

COMPREHENDING CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC REFUGEEES' INTEGRATION IN THE EAST REGION OF CAMEROON 2003-2018

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Abstract

This study aims to demonstrate the different aspects of refugee integration and to highlight the different crises related to this integration in the East Cameroon Region. To achieve this objective, the study relied on a variety of sources, including primary sources (archival documents, oral history, etc.) and secondary sources (books, articles and academic works), which were interpreted qualitatively and presented thematically. This document highlights the push and pull factors of the influx of Central African Republic (CAR) refugees into the Eastern region of Cameroon, presents the various initiatives for the integration of refugees and the crises related to this integration. The study also reveals that the displacement of CAR refugees in the East region of Cameroon was motivated by security, legal, geographic and cultural reasons and that the integration process, while laudable, produced crises in the region. The paper concludes by suggesting solutions to be adopted by local and international systems to combat the threats of the integration of CAR refugees in the Eastern region of Cameroon.

Key words: *Integration, Refugees, Conflicts, East Region.*

Résumé

La présente étude s'est fixée pour objectif de démontrer les différents aspects de l'intégration des réfugiés et à mettre en évidence les différentes crises liées à cette intégration dans la Région de l'Est Cameroun. Pour atteindre cet objectif, ce travail s'est appuyé sur une pluralité des sources à savoir : les sources primaires (documents d'archives, orales, pour ne citer que ceux-là) et secondaires (ouvrages, articles et travaux académiques) qui ont été interprétées de manière qualitative et présentées de manière thématique. Ce document met en évidence les facteurs d'attraction et de répulsion de l'afflux de réfugiés centrafricains dans la région de l'Est du Cameroun, présente les différentes initiatives en faveur de l'intégration des réfugiés et les crises liées à cette intégration. De même, l'étude révèle que le déplacement des réfugiés centrafricains dans la région de l'Est du Cameroun a été motivé par des raisons sécuritaire, juridiques, géographiques et culturelles et que le processus d'intégration, bien que louable, a produit des crises dans la région. Le travail se termine en suggérant des solutions à adopter par les systèmes locaux et internationaux pour lutter contre les menaces de l'intégration des réfugiés centrafricains dans la région de l'Est du Cameroun.

Mots clés : *Intégration, Réfugiés, Conflicts, Région Est.*

Introduction

“The problem of the refugees, is certainly the one with which every human being, be he a refugee or not, is or ought to be immediately concerned...it is unrealistic for anyone who looks at the refugee problem to say it cannot happen here. No one has the absolute safeguard against becoming a refugee himself” (Goedhart, 1953: 261). The Central African sub region has immense natural resources but paradoxically issues of peace and security makes it hard for the population. The CEMAC sub-region witnessed a greater occurrence of refugee phenomenon in the continent caused by a variety of reasons including massive violation of human rights, direct and structural violence, war, internal conflict, ethnic and religious strife and direct political persecutions. This is the case with Central African Republic who since 1960 has been unable to achieve a desirable measure of security and development but however witnessed frequent factional fighting between the government and its opponents among others. Due to the crisis in CAR, the peace that reigns in Cameroon led to a high influx of CAR refugees, particularly in the East Region since May 2003 (Aleinkoff, 1991). As of August 2014, she hosted more than 331.000 people of concern to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These refugees were hosted in many sites including Lolo, Mbile and Timangolo sites, integrated and granted protection by the UNHCR and partners. How can we understand the integration of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon? This paper attempts an inquest into issues surrounding the events that pushed the immigrants into the East Region; the different integrationist initiatives adopted towards the CAR refugees; and the crises related to their integration within the region.

➤ **Factors responsible for the installation of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon**



○ **Push factors**

CAR gained its independence from France in 1960 but has been unable to achieve a desirable measure of stability, security and development. Its economy affected by a legacy of misdirected

macroeconomic policies, unequal distribution of income, frequent factional fighting between the government and its opponents, large unskilled workforce, poor transportation network, and several military coups after independence, witnessed several autocratic rulers. Ange-Félix Patassé, leader of the Central African People's Liberation Movement (*Mouvement pour la Libération du Peuple Centrafricain*; MLPC), became the first democratically elected president since independence in 1993. During his tenure, Patassé faced several military coups and army mutinies, leading to deep ethnic divisions in the military and across the country (Asong Brain, 2021: 38).

