

Conflicts, forced migration and access to land: the special case of north cameroon

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1. Conflicts, forced migration and access to land: the special case of north cameroon

pag. 2

2. The region of North East Cameroon

pag. 3

3. The evolution of the Boko Haram conflict

pag. 5

4. The consequences: forced migration and conflict over access to land

pag. 7

5. The commitment of NGOs

pag. 11

6. Conclusion

pag. 12

Bibliography

pag. 13

"This background document has been realized in the framework of the project, to spread data and information based on a scientific analysis. If you want to know more about this project and be part of its activities, please feel free to contact the leading partner Diaconia in Czech Republic (email: nozinova@diakoniespolu.cz), as well as Focsiv in Italy (email: f.novella@focsiv.it)."

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1. CONFLICTS, FORCED MIGRATION AND ACCESS TO LAND: THE SPECIAL CASE OF NORTH CAMEROON

This case study report presents the main results of a research conducted on the nexus between conflict, forced migration, and access to land, following the dramatic impact of Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria and on the Cameroon border. The nexus is particularly complex and involves several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because it links Goal 16 on conflict and peace, Goal 10 on the need to implement regular and safe channels for migration, and therefore for refugees, Goal 2 on food security and Goal 1 on the fight against poverty. Tackling the tragedies caused by terrorism requires an integrated approach across the different objectives, focusing on the rights of both refugees and host communities, distributing resources equitably, and curbing the violence and trafficking on which it relies.

The armed conflicts that devastate Sub-Saharan Africa have created forced migrations primarily to neighbouring countries and only secondarily to Europe. These migrations in turn generate other tensions between migrants and local populations, particularly over access to land, undermining peaceful coexistence and local development. In the eyes of locals, migrants are land “hoarders”, and new tensions and conflicts over land are generated.

Of course, it is not the case to equate the pressure of migrants on land with the land grabbing of large multinational corporations and sovereign states. Rather, it is necessary to understand that the tensions between migrants and locals have causes that, once again, originate in abuses operated by those who are stronger and have more power. This is the case in Northern Cameroon: the original cause is to be found in the violence perpetrated by warlords, by Boko Haram.

The Boko Haram phenomenon is one of those conflicts that has as a direct consequence the forced migration of people. Forced to abandon their lands, they move to other areas to rebuild their lives, occupying other lands, thus creating another form of land grabbing against local populations, in a war between the poor. However, the main cause of land grabbing is the control of the territory and its resources by Boko Haram in Nigeria, that, in turn, provokes consequent conflicts for access to land in Cameroon.

Boko Haram’s occupation began in Nigeria and spread throughout the Lake Chad basin area, and then into the Far North Cameroon region, causing the involuntary displacement of both Nigerians and Cameroonians living at the border. These displacements, a consequence of insecurity and also of the negative effects of climate change throughout the area, exert a strong pressure on the land and its resources, which is a source of tensions between migrants and locals.

This study highlights the fact that this conflict in a fragile and vulnerable territory such as Far North Cameroon may be a direct cause of land grabbing, i.e. control of the territory by Boko Haram, and indirect land grabbing through conflicts over access to land between migrants and locals. There is the need to find sustainable solutions to this kind of problem that in recent years has been spreading not only in the basin of Lake Chad but in all territories affected by conflicts and wars.

2. THE REGION OF NORTH EAST CAMEROON

The Far North Cameroon region is located in the Lake Chad Basin in the northern part of the country and is bordered by Nigeria to the west, Lake Chad to the southwest, and Chad to the east (Figure 1 and 2).

With an area of 34. 263 km²¹, it has about 4 million inhabitants in 2015, or one-fifth of Cameroon's total population. This makes it the most populated and the poorest² region in the country.

Lake Chad was the only large natural lake basin (25,300 km² in 1963), located in the northern end of the country, shared with Nigeria, Niger and Chad, but for reasons related to both climate change and excessive agricultural exploitation it has been reduced to just 1,350 km². Far North Cameroon (Figure 3) is a multi-ethnic region with more than 50 ethnic groups including the Kanuri, shoa Arabs, peulhs, massa, tupuri, musgum, and others. Its geographical position between Nigeria and Chad, makes it a privileged area for the transit of goods and commercial and multicultural (coexistence of Muslims, Christians and animists with a Muslim majority), and has the same socio-cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic characteristics of the north-east of Nigeria³ and Chad⁴.



