HPG Working Paper

# Supporting Central African refugees in Cameroon

## Policy and practice in response to protracted displacement

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August 2017

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## About the author

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## Acknowledgments

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# 1  Introduction

Cameroon is host to some 259,000 refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR).[1] Refugees left CAR in search for safety in Cameroon as a result of violence in the mid-2000s and a failed coup and communal violence in 2013. The majority (70%) have settled in communities rather than refugee camps. In principle, the legal and policy framework governing refugees is conducive, and they enjoy a number of rights, including the right to work and to free movement. In practice, however, many have struggled to find their feet in a context of poverty, chronic under-development, weak governance and corruption (TI, 2015).

This study is the second part of a two-stage research project exploring the lives and livelihoods of CAR refugees in Cameroon. The first phase of work (Barbelet, 2017) looked at the priorities and objectives of refugees themselves, and the strategies they used to meet them. The study highlighted the role of existing networks of family, friends and trading partners in supporting refugees in displacement, alongside assistance from individuals and institutions in host communities, and humanitarian agencies. The study concluded that one possible way forward in better supporting refugees in protracted displacement may be to understand how assistance can be delivered in ways that promote self-reliance and create opportunities and a conducive environment for local integration and livelihoods support. This second phase of work reverses the focus to explore the perspectives of the institutions, networks and individuals that shape the displacement environment and how they interact with each other and with refugees.

The research is part of a two-year programme designed to generate insights into the lives and livelihoods of refugees in protracted displacement, with companion case studies on Rohingya refugees in Malaysia (Wake and Cheung, 2016; Wake, 2016) and Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan (Bellamy et al., 2017; Barbelet and Wake, 2017). It adds to a growing range of evidence gathered through previous Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) research on forced migration and livelihoods, including work on urban displacement, protracted displacement, vulnerability and livelihoods (Crawford et al., 2015; Metcalfe et al., 2012; Haysom and Sarraj, 2012; Levine, 2014).

## 1.1 Methodology and structure

The analysis in this study is based on 37 interviews conducted over three weeks in February and March 2016 in Bertoua, Mandjou, Tongo Gandima, Guiwa, Boulembe, Kouba and Adinkol in East Cameroon. Respondents included individuals from the host community, local traders, religious leaders, village chiefs, local police, local authorities, local representatives of line ministries, refugee organisations, local civil society organisations, local, national and international NGOs, UN agencies and development actors. Semi-structured interviews were used to probe specific themes, including interviewees' perceptions of their role and functions, perceptions of refugees' lives and the livelihoods challenges they faced and interactions with refugees and other actors.

The report is organised around the clusters of actors that shape the lives of Central African refugees in East Cameroon. Following a short introduction to the context and the policy framework in Cameroon, the third chapter discusses local communities' perceptions of refugees, and the interactions between host communities, refugees and international humanitarian organisations.[2] Chapter 4 focuses on the state, and the interaction between national and local authorities, refugees and humanitarian organisations. The final chapter looks at the challenges and opportunities for supporting refugees through a longer-term development approach, based on the foregoing analysis of interactions between the various institutions and organisations playing a role in refugees' lives.

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1   As of March 2016 (see http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2525).

2   The label 'humanitarian organisations' refers to aid organisations supporting refugees from a relief rather than a development perspective. UNHCR is included under this term.

# 2  Context

In principle, Cameroon is a conducive host environment for refugees. The country operates an open-door policy and has ratified the major legal instruments for refugee protection, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention. These commitments have been translated into a progressive legal framework allowing refugees to work, move freely and reside within the country. In principle, refugees have free access to primary healthcare and education, as well as a range of assistance from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other agencies, including registration and documentation, food assistance, access to water and sanitation at refugee sites and (limited) livelihoods support.

Cameroon currently hosts more than 350,000 refugees, with large populations from CAR (259,000) and Nigeria (72,000). While refugees from Nigeria have settled in the north, the majority of CAR refugees (70%) are concentrated in the east, with smaller clusters in Adamawa (28%) and the north (3%).[3] There have been two major movements of forced displacement: the first in the mid-2000s and the second following communal violence in 2013 and 2014. The first movement of refugees settled in Cameroonian communities, in rural villages and to a lesser extent in urban and peri-urban areas. This group largely comprised people from the Mbororo ethnic group, which shared historical and ethnic ties, cattle-trading links and pastoral migration routes with local Cameroonian communities, including for some family ties through marriage. Mbororos are traditionally nomadic pastoralists, but have increasingly become settled farmers and traders in CAR and East Cameroon.

The second group of refugees was mainly from towns and cities, and settled in more urban or peri-urban areas, as well as in refugee camps. This group has a more diverse ethnic make-up, including Hausas and Bayas as well as Mbororos. These refugees also have historical and ethnic ties with eastern Cameroonians (Bayas make up a significant minority group among eastern Cameroonians) as well as economic ties based on trade.

While the first movement of refugees trickled slowly into Cameroon over years, the second movement was more sudden and on a larger scale, with more than 10,000 arrivals in January 2014, peaking at almost 25,000 the following March. Refugees arrived traumatised by the violence they had experienced in CAR, after weeks of dangerous travel. Although camps were organised to deliver emergency assistance, the majority of refugees chose to settle among Cameroonians. Of the overall population of CAR refugees, 70% live in local communities and only 30% in camps. The size of the movement meant that some villages doubled in size, and others are currently hosting more refugees than nationals.

The first phase of this study highlighted that CAR refugees from both the old and new caseloads have attained some degree of fragile integration within host communities. Economically, refugees have experienced similar livelihoods challenges as locals, alongside additional barriers due to their status as refugees. Socially, the length of displacement and the additional demographic pressure from the second arrival of refugees triggered negative reactions from host communities as well as more restrictive practices by the police and other authorities. The following sections examine this changing environment, and the challenges of responding to CAR refugees' protracted displacement and supporting their livelihoods.

