“Nous Souffrons” Examining the Problems Facing Urban Refugees in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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“Nous Souffrons”
Examining the Problems Facing Urban Refugees in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper is the product of a study that examines the experiences of urban refugees in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Refugees around the world, often victims of unthinkable human rights abuses, are forced to rely fully on the hospitality and protection of the international community. This unique relationship between a refugee and his/her host state can present serious challenges to both parties. This research examined the resources available to refugees in Yaoundé, evaluated their effectiveness, and explored possibilities for improving the experience of these urban refugees. I utilized eighteen structured interviews with refugees and four follow-up in depth interviews with three refugees and the director of a local NGO, Respect Cameroon. My results indicated that the resources available to refugees are primarily provided by UNHCR and local NGO's. I also concluded that these resources exhibit low levels of effectiveness, and could be improved through increased dialogue between organizations and a focus on increasing refugee's knowledge of their legal rights.

Résumé

Ce document est le produit d'une étude qui examine les expériences des réfugiés urbains à Yaoundé, Cameroun. Réfugiés dans le monde, souvent victimes de impensables violations des droits humains, sont obligés de compter entièrement sur l'hospitalité et de la protection de la communauté internationale. Cette relation unique entre un réfugié et sa / son pays d'accueil peut présenter de sérieux défis pour les deux parties. Cette recherche a examiné les ressources disponibles pour les réfugiés à Yaoundé, ont évalué leur efficacité, et exploré les possibilités d'amélioration de l'expérience de ces réfugiés urbains. J'ai utilisé dix-huit entretiens structurés avec les réfugiés et les quatre de suivi en profondeur des entrevues avec trois réfugiés et le directeur d'une ONG locale, Respect Cameroon. Mes résultats ont indiqué que les ressources disponibles pour les réfugiés sont principalement fournies par le HCR et les ONG locales. J'ai également conclu que ces ressources présentent de faibles niveaux d’efficacité, et pourrait être améliorée par le renforcement du dialogue entre les organisations et l'accent sur l'augmentation de la connaissance de réfugiés de leurs droits légaux.
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I. Introduction

The movement of refugees and other displaced persons has been a near constant phenomenon throughout history and currently represents one of the modern world’s greatest social dilemmas. Human movements across borders represent serious challenges to regional and international peace, and play an undeniably influential role in the effectiveness and dynamics of international cooperation. In our ever more globalized world, the complex relationship between refugees, host countries (defined in this paper as the state in which a refugee is seeking asylum), and the international community at large has become extremely relevant and therefore cannot be ignored in any well-rounded discussion of international relations.

Defined by the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention as any person who “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,” refugees are an inherently vulnerable group with a myriad of complex needs that can be difficult, although necessary, for a host country to meet. They represent the human cost of unrest, and are typically recognized as fleeing a “range of causes, including authoritarian regimes; conflict; human rights violations; large-scale development projects; environmental disasters resulting from hurricanes, tsunamis, and climate change.”

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1 The United Nations. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Convention Relating to the Status of
Often victims of unthinkable human rights abuses, refugees are forced to rely fully on the hospitality and protection of the international community. This unique relationship between a refugee and his or her host state can be extremely challenging for both parties, and, as a result, the international community has seen fit to specifically outline the rights and responsibilities of both refugees and host states. Refugees are protected under a variety of international laws, the most relevant and wide reaching of which are the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (heretofore referred to as the Convention) as well as the related U.N. Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (heretofore referred to as the Protocol), which was signed in 1967. These two instruments legally define who is a refugee, what the rights of refugees are, and the obligations of States and have been signed and ratified by the vast majority of the world’s States (145 are party to the Convention, 146 are party to the Protocol). While both the Convention and the Protocol provide much-needed broad definitions, in reality the application of the rights and responsibilities of refugees and their host states varies wildly from country to country. In this paper, we will examine the state of the refugee situation in one specific country, Cameroon.

Cameroon currently hosts over 100,000 refugees, 94,450 of which hail from the Central African Republic (C.A.R.) as of December 2013. And while refugees have been fleeing in high numbers since 2006, March 2013 brought a new wave after political instability (coup d’état, militia groups, indiscriminate killings, etc.) swept C.A.R. Cameroon

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is a signatory of “all major international and regional legal instruments on refugees," including both the Convention and the Protocol, and is thus legally obligated to aid all refugees within its borders. In this paper, we will examine the issues facing refugees in Cameroon as they attempt to adjust to a difficult situation in a region historically riddled with conflict.

II. Research Goals

When attempting to approach the broad subject of refugees in Cameroon, I made the decision to focus on three specific research questions that I felt would allow me to cultivate a deeper understanding of the situation in a clear and focused way. I first asked “What resources are available for refugees in Cameroon?” and hypothesized that refugees in Cameroon have access to a limited amount of resources primarily provided by International Organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) like Respect Cameroon. Next, I asked “Are these resources effective or not?” and hypothesized that these resources are not effective, primarily because of the unexpected and extreme increase in the number of C.A.R. refugees entering Cameroon in recent months. Finally, I asked “What could be changed to improve the situation for both the refugee as well as the host country?” and hypothesized that changes that could positively impact the situation include increased funding, increased cooperation between different groups, and dialogue with the refugee population.

