

The London School of Economics and Political  
Science

Sleight of State: How Host Governments  
Influence International Humanitarian Response

**Anne Della Guardia**

A thesis submitted to the Department of International Relations of  
the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy, London, September 2024

## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

Why do some humanitarian crises and affected regions receive more than others that are also deserving of response? This research examines twin puzzles of humanitarian aid allocation and distribution that highlight divergences in the responsiveness of the humanitarian sector to different displacement situations, where similar zones of reception are *allocated* starkly different levels of response, and some conflict zones where aid *distribution* occurs face far greater constraints than others, despite otherwise similar logistical barriers. Drawing from a comparative ethnography of aid allocation and distribution in three crises in Cameroon, I build an argument that host government political incentives, shaped by subnational political dynamics, contribute to a dialogic relationship between humanitarian organizations, practitioners, and governments that leads to divergent outcomes in distinct crisis zones. I argue that it is the host government's domestic political stakes in different crises, and specifically its *i. security interests* and *ii. economic interests*, that predict how assistance is funneled. Although it can often be in a host government's interest to welcome humanitarian assistance, in other instances there are clear motivations to either entirely block these efforts or at least hinder and guide them to align with a government's interests and agendas. This argument is employed in explaining both puzzles of aid allocation and distribution and identifies four mechanisms through which host governments exert their influence over aid allocation and distribution at a regional level. I conceptualize a host government's abilities to exert its influence through the following four mechanisms identified through this research: *i. Access denial*, *ii. Administrative impediments* *iii. Physical constraints*, and *iv. Perception influence*.

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## Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the generous support, encouragement, and feedback from numerous individuals that accompanied me over these past four tumultuous but rewarding years.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor and mentor, Dr. Milli Lake, whose expertise, guidance, and constant encouragement provided the intellectual foundation for this work. I will forever be in awe of her admirable commitment to doctoral mentorship and am deeply indebted to her as a primary beneficiary of her dedication.

I would also like to recognize the exceptional staff of the LSE International Relations Department (IRD), who maintained an outstanding program despite the unprecedented challenges of the global pandemic, which affected much of my time at LSE, very unfortunately. Their resilience, adaptability, and dedication ensured that our academic community remained vibrant and connected during an immensely difficult period.

I am also indebted to family and friends, whose couches and spare rooms, “Zia Anne’s” in particular, were places of refuge during the nomadic fieldwork phase of this dissertation. Your company, children, animals, and music provided a welcome respite from doctoral life as well as a source of comfort and encouragement.

This research would not have possible without the many people of Cameroon who helped me along the way. I am profoundly grateful for the rich insights and experiences shared with me, and I hope this work honors and contributes to the communities that so graciously welcomed me. It is for them that this dissertation is written.

Finally, to my partner, Julian, your steadfast support has been a cornerstone throughout this journey. Your patience and empathy (not to mention all the extra housework!) have sustained me immeasurably, particularly during the most demanding phases of writing and research. Thank you for always believing in me and in this work, even in the moments when I struggled to, and for truly being the best partner in life.

To all of you: thank you. Your contributions, large and small, made this project possible.

*For all who have fled unfortunate circumstances  
for a better life elsewhere for themselves and their  
families—that they too might see the futures they  
have imagined realized.*



## Chapter 1. Introduction

Driving through the center of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, I am in the passenger seat alongside my humanitarian friend Simon, who is from the West region of Cameroon, as well as a few of his junior colleagues in the back seat. He points out the imposing monument at the center of the enormous roundabout that has “I love my country Cameroon” emblazoned in giant letters on all four sides of two perpendicular, overlapping arches. Simon tells me that even though road names are not really used, this section that dissects the city center is officially called the “Boulevard du 20 Mai”—Boulevard of May 20th. As in many other places, some of the street names here are derived from important dates in the country’s history.

We are stuck in traffic, so Simon can safely take his eyes off the road, and whips around to test his young colleagues in the back of the car: “*Do any of you know what the 20<sup>th</sup> of May refers to? And what year we are talking about?*” One answers that the French Cameroons gained independence from France in 1960, and the British Cameroons joined the new republic in 1961. “*Very good,*” Simon says, “*But that is not what the 20<sup>th</sup> of May is about.*”

He tells me that after the two colonized territories had joined together, the new republic’s first president held a referendum on May 20, 1972, whose result abolished the federal state’s less centralized form of governance and, in its place, established a unitary state that consolidated power in the central government. The day was selected as the country’s national day<sup>1</sup> and is a national holiday celebrated annually on May 20<sup>th</sup>.

“*And we’ve been united ever since!*” Simon says with a cheeky grin. “*Really, that’s the end of the story. There’s nothing to learn. You can leave now!*” he jokes, shaking his head and shooting me a pointed look.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not Cameroon’s independence day. A “*fête nationale*” is not quite the same; it is essentially a national public holiday of elevated importance compared to other public holidays.

Of course, Simon was being facetious, as he clarified with another joke: *“Oh yes, we’re so unified that we need a giant monument to convince everyone we are,”* he says, gesturing toward the monument at the center of the round-a-bout, as we still were stuck in traffic.

Simon was right: many of the national monuments and museums try very hard to cast the state’s narrative as one of national unity and harmony.<sup>2</sup> However, this is not an accurate depiction of Cameroon’s trajectory since independence at all. The reality of the country’s post-independence history has remained one home to an extremely diverse population and highly fractured society. And, although it has largely maintained stability for significant periods following independence (especially compared to many other sub-Saharan African former colonies), this is largely because of its highly autocratic form of government. There have been only two presidents since 1960, both of whom have displayed typical strongmen tactics in consolidating and maintaining power, which has meant little room for pluralism, much less unity amidst a climate of elite capture and highly marginalized regions and groups.

Simon was not only referring to that history but also to contemporary politics as they pertain to regional dynamics. Today, Cameroon can no longer tout itself as the bastion of “stability” it once was widely considered to be. Over the past decade, the country finds itself host to three major humanitarian crisis zones, which form the basis of the main puzzles of this work. I elaborate on these below.

## **1. Two Puzzles**

In the past decade, Cameroon has contended with three major humanitarian crises. (See Figure 1 below for reference.) The oldest of the three is found in the eastern regions of the country bordering the Central African Republic (CAR). Refugees began arriving from CAR in 2003, but the most significant arrivals began in 2013 after the current civil war in CAR erupted.

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<sup>2</sup> If ever you find yourself in Yaoundé, I recommend a visit to the National Museum, which is an exemplary case of historical erasure.

Shortly after in 2014, in the northern extremities of the country, violence perpetrated by groups collectively referred to as Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin began spilling over into the Far North region. Just a few years later in 2016, long-simmering tensions to the west of the country boiled over in the anglophone regions of Cameroon, where unrest eventually escalated into a secessionist civil war in October 2017, referred to as the “Anglophone Crisis” for brevity.<sup>3</sup>

All these crises have warranted and garnered the attention of the international humanitarian community. However, by examining these three crises, there are glaring disparities in the humanitarian response that emerged across otherwise similar contexts. The following section unpacks these before embarking on an explanation of the principal argument this work advances.

My focus in this work is on humanitarian aid allocation and distribution as it relates to dynamics of forced displacement. It is important to understand the distinction between aid allocation and distribution. These distinctions are significant as they are discrete steps in administering aid and understanding them sheds light on two puzzles in the humanitarian response to Cameroon’s three crisis zones.

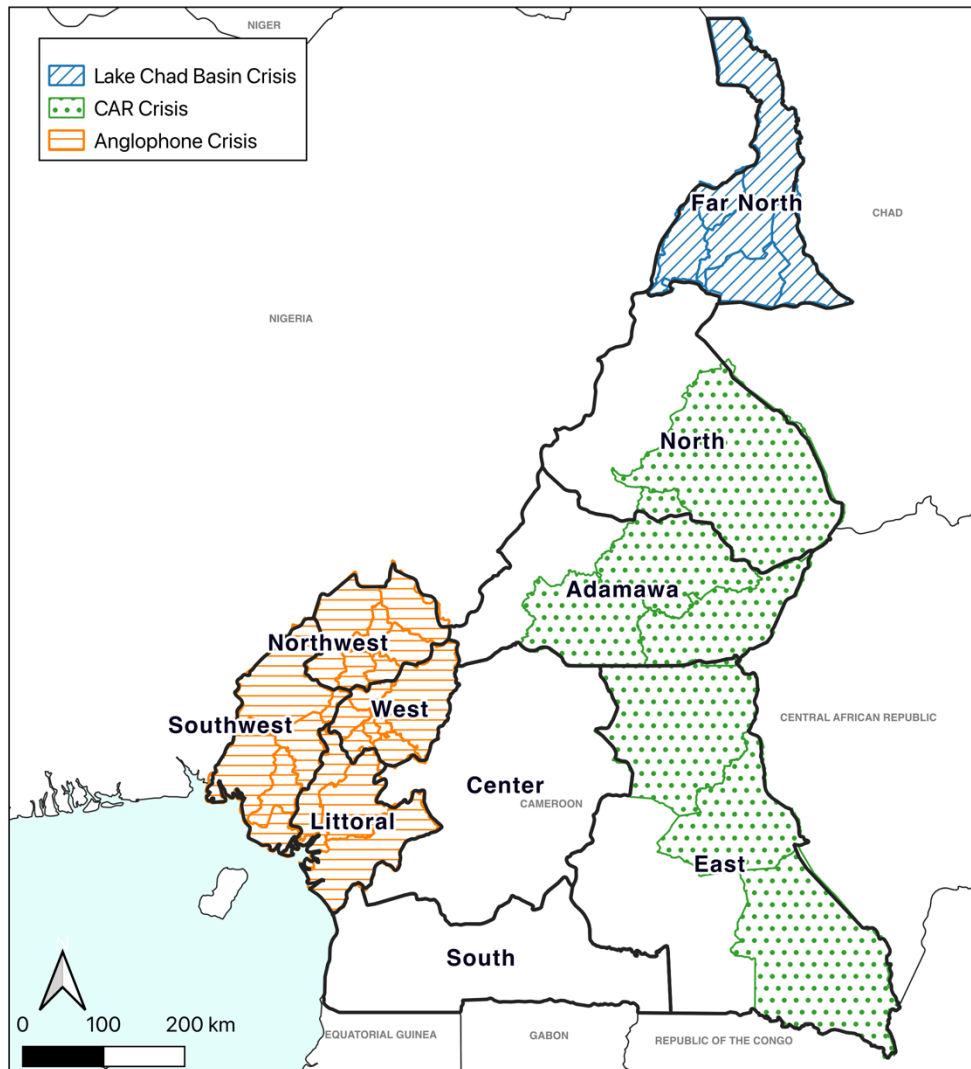
Aid allocation refers to how humanitarians decide to allocate resources. Aid organizations clearly must make decisions of where to allocate resources (particularly funding, but also other material and human resources) within a given crisis. Humanitarian organizations thus inevitably make decisions about where and how much of these resources go and to what kinds of programming and partner organizations. These allocation decisions represent targets of what

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<sup>3</sup> I use “Anglophone Crisis” throughout this dissertation, as the more commonly used name by humanitarians (i.e. “Northwest-Southwest Crisis”) can be confusing, given sometimes it is the entire crisis that is of relevance, while at others, it is distinct administrative units within the crisis. Although this crisis affects many regions, the two primary administrative regions affected are the titular Northwest and Southwest regions, which are home to the country’s anglophone populations. Some discourage the use of the term “Anglophone Crisis” for a variety of reasons, but in part because it suggests the nature of the crisis is one-sided when in fact the state plays a major role. Some also suggest that this can sometimes be interpreted as victim-blaming, so the term is not always preferred or used. I resisted using it myself for most of the duration of this project, however I now apply it here only in the interest of clarity, as no other term was more suitable.

a plan aims to achieve rather than actuals and are indicative of humanitarian priorities and the severity of needs. By looking at how resources are *intended* to be used, this can highlight surprising disparities in which regions are deemed priority areas of intervention.

**Figure 1. Cameroon's Crisis Zones and Affected Regions**



Aid distribution is distinct from allocation, as rather than capturing where resources are initially allocated (i.e. where they are intended to be used), distribution captures the de facto delivery of material aid like food and other basic supplies to populations in need or running programs and services for those populations in areas of intervention. Nonetheless, looking at how and the degree to which aid distribution has operated in each crisis reveals significant disparities, especially as relates to humanitarian access constraints, which directly impact the delivery of material aid and programming.

I next turn to unveiling the twin puzzles of aid allocation and distribution in Cameroon that motivate the research questions underpinning this work.

## 1.1 Puzzles of Aid Allocation and Distribution

When comparing Cameroon's three crisis zones broadly, the allocation of aid resources appears at first glance to correspond with crisis severity and needs. This is especially true for the regions facing active conflict. It is to be expected that crisis zones facing ongoing conflict and violence would be allocated greater resources than more stable reception zones, given that humanitarians prioritize areas with more urgent and severe needs. This is indeed the case in Cameroon. Yet, when comparing regions *without* active armed group activity, a curious puzzle emerges.

The regions affected by the CAR Crisis, (i.e. the North, Adamawa and East regions) are characterized as zones of reception for the CAR conflict across the border. These regions are more stable than elsewhere in the country, and humanitarian needs and programming center around resiliency, self-sufficiency, and integration rather than urgent life-saving aid.

On the other side of the country, the Anglophone Crisis affects four regions that comprise the western power bloc of Cameroon. While two of the regions are anglophone and the other two are francophone, and hence have diverging histories, both represent major strongholds of resistance and opposition to the state's centers of power. The anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions, which are sometimes referred to as the "conflict zones" of this crisis, because they are where virtually all the conflict and violence related to this civil war is located.

The Anglophone Crisis *also* affects the francophone West and Littoral regions, but they are distinct from the conflict zones. This is because they are primarily "reception or receiving zones" of this crisis, rather than places where conflict and violence is concentrated. While the conflict zones also host significant numbers of displaced people, the West and Littoral reception zones are by-and-large *only* places that have received and continue to host significant

numbers of IDPs from the Northwest and Southwest conflict zones. Importantly, although these reception regions may experience very occasional spillover events from the neighboring conflict regions, they are clearly and significantly more stable and peaceful than the conflict zones.

It is key to grasp this distinction between the conflict zones of the Anglophone Crisis (i.e. the Northwest and Southwest regions) and the reception zones (i.e. the West and Littoral), because this distinction forms a primary tenet underpinning this puzzle.<sup>4</sup> By virtue of the reception zones being removed from the active conflict zones—and therefore being mostly free of conflict-related violence—this makes these reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis comparable to the CAR Crisis affected regions that are also major zones of reception. These CAR regions hosting refugees are also relatively stable and free of the lion’s share of conflict-related skirmishes across the border in CAR.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, the West and Littoral regions have received internally displaced people from the Northwest and Southwest regions since the start of the crisis, and the needs identified here are quite urgent. They range from life-saving needs related to health, to programming that is more characteristic of more peaceful post-displacement contexts like resilience and integration programming. On top of this, the West and Littoral have received higher crisis severity ratings than the CAR reception regions in many years since the outbreak of the Anglophone Crisis.

Therefore, the kind of programming demanded and the crisis severity rating in the West and Littoral reflect more urgent needs in those reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis than in the CAR Crisis regions. And yet, it is the CAR reception zones that continue to be allocated *far more* resources than those in the Anglophone Crisis.

Not only do the CAR regions receive noticeably more response, but in most years since the crisis began, the Anglophone reception regions have been omitted as target regions altogether, receiving little to no funding allocation.

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<sup>4</sup> These definitions are given a more detailed treatment in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Figure 1 above on page 12 for clarity on the geography of the different crisis-affected regions.

What's more, although the Littoral has recently attracted some funding for programming, the West continues to be marginalized, despite having more acute needs than the Littoral.

It should strike us as puzzling that these Anglophone Crisis reception regions have fewer resources allocated to them than the CAR Crisis reception regions. Put plainly, the Anglophone Crisis reception zones of the West and Littoral regions (where many IDPs from the conflict zones of the crisis have fled) have received markedly limited humanitarian response compared to the reception zones affected by the CAR Crisis in the North, Adamawa and East regions. I define this disparity as the puzzle of *aid allocation*. This provokes the question:

*Why are regions that are clearly deserving of response consistently deprioritized in aid allocation when other comparable regions that are deemed less urgent are allocated relatively greater response?*

The second puzzle I address in this project pertains to distribution. I use experiences of aid distribution in Cameroon to unpack a twin puzzle. Notably, it quickly becomes apparent that disparities exist in these dynamics too, where some priority regions with urgent needs have received far less aid than anticipated, particularly when accounting for how humanitarian organizations prioritize.

In short, relative to the urgency and severity of needs and numbers of populations in need, the Anglophone Crisis has received less funding per capita than the Far North region of Cameroon affected by the Lake Chad Basin Crisis. Additionally, although both crises face significant hurdles to aid distribution, distribution in the Anglophone Crisis is significantly more difficult, while distribution in the Lake Chad Basin where Boko Haram is active has been relatively easier.

In regions where active conflict and violence are ongoing, whether a civil war or another form of irregular war like Boko Haram or other non-state armed group activity, we would naturally expect impediments to access. Typical

constraints like combat-related insecurity and physical barriers like inaccessible roads due to seasonal flooding and poor infrastructure are found in both crisis contexts. But humanitarians also face other prohibitively stringent barriers to delivery in the Anglophone regions that are either not an issue in the Lake Chad Basin or appear to a minimal degree by comparison. This makes aid distribution much more straight-forward in the Lake Chad Basin than in the Anglophone regions.

It is puzzling that humanitarian aid distribution should be so markedly more difficult in one irregular conflict setting in the Anglophone regions compared to the ongoing irregular conflict in the Lake Chad Basin. This is especially striking given there are advantages to operating in the Anglophone Crisis zones that should facilitate aid distribution compared to the comparatively far more remote and under-developed context of the Far North amidst the Lake Chad Basin Crisis.

This points to a puzzle of *aid distribution*, and motivates a second set of questions underpinning this project:

*Why does one urgent crisis amidst irregular conflict (Anglophone Crisis) receive relatively less humanitarian aid distribution than another (Lake Chad Basin Crisis) when the scale and severity of needs would predict otherwise?*

As will later be illustrated, I argue that this is primarily due to more onerous access constraints imposed by the government in the Anglophone Crisis than in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, which begs the second related question of:

*Why is aid distribution constrained to such a greater degree in one irregular conflict setting (Anglophone Crisis) than another (Lake Chad Basin Crisis) despite comparable physical barriers to delivery as well as contextual features suggesting delivery should be facilitated in the Anglophone Crisis?*

These twin puzzles of allocation and distribution highlight divergences in the responsiveness of the humanitarian sector to different displacement situations. This suggests that an ordering emerges, whereby similar zones of



reception are not only *allocated* more or less humanitarian response compared to others, but humanitarians carrying out aid *distribution* also face far greater constraints in delivering aid in certain conflict regions than others, despite seemingly similar logistical barriers.

Drawing from a comparative ethnography of aid allocation and distribution in three crisis zones, I build an argument that host government *political* incentives, shaped by subnational political dynamics, contribute to a dialogic relationship between humanitarian organizations, practitioners, and governments that leads to divergent outcomes in distinct crisis zones. This argument is employed in explaining both puzzles of aid allocation and distribution and motivates the third and final question addressed in this work. If it is the host government's political incentives that explains the variation observed in aid allocation and distribution in these puzzles, how exactly do host governments exert their agency over these processes that are seemingly under international humanitarian aid organizations' control? More succinctly, I ask:

*How do host governments obstruct or manipulate aid allocation and distribution to their advantage?*

These patterns of greater or lesser humanitarian aid response allocation and distribution motivate everything in the chapters that follow. In the remainder of this chapter, I briefly summarize the argument and explain the mechanisms through which host governments can obstruct aid, followed by a summary of the methods employed to generate the findings as well as an overview of the major contributions. I then lay out expectations for the rest of the dissertation in an outline of the chapters that follow.

## **2. The Argument**

Disparities in aid allocation and distribution can be elucidated by examining the substate political dynamics between the three distinct regions of Cameroon and the central government. I argue that it is the host government's domestic political stakes in different crises and affected populations that predict how assistance is funneled. While existing literature might lead us to

explanations driven by international actor agency and interests or more systemic arguments stemming from the international humanitarian architecture, my analysis of the three crisis zones in Cameroon reveals that each of these are insufficient for resolving the twin puzzles at hand.

Instead of external actors as the most important causal agents, I argue that host governments exert much more influence on assistance decisions than they are normally credited for. This is a function of their responsiveness to local politics which, in turn, shape how humanitarian resources reach different crises. Although it can often be in a host government's interest to welcome humanitarian assistance, in other instances there are clear motivations to either entirely block these efforts or at least hinder and guide them to align with the government's interests and agendas. I elucidate these dynamics through a comparative ethnography of the three distinct zones of reception.

The argument is composed of two main threads defined by: *i.* the government's *security interests* in each crisis context, and *ii.* the government's *economic interests* in the regions affected by a crisis. Specifically, it is: *i.* the *threat potential*, indicated by the state's security interests, combined with *ii.* the *value* of a given crisis region, represented by the state's economic interests, that shape the government's decisions to either facilitate, obstruct or deny aid in certain regions and crises. I argue that together these explain diverging government incentives and resulting behaviors toward different crises and affected regions and that these behaviours profoundly affect humanitarian response activities in ways that reflect the disparities documented above. Government incentives are bound up in the notion that states must consider both security and economic incentives that are important to their political survival. The crux of this line of reasoning rests on the notion that incumbent regimes must weigh the potential reward of facilitating assistance to populations in need with the risks of potentially funnelling aid to their adversaries.

A host government's security interests in places affected by conflict crises rest on the threat potential that different populations and security contexts represent. These security interests vary depending on *i.* the political-historical relations within each crisis-affected region, and *ii.* the nature of insecurity in a crisis context and the government's involvement in different conflict and

displacement scenarios, especially vis à vis its relationship to non-state armed groups and civilian populations in affected regions.

The first of these set of security interests are the domestic politics and historical relationships between the central government and different regions and peoples, which intervene significantly in shaping local dynamics that affect assistance flows. It is the variation in the relationship between a government and different regions, given diverging regional histories, politics, and socioeconomics, that figures into the government's calculations of a given region's threat potential. The degree to which a region is considered a viable threat to the government's political survival then shapes expectations of host government behavior toward different crises.

The second set of security interests involves the nature of insecurity in a crisis context and the government's role in and relationship to each. In instances of low levels of insecurity that are reception zones of displacement, out of the crossfire of conflict, the security interests of a government largely center around maintaining stability. In these places, the government has incentives to ensure that the conflict and violence that has spurred the arrival of displaced people does not spread. In conflict zones, where there is active combat and skirmishes between belligerents as well as one-sided violence against civilians, states can view populations more or less favorably. This is dependent on the degree to which they perceive local populations' allegiances might lie with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and are therefore liable to support the government's adversaries and thereby are viewed as defectors helping to maintain their opponents' strength. These too shape a government's calculations of threat potential and thereby condition its behavior toward aid response.

Economic interests also have important political implications for a state's power and political survival. This is due to the potential gains it stands to derive from directing assistance to certain regions as well as the economic value of different sub-national regions and their potential for the state to extract income and other benefits from them. The government behaves in ways that seek to either augment these interests for additional advantages, or protect these interests to avoid losses, to maximize the potential utility of a region or

territory for its political survival. These interests then influence a host state's decision to approach humanitarian assistance in ways that either facilitate or hinder its allocation and delivery, in line with what is most beneficial to the host government.

However, I argue that these economic interests are subordinate to security interests, as even though advancing or protecting them may bolster a government's strength and chances for political survival, the foremost concern for a government is in considering imminent threats as opposed to factors that contribute to longer-term gains.

In the following chapters I make explicit how government interests and subnational politics intersect with humanitarian response in each of Cameroon's three crises. What's more, they provide illustrative cases that illuminate the two puzzles of aid allocation and distribution outlined above. As will be made explicit in detail in Chapter 5, the Cameroonian government has deeply diverging incentives vis-à-vis different crises and regions. This means that, in a country with several ongoing crises, and indeed in different crises over time, humanitarian access, allocation, and distribution might differ significantly as a function of varying host government incentives and behavior. The complex interplay between the central government, humanitarian organizations, practitioners, and affected regions creates dramatically different landscapes for displaced populations in each crisis zone. I show how the variation in subnational political contexts shape the government's ensuing interests, and conditions the government's behavior toward each crisis and each affected region. As will be elucidated in Chapter 5, these interests align with observed behavior of the government of Cameroon toward response dynamics.

These sub-national relationships suggest clear incentives for the government of Cameroon to facilitate a robust humanitarian response in the CAR Crisis affected regions of the North, Adamawa and East. They also mostly suggest incentives to facilitate response in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis' affected Far North region. Importantly, however, they further suggest that the government should tightly control, hinder or block humanitarian response allocation or distribution to the extent possible in the Anglophone Crisis' affected regions in the Northwest, Southwest, West and Littoral.

To summarize, the government is generally incentivized to *facilitate* the allocation and distribution of aid in the regions affected by the Lake Chad Basin Crisis and the CAR Crisis but is incentivized to *obstruct* aid to the Anglophone Crisis regions. In the following section I illustrate *how* government obstruction of aid allocation and distribution manifest by elucidating four mechanisms of obstruction.

### 3. Mechanisms of Obstruction

How exactly do host governments facilitate or obstruct humanitarian response? I outline four mechanisms through which host governments exert their influence over aid allocation and distribution at a regional level. Specifically, I classify host governments' abilities to exert their influence through the following mechanisms: *i. Access denial*, *ii. Administrative impediments*, *iii. Physical constraints*, and *iv. Perception influence*. I briefly expand on these, as they are expanded upon at length in Chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7.

Humanitarian access denial can take a variety of forms at different junctures of administering humanitarian response. At the most extreme end of the spectrum is: *i. access denial*, where organizations or a set of organizations might be prohibited from entering the country. Or, if already present in the country, organizations might be prohibited from operating in certain areas or face such extreme hurdles that their operations and movements of human resources and supplies into affected regions are prohibited or severely restricted, effectively resulting in access denial writ large.

A more common mechanism than overt access denial is one that may manifest in a variety of ways through (*ii.*) *administrative impediments* that host governments can impose to achieve obstruction by delaying operational processes following authorization of operations more broadly. Their aim is either to influence operations in such a way that they never are implemented or distributed at all or are administered so slowly that the response is ineffective, too little too late, or significantly hindered at the very least. Once organizations have their response plans and access is broadly approved, then access denial

can continue to happen on an *ad hoc* basis before or during specific missions to disburse supplies or carry out programming. Before a delivery mission takes place, obstruction and denial occur mainly because of administrative obstacles. For instance, visa or diplomatic ID applications or renewals can be denied or delayed, or heavy approvals processes for aid distribution operations can be so onerous that they cause significant delays and complications in planning.

After a delivery mission has begun, (iii.) physical constraints are the more likely hindrance to aid operations and can either delay, suspend or abort operations entirely. These are of four types: *i. Environmental constraints; ii. Conflict-related insecurity; iii. Non-state armed group (NSAG) territorial control tactics; and iv. Government territorial control tactics.* While I clarify these in Chapter 2, in this research I only focus on *government territorial control tactics*, given it is the government's agency that is most theoretically salient.

Finally, the host governments can also exert influence surreptitiously over allocation and distribution through indirect tactics that aim to strategically (iv.) influence perceptions to their advantage. These range from: influencing what information humanitarian actors use to make decisions; contesting aid organization assessments, data and claims; limiting or masking information; and leveraging media.

Next, I turn to summarizing the methods employed to study Cameroon's humanitarian contexts.

## **4. Methods**

The project adopts a research design that draws from the comparative tradition while leveraging ethnographic methodology. Essentially, I employed ethnographic methods of data collection to support a research design of within-case comparison case study analyses to answer the two puzzles I outlined above. I adopted this approach, because it allowed for an inductive process of inquiry ideal for rich, in-depth contextual analysis necessary for disentangling mechanisms, while also allowing for the examination of variable-oriented causal questions.

Cameroon was well suited to the research question at hand as a country that is unfortunately contending with more than one displacement crisis. Its context made a within-case comparison of different crises possible and highlighted disparities in response that eventually pointed to the focus of government obstruction to aid response, because of observed divergences in experiences that emerged over the course of the research.

To explore the disparities identified above, I employed a comparative case study approach using Mill's method of difference — also known as a most-similar design. This approach is well-suited for comparisons of sub-national units, as it leverages the similarities of contexts within states to minimize the extent to which multiple sources of causation obstruct the ability to make inferences about the relationship in question (Moses & Knutsen, 2012).

I adopted an ethnographic approach where data collection included a range of documentary evidence from humanitarian operational repositories as well as interviews, informal conversations and interactions, and participant observation. To glean a comprehensive understanding of the humanitarian responses to the major present crises in Cameroon over time and how they might differ from one another, I compiled humanitarian operational documents and datasets from the past decade. This helped to develop my understanding of humanitarian decision-making in resource allocation and allowed for comparisons of population sizes of people in need, crisis severity rankings, and financial flows. It also allowed me to understand the common narrative that humanitarian personnel have internalized and based their operations upon.

While documentary data collection began in 2022, fieldwork for this research was conducted between January and December in 2023. This research also drew on prior lived experience in the country, where I lived and worked in 2018. This previous experience was relevant to the subject, as I worked in field operations for a major humanitarian organization and therefore obtained firsthand experience of the country context as well as insights into the sector's operations and decision-making.

Ethnographic research in each of the three zones involved spending time among humanitarians in different guises. In the Far North affected by the Lake

Chad Basin Crisis, I immersed myself among Cameroonian humanitarians working for a local organization that carried out major international donor-funded interventions. In the East region affected by the CAR Crisis, I travelled to Batouri where I spent time with Cameroonian humanitarians working for an international NGO at their office compound and went on mission with staff as a passenger in a convoy through their zones of intervention. I also attended a debriefing and introduction meeting with a local government representative and observed areas of project implementation. In the West region of the Anglophone Crisis, I spent significant time traveling around the region conversing with humanitarians and civilians in crisis affected areas, as well as shadowed a local NGO on missions and observed program activities in intervention sites.

In addition to these more immersive activities and site visits, I also conducted formal interviews with individuals who represented a wide variety of roles and organizations in Cameroon's displacement response architecture. Interviewees were comprised of international humanitarian and development organization staff, local and national Cameroonian NGO staff, government personnel (including military and local administrators), international donor agency representatives, and, at times, displaced people themselves. These were conducted in the capital, Yaoundé, and in each of the three crisis zones in Maroua (Far North region, Lake Chad Basin Crisis); Dschang, Bafoussam and environs (West region, Anglophone Crisis); and Batouri and environs (East region, CAR Crisis).

Additionally, although adverse experiences about displacement and the relevant contexts came up in interviews, the focus of the research did not demand that participants recount their displacement experiences necessarily. Because the focus of the research was on the assistance delivered and experiences of humanitarian actors trying to deliver aid and allocate limited resources, this allowed humanitarian staff and a few displaced participants to avoid talking about sensitive issues experienced before or during



displacement.<sup>6</sup> Most often, conversations revolved around humanitarians' experiences and the assistance they administered separate from the specific experiences of trauma of displaced people, so these delicate conversations did not comprise a significant portion of the data collected in-person. I therefore generally avoided ethical conundrums surrounding sensitive experiences of conflict and violence. A more in-depth discussion of my approach to contending with ethical dilemmas relevant to conflict and migration research are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

## 5. Contributions

It should be emphasized that the puzzles unveiled by this research are by no means limited to Cameroon. Displacement contexts across the world reveal ample examples of host government obstruction of humanitarian assistance. From the Sudans to Myanmar, Indonesia, Tunisia, Israel, and Colombia, host governments receiving international humanitarian assistance engage in similar tactics as those elucidated by this work, as well as others. What's more, these dynamics are not only relevant to places receiving international assistance, but also in higher-income states that receive migrants and engage in obstructive tactics to advance their own interests in shirking asylum responsibilities and in discouraging migration altogether.

This work challenges the conventional wisdom that donor interests are the singular driver of foreign aid allocation and distribution. Although there is ample literature on aid allocation at national levels and on how governments receiving development aid wield their influence, a burgeoning literature has begun to show that recipient states also behave strategically in response to aid at subnational levels and can influence aid flows to and within their countries. This work expands upon this line of thinking by examining the ways that host

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<sup>6</sup> Only did those issues come up if the participant brought them up of their own volition. As a rule, I never initiated those discussions, nor did I probe unless it was clear that merely listening might be perceived as insensitive, or if they otherwise indicated they were willing to share, as my primary aim was to avoid re-traumatization or triggering of any kind for participants.

states exert their agency in influencing aid allocation and distribution sub-nationally.

The current scholarship examining recipient state or host government<sup>7</sup> behavior toward aid has mainly considered how states might behave by appropriating or redirecting funds to their own advantage (e.g. by supporting their elite base to secure their political survival) or alleviating their public spending budgets so they are able to spend more strategically than pro-socially.

And the scholarship that examines how recipient states influence aid allocation has by-and-large ignored latter parts of the process like the iterative donor-recipient state bargaining process or how aid is implemented at subnational levels. Consequently, aid flows are given high-level, opaque treatments and are assumed to be administered in line with donor preferences that recipient countries accept and comply with (when these align with their interests) (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009). Donor control of the process is typically assumed (Findley, 2018), suggesting that fears related to elite capture (if not fungibility) are assuaged at the very least.

However, more recent work has shown that recipient states have greater influence on aid allocation than conventionally assumed (Abdulai & Hulme 2015; Briggs, 2014; Bush, 2015; Hodler and Raschky, 2014; Jablonski, 2014). This work demonstrates that host governments receiving aid have a much greater repertoire to draw from when considering how to leverage aid flows to their advantage than mere misappropriation and fungibility – even when flows remain under the control of aid organizations.

Overall, aid allocation is under-theorized, and this literature has centered mainly on foreign aid at the national level. What literature does exist on humanitarian aid allocation tends to be limited to disasters rather than emergencies stemming from conflict or violence. And literature that looks at host state behavior specifically in humanitarian aid has thus far studied instances of host states rejecting offers of international assistance, attributing

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<sup>7</sup> The literature on foreign aid for economic development rather than humanitarian assistance uses “recipient state”, whereas “host government” is more often used when speaking of humanitarian contexts.

this behavior to reputational incentives and the host state's desire to signal competence (Carnegie and Dolan, 2021; Grossman, 2021). Therefore, I aim to contribute to the literature on aid allocation by offering theory-building insights relevant to humanitarian aid allocation sub-nationally.

In addition, scholars have stressed the need for advancing research on aid allocation – particularly in the context of conflict and especially of the currently insufficiently examined micro-foundational assumptions about aid processes and flows to beneficiaries (Findley, 2018). This work aims to contribute to our collective understanding of those processes through micro-foundational theoretical work that contributes to this gap by examining why specific locations and recipients within a state receiving aid are chosen over others. Perhaps more significantly, it also contributes by specifying mechanisms that affect allocation and distribution processes in conflict-affected contexts.

What's more, much of the literature examining the politics of aid allocation has specifically focused on development aid, as opposed to humanitarian aid. This work expands on the current knowledge of the politics of foreign assistance by elaborating upon dynamics of an understudied form of aid that also have potential application for development aid. In addition, because most of this research has concentrated on national-level aid allocation, this project makes a substantive contribution by examining subnational allocation as well as aid distribution, both of which are undertheorized in the literature.

I therefore aim to make two broad theoretical contributions. The first offers insights into how diverging subnational dynamics (e.g. the stakes of host government actors) shape distributive dynamics differently in different subregions. The second elaborates upon existing aid allocation literature by applying it to undertheorized contexts where humanitarian assistance is distributed to conflict displacement crises.

This work also contributes broadly to the political violence literature by elaborating on civil war and substate conflict dynamics from the understudied perspective of humanitarian actors. It also contributes substantively by elucidating how state behavior can vary in different irregular conflicts and in

elaborating upon dynamics of contentious politics between the state, migrants, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups.

## 6. Chapter Outline

This dissertation demonstrates how host governments manipulate displacement aid allocation and distribution through four mechanisms. As will become evident, this research is primarily concerned with places that have called on international aid actors to respond to humanitarian crises within the host state's borders, which typically involve lower- to middle-income states.<sup>8</sup> However, while this work entails the comparison of three emergencies within one country case in sub-Saharan Africa, it has broader potential for application within the African continent and beyond as well. Aid and host government obstruction tactics have direct salience anywhere that receives international humanitarian aid, but the arguments here are especially relevant in conflict-affected regions of the world – within sub-Saharan Africa and other middle- and lower-income contexts – and beyond as well.

I organize this inquiry in nine chapters. The following chapter, Chapter 2, elaborates upon the theoretical expectations and foundations of the main argument by elucidating the key literature, specifying and operationalizing key concepts, and explaining the theorized mechanisms through which governments obstruct humanitarian aid allocation and distribution. Chapter 3 describes my methodological approach and details my research design, as well as what data collection and analysis entailed. Chapter 4 justifies the twin puzzles of allocation and distribution found in Cameroon and provides crucial background on its context. Chapter 5 then puts forth contextual evidence from Cameroon to elucidate the incentive structures that shape the government's relationship with each of the crisis-affected populations. In Chapters 6 and 7, I lay out the empirics of how the mechanisms of obstruction apply to aid

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<sup>8</sup> I draw on the classifications from the World Bank's country classification that uses gross national income (GNI) per capita data in U.S. dollars to classify states in one of four categories: low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high-income states. (See, for example: World Bank, n.d.).

allocation (Chapter 6) and distribution (Chapter 7), respectively, comparing the three crisis contexts within the country. To conclude, I examine how these dynamics travel beyond the Cameroonian case in other African contexts but beyond to other continents as well (Chapter 8). I conclude in Chapter 9 with a discussion of the theoretical and policy contributions and implications of the findings, beyond the Cameroonian case.

## **Chapter 2. A Theory of Host Government Obstruction & Denial of Aid**

In Cameroon and beyond, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees do not always receive the same level of response, and some crisis zones appear to be prioritized over others. This disparity underpins the overarching question of this work in building understanding of why some crises and regions are prioritized over others with urgent needs that are also deserving of aid. In answering these questions, this work contributes to literatures examining the dynamics of international assistance delivery in the context of humanitarian emergencies stemming from conflict and violence.

In explaining divergence in response to different crises, regions, and populations within states, the literature on the humanitarian response system might offer relevant explanations. Given separate development of the institutions that support response to refugees and IDPs, it follows that this would plausibly explain any divergences in responses between situations involving these different populations. Relatedly, given host government's different relationship and obligations to these populations, this also could have explanatory power for differential response. However, as will be detailed further below, these explanations are insufficient for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these are that the humanitarian architecture fails to explain variation in response for the same kinds of displaced populations, and improvements to the response of IDPs over the past several decades indicate that previous failings can no longer be blamed for explaining major divergences in response to those populations. What's more, arguments leveraging state sovereignty and legal disparities also fall short, given states may choose whether to comply or not with obligations to displaced populations whether those obligations are enshrined in law or not. This weakens the notion that disparate legal protections for refugees and IDPs are what explain divergences in their response.

In the same vein, a vast literature on the politics of international aid and the emphasis on international organizations and the role of donors provides ample

evidence for their influence in allocation at the national level and suggests significant control over aid flows. It follows then that these foreign actors would be the most likely actors in explaining variation in aid response within states as well, in processes following initial state-level allocation. However, looking to international actors like NGOs and IGOs for answers to the questions of this work leaves us wanting, given the improbability that individual actors' actions would explain regional trends over large areas. More likely would be the influence of many of these actors, however, this explanation is debunked below when considering the international aid system. Evidence that these actors generally follow very principled action also undermines their potential as viable explanations for subnational disparities in aid distribution and allocation that deprioritizes certain populations with urgent needs.

I therefore turn to the role of the host or recipient state as the most likely causal actor. The agency of these states in aid allocation processes is often understated, given broad support for the claim that donor interests dictate aid allocation (e.g. Bermeo, 2011; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Kapfer et al., 2007; Kono & Montinola, 2009). Literature that has looked at recipient or host state behavior has tended to center on political and economic behavior in reaction to receiving aid, which has often focused on state misuse or capture (e.g. Svensson, 2000, Brautigam and Knack, 2004; Reinikka and Svensson, 2004; Gibson et al., 2005; Djankov et al., 2008).

This work therefore contributes to this area of research that is ripe for exploration by examining states receiving assistance as one of the actors that matters most when considering how and why different regions affected by crisis might benefit from more or less humanitarian assistance. I argue that divergences in humanitarian aid allocation and delivery can result not only from donor and international organizations' interests and priorities, but also as a result of the recipient state's strategic calculations in response to divergent incentives in different crisis situations. I also demonstrate how a host government might achieve this even when aid funding bypasses government control through project aid that is directly funneled through aid organizations. I do this in identifying four mechanisms through which host governments can obstruct and deny aid, which suggest a variety of other manners of influence beyond existing explanations of fungibility, misappropriation, or elite capture by other means.

The following chapter lays out the theoretical foundations for my argument, alongside potential explanations generated by existing literature. I do so first by defining the core concepts of the research. This is then followed by a discussion of the essential literature on the international humanitarian response system and the politics of aid flows to evaluate two central alternative explanations of variation in response to different crises. The first is grounded in divergent legal frameworks and the humanitarian response architecture. I first show how the legal frameworks that govern displacement necessarily shape displacement responses in host countries, creating different obligations on host governments for refugees and internally displaced populations. While features of these legal frameworks create some disparities in the distribution and delivery of displacement support, they cannot fully explain divergences we observe in Cameroon and elsewhere. This is particularly true since similarly situated populations in different regions have received different levels of support. I then turn to the literature on the politics of international aid and specifically the role of different international actors in determining aid allocation and distribution. I demonstrate that foreign donor and international aid organization agency are insufficient in explaining sub-national variation in aid response as well.

After reviewing these two explanations in the existing literature, the chapter delineates the core argument, which complements and builds on this literature. In contrast to i. the legal and structural argument of the humanitarian response system's interaction with sovereign states, and ii. the dominant narrative of international actor influence in the foreign aid literature, I argue that the domestic political context profoundly shapes the incentive structures faced by host governments. These, in turn, structure their support – or obstruction – of aid for differently situated displaced populations and other crisis-affected populations. I show that the identities of displacement-affected populations, including host communities, intersect with the government's own political interests and objectives, which can often trump international legal and donor priorities. I conclude by detailing the resulting expectations for the empirics and summarize the four mechanisms through which governments can facilitate and obstruct displacement response, which include: *i. Access denial, ii. Administrative impediments, iii. Physical constraints, and iv. Perception influence.*



# 1. Central Concepts

This project examines processes that influence humanitarian assistance to populations displaced by conflict and violence. There are many kinds of displaced groups as defined by their legal status and displacement experiences. Refugees and asylum seekers are those who have fled their country of origin to a host country due to a “well-founded fear of persecution”; they by definition have crossed a border (United Nations General Assembly, 1951). Refugees and asylum seekers are technically distinct, as refugees have been granted asylum and have formal refugee status, while asylum seekers have not yet attained such status. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) have also fled their points of origin for the same reasons as refugees and asylum seekers, but they have not left their country of citizenship by crossing an international border. Returnees have returned to their points of origin and may have previously been refugees, asylum seekers or IDPs. In this work, I include refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs, combining refugees and asylum seekers in the same category, given humanitarian data and personnel most often do the same, clouding how these two groups may differ in the assistance they receive. I leave it to future scholars to untangle their differential dynamics and experiences.

A core underpinning of the assistance that is delivered to displaced populations is its funding, and therefore, *humanitarian aid*, funding or assistance should be distinguished from its *foreign aid* counterpart. Humanitarian aid is often used more broadly to refer to not only its funding, but the entire response, including programming and material aid. This broader application is also adopted in this work. The key distinction of the term is with *foreign aid*, which encapsulates assistance that targets long-term economic development, while *humanitarian aid* refers to assistance that responds to conflict and natural disaster emergencies. While aid flows are no longer always neatly categorized as such, this is the fundamental distinction that is necessary to orient oneself in the literature that this research speaks to.

In speaking about humanitarian aid, I most often will use this term for clarity to distinguish it from foreign aid, except in instances where context should indicate that by referring to the processes under study, I am specifically

referring to humanitarian aid, as opposed to foreign aid. At times, I therefore refer to humanitarian aid simply as “assistance”, “aid” or “response”. The context of those phrases should indicate I mean humanitarian aid or aid more broadly, while when I am referring specifically to foreign aid, I use the full term to make this distinction known.<sup>9</sup>

Applicable to both broader concepts of humanitarian and foreign aid are the processes of aid allocation and distribution that are central to this research. Aid allocation refers to the process of resource allocation in humanitarian response. This entails funding allocation at national and subnational levels, as well as the allocation of other resources necessary for response, like personnel and organizational infrastructure. This broader definition is what this research employs, where indications of resource allocation are not only limited to funding but to other components like the presence of personnel and aid organization offices and vehicles as well. Aid organizations make decisions of where to allocate such resources in a given crisis, and this is complicated when there is more than one crisis in a state competing for those resources. Even in country contexts where there is a single crisis, humanitarian organizations must decide how much of each kind of resource should go to different activities, locations and populations.

To operationalize allocation, I relied on humanitarian documentation of funding allocation, as well as on observations and what participants told me of humanitarian presence in the relevant regions. Funding allocation decisions in a United Nations (UN) coordinated humanitarian response are typically well-documented. Although they only represent targets of what a plan aims to achieve rather than actuals, they are indicative of humanitarian priorities. What’s more, while recorded allocation decisions may differ from how they are actually allocated, this potential weakness in measurement was counteracted by triangulating with other sources of data. Specifically, documentary indicators of allocation were supplemented by observations and in what people told me of the presence of humanitarian aid actors in a given region.

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<sup>9</sup> Any instance where I have not followed this convention is my own error.

As for aid distribution, it is distinct from allocation, because distribution captures what most people think of when they think of humanitarian aid. Distribution refers to the process of delivering material aid (e.g. medical supplies, food) to populations in need or running programs and services for those populations in areas of intervention. This contrasts with allocation, which describes how resources are intended to be used. Distribution deals with how resources are delivered to their intended beneficiaries. Although this is more straight-forward conceptually, distribution is much more difficult to study and assess. This is because there are typically dozens of organizations involved in aid distribution, and reporting of actual distribution is consequently piece-meal. There are also, of course, incentives for humanitarian organizations to opt for discretion in reporting too many details about actual delivery. Therefore, while measurement drew from documentary evidence, it also necessarily heavily relied upon other sources of data collection through participant-observation and interviews. Indicators of aid distribution include those of allocation as a baseline, since in order to be distributed, aid must first be allocated. In addition to allocation indicators like humanitarian presence in a region, indicators of distribution included stocks of material aid, visible signs of distribution (e.g. aid organization vehicle convoys), experiences of displaced people and host communities having received aid, and evaluations of aid distribution made by local aid organization actors.

Finally, it is key to grasp a distinction I make between different kinds of crisis zones. These are conflict zones and reception zones (also sometimes: zones of reception). Conflict zones are the regions within a crisis where there is active combat between belligerents or frequent violence perpetrated against great numbers of civilians. Reception zones are by-and-large free from active combat, while still experiencing some forms of low-levels of insecurity like criminality and interpersonal or individual-level violence. Although reception zones may experience very occasional spillover violence from neighboring conflict zones, they are clearly and significantly more stable and peaceful than conflict zones.

Another necessary distinction between these is while conflict zones also host significant numbers of displaced people, reception zones are by-and-large *only*

places that have received and continue to host significant numbers of displaced people from conflict zones in this case.<sup>10</sup>

Now that I have clarified the central concepts, I turn to the two bodies of literature that offer the greatest alternative explanatory potential in clarifying why divergences of humanitarian aid response occur subnationally. The first of these is the humanitarian response architecture, while the second relates to the politics of aid allocation. I treat these both in turn to explain why they are insufficient in explaining the variation of humanitarian aid allocation and distribution in the responses to each of Cameroon's three crises.

## **2. Humanitarian Architecture & Aid Disparities**

The foundations of the international humanitarian response system clearly shape displacement responses in host states. Although the legal frameworks and other institutional factors create disparities in the support of different displaced populations, I maintain they cannot fully explain the variation we observe in Cameroon and elsewhere, because historical developments and progress in the aid sector responding to IDPs specifically indicate that previous shortcomings in the response to those displaced populations can no longer be credited for driving major divergences in response that these populations might receive compared to others. Legal arguments also fall short, because whether legal and policy frameworks that compel states to comply with their obligations toward different displaced groups are enshrined in law or not, states often challenge and ignore those obligations. This makes the disparate legal status of refugees and IDPs and their protections insufficient explanations as well. Finally, the humanitarian architecture fails to explain variation in response for the same kinds of displaced populations both within the same crises and across different crises.

### **2.1 The Refugee Regime in the Post-War and Cold War Period**

Although what we think of as the "humanitarian sector" in the west today has its roots in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the aftermath of

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<sup>10</sup> Though this could apply to those displaced by natural disasters as well.

the Second World War that the current global governance structures were established, including the pillars of the humanitarian response regime. The main legal mechanism of the Refugee Regime became the 1951 Conventions on the Status of Refugees that enshrined protections for refugees in host countries (Loescher, 2016). The 1951 Convention defined who qualified for refugee status as “any person who is outside their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, or political opinion.” The Convention also set out the rights of refugees and mandated UNHCR with monitoring and supporting state compliance with the regime’s norms and rules. At the outset, the UNHCR’s core mandate consisted of two principal areas of responsibility: i. protecting refugees from persecution and ii. working on durable solutions for them. (Loescher, 2016, p.651-57)

Although those designing the Refugee Regime did consider whether to include IDPs<sup>11</sup> within the remit of the regime and in the refugee definition, decision-makers eventually decided to restrict the scope to people who not only had been displaced across an international border, but also only to those who had become refugees due to European events pre-1951 (Loescher, 2016). The final core definition adopted in Article 1A(2) and the 1967 Protocol defined a refugee as “any person who is outside their country of origin and unable or unwilling to return there or to avail themselves of its protection, owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (United Nations, 1967). These definitional constraints effectively made who qualified as a refugee extremely restrictive and excluded (and continues to exclude) many kinds of displaced people.

In short, the international legal instruments that govern the protection of displaced persons and the obligations of states to them, it is clear it is a system that was designed almost entirely in service of refugees, as the original international treaties and laws associated with responding to and protecting

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<sup>11</sup> IDPs were referred to as “internal refugees” at the time.

displaced people dealt exclusively with refugees (and to an extent stateless people) to the exclusion of others, including IDPs.<sup>12</sup>

There were clear consequences of this exclusion for IDPs specifically. First, there were no formal, binding legal protections in place for IDPs in this period, nor were there softer international agreements or policies that addressed their needs. IDPs were considered as purely a host state's concern, as part of its domestic affairs. Although the UNHCR did not intervene during many of the major internal conflicts of the 1960s, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was increasingly asked to provide assistance in these situations and did so occasionally, though not systematically and typically only when: *i.* it was explicitly linked to refugee protection as well, *ii.* the activities fell within the remit of its expertise, *iii.* and it also had the permission of the host state. But, in general, during this period, humanitarian actors upheld the "principle of non-intervention" in domestic affairs and did not respond to situations with IDPs. (Loescher, 2016)

## 2.2 Displacement Response Regimes in the Post-Cold War Period

After the end of the Cold War, as the UN became increasingly active in advancing the institutionalization of human rights protections, as liberal internationalism propelled growing concerns for human rights across the globe, this motivated efforts to expand the definition of what kind of events could trigger UN involvement. Before the end of the Cold War, the UN Security Council (UNSC) had limited these events to interstate conflicts.<sup>13</sup> The reformed definition added humanitarian catastrophes as counting as a threat to international peace and security (Weiss, 2016).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, climate "refugees" are not protected under the current convention; although the term is widely used, they are not technically considered refugees at all under the current refugee definition.

<sup>13</sup> That is, those that had already started and those with tensions and potential for a conflict to start.

<sup>14</sup> This was considered controversial, because this change that is now known as "humanitarian intervention", essentially would allow the UN Security Council (UNSC) to use military force in response to crises and human rights abuses. Prior to the 1990s, UNSC resolutions seldom

In addition to introducing and legitimizing humanitarian (i.e. military) intervention, this shift also had implications for non-military international intervention in humanitarian situations, most immediately and significantly for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Specifically, these efforts to expand human rights protections coincided with unfortunate and egregious conflict trends. Intrastate conflicts had proliferated in the wake of the Cold War and created situations with vast numbers of IDPs. Alongside this explosion of internal conflicts were the horrific events of the Rwandan Genocide, Srebrenica, and the NATO intervention in Kosovo. Together, these motivated the development of a regime to protect and assist IDPs.<sup>15</sup> (Loescher, 2016)

Significantly, efforts to extend protections to IDPs represented a major shift for the Westphalian system's deeply entrenched reverence for state sovereignty, where the liberal international community was imposing a condition on that norm that demanded states to maintain its social contract with its populations. Although this was not a new idea, the international "responsibility to protect" (sometimes referred to as R2P) emerged in this post-Cold War era. Though it took some time to articulate and gain buy-in, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty articulated the qualification that such intervention is necessary "when states cannot or will not protect their populations", and the motion was approved at the 2005 World Summit. (Weiss, 2016, p.627).

Despite these advancements, there was resistance among international organizations (IOs) during this period. The UNHCR specifically was not enthusiastic and was doing its best to avoid adding to their responsibilities by including IDPs. (Loescher, 2016) In an effort to maintain control and avoid formally binding commitments to IDPs, UNHCR published guidelines on IDP activities in 1993, which avoided formal commitment but gave leeway to be

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mentioned humanitarian or human rights (and not at all from 1945 until the 1967 Arab-Israel War), so this was a dramatic change in the 1990s (Weiss, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> For example, the UN Sec-Gen appointed the first Representative for IDPs in 1991 (i.e. Francis Deng), and the following year, the Human Rights Commission created a mandate for the position. NGOs were also a driving force behind this movement gaining traction through awareness-raising campaigns about IDPs and advocating for a change in perspective and approach to state sovereignty.

selective of when it should intervene and respond. However, these guidelines did not settle how the global community should approach IDPs and were opaque about the scale, scope and duration of what UNHCR's IDP operations would entail. (Loescher, 2016)

In response to UNHCR's reluctance, the newly appointed (and first) UN Representative for IDPs and his collaborators strategized to overcome this resistance and developed a normative framework to provide guidance on IDPs that was applicable to all actors involved. These Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement were introduced in 1998 and drew heavily from international human rights and humanitarian law and norms to develop a framework applicable to internal displacement situations. The framework laid out state obligations to IDPs and has since received widespread support (ostensibly, at least) and recognition at global summits and through its inclusion in many policy frameworks at different governance levels (i.e. UN, regional organizations, states). Although it is only a "soft law framework" rather than a formal, legally binding convention enshrined in international law, as the Refugee Regime's protection frameworks are, it finally provided IDPs with some semblance of cohesive institutional support to ensure their protection, and it remains the most significant framework relevant to IDPs to date.<sup>16</sup> (Loescher, 2016) In the following section, I make explicit how these development in both the Refugee and IDP Regimes relate to aid disparities.