## 2.1 The humanitarian presence

The humanitarian presence in eastern Cameroon dates back to the mid-2000s, with a rapid increase in late 2013 and early 2014 in response to the most recent influx of Central African refugees. UNHCR started its operations in East Cameroon in 2006–2007, and has a central role in managing support to Central African refugees, as authorised by the government and in partnership with international NGOs. As of the end of 2015, 42 humanitarian actors including

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3   See http://data.unhcr.org/car/country.php?id=44.

nine UN agencies, 16 international NGOs, six national NGOs,[4] five government line ministries, four Red Crescent and Red Cross societies and two international organisations were present and registered under the Humanitarian Response Plan across Cameroon (OCHA, 2015). In 2016, the Central African Republic Regional Refugee Response Plan requested over $130 million to address the needs of CAR refugees in Cameroon, though this was highly unlikely to be met: in the previous year, of the $330m requested under the regional plan, which covers the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chad and Congo, as well Cameroon, just 25% was forthcoming. At the time of the study, humanitarian agencies were expanding their operations in the north to respond to the needs of Nigerian refugees and internally displaced Cameroonians, and reducing their presence in East

Cameroon as a result. National NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and other civil society organisations were supporting CAR refugees in East Cameroon, though not necessarily with humanitarian assistance (some are more developmental, others have a more activist agenda). At the time of the study, UNHCR was developing a livelihoods strategy for CAR refugees in eastern Cameroon. It was intended to refocus its work towards a longer-term, more developmental approach, as the situation in 2016 was increasingly being defined as transitioning out of emergency in 2016. The strategy (UNHCR, 2016b) centred on partnering with the government of Cameroon, mainly on agricultural development, including interventions improving agricultural value chains. It is within this new programmatic context that this study was conducted.

# 3 Local populations, humanitarian assistance and refugee integration: perspectives and interactions

The first phase of this study suggested that refugees' ability to sustain themselves tended to decrease over time, at least for refugees struggling to find a foothold in displacement. Personal assets – whether social or financial – are depleted just as formal assistance declines. The findings of this second phase of the research suggest that something similar may be happening in terms of the attitudes of the host population towards refugees. Where people were generally welcoming at first, attitudes tended to become more negative as displacement became protracted, and as another crisis in CAR led to new refugee arrivals. In Cameroon this erosion of support is particularly surprising given the close ethnic, family and commercial ties between refugees and host populations, suggesting that cultural links may facilitate support, but do not guarantee it.

Despite negative undertones, the presence of refugees resulted in ancillary benefits to host communities. Interviewees, especially in rural areas, acknowledged that hosting refugees had enabled villages to grow and become more dynamic economically. The refugee presence also allowed villages to develop their infrastructure as humanitarian organisations built health centres, schools or extra classrooms and water points. One village chief otherwise critical of humanitarian agencies' focus on refugees at the expense of other vulnerable groups told the study that 'the arrival of refugees has been positive for the local population which benefited from their presence. We now have schools and classrooms'. The fact that villages have continued accepting refugees in the second period of displacement from CAR clearly demonstrates that the refugee presence is at least still tolerated, if not actively welcomed.

## 3.1 The role of individuals in the host environment

Village chiefs, religious leaders and other individuals in the host environment all played an important role in welcoming refugees, allowing them access to land to construct houses and fields to farm and offering financial help. Local people repeatedly presented themselves as important sources of support and as playing a significant role in refugee integration in East Cameroon – and wanted to be perceived as playing that role. According to one respondent, a religious leader, the local population was 'the one to help solve problems before UNHCR was here'. One village chief interviewed told the study that 'UNHCR and ICRC came to advocate for me to support the refugees. But I helped refugees without them having to do the advocacy'.

Some acted in line with what they felt to be their role within the community. Village chiefs in particular felt that welcoming refugees, managing their access to land and ensuring peaceful cohabitation within the village through supporting all the inhabitants, including refugees, was very much part of their function. As one chief remarked: 'I have an important role in the lives of refugees. I consider them to be the people of my village'. Village chiefs also expressed their motivation in terms of charity and a feeling of shared humanity that recognised Central Africans as refugees fleeing war and violence: 'I know they were facing challenges and I welcomed them by way of charity'. Support and help also came from individuals with no particular official function or ties with Central African refugees residing in their village, motivated by similar feelings of charity.

## 3.2 A worn-out welcome?

While local people sought to present themselves as important sources of support for refugees, interviewees also felt that their role in helping refugees integrate into their communities had not been properly recognised or compensated by aid agencies, and that refugees enjoyed privileged access to assistance and services, in particular healthcare and food assistance. The testimony of one village chief neatly encapsulates the tension between the impulse to help and frustration at the lack of recognition of local people's efforts and needs:

> *They were fleeing war and looking for asylum. I gave them land to construct their houses and fields to farm. We have given them everything they needed that we could provide at our level. The refugees can sustain themselves … Yes, the locals are better off in economic terms but we also have old, handicapped people who also need help … there were needs in the village before the refugees arrived.*

Such resentment may be linked to a perception that humanitarian assistance is being unfairly targeted, or at least is being targeted towards refugees at the expense of other vulnerable individuals in the community.[5] It also reflects the perception that humanitarian assistance is not addressing a more chronic developmental problem within communities. In the eyes of one interviewee, from a local authority:

> *We share the same living space. Refugees are better off than locals. They are given a lot of privileges such as nutrition [food assistance]. The NGOs and UNHCR take care of refugees whereas the locals have no help.*

Assistance providers themselves appeared to recognise the need for greater recognition of local contributions to supporting refugees, though what that recognition might consist of was less clear. As one humanitarian worker put it:

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5    As this Working Paper was being prepared, UNHCR indicated that it had recently signed an agreement with the Ministry of the Economy to support the development of councils in areas hosting refugees. UNHCR was also in the process of developing partnerships with other ministries and institutions, including Social Affairs and the National Fund for Employment (FNE), to support refugees' self-reliance.

