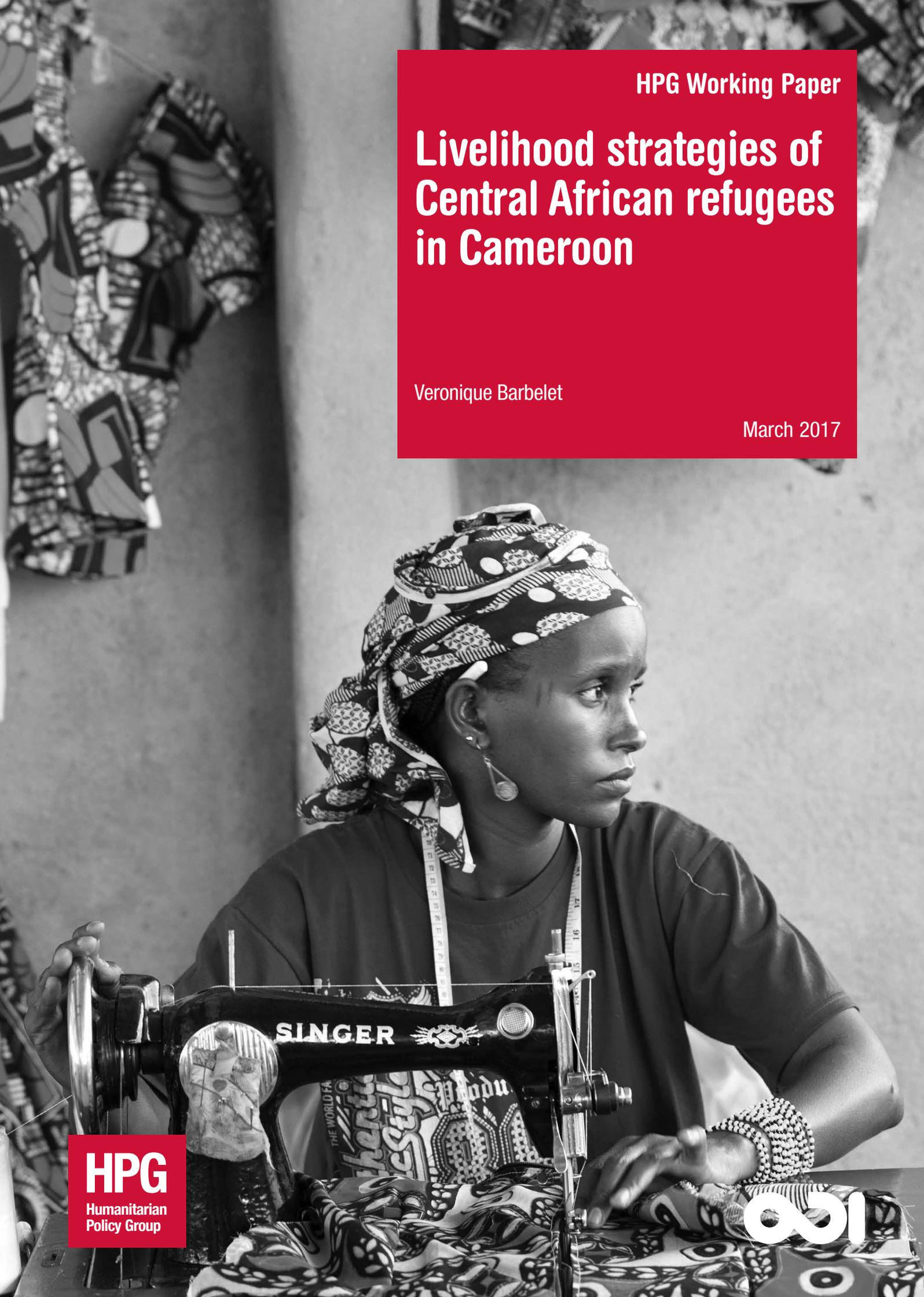


HPG Working Paper

# Livelihood strategies of Central African refugees in Cameroon

Veronique Barbelet

March 2017



**HPG**  
Humanitarian  
Policy Group



## About the author

Veronique Barbelet is a Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank all those who made this research possible. Special thanks to the refugees who opened their doors to us and shared their stories. These interviews were conducted by researchers in Bertoua: Louise Solange Maidjoule (independent consultant), Marcel Corneille Marigoh Mboua (RESPECT Cameroon), Moustapha Mouhammadou (AJEMBO), Aliou Garga (MBOSCUDA), Ousmanou Alihou (AIDSPC) and Michel Ndong Kitio and Rose Nguimatsa (FEPEM). The author would also like to thank her drivers Kongson Rene Nimbuh and Abdoul Bagui Nassourou, and translator Amadou Sardaouna. The fieldwork would not have been possible without the logistical support of Moses Jam, Damien Noma and RESPECT Cameroon, UNHCR and FEPEM. Simon Levine, Eva Svoboda, Tania Cheung and Caitlin Wake provided invaluable comments on earlier drafts.

Humanitarian Policy Group  
Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
E-mail: [hpgadmin@odi.org](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org)  
Website: <http://www.odi.org/hpg>

© Overseas Development Institute, 2017

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce materials from this publication but, as copyright holders, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. This and other HPG Reports are available from [www.odi.org.uk/hpg](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg).

---

# Contents

---

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	1.1 Methodology	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Background: the situation in Cameroon</b>	<b>3</b>
	2.1 The environment for refugees in Cameroon	3
	2.2 Refugees' goals and priorities	4
<b>3</b>	<b>Networks and institutions: family, friends and the host environment</b>	<b>7</b>
	3.1 Family and friends	7
	3.2 The host environment	9
	3.3 Conclusion	10
<b>4</b>	<b>Networks and institutions: humanitarian assistance</b>	<b>11</b>
	4.1 Registration and humanitarian assistance	11
	4.2 Durable solutions	14
	4.3 Conclusion	14
<b>5</b>	<b>Economic activity and livelihoods</b>	<b>15</b>
	5.1 Assets, skills and expectations	15
	5.2 Livelihood goals, strategies and actions	16
	5.3 Conclusion	17
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>19</b>
	<b>Annex 1 Sustainable Livelihoods Framework</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>22</b>

---



---

# 1 Introduction

Over the last ten years, Cameroon has admitted tens of thousands of refugees fleeing violence in the Central African Republic (CAR). Most have settled outside camps, with 70% living in rural, peri-urban and urban areas of eastern Cameroon. With an increasing gap between funding and needs and a growing crisis with Nigerian refugees in northern Cameroon, supporting CAR refugees' self-reliance has become more urgent than ever. This Working Paper examines the lives and livelihoods of CAR refugees, the challenges they face and the institutions, networks and individuals that shape the choices they make and the actions they take throughout their displacement.

Facilitated by a conducive legal framework and existing ties with local communities, CAR refugees in Cameroon have found an environment in which the majority feels integrated. However, many struggle to sustain themselves. From understanding their first priorities and their longer-term objectives, this study highlights the role of pre-existing networks – family, friends and trading partners – in supporting refugees in the first phase of their displacement, alongside individuals and institutions in host communities. It examines the role humanitarian actors and assistance play in refugees' strategies to sustain themselves. By concentrating on the perspectives of refugees, the study brings out some of the less tangible challenges they face during their displacement, as skills may not be fit for purpose in their new environment and how they perceive the possibilities, risks and opportunities before them may limit their ability to achieve self-reliance.

This study is part of a two-year research programme designed to generate insights into the lives and livelihoods of refugees in protracted displacement. It adds to a growing range of evidence gathered through previous Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) research on forced migration and livelihoods, including publications on urban displacement, protracted displacement, vulnerability and livelihoods (Crawford et al., 2015; Metcalfe et al., 2012; Haysom and Sarraj, 2012; Levine, 2014). The study is built on the assertion that efforts over many years to engage in more participatory ways with refugees have not succeeded in ensuring that interventions are planned

and implemented so that they accord with their lives, perspectives and priorities.<sup>1</sup>

The study is organised in two phases. This first phase focuses on how refugees perceive their lives and livelihoods, their aspirations and goals, the strategies and actions they put in place to reach those goals and the institutions, networks and individuals that shape their environment.<sup>2</sup> In the second phase, the project will focus on the perspectives of these institutions, networks and individuals: their roles and functions, including vis-à-vis refugees' lives and livelihoods, their perspectives on the lives of refugees, the obstacles they face in realising their aspirations and how these entities interact with refugees as well as with each other.

This phased approach is designed to explore the central interactions between refugees and their institutional landscape – defined as the institutions, formal and informal, networks and individuals that shape the environment in which refugees live – and identify opportunities to better support refugees' lives and livelihoods. The project considers the following research questions:

1. What are the priorities of refugees in the course of protracted displacement, and what strategies do they use to meet them? How do aims and strategies change during displacement?
2. What opportunities are there to support refugees through a richer understanding of their perspectives, and the roles and perspectives of the people, networks and institutions that are important in shaping their lives in displacement?

