Conflict-induced Refugee Crisis and its Consequences on Access to Primary Education: Case Analysis of the CAR Refugee Children

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ABSTRACT
Cameroon currently hosts around half a million refugees from conflict-affected neighboring 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. The paper is 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 international relations, immigration, children’s education and policy-making theories. The study finds out that the educational challenges of CAR refugee children are multifaced and complex, including traumatic experiences, disrupted education and forced adapting which have negatively affected their access to education. With this outcome, the paper concludes that the issue of poor access to education of refugee children is 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. 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.

Keywords: Access to Education, Cameroon, CAR Refugees, Conflict, East Region.

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 (Kindzeka, 2021).

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 neighboring countries such as Nigeria and the Central African Republic. The statement also indicates the need for preventing violent conflicts and ensuring that persons forcibly displaced from one country to another as conflict-induced refugees 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 so 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 right 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-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 are more displaced people and refugees now than at any other time in recorded history … They are unofficial ambassadors of failed states, unending wars, intractable conflicts. The most striking thing about the current migration crisis, however, is how much bigger it could still get” (Nordland, 2015). 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 (SIPRI Year Book, 2018). 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 (SIPRI Year Book, 2018).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2020, there were “82.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the at the end of 2020 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order” (UNHCR, 2020b). 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 11.0 million in 2019”. This figure includes both IDPs and refugees (UNHCR, 2020b). 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, especially SGD 4 and its 10 targets which aims at “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” UNHCR mentioned that in 2019 alone, out of the 26 million refugees in the world, more than half were children under the age of 18 (Aliyev, 2021). According to UNCHR (2019), of the 7.1 million refugee children in the world, over 3.7 do not go to school. From the same 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 10 non refugees (UNHCR, 2019). The report shows that as refugee children gets older the barriers preventing them from accessing education becomes harder thereby affecting enrolment rate.
Reflecting on Africa, the continent has historically experienced a number of socio-economic, political, cultural, geographical and environmental factors including violent conflicts involving non-state armed and terrorist groups that have often combined to exert pressure on people, causing them to migrate both internally as IDPs and externally in search of basic security and refuge in other relatively peaceful countries. Examples of African countries with massive population displacement as a result of violent conflicts and political instability include among others, Libya, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Cameroon.

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 (ACCORD et al., 2015). For example, as at 31 May 2021, Cameroon hosted a total of 443,919 refugees with the highest number coming from the Central African Republic (323,324), followed by Nigeria (118,002) and other countries such as Chad, DR Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Burundi, Cote D’Ivoire and the Republic of Congo (UNHCR Cameroon, 2021). These Refugees are mainly located in the East and Adamaua regions (UNHCR, 2020a) 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 (ACAPS, 2020). Moreover, over 70% of CAR refugees are staying with host communities (ACAPS, 2020). In the East region for example, tensions between CAR refugees and the host community for access to limited resources such as drinking water, fields, and social services such as education and health are reported (ACAPS, 2020). Furthermore, humanitarian reports UNHCR and other NGOs point to the fact that The CAR refugees are dependent on humanitarian assistance, with education, health, food, WASH, protection, shelter and livelihood opportunities reported as priority needs.

In Cameroon, since 2000, primary education has been made free for all. UNHCR (2009) found that, Cameroon’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% but remains below acceptable standards (UNHCR, 2009). 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 (UNHCR, 2019). The low enrolment rates of refugee children particularly the CAR refugee children in the Eastern Region can results to several social misfits. For instance, juvenile delinquency for the boys, sexual exploitation and child marriages for the girls, drug abuse, child labor 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: What are the challenges and extent of access to primary education in terms of enrolment of CAR refugee children living in the Lolo and Mbile Camps 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(1) REFUGEE CRISIS IN CAMEROON: THE CONTRIBUTION OF UN WOMEN AND MINPROFF FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE REFUGEE SITE OF NGAM

This journal was written by Dorothy Forsac-Tata and published in the International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies. In the results of the research, it is said that Refugees generally face enormous challenges as they struggle for survival but the challenges faced by women refugees are gender specific. These challenges include among others, sexual violence, access to health care, physical abuse and even human trafficking. Several national and international institutions work with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in the management of the refugee crisis in Cameroon. Among these institutions are UN Women and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family known by its French acronym as MINPROFF. There are several efforts to empower female refugees Contribution of UN Women and MINPROFF. The first is Economic Empowerment (Some of these activities include the production of cassava powder used for couscous, selling of eggs, using flour to do beignets, selling of ground nuts and other food items (salt, sugar, seasonings etc.) and agriculture. Some other women who formed groups were given grinding machines with the greatest challenge in the process of empowering women economically is the follow-up and monitoring of women’s activities.). There is also contribution of UN Women and MINPROFF to the self-confidence and self-esteem of Women in the Refugee Site of Ngam (UN Women and MINPROFF give counseling and livelihood support to victims and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) (Forsac-Tata, 2019).

