



Cameroon's Far North: Reconstruction amid Ongoing Conflict

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I. Overview

Cameroon has been officially at war with Boko Haram since May 2014. Despite a gradual lowering in the conflict's intensity, which peaked in 2014-2015, the continuing violence, combined with the sharp rise in the number of suicide attacks between May and August 2017, are reminders that the jihadist movement is by no means a spent force. Since May 2014, 2,000 civilians and soldiers have been killed, in addition to the more than 1,000 people kidnapped in the Far North region. Between 1,500 and 2,100 members of Boko Haram have reportedly been killed following clashes with the Cameroonian defence forces and vigilante groups.

The fight against Boko Haram has exacerbated the already-delicate economic situation for the four million inhabitants of this region – the poorest part of the country even before the outbreak of the conflict. Nevertheless, the local population's adaptability and resilience give the Cameroonian government and the country's international partners the opportunity to implement development policies that take account of the diversity and fluidity of the traditional economies of this border region between Nigeria and Chad.

The Far North of Cameroon is a veritable crossroads of trading routes and cultures. Besides commerce, the local economy is based on agriculture, livestock farming, fishing, tourism, transportation of goods, handicrafts and hunting. The informal sector is strong, and contraband rife. Wealthy merchants and traditional chiefs – often members of the ruling party and high-ranking civil servants – are significant economic actors.

Up until the 1980s, the region's different ethnic communities were engaged in specific economic activities depending on their respective geographic zones, climates and traditions. Before the arrival of Boko Haram, desertification and poverty had already debilitated these specialisations, such as fishing for the Kotoko, livestock farming for the Choa Arabs, agriculture for the Mafa, with the exception of trading in the case of the Kanuri. Forced to move, people have taken their traditional skills with them and diversified their sources of livelihood: in the Logone and Chari, the Kotoko, who were formerly fishermen, now also farm rice and exploit natron deposits; and

many Choa Arabs, traditionally livestock breeders, are now involved in commerce and agriculture.

Over the past four years, the struggle against Boko Haram has further destabilised people's lives and shaken up traditional socio-economic roles. In response, local communities have come up with everyday survival and resilience strategies, which the government and international partners should integrate into their development policies. This briefing is based on documentary research and some sixty interviews conducted from January to September 2017 in Yaoundé and the Far North. It stresses the need to move from an emergency approach to a pro-development approach, and recommends adapting development policies to local socio-economic realities.

II. Economics of Conflict: Contraband and Predation

In Cameroon's Far North, Boko Haram has been using pre-existing contraband networks to handle stolen goods and to resupply (in food, fuel, arms and propaganda material) since 2012, and possibly before.¹ The jihadist group has used violence and intimidation, recruited various kinds of traffickers (of pharmaceuticals, stolen vehicles, Indian hemp, Tramadol, weapons, and watered-down fuel known as *zoua-zoua*), and offered incentives to some struggling traders in exchange for their help in trafficking goods.² Boko Haram has also penetrated the informal economy by providing loans to traders, mainly the Kanuri, Choa Arabs and Mandara, expecting a percentage of their profits in return. In markets near the borders – Amchidé, Fotokol, Makary, Hile Alifa in particular, and Kousseri – Boko Haram has extorted money from traders who it has not helped with financing.³

In the Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga departments hundreds of people have been kidnapped and forced to work as farmers for Boko Haram. The group has sold a part of the harvest in Cameroonian and Nigerian markets.⁴ Boko Haram has been able to gain a foothold in the informal local economy partly due to the relative goodwill among certain sectors of the frontier communities from the conflict's outbreak in 2013-2014. Back then, Boko Haram was not yet directly attacking Cameroon and sought to avoid targeting Muslims when it did strike. In fact, some people in the Mayo Sava even reportedly stated that there was a need for "Boko Haram to liberate them from the kafir (infidel) in Etoudi (the Republic of Cameroon's presidential residence)".⁵ This support is also connected to political, economic, ethnic and even

¹ For a general perspective on Boko Haram in Cameroon's Far North, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°241, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, 16 November 2016.

² Tramadol (or Tramol) is a powerful painkiller very popular among Boko Haram fighters. It is produced in India and sold largely in Nigeria and in the Far North of Cameroon. Several informal "factories" in Nigeria also make it.

