Briefing

iied RELUFA **CED** Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement **LandCam** a CED, RELUFA and IIED project

Policy pointers

The government of Cameroon should adopt more radical, sustainable food security strategies that go beyond humanitarian emergency relief to meet the needs of displaced people, and the communities that host them.

Using the opportunity of its land legislation revision, the government should regulate and recognise customary land rights, enabling local communities and displaced people to access and use land productively.

The government needs to devolve power to decentralised institutions and traditional authorities for the efficient management of rural lands.

Accountability mechanisms must be put in place to enhance inclusive governance of rural lands for the general good.

Land rights: the missing link for food security in Cameroon

For decades food insecurity has been a challenge in Cameroon's Far North region, mainly due to extreme weather and weak land legislation. Now the problem is escalating. The current humanitarian crisis caused by the Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in over 87,000 refugees and 340,000 internally displaced people in the region. Humanitarian agencies are responding with food aid but little attention is given to underlying challenges, notably access to land. The reform of land legislation is an opportunity to strengthen land rights for local communities and marginalised groups.[1] Devolving power to local institutions and ensuring secure land tenure for displaced people and host communities must be priorities to achieve sustainable food security for everyone.

The Far North region of Cameroon faces an escalating food security crisis. The interplay of complex, immediate and longstanding challenges — a dearth of fertile land, extreme weather events, poor land management, violent insurgency and weak land tenure — threatens sustainable food production and food security. The population of the region now includes hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people who coexist with host communities primarily comprised of farmers and herders.

Mounting pressure over pasture and farmland

The Far North is one of the most densely populated areas of the country.[2] Most people are engaged in livestock rearing, fishing and farming — cultivating cereals such as millet, sorghum and rice. But for decades the area has experienced high levels of food insecurity.[3] Of the region's approximately four million people, 35.5% face severe food insecurity.[4]

Located in Cameroon's Sahelian agro-climactic zone, the region has scarce fertile land. The rocky topography in the Mayo Tsanaga and Mayo Sava divisions leaves limited space for farming, hindering local food production. To make matters worse, the Boko Haram insurgency and resulting flow of refugees and internally displaced people from border villages with Nigeria have further increased the pressure for land in many communities.[5] This difficult environment has been a key driver of migration to more fertile areas in search of land for crop cultivation.[6]

Pastures are also under pressure, with around 50,000 cattle in the region, and more coming in from northern Nigeria and Cameroon's border villages. Existing pastures cannot sustain them. In addition to fostering competition between herders for access to pasture, this trend has also sparked new or exacerbated existing conflicts with farmers due to crop damage by livestock. A few local initiatives have tried to facilitate the cohabitation of farmers and pastoralists, but with limited success. Some communities do not

buy into pastoralist land tenure and boundary demarcation processes. One example is the attempt to simplify registration and written agreements resulting from individual transactions, which has so far failed.[7]

Cameroon's land tenure laws date back to 1974 and are not fit for today's context

Food insecurity exacerbated by conflict

Although food insecurity has affected the whole region, certain areas bordering Nigeria in the Logone, and Chari, Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga divisions are worst hit. Since 2013, Boko Haram — the term applied to continually morphing militant groups — has been conducting violent attacks, kidnappings, killings and looting in northern Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. The result has been a mass exodus of people fleeing border villages to other parts of the region for safety.

In 2016, the Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture (GIEWS) stated that the Boko Haram insurgency has contributed to "alarming food insecurity conditions in the Far North region resulting from the refugee influx from Nigeria and the internal displacement of the population of border villages".[8] The International Organization for Migration documented almost 342,416 internally displaced people in 2017.[9] Although attacks by Boko Haram have diminished in frequency in some areas, many of the displaced fear returning to their villages as sporadic attacks and looting continue.

To survive, those who stay in the region either rent land in host communities for crop cultivation or work as labourers. The Mayo Sangue village, for example, hosts around 272 people who fled a border locality after a Boko Haram attack in 2015.[10] These families have no access to farmland and most work as day labourers on local farms in exchange for cash payment or in-kind compensation. Despite some conflicts, host communities have largely been hospitable to internally displaced people. But to increase cooperation and sustain these communities in the long run, the underlying food security challenges must be tackled.