III. Methodology

In order to address these questions, I decided on a methodology approach that would include external research, an internship with a Cameroonian NGO focused on refugee issues, structured interviews, and in-depth follow-up interviews. I chose to conduct my research in Yaoundé, Cameroon mainly as a result of current safety issues plaguing the country. Because of the high levels of violence in the border areas between Cameroon and C.A.R., where a majority of refugees are currently located, I was forced to find another area to conduct my research. Yaoundé, as the capital city of Cameroon and home to many NGO’s, the headquarters for a variety of international organizations (UNHCR, UNICEF, etc.), Government Ministry headquarters, as well as a fairly sizable urban refugee population, was a natural choice for a research site. Conducting my research in Yaoundé also gave me the opportunity to intern with Respect Cameroon, a Cameroonian NGO that works with refugees in the city. The expertise, connections, and knowledge of the staff at Respect Cameroon were invaluable throughout the duration of my research.

After settling on Yaoundé as a project site, I began the process of identifying my sample group and deciding how to collect my data. While I had originally intended to focus primarily on refugees hailing from the Central African Republic, as they currently represent over 90% of the refugees in Cameroon, after speaking to the staff at Respect Cameroon, I re-evaluated this idea. While C.A.R. refugees make up the vast majority of the Cameroonian refugee population, they are primarily located in the Eastern and Northern regions of Cameroon. Yaoundé, on the other hand, plays host to an extremely diversified group of refugees with countries of origin including Rwanda, Chad, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic
of Congo (D.R.C.), and others and has a comparatively small population of C.A.R. refugees. By limiting my study to only C.A.R. refugees I would both run the risk of having a very small sample group and be unable to utilize information resulting from the experiences of a large percentage of Yaoundé’s urban refugee population. As a result of these factors, I decided early on to reframe my research to include the experiences of refugees as a whole in Yaoundé. Therefore, my sample group was composed of refugees (both male and female, with a variety of age ranges represented) residing in Yaoundé, Cameroon, with no preference given to country of origin.

In addition to this adjustment of my sample population, I also re-adjusted my data collection strategy. I originally planned to construct a questionnaire that would allow me to question a large number of refugees in a short amount of time while limiting the possibility of bias (by asking the same questions to a large sample population). Unfortunately, I ran into an unforeseen problem: literacy. Over 80% of urban refugees in Cameroon are illiterate, and I soon discovered that this factor severely limited the effectiveness of the questionnaire. Instead, I decided to conduct structured interviews with my participants. I asked participants the same set of questions, and I, or occasionally a fellow Respect Cameroon staff member, wrote down the participant’s answers. I asked all refugee participants the same initial set of questions, and conducted further in-depth follow up interviews with four participants.

While I had hoped that my time at the Respect Cameroon office would allow me to come in contact with refugees on a regular basis, I found that this was not the case. While

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8 The United Nations, Global Appeal 2013 Update: Cameroon.
refugees do come to the office, they tend to only come to large events held by the organization that happen once a month. While the *Respect Cameroon* office did not provide me with the environment that I was hoping for, they did put me in contact with some of their contacts in the Yaoundé refugee population, and I made several field visits to meet these contacts and conduct my interviews. On each field visit, I was accompanied by a *Respect Cameroon* volunteer. This was necessary for two reasons: safety and participant comfort. The neighborhoods that we visited (*La Briqueterie, Manguier*, etc.) were unsafe for me to spend time in on my own, and the *Respect Cameroon* staff felt that it was necessary for an adult Cameroonian to accompany me at all times in these areas. The presence of the volunteer was also crucial to ensure the comfort of my participants. Because I was working with a group that is considered for a variety of reasons to be a vulnerable population, it was extremely important that I focused on maintaining the highest level of accommodation and comfort for the participants. Having an adult Cameroonian with me who was a volunteer representing a NGO that they were familiar with was essential in this regard. Additionally, while I am adequately proficient in French and would often conduct the interviews myself, having a fluent French speaker with me was helpful in a myriad of ways. The volunteer was able to ensure that my participants understood that their participation was voluntary, all questions were optional, and their participation could be rescinded at any time. They were also able to explain my questions in more colloquial terms, and helped to ensure easy communication between study participants and myself.

I made a total of three field trips with three different volunteers. As mentioned above, when meeting with a participant, I would first conduct a structured interview. I
began this interview by asking participants for their age, country of origin, total time spent in Cameroon, and total time spent in Yaoundé (see appendix 1); questions that would allow me to determine my participant demographics. I then moved on to questions that would allow me to gain greater insight into the nature of participants experience as refugees in Cameroon. I asked such questions as “Quelles sont vos principales difficultés en tant que refugie à Yaoundé?” and “Quels ont été vos principaux succès depuis votre arrivée au Cameroun?” I then asked several questions that would allow me to gauge the availability and effectiveness of resources in Cameroon. This section included questions such as “Pensez-vous que le Cameroun apporte un bon soutien aux refugies? Oui ou non, et pourquoi?” “Avez-vous confiance dans la connaissance de vos droits en tant que refugie? Oui ou Non ? Pourquoi?“, and finally “Connaisssez-vous toutes les ressources disponibles pour les refugies au Cameroun ? Oui ou non ? Pourquoi ?” This structured interview allowed me to get a solid idea of the demographics of my study, and provided me with data directly related to my first and second research questions. I conducted eighteen structured interviews.

The structured interviews also allowed me to gauge participants’ willingness to discuss a sensitive topic with me, which directly influenced my choice of participants for in-depth follow up interviews. I ultimately chose four refugee participants for these interviews: Jeanne Bobende Dino (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Mkkelele Mboy (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbn (Nigeria), and Martin.

