

Using Forced Migration to Foster Emergence? International Aid and Development Policies in Cameroon

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Abstract:

This paper examines the alignment of refugee aid interventions with Cameroon's national policy of emergence, shedding light on an authoritarian government's utilization of international assistance. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, it investigates how international policies aiming at turning refugees into a development opportunity for their host states are managed by an aid-receiving country and strategically leveraged by Cameroonian authorities to strengthen their political apparatus. It explores how the government integrates humanitarian responses with large-scale development policies, while retaining control over strategic sectors. Implementing the emergence policy enables Cameroon to reappropriate international standards, navigating complex donor relations to establish new legitimacy. The analysis highlights the power dynamics and implications of aid interventions within an authoritarian context, demonstrating the state's capacity to transform internal crises into productive forces. This research contributes to a better understanding of the links between refugee aid, host states' domestic and international politics, and migration diplomacy.

Introduction

This article aims to examine how aid interventions towards forcibly displaced people align with the national policy of emergence within an authoritarian context, focusing on employment generation and the promotion of entrepreneurship in Cameroon. The objective is to shed light on a host government's capacity to either reinvest in or redirect refugee assistance projects towards its own development objectives and strategies (Lefort, 2020).

While numbers of refugees keep increasing worldwide, reaching 114 million in 2023, three-quarters of them being hosted by low and middle-income countries (UN News, 2023), international responses have increasingly engaged on development-led projects, approaches, and financing mechanisms. Initiatives such as the 2015 'Grand Bargain', the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the 2018 Global Compacts for Refugees and for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, aim to mediate the impacts of forced displacement on receiving countries and populations, to address the longer-term livelihoods needs of the refugees in sustainable ways, and to contain forcibly people in their regions of origin (Zetter, 2021).

Cameroon does not escape this trend. Since 2014, the country has faced three forced migration crises resulting in an unprecedented level of international aid involvement. Instability in neighbouring Central African Republic (CAR) have led to the arrival of 354,523 refugees in Cameroon's eastern regions; in the Far North region, the Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency has forced 120,934 Nigerian refugees and 453,661 Cameroonians to flee; and in the North-West and South-West regions, the secessionist insurgency and government military repression have resulted in 621,591 internally displaced people (IDPs)¹. International organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations (UN) agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have engaged in responding to these 'complex emergency situations' with methods aiming to provide both emergency assistance and longer-term response (OCHA, 2023). In 2016, Cameroon became the first country to volunteer at the World Humanitarian Summit to implement the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDPN), making it one of the seven pilot countries for this approach (HDPN Taskforce, 2021). But such a refugee assistance is not without effect on the national development strategy of the host country (Easton-Calabria, 2017). In Cameroon, it happens in a context where, over the last decade, development discussions have been dominated by the 'emergence' policy², which emphasizes the resurgence of planning rationales and ideologies as fundamental components of state governance for economic growth and development. This developmentalist principle creates a significant arena for state formation and (re)negotiation, legitimizing new power dynamics, government practices, and social engineering in the field of development (Péclard *et al.*, 2020). Following the era of structural adjustment plans, the 'Vision 2035' policy – often referred to as 'The Cameroon of greater achievements' – highlights the state's determination to regain control over the formulation and implementation of development policies, following the era of structural adjustment plans. Studies have demonstrated how the outcomes of the

¹ Data retrieved from the UNHCR Operational Portal, 31/01/2024: <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/country/cmr> (accessed on 26/02/2024).

² Like Cameroon, of the 54 countries on the African continent, 37 have adopted an 'emergence plan', with a timeframe ranging from a few years to a few decades ('The Map of Africa's "Emergence"': <https://devstate.hypotheses.org/scientific-output/charts-and-figures>; accessed on 03/01/2024). See Daouda (2019).

emergence process simultaneously rejuvenate, nourish, and are influenced by the ‘politics of the belly’ (Bayart, 2009; Amougou and Bobo, 2018). In a context characterized by ‘authoritarian routines’ (Pommerolle, 2007), increased government oversight, and the instrumentalization of relationships with international and private actors (Lickert, 2013; Muñoz, 2018), this new development policy has provided crucial opportunities for the government to instrumentalise the development discourse and heighten centralization of power (Khan-Mohammad and Amougou, 2020). It aims to establish new legitimacy for the four-decade-long regime of Paul Biya, by reigniting a sense of imagined prosperity (Amougou and Bobo, 2018) and serving the regime’s ‘propaganda of stability’ (Eboko and Awondo, 2018) amidst increasing contestation and security challenges (Lekunze and Page, 2022).

