

Household Impact of the January 2025 Internet Shutdown in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

Research Report

Prepared by: *Digihub Africa*

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2025, following the fall of Goma, authorities made a decision that compounded the tragedy of conflict with a silent, invisible crisis: the internet was cut off.

In conflict-affected contexts such as the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, internet shutdowns carry far-reaching consequences for households. They disrupt economic activity, restrict access to information, and fracture vital communication networks at moments when connectivity is most needed.

This report presents findings from a household survey conducted in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It highlights how digital disruptions translate into real-life economic hardship.

The findings reveal that:

- A majority of households experienced income loss or reduced economic activity
- Digital-dependent livelihoods were severely disrupted
- Women were disproportionately affected, particularly those engaged in informal and small-scale economic activities
- Households faced increased financial pressure, affecting access to food, transport, and essential services

In addition:

- 83.3% observed increased misinformation
- 91.7% reported increased community vulnerability
- 76.9% perceived increased risks for women and girls

These findings emphasize the crucial role of internet connectivity in maintaining economic resilience, facilitating communication, and providing access to reliable information, especially during times of crisis.

2. INTRODUCTION

In eastern DRC, as in much of Africa, a large part of the economy relies on mobile phones. Mobile money is not just a convenience but also a banking system. WhatsApp is not merely for talking but how business gets done. Social media is not only for entertainment but also a space for marketing, networking, and sales.

Digital connectivity has become a crucial part of modern social and economic life. Households increasingly rely on the internet for financial transactions, communicating with relatives, running businesses, and accessing information. When the internet goes down, a part of the economy also stalls.

Connectivity, especially in conflict-affected areas, is essential for keeping people informed about security news and helping them stay connected with loved ones.

The internet blackout after Goma fell in January 2025 offers a crucial opportunity to better understand how such shutdowns affect households in practice.

This report examines the household-level effects of the shutdown in three key areas:

- economic impact

- communication and access to information
- perceptions of vulnerability and safety risks

3. METHODOLOGY

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The findings in this report are based on a survey of residents in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. We contacted those who had been silenced, inviting them to share what it was like to be cut off from the world during what might have been the most dangerous days of their lives.

The questionnaire explored:

- Demographic characteristics of the respondents
- household composition
- experience of Internet disruptions
- economic impacts
- Communication challenges
- Perceptions of misinformation and susceptibility

All results are shown as percentages, indicating how responses are distributed among participants.

The report also includes qualitative insights from open-ended responses provided by participants.

4. RESPONDENT PROFILE

4.1. Gender Distribution

Women accounted for 53.8% of respondents, while men made up 46.2%.

4.2. Age Distribution

The majority of respondents fall within economically active age groups:

- 25–34 years: 53.8%
- 35–44 years: 30.8%

Younger and older respondents represent smaller proportions.

4.3. Household Size

Most respondents live in relatively large households:

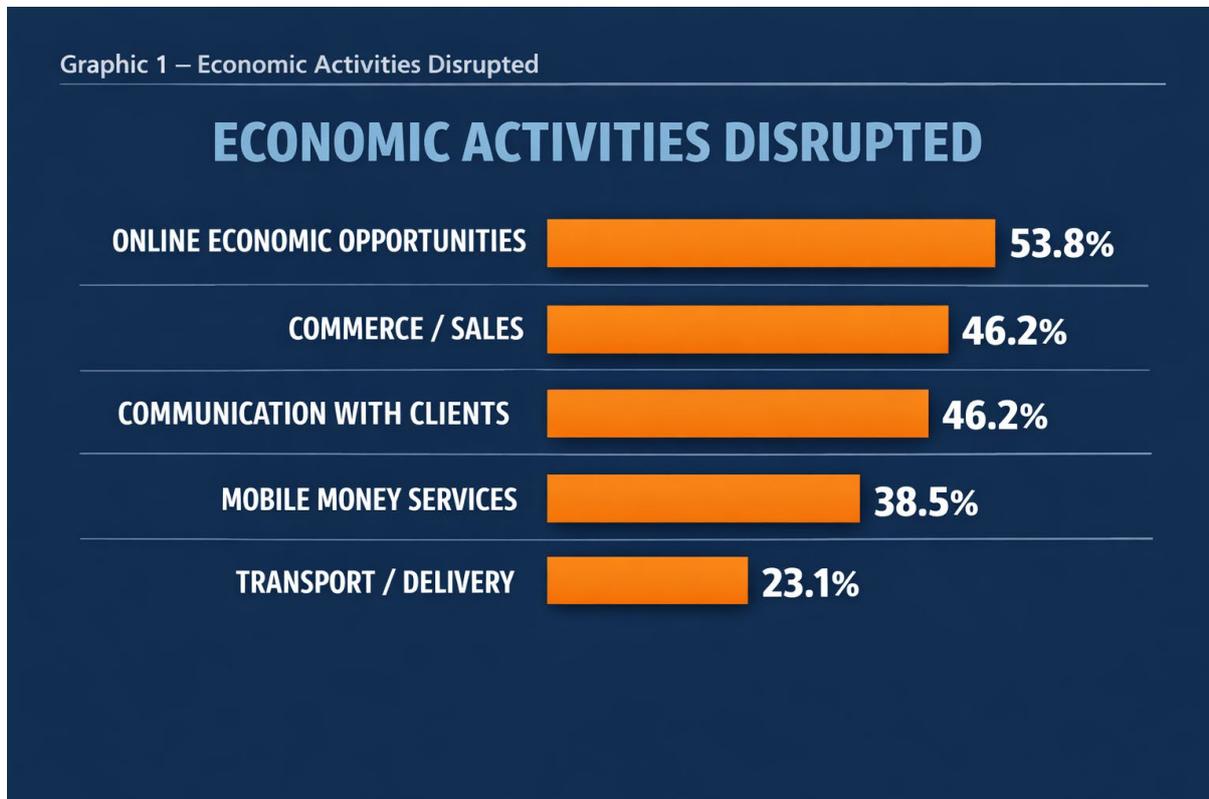
- 6–8 people: 69.2%
- 3–5 people: 23.1%
- 1–2 people: 7.7%

