

Politics and Cross-Border Migrations in Africa: Forced Migration of Cameroonians and Food Crisis in Benue state, Nigeria since 2016

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Abstract. The root of the political crisis in Cameroon which became known as the ‘Anglophone’ problem may be traced back to 1961 when the major political elites of the two territories with different colonial legacies—one French and the other British—agreed to form a federal state. However, contrary to expectations, this did not result to the equal partnership of both parties or the preservation of the cultural heritage and identity of each. Overtime, therefore this created an Anglophone consciousness—the feeling of marginalisation, exploitation and assimilation by the francophone—dominated state and by the francophone population. The political crisis between the authorities in the majority francophone Cameroon and English-speaking protesters in the North West and South West Cameroon led to the forced movement of Anglophone-Cameroonians into the neighbouring Nigeria seeking refuge in four states of Cross-River, Benue, Akwa-Ibom and Taraba. The presence of the refugees in impoverished host communities put strains on the food resources and already limited facilities in these areas. Focusing primarily on Benue communities, this study examines the nature of the relationship between the refugees and host communities, the nature of the food crisis and the response from local and international organisations, partners, central and state government in addressing the food problems of the refugees on one hand. On the other, attention is specifically drawn to the effects of the food crisis on the impoverished host communities. We draw on available data, articles, reports and fieldwork report conducted in the host communities of Benue state towards providing deep insights on the nature of the food crisis, interventions and the effects of the

refugee crisis on the food economy of the host communities.

Keywords: Forced Migration, Refugee, Food Crisis

1. Introduction

Beginning from the end of 2016, the Republic of Cameroon was confronted with a socio-political crisis which (tagged as the ‘Anglo-phone problem’) in the country’s Anglo-phone Regions of North and South West situated along the Nigeria-Cameroon border area (Fonkeng, 2019). The crisis began by lawyers and teachers as protest for reforms from the government of Cameroon. Delay by the government resulted in violence in the two Anglophone Regions of North and South West leading to the death and displacement of several persons and the forced migration of Anglophone-Cameroonians into the neighbouring Nigeria seeking refuge in four states of Cross-River, Benue, Akwa-Ibom and Taraba (Fonkeng, 2019). The root of this crisis can be traced back to 1961 when the major political elites of the two territories with different colonial legacies—one French and the other British—agreed to form a federal state and the consequent Anglophone consciousness characterised by the feeling of marginalisation, exploitation, and assimilation by the francophone-dominated state, and even by the francophone population as a whole (Konings and Nyamjoh, 1997). Before the arrival in February 2020 of about 8,000 Anglophone Cameroonians fleeing the clashes between the Cameroonian security forces and separatists, about 51,000 Cameroonian refugees had been taken in 87 communities in these four Nigerian states. The Cameroonian conflict claimed more than

3,000 lives and displaced more than 679,000 persons according to compilations by non-governmental organizations -N.G.Os (U.N.H.C.R, 2019).

Historically, there have been permanent and temporal cross border migrations along the Nigerian-Cameroon border over time between the nationals of both countries into either side of the border strengthened by economic intergroup interactions between the two nations and by other socio-economic realities of the nations. The plantation economy of southern Cameroon was a source of attraction to many Nigerians. In terms of the socio-economic characteristics of the migrants; most of these were rural low income peasants, labour migrants, artisans, and traders without much of formal education seeking livelihoods. For instance, the cocoa, coffee, banana, and palm kernel plantations first established under the German colonial rule led to the creation of private and public plantations that offered employment to labour migrants from south eastern Nigeria. A common colonial government, common, customs, language and currency, and transportation infrastructure facilitated mobility between south Western Cameroon and south eastern Nigeria (Mberu and Pongou). While voluntary migrations across the Nigerian- Cameroon border continued after the independence, the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria has been responsible for the influx of refugees into Cameroon from Nigeria in recent times. Focusing primarily on the influx of Anglophone-Cameroonians into Benue communities, this study examines the nature of the relationship between the refugees and host communities, the nature of the food crisis and the response from local and international organisations, partners, central and state government in addressing the food problems of the refugees on one hand. Also, attention is specifically drawn to the effects of the food crisis on the impoverished host communities with a view towards providing deep insights on the nature of the food crisis, interventions and the effects of the refugee crisis on the food economy of the host communities.

2. Conceptual Issues

The phenomenon of migration involves time and space, long or short movement from one location to another on permanent basis or temporal basis either across national boundaries or within national boundaries. While the movement of population across international boundaries is referred to as international migration, the movement within internal boundaries is internal migration. The duration of residence in the destination determines whether the process is a migration or otherwise. Some migration

scholars emphasize the duration of residence in the destination or new place for a relocation to be regarded as migration and they believe such relocation must be between six months to twelve months (Ikwuyatum, 2011).