By conducting a comprehensive examination of the dynamics and interactions between Cameroonian and international stakeholders, this research seeks to explore how refugee assistance is perceived and utilised as an additional means and resource to facilitate the achievement of emergence goals. The investigation will delve into the relationships between international stakeholders and Cameroonian representatives at both the national and local levels, aiming to illustrate the dynamics of state domination in an authoritarian context (Morelle and Planel, 2018), characterized by widening social inequalities and recurring exploitative practices by the state apparatus (Mbembe, 1993). Special attention will be given to labour market and employment issues, which are crucial to international aid (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018) and to the emergence policy (Republic of Cameroun, 2009, 2020).

This study relies on primary data collected during two years of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork (Marcus, 1995), conducted while serving both as a researcher and an aid practitioner³: initially, as a Project Manager in Eastern Cameroon (from October 2017 to May 2018), and subsequently as a National Program Officer in Yaoundé, the capital city (from February 2020 to July 2021). This dual role placed me at the juncture where aid interventions are conceived, negotiated, and implemented, facilitating direct engagement with both international stakeholders and the populations targeted by their interventions. I led participant observations during bilateral or coordination meetings and on-site visits to aid projects implementation sites, as well as informal discussions, formal interviews, and various interactions with UN agencies, NGO employees, aid beneficiaries, state representatives, local authorities, and populations in the Eastern region and Yaoundé, the capital city. Although this dual role offered heuristic insights, it also posed limitations and ethical challenges. Despite challenges in reconciling the ethnographer's perspective with the imperative for action within aid agencies (Brabant, 2013; Fresia and Lavigne Delville, 2018; Mosse, 2005; Schattner-Orman, 2024), the triangular relationships that developed among the ethnographer, aid institutions, and people targeted by assistance played a crucial role in shaping both the research and the work within the INGO (Baujard, 2005). This primary data was further enriched by an extensive literature review, which included ‘grey literature’ (official documents and statements by Cameroonian authorities, reports and studies by aid organizations) and academic publications in both French and English. The article is structured as follows: the first section provides critical insights into migration diplomacy and refugee rent-seeking. The second section analyses the Cameroonian context in

³ My status as a researcher was acknowledged by my leadership and colleagues and was explained to all my informants. Any opinions and views expressed in this text are my own and do not represent the views or attitudes of the organization, mission, or project with which I was associated.

relation to these issues. The third section explores how the emergence policy enables the government to assert its sovereignty vis-à-vis international stakeholders and assistance. The fourth section presents an ethnographic case study demonstrating how Cameroonian authorities concretely utilise refugee aid to complement their national development strategy. The conclusion summarises the findings and offers reflections on the ability of aid-receiving countries to ‘fight back’ international policies and ideologies.

By bridging the fields of refugee and development economics in an under-examined case within the Global South, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of how refugee flows affect host states’ foreign policy, political development, and state power in the context of forced migration and development agendas.

Migration Diplomacy and Refugee Rentier State: Turning Forced Displacement into Productive Opportunities

While refugee policy is traditionally viewed through the prisms of humanitarianism, international law, and national security, comparatively less scholarly attention has been directed towards the motivations behind refugee policy (Micinski, 2018). Some scholars underscored how, during the Cold War, forced displacement was strategically manipulated by both the West and the Soviet bloc (Hamlin and Wolgin, 2012; Stedman and Tanner, 2003; Zolberg, 1988). Others have analysed coercive methods in managing refugees, exploiting forcibly displaced people in military conflicts (Kaldor, 2012; Lischer, 2003; Teitelbaum, 1984), or as ‘weapons of mass migration’ (Greenhill, 2016).

Emerging literature underscores the potential for migration management and refugee policy to undergo diplomatic negotiation, reflecting a ‘migration diplomacy’ approach (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019; İçduygu and Aksel, 2014; Norman, 2020; Thiollet, 2011). Variations in interpreting and applying international refugee law have resulted in significant discrepancies in asylum recognition rates (Akoka, 2018; Engelmann, 2014; Hunt, 2014; Loescher and Scanlan, 1998). In the United States, distinct asylum grant rates to Iraqis and Afghans demonstrate how refugee issues can serve as a foreign policy tool to pursue strategic interests (Micinski, 2018). These issues also influence the renegotiation of power relations: during the 2015 European refugee ‘crisis’, Belgrade’s ‘Hungary first’ approach aimed at securing material gain from Brussels (Csehi and Zgut, 2021), while Greece leveraged the migration issue for additional EU funding and more lenient terms in bailout package negotiations (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis, 2022).