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9 “What are your principle difficulties as a refugee in Cameroon?”
10 “What have been your principle successes since you arrived in Cameroon?”
11 Do you think that Cameroon takes good care of refugees? Yes, or no and why?
12 “Do you have confidence in your knowledge of your rights as a refugee? Yes or no? Why?
13 Do you know all the resources available for refugees in Cameroon? Yes or no? Why?
14 Pseudonym
Walbert 12

(Democratic Republic of the Congo). All participants were extremely vocal in their views, and included a range of genders (two women, two men) and experiences as refugees. Jeanne is a single mother who was denied a refugee identity card by UNHCR. Mkkelele is a married father who coordinates meetings of a community of D.R.C. refugees to discuss their rights and problems in Cameroon. Mercy is a young single mother who receives aid from UNHCR for the health problems of one of her sons. Martin is a young man who was also denied a refugee identity card by UNHCR. I also conducted an extensive interview with Damien Eloundou, the director of Respect Cameroon, to discuss refugee issues from the viewpoint of an NGO. Unfortunately, despite my very best efforts and those of both Mr. Eloundou and my advisor, I was unable to interview a representative of UNHCR.

Ultimately, although I was forced to make several adjustments to my original research plan, I feel confident in the relevance and reliability of my data. Using structured interviews allowed me to adjust to the limitations of my sample population without sacrificing my planned safeguards against bias. The in-depth follow up interviews with four refugee participants allowed me to gain greater insight into the experiences of a fairly diverse cross-section of Yaoundé refugees. And while an in-depth interview with UNHCR would have contributed much to this paper, the lack of availability and accessibility of the Yaoundé field office speaks volumes on its own about UNHCR’s relationship with the public and, by extension, with the refugees of Yaoundé.

IV. Resources for Refugees in Yaoundé

The first research question that I explored examined the resources available for refugees in Yaoundé. I initially hypothesized that refugees in Cameroon have access to a
limited amount of resources, primarily provided by International Organizations (e.g. UNHCR) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s). To this end, my research indicated that my initial hypothesis was indeed correct. I discovered that UNHCR provides the bulk of the formal support for refugees, with little to no support from the Cameroonian government, while NGO’s do their best to fill any resulting gaps in aid and provide a more personal, grassroots level of support to refugees.

**United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Yaoundé provides vital assistance to refugees. UNHCR is often the first stop for refugees in Cameroon, as they are registered with the organization and provided with identification documents. While this service was one of several intended to be transferred to the auspices of the Cameroonian government following the November 2011 Presidential decree that legitimized the 2005 Refugee Law (Portant Statut des Refugies au Cameroun)\(^\text{15}\), this has unfortunately not yet occurred. While an Eligibility Commission and an Appeals Commission have been formally established by the government, “they are not yet functioning, and the eligibility officers and support staff have not yet been selected” and, as a result, UNHCR continues to “carry out registration, refugee status determination, and ensure the issuance of documents in Yaoundé and Douala”\(^\text{16}\).

The refugee identification cards issued by UNHCR are vital to the lives of refugees in Yaoundé, as they take the place of the national I.D. cards issued to citizens by the


Cameroonian government. Cameroonian law requires all persons to carry identification cards at all times, and “in sweeps and at pervasive immigration enforcement checkpoints and roadblocks, police frequently arrest, beat, and extort money from those with no documentation." The UNHCR refugee I.D. cards act as legal I.D. cards and help refugees to “avoid police harassment” and, at least in theory, legally “engage in business and obtain almost all necessary licenses and permits on par with nationals." This service is vital for urban refugees like those in Yaoundé.

UNHCR also provides assistance to refugees in a variety of other areas, but their main focus goes to the health and education sectors. Unfortunately, UNHCR does not publish any documents outlining their specific programs in Cameroon, at least that I could find throughout my research. I did have the opportunity to speak to several refugees who have taken advantage of their assistance, but I cannot speak to whether or not their experiences represent those of the average refugee who interacts with UNHCR. Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm, a Nigerian refugee, receives aid from UNHCR for one of her sons. She explained, “HCR, they render me assistance...and that assistance is for my son who is not in good health." She went on to explain that while the assistance is only for her son, the family “lives through that assistance." While Mercy was grateful to receive this aid, she did stress that, in her experience, her situation is very unique and it is generally very difficult to receive this type of assistance from UNHCR. In her words, “they don’t give it to

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18 Ibid.
19 "Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
20 Ibid.
anybody! Another refugee, Mkkelele Mboy, spoke about the educational assistance provided to refugee children. According to Mkkelele, in past years UNHCR has given assistance to all refugee children enrolled in both public and private schools (for school fees, supplies, etc.), but has recently rescinded their support for children in private schools. While this policy change is very controversial among the refugee population, the educational assistance that UNHCR does provide is in high demand as the Cameroonian government “does not provide public relief to its citizens or to refugees.”

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s)

While UNHCR plays a vital role in providing the bulk of the formal support available to refugees, NGO’s also supply important support at the grassroots, community level. While conducting my research, I had the opportunity to work closely with one such NGO, Respect Cameroon. Respect Cameroon is a regional affiliate of Respect International, a Canadian NGO that works “to increase awareness of refugee issues...to build bridges between non-refugee students and refugee students...[and] to encourage students to act to raise awareness of refugee issues.” The Respect Cameroon regional office places a specific focus on the promotion education among refugee students and their families. Damien Eloundou, the director of the organization, explained that education is oftentimes not considered a priority in refugee families. Respect Cameroon’s main goal is raise awareness in the refugee community about the importance of education for their children because, in

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21 Ibid.
22 Follow-Up Interview with Mkkelele Mboy.” Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
23 “World Refugee Survey 2009: Cameroon.” U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
their view, “if [students] don’t get [an education], it will not be good for their future. It is important to remind [families] of this by sensitization.”

