in fragile and conflict-affected settings, so non-financial support (like coaching, networking, advocacy, and data) for private-sector partners is especially critical in these environments.
- The same market-system fragility that lowers standards for business capacity (and makes non-financial support so essential) means that there are fewer and weaker service providers or associations that provide non-financial support in a systemic way after an MSD initiative ends.
- Faced with murky hypotheses and labyrinthine results chains, thinking systemically about the supply of non-financial support requires donors and implementers to put a premium on honest and adaptive teams, to give their staff the latitude to exercise good judgement about what ‘good facilitation’ means in the most difficult markets, and also to grow less attached to the causal models that dominated an earlier generation of systems thinking in favour of embracing complexity and all its messiness and trusting our teammates and partners to navigate a way forward through complex change.

Part 5 reconsiders all four lessons from the MSP Primer and SLR’s underlying hypothesis about economic development as a force for stability by examining the dilemma of **balancing ‘Do No Harm’ with economic development**. It offers a devil’s advocate viewpoint through an extended example of one SLR partnership with a seed company that increased the company’s sales volumes in Ituri through a new value-chain financing intervention that delivered seeds on partial credit to grateful farmers but also provoked unexpected backlash. The final part of this learning document concludes:

- Any systemic change will produce ‘winners and losers’, which could in turn result in conflict – and in Ituri’s fragile context, SLR’s interventions disrupted socioeconomic patterns in ways that played into communities’ fears and anxieties, even when SLR staff and partners tried to minimise such unintended (and often unpredictable) consequences.
- Consequently, close monitoring of emergent concerns through trusted formal and informal information networks is essential, and MSD teams must learn mediation skills (or how to facilitate mediation as a ‘market function’, as SLR attempted) and be prepared to occasionally step in with a ‘heavier hand’ at this point in the market-systems continuum to prevent an intervention from provoking destructive backlash.
- Using programmatic lenses (like conflict-sensitivity) in a pluralistic way can improve private-sector engagement initiatives, but too much focus on frameworks and results may also lose sight of the knowledge of programme and partner staff (and the community members they work with), so MSD team leaders should consider sense-making approaches that can channel diverse tacit and explicit knowledge into better intervention design and management.
- The primacy of conflict-sensitivity in MSD intervention design is not restricted to “fragile and conflict-affected situations”, although those situations make its importance especially clear: like other lessons MSD practitioners bring from more challenging environments, the lessons SLR learnt – about engaging the private sector to promote systemic resilience in Ituri, reaching decisions by balancing the team’s own situation analyses with partners’ sense-making, and adapting a novel approach through an iterative joint learning process with its staff – can be applied to systems change facilitation in less challenging contexts.

These recommendations and conclusions are meant to stimulate team leaders to reflect on how broad guidance about working with the private sector, or about facilitation in general, needs to be adapted to a given time and place – and how the inherent subjectivity of that adaptation process can become a source of creativity and serendipity under the right circumstances. (Along similar lines, this document describes SLR’s experiences in a way to raise questions rather than offer definitive answers, so readers should agree and (especially) disagree with the author’s interpretations according to their own experiences.)

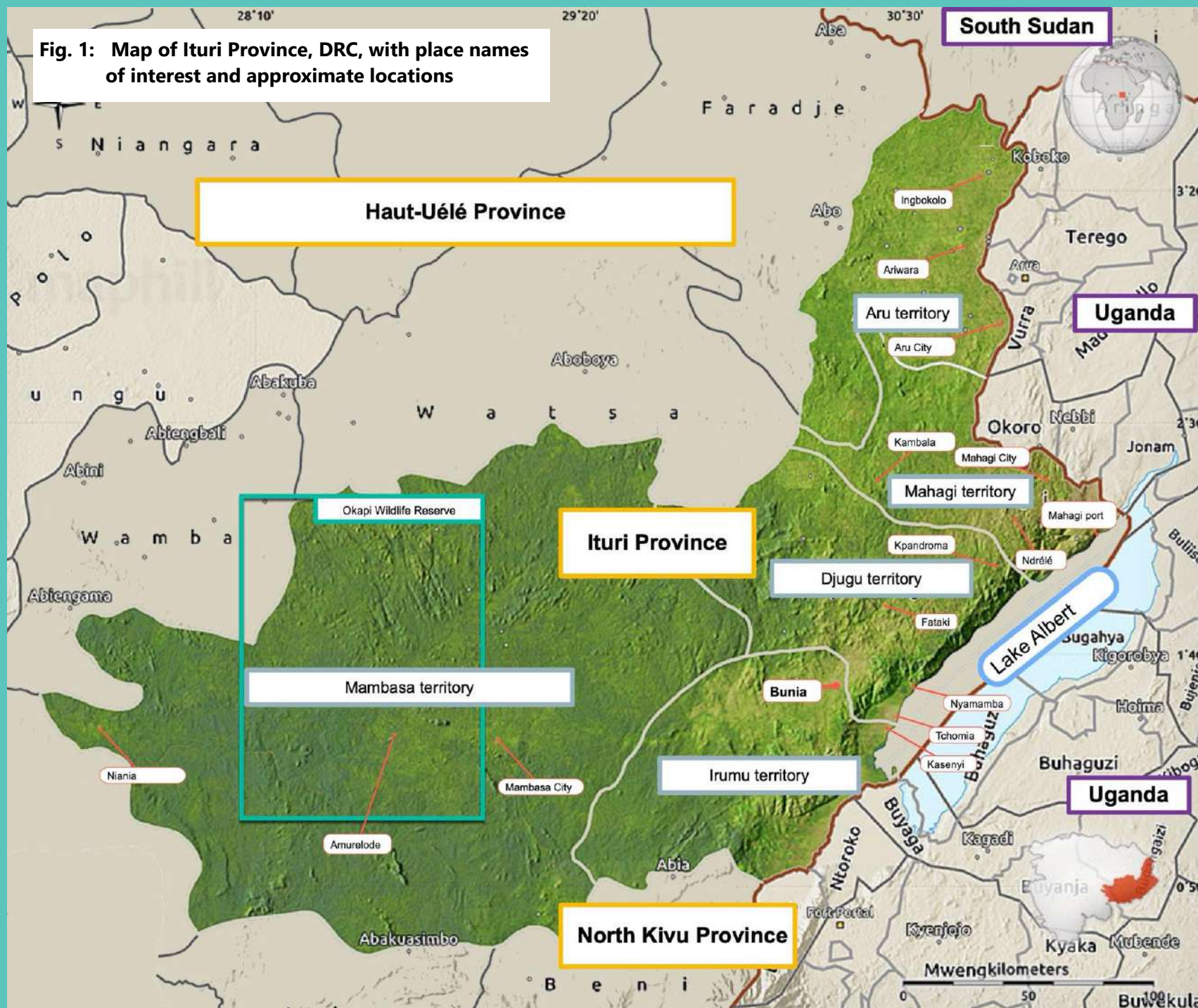
SLR's experience developing an approach for Ituri Province both nuances the recommendations in the MSP Primer and sheds light on an under-documented but critical aspect of MSD team leadership: how to build an effective team from a group of professionals with little prior experience using systems thinking in programmes that address complex problems.



Above and below left: water-taxi passengers wait offshore from a landing point near the town of Nyamamba in southeastern Djugu territory. These precarious boats are the main way to bring people and goods north from Kasenyi and Tchomia along the Ituri side of Lake Albert, and at busy times of day, they have to wait in line before landing and disembarking their passengers. Below right: members of the Strengthening Livelihood and Resilience Activity team and their community partners alight at Nyamamba for the first time in early 2021.

Photos: Daniel Langfitt





Base map courtesy of Google Maps via MapHill free maps: www.maphill.com.

All coloured labels (and any minor inaccuracies with their geographical position) are the responsibility of the author and meant exclusively for reference as points of interest that are mentioned in the body of this learning document.

Working with the private sector for resilience in the eastern Congo

Introduction: results from a resilience activity's private-sector engagement in fragile and conflict-affected Ituri

Market systems development (MSD) programmes achieve economic, social, political, and environmental goals by stimulating long-term change in a system instead of serving vulnerable people or directly providing services to businesses. However, market systems are deeply interwoven with the social, political, and ecological systems they are built upon, and they exhibit a high degree of 'anthro-complexity' (in the current jargon), so forcing them to change in a specific way is difficult or impossible. In other words, the same causes do not consistently lead to the same effects, so even with perfect information, it is not possible to design a linear path to change the system. (Put more intuitively, changing a complex human system is more like raising a child than like assembling a piece of Ikea furniture.)

Because there can be no definitive instruction manual to create a given change in a given system, MSD practitioners must balance universal strategies – drawn from institutional economics, systems thinking, complexity science, and elsewhere – with pragmatic approaches suited to the system they wish to change. For example, one such MSD 'universal' is the idea of facilitation: that MSD practitioners only intervene temporarily in the system, never becoming part of the system itself to avoid distortions. Instead, they aspire to use partnerships with permanent market actors to catalyse systemic change that will outlive the MSD intervention.

Following this logic to its conclusion and authentically ceding power to local system actors to lead change can unlock powerful new resources and knowledge. It also points to promising steps toward both decolonising international development practice *and* doing better development with fewer development dollars. However, MSD practitioners must also 'do facilitation' in a way that guides systems change toward positive development goals – goals set according to shared values. Even when those values come from partners within the system, and those same partners decide what kinds of systems change their values align with, it is the responsibility of a good facilitator to contextualise those goals within the broader picture of an evolving system and avoid leading its partners into trouble.

Not all contexts are equally easy to picture, though. Some economic systems have written rules, consistent enforcement, clear incentives, copious data, and well-established patterns of behaviour that make it easier to construct hypotheses about how to nudge the system into a more desirable state and detect whether those nudges ('probes', in the current jargon) are working or not. Other contexts do not make it so easy. Fragile market systems and societies suffering from ongoing conflict are, however, often trapped in systems of economic exploitation and humanitarian aid that makes them especially appealing locations for initiatives that might break them out of that trap.

These are increasingly common scenarios for MSD interventions. Such settings appeal to some MSD practitioners because of their potential: the lower the starting point, the more room there is to grow. Less elaborate social, political, and economic structures permit a variety of plausible pathways to development – including the potential to explore novel bottom-up socio-political or environmental solutions that would be impossible for an MSD initiative to bring about in more developed economies with more rigid systems.

However, fragile and conflict-affected situations pose special challenges, too. Rule of law is often weak, trust in institutions and between economic actors is low, and society can be fragmented along ethnic, religious, or political lines. The private sector can be a valuable development partner in these places, but the edge-of-chaos nature of such market systems alters what kinds of businesses can succeed there. Efforts to create long-term change need to take this into account.

In late 2021, the Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnerships (MSP) activity produced guidance¹ for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on working with the private sector in fragile and conflict-affected situations. The MSP Primer articulated four lessons:

1. A third dimension – comprising paradigms like conflict sensitivity and principles like Do No Harm – must intersect with the more familiar shared values of development objectives and core business interests in private-sector partnerships.
2. Not all companies are aligned with the objective of long-term inclusive development and stability – some benefit from chaos and maintain status by perpetuating division and conflict.
3. Private-sector engagement best practices – like upfront prospecting of potential partners – are more important than ever in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
4. Alone, financial support to companies in the most challenging contexts is usually inadequate for catalysing transformational change: the private sector also needs help to access human capital, data, information, infrastructure, and improved relationships.

Those lessons resonated with the experiences of the Strengthening Livelihoods and Resilience² (SLR) activity, a programme also funded under Feed the Future via USAID and implemented by DAI. During 2020–2025, SLR worked in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Ituri Province, which borders South Sudan to the north, Uganda to the east, and North Kivu Province to the south.

Ituri's territories of Irumu, Djugu, and Mahagi border Lake Albert and form a mosaic of upland forest and savannah plateau landscapes, whereas northern Aru Territory is more transitional and begins to dry out as it approaches South Sudan; to the west, Mambasa Territory is a warmer lowland riverine landscape with large intact forest blocks. The team was based in Bunia, Ituri's capital and largest city, in northern Irumu Territory near the border with Djugu, but it operated in all five territories.³ (For continuous reference, see the map in Figure 1 above; the author has added approximate locations for the photos and anecdotes shared in this document.)

The western half of Ituri is occupied by the eponymous rainforest – itself part of the Congolian rainforest, which is second only to the Amazon in size and a critical priority for both biodiversity and the fight against climate change. Despite the excellent high-altitude equatorial climate, rich soil, unique flora and fauna, and extensive mineral wealth, Ituri has suffered from over two decades of economic exploitation, intermittent war, and humanitarian dependence.

SLR worked with partners from the private sector, government, and civil society in areas like land tenure, conflict resolution, agriculture, livestock, fishing, nutrition, and social inclusion to prepare Ituri to relaunch its economy, rebound from natural and man-made disasters, and promote stable cycles of socioeconomic development in the face of shocks and stresses. SLR used its role as a facilitator to pursue traditional MSD aims – like commercial sustainability, environmental responsibility, and pro-poor social inclusion – but it also prioritised business models that linked economic development with peace: peace permitted development, and development reinforced lasting peace.

SLR's signature approach engaged communities throughout the war-torn province to co-create each community's own development plan. It shifted the tone of community conversation away from grievances of the past or the anxieties of the present and toward a long-term view of a more peaceful and prosperous future. Then it facilitated the entry of private-sector, civil-society, and government entities to partner with those communities. The team hypothesised that if its community, private-sector, and government partnerships created a safe pocket of economic

1 Maor, Ouellette & Sapara-Grant (2021). [Primer on Private-Sector Engagement in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations](#).

2 This learning document captures SLR's work through the lens of private-sector engagement and community co-creation. For other aspects see [SLR's programme profile on the BEAM Exchange](#)

3 Although its ~65,700 km² make Ituri slightly larger than the US state of West Virginia but a bit smaller than the Republic of Ireland, it sometimes took the SLR team several days to drive across the province, especially in the rainy season or when it needed to avoid militia activity.



The main road in central Bunia leaves the impression of a frontier town, despite being the home for half a million people (many of them displaced by the surrounding conflict). It is situated in the southeastern part of Ituri, with the CODECO militias controlling territory in Djugu to the north and the ADF militia marauding through much of Irumu territory to the south. During 2020–2025, militias cut commercial arteries like this one off from the rest of the DRC and Uganda more than once, and during those times vital goods could only be delivered by air for weeks at a time.

Photo: Daniel Langfitt (unless otherwise noted, all photos in this document are the author's).

opportunity within Ituri's chaos, some market actors would seek to build better lives on the foundation of inter- and intra-community cooperation rather than strife.

At the time of its closure in 2025, SLR had reached nearly 50,000 individuals through partnerships between communities, private-sector actors, and government entities that co-invested over \$1.1 million in initiatives to strengthen the resilience of Ituri province. SLR had no grant facility – a deliberate break from humanitarian norms – and most of its partnerships did not involve directly transferring funds to partners (Part 5 of this document describes one exception). Instead, it mobilised co-investments from partners and directly contributed catalytic resources (like technical expertise or specialised equipment) as part of well-defined partnership arrangements.

These partnerships achieved direct results like helping nearly 6,000 farming households access improved agricultural inputs and apply them to more than 10,000 hectares thanks to new private-sector-led credit facilities, helping 380 people formalise land-tenure rights and resolve seven ongoing land conflicts, enabling 90 indigenous households to increase their annual revenues five- to tenfold through honey production, and establishing over 200 new market linkages between producer groups and value-chain actors. Not uncommonly for a programme that

prioritises facilitating systemic change rather than directly delivering goods or services, however, the indirect effects of SLR's work – while hard to measure⁴ and impossible to precisely attribute to SLR's actions – are more significant.

As SLR closed, the team observed promising signs of longer-term shifts in the system. Traditional chiefs were supporting farmers in their chiefdoms to resolve land boundary disputes and obtain formal title – the chiefs recognised this was a barrier to investment in the land and, by extension, a way they could create greater economic productivity for their constituents. The provincial government and a Congolese university were carrying forward a land-mapping initiative, even as SLR ended its support. Membership of indigenous people in agricultural cooperatives and village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) were growing – on equal terms with Bantu members for the first time. Partners nervously reported militia groups spontaneously escorting deliveries of agricultural inputs through contested territories because they saw it as good for the territory they controlled... perhaps a positive sign? And a commercial bank's agri-credit programme was continuing without SLR support, complemented by crowding-in from new input distributors with variations on the seed-on-credit model SLR piloted. Perhaps most importantly for SLR's staff and Ituri's government, the programme's partners demonstrated how economic development initiatives could reinforce peace and build resilience in a place like Ituri Province.