Fig.1. Cameroon borders - Source: Wikipedia.org, 2019



Fig.2. Maps of the Cameroon regions - Source: Wikipedia.org, 2019

¹ Cameroon has 10 regions. 8 are francophone and 2 are anglophone.

² Crisis Group, 2016, Cameroon: Facing Boko Haram, Africa Report, N°241, November 16, 2016.

³ Ibidem, p 2

⁴ These similarities are a legacy of the country's colonial past, because it was divided without taking into account the socio-cultural characteristics of the peoples. Therefore, in this area you can find members of the same families on both sides of the

Being an area of the Sahel with a particularly arid climate, its savannas favour pastoralism. It is located in the Sahelian agro-climatic zone of Cameroon, on the plain and therefore constantly exposed to the risks of climate change such as floods and droughts.

Lake Chad is a pole of production, commerce and export of agricultural, fish and pastoral products. Its draining has freed up fertile lands rich in pasture, making it a desirable area for agriculture, fishing and livestock breeding. The other activities of the region are commerce, tourism, transportation of goods, handicrafts and hunting, with a prevalence of informal and submerged activities.

Since Cameroon's independence in 1960, the Far North region has been the site of illegal arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and various forms of violent banditry including kidnapping, and the phenomenon of "coupeurs de route"⁵ (bandits formed by local criminals and former combatants from Chad and the Central African Republic who attack and steal from people in the street⁶). It is the poorest region in the country with 74.3% of the population living below the poverty line, compared to a national rate of 37.5%⁷ and a low schooling rate of 46% compared to 84.1% nationally⁸. The presence of the state is almost non-existent, creating a feeling of abandonment in the population. All these problems have made the Far North region a fertile ground for armed violence and the Boko Haram sect.



Fig.3. Geographical map of the Far North region of Cameroon, with its 6 departments. - Source: Wikipedia.org, 2019

⁵ Saibou Issa, 2010, Les coupeurs de route. Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad, Paris; e Christian Seignobos, 2011, Le phénomène Zarguina dans le nord du Cameroun, Afrique contemporaine, no. 239.

⁶ Crisis Group, op. cit.

⁷ Institut national de la statistique (INS), 2015, Tendances, profil et déterminants de la pauvreté au Cameroun entre 2001 et 2014, décembre 2015, p. 43.

⁸ INS, Annuaire statistique du Cameroun 2015, p. 78;

3. THE EVOLUTION OF THE BOKO HARAM CONFLICT

The Boko Haram conflict originated in the early 2000s in Nigeria's Kanuri, a neighbouring region of Borno State. Its spiritual leader Mohamed Yusuf wanted to create an Islamic state to establish Sharia law in the region⁹. Their motivation was to establish a new society based on Islamic law¹⁰.

Nigeria's neighbouring countries, such as Cameroon, were not involved in the conflict because they served as a base of support¹¹ and logistics. In order to keep its supply base secure, the sect extended its relations with the Cameroonian and Chadian mafia network, which controls real estate and land transactions, and the routes where smuggled products pass, such as those of Kousseri-Ndjamena, Mora-Maiduguri, passing through Kolofata and Banki (a Nigerian village where smuggled fuel is stored¹²).

The rise of Boko Haram and, more generally, the instability of Nigeria do not depend only on religious tensions between Muslims (in the North) and Christians (in the South), but also on tribal and regional interests linked to the exploitation of natural resources, the corruption of local political leaders and the poverty in which the majority of the population lives. These are the vulnerabilities that the jihadist organization has exploited to consolidate its power over the territory¹³.

The first signs of Boko Haram's presence in Cameroon date back to 2007 when the sect's fugitives from the Nigerian armed forces took refuge in the localities of Cameroon's border corridor (Fotokol, Mora, Maroua, Kousseri, Amchidé, Kerawa, Djibrilli, Bornori, Tolkomari, Kolofata, etc..¹⁴). Relying on a network of Imams and local preachers, the sect managed to recruit young Cameroonians in the departments of Mayo Sava, Mayo Tsanaga, Logone and Chari¹⁵.