> *There is a need for more appreciation. Central African refugees arrived and the local population welcomed them before the authorities or humanitarian organisations. At first there were no issues. But when the authorities and humanitarian organisations came to only assist refugees without respecting and acknowledging the support given to refugees by locals, problems start. This has more to do with assistance than refugees themselves.*

The apparent resentment towards refugees may also be linked to deeper frustration to do with the duration of their displacement. While initially welcoming, over time, and with the increasing number of refugees from CAR following new arrivals in 2014, this generally positive attitude seemed to be souring. In the words of one interviewee from a humanitarian organisation:

> *You have to understand that when a stranger comes to live in your house, after a few days you start asking when he is leaving. Some people are starting to be frustrated with the situation and it creates sources of conflicts.*

This change in mood appeared to be despite strong similarities between refugees and host populations, ethnically, commercially and in terms of family ties. The study suggests that, while these connections can be important sources of support, they are not inexhaustible, particularly in the face of such a large group of refugees in a context of chronic under-development and poverty, where livelihoods are already fragile.

A large amount of criticism appeared to be directed towards what was perceived as refugees' preferential access to healthcare. In the first phase of this research, refugees complained repeatedly about problems obtaining healthcare and medicines. While they were told that health services and drugs were available to them for free, refugees reported feeling unwelcome at health centres and being treated badly by staff. At the same time, however, host communities felt that free access to drugs and services for refugees took away the little available medicine which they, the locals, had to pay for. In effect, refugees were not satisfied with their access to health services and medication, and host communities were increasingly frustrated with the impact of the refugee presence on their own ability to access health services and medication. As one humanitarian worker put it: 'Locals feel that this has become the refugee hospital'.

The root causes of this lack of good-quality access to healthcare are linked to wider development issues in East Cameroon. Prior to the arrival of refugees, healthcare infrastructure was already insufficient (World Bank, 2008). Even though several interviewees acknowledged that the presence of refugees had helped develop that infrastructure through the construction and staffing of more health centres by humanitarian organisations in areas where both refugees and hosts could benefit, health services were perceived as crowded by refugees, especially in communities where there was a significant minority of refugees, or when drug supplies were exhausted and dysfunctional systems failed to restock health centres.

The study also found anecdotal evidence that local communities were taking back land originally granted to refugees to farm or construct homes. While in 2011 UNHCR claimed to have successfully facilitated access to 2,120 hectares of land for CAR refugees in East Cameroon (UNHCR, 2011), others have warned that this access may create tensions between refugees and locals (Butel, 2013). There is evidence that land may be granted for one agricultural season, but then taken back by locals (WFP, 2013). In one village the study visited, refugees had recently lost access to five hectares of land they had been farming for the previous several years when the customary Cameroonian owner took it back. During the first phase of research, refugees in one of the five villages visited mentioned that the chief was taking land back from them. While it was not possible to assess the extent or prevalence of this practice, it may be a further indication of shifting attitudes towards refugees given the importance of land in refugees' perceptions of how they had been received at the start of their displacement.

## 3.3 Perceptions of humanitarian assistance: symptom or cause?

Our analysis suggests that criticism of humanitarian assistance in East Cameroon may be partly a proxy for, as well as the source of, local frustration around under-development, lack of investment from the government, isolation and neglect. Even so, developing a better understanding of how assistance is perceived locally may open up more space to facilitate refugee livelihoods and contribute to refugees' economic and social integration. Multiple elements shaped

how local people perceived humanitarian assistance, including the vulnerability of refugees vis-à-vis the local population; the role local people saw themselves playing in helping refugees integrate and become 'like them'; and resentment at the continued provision of emergency assistance in a context that local people no longer regarded as an emergency.

Whether perceptions of assistance were positive, negative or a combination was also shaped by the specific type of assistance refugees received. Whereas interventions such as the registration of refugees or protection programming, including providing documents to refugees, were not mentioned as problematic, access to free healthcare and food assistance was regularly criticised for privileging one group over others, treating refugees differently and ignoring needs within the host community. This seems to have contributed to a feeling that, while local people had contributed to the economic and social integration of refugees, by differentiating between the two groups assistance was undermining social integration.

One response has been to ensure that a certain portion of assistance reaches local communities. UNHCR and its partners, for example, often implement a policy that 30% of its assistance targets host communities, and the local health, education and other facilities that it builds are intended to benefit locals, as well as refugees. This policy was also implemented in Cameroon. However, adjusting targeting in this way does not seem to have addressed local frustration around food assistance and free healthcare for refugees. As one humanitarian worker put it: 'The host community does not feel it is taken into account, even with some projects targeting 30% of them and with the construction of infrastructures such as school class rooms, hospitals or water points'. This suggests that simply channelling more material assistance towards local communities will not address underlying sources of resentment to do with wider problems of under-development – problems beyond the remit or mandate of humanitarian agencies themselves.

This study of local perceptions of humanitarian assistance also suggests a need to rethink who in the host environment humanitarian agencies interact with. In general, agencies interact with formal institutions and actors, such as village chiefs, *préfets* (local representatives of the central government) and the

police – rather than individuals outside of official positions and institutions. UNHCR, for example, seeks to support local communities through supporting their local authorities, including through a new collaboration with the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development. However, it is unclear whether working through local authorities is effective in reaching individuals within that community. If the triangular relationship between host individuals, humanitarian organisations and refugees matters for understanding and addressing challenges to refugees' livelihoods – and this study would argue that it does – then this lack of interaction with individuals within the host community outside agencies' usual scope of interest limits agencies' ability to properly understand the local dynamics between refugees and host communities and provide appropriate support for social and economic integration. As one civil society organisation member put it: 'UNHCR does not communicate directly with host communities. They interact with them through the administrative and local authorities that are not necessarily representative of public opinions and may serve personal interest'. Humanitarian actors themselves admitted that more direct and sustained dialogue with host communities was often not prioritised or done systematically. Direct engagement and dialogue with local individuals would facilitate clearer communication.

Humanitarian organisations' ability to engage more with host communities was also constrained as the second movement of Central African refugees triggered a new emergency, requiring humanitarian actors to refocus on life-saving activities for refugees. Our interviews indicated that lack of funding restricted the staff time and other resources that could be invested in more participatory approaches to engaging with local communities. However, the situation for the second group of refugees had since stabilised, and sustained engagement with local communities may have been more feasible. Better communication and information and more meaningful and systematic dialogue between humanitarians and locals – and, crucially, a greater willingness to listen to their concerns – would help address host communities' negative perceptions of assistance.