Accomplishing these results in Ituri using facilitation tactics meant that SLR's private-sector partnerships looked very different from those of MSD programmes in other parts of the world. This learning document explores how and why SLR did private-sector engagement differently in an extremely fragile setting still experiencing active conflict.

The document begins (parts 1–4) with a reflection on where each of the four lessons from the MSP Primer applied (and didn't) to SLR's experiences, seeking both to validate and to nuance the lessons from that primer through examples. Next, it reflects (throughout parts 3–4) on the implications of those experiences for team leaders building and managing teams doing private-sector engagement in similar contexts with similar levels of complexity, unpredictability, and sometimes even 'unknowability'.

Finally, it returns (Part 5) to a re-examination of the first four lessons through the lens of latent socioeconomic conflict – that is, where the Ituri market system meets the Ituri conflict system. This final part of the document uses an extended example of an input-distribution partnership SLR formed with a pioneering Ugandan seed company. The objectively positive outcomes of that initiative (like value-chain financing for smallholder farmers to buy inputs, localised access to more productive climate-resilient seeds and technical training, and the application of more regenerative agricultural practices) nevertheless provoked backlash from other parts of the system, prompting reflection among the team about the role of a facilitator in economic developments that create winners and losers.

This learning document concludes with several questions. What does the complexity inherent to fragile and conflict-affected settings mean for team leaders attempting to use systems thinking to do effective economic development programming? What lessons from settings like Ituri might broaden our view of facilitation practices in more 'developed' contexts? And how can the process of adapting *any* broad insight – like MSP's guidance on conflict-sensitive private-sector engagement, or MSD 'universal' principles like facilitation – to a specific MSD programme team generate new and interesting approaches itself?

⁴ SLR was closed prematurely in early 2025, six months before its planned end date, so several end-of-programme learning efforts (like an outcome harvest) meant to uncover unintended changes to the system – especially signs of change in SLR's 'blind spots' (both positive and negative) – were aborted. Similarly, household- and firm-level endline data-collection was interrupted, which limits the ability of the programme to estimate indirect outcomes. Consequently, many of the results described in this document are based on qualitative observations of SLR and its partners, or on 'good-enough' data-collection that had been completed before SLR received its stop-work order.

1. Considering social entrepreneurship as a commercial strategy

The case for conflict-sensitive business models

Sensitivity to conflict was embedded in all SLR activities. Since long-term changes in the economy interact with social and political systems, a maladroit business intervention can enflame latent conflicts in a community. One group can also appropriate the benefits of a new business approach to the detriment of another group. That can result in both social harm and commercial failure. SLR and the businesses it partnered with shared a hyper-localised understanding of the dynamics of their geography and market segment and hoped this made their efforts sensitive to the conflict system that wove through it. Conflicts can be unpredictable and dynamic, so SLR and its partners trusted their networks of community and government observers, accepted that some business innovations would provoke conflict, and remained nimble enough to respond when conflict emerged (Part 5 of this learning document offers an extended example).

Conflict sensitivity: it's just good business

The observation that conflict sensitivity is a crucial part of economic development programming is not a new one. In retrospect, it is a self-evident part of any shared value proposition, just like the productivity and competitiveness benefits inherent to familiar MSD interventions. It is not as easy as it seems, though: uncontroversial in theory, concepts like conflict mitigation and Do No Harm do not always come naturally to development programmes, their donor managers, and their staff. One way to help them layer these considerations into their work is through the humanitarian–development–peace nexus: seeking to work with – and learn from – government and humanitarian partners who have more practice with these principles in their day-to-day work.⁵ Collaboration with humanitarian



An agitated community explains its challenges with contaminated well water to SLR and its government partners during an inception-phase reconnaissance visit to a roadside community near Niania in western Mambasa Territory. Decades of conflict and humanitarian dependence eroded trust in institutions in this part of Ituri, and so donor and private-sector initiatives that ignore community dynamics – including latent conflict, social exclusion, and environmental justice – usually fail after just two or three years, like this borehole did.

efforts in Ituri was indeed a valuable strategy for SLR, but it took time.⁶ Another way to incorporate conflict-mitigation strategies is to build on what savvy private-sector actors are already doing.

This is a job for the social enterprise

SLR noticed that some of Ituri's most resilient businesses maintain an image of quiet benevolence, scrupulously neutral but well connected to the community they operate in. For example, the input distributor with the seed-credit system described later in Part 5 was able to maintain a seed-multiplication operation in the centre of Djugu Territory throughout intense insecurity because it devoted attention to localised conflict dynamics and cultivated the image of a company that brought benefits to everyone. This pattern is also consistent with the rationale for some social enterprises.

The MSP Primer cited above defines social enterprises as "companies with a business product or service that is driven by a social mission," but in Ituri's humanitarian-saturated climate, SLR had more often found the converse: non-profit organisations with social missions reluctantly exploring business products or services as a financial coping strategy. Decades of concentrated donor assistance have bred a jungle of small organisations that exist to receive grant money. Though some of these Iturian NGOs are phantom 'briefcase operations', many consist of dedicated people who are serious about improving their communities – but suffer from unpredictable ebbs and flows in donor funding.

During its inception-phase visits, SLR observed that a few of the organisations that pitched traditional donor-funded programmes kept their operations alive through an idiosyncratic portfolio of quasi-commercial activities. Faced with the prospect of few true private-sector partners, and on the hypothesis that conflict sensitivity and social inclusion could be a profitable business strategy, SLR decided to partner with a few of these humanitarians-turned-social-entrepreneurs.

From non-profit organisation to social entrepreneur: an example

One youth-led organisation working in Mambasa Territory stood out as one such budding social enterprise. It had gone for a few years with little financial support since an increase in ADF militia⁷ violence had driven its traditional donors away. In response, the organisation tried to make some of its activities self-sustaining and to identify other ways to leverage its connections and reputation in the community to turn a small profit. Its reputation for being fair and socially minded emerged during SLR's semi-public co-creation events (more on co-creation as conflict-mitigation in Part 2 below).

At that time, the social enterprise was employing young people to build simple shelters for the displaced, collecting and bottling honey from indigenous people to sell through Mambasa city retailers and experimenting with women-led production of sticks of chalk for sale to local schools through networks of former pupils. They lacked a clear business plan or commercial vision for any of these 'product lines' (more on the challenges of working with social enterprises that aren't very entrepreneurial in Part 4 below), but a "co-creation road trip" to the villages where the social-enterprise partner wanted to buy honey helped them articulate a pilot activity with SLR.

⁶ For more discussion of how the SLR team dealt with the pressure to act quickly, see Langfitt (2023). "[Approaches to meeting emergent needs without sacrificing systemic change.](#)"

⁷ The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) are an originally Ugandan militia group with ties to radical Islam, primarily active in the northern part of North Kivu province and in southern Ituri and western Mambasa territories in Ituri Province. They are known for being particularly brutal and have occasionally even provoked reprisals from 'homegrown Congolese' militia groups in the area. See [this Wikipedia entry for more information.](#)



Crossing a ravine – very carefully – on a trip to Amurelode in Mambasa Territory. One tactic SLR developed to move from abstract discussions to concrete activities was what it nicknamed “co-creation road trips”. Much of the mileage of these trips was on the backs of motorcycles. Spending days with potential community and private-sector partners on challenging byways like this one built trust and created a venue for informal (and revealing) conversations. Incorporating values like social inclusion and conflict-sensitivity into activity co-design was also easier when SLR and its partners talk directly to communities like the Mbuti who were often without the means to come to a formal co-creation event in the provincial capital.

Photo: Léon Zabiti.

To a land of milk and honey value chains

For the indigenous Mbuti of the Ituri rainforest, the traditional way to harvest a beehive is to cut off the branch it rests on (or fell the entire tree), then smoke the bees out and collect the honey once the hive is abandoned. This drives away the queen to found a new colony, reducing the bees’ annual productivity by up to two-thirds. And needless to say, even if it is an indigenous practice, cutting down trees and starting fires in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve is a sensitive subject.

Unfortunately, though, more efficient and eco-friendly practices depend on equipment that is out of reach for Mbuti in remote parts of the rainforest. Even if they did have access to a market to buy modern beekeeping equipment, most could not afford it: the prevailing behaviours in Mambasa’s honey supply chain are based on exploitative relationships between Bantu spot traders and Mbuti honey collectors. Paying for honey with low-value goods instead of cash and using alcohol and marijuana during negotiations are both common practices.



An Mbuti honey supplier in specially tailored bee-protection garb applying a smoker to a bee colony. He obtained the equipment and training through a partnership SLR facilitated with an aspiring social enterprise which committed to investing in suppliers like him.

Photo: Clarisse Mageza.



Upgrades: after a productive pilot season, the social enterprise and its Mbuti community partners experimented with more modern beehives in lieu of harvesting honey from the forest.
Photo: Léon Zabiti.

By Ituri standards, the first season of honey-buying efforts was a success. Inspired by supplier-club tactics⁸ and using principles of long-term investment in a community network, SLR's social-enterprise partner listened to the indigenous Mbuti communities in Mambasa about their priorities and sought a win-win buying arrangement. They agreed that if the social enterprise provided improved equipment, training, and a pre-negotiated fair price, the Mbuti would respect honey quality and environmental standards and collect minimum required quantities on time. SLR paid for new beekeeping clothing – specially tailored to the Mbuti's small stature – and the social-enterprise partner invested in the transportation and manpower needed to train the Mbuti in collecting wild honey sustainably.

The social enterprise's inclusive business approach paid off, and in the pilot season with SLR, its retail sales grew from 700 to 1,800 litres. The most successful Mbuti sold \$250 of honey, more cash than some had seen in their lifetime. Most of all, the social enterprise and four pilot partner communities developed relationships based on trust and cooperation, thereby linking the Mbuti into Mambasa's wider economic system. In the second phase of the partnership, the social enterprise expanded its operation to source from more communities and introduce modern hives, at the same time contending with the challenges of becoming a market player in honey wholesaling (but not always smoothly; see Part 4 below).

Putting competitiveness in second place?

This pilot activity left the SLR team wondering whether, for a private-sector partnership in this kind of socioeconomic system, values like total productivity and economic competitiveness might come second to conflict sensitivity, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship. Did the honey supplier-club idea take root in Mambasa,

⁸ For an example of supplier-club tactics, see MarketShare Associates (2022) [Miruku Supplier Clubs Business Case](#)

For a more systemic take on how an MSD programme approached partnerships in complexity around the supplier club tactics, see the resources linked to the [FTF Inova profile](#) on BEAM.

where most business and donor initiatives fail, because the social enterprise had a smart financial analysis in its business plan? or because it was perceived as a socially and environmentally responsible player?

Increasing your (social) credit score

Economic programmes working in thin and fragile markets rightly bemoan the lack of capital available to invest in new ventures, and they are right: when financial credit is injected into a value chain, it can create new opportunities for small businesses and the poor alike. (Access to capital is a particularly difficult constraint especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, and Part 5 gives an example of value-chain financing – one way to bring financial credit to a part of society that banks and microfinance institutions do not serve.) However, in extremely fragile environments suffering from ongoing conflict, there is sometimes an even greater deficit of trust and goodwill – and this social credit is often a prerequisite for the financial kind.

One reason the honey supplier clubs succeeded was that the Mbuti collectors and the retail-shop buyers both trusted the social enterprise to source it responsibly, despite the absence of any supply-chain governance mechanisms to enforce it. The fact that their techniques were environmentally friendly was also important: in this part of the DRC where the central government has little reach, the conservation apparatus managing the Okapi Wildlife Reserve sometimes steps in as a de facto zoning regulator and police force. It was vital that the social enterprise be seen as promoting something that would benefit everyone in the territory's power structure.

Acts of faith

Trust-based partnerships can often involve a chicken-and-egg paradox: does a verbal or written promise catalyse the change, or does trust begin with an act of faith? Actions speak louder than words, after all... especially in places with weak contract enforcement. In the messy day to day of business dealings in Ituri, it is some of both, of course: ongoing actions work in tandem with progressive commitments to build trust.

However, these Mbuti honey collectors offer a case where a desperately fragile economic system may be more adaptive – or at least 'differently' adaptive – than a thin but more developed one. The Mbuti communities and the social enterprise were willing to offer each other trust on credit for a few reasons. Although it had not offered them equipment or negotiated pre-determined buying arrangements before, the social enterprise was known to the communities and had behaved acceptably during prior, more ad hoc transactions. The USAID imprimatur also helped SLR serve as a trusted neutral broker behind the scenes. But that may not have been enough for both parties to plunge into a new business model together.

The bleak reality facing both social enterprise and supplier communities was that absent any better economic options, it was worth the risk of working together in a radically different way to escape a very bad status quo. One of the most consistent patterns SLR saw across Ituri was a profound hunger for systemic change – and the willingness of market actors to invest their social capital to achieve it.

A market-based development programme in a place like Ituri needs to act responsibly with the trust offered so readily by partner businesses and communities. For SLR, incorporating this third dimension of social inclusion and conflict sensitivity into the shared values of its partnerships was a good start. However, the team also needed tactics to avoid or mitigate market actors who did not share these values and would violate the trust so important for inclusive economic development.

2. Using co-creation & self-selection to choose the right partners

Places like the eastern DRC become trapped in cycles of violence and dependence not only because of geographic misfortune, historical exploitation, or predatory neighbours, but because some political, social, and market actors within their socioeconomic system develop an appetite for the status quo. The business community has a natural stake in peaceful, predictable, rule-based economic development. Some parts of the private sector may take advantage of political and social instability for financial gain though, bypassing regulations, corrupting officials, or exploiting its own employees, suppliers, or customers. A system rife with distrust fosters exclusionary networks based on ethnic, political, or kinship groups. Market players with a vested interest in this kind of system may seek to undermine efforts to change it.

The MSP Primer on private-sector engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations (cited above) calls them 'bad actors' and recommends that MSD programmes take special care to ensure their private-sector collaborators genuinely embrace values like the ones in Part 1 of this learning document – and that programmes are not arbitrarily picking winners and losers in a thin field of potential partners.

On top of its weak infrastructure and endemic militia violence, Ituri suffered from decades of governance antithetical to a healthy private sector. Since 2003, it has also been saturated with distortive humanitarian money. Some businesses are firmly entrenched in patterns of behaviour ('attractors' in the current jargon) that depend on



Soldiers from the Congolese army escort SLR's community partners on a reconnaissance visit to idle agricultural fields near a Djugu community under the influence of the CODECO militia. In conflict-affected settings, an overt mission to change the status quo can be dangerous work, and threats can emerge both from civil society or the business community and from informal or illicit organisations to spoil the work of development programmes like SLR. To minimise that risk and protect its staff, SLR always began community engagement transparently, and with the support of civilian and military leadership, but it was not always successful. In this community, for example, it became clear that some political and business interests stood to win and others stood to lose from the changes that the community proposed during co-creation, and SLR extracted itself when intractable political dynamics made it impossible to mitigate the risks posed by the misalignment of values.

foreign aid and accept state predation as the norm. Consequently, SLR found that even when it did good stakeholder engagement and developed thoughtful programme ideas, some parts of civil society and the business community felt threatened by the changes SLR stood for. It is possible to deal with backlash from these parts of the market system (see Part 5 for an example), but SLR's best strategy was always to avoid letting 'bad actors' side-track its work in the first place.

Handwriting about the role of facilitators in post-conflict settings

SLR's first line of defence against misaligned partnerships was its community engagement. Meaningful participation from Ituri's conflict-stricken communities was time-consuming and rarely followed a predictable path, but it allowed people to voice their needs and begin to move beyond the role of passive recipients of humanitarian aid or government hand-outs. Parts of this approach felt counterintuitive to many members of the SLR team. Staff with humanitarian backgrounds often struggled with the patience and flexibility required to co-create activities with communities. Meanwhile, those steeped in MSD principles were uneasy with how this more pluralistic resilience approach made SLR more visible in the market system.

