

Refugees wedged between corporate malfunctions and the lack of State involvement: the example of a cash programme in Cameroon

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Cash-transfer programmes are now widespread in humanitarian settings, just as partnerships with companies that promote them. Here is the case of the Gado Badzéré refugee camp in Cameroon. For Pierre Boris N'nde, the unsuccessful initiatives of Mobile Telecommunication Networks breached the “do no harm” principle and resulted in violence that was left for NGOs to manage. The Cameroon State, positioning itself in terms of security, here failed in its role as arbitrator.

In the Central African Republic (CAR), the waves of violence between the Seleka forces (coalition of political parties and rebels) and the anti-balaka militia (peasant self-defence groups) that began in 2005 and intensified from 2012 to 2014, drove large numbers of people to flee to Chad, the Sudan, the Congo, and Cameroon. In East Cameroon, coordinated humanitarian relief was deployed in various refugee camps, the largest of which – in terms of area and capacity – was built in the village of Gado Badzere and administered by the non-governmental organization (NGO), Première Urgence Internationale (PUI)¹. According to its sister NGO, *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF), numerous cases of malnutrition, respiratory infection, and malaria have been reported. In June 2014, out of an estimated site population of 4,500 people, 80 cases of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) were declared in Gado Badzéré and in Gbiti, and 53 cases in Mborguene. MSF estimates that between April and May 2014 there were 1,973 cases of malnutrition, corresponding to an acute malnutrition prevalence rate ranging from 34.7% to 44.9%². In 2016, the United Nations estimated that 60,000 children under five suffered from acute malnutrition and that displaced Cameroonians and other refugee populations in the East Region and neighbouring regions (Adamawa, North, and Far North) experienced general food shortages³. This report also indicates that 2.6 million people suffer from food shortages, including 2.3 million who are critically hungry, and around 298,000 who are in an emergency situation.

Business-humanitarian partnerships under the patronage of the WFP

It is mainly the World Food Programme (WFP) that has been involved in aiding CAR refugees displaced by the outbreaks of violence in their country. In East Cameroon, and more exactly in Gado Badzéré, it has promoted partnership-building as means to more effectively provide

¹ This village is located about 50 kilometers from the city of Garoua Boulai on the CAR border. The villages of Mborguene, Gbiti, Lolo, and Mbile in the same region can also be mentioned.

² Etienne Gignoux and Maud Ginsbourger, “Surveillance prospective de la mortalité et de la malnutrition en communauté. Villes de Garoua Boulai et Gbiti, camps de Gado Badzere et Gbiti, province de l’Est, Cameroun”, April-May 2014, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, p. 11-14,

www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/Rapport%20Mise%20en%20place%20surveillance%20Est%20Cameroun%20-%202014_06_05.pdf

³ The United Nations in Cameroun, Annual Report 2016, [http://cm.one.un.org/content/dam/cameroon/docs-one-un-cameroun/2017/Annual Report 2016 Francais-final.pdf](http://cm.one.un.org/content/dam/cameroon/docs-one-un-cameroun/2017/Annual%20Report%202016%20Francais-final.pdf)

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humanitarian aid, especially in the form of food. These partnerships are made up of five types of partners: governments, NGOs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and other UN agencies that provide technical support. In addition, companies active in the areas of transportation, food, information and communication technologies, finance, and even human resources are partners⁴. We will examine here the case of the Mobile Telecommunication Networks (MTN), a company specialized in information technology and telecommunications.

In its partnership with WFP, MTN runs a Cash-Based Transfer (CBT) programme that helps beneficiaries get food relief through e-money transfers. Specifically, in Gado Badzéré, under the coordination of the NGO Catholic Relief Service (CRS), the goal is to encourage refugees to diversify their diet. The usual humanitarian provision of food relief, consisting mainly of cereals (rice, corn, millet, wheat, sorghum), beans, cooking oil, and salt – all workable ingredients – has been, in itself, insufficiently varied. Money transfers were thus proposed as the technical response to the needs of the refugees, who wanted to supplement their base diet with foods they could select themselves.

In Gado Badzéré, the primary experimental phase is still ongoing, but it should be noted that this programme is not a novel idea in Africa, since it was already running in Côte d'Ivoire, and more exactly in Abidjan, during the post-election crisis of November 2010, when waves of violence drove people into financial hardship and food shortages⁵. The partnership that had already brought WFP and MTN together had as an operational counterpart the French NGO, Action Against Hunger (ACF). This type of partnership, between MTN and ACF had also been active in providing relief to impoverished households in Brazzaville in the Congo⁶.

