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Sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian organisations in Cameroon: methods for identification and logics of obstruction

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Staff turnover, breaches of confidentiality within the organisations responsible for gathering complaints and attempts at a cover-up by refugee-camp authorities all reflect the difficulty of implementing measures against sexual abuse in fragile contexts. This is the case in Cameroon where Jean Émile Mba takes us to learn about the valiant efforts but also limitations of the methods put in place to combat abuse by humanitarian workers.

This contribution is part of a wider sociological analysis of a social reality that remains relatively unexplored in the Cameroonian context. It aims to outline the state of affairs regarding the problem of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) within humanitarian organisations by shedding light on both the methods of identifying these abuses and the organisational challenges caused by the social transactional logics that contribute to the concealment of this social reality.

Attempts to grasp the contours of this "social reality" turns out to be particularly difficult given the social opacity of the issue. Contributions from the sociology of social transactions and strategic analysis served as tools to begin to understand the exchanges and bargaining, negotiations and compromises, strategies and power relationships that impede the identification of SEA in the humanitarian field in Cameroon. Efforts to comprehend these different aspects included semi-directive interviews, documentary studies and content analysis.

The sociological construction of an unexplored social reality

The concept of "sexual exploitation" refers to "any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another". The concept of "sexual abuse", for its part, refers to "the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions"[1]. These acts, referred to here as "sexual misconduct", are most often committed in the humanitarian field by aid workers, or other actors in the chain, against the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. They can also arise between humanitarian workers and take the form of sexual harassment at work.

The exposure of the topic of EAS in the humanitarian field goes back to 2002 with the study carried out by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the British non-governmental organisation (NGO) Save the Children on the generalised sexual abuse in refugee camps in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. This study led to the drafting of the first code of conduct in 2003, and then to the publication of the Secretary-General's Bulletin the same year[2]. The media outcry that followed, reignited by the scandal involving the NGO Oxfam in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, propelled the recognition of SEA as a crucial global humanitarian issue.

[1] Definitions taken from Secretary-General's Bulletin (Kofi Annan in those days) on the "Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse", ST/SGB/2003/13, 9 October 2003, https://undocs.org/en/ST/SGB/2003/13
[2] *Ibid.*

But the scientific construction of this reality needs to be grasped through the prism of pre-existing knowledge. SEA is obviously not specific to humanitarian aid, and research abounds on sexual abuse in the Church[3], gender, sexual minorities[4] and sexual violence committed by the United Nations (UN) Blue Berets[5]. In Cameroon, although some rare works[6] provide a rich and relevant analytical framework for the understanding of sexual abuse in schools[7] and in urban environments[8], they do not have any real connection to humanitarian aid. The scientific vacuum observed in the country around the issue of SEA in humanitarian aid substantiates the professed social opacity of a phenomenon that remains taboo. Our aim here is to shed light on this social reality and to mobilise research to include it in the scientific narrative, on the basis of the methodological and analytical approaches listed above.

Sociology of methods for identifying sexual exploitation and abuse

Since 2019, the humanitarian field in Cameroon has made significant progress in the fight against SEA, namely with the implementation of a nationwide body responsible for coordinating, sharing best practice and monitoring prevention methods in the area of SEA. This network, known as Task Force PSEA[9], housed in the Office of the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) is administered by a "PSEA national advisor" who coordinates its activities.

Created in Yaoundé in July 2020, the PSEA Network brings together personnel known as "focal points" (see below) from UN agencies and national and international NGOs. Its role is to implement prevention mechanisms against SEA by developing reference terms, training programmes and action plans[10]. It is the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) who is responsible for monitoring progress in their implementation[11]. A central body for coordination and strategic orientation of humanitarian action in Cameroon, the HCT is made up of representatives of United Nations agencies and NGOs, but also observers, like donors, the International Committee of the Red Cross or *Médecins Sans Frontières*.