Facilitation – one of the fundamental concepts in MSD described in the introduction – usually calls for a programme to remain out of the spotlight, catalysing changes by empowering permanent actors in the system to lead long-term change. However, the counterargument to this rationale for light-touch orthodoxy is that *any* action in the system is inherently distortive.⁹ Consequently, in some extremely thin market systems like Ituri's, a heavier hand may be appropriate,¹⁰ and facilitation tactics need to be adapted to their context.¹¹

In places beset with conflict where no intervention is neutral, even a facilitator staying in the background and giving as much agency as possible to its partners has a responsibility to minimise unintended harm to the system it is trying to change. Faced with similar constraints to the north of Ituri in South Sudan, the Policy LINK partnership developed an approach with the same broad lines as SLR's, and it coined slogans like "community first, but not alone", "go with the grain", and "it takes two hands to clap."¹² These mantras capture the spirit of how SLR approached community co-creation as a prerequisite to conflict-sensitive private-sector engagement.

The first (and best) filter

SLR always preceded any co-creation effort with stakeholder engagement. Its contacts in the provincial and territorial governments helped it connect to civil society and traditional authorities in each new community. It always consulted (often informally) diverse insider and outsider sources to contextualise how certain parts of local government, civil society, and the business community were part of the conflict system. When it could, SLR involved the private sector at this stage – though sometimes the local branch of the Fédération des Entreprises du Congo (FEC), the programme's starting point for networking with the business community, had political orientations that drove the most promising private-sector and civil-society actors out of the picture. SLR never entered a community without an invitation, and if a community changed its mind, the team politely stepped back, leaving the door open for re-engagement when the community was ready.

⁹ Arguably, 'distorting the system' by amplifying or dampening attractors – that is, temporarily changing socioeconomic behaviours until new patterns take root – is the whole point of facilitating systemic change in the first place.

¹⁰ For a concise contrast between 'light touch' and 'heavy-handed' facilitation tactics and when to apply them, see Grant (2022) [Market Systems Continuum](#)

¹¹ For some early handwriting by the author about SLR's attempts to reconcile 'good facilitation' in the background with a pragmatic response to partners' needs, see BEAM blog: Langfitt (2022). "[Navigating systemic resilience trade-offs in conflict settings: examples from Ituri, DRC](#)".

¹² As of October 2025, the findings and [conclusions of the Partnership for Recovery & Resilience in South Sudan](#) were still available under FtF Leadership & Collaboration for Better Policy Systems ("Policy LINK").



The gamut of community co-creation: (above) the SLR team and community partners visit sites in Kakwa, western Aru Territory, to understand land-tenure conflicts before designing agriculture interventions; (below) a local partner facilitates a community debate in Kasenyi, in lakeside Irumu Territory, about economic solutions to farmer–herder tensions there; and (next page) the leader of a farming cooperative speaks up about his community’s needs at a high-profile “agriculture for peace, and peace for agriculture” investment summit in Kpandroma, Djugu Territory, that SLR co-sponsored. The format of SLR’s community engagement varies, but it is almost always inclusive and conducted in public. This is a key feature for transparently and fairly filtering out potential spoilers while protecting the programme staff who need to make partnering decisions.

Photos: Jean Lomba (above) and Dan Langfitt (below and next page).





(Above: see caption on previous page.) Below: Drying coffee beans in Mahagi Territory. One way SLR brought the private sector into the community co-creation process was through a pitch to coffee processors like this one: co-invest with SLR in maize-milling equipment to profitably continue operations in the off-season, buying maize from communities SLR was helping to increase productivity through the partnership with a seed company willing to offer inputs on partial credit described below in Part 5.



Next, SLR reflected on what it had learnt from stakeholders and developed a broad strategy (the “gather evidence” step in the Policy LINK learning brief). SLR found that aside from setting some broad parameters based on SLR’s overall scope of work (like avoiding healthcare interventions or construction activities it didn’t have the expertise or mandate for), the best starting point was just to ask communities what their priorities were.

The SLR team always came with its own ideas, but it could usually afford to be agnostic about details: in the lakeside town of Kasenyi where it launched its first community partnerships, for example, the team knew from up-front analysis that it wanted to do something linking land tenure to the long-term economic interests of rival herding and farming ethnic groups, like the Élan programme¹³ had rallied historically opposed stakeholders in the coffee value chain further south. However, as long as the proposed crops were commercially viable and would create a shared financial interest with their pastoralist neighbours, SLR didn’t care if the farmers grew tomatoes or aubergines. The community could make livelihood decisions for itself. Since SLR was already using a heavy hand and visibly driving the co-creation process, remaining open-minded also created space for the community to step in and exercise ownership, serving as a check against SLR pushing its own agenda too far.

Co-creation with communities in the shadow of conflict

When SLR sent its teams to begin formal co-creation in the middle of its inception year, it did most of its partnering work publicly. It invited nearly anyone expressing interest to participate, it presented and evaluated ideas in a semi-public space, and it included officials and civil-society leaders on the scoring panel.¹⁴ Finally, once pilots were conceived and general roles agreed upon, SLR began more intensive, bilateral discussions (essentially joint work planning) with partners on the terms of their co-investment, shared objectives, and timelines.¹⁵

Enter (or do not enter) the private sector

How does any of this relate to avoiding ‘bad apples’ in the private sector? SLR did not always succeed in reaching relevant businesses through its preliminary stakeholder engagement, and the more serious companies could rarely afford the time to participate in multi-day community workshops. However, once concrete ideas emerged from co-creation, SLR usually found a way to insert the private sector into the conversation, often pitching them on a new business opportunity. It vetted businesses in the same public fashion as any other potential partner. Just as SLR did not begin work anywhere without an invitation, it did not partner with private-sector actors that did not have the approbation of the whole community.

This tactic addressed two sequential challenges: understanding contextual and unwritten information well enough to distinguish the ‘bad actors’ in the first place, and then being able to safely say ‘no’ to partnering with them. Especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings, information is not readily available showing the true ownership structure, investments, and other interests of businesses (more on this in Part 3 below). That makes it difficult for a donor-funded programme from the outside to recognise the market actors it may be at odds with... especially since ‘bad actors’ are often experts at manipulating outsiders’ perceptions about them. They also usually thrive through political connections or ethnic alignments, meaning they can become powerful enemies if mishandled.

Developing partnership ideas through community engagement helped SLR address both of these issues in a way that let it invest a greater proportion of its time and energy in community discussions than on preliminary assessments. When an unworthy business presented its pitch in front of the community, someone in the room usually stood up in public (or approached SLR staff in private) to explain why its interests were not aligned with the community’s, and their concerns were validated (or repudiated) through public discussion.

¹³ The FCDO-funded [Élan RDC activity](#) implemented by Adam Smith International,

¹⁴ To continue the comparison with the USAID programming in South Sudan, Policy LINK distinguished two steps here: sense-making workshops to interpret findings from stakeholder engagement and formal resilience mapping; and local action planning to help translate resilience priorities into action plans.

¹⁵ For more on SLR’s community partnership approach, including the questions it asked itself when preparing a ‘co-creation roadmap’, see these [SLR workplan excerpts](#).

If the community consensus was against working with the business, it was the people saying so – not a decision by SLR. This upheld SLR's image as a neutral broker, protected SLR's team members from personal pressure and reprisals, and empowered its partners to take charge of their own communities' futures.

Self-selection with partners in the penumbra of fragility

However, once the SLR team began negotiating with a smaller group of partners on concrete activities – and especially once implementation began – it needed a continuous filter.

The co-creation process brought many socioeconomic dynamics into the open. At times, communities also reached collective decisions without explicitly surfacing those issues. In some cases the SLR team did not fully understand why a community or business acted as it did, but trusting local actors to account for latent conflict dynamics was part of the leap of faith – and the surrender of control – that comes with genuine co-creation. Systems are dynamic, and even the act of co-designing a partnership activity is a way of "probing" a system – that is, attempting to nudge it toward a new pattern while also revealing how the system responds to the partnership activity.

For example, SLR asked itself, "if SLR and a tomato-canning business co-invest, will this farmer's cooperative invest its own cash and labour resources to resolve land disputes, formalise their titles, and install fencing to protect tomatoes from wandering cattle?" On the face of it, it is a logical proposition since everyone stands to make money, but it depends on behaviours that fly in the face of decades of adaptation to interethnic conflict and humanitarian distortion. It may not be realistic to expect such a shift in mindset. There are many reasons it may even be against the farmers' interest to make such an investment, especially when their livelihoods rest on such narrow margins.

In a Schrödinger allusion that will aggravate any actual quantum physicist, the act of learning about whether that behaviour change is possible or desirable also alters the very same behaviours it is investigating. In other words, the snapshot of community economic and conflict dynamics that SLR shed light on through the co-creation process started to change the very moment partnership negotiations began. The same fog of war that makes active conflicts opaque billows over into a shadowy information climate in the fragility war leaves in its wake.

Given Ituri's mix of active and post-conflict settings and its sparse private sector, SLR used an iterative approach to continually update its initial snapshot of murky community and market dynamics. The team knew that an acceptable partner today may turn out to be a 'bad actor' with six months' hindsight. Moreover, not every private-sector partnership was tested by the crucible of SLR's co-creation process: SLR entered two or three partnerships based on vetting conducted before USAID awarded the programme to DAI, for example. This created opportunities to move quickly as well as risks of choosing the wrong partners. With all this in mind, the team used ongoing self-selection methods to ensure its values remained aligned with its partners.

Walking through the self-selection door (or not)

Self-selection is a way to engage partners in which the market actors themselves – small businesses, large companies, community organisations or even individuals – choose a partnership opportunity and signal commitment by investing their own time, money, or reputation. An MSD intervention facilitates open-ended access to low-distortion, progressively intensive opportunities and then lets motivated actors opt in (or opt out) as their commitment, incentives, and fit become apparent to the MSD intervention and to themselves.

This second powerful filter helped SLR avoid or disengage from partnerships with 'bad actors' by setting transparent parameters for working together, supporting its partners to meet those parameters, and then relying on self-selection effects to organically sort out those without a long-term interest in inclusive economic development and stability. Put more simply in the team's own shorthand: SLR designed the doorway with its community partners, it built the frame, and it opened the door. Then, it helped prospective partners understand what a 'door' was, and it coached them to get on their feet and walk toward the door (more on coaching in Part 4), but then... some of those potential partners just didn't walk through the doorway. No hard feelings.

“Who you calling a ‘bad actor’?”: revisiting labels

The team experienced self-selection effects in the most surprising ways not with the private sector, but with several provincial NGOs with established reputations for a long-term, ‘development’ outlook and a critical attitude to short-term humanitarian fixes. They came recommended by government partners and other organisations, and SLR heard positive feedback from communities where they worked. The NGOs spoke impressively during initial partnering discussions, mirroring many of SLR’s values. However, time after time, engagement after re-engagement, they just never crossed the threshold of a real partnership. Interpretations differed each time negotiations stalled, and different participants in the interaction saw the impediments in their own way. In the end, SLR and two or three NGOs just never managed to put together a partnership based on co-investing resources in concrete activities.

“It’s not you, it’s me.” (Is it?)

These experiences were doubly humbling. First, SLR staff had initially been bullish about these potential partners – one year they even set aside a large percentage of the programme’s annual workplan budget for a collaboration with one of them – yet attempts to move from discussion to action proved them wrong. Second, the failure to align with organisations that otherwise appeared to be saying all the right things called SLR’s own values and operational systems into question. These NGOs railed against reliance on the humanitarian system, called for inclusive economic opportunities for all, and used other rhetoric that aligned with SLR’s values, so it was counterintuitive to believe that they were beholden to preserving the system the way it was. Was it not just counterintuitive, but also incorrect?



The value of transparent co-creation and self-selection effects:

Minutes after this photo was taken in a community co-creation event in Tchomia, Djugu Territory, one organisation pitched itself to become the coordinator (and, it probably speculated, the one to control any money or equipment SLR was going to co-invest) of the different local SLR partners, but an elderly woman stood up and reminded them of the UNICEF and FCDO funding they had received during the previous two years.

“Where are the results today!?” she asked rhetorically. The room swelled to affirm her objection, and the organisation humbly stepped aside, acknowledging that perhaps they were not best suited for the task since it called for a long-term development outlook, not the fast humanitarian interventions they were used to.

And SLR staff didn’t need to say anything at all.

The team accepted that it was following SLR's mandate and vision, and that prospective partner organisations and businesses might have a different vision for how Ituri could break out of the cycle of violence and dependence on foreign aid. Sometimes those visions were incompatible – or at least, our team did not have the facilitation skills to bring those visions together into a practical working partnership. Calling those potential partners 'bad actors' and assuming they wished to preserve the status quo was an unfair oversimplification. But there was not a practical way to partner with actors with a vision so different from SLR's and its team members' without causing prohibitive frustration on both sides.

Can we get beyond 'bad actor'?

Openly discussing how international development programmes and their staff deal with 'spoilers' or 'bad actors' in fragile or conflict-affected settings can be sensitive and uncomfortable, but not just because it involves passing judgement. Some potential private-sector partners may indeed be explicitly vested in a dependent socioeconomic system dominated by conflict, and a few may be ready to fight to keep it that way.

However, more of them fall into a grey area of obscure motivations and incomplete self-awareness. It may also reflect poorly on an MSD initiative if it cannot find an acceptable way to reach partners in that grey area. SLR never arrived at a clear answer to that challenge to its reliance on co-creation and self-selection tactics. In the end, it put faith in its community, government, private-sector, and civil-society partners to guide it in the right direction most of the time, and it trusted that its commitment to fair and transparent standards and processes would nudge the right partners through the door and keep the wrong ones out.

Relying on self-selection effects or the collective wisdom of partner communities alone was never sufficient to create the right partnerships, though. The team always needed to thoughtfully vet potential partners in their socioeconomic context. Up-front prospecting, however, has a different flavour in a place like Ituri where information is subjective, unwritten, or (sometimes) not even knowable.

3. Vetting private-sector partners in unfamiliar settings

Businesses in Ituri Province face an unfriendly landscape to operate in (Ituri has an ‘underdeveloped business-enabling environment’ in the current jargon). They have incentives to stay small and relatively informal, since the more they put on the books, the more the state can legally tax or illegally extort them. With weak contract enforcement, companies are loath to trust one another unless they have a longstanding relationship, even when there is mutual benefit to be gained from a new business-to-business partnership. With working capital in short supply, the people who start businesses are often those who happen to own assets – not necessarily those who have the knowledge, skills, or energy of a good entrepreneur.

This results in a small field of private-sector actors that an MSD programme can engage. Few of them measure up to traditional standards. It was uncommon for SLR to come across businesses that kept thorough records, used effective accounting and inventory procedures, or possessed the core business skills and vocabulary private-sector engagement specialists are accustomed to, and it sometimes struggled to adjust. The same ‘business-disabling environment’ reinforces norms like avoidance of written contracts, pursuit of exploitative sales margins on one-off transactions, and an orientation to treat humanitarian NGOs and other bilateral or multilateral donor implementing partners (like DAI) as their clients. This often deprioritised Ituri’s people, businesses, and local organisations and the services and prices *they* needed.

Lowering the bar for private-sector partners in Ituri

As the MSP Primer points out, conflict mapping, strategic positioning, due diligence, and environmental and social risk management are steps that a programme can complete up front to help it choose the right kind of private-sector actor (see Part 2 above) based on the right shared values (see Part 1). However, when a programme



The main road into Kpandroma from the southeast, on a calm day. This town in Djugu Territory was the site of fraught disarmament negotiations with the CODECO militias in 2019. CODECO’s return to arms in central Ituri and the intensified violence by the ADF militia in the southern part of the province were largely to blame for most large private-sector actors withdrawing or putting a pause on their operations during 2020–2021, leaving a small field of partners for SLR to work with.

confronts norms and standards like the ones that prevail in Ituri, it becomes difficult to select and vet businesses simply because the information it needs to make decisions about whether and how to partner is absent, unintelligible, or sometimes even difficult to identify in the first place.

After the Ituri peace process broke down during 2020, most of the large companies in the province withdrew or hibernated. When SLR was designed in 2019 and tendered in early 2020, for example, it counted on doing much of its livelihoods work via the large cocoa exporter ESCO Kivu. However, ESCO phased out major purchasing in Ituri by 2021. Faced with this scarcity of partners, SLR radically simplified its partnership criteria to three questions:

- Does the potential partner have an active presence in the geographic zone of interest?
- Do they have appropriate legal status (or can they plausibly get legal status in the near future)?
- Do they do anything (anything *at all*?) related to the livelihood and resilience strategies SLR and its partner communities are investing in?