The difference between Dorothy's journal and this article lies in what is discussed, where Kimberly's journal discusses the efforts of UN women in empowering female refugees in Cameroon, while this paper focuses more on the challenges and extent of access to primary education in terms of enrolment of CAR refugee children living in the Lolo and Mbile Camps in the East Region of Cameroon. In addition, the difference also lies in the object discussed where Dorothy's writing focuses on female refugees, while this paper focuses on child refugees. Even so, Dorothy's writing provides important information regarding the various efforts taken to empower female refugees

(2) REFUGEE CHILDREN IN CRISIS: THE CHALLENGES FACING SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN RESIDING OUTSIDE REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN

This journal was written by Ali Jameel Faleh Al-Sarayrah and published in the International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies. This study aimed to identify
the kinds of challenge encountered by Syrian refugee children who are living in Jordan but not in refugee camps. The challenges faced by these children were low wages, labor exploitation, difficulties with paying back debts for their families, ongoing poverty, and the high cost of living in Jordan. Educational challenges were also largely economic and were mainly due to the high cost of education and the priority of work over school attendance. Health challenges too were economic and centered on the high cost of health care and the obstacles to obtaining medical insurance. Social challenges included lack of interpersonal bonds, an inability to form new friendships, and the absence of entertainment. This journal suggests that providing financial support for Syrian refugee families consistent with the increasing cost of living in the hosting country would result in better lives for the Syrian children, as would creating job opportunities for heads of families in line with memoranda of agreement that Jordan has with international organizations. Further, public education for Syrian refugee children should be made free of charge, particularly in the elementary stages (Al-Sarayrah & Al Masalhah, 2019). The difference between Ali's writing and this article lies in the focus discussed, where the focus of Ali's writing includes identifying the challenges faced by Syrian refugee children including economic, social, health and education. while this paper focuses on discussing the challenges faced by refugee children in Cameroon in accessing education. Broadly speaking, the educational challenges experienced by Syrian refugees and refugees in Cameroon are the same, the difference is in the educational challenges in Cameroon, there are challenges such as the lack of teachers' salaries that affect the quality of education accessed by refugee children.

RESEARCH METHOD

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 and observations from key stakeholders. Primary data collection lasted for one month from 24th June to 24th July 2019, in the Lolo and Mbile CAR refugee camps, complemented by more recent data and observations.

In this study, the target population consisted of CAR refugee parents and children of primary school going age (6-14), this age group was taken with regards to Cameroon standard age for primary education. It is normally from 6-12 years, but two years were added considering a child might repeat or retake a class. Choosing the above population was because, parents could in an in-depth manner share their experience, express their feelings or thoughts on their children’s education. Also, government officials (ministry of basic education), government primary school staffs, 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.
THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

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 international relations, immigration, children’s education and policy-making theories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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 including in crises. Regarding the right to peace for individuals and nations, the declaration on the preparation of society for life 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”. 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” (United Nations, 1985). 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 leave a live of dignity,’ which access to quality education is at the heart.

UNESCO (2017) reports that education has a crucial role in fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies, free from fear and violence. In fact, it 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” (UNESCO, 2017). Education is a way “to ensure stability and sustainable peace, human rights, social justice, diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability, as well as to empower learners to be responsible citizens within their communities, countries and globally” (UNESCO, 2017).
Refugee protection has constituted one of the main concerns of the international community for many years today. According to Mweni (2018), refugee children are in a more unsafe situation and they face the vulnerability of being a refugee and that of being a child. 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 (Mweni, 2018). 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 of charge 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 (United Nations, 2000).

Cameroon is party to all these instruments (ICESCR, 1984; CEDAW, 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”.