Although the majority of refugees reside in the Global South, Western states’ attempts to prevent forcibly displaced people from reaching their territory have led to migration-related diplomacy towards their southern neighbours (Collyer, 2016; Geddes, 2005; Lavenex, 2007). They have also offered host states increased international assistance and development funds to improve formal access to education, social services, and employment for refugees as a means of migration deterrence (Arar, 2017a; Betts and Loescher, 2011; FitzGerald, 2019). ‘Compacts’ and ‘migration deals’ are presented as methods to transform ‘a broken refugee system’ (Betts and Collier, 2017): the refugee ‘burden’ (Czaika, 2005; Gorman, 1987) is turned into a development opportunity, echoing historical approaches where forcibly displaced individuals

could ‘benefit the state’ (Jacobsen, 2002, 1996) and stimulate growth (Betts, 2023; Easton-Calabria, 2022; Jacobsen, 2005; Loescher, 1993; OECD, 2017; Zetter, 2014).

In response, host governments strategically employ refugees in their foreign policy agendas. Migration diplomacy can be used to enhance the country’s status in international fora, but also at the regional level, or to increase economic and diplomatic relationships with refugee-producer countries (Betts, 2021; Geddes and Maru, 2020; Norman, 2020). In negotiations with external and, especially, Global North actors, they can also use migration policy to achieve ‘other aims’ (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019, p. 117; Stock *et al.*, 2019). Some attempt to monetise their migration management regimes (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2020), while others adopt transactional approaches regarding border control practices (Fernández-Molina and Hernando De Larramendi, 2020). As exemplified in Kenya (Betts, 2023; Kibicho, 2016), Ethiopia (Geddes and Maru, 2020), Uganda (Betts, 2021), Libya (Tsourapas, 2017), Jordan (Arar, 2017b), Manu Island and Nauru (Tsourapas, 2019a), Iran, Pakistan, and South America (Freier *et al.*, 2021), ‘host states have increasingly realised their importance within the global refugee regime in the context of rising migration interdependence’ (*ibid*, p. 2748). They have developed various strategies of migration diplomacy and leverage their geopolitical positions to extract resources and material or non-material benefits from other state and non-state actors in exchange for maintaining refugees within their borders. Setting aside the moral implications of such policymaking, scholars studying this global acceptance of ‘refugee commodification’ (Tsourapas, 2019a; Mavelli, 2018; Himmelreich, 2019) aim at seriously consider the geopolitical and realist politics embedded in refugee rent-seeking. They intend to offer ‘new understandings of international politics of forced migration ... and ... a reappraisal of national, regional and global responses to displacement’ (Freier *et al.*, 2021, p. 2760).

In North Africa and in the Middle East, migration management strategies have been theorized in two ways: states may employ coercion or ‘*blackmailing*—threatening to flood a target state(s) with refugee populations within its borders, unless compensated’ as Turkey did, or cooperation or ‘*back-scratching*—promising to maintain refugee populations within its borders, if compensated’ as in Jordan and Lebanon (Tsourapas, 2019b, p. 465). Some states may also use both approaches depending on who they are negotiating with, as Gaddafi’s Libya (Tsourapas, 2017). The choice between those strategies depends on the size of the host state’s refugee community and its elites’ perception of their geostrategic importance. It has led to the concept of ‘refugee rentier states’, in which forcibly displaced people are used as a resource from which rent may be extracted, being turned ‘into commodities subject to negotiation and trade in the marketplace ... while sidestepping humanitarian and rights-based approaches’ (Freier *et al.*, 2021, p. 2748).

Migration Diplomacy and Refugee Rent-Seeking in Cameroon

In contrast to other African countries, where migration policymaking is often analysed through the prism of border externalisation and the ‘pressure to implement policies that give precedence to Europe’s interests over those of African countries and migrants’ (Maru, 2021; Tardis, 2018), in Cameroon, European influences do not play the most determinative role. Firstly, Yaoundé, wielding economic and political influence, retains the ability to selectively engage among

programmes funded by international organisations and even within these organisations themselves (Kofele-Kale, 1981; Pommerolle, 2016). This mirrors strategies observed in other countries that maximized their agency and resisted international demands (Hagmann and Reyntjens, 2016; Hayman, 2011; Zorbas, 2011).

Secondly, Cameroon's approach to migration policymaking is characterized by 'a close articulation between international and domestic factors' (Minfegue, 2023, p. 730). On one hand, Cameroonian migration policies strongly focus on the imperative of security and protection of national territory: the presence of refugees is deemed undesirable if it compromises national security and public order, with Yaoundé reserving the right to order expulsions (Keph Moh, 2022, p. 100; Adamson, 2006). On the other hand, Cameroon, since independence, have welcomed refugees from neighbouring countries like Equatorial Guinea (Njung, 2021; Tsafack, 2017), Chad (Issa, 1994), Nigeria, or the Democratic Republic of Congo (Nsoga, 2020, p. 138) due to objectives of pan-African solidarity. This not only serves regional interests but also enhances Yaoundé's international status, earning commendation from international actors like UNHCR for its 'exceptional generosity' (DeLancey, 2019, p. 322) and its 'policy of hospitality ... in an era when immigration policies are being tightened almost everywhere, and borders are increasingly closed to the influx of refugees' (Fomekong, 2006).