Boko Haram infiltrated Cameroon with refugees fleeing the war in Nigeria. They established cells in Far North Cameroon and engaged in propaganda activities¹⁶. With the declaration of a state of emergency in 2013, Boko Haram began killing civilians to deter them from cooperating with security forces. At the same time, it turned into a criminal group by robbing banks, demanding ransoms from traders, and kidnapping prominent people or the few European citizens still in the area.

The sect officially declared war on Cameroon in 2014 with direct attacks on the population, when the government tried to dismantle its network and cells on the ground¹⁷.

⁹ The Emergence of Boko Haram and the Gradual Spread of Conflict, 2018, in http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/divers18-06/010072917.pdf

¹⁰ Ntuda Ebode, Joseph Vincent, Mark Bolak Funteh, Mbarkoutou Mahamat Henri, M. Nkalwo Ngoula Joseph Léa, 2017, The Boko Haram Conflict in Cameroon. Why is peace dragging on, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

¹¹ Crisis Group, op. cit.

¹² Ntuda Ebode et al., op. cit.

¹³ See <http://www.limesonline.com/boko-haram-un-piccolo-stato-islamico-cresce-in-nigeria/67605>, Boko Haram, a small Islamic state grows in Nigeria

¹⁴ Ntuda Ebode et al., op. cit..

¹⁵ Idem

¹⁶ Idem

¹⁷ Crisis Group, op. cit., p. 8

After the disappearance of its religious leader Mohamed Yusuf, the sect split. Some challenged the brutality of his successor Abubakar Shekau, accusing him of killing mainly Muslims¹⁸.

In early 2015, a multinational anti-terrorist force was created¹⁹ to combat Boko Haram, while some of the sect's fighters have sworn fidelity to the Islamic State organization (often referred to by the Arabic acronym Daesh), thus defining themselves as the "Province of the Islamic State in West Africa" (Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyah)²⁰. The following figure shows the areas of conflict.

The Far North Cameroon region and the entire Lake Chad area served as a refuge for the terrorists. As already written, the first logistic network was created in 2007, a period in which the sect recruited young Cameroonians²¹. In the period between 2010 and 2012, Boko Haram managed to infiltrate Cameroon through refugees (some were recruiters), preaching in mosques, and radicalized Cameroonians who had gone to study in Nigeria and Sudan²².

The Far North thus became a strategic area for financing and for the supply of arms, munitions, and gasoline coming mostly from Sudan and Chad²³.

Funding came from hostages of Western foreign nationals and wealthy local citizens, bank robberies, and large-scale theft of livestock. Northern Cameroon and Lake Chad served as a military, financial, and food logistics base. In addition, as it straddles the border between Chad and

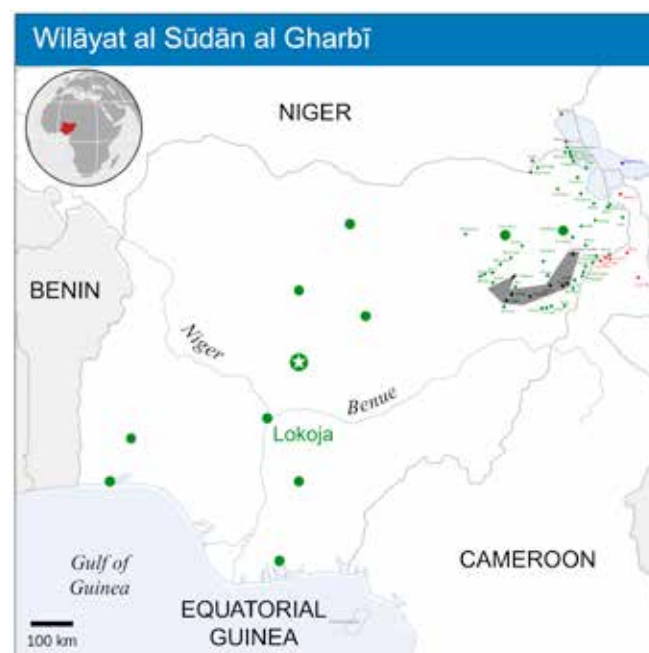


Fig.4. Boko Haram Conflict Area. - Source: Wikipedia.org, 2019

Nigeria, the black market in currency exchange has been very important for raising resources. It is also historically an important area for the illegal trafficking of gasoline (Zoua Zoua), drugs, weapons, medicines, and stolen cars²⁴.