Migration can be either forced or voluntary depending on the circumstances propelling it. Voluntary migration deals with the decision and willingness to relocate to an alternative place for economic reasons on the basis of cost and benefits calculation, with no form of compulsion involved. Involuntary or forced migration refers to the relocation of people from their place of origin or usual place of residence against their desire due to many factors including environmental shocks, socio-economic instability, insecurity, conflict and warfare (Ikwuyatum, 2011).

Mabogunje's push-and-pull model (1970 as cited in Oyenyi, 2013) suggests that centrifugal factors at the source and centripetal factors at the destination serve as push-and-pull factors for migration from one place to another. Inadequate health care, unemployment, primitive conditions and natural disasters (such as desertification, famine or drought), political fear and persecution, slavery and forced labor, among other conditions are centrifugal or push factors that leads to migration. High wage rates and job opportunities, social amenities and education, better living conditions, political and religious freedom, better medical care and favorable climates, among other factors, are pull factors of migration especially when these are lacking in the source. Mabogunje (1970 as cited in Oyenyi, 2013) concluded that in the case of Africa, the effect of selective and unequal urban development and the growing disparity between rural and urban areas is responsible for the migration of people from the rural areas to urban centers (Oyenyi). Thus, the concentration of employment opportunities, better living conditions, education and better medical care in urban centers of Africa since the colonial periods served as pull factors for rural to urban migration (Oyenyi).

The migration of the Anglophone Cameroonians into Nigeria due to the crisis is a case of forced migration which produces refugees. Thus, while voluntary migrations are connected to the search for social and economic alternatives to livelihoods as many scholars believe, forced migrations are caused by social and political problems such as armed conflicts, insecurity, human rights violations and natural disasters (Fongkeng, 2019). Forced migration produces migrants referred to as refugees fleeing their places of residence for their physical security and protection

from imminent threats to physical wellbeing. Some scholars distinguish between forced migration caused by natural disasters on the one hand, and forced migration caused by violence and/or armed conflict and insecurity, repressive state policies, and persecution on the other hand (Fongkeng). The term refugee is applied to a person who:

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term “the country of his nationality” shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national. (UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 and the 1967 Protocol, Article 1(A)2).

3. The Cameroonian Refugees and Food Crisis in Benue State of Nigeria

Benue state was characterised by poverty incidents over the years both in the urban and rural areas which manifested in so many important dimensions due to absence of social and economic infrastructure. A report conducted in 1992 published in 1994 showed that majority of the Benue people had no access to safe water supply, sanitation, medical care facilities, education, and transportation, an indication that the infrastructural development programmes of successive governments such as World Bank assisted Agricultural Development Project and the Directorate of Foods, Roads And Rural Infrastructure (D.F.F.R.I) made no impact on the masses of the state (Gbor, 2004). The Federal Office of Statistics’ (F.O.S) Social Statistics in Nigeria in 1994 showed percentage distributions of poor and non-poor by 22 states. The percentage of poverty, in Benue was 54.99 ranking among the 10 poorest states in the Nigeria. The incidence of poverty, in percentages, by 1992 for Benue was 41.1%. The figure rose to 65.5% by 1996 placing Benue State as the ninth poorest State in Nigeria (Gbor). A Core Welfare Indicators

Questionnaire (C.W.I.Q) survey piloted in Benue State in February 2001 by F.O.S did not show any significant changes in the poverty in the state with regards to access to basic infrastructure (Gbor). There was growing poverty in the area over the years as the state interventions in improving the living standards of the people made no impact. The recurrent food security problems in the state could be traced to environmental and socio-political constraints: soil degradation, land hunger, low production, poor farm technology, lack of credit facilities, and lack of storage facilities (Avav, 2003; Odey, 2011; Surma, 1995). The Benue axis on the Nigerian side of the border with Cameroon which received Anglophone Cameroonian refugees has a long history of food shortages in addition to infrastructure deficit dating to the colonial period due to population pressure, pressure on resources, soil degradation, and land hunger (Briggs, 1941a; Briggs, 1941b).