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, the principle that inspire international organizations such as UNESCO is the fact that to effectively guarantee the right to education, it is critical that all people enjoy equal access to an education of good quality, including refugees. Education can provide long-term, dependable and safe environments, in particular for some of the most vulnerable refugee populations (UNHCR, 2015). The Education 2030 Framework for Action emphasizes that it is crucial to address the educational needs of internally displaced persons and refugees. Clearly, this cannot be achieved by 2030 without meeting the education needs of vulnerable populations, including refugees, stateless persons and other forcibly displaced people (UNHCR, 2016). Education, particularly beyond the primary level, is key to improving young people’s lives and economic opportunities (Peace Child International & The Parliamentary Network, 2017). Hence, SDG4, target 1 forms the bedrock of this research as it recommends states to “ensures 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.” Mweni (2018) notes that the ability of refugee children in South Africa 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. According to Dreyer (2017), experience shows that when a primary and secondary-aged refugee child is lucky to find him or herself in a school run
by an organization such as UNICEF, UNHCR or CARE, these schools do their very best to provide descent education but the resources are stretched to breaking point. Others will have to face greater challenges from the switch to new curriculum. Meanwhile, other refugee children can continue education only when they have learned the official language of their host countries (Dreyer, 2017). It suffices therefore at this point to empirically investigate the case of CAR refugee children resident in the Lolo and Mbila camps of the East Region of Cameroon.

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

The 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 the East region of Cameroon following the complex socio-political security crisis in their country of origin.

Initial Challenges Faced by CAR Refugee Children in Accessing Primary Education and the Intervention of UNICEF

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 fostered community engagement and mobilization through the program Corps International. It provided them 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.

Every August, UNICEF deposits school kits at different inspectorate to facilitate the access to primary education of these children. In addition, UNICEF, funded by Global Partnership for Education had the following projects to carry out; construction of classrooms, toilets, water points, distribution of school kits, and training of teachers. In the month of July 2019, UNICEF organised a week training session with teachers in
To What Extent are CAR Refugee Children Living in the Lolo and Mbile Camps Effectively Enrolled in Primary School?

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 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. We shall certainly revisit this issue as we proceed. In addition, head teachers interviewed had a consolidated view that not all of these number 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 acceptable standards. 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 became necessary to find out the practical challenges these children encounter in accessing primary education in terms of enrolment.

CHALLENGES 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 there is no legislation 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 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, 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, a 42-year-old CAR 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 continued.”

In the same way, another parent, a 41-year-old man said, “though primary education is free and we receive support from partners, I still have difficulties meeting the educational needs of my children.” 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. 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 enemies.”

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 holds for us. We know we may have failed in our time and out of age already. Our eyes, our hope, our strength comes from the success of these children.”
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 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 necessities.”

Clearly, poverty and lack of education are strongly positively correlated. 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 boys who were out of 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 garden.”

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, nor 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. The children must not be victimized, taunted, bullied or, worse still, physically harmed. This permits the children to learn and develop (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). 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 well-being of learners, teachers and other education personnel. However, contrary to expectations schools are not always safe places for children (UNHCR, 2009). Schools can be spaces for bullying; racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender discrimination; sexual exploitation; natural and environmental hazards; corporal punishment and attacks including abduction and recruitment into armed forces.

During the data collection process, when with 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 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 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 ascent 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 asked 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 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 asked 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.

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.”

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 their 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 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 (Hek, 2005). This can lead to feelings of loneliness, particularly in the early stages of arrival (ibid). The way that language is taught can in itself lead to stigmatization. The issue of language and other institutional barriers have been explored by other researchers who have come out with similar findings. According to Sweeney (2018), 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. They may be unfamiliar with certain rules and norms that children who have always been educated in the destination setting take for granted. This can affect the relationship between the child and the teacher, which is crucial to the child’s inclusion/integration. Loewen (2004) argues that, “too often a deficit perspective is taken towards second language learners, with the primary focus on the fact that learners do not possess fluency in the second language.” Rutter (2001) noted that good and effective peer support may help to counter feelings of isolation and help them to pick up the new language quickly.

The Impact of Culture (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 plays a significant role in the educational decision making concerning the girl child.

UNICEF State of the World’s Children (2017) report documents that 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 15. 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 income (ibid). This finding moves to catch up with the experience of CAR refugees. 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 (2016), 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 money.