The PSEA Network is positioned as a device overseeing a constellation of three PSEA regional working groups. The one in the Far North Region of Cameroon, set up in 2017, is managed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The one in the East-Adamawa-North Region, established in 2020, is under the aegis of the UNHCR. The one in the North and Southwest is still under construction. To support these regional initiatives, ninety-three SEA focal points for different organisations – fifty-two in the Far North and forty-one in the East-Adamawa-North – have been created since 2020[12].

Since these mechanisms are very recent, it is difficult to measure and analyse their true impact. The fact remains that the challenges they face speak volumes about the scope of the task in hand of addressing the issue of SEA. First of all, these initiatives struggle with putting their action plans into practice. The standardisation of an inter-organisational SEA code of conduct; the obligation to check the SEA antecedents of applicants during recruitment by NGOs; the standardisation of an inter-agency toll-free hotline; the implementation of mobile "focal point" teams to carry out awareness actions in other organisations, or the implementation of standard operational procedures for complaints on a community basis and in an inter-organisational mode: so many works-in-progress that are as necessary as they are

[3] Hans Zollner, « Les abus sexuels dans l'église. Un appel à changer de regard », *Études*, n° 9, 2016, p. 29-40.
[4] Wendy Delorme, « Insurrections sexuelles… dix ans après », *Mouvements*, 2019/3, n° 99, p. 121-130.
[5] See Marie Saiget, *L'ONU face aux violences sexuelles de son personnel. Crise de crédibilité et changement en organisation internationale*, L'Harmattan, 2012; Nathalie Durhin, « Les opérations de maintien de la paix des Nations unies : le problème des violences sexuelles », *Revue Défense Nationale*, 2017/10, n° 805, p. 87-93.
[6] Daniel Mbassa Menick, « Les enfants victimes d'abus sexuels en Afrique (Ou l'imbroglio d'un double paradoxe : l'exemple du Cameroun) », in Thérèse Agossou (dir.), *Regards d'Afrique sur la maltraitance*, Karthala, 2009, p. 77-95.
[7] Daniel Mbassa Menick, « Les abus sexuels en milieu scolaire au Cameroun : résultats d'une recherche action à Yaoundé », *Médecine tropicale*, vol. 62, 2002, p. 58-62.
[8] See Daniel Mbassa Menick et Ferdinand Ngoh, « Les abus sexuels au Cameroun. Une étude socio-démographique à Yaoundé », *in* Thérèse Agossou (dir.), *Regards d'Afrique sur la maltraitance*, *op. cit.*, p. 187-198.
[9] PSEA: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.
[10] Resources available on the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) platform [including the "PSEA Action Plan"]: https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/location/west-and-central-africa/cameroon
[11] See the PSEA Action Plan 2019-2020, p. 1.
[12] See the meeting report of the PSEA Working Group in the East, Adamawa and North Bertoua, 24 November 2020, p. 2-3.

time-consuming to put in place.

The instability of the focal points themselves tends to disrupt the implementation and functioning of the system. Indeed, "NGOs currently face the challenge of training permanent and specialised personnel in charge of SEA issues. Most often in the organisations, people come and go. People who received training on SEA can move on elsewhere, leaving a void", explained one focal point[13]. The supply of statistical data on the established initiatives is another challenge, while the focal points seem to lack the wherewithal and room for manoeuvre to pass on detailed allegation reports to the PSEA national network. It is true that the authorisation of their dissemination remains eminently administrative and depends either on the Base Chief or on the Country Director. In other words, the proper functioning of external or inter-agency procedures for reporting SEA concerns largely depends on the organisations and not just on the focal points. Similarly, there seems to be a near total absence of feedback mechanisms within NGOs. Only a few, such as Plan International, have feedback committees and thirty-odd safeguarding focal points in the whole country[14]. Their crucial role is to activate mechanisms for feedback and reporting of acts harmful to the protection of children and young people, especially in the event of SEA allegations[15]. International Medical Corps has also set up PSEA focal points in its intervention areas. The fact remains that these focal points, as they are appointed within each project, may be persuaded to cover up certain facts if they risk tarnishing the image of the project for which they are hired. Thus, their transparency and neutrality remain unreliable.