### **2.3 Humanitarian Regimes & Aid Disparities**

Because many of the present-day humanitarian institutions and coordination architecture initially arose in response to transnational emergencies, this established an ordering of which kinds of people were protected and whose needs were responded to due to structural gaps in protections. Specifically, refugee and IDP populations have historically received

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<sup>16</sup> Notably, other frameworks have been established at regional and national levels that complement these Guiding Principles. For example, the African Union's Kampala Convention was adopted in 2012 and required states in the African Union to develop institutions and policies to respond to IDPs, though the institutionalization of these is far from being a reality (Loescher, 2016).



very different levels of humanitarian response, because of imbalances in protections and legal frameworks, coordination architecture, and organizational mandates. This can explain why crises involving IDPs or refugees have previously experienced very different humanitarian responses.

However, while these differences previously could have explained many of the disparities in response to these different populations, the development of the IDP Regime over the past three decades have made this explanation less powerful for significant disparities experienced more recently. In these first two decades of the new millennium, international humanitarian actors certainly have not ignored displacement crises spurred by civil wars and other forms of irregular conflict. Indeed, IDP responses can now often look very similar to those involving refugees.

Part of this can be explained by developments since the introduction of the IDP Regime. Although IDPs were not initially recognized as populations of international concern when the humanitarian response regime was initially established, now that international actors regularly respond to internal displacement emergencies, these actors have made and continue to make strides in improving response to situations involving IDPs.

While there still may be disparities between refugee and IDP response, it would be difficult to argue that these are a consequence of humanitarians deliberately and systematically ignoring their needs when there are clearly many situations across time and space where IDPs have received robust response (relative to the amount of funding received).<sup>17</sup> It is also unlikely that these disparities stem from a system that is significantly less capable in responding to IDPs. Although it is true that IDP response was once riddled with problems, because response to IDP situations was initially coordinated by different UN agencies ad hoc, and policies and programming lacked cohesion

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<sup>17</sup> i.e. Virtually all responses are grossly under-funded, and insufficient response due to budget constraints should not be conflated with deliberate neglect. While this might be difficult to parse out on the surface, analysis at subnational levels can be revealing of whether in fact certain regions are neglected in receiving any response at all versus being targeted for response at sub-optimal levels, which is very often the case given budget constraints. Nonetheless, humanitarians are known to stretch budgets and allocate to new crises as they arise, even though this implies a reduced budget for another crisis elsewhere.

compared to the response UNHCR led for refugee situations, IDP response has since significantly improved. The previous coordination inefficiencies and lack of leadership for their response is now mitigated by reforms that introduced the “Cluster System” for better coordination among UN agencies and other IGOs and NGOs. There is now a clear organization that is followed with lead organizations for different sectors and clear areas of responsibility assigned to various organizations for different aspects of IDP response. For instance, UNHCR has responsibility for IDP protection and shelter and camp management for conflict IDPs specifically, while the World Food Programme (WFP) handles food aid. (Loescher, 2016)

Additionally, it becomes even more difficult to argue that disparities in response are due to prioritization by displacement status, when the sector has only grown more inclusive of who is included in response over time. Humanitarians now respond to a growing list of vulnerable people beyond refugees and IDPs, including returnees, host communities, people affected by sources of displacement but that stay behind, and others with special needs (e.g. people with disabilities etc.). Of course, refugees continue to be the only ones with formal legally institutionalized protections, but these also fall short in their potential to explain response variation.

Although the Refugee & IDP Regimes are essential tools used by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the UNHCR and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to advocate for displaced populations to influence donors and host states alike, both regimes struggle with the same enforcement and compliance struggles that all international laws, normative frameworks or guidelines face. So, even though the legal and policy frameworks in place for refugees might be more robust than those for IDPs, host governments can choose whether to comply or not with obligations to displaced populations whether those obligations are enshrined in law or not. This weakens arguments that rest on disparate legal protections for refugees and IDPs in explaining divergences in their response.

This is not to say that some populations are no longer deprioritized or neglected, but instead points to the reality that both refugees and IDPs, as well as other kinds of migrants, are sometimes prioritized over each other.

Therefore, because there is no systematic variation in which kinds of displaced populations receive more response than others, this suggests that those who are neglected receive less for some other reason than their displacement status. That is, if some IDPs within the same crises or in other crises within the same state receive aid while others are neglected, this suggests that displacement status as an IDP is insufficient to explain why some receive limited or no assistance.

For example, in the Anglophone Crisis regions of Cameroon, this structural explanation fails to clarify why IDPs in the conflict zones of the Northwest and Southwest regions have received far more response than those in the receiving areas of the West and Littoral regions. It also fails to explain why response to IDPs in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis has occurred with fewer constraints than the response to IDPs in the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones. This legal and systemic explanation is further weakened when realizing that refugees and IDPs in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis did not experience significant divergences in response, suggesting that, in fact, the source of divergence stems from elsewhere.

To summarize, despite these many advancements in responding to IDPs, it is plausible that the shortcomings of the humanitarian system could leave them more vulnerable when compared specifically to refugee populations. However, inconsistencies in response to displaced populations with the same displacement status highlight that this systemic explanation is insufficient. In crises where certain IDPs are prioritized over other IDPs, this institutional argument does not explain why some IDPs should receive relatively robust response similar to what refugees receive in some crises, while other IDPs in the same or similar contexts are deprioritized and receive little or no response. If the humanitarian response system were culpable of these divergences, it would follow that displacement status should be more predictive of which situations or populations are prioritized and deprioritized.

While remaining challenges associated with the IDP Regime likely still have some explanatory power in understanding divergences in humanitarian aid, they do not provide a full picture. This is because the humanitarian architecture fails to explain variation in responses for the same category of displaced

populations both within the same crises and across different crises in the same country. What's more, improvements in aid response to IDP situations as well as greater protections, suggest that disorganization and weak response mechanisms or legal status and policy frameworks also fail to explain variation in response.

To evaluate another potential explanation for these variations in humanitarian response, I now turn to the literature on the politics of foreign aid allocation. Although foreign aid is distinct from humanitarian aid, I draw from its literature, because many of its processes and dynamics have clear relevance for those related to its humanitarian counterpart, and foreign aid is supported by a much more significant literature. Therefore, in the discussion below I delineate the dominant explanations of that literature that center on international actors to show that that these too do not offer sufficient support for why certain crises and regions within the same crises that are deserving of response might be allocated and distributed less response than other comparable crises and regions.

### **3. The Politics of Aid Allocation**

To understand what drives disparities in humanitarian aid delivery to displaced populations, I could turn to a vast literature on the politics of international interventions broadly construed (Findley, 2018; Krasner & Weinstein, 2014; Matanock, 2020). Despite the richness of this literature, this research deals with humanitarian assistance and therefore only draws from literature on foreign and humanitarian aid.

A robust body of literature on the politics of international development and humanitarian operations has developed over the past decades.<sup>18</sup> Within this politics of aid literature, the most salient deals with the drivers of aid allocation in building understanding of how, why and where (and implicitly to whom) aid is allocated and distributed. While there exists an extensive literature on the

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Bermeo (2021) for a review of the political economy of development aid and Goldschmidt & Kumar (2016) for a review of the humanitarian aid operations literature.

international humanitarian system, including its donors<sup>19</sup> and implementing organizations,<sup>20</sup> as well as its norms, practices and legal architecture,<sup>21</sup> this literature has not examined humanitarian aid allocation in any depth. Most of the aid allocation literature has treated foreign aid specifically. There is also a dearth of this literature on aid distribution.

Although these two types of aid are distinct, they share similarities in some of their core dynamics so that dynamics found in some of the foreign aid literature can often also apply to the politics of humanitarian assistance as well. I therefore focus on insights from the foreign aid allocation literature and build on this literature by deriving expectations for both allocation and distribution processes presumed relevant to humanitarian aid, as these too are certainly interlinked despite potential for different dynamics as well.<sup>22</sup>

Existing scholarship suggests that variation in aid allocation is a result of two primary drivers: i. donor interests and ii. the characteristics and needs of recipient states.<sup>23</sup> Much of this literature argues that largely donor interests are what primarily drives aid allocation (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Kuziemko & Werker, 2006; McKinlay & Little, 1977; Morrison 2012). However, some scholars show that donors pursue both their own interests *and* the characteristics or needs of recipient states (Claessens et al., 2009; Hoeffler & Outram, 2011; Thiele et al., 2007).

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see: Bermeo (2016), Dietrich (2013), Drury, Olson & van Belle (2005), Kevlihan, DeRouen & Biglaiser (2014), and Olsen, Carstensen & Høyen (2003).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance: Loescher et al. (2008) and Bradley (2016).

<sup>21</sup> For example: Barnett (2013), Barnett & Weiss (2008), and Krause (2014).

<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, there is of course great potential for divergences in dynamics in relation to these different forms of aid, given contexts requiring humanitarian aid are often even more politicized than those demanding aid for development due to conflict and security interests and dynamics. As I discuss in the conclusion, this highlights a potential research agenda that I hope to pursue.

<sup>23</sup> These two drivers represent a major debate in the literature that pits donor interests against recipient state needs as the primary determinant of aid allocation decisions (e.g. see Kevlihan et al., 2014).

What is clear is aid allocation is not random (Flores & Nooruddin, 2009b, as cited in Findley, 2018), and of the actors that influence allocation, international actors (and especially donors) have received the most attention. I review this literature below to examine its relevance in explaining aid response variation in humanitarian crisis contexts.

### **3.1 International Actors and Aid Allocation**

A vast body of previous research supports the primacy of international actors' agency and interests in explaining how and where foreign aid is allocated at national levels (e.g. Drury et al., 2005; Olsen et al., 2003). While scholars, practitioners and other stakeholders have long operated in line with this assumption, some scholars have begun to challenge this conventional wisdom (Dietrich, 2013; Kevlihan et al., 2014) or at least qualify it (Bermeo, 2016; Dreher et al., 2024). Below I synthesize how two broad categories of international actors, i. donors and ii. intergovernmental and non-governmental aid organizations, have been found to influence aid allocation and distribution. I then evaluate their potential relevance in explaining the puzzles of subnational variation in humanitarian aid response identified in Cameroon.

#### **3.1.1 Donors**

A conventional perspective in the broader literature on foreign aid and international humanitarian assistance foregrounds the role of international donors<sup>24</sup> to leverage assistance as a foreign policy tool. The common reasoning is that it is the strategic interests of these international actors that have the greatest influence on aid allocation decisions, because foreign aid is viewed as a foreign policy tool to influence recipient states to achieve donor objectives (Bapat, 2011; Bermeo, 2021; Findley, 2018; Qian, 2015).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> These refer primarily to OECD states as bilateral donors but also to those that operate through multilateral donors.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, donor preferences and interests are not necessarily stable (Bermeo, 2016) and can change subtly with the tides or more profoundly in reaction to historic events, as with the shift seen in US humanitarian aid administered pre- and post-9-11 (Kevlihan et al., 2014).

Some of these strategic interests or foreign policy objectives might include stabilizing the recipient state (e.g. Kono & Montinola, 2009), promoting democracy (Bermeo, 2011), engaging in counterterrorism (Bapat, 2011), or accessing natural resources (Kapfer et al., 2007). Other foreign policy influences on donor aid allocation can stem from alliance ties, the wealth of the recipient country (where more affluent countries are less likely to receive aid), and influences from external actors like the media (Drury et al., 2005; Olsen et al., 2003). Domestic characteristics that have been shown to influence donor state's aid allocation decisions are the emergencies experienced within the donor country, media coverage of foreign disasters, ideology, and partisanship (Drury et al., 2005; Therien & Noel, 2000; Tingley, 2010).

Yet, if the current conventional wisdom would have us believe that it is primarily the interests of international actors and their considerations for host state characteristics and need that determine allocation, this makes the subnational trends of aid response in Cameroon even more puzzling.

If donor interests were the primary driver explaining subnational aid variation, we should expect greater constraints on aid response in the Far North of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis due to donor concerns about "terrorism" linked to Boko Haram activity in that region. While there certainly are conditionalities attached to aid in the region, humanitarian response faces far more stringent constraints in the Anglophone conflict zones, where donors should in fact have more reason to encourage unencumbered response, given the non-state armed groups there are viewed as "rebels" (as opposed to "terrorists"), given the nature of the conflict as a secessionist civil war.

What's more the notion that donors are the primary source of causality in subnational aid response variation is further weakened when considering arguments that posit donor allocation is driven by host state characteristics and need. Given this driver is normally considered at the national level, it is unclear to what extent subnational characteristics figure. If donor interests were a dominant driver, this is inconsistent with the exclusion of certain regions where there is clear and urgent need. Given the major donor states tend to promote liberal internationalist ideals that promote human rights protections inclusively,

this is inconsistent with the apparent neglect of the reception zones in the Anglophone Crisis.

### 3.1.2 Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Aside from donors, international NGOs and IGOs also can influence aid allocation. While the discussion in the previous section examined how the humanitarian aid system might explain substate response variation, here I turn to considering the agency of aid organizations at lower levels of analysis. These organizations hold explanatory potential for the questions at hand, given they are the actors administering and implementing aid, and therefore are expected to influence its allocation and distribution.

Despite an extensive literature that broadly examines international NGOs and IGOs and their practices in both the foreign aid and humanitarian literatures, these actors have received more limited attention in debates about aid allocation and distribution. This is likely because these organizations are often understood and characterized as being at the mercy of international donor financing and therefore donor interests as well. However, some scholars have begun to center these actors' agency in studying aid allocation, arguing that they too engage in strategic games with both donors and recipient states, and their practices and decision-making processes influence patterns of aid disbursement as well (Bush, 2015; Krause, 2014; Heyse, 2007). What's more, some of this literature also challenges rationalist conceptions of international actors as primarily self-interested. For example, research that examined privately funded aid from the United States disbursed through transnational NGOs found that these actors' aid allocation decisions were mostly driven by deeply rooted and principled humanitarian discourse that prioritizes recipient needs, rather than organizational or donor interests (Büthe et al., 2012).

While NGOs and IGOs' may be differently motivated than donors, I also find these actors and their interests fall short in explaining sub-national variation in aid response. Although there are certainly NGOs and IGOs that are more influential than others, it is unlikely that regional trends would result from the practices of individual or perhaps a selection of NGOs and IGOs. A



more likely explanation would be a whole cluster of actors or the whole sector, given they follow a coordinated response plan. However, the previous discussion on the international humanitarian aid system already showed that these actors, at a higher, systemic level of analysis, are insufficient in explaining subnational response variation.

What's more, when applying the needs and characteristics-based argument to aid NGOs and IGOs, this reasoning only makes the puzzles of the research even more puzzling. Given what is known of humanitarian actor decision-making in prioritizing places and people with the most urgent needs, this only emphasizes the peculiarity of mostly excluding the Anglophone Crisis reception zones from response when international actors themselves have repeatedly acknowledged urgent needs in those regions. Indeed, it underpins the puzzle of allocation: if NGOs and IGOs who are motivated by the needs and characteristics of contexts in deciding where to allocate aid are the primary causal force in subnational aid allocation and distribution, why would aid be almost entirely withheld from crisis regions that are clearly deserving of assistance?

Rather than demonstrating further support for donor and aid organization agency in aid allocation and distribution, the above discussion suggests that different kinds of international actors are insufficient in explaining variation in subnational aid response. I elaborate on key implications of this below that point to the argument that it is in fact host governments that are the main source of causation in subnational aid allocation and distribution in contexts that call for humanitarian assistance.

### 3.1.3 Discussion

If it is generally accepted that international interests and institutions are primary drivers of the allocation and distribution of aid, then why are they insufficient in explaining divergences in subnational aid response?

Some clarity arises when acknowledging that foreign actors are not necessarily always effective at advancing their interests, as they face significant principal-agent challenges, among others, in delivering aid. Indeed, a significant portion of the current aid allocation and aid effectiveness literature

focuses on obstacles to international interventions achieving their intended purpose, and foremost among these are the obstacles linked to the recipient state or host government.

The most frequently invoked of these challenges for aid is fungibility,<sup>26</sup> although donors are also wary of the risk of aid capture by elites in recipient countries. Unfortunately, the empirical record gives good reason for this concern in states that are considered “weak” or score low on indicators of good governance (Svensson, 2000, Brautigam and Knack, 2004; Reinikka and Svensson, 2004; Gibson et al., 2005; Djankov et al., 2008). This is one reason why donors have customarily attached conditionalities (e.g. governance reforms) to assistance packages in bilateral aid allocated directly to governments. It is also why citizens in recipient countries can prefer foreign aid spending on development projects over their own government’s spending when perceptions of government corruption are high (Findley et al., 2017).

In line with what this literature suggests, I argue that it is host governments (or recipient states) that most significantly influence subnational aid response variation. Host governments have already been shown to behave strategically in response to other forms of aid, and their interests factor in decisions to accept offers of aid at the national level. Below I review the relevant literature on how governments that receive aid have also been found to interact with foreign aid allocation and distribution to advance their own interests. I then comment on how this literature relates to my argument, in specifying areas in need of further research that my research begins to fill, as well as areas to which I further contribute or build upon.

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<sup>26</sup> Fungibility in the context of aid refers to its interchangeable nature, for example allowing recipient governments to reduce their own budget allocations in the sector that the assistance is targeting and instead divert their own funds to another sector. In these situations, aid inadvertently funds sectors that, at worst, may be totally at odds with the aid in question (e.g. military spending) or, at best, are not as beneficial (Pettersson, 2007).<sup>26</sup> As donors became acutely aware of the associated risks of aid fungibility, it eventually became common practice for donors to impose conditions on aid that aimed to reduce its fungibility (Bermeo, 2011; Collier, 2006; Dietrich, 2013; Dietrich & Wright, 2015; Dunning, 2004; Goldsmith, 2001).

## 4. Recipient States and International Aid Allocation

While international donors have been amply scrutinized for their role in aid allocation, the role of the recipient state or host government in actively influencing aid flows has, until recently, been fairly underexplored. To date, much of the aid allocation literature that has accounted for recipient states has prioritized several strands of work.

The first is the work that considers the characteristics of recipient states as determinants of initial country-level allocation by donors (e.g. Radelet, 2004; Alesina & Weder, 2002). As with the rest of the aid allocation literature, this literature deals with allocation at the national level and on foreign aid rather than humanitarian aid. This body of work also tends to center the agency of donor state's preferences, often depicting recipient states passively, attributing agency instead to foreign actors, where various state characteristics are used as explanations for foreign actors' interests.

Notably, within the literature that focuses on the agency of foreign actors is work that looks beyond donors, their preferences, and recipient state characteristics, to examine the actors that implement aid: the NGOs and IGOs at their intersection (Bush, 2015; Krause, 2014; Heyse, 2007; Yasuda, 2021). This literature shows that these actors also have important influence over aid response through their various practices and decision-making processes.

Another strand has focused on various outcomes following aid delivery including on governance (Knack, 2004), institutions (Bräutigam & Knack, 2004), growth (Bearce & Tirone, 2010; Kilby & Dreher, 2010; Montinola, 2008; Wright, 2008), and democratization (Djankov et al., 2008; Dunning, 2004; Wright, 2009). This work examines how aid influences broad trends and dynamics within a state and how the government responds, for instance in its decision whether to accept or not (Carnegie & Dolan, 2021; Grossman, 2021; Krasner & Weinstein, 2014).

Within this second strand is a third that centers around the political behavior of recipient governments, which has foregrounded issues related to recipient states' limitations and misuses of aid (e.g. Boone, 1996; Easterly 2002).

For instance, some have likened aid to the resource curse (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2008; Humphreys, 2005; Ross, 1999; Sachs & Warner, 1995 & 2001; Jensen & Wantchekon, 2004 as cited in Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009), and others have shown how governments receiving aid aim to influence elections by allocating aid strategically to increase political support (Briggs, 2012) and by reducing political rivals' power by legislating restrictive laws that limit aid flows to civil society groups (Dupuy et al., 2016). In sum, this body of work emphasizes how foreign aid can lead to inefficient public spending, bloated and corrupt bureaucracies, and increased rent-seeking (Burnside & Dollar, 2000; Remmer, 2004). I summarize some of the most important insights of this literature in the following sub-section.

#### **4.1 Recipient State's Strategic Behavior**

Of the broader literature that examines recipient state behavior in response to aid, it is widely acknowledged that aid is a significant source of income for many lower-income countries. Therefore, there are great incentives to remain open to accepting it when it is offered. Aside from the alleviation to their own spending, governments also like foreign aid because it reduces reliance on the tax base, and, significantly, because taxes tend to be more heavily monitored and cannot be appropriated as easily, this means states receiving aid are essentially trading in the less desirable source (taxes) for a more desirable and opaque source (aid) (Djankov et al., 2008; Knack, 2004).

Bueno de Mesquita & Smith's (2009) seminal work in this strand of literature was the first to include recipient state's roles and interests in explaining foreign aid transactions. They argued that both donor and recipient country incumbents' political interests explain the decisions involved in giving and receiving aid. Most relevant for the purposes of this research, they showed that recipient states behave strategically in response to offers of aid by electing policies and allocating resources that preserve their power. They also were found to comply with conditionalities tied to aid when those conditions aligned with their interests, but when their interests clashed with those of socially conscious policies, then they chose their own welfare over those of the populace they are meant to serve, for example through clientelist transfers to elites. The authors posit that the *quid pro quo* relationship between political and other elites

maintains the incumbent regime's political survival, as it empowers the regime to continue to divert resources (or other advantages) to their "selectorate", or elites external to the regime. (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009)

Other scholarship finds different kinds of strategic behavior in recipient states as well, showing that governments adapt to donor preferences, at least ostensibly, to greenlight cash flows (Birchler et al., 2016; Hyde, 2011; Wright, 2009). Although the above behavior can be exhibited by any state, there is ample evidence that such clientelism and elite capture is more prevalent in autocracies and in other states where corruption is highly institutionalized, as Birchler et al. (2016) argue that elites in autocracies "will accept aid only if they believe it will help (or at least not hurt) their survival".

Indeed, there is evidence that this strategy proves effective, as scholars have found that aid helps host government leaders with political survival – even when following pro-democratic conditions and when aid is strictly earmarked and is disbursed as intended (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2010; Kono & Montinola, 2009). The major explanation for this to date is the fungible nature of aid that allows governments to reallocate their own resources with the knowledge that external sources of income will be allocated to sectors that would have previously required government spending (Bader & Faust, 2014; Kosack & Tobin, 2006). All this can help stabilize and even strengthen a regime (Dutta et al., 2013; Morrison, 2007; 2009) as "fungibility...offers an avenue for patronage, repression, and demobilization of threatening interest groups" (Birchler et al., 2016).

These are some of the principal ways that states receiving aid have been found to strategically interact with foreign aid to advance their own interests. Now I turn to complementary literature that has examined specifically how host states have interacted with humanitarian aid allocation.

## **4.2 Host Governments & Humanitarian Aid Allocation**

As the above focus on foreign aid suggests, although there is ample literature on how recipient states respond to various development aid interventions, little of this literature has focused specifically on humanitarian aid until very recently.

Still, much of the above discussion of host state behavior in response to foreign aid has potential relevance for dynamics in instances of humanitarian emergencies. For instance, external sources of income, including humanitarian aid, are clearly highly desirable as they fund services the state would otherwise be providing and enable it to divert its own resources elsewhere (Bermeo, 2016), whether, again, to other legitimate sectoral spending or to support clientelist ends (Briggs, 2012; Jablonski, 2014).

As for the state's role in whether aid reaches its intended recipients, the development of this literature has been delayed in large part due to data limitations and difficulties in access. Nonetheless, some previous literature shows that host governments have been known to obstruct or withhold aid to populations strategically for political or security gains (Keen, 2008; de Waal, 1997; 2017; Bussmann & Schneider, 2016; Lyall, 2019).

What's more, the literature on a host government's own response to its humanitarian emergencies has implications for international humanitarian response as well. Although host government response represents a different modality of assistance, it does point to incentives that are relevant in instances when governments interact with international actors providing assistance for humanitarian emergencies. This literature focuses on the domestic political incentives for government responsiveness to emergencies and has prioritized natural disaster emergencies, showing they pose a real threat to incumbent regimes where populations can punish governments for natural disaster events beyond their control (Achen & Bartels, 2004; Cole, Healy & Werker, 2012). Some of this literature argues that not only do populations tend to blame governments for disasters but also for "hardships of all kinds" (Achen & Bartels, 2004). This creates incentives for regimes to respond to crises for fear of facing their own crisis of legitimacy that might threaten their political survival (Achen & Bartels, 2004; Sen, 1983), and some voters reward governments who respond robustly (Cole, Healy & Werker, 2012). Thus far, these dynamics seem to be supported in more democratic states that are held more accountable by their populations (Besley and Burgess, 2002; Cole, Healy & Werker, 2012). Therefore, it is unclear to what extent regime type interacts with these expectations. What can be gleaned is that state responsiveness has important

implications for state-societal relations that could potentially threaten an incumbent regime's political survival possibly even in less democratic contexts.

With this essential literature summarized, in the following sub-section I discuss its application to the questions of this research. I highlight how these different strands of literature, combined with literature I introduce on subnational aid allocation, inform the argument I advance.

### **4.3 Host Governments & Subnational Aid Disparities**

To date, little of this research has examined the role of the recipient state in influencing the allocation and delivery of foreign aid within its territory after aid is accepted. This is surprising given the existing literature discussed above that makes explicit that sovereign states do interact with aid processes within their territories. It may be that this has heretofore been underexamined because these are processes that are more difficult to study, given the opacity of aid flows once allocated at national levels. Nonetheless, emerging literature has begun to examine these dynamics subnationally.

This assumption of donor control is at least partly a consequence of the aid allocation literature's focus on aid flows at the state level. It also results from a focus on how states respond to initial offers of aid as opposed to latter parts of the aid delivery sequence (e.g. detailed examinations of the iterative donor-recipient state bargaining process or implementation subnationally) (e.g. Carter & Haver, 2016; Harmer & Sarazen, 2018).<sup>27</sup> Consequently, aid flows have typically been given high-level, opaque treatments and are assumed to be administered in line with donor preferences that recipient countries accept and comply with when these align with their own interests (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009).

Furthermore, because many states that receive aid struggle with problematic governance, obstacles to aid distribution have figured prominently in donor

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<sup>27</sup> A future line of research could investigate negotiation processes between aid actors and either host governments or non-state armed groups, given the dearth of research on the matter. Among many other potential directions, this has potential relevance in building understanding of how humanitarian response deals struck with different armed actors might influence conflict dynamics, given humanitarian organizations negotiate agreements with different parties to a conflict.

decision-making and processes so much that one ubiquitous risk avoidance tactic has permeated the aid sector in the wide-spread adoption of project-based aid. Donors now regularly use bypassing as a tactic when allocating aid to recipient states with poor governance and channel more aid instead to non-state actors in these contexts (typically IGOs like UN Agencies or NGOs) (Dietrich, 2013). This kind of aid must be funneled through NGOs, which allows the aid sector greater oversight over funding than aid channeled directly through recipient governments as budgetary support (Morrison, 2012). In states with even more acute governance challenges, aid is typically accompanied by stringent targeting within countries (Winters, 2010). It is because so much of aid is now “project-based” and bypasses governments that the literature often assumes that foreign actors and implementing agencies mostly control the allocation of assistance flows and are generally immune to host state influence (Collier, 2006; Findley, 2018). In short, donor control of the process is typically assumed.

And yet, as the above discussion suggests, recipient states of aid, and host governments of humanitarian crises, can have greater influence on aid allocation than conventionally assumed (Abdulai & Hulme, 2015; Briggs, 2014; Hodler & Raschky, 2014; Jablonski, 2014). For instance, one cross-national study showed that aid was distributed unevenly within 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, failing to reach the poorest regions and favoring instead those where the richest people were concentrated (Briggs, 2017). These findings show that aid distribution was not in line with donor preferences, suggesting instead that either donors were unwilling or unable to monitor or control their aid, indicating they may not actually have as much control over allocation and distribution as is often assumed and instead fell prey to state interference in the subnational targeting of assistance. (Briggs, 2017).

In line with this literature that examines aid flows subnationally, I argue that the recipient state, or host government, has more agency than is normally assumed in the typical scenario where aid bypasses recipient states and is funneled through NGOs and IGOs (Dietrich, 2013).

This said, consistent with the dominant literature, I maintain that donor interests and international non-state actors’ agency are still significant in



explaining aid response dynamics. However, the role of states in influencing aid allocation in contexts of conflict and displacement has been under-theorized, specifically sub-nationally. I argue that these state actors have outsized influence on subnational aid flow processes within states hosting conflict and displacement crises.

I build upon existing literature on strategic state behavior toward aid by arguing that it is the host government's own political and security interests that matter most in explaining variations in aid response. This occurs as the recipient state's political stakes interact with international structures and actors, affecting how response is delivered on the ground and producing diverging experiences among different crisis-affected populations.

However, if aid is bypassing governments of states that receive aid, how then are these host governments able to influence it? What's more, previous scholarship that highlights aid allocation failures often still assumes donor control by attributing these failures largely to fungibility (Findley 2018; Morrison, 2009; Smith, 2008). In reality, there are many other opportunities for aid processes to go awry after it is accepted and preventing assistance from reaching its intended target populations within a state hosting an emergency or receiving development assistance.

I therefore build upon the existing literature by arguing that host governments resort to more channels in influencing aid allocation and distribution than simple misuse or co-optation, as the previous literature suggests. Instead, I show that governments receiving humanitarian aid that is directly controlled by aid actors can still employ obstructive tactics to aid flows. I argue that they do so because of strategic advantages, and they do so through tactics that extend beyond mere misappropriation and elite capture of aid funding. Some of these tactics are more subtle than others, however, all are employed without the host government's direct contact with aid funding.<sup>28</sup> Although the mechanisms supported by this research are only a subset of the broader range of possibilities available to governments, I focus my discussion on those for which I have supporting evidence in Cameroon: *i. Access denial; ii.*

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<sup>28</sup> Some involve contact with aid actors and material aid, but none involve misappropriation of funding.

*Administrative impediments; iii. Physical constraints; and iv. Perception influence.*

The rest of the chapter proceeds by first elaborating upon the argument in further detail before delineating the observable expectations, and the four mechanisms of obstruction elucidated in this research.

## 5. The Argument

While the above discussion demonstrates that international and non-state actors certainly can and have significantly influenced aid allocation (and distribution by proxy), it also showed that donor and implementer control of assistance only goes so far in explaining divergences in where and to whom aid is allocated and distributed. Domestic political incentives of host governments can intervene significantly in these processes as they can shape local dynamics that affect assistance flows. I argue that it is the host government's domestic political stakes in different crises, subnational regions, and populations affected by displacement that predict how assistance is funneled subnationally within states receiving assistance.

There are two main threads of the argument, which maintains that: *i.* the government's security interests in each crisis context, and *ii.* the government's economic interests in the regions affected by a crisis are what conditions the state's actions toward humanitarian aid, affecting both aid allocation and distribution. I argue that it is the host government's combined political incentives, comprised by its security and economic interests, that incentivize its decisions in how it behaves toward aid response. Specifically, it is *i.* the threat potential, indicated by the state's security interests, combined with *ii.* the value of a given crisis region, represented by the state's economic interests, that shape the government's decisions to either facilitate, obstruct or deny aid in certain regions and crises. This results in landscapes of greatly varied experiences among conflict-affected populations and displaced people, including uneven humanitarian support.

Additionally, when security and economic interests are at odds, security interests are prioritized, making economic interests a necessary but insufficient

condition in explaining state behavior toward aid response. Although an obvious point, I maintain it is necessary given it would be difficult to pinpoint territories within a state in which a government would have *no* economic interests. Because the government seeks to derive gains from all territories within the state, this means economic interests must necessarily factor when considering whether to obstruct or facilitate further resources to a territory, which has clear implications for the wellbeing of that territory and, hence, the government's economic interests in it.

Further, I argue these economic interests are subordinate to security interests, because their implications are significant along longer time-horizons compared to security interests. That is, although encouraging the potential to extract greater value from a region may bolster a government's strength and chances for political survival, the foremost concern for a government is in considering imminent threats as opposed to factors that contribute to longer-term gains. Therefore, in situations where it must choose between boosting a region's economic potential and value by facilitating aid response at the risk of strengthening its adversaries, the security interests should be prioritized despite potential economic losses, or at least, no further gain.

As will later be illustrated in depth in Chapter 5, this project offers empirical support for these incentive structures demonstrating how both security and economic interests align with the observed behavior of the government of Cameroon in facilitating the more pronounced displacement response in the CAR Crisis and largely facilitating responses in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis. Conversely, the Cameroonian government's interests in the Anglophone Crisis affected regions align with its observed obstruction of aid response in or to those regions. These incentives and a government's ensuing behavior toward aid is mediated by its perceptions of local populations' allegiances, *vis à vis* non-state armed groups in active conflict settings as well as historical relationships in both conflict and reception zones. I also argue that a government's calculations of threat potential are dependent on whether regions with populations that are considered threatening are perceived as capable of mounting a viable and imminent movement to contest the government or not.

In the following section, I make explicit how government interests and subnational politics can shape humanitarian response. I argue that it is mainly variation in security interests that shape the government's ensuing different approaches toward each crisis in either *facilitating* or *obstructing* aid response, though economic interests sometimes factor as well. I first clarify what the most salient incentives that shape government behavior are. I follow this with an explanation of how these incentives influence aid response and identify the observable implications of the argument. I then elaborate upon the mechanisms through which host governments can exert their influence over humanitarian aid response.

## 5.1 Government Incentives

States consider political and economic incentives that are important to their political survival, a classic insight of political science. In situations of conflict crises that attract international humanitarian response, this is because incumbent regimes must weigh the potential reward of facilitating assistance to populations in need with the risks of potentially funnelling aid to their adversaries. In support of my argument, I draw from two sets of interests that shape the state's behavior toward humanitarian aid. These are: *i.* the government's *security* interests in regions affected by conflict displacement crises, and *ii.* the government's *economic* interests in the regions affected by a crisis. Specifically, it is *i.* the threat potential, indicated by the state's *security interests*, combined with, albeit to a lesser extent, *ii.* the value of a given crisis region, represented by the state's *economic interests*, which together shape the government's decisions to either facilitate, obstruct or deny aid in certain regions and crises. While the latter set of interests could be interpreted as also informing the former, because any set of interests could potentially have implications for a government's security and political survival, I clarify these definitions below.

In short, *security* interests refer to a government's role in and relationship with ongoing conflict contexts as well as its socio-political and historical relationship with and interests in a region and its populations, separate from ongoing conflict interests. *Economic* interests also influence a state's political power and refer to financial or other resources that have extractive potential for

a government in a region or territory in this case. The government can either seek to augment or further develop these interests for additional advantages, or protect these interests to avoid losses, all in aims to maximize the potential utility of a region or territory for its political survival. The below discussion identifies and explains these incentives in greater detail.

### 5.1.1 Security Interests

The host government's security stakes in a crisis vary depending on i. the historical and political relationship with each crisis-affected region, and ii. the nature of insecurity in a crisis context and the government's involvement in different conflict and displacement scenarios. These stakes depend on the government's perceived threat potential of different populations and regions. In conflict zones, this is especially vis à vis relations between non-state armed groups and civilian populations in affected regions. In reception zones, this is linked to the severity of the perceived threat potential of local populations, and the extent to which a region could plausibly mount a viable and imminent threat to the government's political survival.

First, historical and social relations between different crisis affected regions and the central government can have profound repercussions for populations in need of assistance. Primarily, when relations with the central government are characterized as acrimonious, and when there may even be a history of violence and rebellion, this is an indication of weaker support for the government in these regions, which factors in the government's calculations of threat potential. Further factoring into these threat potential calculations, the government also accounts for power differentials between the region in question and its supporters based on socio-political and demographic indicators that would suggest a viable and imminent threat (e.g. population size or the appetite to resort to violence as an avenue for political change). Essentially, while these factors stem from historical and contemporary social indicators separate from ongoing conflict dynamics, these also contribute to a government's calculations in determining the threat potential of a given region or population, which ultimately informs its behavior toward humanitarian aid.

Second, a government's security interests in a crisis-affected region stem from the nature of the conflict setting. In instances of low levels of insecurity that are reception zones of displacement, out of the crossfire of conflict, the security interests of a government largely center around maintaining stability. In these places, the government has incentives to ensure that the conflict and violence that has spurred the arrival of displaced people does not spread. A strategy of containment is generally preferable to maintain stability within the receiving, more stable region, given governments aim to maintain a monopoly on violence and ensure territorial control to stay in power. However, containment is also important for a government that is party to an internal conflict to bolster its efforts in regaining control of conflict-affected areas. In terms of existing violence spreading to other areas, this is clear, given the greater difficulty in establishing control over larger territories. But it is also relevant to the government's interests in civilian populations in the reception zones as well as those displaced by violence. It is in a government's interest to ensure that displaced populations do not trigger unrest in their new locations, as this would require more government resources to reestablish control and stability in those places. Also, because governments often view displacement situations as costly nuisances that require great resources, not to mention a source of potential unrest given known potential for tensions with host communities and other links to different forms of violence, it is generally in their interest to avoid hosting displacement crises within their territories.<sup>29</sup>

In conflict zones, where there is active combat and skirmishes between belligerents as well as one-sided violence against civilians, states can view populations more or less favorably. This is dependent on the degree to which they perceive that local populations' allegiances might lie with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and are therefore liable to support the government's adversaries. Populations that are deemed as likely defectors helping to maintain the government's opponents' strength threaten host governments via the prospect of two principal avenues that might aid and abet local armed group operations. First, they fear the recruitment potential of local populations

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<sup>29</sup> There are boundaries to this assertion of course, especially when considering instances of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing and populations forcibly displaced by industrial projects or natural resource exploitation.

by NSAGs. Second, they suspect that some local populations may help NSAGs in their provisioning by funneling assistance to them or otherwise helping them materially.

As for displaced populations specifically, the main consideration for governments is also whether the displaced group(s) in question are a potential political threat or not. Although much literature and empirical examples exist of perceptions of refugees as security risks, I argue that it is often crises of internal displacement that states view as a greater threat. While it may be an obvious point, this difference in threat perception is linked to the fact that internal displacement spurred by conflict or violence occurs within the territory of the host state in question. This means that IDPs are more often displaced in the midst of ongoing conflict and are therefore perceived to be affiliates and supporters of the government's adversaries and are also vulnerable to recruitment. This, in turn, makes them potential threats to the government's counter-insurgency operations, state security, and monopoly of violence. Importantly, I do not argue that this is a general rule, as this can also be true of refugees, for instance as previous research has shown when they upset the ethnic balance in a state by bolstering minority populations, which can increase their perceived threat potential (Fisk, 2019; Rügger, 2019, Whitaker, 2003).

Nonetheless, in many cases governments are more concerned about situations involving IDPs mainly because IDPs serve as a proxy indicator for the type of conflict spurring displacement in the first place. While refugee situations within a host state are also sometimes accompanied by ongoing or spillover violence from the point of origin of the conflict, in many cases, refugees have fled their own country for the host state precisely because of more secure conditions found across the border in the host state. Therefore, contexts with only refugees often pose a lower threat potential, though there are important caveats of course, as previous research has demonstrated that refugees are both linked to "transnational terrorism" (Milton, Spencer and Findley, 2013; Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006) and are more often victims of violence than the culprits (Bohnet and Rügger, 2019; Choi and Salehyan, 2013; Gineste and Savun, 2019).

Conversely, the threat of recruitment potential suggests that upholding the state-society contract to an extent still matters even in contexts where there is low trust in the state, as in many lower-income and authoritarian contexts. More specifically, in lower-income contexts, there are so many people in need to begin with that when another crisis hits, this merely adds another burden to an already overwhelmed state. Where civil society is weak in less democratic contexts, governments may not be too concerned about an uprising due to lack-luster aid response given state-society relations are already characterized by low trust. But any government would be concerned to an extent with ongoing conflicts on its territory as it wishes to avoid spillover political violence and unrest. So, it must keep up appearances of responding to some portion of the populations' needs (whether it does or not in practice) to prevent more unrest either locally in the ongoing crisis context or in preventing the triggering of a different political crisis elsewhere. This is especially a concern in a region with ongoing conflict due to existing access to arms in the area and active armed groups to join or who actively recruit. It is also of heightened concern in places that could feasibly pose an imminent threat to a government's survival, as in places with substantial population size. However, in places with some threat potential perhaps due to historical grievances but that the government perceives to be less threatening for sundry contemporary circumstances, all else equal, it should not bother to uphold the social contract by facilitating aid to those regions, as they are not considered to pose significant *enough* of a threat to warrant appeasement.

So, in addition to calculations of threat potential different crisis-affected populations and regions, the state also has an interest in maintaining the perception that it is helping crisis-affected populations to an extent (with both government aid and facilitating international assistance) primarily to deter local populations in conflict settings from supporting its adversaries and to maintain a base level of favor among populations all around the country who follow coverage of the war.

These two considerations essentially act as opposing incentives to governments contending with sub-state conflict and highlight how host governments are engaged in a delicate dance balancing perceptions of responsiveness in upholding the social contract while remaining vigilant of



where humanitarians are funneling aid. This is true in regions with active conflict as well as in zones of reception.

Next, I turn to explaining the state's economic interests in regions affected by conflict and how these shape their incentives. This is then followed by a discussion of how these interests map onto government behavior toward humanitarian response.

### 5.1.2 Economic Interests

In addition to the above security interests, the central government's economic interests in a state's different regions also intervene significantly by shaping local dynamics that affect assistance flows. A state's *economic interests* also influence a state's political power. These refer to financial or other resources in a region or territory that have extractive potential for a government that it can either seek to augment or further develop these interests for additional advantages, or protect these interests to avoid losses, all in aims to maximize the potential utility of a region or territory for its political survival.

To understand these interests, it should be highlighted that most of the world's displacement occurs in lower-income contexts, and the greatest number and share of the world's displaced populations are hosted by lower-income countries. On the one hand, this means that the places in the world that are least able to finance humanitarian response are the ones that are contending with humanitarian crises the most. It also should indicate that the states in question are often at least partly responsible for the displacement crises they are contending with. So, it is generally in the interest of states facing mass displacement crises to invite humanitarians into the country to funnel internationally funded assistance to both foreign and national crisis-affected populations. This interest also must be balanced with security interests when inviting internationals into the *mêlée* of a conflict the state is party to, as described above. However, given the public finance benefits of accepting foreign assistance are so attractive—not to mention that in states with high levels of clientelism and corruption, humanitarian aid is yet another source to be leveraged by public officials—states would be loath to reject assistance even in these situations. This is because it is generally in a state's interest to have as

many needs covered by humanitarians and international actors so that: i. they are not perceived to be obstructing international assistance due to potential reputational costs internationally, ii. they might potentially benefit from a boost in domestic public perception of their fulfilment of the state-society contract, and perhaps most importantly, iii. there may be real potential financial or economic gains for the government, whether through fungibility, cooptation, clientelism, or other means.

What's more host governments are also incentivized by economic development. Because so many of the states hosting displacement crises are lower- and middle-income-, they also often have development strategies that they aim to bolster with incoming international humanitarian response. (This is the result of humanitarian reforms that have introduced a new era of aid that aims to address needs at the nexus of humanitarian and development aid and that also often aims to complement host government's development plans.) Host governments, even authoritarian ones, also have strong incentives to secure as much funding from outside sources for their plans or to complement these plans, because, development is often desirable in these contexts (to an extent), as are opportunities to ensure whatever contracts come from those initiatives go to their supporters.

This explains why a government might still accept assistance in cases where it is party to a conflict that calls for such assistance and therefore might suggest it would want to reject aid. While these are not the subnational economic incentives of interest, they are important to mention as baseline conditions for the contexts of interest.<sup>30</sup> For the purposes of this research, the economic interests in question relevant to internal conflict crisis situations, relate specifically to a government's subnational interests.

A government's subnational *economic interests* refer to financial or other resources that have extractive potential for a government in a region within its territory. The government can either seek to augment or further develop these interests for additional advantages, or protect these interests to avoid losses, all in aims to maximize the potential utility of a region or territory for its political

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Grossman, 2021 for a review of literature on a state's decision of whether to accept or reject offers of international aid.

survival. Therefore, the central government's economic interests in different sub-national regions, in terms of their economic value of and extractive potential, also intervene significantly by shaping local dynamics that affect assistance flows. Governments consider these interests by weighing the potential economic gains and losses from either facilitating or blocking international assistance to specific regions. Specifically, in these contexts, this manifests in terms of business climate perceptions and actual productivity and outputs.

Host states are worried about perceptions of the business climate in conflict-affected regions, as these have significant repercussions for investment and ongoing activity in the region, as well as actual outputs and productivity. This is of concern to a government as it derives substantial gains from economic activities, whether legitimately from taxes or in corrupt ways through elite capture. In short, conflict, instability or insecurity are not good for business, as those conditions can scare off investors and halt or hinder current economic activities. This tends to negatively affect the economic outputs of regions affected by crisis, and ultimately, the state's bottom line, which is a strong incentive for host governments to quell insecure conditions as quickly as possible. In reception zones, governments consider the benefits of funneling assistance or not in terms of the gains or losses it might yield in bolstering or maintaining stability for its economic interests in the region.

Therefore, economic interests also have important political implications for a state's power and political survival. This is due to the potential gains it stands to derive from receiving assistance as well as the economic value of different sub-national regions and their potential for the state to extract income and other benefits from them. These interests then influence a host state's decision to approach humanitarian assistance in ways that either facilitates or hinder its allocation and delivery, in line with what is most beneficial to the host government. Now that these incentives are clarified, I discuss how both sets of host government interests can shape their behavior toward displacement response.

## 5.2 Government Political Incentives & Displacement Response

Host governments are responsive to local politics that shape how humanitarian resources reach different crises. Although host governments generally welcome humanitarian assistance, in some instances they can find ways to block these efforts for politically motivated reasons. In the same vein, their receptiveness to international aid is likewise subject to calculations based on their own self-interest. States must consider both security and economic incentives and weigh their potential risks and rewards that are important to their political survival when considering how to treat international humanitarian aid within its territory. I treat these in turn below.

The notion that a government's security interests intersect with aid to populations in need is not new. Previous literature has found that governments can withhold aid to populations strategically for political or security gains in counterinsurgency contexts, which are indeed those relevant to many conflict displacement crisis situations (Keen 2008; de Waal 1997, 2017; Busmann and Schneider 2016; Lyall 2019). Non-state actors also have been found to behave strategically toward aid (Narang 2014, 2015; Narang and Stanton 2017; Wood and Molino 2016; Wood and Sullivan 2015), though I do not focus on them here, as I maintain that government influence is greater and more significant in explaining subnational variation at regional and crisis levels.<sup>31</sup> This is because governments generally have greater control overall within a state's territory than non-state actors<sup>32</sup>, and, as the governing national authority, they interact to a much greater extent with aid actors.

In addition to their greater influence, I argue that governments strategically interact with aid in more ways than previously assumed. Specifically, a government can either facilitate, obstruct, or deny the delivery of assistance to populations in need. What influences their choice of approach in influencing

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<sup>31</sup> It would be plausible, however, that a comparison of both non-state actors (NSAGs) and host governments' influence would highlight that non-state actors might have greater explanatory power for response variation at lower levels of analysis within crisis zones. Further examination of how NSAGs interact with these processes will have to be reserved for future research.

<sup>32</sup> With the exception of "failed states", where governments do not have a monopoly on violence.

aid? I argue that is the host government's combined political incentives, comprised by its security and economic interests, that incentivize its decisions of how it behaves toward aid response. Specifically, it is *i.* the threat potential, indicated by the state's security interests, combined with *ii.* the value of a given crisis region, represented by the state's economic interests, that shape the government's decisions to either facilitate, obstruct or deny aid in certain regions and crises. I discuss below how both these sets of interests align with the host government's behavior toward humanitarian aid response in each crisis. I make explicit what observable and tangible material outcomes would be expected to emerge given host government incentive structures' influence on aid response theorized above.

### 5.2.1 Government Security Interests & Aid Response

A host government's security interests in places affected by conflict crises rest on the threat potential that different populations and security contexts represent. As explained above, these vary depending on *i.* the historical political relations within each crisis-affected region, and *ii.* the nature of insecurity in a crisis context and the government's involvement in different conflict and displacement scenarios, especially *vis à vis* its relationship to non-state armed groups and civilian populations in affected regions. I discuss here how these pertain to the two distinct displacement settings treated in this work of conflict and reception zones. While host governments certainly have security interests in both kinds of crisis zones, these interests manifest differently primarily due to their most distinguishing factor: the presence or absence of active combat. I turn to these below.

#### *Conflict zones*

As explained above, states can have great interest in obstructing aid in some situations of internal conflict. This is attributed to the threat potential of local populations – including displaced people. Specifically, states are suspicious in internal conflict settings that local populations' allegiances might lie with non-state armed groups. Host governments fear their recruitment potential as well as their assistance of insurgents materially with aid.

Because of this, the government may engage in a variety of tactics to control the flow of assistance to areas – or even entire regions – that they view as a threat to their political survival. This behavior is linked to the security context specifically via the perceptions of adversarial alliances. For instance, when governments believe civilians are sympathetic with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) or are conspiring with them, they behave in ways that obstruct assistance.

The government is therefore extremely cautious about allowing aid supplies and services reach places where they fear these may at least partially be used to supply insurgents. This is because supplying insurgents is synonymous with strengthening the government's adversaries and is also assumed to potentially prolong the conflict that the government wishes to end (via its own military victory, naturally).

However, in contexts where civilian populations and displaced people are less likely to be perceived as collaborators and supporters of insurgents, host governments are more prone to encourage aid to these areas, given the potential to bolster their support among these populations by upholding (or at least appearing to uphold the state-society contract even if it is simply facilitating response provided by international actors rather than government-funded aid and services.

States also aim for containment of the conflict and territorial control, as they do not wish violence to spread to other regions, which would require greater resources to quell and would further threaten their political survival. This means that states may have some incentive to encourage aid response in conflict zones in aims to prevent populations from spreading elsewhere.

Historical relations and local politics in crisis regions also factor too, where in some contexts a state can have significant political reasons to be responsive to local populations. For example, this could be true if the conflict-affected region in question lends significant political support to the government, even if this support is confined to elites. This also incentivizes the government to facilitate aid. Conversely, in conflict zones in marginalized regions that do not pose a significant threat to the government, the government has far less incentive to demonstrate responsiveness.

Therefore, we can expect host governments to obstruct or deny aid in settings it considers having higher threat potential, especially in places that are actively posing a threat, as in an internal conflict zone. In areas it attributes with high threat potential, a government's decision to either obstruct or facilitate aid is mediated further by the government's perceptions of local populations' allegiances vis à vis non-state armed groups. In places where it deems significant numbers of local populations are likely to align with its adversaries, it will behave more restrictively toward aid response here. By contrast, in places it perceives as lower threat where it largely views local populations as not supporting non-state armed groups (despite some degree of suspicion, which is inevitable in those settings), it will treat aid response more leniently in these settings, either largely facilitating it to those regions. Significantly, even in conflict zones with high threat potential, we can still expect host governments to facilitate (or intervene in aid so that it is redirected) to local areas within the zone they deem to be less threatening, as in territories under government control or in places where populations are known or perceived to support the government.

#### *Reception zones*

The government's interests in reception zones described above are essentially linked to the government's desire to maintain stability in these zones and to keep any potential threats neutralized. What this means for humanitarian response is a host government will aim to deter displacement when possible if there is a threat of unrest. If this is not possible, as is often the case in refugee situations, given a government's general inability (or at least very limited ability to exert influence) to control conditions in another state, its *modus operandi* is to ensure stability as a measure to ensure control and to encourage any assistance with the costs of those efforts, including humanitarian aid.

As mentioned in the discussion above, conflict containment is preferable for a host government. In instances of internal conflict, it is the government's interest to ensure that displaced populations do not trigger unrest elsewhere, and this is most easily achieved by aiming to keep them from traveling to other regions. For aid response, this means that a government is incentivized to

encourage response within conflict zones to an extent while blocking response to other regions to keep populations from fleeing and spreading unrest elsewhere. This is because the government expects civilians to prefer to remain where material aid and services are.

In cases of reception zones that have received refugees, however, the government is more constrained in its ability to strategize, given it is unable or less able to control dynamics across an international border. Therefore, with significant arrivals of refugees in zones of reception where there is low threat potential, a host government is incentivized to encourage aid response to these places, given its desire to contain the foreign migrants for better control as well as to maintain (or reestablish) stability in the region.

As for upholding the state-society contract in zones of reception, the government will do so in places where it perceives a risk of rebellion if it fails to do so. In many acute crisis situations, however, local populations often are accustomed to a relatively unresponsive state. In authoritarian settings, this incentive is certainly weakened a great deal, given even in places with prior histories of violence and rebellion, these populations might lack motivation to protest, or rebel given the risks involved in doing so and little chance of change. What's more, in some places with recent memories of violence, this may indeed be a reason for which a region's population would not rebel, as it is common for these to have little if any appetite to relive the horrors of violence or war that had come before. This can be true even in the face of blatant marginalization.