Faced with increasing forced displacement over the past decade, President Paul Biya reiterated that 'true to its tradition of hospitality and solidarity, and by virtue of its stability, Cameroon is a haven for people seeking peace and safe refuge'⁴. Emphasizing Cameroon's security in contrast to its neighbours in the sub-region reinforces not only its 'propaganda of stability' (Eboko and Awondo, 2018), but also its international standing. Additionally, Yaoundé demonstrated willingness to collaborate, aiming to secure access to major international resources, representing a potential new source of income. This aligns with the cooperation or 'back-scratching' strategy mentioned earlier. However, the government also exhibited coercion or 'blackmailing' tactics. In a November 2020 aid coordination meeting, a UNHCR representative reported tensions with the government in a context of 'increased crime in the eastern regions, particularly in refugee sites'⁵. Reinforcing armed forces deployment, Yaoundé has 'already summoned [the UNHCR] twice', viewing this phenomenon as a direct consequence of the reduction in aid to CAR refugees: 'the government has clearly indicated that if the UNHCR is no longer able to assist them, then they must be repatriated'.

These examples indicate how Cameroon's refugee rent-seeking behaviours differ from previously described patterns, as the choice between cooperation and coercion is not solely determined by the size of its refugee community and domestic elites' perception of their geostrategic importance. Instead, Yaoundé's approach depends on three factors. First, scale: while 'back-scratching' prevails at international fora, at the national level, authorities may resort to 'blackmail' tactics with aid actors, threatening forced repatriation of refugees. Second, temporality: while cooperation is initially pursued to attract refugee rent, the government does not hesitate to take a harder line towards international stakeholders when these benefits significantly decrease. Third, national imperatives: Yaoundé's hospitality and refugee rent-seeking behaviours come after the preservation of national security and public order.

⁴ 'Leaders Summit on Refugees: Statement by President Paul Biya', 20/09/2016 : www.prc.cm/en/news/speeches-of-the-president/1939-leaders-summit-on-refugees-statement-by-president-paul-biya

⁵ This quote (and the following): observation, Yaoundé, 17/11/2020 (my English translation).

Cameroon exhibits other traits resembling ‘refugee rentier-seeking behaviours’ identified in other contexts (Tsourapas, 2019b), such as efforts to inflate refugee numbers for visibility to the international community. Since 2014, individuals from the Central African Republic and Nigeria entering the country via informal border crossings are automatically recognised as *prima facie* refugees, classifying all of them as forcibly displaced. Establishing the Minawao refugee camp (for Nigerian population) and seven CAR refugee sites may also be interpreted strategically: consolidating refugees into a visible and ‘spatially legible population’ (Petee, 2010, p. 18) enhances Cameroon’s visibility and facilitates their census to secure international funding. These financial resources increasingly focus on supporting the host country’s development and refugees’ integration. Cameroon has become the first country to benefit from the IDA-18 sub-window for refugees, a ‘new approach’ advocated by the World Bank to support local development and access to basic social services in areas hosting large numbers of forcibly displaced people (Lefort, 2020). Employment has emerged as a corner stone of international long-term refugee approaches promoted in the country, as exemplified by this UNHCR representative during an aid coordination meeting in Yaoundé:

‘We need to reassure the authorities – and so far, I don’t believe we’ve demonstrated it adequately – ... that we can transform refugees into taxpayers, bring them out of the informal job market, and actively involve them in the country’s economic progress.’⁶

This position aligns with the 2019-2023 UNHCR Global Strategy aimed at promoting ‘Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion’ (UNHCR, 2019). However, in Cameroon, the highly politicized stakes related to employment underscore the authoritarian system’s link between economic capital creation and the state sphere. The conditions for economic development are heavily influenced by political dynamics (Nkolo Asse, 2015; Oroch, 2015). President Paul Biya has also prioritised access to formal employment in its rhetoric and political commitments: job creation and the preservation of existing jobs are key elements in his speeches, particularly when addressing the youth (Njimeni Njiotang, 2018). Despite the priority given to employment issues in the ‘Vision 2035’ emergence plan, an interim report in February 2019 revealed that, between 2005 and 2014, underemployment rates worsened (from 75.8% to 77%), jobs created by the formal private sector decreased (from 4.8% in 2005 to 3.8% in 2010), and the labour market remains predominantly characterised by informal employment (88.6%) (Republic of Cameroon, 2020, p. 79). These statistics illustrate how the emergence policy primarily serves the interests of a political elite concerned with its own preservation rather than enabling the structural transformation of the economy.