Patassé was overthrown by General Francois Bozizé during a coup d'état that took place in 2003. Continued civil unrest led to the 2004 Bush War, which ended with the signing of a peace agreement in 2007. However, fostering ethnic grievances instigated another successful coup in 2013 which led to the overthrow of General Francois Bozizé by Michael Djotodia, the leader of the Séléka, in March 2013. Continuous civil wars led to the death of thousands of people and the destruction of property across the whole country. Since the outbreak of conflict in 2013, CAR has undergone several interim and transitional governments. In the same year, the Libreville Agreement that was signed between the Séléka and the new government for a coalition of national unity failed due to the dissatisfaction with the distribution of power. This slowed progress in peace talks and in the implementation of a Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation (DDRR) program for the militias in the country. The implementation of the peace agreement remains challenging given the existing religious and ethnic fault lines in the country as well as the continuous violence between warring factions and the emergence of new militia groups. These security reasons caused thousands of CARs to migrate towards Cameroon in search of asylum (Asong Brain, 2021: 38).

○ **Pull factors**

Cameroon has been a state party to international laws relating to the status of refugees as she ratified the 1969 OAU convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa (Afuh, 2013: 53). More so, Cameroon incorporated the key principles of

international protection into its 2005 Refugee Law, including the refugee definition contained in the 1951 Convention as well as the one contained in the OAU Convention, the principles of *non-refoulement*, *non-expulsion* and the exemption from sanctions for illegal entry. Cameroon also acknowledged legislative provisions on refugee rights. All these different conventions signed by Cameroon relating to the protection of refugees explain the high influx of CAR refugees, seeking for safety and protection in the East Region of Cameroon. In 2003, more than 3000 Central African Republic citizens escaped from CAR to find refuge in Cameroon following the political instability in the region. The reason for these migrations towards Cameroon is the geographical and boundary proximity she has with this country. The East region of Cameroon is much closer to CAR as they share a boundary of over 800 kilometers. There are about ten entry points of refugees from CAR in the East Region of Cameroon (UNHCR report, 2020). The main entry points are Garoua-Boulai in the Lom and Djerem Division, Kentzou, Ouli, Gbiti and Toctofo in the Kadey Division and Gari-Gombo in the Boumba and Ngoko Division. This boundary proximity and various entry points attracted the presence of refugees from CAR to the region of study. Also, the CAR refugees migrated to the East Region of Cameroon because both regions share cultural similarities with CAR as some ethnic groups are found on both bordered zones. Examples of these tribes are the Gbaya, Mbum, and Bantu. They easily relate to due to the fact that they have a common ancestor, practice the same culture and speak the same traditional language. According to Yeneh Ihimbru, this could be explained by the fact that the partitioning of the African continent by the Europeans after colonization was made without taking into consideration the opinion of the people, thereby separating families and tribes that were once united.

➤ **Measures at the integration of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon**

The UNHCR is the most important and credible organ of the UNO that works for the management, protection and integration of refugees. This organization works in collaboration with diverse partners including the African Humanitarian Action (AHA), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

(IFRC), World Food Program (WFP), *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and International Medical Corps (IMC). The government of Cameroon instituted government agencies such as the Ministry of External Relations, Territorial Administration and Decentralization, Public Health, to provide assistance to refugees. The UNHCR through her multi-partners facilitated the integration of CAR refugees in the East Region through social and economic initiatives.

- **Social initiatives**

Social initiatives were through the provision of health care, education and enforcement of peaceful coexistence.

- **Health integration initiatives**

One of the greatest sectors of humanitarian action to CAR refugees and other IDPs in the East Region of Cameroon was in the provision of health care according to Article 16 sub 1 and 2 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples Right (ACHPR) which state that:

Every individual shall have the right to enjoy the best attainable state of physical and mental health, state parties to the present charter shall take the necessary measures to protect the health of their people and to ensure that they receive medical attention when they are sick.