Clearly, underpinning all these security incentives are the host government's history and political relationship with a given region and its people. As indicated above, in places where there is a history of violence and opposition, the government might be incentivized to restrict aid to these regions. However, this is not necessarily straight-forward, given in some of these contexts, the government may *need* to be responsive despite a clear history of opposition. This highlights an important distinction, where a history of violence and opposition is insufficient to establish its threat potential. Instead, the government must also consider whether the region poses a real danger to its political survival. In cases where the government's potential opponents are very clearly stronger in some way (for instance, in population numbers), it should be



more responsive in these places than in other regions that do not pose other viable risks (because they are fewer in number, for instance, to use the same example).

Therefore, all else equal, zones of reception that pose a higher threat, the government will obstruct or deny aid, while in zones of reception with lower threat potential, it will facilitate aid response. However, this is mediated by considerations of whether a region poses a clear danger to its political survival.

In places where a rival region that poses some threat because of historical or conflict interests but that the government does not assess to pose a formidable and viable threat should the populations of the region choose to revolt, then it will choose to remain unresponsive, as there is no real incentive to upholding the social contract in these places, given it believes they do not pose enough of a threat to its political survival.

However, in rival regions that pose some threat due to historical or conflict interests and that the government also perceives as an equal or stronger opponent, it will elect to be more responsive in these regions. This is because upholding the state-society contract in these places is more important in these places, as the risks of rebellion in these contexts would be more dire. Thus, in places that may have some adversarial relationship with the government, but that is perceived to be stronger, we should expect the government to be more lenient toward aid and facilitate it to the region in order to avoid a viable threat to its political survival.

### 5.2.2 Implications of Economic Interests & Aid Response

As explained above, diverging regional histories and political value of crisis-affected regions are relevant when considering a state's behavior toward these places and any processes that might influence them, like humanitarian assistance.

Given the above discussion of economic interests on government calculations of the value of a given crisis region, it can be expected to facilitate aid in places where it stands to benefit financially or otherwise from doing so,

while the inverse is true of places that hold little value. In conflict crisis settings, economic interests are trumped by security interests, though the former certainly factor in the government's incentives to reset conflict-affected economies, given its concern for business climate perceptions and actual productivity and outputs. Governments are therefore expected to promote assistance to places that are of high value to it, though this is not necessarily a sufficient condition for it to do so, if security interests incentivize it to block or obstruct, and the inverse is true as well.

As this section aimed to show, as subnational politics vary, so too do a government's political interests in humanitarian crises. Given the government's diverging interests in different crises, subnational regions and their peoples, I highlighted how we might expect a host government to behave given its varying interests in different crisis settings. I argue that it is the host government's domestic political interests that can have outsized influence when explaining variation in how, where and to whom humanitarian assistance is directed to places and people in need, and that this is specifically mediated by security and economic incentive structures.

We can therefore expect host governments to facilitate aid to crises or regions with lower threat potential, and especially to those of higher value to the government. Conversely, we can also expect a host government to obstruct aid in settings it considers having higher threat potential (especially in places that are actively posing a threat, as in an internal conflict). The government's behavior toward regions with active conflict, and thereby high threat potential, is mediated further by the government's perceptions of local populations' allegiances vis à vis non-state armed groups. In places where it deems significant numbers of local populations are likely to align with its adversaries, it will behave more restrictively toward aid response here. By contrast, in places where it largely views local populations as not supporting non-state armed groups, it will treat aid response more leniently in these settings, largely facilitating it to those regions. And in zones of reception where the government does not attribute high threat potential, it will facilitate aid response. However, in zones of reception that pose a higher threat, the government will obstruct or even deny aid, apart from places it views as a viable adversary whose support

it aims to maintain by being more responsive to the social contract and facilitating aid to a greater degree.

And yet, on face value, it appears the government is ostensibly limited in its ability to shape international humanitarian response, because: funding is allocated directly to implementing organizations, allocations for operations are based on humanitarian priorities and decision-making structures, and distribution occurs mostly through implementing partner NGOs or the UN agencies themselves. How then might host governments control or influence these actors' activities to comply with the host's interests?

This is what I make explicit in the following section, where I specify four main mechanisms through which a host government can obstruct humanitarian aid, namely through: *i. Access denial, ii. Administrative impediments, iii. Physical constraints, and iv. Perception influence.*

## **6. Mechanisms of Aid Denial and Obstruction**

In conflict crisis settings, aid can help the actors involved by: “inadvertently supporting the parties to conflict by providing resources to civilians that parties to conflict would otherwise be obligated to provide, thereby allowing conflict parties to allocate funds to war that they would otherwise be required to obligate to service provision.” (Kuperman, 2008; Terry 2002).”

However, this implies that aid benefits the parties to a conflict quite passively, when governments<sup>33</sup> specifically have many avenues available to them in leveraging it to their advantage. This should intrigue the reader, given aid is often strictly ear-marked and funneled through NGOs and IGOs, as opposed to host governments. So, what exactly is on the menu of available options for host governments to use in conflict settings to exert their influence over humanitarian response?

Given the above discussion, states can have disparate incentives when it comes to deciding how to approach a crisis and specifically whether it facilitates, obstructs or denies aid. As some previous academic research shows,

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<sup>33</sup> This applies to other actors as well, though they are not my focus here.

the principal reason why states may want to influence access is that, perhaps unsurprisingly, it can be a strategic policy tool (Cunningham, 2018, p.40).

Governments can either choose to facilitate, obstruct or deny aid. This research focuses on obstruction and denial and leaves it to future research to specify mechanisms of facilitation. In this research, I was able to delineate four different mechanisms through which the government obstructs humanitarian aid distribution and allocation, namely: *i. Access denial, ii. Administrative impediments, iii. Physical constraints, and iv. Perception influence*. I review these in the abstract first here to prepare the reader for the following chapters that demonstrate how these have applied in Cameroon to explain the two disparate puzzles of aid distribution and allocation.

## **6.1 Access denial**

The most direct and obvious way the government can influence where international aid organizations operate emerges through the process of humanitarian leadership at the country-level negotiating international presence and operations within the country, given the humanitarian sector's ability to operate in a state is subject to the will of the host government and whether it wishes to authorize operations or not.

Humanitarian access denial can take a variety of forms at different junctures of administering humanitarian response. At the most extreme end of the spectrum is "access denial" writ-large, where organizations or a set of organizations might be prohibited from entering the country. Or, if already present in the country, organizations might be prohibited from operating in certain areas or face such extreme hurdles that their operations and movements of human resources and supplies into affected regions are prohibited or severely restricted, effectively resulting in access denial writ large.

This circumstance can apply to NGOs but also UN Agencies and other IGOs as well. While large INGOs and UN agencies rely heavily on partner organizations for implementation anyway, blanket access denial can result in conditions where even working through partner organizations is not permitted, which can leave humanitarians grappling with the decisions to proceed clandestinely anyway, putting all actors involved at high risk. Alternatively, if

such working relationships *are permitted*, the necessity of working entirely through a remote model of management with partners still poses many issues, as these smaller implementing partners tend to have lower capacity and are used to leaning on their contracting organization to an extent given those organizations typically can establish a presence in crisis regions.

Blanket denial can also sometimes apply to specific programming modalities. Humanitarians then must adjust their programming (or omit certain kinds) to be more palatable to the host state, as sometimes trust with a government may be dependent on maintaining mandates that are more limited in scope (for instance, by only focusing on medical needs). (e.g. see del Valle and Healy 2013)

Given blanket access denial can result in quite thorny relationships between humanitarian organizations and host governments, this not only creates excessive delays in response but diverts time and resources in humanitarian organizations as they grapple with the additional burden of strategizing on obtaining access or figuring out how to operate without it. This creates significant additional workloads and administration, resulting in further delays to response. Overall, it makes the response more costly in terms of human, time, and material resources required, and as a result more financially costly as well.

Finally, blanket denial through the host government's rejection of international organizations' response approach writ large (e.g. following the release of an Emergency Response Plan or even a regular response plan), is another tactic that can also be used to excuse the government's obstructive behavior. This can be instrumentalized to prolong access negotiations even further to delay humanitarian distribution and implementation of aid programming.

Although access denial is generally thought of in relation to its effects on aid distribution, it can also influence aid allocation. In instances where host governments really would like to prevent aid from reaching particular regions, one tactic available to them is to ensure that the international humanitarian organizations that coordinate the overall response are distracted. Blanket access denial to crisis regions diverts these organizations attention to overcoming

access constraints and denial in the most pressing regions. Because humanitarians prioritize the areas with the most acute crisis severity, as host governments constrain or deny access to those areas, this can delay or even prevent humanitarians from electing to divert resources to those areas. This is particularly relevant when such receiving areas happen to be strongholds of the opposition to the central government. And so, the government can either try to distract humanitarians through blanket denial to priority regions and use lower-priority rival regions as bargaining chips when negotiating access to the priority crisis zones. In this way, humanitarians may be forced to choose between allocating to conflict or receiving zones, and the government knows which they will tend to choose.

This might seem counter-intuitive that in some circumstances the government would prefer to block aid allocation in receiving areas where there is relative security as opposed to where armed groups were actively opposing them. However, this motivation seems more plausible when one considers that the host government has considerably more options available to block aid distribution in conflict zones than in reception zones. So, if it is able to divert aid allocation to a rival region, it seems like it would do so even if this comes at the cost of lifting the blanket access denial to organizations for aid distribution in other regions.

## **6.2 Administrative impediments**

Perhaps more common than overt blanket access denial is the host of bureaucratic hurdles that host governments can impose to achieve obstruction by delaying operational processes following authorization of operations more broadly. Their aim is either to influence operations in such a way that they never are implemented or distributed at all, or operations are administered so slowly that the response is ineffective or, at the very least, significantly hindered.

Once organizations have their response plans and access is broadly approved, then access denial can continue to happen on an *ad hoc* basis before or during specific missions to disburse supplies or carry out programming.

Before a delivery mission takes place, obstruction and denial occur mainly because of administrative obstacles. For instance, visa or diplomatic ID applications or renewals can be denied or delayed, or approvals processes for aid distribution operations can be so onerous that they cause significant delays and complications in planning.

But it can also happen that bureaucratic constraints impact operations in progress, as approvals on the ground are also often necessary and can be difficult to obtain, so that perhaps access denial was never made explicit, but failure to obtain the required approvals results in incomplete missions.

Otherwise, host governments can influence aid allocation through a variety of moves that essentially aim to delay decision-making processes to the point that assistance is rendered ineffective or greatly hindered or introduce administrative burdens that obstruct and delay operational processes.

One approach that governments can use to maximize the obstructive power of administrative procedures is in creating uncertainty and confusion among organizations that must comply with the procedures through inconsistent applications or lack of clarity into the specifics of how some procedures should be followed in practice or in specific situations. This hinders humanitarian operations, as it makes planning difficult, creates more delays, and sometimes results in wasted efforts. What's more, it can also enable the government to justify access denial when administrative procedures are not complied with fully.

The government can also sometimes try to hinder humanitarians through the imposition of collaborating through their own systems as a required condition for access, enabling closer control of humanitarian organization activities, given the greater oversight made possible through government-owned or operated systems.

Aside from onerous, unclear and time-consuming procedures, host governments also can impose financial penalties or fees that essentially constitute quid-pro-quo exchanges to secure access for operations or as part of the maintenance of operating. I refer to this as "skimming", as it draws from the financial resources intended for humanitarian operations. It is no secret that

skimming off the top inevitably happens. As one humanitarian-development professional who had two decades of experience in Cameroon told me, “*It is very expensive to operate in Cameroon — for the international NGOs, yes, but the national and local ones too. Because, well, you know...everything and everyone has a price, including access, and that happens at all levels.*”

While this may serve as an obstacle that obstructs distribution of assistance, as it increases costs for organizations, diverting program funds and increasing the resources required for response, it is often considered part and parcel of operating in many crisis contexts and is not considered a significant constraint to response. Nonetheless, it should be counted among these, as it does represent one channel through which host government actors can green- or re-light operations.

Significantly, greater administrative hurdles not only result in delayed and sometime less efficient and effective response, but the additional bureaucratic burden can also necessitate more resources and higher costs for both implementing and contracting organizations. For instance, if a contracting organization has been denied access but its NGO partner has access, this can significantly increase costs related to the delivery of supplies, as NGOs would have to pick up supplies from distribution points farther away from the area of operation where the contracting organization has access. Additional personnel are often needed to alleviate the additional workload created by new crises, but even more so in crises that have significant access barriers, given these require many more person-hours to navigate existing conditions when planning and carrying out response programs.

### **6.3 Physical constraints**

After a delivery mission has begun, physical constraints are the most likely hindrance to aid operations and can either delay, suspend or abort operations entirely. The most cited culprits during delivery are both insecurity or barriers like checkpoints where supply deliveries can be blocked or confiscated. These are of four types: *i. Environmental constraints; ii. Conflict-related insecurity; iii. Non-state armed group (NSAG) territorial control tactics; and iv. Government*



*territorial control tactics*. While I elaborate on these below, in this research I only focus on *government territorial control tactics*.

*Environmental constraints (i.)* entail barriers to access stemming from things like limited infrastructure or extreme weather, or, as is often the case, a combination of the two where poor road infrastructure that already limits access is further exacerbated by seasonal flooding.

Physical constraints from insecurity might result from either NSAG or government activity, or both. These constraints posed by *(ii.) conflict-related insecurity between parties to the conflict* can range from attacks and skirmishes involving parties to the conflict that hinder response but may not represent targeted obstruction by the host government or NSAGs. For instance, it is common for humanitarian operations to be hindered because of shifting locations of combat, which plausibly *could* be intentional by belligerents, but certainly is not always, given information constraints.

Physical constraints posed by *(iii.) NSAG territorial control tactics* range from checkpoints, aid looting, and violent targeting of aid convoys. *Government territorial control tactics (iv.)* can resemble those of NSAGs, however, these are distinct, because the agency of who is imposing these constraints matters theoretically. Again, these range from tactics like road closures, check points, aid worker detentions, aid looting, and violent targeting of aid convoys or destruction of humanitarian material or facilities.

In this research, I focus only on tactics leveraged by the host government to maintain its territorial control involving, for example, instances where supply deliveries are blocked or confiscated, or humanitarian staff are detained.

One commonly cited and obvious tactic that a government actor can employ for territorial control via the strategic imposition of constraints on humanitarian response is by looting aid cargo and other modes of sabotage of humanitarian operations. This often occurs under the guise of official “confiscation”. The government might wish to do this to prevent aid from reaching areas that are not under its control. This serves as a mode of territorial control, because it allows the government to potentially weaken its adversaries by restricting the

flow of resources to areas controlled by NSAGs, whether those resources are assumed to be voluntarily given or looted by NSAGs.

Government authorities can also stop aid delivery by interrupting activities or by detaining operational aid staff for questioning, often arbitrarily, and even arresting and prosecuting aid staff. This not only has direct repercussions for aid organization operations by potentially suspending some portion or all activities, but also often by serving as a deterrent to other organizations from repeating whatever actions the government deemed unpalatable. In some cases, this can sometimes even motivate an organization to cease operations entirely given the risks posed to staff.

Aside from the above tactics, probably the other most common physical barrier that government authorities can use to restrict aid distribution is in imposing control over infrastructure that enables humanitarian access. For instance, this commonly occurs through road and border closures, strict checkpoints, and communications blackouts.

## **6.4 Perception Influence**

Finally, the fourth mechanism through which host governments can exert influence surreptitiously over allocation and distribution is through indirect tactics that aim to strategically influence perceptions that affect humanitarian response to their advantage. These tactics are especially salient for influencing aid allocation within humanitarian organizations.

One such tactic is by influencing what information humanitarian actors use to make initial decisions of where limited resources should be allocated sub-nationally. Host governments can do this by providing aid organizations with biased indicators, data, or other local information, since international organizations either do not always have access to externally produced data or do not have the necessary sub-national knowledge at a level granular enough to make sound decisions on their own. So, they must rely on the host state's national sources that may not be entirely reliable (and not only because of data collection limitations) and consultations with local actors who are better informed but who may also be subject to government influence.

Alternatively, host governments can also take issue with information and data resulting in the assessments and plans of international organizations. For example, by undermining or questioning estimates of populations affected by a crisis, this deliberate signaling of disagreement can then justify any further obstruction or denial tactics that might be necessary as conditions in the crisis evolve. More specifically, because estimates of populations in need are crucial indicators of the extent of need and hence crisis severity, they are a primary determinant of allocation decisions for humanitarians. Host governments can leverage this fact by creating a dispute over the numbers in question again as a bargaining chip to ensure that certain regions remain off-limits as international organizations vie for access to new areas and advocate to maintain access already granted elsewhere. Essentially, by giving governments grounds to reinstate negotiations with humanitarians, this provides them a convenient—and ostensibly legitimate—excuse to stall and further obstruct humanitarian response.

Another mode of obstruction a government can leverage is in limiting or aiming to mask information from humanitarian actors that would otherwise escalate their motivation to access areas they previously have deprioritized. For instance, because of government influence and control over the media, certain regions might be experiencing violence to a greater extent than is otherwise believed. Because humanitarians make resource allocation decisions based on crisis-severity, which considers the presence of violence and armed activity, this can effectively give the false impression to humanitarian actors that certain regional contexts are less severe than they are.

As for influencing aid distribution, host governments can also instrumentalize the media to negatively influence the opinions of armed groups towards international organizations in areas where the government does not wish humanitarians to go. When this tactic is successful, the host government influences NSAG attitudes toward humanitarians by sowing mistrust among them toward aid actors. This can then hinder aid organization operations as they try to deliver assistance, as local insurgents and militias who view them suspiciously or acrimoniously as a result of government manipulation can then either revoke or constrain their access. Similarly, the government can spread

misinformation and rumors among local populations, so they come to fear humanitarians or create such uncertainty that they do not know whether to trust genuine efforts to deliver aid and therefore opt out of aid, further compounding the difficulty of delivering assistance in conflict zones when populations are afraid to seek assistance or to identify themselves as populations in need.

Finally, the host government also employs surveillance of humanitarian organizations to influence aid distribution, given it can inform host government decisions on humanitarian access or denial. As host governments are informed through their intelligence networks of the actions of international organizations, and if these organizations are behaving in ways contrary to what they are authorized to do, this can further delay and obstruct initial access negotiations or create further constraints or even revoke access entirely after initial authorization has been granted. Furthermore, the impact of this obstruction creates ripple effects that also impede humanitarian operations. International organizations are generally aware they are certainly, or at least very likely, under surveillance. Because of this knowledge, this can result in further delays and inefficiencies in delivering humanitarian response due to efforts to keep aspects of their response hidden or discrete. And these conditions require additional time and sometimes even resources to plan and deliver programming while accounting for surveillance risks.

## **7. Summary**

In this theoretical discussion, I aimed to set the stage for what follows by highlighting that international influence has long been overestimated as the sole or at least primary driving force in determining aid allocation, and donors in particular. As already foreshadowed, host governments also have ample agency, and as we'll later see, even if they are not immediately involved with granular allocation decisions that occur in-house within UN humanitarian agencies and other members of the Humanitarian Country Team,<sup>34</sup> they can

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<sup>34</sup> The foremost authority and humanitarian coordinating mechanism that guides the overall international response at the country-level is the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). It is made

exert influence in ways that affect both sub-national allocation and distribution. Indeed, it becomes apparent that the state is one of the actors that matters most when considering why different regions affected by crisis might benefit from more or less humanitarian assistance.

When research has accounted for states that are recipients of aid, it has tended to focus on the risks associated with channeling aid through governments, while maintaining rationalist theories that recipient states maximize their self-interest when deciding whether to accept foreign aid and its associated policy concessions (e.g. Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009). I elaborate upon this literature by examining processes of aid flows (i.e. allocation and distribution) following decisions to accept aid and by focusing on how states can still exert their influence without aid being channeled through them.

Clearly, as the above discussion indicates, the government can either facilitate, impose constraints or otherwise obstruct and deny the delivery of assistance to populations in need, especially in emergency situations stemming from conflict or violence. Again, I argue that it is the host government's own domestic political stakes in different regions and populations that are more predictive of where assistance is funneled subnationally, as opposed to international actors' interests or the international humanitarian architecture.

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up of UN agencies, OCHA, select national and international NGOs, and the International Red Cross & Red Crescent societies. The HCT is led by someone with the title of either Humanitarian Coordinator(HC) or Resident Coordinator (RC), and its main aim is to guide collective humanitarian response operations with strategic direction. Among its responsibilities is supporting the HC or RC in negotiating and securing humanitarian access.

## Chapter 3. Ethnographic Methods Amidst Conflict & Displacement Crises

As I was preparing for interviews that I had lined up in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon, the methodological approach I had in mind and had prepared looked quite different from the approach that I eventually adopted. The detailed data collection plan that I had put together laid out an ambitious weekly schedule specifying what I would collect when and from whom. I had a spreadsheet that I used to track contacts and where they fell in my pipeline of initial contact through interview and follow-up. The list of my attempts at meticulous organization goes on.

Then I received a Whatsapp message from my friend Elvis<sup>35</sup> whom I had known from the time I had previously spent in the country. I had reached out asking if he was still out west and briefly explaining what I was doing, to which he responded: *“You need to come here. I can show you places here that I think are what you are looking for.”*<sup>36</sup> I bought a bus ticket leaving that weekend.

At the bus station at Mvan in Yaoundé, I boarded the bus headed to the West region. After finding my seat, an older, portly man sat next to me despite the many empty seat options available. The bus eventually filled, and he explained to me later that his choice was strategic, leaning in with a smirk, he says, *“I didn’t*

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<sup>35</sup> All names within this work are pseudonym to preserve the identities and anonymity of each contributor, given the sensitive nature of the topics undertaken and the acute risks present in a highly autocratic, conflict-affected state.

<sup>36</sup> All quotations from participants in this research are products of my own translations from French, except in instances where participants were anglophone. My approach to translating prioritized preserving meaning while keeping as much of the original language as possible. This meant that some phrases had to be modified, where, for instance, there did not exist direct translations of an expression. I believe my bilingualism and familiarity with Cameroonian idioms and manners of expression managed to minimize these compromises. Additionally, any identifying details that could be revealing of the individual’s organizational affiliations or local residency were removed.

want to end up next to that guy,” nodding his head toward a man with many belongings piled at his feet and on his lap, leaving little room for either him or his seatmate.

His name was Armand, and he clarified that yes, I would have to change buses in Bafoussam into a much smaller bus, and that no, this “VIP experience” was not really for *real* VIPs, he winked. The “big men” of the region would never take this bus, which propelled him into a crash course of the region. “*The Bamiléké are known for being the drivers of the economy,*” he said proudly, a Bamiléké himself. “*And not only of the West — of the whole country.*”

He, and many people in other regions, told me how the Bamiléké have a strong work ethic, which most attributed to culture. A common refrain was, as Armand told me, “*We are the ‘worker bees’ of Cameroon because we are the ones who are in Douala and Yaoundé who ‘cherchent’* (i.e. a colloquial term that literally means to “search” but figuratively means “to work hard to find opportunities or to earn money”).<sup>37</sup>

When we arrived at the station in Bafoussam, I bade farewell to my friend and found the little van headed to Dschang, already laden with bags and parcels strapped to its roof. I piled in with about 20 other people, wedged into every nook of the vehicle, which was, in theory, a 14-seater. I was sandwiched between a window and a young woman in her early 20s who sported a gold ring her septum and was dressed very stylishly in an outfit made of Ndop, a material in a traditional pattern from the region. When you are glued to another person for an hour and a half, you get to talking, and I learned she was a student originally from the region who worked as a manicurist on the side in Yaoundé. She was

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<sup>37</sup> This regional narrative and reputation are shared and reinforced by people from other regions. However, essentializing it might be, there is truth to the stereotype. People from the West are indeed industrious, and many of them will come back to the West to build houses or send money back to various family members or assist them in other ways. But as my time in the country demonstrated, the region is developing more slowly compared to what you might expect from the “*chercheurs*” of the country. And people from other regions are also entrepreneurial, given much of the national population is engaged in food production, part of which they sell at markets, as well as a significant share of people engaged in the informal sector, hawking and selling items at markets, along the side of the road, or even amidst road traffic.

going back home for the weekend for a “*dot*”,<sup>38</sup> one of the ceremonial traditions associated with weddings, for her sister. Before parting, she gave me—and *all* the women in her vicinity—her business card for her nail services. I had to smile at the entrepreneurialism.

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These are prime examples of how much of what I learned in Cameroon was a result of unplanned, organic interactions. My research initially set out with a structured, rigid plan of data collection relying almost uniquely on formal semi-structured interviews and documentary data collection. This became irrelevant during my scoping trip almost immediately, as I was continually invited into experience, observe and interact with people who were embedded within contexts that were key to the topics I was exploring. This is not uncommon in qualitative research, where very particular unplanned moments are what informed my understanding of the broader political and social world, resulting in a partial accidental ethnography (Fujii, 2015).

I embraced this shift in my methodological approach, as qualitative methodologies often encourage flexibility in both design and the research process (Yanow, 2014; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). And yet, this work does not fall squarely within the interpretivist tradition, as it also relies heavily on comparative approaches from the formulation of the puzzle through to research design and analysis. Therefore, it is likely best characterized as “comparison with an ethnographic sensibility” or “comparative ethnography”, an approach coined by Simmons and Smith (2017, 2019).

This means the project employs ethnographic data collection methods to support a research design that draws from the comparative tradition in making within-case comparisons to answer two puzzles. I adopted this approach, because it allowed for inductive and abductive reasoning that is ideal for rich, in-depth contextual analysis necessary for disentangling mechanisms, while also allowing for the examination of variable-oriented causal questions (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). In addition, the flexible nature of this approach allowed for the

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<sup>38</sup> It is also sometimes spelled “*dote*”, but “*dot*” seems to be more common in both French and English.



puzzles to emerge from observations in the contexts under study, allowing the prioritization of local and situated perspectives to lead to the definition of the central concepts and questions of interest, rather than defining these *a priori* (Yanow, 2014). As in other interpretivist work, the questions, concepts, and design would evolve as I continued to learn from what I gathered in “the field”<sup>39</sup> and through documentary sources, and indeed even throughout analysis and writing phases (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

In this chapter, what follows is an explanation of Cameroon’s suitability as a case for this research. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach, research design, data collection techniques employed, what these entailed exactly and how they unfolded in this project. I also consider the ethical dilemmas of the research and describe how I mitigated them, and finally, how I approached data analysis to unearth the findings of the research laid out in the following empirical chapters.

## 1. Case Selection: Why Cameroon?

In studying divergences in humanitarian response, there are unfortunately many places that could be fitting. To explain the case selection, I discuss how the context was both theoretically salient and was a practical choice as well.

Although at first, I did adopt a more structured approach to case selection (e.g. Seawright & Gerring, 2008), and that approach informed my initial research design and plans, it became apparent that this kind of approach was not

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<sup>39</sup> I reluctantly use this ever-elusive term, which suggests an exoticism to the locations where they operate, effectively “othering” places and imbuing them with an added layer of meaning that shape one’s expectations and attitudes before ever setting foot in the place. Of course, we already hold preconceived notions about places we aim to visit, but assigning them a singular label, especially when these are often places where those conducting the research are clear outsiders with often stark power differentials between the populations of interest. Labeling these places as “fields” pits them against the sites we normally occupy, implying our own constitute normalcy, while the “field” represents an oddity or, at the very least, a deviation from the norm. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1998)

Nonetheless, given it is so institutionalized, it would be difficult to shed its usage entirely, but I do aim to use it sparingly and as clearly as possible. Notably, researchers engaged in this kind of work should be aware of recent moves by some university departments to phase out its usage. For example, see: Heyward, 2023.

appropriate given the circumstances that were shaping my PhD. I began my PhD in September 2020 amid the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected my project profoundly primarily due to the uncertainty around travel and fieldwork. These exceptional circumstances and practicalities dictated that it would be unwise to choose a country (or countries) in which I had little grounding, especially given the ability to travel for fieldwork was not guaranteed. Although it is common for more interpretivist research designs to select cases based on questions of access as well as appropriateness of the setting<sup>40</sup> (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), in this case, access would be of even greater importance, in the event I was not able to travel.

Although I did choose a different country-case initially, it was generally in the back of my mind that Cameroon would serve as its foil, as I was aiming for a two-country-case comparative design. As it became increasingly apparent that the pandemic's many effects would endure into my second year, this meant that the periods I had initially conceived to begin fieldwork were postponed until mid-way through the third year. I therefore knew it would be key to select somewhere that could potentially allow for virtual interviews conducted remotely, or that would allow me to hit the ground running were I able to go, given the compressed timeframe for fieldwork. The latter was obviously more feasible in a place I had already been, given previously established networks. These uncertain circumstances clearly affected planning and indicated that it proved expedient to instead to opt for Cameroon, a context with which I already had significant familiarity.

Cameroon was also extremely well suited to a comparative study of humanitarian responses and would be representative of a larger universe of cases that would allow for sufficient relevant variation (Lund, 2014) and was also a relatively typical case among states hosting displacement crises.<sup>41</sup> Cameroon clearly represented a state that unfortunately hosts more than one displacement crisis and contained different combinations of the populations of interest that

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<sup>40</sup> Appropriateness refers to the suitability of the actors and events present relevant to the research topic and initial, tentative questions.

<sup>41</sup> How Cameroon fits within the universe of cases is elaborated upon in the discussion of generalizability in Chapter 8.

provided ample opportunity to find suitable variation to examine and identify puzzles to motivate research questions and a research design.

When the research was preoccupied with diverging experiences and treatment of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, the three major crises within Cameroon offered an ideal setting in which to observe potential differences in humanitarian response, given it included crises that have generated internal displacement as well as receiving refugees. Although it did not qualify as a natural experiment, the distribution of these different populations was ideal for comparison where one crisis included only refugees (the CAR Crisis), another with only IDPs (the Anglophone Crisis), and the third involved a mixture of both (the Lake Chad Basin Crisis). These different compositions aligned with different conflict contexts, and in studying these prior to fieldwork via desk research, I elucidated disparities in humanitarian responses to the respective crises, which were key in leading to the current focus on host government behavior.

Finally, I also selected Cameroon for other practical reasons aside from the advantage of choosing somewhere in which I already had prior experience. I happen to have had a binational upbringing that made me fortunate enough to become a native English-speaker and a sometimes-nearly-native French-speaker.<sup>42</sup> My language skills and the under-emphasis of francophone sub-Saharan African contexts in anglophone conflict research<sup>43</sup> meant that I felt a sense of obligation to select a predominantly francophone state as a case, as a

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<sup>42</sup> My French proficiency ebbs and flows with use, as you might imagine, as has my English, when it falls out of use (e.g. This occurs during periods of little human interaction as in a pandemic and while writing a dissertation. Human language is wild.) Nonetheless, my French is very good where, among African francophones, I generally pass as a fully-fledged French person with a nearly perfect accent when it has not fallen out of use. Even when it has, I have found that “outing” myself as not fully French has been beneficial in many contexts, especially in former French colonies. So, although my facility with relevant languages made research in Cameroon possible, it was not only my bilingualism but my binationalism, or the fact that I do not fit neatly into a single nationality, that was also beneficial for access to many different populations of relevance to this research.

<sup>43</sup> Within anglophone academia, francophone countries are typically under-represented in peer-reviewed literature, and Cameroon is even understudied among these. Selecting Cameroon therefore also was an opportunity to contribute to existing literature through a project that would provide thick and useful description of contemporary humanitarian contexts.

strong command of the language is clearly key to access and engaging with populations of interest.

In the following section, I describe the methodological approach and how it allowed me to identify the puzzles and formulate the questions of this research. Further, I discuss my approach to site selection and sampling before elaborating on data collection and analysis.

## **2. Comparison with an Ethnographic Sensibility**

Examining divergences in humanitarian response and unveiling why certain crises and regions that are deserving of response receive less than expected are dynamics not easily studied. Naturally, humanitarian actors must report on their activities for the benefit of donors, partner organizations, host governments, as well as the local and international public. This commitment to transparency, however, only goes so far, given the inherently political nature of humanitarian work creates incentives to obfuscate certain information in the interest of protecting affected populations as well as their ability to operate in fraught, difficult contexts. This is why it was essential to adopt a qualitative, immersive approach to studying these dynamics. While I recognize the value of quantitative approaches to answer certain questions, that kind of design was not suitable for examining the process-oriented questions at hand.

Even as this project initially began with a different set of questions in mind, it became clear that evaluating response merely based on what humanitarians reported and on quantitative indicators and data would not be sufficient in shedding light on how and why these inequities were occurring. As was revealed to me throughout my research, many of the logics underpinning humanitarian response disparities required reading between the lines and piecing together a jigsaw puzzle of different incentive structures, implied meanings, and nuanced political dynamics. While some stakeholders were willing to be very frank, as with a great deal of research in authoritarian or violence-affected research sites, much of the meaning behind people's words required a sophisticated and context-specific understanding of the meta-data grounding their words, where contextual cues, silences, expressions, body language, tonality, and cultural-specific gestures were key data of their own

merit (Fujii, 2010, 2018). This required deep knowledge of the political spaces in which I was working – specifically at the subnational level – as well as the ability to triangulate meaning from interviews with a variety of different interlocutors. While quantitative data could reveal patterns and trends across the country, the meaning behind the numbers would need to be gleaned through qualitative and embedded research.

Initially, while I was probing to understand inequalities of response, it was my initial hunch that, like much of the literature posits, most divergences were the result of international actors' interests.<sup>44</sup> Had I adopted a theory-testing quantitative design that eschewed any ground-truthing, I may have maintained my original line of thinking that centered international actors. In that scenario, my contributions would have better harmonized with prior research perhaps, but the contributions would not have been as significant. Instead, the theory-building approach I adopted, rendered a different perspective, which complements the current literature rather than contradicts by elaborating upon host state actors' behavior. This constitutes a more significant contribution to the existing literature on the politics of aid than I might have otherwise produced, as it builds on existing research without denying the power of international actors' influence. Instead, it refines our understanding of when host governments can intervene and curtail their influence.

As the opening anecdote of this chapter alluded to, my initial approach that privileged semi-structured interviews quickly changed during a scoping trip and my first site visit to the West region when a connection invited me to come “hang out” in places with affected populations. As those anecdotes previously illustrated, my first opportunities for participant-observation were accidental. Traveling to the region yielded interactions and conversations that were

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<sup>44</sup> Because international humanitarian actors are funded by the most powerful and wealthiest states, conventional thinking goes that their interests reign supreme in the world order, and lower and middle-income states surrender to their will. Not only is this a reductive representation of dynamics between these states, but it also promotes an infantilizing conception of less powerful states, casting those states as lacking agency, weaker than they are, and ill-equipped to advance their own interests when many are very capable. The dominant narrative that casts these states as prisoners to the desires of the wealthiest and most powerful is especially detrimental to everyday people of those countries, because it overlooks the extent of power their governments actually have. This is no doubt beneficial to these governments, and particularly for those guilty of gross abuses of power.

exemplary of how I was able to build rich contextual knowledge of the different crisis-affected regions throughout my time there. These chance encounters, or “accidental ethnography” now constitute a significant portion of my data (Fujii, 2015).

What became evident was that the most appropriate approach would draw not only from interviews with a broad range of stakeholders and triangulation using an expansive set of documentary sources, but also from observation of and immersion in relevant contexts. I therefore changed course, as I became convinced that understanding disparities in humanitarian aid across contexts required a purely qualitative approach, and specifically an ethnographic one with a comparative sensibility (Simmons & Smith, 2017).

## **2.1 Puzzle Identification and Research Question Formulation**

The initial focus of this project centered around the apparent puzzle that international humanitarian actors seemed to prioritize situations with refugees over IDPs. As will become clear in chapter 4, this is true to an extent and is explained by the historical development of the international response architecture and disparate refugee and IDP protection regimes. In fact, how and why refugees are often prioritized over IDPs makes perfect sense once one understands humanitarian architecture and history. However, examining these divergences between IDP and refugee response in Cameroon is what illuminated the two central puzzles of this work that could not be explained by that architecture and history. In short, the puzzle I began with provided essential background that allowed me to identify the puzzles and premises of the research presented here.

I can credit this deviation to my immersive approach. By observing the disparate contexts and speaking with many international and local actors about the experiences of displaced populations and the humanitarian response they had received, I was able to glean that humanitarians were not reluctant to respond to IDPs. They merely faced greater obstacles, much of which could not be shared too explicitly in their open-source documentation for fear of angering the host government, which has considerable power in restricting or green-lighting their access. In spending extended periods of time immersed in various

communities, I built relationships of trust that yielded much more detailed information than I ever collected in a formal interview with someone I had just met.

The comparative ethnographic approach I adopted allowed the data emerging from fieldwork and documentary data to identify the relevant points of comparison, while still prioritizing empirics and the examination of causal questions based on comparisons of units that “speak to one another in theoretically relevant ways” as opposed to those selected based on a logic of strict control (Simmons & Smith, 2017, p.129). In this approach, as other studies of conflict settings have demonstrated, it is both deep contextual knowledge and immersion that can bring conflict dynamics to the fore that are not visible otherwise (e.g. Lake, 2018; Parkinson, 2023; Pearlman, 2011; Wood, 2003).

It was through this approach that I discovered the puzzles related to the overarching question of why certain regions had been systematically sidelined in humanitarian response when they were clearly in urgent need of assistance. The twin puzzles of divergences in aid distribution and allocation provoked the questions of:

- i. Why are regions that are clearly deserving of response consistently deprioritized in aid allocation when other comparable regions that are deemed less urgent are allocated relatively greater response?*
- ii. Why does one urgent crisis amidst irregular conflict receive relatively less humanitarian aid distribution than another when the scale and severity of needs would predict otherwise? And why is aid distribution constrained to such a greater degree in one irregular conflict setting than another?*

The data that emerged from my immersive approach illuminated that it was the host government that held the greatest explanatory power for these puzzles, rather than international actor priorities or other alternative explanations. Thus, the methodological shift was key in zeroing in on the current focus of the work, by foregrounding host governments instead of international actors.

## 2.2 Within-Country Sampling & Site Selection

In selecting the sites for the study, it was clear that collecting data from all three broad response areas would be important to identify differences and similarities between the different regions. To achieve this would require some difficult choices given the vast territory that these areas cover together, and, to mitigate this issue, I chose to base myself in the capital, Yaoundé, which was ideal given its centrality relative to the crisis regions.

Being in the capital region also afforded certain advantages, as most relevant international organizations with decision-making power over the country-wide coordinated humanitarian response were headquartered (or at least had a presence) there. The Centre was also a critical region to immerse myself in, as it was here that I refined my sense of perceptions and dynamics of the central government where power is concentrated. This was important to contrast to perceptions and dynamics in the primary regions of interest, as data from and about the Centre served as a foil to everywhere else. What's more, the Centre, as host to the second largest city in the country, attracts people from all regions of the country, so it was not uncommon to run into people from several regions in the same day.

Similarly, in terms of humanitarians with experience of different crisis regions, it was often more efficient to be in Yaoundé to speak to these people, as it meant that data collection on regions outside of the Centre (especially the farthest regions) could sometimes be done without having to travel long distances for site visits. While some of these individuals may be atypical and not entirely representative of local populations in their places of origin,<sup>45</sup> they still offered useful perspectives, as their broader knowledge of different contexts allowed them to provide comparative insights into different place, which was often insightful. Basing myself in the capital allowed me to maximize the potential to speak with people who would be able to speak to all three environments, which proved successful. This strategy was also successful, as I was able to glean rich contextual knowledge about the Center region and

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<sup>45</sup> This is because those who have managed to leave their home regions for the Centre tend to be more privileged generally.



government that, as I later realized, was crucial for the dynamics and arguments that eventually emerged.

As for sampling within the three major humanitarian crisis zones, it was clear that I would aim to visit all three affected regions in some capacity, and indeed, I spent time with humanitarians and local populations in a selection of sites in each. As a reminder to the reader, these three areas of intervention of humanitarian aid include: i. the eastern regions of the country bordering the Central African Republic (CAR) that has received CAR refugees since 2003; ii. the Lake Chad Basin Crisis where violence perpetrated by groups collectively referred to as Boko Haram have displaced both Nigerian refugees into Cameroon and IDPs within the Far North region since 2014; and the Anglophone Crisis in the western regions of the country, where a secessionist civil war has displaced hundreds of thousands of IDPs within the conflict zone and to neighboring receiving regions as well. I explain my sampling strategies and logic separately for each crisis in the below sections.

### 2.2.1 CAR Crisis Sampling

In the CAR Crisis, I had the choice of visiting three distinct administrative regions: the East, Adamawa and North regions. All three of these host CAR refugees and are characterized as zones of reception.<sup>46</sup> However, I determined that the East was the ideal region to examine dynamics of humanitarian aid response. This was because I knew the East was the most affected in terms of the displaced populations it had received over the years and hosted the greatest concentration of aid actors, and this meant that any significant dynamics of response should be most easily observable there.<sup>47</sup>

Originally, the reasoning that informed this selection focused on the fact that this crisis entailed response to refugees specifically, as I was interested in whether the international aid sector prioritized refugees over IDPs at the time. It was important that I observe a humanitarian context where aid response was known

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<sup>46</sup> Zones of reception are defined as regions that are by-and-large free from active combat, while they may still experience some forms of low-levels of insecurity like criminality, interpersonal violence, or occasional spill-over violence from the conflict across the border.

<sup>47</sup> The other two regions would still have been fine choices, as my prior probing showed that response had been relatively robust given the needs found there, but as will be explained below, there were also practical reasons that made them less ideal.

to be relatively robust as a point of comparison to other zones of reception (i.e. in the West and Littoral regions of the Anglophone Crisis) that had received little response as well as to other contexts that had received refugees (i.e. the Lake Chad Basin Crisis). Given all this, I knew that traveling to the East would be enlightening as a foil to what I had already observed of dynamics in both the Anglophone and Lake Chad Basin Crises, and thereby formed a crucial and necessary part of the puzzle of aid allocation to reception zones.

Not only did the East region contain the necessary elements to study the dynamics I was interested in, but there were also practical concerns that made it ideal. The other regions of the CAR Crisis (i.e. Adamawa and North regions) were considerably more difficult to travel to, where ground travel constituted several days of travel, not to mention both security and safety concerns of the train and road network. Budget constraints also meant that another flight in addition to the one I had purchased for my Lake Chad Basin Crisis site visits would strain my research budget without necessarily yielding commensurate rewards of research insights.

On the other hand, travel to the East, could be easily and cheaply completed by bus in about ten hours of travel. Although it would have been ideal to visit at least one of these other regions, which may have identified disparities between these regions and the East, the constraints of my project did not allow for an additional trip. While additional site visits to either the North or Adamawa would have strengthened this research, I do not believe their omission significantly undermines the findings, especially as other sources of data (e.g. from respondents familiar with the regions and documentary evidence) suggested that the response in those regions did not significantly diverge from that in the East. I therefore opted to travel to the East region and maintain that its selection was the best available option to study the CAR Crisis response.

Within the East, I visited Batouri and environs, partly as a convenience sample as I had contacts there, but also because I aimed to visit areas with varying concentrations of refugee populations and aid organizations to examine whether this point of variation held any potential fruitful insights or lines of inquiry. Around Batouri, there is a high concentration of NGOs as this is a primary field site for major aid organizations with an operational presence in the

region. These operate in the environs where there are many refugees in the surrounding villages and towards the border zones with CAR. By contrast, as one travels west from Batouri, along the main road toward the region's capital, Bertoua, and onward toward Yaoundé, there are significantly fewer refugees. While this contrast did not yield any significant insights, the visits overall provided crucial contextual data that allowed for inferences about how and why responses in two zones of reception would differ to such an extent.

Specifically, immersion in the CAR Crisis response demonstrated the marked humanitarian presence in the region, which appeared in stark contrast to the context in the reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis. I learned this by spending time with Cameroonian humanitarians working for an international NGO at their office compound, by shadowing staff preparing for missions as well as accompanying those on mission, and by traveling as a passenger in a convoy through the organization's areas of intervention. I also attended a briefing and introduction meeting with a local government representative and observed areas of project implementation. This embeddedness among local and international humanitarian actors allowed me to glean rich data that informed the theory and argument by providing necessary background of the region and its response, as well as by lending support for the claims of government incentives in the region.

### 2.2.2 Lake Chad Basin Crisis Sampling

To immerse myself in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, it was obvious that I would visit the Far North as the crisis has by-and-large been confined to that region, apart from limited displacement to the North region in the earlier years of the crisis, and humanitarians no longer reported displacement in the North. The Far North was also ideal to examine dynamics of humanitarian aid response in a crisis that was characterized very clearly as a conflict zone,<sup>48</sup> due to the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency present in the region.

In addition to the Far North's suitability given its security profile, its displacement context was also ideal, as it hosts significant numbers of both internally displaced and refugee populations. This distinction also offered

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<sup>48</sup> Conflict zones are defined as crisis regions where there is active combat between belligerents or frequent violence perpetrated against great numbers of civilians, as opposed to low-levels of insecurity like criminality and interpersonal or individual-level violence.

potential for comparisons that could yield theoretically substantive insights. As I was originally interested in how refugees might be prioritized by aid actors over IDPs, it was important to study a range of contexts, and the Far North would allow me to look for disparities in response between these two populations in the same crisis. This mixed displacement population offered an important point of comparison to the other two crises, which each had mostly homogeneous populations of either refugees or IDPs. Therefore, the Far North offered potential to examine how disparities might differ by displacement status as well as how response unfolds in a conflict zone, amidst ongoing irregular warfare. This latter aspect especially gave me insights that later informed the puzzle of aid distribution in demonstrating the greater facility of humanitarian access in this region compared to the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones. Specifically, it proved essential in identifying what constraints and obstacle to response existed in the region and eventually highlighted how aid actors in fact face relatively fewer constraints there compared to the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones. It therefore provided essential data in support of the puzzle of aid distribution by highlighting a conflict zone of response where aid distribution is relatively smoother and generally unobstructed by the host government.

In addition to these substantively relevant attributes, there were again practical concerns in selecting the region and the site within it. The Far North is difficult to access from the southern reaches of Cameroon, primarily because it either requires several days of ground travel that was prohibited by my university's health and safety team, given security concerns.<sup>49</sup> This meant my only option was to fly, and site selection was therefore limited by flight options, as I would not be allowed to travel outside of the immediate vicinity of the city I chose to fly to, due to security constraints. I also would only be able to make one trip, as flights are expensive, given they are run by the national airline that has a monopoly on domestic flights.

These considerations meant my options were limited to the capital of the Far North, Maroua, or Kousseri at the tip of the Far North. Kousseri could be

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<sup>49</sup> For example, while I could have taken a bus or train to Adamawa, reaching the North and Far North in this way was not a viable option due to safety and security risks, and the fact that this mode of travel took at least three days. The distances cannot be stressed enough.

accessed by flying to N'djamena in Chad and crossing the border into Cameroon. However, health and safety recommendations were unfavorable to this latter option. Even though many humanitarians regularly visited, the policies of the insurance provider that my institution had selected deemed this far too risky.<sup>50</sup>

In the end, I selected Maroua, a very suitable option, as almost every organization operating in the region has an office there. This meant there was a strong concentration of people with relevant knowledge and experiences to draw from. Better yet, many of these people who were in the field offices of larger organizations with a presence elsewhere in the country often had experience in other crises too. It was this embeddedness among aid actors in Maroua that enabled me to gather valuable data that informed the theory and argument put forth in this project. After all, I believe the concentration of aid actors and ease of access to Maroua relative to other places in the region made it the best site within the region for the purposes of my research, especially as it allowed me to build my understanding of essential background knowledge on the region and its response, while also supporting the claims regarding government incentives in the area.

### 2.2.3 Anglophone Crisis Sampling

To immerse myself in the Anglophone Crisis, it was not immediately obvious where to plan site visits, because access to the Northwest and Southwest regions, where active conflict was ongoing, prohibited me from traveling to both regions. Although documentary sources indicated that some displacement had occurred to the West and Littoral regions, because this was not foregrounded explicitly, I did not initially aim to go to these regions because I was aware of their neglect. Instead, in speaking with local aid actors in Yaoundé, several people who were

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<sup>50</sup> While I also aim to maximize security in my decisions in conflict-affected places, it is apparent that the security assessments used in state travel advisories and insurance decisions draw from security ratings and recommendations that have been applied to entire regions rather than more granular ratings that would more accurately reflect realities on the ground in specific areas. Of course, these assessments are difficult to arrive at, and I imagine this approach is motivated by an abundance of caution. But the unfortunate result is that it also creates perceptions of insecurity in places that may not actually be all that insecure, which can be detrimental for humanitarian response to populations in need, as well as in how local populations are treated by foreigners who remain informed by those ratings. I will celebrate the day these assessments refine their methodologies and provide more granular-level ratings.

knowledgeable about the crisis suggested that I go to the West region, given its proximity to the conflict zones. Given I knew it also hosted some numbers of displaced people as well, I thought it was a next-best option to examine displacement dynamics that might be similar to those found in the conflict regions. I did not opt for the Littoral region, given I thought dynamics would be heavily influenced by the presence of Douala, the largest metropolis and business capital of the country. I therefore selected the West region for my site visits, as I believed it offered the best potential for theoretically relevant insights.

As my initial scoping visit to the West demonstrated there were in fact quite urgent needs and a surprisingly limited amount of response, the empirics in support of the puzzle of aid allocation began to emerge. Although this puzzle did not crystalize fully until after fieldwork when processing and analyzing all my data, the West region represented a crucial piece of the allocation puzzle in demonstrating a context in which aid allocation appears to have been blocked by the host government. What's more, the dynamics found there were puzzling when compared to the regions affected by the CAR Crisis, which were also zones of reception, as opposed to conflict zones. The West region qualified as a reception zone, because like in the CAR Crisis regions, it too experienced low levels of insecurity, primarily related to criminality, interpersonal violence, and limited spillover violence from the conflict zones.

The data that I was collecting in the West contrasted with the experiences of aid in the CAR Crisis, which suggested that international aid actors did not only prioritize the "hot zones" or places where there was ongoing active conflict. This disparity in regions with relatively similar displacement and security profiles suggested another explanation, which eventually pointed to the explanation of host government obstruction and denial.

As for practical concerns, studying the Anglophone Crisis was in some ways more straight-forward than the other crises, given the western regions' relative proximity to the Centre. Its proximity not only meant that I organically ran into people from the four primary regions<sup>51</sup> affected by the crisis in Yaoundé, but I

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<sup>51</sup> As a reminder, these are the anglophone regions of the Northwest and Southwest where there is active conflict, and the francophone regions of the West and Littoral, which are major zones of reception.

also was able to more easily travel to the West, as it was the closest of the three crisis regions I visited.<sup>52</sup> So, although I was not allowed to visit the conflict zones, this did not preclude me from speaking to people who worked there or who were from there and were either currently IDPs or had migrated prior to the crisis.

During my time in the West, I spent significant time traveling around the region conversing with humanitarians and civilians in crisis affected areas. I also shadowed a local NGO on missions and observed program activities in intervention sites. I initially chose to visit areas in the western extremities of the region, along the border with the conflict zones as well as to the south toward the Littoral as well, albeit to a lesser extent. This selection assumed that relevant displacement dynamics (initially relevant to social cohesion, as I was interested in this for a time, and aid actor behavior towards IDPs) should be most pronounced in places where the greatest numbers of displaced were found. As is often the case in displacement crises, these were primarily areas that were closest to the border regions with the conflict zones, although, as I later learned, IDPs could be found all over the West.

Specific sites within those regions were not selected as deliberately, given I was working on the recommendations of my interlocuters and people who I encountered in the region. I was introduced to sites via the organization and staff I shadowed, in some of their areas of intervention. I also worked with a local guide who knew the region well, as he was native to the West. Because he was not affiliated with any aid organization, his selections introduced opportunities to contrast sites without interventions with those I visited with the aid staff. In any case, site selection within the West followed a loose strategy, which relied almost entirely upon locals who pointed me to appropriate sites and sometimes even accompanied me in visiting them, which was key for engaging with the people found in those sites.

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<sup>52</sup> This points to a limitation of this research, which is further elaborated upon in the concluding chapter (Chapter 9). In short, while this certainly introduced some bias in my research, given greater exposure to those contexts than the other crisis regions, I do not believe it calls into question my claims. Instead, it points to an avenue for future research that is better able to examine contexts where host governments facilitate response as opposed to engaging in obstruction or denial.

Overall, the strategy of traveling to sites within all three crisis regions while also networking in Yaoundé, proved successful in allowing me to speak to a broad cross-section of people and organizations. In the following section I explain what the data collection in this strategy entailed and how it unfolded in the various sites. I also explain what I did exactly for each data collection technique and why, covering participant observation, documentary data collection, interviews, participant sampling, ethics in conflict and crisis affected settings, and positionality.

### **3. Data Collection**

The fieldwork undertaken for this research occurred in two phases in 2023, the first of which was a scoping trip (January to March), while the second (September to December) was longer and a more focused period. Together, my time in Cameroon amounted to a little over five months in-country. I also had previous experience living and working there in humanitarian field operations from years before, which gave me a strong foundation to build upon.

These periods of fieldwork were chosen very intentionally, because seasonality was an important consideration in planning site visits for both interviews and, eventually, participant observation.<sup>53</sup>

Below I elaborate upon the various data collection techniques employed that generated the data from which the findings of this work are derived: documentary data collection, participant observation and interviews. While I treat the main sources of data collection separately below, I must stress that these were all part of an integrated approach that blended these methods of data collection in a concurrent process of triangulation among the many strands and

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<sup>53</sup> For example, during my initial scoping trip, I visited the West region at the end of February and the beginning of March, which fell at the end of the dry season in the region. The sporadic and heavy thunderstorms I witnessed signaled the transition into the rainy season and shaped when I was able to travel certain places, as my guide prioritized visiting the most rural places with the most flood-prone roads first. Similarly, I returned in September to capitalize on visiting the northern reaches of the country before the highest temperatures set in, though I still experienced 35-to-40-degree Celsius heat while there.



narratives (Denzin, 1970).<sup>54</sup> This is ultimately responsible for the in-depth, holistic picture of dynamics in the three responses that eventually crystallized.

I follow this treatment of data collection with discussions of participant sampling, ethical considerations and my approaches to surmounting them, and issues of positionality before progressing to the next section on data analysis.

