

The “Officials of 40 Street” in N’Djamena: a phenomenon outside the humanitarian field

Emmanuel Bossennec • Coordinateur du Pôle formation à l’association La Voûte nubienne

The capital of Chad is experiencing a phenomenon which is common to many other African cities. These young people who “come to the city”, being neither refugees nor displaced persons, pass under the radar of humanitarian workers and politicians alike. They nevertheless represent a situation which ought to concern them both.

Over the last few years, N’Djamena has experienced a mass arrival of young people from the villages in southern Chad. Hoping to find more accessible income opportunities in the capital than in the provinces (to “find their feet”, as one of them puts it¹) they work part-time jobs as domestic workers or street vendors. These young men and women, including a number of minors, are known to N’Djamena residents as the “Officials of 40 Street”. The expression refers to the so 40-metre-wide street which is the main artery that runs through the capital’s northern neighbourhoods and the location of the wealthy households in which many of these young people work. Associated with the rural exodus, this phenomenon which, according to N’Djamena residents, is growing in scale, is both shocking and worrying. Yet, aside from a study carried out in 2016 by the Support Centre for International Health (CSSI), with financial backing from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there is no humanitarian or political programme in place to support and assist these young people. However, a recent article in the French journal *Le Monde* drew attention to their suffering².

Through this phenomenon, common to many African capital cities, this article examines the reasons why a reality presenting all the characteristics of extreme vulnerability, suffering and misery, which would justify dedicated aid programmes, remains a kind of blind spot in terms of humanitarian aid. Our hypothesis is that there is a mismatch between the affected group and aid programmes, and that this mismatch is due on the one hand to the very nature of the phenomenon in question, and on the other hand, to the position and inclinations of those involved in the humanitarian field³.

¹ Moussa Nguedmbaye. « Exode rural : le phénomène prend une dimension inquiétante », *Tchadinfos.com*, 15 janvier 2019, <https://tchadinfos.com/tchad/exode-rural-le-phenomene-prend-une-dimension-inquietante>

² Aurélie Bazzara, « À N’Djamena, la souffrance muette des “fonctionnaires de la rue de 40” », *Le Monde Afrique*, 18 juillet 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/07/18/a-n-djamena-la-souffrance-muette-des-fonctionnaires-de-la-rue-de-40_5333128_3212.html

³ The expression “the humanitarian field” is broadly used to refer to humanitarian actors, programmes and activities, whether they relate to humanitarian aid in the strictest sense, or development assistance, and whether they are institutionalised or stemming from personal or collective initiatives.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

A group that accumulates vulnerabilities

The phenomenon of the “Officials of 40 Street” is difficult to quantify. Apart from the CSSI study mentioned in the introduction, there have been no specific studies on the subject. More generally, data on the population in Chad is outdated (the last census was in 2011), and continent-wide information remains incomplete⁴. The commonly-held view that this phenomenon is on the rise is therefore to be viewed with caution. The very idea of a rural exodus, and the attendant fear of seeing the countryside drained of manpower, is contested by a number of analysts: in one century, the rural population of Burkina Faso has multiplied by five, that of Madagascar by seven, and that of Chad by nine⁵. These statistical considerations notwithstanding, the fact remains that the group vaguely referred to by this expression presents a number of common characteristics.

Generally, the young people in question are considered to come from three or four regions in southern Chad: Mandoul, Moyen-Chari, Logone Oriental and Tandjilé. These regions, which are amongst the most densely populated in the country, make up the agricultural heartland. Since 2003, Logone Oriental has also been home to Chad’s main oil extraction sites (Doba, Komé).

These young people live together in small rooms in the outlying neighbourhoods of N’Djamena (especially Walia, Nguéli, Farcha and Gassi) and travel long distances to get to their workplaces. They can be seen in groups of five or six, morning and evening, walking along the streets leading to the neighbourhoods where they work. During the day, the young men roam the streets, offering various objects and services (nail clippers, shoe-shiners, hairdressers, domestic and everyday objects, pens, second-hand clothes, etc).