This paper focuses on the first phase of the research and the first research question. It is framed by

---

1 See, for example, outputs from recent consultations with refugees and other aid recipients across the Middle East, which criticises aid agencies as 'partial, unaccountable and potentially corrupt, and they fail to meet refugees' most pressing needs' (Redvers, 2015).

2 This report uses Simon Levine's revised sustainable livelihoods framework (Levine (2014), and see Annex 1), which emphasises how livelihoods possibilities, the context and risks are perceived.

ongoing discussions on refugee policy and practice and the need for a better understanding of refugees' perspectives to inform aid agencies' responses to protracted displacement. It also responds to the growing prevalence of out-of-camp refugees, and the on-going challenges aid agencies face in trying to support refugees residing in host communities. Finally, the study recognises the need for different types of intervention in light of increasingly protracted displacement and a move beyond using short-term tools to address long-term issues.

## 1.1 Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in October and November 2015 in East Cameroon. To collect the perspectives of refugees, seven researchers conducted 147 interviews with Central African refugees in Bertoua, Mandjou, Tongo Gandima, Guiwa, Boulembe, Kouba and Adinkol. Semi-structured interviews based on the research questions and Simon Levine's sustainable livelihoods framework (see Annex 1)<sup>3</sup> probed refugees on:

- their priorities and goals;
- their strategies and actions;
- changes in their priorities, goals, strategies and actions;
- the outcomes of these strategies and actions;
- the institutions, networks and individuals helping or hindering refugees' lives and livelihoods; and
- the challenges and obstacles they faced.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for data-gathering to cover key issues, while allowing refugees to bring out new ideas or unforeseen themes during the interview. While these interviews could not qualify as life histories, they aimed to retrace changes in refugees' lives and livelihoods over their years in displacement. Refugees were identified to ensure a diverse sample: sex, age, level of vulnerability, ethnic group, religion, length of displacement (including whether they had come to Cameroon in the first wave of displacement in 2003–2008 or the more recent one, between 2013 and 2015), setting (rural, urban, peri-urban) and place of origin (also in terms of rural and urban). All names have been changed to respect the anonymity of interviewees.

---

3 The project includes a case study of Rohingya refugees living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Interviews focused on the livelihoods of individuals rather than households. The research team interviewed almost as many women as men. The majority of those interviewed (64%) came to Cameroon following the recent conflict in the Central African Republic (as opposed to 36% from the first wave of refugees in the early to mid-2000s). Refugees interviewed were spread evenly across the young, middle-aged and elderly. The religion of refugees was not recorded systematically by the research team (31% unknown). However, a majority of those recorded were Muslim (85%), reflecting the makeup of the overall refugee population in East Cameroon.<sup>4</sup> The majority of respondents were Mbororo<sup>5</sup> (55%) followed by Hausa (24%) and Gbayas (9%). Other ethnic groups included Runga, Nordanko, Kare, Kanoiri, Daba, Mandja, Soumas, Mbaka, Yakouma, Kaba and Arab. Several interviewees referred to themselves as ethnically mixed, or identified themselves from their nationality as citizens of CAR, rather than by their ethnic group. The research team interviewed refugees living in urban and rural areas in Cameroon. Reflecting their urban provenance in CAR, the majority of those living in urban areas were new refugees, while refugees from the first wave of displacement came mainly from rural areas and so resettled in rural areas in Cameroon.

The study ensured that the perspectives of men and women, including in different age groups (interviews were not conducted with people under 18 for ethical reasons) were equally integrated. The hope was that the methodological approach would allow an analysis of the gender dimensions that may influence livelihood choices, actions and outcomes. However, the evidence we gathered was extremely anecdotal, and we were not able to reflect on and analyse these issues in depth. This lack of evidence on gender dynamics and their implications for livelihoods highlights the need to be much more intentional within livelihoods research in integrating gender into the analysis. Similarly, the sensitivity and taboos around gender-based violence meant that these issues were rarely highlighted during interviews, despite the fact that interviews with humanitarian organisations suggested that survival sex was prevalent among refugees.

---

4 According to UNHCR 94% of the CAR refugee population are Muslim, 5% Christian and 1% 'other' (UNHCR, 2015).

5 This refers to any refugee who refers to themselves as Mbororo, Peul or Fulbe. The labels used to refer to these groups are contentious: see Burnham (n.d.) and Dognin (1981).

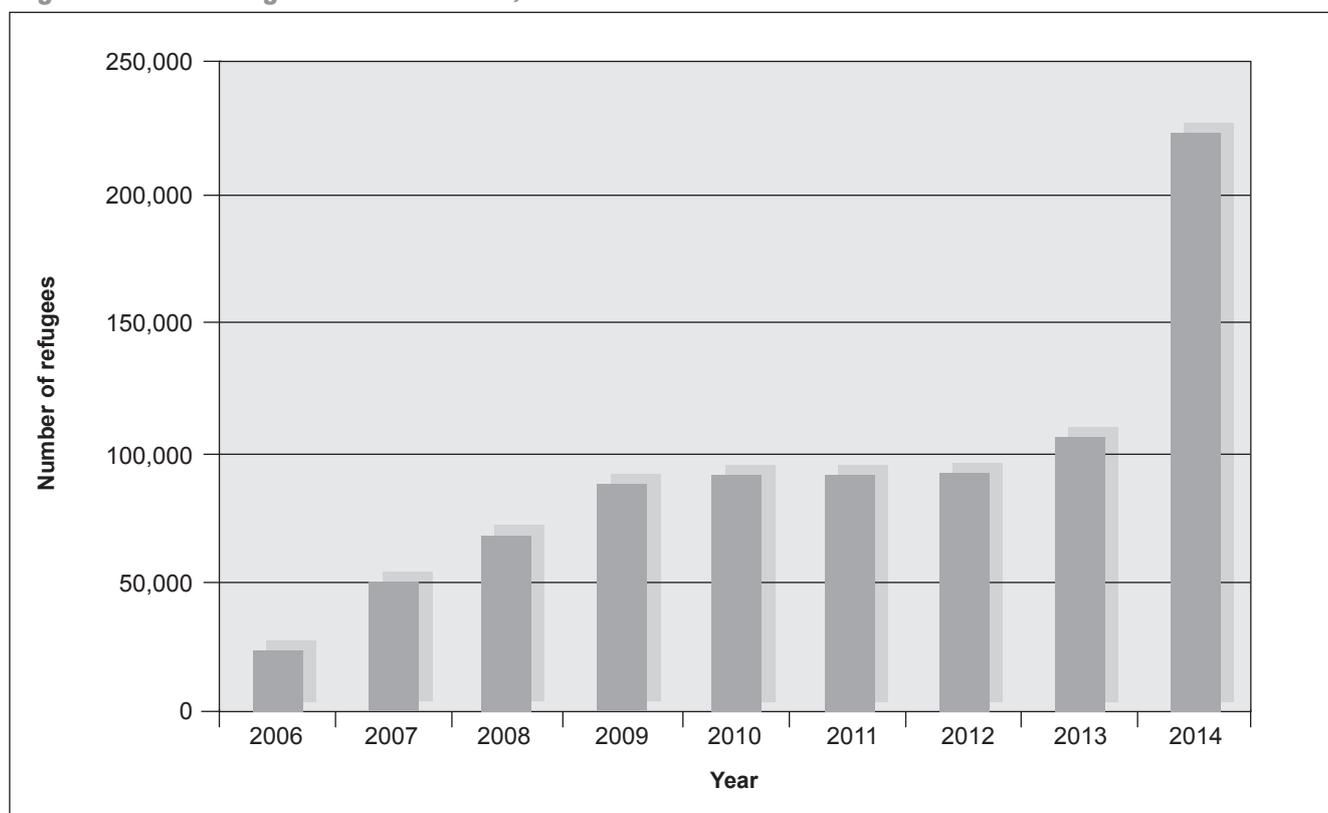
# 2 Background: the situation in Cameroon

Central African refugees have come to Cameroon as a result of two crises. The first followed rising violence in rural areas sparked by a coup in 2003. The second was prompted by another round of violence culminating in another coup in March 2013. The first wave of refugees mainly comprised pastoral Mbororos, who had fled rural areas to escape banditry and kidnapping. The second wave were mainly urban-dwelling Muslim traders (both Hausa and Fulbe), alongside a minority of Christians from urban centres. As of April 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put the number of Central African refugees in Cameroon at 259,145. An estimated 70% were living in towns and villages, against 30% in refugee camps (referred to as 'sites').

## 2.1 The environment for refugees in Cameroon

In principle, Cameroon is a conducive host environment for refugees.<sup>6</sup> The country operates an open-door policy and has ratified the major legal instruments for refugee protection, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention. These commitments have been translated into national law with a progressive legal framework allowing refugees to work, move freely and reside within its borders, and refugees can take Cameroon citizenship, although none of the interviewees had

Figure 1: CAR refugees in Cameroon, 2006–2014



Source: UNHCR.

