

## Refugees and displaced persons in Cameroon: the silent Hydra

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**In the midst of upheavals in Central Africa, and far removed from the refugee crisis in Europe, Cameroon, like numerous countries in the Global South, is undergoing complex migratory issues. Achille Valery Mengo, a privileged observer familiar with the local associative landscape, sheds light on this lesser known humanitarian crisis, highlighting the difficulties for international actors and campaigning for the greater recognition of local actors who are capable of providing their expertise.**

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Over the last few years, Cameroon has been confronted with a complex humanitarian crisis affecting the East, the Adamaoua region, the North and the far North. Political instability in neighbour-ing countries led hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge there. These population movements, which increased in 2014 with the worsening of the crisis in the Central African Republic, were further exacerbated by flooding, droughts, and the rise of the terrorist sect Boko Haram. The Central African, Nigerian and Cameroonian populations are currently badly affected. An observation of the response to this situation, of the increase in the number of refugees and of the socio-economic issues surrounding the humanitarian question raises concerns about the problem of refugees in Cameroon. With a view to addressing these concerns, this contribution examines the humanitarian state of affairs, the response given, the difficulties encountered and proposals to render the former more efficient.

### **The situation of refugees and internally displaced persons in Cameroon**

The reception of foreigners is a cultural value which the Cameroonian State has institutionalised by ratifying international conventions concerning refugees. The law of July 27<sup>th</sup> 2005 on the status of refugees in Cameroon legalises this tradition at the national level and justifies the presence of several hundreds of thousands of people in Cameroon fleeing abuses and violence in their own countries. There are three main categories of affected people: Central African refugees, Nigerian refugees, and internally displaced persons.

The first waves of Central African refugees arriving in Cameroon were registered in 2002. In 2014, the definitive deterioration of the security context in the Central African Republic, with clashes between so-called “Séléka” and “antibalaka” militias, led to hundreds of thousands of Central African citizens fleeing to countries of Central Africa. Cameroon hosted some 253,000 people, which is to say the majority.

The influx of Nigerian refugees in Cameroon, for its part, is due to abuses by the terrorist sect Boko Haram. Spreading desolation in the south-east of Nigeria, the group caused several thousand people to flee. The military offensives of its members on Cameroonian soil having been countered by the Cameroonian army, the group proceeded to carry out kamikaze attacks which

contributed to the increase in refugee arrivals. Nigerian nationals ended up, for the most part, in the Minawao camp, which hosts 54,806 out of the 70,658 registered Nigerian refugees in Cameroon.

Finally, population movements amongst Cameroonians are concentrated in the far North region, caused in large part by natural disasters and insecurity. Indeed, the region is characterised by high levels of poverty, and the inhabitants are extremely vulnerable. Since 2012<sup>1</sup>, thousands of families have been re-localised by authorities to dedicated reception sites, where living conditions remain a source of concern. These people, already profoundly affect-ed, were plunged back into horror from 2014 onwards by the Boko Haram insurrection. In a volatile security context, they were victims of all kinds of abuses. Population movements in this region have been on the rise over the last few months. Last April, the IOM<sup>2</sup> counted 190,591 displaced persons. They ended up mainly in host families, some as tenants and without shelter for a minority.

### Which humanitarian response?

The State of Cameroon is the main actor concerned. Military measures have been taken to secure the borders with the Central African Republic and Nigeria, and camps have also been converted for refugees. New units were created in the army in 2013 and a significant material and human effort deployed in the eastern, northern and far northern regions. The Army watches over the borders and covers the entire zone in order to neutralise Islamist insurgents. A Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is operating in the Lake Chad basin zone<sup>3</sup>. On the humanitarian front, land was allocated for refugee camps. An *ad hoc* inter-ministerial committee has been put in place to manage emergency situations concerning refugees in Cameroon. Governmental resources have also been distributed to all of the clusters at work.

The technical capacities of the international humanitarian organizations distributed throughout these different clusters cover the essentials of the humanitarian response. Under the authority of the HCR and UN organizations, twenty NGOs including Action Contre la Faim, Médecins Sans Frontières, Solidarités International, International Medical Corps, and the French Red Cross have deployed their teams in the four regions affected by the crisis. These international partners carry out capacity reinforcement actions with local actors, and work on crucial aspects of the humanitarian dynamic (information, response planning, funding).

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), six national NGOs are engaged in the humanitarian response, sub-contracting for UN organizations. These local actors work in the sectors of health, education and sanitation and are deployed in the four affected regions. Nevertheless, this presence remains insufficient and calls Cameroon's humanitarian policy into question. In our view, it is less a question of local actors' capacity than an illustration of a national policy which does not take into account the role that can be played by civil society in a crisis of this magnitude. The fact remains that conditions of intervention are perilous on a number of levels.

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<sup>1</sup> In September 2012, torrential rains caused flooding in the village of Maga when the Logone river burst its banks. 7000 people were forced to flee to neighbouring villages.