Some of the grievances in the English speaking Regions of Cameroon that sparked the crisis include: (1) The failure of successive Governments of Cameroon, since 1961, to respect and implement the articles of the constitution that uphold and safeguard what British Southern Cameroons brought along to the union in 1961; (2) The flagrant disregard for the constitution, demonstrated by the dissolution of political parties and the formation of one political party in 1966, and other such acts judged by the West Cameroonians to be unconstitutional and undemocratic; (3) The cavalier management of the 1972 referendum which took out the foundational elements (federalism) of the 1961 constitution; and (4)The 1984 law amending the constitution, which gave the country the original East Cameroon name (the Republic of Cameroon) and thereby erased the identity of the West Cameroonians from the original union. West Cameroon, which had entered the union as an equal partner effectively ceased to exist. It involved a deliberate and systematic erosion of the West Cameroon cultural identity which the 1961 constitution sought to preserve and protect by providing for a bi-cultural federation (Fonkeng, 2019).

These grievances led to protests in the Anglophone Region by October, 2016. The continued escalation of tension, violence, demonstrations by local teachers, lawyers, students, and the unilateral declaration of independence by Anglophone separatists on October 1st 2017, the heavy handed response of security forces led to the death of persons and displacement of some who fled to Nigeria (Lun & Brooke-Holland, 2019). Ekok, Kembong, Eyumojock, Akwaya, Egbekaw, Mamfe Central, and

other localities in Manyu Division were some of the border towns and villages where people mostly women and children relocated to neighbouring Nigeria (Fonkeng, 2019). Initially, the refugees were mostly journalists, lawyers, teachers and youths that participated or led the movement for independence that became targets of the authorities and together with their families feared repercussion. But with time, ordinary Cameroonian civilians from rural areas and some towns were forced to cross the border into poor Nigerian communities of extremely poor road access and non-existent services due to the escalation of military operations by the Government. In 2018-January 22 –February 3rd, U.N.H.C.R and Nigeria’s National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons(N.C.F.R.M.I) registered 2,804 asylum seekers in Cross River making a total of 14,056 number of refugees and asylum seekers that were recorded in Cross River state,, Benue state and Taraba since the beginning of the influx in 2017(U.N.H.C.R, 2018). By May 8, 2018, the Nigerian government with support from U.N.H.C.R registered 21,291 Cameroonian refugees out which about 50% were children. They were located in Cross River State, 17,003, Benue state 3,525, Akwa-Ibom, 197, and Taraba 584 (U.N.H.C.R, 2019). By February 2019, the UNHCR and National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (N.C.F.R.M.I) biometrically verified some 28,311 refugees in Cross River, Benue, Akwa-Ibom and Taraba States (U.N.H.C.R, 2019).

It is important to state that Nigeria had long before domesticated all international and regional refugee instruments and incorporated into Laws of the Federation of Nigeria. Nigeria is party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol; as well as the 1969 O.A.U Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. The status and treatment of refugees in Nigeria has been governed by the National Commission for Refugees Act Chapter N21, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004 and implemented by the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (N.C.F.R.M.I). Key international human rights instruments have been ratified by Nigeria (Anyogu & Ozioko, 2019) U.N.H.C.R, W.P.F and National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (N.C.F.R.M.I) and State Emergency Management Agency (S.E.M.A) took the lead in ensuring that Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria received assistance and protection. The key areas of priority in the above regard include the following:

- enhancing access to asylum through monitoring and advocacy, recalling the fundamental principle of non-refoulement and States international obligations;
- preserving the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum;
- registration and documentation of all refugees in a manner that enhances their protection;
- relocation away from the border areas to new refugee sites;
- protection of vulnerable groups, including women and children(protection against sexual violence, abuse and exploitation);
- promoting co-existence with host communities through community based interventions; ensuring access to essential services(food, shelter, water, and sanitation, health and nutrition, education) for all refugees;
- instituting measures to prevent and reduce Statelessness;
- promoting self-reliance and livelihoods through Cash-Based Interventions(CBIs); and
- exploring durable solution options (U.N.H.C.R, 2019).

In achieving the broad objectives, the U.N.H.C.R partnered the following local NGO’s: Benue Non-Governmental Network (B.E.N.G.O.N.E.T), Rhema Care, Caritas, Mediatrix Development Foundation (M.D.F), Foundation For Justice Development and Peace (F.J.D.P) and Health Initiatives For Safety and Stability in Africa (H.I.F.A.S).

The refugees were given settlement camp in *Abande* and *Agbatse* communities in 2017 but were later transferred to *Anyake* (T. Humbe, personal communication, February, 20, 2020). Subsequently due to the concerns of the host community and the need to give the refugees farm lands, the refugees numbering 6000 were relocated to *Ikyogen* Cattle Ranch, a government property situated on vast land parcels believed to give the refugees space and protection from the clandestine movements of the Cameroonian security forces across the Nigerian-Cameroon border (Duru, 2019).