In this context, international aid responses to the increasing forced migrations over the last decade have provided Yaoundé with additional resources to further its goals under the emergence policy, as detailed in the subsequent sections.

⁶ Observation, Yaoundé, 18/08/2021 (my English translation).

International Aid Goals Meet Those of the Emergence Policy: the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks

In Cameroon, assistance provided to forcibly displaced people is part of a broader framework governed by various agreements with the authorities. One significant framework that will be examined in this section is the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), which sheds light on its evolution and increasing alignment with the objectives of the national emergence policy. These framework plans are jointly prepared by the government and the United Nations country team, outlining the collaborative actions and strategies that international aid actors intend to implement in order to contribute to national development goals. They detail the objectives, activities, and responsibilities of each UN agency, as agreed upon by the government. The content of these framework plans reflects changes in the context, guiding principles and priority themes around which international aid is structured in a country. Table 1 below presents the evolution of objectives and strategic priorities within each UNDAF, with a specific focus on themes related to economic growth and job creation. Before analysing it, a few context elements should be underlined.

The first UNDAF, covering the period 2002/3 - 2006/7, was developed ‘in a national context characterized by peace, political stability, the consolidation of renewed economic growth [after the economic crisis and structural adjustment plans of the 1980s-1990s] and population impoverishment’ (UNCT, 2002, p. 3). During this time, Cameroon was included by the IMF/World Bank Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, to alleviate the burden of debt (Nkama, 2006), while Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) were widely implemented globally. As a joint strategy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), PRSPs required low-income countries seeking financial aid or debt relief to formulate anti-poverty programs that would serve as frameworks for national policies, programs, and development aid (Cling *et al.*, 2002). They were drafted in an international context marked by the concern of international donors to leave it up to governments to define their own public policies (Mouafo Djontu, 2017, p. 108). By then, the nearly 50,000 refugees hosted by Cameroon were excluded from the PRSP and from official statistics and development policies, with their management deliberately delegated to international entities and donors.

The 2008-2012 UNDAF was developed during a period when the Paris (2005) and Busan (2008) declarations aimed to enhance the effectiveness of international aid. At the global level, two key areas of focus were: ‘(i) strengthening partner countries’ national development strategies and associated operational frameworks ...; (ii) increasing alignment of aid with partner countries’ priorities, systems and procedures and helping to strengthen their capacities’ (OECD, 2008, p. 3). In Cameroon, the successful completion of the HIPC Initiative in 2006 alleviated pressure from international financial institutions, providing the government with greater flexibility in managing its own development (Touna Mama, 2008).

The 2013-2017 UNDAF was formulated following the introduction of the emergence policy in 2009, in which refugees are mentioned and included among the ‘dependent people’ (Republic of Cameroun, 2009, p. 8) and the “socially vulnerable populations’ (Republic of Cameroun, 2020, p. 78). This policy aimed to serve as a ‘new reference framework for all development interventions in Cameroon ... with a specific focus on accelerating growth and creating decent jobs’ (UNCT, 2013). It offered an opportunity for Cameroon to reassert itself vis-à-vis

international stakeholders: contrary to the PRSP, which was designed in 2003 to meet an IMF conditionality, the planning documents for the new policy were developed solely by Cameroonian authorities, without direct involvement from development partners such as the UNDP or the World Bank (Khan-Mohammad and Amougou, 2020, p. 58).

Finally, the 2018-2020 and 2022-2026 UNDAFs were formulated in a context of significant changes regarding the international aid landscape within the country. While Cameroon historically received limited attention on the international agenda (Kofele-Kale, 1981; Pommerolle, 2016), since 2014-2015, the growing number of forced migrations within its territory has led to greater involvement from stakeholders that were previously under-represented. In line with the aforementioned trends, the UNDAFs developed from that period onwards include refugee projects and initiatives with the understanding that forcibly displaced people and the assistance they receive should also contribute to the national development.