<sup>2</sup> International organization for migration - Mali *Rapports de matrice de suivi des déplacements (DTM)*, n° 3, April 2016, [http://mali.iom.int/sites/default/files/CMP%20reports/DTM\\_Avril\\_2016.pdf](http://mali.iom.int/sites/default/files/CMP%20reports/DTM_Avril_2016.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Implemented under the auspices of the African Union, the MNJTF is made up of 8,500 soldiers from Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Benin [Editor's note].

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

There are, of course, difficulties linked to insecurity. The Far North region has been the target of acts of violence by Boko Haram in Cameroon since 2013. Despite the efficacy of the military response, the region remains the most dangerous part of Cameroon. In the same way, instability in the Central African Republic influences the humanitarian response, since Central African refugees in Cameroon have no way of returning to a country where they would be difficult to protect. This situation maintains the pressure on available resources. The attacks perpetrated on Cameroonian soil by armed Central African groups do not make humanitarian professionals' work easier. It is indeed difficult for them to cover all the zones undergoing periods of combat. Since the insurgents are mixed in with the inhabitants, there is a high risk of getting ambushed or caught in cross-fire, even though the army is working to protect humanitarian actors.

Food insecurity also aggravates the situation. The extreme poverty of the host regions does not allow them to withstand the pressure exerted on the resources which are available. The humanitarian response there not only concerns refugees and internally displaced persons, but must also take into account the local inhabitants who consent to sharing their very meagre resources. Often incapable of cultivating their fields due to acts of violence by Boko Haram terrorists, a number of them are exposed to famine.

Finally, funding is notoriously insufficient. The humanitarian response required 282.2 million dollars in 2016. Yet OCHA confirmed on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2016 that funding amounted to 62.4 million. Calls for international mobilisation were issued by Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator for OCHA, and Najat Rochdi, Coordinator of the UN System in Cameroon, to engage sponsors to recognise the imperative of supporting the humanitarian response.

The analysis of the refugee question in Cameroon raises the issue of local actors' implication alongside international actors. Faced with the imperative of improving this humanitarian response, both the State and civil society must take initiatives to consolidate the local humanitarian architecture.

### **Incentives to further encourage the implication of civil society in the humanitarian response**

The institutional framework in Cameroon is regulated by the Freedom of Association Act of December 19<sup>th</sup> 1990 and by the regulations concerning non-governmental organizations of December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1999. Certain dispositions nevertheless act as barriers limiting access to financial resources and thereby weakening organizations and their capacity to undertake constructive initiatives. In addition, as we have already mentioned, local organizations identified by OCHA are in a sub-contracting position relative to UN organizations. Granting some of them recognition as associations of public interest would contribute to sustainably consolidating knowledge, granting value to experience, and gradually building up the dynamics of a national humanitarian response.

Civil society is therefore not considered as a potential humanitarian actor, despite what authorities sometimes declare. Faced with the urgency of consolidating a local humanitarian response alongside the international deployment, it is imperative that civil society group together into collectives. A representative organization should conduct advocacy in order to gain greater visibility and a real taking into account of civil society organizations in the humanitarian response. The international humanitarian system remains too hermetic, to the extent that it is almost impossible for local organizations to express themselves individually. The dispersion of the sector does not optimise the efforts of these front line organizations.

For their part, local organizations must revise their resource mobilisation strategies. Volunteering is a very efficient tool, which allows citizens to put their skills at the service of general interest causes. Yet civil society organizations do not operate according to the logic of popular support. It is therefore up to social entrepreneurs to attract citizens' attention and establish a framework allowing them to accommodate volunteers. This process would contribute towards consolidating crisis response capacity and giving credibility to local actors.

The question of refugees and internally displaced persons in Cameroon is a silent Hydra, revealing both the magnitude of an unsung crisis and the absence of links between national and international organizations. Slowly but surely, it has engendered the worst humanitarian crisis that Cameroon has ever known. The entirety of Cameroonian society is implicated, since the legendary culture of hospitality now comes at a very high price. Despite the weight of this human and cultural duty, our society has an obligation to help all of those who seek refuge there. It is essential to build up a framework which will act as a greater incentive for local action. National capacity-building for the response concerns each and every citizen. It is the condition for sustainable and efficient international support and contributions.

*Translated from the French by Juliet Powys*

### Biography • Achille Valery Mengo

Graduated from the University of Yaoundé I (Masters in History and International Relations), from the Regional Institute in Social Studies (Development Executive training), and from the Cameroon Institute of International Relations (IRIC), where he completed a Masters in International Cooperation, Humanitarian Action and Sustainable Development. Achille Valery Mengo worked for several years as an independent consultant in organizational and strategic management for national and international solidarity associations. He is currently a consultant for France Volontaires, Cameroon and administrator of the *Afrik Humanitaires* blog (<http://achillemengo.blogspot.fr/>), a platform for exchange, debate and information on humanitarian issues.

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*To quote this article: Achille Valery Mengo, "Refugees and displaced persons in Cameroon: the silent Hydra", Humanitarian Alternatives, n° 3, November 2016, p. 80-87, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2016/11/22/refugees-and-displaced-persons-in-cameroon-the-silent-hydra/>*

*ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-133-6*