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‘It felt wrong’: emotional labour and the everyday reconfiguration of refugee governance in Cameroon

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Abstract

This article examines how emotional labour shapes the everyday implementation of forced migration governance. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Cameroon, it explores how refugee aid providers' emotional responses – including frustration, empathy, and ethical discomfort – inform situated forms of judgement in their daily work. Building on the emotional turn in the social sciences, emotions are conceptualised as epistemic dispositions through which actors interpret institutional tensions and, in some cases, act upon them. The analysis identifies three pathways through which emotional labour contributes to reconfiguring refugee assistance from within: pragmatic adaptations that soften bureaucratic rigidity; improvised forms of inclusion and relational alliances that challenge categorical boundaries; and structural engagements that support the alignment with state institutions. These findings show how emotional labour makes visible institutional contradictions and inform practical adjustments, while remaining shaped by organisational constraints and unequal power relations, offering a more situated and embodied understanding of refugee governance in practice.

Key words: emotional labour, refugee governance, forced migration, aid, ethnography

Over the past three decades, scholarship in migration studies has shown how refugee governance extends beyond the formal mandates of UNHCR and state agencies, into multi-actor fields shaped by political interests, status hierarchies, and everyday practices (Malkki, 1995; Barnett, 2002; Hyndman, 2007; Betts and Collier, 2017; Bradley, 2017; Zetter, 2021). This literature highlighted how donors, international and local NGOs, host governments, and local populations negotiate access, resources, and recognition (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Landau, 2002; Fresia, 2014; Kelberer, 2017; Ahouga, 2018; Schattner-Ornan, 2024). Ethnographic research, in particular, has explored the everyday politics of refugee governance, showing how field-level actors – whether state officials, camp managers, NGO staff, or forced migrants themselves – interpret, adapt, or resist policy frameworks in ways that reconfigure refugee governance in practice (Turner, 2004; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010; Agier, 2011; Gatter, 2023; Lefort-Rieu, 2026).

The affective turn in the social sciences (Massumi, 1995; Clough and Halley, 2007; Thrift, 2008; Seigworth and Pedwell, 2010) has deepened these debates by foregrounding the role of emotions and embodied dispositions in governance processes. In refugee and migration studies, scholars have examined how fear, suspicion, and empathy shape border control practices (de Leon, 2015; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017), how affective atmospheres permeates camps and asylum offices (Griffiths, 2014; Biehl, 2015; Darling, 2016; Gill, 2016), and how moral sentiments underpin humanitarian action (Feldman, 2007; Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Fechter, 2016). In international assistance, bureaucratic routines often require maintaining a “gloss of harmony” (Müller, 2013) while balancing competing notions of the public good, generating tensions between aid ideals and institutional imperatives (Malkki, 2015; Billaud, 2020; Christian, 2023). Ethnographic attention to moral dilemmas, working practices, and affective attachments has revealed how actors sustain a sense of purpose within these often contradictory environments (Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015; Niezen and Sapignoli, 2017; Sutton, 2023).

Despite this growing attention to emotion, relatively little research has examined how the emotional experiences of refugee aid providers shape the implementation, adjustment, and negotiation of governance in practice. Existing work has tended either to focus on the moral economy of humanitarianism or on the psychological effects of emotional exposure, leaving less explored the ways in which emotions inform everyday forms of judgement and action within organisations. By paying attention to the emotional experiences of both local and international refugee aid providers, this article examines how specific emotional experiences – such as frustration, empathy, or ethical discomfort – may contribute, in certain situations, to the reinterpretation of rules, the adjustment of categories, or the reconfiguration of institutional relations. Emotions here are approached as situated and relational processes through which actors make sense of institutional tensions and, at times, act upon them. This paper does not assume that emotional engagement systematically leads to critique or change, nor that such responses are widespread or shared across actors: it analyses how, under specific conditions, emotional dynamics can become part of the practical reasoning through which governance is enacted and adjusted. In doing so, it recasts emotional labour not as a by-product of refugee assistance, but as one dimension – among others – of the everyday politics of forced migration. Bringing into view the small-scale, often tacit ways in which field actors negotiate the tensions

between institutional imperatives and ethical commitments, this article understands governance as a situated, emotionally mediated practice. By placing emotional labour at the centre of the analysis, it contributes to a more embodied understanding of forced migration governance, highlighting how governance is (re)made also through situated negotiations and affectively driven recalibrations that may, over time, reshape institutional logics from within.

Empirically, the article contributes to current debates by focusing on Cameroon, an authoritarian context that has remained relatively peripheral in refugee studies despite its growing operational relevance. Since 2014, the country has become a major site of international aid engagement, marked by overlapping crises: refugee influxes from the Central African Republic in the East, climate-related pressures and Boko Haram violence in the Far North, and a protracted secessionist conflict in the Anglophone regions (Glasman, 2019; Arsenault, 2024; Lefort-Rieu, 2024a). These dynamics make Cameroon a particularly relevant setting for analysing how governance practices are shaped by multiple constraints, and how aid professionals navigate tensions between institutional mandates, resource limitations, and complex socio-political environments.

Capturing these often tacit and situated dynamics requires a methodology attentive to everyday interactions, embodied practices, and affective undercurrents. This article draws on a two-year multi-sited ethnography ‘from within’ the aid system (Fresia and Lavigne-Delville, 2018). During this period, I was employed in Cameroon by an INGO providing assistance to forcibly displaced populations: first, as a field officer in the Eastern region (2017-2018), and later as a national programme coordinator based in Yaoundé, the capital city (2020-2021)¹. I conducted participant observation during coordination meetings (regional and national), bilateral consultations between agencies and with state representatives, and field visits to project implementation sites. These observations generated detailed fieldnotes documenting interactional dynamics, implicit hierarchies, negotiation processes, and the affective dimensions of everyday work. Particular attention was paid to how emotions were expressed, hinted at, or negotiated in practice – through discourse, tone, hesitation, silences, or embodied reactions observed during interactions.