Refugees face many challenges relating to education, including difficulty navigating an unfamiliar school system, difficulty raising funds for school fees and supplies, and many others. In order to address the multitude of obstacles like these that affect education, the Respect Cameroon staff employs a holistic approach in an attempt to “as far as possible, give answers to many of the needs around education.” This strategy means that Respect Cameroon deals with a diverse array of issues, involving anything from difficulties with home life to health. In Damien’s words, “They are always coming with problems of health, and we think that health is very important for the education of students. Because if they do not have good health they will not be in good condition to go to school.” Respect Cameroon’s focus on this type of holistic approach allows them to better understand the full scope of problems that refugees face, and enhances their effectiveness when promoting their main goal of educational advocacy.

Respect Cameroon is joined in Yaoundé by a variety of other NGO’s that work to address the needs of refugees in the city. Another NGO that is extremely influential in the lives of Yaoundé refugees is the Association de Lutte contre les Violences faites aux Femmes (ALVF). ALVF was founded in 1991 by seven Cameroonian women with the goal of “eliminating all kinds of violence women and girls suffer from in all (private, public, political) spaces in Cameroon.” More specifically, ALVF works to “promote a fair social

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25 “Interview with Damien Eloundou.” Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2014.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
status...[and] promote positive human values taking into account the difference between both sexes, goals which bring them into contact with refugee women. During a follow-up interview, Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm explained that many refugee women use ALVF as an intermediary between themselves and UNHCR. According to Mercy, obtaining an appointment with UNHCR on one's own without the help of an NGO like ALVF is extremely difficult. She explained, "you cannot go to [UNHCR]. If they did not invite you, or they did not call you for an appointment, you cannot go there...When you go there what would you tell them? You cannot." Instead, refugees like Mercy visit organizations such as ALVF and there "you explain your problem to them, and they are the ones now to go to HCR and explain your problem."

This intermediary role played by ALVF and other NGO's is vital for the refugee population of Yaoundé. These indigenous NGO's are "generally better acquainted with the local situation" and as a result are seen as more approachable and relatable than their International Organization counterparts (e.g. UNHCR). NGO's are also able to provide more specialized resources (e.g. Respect Cameroon's focus on education) that can fill gaps in support provided by larger organizations that may only be able to provide generalized care. Respect Cameroon, ALVF and their fellow NGO's provide indispensable support at the grassroots, community level and play an important role in the lives of Yaoundé refugees.

**The Cameroonian Government**

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29 Ibid.
30 "Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
31 Ibid.
A third source of support for refugees in Yaoundé should be the Cameroonian government. Unfortunately, despite many international and domestic legal obligations, the Cameroonian government provides little to no tangible support for refugees within their borders, preferring to take a backseat role to UNHCR’s activities. Despite this attitude, Cameroon can be applauded for its willingness to allow refugees to enter its territory. In a region rife with conflict, Cameroon remains a bastion of peace and stability that provides a safe-haven for a significant number of refugees (currently over 100,000)\textsuperscript{33}. Martin Bokumi, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.C), described the peaceful nature of Cameroon as one of the main reasons that he chose to live in Yaoundé. Martin explained, “Je suis à Yaoundé parce que il y à la paix chez moi chaque fois la guerre de menace.”\textsuperscript{34,35} Cameroon has also allowed refugees to settle in local communities with whom they share ethnic or other cultural similarities. Although this system poses many challenges “in terms of access and effective delivery of assistance,” it has been “an efficient measure to promote self-sufficiency of refugees.”\textsuperscript{36}

Although these policies of the Cameroonian government are to be commended, they represent only a cursory attempt to provide support to refugees. In reality, the Cameroonian government relies almost entirely on UNHCR to coordinate refugee services, virtually ignoring both their international and domestic legal obligations. Cameroon is a State party to both the previously mentioned 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status

\textsuperscript{34} "Structured Interview with Martin Bokumi." Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2014.
\textsuperscript{35} “I am in Yaoundé because there is peace every time war threatens.”
of Refugees as well as the 1967 Protocol. While these two International agreements only legally require States to “cooperate with UNHCR in the exercise of its functions...[and] inform the UN Secretary General about the laws and regulations they may adopt to ensure the application of the Convention”, as a signatory, Cameroon is openly declaring its dedication to the “protection of refugees on [its] territory\textsuperscript{37}”. Cameroon is also a State party to the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. This Convention addressed the problems resulting from post-colonial conflicts in Africa by extending the definition of a refugee to any person compelled to leave his/her country because of “external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality.\textsuperscript{38}”

Along with its international obligations, Cameroon also recently passed its own domestic laws outlining the rights of refugees within its territory. While human rights protection is guaranteed by the Preamble of the Cameroonian Constitution\textsuperscript{39}, in 2005 the National Assembly passed what is colloquially referred to as the Refugee Law which, in \textit{Chapitre III: Droits et Obligations des Refugies}, explicitly states that refugees are to be treated equally with nationals in terms of “\textit{la non-discrimination; le droit de pratiquer sa religion librement; le droit a la propriété; la liberté d’association; le droit d’ester en justice; le droit au travail; le droit a l’éducation; le droit au logement; le droit a l’assistance sociale et public; la liberté de circulation; le droit d’obtenir des titres d’identité et des documents de}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
Despite these provisions, the Cameroonian government has yet to take any serious, tangible steps towards the implementation of this law. In November 2011, President Biya did sign an implementing decree that created both an Eligibility and Appeals Commissions, but “they are not yet functioning, and the eligibility officers and support staff have not yet been selected.” While the 2006 Refugee Law remains unimplemented, refugee issues reside within the competence of the Ministry of External Relations, Division of Protocol and Consular Affairs, Refugee and Migrants Unit. Highly unfortunately, “this unit is staffed by only one person and therefore has insufficient capacity to assume full responsibility for refugee issues.”