Table 1. Evolution of employment and entrepreneurship stakes in Cameroon UNDAFs, 2002-2026

UNDAF	Title and priority rank in development goals	Share of total budget dedicated to employment ⁷	Contributing donors
2002/3 – 2006/7	3/5: ‘Quality growth via industrialization and for employment generation’	57% ⁸ (US\$396,417)	99% IMF (of which 78% under the HIPC Initiative), UNICEF (1%)
2008-2012	1/5: Supporting sustainable growth by strengthening the government's capacity to promote decent employment	7% (US\$680,039)	ILO (81%), UNFPA (10%), UNIFEM (4%), ECA ⁹ (3%), UNICEF (1%)
2013-2017	2/3: Promote the creation of decent jobs and income-generating activities	6% (US\$12,606,000)	ILO (77%), CARO ¹⁰ (12%), UN Women (8%), UNHCR (2%), UNICEF (1%)
2018-2020	1/4: Access to decent employment opportunities, in line with the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper	7% (US\$10,101,000)	ILO (33%), UNHCR (31%), UNDP (21%), UN Women (6%), UNESCO (3%), UNV (3%), ECA (2%), UNFPA (1%)
2022-2026	1/4: Increased opportunities in a green economy that creates decent jobs	3,4% (US\$13,102,203)	UNICEF (39%), IFAD ¹¹ (27%), UNHCR (9%), UNOPS ¹² (7%), UNDP (6%), FAO (4%), UNIDO ¹³ (4%), ILO (3%), UN Habitat (0,7%), UNEP ¹⁴ (0,3%)

Source: UNCT (2021, 2017, 2013, 2007, 2002)

⁷ Excluding World Bank funding.

⁸ The specific proportion of these funds dedicated to employment generation is not specified.

⁹ Economic Commission for Africa.

¹⁰ United Nations Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa.

¹¹ International Fund for Agricultural Development

¹² United Nations Office for Project Services

¹³ United Nations Industrial Development Organization

¹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme

This table, completed by a detailed analysis of the content of each UNDAF, highlights several changes. First, there has been an increasing emphasis on economic growth and employment. In the 2002/3-2006/7 period, these topics represented the third strategic priority, but in the other UNDAFs, they are at the top of the list. There is also a shift regarding the means to be used, as the focus on the development of salaried employment is gradually giving way to the theme of ‘self-employment’¹⁵. Support for small and medium-sized enterprises is no longer just one means among others but has become the central element in achieving the targeted objectives of reducing underemployment, promoting decent jobs, and fostering sustainable economic growth.

In terms of financial resources, the share dedicated to employment issues remains relatively stable at around 7%. Although it decreased in the last UNDAF (3.4%), the amounts increased by almost US\$3 million compared to the previous UNDAF: this can be explained by the general increased funding in humanitarian assistance, from US\$73.2 million in 2014 (the first *Humanitarian Response Plan* in Cameroon) to US\$209 million in 2022¹⁶. This increase in international funding is occurring in a national context where the share of the national budget allocated to the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment (MINEFOP) is decreasing. Despite the prominence of employment-related issues in the discourse on emergence, it represented only 0.5% of the national budget in 2014 (Government of Cameroon, 2014) and 0.37% in 2022 (Government of Cameroon, 2021)¹⁷.

The evolution of contributing donors is also significant. In the first UNDAF under the HIPC initiative, the IMF was almost the only contributor. It then gave way to donors specialising in development initiatives such as the ILO and UNFPA. However, from one UNDAF to another, the role of these donors diminishes, replaced firstly by stakeholders involved in refugee aid (with UNHCR being the second-largest contributor on employment issues for the 2018-2020 period), and then by a growing number of organisations (ten for the 2022-2026 period). These developments reflect the trends mentioned earlier, highlighting the increasing importance of employment generation in refugee aid, as well as the growing involvement of various stakeholders in addressing the crises that have multiplied in Cameroon since 2014-2015.

To understand the practical implications of these changes on the ground, it is necessary to examine the dynamics observed at local level. Drawing on an ethnographic case study, the next section will illustrate how this refocusing of international aid on employment issues, and its re-direction to serve the national emergence strategy, is being implemented.

¹⁵ In the 2013-2017 UNDAF, the aim is to ‘give priority to the development of salaried employment ... The promotion of self-employment will support this central mechanism, specifically by encouraging migration from the informal to the formal sector’ (UNCT, 2013, p. 11). In the 2018-2020 UNDAF, ‘the main emphasis will be on promoting self-employment by encouraging entrepreneurial initiatives, facilitating setting up and integration into promising sectors and in developing related activities around some major projects’ (UNCT, 2017, p. 30).

¹⁶ Data retrieved from OCHA Financial Tracking Services, ‘Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plans’. Available at: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1080/recipients> (accessed on 14/09/2023).

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that some activities, which should fall within the responsibility of MINEFOP, are being carried out by other ministries, each with its own distinct budget. For example, the Centres for the Promotion of Women and the Family, which fall under the purview of the ministry of the same name (MINPROFF), and the Multipurpose Youth Empowerment Centres, managed by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education (MINJEC), both offer vocational training programs. However, publicly available documents do not provide detailed information about the share of funding from these ministries specifically allocated to activities related to vocational training and employment.