This bar, low as it was, still ruled out many businesses. However, if one of them could answer 'yes' to all three questions, SLR invited the business into the co-creation process discussed in Part 2 to be vetted by the community, refine partnership ideas, and agree on roles and responsibilities. If incentives were aligned enough for a partnership, SLR entered negotiations in earnest, identifying what the partner was prepared to invest in terms of capital, credit, expertise, or manpower, and where SLR could deploy resources in a catalytic way.¹⁶

SLR often compensated for the limited information available at the prospecting and vetting stage by shortening the initial engagement to a pilot initiative¹⁷ for a single agricultural season, during which it explored the partners' weaknesses and confirmed that they shared the same values and incentives. After six months of working together, the SLR team, private-sector partners, and community members usually knew whether to scale up their efforts, try something else, or call off the partnership.

Making sense of deceit & incompetence... or just unfamiliar business norms

Talking about "confirming shared values and incentives" through joint implementation of a low-stakes pilot harkens back to the discussion of 'bad actors' in the private sector. (And creating not just one self-selection door, but a series of them (i.e., multi-phase partnerships) for partners to step through one at a time is indeed one way that SLR applied continuous self-selection and ensured ongoing monitoring to filter out partners who didn't share its values and objectives.)

However, this framing paints a portrait of disingenuous economic operators scheming to mislead SLR and its partner communities about their real intentions in order to exploit both. That may have been an accurate picture in some cases, but sometimes the market system in Ituri was twisted so far away from familiar norms that SLR couldn't count on businesses to fully grasp their own interests and incentives – at least, not when the programme was probing a change to business as usual.

In early 2023, for example, SLR was interested in supporting community partners in Aru Territory who were growing a high-performing variety of maize thanks to a partnership with a Ugandan seed company (more in Part 5), so the programme sought output buyers it could connect to the communities expecting to triple or quadruple their harvests that year.

One such potential partner was a family business based in Ingbokolo that bought raw maize to mill into flour to sell into Aru's economic centre of Ariwara and the mine-driven economy of Durba (in the territory of Faradje in neighbouring Haut-Uélé Province). The business struggled to source enough maize to keep their milling machines running efficiently and welcomed SLR's efforts to network them with producers who could sell them higher volumes.

¹⁶ For a table outlining how the team thought about using in-kind or technical assistance to partners according to good facilitation principles, see the last page of the workplan excerpts at www.beamexchange.org/resources/1929 (French)

¹⁷ Although it can feel self-evident, one of the most difficult (and most powerful) skills in MSD partnership development is 'right-sizing' the partnership activity to the market system context, the partner, and the risks. For one instance of that ongoing conversation, see Niyomugabo (2025) [Right-sizing pilots: getting MSD projects off the ground](#)

Before the season began, the business shared the good news that it had signed a large contract with a mine operator in Durba to purchase nearly all the estimated maize production in its target region within Aru. The mine usually imported maize flour from Uganda to feed its workforce, but it was open to a less expensive domestic source. And as farmers sowed the maize seed, the family-owned company began relocating their maize mill closer to the zone of production.

“Wait, what?” wild cards

Then things got weird. Late in the season, the same off-taker informed SLR’s activity manager that it wouldn’t be able to purchase the whole harvest after all – in fact, it didn’t even have a single buyer lined up. “Did the mine operator renege on the contract?” SLR staff asked suspiciously. No: the purchase order was never executed in the first place, it turned out.

The team was baffled. It would be disappointing but understandable if the milling business had lied about landing a large client in order to get funding to set up shop in a new locale, but in this case, deceit didn’t make sense. SLR networking support was never conditional on the advance commitment of a large buyer, and the partner had invested financially and reputationally much more than SLR had: he had relocated tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment a hundred kilometres away and built up the security and electricity infrastructure to support it. More importantly, he had publicly promised all his new neighbours that at the end of the season he would buy all of their production at a high price.

SLR, on the other hand, had merely facilitated introductions and chipped in a few thousand dollars to help with the transport costs – a gesture at de-risking a new commercial relationship between miller and farmer. Did the mill operator think that when the purchase order “fell through” SLR would swoop in to bail everyone out and buy up the harvest? The SLR team had been explicit about this from the beginning: taking some gentle liberties with AIDAR 752.225,¹⁸ they had insisted to anyone who would listen that SLR was categorically prohibited from buying seeds or agricultural outputs. And besides, the partner never requested that SLR buy the maize; he just dejectedly began looking for new, smaller-scale buyers closer to home (and SLR did its best to help him network). So, if not deceit, what had gone wrong?

Hanlon’s razor

The SLR team and its community and government contacts asked around, and the most convincing explanation they could find was that the company’s paterfamilias did not delegate much responsibility to his children, and they had no professional accountant or sales manager. When he suffered a bout of health problems near the beginning of the season, he had asked one of his sons to handle the negotiations with the mine operator but didn’t think to verify that the draft purchase order had actually been countersigned – he usually sold flour in smaller tranches to semiformal or informal operators and had not developed habits around written contracts.

SLR had thought it was practising good private-sector engagement and respecting the partner’s privacy by not insisting on reviewing the supposed contract. After all, the team reasoned, they were at the very beginning of a new relationship, and profit margins are sensitive in rural Aru, where distrust of the private sector is high. Besides, the milling business was taking on far more risk than SLR: why would it do anything to undermine the venture? SLR’s instinct was partially correct. The partner’s co-investment was indeed an adequate gesture of commitment... but in its prospecting, vetting, and self-selection efforts, SLR had failed to account for the partner’s self-knowledge of its own ability to deliver on that good-faith promise.

¹⁸ The Agency for International Development Acquisition Regulations (i.e., USAID’s internal additions to the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR)) imposed source and nationality requirements on USAID contractors like DAI. AIDAR 752.225 prevented activities like SLR from purchasing a single kilo of ‘restricted goods’ like agricultural commodities without a special waiver from USAID – and sometimes waivers went up to officials in Washington, D.C. SLR turned what was a common bureaucratic headache for traditional agricultural programmes into an advantage for its facilitation approach – constraining its own choice architecture (‘burning its ships’) to resist the moral hazard of bailing out needy partners. In other words, if partners knew they were sharing part of the risk and SLR could not rescue them even if it wanted to (the regs prohibited it), they would be less biased to let themselves and SLR walk into an unwise venture that carried too much risk or was unlikely to be commercially viable in the long term without an external subsidy.

This hapless mill operator managed to purchase most of the harvest anyway, but in smaller tranches and at a lower unit price than originally promised. His story was just the most egregious example of the breakdown of demand and cashflow in the Aru output market in 2023 that cast a pall on an otherwise successful seed-credit pilot (described in Part 5). In other parts of the territory, mills found buyers but didn't negotiate advance payment terms, so they arrived in the village without the cash on hand to pay farmers and the maize harvest moved up the value chain slower than expected.

Despite some disappointment, the seed company, most of the farmers, and many of the maize buyers continued their partnerships, but they came into the 2024 agricultural seasons with tempered expectations.

Face to face with wild cards: implications of 'unknown unknowns' for MSD teams

For its part, SLR learnt that in an environment like Ituri's, it was impossible to anticipate all the questions it should ask a potential partner. Standards are uniformly low, but business capacity varies in unpredictable ways. Otherwise solid partnerships were undermined by norms the SLR team didn't even realise they'd taken for granted. The best they could do was spend more time shoulder to shoulder with SLR's partners during the vetting phase and early in partnership implementation and keep their eyes and ears open.

In hindsight, all that would have been needed to avert the Ingbokolo milling company's error would have been to notice how sick the boss had been and, when he was back at work, pose some friendly but pointed questions: "So, did you finalise the deal with the mine?" "But did you see the contract?" "Yes, but is it *signed*?" In more stable and developed markets with more predictable norms and stronger partners, that degree of close observation and epistemic scepticism may be unnecessary, but in the most fragile and conflict-affected settings, it is essential.

"How was I supposed to know to ask that!?"

Even in a best-case scenario with a stronger partner and inquisitive SLR staff, Ituri's business climate posed challenges. In mid-2023, one of SLR's most promising partners was a company that produces low-grade red palm oil for soap in Aru Territory. SLR co-invested in a press that increased production and refined oil to a higher quality fit for human consumption. It also advised the company on how to reduce its waste by arranging with another



Farmers outside of Ingbokolo, Aru Territory, tending a large field of improved maize obtained through a value-chain credit arrangement facilitated by SLR. They counted on paying back the credit they received on the seeds thanks to a miller in the nearest city, who promised to purchase their entire harvest at a pre-agreed price. However, the mill operator did not have the business habits he needed to handle a harvest of this volume – and was not aware of his weaknesses. This led to slower and less lucrative sales at the end of the season.

Photo: Jaël Mbale.

business to collect the palm husks and turn them into building material and transforming the palm kernel into a meal for fish food (to that end, SLR connected them to fish farms SLR was supporting as part of its nutrition programming).

Returning to the observation that the most fragile economies have the most interesting potential to grow, SLR had stumbled into a number of promising circular-economy interventions with community organisations and microentrepreneurs interested in doing productive things with waste. When the opportunity cost is low, it is easy to make a business case to – for instance – collect plastic refuse and convert it into bricks for small construction efforts.

When it came to harvesting and processing palm oil, the company had all the requisite technical competence, asking little from SLR other than one-time financial support to accelerate their expansion and diversification. However, even this partner languished in partnership negotiations with SLR for over six months because it was not standard practice to track annual turnover and other basic business information. When it could not even arrive at a ballpark figure for its *chiffre d'affaires* on its own, SLR decided to build traction by starting the partnership with non-financial support to develop a business plan before co-investing in the oil press.

Keeping an open mind... in spite of everything

Economies at their lowest point also have the greatest potential to develop, and the most unpredictable complex systems can lead to the most surprising futures. Development and humanitarian professionals tend to over-emphasise the risks of bad outcomes and discount the opportunities for good ones. SLR brought that deliberate optimism to its partnering efforts. The flexibility and open-mindedness needed for partnerships in thin market systems are doubly important in a fragile, conflict-affected one like Ituri's, so SLR was always open to compromise when its partners did not measure up.

For example, some experts estimate that three-quarters of the food consumed in the eastern DRC flows through informal channels. For SLR to meaningfully strengthen the resilience of poor households in Ituri, it therefore needed to engage with the informal part of the food system that remained hidden to donor-funded programmes with more rigid views about what market actors make suitable partners.

However, when SLR did compromise at the vetting stage, it designed the subsequent private-sector partnerships to go beyond routine funding to help its partners reach for a higher standard and begin to change prevailing norms. It aimed to make Ituri's business-enabling environment a little bit easier to do business in but found it more challenging than expected to do this in a systemic way.

4. Looking at non-financial support to the private sector through a systems lens

Hindsight is 20/20, and MSD programme retrospectives sometimes give the impression that everything went according to plan... except, of course, for the external forces that were beyond the team's plausible knowledge or control, and for the one expertly executed 'strategic pivot' (never forget to pivot at least once!). This tendency is partly an artefact of low tolerance for failure among MSD programme funders, and partly an expression of the innate human desire for linear narratives. And yet, insights from entrepreneurial ecosystems (think Silicon Valley) show that failure is more common than success, and complexity science (think Lorenz's butterfly effect) demonstrates that causality in complex systems does not work the way we'd like.

It would be disingenuous to let Parts 1, 2, and 3 of this document give the impression that SLR consistently harmonised competing values among Ituri communities and businesses, used co-creation and self-selection to choose perfect partners, and then co-designed partnership activities that were just the right size and risk profile for each one. Needless to say, it did not – sometimes to the detriment of its partners.

One lesson from the MSP Primer that SLR staff understood intuitively and yet took too long to incorporate into SLR's private-sector engagement process and team culture was the fourth one: that private-sector engagement in thin market systems needs to look beyond normal financial support.

Bitter honey

For example, things did not go smoothly for the budding social entrepreneur from Part 1. The work of collecting, cleaning, and bottling the honey from the Mbuti people in the Ituri rainforest should have been the hard part. But flush with more honey than they had ever sold in a season and optimistic about even higher quantities in the future, their manager aspired to expand beyond their established market of small retailers in Mambasa City and Bunia. He looked to North Kivu, Ituri's wealthier and more developed southern neighbour, and travelled with over a thousand litres of honey to a medium-sized city just over the provincial border where he knew of a large pharmacy reputed to buy high-quality wild honey in bulk.

The pharmacy was impressed by the quality of the honey, appreciated the socially responsible story of its provenance, and offered a fair price. It used honey as a base ingredient in a line of natural cosmetic products, and being able to market it as pure – from the unspoilt forests of the Okapi Reserve, no less – was a selling point for its customers in cities like Beni, Butembo, Goma, and Bukavu. The social entrepreneur backed out of the deal, though: by then, he had heard that in the provincial capital Goma, the unit price for wild honey was 50% higher than he was being offered by the pharmacy.

So he travelled to Goma for a better price. Here, though, wholesale buyers were used to dealing with many metric tonnes per transaction, so a thousand litres did not afford him as much leverage in Goma as it did in the north of the province. The higher prices he heard about were usually only paid by NGOs with funding to develop non-forest timber products in specific parts of North Kivu, and they did not price honey like commercial buyers did. Moreover, the commercial buyers knew how far he had come, and at what risk – first through territory controlled by the ADF militia, then through that of the even more feared M23¹⁹ – and they knew he could not afford to walk away from the sale. Crestfallen, he took the deal, accepted a lower unit price, absorbed the extra transportation costs, and slunk back home, lesson learnt.

¹⁹ These events occurred in 2023, before the (second) fall of Goma to the M23 in early 2025. See this [Wikipedia entry on M23](#) for more details and links to current information.



An average day in the world of bulk transport in Mambasa Territory. Contending with these highways, or the narrower and even more difficult byways winding into the rainforest, was not the greatest challenge for the aspiring social entrepreneur that developed buying arrangements with indigenous Mbuti communities in exchange for improved beekeeping equipment, training, and a fair price. Counterintuitively, he foundered when it came to negotiating the sale of the honey. In fragile places like Ituri, enterprises that have learnt to navigate intractable social or logistical situations sometimes falter when it comes to business basics.

The SLR team learnt its lesson, too. It had made the mistake of assuming that once the groups of Mbuti were consulted, supplier clubs were arranged, improved beekeeping equipment was delivered, and the honey had been collected and delivered to the packaging facility in Mambasa City, its partner could handle the selling part. ("Buying and selling is what the 'private sector' is good at, after all.")

Quite the reverse: they came to realise, for a socially oriented NGO in its first serious commercial foray, building trust with a marginalised community, training them, and transacting fairly with them came naturally; negotiating with wholesalers in the big city – less so. SLR should have accompanied this new market player through the process of selling in bulk to serious buyers. However, this sort of handholding felt paternalistic, unrealistically time-consuming, and not even a task that played to the SLR team's strength (most of SLR's staff were humanitarian or international development professionals – not businesspeople). Over the next year, the team began to think about non-financial support in a new way.

Contextualising the need for non-financial support... with humility

It is tempting to laugh at anecdotes like this one, or at the businessman from Part 3 who neglected to verify that the purchase order for a district's entire maize harvest was finalised and signed. But that would be missing the point about working with a nascent private sector in a place like Ituri. The private-sector or quasi-commercial partners SLR worked with usually made it through both a gruelling inquisition by partner communities and a lengthy negotiation process with SLR designed to clarify ideas and filter out 'bad actors.' Of all the organisations and businesses in the area, they were often among the most creative, energetic, and aligned with values of sustainable,

inclusive, resilient economic development. It is incorrect and ill-advised to dismiss them as unmotivated or incompetent.

Following one business practice (like going to extreme lengths to get a better offer) or eschewing another (like written contracts) is not risible in Ituri's context – it is adaptive. In a market system with limited information and little trust, businesses with low turnover seek to balance their books with the occasional sky-high (exploitative?) sales margin, so the smart move may be to walk out of a negotiation at the first suspicion you are being cheated, especially if there is a glimmer of something better. When written records of business transactions can be turned into a liability with unaccountable tax authorities, signing formal sales contracts can be a blunder.