We will see that MTN's operations, carried out in an emergency situation that impacted the availability of products and services, could have triggered and may yet trigger several problems. In particular, various malfunctions have proven that the company's interventions undermined the climate of security, an essential primary condition for humanitarian action and the essential duty of government authorities. In addition, it was hoped that State would be able to act as an arbitrator between the interests – well-founded or not – of a foreign company and of the country's refugees. However, this hope has not materialized. Through its civil administrators and its police and military forces the governments intervenes only in response to incidents set off by malfunctions caused by a partnership of which it is not a member.

Collateral damages

The Gado Badzéré project was created in April 2016. In concrete terms, when basic food rations are issued to all households at its regular General Food Distribution (GFD) events, the WFP offers assistance via a cash system that ensures better food security. This programme involves making a cash transfer through the cell phone of beneficiaries – donated by MTN – who can then make purchases as they wish in registered “CBT shops”. The allocations vary according to the size of the household. For a “size 1” household (a single-person household), the amount comes to around 4,000 CFA francs, or about 8 USD per month (multiplied by the number of people in the household). The CBT programme is run jointly between WFP (as the bearer) and

⁴ World Food Programme, “Partnerships”, <http://fr.wfp.org/propos/partenariats/partenariats>

⁵ ACF International, *Terms of Reference for the external evaluation of CI-ADC of ACF. Money transfers by cell phone (partnership programme between WFP and MTN)*, September 20, 2011, <http://docplayer.fr/832842-Transfert-monetaire-par-telephone-mobile-programme-en-partenariat-avec-le-pam-et-mtn.html>

⁶ World Food Programme, “Partnerships...”, art. cit.

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MTN (as the technical partner), and is supported by the American faith-based NGO Catholic Relief Service (CRS). A CRS project manager explains:

“Refugees go to these shops to buy whatever they want. When I talk about what they really want, it has a lot more to do with food security. They can buy anything to eat. Previously, they had no choice, only a very small selection of food, but now they can choose from a wide variety of stuff, like sardines, which they couldn’t get before. Now they can buy pasta, [...] eggs, and also the main staple they eat a lot at home called *gozob* made from cassava flour. Before, when there was the GFD, there wasn’t any of that at all, but now with the programme, all types of food are available in the shops. [...]. We are targeting 7,000 households on the entire site.”⁷

The presence of the private enterprise MTN in the refugee camp intervenes amid a particularly complex environment with unstable security conditions. Gado Badzéré has experienced and is still experiencing violent incidents in the likes of child abductions, murders, thefts, assaults, and rape, all of which have directly or indirectly impacted refugee populations and their providers, especially humanitarian workers. Between November 2016 and April 2017, Première Urgence Internationale, the French NGO managing the refugee camp, recorded 62 breaches of security that included 5 abductions, 4 murders, and 28 rape incidents and other physical assaults⁸. This climate of fear has instilled a strong feeling of mistrust and insecurity. Humanitarian staff who work every day on-site bringing relief services are not mistrusted, because of the close bond they have established with the refugees. In Gado Badzéré, as elsewhere, these relationships, devoid of business interests, lie at the heart of humanitarian action. An “in-group” feeling⁹ is thus created within the refugee community, in which the aspects of proximity, non-business interactions, and social relations forge the distinct moral identity of the refugee camp. This space has a human dimension not defined by territorial boundaries, but by people who have shared and who have mutually experienced distress and urgent needs. But correspondingly, a feeling of “elsewhere” or of “outsiders” comes into being, that is, one of an “out-group”¹⁰, made up of those who are external to the community and thought to be insensitive to humanitarian concerns, as unilaterally defined by refugees in distress situations.

However, the CBT programme is seen as “upsetting” the principle of urgency behind humanitarian action, thus perpetuating the prevailing climate of tension and violence in the refugee camps. This has been evidenced by certain incidents that illustrate not only the gap between beneficiaries and humanitarian aid, but also the violence that stems from the diverging approaches of business logic and humanitarian logic. This same CRS project manager comments:

“Refugees often make demands, like what happened this morning. Some came to say that their SIM cards were out of order, while these cards are required to enable the phones to access food aid. Young people especially come to make demands. With the hot-blooded ones who say, for example, ‘No, you have to fix things right now’... And so on, well, our hands are tied, because our job is to monitor and do follow-up. We’re like a kind of control panel embedded in the project. That’s to say, we try to see what’s going wrong and what’s OK, we evaluate it, and we try to fix it over time.”¹¹

⁷ Interview with Abdel on 27 February 2017 at the Gado Badzéré refugee camp.

⁸ Summary by us, on the period concerned, of weekly status reports, also called Sitrep (Situation Report).

⁹ Mustapha Chouiki, “La ségrégation sociospatiale à Casablanca”, *L’Homme et la société*, n° 125, 1997, p. 85-105.