In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 aid workers (7 women and 19 men), including 12 Western staff, 5 African expatriates, and 9 Cameroonian nationals. 11 participants were employed by United Nations agencies and 15 by NGOs. Interviews, conducted in French or English and lasting between 50 minutes and three hours, explored motivations for entering the sector, everyday practices, ethical dilemmas, institutional constraints, and professional trajectories. While some interviewees explicitly referred to feelings such as frustration, empathy, or discomfort, emotional dynamics were not always verbalised as such. The analysis therefore also relies on interpretive inference, grounded in the triangulation of observations, interviews, and attention to interactional cues (such as tone, body language, or recurring narrative patterns). These inferences are not treated as direct access to internal states, but approached as situated interpretations of how emotions become socially visible, are negotiated,

¹ My status as a researcher was acknowledged by my leadership and colleagues and was clearly explained to all my informants. While this dual positionality (as INGO practitioner and ethnographer) facilitated access to a wide range of actors and enabled close engagement with aid practices, it also raised important ethical considerations, which I discuss elsewhere (Lefort-Rieu, forthcoming). Any opinions and views expressed in this article are my own and do not represent the views or attitudes of the organization, mission, or project with which I was associated.

or remain partially implicit in practice. This approach entails limitations: emotional interpretations remain partial and context-dependent, and similar situations may elicit different responses depending on actors' positions, trajectories, and organisational environments. The aim is therefore not to generalise emotional responses, but to analyse how, in specific situations, emotional engagement may inform particular forms of judgement and action.

This article proceeds in four sections. The first revisits the literature on emotions and governance, proposing a conceptualisation of emotional labour as a situated and potentially generative dimension of policy implementation. The empirical sections then develop the argument in three steps. The first examines how affective dissonance can prompt pragmatic adjustment in the application of rules. The second explores how emotional engagement may contribute to improvised forms of inclusion and shifts in institutional relations. The third analyses how sustained engagement can, in some cases, intersect with broader questions of institutional alignment and longer-term governance orientations.

Emotions in refugee governance

Since Hochschild's seminal work on emotional labour (1983), the affective dimensions of work and institutional life have received growing attention across the social sciences. Emotions have been reframed not as private or residual phenomena, but as socially regulated, culturally embedded, and politically meaningful practices. This perspective has informed research on mobilisation (Traïni, 2009; Manac'h, 2024), public policy (Blondiaux and Traïni, 2018), and transnational governance (Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Niezen and Sapignoli, 2017), where emotions emerge as both a structuring force and as sites of critique (Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015).

In refugee governance, emotions have long been approached with ambivalence. On the one hand, research on asylum decision-making has shown that emotional responses can shape assessments of credibility and deservingness in contexts marked by uncertainty and discretion (Kobelinsky, 2015; Liodden, 2020). This has raised concerns about the substitution of emotion for justice: decisions may become contingent on subjective affinities rather than consistent legal standards (Delgado *et al.*, 1985; Nussbaum, 2001), thereby contributing to arbitrariness, bias, and unequal treatment.

On the other hand, in humanitarian and refugee assistance studies, emotions have often been analysed through the lens of moral sentiments such as compassion or pity, seen to underpin the "humanitarian reason" that legitimises intervention (Boltanski, 2005; Feldman, 2007; Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012). While this literature has illuminated the moral economy of aid, it has paid less attention to how emotions operate within the everyday implementation of programmes. More recent ethnographies have begun to show how affective registers – including frustration, disillusionment, anxiety, or care – shape professional trajectories and moral worlds (Redfield, 2013; Malkki, 2015; Hor, 2022; Christian, 2023, 2024; Sutton, 2023; Manac'h, 2024; Wallis, 2024; Markland, 2025). These studies foreground the emotional toll and ethical frictions of "Aidland", highlighting how practitioners navigate tensions between institutional ideals and practical constraints. A related strand of literature has further emphasised the costs of such engagement by focusing on the psychological effects of sustained exposure to suffering. Studies of (vicarious) trauma document how repeated engagement with displacement and violence can

generate burnout, emotional withdrawal, or secondary traumatic stress among aid workers (Rousseau and Foxen, 2010; Puvimanasinghe *et al.*, 2015). In this perspective, emotions are often approached through a clinical lens or as risks to be contained in order to preserve professional functioning.

Taken together, these bodies of work tend to frame emotions either as sources of bias or as professional liabilities. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which emotional experiences may, in certain situations, contribute to how governance is interpreted, adjusted, or negotiated in practice. This article proposes to examine this dimension, without assuming that emotional engagement is inherently positive or that it systematically leads to critique or transformation. In doing so, it complements existing approaches by shifting attention from the burdensome or pathological dimensions of emotion to their potential role in shaping situated forms of judgement and action. This analytical move also builds on insights from the anthropology of bureaucracy, which has shown how institutional action unfolds through negotiation, discretion, and the management of competing normative orders (Best, 2012; Hull, 2012; Bear and Mathur, 2015). Within such environments, practitioners are required to maintain a semblance of coherence and neutrality while navigating contradictions between policy mandates and field realities. Emotional labour plays a central role in this process, not simply as a means of coping with tension, but as one of the modalities through which actors engage with it: interpreting rules, recalibrating their application, and sustaining a sense of ethical orientation under constraint (Billaud and Cowan, 2020; Andreetta *et al.*, 2022).