6 A recent HPG study of protracted displacement outlines four elements of a conducive environment for successful self-reliance and livelihoods programme (Crawford, 2015), legal framework and protection environment; access to markets and the private sector; capacity, assets and resources of the displaced; and the environment for external intervention.

## Box 1: Cameroon in brief

Cameroon ranks 153rd out of 188 on the 2015 Humanitarian Development Index (UNDP, 2015). In 2014, the country's economy grew by 5.7% (World Bank, 2015), but a quarter of the country's people live in chronic poverty. Governance and corruption are also concerns: the country is 145th out of 175 on Transparency International's corruption index.<sup>7</sup> Poverty is concentrated in the east of the country, which is also home to large numbers of CAR refugees. The region has had little political significance for the central government in Yaoundé and has not benefited from investment, either by the government or international organisations. The infrastructure is chronically under-developed, with a lack of roads, hospitals and schools.

done so due to the costs and complicated procedures involved (US Department of State, 2014). In principle, refugees have free access to primary healthcare and education, as well as a range of assistance from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP), the Cameroonian Red Cross and international NGOs, including registration and documentation, food assistance, access to water and sanitation at refugee sites and limited livelihoods support. De facto local integration appears to be the norm: very few of the refugees interviewed mentioned third-country resettlement as a long-term goal, and refugees from the first wave of displacement in particular did not anticipate returning to CAR (for more recent refugees there was a more-or-less even split between those favouring integration and those planning to return).

Beyond the legal framework, Central African refugees have longstanding ties with East Cameroon through shared ethnicity, language and religion, reinforced by economic and family relations. The Central African Republic is heavily reliant on goods from Cameroon, and there is substantial trade and commercial exchange across the border. Marriage between Central Africans and Cameroonians is common, and many Central Africans have relatives who have sought refuge in Cameroon during past crises.

---

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.transparency.org/country/#CMR>.

## Box 2: Key legal frameworks

### The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees

The Refugee Convention is the key legal document relating to the status of refugees, their rights and the obligations of states towards them. It defines as a refugee a person fleeing persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. The cornerstone of the Convention is the principle of *non-refoulement*, which stipulates that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. Other rights set out in the Convention include the right to work, housing, education, public relief and assistance, freedom of religion, freedom of movement and the right to be issued identity and travel documents.

### The 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention Governing Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa

The OAU Convention contextualises refugee law within the specific context of Africa, with an initial focus on refugees resulting from wars of liberation (Okello, 2014). It expands the definition of refugee to encompass people fleeing due to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, events seriously disturbing public order in their country of origin or nationality.

## 2.2 Refugees' goals and priorities

The livelihood goals and priorities of the refugees interviewed for this study range from the very immediate need to find safety and security in the short term to long-term concerns around the future of their family in displacement. Refugees try to meet their long-term aspirations in various ways, including trying to re-establish their herd and investing in trade. These strategies tended to change in response to failure rather than success: for instance, initial efforts to re-establish a herd would switch to seeking a field to farm once it became clear that herding was not a viable livelihood strategy in Cameroon.

Security and safety were the first priorities of Central African refugees in Cameroon, and were one of

the chief reasons for choosing the country as a destination. Cameroon was seen as a stable, peaceful country, as opposed to, for instance, Chad or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), both of which have experienced conflict. The majority of refugees interviewed raised concerns about the possible spill-over of insecurity across the border, and refugees typically used the little money they had brought with them to move further into the interior:

*When we arrived in Garoua Boulai, we were put in a camp. We were sleeping on the ground. I came with six people including my mother, my big sister and my little sister. In Garoua Boulai, we were cantoned in a camp. We were too close to the border. This is why we moved to Bertoua, for peace, to forget what happened to us in CAR. We did not know Bertoua before.*

The second priority of new refugees was bringing separated family members together again:

*I have a big brother in Brazzaville and this is how I knew that my daughters and my wife were in Congo at a Congolese friend's house. I went to Brazzaville to get my family and I took them to Kentzou. I then went to Chad to try and find my sons. I took a truck from Bertoua to Brazzaville using the solidarity of the truck driver. My Congolese friend then drove us back to the Cameroonian border. He also gave me the address of his cousin in Bertoua who has been hosting us since then. I still do not know where my sons are.*

Two young women interviewed for this study put this goal over their personal desire to marry:

*My hope is if I can get married with a man who will support my family. If not, then I have to stay and support my family.*

*My only concern is supporting my family. If I find a man who accepts to take good care of my parents, then I will consider marrying him. If not, I have to stay with my family.*

Whether seeking safety or reuniting with family members, the first few months of displacement typically involved secondary movement within Cameroon, often financed by selling the assets and resources refugees brought with them into displacement: cattle, jewellery, cash and clothes. Refugees also negotiated with transport companies or commercial transporters to take them to other locations within Cameroon, and phoned ahead to family and friends already established in Cameroon or from Cameroon to help them move to safer locations. Moving around Cameroon without proper documentation meant using up funds and assets (such as cattle) to pay the police to let refugees travel. 'I entered Cameroon with 70 head of cattle. At each check point, I had to leave one head. I gave up on my cattle, sold them and eventually reached Mandjou where I bought a sewing machine with the little money I had left.'

A third priority was finding work, particularly for refugees with no pre-existing networks in Cameroon. Whereas refugees from the early 2000s tended to seek access to land for agriculture and to graze their cattle, refugees in the second caseload, most of whom came from urban and peri-urban centres in CAR, preferred to move to towns, as their skills and aspirations could be better fulfilled in an urban environment. Finding accommodation, sometimes through family members or through being hosted by family, was the other main priority. Other goals included providing a good life for their children, education and vocational training for themselves or their children, not having to rely on relatives for support, having good accommodation and constructing and owning a house and good health.

In pursuing these goals, refugees drew on a range of sources of support. The remainder of this study explores the key networks and institutions that figure most prominently in refugees' lives: pre-existing networks of family, friends and business contacts; individuals within the host environment; and humanitarian assistance. The final section discusses how refugees' perceptions of the limitations and possibilities open to them influence their hopes and aspirations, and the strategies they pursue to achieve them.



---

# 3 Networks and institutions: family, friends and the host environment

The study found that refugees got by in the immediate phase of displacement thanks to extensive networks, notably pre-existing contacts with relatives, friends and trading partners, and more ad hoc relationships formed after their arrival in Cameroon. This support is crucial for survival, but it does not lead to self-reliance because it is limited in time, scope and scale. Help from these networks – for instance with food, cash, healthcare fees and accommodation – tends to decline after at most a year in displacement as pressure grows on the assets of the household. This assistance was understood strictly as charity: a hand-out, not a hand-up. For instance, we found no instances of refugees being loaned livestock to reconstitute their herd. Assistance was also not on a scale sufficient to make a meaningful difference to refugees' livelihood prospects: cash might be given, for instance, but would not be enough to enable a refugee to establish a profitable business. As such, these informal networks do not offer a route to a viable livelihood over the long term.

## 3.1 Family and friends

Most refugees we interviewed brought some resources or assets with them, which they could sell in the first phase of displacement. The great majority also sought the help of friends, family and trading partners.<sup>8</sup> The close ethnic and economic relations between Cameroon and CAR facilitated the development of relationships prior to displacement, which most – though not all – Central African refugees were able to exploit on their arrival in Cameroon, and throughout

their displacement. Friends and family were particularly important in providing accommodation to refugees when they arrived.

Refugees also relied on friends and family for food and clothes, and for advice on economic opportunities, and relatives often provided assets to start businesses. As one refugee told us: 'One of my brothers is an old refugee in Adinkol. He is the one who told me to come to Adinkol. He sent me 15,000 FCFA (\$25) to bring my wife and children here. He hosted us for six months. He gave me money to rent a field and gave me maize and manioc to plant'. Within refugee households, women and men often relied on their spouse to support them or to support economic activity. In some instances, men provided women with small amounts of cash to enable them to start selling food on the market or outside the house. In other instances, women worked to support older husbands who could no longer work themselves. Women also relied on children to sell products for them: 'We survive thanks to the petty trade my wife and my children do. They bring around 1,000 FCFA (\$1.60) per day home selling porridge and doughnuts'.

There were limits to the extent and duration of the help these pre-existing networks could provide. As one interviewee put it:

*I was welcomed in Cameroon by my in-laws. They hosted me for ten months. Now I rent a house with my two children. They are my husband's family. They came to Cameroon in 2005 as refugees. I could not stay longer with them because my in-laws do not have a lot of means. There was not a lot of space in the house for me and my children. My father in law works as a butcher. I did not want to stay too long with my in-laws not to cause them financial strains.*

---

<sup>8</sup> During interviews, researchers tried as far as possible to clarify when family was used to mean the wider ethnic/clan family and when it was used to refer to blood relations. For anthropologic and ethnographic work on populations displaced from CAR, the importance and nature of family and family and kinship obligations, see Burnham (1996).

