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Claire Lefort-Rieu

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Increasing or diverting control?
Refugee self-reliance, political stakes, and international aid to
forcibly displaced people in Cameroon

Claire Lefort-Rieu, CEPED (IRD / Université Paris Cité)

In recent years, assistance to forcibly displaced people underwent what has been described as a [neoliberal shift](#): instead of providing refugees and internally displaced people (IDP) with protection and assistance, it now focuses on giving them skills and equipment so they can be “self-reliant” and integrate or contribute to the local socio-economic context. This reactivates [topics mobilised in the 1970s](#), that considered refugees as a workforce to stimulate growth and development efforts in their host areas; it also echoes the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)'s efforts to tackle the [aid ‘dependency syndrome’](#). Valuing the economic potential of forced displaced people is also a way of reducing costs, assistance being replaced by the promotion of access to the labour market.

In Cameroon, ‘self-reliance’ projects for refugees and IDPs are overrepresented. Echoing its [global strategy for 2019-2023](#) – entitled ‘Refugee Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion’ –, UNHCR Cameroon signed in 2021 a [partnership agreement](#) with the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training and with the International Labour Organisation to facilitate refugees' access to the labour market. However, such a humanitarian assistance is also apprehended as both a political stake and a power resource by state actors and refugees.

In Cameroon, employment issues are highly politicised. A [strong politico-economic collusion](#) enables the authoritarian government to maintain its hold over the business community, so that it does not become the core of a competing political group. Creating jobs and defending the existing ones are also recurrent [political promises](#) of Paul Biya’s regime, which has held power for four decades.

International assistance does not escape these strong political stakes. By providing refugees and IDPs with skills and equipment, self-reliance projects directly echo the priorities of the [national development strategy](#). Furthermore, given that the material and financial means of state services are often insufficient, the resources provided by humanitarian interventions may be considered and used as a [“manna”](#): state services turn them into an additional means to enable them to achieve their development goals. The Cameroonian state apparatus thus implements [recuperation strategies](#) aimed at reintegrating into the public sphere services that were first developed by humanitarian

aid. For instance, in the Eastern region, Central African refugees involved in socio-economic integration projects are required by state services to comply with the 'procedures of the existence declaration'. Such administrative procedures (compilation of files detailing the members and activities of their micro-enterprise, obligation to pay property tax and tax on the lease, etc.), for which refugees can count on the technical and financial support of international aid actors, aim to enrol forced displaced people in the formal economy, turning their self-employment situation into small and medium-sized enterprises. State authority is exercised through a sovereign prerogative (tax) which integrates humanitarian projects into the national development strategy and in the local economic fabric. This international assistance, initially designed for refugees and their host population, serves not only the national development strategy and objectives but is also a way to strengthen the elements on which Paul Biya's regime relies to maintain itself in power.

In addition to state services, refugees may also reinvest international assistance to serve their own objectives. In a context of [migration securitisation](#), one way to skirt the [mobility restrictions](#) they face is to obtain a document issued by the UNHCR, which serves as a pass from the police or at the checkpoints. By providing refugees with this document – so that they can move between their homes and places of training, internship, or employment during the humanitarian project –, international aid gives them opportunities to regain mobility. This travel facilitation applies to the direct '[beneficiaries](#)' of the project but also to their relatives and community leaders, who are invited to leave the refugee camp to visit the vocational training centres in the regional capital city. In addition to the issuance of the UNHCR pass, all the costs (travel, accommodation, food) related to their stay are covered by the international aid actors: these facilitated trips are also used by the refugees to skirt mobility restrictions and to deal with various matters (family visits, negotiations with suppliers, procurement, etc.). Consequently, the humanitarian manna can also be understood in a spatial sense: the [state of exception](#) that defines refugee assistance exempts them from mobility restrictions imposed by the Cameroonian state.

The humanitarian manna can also be used by refugees to divert the norms that govern the field of international aid. In a neoliberal logic, self-reliance projects focus especially on promoting the ["entrepreneur" refugee model](#). But instead of applying the rules of business management which they have been taught, refugees may, for instance, use their micro-enterprise funds to finance another activity, or close their shop for several weeks to attend family obligations in another part of the country. To them, socio-economic integration projects are one resource among many others, in a landscape characterised by [plural and varied strategies, embedded in networks of social and family obligations](#). The standardised and quantitative tools of international aid actors, designed to monitor the evolution of refugees' start-up businesses according to a

neoliberal scheme, are challenged by the diversity of practices and activities they implement.

This example illustrates the plurality of daily practices implemented by refugees to live, build social relations, develop networks – i.e. a multiplicity of uses and tactics, of ways of [dealing with](#) the layers of power and agency that affect forcibly displaced people. Faced with strong stigmatisation in spaces and social conditions that state and humanitarian institutions define as a state of exception, individuals implement ordinary acts of resistance enabling them to transgress everyday hegemonies. These practices combine [expertise developed over the years](#) (especially during their experience of living in exile) [and limited power-to-do](#) (granted by authorities and aid actors in the host country). Despite the restrictions they face, refugees are able to divert or skirt the rules, to bend them – notably, but not exclusively, through the opportunities offered by humanitarian interventions. Their ability to play with the policies they are subject to also enables them to bring to the fore [forms of \(political\) mobilisations](#).

Bionote:

Graduated with a Master of social anthropology from Ecole Normale Supérieure and Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Claire Lefort-Rieu is a PhD candidate in critical anthropology of international aid (Ceped, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement / Université Paris Cité). She studies forced migrations governance in Cameroon, through extensive fieldwork and a methodology of double ethnography led with both aid actors and their so-called beneficiaries.

Email: claire.lefort@etu-u.paris.fr