The efforts of the Cameroon government, the UNHCR and partners were through the provision of health institutions for the refugees irrespective of their ages. Actions which implied both preventive measures like vaccination, consultation, provision of menstrual pads and curative measures were carried out in all refugee sites of the East Region of Cameroon as health integration initiatives. From 2005 to 2015 four HRUs were constructed in the East Region and equipped with medical facilities and staff from different humanitarian institutions under the UNHCR (Mafany, 2019: 28). The UNHCR, AHA, MSF and IMC conducted vaccination campaigns against diseases like measles and poliomyelitis. The campaigns targeted refugee children below five years of age. It should also be noted that a national convention was signed between the Cameroon government and the UNHCR where the UNHCR and partners were to provide 70 percent of refugees' treatment while the state

completes the remaining 30 percent. In addition, latrines were constructed, trash cans provided and refugees were educated on good hygiene and waste disposal methods. AHA equally gave medical attention to refugees who suffered from post-traumatic stress and psychological problems as many of them suffered from psychological violence, fear, and stress alongside mental and neurological problems as a result of the violence they were victim of and the fact that they were forced to migrate under very harsh conditions.

▪ **Educational strategies**

In conformity with the international refugee Convention of 1951 which states that:

The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education. The Contracting States shall accord to refugees' treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships”.

The Cameroon government, UNHCR and partners provided formal education to CAR refugees. Actions of organizations like the Catholic Relief Service (CRS), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) led by UNHCR facilitated the admission of CAR refugee kids especially female children who were retained at home by their parents, from attaining formal educational in the East Region of Cameroon. Their fees at the level of nursery and primary were paid by the UNHCR/UNESCO. Some 1,785 refugee children (1,288 boys and 503 girls) were enrolled in local colleges and high schools in the East Region of Cameroon from 2017-2018 (UNHCR and WFP joint assessment, 2014). In addition, the CRS, UNHCR, UNESCO and many other partners assisted hundreds of the refugees in establishing birth testimonials for them in order to facilitate their registration into

the end of course examinations at the primary and secondary levels. Again, many secondary and higher education scholarships were awarded to refugee students, under the DAFI scholarship program. This proved that CAR refugees were granted same rights as state citizens, hence integrated in the East Region of Cameroon (UNHCR report, 2009).

- **Livelihood**

This had to do with the provision of living space, shelter and the social cohesion CAR refugees. Concerning the provision of living space, the government supported an ongoing housing program for refugees including the construction of refugee camps with the support of the National Development Plan. Since 2007, more than 20 relocation grounds were available for all resident refugees in Cameroon. Land was acquired from traditional authorities and used in resettling or relocating refugees in the East Region of Cameroon and this led to the relocation of some refugees in Gbiti and Kuete. In addition, more than 680 traditional mud-brick and pan-roofed shelters were built and allocated to refugee families to improve their living conditions. Furthermore, taking into consideration that religious difference was among the reasons which led to the crisis in CAR causing thousands of people to flee to the East Region of Cameroon, the refugees welcomed were settled in refugee sites received equal assistance irrespective of their religious inclination (Asong Brain, 2021: 87). This action promoted living together and brotherhood that was disrupted by the seleka and anti-balaka war (Christian and Muslim war).

- **Security and protection**

When the crisis began in CAR, most citizens felt that their lives were threatened and so ran towards Cameroon in search of asylum and protection. The host government reacted to this problem by providing a law maintaining force at the service of the refugees in the sites. It is for this reason that a gendarme station was opened at each refugee site in the East Region. The gendarmes solved problems among the refugees, the refugees and the local population, and also stopped the infiltrated rebels who came to cause trouble and disorder in the sites. Hence peace and security were provided to refugees so as to make them feel at home in the Region.

- **Economic initiatives**

Economic initiatives were through the provision of financial assistance, farmlands, informal training and self-reliance assistance.

- **Self reliance and financial assistance**

In the economic sector, 53 Common Initiative Groups (CIG) were created and linked to *Credit De Sabel*, a local financial institution that awarded credits to households and small business activities, to facilitate loans to refugees with low interest rates. UNHCR also had a convention with this local financial institution in which its livelihood partners used to fund refugees especially at the Lolo site (UNHCR and WFP joint assessment, 2014: 17). The WFP, in partnership with the UNHCR, equally introduced financial assistance in 2016 as a means of assisting the refugees. This cash assistance replaced the in-kind ration in the three refugee sites of Lolo, Timangolo and Ngarissingo in the East Region of Cameroon. This cash was a project with Plan International known as Cash Basic Transfer (CBT). Under this system, the WFP in collaboration with MTN distributed SIM cards to the beneficiaries and each month, money was transferred to them to enable them buy what they wanted. Approximately 10,000 refugees in 2018 benefited from cash transfer program using mobile money in the refugee sites of the East Region (Tomia, 2019: 91). Again, though limited in terms of amount and numbers targeted, one livelihood program provided 129 people with 30,000 FCFA to start a business (Barbelet, 2017: 15). Again, 41 fishermen refugees organized in associations benefited from 15 nets, 700 hooks, 20 plastic basins, lead sinkers and a boat. This was to encourage the beneficiaries in their income generating activity which was fishing. The UNHCR partners like LWF also encouraged CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon to get involved in activities such as tailoring, carpentry and shoe mending in order to solve the problem of unemployment and idleness (US department of state IDIQ Task, 2014: 8).