### Box 3: Truck drivers' networks

Truck drivers' networks were another important source of support. These networks were created by Cameroonians and Central Africans who drive trucks between Cameroon and CAR. They created trade links and friendships on either side of the border that became support systems in displacement as friends of friends offered help to people as they arrived in Cameroon. Support also came from those Central African drivers who continued working after their trucking companies relocated from CAR to sub-offices in East Cameroon. Trading partners were also a source of support for refugees.

In this case, the interviewee did not feel it appropriate to extend her stay beyond ten months because she was very aware of her in-laws' limited capacity to continue supporting her and her family. Concerns about the impact on relatives of hosting refugees were brought up frequently in interviews. Most families helping refugees were themselves struggling financially and could not extend charity for too long. Refugees felt that, if a family member or friend had already helped with one aspect of their lives, they could not ask again for support. This almost universal sense of impropriety in repeated requests for help suggests that pre-existing networks are critical but short-term sources of support at the onset of displacement, but not a sustainable source of help in the long run. Even so, the help provided by these networks was critical in enabling refugees to attain their first priorities of safety, being together with family and settling down in a location where they felt opportunities for economic activity were available.

Family responsibilities could also impose burdens: refugees may have to take care of older parents or spouses, and many interviewees mentioned being responsible for multiple wives (most men reported being married to two or three women) and as many as 20 children. Family heads from the first wave of displacement in 2003 are ageing; while many had hoped to be supported by their children in their old age, several interviewees reported seeing older parents being abandoned by their children. In CAR inheritance of assets such as land or cattle allowed older people to 'retire' and ensured that their children

### Box 4: Tontines

Revolving funds or Tontines were one of the main institutional mechanisms through which refugees helped each other. Some were organised to support families through sickness or a death, while others were intended to help buy soap or other items not provided by humanitarian organisations. Many were simple cashing mechanisms, where each member would give a certain amount per week and one person would benefit from the sum. Most refugees reported contributing 200 FCFA (\$0.35) a week. A typical tontine has 15–20 members; the largest we encountered in this research had 50.

took care of them. With this economic relationship disturbed by displacement, older refugees felt that there was no guarantee that children would stay to support them in their old age, affecting a crucial function family used to play in people's lives:

*I would like my children to learn how to trade. I would like to teach them how to do this activity. I am scared that my children will abandon me because I am old and I have nothing to give them. I have seen this in so many other families.*

Parents were also keenly aware that their children had grown up in another country, and that their life trajectories were not necessarily the same as they might have been in CAR. As a result of displacement, many pastoralists had settled down and their children did not aspire to raise cattle, preferring instead to find pathways outside of family traditions:<sup>9</sup>

*With my family, my objective is that my children are successful in life and take care of me. At my age, I cannot hope to be rich. But I farmed to keep my children at school. I hope that my children will find a good job in town because they are not used to farming. Young people need to go to school.*

<sup>9</sup> Father-to-son transmission of cattle is one of many ways herds are constituted among Mbororo pastoralists. For a more detailed account see Burnham (1996).

## 3.2 The host environment

In addition to help from family and friends, refugees interviewed for this study spoke of the support they had received from neighbours, village chiefs and religiously motivated individuals, which they often framed in terms of solidarity and a sense of moral obligation. Interviewees were grateful to the government of Cameroon for allowing Central Africans to seek safety there, and for maintaining a stable and peaceful environment. Refugees understood the role that the government played in allowing them to come to Cameroon, and the laws that enabled them to stay in the country and find the protection and stability they sought.

Broadly speaking, support to refugees came from individuals, rather than institutions. Many interviewees said that they felt welcome in Cameroon, and were very grateful for this. Although some individuals supporting refugees were part of pre-existing networks of friends, family or trading partners, most had no prior connections. The case of Labaranne is typical. Labaranne, who is blind, arrived in Cameroon in August 2014. A Cameroonian woman offered her accommodation in her spare room, hosting her, her sister and her nieces. Like Labaranne the woman is also Hausa, but Labaranne does not believe that her desire to help is because they share a religion or ethnic ties. Labaranne's story demonstrates how, at an individual level, the help of one person in the host community can provide the support a refugee needs to survive. This was not an exceptional case, but reflected the experience of many Central African refugees we interviewed.

The older caseload of refugees from the mid-2000s systematically highlighted village chiefs as critical to finding a home and enabling them to farm.<sup>10</sup> Chiefs granted access to fields for farming and land to construct houses, occasionally for free.<sup>11</sup> One chief

---

10 'Chiefs' here refers to traditional leaders in the villages where Central African refugees have settled. Refugees did not mention any ethnic ties or any role played by ethnic ties in the support they received.

11 Village chiefs are also responsible for managing land, agriculture and housing. Although land ultimately belongs to the state, land use and 'ownership' is permitted through village chiefs witnessing the exchange of money for buying or renting land. Interviews with refugees highlighted that they mainly rented fields of one *carré* (equivalent to a quarter of a hectare) in exchange for 5,000 FCFA (\$8.40). Some refugees bought fields for about 20,000 FCFA (\$34) a *carré*.

from CAR brought his entire village with him to Cameroon and, with the authorisation of the local *préfet* (local government representative) in the border town where the refugees arrived, went in search of agricultural land. Once he found a suitable village, he sought the permission of the chief to move his village there and asked for land for farming and homes. This option appears to be less attractive to the newer influx of refugees, who tend to be from urban areas and for whom village chiefs are a less important source of support. It also appears that the support of local chiefs has eroded over time with the demographic impact of multiple waves of refugee arrivals. In one village (out of five visited during the research), refugees mentioned that the chief was taking land back from them.

Although the research uncovered one example of a Cameroonian man in a village near Mandjou helping a refugee set up a small cafeteria and shop, and providing capital to expand his business, help in the form of loans or credit appeared uncommon. Some interviewees said that Cameroonians saw refugees as a risk because they could leave at any time, taking their loans with them. This lack of trust, and the difficulties refugees experienced in trying to obtain loans and credit from Cameroonians, was seen as an important obstacle to starting businesses and trade; even refugees who had been in Cameroon for many years felt this lack of trust.

The police represented another hindrance in refugees' lives. Despite national laws that allow refugees to move freely, interviewees reported being systematically stopped and harassed at checkpoints and asked for bribes. Checkpoints are numerous around Cameroon's urban centres and along the country's roads. The infiltration of road bandits (Zaraguinas) and armed groups from CAR has increased the police presence in the east of the country, while the recent targeting of northern Cameroon by Nigerian armed group Boko Haram has further increased security concerns.

Refugees dealt with movement constraints and police harassment in a variety of ways. Most paid bribes to pass through checkpoints, or used their networks to circumvent movement restrictions. One refugee explained that his Cameroonian business partner travelled to buy the commodities which he then sold in town, thereby avoiding contact with the police. Some refugees explained that some Central Africans had

obtained forged identity cards and birth certificates, which they used as official papers. This was a risky tactic: one mother we spoke to was desperate to secure the release of her son, who had been arrested carrying a fake Cameroonian birth certificate.

Refugees discussed religion, religious institutions and religious leaders sporadically and indirectly, and as a motivation for solidarity religion was most powerful among Muslims within the host population. Religion was also a source of moral support and a way to make sense of life's difficulties. Only one interviewee actively sought the help of a religious leader upon his arrival in Cameroon, receiving accommodation and support to start a trade. Another man relied on the money given to him after Friday prayers at his mosque, and a Christian interviewee told us that her new church community in Cameroon had helped her make connections and extend her trade. However, her

story was an exception, and the main role religion plays seems to lie in motivating charitable acts from individuals in the host community.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

The findings of this part of the study suggest that – perhaps counter-intuitively – more recent arrivals are not necessarily the most vulnerable category of refugee: in the early days and months of displacement they can call on their own assets and on the help of networks of relatives, friends and trading partners formed in CAR, as well as contacts established after arriving in Cameroon. As these assets are depleted and assistance is withdrawn, the range of livelihood options open to refugees tends to constrict as their ability to support their household declines. As a result, humanitarian assistance becomes a bigger factor in how refugees survive and seek to construct a livelihood.

---

# 4 Networks and institutions: humanitarian assistance

In addition to their own networks, humanitarian assistance was an integral part of how refugees sought to sustain themselves. Refugees maximised the opportunities available to them to access assistance and free services. Rather than passive recipients of assistance, refugees perceived assistance as one of a set of assets available to them, and made intentional choices as part of an overall calculation of livelihood opportunities and risks. At the same time, the centrality of aid in refugees' approaches to their livelihoods cannot be equated to aid dependency: the level of aid provided as well as the uncertainty linked to funding shortfalls made aid both insufficient to cover the totality of refugees' needs, as well as an unreliable source of support.