The young women are usually hired by rich families in the city’s northern neighbourhoods, where they carry out menial tasks for the household in exchange for salaries far below the national minimum. They are often subjected to ill-treatment and sexual abuse. Some reside in their employers’ houses and have only Sundays free to see their friends and relax.

The collective psyche views these young people with a mixture of pity and reproach, accusing them of the evils of which they are both the vectors and the first victims. In a country where references are still overwhelmingly linked to the rural context, they are associated with all of the scourges of large urban centres: violence, addiction, robbery, incivility, low education levels, isolation, misery, ill-treatment, delinquency, precariousness, prostitution, sexual abuse, early pregnancies, HIV-AIDS and other STDs, exploitation, and even slavery.

The way in which they are treated by their bosses and the misery of their condition arouses compassion. Conversely, their lack of education and poor upbringing, the violence that is attributed to them and some of their behaviours, which are scandalous in the eyes of Chadian society, are met with disapproval. Deep down, they are blamed for having left the villages out of laziness, to escape the hard work in the fields, and to let themselves be taken in by the mirage of an easy life in the city.

⁴ Bénédicte Gastineau et Valérie Golaz, « Être jeune en Afrique rurale. Introduction thématique », *Afrique contemporaine*, n° 259, mars 2016, p. 9-22, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-afrique-contemporaine-2016-3-page-9.html>

⁵ Jean-Marie Cour et Laurent Bossard, « Migrations rurales en Afrique : la voie vers le développement ? », *Éco d’ici, éco d’ailleurs* (radio programme), 11 novembre 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20171111-afrique-migrations-rurales-paysans-exode-villes-developpement>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

A situation characteristic of the changes in Chadian society

If the “Officials of 40 Street” are the victims of a kind of modern slavery, exacerbated by urbanisation, the scale of the phenomenon in N’Djamena also demonstrates the changing attitudes towards a modernity, which is perceived ambivalently by society as a whole.

Many people in Chad deplore the disappearance of their traditions and the exodus of manpower to the capital, at the expense of agricultural activity. And yet, rural life holds little attraction for those who grow up in the villages. Stories of their elders’ successful urban adventures encourage young people to make the journey themselves, whatever the difficulties. The ability to withstand the hardest situations is also an element of the traditional culture, the power of which cannot be underestimated. If the dream of a better life is the driving force for exile, enduring hardships and perseverance in the face of changing fortunes are the fuel of success.

Whether they admit it or not, for many Chadians, in the north, the south, the cities or the countryside, urbanisation coincides with the aspirations to succeed embodied by the comfort, and even the luxury, enjoyed by the rich elite. Like everyone else, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are attracted by the hope of rapid gains and an easier life, but also, on a more practical level, by the search for means to make their own future. The money earned will enable them to return to the villages and acquire land, build, and get married.

This desire is present at all levels of the social hierarchy. It is also because an affluent minority is thriving in the city that they hire paid domestics, however scantily paid they may be. A woman working in a government division told me one day during a work session on precisely the subject of young migrants of the rural exodus: “My daughters go to school. So I need someone at home to cook the meals, sweep up, wash up, do the washing. And because my salary is limited, I hire one of these young people. I can’t give them any more”. Therefore, it is also because wealthier families prefer to educate their daughters – which is undeniably a form of progress, since these tasks would traditionally have fallen to them – that they resort to an external workforce.

Conversely, if young people from the villages in the south of the country prefer a life of quasi-slavery in the capital, it is also because the village lifestyle no longer corresponds to their vision of the world and the future. They decide to leave, choose this way of life, and their education teaches them to develop a strength of character which enables them to overcome the worst difficulties. This is not a foregone conclusion.

A blind spot in the humanitarian field

From a migration perspective, the “Officials of 40 Street” do not fit into the current categories; as indigenous migrants, they are neither refugees, nor technically displaced persons. Their motivations cannot be attributed to natural disasters or particular political events. They display a number of vulnerabilities (social, economic, sanitary, etc), but they develop in a rather vague fringe of the population: without really being integrated into the social fabric, they are nevertheless integrated into networks of family, neighbourhoods, solidarity, and are not therefore strictly speaking “excluded”. Moreover, the proximity of refugees and food crises keeps them low on the list of priorities for emergency programmes.