The failure of the Cameroonian government to ensure the protection of the rights of refugees in its territory is undeniable. While the government has made several steps forward, most notably with the 2006 Refugee Law, the lack of follow-through is a serious issue. Until the government is able to effectively implement this law and provide tangible refugee protection and assistance, UNHCR will continue to hold full responsibility for refugee issues in Cameroon, assisted in a limited capacity by the programs and services offered by local NGO’s (e.g. Respect Cameroon, ALVF, etc.).

V. Resource Effectiveness

41 “non-discrimination, the right to practice their religion freely, the right to property, freedom of association, the right to sue, the right to work, the right to education, the right to housing, the right to social and public assistance, freedom of movement, the right to obtain identity papers and travel documents, the right to transfer assets, the right to naturalization.”
42 UNHCR. Submission by UNHCR for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Compilation Report - Universal Periodic Review: CAMEROON
43 Ibid.
The second research question that I explored evaluated the effectiveness of the resources available to refugees in Yaoundé. I initially hypothesized that these resources are not effective, primarily because of the unexpected and extreme increase in the number of C.A.R. refugees entering Cameroon. To this end, my research indicated that my hypothesis was partially correct. I discovered that while the support available for refugees demonstrates low levels of effectiveness, the recent inflow of C.A.R. refugees has not had the level of impact that I had anticipated. In reality, while the influx of C.A.R. refugees is undeniably a factor in the low resource effectiveness, there were many serious problems with the system before the most recent conflict in the region.

**Unaddressed Problems**

Although UNHCR and various NGO’s in Yaoundé do their best to provide support for the refugee population, many refugees face extremely difficult challenges that are either unaddressed or addressed ineffectually by these organizations. Throughout my research, I discovered several running themes that refugees identified as serious problems that they deal with in their daily lives, including difficulties understanding their rights as refugees as well as accessing these rights (e.g. education, housing, and non-discrimination). Unfortunately, although Cameroon has vowed to uphold the rights of refugees and UNHCR outlines its primary purpose as working to “safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees,” many refugees that I spoke to throughout my research expressed doubt over what exactly these rights were. Of the eighteen formal interviews that I conducted, 50% of the participants answered “Non” when asked, “Avez-vous confiance dans la connaissance de

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When asked to elaborate, participants further gave reasons such as “manque de sensibilisations⁴⁷”, “parce que les efforts fournis par les organisations (HCR) ne nous satisfont pas⁴⁸”, and “parce que depuis notre arrivé nous n’avons rien obtenu de concret⁴⁹” This lack of awareness of their own rights presents a serious problem for refugees in Yaoundé. Without knowledge, understanding, and confidence in their legal rights, recognizing abuses and advocating for change is nearly impossible for refugees.

Beyond this very basic problem, the refugees that I interacted with throughout my research spoke of numerous difficulties that they face on a daily basis, the most common relating to access to education, access to housing, access to work and discrimination. When asked “Quelles sont vos principales difficultés en tant que refugie à Yaoundé⁵⁰”, five refugees identified education as a serious problem. Rosalie Djiguimbaye, a refugee from Chad, explained that she has trouble because there are “pas des fournitures scolaires pour les enfants⁵¹” UNHCR also identifies access to education as a serious difficulty facing refugees, explaining, “despite the fact that by law public education is free of charge, refugees regularly report that they are required to pay bribes, which they often cannot afford in

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⁴⁵ Do you have confidence in your knowledge of your rights as a refugee?
⁴⁶ 9 participants answered “Non” (50%), 8 participants answered “Oui” (44%), and 1 chose to not respond (6%).
⁴⁷ “lack of sensitization”; "Structured Interview with Nicolas Madjitohoum." Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2014.
⁴⁸ “Because the efforts made by organizations (UNHCR) do not satisfy us”; "Structured Interview with Ali Bon-Dieu." Personal interview. 28 Apr. 2014.
⁴⁹ “Because since we arrived we have not gotten anything concrete”; "Structured Interview with Juvenal Rohanale Rokaou." Personal interview. 27 Apr. 2014.
⁵⁰ “What are your principle difficulties as a refugee in Yaoundé?”
⁵¹ “no school supplies for the children”; "Structured Interview with Rosalie Bjiguimbaye." Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2014.
order for their children to be enrolled in public schools. While NGO’s such as Respect Cameroon attempt to address some of these issues, they are unable to effectively reach more than a small percentage of Yaoundé refugees and the majority of refugee families are left to attempt to address these problems without any resources.