## 4.1 Registration and humanitarian assistance

UNHCR, the Red Cross and NGOs – international and national or community-based – were systematically mentioned as a source of help for refugees during their displacement. The operating environment for humanitarian organisations in Cameroon is favourable: international organisations are welcome and appear to face no difficulties with registration or operationally. UN agencies including UNHCR and WFP enjoy generally good working relations with the government (these institutional questions are tackled in the second study). The government allowed the establishment of refugee camps, although most Central African refugees (70%) choose to live outside of these sites and instead self-settle in villages, towns and cities. The establishment of sites facilitated the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the new refugee caseload which arrived en masse (more than 125,000 arrivals) in 2014, but was also a security measure for a government concerned by the infiltration of armed groups from CAR into eastern Cameroon.

Refugees registered with UNHCR either upon arrival in border towns or during UNHCR registration campaigns. Outside of these campaigns, refugees sometimes found it hard to register, and some new refugees interviewed had been unable to do so (it was unclear from our interviews why this was so). Refugees registered in the hope of receiving proper documentation as well as material assistance. As noted above, freedom of movement and harassment and bribery at checkpoints were the main problems facing refugees, and at the time of the research UNHCR was planning to distribute biometric cards to address this issue, and to meet the government's security concerns by providing documentation that was harder to falsify. The cards were considered to be more reliable documents, while plans to include government seals were intended to increase respect for the document among the police.

Refugees' expectations of humanitarian organisations were not always realistic or based on accurate information about the support they can expect from UNHCR, how this support is provided and why it is provided to one individual and not another. For instance, refugees living in Bertoua blamed UNHCR for a government decision to block food assistance to them, while refugees in Mandjou benefited from a full food ration.<sup>12</sup> Refugees in Bertoua felt that relocating to Mandjou to access food assistance was difficult as many of them relied on free accommodation from their relatives:

*My mother's family lives in Bertoua. We came to Bertoua because we heard that UNHCR was supporting refugees to farm. But we have never received this help. I registered with UNHCR but I do not receive the food ration. Every month I go to Mandjou with the hope that I will receive the food ration. I do not know what to do.*

---

<sup>12</sup> This is explored further in the second phase of this research.

## Box 5: Humanitarian assistance to CAR refugees in eastern Cameroon

The Central African Refugee Regional Response plan for 2016 requested more than \$130 million to respond to the needs of some 235,000 CAR refugees and 217,000 host community members, spread among 22 partners. In September 2016, only 19% of the initial request was funded, including only 7% of UNHCR operations in the country (UNHCR, 2016). The main actors contributing to the Response Plan in Cameroon are, in order of contribution, WFP, UNHCR, Solidarités Internationales, Première Urgence Internationale, the French Red Cross, International Medical Corps, Plan International, CARE and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Cameroonian Red Cross operates as a partner of UNHCR and WFP and is among a number of local actors working with UNHCR and other international agencies to support CAR refugees.

Humanitarian assistance provided by UNHCR and its partners to CAR refugees in East Cameroon includes:

- Registration and documentation.
- Free access to primary healthcare.
- Free access to primary education.
- A full food ration from WFP for new refugees and

vulnerable refugees from the old caseload (female household heads, the elderly, large families etc.). In 2016, in-kind food rations were replaced by cash in some areas of East Cameroon.

- Improved access to water and sanitation through building water and sanitation infrastructure in villages where refugees reside and in refugee sites.
- Protection, with a particular emphasis on gender-based violence.
- Support to livelihoods for a limited number of refugees with seeds, tools and other productive assets.

The severe funding shortfalls facing aid agencies in Cameroon mean that the full range of activities cannot be sustained and priority is given to life-saving activities and the most vulnerable within the refugee community. Even so, the assistance and services provided are the same in and outside of refugee sites, and go far beyond what vulnerable Cameroonian nationals receive in either humanitarian aid or social protection. While free primary school education is available to Cameroonians and refugees, Cameroonians pay for healthcare except in priority areas set by the government, namely nutrition and healthcare for pregnant women and under-fives and HIV and TB treatments.

From interviews, it seemed that refugees were surprised when assistance was cut, and had not put plans in place to compensate.

Refugees judged humanitarian organisations harshly when they failed to meet their expectations, whether or not these expectations were justified or based on accurate information. They also tended to regard the perceived limitations of external organisations more severely than they did those of other forms of support, including from family, friends, trading partners and neighbours. UNHCR's perceived failure to meet their needs led refugees to believe that the agency was not always knowledgeable about their situation. The result was ambivalence, with a lack of trust in UNHCR combined with continued high demands on the organisation. Refugees' expectations of UNHCR included the provision of good legal documents that would allow them to move freely with no discrimination or harassment, food assistance, health

services and water, paying for primary, secondary and university education, providing accommodation and helping them find jobs and ways to sustain their family and reach their life goals.

*When UNHCR started registering people, I quit the job I had. I was expecting two things from UNHCR: that UNHCR provides me a job or that UNHCR pays for school. UNHCR did neither. I get a food ration. I cannot go back to my old job because I will start from scratch again in the company. I try to fight and find small jobs here and there. I hope that the research you are doing will show the reality of refugee life and truth about UNHCR and the lack of support for refugees.*

However, these expectations diminished over time and became more realistic, in part due to refugees' experience with the aid system:

*Before I thought that humanitarian organisations would come and provide support for me to start my trading business. But with the arrival of new refugees, UNHCR is focused on them. I feel I have to develop my economic activities now in case UNHCR abandons us completely. I would like to have access to a bigger field so I can have fruit trees.*

Almost all of the refugees interviewed in the study felt that the quality of the health services available to them was inadequate; while in principle primary healthcare was free, refugees reported suffering discrimination at clinics, and said that they were often told that the refugee quota had been filled and were sent home. If translators were not present they could not benefit from any health services, and to avoid discrimination and long waiting times most refugees interviewed ended up paying for medication and treatment (local Cameroonians have to pay as well). The costs of health treatment, medication and care during pregnancy were often met through business capital or household savings.

Likewise, while both UNHCR and the government provide free primary education for refugee children, education levels are relatively high in Cameroon, and refugees felt that secondary education and vocational training, and for some even university education, was critical if they and their children were to sustain themselves in Cameroon. These higher levels of education are not free – nor for that matter are they free for Cameroonians – but once again refugees expected UNHCR to provide. Refugees also hoped for and wanted more support for their economic activities, and some felt that support was too often given to women rather than men, or in a communal manner rather than individually.

The research also uncovered some tension between the old and new refugee caseloads over UNHCR targeting decisions, in particular a sense that older refugees were being neglected at the expense of newer arrivals.

While many of the refugees we interviewed had networks, skills and assets of their own, most still relied on UNHCR and its partners for support, either to mitigate or recover from shocks (e.g. sickness) and support them with food assistance or through the provision of seeds, tools, capital and material for economic activities. As such, humanitarian assistance, while not meeting all expectations, was nonetheless

perceived as an important asset. The food provided by WFP was often resold for cash to start small business or for other commodities, such as condiments for trade. While in humanitarian discourse this may be regarded as aid diversion, for refugees it was simply a pragmatic response to their circumstances and needs; one refugee, for instance, defined the food assistance he had received as ‘a capacity strengthening measure’. Another interviewee explained that an NGO had given him a field to farm but that, because he also owned a shop, he paid other refugees to do the farming, going back every week to check the work. In effect, humanitarian assistance was one among a range of sources of revenue. Another woman explained that, while she no longer needed the agricultural support received from one of UNHCR’s partners, it allowed her to save up money in case of sickness or other shocks.

The story of Ousmanou exemplifies how decisions by refugees around risks and livelihood options were influenced by the availability of aid during displacement. In his first location after displacement, in Zembe in Cameroon, Ousmanou was not able to farm effectively because cattle kept destroying his crops. However, he stayed in Zembe because he received food aid there. When after two years aid was cut off – according to him with no explanation – he took action, contacting his brother for advice and relocating to Adinkol, where his brother lived and where he had been told he could get access to good agricultural land, which he did with his brother’s help. At the time of the interview, Ousmanou was able to sustain his family without any outside assistance. In Ousmanou’s case, alternative livelihood options were available other than assistance, begging the question why he did not decide to take action and sustain himself from his own resources. While an alternative option that would have allowed self-sustainability was available, Ousmanou preferred to rely on aid, which was less risky than investing all he had to relocate to his brother’s village. When aid was cut this changed his perception of how risky relocation was, and compelled him to become independent from aid as a livelihood source.