These market actors were *responding intelligently to natural incentives* in their socioeconomic system; on the other hand, SLR was suddenly changing the rules and expecting its partners to 'revert' to foreign business norms they had never followed in the first place. And the team's mistake was to expect them to change without the help of a coach.

Twelve businessmen... and a \$45,000 aeroplane?

More such anecdotes abound, and with them, the lesson SLR took from them: not to gape or guffaw, but to perceive the resources and expertise that *are* there, and to find the opportunities to nudge its partners toward something better.

When SLR began its co-creation efforts in Ndrélé in north-eastern Ituri, it came into contact with a group of a dozen businessmen with considerable capital reserves seeking ideas to put their money to use. It transpired that the leading investment proposal was to launch an air-taxi service between Mahagi City and Ituri's capital Bunia to the south. By all reports, they had mobilised \$220,000 between them, lined up a used plane for \$45,000, and were exploring the other equipment, pilots, and permits they would need to get under way. They asked SLR if it could co-invest with them and guide the process of purchasing and outfitting the plane, hiring staff, pricing fares, and competing with the donor-subsidised missionary and UN planes making the Bunia–Aru–Mahagi circuit. (What could go wrong?)



Ndrélé, the so-called "economic lungs" of Mahagi Territory, in north-eastern Ituri bordering Uganda. SLR found more business-oriented actors in this part of the province than on the other end of the province in Mambasa, but they, too, were sometimes in need of coaching on the basics of a viable business plan.

Now, the middle-class, bicycle-inclined author of this piece has never shopped for an aeroplane himself, but he is confident that if someone offers to sell you one for forty-five grand, your first question should be, “Does it... fly?” None of the dozen Ndrélé businessmen had a background in logistics, let alone any aviation experience. And although in practice, USAID’s project managers *did* afford SLR a very flexible mandate to promote resilience and livelihoods in a variety of ways, and even though logistics innovations *are* an underappreciated way to catalyse systemic improvements in remote rural markets, directing U.S. taxpayer funds into a shoestring airline in a war zone seemed a bit... out of scope.

However, by 2023 the SLR team had learnt how to play to its partners’ strengths. Instead of seeing a group of unrealistic dreamers or chastising victims of an attempted swindle (right? surely it was a scam), the team saw the twelve Ndrélé businessmen and their \$45,000 aeroplane as a group of creative Iturians with open minds, a desire to do something useful for their small city, and money to invest.

SLR rarely came across community groups or small businesses with the ability to mobilise more than five or ten thousand dollars, and that was usually in kind – equipment, products, labour, and the like. *Two hundred thousand dollars in cash* was unheard of. SLR never insisted on a specific matching amount from its partners, preferring to calibrate the relative co-investments to the level of risk the partner is accepting, the strategic relevance of the partnership to SLR, and most of all, the partner’s own capacity to mobilise capital.

Sometimes SLR supported 90% of a partnership budget, sometimes 30% or 40%. Or zero per cent: sometimes it only facilitated connections and provided advocacy and guidance, without any in-kind or technical support. However, it always adjusted the magnitude of its investment to the scale of activity the partner was ready for, technically and financially. A group of investors in one of northern Ituri’s most economically important cities with that much cash in hand was interesting because it could unlock significant resources from SLR or from other co-investors, without sacrificing SLR’s role as a facilitator.



The Mahagi aerodrome, as seen from the east, with Mahagi City under light rainfall in the background. One proposal that emerged from SLR’s engagement of the business community in Mahagi was a dozen businessmen from Ndrélé who planned to run an air taxi service for passengers and cargo between this airstrip and Bunia’s small airport to the south in Irumu, flying over the militia-controlled roads in Djugu Territory that separates Irumu from Mahagi. In the name of being a good partner, SLR dissuaded them. *Photo: Dan Langfitt; aeroplane view: Missionary Aviation Fellowships).*

SLR helped the businessmen calculate and compare the risks and rewards of airline operations with agro-processing, guided them through the process of formalising an association, and coached them as they developed a business plan for a small mill that could source its raw material locally and sell flour at a more competitive price than the prevailing Ugandan imports. It also helped them calculate their working capital... at \$30,000 – a figure that plunged from their original estimate when SLR's business-advisor consultant helped them distinguish liquid from illiquid assets (a private aeroplane no longer being part of the plan probably also had something to do with the capital drying up).

Nevertheless, it was a better financial starting point than most of SLR's partnerships, and the new association prepared to install a small factory outside of Ndrélé so it could buy and mill the expanding maize production of nearby SLR partner communities.

Entrepreneurial ventures were not the only SLR partners in need of coaching. When a large regional seed distributor (discussed in Part 5) complained that its affiliated retailers were not complying with the agreed schedule of marketing events, SLR helped it discover that when agro-dealers set up placards and pamphlets in their community marketplace, government officials appeared and demanded that they pay a billboard tax. SLR helped the seed company advocate for more business-friendly policies with the territorial government and have them educate district officials on the distinction between permanent billboards (like the ones large companies like Vodacom erected) and temporary placards at a market stall occupied by a local small business.



Drying coffee beans in the hills above Mahagi Port. Mahagi has historically produced high-quality coffee, though lack of labs and problematic customs checkpoints have pushed much of the coffee production across into Uganda through informal channels, and some of the coffee processors on the Ituri side struggle to operate profitably in the face of their supply slipping away over the border. SLR advised one high-end coffee processor on how to add maize milling equipment to their infrastructure so they could eke out a minimal operating margin in the off-season.

Searching within the market system for providers of non-financial support

The fourth and final lesson from the MSP Primer that inspired this learning document is that in fragile and conflict-affected settings like Ituri, funders of economic development initiatives need to shift away from expecting their implementing partners to succeed primarily through financial support to the private sector (in MSD programmes, this often takes the form of buying down risk through cash or equipment provided to a private-sector partner). Instead, they should devote more attention to helping partners access human capital, data, infrastructure, relationships, and recognition.

The primer gives the example of the USAID Sri Lanka Biz+ programme, which found that the small and medium-sized enterprises in the most conflict-affected part of the country made the best use of their financial assistance when they had a long-term coach – rather than a short-term consultant – to guide them. The programme introduced a management development training initiative and business coaching as a standard part of its model, and this approach was a major contributor to Sri Lanka Biz+ creating 8,000 jobs and generating \$25M in business investments. The primer also observes that as the programme was closing, three district chambers of commerce began working to expand the training to continue growing Sri Lanka small and medium enterprises. This last development is especially noteworthy when it comes to looking at non-financial support through a systems lens.

Who coaches the coaches?

As SLR's community co-creation work required more and more involvement from the private sector to jump-start economic activity, and as the team faced increasing vetting and planning challenges, it reached a similar conclusion to the Sri Lanka programme about the need for coaching. SLR eventually became efficient at building the 'beyond financial support' dictum into a standard partnership workplan, often assigning promising private-sector partners a business-planning coach as soon as co-creation discussions began. While SLR, the business, and the community refined the ideas and negotiating roles, the business coach helped them quantify their assets, calculate their annual turnover, analyse profit margins, and start developing a realistic financial model.

For example, another promising business in Mahagi Territory owned several trucks and worked primarily in construction, but it also had several agricultural investments and was interested in expanding. However, it needed linkages to farmers and guidance on how to establish a profitable milling operation. SLR's coaching helped them start the process of installing a mill in a conflict-prone town on the border with Djugu.

SLR supported its private-sector partners not just in business planning, but also in networking, strategy, business-to-business and business-to-consumer communication, and even advocacy. However, for a programme aspiring to apply a systemic lens to resilience, this raises a challenging second-order question: if coaching is so critical for a nascent private sector in fragile contexts, who coaches the coaches?

Knowledge services through a systems lens

SLR used a simple framework (found on the last page of the workplan excerpts mentioned in footnote 16) for analysing how well-aligned its partnership budgets are with good facilitation principles. For example, when SLR supported a partner to build knowledge, networks, or brand visibility, it was often providing a 'service' that would, in a healthier market system, come from a permanent market actor.

So, when SLR stepped in as a temporary substitute for that ideal permanent market actor, the team formulated a hypothesis for how a (real) permanent actor in Ituri's socioeconomic system could be introduced to that role. Next, SLR looked for a way to bring that actor into the partnership in a modest way. It always attempted to create new market linkages and support a transition of the support function to a permanent actor in the system... when it could.

In the Sri Lanka example, it was chambers of commerce that showed promise of taking over one training function. With entrepreneur coaching, SLR hypothesised there was a business case to be made for Ituri's universities to assume a similar role.²⁰ Perhaps, the team reasoned, universities could learn how to engage businesses in need of

²⁰ This hypothesis was ambitious but not far-fetched. Small businesses are often unable to afford management consulting firms, but usually they do not need McKinsey- or Deloitte-level expertise: just someone to help fix their accounting system or inventory-management practices. At the same time, universities have a strong incentive to offer their students real-world

coaching as case studies, and businesses could learn how to design internships to draw in support from universities when they needed guidance.

SLR began providing business-coaching support on that hypothesis, subsidising only the transportation needs of the faculty who became involved. However, meaningful business coaching was time-consuming, university faculty had many demands on their time, they had few incentives from their deans to leave campus to work with Ituri's small businesses, and they were disinclined to work for free (fair point). Most of all, the university system in Ituri was beset by many of the same challenges – weak infrastructure, precarious financing, insecurity, brain drain – as the rest of the market system.

SLR had neither the in-house expertise nor the bandwidth to approach the university system with the heavy support that would be necessary to test the validity of its hypothesis. So, in the final two years of the programme, SLR continued to use a few excellent university faculty members as part of their roster of business coaches – but as paid consultants, and without the expectation that it would turn into a self-sustaining pattern of activity after SLR left Ituri.

The MSP Primer labels coaching, data, networks, advocacy, and similar activities “non-financial support” – but such support does have a cost, even if an MSD programme does not always register it as a line-item on a grant to a private-sector partner. When it comes to the first-order problem of ongoing financing for agricultural inputs or durable land-tenure dispute- resolution mechanisms, SLR developed an imperfect but hopeful vision for how some of the changes it put in place will continue beyond the end of the activity (and some of them, like credit facilities for improved seeds, or a province-wide land-mapping initiative, do show promising signs of continuing).

On the other hand, SLR found it harder to develop plausible hypotheses around sustaining the ongoing “non-financial support” to the private sector necessary to help it continuously develop and adapt. This train of thought provokes a cautious quibble with the orthodox definition of facilitation as an inherently temporary action: if facilitation is so great, and if complex adaptive systems are always changing, shouldn't MSD programmes pay more attention to shifting their own facilitator role into a permanent market function, instead of pretending that facilitation disappears with them?

To return to the “who coaches the coaches?” conceit, if SLR's university business coaches were themselves in need of more coaching than the programme could offer, and if a *separate* initiative was needed to strengthen the university system to help its faculty assume this role (so, “a coach-coach will coach the coaches”? Please.), a systems lens would look to the permanent system actor that would support the university system to continuously innovate its business-coaching services as business needs change or outside forces shock the economy. In other words... “Who coaches the coach coaches?”

experience to prepare them for the job market. And public benefit + permanent market system actors + unrealised commercial incentive = potential MSD intervention.

See one example at MarketShare Associates (2022) [UniLúrio Business School Interns' Program Business Case](#)



SLR's Y3–Y5 director (its “chief of party” in the old USAID parlance) and deputy director fording an unexpected wet patch with a partner community member near Nyamamba during a prospecting visit to identify agricultural sites in southern Djugu Territory. The team learnt that in a fragile and dynamic place like Ituri, it is difficult to anticipate emergent challenges – and what goes for unpredictable terrain goes for the private sector. Since there are no ready-made formulas to successfully facilitating systemic change, the team members learnt to walk shoulder to shoulder with its partners, keep their eyes and ears open, harness their instincts, trust each other ...and be prepared to get their boots wet.

Harnessing serendipity with human nature... and human judgement

“Who coaches the coach coaches?": the tongue twister sounds absurd, and it is – verging on insulting in a conflict-stricken place like Ituri, where people face a daily struggle to feed themselves and businesses can lose everything overnight. But the question is not purely academic²¹: transforming a system to learn and adapt on its own – without coaches, or coach coaches, or coach-coach coaches emanating from legacy “international development experts” – is arguably the single best thing an MSD initiative can do for systemic resilience.

In fragile, conflict-affected settings where the learning function is so critical, though, market actors that can provide non-financial support like coaching are rare. Sometimes, SLR needed to compromise and pragmatically substitute for some of these functions itself... even without a solid hypothesis for how the function will continue after it closes.

This points to limitations in a programme team's own prescience in the face of a complex system – in other words, sometimes you just do the right thing, hoping that someone you couldn't have predicted will step in and take over your role after you're gone. For future MSD initiatives approaching the dilemma of principled orthodoxy versus

²¹ For an understated but trenchant critique of traditional development programming's (reflexively selfish?) approach to monitoring and evaluation, combined with a productive reframing of adaptive learning as an essential market function – which by extension throws down a gauntlet for MSD initiatives to do 'knowledge systems' interventions as well as market systems interventions – see Fowler, Jeyagaran, Garloch & Bolden (2022). [*Shifting the Locus of Learning: Catalyzing Private Sector Learning to Drive Systemic Change*](#)

'anything goes' pragmatism more intentionally than SLR did,²² this may eventually mean finding other ways of understanding what makes for good facilitation.

The SLR team tackled that question in an inductive way, building its answer from the ground up. The team went through a lot of difficult but honest conversations, case-by-case decision-making, and, sometimes, it just placed its trust in the serendipity inherent to unpredictable places... not in strict policies or prescriptive dogmas (though the author did stubbornly try some of those at first).

Like the observation that private-sector engagement best practices are more important than ever somewhere like Ituri, the same can be said about the importance of hiring the right people and nurturing smart, adaptive programme teams that can work effectively in grey areas and manage tough judgement calls. And nowhere were the judgement calls more difficult for the SLR team than in the grey area between catalysing sustainable economic development and adhering to team members' most deeply held beliefs about right and wrong.

The fifth and final part of this learning document will explore what that means for programmes engaging the private sector in a fragile, conflict-affected setting, and for teams facilitating and making sense of complex systems change and the latent conflict that change process can provoke.



Vigorous debate during a community co-creation session in Djugu Territory during SLR's inception year. It was clear from the outset that while communities agreed to move away from patterns of conflict and rely less on donors, a shared vision for inclusive economic development was elusive: some members of the community stood to win – and others to lose – too much from any specific intervention. SLR eventually extracted itself from this community when intractable political dynamics made it impossible to co-create partnerships that would not reinforce donor dependence or exacerbate community tensions.

²² The Australian-funded Market Development Facility offers an example of a more intentional and self-aware treatment of this dilemma in Fiji and Pakistan. See Bear & Bekkers (2018). [*In search of the sweet spot in implementing MSD programmes: why and how embracing messiness is the key to success*](#), one of four papers in their 'messiness series'.

5. Balancing ‘Do No Harm’ with economic development

Socioeconomic change creates winners and losers. In the long term, MSD practitioners aspire to inclusive and sustainable economic development that benefits everyone. However, at a smaller scale, systemic change creates novel opportunities for some people and businesses... and forces others to adapt or fail. Good facilitation seeks to avoid the catastrophes – political revolution, institutional slavery, rampant environmental destruction, colonial empire, genocide, catastrophic ecological overshoot, and the rest of the litany – that accompanied Europe’s, then North America’s (and others’) industrial transition.

But it is naïve to believe that if an MSD intervention achieves its aim of catalysing transformational change, the change process will always be a smooth one for everyone in the market system. The curve charting socioeconomic changes may feel steepest and bumpiest to communities in the most fragile places, where a low baseline leaves the most potential for progress as well as the greatest risk of conflicts turning destructive or violent. In such places, even simple ideas can have a rapid and significant impact – but that impact can also include conflict. That makes economies like Ituri’s interesting sources of reflection on both the potential of simple innovations to spur livelihoods dependent on aid to rely instead on the market, as well as the conflict that can emerge within communities navigating that transition.

A good systems change facilitator should guide such transitions along a peaceful pathway. In more fragile settings, this means incorporating conflict-sensitivity as a shared value in its partnerships (see Parts 1 and 2 above). Despite working in one of the most difficult environments in the world for MSD principles like facilitation, the SLR team found that interventions built around economic development gained traction with its partners and could achieve resilience objectives like social cohesion, nutrition, and governance. Once sown, one of SLR’s simple ideas – that the seed value chain could itself inject desperately needed financing into smallholder agriculture – created a cascade of effects. Those effects turned out to be both positive and negative, as well as predictable and unpredictable.