³ Crisis Group interviews, local NGOs, academics and local councillors, Maroua, Mokolo, Mora and Kousseri, January-September 2017.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local councillors, local NGOs and former Boko Haram members, Far North and Maroua prison, January-February 2017.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, academic and local NGOs, Maroua and Mora, September 2017.

family-related, generational and religious rivalries and schisms that exist both in this department and in Mayo Tsanaga.⁶

In the Lake Chad region the jihadist movement has been recruiting fishermen as fighters and logisticians since 2013 and demanding payment in money or in kind (*zoua-zoua*, food, water) on islands such as Darak.⁷ In the lake area (Kofia, Hile Alifa, Darak) Boko Haram has issued death threats to farmers who refuse to contribute 10 per cent of their harvests.⁸ Since 2012, in Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga, the group has also made livestock breeders, farmers and traders hand over a percentage of their profits. Traders or livestock breeders travelling to Nigeria have had to pay for safe passage. Cameroonians kidnapped by Boko Haram state that the group forced them to grow crops in Nigeria and then collected half of their harvests.⁹

Other forms of predation include kidnapping, theft and looting.¹⁰ Ransom payments for hostage releases have provided the group with one of its main sources of revenue. In 2013 and 2014, Boko Haram reportedly received at least \$11 million in ransoms, following five abductions of 38 Western (French, Canadian, Italian), Chinese, and Cameroonian hostages, including the mayor of Kolofata, the wife and members of the vice prime minister's inner circle.¹¹ The theft of livestock, which is then sold on the markets in Nigeria and Cameroon, also generates income for Boko Haram: since 2013, the group has stolen at least 17,000 heads of cattle and thousands of sheep and goats in Cameroon, worth around \$6 million.¹² It is impossible to calculate how much money Boko Haram has made by looting shops, health clinics and people's homes.

Boko Haram has spent large sums on supplies, but also on recruiting fighters, informers and on ensuring the support of traditional chiefs and members of the security forces. Before 2014, resupply did not pose a significant problem for the group; since mid-2014, however, the destruction of arms caches in Cameroon, the security response and the dwindling number of logisticians has driven up the cost of supplies. For example, the black market price of a litre of petrol increased to FCFA7,000 (\$12.5, compared to an average price of FCFA400, or \$0.7, in the region).¹³

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, academics, Maroua, September 2017.

⁷ Babette Koulthoumi, "Compétitions autour du contrôle des ressources naturelles sous la pression des changements climatiques, reconversions socioprofessionnelles et conflits communautaires aux confins du lac Tchad", PhD thesis, University of Maroua, January 2016.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, mayor of Hile Alifa, displaced persons from Darak, administrative authorities and security forces, Kousseri, Hile Alifa, Makary, January 2017.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local NGOs, displaced persons and mayors, Mora, Kousseri, Fotokol, Makary and Hile Alifa, January-September 2017.

¹⁰ "Amnesty International alerte sur la recrudescence des attaques de Boko Haram", *Le Monde*, 5 September 2017. Hans De Marie Heungoup, "Boko Haram's shifting tactics in Cameroon: what does data tell us?", *Africa Research Institute*, 14 February 2017.

¹¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, op. cit.

¹² The Task Force on Money Laundering in Central Africa (GABAC), "Terrorist financing in West and Central Africa", October 2016.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, sub-prefects, vigilante groups, high-ranking members of the armed forces and former Boko Haram members, Far North and Maroua prison, January-September 2017.

III. A Devastating Impact across the Economy

Before Boko Haram's arrival, the Far North was already Cameroon's poorest region, with 74 per cent of the population living below the poverty line, compared to an average of 37.5 per cent in the country as a whole.¹⁴ This situation has been exacerbated by the conflict and, now more than ever, the Far North is perceived by the authorities and donors as a region requiring aid rather than an area offering economic opportunities.¹⁵ The closing of the border with Nigeria has dented both the local and national economy, especially since neighbouring Chad – under normal circumstances an importer of goods from the Far North – is also facing a crisis.¹⁶

The conflict has weakened local trading networks, pushing into poverty thousands of traders whose livelihoods depended on trade with Nigeria. To survive, merchants with larger operations have moved to N'Djamena, Bertoua, Douala or Yaoundé. The smaller-scale traders have been the hardest hit. The border's closure has caused some in the Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga departments to make a 100 to 200km detour by motorbike or bicycle, passing through Cameroon's North region, in order to stock up on supplies from Nigeria. Others travel along the dangerous roads in Mayo Tsanaga via Muvi, Pouss and Vizik. This has increased the price of products from Nigeria, although since 2016 the drop in value of the Naira – Nigeria's currency – has softened this inflationary impact.¹⁷

In addition, the temporary opening of the border at Fotokol and Bourrha from January to June 2017 only benefitted large-scale traders, because the smaller ones no longer had the capital to revive their businesses. The city of Kousseri, on the border with Chad, formerly Cameroon's second-largest source of non-oil-related customs revenues after Douala, was badly affected, as were important customs posts such as Limani, Fotokol, Blamé, Blangoua and Dabanga.¹⁸