Ousmanou’s story highlights the importance of perception in refugees’ calculations of the livelihood options available to them – and the risks attached – at different points in their displacement journey. This analysis does not conclude that aid to highly vulnerable people should be cut off in order to compel refugees to explore other options, and segments of the

refugee population will continue to need assistance or some form of social protection to survive. It does suggest that, for some refugees, there are livelihoods opportunities that they are not risking, or which they do not perceive as a possibility as long as they can rely on assistance. At the same time, assessing who exactly within the refugee population would be capable of pursuing new livelihoods in the absence of assistance is extremely challenging.

## 4.2 Durable solutions

Refugees' priorities and goals were shaped very much by whether their long-term expectation was to return to CAR or settle permanently in Cameroon (for reasons which are unclear, only a tiny proportion of interviewees (three) mentioned third-country resettlement as a long-term goal). In our sample, 90% of old caseload refugees favoured integration, against 10% who planned to return to CAR. Among new caseload refugees the proportion was evenly split, with a small number (5%) saying they were considering both return and integration. A majority of refugees in our sample were in effect locally integrated: they perceived Cameroon as their home, felt that they belonged there and did not see any benefits in going back to CAR. In the words of one interviewee: 'A return to CAR seems very far away. I already feel I am a Cameroonian'. Our research shows quite convincingly – and perhaps unsurprisingly – that refugees who had been resident in Cameroon for longer and were more closely integrated into their new environment were more inclined to want to stay, though it is unclear whether these same refugees

would have felt similarly attached to the country in the very early years of displacement.

A lack of livelihoods opportunities and economic betterment was one of the main reasons why refugees wanted to return to CAR – but only if security conditions allowed. As one new caseload refugee put it: 'If peace comes back we will go back to CAR because life is very difficult in Cameroon. At least in CAR we have a house even though all our belongings have been looted'. Refugees who had not acclimatised to life in Cameroon were also eager to return: 'My father is Cameroonian but I grew up in CAR. I am used to living in CAR so I cannot get used to life in Cameroon'. Those who did not want to return cited the atrocities that their family had experienced. One interviewee who said that he could not go back told the researchers that 'the hatred is endemic in CAR. I would like to be integrated in Cameroon'.

## 4.3 Conclusion

In the eyes of refugees, humanitarian assistance is not a distinct source of support, apart from other initiatives they take to sustain their families. Rather, it is one piece in a complex puzzle. Refugees intentionally weigh up the range of options available to them, including humanitarian assistance and services, based on often unrealistic expectations about the scope and sequencing of assistance over the course of protracted displacement. Ultimately, by integrating short-term, time-bound assistance into their strategies, refugees may be unwittingly undermining their livelihood prospects over the long term.

---

# 5 Economic activity and livelihoods

Displacement forced Central African refugees into a new environment that required them to adapt: adapt their skills, adapt their networks, adapt their perceptions and expectations. Some refugees interviewed were overwhelmed and found it difficult to articulate what their goals were, or did not know how to reach them. This is perhaps a surprising finding as in many ways Central Africans should be well-placed to manage their displacement in East Cameroon because of the long-standing economic and family ties between the two countries. Broadly speaking, the research found that refugees with the long-term goal of integration actively took initiatives and tried different strategies to reach their goals, including marrying into Cameroonian families, while those who intended to return to CAR concentrated more on shorter-term objectives and actions – as opposed to sustainable self-sustenance – in order to support their families and meet life’s basic needs.

A small number of refugees we interviewed saw themselves as successful, and many had been able to reach their goals, at least partially: they had accommodation, were with their families, enjoyed safety and security and were able to feed their families. However, more aspirational goals, such as being wealthier or going back to herding, were rarely used as a yardstick for success, and what success refugees had managed to achieve was fragile – reliant at least to some extent on outside assistance, be it from family, friends or humanitarian organisations, and vulnerable to external shocks, including illness and death. How long refugees had been displaced did not seem to be a factor in improving their livelihoods, nor did it seem to extend the networks they could use to further their goals and aspirations.

## 5.1 Assets, skills and expectations

Central African refugees engage in a range of activities to support themselves in Cameroon, including farming, cattle herding, trading (selling and buying

condiments, doughnuts, fruit and vegetables, fuel, bread), gold mining, services (transport, hair dressing, hospitality), collecting and selling firewood and religious teaching. In terms of assets for investment, many refugees from the first wave of displacement came with cattle, though many lost their animals after their arrival due to sickness, lack of access to grazing land and as a result of a severe drought in 2005. New refugees sold clothes, jewellery and blankets for cash to invest in petty trade, typically the domain of women (selling condiments, cakes and juices).

In many cases, the skills refugees brought with them were not fit for purpose in Cameroon. Many refugees had to change their economic activities because their previous work was not available or was not perceived to be a possible option. Refugees who relied on pastoralism and had lost their cattle were no longer able to continue their lifestyles, and instead settled down to sedentary farming. Some refugees had to change economic activities because of the higher level of education or expertise their prior jobs required, or because their qualifications were not recognised; for instance, teachers were not necessarily allowed to teach at the same level in Cameroonian schools because their diplomas were not accepted. Levels of education in Cameroon are higher than in CAR (the adult literacy rate is 71.3%, and primary school net enrolment is 93.5%, compared to 56.6% and 68.9% in CAR (UNESCO, 2000)). Secondary school net enrolment stands at 44.2% for men and 38.7% for women (*ibid.*), as opposed to 18.2% and 10.1% respectively in CAR. The generally lower levels of education among the Central African population meant that refugees’ skills were not competitive on the Cameroonian job market. One woman explained that her son, whom she thought would be able to work in the market to assist a trader, was not able to find employment because he did not have a high-school diploma. In CAR such a job would not require a high school education.

Refugees struggled with expectations and perceptions, as well as skills. In effect, in the early phase of their

displacement many refugees appear to have brought with them knowledge and experience gained in CAR, but which is not suitable for the different economic conditions they encounter in Cameroon. As a result, those refugees who had taken the initiative to invest the capital they had brought with them had been less successful than they expected; many lost money, in turn making it more difficult for refugees to make productive investments. For example, Central Africans who used to engage in trade in CAR found trading conditions more difficult in Cameroon, and were surprised by how little profit they were able to make, even against what they felt was a large investment. Refugees mentioned that, while in CAR a small investment had allowed them to make a large profit, in Cameroon the opposite seemed to be the case; they felt that they were limited by lack of access to capital, that the business sector was overcrowded and that they were unable to compete with Cameroonian businesses with greater investment capacity. Without access to credit and little available capital, trading and business were not easy options.

Refugees also felt that, while in CAR they were accepted as active members of the market system and the economy, they were perceived differently in Cameroon due to their refugee status. Some refugees knew traders in East Cameroon with whom they used to conduct business, and these traders were happy to help them with money to buy food, pay the rent for a few months or pay medical bills. However, refugees felt that these former trading partners were not allowing them to take advantage of opportunities in Cameroon, for instance by refusing loans to enable them to restart trade and business. While several interviewees reported being accepted as traders on the market, they also noted that they often had to buy at higher prices and sell at lower ones, though this may have been because they felt the need to sell quickly to pay for urgent households needs.

## 5.2 Livelihood goals, strategies and actions

Although at the outset the study assumed that refugees had strategies or principles that informed their actions, many were not able to articulate a strategy (in the sense of what they were planning to do in order to reach a particular goal). Some said that they did not have a strategy or did not know what to do to reach their goals. Rather than planned, Central

African refugees' strategies and actions seemed to be opportunistic and reactive to their environment and the possibilities open to them at any particular time. For the newer caseload, the trauma of the conflict made it especially difficult for them to advance their new life as refugees, and they were rarely able to articulate goals or aspirations. These refugees tended to rely on family support for survival and assistance, with no other strategies in place.

Broadly speaking, refugees sought to reach their objectives in five main ways:

- They looked for paid work by going around towns, villages, markets and agricultural fields.
- They did manual work that required no investment in the hope of saving money and accumulating capital to invest.
- They invested the assets they had in businesses/trade.
- They activated their network to access job opportunities and capital.

Refugees' choices tended to depend in part on the stage of their displacement. For instance, manual work and seeking out jobs that did not require investment were often the first steps refugees took, while as they accumulated some capital they aimed to diversify their activities or invest in other activities, as the story of Saidou, a refugee in Cameroon since 2004, illustrates:

*When I arrived, I was helped by my Mbororo brothers. Somebody told me to go and see the chief who proposed to rent a field to me for 5,000 FCFA [\$8]. I only had 1,000 FCFA [\$1.60] with me. The chief agreed to keep the field for me. I went to look for work to pay the rest of the money. I cultivated somebody else's field for one month to get the money. I did not know how to farm but I did not have a choice. I had to farm to feed my family. My objective was to graze cattle and do trade. This is what I did in CAR. But I did not have enough means. I also fetch firewood. But I have to pay to access the land and the firewood. I found my first job farming somebody else's field because of trust. I had started farming my own field when a Cameroonian passed by and saw the quality of my work. He gave me the opportunity to work in his field in order to pay for the rent for my field.*

Failure – rather than success – drove change in the goals and strategies refugees pursued over the years of their displacement in Cameroon. In other words, refugees changed goals and strategies because they were forced to. When one strategy failed to give the expected result, for instance when old age or physical limitations made it impossible for a refugee to continue a particular activity, when assets and capital were depleted or a shock such as an illness derailed plans, then refugees changed strategies and/or goals. Very few refugees interviewed were changing strategies because they had achieved the expected results and were setting new goals. Conversely, refugees who had had some success did not see the need to change their goals and strategies over the course of their displacement.