Over the last decade Central African refugees have integrated into local Cameroonian communities in part thanks to the support and help of locals. As Central African refugees have increasingly come to resemble local Cameroonians in economic terms, in the sense that both groups face similar chronic challenges to their livelihoods, perceptions of their vulnerability and need for assistance have changed: if Central African refugees have integrated into local communities, local people can quite legitimately ask, why should they receive privileged support and assistance?

# 4 Welcoming and controlling: the state's relationship with refugees and humanitarian organisations

Like those of local populations, approaches and attitudes towards refugees among local authorities also appeared to be changing, from an initial laissez-faire approach to their care and management towards a greater concern for controlling their movements and settlement decisions. For refugees, this shift has constrained the choices and opportunities available to them, for instance in terms of where they live and how they pursue their livelihoods. For aid agencies, this hardening of official attitudes means that some decisions, such as where food assistance is delivered, were now out of their control – despite an ostensibly open policy framework.

## 4.1 Freedom of movement and refugee settlement

Cameroon has welcomed refugees through an open-door policy, and has ratified the major legal instruments for refugee protection, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention. A progressive legal framework unveiled in 2005 and officially in force since 2011 allows refugees to work, move around freely and reside in the country.[6] In interviews, local authorities (the police, village chiefs, *préfets*, mayors and local representatives of line ministries) restated this commitment, and explained their role in terms of ensuring that, once in the country, refugees behaved according to Cameroon's customs and laws. One chief highlighted that, when refugees misbehave: 'It is my role as chief to talk to them, to scold them'.  Another

said that his job was to 'advise refugees so that they behave like locals'. One local authority representative described the relationship between the authorities and refugees as 'paternalistic', in the sense of the relationship between parent and child: protecting and supporting refugees, as a father would his children, and providing an element of 'education' and 'parenting', especially in transferring local values to refugees, and disciplining and correcting behaviour deemed not to comply with local customs and culture.

While the authorities saw themselves as welcoming to Central Africans, their function and role also included a more controlling relationship that had led to increasing obstacles to refugees' freedom of movement and increasing efforts to control where they settle. In principle, Cameroonian law permits freedom of movement, and hence freedom to self-settle outside of formal camps. The study found no indication that UNHCR was following a policy of encampment, or had instructions from the government that refugees must be in camps, and police officials we interviewed said that they had been instructed not to detain individuals without refugee status, but to refer them to UNHCR for support and assistance. In practice, however, other concerns, including security and fear of crime, influenced how the legal and policy framework was interpreted and implemented by local authorities.

Broadly speaking, the study found a hardening of official attitudes following new refugee arrivals in 2014. In the early phase of the crisis both humanitarian organisations and the government

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6   For a full overview of national Cameroonian law on refugees see http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/44eb242e4.pdf.

adopted a policy of encouraging refugees able to self-settle to do so, in part in response to delays in locating adequate camp sites. Interviews with refugees in the first phase of this study also showed that many were helped by relatives, acquaintances and refugees from previous displacement to find appropriate villages and towns to settle in. New arrivals were also offered accommodation, in some cases for months (Barbelet, 2017). Since then, growing concerns around insecurity, in particular the infiltration into Cameroon of armed groups from CAR and the conflict with Boko Haram in the north of the country, appear to have prompted a more assertive approach to self-settlement, and to refugee movement in general. This is a legitimate concern: armed groups have crossed over the border into Cameroon and committed violent acts against refugees and local Cameroonians (HPG interviews; CRS, 2016), contributing to a general sense of insecurity and instability in the east of the country. One humanitarian worker explained the change in attitude: 'before, the government was open to local integration, but with the new influx this is no longer possible. The security issue has become crucial'. Other factors at work in influencing official attitudes included a sense that the second movement of refugees had brought with it 'people with bad values' – highlighting again the paternalistic relationship between the authorities and refugees – and more general concerns about the large number of refugees in the country (IEDA Relief, 2014); according to one local authority representative interviewed in Bertoua, 'the percentage of refugees is higher than locals here'.

This more controlling approach towards refugees translated into an increased emphasis on managing refugees' movements and encouraging refugees to settle in specific locations. As one humanitarian worker explained: 'The position of the government is that there is an area for refugees. Mandjou is OK and Bertoua is not'. In implementing this policy, the authorities directed where assistance could be delivered and where it could not, forcing refugees to choose between receiving assistance or accessing informal support through family members and seeking livelihoods opportunities in cities such as Bertoua. Refugees' freedom of movement was also being curtailed, further affecting livelihoods opportunities and hampering economic and social integration. As one interviewee from a humanitarian organisation put it: 'The police stop refugees at check points and state that refugees are not allowed to move'.

The distinction between areas where refugees could settle and thus receive humanitarian assistance and where they could not was not clear in the first phase of this research; refugees we interviewed in Bertoua could not explain why they were not receiving food assistance, and did not understand that this was government policy. As a result, refugees wasted time, effort and resources in trying to access food assistance in areas where it was explicitly not available. For its part, UNHCR and other assistance agencies felt that they had little choice but to compromise with a government that had generally facilitated the refugee presence in Cameroon, rather than advocating in favour of more open policies that aligned better with refugees' interests.

## 4.2 The state, humanitarian organisations and refugees

Humanitarian organisations are permitted by the government to operate and support refugees in East Cameroon. In fact, while the government saw its role as welcoming and hosting refugees in accordance with its legal commitments, local authorities distanced themselves from direct responsibility for supporting refugees, in effect 'sub-contracting' this role to UN agencies and NGOs. As one local authority representative explained, while UNHCR's mandate derived from the government, 'our interaction is not direct because UNHCR manages refugees'.

In effect, humanitarian organisations, whether willingly or not, substituted for some aspects of state authority and responsibility towards refugees. For example, one police officer we spoke to told the study that UNHCR would displace the government in disputes between refugees. While UNHCR clearly has a role in refugee protection, replacing the authority of the state in such a direct way may well have the effect of undermining longer-term social integration and cohesion in much the same way as popular perceptions of refugees' privileged access to material assistance.