Food aid and traditional coping strategies no longer enough

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies operate in the Far North region providing food aid to the refugees from Nigeria.[11] This emergency response is saving lives and helping sustain the affected population.

But internally displaced people and host communities do not receive the same attention.

A more sustainable approach has been taken in rural areas of the region, where community grain banks have been used for many years. Some local communities use these as a coping strategy to reduce migration and tackle food insecurity — especially during lean periods. Since 2006, the Reseau de Lutte Contre la Faim (RELUFA) has worked with rural communities to store food and manage their existing grain stocks more efficiently. Community grain banks have been created in some 45 villages across the region, helping to reduce migration and ensuring there is food year round. During a visit to Cameroon in 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food stated that "[c]ommunity grain banks should be supported and extended to many areas in the Far North region".[12] But with prevailing pressures from the large influx of refugees and internally displaced people, community grain banks alone can no longer sustain these villages.
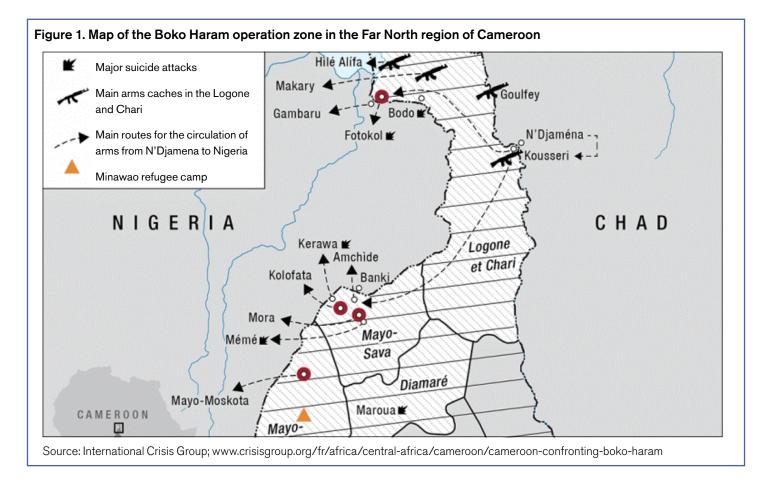
More radical and sustainable strategies are needed by the government and international donors to improve food security and meet the needs of all affected communities.

Land governance vacuum between customary and legal regimes

Cameroon's land tenure laws date back to 1974 and are not fit for today's context. Basic questions over who owns land and how to legitimately acquire it remain unclear.[13] Some 85% of Cameroon's land is under customary tenure and is becoming increasingly insecure due to the current influx of investors.[14]

Many rural communities in the Far North region consider land to be community or family property handed down through ancestral lines, and traditional rulers often play a central role in land management. There are some traditional rulers who see land as a private asset to generate income for the chieftaincy and manage it with little transparency and accountability, while others oversee land as a public good.

Yet for most of the rural population, Cameroon's laws only recognise them as land users, not land owners; only a land title confers official ownership. Very few people possess such a land title due to the prohibitive costs and complexity of the process to obtain one. Consequently, most individuals, families and communities are unable to lay claim to the land that they use, manage, invest in and legitimately should own under legal and customary norms. The lack of

Figure 1. Map of the Boko Haram operation zone in the Far North region of Cameroon

Source: International Crisis Group; www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroon-confronting-boko-haram

alignment between customary land tenure practices and the legal regime is a major contributing factor to tenure insecurity for rural people. In this land governance vacuum, rural communities face challenges to asserting their rights to land and productive resources.

Land tenure and internally displaced people

Village chiefs in the Far North lease out land for crop cultivation to internally displaced people who can afford to pay. This is usually for limited periods of up to three years. Many chiefs refuse to lease the land for longer out of fear that 'foreigners' will permanently settle in the village, claim customary ownership of land and worsen already existing land pressures. This means internally displaced people often struggle to access land for long enough to grow their own food, invest in farm productivity and become food secure. They can also be arbitrarily evicted from the land and, unlike refugees, most have no access to food aid.