Refugees tended to frame their goals based on the skills they already possessed, in the process limiting themselves to a set of perceived possibilities: ‘I only know how to do petty trade’; ‘I only know how to do agriculture’; ‘This is what God wanted me to be. I cannot want anything else’; ‘I would like to have cattle but I can only farm the land now’. Several interviewees simply felt that they did not have a choice but to take the path they did: ‘I did not know how to farm but I did not have a choice. To feed my family I had to farm. My goal was to raise cattle and trade. This is what I was doing in CAR’. Hassan, for instance, wanted to engage in trade to support his family, but found Cameroon too difficult an environment and so turned to farming instead. Hassan was 74 when we interviewed him and was still hoping to get into trading, but had no plans in place to reach that goal. Theodore came to Cameroon as a young child and hoped to go to school, but ended up selling bread in Bertoua from the age of 15 until 27, when he became a farmer. Mouhamadou also wanted to trade but went on to farm instead. When we interviewed him, in November 2015, he asked for help from UNHCR and its partners to start a small trading business.

Refugees who were willing to ask for or invest capital were generally more successful than refugees who followed a more conservative path. Refugees’ attitudes to risk varied: in general, most were wary about taking risks in part due to their status as refugees. One woman, for instance, was advised by her mother not to buy a large quantity of flour on credit, fearing the consequences if she was unable to repay the debt because, as refugees, they may face harsher consequences or may not be forgiven as easily: ‘My mother said not to take too much on credit because she fears we will not be able to repay. Since we are foreigners, it is a priority not to get in trouble’. Many refugees expressed fear and concern over getting loans or buying commodities on credit and shied away from using credit as part of their livelihood strategies. Refugees also felt that the less they had, the less help or fewer opportunities they could expect. As one refugee put it: ‘When one knows you have nothing, nobody comes to help you. I have brothers in Mandjou who used to give me commodities to sell in CAR. But now, as a refugee, nobody wants to take the risk to give me anything. I would not want to take the risk either’.

## 5.3 Conclusion

These restricted perceptions of livelihood goals, options and strategies may explain why Central African refugees believe that they have generally had limited success in reaching their goals and fulfilling their aspirations. From our interviews, it appears that Central African refugees have essentially censored themselves, limiting their goals based on the skills they have, rather than the skills they need, and limiting their strategies in line with perceived restrictions, rather than opportunities. They have based their strategies on less risky options that rely heavily on external factors, including the help of well-disposed individuals and humanitarian organisations.



---

# 6 Conclusion

The goals, livelihood strategies, activities and outcomes of Central African refugees in Cameroon are fundamentally shaped by each refugee's perception of their context, risks and livelihood possibilities. When stating that they had no choice but to do what they were doing, refugees told us that they could not follow certain paths because they felt that they did not have the connections and relations they needed to do so, and felt that nobody would help them financially to set up businesses because of their lack of resources and means. This restricts Central African refugees at the very outset of their thinking and strategising about what to do to sustain themselves, and what goals they can achieve. Understanding this is critical to understanding why refugees are not developing certain strategies and actions, and therefore not reaching outcomes that may in fact be within their reach. The livelihood actions and strategies of Central African refugees are also influenced by the relationship between their perceptions of risk and the policy and institutions of aid, shedding light on the incentive and disincentive structure of assistance.

Central African refugees relied on their pre-existing networks as their main source of help and support. Whether family, friends or trading relations, they were the first point of call for Central African refugees as they arrived in Cameroon. At the same time, solidarity and charity from family, friends and trading relations had limits, and Omata (2013) warns against romanticising this charity network as a sign of social cohesion and community resilience: 'Informal support networks should not be viewed as a substitute for more organised institutional assistance by refugee-assisting agencies. Without understanding the sacrifice, stress and burdens entrenched in these mutual assistance practices, refugee policy-makers are left clutching at the straws of idealised and romanticised versions of community'. Although heavily criticised by refugees for not meeting their high expectations, UNHCR and its partners came in a close second, providing food, access to education, health, other services and documentation. The host community was another critical element within refugees' support system, particularly for the small proportion who did not have pre-existing networks in Cameroon. Religion played a role,

although not as important a role as some may assume, in motivating individuals to help refugees extend their support networks, as moral support or as a way of making sense of life.

Humanitarian assistance, while an asset, did not necessarily support refugees' goals and aspirations – and perhaps should not be made to do so. Either way, this raises a salient question around the objectives of humanitarian assistance in protracted displacement. Refugees in their first few months of displacement require immediate help and support, including registration and food assistance. Refugees also rely on humanitarian assistance as an asset for survival, and in their livelihoods strategies and actions. Nevertheless, if humanitarian assistance is intended to provide, not only short-term emergency support but also help towards self-reliance, this research into refugees' perspectives shows that this is not happening. Central African refugees in Cameroon are surviving partly through their own initiative and agency, but they are also adopting livelihood strategies in which humanitarian assistance plays an integral part. Central Africans, including those who have been in Cameroon for a number of years, still seek emergency humanitarian assistance to support their livelihoods. This creates a perverse system preventing – or at least discouraging – refugees from challenging the perceived limitations they face and trying other livelihood options.

The most important finding from the perspective of Central African refugees living in East Cameroon is perhaps that none of the help they receive supported them in the long term, in a sustainable manner, to become self-reliant. CAR refugee perspectives highlight the role that pre-existing networks such as friends and family play in helping them survive during displacement, and yet evidence suggests that this informal support is limited in scope, scale and time. As a result, it helps refugees sustain themselves and support their families for a while, but not to become self-reliant. Similarly, the types of assistance and support given to refugees by formal institutions and organisations (including aid agencies) is not geared towards supporting self-reliance and livelihoods beyond an aid-dependent system. Evidence gathered

through refugees' perspectives also highlights the dearth of effective livelihoods interventions. Support to self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods is thus restricted to refugees' own agency and action leaving many unable to reach positive livelihoods outcomes. This study demonstrates the urgent need to rethink the way we support refugees in protracted displacement. In particular, it highlights the necessity and urgency of thoroughly evaluating aid agencies' contribution (or lack thereof) to refugee livelihoods and self-reliance.

One hard fact on displacement is the near-certainty of it lasting many years, over one or more generations. Cameroon is a facilitating environment to support the economic and social integration of refugees and their self-reliance because it allows refugees to settle within communities, to work and to move. And yet, in responding to the first and second refugee influx, aid agencies have replicated a care and maintenance model. For some refugees this may be necessary at the onset of displacement in order to save lives, but it also needs to be systematically linked to a self-reliance strategy, because the second hard fact we know on displacement is that aid funding decreases as the years go by. In effect, a different vulnerability emerges after years of displacement when external assistance from formal organisations diminishes, charity from pre-existing networks dries up and refugees have exhausted their financial capital as well as the livelihoods options they felt were available to them.

This study on the perspective of CAR refugees also highlights how we need to rethink livelihoods support. Supporting the livelihoods of refugees remains a new sector for UNHCR and other partners (Jacobsen and Fratzke, 2016: 5). Most livelihoods interventions are based on existing practices geared towards other vulnerable groups that are not refugees. The perspective of refugees also highlights the psychological obstacles preventing many from fully deploying their potential. Conservative views of their livelihoods opportunities and perceptions of high risks have prevented refugees

from seeking available livelihoods paths. Livelihoods interventions have not taken into account how perceptions, attitudes to risk, trauma, attitudes towards local integration (and return and resettlement) and difficulties in adapting to new realities differentiate refugees from other vulnerable groups, and mean that support for refugee livelihoods cannot be implemented the same way. Aid agencies can do more to ensure that the livelihoods programme they invest in integrate the perspectives of refugees and address these 'softer' aspects of the challenges they face in fulfilling their aspirations and meeting their livelihood goals.

The displacement story of Central African refugees in Cameroon can be told through the numerous institutions, networks and individuals that come into play in supporting them in their lives and livelihoods. This study aimed to identify refugees' amorphous institutional landscape, comprising individual family members, friends, former trading partners and individual Cameroonians, motivated by a shifting combination of moral values, solidarity and social responsibilities and obligations. How refugees perceive their circumstances and possibilities can be the difference between reaching their goals and struggling. The question then becomes how can livelihood interventions be designed and implemented in order to take these factors into account? The second part of this study will further explore this question. In particular, by moving from the perspectives of refugees to the perspectives of the institutions (formal and informal), networks and individuals that shape their lives and livelihoods, this project will seek to identify opportunities to address the discrepancy between these two perspectives, and identify where challenges remain. Through examining the roles and perspectives of these actors vis-à-vis refugees, as well as their interaction with them and with each other, we hope to identify why more investment in self-reliance strategies has not been made, and why the perspectives of refugees have not been integrated in ways that enable better-designed interventions to support their livelihoods.