One negative system response to the seed-credit nudge (or ‘probe’ in the jargon) from SLR’s partner’s new business model came from groups that felt they lost out from the change in the market. When some of them attempted to undermine that change in illicit ways, the SLR team was forced to weigh the trade-offs between maintaining its role as a facilitator that stayed in the background and mitigating the harm of emergent community conflict through direct action.

The final part of this learning document will begin with a detour into a case study of how SLR put its private-sector engagement tactics into practice in the co-design, pacing, and co-investment in an input-distribution partnership with a large seed company.

Patient partnerships and value-chain finance: a case study piloting seed sales on credit

When we envision a successful economy, we picture a system where households and businesses have reasonable access to the goods and services they need to thrive, and where they can mostly trust in each other to abide by the law and deliver on promises – part of the figurative ‘social credit’ discussed in Part 1. However, they also need access to literal credit – perhaps one of the most important services there is for permitting economic development and mitigating risk.

In developed economies, various types of credit help people secure livelihoods and ensure that businesses can innovate and grow. Student loans, mortgages, stock markets, venture capital, vertically integrated supply chains, even net-60 payment terms with a patient vendor or receivables financing from a specialised lender – these are all ways for people or firms to get money today based on the promise of something tomorrow. Credit moves financial resources through an economy like water through the pipes of a house, and those movements of financial resources become the transactions that drive productivity and growth.

When those pipes are blocked or non-existent (for example, in many parts of Africa, even when a small business does qualify for a commercial bank loan, it faces annualised interest rates of above 30 per cent), many business transactions that would otherwise make sense fail simply because no one can get the cash to start the chain of exchanges.

A sophisticated credit market is a hallmark of advanced economic systems, but if any place needed healthy access to credit, it would be the most fragile and conflict-affected parts of the world. People and businesses in places such as Haiti, northern Mozambique, Myanmar, and Somalia have the least cash to invest, yet they exist in economies with the most room – and moral mandate – to grow if conditions are right, and if growth is sustainable and inclusive.

Taken in aggregate, and with the right vetting tools and risk-management strategies, people in these places could be excellent loan customers. Unreliable data, unsophisticated legal infrastructure, and a lack of trust, however, make credit beyond the reach of most households and small businesses in the fragile parts of the world.

Back to Ituri: making the case for value-chain financing...

Even before the alphabet soup of militias gets involved, many of Ituri's roads are impassable in the rainy season, even for the hardest motorcycles. Ituri also lacks mobile network coverage across broad swaths of territory, and much of its economy has been subsidised and its financial systems distorted by decades of humanitarian interventions by international donors.

In this environment, traditional banks cannot find responsible ways to finance agricultural businesses, let alone smallholder farmers – nor do they have much incentive to do so. More socially motivated microfinance operators have few reliable models for helping farming communities buy the agricultural inputs that are key to increased



Unspooling the winch: a familiar part of any Ituri road trip during the rainy season. The challenging infrastructure – like this road north of Niania, Mambasa Territory – in the province is a major operational constraint on any business offering agricultural goods or financial credit (or selling anything, really) outside of the major population centres; but at the same time, smallholder farmers must contend with the same roads and cannot always travel far to access the inputs they need for their farms.

harvests and adapting to a changing climate. They also struggle with public perception, as many people see them as extensions of the humanitarian system and sometimes regard micro-loan repayments as optional.

Value-chain financing is sometimes a solution when the traditional financial sector cannot serve a segment of the market system: one value-chain actor (usually a larger firm with access to capital reserves, favourable bank loans, or the ability to temporarily absorb the costs of producing its goods or services) creates credit in the market system by providing something upon the promise of payment later. In Ituri's agricultural distribution system, the value-chain actors with the greatest incentive to see farmers buy more agricultural inputs are the input companies themselves.

Many seed companies in the DRC and Uganda also have financial flexibility because seed multiplication is forgiving to cash flow: they produce the seeds in-house using a vertical supply chain, so they do not have invoices to pay to an external supplier. Some of them also have regional operations which can temporarily underwrite comparatively small efforts in Ituri. To explore potential partners for a value-chain financing pilot, SLR therefore looked at seed companies selling certified seed varieties to the smallholder farmer segment.

...and commercially certified seeds

Like farmers in many fragile agricultural economies, smallholders in Ituri do not habitually purchase certified seed¹. Instead, they save seeds from year to year and supplement it with low-quality seeds from the nearest marketplace. Their experience with certified seed in professional, sealed packaging is typically limited to large but irregular humanitarian seed-distribution efforts.

This is a familiar scenario for agricultural development practitioners in fragile and conflict-affected settings the world over. Farmers do not have the ability or willingness to pay for seeds, the logic goes, and there is no real private sector to be found, so international donors or the national government step in and fill the gap with vouchers for seeds and funding for seed retail networks.

SLR did not find that this logic held up consistently, even in the most difficult parts of Ituri. Instead, farming communities were prepared to raise the money to purchase seeds, and as early as 2020 SLR identified a few businesses already building distribution networks.

One of these businesses multiplies and sells certified hybrid maize seeds that thrive in a variety of temperature and rainfall conditions and generated yields three or four times greater than traditional varieties did. It was too good an opportunity for SLR and its community partners to miss, so, harkening back to one of the mantras of the Policy LINK South Sudan activity from Part 2, SLR "went with the grain" and began developing a partnership with the company.

¹ Using saved seed can be part of a portfolio of household resilience strategies in extremely thin markets. If a political or military (or pandemic!) disruption causes the supply chain to break down, the logic goes, isolated communities that have become dependent on commercial seed will be unable to plant anything at all. Thoughtlessly propagating industrialised agriculture norms to vulnerable farmers via neocolonial extension of the global food system is indeed something to be guarded against. However, this is not a categorical argument against expanding input-distribution infrastructure that includes certified seeds: Ituri is not Iowa. First, production and commodity pricing is much less rigid in Ituri – and there are many more pathways to development. Second, compared to the many avenues linking a commercial soybean farmer in the U.S. into the market system, a smallholder in Ituri may barely have any. The comparative value addition of creating new linkages into the market may on its own be worth using the leverage point of commercial certified seed sales: in a place like Ituri with so many possible futures, it is plausible to imagine that today's agro-dealer could become tomorrow's teacher of techniques to combat Fall Army Worm, an extension agent for a new market player promoting regenerative agriculture, or even a local seed bank for local varieties. Third and most importantly, a transition to use of hybrid maize seed offered such significant food-production and income improvements (cash is also an excellent asset for absorbing shocks) for extremely vulnerable households, it just wasn't appropriate to second-guess the technology adoption – and besides, SLR needed to work with the private-sector partners it had available and follow the priorities it co-created with its communities.



An aerial view of the seed-replication farm and factory of one of SLR's largest private-sector partners (bottom-right of photo), across the road from a camp for internally displaced persons (centre) next to Fataki (top), in central Djugu Territory. This partner weathered a region subject to intense CODECO predations that drove out other international businesses thanks to its attentiveness to bringing social benefits to its neighbours (like hiring IDPs to work multiplying seeds) and careful neutrality in ongoing political and ethnic conflicts (like employing both Hema and Lendu workers). In an unstable place like Ituri, being seen as socially responsible and non-exploitative by the surrounding community, territorial government, and even marauding armed groups can be a profitable business strategy.

Photo: Dan Langfitt; h/t Missionary Aviation Fellowships for the lift

Weaving the right partner into community co-creation discussions

The maize seed company is based in Uganda, but it committed to building and maintaining operations in Ituri on the belief that when peace returned, it would reap the rewards of its reputation for sticking by Ituri farmers through the worst of the violence. In line with that strategy, the company developed a seed-distribution model featuring agents that each manage relationships with ten to twenty affiliated agro-dealers. These agro-dealers range from brick-and-mortar establishments selling a wide inventory of agricultural and veterinary supplies to community members aggregating seed orders with a phone and a motorcycle.

During the seed company's partnership with SLR, the roster of agro-dealers changed from year to year, as some dropped out and others were recruited. The maize seed company provided a one-day technical training each agricultural season for its affiliated retailers, and the full-time sales agents established small demonstration plots and offered follow-up agronomic support to customers.



Two of the agents of one maize seed company interview an affiliated agro-dealer in Aru City on his sales performance during the January–May 2022 season. The company’s sales agents are employees, but the agro-dealers only earn a small commission on each bag of seeds they sell. Agro-dealers become affiliated vendors by attending training on giving technical support on good agricultural practices to their customers so they get the most productivity out of the seeds. Some agro-dealers are brick-and-mortar operations, but others aggregate orders as a supplemental activity to, say, selling bread from a small kiosk like this one. Still others are entirely mobile and work from a motorcycle. This flexibility helped the company penetrate logistically difficult and insecure parts of Ituri even before 2020, and it made it an excellent collaborator for the SLR team as it first set foot in Ituri.

The company was forced to curtail its network numerically and geographically when militias reactivated in 2020, but its own attention to the local conflict system (see “conflict sensitivity: it’s just good business” in Part 1) made it possible to continue multiplying some seeds locally, supplement them with imports from its operations in Uganda, and sell them through the more limited network. However, to break even financially, it needed to find ways to increase its sales volumes. In other words, its profile was perfect for a classic MSD input-distribution system partnership.

However, SLR did not immediately introduce the seed company to its community partners in 2021–2022. Before recommending the (admittedly risky) step of selling seeds on credit, SLR worked with the seed company to explore solutions to its own priorities. It began with the challenges the company faced with its roving sales agents and network of agro-dealers and mobile retailers. Understanding each other’s objectives and reaching an agreement on a framework for the partnership took most of the second half of 2021.

The first two seasons of the following year featured improvements to the existing seed-distribution model instead of bold innovations. SLR helped the company mobilise new agents and expand their agro-dealer network into less-

secure, harder-to-reach parts of Ituri. As part of the co-investment, SLR partially (but temporarily) financed the logistics costs involved in reaching these new areas, which was a high priority for SLR and its government partners. However, rather than a grant, SLR provided its contribution to the partnership budget through a fixed-price, pay-for-performance contract akin to the commercial contracts the seed company was used to. The partnership also experimented with ways to handle marketing events and agronomic follow-up more efficiently.

During the January–May 2022 season, the seed company reported a twofold increase in maize sales, from 15 to 35 metric tonnes, while almost tripling the number of agro-dealers participating in the network. But during the subsequent season in August–December, the company had its own “wait, what?!” wild-card moment: it saw similar sales figures, but they did not capture all the potential demand. Due to a coordination problem, it was not able to respond to all the demand from its affiliated agro-dealers: the Uganda side of its operation was simply not used to bringing seeds over the Arua–Mahagi border in such high volumes.

While the company worked out its supply chain, SLR was navigating its inception period, finding its footing in Ituri’s murky web of interethnic tensions, and building trust with communities. Weaving the seed company into co-creation discussions, let alone taking on more aspirational innovations – like value-chain financing of seeds on credit or customer segmentation to reach vulnerable groups – had to wait.

Another take on self-selection: surrendering activity pacing to the partner

The seed company and its retail network were already stretched thin by the demands of working in Ituri, and it would have been premature and artificial to push some of SLR’s ideas this early in the partnership. There was room for learning and adaptation, but it started on the margins. For instance, reflecting on its network performance during the first half of 2022, the seed company observed that most of its affiliated agro-dealers did not have basic sales and inventory procedures, so in the August and September training, it introduced a training module on these subjects and then coached and monitored agro-dealers through the rest of the year.

SLR had overt discussions with the company about the importance of not overreaching, but it also gave them many subtle opportunities to slow down the pace or diplomatically decline SLR’s suggestions. For example, every agricultural season that SLR made a financial contribution to partially buy down the risk of a new initiative, it negotiated a commercial contract with the seed company that formalised its goals; sometimes those negotiations inexplicably stalled – often a sign that SLR was pushing too hard and needed to right-size its ambitions. The commercial manager of the seed company was optimistic and ambitious in discussions, but when it came down to reviewing sales targets in a pay-for-performance contract, his realism kicked in.

Once the seed company’s retail channel was on the right track, the partnership gained momentum with a seed-credit innovation to strengthen the wholesale channel. The 2022 partnership work helped the company recognise that its affiliated agro-dealers were still developing their business skills and tended to sell in small volumes that would take many more years to reach the company’s overall targets for the province. In early 2023, it was more open to listening to SLR’s advice on identifying communities that could collectively purchase large volumes of maize seeds on partial credit, with a down payment at the time of planting and full repayment after the harvest. The maize seed company had always had an ad hoc wholesale line in Ituri – sometimes selling to government, sometimes to humanitarian actors, sometimes to the occasional large-scale farmer – but this was a new approach.

Exploring the market systems continuum with heavy-handed facilitation tactics

In the first half of 2023, SLR helped the company identify promising communities in Aru and Mahagi territories where SLR was already working on household resilience and social cohesion – and where the logistics were not as difficult and SLR and partner staff could more easily monitor the pilot. From its own prospecting work there, SLR knew which communities were most likely to apply the right farming techniques for the hybrid maize variety (for an accurate test of the basic premise of the innovation), and it linked them with mill operators prepared to purchase their harvests. The communities set aside and prepared land for planting and grouped their orders to save on transportation costs and visits from the seed company’s technicians, who educated its new customers about the improved yield of its seeds, enlisted new agro-dealers in the communities, and negotiated the portion of the seed price that farmers would pay up front.

Unusually, SLR worked not only on both the supply and demand sides of the maize value chain, but it also contributed to the cost of clearing and ploughing the land for planting. This served the dual purpose of ensuring proper soil conditions and injecting cash into the local economy – cash that could be repurposed to pay for the up-

front portion of the cost of the seed. The team judged this compromise in facilitation tactics to be necessary for the proof of concept. It was more facilitative than directly subsidising the seed purchase price, they reasoned, since it left decision-making in the hands of community members on whether to spend the newly earned cash on seeds.

In a more stable, developed economy, it would be distortive and unnecessary for a market-systems-change facilitator to openly identify customers for a firm and then provide those same customers with income-generating opportunities. In extremely fragile economies, though (see footnote **Error! Bookmark not defined.** above), it is sometimes necessary to use a heavier hand to jump-start commercial transactions.

Importantly, though, SLR insisted that it remain outside of the commercial relationship between the seed company and the 1,100 farmers participating. After the seed company assessed farmers' knowledge, confirmed their access to suitable land, and negotiated the terms of payment for the seed, each farmer signed simplified contracts with the company. SLR did not play a role in the commercial transaction: it merely facilitated the introduction and coached each side, offering no guarantee of harvest to the farmers, nor of payment for the balance of seeds to the company. The team made similar introductions between farmers and buyers, but SLR did not guarantee purchase, either. This insistence on remaining a guide, but not a player, in the economic transaction was the germ of continuity for this new approach to input distribution. Once SLR's involvement brought down the risk of the new wholesale strategy and it proved successful, the seed company was able to continue it independently.

Adopt, adapt, expand, and...

During the January–May 2023 pilot season, the company sold nearly 30,000 kilos of seeds in bulk on partial credit – a full season's worth of retail sales in just four transactions. Farmers in Aru and Mahagi saw the benefits immediately. The seed company was literally invested in the success of their harvest, so its technicians visited regularly and encouraged the practices that would maximise the farmers' chance to pay back the seed credit. The hybrid variety offered a significant improvement in yield, with the average farmer harvesting 2,500 kilos of maize and (eventually) selling it into the market.

This was a major change for these farmers, most of whom had only grown small quantities of maize for household consumption with traditional saved seeds, or at most sold smaller volumes into the informal market. SLR had successfully facilitated access to quality, affordable seeds and agronomic advice for over a thousand members of partner communities through a private-sector channel.

Like most plans made in Ituri Province, however, the first season of the seed-credit initiative did not go according to the hopes of the planners. Organising farmers and negotiating a new payment arrangement took time. So did



Aru is the driest of Ituri's five territories, and in part thanks to its border with Uganda, it also has the best road infrastructure. The transportation artery to the left, in south-western Aru between Biringi and Kandoi, is actually one of the best rainy-season roads rural Ituri businesses contend with. SLR and the seed company deliberately began their seed-credit pilot in the comparatively 'easy' territories of Aru and Mahagi to test the model and build momentum before expanding to the less accessible and more conflict-ridden Djugu and Irumu.