The reports of the Emergency Food Security Assessment (E.F.S.A) confirmed the food insecurity level of the Cameroonian refugees and concluded that food assistance was the most urgent need of the refugees. On the general note, the influx of the Cameroonian refugees had implications on the food situation in this area in some significant ways. The

increasing population of the refugees put strains on the prevailing food production in these areas that were already food deficit as pointed out. In consequence, the food production capacity of the areas proved inadequate in sustaining the host communities and the teeming refugee population during the period. Food imports through market distribution or supply channels from other parts of Benue state could not solve the problem of food access due to poor road network especially in the *Kwande* area. The increasing food prices in the area contributed in no little extent to affect food access in the area during this period.

The vast majority of the refugees were in the households of members of the host communities in the rural areas who needed to be assisted and this affected the household food supply and consumption leading to food insecurity for the hosts and the refugees. Low incomes of the members of the Benue host communities worsened the food access problem. The food insecurity situation of the hosted refugees in the households was worst in the households headed by women particularly widows. The 2018 report of the Emergency Food Security Assessment (E.F.S.A) shows that the food security of the Cameroonian refugees was worse than that of the host communities. The report further shows that the host communities had access to certain livelihood opportunities while the Cameroonian refugees had little access to land. The refugees could not afford the cost of renting land, obtaining seeds, tools and other implements (E.F.S.A. 2018). Field information in the area indicates willingness and cooperation on the part of many households in host communities towards the plight of the refugees and assistance in spite of the challenges of food production and distribution (D. Tyukpev, personal communication, February 20, 2020).

Evidence suggests that the refugee population in the refugee settlement were not in better food situation in spite of the efforts by U.N.C.H.R, international and local partners in ensuring the refugees were fed. This was done through distributing cooking utensils, food items and cash-based intervention (C.B.I) equivalent of 20 dollars to purchase food of their choice¹. The evidence shows that 26% of refugees in settlements were insecure, and 38% of the out of camp refugees were severely food insecure. The cash based intervention of 7,200 Naira equivalent of 20 U.S dollars per month was insufficient for each refugee family to depend on for feeding as information has shown. Most of the refugees in the host communities engaged in various activities to raise cash for food or to obtain food from members of the community to supplement the assistance from their host and that of

the international and local agencies. These activities include weeding, clearing of farmlands and harvesting of crops (U.N.H.C.R. 2019). Furthermore, the evidence points to the fact that the food insecurity situation of both the refugees and those in the host communities deteriorated in 2019 (F. Agbo, personal communication, February, 23, 2020). The efforts of international agencies and partners to address the livelihood challenges of the Cameroonian refugees yielded little progress. The efforts were in from of entrepreneurship training for the refugees and some members of the host communities.

The international agencies and partners were confronted with challenges in tackling refugee crisis in the area. One of these problems as indicated in U.N.C.H.R sources was underfunding, for instance, out of the 184 million U.S dollars required for U.N.H.C.R operations in Cameroon and Nigeria including 35.4 million U.S dollars needed for critical life saving assistance to displaced Cameroonians, only 4 percent was raised(U.N.C.H.R, 2019). Other problems include allocation of more land for additional settlement of refugees, registration, and inaccessibility of refugees in remote areas due to poor road conditions. The forced return of 47 Cameroonians among whom were recognized refugees and registered asylum seekers on the 26 January 2018 by the Nigerian government remained a matter of concern to U.N.H.C.R and other international human rights organisations (U.N.C.H.R, 2019). This led to fear among the refugees about their physical safety in the area and subsequent departure from the settlement into the wider host communities seeking assistance. Some of the refugees who were not willing to be registered due to fear of detention and refoulement and those that were not captured due to inaccessibility added to the population that went into the larger host communities for assistance in households where their food security became precarious (U.N.C.H.R, 2019).

Food crisis in the area also had implications for malnutrition among the refugees and members of the host communities. Food experts agree that the immediate causes of malnutrition, health and diseases are household food security, personal health, primary care services, and the psychological care environment which have synergies and impact each other. House hold food security in terms of quantity and quality and the ability to utilize food is an important determinant of malnutrition (Fanzo, 2012). Fanzo has argued that:

The ability to access primary health care including issues such as distance, affordability and quality of

care can have implications on nutritional outcomes. Access to health services and environmental conditions relate to the access to essential drugs and immunizations, safe water, and sanitation and hygiene. Insufficient or delayed treatment also prolongs disease occurrence and severity. Poverty, poor hygiene, lack of knowledge, no access to water supplies, poor housing and health services, cultural practices and discriminatory social structure often occur together and these create environment of poor nutrition.