¹⁰ *Idem*.

¹¹ Group interview on 27 February 2017 at the Gado Badzéré refugee camp, present comments by Abdel.

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Business logic and humanitarian logic: the odd couple

Digital technology claims that it can transcend any barrier. Yet this new digitalised form of assistance creates a problem in the provision of commodities and services. At this point, we are going from a general and undifferentiated distribution of resources to the personalized attribution of selected store products via a kind of commercial and digital transaction between MTN, the supplier, and its “customers”, in this instance, refugees. But we can see how the latter and the humanitarians end up paying the price of this encounter with technology. The problem mentioned by the CRS programme manager is technical and not organizational. So only the company MTN can remedy the situation. MTN’s lack of control over the CRS digital tool ends up unsettling the beneficiaries. Any problems that crop up immediately become the excuse for the beneficiaries to condemn the “outsider”, embodied by the company. As a result, project managers can only:

“register complaints, transmit them to the parties concerned, that is, to WFP, the financial partner, and to MTN, the operational partner. This often takes time. Some people complain that when this takes time, it becomes a problem for them. Especially when we know that they haven’t received aid for two or three months, they retaliate. We saw this kind of counter-reaction just last week.¹²”

Clearly, the MTN’s management model for these activities was ill-fitted to the situation. In any case, there was no “fall-back position” applicable in this instance to offset MTN’s failures. Registering complaints and submitting them for review – as humanitarian organizations are obliged to do – without knowing the response time illustrate the types of managerial approaches found in classic business transactions. They hold no account for the poverty of the refugees, or their urgent needs, or threats to their security. Here is where the difficult coexistence between humanitarian logic and business logic finds its simplest expression¹³. Even when considering that, over the years, humanitarianism has become a fertile ground for companies – in terms of social responsibility, patronage, and publicity – the fact remains that the mingling of these two different types of logic is apt to lead to ethical breaches and to undue harm to people in distress¹⁴. From this point of view, this project manager’s account tells us of potentially far more dire consequences:

“This has me talk about last Saturday. I was there when an entire crew from MTN came from Bertoua to systematically help the refugees by repairing their damaged SIM cards. Generally on Saturdays, we don’t work, mainly for security reasons. At the camp, it’s part of the security protocol of all the agencies. So on Saturday, I wasn’t to be working to ensure the safety of the MTN agents who are not part of the humanitarian staff. But we had to work with them anyway, accompany them, and be responsible for their safety. After working for 2 hours to 3 hours, there was disturbance where a driver, perhaps misjudging the situation, or the intent of the project, or the mood in the camp, gave some biscuits to a nine-year-old child. I mention this because there’s an ill feeling of mistrust in the camp, since children have been abducted in the past. Several cases of missing and abducted children have been reported. So this driver began to be friendly with the child, who said he had a little brother in the hospital, and the driver went to see the little brother, and he was seen stroking the child’s hair. Well, back at the camp, people thought

¹² Group interview on 24 February 2017 at the Gado Badzéré refugee camp, present comments by Barkadine.

¹³ Anne-Sophie Binninger and Isabelle Robert, “NGOs and businesses: dangerous liaisons”, *L’Expansion Management Review*, n° 127, 2007/4, p. 16-25.

¹⁴ Stéphanie Stern, “Is the private sector a threat to the humanitarian sector?”, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, n° 98, 2015/2, p. 103-111.

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he had been trying to abduct the child. Some refugees caught sight of him and one of them said, ‘There’s the child snatcher!’, and then the others, believing that, began to lynch the driver. Me, with some other people in the camp, we tried to rescue him. The men as well as the women were beating him up. It was hard. I tried to protect him. It’s true that that’s not part of the security protocol, but I did it anyway, I had an impulse, because you’ve got to save someone who’s expecting help. I tried to rescue him and I got beaten up myself in doing so.¹⁵”

The accumulation of such incidents or even of rumours has led to a dichotomy between the “victims” (the refugees) and the “perpetrators” (the armed gangs, the governments, the “others” who put refugees in this situation). This has inevitably given way to the search for a scapegoat, the obvious candidate being MTN, labelled by refugees as an organization in the “out-group”, and accused of not supporting their cause or fulfilling their needs. MTN’s shortcomings were judged to outweigh the help it was meant to bring. For this reason, MTN’s employees have been subjected to various forms of violence, even when they themselves and the company have not been blatantly accused – as was the case – of “robbing humanitarian aid”. MTN was anyway unable to distribute the funds that had been made available for the refugees.