Photo: Floribert Losinu

mobilising SLR resources to support the preparation of the land. Furthermore, some of the pilot towns in southern Mahagi suffered a spike in CODECO¹ militia activity coming over from Djugu Territory, and the violence forced the seed company to keep its technicians at a safe distance. SLR's partners got involved to help arrange a way to safely transport the seeds into the threatened towns, but this also took time. These factors all delayed the delivery and planting of the seeds, so the maize plants were exposed to less rainfall and most farmers saw a smaller improvement in yield than trials promised.

Although all 1,100 farmers repaid 100 per cent of the credit they received, that repayment arrived late, too – because of problems with credit pipelines elsewhere in the economic system. SLR linked farming communities with maize-milling operations interested in buying the harvest, and it helped the millers plan for the boom in production. However, those same mills were nearly as strapped for cash as the farmers, so when tonnes and tonnes of maize came onto the market, the mills could not obtain credit to buy all the production (and some, as described in Part 3 above, did not have the business practices needed to commit such large buyers, either, and some deals fell through).

As a result, many farmers had to sell their harvest at the village market for lower prices than they had hoped, and others sold to the millers but had to wait for payment once the mill ground the maize and sold the flour to a wholesaler with the cash on hand. One seed company on its own cannot provide the credit to run an entire value chain in a cash-starved place like Ituri.

Nevertheless, the pilot was successful enough that the seed company expanded the communities eligible for the credit facility. More importantly, though, their example motivated other input companies in other parts of Ituri to follow suit. SLR adapted the marketing tactic with three other enterprises: a large rice-milling operation in western Ituri that also sells seeds in an effort to reach a profitable operating margin; a North Kivu input company with prized potato varieties interested in entering the Ituri market for the first time; and a socially motivated enterprise with land concessions and deep roots in Ituri's most unstable territory of Djugu.

During 2023–2025, SLR supported these companies with business coaching and advice, and it networked them with some of its communities. This time, it took a lighter-touch approach in facilitating the adaptation of the seed-credit model to other value chains: the maize seed company had taken the risk, and the lessons it and SLR learnt reduced the risk for new entrants. Importantly, even before it launched the seed-credit pilot with the maize seed company in 2023, SLR was developing communication channels with potential imitators to expand its scale. Furthermore, as it explored the creditworthiness of farmers in groups, SLR supported a major commercial bank to extend its agricultural credit facility from other DRC provinces into Ituri, supporting both farmer groups and small agri-businesses.

When it comes to risk, Ituri offers a whole smorgasbord. Learning about what typically works (and what doesn't) and identifying some of the wild-card issues that can spoil a well-conceived pilot programme addresses some kinds of risk. As SLR closed down in early 2025, it saw some anecdotal signs of natural continuation or expansion of the seed-credit business model it helped pioneer, but it also saw some promising enterprises side-tracked or closed down due to political predation or the resurgence of the M23 militia in North Kivu province to the south.

¹ The so-called [*Coopérative pour le développement du Congo \(CODECO\)*](#) is a collection of homegrown Lendu militias with cult-like religious inclinations that militarised during the 1999–2003 Ituri conflict and relaunched intensive attacks in 2017, subsequently splintering into loosely affiliated groups. During most of SLR's period of implementation, CODECO controlled parts of Djugu Territory and launched raids north into Mahagi and south into Irumu.

Crowding in: SLR inspects one of the rice mills of a Mambasa company that purchases rice from nearby farmers to process, package, and sell into the provincial marketplace. Inspired by the maize company's experience, they ran a seed-credit pilot with 100 neighbouring rice farmers. *Photo courtesy of Mavuno Enterprises.*



One disadvantage of value-chain financing is that it is often linked to single value-chain actors, and that can make it brittle. The entry of the commercial bank into the Ituri credit pipelines was a promising sign, but it can turn off the taps at any moment. Although SLR was disbanded before it could fully assess the system response² to the seed-credit innovation, it did get a taste of what an unintended response from the system could look like in Ituri – and the systems-change facilitator came face to face with a backlash from the system.

The system responds: backlash in a refugee context

So far, the narrative in Part 5 has outlined a typical successful MSD intervention as they are often described in retrospect: a predictable win-win that caught on quickly once the groundwork was done and trust was established. But it is just one way of telling the story, and it is a narrative that leaves out many of the messy details. Value-chain financing arrangements will hardly seem innovative to regular visitors to the BEAM Exchange, but in Ituri, the seed-on-credit initiative amounted to a sharp change in livelihood strategies and mentalities about the moral economy. After years of inputs coming to smallholder farmers inconsistently, of variable quality – but at no cost and without accountability – improved seeds were suddenly available reliably... but at a price, and with agronomic and contractual conditions. Instead of the loudest communities with the best self-advocacy getting seeds from humanitarian organisations for free, SLR and its partner seed company assessed farmers' land availability, trustworthiness, and commitment to good agricultural practices.

For some partner SLR communities, this felt like socioeconomic whiplash: under the alternative system SLR was probing, businesses or individuals with the social position and skills for navigating the humanitarian system would lose status or market share to others who were better at business plans or at growing and selling crops in a market

² The Adopt-Adapt-Expand-Respond matrix is a simple framework for intuitively managing and assessing the extent to which systems change has occurred from the perspective of a given business practice, innovation, or other system behaviour. See Nippard, Elliott & Hitchins (2014) [*Adopt-Adapt-Expand-Respond: a framework for managing and measuring Systemic change processes.*](#)

economy. SLR neither planned nor wished for socioeconomic conflict as a by-product of its pilot seed-credit intervention, but it shouldn't have been surprised by what happened next.

Socioeconomic whiplash for farmers: stealing from the poor to give to the... poor?

The first bump in the road occurred in mid-2023 in an isolated, ethnically divided community bordering Djugu, Ituri's most insecure territory. The south-west part of the community had more displaced people, it received more humanitarian aid, and it had closer ties to the nearby CODECO militia. When SLR introduced the seed company and its pilot seed-credit initiative, farmers from this side of the community took offence at the idea of paying for seeds in the first place. They declined to participate.

This suited the seed company fine, since it needed to limit the number of participants for the pilot anyway. Instead, it worked with more receptive farmers on the north-eastern side for the first year. In September toward harvest time, though, SLR began to hear stories about crop theft. Reports trickling in from trusted community members described people from the south-west part of town openly stealing cobs of maize from fields in the north-east. Although the north-east/south-west split did not map precisely to ethnic fault lines, there was enough alignment of crop-theft patterns with Hema–Lendu–Alur divisions to merit alarm.

SLR faced a dilemma: on the one hand, it had been heavily involved in launching the pilot in this divided community. It facilitated the entry of the seed company, vouched for farmer groups, and introduced maize mills as potential customers. In parallel, it had even co-invested in land preparation to inject cash into the town's economy to help participating farmers afford the seed down payment.

On the other hand, SLR neither represented the seed company, guaranteed the purchase of outputs, ensured repayment for the seeds, nor assumed any legal obligation to the community in case the pilot failed. The programme wished to maintain some semblance of a facilitator as it prepared to step into the background next season, letting the maize seed company take more leadership in adopting the model while SLR focused on identifying other input companies that could adapt it to their own value chains.

Systemic backlash for the seed-credit partnership: and the facilitator does... what?

On the other hand, it saw its intervention potentially harming a community it was trying to help. Some of the dilemmas SLR faced generated lengthy debates – and sometimes heated words – between members of the team espousing a long-term facilitative viewpoint and those concerned with preventing harm from coming to Iturians. Fortunately, this judgement call was not as difficult.

The SLR activity manager intervened swiftly with a week of phone calls behind the scenes. She deftly coached the aggrieved farmers in the north-east on peaceful ways to dissuade their neighbours from stealing their maize, and she encouraged neutral community leaders to remind the would-be Robin Hoods in the south-west that at the beginning of the season, they had *chosen to opt out* of the seed-credit pilot. Successful maize producers on the north-east side cleverly reassured their disgruntled neighbours that if the pilot was a success – and if they were able to sell a large (read: not stolen!) harvest and pay back their credit – the seed company would expand the credit facility. Then, in the upcoming season, farmers on both sides of town could benefit. The theft stopped.

SLR successfully navigated this bump in the road neither by luck nor with explicit advance planning. Instead, it applied conflict-sensitive facilitation principles and gave its intervention manager the space to use her own judgement. SLR had invested time up front to learn about the community, worked with the seed company to map out potential fault lines, and applied lessons about putting the community first (but not alone!) in the activity co-creation process described in Part 1. In Mahagi, this participatory process had led to an invitation for everyone in the community to participate in the seed-credit pilot based on objective eligibility criteria.



Getting the lay of the land: SLR staff was able to navigate an emergent conflict in western Mahagi Territory because it had spent time with its private-sector partners surveying and understanding land-use patterns around fields like these, near Kambala, and the socioeconomic dynamics of the communities that farm them.

Photo: Meta Bonefride.

Crucially, the public self-selection by the south-western contingent *not* to participate in the pilot created pressure for those resentful community members to accept responsibility later on. SLR had also spent years differentiating itself from humanitarian organisations in the area, convincing the community and the seed company that SLR was not going to bail anyone out in case of non-performance. This reduced the moral hazard of the community turning to SLR for monetary compensation for stolen crops instead of resolving the conflict themselves. Not only did SLR protect itself and its partner's seed-credit initiative by insisting the conflict-resolution process be handled internally, but it also gave a divided community practice settling a dispute peacefully, with the incentive of an economic win-win.

Most important of all, though, were the transparent and consistent rules SLR's partner established for the new seed-credit regime: the south-western part of the community stopped stealing from their north-eastern neighbours because they believed that next agricultural season – and for seasons and seasons thereafter – they would have a fair opportunity to access the same seeds on the same terms.

The power of patterns

Patterns are powerful, and transparency and rules create islands of predictability within a sea of chaos. Chaotic socioeconomic systems are corrosive to human psychology over time – put simply, our brains don't tolerate a true lack of patterns for very long – so one tactic for breaking cycles of disaster and dependence is to create pockets of order where positive disruptions can take root and build the foundations of eventual stability. SLR's initiative to extend the seed-credit pilot to the edge of highly insecure Djugu Territory was a deliberate effort to nurture one such pocket and create a healthier, stable pattern (or 'attractor', in the jargon) around which communities and businesses could rebuild and develop.

A fragile economy in transition: knowledge systems, disinformation, and rethinking 'spoilers'

Consistent patterns and transparent communication were the key to diffusing the emergent conflict between the entrepreneurial credit-accepting farmers and the resentful ones who briefly stooped to theft, and they highlight how knowledge systems weave throughout a market system. Knowledge systems are the ensemble of institutions, actors, governance mechanisms, and patterns through which data and information are produced, transformed into usable knowledge, and shared, used, and regulated. A knowledge system goes beyond individual cognition: it encompasses the frameworks, paradigms, and 'ways of knowing' that constrain or enable knowledge processes for groups and organizations.

Like nearly everything else in fragile and conflict-affected situations, knowledge systems can be easily disrupted by the actions of a few individuals. In small, well-known communities, it is easier to compensate for weaknesses in knowledge systems if there are competent mediators like the SLR intervention manager, community leaders, and the maize seed company agents. However, at a larger scale like a district or territory, the knowledge system of a fragile economy undergoing a transition can be a major vulnerability – and a source of potential socioeconomic conflict.

(Rogue) marketing and (mis)informed customers

In late November 2023, during preparations for the next agricultural season, a murkier situation emerged in Aru Territory near the border with Uganda. In this more stable part of Ituri, the pilot seed-credit initiative had been particularly fruitful, and the seed company was scaling up its marketing. As word of the initiative spread through Aru's farming communities, so did an inexplicable panic that the seeds were genetically modified organisms, inferior in taste to the traditional lower-yield maize varieties, and dangerous if consumed by children. None of the maize-milling operations in the area would deign to buy the harvest, lamented the WhatsApp conspiracy theorists, and they claimed everyone was being hoodwinked by a malevolent Ugandan agro-industrial company.

SLR knew that the maize seeds were hybrids, not GMOs, that the varieties had been extensively tested and consumed in Uganda for over a decade without ill effect, and maize millers were in fact lining up to buy Aru's increased maize production – SLR was even co-investing with some of them to move them closer to the zones of production. When SLR began tracing the rumours through its community partners, it learnt that an alleged representative of an international humanitarian organisation had gone on a local radio show and raised concerns about the safety of the new maize variety, stated the maize was ineligible for its school feeding programmes, and discouraged farmers from buying the new seeds.

Customer choice is an important feature of a developed market economy, where knowledge systems have evolved to enable consumer decision-making. However, choice is not a given in zones with a high degree of dependence on government social programmes or humanitarian organisations. Humanitarian (ex)beneficiaries at the beginning of their transformation into customers are not automatically adept at navigating these choices and can be more susceptible to manipulative marketing.

On the other hand, a lifetime in a conflict-prone area had also helped Aru maize farmers develop a healthy scepticism of institutions and the media. Unlike in the more unstable Mahagi town on the border with Djugu, where SLR needed to intervene swiftly to stem emergent conflict, the market actors in Aru found a solution to this brief panic on their own.

It turned out that the person on the radio show did not speak for the humanitarian organisation at all, and the school feeding programme reassured maize mill operators it would be open to buying maize flour ground from either type of maize. The seed company's two permanent sales representatives in the province reinforced messaging about the safety and palatability of their maize variety through a network of mobile agents and agro-dealers trusted in their communities. The truth about the deception spread through social media and by word of mouth.



Trusted community members like this agro-dealer, at her storefront in Aru city, were essential to quelling rumours about the safety and commercial viability of the hybrid maize seeds SLR and its partner seed company were promoting as part of a new seed-credit initiative. Although more stable than other parts of Ituri, Aru's economy is relatively unsophisticated when it comes to features like customer choice, which makes consumers vulnerable to manipulative marketing. A relationship between seed distributor and retailer based on trust and regular communication was crucial for discovering and dispelling the rumours as soon as they began.



The SLR team's hypothesis was that the radio provocateur was acting on behalf of a handful of entrepreneurs who buy maize flour in western Uganda and transport it across the border to sell to the school feeding programme at a high markup... but SLR and its partners could not reach him for comment because he had fled to Uganda in the face of community reprisal for his radio appearance.

A big tent... even for the spoilers?

Although SLR was not called on to resolve the problem, it took lessons from the brief panic that threatened to destabilise the seed company's operations in Aru Territory and contributed to several actions to strengthen the resilience of the knowledge system in the short term. For example, SLR used its media networks in the provincial capital to facilitate radio appearances for representatives of the seed company to explain the differences between hybrid and GMO seeds. It also reminded the radio journalists of the importance of vetting or at least contextualising the guests they broadcast on their platform. The school feeding initiative originally blamed for the disinformation is operated by a European humanitarian organisation with a commitment to market-based programming, and with SLR's encouragement, the organisation's provincial leadership clarified its position publicly.

These were good mitigation measures, but could SLR have foreseen and prevented the disinformation in the first place? Re-examining the Uganda-to-Aru maize middlemen from a more compassionate perspective, they were just small-business owners who stood to lose their entire market in one or two seasons if their main customer shifted to domestically produced maize. Eager to generate momentum and encourage imitation and crowding-in, SLR and its seed-company partner had devoted energy to catalyse a decisive shift in production that took place in the course of a single season and would encourage more farmers and mill owners to follow the next year. From the point of view of the middlemen, it was a sudden and threatening change in their market. In somewhere with such normalised dependence on humanitarian infrastructure, it is hard to even blame them for perpetuating an extractive business model that added little to the economy – if you can get ahead without hurting anyone... well, you might as well get ahead.

It may not have been possible for SLR to have foreseen what happened with the maize middlemen. Complex systems change is inherently unpredictable. On the other hand, if it had done a short but thoughtful analysis of the maize value chain in the specific parts of Aru its partners were working in, it would have traced their supply chain to the school-feeding programme as a prospective large off-taker of the new harvests. It knew the organisation that administered the maize purchases (indeed, their offices in Bunia were next door), so it would have been a simple matter to understand that a change in their choice of supplier from cross-border traders to domestic producers could have been seen as a threat. SLR conducted market-systems assessments at the beginning of the programme,¹ and it used many less formal approaches to continually make sense of Ituri's market system, but the initial assessment looked at the maize value chain at the level of the province, most of which did not feature a close, navigable land border with a major Ugandan city like Aru does, and that assessment overlooked the small-scale cross-border trade in that value chain.