Note that large household sizes increase vulnerability because more individuals depend on limited and unstable income sources.

5. INSIGHT – DISRUPTION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND HOUSEHOLD IMPACT

Graphic 1 – Economic Activities Disrupted

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The survey results show that economic activities closely tied to digital infrastructure were heavily impacted during the internet shutdown. More than half of respondents (53.8%) reported disruptions to online economic opportunities, making it the most affected area. This was followed by disruptions in commerce/sales (46.2%) and communication with clients (46.2%), both of which are crucial for maintaining daily business operations.

Additionally, mobile money services (38.5%), a vital financial tool for both individuals and small businesses, were notably disrupted. While transport and delivery services (23.1%) experienced less impact, the data still shows a general slowdown across several sectors of the economy.

At the household level, these disruptions likely caused reduced or unstable income streams, especially for those relying on digital platforms, small trade, or remote transactions. The significant disruption in online opportunities indicates that many households may have faced interruptions in their main or supplementary income sources.

The simultaneous effects on commerce and client communication suggest that households involved in small businesses or informal trade may have had trouble maintaining customer relationships, completing transactions, or finding new business opportunities. This can cause delays or losses in expected earnings.

Disruptions in mobile money services highlight potential challenges in managing everyday household finances, such as sending or receiving money, paying for goods and services, or

supporting family members in different locations. In areas where mobile money is common, these disruptions can impact both immediate consumption and financial planning.

In response to these challenges, households may have had to adopt coping strategies, such as:

- relying more on cash-based transactions,
- reducing or postponing non-essential expenditures,
- seeking alternative, often less efficient, ways to reach customers or suppliers,
- or depending more heavily on informal support networks.

Overall, the data shows that internet shutdowns can have immediate and direct effects on household economic stability, impacting not just income generation but also the ability to handle expenses and maintain financial resilience.

6. INSIGHT – INCREASE IN MISINFORMATION

Graphic 2 – Increase in Misinformation

INCREASE IN MISINFORMATION



The survey results reveal a clear and significant trend: a large majority of respondents (83.3%) reported an increase in rumors or misinformation during the internet shutdown. Only a small proportion indicated no change (8.3%), while 8.4% were unsure. This overwhelming perception suggests that misinformation became a dominant feature of the information environment during the disruption.

These findings indicate that internet connectivity plays a critical role in stabilizing information ecosystems, particularly by enabling access to diverse, timely, and verifiable sources. When these channels are disrupted, the flow of reliable information is constrained, creating conditions where informal, unverified, and potentially misleading content can circulate more easily.

The small number of respondents reporting no increase indicates that the rise in misinformation was widespread, affecting various groups and locations. Meanwhile, the

uncertainty among some respondents may reflect confusion or difficulty in telling apart verified and unverified information in a chaotic information environment.

When reliable digital platforms are unavailable, people may increasingly depend on word-of-mouth, fragmented updates, or secondary sources, which are more prone to distortion. This can cause rumors to spread quickly, especially in situations marked by instability and increased public concern.