### 3.1 Documentary Data Collection

I began collating available secondary data on displacement response long before I started planning to go to the field. This archival work was iterative and began with my prior knowledge of the context. It first enabled the planning of fieldwork through an established direction and guiding questions, which eventually changed over the course of fieldwork, but it allowed an informed starting point that avoided floundering amidst too many possible directions. These documentary sources then assisted me in refining the research questions that emerged during the scoping trip and enabled my planning of the second round of fieldwork. It then continually enabled triangulation both *during* and *after* fieldwork, and, as is typical of ethnographic work, it also formed an essential part of the writing phase, where the flexible research design allowed for analysis and iterative learning to continue throughout data collection as well as while sifting through and referring to processed data while writing (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

As a first step, I compiled humanitarian operational documents and datasets from the past decade to give me a comprehensive understanding of the humanitarian responses to the present major crises in Cameroon. I analyzed these data primarily for patterns and trends over time that would shed light on how they might differ from one another. I drew from both primary and secondary sources from open-source humanitarian reports and databases like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Refworld.org archives and its operational data portal (UNHCR, 2024a; 2024b), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

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<sup>54</sup> This is in line with Denzin's (1989) definition of participant observation, which entails "a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection".

Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) portal (HDX, 2024), and the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix displacement-focused data platform (IOM, 2024). I also collected documentary evidence from a wide range of operational documents and some grey literature published by NGOs, IGOs and think-tanks, as well as from internal documents and data shared by some participants that were not publicly available.

These sources helped develop my understanding of humanitarian decision-making in resource allocation and allowed for comparisons of population sizes of people in need, crisis severity rankings, and financial flows. They also allowed me to understand the common narrative that humanitarian personnel have internalized and based their operations upon. Probably the most consistently useful of these sources were the Humanitarian Response Plans and Humanitarian Needs Overviews issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) every year in places with ongoing crises and international response presence. I reviewed all the Humanitarian Response Plans and Needs Overviews from the past decade of response (i.e. from 2014 to 2024), which gave me a comprehensive sense of the evolution of the crises and response activities since 2013 (as these plans also reported on the previous year's activities). This process culminated in an empirically grounded understanding of the evolution of the humanitarian response architecture and international system's priorities over time, as well as a detailed understanding of activities in each crisis.<sup>55</sup>

Altogether, the thorough use of (and one might say, immersion in) documentary sources proved indispensable. Not only did it provide necessary background information, but some of the major findings of this work were first noticed in documentary sources. For instance, the first indication of host government perception influence emerged in the frontmatter of these documents, where the prefaces of the plans indicated tensions between the

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<sup>55</sup> This said, that experience truly is a motivation to begin using computational tools at least in collection if not for text analysis, since the limitations of these tools at present more than likely would not have picked up some of the evidence stemming from subtle omissions or variations in reporting style and substance (e.g. bureaucratic language that masks contextual details when contrasted with more detailed specific language in previous publications).

estimates of displaced populations calculated by humanitarian actors and those issued by the relevant government agency.

Significantly, documentary data were crucial in triangulating data I had collected from in-person interactions. Along with the usual desk research of secondary sources, these primary sources allowed me to make comparisons of what people had told me, what I had observed, and what humanitarians said in their own documentation of events. Through this iterative process of comparing findings from different sources, I followed-up on any major discrepancies to the extent possible, and documentary sources were often the first place I turned to, as they were often the most accessible source.

## **3.2 Participant Observation**

Although my approach evolved over the course of the project, it was clear from the outset that it was important to speak to a broad range of actors across the different crisis contexts. Once I knew it would be possible to conduct participant-observation as well, I was able to leverage my immersion in everyday contexts to unveil the perspectives and practices of humanitarian crises and responses to eventually identify and explain the main puzzles of the research (Hammersley, 1985; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In what follows below, I describe what these activities entailed broadly as relates to all three crises and how they informed the development of my findings. I then summarize participant-observation activities specific to each crisis region and the sites I visited.

### **3.1.1 Participant-Observation in Three Crises**

Participant-observation in each of the three crises involved spending time among humanitarians in different guises. While I was able to formally interview many humanitarians during my time in these different regions, it was the time I spent “hanging out” that often proved more fruitful, as subjects—that were relevant but that I hadn’t previously thought to ask about in interviews—came up organically.

The people I observed and spoke with more informally through participant-observation ranged from international humanitarian and development organization staff, local and national Cameroonian NGO staff, government

personnel (including military and local administrators), international donor agency representatives, local people of different socio-economic backgrounds in each region, and, at times, displaced people themselves. These were conducted in the capital, Yaoundé, and in sites within each of the three crisis zones: in Batouri and environs in the East region of the CAR Crisis; in Maroua in the Far North region of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis; and in Dschang, Bafoussam and environs in the West region of the Anglophone Crisis. Significantly, many of the interactions I drew from took place on the move, drawing from a growing tradition of mobile qualitative methods (Evans & Jones, 2011). I spoke with people in transit to and from sites in cars, buses, and vans; on moto-taxis and planes; and even while hiking and sliding up and down mountains, around sacred lakes, and in the mist of waterfalls.

I documented these insights by keeping regular field notes and journaling about my thought process and the evolution of the project. These were kept and recorded in a variety of ways, sometimes through voice notes to myself, especially while on the move, but most often either in a physical notebook or in digital files. Initially, I noted any background information that seemed it could be important for inter-group relations, as I was initially interested in communal dynamics and social cohesion between displaced people and host populations. This built my knowledge of the different region's social histories and contemporary dynamics, which inevitably included information about the various crisis situations and how they had affected local populations. As it became clearer that certain populations had sometimes very different experiences of humanitarian response, my attention turned more to examining the aid actors delivering it, as the most obvious source of disparities in aid delivery (at the time I did not distinguish between aid allocation and distribution) suggested aid organization priorities. I therefore became interested in how humanitarians deliver aid and spent much time learning about their decision-making structures and processes, while continuing to learn about the sub-regions in question. I subsequently began to pay more attention to how locals viewed aid organizations and what their experiences were in interacting with them.

After traveling to the West and in growing more embedded within the local communities in Yaoundé, I recognized the disparities between response to IDPs

in receiving zones of the Anglophone Crisis and all the other regions. This was to be expected in the regions that were clearly more urgent as they contained ongoing active combat between parties to the conflict. What was unexpected was that the CAR Crisis regions, which were comparable receiving areas, did not seem to have experienced the apparent neglect that the West region of the Anglophone Crisis had. This was the initial idea behind the first puzzle, which I eventually came to understand it as one of aid allocation, and thus began the iteration of this work that eventually developed into its current form.

From there, I was able to ask more targeted questions to aid staff I was interviewing and could search documentary evidence in a more focused manner. I was also able to engage community member participants about questions that related more to regional experiences of discrimination, as well as of more detailed understanding of conflict and insecurity dynamics. These insights eventually highlighted significant divergences in access issues between the Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crisis combat zones, which unveiled the second puzzle about aid distribution and access, which now forms a central thread of the research.

Data analysis was very much integrated with fieldwork and data collection. As I continued to converse and interview participants in these sites while continually collecting documentary evidence, I accumulated more data that I began mentally coding as patterns related to the puzzles in question began to emerge. For instance, my focus was initially on international humanitarian aid organizations in explaining divergences in aid distribution. However, as I spent more time in Yaoundé and spoke with people from different regions, and especially after visiting the West region, I kept hearing mention of the Bamiléké War. I had never previously intended to delve so deeply into Cameroonian history and subnational politics to explain the divergences I was seeing. Yet, this explanation, although not a novel one, emerged from the context and participants themselves. As I travelled to other regions and spoke to people from those regions in Yaoundé, this mental note I had initially registered during the scoping visit gained traction as I learned of other region's histories and the government's interests in them. Although the shift in my attention to the Cameroonian government was gradual, this mental coding was a crucial step in that process and yielded a significant shift in the project's substantive focus and design.

I summarize the activities of my site visits for each crisis region and in Yaoundé in the below sub-sections. Although I typically discuss the crises in order of their appearance chronologically, here I discuss my site visits in the order in which they were conducted.

### 3.1.2 Participant-Observation in Yaoundé

In Yaoundé, I lived in three different central areas of the city, where I became embedded in the communities of my immediate surroundings as well as in the different communities of interest, specifically among those from the northern, western, eastern and central regions. I spent most of my time in Yaoundé with Cameroonian nationals. Except for the interviews conducted with foreigners, I almost exclusively spent time with local people in my neighborhoods and with previous acquaintances and friends from my pre-existing network who worked as teachers, businesspeople, and NGO staff. In between formal interviews and site visits to other regions, I often spent time at local offices, university departments, bars and restaurants that Cameroonians frequent (as opposed to the “expat spots”), and around the local community gathering places with the neighbors I befriended. This time spent in the capital city and region was essential in building my understanding of the central government’s dynamics and politics. This time also offered ample sources for building knowledge on a cross-section of people from different regions, ethnicities and walks of life.

### 3.1.3 Participant-Observation in the Anglophone Crisis

In the West, I spent time with a local NGO and met with its leaders several times. I also spent time with staff, riding with them on missions and observed kick-off activities for a livelihoods program in one intervention site. I also visited another site where much of the NGO’s activities were focused and visited with the site manager who took me on a tour of the site, spoke with IDPs, and observed facilities in operation, including a mobile classroom providing catch-up classes to IDP teenagers. Here, I was able to spend significant time among local populations throughout the western reaches of the West region that bordered the Northwest and Southwest conflict zones. I spoke to elites, farmers and herders, professors and students, development and humanitarian staff, businesspeople, artisans, security guards, local and traditional authorities, and IDPs as well. I

went to museums and sacred sites, visited *chefferies*,<sup>56</sup> attended a memorial and funeral, ate at local roadside stands, attended performances, took local transportation, and otherwise “hung around” with my local contacts who exposed me to various affected communities.

#### 3.1.4 Participant-Observation in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis

Because of the high concentration of aid organizations and staff in Maroua, this site offered rich potential for participant-observation. While in Maroua, I immersed myself among Cameroonian humanitarians working for a local organization that carried out major international donor-funded interventions. I spent time with them at their offices, where I also conducted interviews with many of them. Here I was able to observe pre- and post-mission briefings as well as shadow staff of different levels of seniority. I also spent time with them outside of the office in bars and restaurants and out and about in Maroua. I even was invited into their homes, where I shared meals and socialized.

Aside from this organization, I also interacted with the many different staff of various aid organizations who were either staying at the same hotel as I was or were having a meal there, as it was a popular spot for aid staff. I also spent time among local populations of different socio-economic backgrounds, a few of whom were elders who could speak to the region’s changes since before independence. These individuals represented a broad range of professions as well, including traders, artisans, herders, businesspeople, and expatriates working outside of the humanitarian-development-peace sector. Significantly, I also encountered displaced people who shared their stories with me, so I was able to directly learn from their experiences as well.

#### 3.1.5 Participant-Observation in the CAR Crisis

In the East, I spent time with Cameroonian humanitarians working for an international NGO at their office compound. I attended planning meetings, interviewed staff, and observed day-to-day operations. I also went on mission with staff as a passenger in a convoy through their areas of intervention, attended a debriefing and introduction meeting with a local government

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<sup>56</sup> i.e. Local “chiefdoms”, which are local traditional governance structures organized hierarchically and with distinct geographic boundaries, headed by chiefs of various ranks.

representative, and observed areas of project implementation. These activities provided rich opportunities to observe aid workers in action in a variety of contexts, where I learned from their interactions among themselves at the compound, more formally in planning sessions, but informally as well in the moments in between scheduled activities during the day. I also learned from their interactions while on mission in the “field”, in the car, and with the government officials. This time spent observing and participating in their activities contextualized and confirmed what I already thought I knew about the relative robustness of response in the region. It also allowed me to learn about the region’s history throughout my conversations with various interlocutors.

Very unfortunately, however, I was not able to engage with local populations in the East to the same extent as elsewhere. This was because, ironically, I faced the greatest mobility constraints in the East, despite it being far more secure than the Far North in the Lake Chad Basin, for instance.<sup>57</sup> The mobility restrictions I faced were only due to my association with the international NGO I was shadowing, whose internal security protocols required that I remain at my hotel when not at the NGO compound. (I would not have been subject to any mobility restrictions otherwise, aside from avoiding areas near the border.) I was under strict orders not to leave, and whenever I did, it was always in the company of a driver who doubled as security personnel. When I left on site visits, it was only under the supervision of a staff member.

Of course, as an international guest, the organization was acting out of an abundance of caution to avoid any fiascos for which they might be liable. While I appreciated the organization’s concerns for my safety, these measures were not commensurate with the context based on prior conversations as well as later exchanges with many who knew the East. These individuals reassured me in characterizing this treatment as “absurd” and “totally unnecessary”, as they reiterated how security was not an issue aside from the *coupures* (i.e. highway

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<sup>57</sup> It is clearly more secure than the Far North, Northwest, and Southwest regions. How it compares to the West region is debatable, as they are both receiving zones that border conflict regions and therefore experience some insecurity. In the East’s case, this has mainly taken the form of criminality in the form of highway robbery and very occasional spillover violences from the CAR Conflict, while the West sometimes experiences spillover violence from non-state armed group activity in the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones.



robbery). This should assuage any concerns of inconsistent representation of the security context of the region, as this represents an underlying assumption of the puzzle of aid allocation.

In any case, this constraint on my mobility in the East was fortunately counteracted by my many interactions with people whom I met elsewhere who were from there or who had previously worked there, not to mention a mountain of documentary evidence from decades of humanitarian presence in the region from which to draw. Notably, I had also previously been to the East during my time living in Cameroon years prior, and therefore had my own prior impressions to draw from as well.

It was therefore through these experiences and observations that I was able to uncover the puzzles of the research, as well as eventually develop my argument and identify the mechanisms of government obstruction and denial through which the argument of government incentives operates. Next, I elaborate upon what the interviews conducted for this research entailed.

### 3.3 Interviews

In addition to documentary data sources and more immersive site visits, this research is based on 57 formal and semi-formal interviews with key stakeholders involved in different ways in Cameroon's displacement response architecture. In addition to these, I draw from at least 138 informal conversations and interactions. I believe this to be quite a successful number of participants for a dissertation project conducted in a constrained period. I credit this success to my prior experience and network in the country, which allowed me to maximize my time, because I was able to essentially avoid the typically necessary period of establishing initial relevant contacts that can be extremely time consuming. See the below **Table 1.** for an overview of the interviewees and which organizations and communities they represent.<sup>58</sup>

The people I interviewed and conversed with included foreign and national humanitarian and development organization staff, major donor state

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<sup>58</sup> Note that the sum of the number of participants is greater than the actual minimum total of 138, as the table depicts the number of participants that provided data on each crisis context and many participants were knowledgeable about more than one of the crises.

agency's representatives, a wide range of local people from each region (including displaced people), and a limited number of government personnel, including current or former military and local administrators.

**Table 1. Participant Types: Interviews & Conversations<sup>59</sup>**

<b>Crisis</b>	<b>Organization or Community Type</b>	<b>Interviews or Conversations</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
<b>Lake Chad Basin</b>	Local Population	Conversations	55
	Local Population	Interviews	1
	Local or National Aid Organization	Conversations	71
	Local or National Aid Organization	Interviews	14
	International Aid Organization	Conversations	4
	International Aid Organization	Interviews	12
	<b>Anglophone</b>	Local Population	Conversations
Local Population		Interviews	2
Local or National Aid Organization		Conversations	89
Local or National Aid Organization		Interviews	23
International Aid Organization		Conversations	2
International Aid Organization		Interviews	11
<b>CAR</b>		Local Population	Conversations
	Local Population	Interviews	0
	Local or National Aid Organization	Conversations	54
	Local or National Aid Organization	Interviews	5
	International Aid Organization	Conversations	22
	International Aid Organization	Interviews	12

<sup>59</sup> This table shows the number of participants of each sub-type (local population, local or national organization, or international aid organization) that contributed data on each crisis context either through a semi-structured or formal interview, or via informal conversations and interactions.

Many of these interviews were conducted in the capital, Yaoundé, but an equal number were conducted in sites within each of the three crises: in Maroua, the capital of the Far North region, in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis; in Dschang, Bafoussam and rural environs in the West region of the Anglophone Crisis; and in Batouri and rural environs of the East region of the CAR Crisis.

During a scoping trip conducted from January through March 2023, I focused on interviewing individuals who had close involvement with displacement response in some capacity. In so doing, I was able to collect data from individuals who had “field” or operational experience in field offices in all three crisis contexts as well as those based at organizational headquarters in Yaoundé. These interviews aimed to unveil the particularities of humanitarian response in specific regions to unveil patterns of divergence and their potential explanations. They also sought to collect contextual and descriptive data that could be of importance for trend analysis as well. In the subsequent core period of the research the following fall and winter (from September through December of 2023), I was then able to maximize my time, given the groundwork previous laid during the scoping trip, where I was able to interview the wide cross-section of stakeholders necessary to examine aid disparities.

I typically was able to initiate contact with people via introductions through my existing network. These introductions were most often made via WhatsApp, while my efforts to reach out to people through formal channels (e.g. email, telephone, and LinkedIn) were by-and-large unsuccessful. After initial introductions were made, I typically set up a time to speak in person, during which we sometimes would launch into the interview directly. Others preferred to use this first meeting to vet me, and in those cases, those meetings were essentially a meet-and-greet and trust-building exercise. Following up after those meetings only sometimes resulted in non-response, but most often those individuals were willing to speak with me once they understood the project and decided I was trustworthy. When I was unable to follow up with a formal supplementary interview, I treated what I learned in those initial encounters as background. This was material not to be formally cited or invoked in my research outputs, but that could nonetheless contribute to my broader understanding of the dynamics at play.

I sometimes met with people in their offices, as for foreigners working at international organizations, this was often preferable, given the sensitive nature of the research and their desire for confidentiality. For Cameroonians, however, their preference almost always was to meet off the premises of their places of work, because they preferred to keep their contributions to my research separate from their formal place of work. This meant I met with people in restaurants and bars, given meeting privately in homes would not have been appropriate for the culture, and typically I was meeting with men. To mitigate any risks associated to meeting out in public, I changed the places of meeting constantly and would typically select low-profile places either during times when they were not busy on weekdays or when they were very busy so that we blended in, appearing to be friends meeting up for a drink or a meal.

Although it was not typical, it warrants mentioning that a few of the interviews I conducted took place over Zoom, because some individuals whom I had known previously were no longer in the country or happened to be traveling for work. So, despite some inevitable limitations of online interviewing, such as an ability to build trust or rapport, these generally did not pose a problem, as I typically only used Zoom or WhatsApp for interviews with people whom I already knew. Our prior familiarity meant that I did not need to do as much trust-building or contextualizing of my own background to facilitate open dialogue. While these interviews were a last resort for me, they nonetheless provided some useful data that would have been inaccessible otherwise.

I conducted interviews and all my exchanges in both French and English. Only in a few instances did I encounter individuals who only spoke local languages, which was to be expected given I was mostly targeting professionals who necessarily speak one of the two official languages, as they are necessary to work in aid organizations.

While ethnographic methods and interviews dominated my time in the field, I knew it was also important that I cross-reference these impressions and findings with other sources. My strategy for triangulating the data collected via interviews and ethnographic methods was discussed in the previous section on documentary data collection.

Before outlining my approach to data analysis, two crucial aspects of data collection need to be addressed. In the following section, I specify my approach to participant sampling. Relatedly, I follow this with a critical evaluation of my positionality and how it impacted my ability to collect data, and consequently, how it relates to my sample of participants.

### **3.4 Participant Sampling**

As is common in ethnographic and qualitative research more broadly, my sampling was often the result of happenstance, pursuing leads of potentially relevant participants opportunistically (Reeves et al., 2013). I also employed a more purposeful strategy, intentionally targeting individuals I knew would provide cross-cutting perspectives of the contexts that were what I had assessed to be the most significant (Reeves et al., 2013). Therefore, identification of participants relied on three approaches. The first involved a looser strategy of “hanging around” and seeing what potential connections might arise from my network, which naturally grew the more time I spent in the country, and from spending time in the crisis regions and places in Yaoundé where it would be likely to encounter relevant individuals. The second more targeted strategy entailed searching for relevant individuals online or by asking well-connected professionals I already knew, and reaching out to them via LinkedIn, Whatsapp, and email. As these first two approaches yielded interviews, I then asked participants for referrals to other people who might be willing to speak, drawing from the snow-ball sampling method in my third approach to participant sampling (Parker et al., 2019).

Aside from the regional selection already discussed above in the discussion on case selection and site selection, participant sampling was also informed by a comparative sensibility in that I aimed to interview, converse with informally, or observe: humanitarians and non-humanitarians, those working in humanitarian aid and others in international development or programming considered at the humanitarian-development-peace-nexus; foreigners and locals from different regions within Cameroon (except the South region, which was the least relevant to the subject); staff from international, national and local NGOs (i.e. with only a regional presence, for example); Cameroonian and foreign staff from UN Agencies; people from different ethnicities within regions; elites, middle-income

people, and those living in poverty; former government military soldiers and civilians; as well as some staff from civil society organizations and a few government representatives in the civil service.

Of course, I was not able to capture perfect representation of the most significant actors. Of all the different types of people and organizations I targeted, perhaps unsurprisingly, it was meetings or encounters with government representatives that were the hardest to come by. This was because most of the people I spoke with were already concerned about anonymity and given the subject of the research and nature of the regime in Cameroon, they were understandably generally uncomfortable with the idea of referring me to any contacts they might have had in the government.<sup>60</sup> On top of this, securing meetings with the government on my own, via a combination of letters of introduction, email, telephone, and LinkedIn correspondence, was unsuccessful and represents a deficit in my sampling.<sup>61</sup>

In the same vein, I did not speak to as many displaced people as might have been possible. This was my intention and part of my participant sampling strategy from the outset, where I did not explicitly seek out displaced people as participants, given the many ethical considerations specific to displaced or migrant populations (Clark-Kazak, 2021; Müller-Funk, 2021) and known problems of over-researching displaced people (Omata, 2020; Pascucci, 2016). Although Cameroon might be understudied in the scholarly literature, these populations also participate in NGO and international organization studies and assessments. I therefore did not want to overburden disadvantaged people; however, I also did not want to exclude those I encountered who were willing to speak. I knew early on that I would likely happen upon displaced people, given the time I had planned with aid actors, and this is indeed how participant sampling of those populations occurred, an approach that other migration scholars using ethnographic approaches have also adopted (Carney, 2021).

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<sup>60</sup> In addition, I was not entirely comfortable pursuing this avenue, given the personal security concerns it implied.

<sup>61</sup> In fact, I did not secure a single interview with government representatives this way. Any exchanges I managed to obtain were through chance encounters and via participant observation with humanitarians.

In addition to these most prominent imbalances, I spoke to more men than women, more Cameroonians than foreigners, including more people working in Cameroonian NGOs as opposed to INGOs and IGOs, and more people from the western regions and Center than those to the east and north.

I spoke to more men than women likely because, first and foremost, I was often speaking to people in the workforce and in positions of some seniority. While many women work in Cameroon, it is often a goal for married women to stay home if the family can afford it. So, it is probable that there were simply more men to speak to, because women who might otherwise be employed in those positions were at home. This said, there were several Cameroonian women humanitarian workers whom I shadowed in the north and east who were among the most helpful of anyone I encountered. Of the people I engaged with outside of humanitarian organizations, the sex ratio was much more even, given a significant portion of my existing personal network were women.

While I initially targeted more international organizations to gain a sense of their priorities, I intentionally embedded myself within Cameroonian circles to prioritize learning from a perspective that is often masked in aid research. I also knew that given the overwhelming amount of prior research about international actors available, I chose to prioritize local actors, as I knew I could always supplement with previous research studying those organizations, a strategy that other scholars have also adopted in similarly immersive work (e.g. Lake, 2018).

Finally, I spoke to more people from the western and center regions primarily due to proximity, as I spent the most time in these regions, and there were higher concentrations of people from these regions in those same regions. This was also intentional, given it became quickly apparent that there was a story of neglect in the western regions that I thought from the outset would be the main thrust of the research (albeit for different reasons at first), and I therefore planned more time in these regions and spoke to more people who had either worked in them or were from there.

Next, I detail the ethical considerations that needed addressing to carry out research on such a sensitive topic. The following section therefore covers challenges of sensitive research in conflict and crisis-affected contexts –

specifically as relates to ethnographic research – as well as the tactics I employed to overcome them to the extent possible in conducting this research in Cameroon.

### **3.5 Ethics in conflict and crisis-affected zones**

Ethical considerations abound when researching sensitive topics like conflict, displacement and the politics of humanitarian response in an authoritarian state. The nature of research involving human participants made an ethics review necessary, as is typical in social sciences.<sup>62</sup> Of particular concern were consent and confidentiality, the potential for re-traumatization of participants recounting traumatic events, as well as personal security challenges I faced with implications for ethics, which I elaborate upon below.

Given the challenging nature of the topic, ethical considerations figured prominently in research design and data collection to ensure that participants were doing so voluntarily, with multiple opportunities to bow out, and with as full an understanding of the project to the extent possible. To achieve this, a robust consent process was always followed, and all participants were given information about the study prior to participation and had many opportunities to opt out. However, it must be noted that displaced people and (especially Cameroonian) humanitarians were typically very willing to speak with me. As in other immersive conflict research, it is possible that some of these individuals may have been incentivized by hopes of some kind of reward or benefit through participation. As no compensation was forthcoming, I tried to dispel these assumptions through the informed consent process that I initiated before each interview and interaction, though this was likely not always successful despite my best efforts.

I solicited consent orally due to the topic's sensitivity and because some participants could sometimes be illiterate, though these did not make up many of the participants. Nonetheless, I did not wish to make these individuals uncomfortable or ashamed by asking them to write their names if they were unable to read what they were signing, as that approach would have posed greater ethical issues. As for participants who were literate, I did not wish to

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<sup>62</sup> Research was carried out under protocols approved by the Ethics Review Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science (REC Approval No: 244963).



make them apprehensive or fearful about their association to a potentially controversial project by signing their names. Although it is true that most participants working in humanitarian organizations or in government tend to be more educated and less marginalized or vulnerable than other subject populations, I nonetheless deemed that providing written consent posed an unnecessary security risk to them. If my forms had ever been confiscated by a party that viewed my efforts maliciously or suspiciously, it could have potentially put those participants at risk by their affiliation with my project.

Even though it was unclear in certain phases of the project whether it would indeed be controversial, I wished to cause no harm and aimed to minimize the risk of doing so whenever possible. While consent is clearly extremely important, and written consent ideal in secure circumstances, the contexts in question were not secure, so I preferred to err on the side of extreme caution than go on to regret an overly optimistic approach to consent in what is, in the end, a highly authoritarian state.

Of course, the primary concern was maintaining participant confidentiality and anonymity. This is not atypical for ethnographic fieldwork, but is, as has already been made explicit, of great concern in conflict research in authoritarian contexts, where it is important to ensure that the identities and data of participants are kept anonymous and confidential. In line with many of the leading qualitative conflict scholars in political science in the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations, I always aimed to prioritize the protection of all people I interacted with, participants and non-participants alike (Jacobs et al., 2021).

To mitigate these concerns for participants, I aimed for discretion in where we spoke, as optics can matter, while also respecting cultural norms. This meant I tried to conduct interviews or conversations in places that were at least somewhat out of the public-eye (like restaurants and offices) as totally private locations were not necessarily an option given cultural considerations. Sometimes, however, the best option was to hold these in places where there were many people around and/or while performing some kind of activity to blend in with the crowd and appear as if we too were merely there as onlookers (which we were, though with additional aims). For example, one such

conversation occurred as I was watching a football match in a crowded bar, while others were held while on a group hike. In more rural areas, discretion can be more difficult, but the fact that I was accompanied by a local allowed me to blend in more than if I had showed up on my own. The humanitarians I accompanied and my guide in the West, “Elvis”, likely gave the impression to any people I was not introduced to that I was either also a humanitarian or a tourist. My hope is that this allowed me to visit communities without attracting too much attention. In many regions, foreigners are not that uncommon, so my aim was to ensure my presence was not noteworthy compared to others, so that it would pose little risk to participants, village leaders or even non-participants by association.

I recorded consent on an excel sheet aside anonymized code names for each participant. This excel sheet was stored in secure storage spaces, where it was encrypted on an external hard drive or in a file on my desktop when internet access was not available, but then later uploaded to LSE's secure cloud storage in Microsoft OneDrive. I used pseudonyms to anonymize names and masked exact ages so to maximize anonymity, especially in the cases of rural participants. For instance, when writing about a specific participant, I refer to the person in terms that reveal what age bracket the participant belongs to (e.g. an elder or a younger parent of small children or a middle-aged man). Livelihoods were sometime important to record as indications of socio-economic status, but I was able to use general terms that are not revealing of precise employers, for example. In addition, in rural areas, because most people tend to do very similar things, this was not as much of an issue. I also anonymized exact locations of participants, given in very small communities even anonymized experiences and comments can be enough to identify an individual. I therefore anonymized the site names within the regions out of an abundance of caution.

To ensure that data collected was stored and backed up securely, I used the “3-2-1 system” by always backing up to my desktop and external hard drive, and to OneDrive whenever I had internet access (Dupuis, 2020). I also cleared my devices when passing through a border (i.e. on my way in and out of Cameroon) and then re-download from the cloud once through and in a secure location. Despite debates about transparency in qualitative research, given these acute security concerns in Cameroon, I opted for a stringent approach to data protection and have thus far elected not to share my metadata for the time being,

as I am unconvinced that the marginal additional benefit of sharing records of my administrative and research processes lend sufficiently more credibility to this work to warrant the risk of making them available for public consumption.<sup>63</sup> (Büthe & Alan, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2021; Kapiszewski & Karcher, 2021)

As for the sensitive topics that this research entailed, and their ensuing risk of re-traumatization for participants, I believe this was minimized, because the focus of the research did not demand that participants recount those experiences necessarily. Although adverse experiences about displacement and the relevant contexts came up in interviews, because the focus of the research was on the assistance delivered, this allowed humanitarian staff and displaced participants to avoid talking about sensitive issues experienced before or during displacement. Only did those issues come up if the participant brought them up of their own volition. As a rule, I never initiated those discussions, nor did I probe unless it was clear that merely listening might be perceived as insensitive, as my primary aim was to avoid re-traumatization or triggering of any kind for participants. More often, conversations revolved around assistance administered and humanitarians' experiences separate from the traumas of displaced people, so these delicate conversations did not comprise the bulk of the data collected in-person. What's more, although this research was conducted in challenging environments across the different crisis contexts, the most challenging for data collection was in the capital in Yaoundé where people were more reticent to meet and discuss these topics, likely given their proximity to the center of state power.

Finally, personal security challenges for the researcher are inevitable in most contexts, but especially when traveling to authoritarian and conflict-affected settings. First and foremost, I was concerned about government representatives who might disapprove of the topics I was studying, so I always aimed for discretion. Although I did not engage in deception, as I always disclosed who I really was and my broad purpose of researching the humanitarian crises in Cameroon, I also did not act in ways that could draw attention from authorities. discretion manifested in many ways. For instance, while I was forthcoming in introducing myself, I also did not necessarily go into detail with individuals

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<sup>63</sup> Despite the steps I took to ensure anonymity, I am reluctant to share in case I have overlooked anything and would rather save any potential sharing for the book version of this work.

whose positions were unclear. I also typically foregrounded my student status in efforts to signal that I was not very important to suggest that my activities did not pose any significant threat. While this was certainly a personal security tactic as well, it was very deliberately an approach that I hoped would reduce the risks for anyone I interacted with, who could also potentially face repercussions for their affiliation with me and my project. By being judicious with what details I revealed about myself and my work (when out in public, outside of the consent process) and by attempting to diminish perceptions of my status, I aimed to blend in and become as forgettable as was possible for a foreigner.

There were also, of course, safety and security risks, given the various insecurity situations. I mitigated these by following security protocols and avoiding areas that were known to be insecure and where travel advisories warned against going. I also kept a low profile and abided by the rules, laws and norms as much as possible. Emotional and psychological risks included stress and distress from coping with the subject material and contexts in person, which I mitigated by maintaining known mental health best practices (e.g. healthy diet and exercise) and in socializing to avoid isolation.

Although it is an uncomfortable subject, sexual harassment must be addressed given it was such a prominent dynamic of my experience. As a woman in Cameroon, some of this is part of daily life, although it should be noted that many Cameroonian women (and men) do not view it as harassment. It is likely that my experience was especially pronounced, given my race as well. These dynamics manifested in many ways. At its most benign, harassment ranged from catcalling, incessant phone calls, and inappropriate comments in professional settings. At its most severe, I sometimes had to contend with being followed and propositioned with *quid pro quos*. Although it should go without saying, I did not engage in any quid pro quos, which I perceived as not only deeply uncomfortable but also as a reason to disengage with that person entirely, as these dynamics ruined the participation potential of those individuals for this research, as I clearly did not want myself or my work to be associated with such dynamics given clear unethical implications (not to mention risks to my personal safety, which I of course also considered). Further, this was also unfortunate, as these dynamics did limit my mobility to an extent, as to mitigate the associated risks, I elected to avoid certain areas after incidents occurred and did not go out at

certain times of the day in certain places. I especially never went out alone at night. Notably, this was much more of an issue in cities and especially Yaoundé, and I almost entirely avoided these experiences in more rural settings.

Finally, in mitigating personal security risks in the neighborhoods I lived in while in Yaoundé, I embedded myself in these communities by walking around, greeting and exchanging with locals, even befriending some, and buying sundry items from the local stands and vendors in the neighborhood. I became a known entity where I would be greeted by name throughout the neighborhoods I lived in and was even allowed through the paths of the informal housing built on the hillsides of what was a very mixed neighborhood socio-economically. I believe this bolstered my personal safety and security, as it avoided an “us versus them” approach that in fact can pose greater risks to researchers (Lake and Parkinson, 2017). Although this approach contradicts my aim for discretion in my other activities, it was a calculated decision to be known in the places I frequented most, as familiarity and friendly relations are a way to be counted among those who the community chooses to take care of in the face of a potential threat.

### **3.6 Positionality**

As alluded to in discussing the imbalances in my participant sampling, data collection in these contexts was both possible and limited by my demographic positionality, given the socio-political implications of how my various identities intersected with the settings and people I encountered (Yanow, 2014).

My various identities gave me access I might not otherwise have, in some instances because I was viewed as an insider and in others as an outsider. Most obviously, my status as a foreigner gave me privileged access to other foreigners, while my bilingualism as a francophone and anglophone enabled me to gain acceptance in both French- and English-speaking circles. However, the fact that I could not speak any of the local dialects was a limitation that distinctly made me an outsider, though whenever I traveled to any region, I tried to learn at least a few greetings and phrases in the dominant local language out of respect to local populations. I believe this helped in influencing whatever positive impressions locals may have had of me and may have helped me gain acceptance.

As a white woman, I was of course very visibly an outsider, which locals everywhere will make known as they tried to gain my attention by crying out, “*Eh, la blanche!*”<sup>64</sup> nearly everywhere I went. While my race meant I held a very clearly (and uncomfortably) privileged position in that society, it also meant that any Cameroonian interacting with me was acutely aware of the disparity and all the fraught dynamics they or their ancestors had experienced during colonialism, as well as post-independence. Cameroonians’ relationship to white people is unsurprisingly complex. On the one hand, many put Caucasians on a pedestal, for instance by aspiring to colorist beauty standards (i.e. skin bleaching has become quite common among the elite who can afford it). However, many also abhor their former colonizers, their continued influence in the country and the benefits they continue to derive from Cameroon’s many riches. So, when first meeting someone in Cameroon, many were somewhat wary, until I had earned their confidence. With some, this took several interactions to prove. For example, one man who had had terrible previous experiences with foreigners eventually told me that he found I was not like the other foreigners he knew. When I asked what he meant, he said, “*You know, you’re not ‘coincé’ (stuck-up), and you treat me as equal.*”

So, while my race meant that I was viewed as an outsider, it also gave me certain privileged access even among locals, likely because of perceived power-differentials and a tendency among some to show greater deference or favorability to white people. The latter often culminated in dynamics that would be akin to enjoying celebrity status and all the negative implications that has for privacy and the ability to go about one’s business as usual.<sup>65</sup>

Additionally, as a clear foreigner working on development and humanitarian themes, this also positioned me as someone that was (to an extent correctly) assumed to have better access to decision-makers that could

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<sup>64</sup> This essentially means, “Hey white lady!”.

<sup>65</sup> For example, after delivering a presentation at a university department in Yaoundé, I was seated outside waiting for a taxi when I was approached by a man who told me he had been looking for me after he had seen my picture online. This was alarming at first, but my apprehension was somewhat assuaged when he explained that he was a professor and had seen images depicting the presentation I had *just* given not fifteen minutes prior and had already been uploaded to the department’s website. These images would later appear in departmental marketing materials as well (without my consent, as it did not appear this was common practice).

potentially help influence local conditions within Cameroon for the better. This, I believe, was a significant reason why many people were very willing to speak with me, and at times, even sought *me* out to share their perspectives and stories.<sup>66</sup> So, in this case too, my outsider status significantly improved my access.

What's more, I am a very peculiar case, given my bilingual, binational identity. While I can communicate fluently in French, I often do not pass as culturally French, given my international upbringing and significantly more time spent in the US and Canada. So, while this means I have the distinct advantage of conversing with ease in many kinds of circles, the fact that my "little accent" and foibles in my weaker language aligns with the language of the colonial power (that currently has the most fraught relationship with the country) was, in fact, an advantage. To put it bluntly, to Cameroonians I was "not really French", because, in their words, I was friendly and treated them with respect. This was a significant advantage, as it allowed me to befriend many locals and is how I mainly spent my free time among Cameroonians. This was a distinct advantage for my research too, as that social time was essential to my building and deepening relationships and trust, which further helped me to expand my networks and collect more data.

As a woman, this certainly meant I was better able to access female participants in a way that was less charged than if I had been a man, and especially a white man. Like in many parts of Africa, social dynamics in Cameroon are such that for many people, men and women alike, their objective is to obtain a white romantic partner. This is partly due to warped beauty standards as well as the unfortunate reality that foreigners from comparatively wealthy countries and backgrounds<sup>67</sup> imply a great improvement in quality of life. This means that many Cameroonian men and women make efforts to woo white people. Because it is still a very traditional society, where gender norms are strictly upheld and anything that contradicts hetero-normativity is castigated (despite a known population of queer people in-country), my interactions with women were always explicitly platonic. While there were

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<sup>66</sup> I elaborate on this point at the end of this section where I discuss Cameroonian's willingness to speak, as my positionality cannot be solely credited for this dynamic.

<sup>67</sup> This is true even if, by one's own country's standards, one is not considered wealthy.

imbalances of course due to my race, my sex and gender meant that, in that traditional context, the conversations I had with Cameroonian women lacked those complications often present when speaking with Cameroonian men.

This brings me to the greatest challenge I encountered in the country, which warrants mentioning although it might be an uncomfortable subject, as it relates to my position as a white woman and very clearly impacted my access. As explained, my status as a white woman made me particularly desirable to men in the country. This dynamic colored many of my interactions with Cameroonian men. I believe it sometimes granted me access to people and places that perhaps a foreigner from a different race and sex may not have been granted. While I tried to mitigate this in the strategies already elaborated upon in the previous section on ethics, it is likely that I was not always able to dispel any expectations among participants who were men.

Aside from these various identities, my previous lived experience in the country was crucial to the success of my fieldwork. I had lived and worked in Cameroon in 2018, and as previously mentioned, this experience meant I already had a well-established network of people (both local and international) from which to develop further contacts. What's more, my previous experience was relevant to the subject of this research, as I worked in field operations for a humanitarian organization and had firsthand experience of the country context and insight into the sector's operations and decision-making. This experience essentially gave me credibility as an insider to the humanitarian sector, which was often key in developing new contacts and building trust.

Additionally, my prior network was also typically the reason I was able to access opportunities for participant-observation as well, given I was a known entity and vouched for by mutual acquaintances or friends. However, I should mention one caveat to this. Although those prior contacts gave me greater opportunity to "hang around" with certain local groups, I also was able to achieve this via new networks that I established on my own. This embeddedness was possible due to my approach in ensuring my own security was characterized by forging connections and making myself known as a "good foreigner", which can be quite the inverse of what some foreigners practice by living as shut-ins within gated and guarded compounds, almost never walking



around, and engaging solely with other expatriates. This approach of “hanging around” was therefore also key to developing my local knowledge and gaining relevant access.

Finally, although my positionality certainly interacted with local conditions and people in clear ways that impacted my access, it is important to credit Cameroonian people themselves for generally being very willing to speak. I cannot attribute my success in speaking to and interacting with as many people as I did solely to my own positionality. Perhaps my positionality made me approachable to Cameroonians, but it also is not uncommon that people affected by civil wars and authoritarianism want to talk. This might seem counter-intuitive given assumptions that locals are fearful of reprisals from authorities by expressing dissenting or oppositional attitudes. But as other research has found, people in these contexts are often very motivated to participate in research which gives them opportunities to share their experiences and the potential to become a part of the historical record. What more, previous studies have indicated that participation can be beneficial for their own processing of events, identities, sense of purpose, and meaning. (Green, 1995; Nordstrom, 1997; Das, 1990; Suarez-Orozco, 1992; as cited in Wood, 2003)

In my experience, this was also true of Cameroonians whose willingness to speak was especially true outside of the Centre. Although, even in the Centre, nationals were still surprisingly open with me, aside from those working with clear affiliations to the government.<sup>68</sup> While Cameroonians certainly have reason to fear reprisals, I often heard them attribute their willingness to speak to their desire to inform the rest of the world of the various crises in the country. Many said they hoped that whatever I produced would communicate to the international community the severity of conditions in-country to raise more funds for response.<sup>69</sup> Overall, many simply wanted to know that their experiences would be recorded, as they were so accustomed to official records and media lacking pluralist perspectives. This was especially true of people

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<sup>68</sup> As previously mentioned, it was often foreigners who were more wary and more cautious when talking about their work.

<sup>69</sup> Although I wish that as well, as my research shows, the amount of funds raised is not the only issue when it comes to the Anglophone crisis.

who were poorer and marginalized and of those who had witnessed or experienced conflict-related violence, or worked closely with those populations, but also among more advantaged people who were also very willing to converse when somewhere discrete.

### **3.7 Data Collection Summary**

Essentially, I employed ethnographic methods of data collection to support a research design that employs within-case comparison case study analyses to answer the two puzzles. While documentary data collection began in 2022, fieldwork for this research was conducted between January and December in 2023. Immersive, ethnographic research in each of the three zones involved spending time among humanitarians and local people in different guises and conducting formal interviews with individuals who represented a wide variety of roles and organizations in Cameroon's displacement response architecture in all three regions and the capital, Yaoundé. Ethical considerations primarily related to the sensitive nature of the research subject, and efforts to mitigate any risks were discussed at length. The section concluded with a thorough discussion of my positionality and how it shaped the project, especially as related to my access to participants.

Therefore, whether through formal interviews, informal exchanges, participant-observation, or sifting through documentary data, these methods enabled me to build a solid understanding of the country context and the crisis-affected regions. They also allowed me to identify the final puzzles motivating this research, and uncovered data in support of the arguments laid out in detail in the previous theory chapter (Chapter 2) as well as in the empirical chapter where government incentives and subnational politics is discussed at length (Chapter 5). The data collected ultimately allowed me to answer the research questions that ultimately aimed to build understanding of why certain regions and crises receive more robust humanitarian response than others.

## **4. Data Analysis**

Because ethnographic data analysis is "iterative and unstructured" (Reeves et al., 2013, p. e1370), it was conducted throughout data collection as well as in

the post-fieldwork phase dedicated to data processing and analysis, and eventually, during writing as well. During data collection, this involved taking detailed notes and jottings that described the contexts, people and processes under study. Throughout fieldwork, I also wrote field notes and jottings in cases where participants were not comfortable with audio recording, or for informal exchanges that happened on-the-go where recording was not an option.

During this process I also began initial analysis by noting any linkages across the data points I was accumulating. As is typical for ethnographic research, analysis was an iterative process, where my ideas evolved constantly as new information emerged that either confirmed or contradicted my priors. For example, after going through my notes after my initial site visit to the West region, it became clear that most people there spoke of how little response had occurred despite citing similar needs found in other crises. This clearly contrasted with my notes from the other crisis regions, which indicated that those same needs were receiving relatively robust response elsewhere. This highlighted regional disparities, which served to bolster the puzzles driving the work.

This process of drawing linkages between my various data points continued throughout collection and formed the bulk of the process of post-fieldwork analysis. It also became clear throughout this period as I acquired more data points that international humanitarian aid organizations might be prioritizing one set of IDPs in the combat zones of the Anglophone Crisis over those in the reception zones. However, when comparing how aid actors spoke of response to different displaced populations in different crises, it was clear their attitudes and willingness to respond were quite similar, which weakened my initial hypothesis that disparities in response was a result of international humanitarian actors' deliberate neglect of IDPs compared to refugees.<sup>70</sup> This was further debunked when I realized that IDPs in the Lake Chad Basin were not experiencing the same neglect as IDPs in the Anglophone Crisis.

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<sup>70</sup> For the record, I did not believe this neglect was malicious, but instead the result of constraints to the international humanitarian architecture, and specifically, the Refugee and IDP Regimes.

The evolution in my thinking developed through the constant comparison and analysis of the data I was accumulating, which directed me to consider instead the obstacles humanitarians were facing first in distributing aid, as this emerged in my data. Although the disparities in experiences in the various regions were clear by the time I completed fieldwork, the full picture of the argument and the final two puzzles did not develop until the post-fieldwork stage after I had returned from Cameroon.

After data collection was complete, I turned to processing the data upon my return from fieldwork. I coded this data to learn what trends it contained using thematic coding (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Not only was thematic coding categorization based on *similarity relations*, but it also ensured to incorporate analysis of connections or *contiguity relations*, essentially equating to *axial coding* in grounded theory analysis (Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; as cited in Robson & McCartan, 2016). Although I did not code all the documentary sources I came across, I did thoroughly code a strategic sample of these (i.e. the response plans discussed above).

While processing and coding the data, I finally realized there were in fact two puzzles, one of aid distribution and another of allocation. This was because, after processing the data, I could finally map out the dynamics while triangulating to build my confidence in the ideas I already had developed. During this phase, I interpreted how the relationships between the various sources of data built a larger understanding of the dynamics relevant to the puzzles of aid distribution and allocation. (Reeves et al., 2013). The distinction between the puzzles became evident as I finally examined more cohesively what the data indicated about obstacles to response. Then, during the analysis and writing phase, I realized in reading participants' comments about the government and relevant commentary of humanitarian operational documentation on humanitarian access that the government's role of obstruction and denial applied not only as it was traditionally conceived in hindering aid *distribution* but that it also applied to *allocation* as well.

Because this analysis drew on interview data from a range of perspectives, as well as an extensive range of written records from many sources, analysis involved triangulating findings via coded data from these various sources with

the explicit aim to bolster validity (Webb, 1966, as cited in Davies, 2001). Triangulation was an important feature of my design in maximizing methodological rigor by evaluating evidence of baseline conditions in the various study sites. I also leveraged it to evaluate the degree to which the experiences of assistance in each crisis region could be considered representative, for example by comparing what individuals had told me (which very well could have been idiosyncratic) with what more comprehensive evaluations had determined. Triangulation also formed a significant step in solidifying the main underpinnings of the argument in identifying the Cameroonian government's political and security interests in the three crises. Throughout that process, I also eventually identified the mechanisms and reasons for which the relationship of interest exists.

Consequently, my approach to data analysis was clearly iterative, and although there was a distinct period of analysis that occurred after all data collection had been completed, analysis had been ongoing throughout the collection phase. This is indicative of the flexible ethnographic approach, which intentionally allows for overlap of these phases, as it enables adjustments to the research design and theory as new information emerges throughout data collection and, sometimes, even post-collection during processing, analysis, and writing (Simmons & Smith, 2017).

## **5. Summary of Design & Conclusion**

The immersive approach to data collection I adopted allowed for an in-depth study of the humanitarian literature and comparison of the contexts of Cameroon's three crisis zones. In so doing, two puzzles emerged of divergent experiences of humanitarian response. The first puzzle demonstrates disparities in *aid distribution* when comparing the Anglophone and Lake Chad Basin Crises, which have many similarities in terms of humanitarian needs and insecurity conditions. The second puzzle stems from disparities in *humanitarian response allocation* in the CAR and Anglophone Crisis reception zones.

The data collection techniques described above permitted the identification of these puzzles and yielded the data necessary to conduct within-case comparisons that unearthed evidence in support of the explanation for these

disparities in response. For both puzzles, I employed a comparative research design using Mill's method of difference — or a most-similar design, which is well-suited for comparisons of sub-national units, as it leverages the similarities of contexts within states to minimize the extent to which multiple sources of causation obstruct the ability to make inferences about the relationship in question (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). ) This design was well suited to the chosen context, given it concerns sub-national units that share many similarities but differ in ways that have potential significance for theory-building (Gisselquist, 2014).

This dissertation therefore endeavors to disentangle how and why response to displaced populations have evolved differently, provoking the overarching question:

*Why have some crises and regions been so systematically sidelined in displacement response when they are also urgent need of support?*

These questions are causal in nature, and the research design adopts a theory-building approach to explore the drivers of these disparities, drawing on qualitative interview-based and ethnographic fieldwork in Cameroon to advance the argument that host governments frequently have outsized influence on aid distribution and allocation within and between different crisis-affected regions.

Admittedly, it might seem somewhat unsurprising that, in an authoritarian context like Cameroon, host governments wield significant influence on aid processes that are normally conceived as being entirely under the control of international actors. And yet, this type of state actor's role in humanitarian response remains underexplored in the literature, as was discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2. Although the limited academic studies on the topic have also tended to adopt single case-study designs—aside from one influential cross-national analysis (Briggs, 2017)—these have all used quantitative methods of analysis (Briggs, 2012, 2014; Jablonski, 2014). More often, the grey literature that exists on the subject is written by practitioners within aid organizations and policy-influencers like researchers at think tanks.

These have most often relied upon desk research and interviews with key informants embedded within the humanitarian sector, which have produced convincing scholarship on the topic. As thoroughly discussed above, I too drew heavily from these methods and make a novel contribution in producing new research on the topic using these tried methods as a complementary part of a more ethnographic approach that also employed participant-observation techniques.

Consequently, this research makes an important contribution by elaborating on the role of host state actors in influencing humanitarian aid by specifying their interests in either facilitating or obstructing aid and providing evidence of different mechanisms through which they achieve obstruction. It also makes a significant methodological contribution to the literature on the politics of aid, and the politics of humanitarian aid specifically by providing a richly contextualized account of an under-researched case that is theoretically salient for dynamics within a universe of cases that is also under-explored. What's more the ethnographic approach was key to theory building and making a useful contribution, as the strength of this method is in its ability to produce a "fine-grained evidentiary base" to strongly support inferences and arguments advanced in the work (Yanow, 2014, p.147). Additionally, the comparative ethnographic approach is particularly well-suited to specifying political processes, as I have done here with the mechanisms of obstruction and denial (Simmons & Smith, 2017). Essentially, the methods employed produced data on government interests in different crises and how this is linked to their expected and observed behavior toward either facilitating or obstructing humanitarian response.

In the following chapters I offer a glimpse into the extensive amount of rich data that this approach produced, while providing essential background in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, I clarify and justify the puzzles further, and in Chapter 5, I elucidate the argument empirically with the Cameroonian case by reviewing relevant subnational politics and histories between the affected regions of the three different crisis zones and the central government. In that chapter, I also explicitly detail the government's incentive structures and political interests in each region and expected behavior vis à vis aid allocation and distribution. Chapters 6 and 7 lay out the empirics and evidence in support

of the argument and illuminate how the mechanisms explain the variation in aid allocation and distribution in Cameroon's three humanitarian crises.



## Chapter 4. Puzzles of Aid Allocation and Distribution

Cameroon currently faces three significant humanitarian crises: the Central African Republic (CAR) Crisis in the east, the Lake Chad Basin Crisis to the north, and the Anglophone Crisis to the west of the country. Although it has contended with the CAR Crisis since the early 2000s, it is this most recent decade that has been the most eventful overall. I therefore concentrate on this period, from 2014 to the present, as it is the most salient for the questions at hand.<sup>71</sup>

Although CAR refugees first arrived in Cameroon in 2003, renewed violence in CAR in 2014 sent even more significant waves of refugees into the eastern border regions thereafter. In the same year, violence from the Lake Chad Basin Crisis began spilling over into the Far North region, leaving the country and humanitarians to face two acute crises simultaneously across a huge swath of territory. Just a few years later, beginning in 2016, unrest in the Northwest and Southwest regions boiled over and triggered the outbreak of a civil war in 2017. This new crisis spurred huge numbers of displacement as well, catapulting the country into a new phase with three ongoing humanitarian emergencies in three distinct regions.<sup>72</sup>

This chapter aims to provide the critical scaffolding necessary to orient readers sufficiently so they may critically engage with the research questions of this work. First, by laying out the three crisis contexts in Cameroon, I examine how responses have aligned with the logic of humanitarian decision-making in resource allocation and distribution. In doing so, I illuminate the two puzzles underpinning this project, documenting the different responses experienced in different regions of the country. The data informing and substantiating these puzzles draw from immersive observational and interview-based fieldwork

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<sup>71</sup> September 2024 as of this writing.

<sup>72</sup> While these crises are in varying stages of their development and some affected regions have lower severity levels, they are all ongoing as of writing in September 2024.

and documentary data gathered from humanitarian operational documents that together allowed for an in-depth comparison of the three contexts. I then consider alternative explanations of these puzzles and articulate why they are insufficient in explaining these puzzles and consequently highlight how the government is the most likely actor that holds explanatory power for the questions at hand.

But first, it is necessary to become acquainted with Cameroon, where we will begin by learning about the eastern crisis zones before traveling north and finally making our way back down to the west. (See Figure 2 below for reference.) An introduction to these three broad contexts reveals the political dynamics facing nine of the ten regions of the country. Not only does this offer valuable context on a state at the crossroads of west and central Africa—and, of broader significance, a lower-middle income hybrid regime—but it also provides the essential background necessary to engage fully with the arguments and empirics of this work.