The analysis focuses on a limited set of recurrent emotional configurations – particularly frustration, empathy, and ethical discomfort – whose effects vary depending on contexts, positions, and interactions. Following Gill (2016), it recognises that different emotional registers orient action in distinct ways and may lead to divergent outcomes. The term *emotions* is used here to refer to socially recognisable and narratable states through which actors interpret situations, orient judgement, and justify action. While affect theory has emphasised pre-conscious intensities and atmospheres (Massumi, 1995; Anderson, 2006), the focus here is on emotions as they are experienced, expressed, and made meaningful in practice. Building on feminist theory and affect studies (Ahmed, 2004; Holmes, 2004; Probyn, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Berlant, 2011; Pedwell, 2014), emotions are conceptualised as relational and situated processes that are expressed, inferred, and negotiated in interaction. Methodologically, this implies paying attention not only to explicit verbalisation, but also to tone, hesitation, silences, bodily postures, and recurring interactional patterns. Emotional dissonance – whether explicitly named or inferred from such cues – may emerge when institutional categories fail to accommodate lived situations. It can manifest as unease, frustration, or moral tension, signalling the limits of existing frameworks and drawing attention to what procedural responses leave unresolved.

On this basis, the article proposes a meso-level analysis situated between individual coping strategies and macro-level reform narratives. It examines how specific emotional configurations may, in certain situations, inform operational decisions, eligibility criteria, and institutional alliances. Three forms of emotionally mediated practices are identified: (1) programmatic recalibrations that soften institutional rigidity; (2) ethical improvisations that extend inclusion beyond formal categories; (3) structural engagements that reconfigure institutional alignments over time. Across these domains, emotional dissonance operates as an epistemic signal: it renders visible procedural inconsistencies, highlights exclusions, and supports situated

reinterpretations of governance. This does not imply that emotional labour consistently produces more just or inclusive outcomes as its effects remain contingent, uneven, and sometimes ambivalent. However, attending to these dynamics makes it possible to analyse how governance is continuously interpreted, negotiated, and adjusted through the situated judgments of those who enact it. Emotional labour thus appears as one of the processes through which refugee governance is inhabited, questioned, and, at times, reworked from within.

Emotional dissonance and pragmatic recalibration

How do refugee aid providers respond when formal policy frameworks fail to accommodate the realities they encounter? This section examines how emotional dissonance – described by field staff in terms of frustration, concern, or ethical unease – may, in certain situations, give rise to pragmatic recalibrations of refugee governance. Far from being systematic or uniformly distributed across actors, these responses reflect situated ways in which some professionals, depending on their position, experience, and room for manoeuvre, engage with institutional constraints. Such adjustments remain embedded in organisational routines and seek to preserve a sense of ethical integrity while operating within – or at the margins of – institutional legitimacy.

Reframing responsibility: from policy adherence to moral honesty

A Cameroonian camp manager, working in an overstretched refugee site, offers a striking example of this process. With ten years of experience in the humanitarian sector, he described a growing sense of disillusionment with what he calls the *effet de saupoudrage* – the tokenistic distribution of aid to a handful of beneficiaries in a camp of thousands. In our exchanges, this was expressed as a combination of frustration and concern about the effects of such programmes on refugees' expectations and everyday survival. He describes his gradual repositioning within the aid system:

Over the years, I've discovered – if I may put it that way – a new role: navigating humanitarian work from within the system. ... So I tell [refugees]: 'Find a way to free yourselves from this system!' Because, honestly, they can't rely on international aid. ... For instance, I might say to the youth, right in the middle of a meeting: 'Don't wait for the INGO to come and offer vocational training, because only ten young people will actually be included in the project.' The [INGO] won't complain about me, because I haven't lied – and I can always justify myself by saying it's to encourage others to look for work. *Self-reliance*, as they say.²

This repositioning does not entail a rejection of his institutional role, but a redefinition of its moral boundaries. Rather than reproducing aid's official narratives, he chooses to foreground its limits in his interactions with refugees. His account suggests that what he experiences as

² Interview, 26/04/2018 (my English translation).

frustration and ethical concern leads him to reframe his professional responsibility, prioritising what he describes as “telling the truth” over strict alignment with programme messaging.

This stance is rooted in a longer professional and moral trajectory. Coming from a Mbororo elite background and educated in a Catholic school in Bertoua (the regional capital city), he initially encountered aid work through Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, MSF), where he worked alongside expatriate staff strongly attached to humanitarian ideals. As he recalls:

I discovered humanitarian work with MSF, and I loved it. With the story of Henry Dunant, with everything linked to... love for others, I believed in humanitarianism like a religion, like something perfect. [...] But over time, I realised that everything is tied to resources, to money, to interests... (*silence*)³

The disillusionment he expresses reflects the erosion of an earlier moral horizon, shaped by both professional socialisation and personal beliefs. His current practices – tempering expectations, speaking candidly to refugees, and reframing aid promises – can be understood as emerging from this tension between initial ideals and accumulated experience. Emotional dissonance, in this sense, is not only a reaction to immediate constraints, but the product of a longer process of moral recalibration.