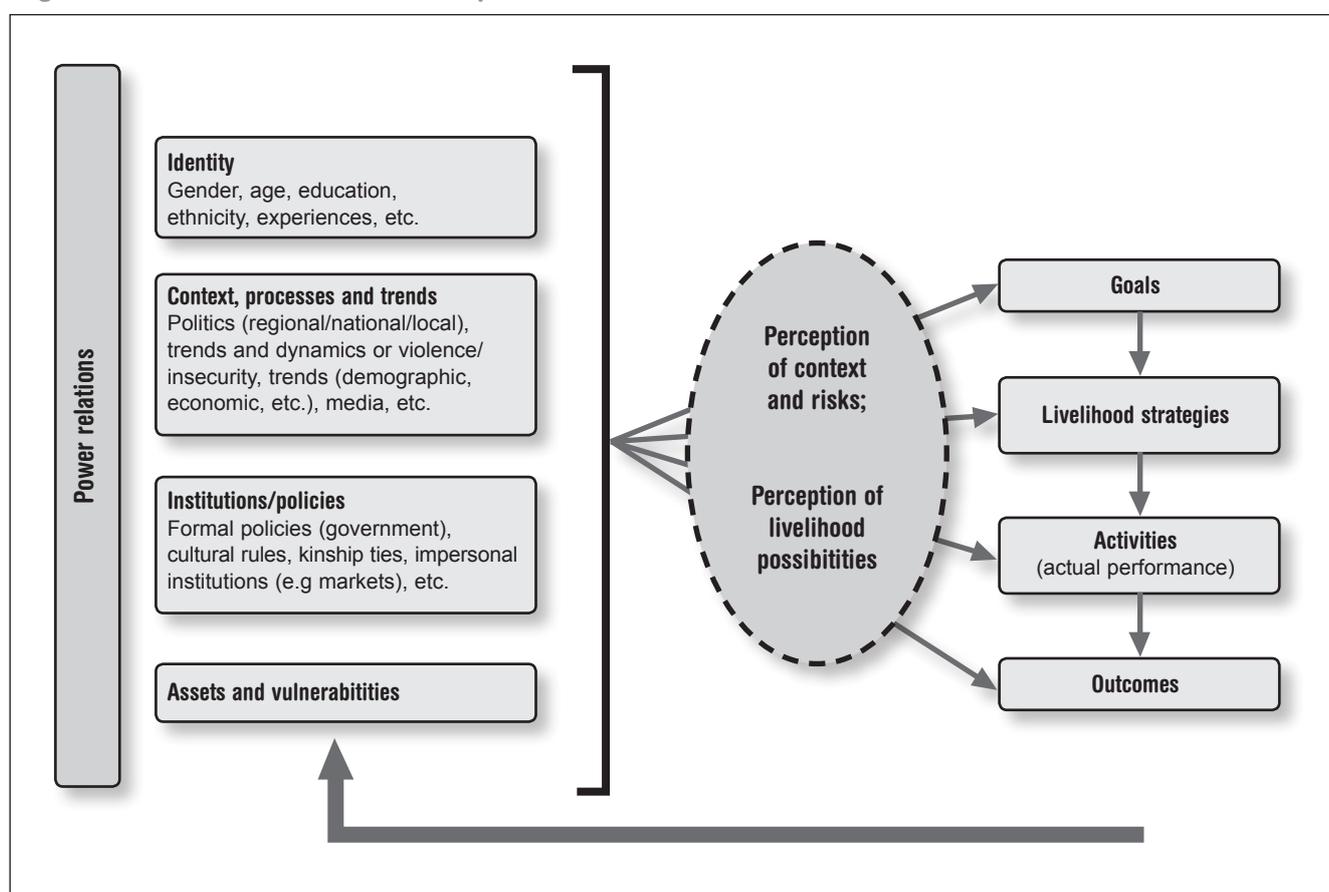
# Annex 1

## Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

This study uses Simon Levine’s Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. The diagram below provides a picture of the elements of this livelihoods framework. It is based on the belief that technical perspectives have failed to take into account the more complex realities faced by people, instead assuming that economic formulae and other technical fix were enough to support people’s livelihoods, resulting in predetermined possibilities of how people could and should live. The livelihoods approach seeks instead to understand people on their own terms, and how the broader society in which they live – the economy,

politics, how institutions act, cultural rules – shapes their options and their choices. By focusing on people rather than the vulnerability context, assets and the institutional environment, the differences between people’s choices and strategies start appearing, revealing other important elements of livelihoods: that individual people are making choices, partly based on what is out there, but also on what these individual people perceive. Levine’s framework thus helped understand how CAR refugees were living in the same environment, but making different choices because of what they perceived as possible.

Figure 1: How livelihoods are shaped



Source: Levine 2014

---

# References

- Barbelet, V. (2015) *Central African Republic: Addressing the Protection Crisis*, HPG Working Paper. ODI: London.
- Boutrais, J. (1994) Pour un nouvelle cartographie des Peuls, *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, 133-135, XXXIV-1-3, 1994, pp.137-46.
- Boutrais, J. (1994) Les Foulbe de l'Adamaoua et l'élevage : de l'idéologie pastorale a la pluri-activité, *Cahier d'Etudes africaines*, 133-135, XXXIV-1-3, 1994, pp.175-96.
- Burnham, P. (n.d.) 'MBOSCUA: A Novel Experiment in Ethnic Organisation', Conference Paper.
- Burnham, P. (1996) *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Crawford, N. et al. (2015) *Protracted Displacement: Uncertain Paths to Self-reliance in Exile*, HPG Commissioned Report. London: ODI.
- Dognin, R. (1981) L'installaion des Djafoun dans l'Adamaoua camerounais. In Tardits, C. (1981) *Contribution de la recherché ethnologique a l'histoire des civilisations du Cameroun*. Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.
- Human Rights Watch (2007) 'The State of Anarchy: Rebellion and Abuses against Civilians', vol. 19, no. 14.
- Jacobsen, K. and S. Fratzke (2016) *Building Livelihoods Opportunities for Refugee Populations: Lessons from Past Practice*. Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Levine, S. (2014) *How to Study Livelihoods: Bringing a Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to Life*. SLRC working Paper 22. London: SLRC.
- Okello, M. (2014) 'The 1969 OAU Convention and the Continuing Challenge for the African Union', *Forced Migration Review*, 48, November.
- Omata, N. (2013) 'Community Resilience or Shared Destitution? Refugees' Internal Assistance in a Deteriorating Economic Environment', *Community Development Journal*, vol. 18, no.2, April, pp. 264-79.
- Metcalfe, V. and S. Haysom, with E. Martin (2012) *Sanctuary in the City? Urban Displacement and Vulnerability in Kabul*. HPG Working Paper. London: ODI.
- Seignobos, C. (2008) *La question mbororo: refugies de la RCA au Cameroun*. Yaounde/Paris: Institute de Recherche pour le Developpement.
- UNDP (2015) *Human Development Report 2015: Work for Human Development*.
- UNESCO (2000) 'Education for All Assessments', [http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/efa\\_2000\\_assess/index.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/efa_2000_assess/index.shtml).
- UNHCR (2015) *Cameroun: profil de la population refugie de l'Est, du Nord et de l'Adamaoua*, 30 August 2015.
- UNHCR (2015b) 'Central African Refugee Regional Response Plan December 2015'.
- UNHCR (2016) '2016 Central African Republic Regional Refugee Response Plan: Funding Snapshot as of 15 August 2016', <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/CAR%20RRP%202016%20-%20Funding%20tracking%20all%20agencies%2015AUG16.pdf>.
- US Department of State (2014) 'Field Evaluation of Local Integration of Central African Refugees in Cameroon'.
- World Bank (2015) 'Cameroon Country Page', <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cameroon/overview>.

# HPG

## Humanitarian Policy Group

---

The Humanitarian Policy Group is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and information professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

---

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce materials from this publication but, as copyright holders, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. This and other HPG reports are available from [www.odi.org.uk/hpg](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg).

© Overseas Development  
Institute, 2017

Humanitarian Policy Group  
Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
E-mail: [hpgadmin@odi.org](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org)  
Website: <http://www.odi.org/hpg>

Cover photo: As of January 2016, 243,750 people had fled violence in Central African Republic (CAR) and become refugees in Cameroon. Vulnerable women and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are supported through economic and social rehabilitation programmes to promote CAR refugees' self-reliance.

© UN Women/Ryan Brown