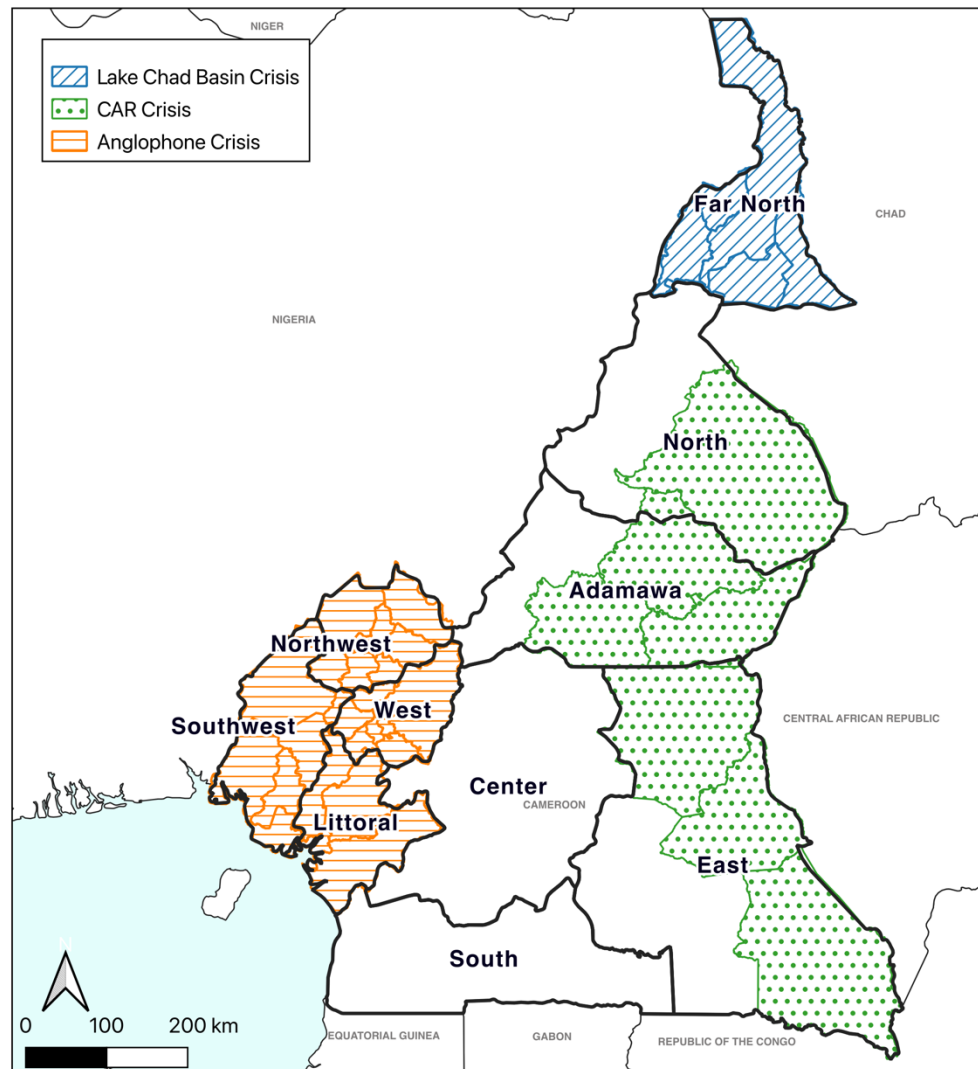
## **1. Cameroon's Three Crisis Zones**

If you had told someone before the millennium that we would be discussing three separate, significant humanitarian crises in Cameroon in 2024, many might not have believed it, since it was long considered a bastion of stability in the region. Despite episodes of violence that erupted periodically, which were generally quickly quelled if internal, this perception was largely accurate. It is important to note, however, that this stability was by-and-large the result of highly centralized autocratic single-party rule rather than a pluralist state with high legitimacy because of strong state-societal relations.

That stability was shattered over the past decades as each successive crisis appeared, each arguably more destabilizing than the last, leaving almost no region of the country unaffected. To situate the reader in these crises and affected regions, it is important to understand the regional composition of the country. Cameroon is divided into ten regions: in the “Great North” lie the Far North, North and Adamawa regions; the “Great West” comprises the Northwest, Southwest, West and Littoral regions; and the remaining Center,

South, and East regions together form the “South” of the country, though many will tend to refer to the Center on its own, given it hosts the capital and centers of political power.

**Figure 1. Cameroon's Crisis Zones and Affected Regions**



Humanitarian response coordination efforts do not typically refer to each region individually, instead organizing efforts around each crisis zone and its respective flows on all the affected regions. In this vein, there are three broad crises of ongoing humanitarian response in the country: i. the East, North, and Adamawa regions comprise what is collectively referred to as the Central African Republic (CAR) Crisis; ii. the Far North and, only to a minimal extent, the North regions are part of the broader Lake Chad Basin Crisis that also affects regions of Nigeria, Chad and Niger; and iii. the Northwest, Southwest,

West and Littoral regions are those most affected by the Anglophone Crisis. These three crises are where most displaced people are found, though some of these populations have settled in the two most populous cities of the country – in the national capital, Yaoundé (in the Center region), and in the business hub, Douala (in the Littoral region), which is the country’s major port and trade center on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea.

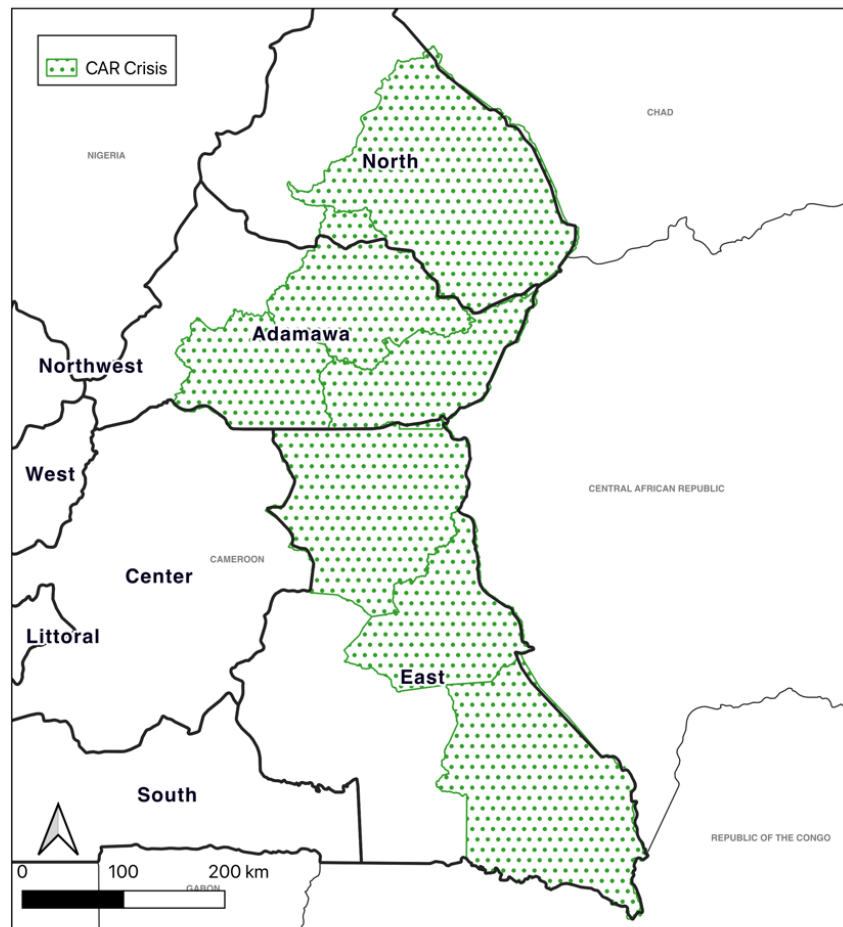
As briefly mentioned earlier, the first of these crises to emerge on the scene was the CAR Crisis, where refugees escaping civil conflict in CAR began crossing the border into Cameroon’s eastern regions in 2003, though the most significant waves arrived ten years later beginning in 2014. The next crisis to emerge was the Lake Chad Basin Crisis that had already begun in neighboring regions of northeast Nigeria in 2009. The non-state armed groups, almost always collectively referred to as Boko Haram (despite there being several factions that are not aligned), began perpetrating violence that spilled over into Cameroon beginning in 2014 as well, making that year particularly challenging for humanitarian operations. Violence in neighboring areas of Nigeria displaced Nigerian refugees across the border to the Far North region in Cameroon. Violence by the same actors within northern Cameroon also displaced Cameroon nationals as internal displaced persons (IDPs) within the Far North and, to a far lesser extent at the beginning of the crisis, the North region. Finally, the Anglophone Crisis to the west of the country has displaced over a million people fleeing the civil conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions. The most significant numbers of IDPs have been displaced within the conflict zones of the Northwest and Southwest regions, but significant numbers have also fled to reception zones in the neighboring West and Littoral regions. This crisis has old roots, but the current conflict is considered to have officially broken out in the fall of 2017 after bouts of political violence and unrest that began in 2016. I synthesize the key events, features and dynamics of each crisis chronologically as they appeared, beginning with the CAR Crisis.

## **1.1 The CAR Crisis**

The CAR Crisis is the oldest and most protracted of Cameroon’s three crisis zones. (See Figure 3 below.) The current situation of protracted displacement is rooted in the past two decades of violence and turmoil that began with a coup

in 2003. As that civil war wore on, civilians began to flee CAR to neighboring states in sites with comparably greater stability. In the first decade of the crisis, between 2003 and 2013, tens of thousands of CAR refugees had settled in Cameroon (OCHA,2016, p.6-7; OCHA, 2019, p.6).<sup>73</sup>

**Figure 2. CAR Crisis Affected Regions**



In 2013, another coup by the Muslim Seleka group prompted groups of anti-balaka Christians to wage retaliatory attacks against the Seleka and eventually Muslim civilians as well. This renewed violence spurred the great waves of displacement with 109,000 refugees arriving in 2014 alone (UN OCHA, 2023). As of November 2023, approximately 350,000 refugees now live in the eastern

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<sup>73</sup> The estimates from authoritative sources vary widely, ranging from 50,000 to 92,000, and sometimes 108,000. Estimates differ, because displacement figures are notoriously difficult to ascertain, though methodologies have improved since the first decade of the millennium.

reaches of the East, Adamawa and the North regions, the majority of whom are in the East.<sup>74</sup> (UN OCHA, 2023, p.3)

Today, the conflict continues across the border, and while there is no doubt that the state of CAR today continues to be violent and chaotic, the receiving areas in Cameroon have largely stabilized and have stopped receiving the great numbers they did at the peak of the crisis. For instance, between 2015 and 2022 the number of annual arrivals ranged between 13,000 and 32,000, and the total numbers across regions between December 2022 and November 2023 had only grown by about 8,000 people (UN OCHA, 2023), which aligns with the development of violence in CAR now concentrating elsewhere.<sup>75</sup>

Most CAR refugees have remained in these border regions, where approximately 70 percent of the refugees are dispersed throughout several hundred sites and villages within host communities while the other 30 percent live in seven “organized sites (camps) (e.g. see OCHA, 2016-19). However, given the duration of their presence in Cameroon, there are some who have made it to the urban centres of the country with approximately 14,000 registered in Yaoundé and 10,000 in the Littoral. (UN OCHA, 2023). Several humanitarians and development staff said that this indicates that some are adapting enough to afford to come to the capital and try to make a life there.<sup>76</sup>

The displacement profile in these regions is squarely one of protracted displacement where refugees are in the post-displacement phase where the main challenges are related to local integration, self-sufficiency (i.e. reducing aid dependency), poverty-reduction and resilience-building. One of the most cited issues at the height of the crisis was that refugee arrivals triggered severe tensions with host communities.<sup>77</sup> Even as periods of relative calm in CAR

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<sup>74</sup> Approximately 200,000 of the total (~350,000).

<sup>75</sup> For instance, in eastern and norther parts of the country, or in the northwest hinterlands bordering Adamawa. (ICG, 2024b + ACLED, 2023)

<sup>76</sup> One of the aid workers I spoke with speculated that they were probably the ones who were better off to begin with, though, as the distance to travel is far and costly for most.

<sup>77</sup> This is widely attributed (among humanitarians and locals alike) to the practice of not initially including host communities in programming.

arose, cross-border attacks by anti-Balaka militia continued to spur displacement into Cameroon. In response, the authorities sometimes restricted refugee mobility beyond the sites where they reside for fear of insecurity spreading within Cameroon. (OCHA, 2016, p.27)

All told, the regions affected by the CAR Crisis represent a relatively stable displacement context in that they are distinctly removed from the conflict responsible for sending refugees, and the areas in which the refugees have settled now experience low levels of insecurity by most accounts and measures.

## 1.2 The Lake Chad Basin Crisis

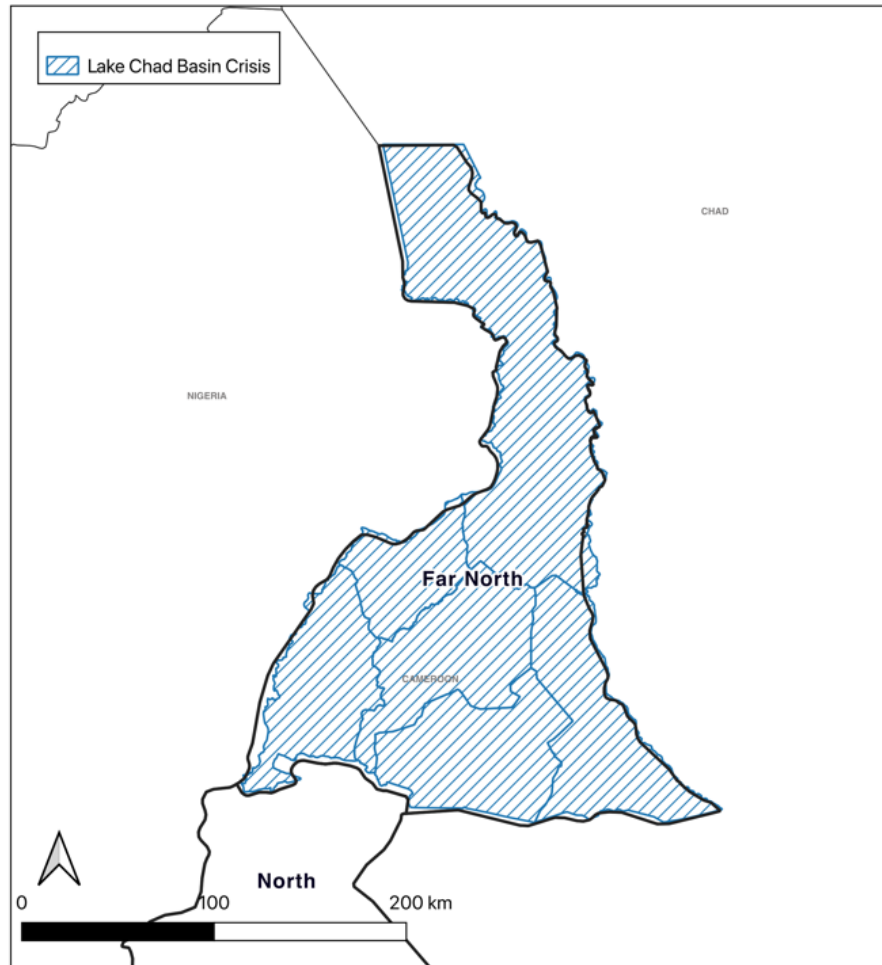
Turning to the northern extremities of Cameroon affected by the Lake Chad Basin Crisis (See Figure 4 below.), we find a regional crisis affecting neighboring countries of Nigeria, Chad and Niger. After Nigeria, Cameroon is the second most affected country by violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) colloquially referred to as Boko Haram, or more accurately, *Jamaat Ahlis Sunna liDawatti wal Jihad*, which has comprised several factions over the years. There were reports of Boko Haram's presence in Cameroon as early as 2009, however, their violent activity did not spread from Nigeria until 2014. The crisis has thus far displaced mainly<sup>78</sup> Nigerian refugees into Cameroon as of 2013, and as violence subsequently spread into Cameroon, internal population displacements began and has continued to this day (OCHA, 2020, p.18).

While the Far North has hosted most of the displacement, relatively smaller numbers of Nigerian refugees (for example, 21,000 in 2019) fled to the North region. It is unclear whether the region still hosts many, as recent reporting suggests that displacement from the Lake Chad Basin Crisis is now limited to the Far North. In any case, as of this writing, the latest figures indicate Cameroon now hosts 134,000 refugees and 138,000 returnees in the Far North, and 385,000 continue to be internally displaced by this violence today (OCHA, 2023, p.16).

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<sup>78</sup> Some Chadian and Nigerien refugees have been recorded periodically, but because their numbers are very few, they are generally not even mentioned.

**Figure 3. Lake Chad Basin Crisis**



Although not all refugees in the Far North reside in camps, the majority do, as this was an intentional decision of the Cameroonian government “for security reasons” (OCHA, 2015, p.43). This highlights how displaced people here have experienced mistrust and stigmatization by community members and the government. Unfortunately, this is a dynamic that is not uncommon in conflict-displacement settings. This suspicion became commonplace especially after attacks intensified in Nigeria in 2015 and sent significant numbers over the border again, which prompted a government response to restrict refugee movements from beyond the sites where they reside as they became perceived as “vectors of insecurity” (OCHA 2016, p.27).

Worsening insecurity also seemed to correlate with worsening attitudes towards all displaced people in the region among host populations. Even though many or most are not involved with the increasing violence and suicide attacks attributed to Nigerian insurgents, they were ostracized due to the



perception of bringing violence into Cameroon or under suspicion of collaborating or otherwise having affiliations to non-state armed groups (OCHA, 2016, p.27). On top of this, superstitions that displaced people's proximity to violent episodes may attract violence to a host's locations were also commonly cited as a reason for negative attitudes towards displaced populations (refugees and IDPs alike).<sup>79</sup> Fortunately, these dynamics seem to have tempered over time.

Some of the other major concerns for displaced and host populations in this region include the targeting of women and children (OCHA, 2018, p.5), exposure to recruitment by insurgent groups to (mostly) men and young people, as well as other "grave child rights violations" (OCHA, 2019, p.6). As is typical for displaced people, both IDPs and Nigerian refugees are highly vulnerable given their loss of property and access to land, which limits livelihood opportunities, as well as the loss of identity documents, which limits their mobility and access to basic services.

Most of the refugees in the Far North reside in camps (OCHA, 2015, p.43), while the majority of IDPs as well as the out-of-camp refugees reside in host communities throughout the region (OCHA, 2018, p.5). The displacement profile involves ongoing displacement movements of relatively short distances that are sometimes pendular due to visits to points of origin to visit and tend to family and fields left behind. Refugees are mainly found in camps, while IDPs are either settled in host communities or found in temporary shelters often near the government's military bases. As the military moves its bases, the IDPs often follow, suggesting good relations with the government.<sup>80</sup>

All told, the Lake Chad Basin Crisis in Cameroon represents both a receiving area and a conflict zone with ongoing episodes of violence and displacement. The already extremely poor region has suffered catastrophic economic consequences, and although violence has waned in recent years, the

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<sup>79</sup> Other research has even unearthed that this is partly why IDPs are often sequestered to their own sites, essentially because a local chief designated a spot of land where they can establish a new village (Della Guardia et al., 2024).

<sup>80</sup> While it is possible that there are divergences in relations between different subsets of IDPs and the government, my research unveiled no systematic patterns of this.

areas where refugees and IDPs are hosted still experience significant insecurity, though the number of districts with extreme crisis severity ratings has decreased over the years.

### 1.3 The Anglophone Crisis

The most recent displacement crisis to emerge in Cameroon is rooted in a civil war between the government and separatist anglophone minority in the anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions in the western reaches of the country. (See Figure 5 below for reference.) As of August 2021, the crisis had displaced over one million people (OCHA, 2022, p. 9-10), mainly IDPs within Cameroon, but among this million were 73,000 refugees who fled to Nigeria as well, most of whom left the Northwest and Southwest before 2020 (OCHA 2023, p.17; OCHA 2022, p. 9-10).

The Northwest and Southwest regions were previously the British Southern Cameroons when they were part of the British-mandated territory formally acquired after the First World War. This explains the linguistic divide of colonial languages spoken in these regions compared to the rest of Cameroon where French is spoken. The crisis technically began in 2016, but the first skirmishes between non-state armed groups and government forces emerged in September and October 2017, which triggered the first displacements in the Northwest and Southwest.<sup>81</sup> The conflict escalated quickly, displacing large numbers of people, and within a year, by October 2018, this number had ballooned to 437,000 IDPs. This figure continues grow, though different regions' numbers ebb and flow in response to conflict dynamics (OCHA, 2019, p.7).

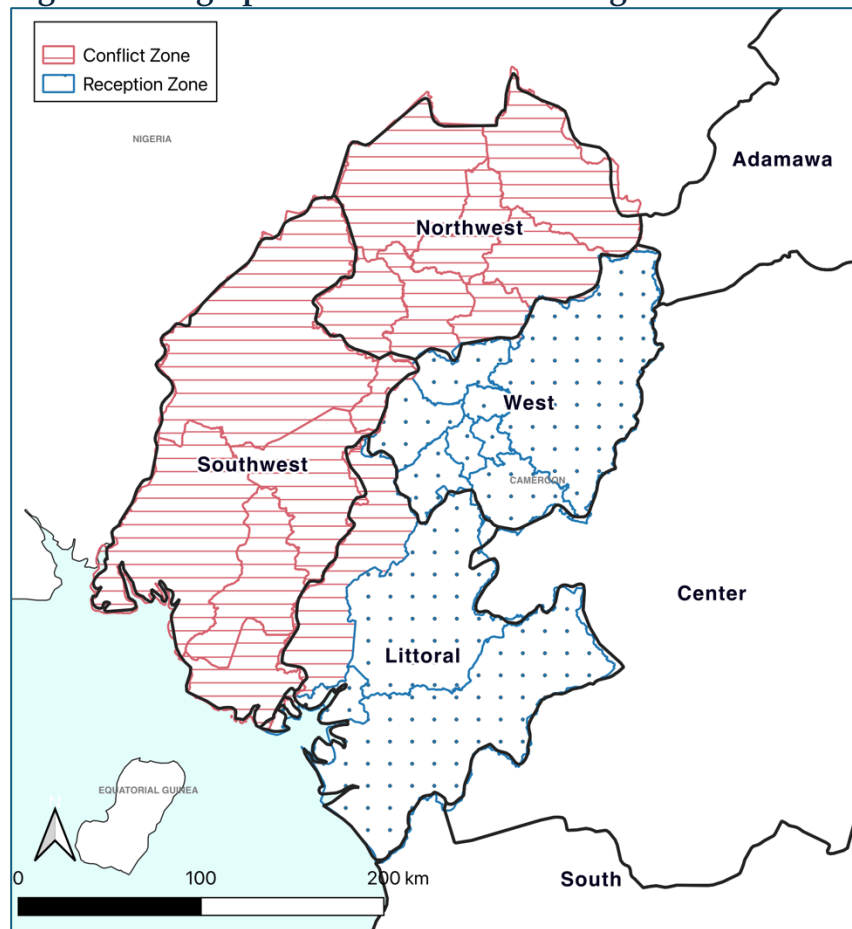
Although the crisis has displaced the most significant numbers within the Northwest and Southwest, the neighboring West and Littoral regions have received significant numbers from the outset as well. Growing numbers have also gone to the Center region as well, and very small numbers have fled to Adamawa's westernmost regions. (See Figure 5 below for orientation.) The latest figures as of October 2022, depict a situation where the West's IDP numbers (~114,000) have approached those in the Southwest (137,000), while

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<sup>81</sup> Accounts differ. Humanitarian documents cite October 2017 as the start (OCHA, 2019, p.7); while individuals I spoke to said it started earlier in September that year.

the Northwest continues to host the highest numbers (231,000), given the concentration of violence there. The Littoral (80,000), Centre (60,000) and Adamawa (5,000) regions also have received IDPs, albeit to a lesser extent (OCHA, 2023, p.10).

**Figure 4. Anglophone Crisis Affected Regions**



Displacement dynamics in the Northwest and Southwest are different from how most people imagine displacement to occur. Instead of fleeing to a reception site where displaced people remain and rebuild their lives from scratch, most of the displacement in the conflict regions is considered “pendular”, where IDPs alternate between their homes and a place of refuge. Overall, the displacement profile includes long-term displacements to new regions (reception zones) and within the Northwest and Southwest, as well as shorter-term pendular movements within the conflict zones (OCHA, 2023,

p.17). The prospect of return for those who have left their places of origin in a less temporary manner is still not considered a viable option given the complexity of the context and especially the volatility of ongoing insecurity.

The Anglophone Crisis regions can be divided into two kinds of displacement contexts. The first is the conflict zone comprised of the Northwest and Southwest regions where conflict and violence are ongoing and the source of displacement within these regions as well as of those who have fled to other regions and across the border to Nigeria. It is also, of course, technically a reception zone as well in the sense that many displaced people are displaced within these same regions to new locations or engage in pendular movements as needed. But these regions are still best described as conflict zones, given their defining feature is the presence of active conflict.

The second kind of displacement context involves the regions outside of the conflict zones that I conceive of as reception zones. These are the West, Littoral, and to a lesser extent the Center and Adamawa. They entail a different set of reception dynamics than IDPs who have fled to new locations but have remained in the anglophone conflict zones. In the reception zones of this crisis, these regions are all far more stable in terms of security, even if those bordering the conflict zones receive some occasional spillover violence. It is this relative stability that make these reception zones distinct from the conflict zones.

## **1.4 Summary**

The most essential points from these crisis synopses are, on the one hand, the CAR Crisis can be depicted as a zone of reception contending with post-displacement challenges and limited insecurity. On the other hand, the Lake Chad Basin Crisis and the Anglophone Crisis are ongoing emergencies contending with security from irregular conflicts that have triggered acute humanitarian needs that have made them the priority zones of operation in recent years.

In the following sections, I turn to examining how humanitarian response unfolded across these three crises. I first delineate how humanitarians make decisions regarding aid allocation and distribution and specify their logic of prioritization. I then discuss how the relative distribution and allocation of

response resources illustrates that the realities of response diverge with the humanitarian sector's explicit decision-making logic and *modus operandi* of prioritizing the most urgent crises and most severe needs in quite significant ways. In so doing, I highlight the two principal puzzles of this work that question why aid distribution and allocation in Cameroon's crisis contexts defy expectations.

## 2. Humanitarian Aid Distribution & Allocation

Despite some differences in context, the above discussion illustrated how all three of Cameroon's humanitarian crises warranted and garnered the attention of the international humanitarian community. As I demonstrate below, by examining aid allocation and distribution in these three crises, I find significant disparities in humanitarian response across otherwise similar contexts. To fully understand the puzzles of humanitarian assistance, it is first necessary to understand the distinction between aid allocation and distribution. This distinction is significant as both are distinct steps in administering aid. I also set expectations of how we might expect allocation and distribution to occur, according to humanitarians' own decision-making logic.

Aid allocation refers to how humanitarians decide to allocate resources.<sup>82</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, in the politics of aid literature this has been studied mainly at the national level and specifically focused on development assistance with a few exceptions. But aid organizations clearly must make decisions of where to allocate resources (particularly funding, but also other material and human resources) within a given crisis. This is complicated further, of course, when there is more than one crisis in a country, competing for international aid resources. Humanitarian organizations thus inevitably make decisions about where and how much of these resources go to different kinds of programming and partner organizations.

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<sup>82</sup> There is a separate and related literature on allocation regarding development organizations, which I discuss in Chapter 2 and that has some parallels with the arguments unpacked here.

Decision-making and allocation of international humanitarian funds raised for the coordinated response is primarily shaped by three factors: the estimated number of people in need (PIN), crisis severity ascertained in needs assessments carried out by humanitarian organizations, and the strategic priorities of international humanitarian actors. Some of these decisions for a United Nations (UN) coordinated response are generally well-documented, and, although they only represent targets of what a plan aims to achieve rather than actuals, they are indicative of humanitarian priorities and the severity of needs. Of most salience for the purposes of this work, by looking at how resources are *intended* to be used, this can highlight surprising disparities in which regions are deemed priority areas of intervention.

Aid distribution is distinguished from aid allocation, because, instead of signifying where resources are intended to be used, distribution entails the actual delivery of material aid (e.g. food aid, medical supplies) to populations in need or programs and services for populations in the areas of intervention. Looking at how and the degree to which aid distribution has operated – and the degree to which humanitarian organizations have faced obstacles – in each crisis reveals significant disparities.

There are many actors involved in aid allocation and distribution, though more so in distribution than allocation. While humanitarian aid funds may be distributed primarily through the major relevant UN agencies and international NGOs, many of these largely distribute material assistance and programming through local partners<sup>83</sup> for work on-the-ground, or in the “field” in humanitarian-speak.

Although allocation and distribution are distinct steps of humanitarian response, where and how much distribution occurs is determined by allocation decisions. Therefore, to understand the logic behind where humanitarian aid

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<sup>83</sup> The term “local partner organizations” refers to (mostly) local NGOs and some civil society organizations.

resources are both allocated and distributed, it is necessary to understand what drives aid allocation in humanitarian decision-making.<sup>84</sup>

The primary planning tools that international humanitarian actors use in all protracted crises are the Humanitarian Needs Overview, which is based on needs assessments and analyses of the situation(s) on the ground, and the Humanitarian Response Plan, which sets targets, objectives, and budget allocations based on the needs identified and is subsequently used to appeal to donors for funding, without which international humanitarian response would not be possible.

It warrants specifying that in humanitarian and development response not all people in need (PIN) that have been identified through the sector's needs assessment mechanisms are targeted. There are always more people in need than the number of people that humanitarian response can reach in large part due to feasibility constraints driven by underfunding. Humanitarians and development aid workers aim to deliver assistance to as many people as possible, but the reality is the sector must selectively target assistance, knowing that often even many of those will not be reached. Thus, humanitarian decision-makers must make decisions about who might be supported by assistance, which necessarily also means choosing who will not benefit from support. Most often, these leaders will try to prioritize as many of the most vulnerable populations with the highest needs and displaced people in particular.<sup>85</sup> Targeting of populations represents an ideal scenario, projecting the extent to which needs *could* be covered assuming the requested funding is received.

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<sup>84</sup> There are no doubt intervening factors that influence how distribution occurs on the ground that explain divergences between resource allocations in plans and how aid is distributed in practice. This research unveils one such explanation by attributing divergences to access constraints, however, there are certainly other plausible reasons that intervene with response delivery. This highlights an area that further research should pursue.

<sup>85</sup> However, the people that humanitarians respond to has grown and diversified in recent years even beyond these categories to include host populations, acutely malnourished children, people who are food insecure, as well as other vulnerable groups like those living with physical or mental disabilities, and older people (OCHA, 2023b, p.22).

Put simply, the allocation of humanitarian funds (regarding UN-coordinated response) is primarily shaped by three factors: i. population numbers of people in need (PIN), ii. the severity of needs in crisis regions, and iii. the strategic priorities of international humanitarian actors.<sup>86</sup>

Population in need (PIN) estimates are conducted by humanitarians through “multi-sectoral needs assessments” that offer the best possible estimates of how many people are affected by crises, and importantly, what their needs are. The Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plans report both the total numbers of populations in needs as well as those that are targeted by a response plan. These planning documents also outline what humanitarians call “intersectoral severity”, which is a rating scale<sup>87</sup> of the severity of each crisis zone that considers different levels of severity of each regions’ sectors of response and needs. As for strategic priorities, these include thematic or programmatic priorities that the humanitarian sector has identified each year. While these have evolved to an extent over time, the core strategic priority continues to be providing “lifesaving” assistance, though this may be articulated differently from year to year, but more traditionally development-oriented priorities, for instance in resilience-building activities and in increasing basic service provision, are now also included.

Therefore, according to this decision-making logic, the numbers of populations in need, crisis severity and strategic priorities should therefore dictate where funding is allocated and distributed. We should therefore expect these to be reflected in records and experiences of funding allocation and distribution.

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<sup>86</sup> It wasn’t until recently that a standard framework was developed to analyze needs specifically to inform allocation decisions. This Join and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) was another reform to come out of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 to improve humanitarian assessments for better understanding of crisis complexities and enable response actors to deliver aid more effectively with limited resources. It has since been revamped to its current iteration, dubbed “JIAF 2.0”, which accounts for needs across the many sectors of response and aims to assist decision-makers with insights into the number of people in need (PIN), where they are, the severity of needs, and the sources of needs. (JIAF, n.d.)

<sup>87</sup> The scale consists of five rankings ranging from 1 to 5 with the following associated definitions: Minimal (1), Stress (2), Severe (3), Extreme (4), and Catastrophic (5).



However, in Cameroon, these ideals of allocation are not necessarily reflected in the realities of allocation and distribution of aid to different regions and crises. While the humanitarian community has responded to all three crises in Cameroon despite chronic underfunding, delving into the details of the three responses reveals differences in how resources are both allocated and distributed. I turn to examining these disparities of aid allocation below before elucidating the disparities of aid distribution.

### **3. Puzzles of Aid Allocation & Distribution**

As explained above, we should expect aid allocation to be shaped by numbers of populations in need, crisis severity and strategic priorities. However, as I demonstrate below, sometimes regions that are considered more urgent, as in the Anglophone Crisis, are deprioritized compared to crises that are considered less urgent, as in the CAR Crisis.

When comparing Cameroon's three crisis zones broadly, the allocation of aid resources appears at first glance to correspond with needs. This is especially true for the regions facing active conflict. It is to be expected that crisis zones facing ongoing conflict and violence would be allocated greater absolute resources than more stable reception zones, given that humanitarians aim to prioritize areas with more urgent and severe needs. This occurs to an extent in Cameroon, where both the Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crises are allocated greater total budgets than the CAR Crisis. However, there are striking disparities when comparing per capita spending.

For instance, when examining the ratio of spending to the target number of populations in need (PIN) in recent Humanitarian Response Plans, these demonstrate that the spending ratio of requested funding per targeted person in need in the CAR Crisis outranks per capita spending compared to both the Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crises. The data available suggests that this

is not an anomaly, as the past three years of available data demonstrate this inequality.<sup>88</sup> (See below Table 2.)

**Table 2. Budget in Cameroon Response Plans by Crisis & PIN (2021-23)**

	<b>CAR Crisis</b>	<b>Lake Chad Basin</b>	<b>Anglophone Crisis</b>
<b>2023</b>	\$ 265.50	\$ 165.56	\$ 113.54
<b>2022</b>	\$ 355.72	\$ 137.38	\$ 97.07
<b>2021</b>	\$ 243.64	\$ 104.88	\$ 95.75

What explains this disparity? Delving further into humanitarian response plans demonstrates that aid allocation sometimes does not align with humanitarians’ prioritization framework and ensuing expectations of prioritizing the places and people with the most urgent needs.

Further analysis of these response plans reveals even more specific discrepancies between stated humanitarian prioritization criteria and aid allocation. I demonstrate this below by considering the first two decision-making criteria of: i. population numbers of people in need and ii. crisis severity.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Note that the author attempted to find budget data for more years differentiated by crisis, but it is a recent development that the Humanitarian Response Plans report financial planning data in this manner. Previous years’ planning documents (that are open source) do not reveal the budget distribution by crisis. It is somewhat possible to ascertain a rough relative distribution by coding data from OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service, as some of these lines are clearly earmarked for certain regions, however, many other lines are not, so it is unclear how some of the funding raised is allocated by region. Nonetheless, other indicators suggest this prioritization as well (as will be made clear below), bolstering confidence that this prioritization has been consistent since all three crises emerged in the country.

<sup>89</sup> I do not elaborate upon strategic priorities, because strategic priorities generally can be met by providing assistance in any of the zones with crisis affected populations. For example, the strategic priorities in the 2023 response plan included: i. improving the physical and mental wellbeing of crisis-affected populations through reduced morbidity and mortality; ii. reducing, preventing, mitigating, addressing, and monitoring protection risks for people affected by crises; and iii. reducing vulnerabilities and improve resilience through improved access to basic services and material and financial assistance to bolster livelihood activities (OCHA, 2023, p.22-25). Additionally, because plans often claim that humanitarian actors will prioritize people with certain levels of inter-sectoral severity when speaking of strategic priorities, this factor overlaps

Discrepancies emerge when examining budget allocations by crisis relative to these population figures, where higher priority regions with more populations in need are allocated lower budgets relative to population figures.

For example, as the Anglophone Crisis emerged and was incorporated into the annual response plan in 2019, it had greater displaced populations than both the Lake Chad Basin and CAR Crises. It also affects more people in need when considering displaced and host populations together compared to the other crises (See Table 3 below). However, the relative budgets allocated to the Anglophone Crisis does not reflect the number of people in need, where the crisis with the lowest numbers of populations in need is allocated the highest spending per capita (See Table 2 above.). So, although priority regions did receive more when comparing total budgets, what they received was not proportional to the number of people in need or to those who were targeted. Indeed, populations across the three crises were often targeted at similar levels. In short, this meant that in higher needs regions with more people in need like in the Anglophone Crisis, humanitarians must stretch funding much further.

**Table 3. Populations in Need by Crisis Response (2020-2023)**

	<b>CAR Crisis</b>	<b>Lake Chad Basin</b>	<b>Anglophone Crisis</b>
<b>2023</b>	607 k	1.6 M	1.7 M
<b>2022</b>	475 k	1.2 M	2.0 M
<b>2021</b>	758 k	1.2 M	2.2 M
<b>2020</b>	618 k	994 k	2.3 M

What’s more, given the humanitarian prioritization logic, all else equal, we should expect that places receiving displaced populations with similar crisis severity levels and population numbers would also receive roughly similar budget allocations. However, examining how these severity ratings align with budgets demonstrates that this is not necessarily how budget allocations are prioritized (See Table 4 below).

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with the crisis severity criteria and does not influence decision-making sub-nationally to the degree that the first two do. I therefore do not include it in the below discussion.

For example, the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan rated six departments as “Extreme” (a four rating on a five-point scale from the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF)), three of which are in the Far North and the remaining three in the Northwest and Southwest, while the CAR Crisis regions (East, Adamawa and North), were all rated as “Under stress” (a two rating on the five-point JIAF scale). The remaining departments in the Far North, Northwest and Southwest are rated as “Severe”. Given these ratings, we should expect the regions containing the “Extreme”, “Severe” and “Under stress” zones to all be allocated similar levels of response as each other, all else equal. (OCHA, 2023, p.26).

**Table 4. Crisis Severity by Crisis & Affected Region (2020-2024)<sup>90</sup>**

Region	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Lake Chad Basin Crisis</b>					
Far North	1-4	3-4	3-4	3-4	2-4
<b>Anglophone Crisis</b>					
Northwest	2-4	3-4	3-4	3-4	3-4
Southwest	2-4	3	3	3-4	3-4
West	1-4	3	3-4	2	2-3
Littoral	1-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3
<b>CAR Crisis</b>					
East	1-2	2-3	2-3	2	2-3
North	1-2	2-3	2-3	1-2	1-2
Adamawa	1-2	2-3	2-3	1-2	1-2
<b>Source: See OCHA 2020b-2024b.</b>					

Other years of response show similar trends (See Table 4 above.), where generally the regions with the highest crisis severity ratings, using humanitarians’ own scale, were located in the conflict zones of the Lake Chad Basin (Far North region) and Anglophone Crisis (Northwest and Southwest regions), and the lowest ratings were consistently found in the CAR Crisis

<sup>90</sup> As a reminder, the crisis severity scale consists of five rankings ranging from 1 to 5 with the following associated definitions: Minimal (1), Stress (2), Severe (3), Extreme (4), and Catastrophic (5). (JIAF, n.d.)

regions and the Littoral reception zone of the Anglophone Crisis to an extent. Yet, the highest budgets allocated per capita are found in these less urgent regions of the CAR Crisis.

It is striking that a zone that is a more protracted stable environment of ongoing fragility found in the CAR Crisis has and continues to receive more assistance per capita than a current crisis that can be considered unambiguously an emergency as in the Anglophone Crisis. As one international humanitarian professional who works on funding for all three regions said when speaking about the CAR Crisis regions, *“That just shouldn’t be when there are so many other people in need in emergency situations rather than protracted ones.”*

While the regional allocation of aid funding is indeed puzzling, comparing allocation to the different crises broadly is complicated by the fact that the regions affected by the CAR Crisis are characterized as zones of reception for the CAR conflict across the border. These regions are more stable than elsewhere in the country, and humanitarian needs and programming center around resiliency, self-sufficiency-building and integration rather than urgent life-saving aid. Therefore, comparing it the conflict zones of the Anglophone and the Lake Chad Basin contexts is not entirely fair, given the differences in security environment, urgency and needs, which are more akin to longer-term development assistance. The disparity between aid allocation to the CAR Crisis could be due to different crisis related needs and costs, perhaps where the CAR Crisis regions simply require higher per capita spending because the programming is more capital intensive. This, and the fact that humanitarians have highlighted that it is especially costly to operate in the Anglophone and Lake Chad Basin Crises should also indicate that perhaps the higher cost to operate is because these humanitarians are referring specifically to the *conflict*-affected regions of these crises. And, because conflict contexts may simply be more costly to operate in, this yields budgets that are far more strained per person in need in the most urgent regions, further explaining the disparity.

So, although it is unfair to compare the CAR Crisis regions with the conflict-affected regions of the other two crises, the CAR Crisis *is* comparable to similar zones of reception affected by the Anglophone Crisis. Therefore, when

comparing the regions *without* active armed group activity, a more strongly justified puzzle of aid allocation emerges, which I unveil below.

### 3.1 A Puzzle of Aid Allocation in Two Zones of Reception

If we zoom in even further and investigate response allocation at regional levels within crises, we find further counter-intuitive dynamics of the response. Comparing allocation to the more stable zones of reception in the Anglophone Crisis to the those in the CAR Crisis regions reveals stark differences in humanitarian aid funding allocation, where the West and Littoral regions of the Anglophone Crisis are allocated almost no assistance when compared to the relatively significant budgets allocated to the CAR regions. This is striking given urgent needs identified in the Anglophone reception zones, which are even highlighted in humanitarian response documentation and data.

Before substantiating this puzzle, I remind the reader that the Anglophone Crisis affects the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions, which are referred to as the “conflict zones” of this crisis, because this is where most of the combat related to the civil war is found. The Anglophone Crisis *also* affects the West and Littoral regions, which are distinct and separate from the conflict zones. Not only are they entirely different administrative regions of the country, they also are francophone and host very different ethnic groups. Of most salience, they are primarily reception or receiving zones, instead of places where active conflict and violence are ongoing. While the conflict zones also host significant numbers of displaced people, the West and Littoral reception zones *only* have received and continue to host significant numbers of IDPs from the conflict zones. Although these reception zones may sometimes experience very occasional spillover events from neighboring conflict regions, they are clearly and significantly more stable and peaceful than the conflict zones.

It is key to grasp this distinction between the conflict zones of the Anglophone Crisis (i.e. the Northwest and Southwest regions) and the reception zones (i.e. the West and Littoral), because this distinction forms a primary tenet underpinning this puzzle.<sup>91</sup> By virtue of the reception zones being

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<sup>91</sup> These definitions are given a more detailed treatment in Chapter 2.

removed from the active conflict zones, this makes the reception zones of the Anglophone crisis comparable to the CAR Crisis affected regions that are also major zones of reception. These CAR regions hosting refugees are also relatively stable and free of the lion's share of conflict-related skirmishes across the border in CAR.

Returning to the puzzle of response allocation, as explained above, we should expect that places with the most urgent needs should be allocated more humanitarian response according to humanitarian resource decision-making logic. But this is not reflected in response plans when comparing aid allocation to the Anglophone Crisis and CAR Crisis reception zones, which offer the most comparable contexts in examining these disparities, as I established above.

When examining humanitarian response open-source records, it is evident that the West and Littoral regions are indeed major receiving areas. In the West, IDP figures have ranged between an estimated minimum of 32,000 in 2018 (OCHA, 2019a, p.64) and maximum of 163,000 in September 2020 (OCHA, 2021a, p.8). At its minimum, the Littoral hosted 54,000 in 2018 (OCHA, 2019a, p.64), stabilized at its maximum of around 80,000 since 2020 (OCHA, 2021a-2023a), and has since seen IDP numbers reduce to approximately 65,000 (OCHA, 2024b, p. 60). Although figures in the CAR Crisis writ-large total to approximately 350,000 refugees now, the North and Adamawa regions of the CAR Crisis have hosted similar numbers of displaced people, and often even less. For instance, according to humanitarian estimates in 2019, the West and Littoral hosted 32,000 and 54,000 IDPs respectively, while the North and Adamawa of the CAR Crisis hosted 21,000 and 57,000 (OCHA, 2019a, p.2). This holds true more recently as well, and even demonstrates a more striking disparity, where in 2022, the West and Littoral numbers of displaced people had reached 114,000 and 80,000 respectively, compared to 46,000 and 77,000 in the North and Adamawa (OCHA, 2022a, p.16).

So, the West and Littoral regions host displaced populations that are well within the range of populations in need that have previously received comparatively robust response in similar reception zone context. And yet, they have yet to become a significant part of the international response.

In addition to population numbers signalling needs, the requirements of the populations in the West and Littoral are also considered significant and urgent in humanitarian response plans and needs assessments. For example, examining the plans that were developed after the Anglophone Crisis broke out (i.e. OCHA, 2019-2024) highlights discrepancies between needs and funding allocation.

First, needs are indeed significant and urgent in the Anglophone reception zones, compared to the CAR Crisis. The needs identified here range from life-saving needs related to health, education, shelter and protection needs, as well as programming that is more characteristic of more peaceful post-displacement contexts like resilience and integration programming, as in the CAR Crisis regions. The latter kind of programming is expected of a more stable reception zone. The former set of needs, however, should highlight the urgency of needs. For example, by looking at this most recent Humanitarian Needs Overview (2024), humanitarian assessments determined significant needs in education, nutrition, shelter and non-food items, and protection (including those related to child protection and gender-based violence) in the reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis specifically. And yet, that year's Humanitarian Response Plan does not target these needs almost at all. This is not the case in the CAR Crisis, where needs are primarily centered around livelihoods and access to services. (OCHA, 2024a; OCHA, 2024b)

On top of this, parts of the West and Littoral have received the same or higher crisis severity ratings than the CAR reception regions in many years since the outbreak of the Anglophone Crisis. Most recently, there were even parts of the West and Littoral that shared the same rating as certain conflict zones (i.e. in parts of the Southwest and Far North regions) (OCHA 2024b, p.7). While humanitarians often assigned the same ratings to the East region of the CAR Crisis as the West and Littoral, all regions of the CAR Crisis still were allocated relatively more response than the contexts with similar or more urgently rated crisis severity in the Anglophone reception zones (OCHA, 2020 – 2024).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Crisis severity ratings became available in the Humanitarian Needs Overviews as of 2020 in Cameroon.



Given humanitarians themselves have made the real needs and severity in the West and Littoral reception zones explicit, and, because they also communicate their intention to target these populations, these should all be strong indications that these regions really are considered deserving of response *by humanitarians* specifically. However, these needs and intentions do not translate to budget allocation necessarily or at all, as these regions are essentially bypassed entirely or extremely sidelined when it comes to actual project funding allocation and reports of financial aid flows.

For instance, what can be surmised from OCHA's financial data is, between 2018 and 2024, the West and Littoral were explicitly included in only a handful of projects, which pales in comparison to the project funds earmarked for the Anglophone Crisis conflict-affected regions, not to mention the other crisis regions (FTS, n.d.). For instance, in 2023, out of 358 funding flows directed at projects throughout the country, only three were intended for the West and Littoral (along with the Northwest and Southwest of course), while most funding flows were earmarked for projects in the Northwest, Southwest, Far North, and CAR regions as well as for refugees specifically. This is clearly not commensurate with the needs in the West and Littoral, especially when considering what similar regions are allocated.

Therefore, given comparable and sometimes greater numbers of populations in need in the Anglophone reception zones when compared to those in receiving areas in the CAR Crisis, as well as the kind of programming demanded and crisis severity ratings, these factors together support the assertion that there are more urgent needs in those reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis than in the CAR Crisis regions.

It is puzzling that these Anglophone Crisis reception regions have fewer resources allocated to them than the CAR Crisis reception regions. This is not to say that the CAR Crisis is not deserving of the assistance it is allocated. However, it is striking that the Anglophone Crisis reception zones have received such markedly limited humanitarian response compared to the reception zones affected in the CAR Crisis. I define this disparity as the puzzle of *aid allocation*, provoking the question:

*Why are regions that are clearly deserving of response consistently deprioritized in aid allocation when other comparable regions that are deemed less or similarly urgent allocated relatively greater response?*

Examining these data clearly shows us that aid allocation is sometimes parsed out in ways that seem to directly contradict the mandates, directives and policy priorities established by humanitarian organizations themselves. Yet, this disparity in allocation is not the only puzzle we observe. It also becomes evident that these disparities emerge when examining *aid distribution*, or the extent to which aid resources reach populations. I clarify and substantiate this puzzle in the below section.

### **3.2 A Puzzle of Aid Distribution in Two Conflict Zones**

The second puzzle I address in this project pertains to aid distribution. It quickly becomes apparent that disparities exist in aid distribution dynamics too, where some priority regions with urgent needs have received far less aid than anticipated, particularly when accounting for how humanitarian organizations prioritize. It warrants reiterating that while the discussion above summarized how humanitarian organizations allocate funding, this is not necessarily revealing of how this funding is actually distributed to populations in need.

We should expect aid distribution to align with aid allocation decision-making, without the expectation of distribution meeting targets fully, as underfunding makes meeting targets improbable. However, as I demonstrate below, certain urgent crises sometimes receive less aid distribution than other regions for reasons other than underfunding. Specifically, I compare distribution in the conflict zones of the Anglophone Crisis and the Lake Chad Basin and show that distribution is markedly more difficult in the secessionist civil war setting of the Anglophone Crisis compared to the context in the Far North region of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. As has been foreshadowed, I find that this is due to significantly more onerous access constraints in the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones than in

the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, which provides the main thrust of this second puzzle of aid distribution. I substantiate this puzzle below.

First, I should point out that data on aid distribution broken down by crisis and region are not publicly available, understandably, as this information could be leveraged against humanitarians and potentially crisis-affected populations. While OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS) does provide funding data, it is quite opaque when trying to understand the subnational distribution of project funds. While I was able to use those data to glean inferences for aid allocation, these were not as useful in determining to what extent those project funds reached their intended destinations. I had to rely on other sources of data to ascertain how distribution had occurred and to what extent different regions had received it.

What I *was* able to unveil demonstrates that, as with aid allocation, distribution also does not always comply with humanitarian allocation logic. Combining strategic priorities and crisis severity, we should expect the Anglophone and Lake Chad Basin Crises to be allocated equivalent or similar funding levels, while the CAR Crisis should be requiring and receiving less, according to the logic of prioritizing the most urgent needs. However, weighing the fact that the Anglophone Crisis has more people in need than both other crises, we should also expect it to receive greater funding than both the Lake Chad Basin and CAR Crises.

Yet, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan's distribution of total required funding ranks the Lake Chad Basin Crisis as having the highest needs (\$159.3m), followed by the Anglophone Crisis (\$147.6 m), then the CAR crisis (\$97.8m). In absolute terms it might appear that the most urgent crises are receiving roughly similar funding, but when accounting for the scope of the crisis by including numbers of population in need as mentioned above, the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones are allocated even less funding than the CAR Crisis, whose context and crisis severity ratings are not as urgent.

In sum, relative to the urgency and severity of needs and numbers of populations in need, the Anglophone Crisis has not only been allocated less

funding per capita than the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, but it also has received less distribution of aid.<sup>93</sup>

As will be detailed in Chapter 6, although both crises face significant obstacles to access, distribution in the Anglophone Crisis is significantly more difficult, while distribution in the Lake Chad Basin where Boko Haram is active has been relatively easier, which explains disparities in the amount of aid distributed. What's more, in these contexts impacted by irregular substate conflict, there are *markedly different humanitarian access contexts* beyond the constraints posed by insecurity. These regions may differ in significant ways in terms of their demographics and physical environment among many other socio-economic variables, but they share similarities in their security contexts, which is typically thought of as the most significant factor affecting humanitarian access. And while some of the same access constraints appear in all three regions of both crises, access to populations in need is less constrained in the Far North than in the Northwest and Southwest.

It is puzzling that humanitarian aid distribution should be so markedly more difficult in one irregular conflict setting in the Anglophone regions compared to the irregular conflict in the Lake Chad Basin. In regions where active conflict and violence is ongoing, whether a civil war or another form of irregular war like Boko Haram or other non-state armed group activity, it is natural to expect impediments to access. Typical constraints like combat-related insecurity and environmental barriers like inaccessible roads due to seasonal flooding and poor infrastructure are found in both crisis contexts. But humanitarians *also face other* prohibitively stringent barriers to delivery in the Anglophone conflict regions that are either not at all an issue in the Lake Chad Basin or appear to a minimal degree by comparison. This makes aid distribution much more straight-forward in the Lake Chad Basin than in the Anglophone regions. This is especially striking given there are advantages to operating in the Anglophone Crisis zones that should *facilitate* aid distribution

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<sup>93</sup> While this does not necessarily indicate actual distribution levels, it does strongly suggest that the relative distribution of funding is likely to look similar, assuming humanitarians act in accordance with their plans.

compared to the comparatively far more remote and under-developed context of the Far North amidst the Lake Chad Basin Crisis.

In sum, it should strike us as puzzling that the Anglophone Crisis conflict regions have fewer aid resources distributed, and I argue that this disparity is explained by diverging access constraints in both irregular conflict contexts. These diverging circumstances point to a puzzle of *aid distribution* and motivate a second set of questions underpinning this project.

*Why does one urgent crisis amidst irregular conflict (Anglophone Crisis) receive relatively less humanitarian aid distribution than another (Lake Chad Basin Crisis), when the scale and severity of needs would predict otherwise?*

*And why is aid distribution constrained to such a greater degree in one irregular conflict setting (Anglophone Crisis) than another (Lake Chad Basin Crisis) despite comparable baseline barriers to delivery and contexts suggesting delivery should be facilitated (Anglophone Crisis)?*

These twin puzzles of allocation and distribution highlight divergences in the responsiveness of the humanitarian sector to different displacement situations. This suggests that an ordering emerges, whereby similar zones of reception are not only *allocated* more or less humanitarian response compared to others, but humanitarians carrying out *aid distribution* also face far greater constraints in delivering aid in certain conflict regions than others, despite seemingly similar baseline logistical barriers.