Refugees interviewed for this project also spoke of a lack of access to work, housing, basic nutrition, and healthcare as significant problems that they face. Seven of the eighteen refugees that I conducted structured interviews with (39%) spontaneously named access to work as a principle challenge. While one of UNHCR’s main goals for urban refugees is to “promote...income-generating activities”, in 2013 the organization admitted that consequences of a lack of funding would include “urban refugees...continuing to live under extremely precarious situations, without access to microcredits, livelihood and income generating activities.” Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwmbm shed more light on this situation, explaining “We Africans, or we blacks, especially if they know that you are foreigners, for them to give you a job easily...they prefer to give to their fellow brothers, than to give to you. So we find it so difficult.” Eight refugees (44%) also named housing as a primary challenge, along with seven (39%) who named basic nutrition, and six (33%) who named access to healthcare.

In addition to these difficulties, refugees also spoke about experiencing discrimination and even violence because of their “outsider” status. Ali Bon-Dieu spoke

\[\text{UNHCR. Submission by UNHCR for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Compilation Report-Universal Periodic Review: CAMEROON.}\]
\[\text{“Interview with Damien Eloundou.” Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2014.}\]
\[\text{UNHCR. Submission by UNHCR for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Compilation Report-Universal Periodic Review: CAMEROON.}\]
\[\text{UNHCR. UNHCR Global Appeal 2013 Update: Cameroon.}\]
\[\text{“Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwmbm.” Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.}\]
about problems that he experiences in his neighborhood. He explained, "la voisinage qui est injurieux par rapport aux tout de réfugié." When speaking of his neighborhood, another refugee, Ibrahim Bon-Dieu Gopele, indicated that he faces instances of “xénophobie.” Two refugees from Chad, Nicolas Madjitohoum and Urdain Lokissioingao, also indicated “arrestations arbitraires” and “arrestation abusive” as principle challenges, highlighting a serious issue facing urban refugees. UNHCR itself recognized the detention of refugees as a key protection issue in Cameroon, explaining that refugees are “particularly vulnerable to violations of their human rights when dealing with law enforcement authorities.” Additionally, refugees “are often detained for periods longer than those prescribed in the relevant legislation...[and] Cameroonian detention centers...often fail to provide for detainee’s basic needs.” Unfortunately, while UNHCR recognizes these problems, the organization is currently unable to provide any tangible support to refugees experiencing wrongful arrest, and instead only recommends that the Cameroonian Government detain refugees “as a last resort” and “contemplate improving detention conditions.”

Ultimately, urban refugees in Cameroon face many challenges in their daily lives that are not addressed effectually by the resources available to them through UNHCR, NGO’s, and the Cameroonian Government. These unaddressed problems represent significant lapses in support, and are extremely worrisome in part because of how basic

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57 “The neighborhood is insulting to the refugee.”; "Structured Interview with Ali Bon-Dieu." Personal interview. 28 Apr. 2014.
58 “Xenophobia”; "Structured Interview with Ibrahim Bon-Dieu Gopele." Personal interview. 28 Apr. 2014.
59 “Arbitrary arrest”; "Structured Interview with Nicolas Madjitohoum." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014
61 UNHCR. Submission by UNHCR for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report-Universal Periodic Review: CAMEROON.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
many of them are. Access to education, housing, basic nutrition, and basic healthcare are essential to human life, and it is most telling that refugees are still struggling to obtain these primary rights. Unfortunately, many refugees lack confidence in their own knowledge of their rights as refugees, which prevents them from advocating for change. These problems represent serious unaddressed difficulties in lives of refugees, and contribute heavily to my conclusion that the resources available to refugees demonstrate low levels of effectiveness.

**Government Apathy**

Another serious problem that affects the resources available to urban refugees in Yaoundé is the apathy of the Cameroonian government towards the plight of refugees. As discussed extensively above, the Cameroonian government has been woefully lax in terms of applying its domestic laws concerning refugees. The government has not made the refugee situation a priority, and, as a result, they offer virtually no support for refugees. Damien Eloundou was able to shed some light on the Cameroonian attitude towards refugees that gives insight into the government’s indifferent approach. Damien explained, “there are two ideas. Cameroonian are kindly…there is a lot of peace in Cameroon so all the people coming from the other countries are very good integrated. But there is also an idea opposite of this one, that sometimes they say ‘we have our population who are not very well, who…are not very comfortable, and you want to present us the problems of the refugees?’”

Damien also explained that this “Cameroonian first” attitude is compounded by a lack of knowledge in the government of the applicable Cameroonian laws relating to refugees. Damien remarked, "Many administrators in charge of vulnerable people…don’t know the

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64 Interview with Damien Eloundou." Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2014.
rights of refugees in Cameroon! They don’t know the law. In the Ministry of Social Affairs, I know persons there who don’t know the law that refugees have rights and it is in a law taken by the President of the Republic.65"

Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm was able to share with me her thoughts on this phenomenon from the perspective of a refugee. When discussing Cameroon’s Refugee Law and the possibility that the Cameroonian government may become the primary caregiver of resources for refugees over UNHCR in the future, Mercy expressed extreme apprehension at the thought of dealing exclusively with the Cameroonian government. She explained that that prospective scenario “will not be better. We are praying, we are praying but then things will be so difficult...more difficult than what we are passing through now.66” When I asked her to elaborate, she went on to say, “You know we blacks, we have hatreds among us. And when they saw that you foreigners are coming before them, they think maybe you are coming before them to come and ask for a favor. And they will forget that you are coming for your rights!67” Mercy explained that, in her experience, refugees already experience this attitude at some level when interacting with Cameroonian-led NGO’s. Using the example of ALVF, she said, “sometimes when we go to ALVF, we will go and explain our difficulties but they will say, ‘No, how do you people think you are suffering? There are more Cameroonian that are suffering more than you people!’ But how can those people say something like that? We are refugees. We don’t have parents here, we don’t have families here, and the Cameroonian, even if they are suffering, they have their families68.”