Such a position, neither fully compliant nor openly defiant, illustrates one possible response to institutional dissonance. It allows him to maintain a sense of ethical coherence, but also requires careful positioning vis-à-vis his organisation, whose programmes he is effectively reframing in front of beneficiaries. His stance was not shared by all members of the camp management team, and was partly enabled by his social and professional positioning – as a member of the Mbororo elite and head of the unit. During meetings, when he adopted this tone, other staff members appeared visibly uncomfortable – avoiding eye contact, looking down, or remaining silent. When I later discussed these moments with them, they indicated that while they did not necessarily disagree with his views, they were concerned about the need to maintain consistent messaging and to avoid statements that could be perceived as undermining institutional credibility or provoking “unrest” among refugees⁴. These divergences point to the absence of a unified “ethics” among aid workers, and highlight the role of individual trajectories, organisational cultures, and perceived risks in shaping how emotional responses translate into practice.

Bureaucratic discretion and situated responsiveness

If emotional dissonance may lead aid workers to reframe their responsibilities and modes of communication, similar tensions can also reshape the use of bureaucratic discretion in everyday practice, as illustrated by the management of *à-qui-de-droit* letters – UNHCR-issued travel permits allowing refugees to circulate between towns without facing police harassment or extortion⁵. These documents, officially limited to medical or protection-related emergencies,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Observations and informal discussion, Eastern region, May 2018.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of aid procedures and refugees’ strategies regarding UNHCR *à qui de droit*, see (Lefort-Rieu, 2022, pp. 475–479).

are frequently requested for everyday survival needs. Their issuance is governed by complex, multi-step procedures that often result in delays and denials.

The UNHCR fieldworker quoted here operated in a context of increasing strain on both refugees and aid providers. Our discussion took place shortly after a series of announcements from headquarters regarding significant reductions in assistance, particularly food aid, justified by budgetary shortfalls. These decisions were widely criticised at field level, where staff were confronted daily with their consequences and with repeated requests from refugees seeking support. It is within this context that he described the permit system:

Obtaining these documents is a nightmare: too many steps, too many constraints. Once refugees finally get an *à-qui-de-droit*, they try to solve as many problems as possible before it expires. ... I've had people come to me and say, 'If you only write 'buying merchandise', they will give me three or four days. But I need it valid for three months to go back and forth without reapplying'. ... With everything happening right now, what would you have me do? (*dismissive hand gesture*)⁶

While he does not explicitly name his emotions, his account – combined with tone, pauses, and a dismissive gesture – suggests a persistent frustration with the rigidity of procedures and their growing disconnect from refugees' everyday realities. In response, he explains that he occasionally extends the validity of these documents beyond official guidelines, based on his assessment of individual situations. This practice of “stretching the rule” can be understood as a discretionary adjustment shaped by repeated exposure to administrative constraints and to the cumulative effects of aid reductions. It reflects a form of judgement grounded in close engagement with refugees' daily constraints, while remaining embedded in institutional routines.

Such practices are not generalised. Among other UNHCR staff involved in issuing these documents, this position appeared to be relatively marginal. It depended not only on the staff member's position, perceived margin of manoeuvre, and willingness to assume professional risks, but also on his everyday proximity to the refugee population. Unlike many colleagues who commuted from the departmental capital, he was based in the locality where the camp was located, resulting in more frequent interactions with refugees and more direct exposure to the practical consequences of administrative constraints. This suggests that forms of emotional and moral attunement are shaped not only by individual dispositions, but also by patterns of spatial and relational proximity.

These tensions became more explicit as UNHCR, under pressure from the Cameroonian government and citing security concerns, began to restrict refugee mobility. The same employee recalls:

Now, UNHCR is asking aid partners to 'strongly discourage' – that's the exact phrase – the use of these documents. Because they can't outright say, 'Tell refugees not to travel'. Instead, they instruct us: 'In your awareness campaigns, strongly discourage refugee movement. In this regard, we do not want to see too many requests for *à-qui-de-droit*'.

⁶ Informal discussion, 04/01/2022 (my English translation).

The issuance of these documents has therefore become increasingly difficult, even for medical reasons. ... So mobility is discouraged at the very moment when food distributions and other forms of assistance are being reduced. ... But I keep asking myself: why are we doing this? What are we really trying to achieve? ... All I can do is try to limit the abuses suffered by refugees. Today, I am not proud to be part of such a system of assistance.⁷

In this context, continuing to issue extended permits required navigating not only formal rules but also shifting organisational expectations. His account suggests that emotional dissonance – expressed here through questioning, hesitation, and explicit moral discomfort – may, in certain situations, operate as a counterpoint to evolving institutional priorities. Rather than openly contesting policy, he maintains a discretionary practice he presents as a way of “limiting the abuses” and preserving a degree of mobility for refugees. Emotional engagement, in this sense, contributes to shaping judgement without determining it entirely.

Taken together, these examples suggest that emotional engagement may, in certain situations, contribute to how aid workers to interpret and navigate the tensions inherent in refugee governance. Frustration may reveal procedural inconsistencies; empathy or concern may draw attention to overlooked needs; ethical unease may prompt reinterpretation of rules. In this sense, emotional labour can function as an epistemic resource, shaping how actors make sense of their work and its limitations. At the same time, these dynamics do not produce uniform outcomes: they coexist with other responses, including compliance or strategic silence, and remain shaped by organisational hierarchies, professional trajectories, and institutional constraints. Emotional labour thus appears here as one of the modalities through which institutional logics are perceived, negotiated, and in some cases pragmatically recalibrated in practice.

Emotional critiques and improvised inclusion

In contexts where governance frameworks rely on rigid status distinctions and fragmented institutional mandates, frontline aid actors are frequently confronted with tensions between official classifications and the situations they encounter in practice. Although these tensions are not always explicitly articulated in terms of frustration, discomfort, or moral unease, they become visible through the tone of exchanges, hesitations, or the way situations are narrated, pointing to a perceived gap between institutional categories and lived realities. While responses to such situations are not uniform, in certain cases, these tensions give rise to improvised forms of inclusion. In such moments, emotions can be understood as part of the process through which actors interpret institutional constraints and identify their limits, sometimes prompting adjustments that remain within, or at the margins of, formal rules.