#### **4. Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I asked why such striking differences in humanitarian response are found within and across Cameroon's humanitarian crises. I then laid out the necessary background on aid allocation, distribution and access that demonstrated clear differences in how each of the three crisis situations in Cameroon receives assistance. These patterns of divergence in humanitarian aid response allocation and distribution are the scaffolding for the chapters that follow. In the next chapter (5), I summarize the most relevant background on the three crises and delineate the subnational politics that provide the empirical

foundation upon which the argument is built by expanding upon the Cameroonian government's incentives in each crisis broadly and in each affected region more specifically. I then articulate how these relate to response dynamics and specify the mechanisms through which host governments can obstruct aid.

## Chapter 5. Host Government Influence on Aid Allocation & Distribution

After a meeting at the University of Yaoundé I, the Yango<sup>94</sup> driver calls to tell me the guards at the entrance to the campus won't let him in and that I should come to him. I tell him, "No problem" but that it would take me ten minutes to walk. He reassures me he'll wait, but before I make it to the gate, he finds me, explaining he was finally able to negotiate entrance, and as I climb in the passenger's seat, he says, "*Oh I'm sorry I made you walk, because you're really sweating now, eh?*" I grin and shrug my shoulders, and we both laugh.

He tells me his name is Raoul and used to be a student here, so he knows the campus well. He gives me a little tour as we truck along the main road slowly as students fill the streets on their way to and from classes. As he points out his various old haunts, he tells me about how he studied international relations with the aim to become a diplomat, but his plans hadn't worked out as he had hoped. He looks at me seriously, shaking his head and says, "*It's because this country isn't made for people with dreams.*"

After he points out the cafeteria and a few other sites, we come upon a building that he says is where all the people who are training to be journalists go. "*Really, there is no point going anywhere else if you want to do that line of work. That's where all of them go.*" When I ask why, he looks at me pointedly, "*Well, it's easier to control that way isn't it? And the government...well, they control everything.*"

Very unfortunately, this was a conversation I had many times in Cameroon in different guises. While the details might differ, the take-away was always the same: the government exerts a great deal of control over most aspects of public life, and that goes for humanitarian operations as well. As has been foreshadowed in previous chapters, disparities in displacement response are

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<sup>94</sup> Yango is the ride-share service that has recently emerged in Cameroon, though only really operates in Douala and Yaoundé and requires cash payments.

also not immune to the influence of host governments where conflict emergencies occur. As this chapter will show, the Cameroonian government has deeply diverging incentives vis-à-vis different crises and regions. This means that, in a country with several ongoing crises, and indeed in different crises over time, humanitarian access, allocation, and distribution might differ significantly as a function of varying host government incentives and behavior. The complex interplay between the central government, humanitarian organizations, practitioners, and affected regions creates dramatically different landscapes for displaced populations in each crisis zone.

So, Raoul was not wrong. He and just about everyone else I interacted with in Cameroon in any meaningful way brought up government control and clientelism and told me how it had affected their lives. More top-down evaluations of these dynamics confirm these dynamics as well, where Freedom House categorizes it as “Not Free” with a freedom score of 15/100, while Transparency International assigns a corruption score of 27/100.<sup>95</sup> While humanitarian operations encounter challenges in any context, some of the most difficult places to operate are in authoritarian states or that, euphemistically, are considered “hybrid regimes”. The difficulty with such a context is that humanitarians must contend with a regime that, despite being lower- or middle-income, may in fact have a significant amount of capacity and control.

In these contexts, humanitarian actors contend with a different kind of host government than somewhere like CAR where the state has little control over vast swaths of territory. In contexts with greater state capacity, there are two aspects of these regimes that significantly influence humanitarian organizations’ access to populations in need. First, given these regimes have a “distaste for dissent”, this impacts humanitarian actors’ ability to advocate for access and protection. Second, given their greater power and capacity relative to more fragile states, this generally means they have very well-developed bureaucracies that are present throughout a large part of the territory. This, in turn, makes humanitarian operations increasingly challenging because there is

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<sup>95</sup> The TI score places Cameroon 140<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, where 0 is the most corrupt and 100 is the cleanest record for a country’s public sector. This places it below the global average and even below the average score within Sub-Saharan Africa. (Freedom House, 2024; Transparency International, 2023)



typically a significant learning curve in navigating these bureaucracies, making it difficult for organizations with limited experience in the country. It can even pose difficulties for those *with* significant experience in-country, as host governments can change and obfuscate procedures strategically in response to changing conditions. This highlights the reality that authoritarian governments' high(er) capacity makes them adept at manipulating humanitarian access. (Walton, 2015)

As will be illustrated in the forthcoming chapters, this is what I find in Cameroon. In the previous chapters, I examined the three crisis contexts and responses to these and concluded that the allocation and distribution of resources across the three contexts highlighted two puzzles. I argue that these disparities in humanitarian access, distribution and allocation can be elucidated by examining the sub-state political interests of the government in different regions of Cameroon. I argue that it is the host government's combined political incentives, comprised by its *security and economic interests*, that incentivize its decisions in how it behaves toward aid response. Specifically, it is *i.* the threat potential, indicated by the state's security interests, combined with *ii.* the value of a given crisis region, represented by the state's economic interests, that shape the government's decisions to either facilitate, obstruct or deny aid in certain regions and crises. However, I argue that security interests are more important and trump economic interests when they are at odds, where economic interests are a necessary but insufficient condition in explaining state behavior toward aid response.

In support of these arguments, this chapter draws from the empirical record to review the relationships between the affected regions of the three different crisis zones and the central government. Each of the sections highlights how we might expect the government of Cameroon to behave toward different crises given the government's interests in each affected region. As will be made explicit below, the government is generally incentivized to *facilitate* the allocation and distribution of aid in the regions affected by the Lake Chad Basin Crisis and the CAR Crisis but is incentivized to *obstruct* aid to the Anglophone Crisis regions. Specifically, this is because host governments facilitate aid to crises or regions with lower threat potential, and especially to those of higher value to the government. Conversely, host governments obstruct aid in settings

it considers having higher threat potential. However, the government's behavior toward regions with active conflict, and thereby high threat potential, is mediated further by the government's perceptions of local populations' allegiances vis-à-vis non-state armed groups, where it will be more lenient toward aid in places where it believes local populations to be unsupportive of its adversaries, as in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, by contrast to contexts where it perceives populations as largely aligned with non-state armed groups, as in the Anglophone Crisis. Further to this, I also argue that a government's calculations of threat potential are mediated by the threat potential of local populations as well, dependent on whether regions with populations that are considered threatening are perceived as capable of mounting a viable and imminent movement to contest the government or not.

In what follows I substantiate these subnational incentive structures and make explicit their implications for humanitarian response in Cameroon. Finally, I illustrate *how* government obstruction of aid allocation and distribution manifest by expanding upon the four mechanisms of obstruction supported by the empirics of this research. Chapter 6 will elaborate upon these mechanisms by demonstrating how they apply to aid distribution in Cameroon, while Chapter 7 does the same for aid allocation.

## **1. Substate Politics, Government Incentives & Aid**

In explaining divergences in humanitarian response, the political context of the regions where displaced people find refuge figures prominently in determining the level and quality of response they might expect to receive. While there are certainly several other forces and actors that help explain this variation in aid distribution and allocation other than host government dynamics, in this work I focus on host governments as their role remains underexplored. What's more, as will become evident in unpacking the empirics of the two puzzles, host governments can exert important influence on how—*and where*—aid is administered, ultimately resulting in profound impacts on the experiences of crisis-affected populations. Indeed, I argue that they are the

actors whose agency matter most in explaining subnational variations of aid response.

Indeed, extreme control tactics underpin all regional relationships with the government of Cameroon. The government has ensured that regional autonomy and opposition is hindered in each of the country's regions through extremely centralized governance and, more directly, by appointing vetted politicians and bureaucrats who are loyal to the Center in regional positions of power. For instance, all ten of the regional governors and the departmental prefects are direct appointees of President Paul Biya (who has been in power for over 40 years).<sup>96</sup>

Even though the government holds considerable power over regions, there is also variation in its relations with different regions given diverging regional histories, politics, and socioeconomics. As I make explicit below, these, along with the crisis context and the government's ensuing security interests in each, demonstrate how subnational politics have significant explanatory power when examining varying experiences of humanitarian response.

The crux of the argument is that different crisis contexts can yield different political incentives for host governments. I argue that both a government's *i. security interests* in different conflict contexts, as well as its prior history with and political interests in crisis-affected regions, influence a government's attitudes towards different crises and affected regions and its calculations of their threat potential. Further, these calculations of the extent to which regions pose a risk to the government's political survival is balanced with its *ii. economic interests* in these regions, so that the value of a region to the host government's political survival factors in these calculations as well. However, I argue that these economics are subordinate to security interests, as although they may bolster a government's strength and chances for political survival, the foremost concern for a government is in considering imminent threats as opposed to factors that contribute to longer-term gains. As made explicit above, economic

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<sup>96</sup> For example, in the East, the Governor, Grégoire Mvongo, has served since 2015. He previously served as sub-prefect of arrondissements in the Center, as Secretary General to the West's governor, and as prefect of departments in the Center, North, South, and Littoral regions. Mvongo is from Nanga Eboko, a town, municipality, and capital of the Haute-Sanaga department of the Center region.<sup>96</sup> His career exemplifies how the central government maintains influence even in the far reaches of the country. (Cameroun 24, 2015; Cameroon Tribune, 2015)

interests are necessary but not sufficient in explaining government behavior toward aid allocation and distribution. In short, a host government might aim to obstruct or facilitate humanitarian aid response due to incentives that would enhance its political survival.

In this section, I unpack the major forces influencing the Cameroonian government's approach to different crises and regions within crises. I first review the security contexts and political histories between the affected crisis regions and the central government and identify what they suggest about the government's incentives and attitudes toward the affected regions and crises. Because the major features of each crisis were already summarized in Chapter 4, I only highlight details about the security context that are relevant to understand the government's interests in each crisis. After discussing these incentives, I set expectations of what these incentives imply for host government intervention in humanitarian response in each crisis. As has been the favored approach in this dissertation, I begin with the CAR Crisis, before turning to the Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crises.

### **1.1 Subnational Politics in the CAR Crisis**

For over two decades, civil wars in the Central African Republic (CAR) have displaced hundreds of thousands of people to neighboring countries, including Cameroon whose East, Adamawa and North regions have hosted CAR refugees since 2003. To understand the response dynamics present in this region, I provide an overview of insecurity in the affected regions, followed by a discussion of regional politics. I then specify the ensuing political interests of the government. As I will elucidate, although the crisis affects three different administrative regions, their security conditions are very similar, so that discussion treats the three affected regions together. Conversely, these regions' politics, socioeconomics, and histories are different, so I review that essential background separately for the East and treat the northern regions together, as they align on these dimensions, given they are both part of the culturally distinct "Great North". With those distinctions clarified, I examine below the regions affected by the CAR Crisis to elucidate why the government of Cameroon can be expected to facilitate response in each of these regions.

### 1.1.1 Insecurity in the CAR Regions

In 2013 and 2014, civil war violence renewed in CAR and began spilling over the border into Cameroon, eventually displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Although the conflict continues, these events have significantly tapered off in recent years. There are now only occasional instances where violence from CAR enters the eastern regions of Cameroon, and most of any lingering insecurity on the Cameroonian side is confined to the border zones.

This is why the United Kingdom and United States' travel advisories advise against any travel within 40 and 20 km of the border, respectively, given attacks by armed criminals persist in these border zones (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). However, the most densely populated areas of the region lie well beyond the most insecure zones, meaning most of these regions' populations are generally unaffected by violence. Unfortunately, the affected zones are also where many refugees reside.

Nonetheless, both foreign and Cameroonian humanitarian or development NGO staff will tell you that the security is generally fine out east. Many of those I spoke to had visited numerous times or even lived there for periods and said that security was not especially worrisome. They had been out to the villages near the border many times and never encountered any trouble. There was, however, always one caveat, and that was: "Just don't go on those roads at night."

The main concern that was reiterated from people in-the-know and throughout the region were the "*coupeurs de routes*" (i.e. highway robbers) on the rural roads out towards the border. Although "*coupures*" can happen during the day, the banditry tended to occur past dark, hence the admonition of avoiding those rural roads after sunset. According to locals, a *coupure* tends to involve a group of young men wearing balaclavas who have blocked the road. They are often armed with machetes and knives, but sometimes also guns, and threaten travelers to surrender their valuables. They tend to simply want money or material goods and generally set people free once they have been "paid".

The other main source of insecurity in the eastern regions, in addition to the ongoing crisis in CAR, are livelihood conflicts. Many people in these regions are agriculturalists, but nomadic herders also have a significant presence. These conflicts tend to center around disputes over land-use and sometimes pit refugee populations against host communities (OCHA 2020, p.45-6). Other intercommunal conflicts and different forms of interpersonal violence also are not uncommon. For instance, cattle rustling occurs in some parts as well, though incidents occur only occasionally.

Other than this knowledge, the primary signal that you might be in an area impacted by insecurity came from humanitarian organizations. Despite generally good security conditions, and perhaps because of previously worse conditions, the NGOs in the region tend to “bunkerize”. For instance, their compounds where staff work and sometimes reside are often surrounded by thick walls lined with barbed wire and surveilled by dedicated security personnel. Staff mobility is often restricted, which limits contact with local communities.<sup>97</sup> This is problematic in not only alienating humanitarians but also in greatly distorting their perceptions of insecurity in their surroundings.<sup>98</sup>

At no point on my way to or from the East did I encounter any military. Nor did I see any in the time I spent in and around Batouri. This is not to say that they are not present,<sup>99</sup> but only that their presence was inconspicuous in the places I visited. Tellingly, however, one soldier who had experience throughout Cameroon shared his stories with me, referencing combat and losing friends

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<sup>97</sup> Although this is a subject of debate, in my own experience, security concerns are grossly overestimated as a precaution to reduce risk to staff. I believe that, together with outsider assessments of security like those from the State Department, those assessments are so extreme that it reinforces and exacerbates one’s sense of insecurity. As perceptions of security are integral to promoting positive social relations that in turn reinforce security, this phenomenon is troubling.

<sup>98</sup> In between fieldwork visits, I met a scholar who had conducted research in Cameroon at a conference in North America. He had gone to Yaoundé and stayed at an NGO’s compound and essentially did not leave the premises unless it was in a securitized SUV to and from meetings at various offices in the most affluent parts of the city. He was shocked to learn that I was living in an Airbnb in the midst of a local neighborhood and would walk or take local transit options around many parts of the city.

<sup>99</sup> They are. For example, see: ACLED, 2023.

and fellow soldiers in the conflicts in the Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crises and described his CAR Crisis as a holiday by comparison.

So, while there are occasional roadside muggings and cattle rustling in rural areas, most of such insecurity is contained within close-range of the border. Otherwise, the predominant source of negative peace in the region beyond the border zones are fragility factors related to poverty (e.g. food insecurity), limited development and host-refugee tensions, albeit that have significantly diminished now that hosts are also included in assistance programming.

Now that the CAR regions' security context is clarified, I turn to synthesizing the relevant regional politics for the northern regions, the North and Adamawa regions, followed by a summary of relevant regional politics in the East region.

### 1.1.2 CAR Crisis Regional Politics

The CAR Crisis affects three regions in Cameroon: the North, Adamawa and East regions. I first unpack the political and historical context of the northern regions' relations with the government, followed by the East's.

#### *The North and Adamawa*

As in many other countries, there are several regional power blocs in Cameroon. The North and Adamawa regions are two of the three regions<sup>100</sup> that belong to the Great North, which are inherently linked by similar socio-economic contexts, demographics and culture.<sup>101</sup>

Not only do the northern regions form a regional bloc with a distinct identity, but they are also extremely different from the other regions of the country, given starkly different physical environments as either squarely part of the Sahel region (the Far North) or as a transition zone to the Sahel (Adamawa

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<sup>100</sup> The third region is the Far North, which is discussed in the next section when discussing the Lake Chad Basin Crisis.

<sup>101</sup> This was more apparent previously, as they used to comprise a single administrative unit, formerly called the Northern Province that was subsequently broken into the current three regions in purported decentralization efforts. (ICG, 2010)

and North) from the southern parts of the country. Their social context is distinct, as the northern regions were originally part of the Fulani Sokoto Caliphate in the early nineteenth century, which established small Islamic states called “lamidats”, hence the concentration of people who practice Islam. The religious composition of the region is often assumed to align with the ethnic divide between Fulani (Muslim) and non-Fulani (non-Muslim), sometimes referred to together as Kirdi, however these parallels suggest a much neater alignment than exists in reality.<sup>102</sup> In any case, the northern regions are ethnically diverse and populous, where the majority are Muslim and Fulani, and the non-Fulani population has been subordinated for the past two centuries. These cleavages (both religious and ethnic) represent the primary divisions when tensions arise within the region as well as with the central government. (ICG, 2010)

The North region was home to the country’s first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, following independence in 1960. The Fulani elite in the northern regions benefitted greatly during the Ahidjo regime, both politically and economically. When Ahidjo resigned and was succeeded by Paul Biya in 1982, this threatened the privileged position that the Fulani elites had until now enjoyed since independence. Tensions eventually emerged as Ahidjo continued to try to assert his power, and a coup attempt in April of 1984 was attributed to those still loyal to him. In retaliation, the Biya regime cracked down violently on communities in the north, with many arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial killings. No due process or reconciliation efforts followed, and many remain embittered and harbor grievances they attribute to that period to this day. (ICG, 2010; Britannica, 2024; Britannica, n.d.)

Consequently, the northern bloc continues to hold a certain degree of power within the country, given lingering resentments over the violence of 1984 pose a potential threat to the government, and elites in the south of the country fear reprisals. This threat perception is understandable, especially given the size of

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<sup>102</sup> For example, some non-Fulani in the region also practice Islam but their presence in the region pre-dates the Fulani’s arrival. And while some of the non-Fulani certainly do practice Christianity since it was introduced by colonial missionaries, animism is also still practiced among these populations.



the population in the three regions. As a result, it is generally maintained that Biya's power depends on these regions' political support.

However, when the regime decided to allow a multi-party system (at least ostensibly), several parties emerged in the north. Most significantly, the National Union for Democracy and Progress (NUDP) party was formed in 1990 by Ahidjo supporters who opposed Biya's regime and eventually became the primary representation of northern perspectives and concerns. The Biya regime also encouraged other groups in the region to form rival parties to the NUDP, in a move to keep the NUDP's power in check, presumably. Amidst all this, Biya managed to maintain the loyalty of many Fulani traditional leaders and elites, and this loyalty was perpetually rewarded with unfettered power, financial advantages, and preferential treatment to the point that some have even gotten away with alleged murder.<sup>103</sup> (ICG, 2010; Britannica, 2024; Britannica, n.d.)

Subsequently, and likely in a move to appease the largest opposition movement in the North, the Biya regime incorporated the NUDP into its government in 1997. This effectively undermined the NUDP's ability to oppose the government and press the regime for change, as opposition within (and without) the regime has always been viewed as subversive and is not tolerated. This meant that since the NUDP was integrated into the government, its threat potential was neutralized, and no other northern party was a serious contender to replace it, given they either represented mere regional grievances or were not committed to broad-based representation and opposition. (ICG, 2010)

Therefore, despite a history of opposition, tension and violence, the government has strong incentives to be responsive in these regions to maintain support from its elite coalition and to prevent an uprising in the most populous region, which poses a very real threat to the government's survival.

### *The East*

The East, on the other hand, has historically been dominated by the Center, as it falls within the Center-South power bloc (along with the South and Center

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<sup>103</sup> For instance, the death of an NUDP parliamentarian in 1996.

regions). Together with the northern regions, it has typically ranked as among the poorest regions in the country, although it is not populous relative to other regions. Its marginalization and neglect even previously earned it the unfortunate moniker of “the forgotten province”.<sup>104</sup> This, as well as its relatively small population and no significant history of politicized grievances, should be strong indications that the government is not preoccupied by the region and certainly does not perceive it as a serious threat historically.

On the contrary, developments in the regions indicate that the government has every reason to want to facilitate assistance in the region. Despite its particularly subordinate position in the regional hierarchy, in recent years the East has garnered increasing attention, given interest in exploiting its vast natural resources – not only of forestry but of mineral resources as well. The development of these industries has accelerated logistical and transport infrastructure development. Already, the natural resource industries developing there represent a major source of income for the Cameroonian government, given the sale of exploitation rights and contracts to international and national companies.

Indeed, development in the East reflects an economic incentive for the central government to encourage response to displaced populations to prevent further insecurity or instability that might stem from poverty or social cohesion issues between refugee and host populations. After all, further or deteriorating instability or insecurity would not be good for business, as those conditions tend to scare off investors and halt or hinder existing activities. The central government therefore has clear and significant incentives to enable response in the East, especially because of business interests developing there and the need for stability for forestry and mining operations to continue unhindered.

In the below discussion, I synthesize what I have laid out above to indicate what these contexts suggest for the government’s interests in the CAR Crisis and how this specifically shapes expectations of the government’s behavior toward aid response in the affected regions.

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<sup>104</sup> Forgotten province and not region, because this moniker was coined long ago and when the regions were still previously called provinces prior to 2008.

### 1.1.2 Government Interests in the CAR Crisis

All together, we can observe in the security context in the regions affected by the CAR Crisis, as well as in the respective prior relations between the three affected regions and the central government, that the government has clear incentives to encourage aid to these areas by facilitating response distribution in and aid allocation to these regions. This is because of the government's political interests in these regions, specifically as relates to their threat potential for the government's political survival and their value, which serves to bolster its political survival. I elucidate how these interests emerge in this context to shape the government's facilitative behavior toward aid response.

As for the government's *security interests*, the security context in these regions is relatively stable, indicating that the government's conflict-related security interests suggest there is little threat to its political survival. The security profile of the crisis regions suggests that the government does not have strong incentives to concern itself to a great degree with the affected regions. It also suggests the government should have no problem with other actors funding and responding to needs in these regions. This is because the security context is relatively stable, as the violence that exists in the region is characterized by criminality among small, dissipated bands and individuals, rather than more cohesive non-state armed group (NSAG) activity in opposition to the government. Therefore, the security context suggests the affected regions do not pose much of a threat to the government's political survival.

The other aspect of a government's security interests is its historical-political relationship with each region, which also suggests it should facilitate aid. In the East, this is due to no prior significant political tensions or violence, as well as a socioeconomic profile with low population numbers that make it an unlikely adversary. The East therefore has low threat potential. In the North and Adamawa, although the regions do have specific historical grievances against the state, and the central government has previously and likely continues to view the region with caution, it appears to have minimized the risks posed by these regions by limiting their oppositional forces and by securing a fiercely loyal local elite that ensures the government's interests are upheld. Therefore, because the once-threatening opposition movement here was neutralized and

the government's need to maintain support from its elite supporters in populous regions of the northern power bloc that could otherwise pose a viable and imminent threat, the government is incentivized to facilitate assistance to the Adamawa and North regions as well.

The government's *economic interests* also incentivize the promotion of response in the CAR Crisis regions. This is due to the profitable industries that it directly benefits from in the East especially. What's more, although many people in all regions of the country are marginalized and do not benefit from the state's clientelist networks, these CAR Crisis regions have typically had the unfortunate designation as the poorest regions of the country, performing poorly on human and economic development indicators because of some of the worst economic neglect. However, given the government's economic incentives to promote stability in these regions, this suggests that it has every reason to facilitate aid to these regions, especially given the opportunity to fund that development and stability from international funders.

Therefore, historical regional dynamics and the current crisis context create security and economic interests for the government that indicate it should want to maintain and promote stability by facilitating humanitarian aid to populations in need in the CAR Crisis regions of the North, Adamawa and East regions in Cameroon.

Next, I turn to examining the Cameroonian government's relations with and interests in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, where the government is also incentivized to facilitate humanitarian response due to its security and economic interests.

## **1.2 Substate Politics in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis**

As has been previously referenced, the Lake Chad Basin Crisis is a regional crisis that has primarily affected the Far North region of Cameroon as well as three of its neighboring states of Chad, Nigeria, and Niger. The crisis is the result of violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups collectively known as Boko Haram. Reports emerged of Boko Haram's presence in Cameroon as early as 2009, however widespread violence that triggered significant displacement is considered to have begun in Cameroon in 2014. This crisis has almost only

affected the Far North region, though has sent comparatively small numbers of displaced people to the North region as well earlier in the crisis. However, these were uniquely IDPs from the Far North as opposed to Nigerian refugees, and they have since either returned to their places of origin or have integrated into host communities in the North and are no longer considered displaced. The below discussion therefore only focuses on the Far North context.

In the discussion that follows, I elucidate the response dynamics present in this region, by highlighting the government's political incentives in the Far North region of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis. I summarize both the security context and regional history and politics to highlight the government's security and economic interests.

The reader should note, however, that the historical context relevant to the Far North's relationship with the central government is parallel to the discussion above for the other two northern regions. While the Far North's security context is quite different, its socio-political and historical context can be understood as essentially the same as the other two regions of the "Great North". For this reason, I do not repeat what has already been detailed above, and instead highlight some of the key relevant distinctions of the Far North in relation to the North and Adamawa that allow us to understand that the government's interests in the Far North also predict that it would mostly have reason to facilitate aid to the region. Let us now turn to the Far North, in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, to learn why the government of Cameroon can be expected to facilitate aid allocation and distribution response in this crisis region.

### 1.2.1 Insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis

Prior to Boko Haram activity in the region, insecurity in the Far North region<sup>105</sup> was on the rise because of growing criminality, which is widely attributed to: i. the increasing availability of small arms due to conflict and insecurity in the broader region, and especially in neighboring Chad and CAR; and ii. environmental degradation and climate change, which have made subsistence agriculture increasingly difficult as a livelihood in a context where

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<sup>105</sup> The Far North region is synonymous with the Lake Chad Basin Crisis to humanitarians.

there are few alternative livelihood options. All of this is exacerbated by the remoteness of the region. That is, as the farthest-flung peripheral region from the center of the country, the ability of the state to maintain or reestablish order is significantly hindered, hence the “wild west” reputation of the region as I was told by local humanitarians.

While Boko Haram has maintained a presence in Cameroon since at least 2011, attacks first began in Nigeria in 2011 (CFR, 2024) and spread to Cameroon in March 2014 (ICG, 2016). The most affected departments within the Far North region continue to be Logone-et-Chari, Mayo Sava, and Mayo-Tsanaga, and in certain periods, Diamaré as well. Violence perpetrated by Boko Haram groups ranges from attacks on villages that often left them destroyed, kamikaze attacks (often committed by children), to kidnappings, extortion, and the destruction of goods and property (OCHA, 2016, p.20).

Abductions and forcible recruitment by these non-state actors were also common (OCHA, 2018, p.3). Voluntary recruitment among local populations is also reported, most often attributed to high poverty levels in the region, extremely limited economic prospects, and an extremely young population, where over half the population was estimated to be under the age of 18 in 2018 (OCHA, 2019, p.6). Not only has child soldier recruitment been an egregious feature of the conflict, but other protection issues affecting children in the region, like child marriage, also became an increasingly worrying and significant part of the insecurity context. (OCHA, 2019, p.32)

The arrival of Boko Haram activity in the Far North also gave rise to communal self-defense militias (i.e. *comités de vigilance*). Although these groups are often viewed with caution, the Lake Chad Basin also has a history of vigilantism and communal violence, the Multinational Joint Task Force (an international unit whose aim is to root out Boko Haram and restore peace to the area) has encouraged these groups, as they are seen as essential in providing local knowledge and human resources to this coalition of forces (ICG, 2017). These local community militias throughout the region also engage in skirmishes and contribute to a climate of widespread fragility and violence.

In addition to non-state actor violence, government forces have also played a role in perpetuating insecurity because of enacting (alleged) widespread human rights violations through their efforts to combat Boko Haram. These

have included excessive use of force in search operations and mass arrests as well as forced disappearances. (Amnesty International, 2015)

Aside from non-state armed group activity, its impacts and other forms of violence and conflict, the region faces other sources of insecurity stemming from both poverty and its fragile, increasingly degrading natural environment. As mentioned earlier, the three northern regions are among the most fragile regions of Cameroon, and the Far North is the most fragile of the three. By most measures, the Far North is typically considered the poorest region of the country, conditions exacerbated by its arid, mostly Sahelian landscape and climate that are more prone to climate shocks and agro-ecological conditions that can make agriculture otherwise difficult. Flooding is a major and growing concern that has begun to regularly displace many thousands of people every year, some of whom have previously been displaced multiple times by violence as well.

Now that the conflict and insecurity context is clarified, I turn to the regional politics and historical relationship between the Far North and the central government to illuminate the government's relationship with the Far North and its peoples.

### 1.2.2 Lake Chad Basin Crisis Regional Politics

Just like Adamawa and the North, the Far North region is also part of Cameroon's "Great North" power bloc, only it is affected by the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, as opposed to the CAR Crisis. The same dynamics as in the above discussion contextualizing the northern regions of the CAR Crisis apply here. To summarize, the local politics of the Far North and its relations with the central government suggest the government is incentivized to facilitate aid to the region. This is because the central government's power depends on these regions' political support, because the northern regions are the most populous power bloc of the country. While this signals a real security threat to the government, this threat was neutralized in previous dealings with the primary force of opposition representing the region (the NUDP). Because the government has since maintained an elite support network in the region, this means it now has strong incentives to facilitate response in the northern regions to maintain support from its elite coalition in regions that otherwise could pose

a very real threat to its survival. The government therefore has security incentives to respond to the population's needs in these regions, particularly when it does not have to divert its own resources.

As for the government's economic interests in the region, the Far North used to be the second most important tourism region of the country. However, the crisis has all but finished tourism, which has had ripple effects across many businesses, ranging from hotels and restaurants to the informal sector as well, as the region is a major producer of artisanal crafts. Additionally, because the region is far-flung (e.g. it requires several days of ground travel from southern regions of the country to reach it), the national airline, Camair Co. is the preferred mode of travel for locals who can afford it and foreigners who do not have access to the UN flight service (UNHAS). The decline in tourism certainly represents a decline in revenue for the national airline, indicating that the insecurity that has plagued the Far North since 2014 has been extremely costly for the central government, not to mention its military spending and other associated costs of contending with the conflict.

Therefore, the government has clear security and economic incentives to facilitate response in the Far North region of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis as will be elaborated upon in further detail below.

### 1.2.3 Government Interests in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis

As compared to the CAR Crisis regions, there are clearly many more sources of insecurity in the Far North. These many sources of insecurity imply that the social contract is one of the most vulnerable in the country, and therefore it poses a real risk and potential threat to the central government's political survival. As expected, the government has been desperately trying to extinguish Boko Haram's presence in the Far North. While great strides were made prior to 2018, the emergence of the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest diverted resources and attention away from the campaigns up north. Because of the significant reduction of military efforts away from the Far North, this unfortunately gave Boko Haram the capacity to gain traction again, resulting in an increasingly protracted situation. While the government absolutely welcomes assistance in the region, the security context is such that it is afraid of



fueling the conflict by potentially provisioning non-state armed groups with aid, as is common in insurgent contexts.

However, in line with the theory of government incentives and behavior toward aid response, the government's perceptions of civilians as largely unsympathetic to Boko Haram align with its behavior in mostly facilitating response in the region. While there is some suspicion of local populations (of either assisting NSAGs through recruits, providing intelligence, or sharing supplies), conflict dynamics help to temper the government's suspicions. This is because in the Far North, most attacks are targeted at the government's armed forces *and* civilians, indiscriminately. Despite suspicions of individual affiliations to the group, by virtue of the seemingly arbitrary nature of violence, this signals to the government that the populace are generally bystanders in the violence who would also like nothing more than for peace to be restored without Boko Haram. Further, I was told that there was concern that neglecting populations by withholding assistance would be expected to promote further NSAG recruitment of civilians among local populations. This was consistent with government behavior that largely facilitates aid response in the region, as the government wishes to quell the remaining insecurity for both political and economic motivations.

Despite suspicions of some of the local populations, which suggest an incentive to obstruct aid, the government has stronger incentives to facilitate aid in reaching affected populations, albeit with caution. First, given the people power of the region, historical and fresh grievances as a result of government-perpetrated violence on local populations and otherwise general marginalization, the government is incentivized to prevent the most populous region of the country from mounting another uprising or civil war as a result of blatant neglect during a crisis of extreme severity. What's more, the regional politics indicate that the government must also maintain the support of its local elite network in the "Great North", and aid response necessarily interacts with these local elites as they are key to accessing local districts where displaced populations are found. They therefore stand to benefit from aid response, as facilitating aid that must engage with local and traditional leaders offers opportunities for the government to direct benefits to its supporters. Finally, the Far North represents significant economic interests, as it used to be the second

most important tourism region of the country and is also a significant agricultural producer of livestock as well. Given the government's desire to restore stability so that the economy may be resuscitated, this is also consistent with its facilitation of aid to the region, as aid is considered to be a stabilizing force.

Therefore, in general, the government's incentives predict that the government should want to encourage aid allocation and distribution here except for the ever-pervasive fear that material aid will be commandeered by active NSAGs. Aside from this apprehension, the government has clear security and economic incentives to facilitate response in the Far North region of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis. Next, I turn to the third and final crisis that erupted in the western regions of the Anglophone Crisis where a very different picture emerges.

### **1.3 Substate Politics in the Anglophone Crisis**

Although the roots of the Anglophone Crisis date to the colonial period and independence, the current conflict's immediate triggers began to simmer in 2016 with unrest that later escalated into a civil war in the fall of 2017. Violence has often involved attacks on civilians and their property, which has continually driven displacement since the outset of the conflict to the present day. While figures vary, it is estimated that at least one million people have been displaced, but because of measurement challenges, as displacement is inherently difficult to measure, the total figure is almost certainly more. What's more, including other affected populations expands the number of people affected by hundreds of thousands, sometimes ballooning to well over two million people in need (OCHA, 2020, p. 18).

In the following section, I outline the insecurity context and regional politics in the affected regions and make explicit how they predict the government should try to obstruct humanitarian aid in these regions. I show that this expectation of government obstruction is largely linked to security dynamics in the conflict zones, as well as the government's historical relationship with this western bloc of power in the country, which has traditionally been a bastion of

resistance and opposition to the central government. This incentivizes the government to obstruct and deny assistance in all four regions, though this manifests differently in the conflict zones of the Northwest and Southwest regions compared to the West and Littoral reception zones. In the conflict zones, while there are certainly incentives to obstruct and deny in these regions, there are also caveats to this, as there are some incentives for the government to facilitate a certain degree of aid to places where it perceives its supporters are located and whose loyalty they wish to maintain by facilitating assistance there, as prior research has shown. It therefore resorts to an obstructive approach that focuses on controlling where aid is directed in these conflict zones. By contrast, in the West and Littoral reception zones, the government has few incentives to facilitate aid to these regions, and it therefore adopts a denialist stance by obstructing aid to prevent it from reaching those regions, with the exception of Douala, the capital of the Littoral and country's largest city and business-hub.

I turn now to the west of the country to the regions affected by the Anglophone Crisis to learn why the government should be expected to obstruct humanitarian aid allocation and distribution there.

### 1.3.1 Insecurity in the Anglophone Crisis

Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2017, the most affected regions by violence are the Northwest and Southwest regions. While these regions have also hosted the greatest share of the displacement (unsurprisingly given they also host the sources of displacement), neighboring regions of the West and Littoral have also received large numbers and have at times experienced spillover violence as well. Although relatively few (~5,000 check) IDPs from the Northwest and Southwest have made it to the western zones of Adamawa and more have fled to the Center (~50,000) and across the border to Nigeria (~70,000), these regions represent anomalies for different reasons and are not considered in this analysis.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> The impact on Adamawa has been so minimal, it has not featured as a major part of the response, and few people even realize that IDPs have fled there. It therefore is omitted for these purposes, as I was unable to collect much data on the situation there. By virtue of fleeing to the Center region, those IDPs who made it to the Center have removed themselves from the regions where they would be affected by aid obstruction in the conflict zones, though they certainly may experience the dynamics common to reception zones. Although they would have served as

The insecurity and violence largely involve skirmishes between NSAGs and government forces. Violence committed against civilians is often quite targeted as the groups aim to punish and weed out those who demonstrate any loyalty or ties to the central government. This contrasts with Boko Haram activity in the Far North, where violence and criminality often appear indiscriminate. By contrast, in the Anglophone Conflict, there appears to be some logic at play. As one IDP told me, *“The [Amba] boys<sup>107</sup> do not harm everyone...because if they know someone that you know, then they won’t hurt you.”* This targeted violence again aligns with perceptions of allegiances, as humanitarians report that targeted attacks (not only killings, but other violence like sexual violence) are committed against local populations who are suspected of supporting the government.

Indeed, humanitarians have described the context in the conflict zones (i.e. the Northwest and Southwest) as “characterized by a climate of ‘terror’”, where human rights abuses and violations have been committed by both non-state armed groups and government forces, and many people have been killed. Another IDP from the Northwest told me how he fled his home for the West: *“As we made our way, I often had my youngest daughter in my arms, and I will not tell you the horrors...so many dead and houses burning...the violence was [trails off]... I had to hide my daughter’s eyes so she would not see such things.”*

Violence in the affected regions takes the form of attacks on villages, kidnappings, assassinations, arbitrary detention and arrests, destruction of property, sexual violence of all kinds including those perpetrated against men,

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a good foil to IDPs who remained in the western reception zones (the West and Littoral), unfortunately insufficient information about response to their needs was not unearthed by this research. What’s more, the politics of hosting such politicized displaced populations in the capital region (and mostly capital city) of the country certainly could be expected to have idiosyncratic dynamics resulting from living in proximity to the centers of power. For this reason, too, I did not include the region in the research. As for those who fled to Nigeria, by virtue of crossing the border, they became asylum seekers or refugees by default and would be subject to Nigerian politics and any humanitarian response mounted in that country. Therefore, these are also omitted from the discussion and the rest of what follows.

<sup>107</sup> Local populations often refer to the anglophone non-state armed groups as the “Amba boys”, referencing, Ambazonia, the name the secessionist movement has given the state it aims to establish.

women and children, as well as recruitment of child soldiers (OCHA, 2020, p. 18; OCHA, 2019, p. 32).

NSAGs also impose ghost towns on Mondays, where nothing is allowed to operate (e.g. markets). Curfews have often been imposed, and roadblocks and check points by all parties to the conflict are common. All this greatly restricts mobility within the conflict regions, which greatly impacts livelihoods that often depend on transporting and selling wares or produce at markets.

In addition to widespread violence, other forms of insecurity exacerbate conflict impacts. While the Southwest is better off than the Northwest, given the benefits of a coastline and proximity to Douala, poverty is still widespread. Conversely, the Northwest is counted among the poorest of the country, and consequently, the conflict's impact on basic services is particularly egregious as many areas of those regions were underserved to begin with. Since the conflict's onset, basic facilities have been repeatedly targeted, given their affiliation with the central government, and the consequences for education and health services has been dire.<sup>108</sup>

In the same vein, the conflict has also severely impacted agricultural production, which has had calamitous implications for the livelihoods of the over 70 per cent of the population that identify agriculture as their main source of income and livelihood before the crisis began (OCHA, 2019, p.6).

In the reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis, in the West and Littoral, insecurity is relatively stable compared to the conflict zones and more often linked to criminality. While most of the fighting has taken place in the Northwest and Southwest conflict regions, some of the violence sometimes spills over into border areas of the reception zones. One such attack occurred during my fieldwork at a market in Bamenyam in November 2023, in the West's Bamboutous department right along the border with the Northwest. A

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<sup>108</sup> For example, in 2018 it was estimated that 80 per cent of school children in the conflict regions were unable to attend school, given the no-school policy of the NSAGs. And, of the 18 health districts across the two regions, 16 were considered unsafe, and 40 percent of facilities already were non-functional by the end of 2018 (OCHA 2019b, p.6). These attacks against basic infrastructure and the staff who provide services (i.e. including teachers and health professionals) have continued, which has reduced operational capacity of services in the region even further.

group of thirty or so men on motorcycles fired on a busy market, killing nine people and kidnapping approximately ten. They also burned down stores and a cargo vehicle and made away with several motorcycles. They were dressed in military-style attire and were heard speaking pidgin English, so reporters assumed they were affiliated with some faction of Anglophone rebels (RFI, 2023).

So, although people will tell you that the West region is totally secure (who were, notably often the same people who also did not believe the crisis in the West and Littoral were deserving of aid), it is still difficult to forget that there is an ongoing civil war sometimes as few as 30 km away, given the extremely visible military presence and checkpoints on the main roads in the West. What's more, it was not uncommon to hear of arbitrary arrests and detainees. In the Littoral, these dynamics are not as visible, as it is farther from much of the conflict activity compared to the West. In addition, it hosts a polarized context where conditions in Douala, the capital of the region and the largest city and economic center of the country, is not representative of the whole region. Security contexts outside of Douala in smaller cities, towns and rural areas are more akin to the West's, though often without extremely visible military presence.

Now that the security context is clarified, I turn to recounting the salient history and political context of the region to elucidate support for the claims of the government's interests in these regions.

### 1.3.2 Anglophone Crisis Regional Politics

Having clarified the government's security interests in the Anglophone Crisis, I now lay out the regional politics and historical relationship between the four most affected regions and the central government to illustrate what can be ascertained about the government's attitudes towards and interests in the western regions and its peoples.

The Anglophone Crisis is set within the broader "Great West" region of Cameroon, which includes, together, i. the Northwest and Southwest, ii. the West, and iii. the Littoral regions. This western bloc has traditionally been the primary stronghold of resistance and opposition to the centers of power.

However, understanding the regional relationships with the government requires parsing these relationships out among the regions, given the Northwest and Southwest, as the country's two anglophone regions, have shared histories that allow them to be treated together, just as the francophone West and Littoral regions go hand-in-hand and are considered together below. I begin with the Northwest and Southwest before reviewing the West and Littoral's histories.

### *The Northwest and Southwest*

Prior to independence, the Northwest and Southwest regions were previously part of the British Cameroons. When independence movements in the post-war period emerged, there was wide debate about what these regions would do, but ultimately parts of this territory that extended up to the Lake Chad Basin voted to join Nigeria, while the southern regions (in the present-day Northwest and Southwest regions) voted to join Cameroon.

Ever since this "reunification" of the British and French Cameroons, cultural and linguistic barriers have still never been overcome, and many Anglophones within the regions consider that the agreement to unify the two Cameroons as an "equal federation" has not been honored given generalized economic neglect and marginalization of the English-speaking regions and peoples. While many do not expect the equal union stipulation to be honored anymore, they still have advocated for the regions' particular needs and concerns to be seriously accommodated by the central government, which, in short, have not. While some anglophone elites have been integrated into the government as members of parliament, the consensus is they have not advanced anglophone interests and have instead fallen under the government's influence (ICG, 2010).<sup>109</sup>

The introduction of ostensible multi-party politics in the 1990s revived hope that progress might be made for anglophone concerns, and especially efforts to advocate for federalism. As it became evident that this reform did not actually

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<sup>109</sup> There is evidence for this in that Anglophone parliamentarians had, up until 1972, a collective veto power over laws passed through parliament, but never used it. Indeed, this is also why some anglophones are also targets of violence by non-state armed groups in the region, given perceived (or perhaps actual) loyalty to or affiliation with the government. (ICG, 2010)

introduce genuine political contestation and pluralism, this spawned a secessionist movement. As of the late 1990s, this movement triggered violent episodes, assassinations, and government crackdowns, and tensions have simmered ever since.

In 2016, these tensions came to a head as demonstrations and strikes were staged in the anglophone regions, which the government repressed with excessive force. Although the government did present a few conciliatory measures that appeared to address some of the grievances of the region (at least ostensibly), it was not taken seriously as they did not sufficiently meet anglophone demands, some calling for federalism and others for secession. On October 1, 2017, some separatists declared independence for the Northwest and Southwest regions, which triggered skirmishes between government forces and separatists that eventually became the non-state armed groups of today, and hence the conflict had officially begun.

Evidently, the relationship between the central government and these two anglophone regions has been consistently fraught since they were adjoined to the Cameroon Republic in 1961. Although the francophone regions of the “Great West” share this fraught history with the government, their history is different from that of the anglophone regions, as I explain below.

#### *The West and Littoral*

Before Cameroon’s independence in 1960, the foremost nationalist movement in the country emerged with supporters primarily from the Bamiléké and Bassa groups from the West and Littoral regions, respectively. These regions were home to an anti-colonial nationalist movement and were a bastion of support of opposition groups,

In the West, the high population and business prowess of its people have made it an important political rival to the current government since independence. Although there are other groups in the region, the Bamiléké are especially seen as threat. As for the Littoral, it is best known as host to Cameroon’s economic and business capital, Douala, which has typically never viewed the government very favorably. However, there is a stark divide between the urban center and the rest of the region, where poverty certainly is



also challenging, as the majority of the people claim fishing and agriculture as their primary sources of income. The Bassa and Duala people in the region resisted German colonial expansion and maintained their oppositional role during the decolonization period.

Of most salience, it is this history of opposition that has its roots in the decolonization period that most directly influences the Cameroonian government's incentives in the regions today. The opposition in question emerged in a nationalist movement, which eventually became a political party called the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC) that was formally founded in 1948. It began promulgating efforts for independence from France, the colonial power at the time that succeeded Germany after World War I. The UPC demanded not only independence but a complete separation from France post-independence.

Thereafter followed a period of political violence where French authorities tried to repress this movement through arrests and assassinations of activists and violent crackdowns. Eventually, an irregular civil war—known as the Bamiléké War or the Cameroon Independence War—erupted. Bamiléké and Bassa villages were targeted, some razed to the ground, while populations were forcibly relocated, and other civilians killed indiscriminately. The war began with riots in 1955 and is considered to have ended with the defeat of the western regions and nationalist movement in 1964, several years following independence in 1960.

In the interim, as global forces made independence a looming reality, the French identified and encouraged the empowerment of political leaders that had proven supportive of colonial rule and could be trusted to maintain close relations with France, so that it could continue advancing its economic interests in the country following independence.

Given the ongoing rebellion among the Bamiléké and Bassa people in the West and Littoral regions and their explicit aim to cut ties with France, this cast the region as clearly unfavorable to the French who were searching for Cameroonian nationals to appoint as leaders that would remain loyal to them and allow their interests to be maintained in the post-independence era. It stands to reason that the French would not promote leaders from the West and

Littoral, given ongoing tensions and eventual conflict. Indeed, they did not and chose instead Ahmadou Ahidjo as the new republic's first president, a man from the North region who had demonstrated loyalty to the French. (Britannica, n.d.)

Once multi-party politics were introduced in the 1990s, several opposition groups arose in the regions again, including the UPC, though, unsurprisingly, none of these has managed to mount a legitimate opposition campaign, given an electoral system that is neither free nor fair continues to plague the country.

Therefore, although the Northwest and Southwest regions' political history differs from the history of the West and Littoral regions, both pairs of regions represent threats to the central government due to long track-records of hosting oppositional forces, albeit different ones. Therefore, other considerations notwithstanding, the government should be expected to obstruct aid in all these regions. Now that these regional histories have been clarified, in the next section I make the government's interests in them more explicit, specifically as relates to their expected behavior toward humanitarian response in the affected regions of the contemporary Anglophone Crisis.

### 1.3.3 Government Interests in the Anglophone Crisis

Given the above, let us consider what this context suggests about the government's security interests in the region as evidence that the government has strong incentives to obstruct humanitarian aid in the region. I begin with security interests and follow with economic interests.

The incentives stemming from the security context in the Anglophone Crisis suggest the government should try to obstruct humanitarian response. This crisis poses the most significant security threat to the government, as a secessionist civil war in a context where the country's most blatant opposition has been seated since independence. The government certainly has reason for concern. While the threat of secession, and hence the loss of valuable territory, and an ongoing civil war is already convincing of the regions' threat potential,

the violent politicization of government services<sup>110</sup> also signals the severity and seriousness of the threat.

More specifically, as is common in irregular conflict settings (as is also the case in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis), there is a known fear amidst the government of material aid reaching insurgent groups. What's more, given the nature of the conflict, suspicion of local populations is present to an even greater degree than in the Lake Chad Basin. This is at least partly because the government is highly suspicious of local communities collaborating with armed groups that were formed directly from local populations in those regions. Even if many civilians wish for peace to be restored and resent the violence and unrest the uprising has brought about, it is more difficult in a secessionist civil war context for the government to distinguish where loyalties lie, and so it is generally assumed that many of the anglophone population is a potential defector and supporter of NSAGs. This perception is further bolstered by the very visible support from the many demonstrators and others who supported the movement prior to the conflict's outbreak.

As indicated before, the degree to which non-state armed groups target civilians can be used as a proxy for the government's perceptions of trust or mistrust. Comparing the security contexts in Cameroon's Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crisis illustrate these dynamics. For instance, in the Far North 80 to 90% of attacks are on civilians, whereas in the Northwest and Southwest, the vast majority are on government forces. Although it is not entirely clear how the government uses this information, it is very plausible that it interprets these targeting difference by non-state armed groups as an indicator of the degree to which it can trust local populations. This would clearly affect its willingness to assist humanitarians in securing access and in delivering or allocating aid.

Therefore, the security context in the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones poses an acute security threat to the government, as do the histories of violence and opposition in all four major regions affected by the crisis. This, combined with greater reason to mistrust local populations, supports strong incentives for the government to obstruct aid in the conflict-affected regions.

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<sup>110</sup> i.e. Attacks on government services and anything or anyone affiliated with the government.

In the reception zones of the West and Littoral, security interests also suggest that the government should obstruct and deny aid given disincentives in assisting its rivals. On top of this, however, is the incentive to contain displaced populations in the conflict zones. Since government view IDPs in this crisis with great suspicion, given their (assumed) association with non-state armed groups, the government prefers to keep them within the conflict zones, presumably so they are better controlled and to prevent spillover discontent from the conflict spreading elsewhere. Blocking assistance in the West and Littoral, as neighbouring regions that offer refuge to IDPs, incentivizes IDPs to remain in the conflict zones where there are services and material aid. Therefore, it is not only the historical security interests of these reception regions but also specific conflict security interests that figure into the government's calculation to block aid in the West and Littoral, not only to deprive their rivals but also to contain IDPs.

Unlike in the Far North in the Lake Chad Basin, the government can deprive these rival regions of aid with little fear of repercussions. The distinction is that while the government does view the West and Littoral as a threat, they do not perceive the threat to be as high as up north, given differences in population size *and* differences in its evaluation of the region's appetite for conflict and uprisings. The crux of this is that in the West and Littoral, while they are seats of opposition, its people are perceived as prioritizing stability, given their business prowess, and their distinct living memories of the Bamiléké War, which makes them reticent to resort to political violence or protest, even in the face of blatant discrimination. This was a very common explanation to hear, as one elderly man told me, *"No, we won't revolt like the English (anglophones) because we remember...we French, we just accept this, that's why nothing changes...The anglophones don't put up with it, but the French won't ever do that (engage in conflict), because we know what the government is capable of."*

Many others from the region I spoke with attributed their acceptance of the status quo specifically to a desire to avoid renewed bloodshed at all cost. One middle-aged gentleman told me, *"It is just not possible to have a war here in the West, because the rebels during the colonial war were here and not elsewhere. The Northwest and Southwest don't have a recent history of war before this current one."*

*This explains why we don't feel like rebelling against the Centre. People still have very distinct memories of the horrors."*

So, although the Cameroonians' authoritarian politics and marginalization of anglophone peoples backfired in triggering a costly civil war, this seems to be less of a risk in the West and Littoral regions, contrary also to the Far North. It is likely that the government is aware of this fear and reticence to rebel in the West and Littoral, which empowers it further to wield its tactics to deny aid to those regions.

What's more, because colonial economic activity centered along the coast and around the Bafoussam–Douala–Yaoundé hubs, this means that the pattern of development in the country that emerged was not only highly uneven, but that the West (Bafoussam) and Littoral (Douala) specifically became legitimate rivals to the Center (Yaoundé) in economic terms, though this rivalry is far more pronounced between Douala and Yaoundé. As for the anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions, they are known for great agricultural productivity, and this means that the government also has incentives to maintain stability in those regions, given they impact their own economic interests.

Economic incentives in the Northwest and Southwest regions also support this behavior as the government strives to end the conflict (in military victory) so it may once again reap the rewards from previously highly productive regions. Obstructing aid to opposition areas would ideally accelerate this process for them, in the hopes of: i. preventing resources from reaching non-state armed groups, and ii. in making local populations grow weary of the conflict as they struggle to survive with livelihoods that have been largely interrupted because of the insecurity, and, if the government is successful in its obstruction, of assistance from humanitarian sources as well.

In the Littoral, it has some incentives to allow aid allocation and distribution here, particularly in Douala, the economic and business capital of the country. This is because the government relies on it as the only major port city for trade and national exports, upon which the economy strongly relies. Stability is therefore paramount in Douala specifically, as a crisis there would have dire implications for the country's economy and many of the government's income

sources. However, economic interests in the rest of the region are relatively limited by comparison. Therefore, the government has an interest in somewhat facilitating aid to Douala specifically, while it has little interest in the rest of the region.

Therefore, not only does the Anglophone Crisis pose an ongoing extreme threat to the central government in terms of security and the state's monopoly on violence, from which distinct conflict security interests stem from, the regional histories of the West and Littoral also highlight how these regions represent a threat due to their histories of violent rebellion. Economic interests do not factor to the same extent, except in explaining the limited aid that has been permitted to flow to urban IDPs in Douala. Combining these interests therefore should predict that the government would be permissive of assistance to a limited extent in Douala but not generally to the rest of the Littoral region or the West.

To summarize, the security and economic contexts—as well as historical relations between these four western regions and the government—suggest that the government has mostly clear incentives to tightly control, hinder or block humanitarian response allocation or distribution to the extent possible, with few exceptions.

## **2. Conclusion**

It therefore would appear that the Cameroonian government has quite diverging incentives vis-à-vis different crises and regions. Effectively, this means that in a country with several ongoing crises or in different crises over time, humanitarian responses might differ significantly as a result of varying host government incentives and behavior, as determined by diverging relationships between the host state and affected regions.