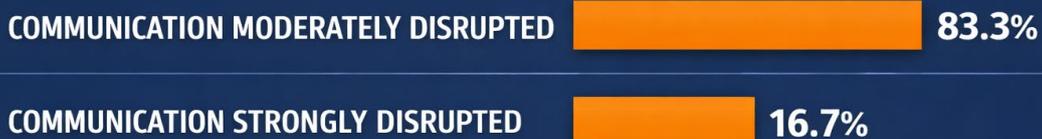
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Overall, the data shows that disruptions to digital information channels not only decrease access to information but also can actively reshape the information environment, leading to increased exposure to misinformation and lowering the reliability of available narratives.

7. INSIGHT – COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN AND SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

Graphic 3 – Communication Breakdown

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN



The survey findings indicate that disruptions to internet connectivity had a near-universal impact on communication patterns among respondents. A significant majority (83.3%) reported that communication was moderately disrupted, while an additional 16.7% experienced strong disruption. Notably, no respondents reported stable or unaffected communication, underscoring the widespread nature of the disruption.

These findings indicate that internet access is crucial for maintaining communication networks, especially where digital platforms are the main way people interact with households, relatives, and wider social circles.

The dominance of “moderate disruption” suggests that while some alternative communication methods (such as SMS, voice calls, or physical movement) remained partly accessible, they were not enough to fully replace digital communication channels. At the same time, the high

percentage of respondents reporting strong disruption shows that for some people, losing connectivity led to almost complete isolation from their usual communication networks.

The implications extend beyond simple communication barriers. Reduced ability to maintain contact with family members and relatives can weaken informal social support systems, which are often critical in crisis settings. These systems typically facilitate the sharing of information, emotional support, and coordination of assistance within and across households. In this context, disruptions to internet connectivity may therefore lead to:

- diminished access to timely information shared within personal networks,
- reduced emotional and psychological support through regular contact,
- and limited coordination of household or community-level coping mechanisms.

Overall, the data shows that internet connectivity is not just a technical infrastructure issue but also a crucial factor in promoting social cohesion and resilience, especially in unstable environments.

8. INSIGHT – INCREASED COMMUNITY VULNERABILITY

Graphic 4 – Community Vulnerability

COMMUNITY VULNERABILITY

COMMUNITIES BECAME MORE VULNERABLE **91.7%**

NO CHANGE PERCEIVED **8.3%**

The survey results show a strong and consistent belief that the internet shutdown increased vulnerability in communities. A large majority of respondents (91.7%) said that communities became more vulnerable, while only a small portion (8.3%) saw no change. This near-unanimous view indicates that the shutdown's effects went beyond personal experiences and impacted community resilience and stability.

These results show that access to digital communication and information channels is crucial in how communities prepare for, respond to, and handle crises. When connectivity is lost, the

ability to get timely updates, verify information, and coordinate responses can be greatly diminished.

The high perception of vulnerability may stem from multiple interconnected factors. Limited access to trustworthy information can increase uncertainty, making it harder for individuals and communities to make informed decisions. Simultaneously, barriers in communication channels may weaken collective coordination, including sharing alerts, mobilizing support, or responding to emerging risks.

At the community level, these disruptions can also impact informal support networks, which are often vital in crisis situations. When people are less able to communicate quickly and reliably, it becomes more difficult to check on vulnerable individuals, organize help, or preserve social cohesion.

The small proportion of respondents reporting no change indicates that the rise in vulnerability was broadly experienced across various groups, rather than being confined to certain segments of the population.

Overall, the data shows that internet shutdowns can have widespread effects on community resilience, not only by limiting access to information but also by weakening the networks and mechanisms that communities rely on to handle uncertainty and respond to crises.

9. INSIGHT – PROTECTION RISKS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Infographic 5 – Protection Risks for Women and Girls

PROTECTION RISKS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS



Policy Insight

The survey results show that a large majority of respondents (76.9%) believed that risks for women and girls increased during the internet shutdown, while 23.1% said there was no increase. Although these results are based on perceptions rather than direct measurement, the consistent responses indicate a widespread concern about increased protection risks when connectivity is unreliable.

These findings highlight the crucial role that digital communication channels have in supporting safety, providing access to information, and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. When connectivity is lost, women and girls may face greater difficulties in getting timely information, reaching out for help, or staying connected with support networks.