Underlying this position was a strong sense that humanitarian organisations did not respect local institutions. One local authority representative told the study that 'they [humanitarian organisations] are elusive with us. We do not have any contact with them. We do not see them. We are the ones who have to go and see them'. The view among

local authorities that UNHCR and other agencies were implementing their mandates in ways that failed to respect roles and functions usually reserved to the state appeared to be changing the way local authorities interacted with the agency. Much as with attitudes towards refugees themselves, state authorities appeared to be trying to reassert their position and role by controlling the work of humanitarian organisations and monitoring their activities. As one local authority member put it: 'Before they used to not inform us but we reminded them of their obligation and brought order back.

Now they inform us'. Another told us that 'UNHCR had corrected its mistake' when the authorities asked the agency to share assistance with host populations.

Changing attitudes towards refugees and assistance agencies are likely to have important implications as the humanitarian response transitions out of the emergency phase and into longer-term developmental programming in what has become a protracted refugee situation. The tensions and opportunities inherent in this shifting policy and programming landscape are explored in the next chapter.

# 5 A developmental approach to refugee support

Interviews for this study found a striking consensus among organisations concerned with refugees that the situation in East Cameroon constituted a post-emergency transition. For both humanitarian organisations and local authorities, this called for a different approach to supporting refugees. For the government this meant a more assertive relationship with refugees and greater involvement in managing the refugee situation. For humanitarian organisations, and in UNHCR's new strategy, this meant a change of operational focus from emergency assistance to longer-term programming in sectors such as livelihoods, education and health. However, this shift in focus seemed disconnected from the actual reality of refugees' lives; while some felt a continued need for assistance and access to services, many of the refugees we spoke to in the first phase of this research said that they had been looking for support to become self-sustaining and to achieve their livelihoods aspiration from the onset of their displacement. This suggests that programming was not sufficiently adaptive or in line with the shifting needs of refugees over time.

## 5.1 Lagging behind: the gap between support and needs

A transition from an emergency to a more stable displacement situation had taken place once before in East Cameroon, following the arrival of Central African refugees in the mid-2000s. As food security and nutrition indicators improved, and humanitarian organisations came to regard refugees' integration as successful, in economic terms at least, food assistance was cut from 80,0000 to 18,000 beneficiaries in 2011. At the time of the second crisis in CAR, the few humanitarian organisations present in East Cameroon were planning their exit strategies. The new influx of Central African refugees shifted the response back into emergency mode, and an increasing number of NGOs set up operations in response.

Two years on, humanitarian organisations were again ready to switch gears from emergency relief back to longer-term support. However, some humanitarian organisations felt that they were playing catch-up with the realities of refugees' lives and needs. As one humanitarian worker put it: 'refugees are waiting for us', implying that the humanitarian response was lagging behind, and was not providing the right support at the right time. This discrepancy between what refugees said they needed and the life-saving assistance humanitarian organisations were providing was a function of how humanitarian organisations defined the situation on the ground: as long as humanitarian organisations termed the situation an emergency, the operational focus remained on life-saving relief. The first phase of the study on the perspectives of refugees found that a minority, from both the first and second caseloads, still wanted relief, but others – probably the majority – sought help to become self-reliant from early on in their displacement. In effect, the idea of a 'transition' from emergency to post-emergency was a misnomer: the two states co-existed. Some refugees found themselves in greater need at the onset of their displacement, while others grew increasingly destitute over the years. Some had greater capacity for self-reliance at the beginning of their displacement, when they still owned productive assets, while for others self-reliance came with time, as they developed new strategies to respond to diminishing assistance.

In other words, refugees had different trajectories and capacities at different periods during their displacement. There was no single transition into or out of the need for assistance or livelihoods support, but a more complex story of individuals needing different forms of support at different times, regardless of how aid actors defined the situation they were in. Selecting the types of support to provide based on whether the overall refugee situation was defined as 'emergency' or 'post-emergency' – and consequently the types of support given to refugees – did not match the complex and shifting patterns of needs and

capacities individual refugees experienced during their displacement.

Humanitarian organisations understood that different people had different abilities to survive upon arrival, and that some refugees could have benefited from more support for their livelihoods goals, rather than the provision of assistance, but this knowledge did not translate into more textured and adaptive programming. As one humanitarian worker put it: 'we assumed [in 2014] that those refugees living in villages were going to be OK for six months and that the focus should be on entry points and sites'. Humanitarian workers we interviewed felt that, at the time of the influx, there was no space for livelihoods support:

> *People were dying. So we needed to save lives. You will not have the budget or the space to hire a livelihoods officer and as head of this organisation I would not have had that space. At the beginning the priorities were health, WASH and nutrition. We focused on these.*

There was a real sense from our interviews that supporting self-sustenance through livelihoods programming at the time of the emergency, with some refugees showing extreme levels of under-nutrition, food insecurity and ill-health, ran counter to the humanitarian imperative to prioritise the most vulnerable. Implementing developmental activities alongside an emergency response also risked taking already limited funding away from life-saving work. UNHCR funding levels against requirements for the CAR situation in Cameroon were respectively 16% for 2015, 15% for 2016 and 6% by July 2017.[8] While from a principled point of view the decision by humanitarian organisations to prioritise lifesaving interventions and target the most vulnerable was a rational choice, especially in light of limited funding, this led to missed opportunities to provide punctual support to refugees who could have achieved self-reliance earlier. As discussed in the first phase of this research (Barbelet, 2017), the emphasis on immediate

assistance also appears to have discouraged refugees away from more uncertain, but potentially more rewarding, livelihood choices.[9]

Dedicating resources, whether human or financial, remains a negotiation between pure humanitarian needs and longer-term support. According to one humanitarian worker:

> *This is a battle inside not with senior management but with other sectors, health and protection. We are fighting for funds. Although livelihood is a priority in the organisation, I only got 50% of the budget I requested. It is not life-saving short-term. But livelihood takes time. In the next four years if there is no more money for us to give assistance, livelihoods will become life-saving.*

The failure to adjust programming to align more closely with refugees' needs was partly caused by the lack of reliable socio-economic data, beyond data available in needs assessments, necessary to make such policy decisions. More data was needed to make programming adaptive and reactive, including information gathered through the Household Economy Approach, levels of education and skills and past livelihoods experience in CAR and in Cameroon. More importantly, an analysis of past actions and strategies tried by refugees and an analysis of the obstacles and challenges they faced in doing so would have enabled a more in-depth understanding of who was resilient and what was needed to improve refugees' self-reliance. Gathering such information is one of the steps UNHCR is currently taking as part of its focus on supporting the livelihoods of refugees in eastern Cameroon.

