

Conflict-induced Refugee Crisis and its Consequences on Access to Primary Education: An Analysis of the case of Central African Republic (CAR) Refugee Children Living in the East Region of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Cameroon currently hosts around half a million refugees from conflict affected neighbouring countries such as Nigeria and the Central African Republic (CAR). This article focuses on the rights to basic education in terms of access and enrolment for CAR refugee school-aged children who reside in the East Region of Cameroon. Based on a qualitative research approach and a combination of secondary and primary data, powered by a theoretical framework of analysis that is informed by the Rational Choice Theory of human behaviour; International Relations Theory of forced migration and refugees and the Global Public Policy Theory of international problems, the study arrives at important findings and conclusions. The study finds out that the educational challenges of CAR refugee children are multifaceted and complex. Many have traumatic experiences and disrupted education. Moreover, they are tasked with adapting to a new educational system and culture. These factors among others have all interacted and intermingled to negatively affect CAR refugee children's access to primary education in terms of enrolment and girls are excessively more disadvantaged. With this outcome, the paper concludes that the issue of poor access to education of refugee children is not merely due to dysfunctional organs of governments or the combination of challenges unfolded in this article but it is also a result of the 'exclusionary impulses' vis-à-vis the phenomenon of 'refugee as the stranger other' in many parts of the world, and such a state of affairs no doubt works against inclusionary policies advanced in many international conventions and instruments that give more attention to the protection of these vulnerable groups; thereby consolidating the fact that there are ambiguities and critical limits to the international solidarity policy of Refugee Protection. Hence, as a way of contributing to evidence-informed policy alternatives, the paper argues that any action towards a sustainable solution must be rights-based, person and human security-centred and tailored towards addressing the dual challenge faced by the refugee child: the helplessness of being a child and the complex challenges of being a refugee.

INTRODUCTION

"This is a day where we would like to have people understand that behind these figures, you have women, you have children. Each of them with his or her own story of violence, of persecution. People lost everything. Children lost their school, they lost their friends, parents lost their jobs and they need to restart a new life in a very difficult context. On World Refugee Day, we show empathy, solidarity to these people." Olivier Guillaume Beer- UNHCR representative in Cameroon (20 June 2021).¹

The statement above made by Olivier Guillaume Beer, UNHCR representative in Cameroon on the occasion of the commemoration of the World Refugee Day on 20 June 2021, gives an indication of some of the challenges faced by conflict-induced refugees in their host countries such as Cameroon which currently hosts half a million refugees from conflict affected neighbouring countries such as Nigeria and the Central African Republic. The statement also indicates that the need for preventing violent conflicts and ensuring that persons forcibly displaced from one country to another as conflict-induced refugees

¹ Kindzeka, Moki K. (2021). *UN Agency Says Cameroon Home to Half a Million Refugees*. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/africa/un-agency-says-cameroon-home-half-million-refugees>. Accessed July 2021.

have access to solutions and fulfill their hopes and rights, such as their right to basic education and social integration in host countries, have never been more pressing than now.

The end of the cold war did not mean the end of conflict and population displacement. The 1990s saw numerous conflicts with an ethnic dimension, which led to suffering and displacement for millions of people, including children and young people, often under horrific circumstances. Their lives were disrupted and their education abruptly terminated. This has coincided with the enhanced awareness of children's needs and rights, following nearly universal ratification of the 1989 convention on the rights of the child.

Despite this growing international recognition of the protection of rights of refugees, the world continues to experience an exponential increase in population displacement in terms of both IDPs and refugees, including children. In fact, the 21st century is characterized by new types of wars and increasing violent intrastate conflicts causing the affected population either to perish in the conflict or forced to move to other countries in search for refuge. Moreover, while the number of conflict-induced refugees worldwide has been increasing in recent years, children who represent more than half of the refugee population are the most negatively impacted. For example, on 31 October 2015, *The New York Times* reported that there is an ever-increasing number of displaced people and refugees now than at any other time in human history.² They are unofficial ambassadors of failed states, unending wars, and intractable conflicts. The most striking thing about the current migration crisis, however, is how much bigger it could still get.³ In effect, the internationalization of what often begins as purely internal conflicts, the nexus of criminal violence and the activities of a multitude of armed groups together with the growing impact of climate change, have served to further exacerbate human insecurity in the world.⁴ More problematic is the fact that belligerents increasingly target civilians, and global displacement from violent conflicts and terrorism has also sharply increased over the last years.⁵ (ibid). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2020, there were “82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2020 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order.”⁶ The same report holds that in 2020 alone, “several crises – some new, some longstanding and some resurfacing after years – forced 11.2 million people to flee, compared to 11 million in 2019.” This figure includes both IDPs and refugees.⁷ With this increasing migration and refugee crisis, children certainly lose their basic right to education, peace and development.

Accessing education for refugee children remains a great challenge especially in terms of enrolment even in the midst of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal, specifically SGD 4 and its 10 targets which aims at “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” In 2019 alone, out of the 26 million refugees in the world more than half were children under the age of 18.⁸ Out of the 7.1 million refugee children in the world, over 3.7 do not go to school⁹. From the same

² Nordland, Rod (2015). *A Mass Migration Crisis, and It May Yet Get Worse*. *The New York Times* October 31, 2015. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/world/europe/a-mass-migration-crisis-and-it-may-yet-get-worse.html>. Accessed July 2021.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ SIPRI Year Book (2018). *Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Available at <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2018>. Accessed February 2021.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ UNHCR (2020). *Global Trends on forced Displacement in 2020*. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020>. Accessed July 2021.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Aliyev, Agil (2021). The Challenges Faced by the Refugee Children on the Immigration to Europe, *Open Journal of Political Science*, (11): 251–265. Available at <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2021.112017>. Accessed July 2021.

source, only 63% of refugee children compared to 91% of non-refugee children globally have access to primary education. To add, 6 out of 10 refugee children have access to primary education as opposed to 9 out of 10 non-refugees.¹⁰ The report shows that as refugee children get older, the barriers preventing them from accessing education become harder, thereby affecting enrolment rate.