In addition to these embryonic mechanisms, there are toll-free hotlines set up by the UNHCR on site, and the "suggestion boxes"[16] implemented by certain organisations to escalate complaints. While such mechanisms for reporting SEA issues have the merit of at least existing, their security and accessibility are questionable. For instance, some suggestion boxes are often stored in the homes of the chairs of the feedback committee when they should be accessible to the wider population. Some alleged SEA perpetrators (senior executives) even held the keys to these boxes so could access them whenever they wanted. These suggestion boxes and the toll-free hotlines are also sometimes poorly suited to the sociological realities (language barriers, illiteracy), hence their scant use by victims. Likewise, meetings of feedback committees are problematic: they rarely respect confidentiality rules, so complainants do not feel the conditions are in place to testify and denounce the perpetrators of abuse. This is the case with the "Complaints Management Committees" meetings set up by African Initiatives for Relief and Development in the refugee sites in Lolo, Mbilé, Timangolo, Ngam, Ngaoui and Gado, as they are they are open to the general public.

Of course, it is important to bear in mind again that all these national and regional set-ups and coordination between organisations are still in their infancy. Their efficiency in the future will depend on the effective implementation of internal mechanisms within NGOs and on the unfaltering commitment of stakeholders, in particular with regards to the four cardinal rules of reporting: safety, confidentiality, transparency and accessibility.

Logics of obstruction and social opacity: performance, sexual transactions, and organisational image

This corpus is based on the results of a qualitative study carried out by means of interviews with members of feedback committees, focal points, and other humanitarian workers[17]. Based on these consultations, a

[13] Interview on 12 January 2021 with David Ayambouye, focal point for ADEES, a local NGO.
[14] Safeguarding focal points ensure that children and young people are protected from all types of harm.
[15] See the guide and toolkit of Plan International, *Child-friendly feedback mechanisms guide and toolkit*, 2019, p. 3: https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/glo-feedback_complaints_mechanisms_guidance_toolkit-final-io-english-jul19.pdf
[16] These "suggestion boxes" are designed to collect nine categories of data, from simple suggestions for improvement or information requests to reports of SEA or safety issues.
[17] The survey was carried out from November 2020 to January 2021 through open-ended (semi-structured) interviews with 400 humanitarian professionals (300 female and 100 male), randomly selected from various humanitarian organisations via different WhatsApp groups, meeting attendance lists or by being put in touch by another colleague. Eighty percent of these interviews were conducted over the phone. The corpus is also based on ten focus groups conducted with thirty Complaints

number of elements illustrate the social opacity of SEA in the humanitarian environment. Firstly, 90% of the three hundred respondents mentioned the fear of losing their jobs, reprisals or a negative impact on their image as factors explaining their decision not to report sexual misconduct. But the act of withholding is also down to the actors themselves where the culture of impunity in the humanitarian sector can exacerbate a sense of helplessness and the instinct of silence. We therefore observe efforts to conceal cases at the community level, such as in Lolo[18], where a humanitarian worker from the NGO Agence Humanitaire Afrique was reported for abusing a 17-year-old refugee girl. The vigilance committee[19] attempted to cover up the case, without going through the proper NGO channels, even though it did not have the mandate to manage SEA cases. Taking a leaf out of the book of the UNHCR, which introduced a scale of fines for theft offences, the committee supposedly asked the perpetrator to pay 100,000 CFA francs [approximatively €150, editor's note] as an amicable settlement. When the negotiations failed, due to the fact the perpetrator refused to pay and absconded, the case was passed over to the UNHCR.

At the NGO level, we have observed that the corporatist mentality of humanitarian personnel is contributing to the emergence of "organic solidarity", seen through the clubs, tontines, after-work drinks or sports between colleagues that foster a stronger sense of belonging to a same humanitarian cause. As alliances and friendships form and bonds and affinities develop, the "duty to protect" any colleague accused of sexual misconduct becomes standard practice or even the unwritten rule. Such barriers are just one example of the obstacles and smokescreens that thwart or complicate the identification of SEA.