⁷ Informal discussion, 04/01/2022 (my English translation).

Stretching categories and reworking inclusion

A first cluster of practices emerges from the treatment of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in eastern Cameroon. In this region, UNHCR maintains operational leadership under the area's designation as a “refugee zone”, which technically excludes IDPs from formal assistance (Lefort-Rieu, forthcoming). As one UNHCR representative explained during a coordination meeting in 2021, they must be ‘excluded’ from interventions not due to outright denial, but due to ‘prioritisation and resource constraints, which prevent us from addressing all needs and situations’⁸. This institutional framing aligns with the Cameroonian government's denial of the Anglophone conflict and its displacement consequences (Annan *et al.*, 2021; Beseng, Crawford and Annan, 2023).

Yet this logic is regularly challenged in practice. In cities such as Bertoua, IDPs actively sought assistance, repeatedly approaching international organisations to register and request inclusion in aid programmes and beneficiary lists. For some field staff, these interactions created situations of tension, where the perceived urgency of needs conflicted with formal eligibility criteria. This became particularly visible in everyday situations at the office, including within the INGO I was working with. During a field mission in the East, as I was leaving the field office for a meeting, I encountered a colleague engaged in a prolonged discussion at the entrance with a man speaking in English. The staff member stood with his gaze lowered, repeatedly saying: “I know, I’m really sorry.” I asked the field director what was happening and he replied:

Probably an IDP asking us to add him and his family to our beneficiary list. These days, it never stops. Before, they used to just leave envelopes in our mailbox; now they come in person. And it’s really difficult for us, when they explain everything they’re going through, to just say: ‘we understand and we sympathise, but unfortunately we can’t do anything for you.’⁹

Such interactions illustrate how institutional categories are confronted with situations that make their application both practically and morally “really difficult”. To navigate this gap, one practice – witnessed within our INGO but also reported in other aid structures – consisted in reclassifying IDPs as “host populations”, thereby enabling their inclusion in programmes designed to support both refugees and local communities, while maintaining formal compliance with donor reporting requirements. In aid coordination meeting, this was often described as a pragmatic solution used in specific contexts: a situated adjustment shaped by organisational flexibility, individual discretion, and the perceived acceptability of such practices within specific teams¹⁰.

In such situations, emotional discomfort can be inferred from the way staff described or navigated these encounters. Repeated exposure to unmet needs, combined with the constraints of formal classification systems, contributes to shaping how certain actors justified or normalised these adjustments. Categorical flexibility can thus be understood not only as a

⁸ Observation, Yaoundé, June 2021.

⁹ Observations, Bertoua, August 2020.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, October 2020.

technical workaround, but as a situated response to tensions perceived in practice. These micro-adjustments translate experiential discomfort into operational decisions, subtly recalibrating how eligibility is interpreted and applied. In this sense, affective unease – arising from the confrontation between institutional limits and lived situations – participates in the reworking of governance categories from within.

While such adjustments operate within existing classificatory frameworks, other responses emerge when field actors encounter situations that fall entirely outside recognised categories. In these cases, emotional engagement does not only lead to the reinterpretation of existing labels, but may also prompt attempts to expand the scope of assistance itself. Such interactions can give rise to forms of internal advocacy that seek to extend the reach of existing programmes, particularly when certain forms of vulnerability remain unrecognised. This dynamic is illustrated by a Cameroonian INGO professional working in women's protection. During home visits, her team repeatedly encountered displaced Anglophone girls and women living in precarious and often invisible conditions:

Many of them arrived traumatised, but they didn't exist on any official list. ... They keep a low profile because they're afraid of being seen as secessionist sympathisers, and that makes it harder for them to seek help. Many had to drop out of school, some are now supporting entire families on their own, and increasingly, young girls are turning to survival sex just to get by.¹¹

Although she does not explicitly frame her account in emotional terms, her description of repeated encounters, combined with her emphasis on invisibility and vulnerability, suggests a form of sustained engagement that shaped her subsequent actions. The persistence of these situations across visits, and the way they were reported in meetings and written reports, indicate how certain concerns gained salience over time. These encounters led her to repeatedly raise the issue during coordination meetings and in reports to headquarters, advocating for the inclusion of these women and girls in existing programmes. This ultimately resulted in a limited budget reallocation to support their psychosocial needs. Although modest in scale, what matters here is the process through which this adjustment emerged: repeated exposure, relational proximity, and the accumulation of concerns regarding unaddressed needs. More than an isolated act of compassion, this can be understood as an intervention that unsettled dominant logics of eligibility and denial (Lefort-Rieu, forthcoming). However, such initiatives were not straightforward: they depended on internal negotiations, available resources, and the willingness of supervisors to accommodate these adjustments.

Taken together, these field-level improvisations suggest that certain forms of emotional engagement contribute to how aid actors identify and respond to the limits of existing governance frameworks. Frustration, discomfort, or concern can draw attention to inconsistencies in classification systems or gaps in assistance, prompting situated adjustments in practice. When aid professionals repurpose classifications or extend eligibility criteria, these actions do not simply address immediate needs; they also constitute implicit critiques of the exclusions embedded in institutional arrangements. In this sense, emotional engagement

¹¹ Informal discussion, Bertoua, February 2020.

contributes to forms of practical reasoning through which governance categories are interpreted, stretched, and occasionally reworked from within.