Africa is disproportionately affected by conflict-induced or forced migration, with four of the top ten refugee accepting countries in the world being in Africa; and over 25 percent of the world's refugees residing in Africa.¹¹ For example, as of 31 May 2021, Cameroon hosted a total of 443, 919 refugees with the highest number coming from the Central African Republic (323, 324)¹², followed by Nigeria (118, 002) and other countries such as Chad, DR Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Burundi, Cote D'Ivoire and the Republic of Congo.¹³ These Refugees are mainly located in the East and Adamaoua regions (UNHCR, 2020) and many have been living in these regions for several years, including 45,000 people who have been in Cameroon for more than 10 years.¹⁴ Moreover, over 70% of CAR refugees are staying with host communities in the East Region of Cameroon (ibid).

Since 2000, primary education has been made free for all in Cameroon and the country's Refugee Law provides that refugees should have access to social services and public assistance in terms of equality with Cameroonian nationals. In the Eastern and Adamawa regions, UNCHR in collaboration with the Government constructed 22 classrooms and held campaigns to encourage enrolment. At the end of this, the enrolment rate increased from 24 to 35%.¹⁵ To add, according to the report given by UNCHR in the Lolo and Mbile camps, the effective enrolment of CAR refugee children is still a problem as out of 6,982 refugee children in these camps, only about 2891 enrolled are effectively in school.¹⁶ The low enrolment rates of refugee children particularly the CAR refugee children in the Eastern Region can result to several social misfits. For instance, juvenile delinquency for the boys, sexual exploitation and child marriages for the girls, drug abuse, child labour and dependency. All these factors place the refugee children in a disadvantageous posture as education, be it formal or not, gives hope of a better future.

It is against this backdrop that this article sets out to investigate the challenges and extent of access to primary education in terms of enrolment of CAR refugee children living in the East Region of Cameroon, with a focus on the Lolo and Mbile Camps that host the highest number of these refugees. As such, the article sets out to answer the key question: *How does the status of being a 'conflict-induced refugee*

⁹ UNHCR (2019). *Global Trends on forced Displacement in 2019*. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>. Accessed June 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ ACCORD, AU, IOM & OSAA (2015). *Conflict-induced Migration in Africa: Maximizing New Opportunities to Address its Peace, Security and Inclusion Development Dimensions*. High-Level Expert Group Meeting, 23-24 November 2015, Durban, South Africa. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Durban-EGM-report.pdf>. Accessed July 2021.

¹² This high influx of CAR refugees into Cameroon was further heightened since the December 2020 electoral crisis in CAR which caused Cameroon to receive an additional 6, 616 CAR refugees out of the 112 000 people into border locations who fled to escape armed conflict (UNHCR, March 2021).

¹³ UNHCR Cameroon (Fact Sheet, May 2021). *Cameroon refugee & asylum seeker figures*. Available at <file:///C:/Users/HP/AppData/Local/Temp/UNHCR%20MCO%20CAMEROON%20FACT%20SHEET%20MAY%202021.pdf>. Accessed July 2021.

¹⁴ ACAPS (2020). *Overview*. Available at <https://www.acaps.org/country/cameroon/crisis/car-refugees>. Accessed July 2021.

¹⁵ UNHCR (2009). *Education Strategy 2010-2012: education for all of concern to UNHCR*. Available at [https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d11de9d2.pdf%20\(7](https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d11de9d2.pdf%20(7). Accessed July 2021.

¹⁶ Ibid.

child' currently affect CAR Refugee children's right to primary education in terms of enrolment in the East Region of Cameroon? The aim is to advance the theoretical as well as policy and practice debate around the structural and practical challenges faced by refugee children in host countries. For the purpose of logical understanding, this article, after laying down the theoretical and methodological framework, it discusses the right to peace and access to (primary) education for refugee children before bringing to light the challenges faced by CAR refugee children in accessing primary education, after which a conclusion is reached.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

This research is theoretically and empirically grounded around a critical review of relevant literature and desk-based inquiry, adopting an essentially qualitative approach and a case study research design. Within the review of relevant literature and policy implications of the key findings, the analysis is informed by three interrelated theories: the *Rational Choice Theory of human behaviour*; *International Relations Theory of forced migration and refugees* and the *Global Public Policy Theory of international problems*. As concerns the *Rational Choice theory*, the argument is simply that while individuals are attached to their homes and countries of origin, they are also strategic in their interaction with their physical and social environments and their conflict situation. Hence, in the face of violent conflict (or civil war) in a country such as the Central African Republic (CAR), the decision to flee or not to flee is a function of one's expectation of being victimized in midst of the civil war and socio-economic opportunities at the place of origin (CAR) as well as the destination (Cameroon). As such, the analysis in this article also places refugees within the mainstream of International Relations Theory of forced migration and refugees with the argument that, the causes and consequences of, and responses to, the CAR refugee crisis in the East Region of Cameroon are intertwined with many of the core concerns of International Relations. As such, the analysis is also powered by the *Global Public Policy Theory* that aims at responding to global problems such as transboundary insecurity and refugee crisis. Global public policies seen as a subset of international policies¹⁷ are mostly found in "treaties or resolutions adopted at either the UN, specialised agencies or ad hoc conferences focused on a particular widespread concern."¹⁸ Along this line of thinking, some authors have argued that international policies and foreign policies are interrelated:

International policies are joint responses to common problems that two or more national governments work out with one another, often with the active participation of IGOs [intergovernmental organisations] and INGOs [international nongovernmental organisations]¹⁹

Thus, in this article, the analysis of international refugee crisis (such as the CAR refugee crisis in the East Region of Cameroon) is situated in a broad historical, international and human perspectives, analysing the causes and implications of conflict-induced refugee crisis on the needs and aspirations of CAR refugees, with a focus on access to primary education for children.