## 5.2 Challenges to a long-term developmental approach

As it became clearer that Central African refugees were going to be in East Cameroon for at least a few more years, the humanitarian sector was increasingly thinking about livelihood support at a meso level (beyond a household-level approach, but also not at the national macro-economic level, including for instance developing

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8   UNHCR 2015 Funding Update Cameroon, 1 December 2015, http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2015%20 Cameroon%20Funding%20Overview%20as%20of%201DEC15. pdf; UNHCR 2016 Funding Update Cameroon, 27 January 2017, http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Cameroon%20 Funding%20Update%2027%20January%202017.pdf; UNHCR 2017 Funding Update, 17 July 2017, http://reporting.unhcr.org/ sites/default/files/Cameroon%20Funding%20Update%2017%20 July%202017.pdf.

9   For more on how perceptions of livelihoods opportunities and risks play a role in livelihoods choices, see Levine (2014).

market infrastructure and strengthening local value chains) and in more strategic ways. As part of this new approach, UNCHR and its partners were advocating for a longer-term developmental approach to supporting refugees. In line with this, UNHCR's strategy for 2016 was geared towards shifting to 'development oriented interventions in refugee-hosting municipalities … in particular through community-based development mechanisms and increasingly aligning the humanitarian intervention with Government-led development plans' (UNHCR, 2016a). The analysis below identifies some of the factors that may undermine such efforts.

### 5.2.1 Scale

Most livelihood support to refugees was small scale and most often involved transferring assets (either money or in-kind), with very little understanding of whether that transfer would make a difference. In 2014, UNHCR reached a little over 6% of CAR refugees with livelihood support, primarily assets or cash to support productive activity, such as the distribution of seeds and tools for agriculture. Similarly, in 2015 WFP's livelihoods support through its Food for Asset programme reached just 7,500 people. Most of the livelihoods programmes recorded during this research were reaching a few hundred people. One NGO staff member reflected that livelihoods support to CAR refugees was like 'pouring a glass of water in the river'.

Livelihood support was not only small in terms of numbers targeted, but also in terms of the support being provided. Most projects were based on distributing assets often limited to a few thousand CFA francs. For instance, one programme provided 129 people with 30,000 FCA (£30) to start a business. When interviewed, the programme coordinator reflected that such a small sum amounted to 'subsistence not a real livelihood'. By way of comparison, traders interviewed as part of this study considered that, to set up a small shop that could sustain a family, a start-up investment of 500,000 FCFA (£860) would be required. Essentially, most programmes labelled livelihoods support were in fact just another way of transferring assets to refugees, with little more impact than the immediate relief that a cash transfer provides.

### 5.2.2 Lack of evidence

The lack of strategic livelihood support meant that it was difficult to identify successful attempts to support the livelihoods of Central African refugees in East Cameroon. This was compounded by a lack of

adequate monitoring and evaluation of projects. As most livelihood projects were short-term, implementing organisations could not monitor the impact of their livelihoods support in the medium to long term because monitoring stopped with the end of the project. The lack of long-term monitoring months and even years down the line meant that there was little evidence of whether and how interventions had helped refugees. In addition, interviews revealed that indicators used to judge the success of livelihood support focused on monitoring outputs delivered, but did not consider other indicators of success, such as increased revenue, decreased debt or improved nutrition outcomes within the household, let alone more subjective indicators of the extent to which refugees felt that interventions had contributed to better lives and livelihoods. This interview with one livelihoods programme coordinator exemplifies the problem:

> *It was a success. Sixty per cent maintained their activity. Others just spent the money we gave them. Because the money we gave them was not to be paid back by the beneficiary there was no strict monitoring. We only came back once after one month. When we stop our projects, nothing is done to make them independent from our assistance.*

The study only found one evaluation of livelihoods support to CAR refugees (US State Department, 2014). Among other things, the evaluation recommended increasing the scale of support to refugees to enable them to move beyond a hand-to-mouth existence.

### 5.2.3 The limited presence of development partners

Another obstacle to changing the forms of support refugees in East Cameroon receive stems from the types of actors present there, in particular the dearth of development capacity in a context of repeated refugee emergencies. In the absence of suitable partners, humanitarian organisations did not see themselves as either equipped or mandated to undertake more developmental work, and at the time of the field research many were redirecting their operations to northern Cameroon, in response to internal displacement and a refugee crisis prompted by the conflict with Boko Haram. As one humanitarian worker put it:

> *Our organisation does not have the weight to carry forward this argument. We need to be*

*here as long as refugees are here but we do not have the development expertise. We need to attract new partners. We are looking to local national partners but they lack capacity. Civil society is weak and fragmented.*

### 5.2.4 Redefining partnership and the role of government: the money question

A more developmental approach also entails closer partnership with the government. Although the transition out of the emergency phase has prompted closer collaboration between humanitarian organisations and the government, the government has been reluctant to integrate refugees' needs within ministerial development plans and budgets, preferring instead to treat them as a separate issue to be met through parallel bilateral funding from humanitarian organisations.[10] In part this stems from a concern that including refugee needs in wider development planning would constitute a tacit admission that many CAR refugees will effectively become permanent residents. According to one local authority representative: 'We know that among refugees in the Gado camp, for instance, 40% will not want to go back to CAR. What will we do with these 40% staying in East Cameroon?'. Without increased investment from the central government, local authorities felt that they did not have the resources to support local populations, including refugees. In some areas refugees were prevented from joining government-supported agricultural groups and cooperatives, meaning that they could not access funding to support agricultural activities.