Nevertheless, there are recurring food crises in some regions and NGOs recently raised the alarm with regard to spikes in malnutrition recorded in N’Djamena. Additionally, the guidelines for international aid are largely dictated by cross-border migrations – particularly those heading north – and by terrorism. Chad is not generally considered to be a country of emigration towards Europe and

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

these young people, from agricultural regions assimilated to the Christian South, are not considered at risk of turning to Islamic terrorism. Hence, in the hierarchy of crises, the “Officials of 40 Street” are somewhat outside the scope of the humanitarian field. Must human distress be catastrophic in nature before it attracts the attention of humanitarian aid and therefore, ultimately, of public opinion?

An analysis by IRIN, published in March 2015 on the occasion of the World Humanitarian Summit, gave refugees a platform in order to study their perception of humanitarian aid agencies⁶. The uncompromising comments by those concerned spoke volumes about the mismatch between refugees’ expectations and aid processes. All too often, humanitarian aid is guided by a technical view of situations. Responses are supposed to follow a logical pattern intended to reassure institutional donors and operatives on the ground.

But crises always have structural, which is to say political, causes. Not in terms of party politics – though that may play its part – but political causes in the wider sense. For example, food crises are less often due to a lack of food and more to a lack of management policy with regard to food. At this level, technical responses are insufficient.

The articulation between humanitarian aid and politics is at stake, and humanitarian actors are loath to venture outside of their comfort zones⁷. Too often, their apolitical nature leads them to distance themselves from these issues, both for reasons of their agendas, and out of fear of offending the authorities and risking a ban. On the other side, political leaders are anxious to avoid NGO interference in their affairs, whilst simultaneously agreeing to implement the programmes imposed or generated by international funding. In this case, the situation of the “Officials of 40 Street” is highly political, and a strictly technical response would certainly be unsuitable.

Finally, the “Officials of 40 Street” are free agents, and equipped by their environment to deal with their choices. It could certainly be argued that, because of the context, their range of choices is limited, and that, in reality, this places them in a position of subjugation. Yet it is precisely this reading of events which leads to intervention on someone else’s behalf. By giving credit to the other person’s decision-making ability, the logic and processes of aid are reversed. The action is no longer driven by one’s representation of the other, but by that of the people that are being addressed.

If the “Officials of 40 Street” remain on the margins of the humanitarian field, it is therefore for two main reasons. The first relates to humanitarian actors’ difficulty in integrating politics into their representations and responses. The second, related reason, is the fact that the subjects targeted by the programmes are free subjects. These two considerations cannot be satisfied by technical or matrix-like responses which influence the representations, and therefore the definition of problems. Courses of action must be found which provide better support to people and changes, and a better response to distress. This, after all, is the very purpose of humanitarian aid.

Translated from the French by Juliet Ponys

⁶ Louise Redvers, “What refugees really think of aid agencies”, *IRIN*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2015/03/05/what-refugees-really-think-aid-agencies>

⁷ Danièle Lochak, « L’humanitaire, les droits de l’homme et le politique », *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, n° 72, octobre-décembre 2003, p. 53-60. http://www.persee.fr/doc/mat_0769-3206_2003_num_72_1_953

Biography • Emmanuel Bossenec

Following a degree in philosophy and a decade spent in a web agency, the desire to find employment that was closer to his aspirations led Emmanuel to Chad, where he was a volunteer for an international solidarity project for three years. He then worked with the NGO Acra, before joining the NGO Essor as Country Coordinator. He returned to France in July 2018 and is currently a Training Coordinator with the *Voûte nubienne* [The Nubian Vault] association, where he works on the development of the construction market in the Sahelian zone, using to the ancestral technical process which gives the association its name.

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives.

To quote this article: Emmanuel Bossenec, "The 'Officials of 40 Street' in N'Djamena: a phenomenon outside the humanitarian field",
Humanitarian Alternatives, n°10, March 2019, p.70-78,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/03/25/officials-40-street-ndjamena-phenomenon-outside-humanitarian-field/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-483-2