The perceived increase in risk may be linked to several overlapping factors. Reduced communication channels can prevent people from reporting incidents, seeking help, or accessing services, while disruptions in the flow of information may decrease awareness of available support options. Additionally, broader rises in misinformation and uncertainty, as highlighted elsewhere in the survey, might create environments where risks are less visible and harder to navigate.

At household and community levels, weakened communication can also undermine protective social structures, such as the ability of family members, peers, or community members to monitor well-being, provide support, or intervene when risks occur.

The proportion of respondents reporting no increase suggests that perceptions may vary based on context or individual circumstances. However, the overall trend shows that the shutdown is generally linked to increased concerns about safety and protection, especially for groups already facing structural vulnerabilities.

Overall, the data highlights that internet connectivity is not just a tool for communication and economic activity but also a vital part of protection systems, especially for women and girls in fragile and crisis-affected environments.

10. INSIGHT FROM OPEN QUESTION (with Respondent Testimonies)

The survey results show that the internet shutdown directly affected household economic stability, with most respondents reporting some disruption to their income. A majority (53.8%) described the impact as minor, while 23.1% experienced a moderate effect, and 15.4% faced a significant impact on household income.

This distribution indicates that although the severity of impact varied, economic disruption was common, affecting households at different levels of vulnerability. Even when the impact was described as minor, it often meant disruptions to fragile and irregular income streams, especially for those relying on daily trade or informal economic activities.

Several respondents described how even short-term disruptions affected their ability to earn: “I sell small goods online and through WhatsApp. When the internet stopped, I could not reach my clients. Even a few days without sales affects my family.”

“My income depends on daily transactions. Without the internet, I lost customers and could not advertise what I sell.”

The findings on financial losses further support this pattern. Nearly half of respondents (46.2%) reported small financial losses, while 23.1% experienced moderate losses, and 15.4% reported major losses. The link between income disruption and financial loss categories shows a consistent and real economic impact at the household level.

For some households, these losses translated into immediate financial pressure:

“We had to use the little savings we had because money was not coming in as usual.”

“Payments were delayed because clients could not send money. It affected how we manage our daily needs.”

These results indicate that the shutdown likely affected not only income generation but also household financial management and consumption patterns. Decreased or unstable income

restricted households' ability to pay for routine expenses such as food, transportation, education, and healthcare.

Respondents also emphasized how disruptions to mobile money and communication channels worsened these difficulties:

“Even when someone wanted to pay me, it was difficult because mobile money services were not working properly.”

“I could not send money to my relatives. It created stress at home.”

Households needed to adopt coping strategies. Some respondents explained these adjustments practically:

“We reduced our daily expenses and focused only on food and basic needs.”

“I had to find alternative ways to sell, sometimes moving physically to look for customers.”

But, over time, even small or moderate losses continued to add up.

Conclusion

The survey results offer a detailed view of how internet disruptions can impact households and communities across various interconnected areas. The findings indicate that the effects go beyond technical issues, affecting economic activities, communication networks, information settings, and perceptions of safety and vulnerability.

At the household level, the data shows that most respondents experienced some level of economic disruption, especially with income activities that rely on digital connectivity. Although the impact ranged from minor to severe, these disruptions were common and often affected daily livelihoods. Issues with mobile money services, client communication, and online economic opportunities highlight the increasing dependence on digital infrastructure for both income and financial management.

The findings also emphasize the crucial role of internet connectivity in sustaining communication networks. With all respondents reporting either moderate or severe disruption to communication, the shutdown greatly impacted individuals' ability to stay connected with family members, clients, and wider social networks. This has significant implications for social support systems, especially in situations where digital tools are the main means for maintaining relationships and coordinating assistance.

Furthermore, the survey indicates a clear shift in the information landscape, with most respondents reporting an increase in rumors or misinformation. This implies that disruptions to accessing reliable digital sources may lead to more unverified information, potentially influencing perceptions and decisions in uncertain situations.

At the community level, the widespread belief that vulnerability has increased highlights the systemic nature of the impact. Reduced access to information and communication channels seems to weaken the collective ability to respond to crises, coordinate support, and preserve social cohesion. These effects may be even more severe for specific groups, including women and girls, who respondents say face higher protection risks.

Overall, the findings show that internet connectivity is no longer just an optional or secondary resource. It has become a crucial part of household resilience, supporting livelihoods, access to financial services, information exchange, and social support networks. Disruptions to connectivity can cause ripple effects, heightening vulnerabilities and limiting the ability of households and communities to respond to crises.

Overall, this survey emphasizes the importance of considering internet access not just as infrastructure, but as a crucial part of economic stability, social cohesion, and community resilience in fragile and conflict-affected areas.

Digihub Africa