The management logic behind the company’s aid programme failed to fit within the scope of humanitarian action. In actual fact, over the course of several months, this logic led to perpetuating the violence that the company was supposed to quell. The rationale of humanitarianism implies that the vulnerability factor, the root cause of the violence and the trauma inflicted on displaced people, be an integral component of humanitarian action and a factor in maintaining the dignity of people in any act they do. As part of this, the precariousness of the camps must be understood. The point here is that business logic, essentially profit-oriented, can relate to the sensitive field of humanitarian aid only with extreme difficulty.

What about a third party intervening as arbitrator to mitigate this type of tension? In this case, if the State or even the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were to agree to this suggestion, its goal would be not so much as to ease up relations – for example by reminding MTN of its commitments – but to maintain an “acceptable” level of security put in jeopardy by the company’s malfunctions.

The State no longer an arbitrator?

Generally speaking, in the humanitarian sphere, the State has several functions. In our present case, it intervenes at the legal level, at the level of obliging the parties concerned to carry out their duties, and at the level of dissuasion.

To the extent that refugee camp has experienced numerous adverse events, the Cameroon government relies on its legal framework that has always provided for laws that govern the lives of refugees. In short, it asserts its sovereignty. The delegation from the sub-prefecture, represented by the sub-prefect, the police commissioner, and the gendarmerie commander, regularly visit the refugee camp, together with UNHCR staff in charge of its management. Their obvious objective is to manifest authority and to recall the requirements for maintaining order in community life. Leaving UNHCR to manage the more technical issues, the State has the task of creating or, at least psychologically, of restoring the hierarchy of relationships, and more especially, of weighing on the conscience of the refugees who are the beneficiaries and targets of

¹⁵ Interview with Abdel on 27 February 2017 at the Gado Badzéré refugee camp.

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projects. The authorities were, in fact, driven to intervene during the MTN incident, and during prior incidents that occurred, such as the controversial group marriages¹⁶ that were held contrary to Muslim principles, and the brawls between families standing up for their children who were skirmishing among themselves. At the same time, UNHCR was pressured by the administrative authorities to identify the ringleaders and permanently reassign them to other humanitarian sites far from the camp where the incidents took place.

Can we expect that this payment mechanism will meet the expectations of both parties? Does the type of justice that leads to exclusion, or to the threat of exclusion, solve the basic tenets of the problem? In this case, people, and especially young people, resent decisions from above and may eventually resort to reacting with violence. For the moment, even if tensions have been temporarily dispelled, we see that the fundamental issue has not been resolved. The problem posed by MTN's presence reflects a certain way of thinking and of implementing projects. Scattering the camp ringleaders or threatening to do so does not, in any way, settle the basic question of how to make two different rationales successfully coexist around the same food assistance programme: one business-oriented and the other humanitarian. The reverse holds true. The joint intervention of the State and UNHCR is an expression of a form of violence that, in the long run, will be unable to stem a latent, if not a real revolt.

On the other hand, the Cameroonian State does not spare any effort in what it considers a risk for its national security, the primary one being the threats along its various land borders: in the North from the terrorist group Boko Haram, in the East from the Central African conflict, in the Northwest and Southwest from secessionist demands. Admittedly, we can consider that the State is playing out its assigned role and that its actions do much for protecting its own citizens and the refugees in its country. Conversely, it is unfortunate that its view on all humanitarian actions is purely confined to security matters devoid of any real ethical approach. In other words, as long as incidents in the refugee camps do not have a direct or indirect impact on national security, the State shows little interest, but just enough to be a reminder of its physical might or of its capacity to launch traumatic interventions led by the gendarmerie or armed forces into the refugee camps, very often at night, or of its capacity to outsource deportations to UNHCR. Whatever else happens, as we have seen, leaves NGOs, such as CRS, on the front line to deal with the excesses caused by MTN's malfunctions.

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

Biography

Pierre Boris N'nde • A PhD graduate in social and cultural anthropology (Université Laval, Quebec, 2016), is a researcher for the SOHA project (Open Science in Africa and Haiti) and at the Department of Information and Communication of Université Laval. His research has focused on informality, violence, production of endogenous security, and insecurity in the urban areas of Cameroon. As part of his postdoctoral research funded by the French Red Cross Foundation (2016-2017), Pierre Boris N'nde assessed the security environment and its impact on humanitarian action in Gado Badzéré in East Cameroon. A volunteer member of the Canadian

¹⁶ Ceremonies organized by the administrative authority to officially unite several couples at the same time. The aim is to respond to the great demand and availability of the registrar or administrative authority.

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Red Cross, he has worked on management projects at the Catholic University of Central Africa in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and has taught at the Department of Anthropology at Université Laval. In his work, Pierre Boris is concentrating more and more on humanitarianism. Taking on a more ethnographic approach, he raises questions directly related to research in humanitarian action, to the safety of refugees, and to the spatial anthropology of refugee camps.

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