The Cameroonian and Chadian mafia networks involved in trafficking in children, cars, motorcycles, and spare parts also controlled real estate and land transactions, and smuggled products between the two countries²⁵.

The sect set up its logistical network by relying on these smugglers, traffickers, traders, and transporters, who were offered large sums of money²⁶.

¹⁸ The emergence of Boko Haram and the gradual spread of the conflict, op. cit.

¹⁹ Made up of military personnel from the Lake Chad Basin Commission countries and Benin.

²⁰ The emergence of Boko Haram and the gradual spread of the conflict, op. cit.

²¹ Crisis Group, op. cit. p.8

²² Idem p. 9

²³ Idem p. 10

²⁴ Idem p. 2

²⁵ Cyril Musila, 2012, "Le trafic d'armes légères et de produits de contrebande: carburant, médicaments, véhicules et pièces détachées", in L'insécurité transfrontalière au Cameroun et dans le bassin du lac Tchad, Paris, July 2012.

²⁶ Crisis Group, op. cit. p10

Taking advantage of ethnic rivalries, Boko Haram was able to make alliances with criminals in the area and gain control of the territory and its resources. Especially on the edges of Lake Chad where the drying up of water has freed up fertile land²⁷. The vast majority of Cameroonian recruits joined the sect for socio-economic reasons²⁸.

4. THE CONSEQUENCES: FORCED MIGRATION AND CONFLICT OVER ACCESS TO LAND

The direct consequence of the conflict and of Boko Haram’s control of territory in some areas of the Far North has been the forced migration of refugees from Nigeria to Cameroon, but also of Cameroonian citizens living in border villages who have had to move inland.

The latter are referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to UNHCR, since the beginning of the conflict in 2009, about 2.5 million people have been forced to leave their villages because of the conflict²⁹. Of these people, 428,289 are in the region of Far North Cameroon, making it the second most affected region by the conflict. Of these people 270,870 are IDPs, 46,845 refugees are out-of-camp³⁰, while 110,574 are returnees (i.e. Cameroonian citizens who resided in Nigeria and returned to their home country because of the war)³¹.

The two figures below show the trend of migration according to the different types in the period 2015-2019. It can be seen that at the beginning of the conflict, migration was mainly of Nigerian refugees and displaced Cameroonians who moved for security reasons. From 2016- 2017, there is more migration of those who returned to their home villages.

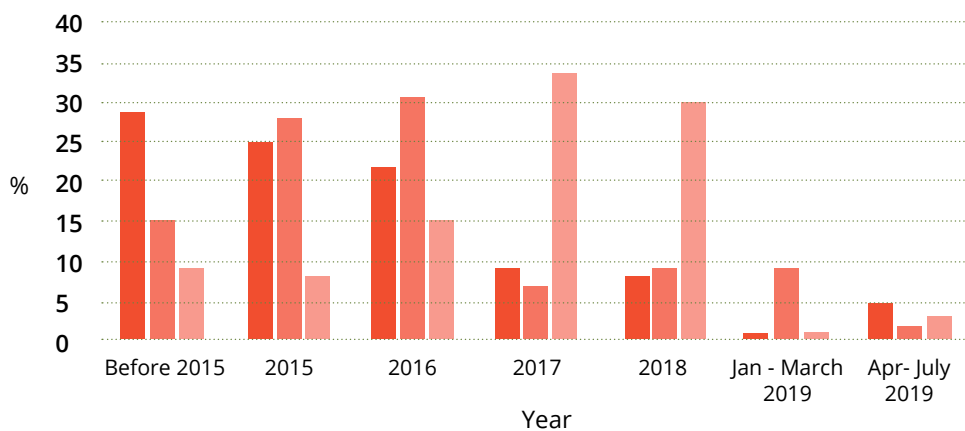


Fig.5. Migration in the far north of Cameroon

- Internally displaced persons
- Refugees out of camps
- Returned

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), September, 2019, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)