Methodologically, the analysis makes use of both secondary data (from books, articles, online media and reports and policy documents of government and international organizations) and primary data from semi-structured interviews from key stakeholders. Primary data collection lasted for one month from 24th

¹⁷ Soroos, Marvin (1986). *Beyond Sovereignty: The Challenge of Global Sovereignty*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

June to 24th July 2019, in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* CAR refugee camps in the East Region, complemented by more recent data. The target population consisted of CAR refugee parents and children of primary school going-age. Also, government officials (ministry of basic education), government primary school staffs and international organizations make up another unit of the target population for this research. Thus, the research participants were purposefully selected due to their relevance, involvement, position or authority on the issue of refugee's access to education. In terms of sample size, a total of 85 people participated in the interview process. Out of the 85 interviewees, there were 25 CAR refugee parents and 50 children, 6 primary school teachers (including head teachers), 2 government officials, 1 UNICEF official and 1 UNHCR personnel. Content and thematic analysis is adopted as data analysis technique.

THE RIGHT TO PEACE AND ACCESS TO (PRIMARY) EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN.

The 1951 UN Convention, as modified by the 1967 Protocol, defines a refugee 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.” Over the last couple of decades there has been a growing body of literature, mainly in the fields of peace and conflict studies and international relations which explores the concept of peace and the right to peace during crises. Regarding the right to peace for individuals and nations, the declaration on the preparation of society to live in peace adopted by the United Nations on 15 December 1978 (resolution 33/73) declares that: *every nation and every being regardless of race, conscience, language or sex has the inherent right to live in peace. Respect for that right as well for the other human rights is in the common interest of all mankind and indispensable condition of advancement of all nations, large and small in all fields*²⁰.

Additionally, the United Nations declared after the 3rd World Conference on Women, Nairobi 1985 that “peace includes not only the absence of war, violence and hostility at the national and international levels but also enjoyment of economic and social justice, equity and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within the society.”²¹ This implies that refugee children, like all other children have the right to live in ‘positive peace.’ This involves not only the absence of war/physical violence or the presence of physical security but also the absence of all forms of violence and the presence of social justice and human security- which entails, ‘freedom from fear’, ‘freedom from want’ and ‘freedom to live a life of dignity,’ which access to quality education is at the heart.

Education has a crucial role in fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies, free from fear and violence.²² Education enables people to engage in an efficient, inclusive and peaceful way into political processes and civic structures. It also leads to a greater participation of women in politics and helps people to access justice and legal protection. By increasing self-reliance and personal capacities, education can increase tolerance and can contribute to active citizenship. Education has been recognized as an important “tool to help prevent terrorism and violent extremism, as well as racial and religious intolerance, genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity worldwide.”²³

²⁰ United Nations (1978). A/RES/33/73 - *Declaration on the Preparation of Societies for Life in Peace*, 15 December 1978. Available at <http://www.un-documents.net/a33r73.htm>. Accessed May 2021.

²¹ United Nations (1985). *Third World Conference on Women*, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985. Available at <https://www.unsystem.org/content/third-world-conference-women-1985-0>. January 2021.

²² UNESCO (2017). *Protecting the right to education for refugees*. Working papers on education policy. Second edition. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France.

²³ *Ibid.*

Refugee protection has constituted one of the main concerns of the international community for many years today. Refugee children are in a more unsafe situation and they face the vulnerability of being a refugee and that of being a child²⁴. They are denied certain fundamental rights of life, including education, which give them the opportunity to rise above the crisis in which they have found themselves and be useful to themselves and to their community.²⁵ International instruments on free and compulsory education (2014) explaining the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) underscores the importance of primary education. Article 14 of this convention explains state obligations for a detailed plan of action for the progressive implementation of the right to compulsory education free for all. Also, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 28 and the 1960 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention against discrimination in education also sets out the right to free compulsory primary education in its Article 4(a). These provisions for free and compulsory primary education are the substance of the political pledges made under the Dakar Framework for Action regarding the national Education for All (EFA) action plan (World Education Forum, 2000). Cameroon is party to all these instruments (ICESCR, 1984; CEDAW,²⁶ 1994 CRC, 1993; African Charter, 1989; African Children’s Charter, 1997), providing for the right to education which is enshrined in paragraph 23 of its Constitution’s Preamble in these words: *The state shall guarantee the child’s right to education. Primary education shall be compulsory. The organization and supervision of the education shall be the bounden duty of the state*²⁷

Furthermore, as stated earlier, SDG 4 of the 2030 Sustainable development agenda aims at “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” This draws attention to the fact that inclusive education is a major pillar of sustainable development and peace. Hence, SDG4, target 1 forms the bedrock of this research as it recommends states to “ensure that all children, both girls and boys, enroll in and complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.” However, the ability of refugee children in Cameroon (as in many parts of the developing world) to enjoy this right is being violated despite the protection afforded to them under international and local statutory provisions. Factors such as fees, language, lack of documentation, xenophobia, etc. often place barriers that deny the accessibility of education to refugees.²⁸

CHALLENGES FACED BY CAR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN ACCESSING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN TERMS OF ENROLMENT IN THE EAST REGION OF CAMEROON

This section opens with some background information regarding the challenges of accessing primary education and the intervention of UNICEF from the time CAR refugees started arriving in the East region of Cameroon following the complex socio-political security crisis in their country of origin.