Poor water and sanitation is associated with increased risk of infections in children and increased malnutrition. Improved water and sanitation is linked to lower risk of malnutrition (Fanzo, 2012). As evidence suggest, safe water supplies and sanitation remained critical problems of the refugees within and outside the settlement though efforts were made by the agencies to increase access to water, health, and sanitation facilities as well as awareness on personal and environmental hygiene, prevention of water related diseases and menstrual hygiene management for the refugees. For instance, cleaning materials such as brooms buckets, soaps and disinfectants were provided in 17 refugee communities in *Anyake* settlement by U.N.H.C.R to keep the environment clean in 2019. A report shows that the refugees got medical care in primary, secondary and tertiary health care facilities in the settlement (U.N.C.H.R, 2019). Also, there was immunization of children from the age of 9 months to 5 years, provision of drugs, latrines, sanitary pads, disinfectants, to the refugees, and the rehabilitation of Primary Health Centre in *Ikyogen* to improve medical care for both the refugees and the host community. There was portable water treatment and provision hybrid bore hole system that supplied water to a good number of both the refugees and the host community households at *Ikyogen*. However, water supply was reported to be inadequate due to the increasing number of refugees (U.N.C.H.R, 2019). Most of the refugees on the borders and those living in the host communities as well as the host community households had no access to primary health services due to poor road network.

The Benue state government had challenges in its response to the refugee problem in the state. The flooding that occurred in Benue state in 2017 and the fatal clashes between herdsmen and farmers in early 2018 affected Benue state government's response to the Cameroon refugee problem. The problem of Internally Displaced Persons (I.D.P.s) who were food producers in Benue rural areas affected food production and distribution in Benue state few years before and during the Cameroonian crisis (Genyi,

2017; Ogebe, Aba and Ligom, 2019). But most important in this context was the financial implications of farmers/herders conflicts on the part of government to tackle both I.D.P's problem and that of the Cameroonian refugees. With regards to this challenge, the Executive Secretary of Benue state S.E.M.A, stated in 2019 as follows:

The financial burden is very huge, we have appealed to the federal government through the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons for support. They have supported quite alright especially in the area of provision of food. They have also helped in the area of data but that support is not enough because the number keeps increasing. We are also appealing to the National Emergency Management Agency, N.E.M.A, to come in. Part of N.E.M.A's mandate is to also cater for refugees and not I.D.Ps. There are promises that they will extend their support to the refugees' situation also in Benue. We have continued to interface with U.N.H.C.R which is the leading supporter in the humanitarian crisis. We are also working with a host of other humanitarian agencies (Duru, 2019).

4. Conclusion and Options for Resolving the Food Problem in Benue State of Nigeria

This paper examines the nature and dimensions of food crisis in Benue, one of the four Nigerian states along the other half of the Nigerian-Cameroon border. It is argued principally that, this part of Benue that received fleeing Anglophone Cameroonians was before the Refugee problem characterized by many poverty indices including food deficits caused by population pressure, pressure on resources, soil degradation, land hunger, and poor social, and economic infrastructure. The influx of Anglophone Cameroonians put additional strains on prevailing food production capacity and distribution which proved inadequate in sustaining the refugees and host communities. The efforts of local and international agencies, partners, and government through life saving interventions proved inadequate due mainly to underfunding, allocation of more land for additional settlement of refugees, registration, and inaccessibility of refugees in remote areas due to poor road conditions.

The federal government of Nigeria has the responsibility of providing sufficient funds to the Benue state government to tackle the Anglophone Cameroonian refugee and I.D.P problem. The federal government's intervention through National Emergency Management Agency (N.E.M.A) by provision of relief in the past in the area of food has not been sufficient. Releasing the state's share of the

10 billion Naira mentioned in (Duru, 2019) promised by the federal government for the states affected by herders and farmers crisis in 2019 is imperative for managing about 500,000 Internally Displaced Persons (I.D.Ps) and the 6000 Anglophone Cameroonian refugees. The U.N.C.H.R should increase the cash based intervention to meet up the food needs of the refugees (since the 20 dollar per month proved insufficient to cater for the refugees especially those with large families), and to invest more funds in livelihood intervention to enable self-reliance of the refugees. The expansion of the information gathering system by international agencies and partners through the use of more indigenous ad hoc personnel, and the available transportation means is necessary for reaching out to refugees in the host communities in terms of registration and life saving interventions. Sustained poverty reduction, food production, rural development interventions, devoid of poor implementation and corruption are imperative for improving the living standards of the Benue people and for coping with socio-economic and environmental shocks.

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