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. It was observed during data collection that once girls reach the age of 13 or 14, their parents 'cast them' and 'throw them aside', leaving them at home to cook and 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 (Guilbert, 2016). 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 go to school… I was meant to be married,” she said timidly, covering her face with her scarf. It also came to the knowledge of the investigator that another 13 years old girl loss 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.

So far, it has become evident, concerning the school enrolment of CAR Refugee children resident in the *Lolo* and *Mbile* camps in the East region of Cameroon that, cultural interests have taken precedence over formal schooling. This cultural element thus plays a significant role in the educational decision-making of both CAR refugee children and their parents, especially when it comes to the girl child. Thus, if schools fail to recognize and respond to such cultural differences, it may unintentionally reinforce barriers to learning, and impede refugee children’s progress in school.

**Challenges Related to Official Documentation and Admissions but Minimized by UNHCR**

For the refugee, identifying documents serve the fundamental purpose of proving that one’s presence in the host state is legal. When attempting to access socio-economic rights, refugees are often greatly disadvantaged in terms of the official documentation required to live and flourish outside their country of origin. The identity of a child becomes an obstacle, since in most cases, parents flee their country of persecution without any documentation. Unlike other aliens, refugees are likely to arrive in the host state without ID 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, “Refugee all over the world have documentation issues since their journey is always unprepared”. Upon the arrival of CAR refugees in the East, the UNHCR provides them with documents called “Attestation de Composition Familiar” which carries the information of the entire family.” A CAR refugee parent also echoes the issue in this way: “I did not have difficulties in the enrolment process. I just went with the paper given to me by UNHCR and my children were registered in school.” This document makes enrolment easy for the refugee parents as they just have to present it at the head teacher’s office for their children’s to be enrolled into a primary school.

**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) has 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?” one of the teachers said. 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, these teachers also have no experience in teaching and dealing with refugee children. They have not been trained to have proper preparation in dealing with refugee children during interviews with some head teachers. Also, 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 children”. 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 performance and consistency of teachers since the ability of a teacher to follow-up about 122 children is quite limited.

More so, 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 pupil 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.” 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; “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”.

In conjunction to other difficulties, a 14-year-old pupil highlighted the problem of overcrowding in class. He reported; “I really like being in school. What disturbs me the most is the fact that I mostly get confused and lost during lessons and can’t meet up. We are so many in class, making it very difficult for my teacher to attend to our individual needs”. In addition to the lack of follow-up and care for their education from teachers, this pupil was no longer motivated to learn and at the time of data collection, he was a school dropout. As a consequence of the inconsistency and shortage of teachers, parents also feel reluctant to enroll their children in 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?” 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 your 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 them. However, while doing so, they forget the importance of spending quality time with their children.”

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 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.” 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.”

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 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 school.”

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. The more a parent cares about a child, the less likely it is that the child ends up with a low level of education. Lack of parental follow up such as, accompanying children to school, the constant check of their books and their lives in school has played a negative role in school enrolment as most refugee children as well as Cameroonian
children easily make their way out of school knowing their parents are less concerned. This takes us to the logical conclusion of this article.

CONCLUSION

This article departed with the research question: What are the challenges and extent of access to primary education in terms of enrolment of CAR refugee children living in the Lolo and Mbile Camps 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 basic education and social integration in host countries have never been so pressing down now.

According to Karugu et al., (n.d), the Cameroon government has demonstrated its will to promote basic education for All. 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 in the domestic practical level as is the case in the East Region of Cameroon and other parts of the world. For example, Yarrow (2012), explained 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 dysfunctional organs of government or the combination of challenges unfolded in this article but it is also as a result of the exclusionary impulses vis-à-vis the phenomenon of ‘refugee as 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. As some authors have found out in the case of South Africa, “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” (Motha, 2012).
However, international conventions and domestic laws on child protection are clear that the tension between the child as a migrant and as a person in need of care should be resolved in favor of the latter as they are first and foremost children and refugees second and as children they are in need of special protection and even more so as conflict induced refugees. As the analysis in the case of CAR refugee children has unfolded, the experience of a refugee child is often marked with the trauma and loss associated with armed conflict and the separation from family and loved ones. Refugee children in the East Region of Cameroon (as in other places) see themselves in an environment that is both new and strange. This experience is often capable of destroying the child’s self-esteem and the ability to relate with other members of the society thereby negatively affecting their life chances.

Clearly, 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-centered 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 refugee child at the center of analysis must also be language, culture and gender sensitive.

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