Beyond these organisational obstacles, individual inclinations also play a part. The race up the career ladder in which "the new young humanitarians"[20] compete is part of a game plan. This latest generation of humanitarian workers, prone to manipulation, is often required to negotiate sexual transactions with higher management. These "economic-sexual exchanges"[21], described by Paola Tabet as "a big scam"[22], are another example of how the sexuality of female humanitarian workers is regarded as a bargaining chip to advance their careers. Left feeling betrayed, tainted, and disillusioned, they often prefer to keep quiet. Although 70% of our respondents admitted to having been exploited in this way, only 30% of them said they rejected repeated advances from their superiors, as illustrated by these anonymous extracts, two of many, below:

> "I had just been recruited by the organisation and we often finished work late. One night, whilst we were reporting on our activities, Mister suggested that I sleep with him to get a promotion. I declined his offer. He started to blackmail me, saying he was going to ruin me. Thankfully, he was transferred elsewhere. I didn't report him, because I didn't know who to talk to, and above all, I was afraid of reprisals."[23]

> "I was the victim of harassment by a superior, an expatriate, who took my phone number and called me at the weekends. First, he pretended to talk to me about work, and then he started to say: 'I would like to come to where you are now? Could you show me around the city?' He did everything to find out where I lived… I didn't report him, because I didn't want to get him into trouble, I am a Christian."[24]

Management Committees or Feedback Committees in the East, Adamawa and Far North Regions. It is also based on phone interviews conducted with fifteen focal points.

[18] Site for Central African refugees located in the East Region of Cameroon.

[19] The vigilance committee is a community structure set up by elections. Its role is to monitor activities (e.g. food distribution) at refugee sites. It also monitors site security: it controls entry and exit, flags the presence of suspicious people, intervenes in the event of crowd movements and manages tensions. Finally, it ensures the security of goods and services on the site.

[20] To use Amélia Houmairy-Romy and Vincent Taillandier's expression, "Should the 'new young humanitarians' hack the system?", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, issue 13, March 2020, p. 35-46, http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2020/03/13/should-the-new-young-humanitarians-hack-the-system

[21] Paola Tabet, an Italian feminist anthropologist, defined economic-sexual exchange as "any sexual relationship involving compensation", in Frédéric Salin, « Les échanges économico-sexuels », *Regards croisés sur l'économie*, 2014/2, n° 15, p. 302-305.

[22] See Paola Tabet, *La grande arnaque. Sexualité des femmes et échange économico-sexuel*, L'Harmattan, 2004.

[23] Life story of an anonymous respondent from 16 December 2020.

[24] Witness statement recorded on 12 January 2021 from an anonymous victim.

The issue of SEA is becoming central to the humanitarian mandate of NGOs, which is to be commended. Sponsors are moving in this direction, perceiving SEA committed by the very people sent to bring aid as a grave violation of accountability and with the potential to affect the legitimacy of operations, trust, and community acceptance of humanitarian interventions. Although a number of NGOs are taking part in this movement, many others – at least in Cameroon – are reluctant to open their doors to inter-organisational mechanisms of regulation and coordination against SEA. They are concerned about their reputation and image, especially since SEA scandals can impact their funding, and therefore resort to developing internal cover-up strategies. When these obstacles are not produced by the humanitarian system itself, the mentalities of actors who control the "grey areas" must be challenged. The very recent approach taken in Cameroon, the beginnings of which and the reality it hopes to bring to light we have described here, is a step in this direction. It still needs to be structured in order to fulfil its potential and fight the scourge of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

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He currently holds the position of Safeguarding Children and Youth Program Officer at Plan International in Cameroon. Previously, Jean Émile was a Child Protection Officer and a Child Protection Supervisor at International Medical Corps. He has a Master's in International Studies and is a PhD student in Political Science. He is currently completing a PhD thesis at the university of Ngaoundéré (Cameroon) on the topic of "Humanitarian NGOs and the demobilisation of community mechanisms for the protection of children in the post-intervention period in the Far North Region of Cameroon". He can be contacted at jeanemilemba@yahoo.fr.

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