Devolving power to decentralised institutions

With growing pressures over land, traditional authorities and local administrative institutions are struggling to manage this valuable resource, calling for a fundamental re-think on land

management. One option is for Cameroon to adopt decentralised land management and administration — in line with the new law making locally elected officials and traditional authorities the custodians of devolved local power. The demands of the internally displaced has complicated land management in rural areas where land rights are based on local customs and practices but are not legally recognised. In many rural areas, local accountability mechanisms for the management of community lands that used to function well are no longer appropriate. Many traditional rulers no longer depend on the local council of elders for that management role. There is also limited transparency and participation by communities in land management with few accountability mechanisms to check traditional and local administrative authorities. New policies are therefore required to regulate local land management.

Since elected local officials and entities depend on the local people for their mandate, they should be more answerable to them. But any new approach should build on existing customary institutions. One way to achieve this is for all stakeholders to work together to ensure that there is secure access to land for productive purposes for everyone and more inclusive land governance institutions at the local level.

The way forward: strengthening land tenure; devolving power

In this complex scenario, there are no magic bullets to solving food insecurity. While responses to date have focused on palliative measures such as humanitarian assistance and food storage, they have failed to address a vital factor: lack of land rights.[15] We argue that strong and accountable land tenure is critical to food security for both host communities and internally displaced people in the region, demanding new strategies. In 2011, the government began a process to revise its land legislation in consultation with stakeholders. The process is still ongoing but must be prioritised, and it will need to radically depart from the current land title registration system that has failed rural communities.

Another step towards sustainable food security will be devolving land management to locally elected officials and traditional authorities.

These representatives will need to engage with village councils — including marginalised communities — and recognise social differentiation within communities to secure fair access to farmland and pastures. For devolution to be effective, inclusive, transparent and accountable mechanisms will be required.

To enhance peaceful cohabitation, government, civil society organisations (CSOs) and the humanitarian agencies should support new spaces for meaningful and informed stakeholder dialogue on land access and land rights in areas with large populations of refugees and internally displaced.

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Notes

[1] World Bank (2011) Land Tenure Policy: Securing rights to reduce poverty and promote rural growth. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/437601468331908360/Land-tenure-policy-securing-rights-to-reduce-poverty-and-promote-rural-growth / [2] The population of the Far North region in 2013 was 3,803,138, with a population density of 110/km² (290/square miles). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Far_North_Region,_Cameroon / [3] According to the World Food Program, people are considered food secure when they have availability and adequate access at all times to sufficient, safe nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life. www.wfp.org/node/359289 / [4] European Commission (2016) Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/cameroon_en_3.pdf / [5] FAO (2017) Lake Chad Basin crisis: response strategy (2017-2019) Mitigating the impact of the crisis and strengthening the resilience and food security of conflict-affected communities. http://www.fao.org/3/a-bs126e.pdf / [6] Ahidjo, P (2012) Access to Land and the System of Land Ownership in Northern Cameroon. *Journal of Knowledge Management, Economics and Information* II(3). www.scientificpapers.org/wp-content/files/1284_Paul_AHIDJO_Access_to_land_and_the_system_of_land_ownership.pdf / [7] Koussoumna, N (2018) Revue des expériences de reconnaissance et sécurisation foncière des communautés du Nord Cameroun. / [8] FAO (2018) Country Briefs: Cameroon. www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=CMR / [9] International Organization for Migration (2017) Cameroon Displacement Report, Far North Region, Round 12, 27 November to 8 December 2017. / [10] UNHCR, Nigeria emergency. www.unhcr.org/nigeria-emergency.html / [11] UNHCR (2019) Nigeria emergency. www.unhcr.org/nigeria-emergency.html / [12] De Schutter, O (2012) Preliminary conclusions of the mission to Cameroon of Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (16-23 July 2012) / [13] Alden, E (2010) Whose Land Are You Giving Away Mr President? World Bank Conference on Land Policy and Administration / [14] Fombe L, Sama-Lang I, Fonjong L and Fongkimeh A (2013) Securing Tenure for Sustainable Livelihoods: A Case of Women Land Ownership in Anglophone Cameroon. / [15] NRC (2017) Déplacement forcé et accès au logement, à la terre et à la propriété : Cas de l'extrême-nord du Cameroun. https://tinyurl.com/y3wzxm59

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