Hundreds of thousands of people employed in agriculture, transport, fishing and livestock breeding have also been affected. After three years, the border regions are inaccessible and the cultivation of tall-growing cereal crops – millet and maize mainly – has been prohibited by the army, even in certain non-border areas, for security reasons. This has led to a two-thirds reduction in regional agricultural production since 2014. In Mayo Tsanaga and Mayo Sava, thousands of displaced farmers have taken advantage of the solidarity of others who lease them farmland.¹⁹

¹⁴ "Tendances, profil et déterminants de la pauvreté au Cameroun entre 2001 et 2014", Rapport quatrième enquête camerounaise auprès des ménages, Institut National de la Statistique, December 2015. Issa Saibou, "Effets économiques et sociaux des attaques de Boko Haram dans l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun", *Kaliao*, special edition November 2014, p. 156; Machikou Nadine, Claude Mbowou, "Economie politique de la violence dans l'Extrême-Nord", Rapport national Cameroun, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), October 2015.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Yaoundé, January 2017.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Sultan of Kousseri and administrative authorities, Kousseri and Fotokol, January-September 2017.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sultan of Kousseri, administrative authorities, traders and fuel smugglers, Maroua, Mokolo, Mora, Kousseri, January-September 2017.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, traders and high-level officials from regional customs delegations and trade ministry, Maroua and Mokolo, January-September 2017.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, high-level officials from regional delegations of the agriculture and transport ministries, and local journalists, Far North, January-September 2017.

Transport within regions has also been adversely affected by the conflict. The Maroua-Kousseri route – the main road between Kousseri and the south of the country – was closed for some months in 2014. Other vital routes for the economy, such as Amchidé-Mora, Maroua-Kousseri and Fotokol-Kousseri were only passable with a military escort until 2016. This has paralysed trade within the region and also with the rest of the country. Insecurity, combined with the roads' poor state of repair, forces Kousseri traders to detour through Chad in order to reach southern Cameroon. According to executives from the Camrail train company, the freight of onions, millet, sorghum, maize, peanuts and live pigs from the region to the rest of the country has dropped by half since 2014. Travel agencies in the region report an average halving of their business figures since 2014, although the regional transport delegate points to an improvement since 2016.²⁰

The ban on motorbikes has been a blow to the thousands of motorbike taxi drivers and other people whose small businesses were dependent on this form of transport. Insecurity on the lake, the prohibition of vessels on the Logone imposed by the Chadian authorities, and the closing of the river route connecting the Mayo Danay department to N'Djamena and Kousseri, have also ruined the local river transport, fishing and trade sectors. Compounding the problem, demolitions and house searches by the security forces in the towns around the lake have had a devastating effect. The Logone and Chari authorities also report that Boko Haram has abducted fishermen and demanded ransoms for their release.²¹

Tourism has probably been the worst-affected sector as a result of this conflict. In Maroua, Waza and Kousseri, tourism activities remain at a standstill. Dozens of restaurants and 27 hotels have been closed since the start of the conflict, according to the regional delegate.²² Before the arrival of Boko Haram, the Far North was considered Cameroon's most beautiful region for its remarkable landscapes, and the second most-visited region by foreign tourists. Waza and Rumsiki were both popular destinations, providing a boost to local handcraft production. But since the conflict erupted, tourists no longer visit the region and European countries and the U.S. have issued strongly worded travel advice warning their citizens against visiting the area.²³

The conflict has also caused the destruction of properties, houses, schools, markets, roads and health clinics. A ministerial report of September 2016 – seen by Crisis Group – detailed this situation: more than 40,000 homes, dozens of villages, around 100 markets, 128 out of 793 schools, 30 out of 217 health clinics, and 246 out of 730 oil wells have been destroyed or harmed in the three border departments since 2014, causing an estimated FCFA240 billion (\$430 million) in damages.

At a national level, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) calculated the budgetary impact of the conflict (including the security expenditure) at around 1-2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015 – in other words, between \$325 and

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, high-level officials from the ministry of transport, Camrail managers and travel agency directors, Yaoundé and Maroua, January 2017.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, prefect, police chief, driver of a travel company, motorbike riders and local NGOs, Far North, January-September 2017.

²² Crisis Group interviews, high-level official from the regional delegation of the tourism ministry and hotel directors, Maroua and Kousseri, January 2017.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, academics, Maroua, September 2017.