²⁴ Mweni, Sabelo, K. (2018). *The Right to Education of Asylum Seekers and Refugee Children*, (Master’s Thesis University of Cape Town). Available at https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/27907/thesis_law_2018_mweni_sabelo_kenneth.pdf?sequence=1. Accessed July 2021.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For details, see Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

²⁷ Preamble of the Constitution of Law No.96/06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the Constitution of 2 June, 1972.

²⁸ Mweni, Sabelo, K. (2018). *The Right to Education of Asylum Seekers and Refugee Children*, (Master’s Thesis University of Cape Town). Available at https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/27907/thesis_law_2018_mweni_sabelo_kenneth.pdf?sequence=1. Accessed July 2021.

Some Initial Challenges faced by CAR refugee children in accessing Primary education upon arrival in Cameroon in 2013-2014.

Upon the arrival of CAR refugees in Cameroon in 2013-2014, the majority of them were women and children. UNICEF being the main international organization in charge of basic education in the East Region had to engage in a dialogue with the Cameroon Government on how to educate the CAR refugee children. The government at that time could not allow these children to enroll in public schools due to insufficient space. Both the *Lolo* and *Mbile* primary schools were too small to accommodate these children. Consequently, in the 2014 and 2015 school year, UNICEF built what was known to be *Temporary Learning Spaces* in the refugee camps. With the agreement of the Cameroon Government, these *Temporary Learning Spaces* were to function for a period of two years, that is, 2015-2017 after which there will be a transition from these *Temporary Learning Spaces* to public schools. Aside from the refugee children being in school, one of the main aims of the *Temporary Learning Spaces* was to help the children adapt to the Cameroonian system of education. During this period, UNICEF was in charge of everything regarding the schooling of these children. It provided the refugee children with school kits (bags, books, pens etc.), and paid temporal teachers. The implementing agency- Plan International, carried all this out with the supervision of UNICEF. The process of transition of these refugee children from *Temporary Learning Spaces* to public schools with UNICEF and other partners began in 2017 but took its full course in 2018. With the massive transition of refugee children to public schools, the government created two additional schools in *Lolo* and *Mbile* making a total of four primary school each. The government also sent trained teachers to these schools. The question now is, *how does the status of being a 'conflict-induced refugee child' currently affects CAR Refugee children's right to primary education in terms of enrolment in the East Region of Cameroon?*

CAR Refugee Children enrolled in the Lolo and Mbile Government Primary Schools

During data collection, it was observed that 1359 CAR refugee children were enrolled in the *Lolo* Government Primary School and 1768 were enrolled in the *Mbile* Government Primary School, making a total of 3127 CAR refugee children enrolled in both the *Lolo* and *Mbile* government primary schools (group I & II A, B) in the East Region. Hence, it became clear that, out of the total number of primary school-going-age children in these camps (6,982), only about half of this number (3127) were enrolled while 3855 (45%) were out of school. Moreover, out of the 50 children of primary school going age interviewed in both refugee camps, there were 31 boys and 19 girls. Out of which, 14 boys and 7 girls were enrolled in school, giving a total of only 21 children (42 %) enrolled, out of 50 children interviewed, leaving up to 58 % of the interviewed school going age children as out of school children. Another important fact to realize is that though women (about 52%) are more than men (about 48%) in these Camps, there is still a very low proportion of women (and girls in particular) enrolled in primary school (i.e., 7 out of 19 interviewed (about 37%) as compared to the number of boys enrolled, 14 out of 31 boys (45%)). This certainly reflects some gender disparities and power relations between men and women among the CAR refugees living in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* Camps (details of this issue are discussed in another section below). In addition, head teachers interviewed had a consolidated view that not all of these numbers enrolled end up attending or staying in school.

The above analysis clearly points to the fact that the extent to which CAR Refugee Children (living in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* Camps in the East Region of Cameroon) are enrolled in primary school, is still very low and below. The analysis also reveals that more than half (58%) of the interviewed children of primary school going age were out of school with the majority being girls. Having unraveled the 'very low' extent of enrolment in primary school of CAR Refugees (in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* Camps), it is necessary to

find out the practical challenges these children encounter in accessing primary education in terms of enrolment.

Obstacles faced by CAR Refugee children in accessing primary education in terms of enrolment: perspectives from children and parents.

During the research process, it was established that a number of constraining factors interact to negatively affect the access to primary education of CAR refugee children in terms of enrolment. These factors are discussed below, in line to with the relevant literature.

Financial Constraints and Poverty

With the current economic difficulties, poverty amongst the refugee families is a common factor. This makes it difficult for refugee children to access education. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Children's Charter both require contracting states to provide free basic education. In Cameroon, no legislation exists allowing children to be absent from primary school for cultural, religious, family or other reasons. On the contrary, all national legislation encourages parents to send their children to (primary) schools. Primary education is thus compulsory in Cameroon.

However, the first major challenge identified in relation to CAR refugee children accessing primary education in the East region of Cameroon is the lack of economic opportunities, leading to financial constraints and poverty. Primary education is only free at the level of school fees. Parents are expected to meet other needs such as the purchase of books and uniforms of their children and this is very challenging regarding refugee parents' weak economic and financial situations. During interviews, parents of the refugee children expressed deep concerns about their inability to cater for their families because of financial difficulties. For example, one refugee parent put his plight in this way:

I didn't have to struggle that much with schooling about two years ago because upon arrival in Cameroon, my children were placed in an educational system called temporary learning spaces sponsored by UNICEF. When transferred to public schools, though primary education is free, meeting up with the school requirements became a nightmare. Three of my older children had to drop out from school while the youngest continued²⁹.