Instrumentalising Forced Migration and Resisting Local Integration

Cameroon plays a significant role in the ‘change of approach’ advocated after the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the Global Compact on Refugees. It has been selected as a pilot country to test a new partnership between the World Bank and the United Nations system, aimed at promoting joint interventions in ‘crisis-affected situations’ (Bourgeois, 2018). In this strategy, projects promoting refugee self-reliance are central as exemplified by a ‘vocational training and socio-economic integration’ project for Central African refugees, implemented by an international NGO in the Eastern region. The project’s objective to train a hundred of young Central Africans and Cameroonians annually in Ministry-approved centres and facilitate their integration into the labour market. The ratio of beneficiaries aims for 60-70% refugees and 30-40% host populations. In September 2020, during a visit to these young, so-called ‘new entrepreneurs’, the regional representative of the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (DREFOP) explained:

‘[The INGO] must conduct checks to ensure everything is functioning, and so must the Cameroonian state services. [...] Congratulations [to the INGO] for its systemic approach to addressing employment issues in Cameroon, [...] which aligns with government policy. [...] Many thanks to the [INGO] for enabling us, the Ministry services, to achieve our objectives. Now that you [project’s beneficiaries] are trained, established, and working, you can train other youth and thus create new jobs.’¹⁸

This refugee aid project aligns with national development priorities, which emphasize enhancing the skills and employability of individuals excluded from the labour market (Republic of Cameroon, 2020). However, like in other sectors, the material and financial resources available to state services often prove inadequate¹⁹. As a result, they use aid for refugees as a resource to fulfil their own development objectives. After completing their socio-economic integration process in the local market, project beneficiaries undergo various administrative procedures, such as compiling detailed files on each micro-enterprise’s members and activities and fulfilling obligations like land tax and leasehold tax payments. The INGO provides logistical and financial support for these procedures. The objective is to formalize the beneficiaries’ economic activities as official small enterprises. Through its administration, the Cameroonian state (re)integrates the outcomes of refugee aid into its emergence agenda. These self-reliance projects become recognized economic entities that contribute not only to development objectives and policies, but also to the employment promises of President Paul Biya’s regime.

In addition to benefit from aid interventions implemented within its territory, the state also retains ultimate power and sovereignty (Kojoué, 2020). While in the short term all project beneficiaries are integrated into the achievements of emergence and used as a means of

¹⁸ Observation, Bertoua, 10/09/2020 (my English translation).

¹⁹ At the end of 2020, the Minister of Vocational Training and Employment strongly complained over the announcement of a nearly US\$2.5 million reduction in the allocation of the 2021 national budget for its Ministry (Atanga, 2020).

achieving these national development objectives, a clear distinction is made between refugee and Cameroonian beneficiaries in the longer term. At the end of the eight-month training program in Ministry-approved centres, in line with international aid policies (Kirk, 2009), the learners in the INGO project undergo a national examination (Diploma or Certificate of Vocational Training) to receive official recognition of their achievements and facilitate their formal and lasting integration into the job market. However, despite passing the exams, the Ministry never issues the official diplomas. Apart from the stated reasons (internal reshuffling, administrative delays, etc.), this refusal to issue diplomas, or in other words, to grant refugees state recognition, can also be interpreted as a means for the Cameroonian authorities to prevent genuine local integration and maintain the possibility of repatriating these individuals to their country of origin.

This project exemplifies a strategy employed by a host country to deter aid agencies from pressuring it into pursuing local integration, which the state opposes. However, the authorities avoid direct confrontation to prevent jeopardizing the benefits derived from aid projects. The Cameroonian government capitalizes on the neoliberal shift in aid to forcibly displaced persons while maintaining its refugee management policy, which ultimately aims to facilitate the return of refugees to their home country. In February 2021, while the UNHCR and the International Labour Organisation signed an agreement with the government to facilitate refugee access to the labour market (ILO, 2021), at the very same time, the ‘voluntary repatriation’ of refugees to their country of origin was still ongoing (Bodo, 2021). These dynamics highlight the ability of a southern country to resist the directives of international stakeholders who, under the pretext of supporting national development policies, aim to impose local integration as a ‘sustainable solution’ to forced migration.

Conclusion: ‘the ‘Empire’ Fights Back’²⁰?

The example of Cameroon demonstrates how an aid-receiving country manages international policies and ideologies, showcasing how a Sub-Saharan authoritarian state ‘is fighting back against its subordinated role’ (Zetter, 2021, p. 1779). Using the core-periphery/metropole-dependency model, Zetter has underlined how ‘from the perspective of the South – the refugee-impacted countries at the periphery – the model of economic dualism is one of inevitable co-optation’ and resistance, aiming at ‘preventing, as far as possible, [refugee] sustainable livelihoods and resilience in the host countries’ (*ibid*, p. 1780).