- **Provision of farmlands**

Farmers that flee away to Cameroon when the crisis broke out in CAR were provided with land from the UNHCR to rear their animals and cultivate food crops on the pieces of land. The crops and

livestock animals were sold to the local population by the refugees to enable the refugees supply their needs. International Relief and Development organization (IRD) and the Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration (PRM) taught the CAR refugees nomads how to cultivate and harvest crops typical to the area, such as cassava for income generating, family consumption and for contributions to community crop storage. In addition, they provided refugees in the East Region with necessary inputs to apply their training, such as seeds and many others. IRD also secured fertile land for refugees to cultivate their crops. (US department of state IDIQ Task, 2014: 8). The Women's Agricultural Rural and Development Association (WARDA) also played an important role in the integration of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon by encouraging, financing and supervising the women to cultivate crops like corn, tomatoes, vegetables, watermelon. Each crop was cultivated on 2 hectares of land. There were 17 delegates coordinating work on the farm from amongst the refugees and some indigenes. From the harvest they made, 70 percent was for home consumption and 30 percent for sale. After sales, the beneficiaries shared the money among themselves to buy other needs.

➤ **Crises linked to the integration of CAR refugees and recommendations**

The integration of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon though laudable, produced crises aftermath.

○ **Crises linked to the integration of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon**

Various efforts were done to ensure the integration of CAR refugees in the East Region of Cameroon but however these multi-faceted efforts created crises between the refugees and host population.

▪ **Crises linked to farming and livestock rearing by refugees**

Humanitarian actors in the process of integrating CAR refugees provided them with land to enable them carry out income-generating activities like farming or livestock rearing. Despite all these efforts, the issue of the occupation of indigenous land by refugees without their consent and the destruction of the host populations' plantations by the latter remained one of the main causes of conflict between

these two groups. The indigenous populations accused refugees of anarchic occupation of their lands without their permission. In 2018, the report of the National Institute of Statistics of Cameroon showed that 56.0% of the East Region community was victim of conflicts related to the pressure and occupation of land by refugees and IDPs. These pressures due to land occupation led to quarrels and fights between the refugees and host populations.

- **Crises linked to the management of refugees**

Indigenes of the East Region of Cameroon perceived that humanitarian assistance was unfairly targeted, or at least was being targeted towards refugees at the expense of other vulnerable individuals in the community. It also reflected the perception that humanitarian assistance was not addressing a more chronic developmental problem within communities. In the eyes of one interviewee, from a local authority: despite the fact that they both shared the same living space with refugees, refugees were better than the locals. They were given a lot of privileges such as nutrition. The UNHCR and Ngo's took care of refugees whereas the locals never received up to 30% of this humanitarian aid. Indigenes also felt that free access to drugs and services for refugees took away the little available medicines which they, the locals, had to pay for. As one other interviewee put it out, they felt that most hospitals within the region became refugee hospitals (Barbelet, 2017: 6). They showed their discontent through quarrels and fights which led to crises in the region

- **Crises linked to the increase of refugee population and insecurity**

Indigenes of the East Region of Cameroon were residing peacefully before 2003. The sudden arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighboring Central African Republic went ahead and caused a rapid increase of population and pressure on the little natural resources available in the region. This resulted to overcrowding on the limited resources and a scramble on land for agriculture, on pasture for cattle rearing, on water points as well as well as many other services. This made things difficult for the local community (Forced migration review, 2003). Again, the indigenes in the East Region of Cameroon also faced the problem of insecurity in the region. Continuous scramble over limited resources often generated conflicts and fighting which sometimes left

people seriously wounded. Very often some arguments were not forgotten and this instead pushed people to commit acts of revenge leading to the anonymous killings of the indigenes in the East Region of Cameroon.