While in many or most cases host governments welcome humanitarian assistance, in some instances they can find ways to block these efforts for politically motivated reasons. More explicitly, they might do this to limit funding to a region they view as a security threat. Specifically, it is the perceived threat potential associated with certain populations and regions that

largely conditions the state's actions. However, the state's actions are also conditioned to an extent by economic interests, or the value of a given region, that shape the government's decisions to either facilitate, obstruct or deny aid in certain regions and crises.

As I have shown in this chapter, in regions and crises with lower threat potential, and especially those with higher value, as in the East region of the CAR Crisis, the government enables aid response, facilitating rather than obstructing and denying humanitarian access. On the other hand, in contexts with higher threat potential, as in the Anglophone Crisis regions, the government can be expected to obstruct and deny humanitarian access and response.

I further show that the government's behavior toward regions with active conflict, and thereby high threat potential, is mediated by the government's perceptions of local populations' allegiances vis à vis non-state armed groups. In places where it deems significant numbers of local populations are likely to align with its adversaries, as in the Anglophone Crisis conflict regions, the government is expected to behave more restrictively toward aid response here. Conversely, in places where it mostly views local populations as unsupportive of non-state armed groups as in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, it treats aid response more leniently by mostly facilitating it to those regions with the possibility of a few limited constraints due to a degree of suspicion, which is inevitable in irregular conflict settings. In zones of reception, absent active combat and non-state armed groups, where the government does not attribute high threat potential, it will facilitate aid response as in the CAR Crisis regions. However, in zones of reception with similarly stable security conditions but that pose a higher threat for other reasons, as in the West and Littoral of the Anglophone Crisis, the government will obstruct or even deny aid.

As for its calculations of whether to be responsive or not to populations of broad regions that are considered threatening but that are not currently parties to a conflict, for example in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis<sup>111</sup> and the West

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<sup>111</sup> While there is conflict in the Lake Chad Basin, the belligerents involve actors that do not represent the region in the same way that non-state actors in the Anglophone Crisis do, for example. In the latter context, it is reasonable to say that there has been an uprising in the

reception zone of the Anglophone Crisis, the government will facilitate response in places that pose an imminently viable threat should they be provoked (e.g. the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, where it has the power of large populations that could very well pose a legitimate challenge to the government's military if required). However, where it perceives no viable or imminent threat, it will deny or obstruct aid, as in the West region, where there is little appetite for political violence given its history and memory of the Bamiléké War, as evidenced by the neutrality it has maintained throughout the Anglophone Crisis and contemporary preference for maintaining stability and promoting growth.

But how exactly does host government obstruction emerge in humanitarian response in Cameroon? In the following chapters, I demonstrate how these incentives and expectations emerge in the two puzzles of aid distribution (Chapter 6) and allocation (Chapter 7) in two subnational comparisons within Cameroon's three crises. I further demonstrate how the government of Cameroon exercises its influence over aid response through four mechanisms of obstruction, namely: *i. Access denial*, *ii. Administrative impediments*, *iii. Physical constraints*; and *iv. Perception influence*. I do so by providing empirical evidence in support of these in the following chapters and make explicit how these empirics align with our expectations of government facilitation and obstruction because of host government subnational political incentives.

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anglophone regions, whereas that is not the case in the Far North where the Boko Haram insurgency is very clearly of a different nature.



## Chapter 6. Denial and Obstruction of Aid Distribution in Cameroon

In the previous chapter, I laid out the necessary background on the subnational politics that explain the host government's diverging incentives in the three crisis contexts. This discussion went on to highlight how those incentives shape expectations of how the Cameroonian government should intervene vis à vis humanitarian aid in the three crisis contexts.

In this chapter, I examine how these government incentives emerge empirically in the Cameroonian context by examining the puzzle of *aid distribution* of why certain conflict zones, the Northwest and Southwest regions in this case, receive less international humanitarian response compared to other conflict zones in the country that have received more (i.e. the Lake Chad Basin Crisis). I contend that this is due to significantly more onerous access constraints on aid actors imposed by the host government, which is a function of subnational politics. In this chapter, I depict the obstacles to aid distribution in the Northwest and Southwest regions largely from the perspective of humanitarians themselves, where there is clear and strong evidence in support of the expectation that the host government should obstruct aid in these regions, in line with its interests. I contrast these experiences with experiences of aid distribution in the Lake Chad Basin and CAR Crises to demonstrate how government interests in those crises are also reflected in its behavior toward response, where aid distribution is strikingly less constrained than in the Anglophone Crisis conflict regions.

I empirically support the four mechanisms identified in this research by demonstrating how they emerge in aid distribution and humanitarian access in Cameroon's crises. Cameroon's contexts illustrate issues related to humanitarian distribution, as there is considerable variation in access constraints across contexts. By examining experiences of aid distribution in Cameroon, it becomes apparent that disparities in aid distribution across the three crisis contexts result from different access constraints imposed by the host government. Below, I illustrate the different access environments and provide

evidence for the host government's mechanisms of influence previously delineated in Chapter 2.

## **1. Obstruction in the Anglophone Conflict Zones**

Comparing aid distribution in Cameroon provides an instructive narrative of how host governments respond differently to aid distribution depending on their diverging interests in different crises. Rather than consider each crisis chronologically, I begin with the Anglophone Crisis, which exemplifies how a host government can obstruct humanitarian access and distribution. I follow this with a discussion of access in the CAR and Lake Chad Basin Crises and then detail the experiences of distribution in each together, which indicates contexts where humanitarians faced relatively few constraints on their distribution activities when compared to the constraints faced in the Anglophone Crisis.

Since the beginning of the conflict, humanitarian access has remained a major challenge in the Anglophone Crisis, and particularly in the conflict zones of the Northwest and Southwest regions. In the humanitarian community's public documents, these obstacles are attributed principally to unpredictable insecurity due to ongoing hostilities, violence and violations of international humanitarian law, physical and environmental access constraints (e.g. rough terrain, poor infrastructure and supply chain issues), and, significantly, major administrative hurdles and restrictions on the movement of goods, humanitarian personnel, UN agencies, and civilians.

Naturally, in these open-access reports and plans that are read by Cameroonian government officials as well, humanitarians must be careful of what they say and do not say. And, while the obstacles to access are generally referred to in vague, passive language to avoid pointing fingers directly at the government, speaking to humanitarians involved with the response, and especially those who were involved at its outbreak, emphasize that the phrases mentioning "administrative hurdles" are egregiously euphemistic.

One aid professional and former soldier told me that the government did not want significant amounts of aid going to these conflict zones, but that with

all the attention from international humanitarian groups the crisis had garnered, the government could not block it entirely, as the focus in the country was now there, and the “*internationals are drawn there like mosquitoes to still water*”. Nonetheless, they still resort to tactics to try to control the flow of aid as much as possible including through *i. Access denial; ii. Administrative impediments; iii. Physical constraints; and iv. Perception influence.*

In what follows, I lay out the empirical evidence supporting how the government of Cameroon employs these to obstruct, and sometimes, deny aid in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the Anglophone Crisis. This empirical evidence supports the over-arching argument of how host government political interests in conflict crisis contexts shape its behavior toward aid response. In the case of the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones, it engages in denial and obstruction, which appears in contrast to the empirical trends in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, as well as in the CAR Crisis<sup>112</sup>, which is illustrated further below.

In short, as previously discussed are consistent with aid denial and obstruction because of security dynamics in the conflict zones, which suggests that extreme mistrust of local populations’ allegiances due to perceived affiliations with non-state armed groups incentivizes obstruction of aid (e.g. by diverting aid from areas where it perceives its adversaries are and diverting aid to areas particularly within its control and where it perceives greater likelihood of support and loyalty). In the same vein, it has security interests in containing populations in the conflict zones, motivated by the desire for better control of defector populations as well as preventing the spread of unrest and violence elsewhere. This incentivizes the government to obstruct and block aid from reaching the West and Littoral reception zones to incentivize IDPs to remain in the conflict zone where there aid response is present. In addition, the government’s historical relationship with these four western regions, which

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<sup>112</sup> I include the CAR Crisis in this analysis, not because it offers a perfect comparison with the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones; it does not, as it is clearly a zone of reception without active combat and the ensuing security incentives found in conflict zones. However, it does demonstrate that the observations of aid distribution in the CAR Crisis does indeed align with expectations stemming from the theory of subnational politics and government incentives, which predict government facilitation toward aid distribution in a reception zone that is not perceived as a political threat and holds high value for the government.

have long hosted resistance and opposition movements, also incentivizes obstruction and denial of assistance in all four regions, given a desire to avoid strengthening its opponents. Finally, economic interests primarily figure in the government's desire to restore stability in the agriculturally productive Northwest and Southwest regions and in allowing some assistance to reach IDPs in Douala, the major business hub of Cameroon, where the government has significant interest in maintaining stability as well.

But first, I turn to supporting evidence for the four mechanisms of obstruction and denial in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the Anglophone Crisis.

### **1.1 Mechanism 1: Access Denial in the Northwest & Southwest**

From the beginning of the Anglophone Crisis, the government was reluctant to provide access into the Northwest and Southwest regions. Access negotiations between the government and the major international humanitarian organizations, as led by the Humanitarian Country Team, Humanitarian Coordinator, and OCHA (the main UN agency responsible for response coordination), were drawn out and rife with difficulties.

To begin with, MINREX, the ministry responsible for foreign affairs, bypassed international organizations in the initial phase of the crisis opting to communicate their expectations of international entities only with the diplomatic missions initially. Evidently, according to humanitarian personnel, the Humanitarian Coordinator had to specifically request a copy of the communiqué that the state diplomatic missions had received and shared it with the UN Agencies herself.

Although there is no explicit evidence that this oversight was intentional, the government had ample experience working with the Humanitarian Country Team given the country's two prior crises dated back to at least 2014 (and longer in the case of the CAR Crisis). While humanitarians have reformed their operations in the past decades, the basic working relationship between the Country Team and host governments, which requires communication and collaboration, was no mystery to the Government in 2018. That humanitarians and other international organizations were kept in the dark at first suggests a

very intentional move on the Government's part, likely to delay the progression of their operations.

It might be surprising to some that humanitarian access is not necessarily granted immediately following the outbreak of a crisis. This was the case with the Northwest and Southwest, where many organizations, including UN Agencies, did not have access until at least six months after its outbreak and likely longer for some organizations. This access denial applied not only to these organizations' humanitarian personnel but to the distribution of material aid and supplies too. During the early days of the crisis, some humanitarian staff said they were told the government was initially rejecting the Emergency Response Plan that the humanitarians had put together and issued in May 2018. Others said it was never the case it was rejected outright, but that it seemed there was confusion as to how to react to it, as they suspected government also likely needed time to strategize.

Whatever the case, access denial created many strategic conundrums that delayed tangible response distribution and implementation. Part of this was because it necessitated strategizing by humanitarians to figure out how to approach such stringent restrictions. This was true at the highest levels, where both the United Nations Country Team (largely a representation of the leading foreign aid actors and UN Diplomatic missions in the country) and the Humanitarian Country Team needed time to figure out what the approach should be during that time of access denial. While individual organizations may have been planning their responses and putting things in place, they were delayed by the lack of agreement or decisions on a sector-wide strategy, which most agreed was expected to be uniform across the sector. Another part was simply due to the reality that the denial situation required more resources, human and otherwise. For instance, access was such a problem especially at the beginning of the crisis that a dedicated Logistics Cluster was established specifically for the Anglophone Crisis response in October 2018 (OCHA 2019, p.32 & 36). Not insignificantly, another way that access denial delayed response was in the resulting limited information about humanitarian needs.

Because so many organizations did not have access at first, robust evaluations and the UN's coordinated needs assessments were impossible to

carry out. Instead, UN agencies and other contracting IGOs or INGOs had to rely on piecemeal assessments completed individually by local NGOs or INGOs who already had a presence in the zones and were allowed to operate. Coordinated, multi-sector needs assessments that the UN humanitarian apparatus normally carries out were delayed and did not happen until much later than usual, which further delayed the ability of organizations to plan and implement response.

The lack of – or very limited – humanitarian access and an increasingly thorny relationship with the government required more strategy and more administration for organizations. This ranged from strict communications policies for staff when communicating with any representative of the government, more internal approvals processes especially for external meetings or communications, and strategy sessions ahead of these interactions to determine the best way to position themselves so that, on the one hand, opportunities to open access were not lost, but on the other hand, humanitarian and organizational principles and interests were still maintained.

At the beginning of the crisis, NGOs that were already present in the two regions could operate, but any others, including major actors like UN Agencies that lead various clusters of the response, were blocked. OCHA did manage to gain access, although it was pointed out that this was probably because it was such a small operation and, because it is only a coordinating organization as opposed to one that implements response. So, for many organizations, access denial required a remote approach where major international humanitarian organizations had to operate purely through NGOs (and largely local or national NGOs). Although it is typical for the major UN Agencies and INGOs to operate through NGOs in any given response, it is atypical for these organizations to have no access at all themselves (other than in other situations of access denial).

#### 1.1.1 Remote management

In this period where international organizations did not have access and the Humanitarian Coordinator and OCHA were trying to negotiate and secure it, international organizations debated whether to respect procedures or not.

While some certainly delayed their operations until after they received authorization as an organization, others opted for a different strategy.

One humanitarian explained: *“The government wasn’t giving many of us access, so leadership decided to adopt a remote management model until access was given the go-ahead. That meant that any programs or distributions would be done purely through implementing partners...And all coordination would have to happen via email, over the phone, or face-to-face with partners outside of the conflict regions...It was not viewed as a permanent solution but was the best we could do to ensure there was any response at all, given the tremendous, growing needs. There really was no other way we could see, and of course they did not want to risk the other programs and access in other crisis zones.”*

While the ground-level implementation of humanitarian response is often best left to local actors given their greater familiarity with the local contexts and populations, international actors provide essential enabling services that facilitate these local actors’ activities. For instance, coordination of the entire response is OCHA’s responsibility at a high-level, including needs assessments, but individual organizations and agencies also must coordinate their own programs and activities that they have contracted out as well as monitoring and evaluating (M&E) their impact. Without access, logistics, assessments, and M&E clearly become infinitely more difficult. This increased the burden on local actors and weakened their support from their better-resourced and more powerful contracting agencies.

Indeed, when the partner organizations (i.e. either local, national or INGOs) learned that remote management would be the *modus operandi*, they were very apprehensive about working without more support and sometimes resentful. As one humanitarian told me, *“They felt like they were being left to implement the programs in the field totally on their own — and taking on the risks by themselves while we sit in our offices back in Yaoundé or wherever in comfort and safety.”*

The remote operational approach was itself a hindrance to distribution as it required more coordination and involved higher risk. Significantly, for those that did not yet have authorization from the government as an organization to operate, this implied operating with the utmost discretion. This meant adopting a zero-visibility policy, which required the masking or removal of logos from

materials to give the illusion that the partner implementing organizations were sourcing them on their own. This was intended to reduce the chance of the government finding out that the implementing organizations were collaborating with organizations whose access had not been authorized.

To minimize risk in this case, this meant that any materials provided to implementing organizations were handed over prior to entering the Northwest and Southwest regions. This introduced additional coordination and logistics for the contracting agencies to manage their supplies and reposition them in more appropriate locations that were also more centralized, given the inability to dispatch within the conflict zones due to serious physical constraints. In addition, partners would pick up the materials themselves, adding to their operational burden as well.

Not only did remote management introduce new operational challenges, but access denial also made planning difficult as actors did not have a full understanding of the context and, most significantly, a full picture of humanitarian needs, which made response planning exceedingly difficult. They did not know when or if access would be procured and therefore did not know how long remote management would have to be maintained with all its additional hurdles. This included lack of familiarity with many of the potential partner organizations that were present in the affected regions and little knowledge of their capacity.

Along with the additional coordination, administration and strategizing that access denial necessitated, there was also uncertainty about the risks involved with adopting remote management. Humanitarians said they did not know to what extent operating through actors on the ground with permission would be considered a violation of their own access denial, and thus were unclear on the potential gravity of the consequences. The adopted approach was that it was better to go ahead discretely and ask for forgiveness later if reproached. Not all humanitarian staff were comfortable with this, understandably, for fear of being found out by the government. Nonetheless, those who raised concerns said they kept their heads down and went along with the approach, given it enabled much-needed response, but there was certainly concern and fear among people involved.



### 1.1.2 Surveillance

Indeed, this fear was justified. In particular, a few NGO personnel pointed out that it was a risky approach given the number of people involved and the fact that so many are Cameroon nationals, some of whom almost certainly had ties to the government. In addition to a risky numbers game, the others were worried, because so many of their operations had to closely coordinate with authorities (e.g. government representatives attending meetings at their offices, observing workshops etc.) that they would inevitably find out about at least some of the barred organizations' involvement. Indeed, one humanitarian told me that the government knew about at least some of the activities that his organization was carrying out without authorization.

Some humanitarians also mentioned that they were discouraged from communicating about sensitive organizational information about the response over the phone or via email and instead were encouraged to either use WhatsApp or speak in-person in a secure location, as it was generally acknowledged that they were certainly under government surveillance. Internal procedures became more onerous as well as a result. Again, organizing any activity became more time-intensive, as more strategy was required for just about every step in the planning and delivery process, as management kept their staff on a short leash, imposing a greater and more involved communication burden on personnel.

Organizations adopted other strategies to try to quell surveillance as well, including varying the locations of workshops, trainings and meetings held with implementing partners under remote management and limiting the meetings to essential personnel only. One humanitarian described an instance of possibly catching a government informant in the act of surveillance, where an individual attending a workshop had posed as a member of the media and was later discovered to have provided false credentials, including a media outlet that did not exist.

In any event, these organizations' experiences demonstrate that host government surveillance affects aid distribution. It slows down processes involved in planning and executing aid distribution, creating more obstacles for program implementation and material aid and supply delivery. Worse, the

intelligence that surveillance potentially produces, informing the government of unauthorized activity, can motivate it to impose further constraints on access or prolong or reinstate access denial. In the case of the Northwest and Southwest regions of the Anglophone Crisis, some humanitarians suspected that surveillance and monitoring helped delay the access negotiation process and prolonged denial, as the government learned of organizations operating without approvals, despite having been informed of the government's processes.

Aside from surreptitious surveillance, the government also monitors organizations' public communications, including social media activity not only of the organizations' accounts but of their staff's as well. There were also reports of aid organization staff members responding positively to content in support of the "Northwest-Southwest or Anglophone resistance" movement and of non-state armed groups opposing the government. Some individuals I spoke with suspected that this behavior also likely prolonged access denial, given it undermined the organizations' commitment to the humanitarian principle of impartiality and likely was interpreted as the organization taking a position on the conflict.

### 1.1.3 Other avenues of access denial

Even once the organizations' access was tenuously approved, with the procedural caveat of having to gain authorization for missions, access denial took other forms, specifically by denying access to certain forms of program modalities as well as major logistics routes.

For instance, the government denied cash programs in the Northwest and Southwest regions for many organizations, at least at the beginning of the crisis. Cash programming is a relatively recent modality of delivering assistance, which has necessitated some advocacy to persuade host governments of its merits. This was true of Cameroon's government, which was reluctant at first to accept the modality, but by the time that the Anglophone Crisis had broken out, it had already agreed to the implementation of cash transfers in other crisis regions. However, several organizations said that their plans for cash transfers in the Northwest and Southwest regions at the beginning of the crisis were denied. Not only did this deprive hard-to-reach populations of assistance, as

this is now considered the preferred aid modality in those contexts, but the blanket denial of that specific kind of program wasted considerable efforts and resources, given organizations that had carried out the program in the eastern and northern regions of the country had already begun planning these responses and allocating resources like personnel to manage the programs.

Logistics routes that humanitarian organizations relied upon for distribution also experienced blanket access denial when United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flights were suspended. UNHAS is the UN agency that provides air services to the humanitarian community and is a major component of the UN's logistics support to crises. Humanitarians refer to UNHAS air transport as the "safest and most reliable way to reach the intervention sites" in the North, Far North, Northwest, and Southwest regions, which all host displaced populations (OCHA 2020, p.43). These flights not only transported personnel but supplies as well and made medical and security evacuations possible in the regions served. They also enabled the delivery of emergency humanitarian equipment far closer to where was needed than would otherwise be possible (OCHA 2020, p.43). Other than these flights, the only commercial operator in the country that could replace the UNHAS flights would be the government's nationalized airline, Camair-co, which holds a monopoly on all commercial domestic routes. However, it is not really considered a viable option, as it is not reliable in many ways, in terms of safety, as many humanitarian staff pointed out, but also in terms of its schedule, as I learned when discussing flight possibilities up north with an NGO staff member. I insisted that the site cited a flight's availability at a certain time on a certain day to which he responded with a big hearty laugh throwing his head back and wagging his finger saying, *"You really shouldn't believe anything on that site.... It is a great work of fiction"*. And in explaining why the UNHAS flights were suspended, another said, *"Of course the government (of Cameroon) does not want those (UNHAS) flights to start again. They are so important for logistics and transporting people too...and also, the government would love for humanitarians to spend on Camair flights. That's more money in their pockets, of course,"* he told me, scoffing.

Although these flight suspensions also impacted access to other regions, because the flights had previously operated to those regions without such

denial (as far as my sources could tell), it was not until the Anglophone Crisis emerged that this mode of access denial emerged. It therefore is plausible that restricted flight options to other regions were simply a casualty of the government's main objective of blocking aid access in the Northwest and Southwest regions as opposed to the other regions impacted by the Lake Chad Basin and CAR Crises.

#### 1.1.4 Access Re-Denied

Finally, and before moving on to obstacles to response posed by the next mechanism, it should be highlighted that once access is granted following denial, denial can still very easily be reinstated, as one NGO's experience illustrates.

In December 2020, the government detained four staff members of an international medical NGO operating in the Northwest conflict zone of the Anglophone Crisis. Subsequently, the government suspended authorization for all the NGO's activities. This suspension of access demonstrates that access denial can be reinstated, and that access is not necessarily guaranteed to be stable once initially granted. This instance very clearly negatively affected the health care response in the Northwest region by leaving great gaps in health response broadly but specifically for the cholera outbreak as well. The organization was considered a "key player" in "case management and primary care, including in hard-to-reach areas, through mobile clinics and working with community health workers" and was one of the few health organizations that operated ambulance services in both the Northwest and Southwest regions. The government's suspension of its operations motivated the organization's own decision to cease operations in the Southwest region as well, given denial had drawn out for at least a year. This shows how the government strategic suspension of certain organizations' activities can be felt acutely if it is a "keystone organization", as in this case. Humanitarians reported that although some remaining organizations were able to ramp up their efforts after the loss of that actor, the *"NGO's suspension considerably stretched the response capacity of remaining partners and of government services"*. (OCHA 2023, p.18-19)

All the above should illustrate how access denial imposed by the government very clearly obstructed aid delivery and resulted in diminished

response in the region. And, importantly, readers should appreciate the duress under which humanitarians must work, knowing that even once access denial is lifted and organizational access is green lit, this does not mean that it is guaranteed to remain that way.

This section also demonstrated that not only did the government engage in access denial, but that this access denial had a very clear and profound impact on the aid sector's ability to distribute aid. Access denial extremely hindered operations resulting in far less aid distribution than otherwise would have been possible. What's more this pattern cannot be understood absent the incentive structures and political context that frames the Cameroonian government's relationship with the anglophone regions.

Eventually, however, the Government did lift blanket access denial for organizations. Unfortunately for humanitarian actors, this did not signal the end of their access constraints and distribution troubles. In the following section, I lay out some of the primary ways that the government of Cameroon used the second mechanism of obstruction and denial through administrative impediments leveraged against humanitarian aid actors in the Anglophone conflict regions of the Northwest and Southwest.

## **1.2 Mechanism 2: Administrative Impediments**

After the humanitarian sector received the go-ahead for access writ-large, this unfortunately did not mean the end of the challenging access environment for humanitarian operations in the Northwest and Southwest conflict zones in the Anglophone Crisis. While humanitarians have since adapted to the stringent operational context, and operations within the regions have been ongoing, the response remains riddled with administrative impediments not found in other crisis regions elsewhere in the country.

First and foremost, among these administrative impediments were additional requirements imposed on humanitarian organizations to gain access for specific missions. For example, the government initiated a procedure that required organizations to inform it of every individual mission and activity that were planned for implementation or distribution in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Prior to the Anglophone Crisis, as many humanitarians told

me, NGOs and UN Agencies had not previously been required to issue a letter of notification or authorization to the government for specific movements. As one told me: *“It was a huge issue, because if we complied with the authorization requirement for every delivery, that is obviously a big obstacle that slows everything down. But maybe even worse, by going along and asking permission...well, it sets a terrible precedent, which I think will affect operations here down the line...”*

Despite this risk, organizations began to send notifications of their movements to the relevant ministries about two to three days prior to departure without expecting any reaction and would proceed with their operations without waiting for a decision from the government. One humanitarian told me that these organizations were censured for this and were informed by government officials that this was unacceptable, clarifying the letters sent by NGOs and UN agencies were not intended to *inform* but rather to seek *authorization* for all missions, and all access requests had to go through the Ministry of External Relations. The government wanted to know what specific activities were planned, which populations would be targeted, and the details about where and when and for how long. This humanitarian and several others said that this onerous procedure was clearly *“a sign that the government wants control of where aid is going...and also, of course, it is intended to create delays, because that’s good for them.”*

Another issue with the authorization requirement was that even after all the information about a mission was collected and submitted to the appropriate authority, there was often no telling how long a decision might take. Some requests for authorizations stalled and remained pending for a long time – often so that missions had to be postponed, cancelled, or totally reorganized due to changing conditions. Therefore, the requirement of obtaining explicit authorization for movements within the regions stalled those that were authorized and denied those that were rejected. Those that were authorized were further hindered by the requirement to then obtain an official letter with a government seal that enabled the humanitarian vehicles to pass through the government’s checkpoints.

Another way that these authorizations created obstacles was in the requirement to meet with the local authorities or regional governors who

sometimes were conveniently very difficult to meet with or did not grant their authorization for opaque reasons. What's more, the outcome of these meetings could sometimes be dependent on ostensibly trivial circumstances. As one humanitarian told me about a mission in the Southwest region: *"We had issues with access not because of insecurity but because we had not been able to meet with the Governor, and we needed to meet with him before leaving for the site of our intervention...our team was already there in Buea and did not know whether the mission would happen, because we had trouble tracking the Governor down. On top of that, we knew from others that whether we were successful was dependent on the Governor's mood. So, it was very complicated...We managed to meet with him, but there were others that were not able to, or took a long time to finally manage it."*

The authorization procedure also severely impacted logistics and significantly impacted the efficacy of response delivery and supply chains. Some interlocutors described that there were also "complex administrative procedures" specifically regarding how freight was allowed to be transported within the two regions and that these too made aid distribution difficult.

In any case, almost all humanitarians I spoke with that had worked on the crisis said that these requests for authorization hindered their movements significantly and impacted their ability to implement their programming and deliver material aid and supplies.

Aside from authorizations, administrative impediments also obstructed aid distribution, because some procedures often were not entirely clear. That lack of clarity created further delays and required more time and resources within aid organizations to navigate how to respond, as opposed to channeling those efforts and resources into response delivery and activities. Although it is possible that some of the confusion was simply because many of these procedures had recently been introduced and therefore were not institutionalized, some humanitarian personnel also said they thought the lack of clarity or inconsistency of certain procedures was intentional on the government's part. This was because, they said, it created opportunities for the government to accuse aid organizations of violating procedures, and this was ideal, because this then enabled them to justify further obstacles or delays in granting authorization to operations.

Other administrative impediments arose with the release of the government's own response plan, requiring, again, more strategy, negotiation and maneuvering for humanitarians. The government eventually announced that it accepted both plans (i.e. the UN-coordinated response and government response) and, significantly, stressed that it saw them as complimentary. However, as some humanitarians told me, many major players in the humanitarian apparatus in the country were not consulted or included in the development of that plan. The government indicated that complementarity meant that humanitarians were to respond in places that the government dictated they should. Many humanitarians took issue with this, adamant that overlap between the plans was a necessity, because the government could not be assumed to be trustworthy in this context as a party to the conflict. Specifically, they suspected that some (or even many) of the areas that the government claimed it was targeting with response would not actually receive anything. If humanitarians complied and did not target those areas, then clearly aid organizations would have essentially assisted the government in its efforts to deny aid to those areas. On top of this, the government also began pressuring humanitarians to work through the government's own coordination structure, which again obstructed by increasing the administrative burden on humanitarians, yielding more delays.

Although it is unclear what approach most actors took, at least some organizations tried to appear as though they were striving for complementarity. This added another administrative step when planning activities, as everything would have to be cross-referenced with the government's plans.

The above discussion illustrates how administrative impediments imposed by the government in Cameroon very clearly obstructed aid delivery and resulted in diminished response in the region. These dynamics also must be understood within the context of the subnational politics of the region, where the government's political interests in the anglophone regions, as previously discussed above, predict that it should engage in such obstructive tactics toward international humanitarian aid. In the following section, I elucidate how the government of Cameroon employed the third mechanism of obstruction through the physical constraints wielded against humanitarian aid actors in the conflict zones of the Anglophone Crisis.



### 1.3 Mechanism 3: Physical Constraints

Another way that the Cameroonian government obstructs humanitarian aid distribution involves physical barriers that are most pertinent to missions that are ongoing “in the field”. These involve checkpoints where access can either be denied or severely delayed. A few humanitarians told me how they had been held up for hours and hours, and one even for about 24 hours, for reasons unknown or because they supposedly did not have the right authorizations despite having followed the government’s procedures. This kind of obstruction can apply to operations involving only people but also those delivering supplies as well. In one instance, a humanitarian told me that even regular distribution of supplies was impacted, where health supplies being dispatched to the regional health authorities in the Northwest had been blocked. These deliveries were part of regular activities that pre-dated the crisis and were supported by agreements that the Ministry of Health had signed off upon long ago. This was striking, because that operation had previously operated without such issues. Unfortunately, these blockages are not the only way that the Government physically with aid distribution, as there have also been reports of supply deliveries being confiscated as well.

Although not as common as the other physical access constraints, the government has also resorted to arbitrary arrests and detention of aid staff as a physical access barrier to aid distribution. This more commonly results in delays to aid distribution but can lead to denial (as with the medical NGO mentioned in the discussion of reinstating access denial).

Finally, the government is also believed to have intentionally leveraged infrastructure to obstruct humanitarian access and aid distribution. In the conflict regions of the Anglophone Crisis, communications infrastructure controlled by the government is subject to frequent network disruptions. Some telecommunications towers have also been intentionally destroyed by belligerents, making communications infinitely more difficult in the affected regions. Although culpability is not always clear in both cases, intentional network disruptions and blackouts are a known tactic that the government has been known to resort to during times of unrest. While I cannot ascertain for certain whether the government wielded its influence in this way, given the

subnational political context and security interests of the government in this crisis and region, it is very plausible it could have, and many local humanitarians were convinced that it was the case.

The above demonstrates some of the ways in which the government uses physical constraints to obstruct aid distribution in the region, as is expected given the incentive structures and political context that frame the government of Cameroon's relationship with the anglophone regions. In the next section, I describe how the government engaged in the fourth and final mechanism of obstruction and denial, in resorting to perception influence tactics to influence humanitarian aid distribution in the conflict zone of the Anglophone Crisis.

#### **1.4 Mechanism 4: Perception Influence**

Another way that the government hindered aid distribution is in influencing the perceptions of different populations. As established earlier, the government monitors humanitarian actors' activities, including their public communications and social media activity, including official accounts as well as those of their staff. This is also of salience here, as several humanitarians told me they had to be very careful about their public image, as it could impact their access and ability to distribute aid. Specifically, when aid workers learned that government officials had observed online activity of some of their colleagues that favored the secessionists, they suspected that the government then engaged in discrete modes of retaliation by aiming to negatively influence perceptions of these aid organizations among non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and local and displaced populations in the conflict zones.<sup>113</sup>

Specifically, it was suggested that the government aimed to negatively influence how NSAGs in the Northwest and Southwest perceived humanitarian actors operating in the region. According to staff members of different agencies and NGOs, the different factions of NSAGs wanted aid to reach local populations from the beginning, and negotiations with these groups were initially generally straight-forward, where they communicated that aid

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<sup>113</sup> I was unable to speak to any government actors who would have had any knowledge about these dynamics, so what evidence exists is purely based on international and local humanitarians' perspectives.

organizations operating in areas under their control would not face any issues, if the organizations informed the NSAGs of their missions ahead of time. This indicates that NSAGs generally trusted aid organizations to an extent. However, there later were instances of government-controlled media manipulating statements issued by UN Agencies by inserting false claims that these agencies condemned the secessionists and threatened retaliation against the NSAGs when the statements had only condemned the violence perpetrated against populations, infrastructure and personal property. While I did not manage to speak with any NSAG members to my knowledge, a few humanitarians told me that these events negatively impacted humanitarian access, at least for a time, complicating aid distribution because of soured relations with NSAGs.

In addition to trying to manipulate NSAG perceptions of humanitarian actors, the government is also suspected to have tried to influence perceptions among the local populations in the Northwest and Southwest regions in ways that obstruct aid distribution. According to some humanitarians, displaced people from the regions, and local populations that have regularly visited the regions, there were rumors circulating that the people who were delivering aid were not actually aid actors. Instead, so the rumors said, people were dressing up to resemble international NGO or UN personnel, when in fact, they were bad actors. The specifics of the rumor were unclear, including who the bad actors were suspected to be exactly or what they were gaining by engaging in the supposed charade (which aligns with what one might expect when asking multiple people about rumors). Whatever the details were, they clearly were enough to sow sufficient fear and uncertainty that many IDPs did not want to identify themselves or appear at distribution sites, given widespread mistrust and fear of accepting aid, in part due to these rumors.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> While my data show that at least some of the reticence of affected populations to seek out aid is explained by these rumors, unfortunately, I do not know for certain who planted these rumors, or whether they were even started and spread intentionally. It was suggested several times that this would not be a surprising move for the government, but no one knew for certain. So, while evidence for this manifestation of this mechanism is tenuous, it does suggest that the government likely intentionally manipulated information to influence perceptions of humanitarian actors in conflict zones.

The government is also suspected to have leveraged public perception to justify aid delivery obstruction. Many humanitarians brought up that the government has taken a “denialist stance” toward the Northwest-Southwest Crisis, as the government has often disagreed with humanitarian assessments of population numbers, undermined the crisis’ severity, and even rejected humanitarian response plans. I was told that these actions all give the government leverage when negotiating with humanitarians, as they can be used to justify access obstruction or even denial. Specifically, by communicating publicly that they contest humanitarians’ evaluations, they make known that they are not operating based on the same baseline information, and this puts them in a better position to unapologetically obstruct aid than if they were to agree fully with humanitarians’ assessments.

Additionally, some humanitarians pointed to another way that the government could influence NSAGs’ and affected populations’ perceptions of humanitarian actors to work in the government’s favor. Specifically, when the government’s plan was announced, it was viewed as problematic for many reasons. Of most salience here, the government’s imposition on humanitarian organizations to ensure complementarity with the government’s own response plan created the risk of humanitarians being perceived as government partners if they aligned with the government plan. This ran the risk of hindering access if NSAGs or local populations in the affected regions caught wind. Although this research did not uncover conclusive evidence that those specific dynamics occurred, apprehension over its occurrence indicate that it is plausible that this could have been part of a very intentional strategy within the government to obstruct aid distribution by influencing perceptions of humanitarian actors in the conflict zones every way available to them.<sup>115</sup>

This final discussion of the government’s use of perception influence tactics to influence aid distribution indicates that its behavior toward aid response aligns with expectations set by the Cameroonian government’s subnational political incentive structures that stem from the anglophone regions that suggest it should obstruct aid to these regions. Humanitarians’ experiences of

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<sup>115</sup> This offers potential for future theory-building research to explore.

delivering aid amidst difficult access conditions effectively illustrate the ways in which host governments can obstruct and deny aid distribution.

By contrast, turning to the CAR and Lake Chad Basin Crises, a very different picture emerges in the aid distribution landscape. The below discussions serve as a foil to what I have depicted here in the Anglophone Crisis regions. In these other crises, I show how the government does not engage in such obstructive tactics toward aid distribution. While certain access constraints may still be present, they are far less extreme than what is found in the Northwest and Southwest conflict regions of the Anglophone Crisis.

## **2. Aid Distribution in the CAR Crisis**

In 2013 and 2014, refugees from CAR flowed into Cameroon amidst widespread violence across the border. And as humanitarians rushed to put together a coordinated response, relations with the Cameroonian government and military were very positive. Humanitarians viewed them as extremely cooperative in granting humanitarian access and even in assisting with logistics for transport and delivery of aid. Apparently, according to humanitarian reports and plans from the time, the government even made boats with out-board motors and pirogues available to assist with access to hard-to-reach areas during the rainy season (OCHA, January 2014, p.10).

According to these documents and personnel who had experience with the response, it is evident that humanitarians were able to ramp up their efforts quickly in response to growing needs in the affected regions. There were and still are constraints to aid distribution, of course. But in this context, those that are most often cited were insecurity along the border zones, high staff turnover and over-work, and limited and poor infrastructure. Notably, while these constraints certainly pose challenges for aid distribution as well, the features of deliberate obstruction and denial did not emerge.

Overall, the main constraints humanitarians reported certainly were not the result of overt government efforts to obstruct or deny access to aid operations.<sup>116</sup> So, while humanitarians may have been hindered by other sources, many of these obstacles are also common to other crisis regions. What is striking is the absence of the most visible of the mechanisms of aid denial and obstruction identified in the Anglophone regions, where access denial, administrative barriers, and physical constraints were not mentioned once amidst many sources and participants.

Instead, humanitarians said that from the beginning the government has been cooperative overall were described by those I spoke with in very positive terms. The cooperative nature of the government in the CAR crisis-affected regions is also reflected in the programming modalities made available, where, for instance cash transfers had been authorized in the East region by 2016, shortly after it came onto the scene as a preferred modality by major international aid organizations in conflict contexts (as a solution to overcoming access constraints). This contrast with the government's denial of cash transfers in the Anglophone Crisis, especially given it previously was an early adopter, demonstrating it was amenable to new aid modalities in the CAR crisis, where it was in its interest to encourage aid response (OCHA, Dec 2016).

So, all told, the humanitarian context in the CAR Crisis regions has been relatively accessible and comparatively straight-forward for humanitarian organizations to distribute aid to populations in need, in line with the expectations previously laid out in Chapter 5. Indeed, this is what we would expect in a relatively stable reception zone where the government's political interests encourage it to facilitate aid to the affected regions. In sum, this is because the security context in these regions is relatively stable, indicating little threat to the government's political survival due to conflict-related security interests. The government's relationship with each region further suggests either little or modest political threat. In the East, this is because of few significant political tensions or violence in recent history, as well as a

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<sup>116</sup> One could argue that the government could be held responsible for the underdevelopment of roads and other logistics infrastructure, but those obstacles are part of longer-term trends that would not qualify as clearly deliberate obstructive behavior in response to the specific crisis context in question.

socioeconomic profile with low population numbers that make it an unlikely adversary. In the North and Adamawa, this is attributed to the neutralizing of the once-threatening opposition movement and in the need to maintain support for the government's elite support network in the regions that otherwise could pose an imminent and viable threat. The government's *economic interests* also incentivize the promotion of response in the CAR Crisis regions, given the profitable industries here from which it directly benefits.

### 3. Aid Distribution in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis

The puzzle of aid distribution centers around the question of why one urgent crisis amidst irregular conflict (the Anglophone Crisis) receives relatively less humanitarian aid distribution than another irregular conflict setting (i.e. the Lake Chad Basin Crisis) when the scale and severity of needs would predict otherwise. More specifically, it examines why aid distribution is constrained to such a greater degree in the Anglophone Crisis than the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, despite comparable contextual barriers to delivery in terms of insecurity and poor infrastructure.

Above, I demonstrated in detail how the government in Cameroon has obstructed and even denied response in the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones. In the below discussion I highlight how the Lake Chad Basin's dynamics of aid distribution are juxtaposed and explain this divergence by highlighting how government incentive structures figure into dynamics of access constraints in the region.

As I will show, in the Far North region of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, dynamics appear in clear contrast to the access constraints humanitarians experience in the Anglophone Crisis conflict zones. As one humanitarian who had worked in both contexts told me, *"The Far North? Of course, yes, access because of Boko Haram is an issue, but we have our sources, and we stay informed constantly in the lead up to a mission and throughout as well, of course...But it is less complicated than the Anglophone regions...Here (in the Far North), the government is not as much of a problem. To go to Northwest/Southwest? (Pauses for several beats)...It's very complicated."*

Further highlighting the puzzle, while the Lake Chad Basin Crisis has greater access constraints than in the CAR Crisis regions. This is to be expected, especially as a conflict crisis zone given the presence of Boko Haram and active violence and combat in the region. However, despite additional constraints mainly due to insecurity that have made aid distribution more difficult, the government has also generally been cooperative with humanitarians, as in the CAR Crisis.

I clarify these dynamics by elaborating on the different constraints found in the Far North below, highlighting how this irregular conflict setting's constraints center around insecurity and logistical challenges unrelated to host government obstruction.

In the early period of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis, there were major obstacles for humanitarians to contend with in rolling out a response to this new crisis as the CAR Crisis was also escalating. Responding to two escalating crises across a massive operational area in remote regions that were logistically difficult to reach due to distances certainly made aid distribution challenging. However, very noticeably, none of these challenges that humanitarians cited in their interviews with me or in the documentation from the time mentioned the government as an obstacle.

Instead, the major constraints mentioned were supply chain issues (i.e. stocks and transport issues) given the distances and the fact that these had not been firmly established previously given the absence of crisis in the Far North. What's more, even though the country had contended with the CAR Crisis for a decade by that time, which suggests these supply chains might have been already in place, the CAR refugee numbers had not arrived in significant numbers since initial arrivals closer to 2003 and 2004. Supply chains therefore were not equipped to handle significant arrivals of tens of thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands of refugees from both CAR and Nigeria in addition to IDPs in the Far North.

In addition to supply chain challenges, humanitarians also highlighted that major access constraints for aid distribution stemmed from the difficulty of logistics in rural areas with poor infrastructure, human resources challenges (e.g. high turn-over, over-work and dependence on partner resources), and



insecurity along the border zones with Nigeria.<sup>117</sup> When mentioning the government's role in coordinating with the Humanitarian Country Team and implementing organizations, the people I spoke with generally had very positive comments and depicted what appeared to be a generally helpful relationship with the government, where the military often provided assistance with transport logistics and in offering armed escorts for humanitarian operations.<sup>118</sup>

Foremost among these constraints, however, were insecurity and military operations. Unsurprisingly, the worst access constraints have typically been concentrated where the most acute insecurity exists, which in the Far North is found in the northernmost extremes as well as the western border of the region with Nigeria (OCHA, 2020, p.45).

Although real risks of attack on operations exist, the context is less fraught than in the Anglophone conflict regions, given humanitarian organizations can rely on armed escorts when needed, especially to particularly insecure areas. This demonstrates quite different dynamics and risks than in the Anglophone conflict zones, where armed escorts are not possible and ill-advised, given affiliation with any government body puts operations at risk of attack by NSAGs. (OCHA, 2020, p.29)

In the Far North, while there are access constraints, humanitarians have typically been able to access many of the populations in need that they have targeted. When they have been unable to, it was almost always due to insecurity. While administrative impediments were highlighted as constraints in the crisis emerging in the Anglophone regions, these were not really mentioned as the prevailing issue up north. If anything, here the government appears to have been mostly helpful when directly interacting with humanitarians, for example through efforts of CMCoord (coordination with the

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<sup>117</sup> For documentary evidence, see OCHA, April 2014, p.13.

<sup>118</sup> Again, for documentary evidence, see OCHA, April 2014, p.13.

military) and road infrastructure projects that humanitarians recognized as greatly improving access to zones that had previously been inaccessible.<sup>119</sup>

What's more, the government's resistance to cash transfers in the Anglophone conflict zones was also not felt in the Far North, where humanitarian implementing organizations had begun to employ cash transfers to overcome access issues after these had already been piloted and developed in the CAR regions (OCHA, 2016). This appears in stark contrast to the blocked cash transfer programs in the Anglophone Crisis regions.

These differences in conflict settings highlight diverging security interests, especially noticeable in the government's perceptions of civilians as largely unsympathetic to Boko Haram. This aligns with its behavior in mostly facilitating response in the region. While there is some suspicion of local populations' collaboration with or support for non-state armed groups, conflict dynamics help to temper the government's suspicions, given most attacks are targeted at the government's armed forces *and* civilians, indiscriminately. Despite suspicions of individual affiliations to the group, by virtue of the seemingly arbitrary nature of violence, this signals to the government that the populace by-and-large are bystanders in the violence who would also like nothing more than for peace to be restored without Boko Haram. Further, despite some suspicions, which suggest an incentive to obstruct aid, the government has stronger incentives to facilitate aid in reaching affected populations, albeit with caution.

This is primarily because it perceives the region to pose a significant and viable threat, if it should lose the support of its elite network, given the people power of the region, historical and fresh grievances as a result of government-perpetrated violence on local populations, and otherwise general marginalization. The government is incentivized to prevent the most populous region of the country from mounting an uprising or civil war as a result of blatant neglect during an extreme crisis. What's more, the regional politics indicate that the government must also maintain the support of its local elite

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<sup>119</sup> For example, government efforts opened access to the Kouyapé-Moskota corridor in Mayo Tsanaga where over 3000 people were displaced after their villages were attacked at the end of 2017 and humanitarian access was previously limited to this area.

network, and these elite offer another reason for encouraging aid, given they stand to benefit from aid response, as aid must engage with local and traditional leaders to operate. This offers opportunities for the government to direct benefits to its supporters. Finally, the Far North represents significant economic interests, as it was once the second most important tourism region of the country as well as a major agricultural player, as one of the foremost regions that raises livestock. This is also consistent with the government's interests, as it aims to restore stability so that the economy may be resuscitated. Facilitating aid to the region promotes the above interests, because aid is considered a stabilizing force. All this is therefore consistent with government behavior that largely facilitates aid response in the region.

Therefore, the access context and experience of aid distribution in the Far North does appear to align with expectations set previously in Chapter 5 because of the Government's interests in the region and crisis.

## **4. Conclusion**

The above discussions have aimed to demonstrate that, in the western regions of Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis, the context in the conflict regions result in access dynamics that are the most difficult of the three crises for aid distribution. Not only are there NSAGs to contend with, but because the government of Cameroon is a party to the conflict *and* it is a secessionist civil war, this results in a quite different context than found in regions affected by the CAR Crisis and the Lake Chad Basin Crisis.

Not only is it well known that access constraints are notoriously difficult in the anglophone regions, but the additional constraints that I have conceptualized as the four mechanisms of access denial and obstruction, are cited as primary features of the context and pose the greatest obstacle to response in the region combined with insecurity. While other regions affected by other crises in the country might also have the presence of armed actors to contend with when considering access to populations in need, the government plays quite a different role in those contexts. In those crises, the Government acts mainly as a facilitator to humanitarian access, while in the Northwest and

Southwest it represents another constraint. This is partly inadvertently due to the political and security context of the conflict that puts anyone associated with the government at risk of attack by NSAGs. But the government itself very deliberately interferes with humanitarian access as well.

In these regions, the relationship between the government and NSAGs is more politically charged and fraught than in other regions of the country. Here, because NSAGs have the support of portions of local populations, they are by-and-large home-grown from those regions, and their objective of secession, mean there is a lot more suspicion here certainly than in the reception zones of the CAR Crisis or even in the Far North in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis. NSAGs in the Anglophone conflict regions may also be labeled as “extremists” and “terrorists” just as Boko Haram actors are in government rhetoric, but the anglophone armed groups are perceived differently than the factions of Boko Haram up north.

Evidently, access in the Anglophone conflict regions is clearly very different than in the regions to the east affected by the CAR conflict, as the government is not a party to the civil conflict that is the source of cross-border displacement. In the Far North, while the Government has run military operations and is clearly involved, the conflict and violence are of a different nature. Because the stakes are quite different, the government’s behavior toward these crises are too, including its approach to and relationship with humanitarian access.

Therefore, by contrasting these three crises, I have demonstrated that not only have humanitarians experienced variation in access in efforts to deliver aid to populations in need, but also that the host government behaves quite differently toward aid response in different crisis settings, given their corresponding interests in each. In the following chapter (7), I detail the empirical case and support for how these mechanisms of government obstruction emerged in aid allocation to the West region of Cameroon.

## Chapter 7. Government Obstruction in Humanitarian Aid Allocation

*On a day of site visits with Elvis, my guide in the West region, he says we must make a stop at a waterfall that is key to visit, as it represents a crucial part of the region's history. We veer off the road that leads to Bamenda, the capital of the Northwest, past a major checkpoint, as this is the direction toward most of the violence at the time of my visit. The usual animist offerings common to the region are all about the cliffs overlooking the waterfall, as it is considered a sacred site as well. But the story that Elvis shares points to the site's history of violence.*

*He tells me that during the colonial period, the French would throw insubordinate slaves to their death over the falls to the shallow rocky pool below. This horrific, punitive practice continued until, on one such occasion, the poor enslaved man who had been sentenced to death grabbed on to the colonial executioner, taking him down with him and killing them both on the rocks below. The practice stopped after that and highlights a history of violence and conflict in the region that, while not recent, continues to shape the politics of the region to this day.*

In the last chapter, I unveiled how host government tactics affect humanitarian distribution by comparing experiences of humanitarian organizations' access and efforts to distribute aid in Cameroon's three crisis zones. I demonstrated how the Cameroonian government denied and obstructed access via four mechanisms in the Anglophone Crisis, while largely facilitated humanitarian aid in the northern and eastern regions affected by the Lake Chad Basin and CAR Crises. While this kind of government behavior is often discrete, it is also perhaps quite intuitive how and why *aid distribution* in a secessionist civil war might be significantly affected by such behavior compared to other conflict-affected contexts.

Now we look at a less obvious instance of how host governments can use some of these same tactics to obstruct humanitarian response by influencing *aid allocation* at the regional level. This chapter takes on the second puzzle of why certain crisis-affected regions, the West and Littoral (albeit the latter to a

lesser extent), receive markedly little international humanitarian response when comparable contexts within the same country have received significantly more at similar phases in their own crisis trajectories, as have contexts with less severe conditions.

This chapter depicts how the crisis in the West has unfolded and how humanitarian response has emerged there. While both the West and Littoral are reception zones that have been sidelined, I focus here on the West, because it experienced these dynamics in a more pronounced manner, and it is where I chose to collect data, as there was neither time nor other resources to cover both.

The background on the crisis in the West aims to establish firmly that the West has indeed been sidelined when compared to other areas in Cameroon that have been receiving significant numbers of displaced people. I then consider possible explanations of its experience and illustrate how substate politics and prior regional relations with the central government explain its deprioritization in humanitarian aid allocation. This is followed by a discussion of the empirical evidence for how substate allocation of humanitarian response and funding is vulnerable to host state interference via some of the previously discussed mechanisms. In this discussion of the mechanisms, I elucidate how the government of Cameroon has likely employed these in the context of its subnational political incentives as defined by security and economic interests in the West as compared to the CAR Crisis reception zones. I show how those incentives and previously set expectations of how the Cameroonian government should intervene vis à vis humanitarian aid emerge in practice in Cameroon's zones of reception.

## **1. Crisis in the West**

Although many of the IDPs of the Anglophone crisis remained in the Northwest and Southwest regions where the conflict is ongoing, many also fled to the West and Littoral regions that border the conflict zones, as these regions are more stable than the conflict-affected regions. Despite the relative stability of these regions, services for IDPs are scant. As one Cameroonian humanitarian professional in the West put it: *“What the government provided in humanitarian*

*assistance essentially amount(ed) to camping gear...and the international organizations are focused on the conflict zones. We are on our own here."*

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, this humanitarian's comments are not unfounded. But before we get into the politics of aid denial and obstruction, and, because we have up until now focused on the three crises as whole units, it bears elaborating briefly what the crisis and response in the West region has entailed.

The main waves of IDPs in the West began in 2017 and persisted into 2019, but these numbers continue to grow. The first figures recorded in the main planning documents for coordinating response (i.e. the Humanitarian Response Plan) reported that 32,000 IDPs had arrived in the West as of January 2019 (OCHA, 2019). By October 2020, this number had reached 163,000 (OCHA, 2021). By comparison, the Northwest (232,000 IDPs) and Southwest (177,000 IDPs) were carrying a higher share, but the West's figures were well within the realm of severity of the crisis experienced in the Southwest, judging by the numbers at least (OCHA, 2021).<sup>120</sup>

Most of the displaced people who came to the West went to the Bamboutos, Ménoua and Mifi departments that make up the northwest territories of the region. They are found in the capital city of Bafoussam, as well as smaller cities like Dschang and the many towns and villages scattered throughout. It is unclear whether more live in rural or urban areas, as people in cities and rural areas all believe they host more.<sup>121</sup> Several humanitarians stressed that a lot of displaced people are not counted, confirming a known challenge, so it is difficult to know their relative distribution with any certainty. However, several authorities on the matter and region told me that they believed there were far

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<sup>120</sup> The Littoral had received approximately 81,000 by this time. (OCHA 2021, p.8) And these reported trends have continued, where, as of October 2022, the West reportedly hosted 114,000 IDPs, comparable to the Southwest's 137,000 IDPs, while the Littoral (80,000 IDPs and 8,000 refugees) and the Northwest's (231,000 IDPs) displaced populations remained relatively stable (OCHA 2023, p.16).

<sup>121</sup> It may be a case where there are greater *numbers* in cities but higher ratios of IDPs in rural areas and smaller towns and villages, both of which contribute to these contradictory impressions.

more in the rural areas than cities, given disparities in the cost of living between urban and more rural places.

What is clear is that the IDPs are all hosted within communities as opposed to camps. As a displaced person from the Northwest or Southwest, if you have the means to cross over to another region, this generally means you have enough money for transport. Although, this is not always the case, as some IDPs are known to have fled on foot. As one IDP told me, *“I walked three days over a distance that normally would have taken two hours to drive.”* Of those who manage to make it to the West, it is the better-off IDPs who reportedly tend to go to the cities, while those who are worse-off go to smaller towns or villages in more rural areas. Oftentimes participants told me that the older generations are among those who choose to stay behind, and those who either cannot afford transport or do not wish to make the journey on foot.