In retrospect, had SLR looked at the hyper-local value-chain dynamics of Aru with an eye for the overlap of latent conflict dynamics with the changes they were hypothesising, the team might have even invited some of those middlemen into the co-creation tent, just like it did with the farmers in the Djugu town. At best, SLR might have found a way to offer them an entry point into the new domestic maize supply chain it was working to build. At worst, the middlemen would have at least had warning that there was a potential change in their market – which could either give them time to find other customers or other products to transport... or a whole year to orchestrate a more destructive disinformation campaign. Hindsight is 20/20, but sometimes even in retrospect it is hard to understand how latent conflict dynamics surface and play out. As far as the SLR team knows, the aggrieved Aru maize middlemen have diversified.

¹ The observation that lengthy and costly studies are often impractical and too static to be useful – especially in dynamic conflict settings – is not new. Adapting tools like Sparkman, Field & Derks (2016) [Practical Tools for Measuring System Health](#) or the “good-enough” Wild (2025) [Market systems analysis toolkit](#) to Ituri's context would have helped SLR balance methodological rigour with swift adaptive management of interventions as it gathered feedback from the system.

Conclusion: sense-making and serendipity

If good, systemic economic development is bound to create conflicts, shouldn't all economic-development activities – not just those in fragile, conflict-affected places like Ituri – adopt a conflict-sensitive lens to their programming? Do they not risk seeing their gains mooted by counterbalancing feedback from their economy's equivalent of disgruntled Mahagi farmers or Aru-Uganda maize middlemen? Are there other lessons systems-change facilitators might take from SLR's experiences?

New growth from scorched earth

An extreme situation sometimes distils lessons that can be reapplied to a more typical one. Just as war zones and communities living on the brink of ruin can be so intense as to offer the moral clarity of a parable, doing systems-informed economic development work in Ituri spotlights the importance of sensitivity to conflict systems. The conflict dynamics in Ituri are more visible and more influential than they are in most places, but every economy overlaps with social and political systems characterised by struggles over status and resource allocation. Less fragile places have better ways of regulating that latent conflict and keeping it below the surface, but it is still there – and with it, the potential to spoil well-meaning MSD interventions that make the mistake of overlooking it.

There may be a few direct analogies one could conjure up between SLR's work in Ituri and an MSD intervention in Morocco or Thailand, but the broad lessons aren't new. For years, international development experts have recommended rolling political economy analysis, thinking and working politically... and avoiding market systems analyses that just gather dust on a shelf. These are not radical ideas – just a reminder to MSD programme designers to be multidisciplinary with their staffing plans and pluralistic with their approaches.

However, SLR's experiences also point beyond the need to exercise caution around active or latent conflict in market systems. The extreme challenges the team faced forced it to experiment with new ways of making sense of its situation and arriving at decisions about how to act. Ituri's socioeconomic system is dynamic and difficult to untangle, and the SLR team was a small one without limitless time to fully understand everything in every community or every value chain. They spent many of their daylight hours contending with Ituri's dilapidated roads, its insufficient telecommunications, and its hostile militias.

The team therefore balanced its own ways of making sense of the system – like formal analytical methods described in its written deliverables to USAID, casual talks with market actors, and a lot of time out in the (literal) field just looking around – with ways of harnessing the collective insights of its partners... even without a full understanding of how those insights came about.

For example, the outcomes from the co-creation and self-selection tactics described in Part 2 sometimes came as a surprise to SLR. Even in retrospect, it was not always possible to work out how and why one thing worked and another didn't. SLR facilitated these methods of reaching decisions, but the sense-making process was shared with its community or private-sector partners. Sometimes, SLR only observed the inputs (a co-creation workshop; a partnership pitch) and the outputs (a creative livelihoods scheme; a company that never did manage to 'walk through the partnership doorway'). And the process its partners followed in between, making sense of their situation and coming to a decision about how to address it? This sometimes remained unclear to the SLR team.

Shared sense-making and small steps toward shared power...

The team was comfortable with that veil of mystery because it brought values like transparency and equanimity into co-creation, partner negotiations, and continual analysis of community and marketplace dynamics. In other words, the SLR team trusted its partners to make sense of their situation in different ways than it could, and it trusted itself to know and intervene if something went wrong. Allowing its partners to use their own ways of knowing – not a forced systems-mapping exercise or a contrived logical framework – to reach decisions about their own development sounds like an obvious minimal step toward sharing power, but it did not always come easily. The whole SLR team was frustrated from time to time when a community or private-sector co-creation effort didn't go the way it wanted to.



An act of listening: SLR-facilitated community co-creation sessions focused on developing commercially viable livelihood programmes in order to reorient communities to the future, but the sessions also served as a platform for listening to people who felt ignored for decades. Iturians, the team observed, would sometimes accept financial hardships and take on security risks just to feel heard – a trait they share with the politically disaffected in many of the world’s wealthier countries. Regardless of what *Homo economicus* would do, this is not ‘irrational’ behaviour, and MSD practitioners might do well to consider the value of listening as a ‘service’ in itself, not just as a sense-making tool for complex systems.

Sometimes, patience was enough to get SLR and its partner on the same page, like with the seed-credit pilot introduced after two seasons of refinements to the company’s existing model. On other occasions, like the author’s own efforts to catalyse the development of low-cost business-consulting services among Ituri’s universities (see Part 4 above), it just never worked out. On discouraged days, the team grouched about the wasted time. On more enlightened ones, they reminded themselves that this was what it looked like to surrender some of their power in the name of better facilitation.

Reaching an approach to stakeholder engagement and partnership development that balanced SLR’s analytical and observational sense-making with partners’ own ways of knowing was not smooth or easy. It was not even entirely intentional. SLR began in late 2020, when Covid-19 lockdowns combined with Ituri’s re-descent into armed uprising and inadequate telecommunications to make many routine programme start-up activities impractical. No DAI headquarters staff or subcontractors travelled to Ituri in the first two years. Formal training for SLR staff – most of them former humanitarian workers – in topics like facilitation or resilience programming was never on the table. Leadership shared what they could on long road trips and during the occasional day-long strategy session, but it wasn’t enough.² And in retrospect, it wouldn’t have been appropriate, at least not on its own. The USAID policy on resilience, for example, certainly applied to Ituri, but its definitions were too abstract and did not resonate with

² Core MSD paradigms and skills are in short supply among Congolese development and humanitarian professionals, and in this skills-gap obstacle to locally led development, the DRC is not alone. One-off MSD training for teams like SLR’s is important but insufficient on its own. Formal, long-term coaching for MSD team leaders is an effective way to accelerate the process of adapting standard concepts to the team’s unique context – while leaving the team leader in the driver’s seat. It also suggests imitation: one important competency of MSD team leaders is their ability to serve themselves as a coach for their staff and guide the maieutic process of ‘approach development’ – a better version of the ad hoc one the SLR team experienced during its inception year. Ideally, this coach-don’t-prescribe mindset would even filter down to individual staff members in their interactions with market actors, and in turn perhaps contribute to filling the gap described in Part 4 of this piece, to the extent that permanent market actors can imitate staff members. For an example of the skills and knowledge required by team leaders, see Sparkman, Klassen, Kruegerv& Peach (2025) [MSD Team Leader Competency Framework](#).

Iturians. It might have been fit for the purpose of programme design, but not for creating a shared vision with a team of Congolese staff and communicating it to partners and communities throughout the province.

...with a dose of serendipity

Instead, half by accident and half through regular team-building reflexes, SLR arrived at its approach through what the author self-consciously called an “inductive approach to approach development” (more tongue twisters) because that sounded more professional than “we built something when we were already hurtling through the air and we said ‘this looks cool, let’s call it... an aeroplane!’” This bottom-up, ‘crowdsourced’ way to organise the team around a shared approach followed patterns of give-and-take that will be more recognisable to linguists translating a text into a target language *and* a target culture (the jargon is ‘transcreation’) than to project managers implementing a programme according to a formal approach articulated in a grant or contract proposal.

For example, the SLR team members who had formal experience with ideas like ‘facilitation’ or ‘resilience’ described what those words meant to them, gave examples, and told stories about them – not in a prescriptive way, but for colleagues and community members to react to. Those less familiar with those ideas listened, co-created interventions with partners, and told their own stories back.

Some stories about ‘resilience’ were about breaking free of a mindset of dependence on humanitarian aid, others were about people coming together to support each other, and still others were about communities mobilising their own resources to co-invest with SLR. Some staff’s stories never advanced beyond households or communities getting better at dealing with emergencies; others critiqued the rigidities and dependencies of the humanitarian sector and sounded more like talking points on localisation. The author’s remained stubbornly abstract and overly concerned with systems-level capacities to absorb shocks or stresses and to adapt and evolve over time in response to emergent risks and opportunities.

Every definition of ‘resilience’ was different, but they all rhymed. And as everyone on the team heard each other iterate their stories over and over again, the definitions grew closer and closer together.³ Even if the Venn diagrams of each team member’s understanding of ‘facilitation’ or ‘resilience’ never fully overlapped, team members listened to each other enough to find a common vision and a way to work together. Indeed, in a sort of reverse-groupthink, the small differences between individual team members’ understanding of ‘resilience’ or ‘facilitation’ sometimes created exactly the semantic gaps needed for sparks of creativity to ignite.

The team listened to its partners, too. Community leaders and humble farmers alike held forth in lengthy reflections about what resilience meant to them. SLR tried to focus and expedite these sessions, but the team also learnt the value of the act of listening on its own. Sometimes, the way the community came to understand and articulate its vision for future development paid off for SLR – for example, when ‘resilience’ became synonymous with the call for the community to mobilise its own resources as a co-investment with the programme. At other times, it felt more like a long therapy session without benefit to SLR’s agenda. Part of sharing power over the partnership agenda, however, sometimes meant making judgement calls about what listening was productive... and when it was time to get back in the car, go home, and come back another time. However, the very act of sharing control of the agenda was often enough to build the minimum trust within a community and between a community, the private sector, and SLR to begin a partnership.

It was partly just good fortune that the team arrived at this inductive approach to developing shared understanding. The narrative presented in this learning document did not feel as deliberate when the team was living through it. Much depended on the trust of the team extended to its leadership, and on the patience and goodwill of SLR’s partners – especially when staff were still learning how to do community co-creation efficiently and frustration was high on all sides.

Even once SLR hit its stride in 2022 and 2023, its vocabulary was idiosyncratic, its approach might have been better adapted to Ituri’s context, and it overinvested in some opportunities and missed others. The MSP Primer’s recommendations, the USAID resilience policy, and any other broad guidance related to facilitating systemic change need to be adapted to every context, every time. That adaptation process is subjective, messy, difficult, and

³ In a similar spirit, this learning document has a deliberate mix of concept discussion, programme anecdotes, and personal reflection, embracing the subjective to provoke questions rather than offer answers. Readers are invited to agree or disagree, tell their own stories about those questions, and reach their own conclusions – or better yet, their own questions.

under-documented (but see footnote 22 above for an example of more documentation).

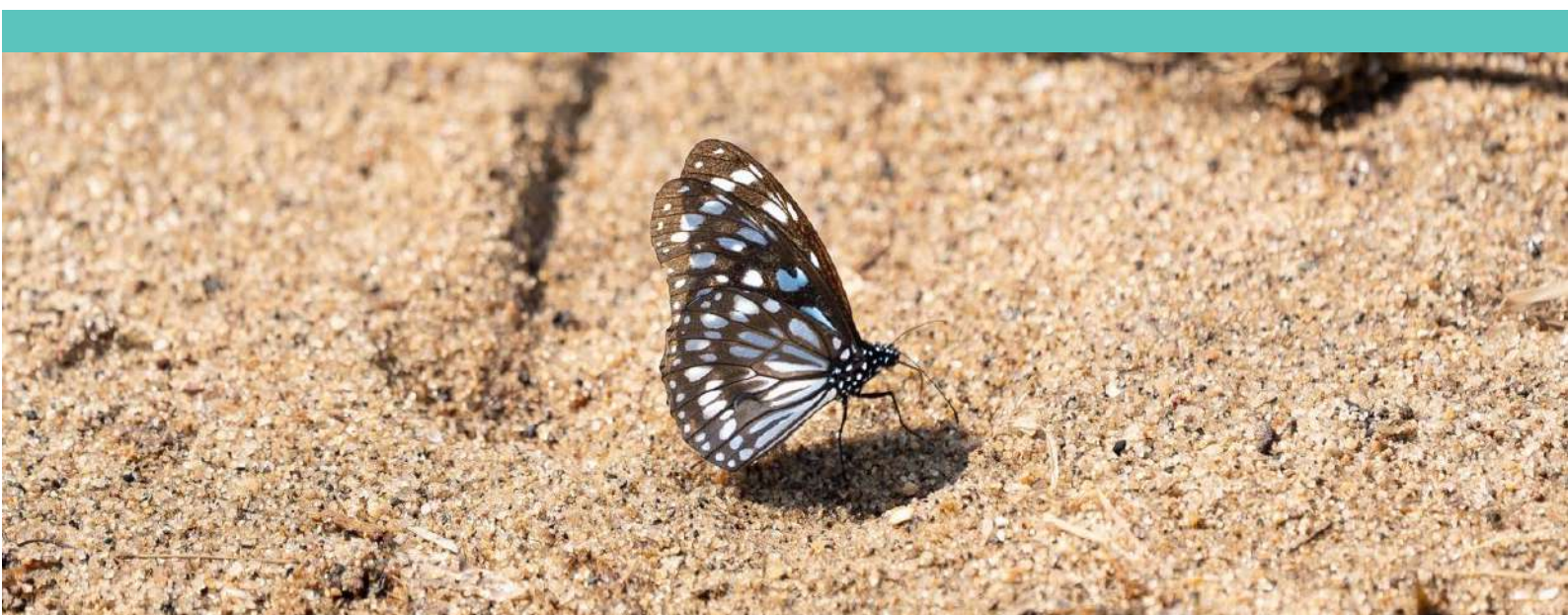
Yet, just as we can each change the same everyday thing – like a commonplace butterfly – into a panoply of literary allegory or scientific analogy in our minds, when we give our team members and partners the right channels to learn from each other, and when we work cooperatively to bring abstract principles down to earth in a way that is intuitive for them, those same team members and partners can become a programme's greatest source of creativity and serendipity.

Back to the human factor

Like so many questions in the management of complex change, adapting abstract approaches to a specific context

– or striking the right balance between formal analyses, indirect methods for making decisions in uncertainty, and individual case-by-case judgement calls – all boil down to pragmatic trade-offs... not to an epistemological ideal or an optimal practice. As usual, it is a matter of budgets, leadership, staffing, partners, organisational culture, the whims of clients, and the familiar realisation that there is never enough time, money, or expertise.

On the other hand, perhaps we can take heart from the lessons we draw from the fragile and conflict-affected parts of the world, especially in an era of diminishing foreign aid and development resources for programmes like SLR. Our colleagues, community partners and private-sector collaborators, may already have all the knowledge and relationships we need to navigate our way through the most difficult situations. The art of good facilitation is about nurturing the human parts of our knowledge ecosystem and listening to their voices properly.





The donor-project graveyard at Kasenyi, Irumu Territory: a familiar sight in the eastern DRC.

Ituri is replete with such monuments to aid and development initiatives of yore. These placards are tempting to mock when they are the only outwardly visible results of donor funding, but they are also a reminder of the intangible human experiences that accompanied those programmes and emerged from their work. The staff who work on MSD programmes, their partners in the private sector and civil society, and their government counterparts all bring their own knowledge and mindsets to an MSD partnership, and they leave with their knowledge augmented and their mindsets altered. That human factor is an underrated outcome of programmes like SLR.

The most heartening messages SLR team members hear from their former community partners reaching out, more than a full agricultural season now since SLR shut its doors and in a period of intensifying crisis in the eastern DRC, are the ones that say “your team had the right approach: you cared about our priorities, and you focused on our long-term resilience.” And whatever they might understand ‘resilience’ to mean precisely, the feedback feels good. One key to managing change – and the small conflicts that come with it – in complex systems may be found across the gamut of instincts, knowledge, and relationships of those staff, partner, and community members. A good facilitator just needs to find the right way to activate them.

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