\$650 million.²⁴ But the overall economic impact over the past four years has been greater still, since the conflict and its consequences have led to the paralysis of the local economy and slowed down the national economy. The indirect cost and loss for the country as a whole have not yet been analysed in depth at a national level.²⁵

The Cameroonian state does not provide information on the funds allocated to the war against Boko Haram. However, the defence ministry and national security delegation budgets have increased from \$305 to \$420 million and from \$130 to \$145 million, respectively. This points to an increase in security expenditure of more than \$500 million over the four years of conflict,²⁶ without including non-budgeted defence spending, such as on Operation Alpha in the Far North, led by the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) and supported by the secret funds and financial support from partner countries such as the U.S.²⁷

IV. Community Solidarity and Survival Strategies

Hard hit, the local population is developing new resilience. Humanitarian aid plays a vital role, but community solidarity is also very robust. As of today, most of the 220,000 displaced persons in the Far North have been given accommodation and supported by host families.²⁸ Those originally from the Far North and now living in Yaoundé and other cities in the south have also come to the assistance of their families. Further to this, the “president’s donations” and contributions from the southern Cameroonians have totalled FCFA2 billion (\$3.6 million). Yet these solidarity mechanisms have soon shown their limits: host communities are under great pressure, making them as vulnerable as those who have been displaced.²⁹

Economic diversification has also allowed many to survive. In Maroua, former traders from Kerawa have switched to importing *zoua-zoua* and breeding livestock; traders from Koza in Mokolo are trying their hand at farm work.³⁰ Some people from the region have been hired by the 50 or so NGOs present in the Far North. In the Mayo Sava, farmers and livestock breeders play cat and mouse with Boko Haram. Since Boko Haram lacks a permanent presence, local farmers risk their lives by grazing their flocks, farming their land and harvesting their crops depending on the

²⁴ “Sub-Saharan Africa: Time for a Policy Reset”, IMF’s Regional Economic Outlook, April 2016, p. 24.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, researchers at l’Institut National de la Statistique et à la Fondation Paul Ango Ela, Yaoundé, January 2017.

²⁶ See Cameroonian finance laws from 2013 to 2018.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, high-level Western diplomats, Yaoundé, January 2017. U.S. financial backing for the Cameroonian army in the struggle against Boko Haram is estimated at over \$111 million since 2015, in addition to donations of materials and training provided to elite military units. Other countries such as France, Germany, China and Russia also assist the army through training and donations of materials. Robert Trafford, Nick Turse, “Cameroonian troops tortured and killed prisoners at base used for U.S. drone surveillance”, *The Intercept*, 20 July 2017.

²⁸ Hans de Marie Heungoup, “The humanitarian fallout from Cameroon’s struggle against Boko Haram”, Crisis Group, 21 February 2017.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian NGOs, displaced persons and host families, Yaoundé and Far North, January-September 2017.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, mayors, traders and former smugglers, Maroua, Mokolo, January 2017.

jihadists' movements, which they try to anticipate based on information provided by vigilante groups.³¹

The Kanuri have been the hardest hit economically and socially by the conflict. Unlike the others, they had not truly diversified their sources of income before Boko Haram's arrival. Instead of seeking to engage in new activities, some have developed trading strategies allowing them to circumvent the closing of the border and some of their members who used to be livestock breeders have moved to safer areas. Others, meanwhile, have chosen to collaborate with Boko Haram's economic system. In Minawao, Kanuri refugees control small-scale trading in and around the refugee camp. Sometimes they travel to the markets of Maroua in order to trade their goods.³²

As another example of a survival strategy, displaced women in Kousseri now sell peanuts and charcoal. Some of them have sewing machines and others have turned to prostitution. Men sell onions, and children sell water or beg.³³

V. The Limits of a Security-focused Response

In their fight against Boko Haram, the government has prioritised a security response and taken few specific measures to revive the economy. An emergency plan for the development of the north – comprising three regions, including the Far North – was announced in June 2014. This plan, however, only budgeted FCFA78.8 billion (\$140 million) and falls far short of the area's development needs, which senior officials from the north have estimated at a minimum of FCFA1.6 trillion (\$2.86 billion).³⁴ In March 2015, the government has declared an FCFA5.3 billion (\$9.5 million) emergency plan for school and hospital constructions in the Far North. In April 2016, the ministry of territorial administration and decentralisation launched a quick-impact project of FCFA4.5 billion (\$8 million) for the Far North.³⁵

In the Triennial Emergency Plan and in the Public Investment Budget (BIP), the share allocated to the Far North remains the lowest in the whole country; furthermore, some of these funds were allegedly embezzled.³⁶

Despite the security impacts of some government measures taken after the July 2015 Maroua attacks – particularly the ban on motorbike taxis (a source of livelihood for tens of thousands of young people), the closing of the border, the prohibition of fishing, the shutting down of some markets, and restrictions placed

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities and village committees, Mora and Kolofata, January-February 2017.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Kanuri refugees, traders and humanitarian NGOs, Maroua and Minawao, January-September 2017.