In the same way, another parent, said, "though primary education is free and we receive support from partners, I still have difficulties meeting the educational needs of my children."³⁰ This parent acknowledged the fact that the headteacher of his children's school understood his difficulty and gave him the opportunity to pay the Parent-Teachers Association (P.T.A) levy in instalments. Despite this, he still could not afford the fees. He has six children, two biological and four adopted children of his brothers who were killed in the Muslim – Christian violent conflict in their home country. He said his inability to afford the school needs of his children has affected the unity of his family, as he puts it:

The main problem is meeting up with school needs and I am financially handicapped which has made me unable to send them to school. I had to stop the education of my biological children since I didn't want to give any room for discrimination. I have noticed since my two kids stopped school, they have become very hostile to the other children.

²⁹ Interview with a 42-year-old male CAR refugee parent.

³⁰ Interview with a 41-year-old male CAR refugee parent.

They accused me of putting their future in jeopardy in an attempt to be a good Samaritan as they have started seeing their cousins as enemies³¹.

The economic and financial constraints faced by refugee parents and their inability to afford the school needs of their children is further buttressed in words of a female parent in this way:

I have three children of primary school going age who are not in school because I cannot afford for their schools considering I am a widow. I boil eggs and send two of them to sell while the other stay at home taking care of her youngest sibling as I join other women in the farm to get food stuff for the day.... Without education, our children may end up being on the streets, becoming bandits or armed robbers. These children are our future, if they are out of school then what does the future hold for us. We know we may have failed in our time and out of age already. Our eyes, our hope, our strength come from the success of these children³².

With the above findings, it becomes relevant to also find out from the point of view of the children themselves, the day-to-day challenges they encounter in accessing primary education in terms of enrolment. For example, when CAR refugee children were asked the question: *do you have your basic school requirements such as books, bags, uniforms, shoes?* The following outcome was obtained. A very high number of CAR refugee children enrolled in primary school (up 76%) were not able to have their basic school requirements. Considering the present financial difficulty and poverty situation of their parents, such an outcome is not surprising. This also has made some of the refugee children to develop the feeling of disadvantaged and misery compared to their Cameroonian counterparts. This has also had the negative effect of discouraging the majority CAR children from attending school despite their enrolment as they cannot afford what they see other children ‘enjoying.’ As a consequence, their disadvantaged and poverty situation has given birth to misery as most of the refugee children have come to replace schooling with money making activities so as to improve on their living conditions.

A few quotes here from some of the children interviewed suffice to illustrate the observation above. The story of a 13-year-old adolescent refugee girl is quite telling. In her words,

I feel sad seeing other children enjoy what I can’t have. I am a child who has needs like any other child. It worries me to know that my parents can’t meet my basic needs because of our present situation. Rather than schooling, I have decided to sell ‘boiled eggs’ from which I get little money to buy my basic necessities³³

So far, it has become abundantly clear that due to financial difficulties and poverty, most CAR refugee parents are unable to afford school requirements such as books, uniforms, shoes etc. This has led to misery, which in turn has negatively affected the enrolment of CAR refugee children who are now more interested in doing little odd jobs and ‘making money’ rather than going to school.

Psychological Issues

Psychological issues have also had a negative effect on the mindset of CAR refugee children who have lost interest in pursuing education. For example, during interviews, a number of boys who were out of

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview with a 37-year-old female CAR refugee parent.

³³ Interview with a 13-year-old refugee girl.

school questioned the need for education, or blatantly stated that they did not want to go to school. This was not only linked to their new lives as refugees. Some said they had stopped school even before the crisis started in CAR because they did not like going to school, while others wanted to work, others felt they were not learning much. However, other children appeared to be uncomfortable and unable to adapt to the new system of education in the host country Cameroon. They said that although they valued education, they did not plan to go back to school until they return to their country.

Some children suffered psychologically from losing their parents and witnessing the death of other family members in their home country and on their way to the country hosting them-Cameroon. As one teacher interviewed said, *“I have eight refugee girls in my class who still suffer from psychological trauma. Girls who saw dead bodies back in CAR. One girl witnessed her father being shot and killed in front of her”*.

In the same vein, a 14-year-old refugee boy put his own experience as such:

I can't even get three square meals a day, why should I even go to school when the pain of losing my two siblings in the conflict is still fresh like yesterday. I feel so lonely; life has been so different without them. How can I focus on school? Working in my father's garden everyday makes me feel better and has improved on our financial situation as we make profit from the proceeds of the garden³⁴.

Also, it was observed during fieldwork that another child, who left CAR when she was 10 years old, knowing how to read and write, due to the hardship they faced and the psychological issues resulting from her unfortunate experience as a refugee child in Cameroon, she no longer knows how to read and write. She is not interested in learning anymore, not even learning any skills or doing any activities. This psychological issue makes these children to live in constant fear, as they are mostly absent minded leading to inconsistency and dropout.

Challenges Related to Physical Security and Social Integration of CAR Refugee Children

The school environment has to be safe and secured for learning. In this article, social integration is considered a process during which new comers or minorities are incorporated into the social structure of the host community. Physical environment and the protection role of education involves the ability of schools to provide a safe and secure space that promotes the wellbeing of learners, teachers and other education personnel. However, contrary to expectations, schools are not always safe places for children. In some places, schools have been transformed into spaces for bullying; racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender discrimination; sexual exploitation; natural and environmental hazards; corporal punishment and attacks including abduction and recruitment in to armed groups.

During the data collection process, when CAR refugee children were asked the question *as to know whether they felt safe in school?* Among the interviewed CAR refugee children enrolled in primary school, 13 (62%) said they did not feel safe while 8 (38%) reported that they felt safe. This could probably be due to the absence of 'freedom from fear' stemming not only from their personal experiences as conflict-induced refugees but also probably the manner in which they are treated in school by classmates and teachers. Hence, with the question: *Are you stigmatized in school?* The result was not different. Out of the interviewed children in school, 14 (67%) said they were stigmatized while only 7 (33%) of these children said they did not experience any stigmatization. Taking the analysis further with

³⁴ Interview with a 14-year-old refugee boy.

the question: *do you have Cameroonian friends in school?* The result was not different, as up to 62% of CAR refugee children enrolled in primary school said they did not have Cameroonian friends.