²⁷ Joan Tilouine, Cameroon: how Boko haram terrorists converted to import-export, in lemonde.fr

²⁸ Crisis Group, op. cit., p.14

²⁹ <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/news/stories/2019/2/5c6287a6a/apres-attaques-boko-haram-refugies-nigerians-luttent-survivre.html>

³⁰ These are the refugees who do not stay in the only official camp because it is overcrowded and therefore create makeshift camps or are taken in by local families.

³¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), Report Cameroon 2019, Displacement DASHBOARD number 19 CAMEROON – FAR NORTH REGION, August 2019.

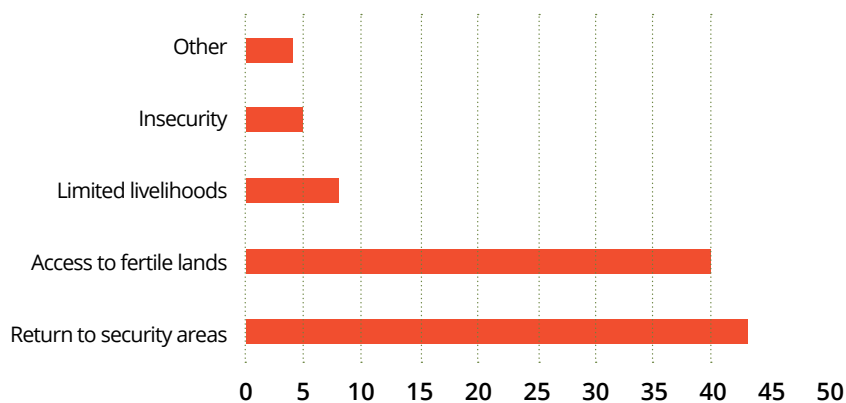


Fig.6. Reasons for return in the period 2014 to July 2019 in Far North Cameroon

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), September, 2019, Displacement Tracking Matrix

In general, the main reasons for forced migration are renewed security in the areas of return, access to arable land, and limited livelihoods in the areas to which they migrated. In the case of Minawao camp, which is the only official refugee camp in this region, there are 58,561 refugees. 40% of the population is displaced in the departments of Logone and Chari, and 34% in the department of Mayo Sava. 94% of the displacement was caused by Boko Haram, while 6% was caused by climatic factors such as floods and droughts³².

The Boko Haram insurgency has caused a flow of forced migration into villages bordering Nigeria, which has increased pressure for access to land in many communities. The conflict has been crucial in migrating to more fertile areas in search of arable land.

The demographic pressure caused by the increase in displaced persons and those who have returned to their villages of origin, causes problems for access to arable land, because most of the local population are farmers and

breeders. Communities hosting migrants no longer have the capacity to because they too need assistance and to maintain control of their land for their livelihoods.

Access to decent housing and land is recognized by several international human rights conventions. However, these rights have been lost due to the Boko Haram conflict in the Far North region of Cameroon, in the departments of Logone and Chari, Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga in particular (because it is close to the Nigerian border making it the most affected by the conflict)³³.

According to a study conducted by the Norwegian Refugees Council (NRC) during the period December 2017- March 2018, several categories of disputes and conflict risks related to access to land by forced migration emerged³⁴.

First, there are conflicts related to contracts for the use of crop fields, housing, and natural resources.

³² International Organization for Migration (IOM), Displacement Tracking Matrix, September, 2019.

³³ Humanitarian Newsletter Cameroon, Issue 09, August 2018 in www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/cameroon; www.unocha.org del Bureau de la coordination des affaires humanitaires (OCHA)

³⁴ Gabriel Bamana, Alex Hartman, 2017, Forced displacement and access to housing, land and property: the case of far north Cameroon, Norwegian Refugees Council.

