

Insights from the refugee response in Cameroon

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The integration of Central African refugees into existing Cameroonian communities has had far-reaching development impacts on the region and the state as a whole; this observation calls us to re-evaluate the significance of smaller-scale, less noticed refugee crises.

We miss an important opportunity if we ignore smaller, less geo-politically prominent situations such as that which has been unfolding in eastern Cameroon since 2005. Despite the lack of media attention it has received, this situation offers significant insights into how humanitarian responses are conducted today and possibilities for making them more effective. Rather than creating refugee camps to contain the influx, humanitarian organisations are assisting refugees to integrate into existing Cameroonian towns. Mbororo and Gbaya people fleeing violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) settle into Cameroonian Mbororo and Gbaya communities. Many refugees have pre-existing family ties with Cameroonians and others share languages and cultures with them. Humanitarian workers cite these shared social ties as a key factor behind the success of the integration process.

Assistance to meet the most urgent needs of the refugees (emergency food and hygiene distributions, water and sanitation, health care and education) centres around agriculture: distributing seeds and tools and training refugee communities in farming techniques. This focus on agriculture, however, is in

itself one of the potential drawbacks of an integration model of refugee assistance: that of conflict of interests between refugees and their host communities. Within Cameroon, there has been a long history of enmity



Amadou Hayatou used to be a diamond miner in CAR before fleeing violence. Now he works in the field he shares with a cooperative of other refugees in Cameroon: "Now my diamonds are my potatoes!"

and conflict between sedentary farming communities and nomadic pastoralist groups, and disputes over land-use rights are common. Many refugees were pastoralists in

the CAR but are now being asked to become sedentary farmers in Cameroon. This shift in modes of livelihood and the expectation that Cameroonian communities will share arable land with these newcomers are potential sources of conflict that need monitoring.

NGOs are attempting to mediate this problem by negotiating with local leaders to gain access to land for refugees to farm. These organisations have found, however, that the most effective way to maintain a cooperative relationship between refugees and host communities is to include the host communities in humanitarian programmes. The East region is notorious in Cameroon as the 'forgotten province', having received considerably fewer resources and less development assistance than other parts of the country. Now food, wells, latrines, health centres and classrooms built by NGOs to benefit refugees and Cameroonians alike help induce the communities to remain open to the displaced Central Africans.

Evidence of the effectiveness of these efforts at facilitating integration can be seen in the frustration expressed by the local delegation of the Ministry of National Security. To carry out their duties effectively, security personnel feel it is necessary to keep strict track of who is a refugee and who is a citizen. Now, though, they have trouble making this distinction. What these security personnel see as an obstacle, humanitarian organisations would count as a success: that Central African refugees have become autonomous, self-sufficient, nearly indistinguishable members of their Cameroonian host communities.

Capacity building and development

The influx of international resources also represents a significant opportunity for Cameroon to bolster its own national development. Aside from contributions to infrastructure, other impacts are less concrete. While capacity building for Cameroonian professionals, for instance, is not a planned outcome of a humanitarian response, the NGOs working in the East hire Cameroonian employees and provide them with professional development

opportunities ranging from résumé-building to regional and international travel.

Humanitarian NGOs also build human capital beyond their organisations. Many work closely with local government representatives to share information about the organisation's activities in their domain of responsibility. In the process, they train local government officials in the techniques they are bringing into communities (for example, hand-washing techniques or well maintenance) to better equip the officials to reinforce these techniques in their own programming. Similarly, when they disburse funds to a local traditional leader for community projects, NGOs train the leader in money management. International organisations also partner with local NGOs to develop sustainability in their programmes in anticipation of the international NGOs leaving the area.

In addition to benefitting their explicitly intended recipients (refugees and their host communities), international resources benefit Cameroonians at many levels. As we evaluate the effectiveness of an integration approach, we should keep these further reaching and often less acknowledged impacts in mind.

Looking at different kinds of crises can cause us to reframe our questions about responses to crisis. What kinds of approaches is the refugee regime taking to smaller-scale crises such as that in eastern Cameroon? What opportunities exist in these situations for innovation in models of refugee assistance? How can we understand the impacts of assistance models beyond the humanitarian space? By sparking such questions and new perspectives, the case of Cameroon can contribute to an understanding of modern humanitarian action. It would be worth considering where else such a model might also work.

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