The above analysis points to the fact that just like financial difficulties, poverty, and psychological issues, CAR refugee children also face security and social integration challenges (in their schools in terms of socializing and making friends with their Cameroonian peers). For instance, it was observed that seven (7) refugee children dropped out of school shortly after being enrolled due to the mockery they faced in school from their Cameroonian schoolmates. According to their Cameroonian schoolmates, CAR refugee children “*have a funny accent and cannot fluently express themselves in French*”. This has steered a horrible feeling in them and either caused them to be inconsistent in school or dropout of school and stay in the camps, interacting among themselves.

Language Barrier

Language barrier is another major problem that impedes the effective enrolment of CAR refugee children in primary schools. Since French is the language of instruction in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* government primary schools, it was deemed necessary to ask the enrolled CAR refugee children the question: *can you speak, read and write French?* In relation to this question, CAR refugee children were found to have problems in school due to language barrier. During the interview process, it was depicted that more than 60 % (62% to be more precise) of interviewed school going CAR refugee children were unable to effectively speak, read and write French, which is the teaching and learning language of instruction in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* government primary schools. This also contributes to their inconsistency in school as well as their weak and below average performance. This is how a 13-year-old girl puts her experience:

In the classroom I either ask the teacher to repeat or explain for me if I do not understand or ask my fellow peers to assist me. This has become boring and tiring as in almost every lesson, I will have to raise my finger for clarity. This has affected my performance in class and thereby discourages me from going to school every day.³⁵

Echoing the point above, a 10-year-old boy puts his own experience in this way:

I find it difficult adapting to French since we mostly speak Sangho back in the camps. I get quiet and frustrated knowing I cannot fluently express my worries of not understanding lessons to my teacher. This is due to the fact that we are many in class and the teacher finds it difficult to attend to our various needs.³⁶

Briefly, it could be said that though French is the main language of instruction in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* government primary schools, CAR refugee children still have difficulties communicating effectively in French. They mostly express themselves in *Sangho* which is one of the main spoken languages in their home country. This has affected the majority of them since they had not been to school before coming to Cameroon and they always communicate in *Sangho* in the camps. Language barrier therefore, plays a negative role on enrolment and consistency as the children find it boring and exhausting studying in French.

The experience of CAR Refugees in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* Camps in the East Region of Cameroon resonates with similar situations in other parts of Africa and the world where it has been demonstrated that refugee

³⁵ Interview with a 13-year-old refugee girl.

³⁶ Conversation with a 10-year-old refugee boy.

children often experience exclusion from fellow classmates because of language barrier and difficulties communicating in the host country's language. They neither understand their classmates who in turn are unable to understand them.³⁷ This can lead to feelings of loneliness, particularly in the early stages of arrival.³⁸ The issue of language and other institutional barriers have been explored by other researchers who have come out with similar findings. Refugee and asylum-seeking children may experience difficulty adjusting to a new educational system, which can be very different from what they experienced in their home countries.³⁹

Cultural Challenges (including religious beliefs)

Culture is the way of life of groups of people, meaning the way they do things. It can also be seen as an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior as well as the outlook, attitudes, values, morals, goals, and customs shared by a society. It should be noted that the Central Africans are made up of Muslims and Hausa who have a strong belief in early child marriage. This religious aspect plays a significant role in the educational decision-making concerning the girl child.

According to a UNICEF report, Central African Republic is the 2nd highest nation in the world for percentage of child marriage. According to this report, 68% of girls are said to be married off before the age 18 and 18.29% are married before they turn 15⁴⁰. As the country has become more destabilized, poverty rates have increased and some families have married girls off in exchange for bride price and to boost income⁴¹ (ibid). This finding moves to catch up with the experience of CAR refugees in Cameroon. Analysis of field data reveals that 67% of parents interviewed and who had female children advanced that their female children were not in school due to the belief in early marriage. Furthermore, as noted earlier, only 37% of girls interviewed were enrolled in primary school as against 45% of boys enrolled. According to a report by UNICEF, CAR refugee female children were forced into marriage upon arrival in eastern Cameroon. Many families lived in cramped under resourced conditions and some married off their daughters in exchange for money⁴².

While free education is provided, most of the refugees (two-third) live in conditions where they struggle to afford enrolment fees of up to 2,000 CFA francs (about 4 USD). Many end up forcing their daughters to marry (even with older men). It was observed during data collection that once a girl reaches the age of 13 or 14, her parents 'cast her' and 'throws her aside', leaving her at home for cooking and to do the household chores with the mindset of preparing them for marriage. For some of the girls enrolled in school, they made mention of the fact that they can be in school, but in their minds, they are just waiting to be taken out for marriage. Many of the refugees are from herding or farming communities and do not value education for their children especially the girl child. During interviews, a 13-year-old girl turned her face away as she recalled her family's attitude to school back at home. "My parents didn't want me to

³⁷ Hek, Rachel. (2005). The Experiences and Needs of Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children in the UK: A Literature Review. *National Evaluation of the Children's Fund, University of Birmingham, Research Report RR635*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Sweeney, Maureen (2018). *Enforcing/Protection: The Danger of Chevron in Refugee Act Cases. Administrative Law forthcoming*. University of Maryland Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-23. Available at file:///C:/Users/DRARRE~1/AppData/Local/Temp/SSRN-id3228530.pdf. Accessed July 2021.