Relational alliances and situated redistribution

A second set of practices emerges through shifts in institutional relations, particularly in interactions with local organisations. Despite widespread commitments to “localisation” since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, including the pledge to allocate 25% of aid funding to local actors, these objectives remain largely unmet in Cameroon. INGOs often retain control over programme design and resource allocation, citing concerns related to accountability, technical capacity, and donor requirements (Wade, 2023).

Within this context, some aid professionals described practices aimed at supporting local organisations in ways that exceeded formal partnership arrangements. These practices appeared in specific contexts and depended on individual initiative, organisational culture, and existing relationships. One African expatriate in eastern Cameroon for over four years described how he facilitated access to technical support for smaller local NGOs, sometimes by bypassing internal procedures or informal hierarchies. His account suggests that these practices developed over time, through repeated exposure to what he perceived as structural asymmetries in the aid system. Over the course of his deployment, he had witnessed successive programme cycles in which localisation commitments remained largely rhetorical, alongside repeated refusals to formalise partnerships with local organisations. At the time of our exchanges (2018), none of the calls for proposals or expressions of interest launched by UNHCR in the region had been awarded to Cameroonian civil society organisations (CSOs), despite being formally open to both national and international actors. These outcomes were officially justified by UNHCR in terms of “limited logistical capacity” and “technical weaknesses”, but were widely perceived by local actors as reflecting a reluctance to entrust national organisations with operational responsibility¹². These recurring experiences contributed to a gradual consolidation of critical perceptions regarding partnership mechanisms. Over the eight months during which I interacted regularly with this staff member, such tensions became visible through everyday interactions. In informal discussions or meetings, he would adopt an ironic or sarcastic tone when referring to eligibility criteria or to the outcomes of calls for proposals, sometimes joking about the “suspense” surrounding which organisation would ultimately be selected. These remarks did not take the form of explicit emotional statements, but pointed to a critical stance shaped through repeated engagement with these processes. It was only in the more formal setting of a semi-structured interview that he articulated how he responded:

When a local NGO wants to work on a specific issue or with another [organisation in consortium], they often lack technical or program expertise. So, we’ve ensured that our staff are always available, and that [these CSOs] can draw on our own expertise. I tell the CSOs: all it takes is an email or a text for us to make someone available to advise or support them. That’s how we assist two or three local organisations [in the area]. ... The idea is also to share documentation, to connect their offices with INGO headquarters,

¹² Informal discussion with a CSO representative, 03/05/2018.

and to create opportunities for them to engage at the local level. All this really helps them become identifiable as potential partners.¹³

In practice, one of the organisations he supported in this way was awarded, a few weeks later, a local call for expressions of interest launched by the World Food Programme (WFP). Drawing on this outcome, he subsequently referred this organisation to the national management of his INGO, presenting the recently secured WFP funding as evidence of its reliability and capacity – without mentioning the informal support he and his team had previously provided.

His account points to a form of judgement shaped through time, in which repeated encounters with institutional constraints, combined with relational proximity to local partners, informed his assessment of these practices as necessary or justified. These interventions can be understood as situated responses to enduring tensions within the aid system. Beyond informal capacity-sharing, they contribute to redistributing access to institutional resources, knowledge, and recognition. Although they remain embedded within existing hierarchies and are not generalised, they create limited openings through which local actors can access forms of support otherwise difficult to obtain. Even if they do not transform established power relations, they may subtly reconfigure how these relations operate in practice.

In this context, emotions expressed through frustration or irony, alongside references to fairness and unequal treatment, inform how certain actors interpret their role and justify their interventions. While these practices do not amount to a unified ethical stance, they reflect the interplay of professional judgement, relational engagement, and accumulated experience. They can thus be understood as contributing to a situated ethics of care, in which attachments and embodied judgements motivate actors to reinterpret their roles and, at times, to challenge existing hierarchies in refugee assistance.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a range of situated responses through which aid actors engage with the limits of existing governance arrangements. In some cases, this involves adjusting categories; in others, reconfiguring relationships. Emotional engagement may contribute to how certain actors identify inconsistencies and justify specific interventions. While these practices remain contingent and unevenly distributed, they create context-specific spaces in which the boundaries of refugee governance are negotiated and, at times, reconfigured. Building on these observations, the next section examines how, in some cases, such engagements extend beyond immediate adjustments and contribute to longer-term reorientations of institutional trajectories.

Emotionally situated reconfigurations: from operational adjustments to structural engagements

While much of refugee governance operates within short-term project cycles, predefined outputs, and bureaucratic constraints (Brun, 2016), some field-level actors described moments in which their engagement extended beyond immediate implementation concerns. In these situations, tensions between programme requirements and lived realities triggered broader

¹³ Interview, 15/04/2018 (my English translation).

reflections on what constitutes meaningful intervention, appropriate targeting, or responsible exit strategies. While such shifts do not follow a linear trajectory, nor do they characterise all actors, in certain cases, repeated exposure to these tensions – and the accumulation of concerns over time – contributes to reframing how frontline workers interpret their role and the objectives of the programmes they implement. Emotional labour, here, can be understood as one dimension of a situated process of politicisation: a mode of engagement through which actors question temporal, normative, and institutional assumptions embedded in refugee governance.