However, alongside Zetter's analysis of how impacted countries instrumentalise their situation by playing the ‘refugee burden’ or ‘securitization’ card, Cameroon introduces a third dimension: the emergence policy. Instead of directly resisting the self-reliance strategies promoted by many donors, Yaoundé not only prevents these projects from achieving their goal but also derives benefits from them. On one hand, Cameroonian authorities proactively play the ‘refugee-burden’ card of responsibility sharing, aligning with the Global Compact for Refugees. By boasting about their ‘open door policy’, they have secured increasing funds from a growing number of stakeholders over the last decade. On the other hand, the support for employment

²⁰ Expression borrowed from Zetter (2021, p. 1779).

generation serves the emergence strategy, which ultimately aims to legitimise and strengthen the political apparatus.

Cameroon also stands as an example of the state's ability to transform internal crises into productive forces, enabling the maintenance of the existing system and the defence of its interests (Van de Walle, 2001). Scholars have long emphasised the role of international assistance in African state-building, considering that many states on the continent have become aid-dependent (Green, 2014; Moss *et al.*, 2006). Among the various 'perverse effects' identified, they have noted a propensity 'to behave like a good student' (*se comporter en bon élève*) (Olivier de Sardan, 2021, pp. 307–310), characterized by opportunistic stances towards external funding, discourses and practices that suit international organizations, and a lack of contestation of their directives. They also include a 'loss of initiative' (*ibid.*, pp. 314–316), reflected in general passivity within administration and public services, resignation among state agents, and a lack of personal investment in their work, as the aid-recipient country is a 'partner' of international organisations but not a decision-maker. Cameroon, however, presents a different situation. While adopting a cooperative 'back-scratching' strategy regarding refugee issues, through its 'open door policy' or by volunteering to be a 'pilot country' for the new mechanisms promoted at the international level, it may indeed 'behave like a good student'. Yet rather than a perverse consequence of international aid, this appears to be a strategic move without any loss of initiative. Illustrated by the vocational training case study, this opportunistic strategy reflects the ability of both national and local authorities to navigate the complex dynamics of donor relations and reshape the standards and practices imposed by international institutions. By contributing to the implementation of the emergence policy, refugee assistance not only supports national development goals but also provides Cameroonian state representatives with opportunities to leverage international discourse to establish new legitimacy for themselves.

Cameroon challenges the 'weak bargain power vis-à-vis the international donor community' regarding refugee politics in Africa (Betts, 2023, p. 180). Yaoundé's strategic relationship with international stakeholders, as highlighted elsewhere (Beseng *et al.*, 2023; Chouala, 2004; Pommerolle, 2016; Terretta, 2013), also applies to refugee assistance. Echoing the concept of 'indirect private government' (Mbembe, 1999), the authorities choose to delegate, without fully relinquishing control, the achievement of some development objectives deemed of lesser priority, while retaining control over strategic sectors and activities (Amougou and Bobo, 2018). This sub-contracting or 'discharge' (Hibou, 1999a, 1999b) of public activities should be seen as a strategic decision, as state elites maintain ultimate power and sovereignty in their relationships with aid stakeholders and may also opt for coercive 'blackmailing' strategies if needed.

Cameroon is not the only host country whose strong political will has enabled him to integrate humanitarian responses with large-scale development policies (Enten, 2017). In recent years, a substantial body of literature has examined the merging of humanitarian, diplomatic, and economic agendas in various contexts such as Jordan (Arar, 2017a; Gordon, 2021; Kelberer, 2017; Morris, 2021), Ethiopia (Abebe, 2018; Betts, 2023; Gordon, 2019), or Uganda and Kenya (Betts, 2023). These studies have highlighted how refugee-hosting states in the Global South leverage forced displacement crises not only to incorporate their development into the global refugee response but also to negotiate self-serving policies and promote state-centric agendas (Arar, 2017a). Moreover, Cameroon echoes countries positioned between influential northern

neighbours and significant refugee-originating nations to the south, in which diplomatic considerations stand as crucial factors driving migration reforms. These countries may institute liberal and inclusive policies if diplomatic and economic advantages are at stake, yet these policies may reverse if geopolitical calculations change. Such calculations should be understood regarding not only Global North actors: like Cameroon's 'open-door policy', Morocco and Gaddafi's Libya migration diplomacy are strongly influenced by the strategic roles they sought to play in their regional environment and among Sub-Saharan countries (Norman, 2020; Tsourapas, 2017). However, unlike these countries, Cameroon is not a transit country and recently entered the front of the international humanitarian landscape and refugee regime (Mengue and Troit, 2023). Its unique characteristics warrant further exploration to enrich debates about migration diplomacy, refugee rent-seeking, and Global South agency towards Western and international stakeholders.

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