⁴⁰ UNICEF (2017). *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2017>. Accessed July 2021.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² UNICEF (2016). *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting a Global Concern*. Available at file:///C:/Users/DRARRE~1/AppData/Local/Temp/FGMC-2016-brochure_250.pdf. Accessed June 2021.

go to school... I was meant to be married⁴³,” she said timidly, covering her face with her scarf. It also came to the knowledge of the investigator that another 13-year-old girl lost interest in school because her parents kept commenting that she will soon be married off to a man thrice older than her for financial reasons. With this, it is evident that the cultural beliefs of CAR refugees have a negative bearing on the enrolment of their children, most especially the girl child.

Challenges Related to Official Documentation and Admissions but Minimized by UNCHR

Unlike other aliens, refugees are likely to arrive in the host state without ID and other official documents or passports from their state of origin, given that refugees are often forced to leave their home countries under difficult circumstances. Refugees found without documentation of one kind or another are likely to be detained, arrested or even deported, making documentation a primary concern for this marginalized group.

Unlike the above mentioned, documentation and admission of CAR refugee children was different in the East region of Cameroon as during interviews with some parents, school staffs and UNHCR personnel, it was reported that the enrolment process into the government schools is not complex for all especially for refugees. As the UNHCR personnel put the situation, “Refugees all over the world have documentation issues since their journey is always unprepared... Upon the arrival of CAR refugees in the East, the UNCHR provides them with documents called *attestation de composition familiar* which carries the information of the entire family.”⁴⁴

The Problem of Insufficient and Inconsistent Teachers

Teachers play a central role in helping refugee children integrate in their new environments and find the right pathway to continue their education, learn and recover from their painful experience. Insufficient and inadequate human resources represent an important challenge to educational access in terms of enrollment and consistency in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* government primary schools. The number of teachers deployed to this area is very low. For example, during an interview with some of the school headteachers, it was mentioned that there were 31 teachers for about 1,919 pupils in *Lolo* and *Mbile* in the 2018/2019 academic year. In addition, lack of motivation and inadequate learning materials (tools) have made some of the teachers to be inconsistent in school. Most of them complained about the situation. As one of them put it, “how do we find new ways to reach different types of learners, when there is not enough supply of didactic materials to accomplish this task?” Along this same line, teachers who just graduated and were transferred to this area raised the issue of salary. “I have been a teacher in this school for two years with no salary...tell me, how do I function well in this condition? It discourages and affects my consistency in school,” complained one teacher.

Also, during interviews with some head teachers, most of them raised the issue of insufficient teaching staff, making the workload heavy on the few of them. An anonymous male teacher said, “I teach two classes of about 61 pupils each. With regards to this number, it is so difficult and practically impossible for me to allocate extra time for all these children⁴⁵”. This reveals that the teacher-pupil ratio in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* government school is approximately 1:122, meaning 1 teacher for 122 pupils. This certainly has the potential to negatively affect the children’s school enrolment and performance as well as the

⁴³ Interview with a 13-year-old refugee girl.

⁴⁴ Interview with a UNHCR personnel working with refugees in the east Region.

⁴⁵ Interview with a male teacher of one of the schools attended by CAR refugee children.

performance and consistency of teachers since the ability of a teacher to follow-up about 122 children is quite limited.

In addition, during a discussion with a group of refugee children, the irregularity of teachers was raised as one of the major challenges, which discourages most of them from being interested in school and staying in school during school hours. A 12-year-old CAR refugee child recounted: “my teacher is not regular in school; this discourages me a lot as it pushes me to go join my friends who are not going to school and stay in the village to ride bicycle.⁴⁶” Due to the irregularity of her teacher in school, a 13-year-old female pupil preferred to go and assist her mother in selling groundnut in the market, rather than being in school. She says: “my teacher is mostly absent from school, so I always choose to go and help my mother to sell her groundnuts than waste the day doing nothing.⁴⁷ As a consequence of the inconsistency and shortage of teachers, parents also feel reluctant to send their children to school. In the words of one of the parents, “what is the need for spending the little I earn sending my children to school when they return home most of the time with almost nothing written in their books?⁴⁸” This may in turn also lead to pupil inconsistency or drop out. It should be made mention that this problem of insufficient teachers affects nationals as well.

Parental Negligence in Terms of Follow-Up.

It can be incredibly frustrating for a teacher when parents do not support their efforts to educate their children. During interviews, an observation was made at the level of the home where many teachers complained about lack of parental negligence in terms of follow-up. Lack of parental follow-up has a very strong negative effect on the children’s interest in school and contributes to school dropout, which further leads to juvenile delinquency. Children who drop out of school tend to get involved in deviance behavior such as criminal acts, stealing, rebelliousness and a host of other troublesome behaviors almost on a daily basis. According to some teachers, refugee parents’ low level of education makes them to see no need to follow up their children’s education or even to accompany them to school. While the researcher was taking part in a general meeting held on the 25th of June 2019 in Lolo with refugees, UNCHR and partners, the president of refugees emphasized; “parents please get involved in your children’s life, take full responsibility of their education”. He encouraged parents to follow up their children by personally taking them to school every morning. He added;

It is the parents’ responsibility to teach moral and ethical values to their children. They should teach them the difference between right and wrong behaviors. Lack of social and moral values can lead children to poor interaction with others and make them less confident. They may become selfish and arrogant. They will not respect the laws of the state. Parents often neglect their children and pay more focus on working hard to earn money for themselves. However, while doing so, they forget the importance of spending quality time with their children.⁴⁹

On several occasions, it was reported that children leave home for school but do not get to school. Some of them get distracted by those who are not in school, others prefer to go around doing menial jobs like washing dishes in restaurants, just to earn some money and rent bicycles that they will ride around the camp. They spend the whole day loitering about and at the end of school hours, they go home pretending

⁴⁶ Conversation with a 12-year-old Car Refugee.

⁴⁷ Conversation with a 13-year old female CAR refugee.

⁴⁸ Interview with a CAR Refugee parent.