65 Ibid.
66 “Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm.” Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
The difficulty of this “Cameroonian first” attitude of the government and even NGO’s is a serious factor in the application of refugee rights in Cameroon. The Cameroonian government is happy to leave all refugee issues in the hands of UNHCR, despite legislation that requires them to provide support of their own. The apathy of the government and their compete lack of support programs, combined with the many unaddressed problems still facing refugees in Yaoundé today (e.g. basic healthcare, basic nutrition, education) despite the efforts of both UNHCR and local NGO’s, supports my conclusion that refugees in the city receive a very low and ineffectual level of support.

VI. Possible Improvements for the Future

The third and final research question that I explored asked what could be changed to improve the experience of refugees in Yaoundé. I initially hypothesized that changes that could positively impact the situation included increased funding, increased cooperation between different groups, and dialogue with the affected population. To this end, my research indicated that my hypothesis was partially correct. While increased funding is important, I feel that the most effectual changes would include both increased cooperation between different groups as well as programs aimed at raising refugee’s awareness of their legal rights.

Increased Cooperation Between Groups

In any situation where a variety of organizations exist to provide resources to the same population, cooperation is essential. In the specific context of urban refugees in Yaoundé, it is important for all parties (e.g. UNHCR, local NGO’s) to focus on increasing their communication and cooperation in order to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. The U.N. recognizes this need, and has created the United Nations Non-Governmental
Liaison Office (NGLS) to promote constructive relationships between the U.N. and NGO’s. With regards to UNHCR, NGLS encourages “NGO’s that provide support and services to refugees...to coordinate with UNHCR in order to avoid duplication and to ensure efficient allocation of resources.” While UNHCR does cooperate with NGO’s to a certain extent in Cameroon, I believe that this process could be improved. Damien Eloundou, the director of the NGO Respect Cameroon, described the relationship that his organization has with UNHCR. He explained, “We don’t have a convention with them, but they are aware when we have activities.” He also explained that he has met with the UNHCR Head of Office in Yaoundé, but spoke of a one-hour exchange last year as the last time any meeting occurred. During this meeting, Damien explained a program that Respect Cameroon was looking to implement, and “[The Head of Office] was very, very impressed...and she told me that she will follow it. But three or four months after that, problems in C.A.R. began and they were obliged to concentrate a lot of money towards that cause.” He has not had contact with the Head of Office since that time.

Damien also explained that it is very difficult to access UNHCR, saying that, “with the situation in C.A.R. it is not easy to get access to them because they are not many and they are just a few members, few personnel, and few personal support.” It is unfortunate that the director of one of the most active Refugee-focused NGO’s in Yaoundé views contacting UNHCR as a daunting task. Mercy’s description of the operating procedures of ALVF also reveals this lack of communication between UNHCR and NGO’s. Mercy explained that when

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70 Interview with Damien Eloundou.” Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2014.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
refugees go to ALVF to attempt to get in contact with UNHCR sometimes the NGO will prevent refugees from seeking aid with the UN Organization. Mercy explained, “[ALVF] will tell you there immediately that there is no money, or that we cannot do nothing for you. They will just tell you instantly! They tell you to go back.” Narratives like Damien and Mercy's underscore the need for increased cooperation and coordination between UNHCR and other NGO's working in Yaoundé.

**Increased Awareness of Refugee Rights**

A second important step forward for refugees in Cameroon would be to implement programs that would increase awareness of refugee rights for both refugee's themselves as well as government officials. Implementing this step is harder than it may seem, as UNHCR reports that approximately 80% of urban refugees are illiterate and admits that they experience “difficulties in communicating with urban refugees...[who] often speak a great diversity of languages.” While these difficulties are impossible to deny, it is imperative that UNHCR and NGO's prioritize this need. Without knowledge of their own rights and responsibilities, refugees cannot hope to effectively utilize the resources available to them, let alone speak out against abuses or advocate for change. In a vulnerable population, this is completely unacceptable.

Damien Eloundou has seen many refugees struggle to understand and access their legal rights throughout his tenure as the director of Respect Cameroon. Damien explained that the problem is so endemic that Respect Cameroon, an NGO focused on educational

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73 “Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
advocacy, is contemplating beginning a program on “Accompagnement Judiciaire” in order to attempt to address this most pressing need. Respect Cameroon is looking to implement this program because, “we got a lot of needs, a lot of complaints, a lot of recommendations for the refugee population about procedures...the process of when they have a problem with policemen.” He went on to explain how this lack of confidence in their legal rights is an area of need not addressed adequately by UNHCR. According to Damien, “in UNHCR there is a lawyer, but one lawyer for all the refugees...in Cameroon! He is alone, he is alone. And a lawyer is...he is a lawyer! A judicial administrative person. So he is not accompanying people, he cannot make the work of social workers.” The lack of knowledge and confidence in their own legal rights that is currently endemic in the Yaoundé refugee population represents a serious problem that must be addressed in order to improve the experience of refugees living in the city.