- **Crises linked to the Privileges offered to refugees**

The UNHCR in its multi faceted efforts enabled refugees to set up markets in the camps and around the sites. In their refugee integration program, humanitarian actors fund refugees in income-generating activities, including trade. This funding enabled them to engage in small businesses in various areas. These actors created markets in the camps and in the vicinity of other sites called "refugee markets" which were 85% made of refugees. The host populations were less represented because the refugee's claimed ownership of these markets. This situation led to an economic growth on the part of CAR refugees to the detriment of the host population that lacked the means to get started. The indigenous people, because of their difficult access to the various refugee markets and a lack of means to create income-generating activities, loosed customers to the extent that it resulted to competition, hatred, fight and tension in the region.

- **Recommendations to CAR Refugees integration crises in the East Region**

The UNHCR and the state of Cameroon should pay attention to the special needs of the indigenes when handling refugee problems. It was observed that most villagers complained of the fact that foreigners were granted more attention and even had better living standards than some of them in their own natal land. The UNHCR should empower the host population by offering them 30% of humanitarian assistance through the provision of food, professional training, and medical assistance to the most vulnerable Cameroonians in host villages. This will help in reducing tension between the refugees and the local population.

Recreational activities should be organized by the UNHCR in the East Region of Cameroon. This should involve games like football and music concerts draft in a mixed and integrated manner regrouping both the CAR refugees and the local communities. This will help to reduce the conflict and facilitate CAR refugees' integration in the region.

The UNHCR and the Government of Cameroon should include working with traditional rulers to find lasting solutions to land scramble as farmers and herders clash over land for farming or livestock.

Again, special emphasis should be taken to monitor the progress of refugee integration. This will include ensuring that there are teachers in the new schools and monitoring attendance rates, completion rates, and achievement rates; that there are health workers in the new health centers and that the refugees, especially the vulnerable refugees, are seeking treatment; that the water pumps are functioning and well maintained; and that the livelihood assistance is being used for its intended purposes.

Furthermore, continuous efforts should be done to create a pathway to citizenship. This should be done when the Government of the Republic of Cameroon is ready so that they are not pressured into making commitments that they cannot keep or creating expectations that cannot be met fully. All efforts to create the pathway should be completely consistent with the country's laws so that the validity of citizenship cannot be questioned.

Some efforts were implemented to make the CAR refugees economically independent. However, the livelihood support was in small scale and produced very little income which then required households to supplement their personal income to meet basic needs. Unless the activities are at a larger scale, they are not sufficient to produce the income required to move beyond a subsistence level. Hence there is need for the UNHCR and partners to implement large scale livelihood support to refugees. Efforts should equally be done to solve the lack of access to markets through freedom of movement, good road construction, efficient transportation and reliable communications in order to facilitate the economic integration of refugees.

The Government of Cameroon should continue supporting agricultural interventions moving beyond subsistence farming to cash crops production that will lead to self-sufficiency and increase the refugees' standard of living. This will require larger plots of land, which will have to be negotiated with the village chiefs. The UNHCR and partners will also need to expand training and provide additional inputs to cultivate the larger plots of land.

African head of states should work towards the prevention of conflicts by promoting peace, good governance and socio-economic development. Most crisis that erupts in African states are as a result of the lack of socio-economic development and bad governance of African head of states who do not implement democratic policies and fail to listen to the voice of the people. This usually leads to oppositions and political coups resulting to massive loss of lives and forced migration of people. Good governance and socio-economic development will lead to political stability thereby excluding the possibilities of refugees.

Conclusion

This paper sought to demonstrate the different aspects of refugee integration and to highlight the different crises related to this integration in the East Cameroon Region. From the above analyses, in collaboration with the government of Cameroon, the UNHCR and its implementing partners carried out several economic and social measures to integrate and empower CAR refugees. These measures included the provision of health care, education, as well as funding aid and promotion of peaceful coexistence between the CAR refugees and their host communities. However, all these integrationist strategies were not without outcomes as CAR refugees Integration was a source of a plethora of crises between refugees and the indigenous population. It was a source to quarrels, fights, insults and crises linked to the use of basic infrastructures, the care of refugees and the privileges granted to them. This increased the rate of insecurity in the region. The UNHCR and the republic of Cameroon should pay attention to the special needs of the indigenes and host population when providing assistance to refugees' meanwhile African head of states should work towards the prevention of conflicts by promoting peace, socio economic development and implementing good governance and democratic principles.

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