⁴⁹ President of Refugees during a general meeting held on the 25th of June 2019 in Lolo with refugees.

they were in school. An interviewee from one of the organizations working with refugees in the camp said; “I always see a group of boys, riding bicycles during school hours. I’m surprised when I see these same children going home humbly after closing hours with other classmates as if they were in class.”⁵⁰ Along this same line, a teacher reported that most parents are negligent when it comes to their children’s education. In his words, “I noticed that children come back to class with undone homework, some even do it but have it all wrong because there was no one to guide them. More so, there is a group of these children who are irregular in class. They are very rude and involved in stealing.”⁵¹

Clearly, not only some refugee children do not have access to primary education due to parental financial difficulties, some of those who have access tend to be disinterested and unenthusiastic. This certainly accounts for their very poor school performance. This issue was well captured in the words of one female parent:

I cannot reconcile my child’s performance in school and at home. One day, I tried asking her all what she claims she got correctly in class but to my greatest surprise, she became a dumb. She could not answer any of the questions correctly. Meaning she only copied all of these from her classmates, gave good ticks and forged her teacher’s signature before reaching home. While monitoring her, I discovered she leaves home well dressed for school but does not get to class. She is distracted by other girls who are out of school⁵².

The parent speaking above admitted that this situation has been going on for long unnoticed and her child was gradually dropping out of school because of her negligence. Certainly, good parental follow-up is an important factor when it comes to a child’s education. This takes us to the logical conclusion of this article.

CONCLUSION

This article departed with the research question: *how does the status of being a ‘conflict-induced refugee child’ currently affects CAR Refugee children’s right to primary education in terms of enrolment in the East Region of Cameroon?* Based on the analysis in this paper, it has become abundantly clear that a combination of structural, operational and relational factors (poverty and financial constraints, misery, language barrier, cultural and religious beliefs, inability to socially integrate, insufficient teachers and parental negligence) have all interacted and intermingled to negatively affect CAR refugee children’s access to primary education in terms of enrolment. By extension, the extent to which the majority of CAR refugee children have access to primary education in the East Region of Cameroon is still very low (less than 50%) and the girl child is relatively more disadvantaged due to cultural and religious beliefs. The findings point to the fact that the need for preventing violent conflicts and ensuring that persons forcibly displaced from one country to another (such as the CAR conflict-induced refugees) have access to solutions and fulfilling their hopes and rights such as their right to basic education and social integration in host countries have never been so pressing like now. Cameroon government has demonstrated its will to promote *basic education for all*⁵³. For example, in the Preamble of Cameroon’s constitution it is stated that, *the State shall guarantee the child’s right to education. Primary education*

⁵⁰ Interview with an International NGO staff working with Refugees.

⁵¹ Interview with a teacher of one of the schools attended by CAR refugee Children.

⁵² Interview with a female CAR refugee parent.

⁵³ Karugo. A. M, Kamere.I. M, Mugo.P. (n.d) *The Education System of Cameroon*. Available at <https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/123456789/10018/the%20education%20system%20of%20cameroon..pdf> Karugo sequence=1. Accessed July 2021.

*shall be compulsory. The organization and supervision of education at all levels shall be the bounden duty of the State*⁵⁴.

However, sometimes the execution of the law does not perfectly translate to the realities of the situation. As the case of Cameroon has shown, there is usually a disparity between principle and practice. The findings of this research article reinforce the argument that though there seems to be adequate national and international laws in place, creating and guaranteeing rights to refugees, the operation of these laws in practice leaves much to be desired. The level of attention given to refugee children at the international level is not the same as it is at the domestic practical level as is the case in the East Region of Cameroon and other parts of the world. For example, authors such as Yarrow Eman⁵⁵ have found that it is challenging to run education programs in refugee camps since there are people from different places with different languages, cultures, traditions and religions. Historical and political factors continue to impede the right to access education on a regional and global scale. However, the fact remains that schools are made to look beyond the needs of school communities including an understanding of other children who are poor and not part of the school community. Hence, it is important to note that the ‘very low’ access to education of refugee children is not merely due to weak organs of government or the combination of challenges unfolded in this article but it is also as a result of ‘weak politics.’ That is, the *exclusionary impulses* vis-à-vis the phenomenon of ‘refugee as a stranger other’ in many parts of the world. This no doubt works against inclusionary policies advanced in many international conventions and instruments that give more attention to the special needs of these vulnerable groups. Some authors have found out in the case of South Africa that the “unwillingness to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers’ rights are protected is borne out of xenophobic views that refugee children deserve less care than the locals.”⁵⁶ Hence, it has become abundantly clear in this study that, there are ambiguities and critical limits to the international solidarity policy of Refugee Protection.

Hence, in terms of policy implications, the Government of Cameroon and her national and international development partners involved in the effective management of the CAR refugee crisis in the East Region, should rethink and adapt their responses to the practical needs of refugee children. Such a policy strategy must adopt a rights-based approach to development interventions and responses should be tailored towards addressing the dual challenge faced by the refugee child: *the helplessness of being a child and the complex challenges of being a refugee*. This also implies that there must be an intersection between the top-down approach (through international and national laws and policies) and the bottom-up community-based approach which is *person-centred* and *human security oriented* (‘freedom from fear’, ‘free from want’ and ‘freedom to live a life of dignity’). Such a policy and practice reorientation which puts the educational rights of the refugee child at the center of analysis must also be language, culture and gender sensitive.

⁵⁴ Preamble of The Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 96-06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the Constitution of 2 June 1972.

⁵⁵ Yarrow, Eman I. (2012). *Factors Contributing to Successful High School Completion for Resettled Refugee Students in Arizona: Student and Mentor Perspectives*. Arizona State University

⁵⁶ Sibanda, C. A. S., & Vally, S. (2012). *The Education Rights of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Africa. Report to the Foundation for Human Rights*.