Reframing success: when programme metrics meet lived realities

These dynamics become particularly visible when aid workers confront discrepancies between programme indicators and everyday realities. This was the case in an education programme implemented by the INGO I was working for, which targeted refugee children exclusively. Following donor guidelines, the programme distributed notebooks to 400 refugee pupils in schools where more than 3,000 students – many from host communities – were enrolled. On the day of the distribution, the team in charge returned early to the office, unusually quiet and with a stern expression. It was only later that evening, during dinner, that the team leader described the experience:

Local authorities have been informed, and the community knew the supplies were for refugee children. Still, when we entered the classroom and handed notebooks to some children while others received nothing, it was hard to watch. Younger children cried. It was hard to witness and it felt wrong, even to us.¹⁴

Although specific emotions were not explicitly named at the time, both the atmosphere following the distribution and subsequent conversations pointed to a shared sense of discomfort with the practical effects of targeting criteria. In the following weeks, this unease persisting among some team members and informed a series of adjustments. These included using leftover supplies (and, in some cases, personal resources) to support high-achieving students regardless of status, as well as advocating internally and externally for more inclusive coverage. These efforts eventually contributed to a revised budget line the following year, extending support to all students in selected schools. While modest in scope, these changes illustrate how field staff, confronted with the visible effects of programme design, may seek to reorient interventions in ways they perceive as more appropriate.

In this case, emotional engagement contributes to a process of situational judgement through which actors reassess programme priorities and outcomes. Discomfort, relational attentiveness, and concern appear to shape how certain discrepancies are identified and acted upon. These practices can thus be understood as forms of incremental redirection within existing governance frameworks: they influence how categories are applied, how priorities are negotiated, and how success is interpreted in practice.

However, these adjustments unfolded within organisational environments structured by competing priorities. As our field office supervisor summarised:

¹⁴ Interview, 15/04/2018 (my English translation).

It's a constant struggle to keep the conversation focused on people, not on outputs. Try to convince donors and your own hierarchy that this isn't just about performance or securing future funding: it's about fairness. That's a real challenge – and it's not always easy.¹⁵

This tension became particularly visible during a project design meeting held a few months later, in preparation for a new multi-year proposal. During this meeting, a senior manager visiting from headquarters emphasised the importance of selecting activities likely to “interest the donor” and “increase visibility”. When field staff raised concerns about the quality and sustainability of proposed interventions, these were dismissed as “unnecessary perfectionism”, with the project framed instead as an opportunity for organisational growth. These remarks generated a palpable sense of frustration and unease among field staff, although this was not expressed openly: it surfaces through silences following the manager's statements, exchanged glances, and the gradual withdrawal of some participants from the discussion, who remained quiet and spent the rest of the meeting looking down at their notebooks or their hands, without taking notes. In informal conversations afterwards, several colleagues described feeling that their knowledge of field realities was being sidelined in favour of donor-oriented considerations. Yet, given the hierarchical configuration of the interaction and the strategic importance of the proposal (on which the reconduction of their contracts depended upon), these concerns were not voiced during the meeting itself. In practice, however, they resulted in more discreet forms of adjustment. Once the manager had returned to headquarters and requested additional inputs to “finalise” the proposal, the team introduced a series of minor but deliberate modifications that they considered more consistent with local needs. For instance, “community fields” initially planned as collective gardening spaces within a “women's empowerment and gender-based violence response” component were restructured into individual plots, following repeated requests from communities who had highlighted the difficulties of collective crop management. A small budget reallocation was also made to include fencing for these gardens, in order to protect them from damage by stray animals. These changes remained within the overall structure approved by headquarters, but subtly shifted the balance between donor expectations and field-level priorities¹⁶.

This sequence illustrates how emotionally grounded concerns do not always translate into direct contestation, but may instead inform more indirect forms of negotiation within organisational constraints. It reveals how tensions between different institutional logics – visibility, performance, accountability, or perceived fairness – can be managed through adjustments in practice. In this sense, emotional engagement contributes to shaping not only how discrepancies are perceived, but also how they are pragmatically navigated and, in some cases, partially reconfigured. In doing so, it also participates in a subtle reframing of what counts as “success” in project design: not only the capacity to meet predefined indicators, but the ability to align interventions more closely with the lived realities and expectations of affected populations.

¹⁵ Interview, 15/04/2018 (my English translation).

¹⁶ Observations, Batouri, February 2018.

In some cases, however, such engagements extend beyond immediate adjustments and begin to intersect with broader questions of sustainability, responsibility, and institutional alignment.

From care to alignment: negotiating the place of the state

This extension towards more structural questions was particularly visible in an INGO-led child protection programme that, in 2017–2018, established community-run preschool spaces for refugee children in eastern Cameroon. Initially conceived as temporary humanitarian structures, these centres attracted the attention of the Ministry of Basic Education, which proposed to formally register them as Community-Based Preschool Centres (*Centres Préscolaires à base Communautaire*, CPCs), a state-sanctioned model designed to extend access in underserved areas (Lefort-Rieu, 2022).

At headquarters level, this proposition generated significant reservations. Senior management expressed concerns that the state might appropriate internationally funded aid services to meet its own objectives, potentially undermining both humanitarian neutrality and refugee targeting. Field staff, however, assessed the situation differently. Through frequent interactions with children, caregivers, and local communities – whom they met several times a week – they were directly confronted with the expectations generated by the programme and the absence of viable alternatives. In their view, registration offered a way to ensure continuity of services after the INGO’s withdrawal, preserving access to early education for 1,600 children and employment for 30 local monitors. As one team member explained: “If we leave, the government can take over. That’s better than just shutting it all down”¹⁷.