The most frequent problems relate to non-payment of rents by out-of-camp refugees and IDPs, and rental price inflation due to increased demand caused by displacement.

Other conflicts are related to the return of displaced people to their places of origin: these conflicts involve secondary occupations and destruction of housing, scarcity of arable land, inheritance conflicts, and expulsion of women from land.

Finally, there are institutional conflicts due to the lack of administrative procedures to regulate problems such as the double sale or double rent of houses and fields, which in turn generates inflation and speculation.

Refugees try to integrate into the new communities in Cameroon, but this generates tensions with the locals. The arrival of the refugees, although bringing infrastructure such as wells and latrines to the villages, thanks to the work of humanitarian organizations, is the source of many problems and risks for the rural activities of the locals (agriculture, livestock breeding, woodworking). Conflicts occur over the exploitation of natural resources such as wood and water. Wood, being the only source of energy for the refugees for cooking, is collected in the nearby bushes for their needs. However, the hosting populations accuse the refugees of illegally cutting down trees. In addition, some refugees cut wood for sale, which puts them in competition with timber sellers from the hosting population. Wood is also used for the construction of houses and sheds. This increases the depletion of natural local resources.

The hosting communities as well as the displaced ones live in poverty. The fact that the displaced receive aid from the state and non-governmental organizations while the locals do not, worsens the situation between the two communities. There is a lot of prejudice against refugees who are seen as thieves and accomplices of terrorists.

The conflict situation in the Far North has highlighted the pre-existing problem of access to land and land ownership in Cameroon, exacerbating the unequal treatment regarding access to property between men and women. According to common laws in this region, women have no right to land ownership. In addition, households lack information about the regulatory framework on land ownership, which generates discriminatory practices to the detriment of refugee women heads of households in particular, and widows. Land tenure regulations are poorly understood and have limitations. While the common system gives few guarantees and protection to women heads of households, the formal system, still under reform, has long, expensive procedures and little knowledge of local communities.³⁵

Another frequent type of conflict is that between farmers and breeders. There have always been conflicts between farmers and breeders, but the arrival of migrants has emphasized these tensions. The main causes relate to damage caused to crops, access to water, the fact that farmers cultivate on transhumance routes, and causing damage to livestock and pastoralists.

³⁵ Bulletin humanitaire Cameroun, op. cit.

Conflicts between farmers and breeders over access to local resources, can be considered as conflicts between different forms of production or land use³⁶. Ranchers need space to graze livestock and farmers need more land to extend their fields and use areas along waterways for crops. In many cases, the increase in cultivated areas is at the expense of grazing areas, because farmers are often seasonal.

Most migrants come with livestock. But they are not allowed to take them out to graze in areas fenced off by breeders in the host communities, or even allowed to mix them with local livestock when they go out to graze outside the fences. Some do not have the means of hiring a shepherd, so the animals are left alone, causing damage in the camps.³⁷ Another problem concerns sick animals and the non-respect of natural routes of transhumance. All this leads the hosting populations to refuse to mix their animals with those of the migrants, but contacts are inevitable because of the restricted spaces. This generates more conflicts over access to land. In addition, refugee breeders and farmers need the space not only to graze but also to build and cultivate.

Damage caused by livestock to fields are also reasons for tension³⁸. In this area of the Sahel, where a large part of the population lives on pastoralism, there are spaces reserved for grazing and corridors for the passage of livestock in search of pastures and water, which are very often not respected by farmers. This leads breeders to take the roads used by cars, exposing animals and road users to accidents and therefore fines. Conversely, trampling of crops next to wa-

terways (of cassava, peanuts, vegetables, yams, etc.) by animals are frequent, causing tensions with farmers.



Fig.7. Theafricanreport.com



Fig.8. lcpn.org

³⁵ Bulletin humanitaire Cameroun, op. cit.