VII. Conclusion

The relationship between refugees and host states is extremely complex. Often victims of human rights abuses, refugees are forced to rely fully on the hospitality and protection of their hosts. This population is extremely vulnerable, and it is important to continually examine and evaluate their experiences in host countries. In this paper, I examined the issues facing urban refugees in Yaoundé, Cameroon, as they attempt to adjust to a difficult situation. Ultimately, I approached this topic by examining three research questions. I asked “What resources are available for refugees in Cameroon? Are these
resources effective or not? And what could be changed to improve the experience for the refugee?” To address these questions, I decided upon a methodology approach that included external research, an internship with a Cameroonian NGO focused on refugee issues (Respect Cameroon), structured interviews, and in-depth follow-up interviews.

Through my research, I discovered that refugees have access to a limited amount of resources primarily provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and local NGO’s. The Cameroonian government plays basically no role in providing services to refugees and instead UNHCR provides the bulk of the formal support, while NGO’s do their best to fill any resulting gaps in aid and provide a more personal, grassroots level of support to refugees. My research also showed that these resources demonstrate low levels of effectiveness. Refugees face serious fundamental problems in their daily lives, including difficulties understanding their rights as refugees as well as accessing these rights (e.g. education, housing, and non-discrimination) that are unaddressed or addressed ineffectually by the current available resources (e.g. UNHCR, NGO’s). Ultimately, my research led me to conclude that the most effectual changes to address these lapses would include both increased cooperation between different groups as well as programs aimed at raising refugee’s awareness of their legal rights.

While I feel that this study provides insight into a variety of issues plaguing urban refugees in Cameroon, it is important to recognize the limitations of my study. I interviewed eighteen refugees living in Yaoundé, an adequate, if slightly small, sample group. Because of the small size of my sample, bias is possible. Additionally, because of the vulnerable nature of the population, first contact was always made with refugees through the NGO Respect Cameroon. This naturally limited the refugees that I was able to access to
those who were settled enough in Yaoundé to both seek out the services of an NGO and to focus on education (the focus of the NGO) as a priority. Many of the refugees I spoke to had lived in Cameroon for a number of years, and therefore had more exposure to programs, opportunities, and resources available to refugees than their newly arrived counterparts. In short, my sample population was a group of refugees who were most likely to be well settled and have experience utilizing resources for refugees in Yaoundé. In the future, I recommend that other researchers seek out refugees through a variety of channels, instead of through just one NGO as I did. This will not only give further insight, but will also lessen the possibility for bias and enhance the statistical significance of the study. I would also recommend that further investigation include a deeper look into the Cameroonian government’s view of refugees and their strategies for implementing the 2006 Refugee Law.

Ultimately, this study examined an extremely serious issue currently facing Cameroon. With the current conflict in C.A.R. and the rise of militant Islam in Nigeria, Cameroon is set to receive an unprecedented amount of refugees in the next few years. The systems in place to aid refugees that may have once been considered of low priority in Cameroon will come under increasingly strict scrutiny by the International community as all eyes turn to the regional conflicts sweeping Central Africa. It is imperative that UNHCR, NGO’s and the Cameroonian government work together to improve the effectiveness of the resources currently available to refugees. As Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbn explained, “We are waiting for that great day. [Refugees] don’t know how things are going to take place and
we pray! And we want to ask them to give us more assistance because we are suffering. The refugees in Cameroon, we are suffering much. We are suffering.\textsuperscript{79}"

\textsuperscript{79} "Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbm." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
**Structured Interview Questions**

- Quel âge avez-vous?
- Quel est votre pays d’origine ?
- Et depuis combien de temps êtes-vous au Cameroun ?
- Depuis combien de temps êtes-vous à Yaoundé ?
- Et pourquoi avez-vous choisi de vivre à Yaoundé ?
- Quelles sont vos principales difficultés en tant que réfugié à Yaoundé ?
- Quels ont été vos principaux succès depuis votre arrivée au Cameroun ?
- Pensez-vous que le Cameroun apporte un bon soutien aux réfugiés ? Oui ou non ou un autre ?
- Avez-vous confiance dans la connaissance de vos droits en tant que réfugié ? Oui ou Non ?
- Connaissez-vous toutes les ressources disponibles pour les réfugiés au Cameroun ? Oui ou non ?
- Aimeriez-vous retourner dans votre pays d’origine ou prévoyez-vous de rester au Cameroun ou un autre choix ?

**Follow-Up Interview Questions (Respect Cameroon)**

- So, about *Respect Cameroon*, I know that your main goal is to facilitate education, but do you have specific goals that you’re working towards?
- What are their legal rights?
- Is there one lawyer for all the refugees?
- So besides things like health, education, and things like access to judiciary procedures, what do you think, or what, in your experience, are the other main problems that refugees have in Cameroon?
- So, do you think, in your opinion, when refugees come here, they get support from the government or they just kind of on their own?
- So, if UNHCR is the body that does the most work with refugees in Cameroon, does *Respect Cameroon* have a relationship with UNHCR? Do you work together at all?
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"Structured Interview with Nicolas Madjithohoum." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.

"Structured Interview with Rosalie Bjiguimbaye." Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2014.

"Structured Interview with Urdain Lokissoingao." Telephone interview. 24 Apr. 2014.


Interviews

"Follow-up Interview with Mercy Osagha Mudiakamwbn." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.

"Follow-Up Interview with Mkkelele Mboy." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.

"Follow-Up Interview with Anonymous I." Personal interview. 24 Apr. 2014.

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"Structured Interview with Rosalie Djiguimbaye." Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2014.

"Structured Interview with Urdain Lokissioingao." Telephone interview. 24 Apr. 2014.
Map of Cameroon’s Refugee Locations
Photos

Refugee children participating in a program at the Respect Cameroon office.

Respect Cameroon staff interacting with refugee children.
Study participants