These differing positions reflect not only institutional roles, but also distinct forms of engagement with the programme. Field staff, more directly exposed to its everyday functioning, appeared more inclined to prioritise continuity over organisational positioning. This became particularly visible during a meeting with community representatives, where concerns about the programme’s future were raised repeatedly. Caregivers and community leaders insisted on the importance of maintaining the centres, not only for educational purposes but also as spaces of stability for children and their families. They stressed that these centres enabled parents to engage in agricultural or livelihood activities away in the bush without having to take young children with them or worrying about finding someone to look after them. In response, field staff acknowledged the uncertainty surrounding future funding while attempting to identify possible solutions. The discussion was marked by repeated requests, pauses, and moments of hesitation, as staff struggled to reconcile institutional constraints with community expectations. These interactions were revisited in subsequent internal meetings within the INGO, where staff expressed concern about the consequences of programme closure and the lack of alternatives. Although these concerns were not always framed in explicitly emotional terms, they were conveyed through the persistence of the issue, the repetition of concrete situations, and a shared unease regarding the prospect of withdrawing support after having encouraged reliance on these structures. Over time, these concerns contributed to bringing the issue to senior management. This required careful negotiation as registration raised questions about mandate, accountability, and long-term responsibility. Field staff ultimately secured approval by reframing the proposal

¹⁷ Informal discussion, Batouri, February 2018.

not as a shift in institutional alignment, but as a response to sustainability concerns compatible with donor requirements. This reframing allowed the initiative to be integrated without openly challenging organisational principles. In this case, references to care for beneficiaries, concern about service continuity, and frustration with the limits of short-term programming informed how field staff articulated and justified their position. Emotional engagement intersected with strategic considerations and organisational constraints, contributing to how certain options were perceived as viable and legitimate¹⁸.

Across these trajectories – from programme-level recalibrations to negotiated forms of institutional alignments – emotional labour appears not only as a way of apprehending the limits of refugee governance, but also as a dimension through which actors engage with broader structural questions. Repeated exposure to programme constraints, combined with relational proximity to affected populations and concern for service continuity, contributed to reframing how field actors understood the role of the state within refugee assistance. They came to support forms of policy integration that could ensure the durability of services beyond project cycles. In doing so, they participated in the embedding of refugee assistance within national development frameworks, despite initial institutional reluctance and ideological ambivalence at higher levels of the organisation (Lefort-Rieu, 2022, 2024b). These processes remain contingent on organisational hierarchies, available resources, and the ability of field actors to translate their concerns into terms compatible with institutional logics. However, they illustrate how, under specific conditions, engagements rooted in everyday interactions may contribute to reorienting refugee assistance in relation to national policies. In this sense, emotional labour can be understood as a situated form of politicisation and a practical mode of reasoning through which forced migration governance is reoriented towards longer-term configurations of responsibility, continuity, and institutional cooperation.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a reframing of the emotional dimensions of refugee governance. Rather than treating emotional labour as a residual or private cost of aid work, the analysis has shown it to be a constitutive mode of political reasoning. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Cameroon, I have argued that emotions such as frustration, empathy, and ethical discomfort function as epistemic dispositions: they expose contradictions, reorient judgments, and inform situated practices of adaptation. Emotional labour is thus not simply what enables refugee aid providers to cope with institutional contradictions; it is one of the processes through which forced migration governance is enacted, negotiated, and, at times, re-signified.

Three main pathways were identified. First, emotional dissonance prompted pragmatic adaptations that softened bureaucratic rigidity in everyday implementation. Second, ethical discomfort informed improvised forms of inclusion and relational alliances, which challenged categorical exclusions and redistributed access to resources and recognition. Third, sustained affective commitments contributed, in certain cases, to structural reconfigurations, including the alignment of refugee assistance with state institutions and longer-term governance frameworks. Taken together, these dynamics show how governance is continually adjusted from

¹⁸ Observations, Batouri and Kette districts, January-March 2018.

within, through emotionally mediated and situated practices that redefine what counts as fairness, responsibility, and appropriate intervention.

These findings invite a reconsideration of how forced migration governance is analysed: not only in terms of institutional architectures, policy frameworks, and multi-actors negotiations, but also through the everyday and affective processes by which governance is enacted. Emotions mediate the interpretation of mandates, the application of rules, and the negotiation of ethical commitments. They make visible what institutional categories obscure and may support alternative forms of judgement and action. At the same time, emotional labour remains inherently ambivalent: it may foster forms of inclusion and accountability, but can also – as highlighted in existing scholarship (e.g. Redfield, 2013; Christian, 2023; Markland, 2025) – generate arbitrariness, reinforce gatekeeping practices, exacerbate professional tensions or reproduce inequalities generate arbitrary exclusions, reinforce gatekeeping. Attending to these dynamics therefore requires recognising emotions as relational, situated, and politically indeterminate, rather than inherently progressive or corrective.

By foregrounding Cameroon, this article also contributes to a more provincialised understanding of refugee governance. It situates aid practices within an authoritarian context marked by overlapping crises and structural constraints (Lefort-Rieu, forthcoming), showing how governance is locally negotiated and reworked under conditions of uncertainty and limited resources. This perspective complements existing studies of border regimes, camp atmospheres, and humanitarianism by shifting attention to the everyday implementation of assistance within aid organisations.

Recognising emotional labour as political and epistemic does not imply romanticise aid actors or overlooking structural inequalities. Rather, it highlights how governance is inhabited and made meaningful through embodied encounters, relational tensions, and situation judgements. Many of the adjustments described here remain fragile, context-dependent, and only partially institutionalised, shaped by high staff turnover, project-based funding, and organisational hierarchies. Their circulation often relies on informal practices, shared sensibilities, and localised forms of knowledge rather than formal policy change.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining how emotional dynamics travel across organisational levels, accumulate over professional trajectories, and contribute to the formation of shared sensibilities or moral economies. Such inquiry would help illuminate not only how forced migration governance is experienced in practice, but also how it may, under specific conditions, become collectively contested and reoriented.

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