³⁶ Kossoumna Liba'a Natali, 2016, Étude sur les conflits agro-pastoraux dans les régions camerounaises du Nord, Adamaoua et Est, UNHCR, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR_LWF_ETUDE_SUR_LES_CONFLITS_AGRO-PASTORAUX_CAMEROUN_NORD_ADAMAOUA_ET_EST.pdf

³⁷ Idem

³⁸ Idem

5. THE COMMITMENT OF NGOS³⁹

Faced with these problems, many non-governmental organizations are trying to bring solutions, in a region facing the double threat of insecurity and the effects of climate change. Local organizations working in the area before the conflict act on structural problems such as: the creation of job opportunities to avoid the recruitment of young people by terrorist groups, and the improvement of living conditions in a healthy environment. The activities carried out are:

- facilitate access to water and promotion of sanitation (creation of wells for domestic use, livestock and agricultural wells);
- creating income-generating activities to enable people to be more independent and to produce to meet their basic needs, including the purchase of land;
- the transfer of money for those most in need⁴⁰: money that is used for urgent needs including food, health and housing rents;
- women's empowerment and prevention of gender-based violence.

Legal support activities are widespread to promote land rights protection activities, such as legal assistance to IDPs.

Other advocacy activities are directed to local state and non-governmental institutions for better protection of rights for access to land, such as strengthening of capacities to assist in the issuance of documents for the rights protection.

Despite the efforts of these organizations, there is still very little funding and insufficient coordination of activities. The recent crisis in the English-speaking regions of the country, called the Northwest and Southwest Crisis, has drawn the attention of the international community, distracting it from the Far North. In September 2019, a large national dialogue was held to discuss the "Anglophone crisis" in Cameroon.

Despite this dialogue, armed confrontation between the Cameroonian army and separatist groups continues. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Crises, OCHA, in the Anglophone areas, 5.475 IDPs were registered in the period between December 9 and 15, 2019 due to the armed conflict between the Cameroonian army and separatist groups. This crisis has already caused around 2000 deaths and 500 000 IDPs⁴¹.

While actions for land protection are increasingly scarce and insufficient.

³⁹ Souita Sophie, Analysis of resilience in communities affected by the humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin: the case of Far North Cameroon, Dissertation Thesis for the Master's Degree in New Horizons in International Cooperation and Law, 2019.

⁴⁰ There are 3 types of cash transfer: unconditional cash transfer, i.e. giving money to the most vulnerable without any conditions; cash for work, i.e. giving money in exchange for socially useful work; restricted cash to start income generating activities.

⁴¹ Journal du Cameroun. Com, 26-12-2019, "English-speaking crisis: more than 5000 IDPs registered in December 2019".

6. CONCLUSION

From this analysis, it appears that the Boko Haram conflict that began in Nigeria as a religious conflict, has spread to territories in neighbouring countries, particularly in the Far North of Cameroon, causing forced migrations of both Nigerians and Cameroonian populations to border villages. This region, abandoned by institutions and controlled by criminal networks, has seen the expansion of the conflict and the activities of the terrorist sect, which seeks to increase its control over the territory for economic, criminal and logistical purposes.

Boko Haram is therefore the first source of land grabbing in the region, which causes another indirect and different form of conflict over land, because it has forced the populations of the affected areas to move to safer areas, generating tensions between newcomers and local populations for access to land, the main source of livelihood for all. This creates a spreading effect of the conflict for access to land that generates a sort of war between the poor, causing a vicious circle of conflicts.

Given the demographic pressure caused by displacement, and the repeated conflicts between local populations and displaced and refugee populations, and the many problems that result, it is very important to strengthen land management in this region. In a context where access to land and natural resources are limited, tensions develop at the expenses of the values of sharing and solidarity.

Conflicts increase between rural populations, refugees and IDPs, between farmers and ranchers, threatening social cohesion and the objectives of sustainable development. It is a priority effort by the international community to quell these conflicts at the source: the fight against terrorism is essential for the security of populations, as well as the fight against poverty and a fair management of land and natural resources, in the Agenda 2030 framework.



Fig.9. france24.com

³⁹ Souita Sophie, Analysis of resilience in communities affected by the humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin: the case of Far North Cameroon, Dissertation Thesis for the Master's Degree in New Horizons in International Cooperation and Law, 2019.

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⁴¹ Journal du Cameroun. Com, 26-12-2019, " English-speaking crisis: more than 5000 IDPs registered in December 2019".

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