While the integration of refugees remains a sensitive subject, the government has accepted that their presence will be long-term, requiring more involvement on its part and closer partnerships with humanitarian organisations and UNHCR on the ground. While UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations have long worked at the technical level with line ministries, there were indications that the central government's increasing interest in managing the refugee situation was prompting greater collaboration at a more strategic level. Reflecting this, UNHCR's livelihoods strategy for 2016 states that it

will increasingly work with the government (UNHCR, 2016a), though it remains to be seen whether it will be able to provide the right incentives to allay government concerns around integrating refugee needs into national development plans. The World Bank might provide the necessary incentive through the extension of its global concessional financing facility, announced in October 2016,[11] to support Cameroon in hosting refugees while also dealing with development challenges. In the meantime, the response will continue to rely on separate humanitarian funding, limiting the scope for interventions aimed at improving refugee livelihoods. Multi-year strategies such as UNHCR's multi-year livelihoods strategies in eastern Cameroon could help extract long-term gains from short-term funds. However, current funding gaps and the continued prioritisation of protection and assistance to the most vulnerable will remain a challenge for livelihoods programming.

### 5.2.5 Donor policies: funding and project cycles

Humanitarian organisations felt that current donor funding structures did not support long-term programming for refugees, and that the short-term nature of programme and funding cycles constituted a significant obstacle to providing better support for refugees' lives and livelihoods. Partnerships and budgets were being decided on an annual basis (with delays). Humanitarian organisations felt that, with six- to nine-month projects, little could be done to achieve any meaningful impacts on the lives of refugees. Humanitarian organisations did not feel adequately equipped to deal with protracted displacement, in the sense that short-term funding from donors meant short-term programming by agencies. It is unclear why, in the case of East Cameroon, donor support for refugees still came from the humanitarian pot, not from development funds, especially as the situation was being described as a post-emergency setting.

Humanitarian organisations were also concerned that the humanitarian sections of donor governments were not set up to support a longer-term approach to refugees. While some donors were funding assessments (such as value chain analysis and household economy approaches) that supported the development of longer-term livelihoods support to refugees, it was widely

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10 The World Bank's announcement in October 2016 of new financing facilities for middle-income countries hosting refugees may provide greater incentives for governments and development partners to work together in refugee contexts. See http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/10/04/following-the-refugees-new-global-concessional-financing-facility and World Bank (2016a).

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11 For more on this facility see http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/10/04/following-the-refugees-new-global-concessional-financing-facility.

accepted that this was pushing the boundaries of donor policies regarding humanitarian funding; as one humanitarian staff member put it: 'It is clear that our humanitarian donors are stepping out of their mandates in supporting food security and livelihoods projects'.

Respondents highlighted that some donors simply refused to fund livelihoods support for refugees. Even where donors funded livelihoods work and allowed multi-year funding, this remained short-term due to UNHCR's policy of one-year projects, highlighting the need to revise other policy and operational frameworks to allow for a longer-term approach. According to one interviewee from a humanitarian organisation:

> *We are having difficulties having funding for three years rather than one year. DFID gives funding for three years but because it funds activities through UNHCR, projects remain six to nine months long. UNHCR does not seem to have this vision of longer-term strategy.*

There was no indication that UNHCR's new livelihoods strategy would make longer-term funding for implementing partners and projects more likely, although it does stress that short-term funding and programme cycles need not in themselves be an obstacle to longer-term strategic planning (UNHCR, 2016b).

Humanitarian organisations were also concerned that donors would not accept livelihood projects funded from humanitarian funds that were not geared towards the most vulnerable refugees, but towards those able or with the potential to successfully benefit from livelihoods support. Donors providing humanitarian funding were seen – accurately, and in line with the principles of humanitarian donorship based on needs – as only funding projects that targeted

the most vulnerable. Once more, as argued above, it is unclear why support to refugees in protracted displacement should not benefit from development funding that would be more in line with the realities refugees faced in East Cameroon.

### 5.2.6 The operational divide

Several humanitarian organisations were critical of development partners at the national level, and questioned their ability to provide meaningful support at the local level in East Cameroon. This criticism was based on a perception that the World Bank and UNDP were suited to policy dialogue at the global and national level, but were less equipped to provide operational support. As one humanitarian worker put it: 'There is no role for UNDP and the World Bank: they are not here and they are not interested. The government is a much more important partner'. At the same time, however, there is a need for national-level policy dialogue hand in hand with micro-level livelihoods interventions to address the multiple obstacles preventing refugees from achieving better livelihood outcomes.

Ultimately, in a long-term displacement context like Cameroon, the key lies in harnessing the comparative advantage of humanitarian and development expertise and funding together, rather than sequentially. Humanitarian and development needs exist side by side, and need to be addressed in tandem if refugees are to attain self-reliance and sustainable livelihood outcomes. The point perhaps is less to do with overcoming a 'humanitarian–development divide' than accepting its reality and finding flexible ways to leverage the potential opportunities of both forms of assistance. Bringing in development partners and development banks as equal actors to UNHCR and humanitarian organisations in responding to displacement and supporting refugees and their hosts at the very onset of any refugee movement would be a step forward in accepting this reality.

# 6 Conclusion

In the first phase of this study, CAR refugees were found to have different trajectories in displacement, with some needing assistance early, while others arrived with assets they could use. However, as time went on many CAR refugees found it difficult to secure sustainable livelihoods and fulfil their goals and aspirations, and were increasingly vulnerable as their financial and human capital was depleted. At the same time, the ad hoc informal support refugees relied on decreased rapidly as displacement went on, at the same time as formal assistance declined.

This second phase of work highlights a two-fold process of vulnerability. While refugees' own human, financial and social capital decreased and formal aid reduced, we found that initially welcoming attitudes from within host communities and the local authorities soured over time. Personal, trading, religious and ethnic ties between hosts and refugees facilitated but did not guarantee support and welcome. Host communities sought to present themselves as having played an important role for refugees – a view that refugees echoed in our first phase of research. However, host communities also felt that their support had not been properly recognised and compensated. Instead, they viewed formal assistance as unfairly targeting refugees and failing to recognise that, while refugees faced specific obstacles, people in East Cameroon generally faced similar chronic challenges to their livelihoods.