³³ Observations by Crisis Group researchers, Kousseri, January-September 2017.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, high-level officials from the North, Yaoundé, August 2016. "Plan d'urgence du Grand Nord: les fausses promesses du gouvernement", *L'œil du Sahel*, 20 December 2014.

³⁵ "Extrême-Nord : 4,5 milliards pour des projets à impact rapide", *actucameroun.com*, 28 April 2017.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, sub-prefects, academics and local NGOs, Maroua, Mora and Kousseri, January 2017. For a detailed analysis of the government projects in the Far North, see Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, op. cit.

on the transport of foodstuffs – these actions have also increased some communities' vulnerability and inadvertently helped Boko Haram in its recruitment efforts.³⁷

International support has so far been focused on the still-patchy humanitarian response, virtually disregarding the region's development, with the exception of actions taken by the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the French Development Agency (AFD). These organisations have tentatively begun some projects. Further, members of local civil society organisations have criticised initiatives taken by international actors, accusing them of drawing on international funds without this having any visible effect on people's lives in the Far North. Some of the population, and even members of the army, perceive aid from NGOs and the UN provided to the displaced and to the border communities as indirect support for Boko Haram. They report that Boko Haram cordons off all these areas at night and seizes everything that the NGOs have brought. For example, sacks of rice from the World Food Programme sent to Cameroon have reportedly been found in Sambissa, in the heart of the Boko Haram territory in Nigeria. To be fair to the country's international partners, sacks of rice bearing stamps showing they had been donated by the Cameroonian government have also reportedly been found in Sambissa.³⁸

VI. A Development Contract with the Far North: Opportunities

The conflict in the Far North has caused economic distress for the local inhabitants and shaken up communities' ways of life. The situation poses two fundamental questions for the government and development community: How to revive the Far North's economy without playing into the hands of Boko Haram? How to implement development policies that are integrated with the national economy while respecting local practices, when such practices are a source of resilience but are often at the limits of legality?

- ❑ First of all, development actors must improve their understanding of local economic traditions and how these have evolved over time; of generational issues, social factors, and power balances; of divides between the region's rural and urban areas. They also need to identify people's aspirations and needs more clearly. One way of achieving this would be to organise opinion surveys in every department, working closely with people who have specialist local knowledge before implementing projects and during implementation.
- ❑ The development contract should be centred on strong socio-economic measures, taking into account the dynamics of local economies and the region's border geography, as well as repairing the social fabric and reconnecting cross-border communities, without which economic ties would be severed. This requires development organisations to support the informal sector, determine the region's

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, local councillors, traders, local NGOs and local people, Far North, January-September 2017.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, local NGOs, academics and soldiers, Maroua and Mora, January 2017.

strongest economic sectors, and work more on projects around the Lake Chad basin, or target the niches with strong potential for economic recovery, regardless of the obstacle placed by the border.

- ❑ The government and international partners must also envisage ways of supporting and indirectly regulating certain trafficking activities, such as the trade in *zoua-zoua*. Although these activities may border on the illegal, they are accepted by the vast majority of the population and constitute an important resilience factor.
- ❑ This development contract must also give prominence to local communities' inclusion and participation – rather than simply kowtowing to the wishes of traditional chiefs – and be implemented according to high standards of best practice and transparency. As part of this inclusion, more support needs to be given to women and the young, and particularly to the communities hardest hit by the conflict and others whose activities have been most impacted by the conflict.
- ❑ To be most effective, the development contract must be compatible with the development plans of other states of the Lake Chad basin, such as the Buhari Plan for the development of North East Nigeria, adopted in June 2016.
- ❑ Finally, the Cameroonian government must begin a gradual easing of the restrictions it has applied in July 2015, such as the closing of borders, the restriction on motorbike transit and transport of goods, working on a case-by-case basis and tailoring its approach to the individual departments and districts.

VII. Conclusion

In countries confronting insurgencies, the issue of reconstruction or development policies is only considered once conflicts are beginning to ease. Cameroon's Far North is no exception. The government and development actors must combine existing emergency projects with longer-term development initiatives. The Far North must no longer be seen solely as a region in need of aid, but instead as an area of economic opportunities which could boost local development and revitalise growth across the country.

Nairobi/Brussels, 25 October 2017

Appendix A: Map of Cameroon



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

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