Box 5.7: What Elections Mean: Identities, Return and Reintegration in the DRC

A strongly-held conventional wisdom holds that the purpose of elections is for people to vote for the person or party who they think will furnish them with a brighter future. Yet in some post-conflict situations the process of getting registered to vote may be as important as the voting itself when it comes to assuring or re-establishing people's day-to-day access to security and services.

In the DRC, for example, national identity cards had last been issued by the state in the early 1990s; the best most people were subsequently able to obtain was an 'attestation of loss of identity document' written by their local administrator. In the conflict zones of eastern DRC this route to an identity as a Congolese citizen was seen as being open to abuse by factions bringing in fighters from neighbouring countries from the late 1990s onwards, and these attestations were widely viewed as of dubious standing.

When voter registration cards were issued in a whirlwind registration campaign from mid-2005 onwards, applicants had several possible ways by which to prove their identity. For those who succeeded in doing so, the cards also doubled as legally recognized temporary identity documents, and thus quickly became the most valid and legitimate means of establishing juridical identity and citizenship.

Those who were unable to register to vote, however, were substantially disadvantaged, as was evident in Kinshasa where, within weeks of registration closing, there were reports of people without a voter card finding themselves being severely harassed by the authorities. In some eastern parts of the DRC, with roadblocks to be negotiated every few kilometres, the lack of a voter registration card risked becoming even more of an ongoing liability.

There were, though, many reasons for people failing to register**:** the registration campaign allowed only three weeks per province—and many of DRC's provinces are larger than Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda combined; the DRC's several million internally displaced were likely to have lost their documentation at the time of flight**;** many who had suffered multiple displacements over the years were unlikely to be able to find five witnesses from their host population; and for the hundreds of thousands of refugees in nine neighbouring countries, the three-week registration period was an impossibly small window of opportunity within which to organize to return home after years in exile. Thus the registration process risked excluding some of the very people whose return and participation in the elections would be a key indicator of a successful post-conflict transition.

The DRC case thus highlights that elections, and the prior registration process, both of which appear to be very specific, time-bound and forward-looking events, are in reality also key indicators of success or failure in re-establishing the claim to citizenship—and its concomitant minimum guarantees of security—of those displaced by conflict.

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