A facilitating de jure policy framework was not enough to guarantee support to refugees as official attitudes became more controlling of refugee movements and settlement. For refugees, this shift limited the choices and opportunities available to them. For aid agencies, a hardening of attitudes towards them meant less freedom in how they supported refugees, just as UNHCR's more developmental approach entailed a closer relationship with a more assertive government. This recognition of the need for longer-term support was however disconnected from the realities of refugees, many of whom had already taken steps towards self-reliance early on in their displacement. In Cameroon, aid agencies lacked the ability to operate in adaptive and reactive ways, and thus failed to exploit what

opportunities did exist to improve refugees' livelihoods with the right support at the right time.

A number of key implications follow from this. Host communities are a critical institution in hosting refugees, and as such are a significant element of refugees' lives and livelihoods. Yet aid agencies' accountability to host communities remains weak. More accountability would involve not only improving information dissemination and communication, but also checking in more effectively with host communities on the impact of assistance and of the presence of refugees. Part of the issue highlighted in this report is the way aid agencies interact with host communities through other local institutions (the village chief or the mayor). How aid agencies can better interact with individuals and locals beyond administrative and local authorities remains a challenge. Partnership with local civil society organisations may help change the dynamic of that interaction with host communities. Because of their membership structure, civil society organisations would be better placed to represent and relate to the interests of local populations.

For many refugees in East Cameroon, both economic and social integration is being curtailed by more controlling government policies on their freedom of movement and freedom to settle where they feel they can best sustain themselves and their families. Livelihoods are often solely thought of in economic terms, and much less so in social terms. However, both elements are essential to livelihoods. Aid agencies' current policies should be considered and examined in light of their impact on social integration. For assistance providers, the tendency to conceptualise the situation as an emergency, and hence needful of emergency assistance, has prevented other expertise and partners from coming forward to address the chronic issues East Cameroon faces – challenges that will continue to obstruct the livelihoods of both refugees and locals. By highlighting the varying levels of vulnerability and needs among refugee populations, a reality at odds with common assumptions around the sequential nature of vulnerability, and hence a 'simple' transition from emergency assistance to

longer-term support, this report calls for a more adaptive approach to responding to refugee situations.

Even given the funding and operational constraints as well as the changing policy context, going forward, a number of actions can be taken to better respond to the refugee situation in eastern Cameroon:

To address social integration and relations between hosts and refugees, current targeting policies should be evaluated to identify if and how they support better social cohesion. Similarly, quick-impact projects within the host community should be further evaluated to understand how they are perceived by the community concerned. We found that projects designed to improve the common good – building schools, healthcare centres and water points – have done little to affect local perceptions of assistance, and also have not necessarily been successful in an objective sense: having more health-care centres does not necessarily improve local access to drugs, and more schools does not necessarily mean less crowded classrooms and higher-quality education. Social cohesion analysis (CRS, 2016) should be conducted in place of simple assumptions that current targeting processes support better social cohesion. Finally, partnerships with community-based organisations and local civil society organisations should be explored as a more effective way to monitor and relate to host communities.

To address growing restrictive interpretations and implementation of the national refugee policy, UNHCR and its partners should continue monitoring how refugees' experiences evolve, using this as a basis for advocacy with the government. Furthermore, as the World Bank increases its engagement in the refugee situation in Cameroon, any financing or interventions from the Bank and other development partners should incorporate incentives and conditionality regarding freedom of movement, freedom to settle and access to assistance, services and land.

Donors and development partners must commit to investing in longer-term developmental support to the refugee situation in eastern Cameroon even if events in the CAR mean that new refugees cross the border. To address chronic underdevelopment and the lack of economic opportunity in eastern Cameroon, the government, with the support of development banks and donors, needs to invest funding and attract partners with the right expertise to tackle such structural obstacles to both refugees' and locals' livelihoods. At the same time, humanitarian organisations and UNHCR need to operate in a more adaptive manner, managing both assistance and services to the most vulnerable refugees and investment in the livelihoods of refugees.

# Annex 1
## List of interviews

A total of 36 interviews and one focus group discussion (local traders) were conducted. For some of the organisations listed below, multiple interviews with different individuals were conducted. Interviews were conducted anonymously and represented individuals' experience and opinions rather than that of their organisations.

| Host community | |
|---|---|
| Local Catholic priests | Local faith-based actor |
| Local imam | Local faith-based actor |
| Individuals from the host community | Host community |
| Local traders | Local private sector |
| **Local authorities** | |
| Village chiefs | Local authority |
| Local police | Local legal authority |
| Mayor | Local authority |
| Préfets | Local authority |
| Département de l'Agriculture et du Développement Rural | Local representative of national government |
| Ministère de l'Agriculture et du Développement Rural | Local representative of national government |
| Ministère des Affaires Sociales | Local representative of national government |
| Ministère de l'Elevage, des pêches et des industries animales | Local representative of national government |
| **National and local organisations** | |
| Association pour l'Intégration et le développement Social des Peuls d'Afrique (AIDSPC) | Central African refugee community organisation |
| Association des Jeunes Mbororo de l'est (AJEMBO EST) | Community-based organisation |
| Association d'Assistance au Développement (ASAD) | Local NGO |
| Association Femmes pour la Promotion du Leadership Moral (FEPLEM) | Local NGO |
| GIC – regroupement de producteurs agricoles | Local agricultural cooperative |
| Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) | National NGO |
| RESPECT Cameroun | National NGO |
| **International organisations** | |
| Catholic Relief Services (CRS) | INGO |
| Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) | INGO |
| UNHCR Bertoua | UN |
| ICRC | ICRC |
| IEDA Relief | INGO |
| Lutheran World Foundation (LWF) | INGO |
| UN Women | UN |
| Premiere Urgence (PU AMI) | INGO |
| Solidarites | INGO |
| UNICEF | UN |
| WFP | UN |

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# HPG

## Humanitarian Policy Group

The Humanitarian Policy Group is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and information professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

Cover photo: A CAR refugee makes beignets (doughnuts) for sale at a restaurant in Ngam refugee camp.
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