IDPs from the Northwest and Southwest tend to go wherever they have contacts, staying with friends, family, or other relations who tend to be willing to help for the first few months after their arrival. One man from a host community told me, referring to the West, *“Unlike people in your countries, it is not acceptable to leave people to sleep in the streets here...it might not be totally normal housing, so it might be finding space in a little shed on a host’s property, because, of course, the hosts themselves are often also poor and do not have much. But whatever the case, they’ll generally try to find a place for them.”* Nonetheless, shelter needs were cited among the most urgent needs according to humanitarian needs assessments, where, for example, 95 per cent of IDPs in the West region were once estimated to need shelter support, while 40 per cent were in more acute situations and in urgent need, and continue to be today (OCHA, 2021; 2024).

Once they begin to earn money, they are then able to rent a place, as evidently housing can be relatively accessible if one has a basic level of income, though they certainly cannot afford large, comfortable places in good locations. They often are found sharing with many people in small structures that might be on the outskirts of town, in less desirable areas or very rural areas and smaller towns or villages. *“They might not have any electricity or running water, but they could more likely have access to a well, and most importantly, walls and a roof.”*



Livelihoods are also a significant problem, as the vast majority of IDPs from the Northwest and Southwest pursue subsistence agriculture, just like people in the West. Although livelihoods are an issue in both rural and urban areas, as is common in most contexts, finding work in the cities is often a bit easier. This is because there is generally more opportunity, however, these opportunities are typically obtained through connections. As one local man tells me, *“Yes, there is more work in the cities, and the IDPs do go there to find it. But you generally need connections to find anything. Without connections? It can be tough...”* In rural areas, IDPs try their best to pursue agriculture generally by renting land to farm, since one local woman told me: *“There is more going on in cities for work...but this does not mean you will find one. It’s not easy...and outside of the cities, the only thing we can do is work the land.”* And without access to their own land, this represents yet another hurdle to overcome to generate income, given the costs associated with renting parcels.

I spoke with a major local actor working in the region who explained to me what IDPs in the region viewed as their main challenges. *“First is health, especially for those who have newly arrived and have left behind most (or all) of their possessions and livelihoods. Jobs (livelihoods) are the second highest need, because it influences everything else—like access to food, housing, and basic daily needs. And then administrative documents, because you need those to do everything in Cameroon. It impacts their ability to get health care, to register their kids in schools—even to travel locally...And most of them had to leave their documents behind...Then fourth priority is education, because a lot of kids are needed to help their families earn money and you can’t register a child without documents, so school is not at the top at all even though most of them of course wish that for their children.”*

Another humanitarian told me that water access was not as significant of a problem, because it rains so much in the region practically year-round, but that all the rain made water-borne illnesses extremely prevalent. And, as he worked in areas prone to flooding and standing water, cholera, malaria and other life-threatening diseases had been recurring issues in the rainy seasons, which, as alluded to above, cover most of the year in the region. He spoke to me about water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programming needs, given water-borne disease was such a problem. *“You see, here we are in a valley, and with so much rain it is worse here than up there in the hills, because it is flat and so very prone to flooding.*

*So, cholera is a major problem...It becomes so muddy that you would normally need boots to get from one place to another – even short distances.” He looks at my sandals, chuckles, and tells me: “You would not get through the mud in those. You would just sink down...But there is so much more need than what [our organization] can provide. But we’re the only NGO here.”*

Aside from the challenges of meeting IDPs’ basic needs, these newly arrived populations also face the usual challenges of social cohesion and integration within host communities. While my sources diverged in their opinions on the degree to which communal tensions were present, there were clear indications that there had been some issues with disputes over rent and evictions as displaced people sometimes cannot afford to make their rent every month. Most often, however, these problems were the result of theft, fights, and access to resources — and almost always land and firewood. One local humanitarian originally from the Northwest told me that *“Yes, there is always a need to reinforce the idea (of the need for social cohesion) because there are always a few problems, but it’s not a huge problem here; the displaced are more or less accepted by hosts.”* He tells me, though, that there are local committees called peace committees (*comités de paix*) that provide mediation services for the communities when conflicts arise, so by virtue of their existence, there clearly is some need. Another local humanitarian explained that she thought social cohesion was improved here partly because the poorest and most vulnerable within the host communities are also included in the assistance programs.

In addition to all of this, another humanitarian told me that one of the most neglected problems was mental health and illness. *“It is a horrible situation that they have fled but also a horrible one that they find themselves in here. There are abandoned babies, so much (interpersonal) violence, men hanging themselves...there really needs to be more programming that addresses these mental illnesses and trauma from what they have seen and lived.”*

These are all, very unfortunately, typical challenges of displaced people arriving in new communities. Travel to the eastern regions of Cameroon that have received refugees from CAR, and you would hear similar stories. While the ordering of priorities might not be identical across the board, the same

challenges that emerge for displaced people in other reception zones across the country are also found in the West.

One would assume, then, that the international humanitarian response to displaced people in the West would resemble the responses in other regions with similar dynamics. Yet, as Chapter 4 already demonstrated to an extent, this is not the case at all.

## 2. Response in the West

International humanitarian actors began referencing the West as a zone of reception as of the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan, but it is only more recently that the aid sector began to acknowledge that real needs existed and began indicating motivations to expand the response to those regions. And yet, response has still remained minimal. As humanitarians working in the region told me throughout 2023 that even if “the internationals” might be paying more attention, this has not necessarily converted into actual action or presence in the area. It also clearly falls short of allocating aid to the region, as the vast majority of what has been allocated has gone to capacity building of local organizations as opposed to the usual programming (OCHA, 2023).

According to a local humanitarian that works for a local NGO responding to displaced people’s needs, *“The international NGOs and UN are mainly in the Northwest and Southwest, and the receiving places like the West and Littoral don’t have as high of a presence at all...there are some international actors but not that many.”* And those who are there, were typically development actors present before the start of the Anglophone Crisis.

Although humanitarian documents showed a growing presence of local NGOs in the region as the crisis wore on, as recently as the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA, 2023), there still was no “formal presence of OCHA and most sector lead agencies”. This is, again, quite strange for there to be such little presence of high-level actors in major zones of reception and (in theory) response. (OCHA, 2023)

Not only do international actors have extremely limited presence in the West, they also evidently have not been directing much funding to the region either. Based on open-source humanitarian financial data and what local staff and leaders of local NGOs told me: *“The international community is not really throwing money at the receiving areas like the West and Littoral.”* One NGO leader in the region described the breakdown of funding sources of what a typical local Cameroonian NGO might expect to receive: *“Funding is coming mostly from local organizations themselves, then about 20% of the funding comes from the diaspora, and then maybe 5 to 10% from the International Community. And the internationals give relatively small amounts like 10,000 to 20,000 euros, or maybe 50,000, but that’s really the upper limit...And with all the needs, well, that doesn’t go very far.”*

Indeed, when speaking to local NGO staff who were involved in implementing actual programs, they repeatedly said that there was far more demand for their programs than they would ever be able to meet even if they did have budget given there was only so much a small organization could do. This is often why they stressed that international organizations were really needed for their greater resources and (typically) better ability to coordinate.<sup>122</sup> One local staff member told me at the launch of a job training program I attended: *“You see this livelihoods project that we’re launching here? It is a good example. There were only 40 spots available for IDPs, because that’s what the funding could provide material for. But 260 other IDPs here in this village and its surrounding area applied for those spots...Some people are living on 500 CFA<sup>123</sup> per day and sometimes living with 12 people in a one-room apartment, house or hut. They often don’t have access to land to farm. So, this is a way out for them.”* But with so few organizations working in the region, most IDPs are left wanting and continue to struggle.

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<sup>122</sup> Every actor has its strength, as local actors stressed, and while many said that coordination (and of course procuring funding) was the strength of international actors, local actors were comparatively better at implementation, given cultural proximity and other local knowledge relevant for responding to populations in need.

<sup>123</sup> This equates to about \$0.85 US Dollars, as of the conversion rate on September 16, 2024. This is below the international extreme poverty line set by the World Bank previously at \$1.90 and recently updated to \$2.15 in 2022, adjusting for inflation. See here for further details: World Bank, 2022.

Another local staff member was telling me about the great health needs in his area of responsibility and that one day they had organized a massive campaign where health services were provided for free. This was announced in advance, so people had time to plan to come from throughout the region. *“Approximately 1600 people showed up... We (the service providers) were expecting to be at the site for the whole day but had expected to leave around 4:00 or 5:00 pm. We were there until 5:00 a.m., working around the clock for nearly 24 hours.”*

Indeed, local humanitarians in the West feel neglected, operating on shoe-string budgets, and to some it feels as though the international humanitarian community is to blame. In the West, I heard neglect repeatedly attributed to a lack of will among donors and international organizations. Unfortunately, local actors believed that foreign aid organizations were unwilling to help displaced people in the post-displacement phase where they must set up their new lives. As one local NGO staff member put it, *“People want to fund the hot zones, because that is where the action of the conflict is, and that is perceived as being the most important.”* Others suggested that this was because the international community seems to prioritize stabilization and the most basic needs rather than responses that target longer-term human security and welfare or the ingredients necessary for peace. As one Cameroonian humanitarian professional said: *“When does humanitarian aid end and development begin? I’m not sure, because what many think of as development feels very humanitarian to me.”*

Another humanitarian stressed it was not necessarily that the priorities of international organizations or funders were misguided: *“I cannot say that what they do is not useful, but only if they’re looking to respond to the people and places that have the greatest needs, then that’s when it becomes a little confusing.”*

Instead, he told me he thought the root of the problem was essentially that the United Nations agencies that lead the coordination of the response prioritize combat zones over reception zones: *“The UN needs to change: it operates in the very short-term and is very reactive. It needs to have a longer-term outlook if it wants to achieve objectives. But they only go to the so-called crisis zones when we’re part of the crisis too. It’s just not as obviously urgent, but people still are in crisis here.”*

And while I have no doubt that the premise of local humanitarians' perceptions is right – that they have been neglected by the international community – I am disinclined to think that the explanation for this unfortunate situation is that international humanitarians deprioritize reception zones, given they have not in many other crises across the globe and even within Cameroon. While it is understandable that local humanitarians in the West would think that the international aid response system has these misguided priorities, given this has been their own experience in this context, these same international organizations have not behaved in the same way in parallel regions in other crises, suggesting another explanation must be perpetuating neglect in the West. (Indeed, this is what I argue and provide evidence for below.)

Asking humanitarians in the region about the government's response suggests what the problem might be. The general refrain I heard was it had not done very much. Several humanitarians equated what the Cameroonian government provided to "camping gear", referring to the basic survival kits that are often delivered as part of a response. Although the government launched its own response plan,<sup>124</sup> and some admit that there has been a *little* response, most claimed that they had not seen or heard of the government doing anything to respond to populations affected by the crisis. One local humanitarian said, *"The government? Oh right, there is supposedly a fund and program, but where it is, I haven't seen. And I have been all over the West. And I'm involved with the coordination committees—part of the core structures of the response in the region. No, the government minimizes the problems here. They even deny, and if this wasn't terrible enough, it also seriously impacts the mental health of the victims of course..."* Another said: *"What has the government done? Nothing. It's NGOs—all NGOs. From the government? Not one mattress. Not one grain of rice. No water. Nothing."*

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<sup>124</sup> For reference, this is the "Plan présidentiel de reconstruction et de développement des régions du Nord-Ouest et du Sud-Ouest (PPRD)," or the Presidential Plan for Reconstruction and Development of the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

### 3. Subnational Politics & Government Interests

I contend that this variation in humanitarian response is a function of subnational politics and the host government's interests. As previously detailed in Chapter 5, the government's subnational interests in each region influences how it approaches each of Cameroon's three major crisis zones. As a reminder, I established that the Government of Cameroon should be expected to deny and obstruct access in the Anglophone Crisis, while mainly facilitating response in the Lake Chad Basin and CAR Crises. Indeed, that is what bore out in the empirics on aid distribution recounted in Chapter 6. Now, in answering the puzzle found within the Anglophone Crisis of why the reception zones, and the West region in particular, have been so overlooked, I turn to elucidating exactly how government obstruction and denial of aid to these regions must be understood within the context of regional-level politics and how they shape the government's incentives that motivate its obstructive and denialist behavior toward aid response there.

Although the West's relationship with the government was touched upon in Chapter 5, I further elaborate upon this relationship and the government's resulting interests and expected behavior in greater detail here.

Ever since independence, the West's high population and business prowess have made it an important political rival to the incumbent government. The current President, Paul Biya, is from the Centre and from the Beti-Pahuin ethnic group, that are much fewer in number than either the Bamoum or Bamiléké of the West. This, along with the previously described history of conflict and rebellion between the center and the West in the Bamiléké (Civil) War around the time of independence, the relationship between the West and the Center<sup>125</sup> is characterized by rivalry and the discrimination and oppression of western peoples.

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<sup>125</sup> Often when referring to "the Centre" individuals often mean the government and the elites who support them rather than ordinary people from the Centre region who form the non-elite classes. While these people may benefit from their proximity to the centers of power and may enjoy certain advantages that those from other regions are deprived of to some extent, it should be stressed that these non-elites certainly are not culpable for the ills that the elite coalition produces, and any ire from those from other regions is quite misdirected.

In the West, the rivalry is palpable in the attitudes toward people from the Center who are characterized as lazy, either because they are bureaucrats in the government who are perceived as not doing much of anything, or, because they are *“waiting around for someone to give them a job rather than start a business of their own”*. While this is a caricature, it is true that certain groups from the Center region enjoy privileges that position them well for government jobs that would be unattainable to someone from a different region given their kinship ties. But there are certainly many businesspeople from the Center, as well as in every region of the country, especially given the informal sector is where most of the lowest-income people earn their income. Nonetheless, the reality is that people in all regions operate based on perceptions of people from other regions that are heavily stereotyped, and this shapes the subnational politics between each region and the central government.

In addition to a rivalry that rests on essentializing perceptions of the people in each region, people in the West are quite politically aware and engaged. They often allude to or acknowledge widespread government corruption and discrimination of people from other regions, including from the West. Some can be quite vocal and critical, as one entrepreneur in the West said, *“We make the money, and then the government taxes us so they can fill their pockets...We do not wait for the government to make things happen, because they are so corrupt and constantly skimming...”* Another said: *“There are so many scandals, and when the ministers or whoever are caught, it is not a small. They go big! We’re not talking a couple of million here and there. It’s more like 30 or 40 million. And then you look around at our country and think what it could be. And you see the places those guys live...it just should not be.”*

It is not surprising then that the relationship between the people from the West and Centre is strained. Aside from cultural differences, the power differential motivated many people in the West to tell me, like this man did: *“We really don’t get along with the people from the Center.”* And many told me that the feeling was mutual possibly, because *“People from the Center are jealous of people from the West.”*

The simplest explanation for the West’s sidelining was suggested by many participants: the government does not want humanitarians to go to the West,



because they do not want to help their rivals in any way. As one participant explained, *“You know that the people from the Centre do not like the Bamiléké, right? They are rivals...while discrimination happens everywhere, there is a very particular rivalry here that dates back but very much exists now, because Kamto (the leader of the opposition) is Bamiléké and has the support of the West.”*

In addition to these historical incentives, given the government’s prior history with the West region, its security interests in the Anglophone Conflict also explain the West’s sidelining in aid allocation. By blocking assistance specifically in neighbouring regions, some participants pointed out that the aim of the government is not only to deprive their rivals but to contain IDPs. As one participant said, *“They not only don’t want to help the Bamiléké, but they also want the anglophones (IDPs) to stay in the Northwest and Southwest for better control.”*

The crux of this is that the government views IDPs in this crisis with great suspicion, given their presumed association to secessionist non-state armed groups. It therefore wants to contain them to the conflict zones, presumably so they do not spread discontent elsewhere. And, because the government knows that humanitarians are attracted to the “hot zones”, and decision-making prioritizes places with the highest numbers of populations in need and crisis severity, they are expected to flock to areas of active conflict (or combat zones) first. The government leverages this fact in the Anglophone Crisis. Even though it knows it would be politically difficult to block international response to the conflict zones, given the influence of powerful western donor countries via the major aid organizations, it knows that if forced to choose, humanitarians will choose to respond in a conflict zone versus a zone of reception. So, it takes advantage of this assumption by instrumentalizing aid allocation in aims to influence the incentives of displaced populations, essentially encouraging them to remain in the active conflict zones (i.e. the Northwest and Southwest) where there is markedly more response to their needs. Conversely, because the receiving zones outside of the conflict zones are for the most part ignored and lack services, this incentivizes people to remain there rather than seek safety further afield.

However, if the Cameroonian government preferred that the IDPs in the Northwest and Southwest remain there, it seemed like that strategy ran the risk

of encouraging a greater pool of potential recruits for NSAGs, and that surely would not support the government's security interests. That question was eventually assuaged as one participant told me, "*Of course that is a risk, but I think they believe that risk is lower than the risk of people bringing the unrest in more peaceful regions...and that has potential to do more damage—especially in a region with a history of violence and such strong opposition.*"

Therefore, despite the West's displacement context clearly qualifying as a reception zone deserving of assistance, the government's prior relationship with the region, as well as its security interests, suggest clear incentives for it to wish to obstruct and, ideally, block aid entirely to the region.

In the following section, I lay out the empirical evidence supporting how the government of Cameroon might achieve this. In some cases, the evidence is clear, while in others, it is merely likely to support this line of argument. This is, at least partly, because the process of aid allocation involves fewer people and actors and is much less visible than distribution, making the examination of this part of humanitarian response at subnational levels much more difficult than aid distribution. Given what evidence follows, there is nonetheless a strong case in support of the claim that the West region was intentionally sidelined in humanitarian aid allocation because of intentional host government influence, mainly motivated by the government's security interests.

## **4. Mechanisms of Obstruction and Denial of Aid**

### **Allocation**

Just as we saw in the last chapter how the government obstructed aid delivery in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the Anglophone Crisis, there is also evidence that the Cameroonian government employed a variety of tactics to divert international humanitarian resources from being *allocated* to the West region. Below I discuss this evidence and delineate the mechanisms through which the government appears to have exerted its influence on humanitarian actors to successfully sideline its rival. In what follows, I show evidence that the host government engaged in mechanisms of *access denial* and *perception influence* to obstruct aid allocation to the West region of the Anglophone Crisis.

Readers might pause to question why only two of the four mechanisms identified in this research emerge in this chapter. However, this is entirely logical when considering that the use of the two mechanisms omitted (i.e. *administrative impediments* and *physical constraints*) would require allocation to a region to have *already occurred*. That is, these mechanisms of obstruction are either irrelevant (because organizations would not face them without allocating resources to the region and mounting a response), or they did not emerge because of the opaque nature of the process or because they simply were not employed. Although there are certainly plausible ways that these might be leveraged by a host government,<sup>126</sup> I focus below on what is supported by the data of this research, which demonstrates evidence for the claim that the host government engaged in *access denial* and *perception influence* to affect aid allocation in the West region.

#### **4.1 Access Denial & Allocation**

The actors leading the West's response have mainly been local NGOs with international funding and a handful of INGO implementing partners. Of the international organizations that had a presence there, these were typically INGOs and bilateral development aid agencies that had previously established a presence in the region prior to the crisis. Most, if not all, of the major humanitarian INGOs and the UN Agencies were focused on the Northwest and Southwest, which meant that the response in the West region was quite limited where local actors with relatively little capacity were shouldering the bulk of the burden. As for the government, many people in the region told me that the government was not doing much in the West in terms of response.

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<sup>126</sup> There are a few ways that these impediments could plausibly be used to obstruct aid allocation to the West and Littoral. For instance, the government could have communicated to humanitarian actors that mounting a response in the regions in question would entail such onerous administrative procedures that aid organizations could have simply chosen to forego allocation. But this research did not uncover evidence for this having occurred.

However, due to the sensitive nature of the claim that aid allocation to whole crisis-affected regions was blocked intentionally by the state's authorities, evidence for this claim is extremely difficult to uncover. The consequences of revealing how this was achieved imply that any kind of paper-trail would likely have been destroyed and that anyone involved with brokering such a deal would likely be remiss to share information about it, whether Cameroonian national or international.

Limited response in these regions at the outset of the crisis seems justified, given the significant informational gaps and constraints that international actors were having to navigate. But as the crisis wore on, humanitarians finally formally acknowledged there were “considerable numbers of IDPs from the Northwest and Southwest regions in the Littoral and West regions” as of 2021 (OCHA, 2022). While the 2019 and 2020 Humanitarian Response Plans (whose evaluations and assessments would have been conducted in 2018 and 2019, respectively) acknowledge displaced population figures in those regions, it was not until 2021 that their tone shifted and humanitarian rhetoric began to reflect a desire to mount a response in those regions, as displaced population figures continued to climb.

For instance, OCHA asserted in the response plan from that cycle that humanitarian stakeholders were committed to increasing response activities in these regions but had been unable to for reasons they failed to mention explicitly (OCHA, 2022). Reading between the lines suggests that the “lack of operational humanitarian presence in the Littoral and West” and “limited funding allocated to a response in these regions” is not due to their unwillingness or even indeed that the primary driver was underfunding, which they otherwise make very clear in other parts of their plans. Instead, here, passive language is used to avoid assigning blame to the actor responsible for such limited allocation.

For instance, this is suggested in the frontmatter of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) in 2022 that discusses operational capacity and access: *“Despite the commitment in the 2021 HRP to mount a robust multisectoral response in regions hosting IDPs from the North-West and South-West, this was not achieved in 2021 due to a lack of operational humanitarian presence in the Littoral and West regions. While OCHA continued to facilitate the coordination forums with local NGOs, the very limited funding allocated to a response in these regions left most of the affected population without assistance (OCHA, 2022a, p.34).*

Most recently, Although most sectors do not acknowledge the omission of the West in their targeting in that plan, the Housing, Land and Property (HLP) team (an area of responsibility within the Protection sector) justifies the omission of the West and Littoral by attributing this to high-level decisions (and

evident broadly applied policy) made by the Humanitarian Country Team (i.e. the leadership of the international UN-coordinated response in the country). They report: *“In line with the decision of the HCT to prioritize the scope of this (response) to the epicenters of the crises, no activities are included in the HLP response plan for the Littoral and West regions. However, advocacy with other actors, including local authorities, is ongoing to engage on preventing forced eviction of IDPs living in those regions.”*<sup>127</sup> This suggests that actors would like to respond, but are held back by country-level policy decisions to limit the response in those places. This also supports the argument advanced in this work that it is indeed the host government’s denial and obstruction tactics that explain disparities in response experienced in the reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis.

Thus, while there was a clear shift in the stated objectives of humanitarians to respond to the West and Littoral, as ever, actions are more telling of dynamics behind-the-scenes. In the 2022 response plan, the Protection Cluster began allocating funding to the Littoral specifically but excluded the West. So, while humanitarian plans began to allocate resources to the Littoral, even if it was very little, this is odd given the Littoral’s context was never ranked as severely as the West’s, which these same response plans indicated as well.<sup>128</sup> According to humanitarians’ own decision-making logic, the West should have been targeted over the Littoral.

This said, it must be underlined that the Littoral is also deserving of what little assistance it has received,<sup>129</sup> and the Protection Cluster’s targeting of the

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<sup>127</sup> See: OCHA, 2024, p.64

<sup>128</sup> Even as early as 2019, as the 2020 response plan was in its assessment stages, there was acknowledgement that access constraints (and by proxy, insecurity) existed along the border with the West and was ranked as having high constraints. By comparison, there were only moderate constraints reported along the Littoral-Southwest border. So, the situation in the West was considered by humanitarian documentation (as well as participants) as more acute than the Littoral (OCHA 2020). Although violence had initially been more concentrated in the Southwest at the start of the conflict, as the crisis has worn on in more recent years of the crisis, violence and insecurity has moved northward from the southwest to concentrate in the Northwest, resulting in greater spillover violence into the West and higher IDP populations than in the Littoral region.

<sup>129</sup> It should also be stressed that what it has been allocated is indeed very little, except for the region’s principal city (and the country’s business capital), Douala, which often receives much

Littoral's populations in need was indeed minimal compared to its targeting of populations in other regions. Humanitarians from the Protection Cluster even acknowledge this in their plans to "*only*<sup>130</sup> target 1,568 individuals of the 30,000 people in need in the Littoral region, considering partners' limited resources and capacities" (OCHA, 2022). This also suggests that the international organizations with better capacity were still not mounting significant operations themselves in these regions, given the implied reliance on partner organizations. It also highlights that these organizations were avoiding operations in places with higher security that were presumably more straightforward to operate in, also pointing to government aid denial to the West.

Not only was response not forthcoming to the West region, but to date most of the leading humanitarian agencies, including OCHA, still have no formal presence in the region (OCHA, 2023, p.113). In addressing this gap in presence, OCHA communicated that despite this shortcoming, it would "*continue to support and strengthen humanitarian coordination mechanisms established in 2020 in the West and Littoral regions to increase response coordination*" (OCHA, 2023, p.113). While this indicates their support of coordination mechanisms in the region, this clearly does not equate to allocated aid funding, and more importantly points to the likelihood that these organizations were facing aid denial, given the leading agencies involved in response elsewhere in the country still had no presence and made no indications that they would be establishing one. While it is not unusual that these organizations would have their primary base of operations operating out of the more urgent crisis zones (as in the Northwest and Southwest here), it is highly unusual that they would not have at least a Field Office in a separate zone of response, as is the case in other crises in the country. Even if budget constraints were a concern, this would not prevent these agencies from setting up *some* kind of presence here. This further suggests that international aid actors likely have not established these offices due to access denial.

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more assistance and programs than the rest of the region as it is often targeted by programs catering to urban displacement, as it is the largest city in the country.

<sup>130</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

Furthermore, speaking to humanitarians and development actors that had worked in the region and in Cameroon more broadly also highlighted evidence for government access denial, as their comments highlighted that the West's experience of aid allocation obstruction was not new. One told me how he had helped open one of the major international development organizations' offices and presence in the country several decades ago. Naturally, when the current crises emerged, the organization established operations responding to the CAR and Lake Chad Basin Crises. However, when the organization had investigated establishing operations in the western regions (before the Anglophone Conflict had broken out), he told me that they had been "blocked by the government". Although, they and many others eventually were able to operate in the Northwest and Southwest once the crisis emerged, as the government could not block it so directly anymore, given the gravity of the crisis and international attention. But because the West and Littoral were not seen as urgent as "mere" zones of reception, blockage could continue to an extent in those regions, given the international organizations' attention was monopolized by the conflict zones.

Despite this evidence of some international influence on subnational response allocation, the bulk of the evidence suggests that it is the government's agency that matters most. This is evident in what one veteran development and humanitarian professional told me:

*"The decision to invest in a certain region and allocate aid resources is a question of politics. Ultimately, it is a function of the (Cameroonian) government, which is associated with wherever NGO action is happening...and international organizations, the UN, all of those, they are bound by what the government wants to happen."*

The above evidence suggests that allocation of resources to the West and Littoral regions have been subject to government access denial that not only blocks humanitarian actors from *operating* in the regions, but also possibly prevents them from even allocating resources to the regions in question, and the West especially. Although I cannot know for certain, as I do not have confirmation from government sources, a near impossibility to obtain, abductive logic allows for inferences that these dynamics are the most likely explanation supported by the data.

In short, it was suggested a few times to me that aid to the West and Littoral were likely used as bargaining chips that the government leveraged in exchange for finally granting access to the biggest international humanitarian actors into the Northwest and Southwest. In return, they would be expected to leave the West and Littoral to their own devices. Although no international humanitarian actor corroborated this, several local NGO staff members suspected that this was what had happened, essentially imposing blanket access denial on aid allocation to the West and most of the Littoral.

This final discussion of the government's use of access denial to influence aid allocation indicates that its behavior toward aid response aligns with expectations set by the Cameroonian government's subnational political incentive structures in the reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis that suggest the government should obstruct aid to these regions.

## **4.2 Perception Influence**

While the above discussion of the evidence in support of government access denial rests on abductive reasoning, there is clearer support for the claim that the government of Cameroon obstructed aid allocation to the West and Littoral through the mechanism of perception influence. This mechanism points to a host of tactics that the government can use to influence allocation, which includes contesting, undermining, and controlling information that humanitarian actors use to make initial decisions of where exactly they should plan to distribute limited resources.

First, it should be highlighted that humanitarian actors often use indicators developed by national entities like the Institut National de la Statistique to make sub-national allocation decisions in contexts that (at least initially) they know very little about. This is beneficial to the host government, as it can leverage its own data to steer development and humanitarian aid. Indeed, one humanitarian told me that, *"Oh yes, the government certainly plays with the numbers to try to direct us one way or another. This is not surprising seeing as there are high stakes for them in where we operate... Those decisions are political and the [leadership who negotiates] must constantly try to read through the lines to the best of their ability."*



While the stakeholders I spoke with maintained that humanitarian organizations tried to use data that were as unbiased as possible, many of them pointed out that the international organizations are sometimes captive to local actors for certain kinds of subnational information. And it is in these instances that aid actors can be susceptible to a host government's strategic maneuvers, because they sometimes yield allocation decisions that are based on erroneous or biased data.

There is clear evidence that aid actors have used the Cameroonian government's data in this way to prioritize response in regions that are indeed deserving. Notably, once these programs receive additional financing and expand to other regions, the Center has traditionally been included while other regions with comparable or worse poverty or crisis conditions are omitted. While it is unclear which exact data or indicators the government may have used to influence aid allocation at granular levels in preventing allocation to the West and Littoral, it is certainly plausible.

Another told me that while funding is of course driven by international donors, decisions of allocation are influenced by the government's agenda, and this has previously applied to the West specifically: *"Historically, the government has blocked funding to the West because it is seen as very well off, despite there being real need. This is because decisions are made based on regional averages of course...then people develop perceptions of the whole region based on those averages. So, yes, other regions are poorer on average, but that doesn't mean there isn't a lot of need here too."* Another underlined the point: *"Well, where do you think those regional indicators come from? A lot of the data comes from the INS.<sup>131</sup> Internationals coming into the country want to pour resources into programming, not into basic surveys. Yes, they do needs assessments, but they are not doing comprehensive evaluations of poverty levels or what-have-you across the country. They often rely on the (host) government and national sources for that."*

A better supported indication of the government's deliberate engagement in this mechanism is in observing how the government has tried to influence perceptions of crisis severity in the West and Littoral. One of the most visible

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<sup>131</sup> i.e. the National Statistical Institute

ways the government has done so is in contesting the severity of the crisis in the Anglophone Crisis regions by contesting humanitarians' estimates of populations in need (PIN), overall crisis severity, and response plans themselves (i.e. the core planning and coordination instrument used and published by OCHA to appeal for funding and coordinate crisis response among the many actors involved).

As a reminder, estimates of populations in need (PIN) are crucial indicators of the extent of need and crisis severity, and they are therefore a primary determinant of allocation decisions for humanitarians. After many years of working with aid agencies, the government certainly knows this and has repeatedly tried to downplay these estimates of populations in need reported by humanitarians in the West and Littoral specifically. Indications of this disagreement can be seen plainly in the response plans that have issued statements in their frontmatter to this effect, acknowledging that the UN estimates differed significantly from those estimated by the government's Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT). The first indication of this disagreement emerged in the 2021 response plan's frontmatter where a "Caveat on displacement figures for the North-west and South-west Crisis" specified that the estimated displacement figures mentioned in that year's Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan were "based on multi-sectoral needs assessments (MSNAs) conducted in August and September 2020 under the leadership of OCHA" (OCHA, 2021, p.2). It went on to clarify that the figures "validated" by the ministry responsible for these affairs (i.e. the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MINAT)) were quite different and that OCHA agreed to review the IDP figures in 2021 "based on a joint data collection exercise" (OCHA, 2021, p.2). Despite these subsequent joint efforts, the following two response plans continued to report stark differences in the figures, where the MINAT undercut humanitarian figures by at least 60,000 and as much as 100,000 PIN in the West and Littoral (OCHA, 2022; 2023).

Until this point, it might not be totally clear that this was really such a significant point of contention. However, amid these published displays of friction, I was told that the government rejected at least one of the response plans because of the international humanitarian community's exaggeration of the crisis, including the scale of the crisis and how many people were affected.

Almost everyone I spoke with, as well as certain assessments conducted by multiple actors since the outset of the crisis, suggested that the government did so strategically. As one humanitarian professional said, *“The government has been taking a denialist stance toward this humanitarian crisis more broadly [than just the West/Littoral] ...it doesn’t recognize the number of IDPs. They say that many have returned home and continue to minimize it, when the numbers and needs are, in fact, growing.”* As for the West and Littoral specifically, another said: *“It is in the government’s interest to keep the internationals from going there. And by taking issue with the severity and numbers outside of the conflict zones, this forces the internationals to prioritize the conflict zones over the others if they want to continue to operate in those places.”*

Because international humanitarians must maintain positive relations with the government, this necessitated efforts to appease the government’s concerns. As a few humanitarians pointed out, this meant clouding some of what their information products shared. After the tensions over population figures in previous years, OCHA then omitted figures in the 2024 response plan to cope with the evidently delicate nature of publishing figures of populations in need (OCHA, 2024).

The most salient feature of this dynamic can be distilled in what I heard from a few people familiar with the crisis. By making population figures a thorny issue, when it came to the West and Littoral, this effectively drew a line in the sand that humanitarians needed to respect if they wanted leeway to operate elsewhere – the Northwest and Southwest conflict zones in this case. When given the choice, international actors would understandably prioritize conflict zones rather than reception zones. And by publicly downplaying crisis severity in rival regions, the government gained leverage when negotiating with international actors about humanitarian access. While we cannot know with certainty that this was in fact what the government intended with its actions, its behavior suggests that it engaged in deliberate efforts to deter humanitarian response allocation to those regions by undermining humanitarian estimates of populations in need that are key for humanitarian aid allocation decision-making.

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of this tactic was its power in sowing doubt among those with decision-making power over aid funding allocation decisions. While most people I spoke to who worked on the response in some capacity acknowledged the needs in those regions, there were also a few individuals who were more skeptical. Some comments of the NGO leaders I spoke with revealed either a lag in their awareness or disagreement with the assessment of international humanitarians of crisis severity in the receiving zones like the West. Notably, it was evident in talking with humanitarians who interacted a great deal with the government, where one told me that *“Oh, it’s not actually that bad in the West...that has really been overblown...”* But given the international coordinated response plans have acknowledged significant populations of displaced people in the West and Littoral since the 2019 response plan, and every other person with experience in those regions said otherwise, it is likely no coincidence that those who downplayed the severity were also individuals who tended to sympathize with the government. This suggests that the Cameroonian government’s approach has been successful to the extent of, at best, delaying their perception of the true gravity of the crisis in the reception regions, and at worse, persuading key players that there is not much of a crisis there at all, with clear implications for aid allocation decisions.

Another way that the government aims to influence aid allocation is by manipulating perceptions of local contexts. Specifically, the government tries to limit public communication and media coverage of conditions in rival zones that might jeopardize its ability to stave off international actors from delivering assistance in those places. For example, the government has tried to limit information about spillover violence from the conflict into the West, as it is in its interest to keep this quiet to avoid an expansion of significant humanitarian presence into the region. Indeed, the government has an exceptionally strong record in limiting journalistic freedom, with many examples of journalists being detained and even killed.<sup>132</sup> While some events receive news coverage that inevitably are picked up by humanitarian organizations, people in the region said that spillover violence was more common than the coverage might have you believe. A few local humanitarians told me that there were even IDPs who

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<sup>132</sup> For example, see Human Rights Watch 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b.

had been displaced within the West region (in the Ménoua department), as they lived in border zones that experienced this spillover violence. However, speaking to international humanitarians, they were generally not aware of that at all. Local actors suggested that the government did not want to draw attention to this spillover violence and displacement in the West, as this would encourage the international organizations to increase its crisis severity ranking and possibly divert resources there.

In sum, the above evidence suggests that the Cameroonian government obstructed humanitarian allocation to the West and Littoral regions through various tactics of perception influence. This is in line with expectations set by the Cameroonian government's subnational political incentive structures in the reception zones of the Anglophone Crisis that suggest the government should obstruct aid to these regions.

## 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the government of Cameroon engages in aid denial and obstruction tactics to block aid allocation to the reception regions of the Anglophone Crisis.<sup>133</sup> The above ties into my theory and aligns with expectations of the government's incentives in these regions that predict it should obstruct and deny aid to the West and (mostly) to the Littoral reception zones given clear security and economic interests explained in previous chapters. In the next substantive chapter of this research (Chapter 8), I turn to demonstrating how aid denial and obstruction to humanitarian aid, as well as the specific mechanisms elucidated here within, emerge in a wide range of other contexts to demonstrate the generalizability of this work.

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<sup>133</sup> I do not go to pains to compare it to other regions, given other response regions, where aid is *distributed*, have clearly been allocated funds, and I believe the foils to the experiences of the western regions of the Anglophone Crisis was sufficiently elaborated upon in the previous chapter's discussion and demonstration of the government's denial and obstruction of aid *distribution*.

## Chapter 8. Aid Obstruction & Denial Beyond Cameroon

Although this research delved deeply into a single country case study in Cameroon, the contexts examined here should also be understood as sharing relevant dynamics with a wide range of contexts elsewhere. Even if diverse socio-cultural contexts within and across states and continents can make places appear quite different, conflict and crisis contexts — and dynamics of aid response — often entail striking similarities despite entailing distinct features otherwise.

Indeed, Cameroon is an excellent example of host government aid denial and obstruction dynamics, however, it is far from being the only country where such dynamics exist. Governments of other states have also resorted to similar tactics to obstruct or deny aid strategically. These states are either also impacted by conflict and violence and have attracted humanitarian funding or are major receiving countries of displaced people without hosting their own internal displacement crises.

I focus the below discussion on demonstrating how the four categories of mechanisms of host government denial and obstruction of humanitarian aid that are specifically supported by this research are seen in a wide range of contexts spanning the African continent to Europe, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.

These contexts not only diverge in their regional classifications but in many other important ways as well. There are a broad range of income-levels represented with lower- to middle to higher-income countries, as well as a range of regime types, including liberal democracies, hybrid regimes, and some of the most tightly controlled autocracies. These places also differ in their security settings: from areas only receiving refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants to those experiencing international conflicts, civil wars, and a wide

range of other irregular conflict settings as well. Other divergences emerge in states that are primarily receiving or crisis-hosting states, as well as in applications to different kinds of migrant populations and types of crises, including some applications for longer-term development aid and aid at the nexus of development and humanitarian aid.<sup>134</sup>

Before discussing and demonstrating the generalizability of this research, I elaborate upon the scope conditions of the findings. I then turn to the varied contexts to show how what I have depicted in Cameroon very unfortunately has much broader applicability in a variety of settings in many other parts of the world.

## 1. Scope Conditions

This work primarily aims to contribute to questions and theories relevant to the politics of aid, political violence, and migration and displacement literatures — in contexts experiencing major displacement crises. Understanding how governments (or other powerful actors) can strategically respond to or deny the needs of various populations has salience anywhere humans are found. However, the arguments here are especially relevant in regions of the world with significant populations of migrant or displaced populations and high degrees of inequality and patronage politics — within sub-Saharan Africa and other lower-income contexts, but beyond as well.

The main objective of this research was to contribute to the understanding of how states interfere with international humanitarian aid in response to displacement crises, which contributes to debates about how state actors strategically respond to or neglect the needs of both citizens and migrants within their territories. This should be of interest to those working in a broad range of academic and applied fields — from those working on state-society relations and distributive politics, to peace and conflict studies, to migration policy.

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<sup>134</sup> This has alternately been called the peace-development nexus, humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and the security-development nexus by different actors, among other variations.

This dissertation's arguments pertain to the emergence of a particular, common form of intrastate armed conflict: insurgency in a lower-middle income state. To remind the reader, the main argument of this work posits that subnational political interests of the host government govern how it behaves toward different crisis-affected regions within its borders. This line of thinking clearly aims to explain subnational variation and has broader applicability to meso-level dynamics within states, but also has potential to explain state behavior toward crises beyond its borders, especially in neighboring states. Although the argument may also apply at more granular levels, accounting for variation in obstruction or denial in different crises by different state organisms or representatives, not all actors are alike. There are certainly divergences in when, where and how the dynamics of interest might occur at more local levels. This is also reflected in variation among individual government actors, where some can be more sympathetic to populations they have some proximity to, while others may simply exhibit more altruistic tendencies, even towards populations or regions that represent supposed or actual adversaries. The point is not all individuals who work as agents of the state in whatever capacity are prone to carry out the policies that the state aims to implement to advance its interests. While this certainly implies risks for those who defect, especially in more authoritarian environments like Cameroon, at least some individuals are likely to deviate on occasion, if not consistently.

Nonetheless, I maintain that this argument and the mechanisms put forth in this work have many diverse applications in a broad range of contexts. Broadly, the contexts of interest involve places where humanitarian crises have displaced people internally or internationally, whether from, to, or within lower or higher-income states.<sup>135</sup> Notably, this work is not only applicable to lower-income contexts, and there is applicability in states well beyond sub-Saharan Africa. I expand in the discussion below on the scope conditions of my findings by considering their applicability to states of different income-levels and regime type, to states that are either primarily a receiving or crisis-hosting state, and to

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<sup>135</sup> I draw on the classifications from the World Bank's country classification that uses gross national income (GNI) per capita data in U.S. dollars to classify states in one of four categories: low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high-income states. See, for example: World Bank, n.d.



situations involving different kinds of migrant populations and crises beyond conflict-displacement.

### **1.1 Income-level, Crisis-hosting states & Receiving states**

The specific mechanisms described in Cameroon are more likely to appear in more similar guises in other lower-income crisis-hosting states than in higher-income receiving states. Importantly, this does not mean that higher-income receiving states do not engage in access denial and obstruction, but simply that because of their distinctions from lower-income crisis-hosting states, the ways in which they engage in denial and obstruction differ. Their difference also mean they have other options available to them in hindering assistance to migrant populations.

The organizations that are the foremost actors in international humanitarian response (e.g. the UNHCR, OCHA, the ICRC etc. ) have engaged in coordinated responses across most regions of the world. Within the broad spectrum of places these organizations operate, the dynamics in Cameroon will sound familiar to practitioners with experience elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa like Nigeria, Mozambique, the Sudans, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Ethiopia and Somalia. But these dynamics also travel beyond the sub-Saharan African region in North Africa (e.g. Libya, Tunisia, Egypt) and are recognizable to those who have worked in humanitarian operations on other continents as well, as in Europe (e.g. Ukraine, Greece, Spain, Italy), Asia (e.g. North Korea, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Yemen, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Myanmar, Indonesia), and the Americas (e.g. Colombia, Haiti, Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mexico).

All these states either host ongoing conflict and violence within their territory or receive significant populations from crises in neighboring and distant states. Despite important differences between states hosting crises within their borders and those that are primarily receiving states, the latter also practice obstructive tactics that either strive to interfere with response to refugees, asylum seekers and other classes of migrants, or deter migration altogether. I consider these two types of states below.

### *Higher-Income Receiving States*

The mechanisms found in this research also have broader applicability in higher-income receiving-states as well, where states that receive migrants (e.g. Greece and the United States) also engage in obstructive and denialist tactics to advance their own interests in shirking asylum responsibilities and in discouraging migration. These can differ in how the mechanisms described in this work emerge, though. For instance, access denial is not relevant in the same way it is illustrated in this work in contexts where states manage their own humanitarian or migrant response.

This is not to say that access denial does not occur in those states, but that because these states generally do not have a UN Country Team that seeks authorization to operate, the dynamics described in Cameroon have less applicability. For instance, in higher-income settings that receive significant arrivals of migrants, access denial might instead be practiced through stringent immigration policies and austere (and cruel) border control, as seen in Mediterranean states that neglect to rescue vessels carrying migrants. In contexts like these, the state is often both the one providing and denying assistance, where it might be processing asylum requests and offering services to new arrivals, while also forcibly returning people across borders, or separating families and detaining children (as at the US border). These too certainly count as access denial in providing assistance to displaced people and other migrants.

However, the crux of this distinction between states that manage their own “responses” (or migration policies, more commonly in higher-income contexts) and lower- or middle-income states is that many higher-income states are also the primary donor states that fund international humanitarian response organizations, which points to their higher-income status and ability to cope with their own responses without international assistance given higher budgets and capacity. It would indeed be peculiar if these states should begin requesting international assistance.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> i.e. The international humanitarian community already struggles to fundraise for crises in lower-income contexts. It would almost certainly face greater difficulties fundraising for

While international actors certainly do intervene in some higher-income contexts like Greece, where the dynamics of this work also appear as I illustrate below, more often the primary actors involved are state-sponsored. Given this, it stands to reason that the ways in which these state actors influence aid response can differ significantly when they have direct control over assistance, rather than having to cope with foreign actors on their territory, which can often call for less obvious modes of obstruction.

What's more, given the dynamics examined in this project specifically deal with the denial of international humanitarian actors' *access to* populations in need, this also suggests these higher-income contexts warrant separate study. Even though these higher-income contexts may share some similarities with those discussed in this work,<sup>137</sup> because they represent somewhat different dynamics where the primary access issue is in *migrant populations themselves* accessing assistance, these higher-capacity states warrant separate consideration.

Therefore, because higher-income receiving states tend to lack this interaction between the host government and the international humanitarian aid system, I maintain that they warrant separate analysis. I do not treat these situations below, though I do include situations where higher-income states *do* interact with the international aid system.

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"migrant crises" in relatively peaceful contexts in states that have far more capacity to cope with these situations that often also have the added benefit of occurring absent the hardships of conflict contexts (i.e. I very intentionally use the term conflict as opposed to violence or other terms signaling negative peace, as border situations everywhere can also be dangerous in the absence of war).

<sup>137</sup> For example, in high-income contexts, it is also possible that aid obstruction and denial are applicable to domestic non-state actors that also likely face hurdles in assisting populations in need due to constraints imposed by their own government. However, this too represents different dynamics, given the interaction in question appears between a state and domestic actors that are typically much less powerful and influential than the organizations leading an international Humanitarian Country Team. In any case, further research of these dynamics in higher income contexts would be fruitful grounds to pursue to test the boundaries and applications of this research.

Finally, given the argument I advance focuses on sub-national politics, this also has potential limitations in explaining host government behavior of receiving states toward some international migrant flows. While there is certainly applicability, for instance in states that are concerned about international flows upsetting local political conditions, sub-national security and economic interests certainly have applicability, where states might be worried of new arrivals adding to the numbers of minority populations whose growth could challenge their power. But it is also the case that situations of international migration, implied by “receiving states” should introduce international political considerations that may not be only relevant to domestic political interests once considering the impact of the host government’s actions on its neighbors, for instance. This too forms a boundary of this work.

#### *Lower-income Crisis-hosting States*

Turning to lower-income crisis-hosting states where international humanitarian actors more often intervene, the mechanisms elucidated here have more obvious applicability. As I show below, more similar manifestations as those found in Cameroon are more likely to emerge in these contexts, where many other states of this kind exhibit very similar behavior as the government in Cameroon in obstructing or denying aid.

Lower-income, crisis-hosting states exhibit contexts that share more similarities with Cameroon in hosting crises linked to significant levels of conflict and violence within their borders, as well as very often hosting international migrant and refugee populations. Within these cases, host governments very deliberately and explicitly try to influence aid distribution and allocation to align with their security interests.

For instance, in Mozambique, where there is an ongoing civil war, the government blocked and otherwise heavily restricted assistance in insurgent-held areas in the eastern Macomia region. (OCHA, 2024b) Similarly, in Myanmar, the military junta also restricts aid delivery to places under control of their opposition groups, with the explicit aim to cut off their adversaries’ link to basic supplies, financing, intelligence and potential recruits (HRW, 2024; The New Humanitarian, 2021; OHCHR, 2023). There have even been reports of the

junta deliberately intervening with aid distribution by trying to take over the process and succeeding in doing so strategically (Burma News International Online, 2024; The New Humanitarian, 2023). In the same vein, in Afghanistan the Taliban are reported to have diverted aid distribution from reaching populations targeted by the UN and INGOs to populations that are aligned with the Taliban-run government. The Taliban have also influenced aid allocation, exerting pressure on aid organizations in their resource allocation to prioritize affiliates of the government. (Freedom House, 2024)

In all of these places, these host government actions are the function of their strategic subnational political interests, as determined mainly by security interests in conflict contexts and historical political relations with different populations and crisis-affected regions.

## **1.2 Regime type**

Secondly, regime type matters when considering the applicability of this work where the findings are more directly applied in states with more autocratic regimes than in more democratic states. Many of the most extreme manifestations of analogous denial and obstruction tactics found in Cameroon emerge most prominently in more authoritarian states and hybrid regimes than more democratic states. However, I stress that this is a potential but not inevitable scope condition, as parallel or at least related versions of the tactics I identify also are practiced in more democratic settings as well.

This distinction stems mainly from different constraints on regimes and expectations regarding their obligations to uphold the social contract with populations. More authoritarian and hybrid-regime states are less constrained than democracies, which are more beholden to broader swathes of the population than in the former regime types, which have a comparatively small network of elite supporters that maintain their power. This means democracies are less able to engage in more blatant behaviors of aid response denial or obstruction, because doing so can threaten their political survival to a greater degree than in more autocratic settings. Autocracies and hybrid regimes, on the other hand, have more leeway, given their populations are less accustomed to their needs being met, so low trust in the state and its obligations to fulfilling

the social contract enable these states to behave in more obviously obstructive ways. Consequently, democratic states must engage in denial in ways that are often more subtle and may have the appearance of more legitimacy as they can be institutionalized, as in integrating denialist measures in policy and laws that make migration requirements so onerous that migration is deterred.

What's more, these states' behavior range in the degree of severity in their application, where there appears to be an association between regime type and the severity of the application of denial and obstruction tactics. Within the "Universe of Cases", Cameroon is a most-likely or typical case, given its regime type as well as its various contexts that are prototypical examples of different kinds of conflict-triggered crises. However, there are certainly other states that are more autocratic, where the dynamics described appear more egregiously. Using Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" rankings illustrates this association, where states that are more autocratic than Cameroon exhibit the dynamics of interest even more prominently and severely as in Myanmar, Afghanistan, Syria, and the Sudans (Freedom House, 2024). There are also states that are more democratic than Cameroon, though still are not considered democracies, that engage in these tactics (albeit less egregiously) as in Papua New Guinea, Madagascar, and Thailand. The association is not perfect of course, as Israel's behavior in Gaza exemplifies.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, while aid obstruction and denial are not unique to authoritarian regimes, these regimes also have the most leeway to employ them.

In any case, both sets of host governments can exhibit denialist and obstructive tactics toward aid response that are a function of their strategic subnational political interests. In autocracies, the behavior shown in Cameroon is more obviously recognized, however democracies also calculate the threat potential of different populations and the implications of either facilitating or obstructing assistance to regions receiving migrants for their political survival. Indeed, all else equal, because democracies must be more responsive than autocracies to their populations (or suffer potential electoral losses), they are especially concerned with how their actions in specific subnational districts are perceived, which is mediated by the incumbent government's historical

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<sup>138</sup> Though its democratic ranking really should be questioned.

political relations with different populations and crisis-affected regions (e.g. through calculations of whether it might lose a given district if it does not respond, for instance, which is based on party affiliations and historical support for various parties in various substate regions).

### 1.3 Migrant Populations & Types of Crises

Finally, considering the type of migrant and crisis matters when considering the applicability of this work, where the findings are more directly applied to conflict displaced people as opposed to those displaced by either rapid- or slow-onset disasters, or economic migrants. The findings are also most relevant for other situations involving irregular substate conflict crises than interstate conflicts.

The populations of interest include different displaced groups naturally, but also include crises involving other categories of migrants and displacement to which humanitarian aid organizations respond. For example, a robust response to the Venezuelan Crisis is ongoing within Latin America that entails programming intended for a portion of those who have fled Venezuela as refugees but also for those classified as economic migrants. Additionally, even though the dynamics elucidated in this work can plausibly be expected to be most pronounced in conflict settings, aid instrumentalization can also happen within states where natural disaster emergencies have occurred and especially when these overlap with conflict settings, as in Mozambique and Myanmar, where governments imposed restrictions on humanitarian access to cyclone-affected regions strategically to withhold aid response from their opponents and populations within areas under non-state armed group control. Therefore, the mechanisms and argument highlighted by this research are applicable in those settings as well, as substate political interests also feature in the actions of host governments in contexts involving different kinds of crises and migrant populations.

Evidently, host governments in other regions also instrumentalize aid to advance their interests. This is therefore what the following section and the remainder of the chapter undertakes, in explaining how the mechanisms appear elsewhere in the world. I begin with explaining how (i.) *access denial* has

appeared in other settings, followed by applications of (ii.) *administrative impediments*, (iii.) *physical constraints* and (iv.) *perception influence* in a wide range of contexts as well.

## **2. Mechanisms of Obstruction & Denial Beyond Cameroon**

This project in Cameroon contributes directly to elucidating tactics of host government obstruction and denial of aid. While there are ample examples of states engaging in these other tactics, for example, through violent means that target aid workers, I focus here on demonstrating how the four mechanisms highlighted in this research have emerged elsewhere. I show that these mechanisms are not idiosyncratic to Cameroon and that they emerge in a wide variety of contexts to highlight to readers the broader generalizability of my findings.

### **2.1 Blanket Access Denial**

Blanket access denial refers to instances where organizations or a set of organizations might be prohibited from entering the country altogether or are prohibited from operating in certain areas or responding to certain populations. It might also manifest in instances where organizations may have authorization to operate, but they face such prohibitive restrictions that access denial is the net result.

Some states make it extremely difficult or impossible for personnel or even entire organizations to enter a country, to access certain regions, or simply to operate normally. For example, Indonesia has refused humanitarian access to both national and international NGOs, as well as UN agencies and the media, to the provinces of Papua and West Papua where egregious human rights abuses (e.g. torture, disappearances, murdered children) have been reported against indigenous Papuans, which has spurred mass displacement (HRM, 2024a; OHCHR, 2022). The government also denies UN initiatives that aim to monitor



human rights protections and violations.(HRM, 2024b; Morris, 2024) These trends in Indonesia are indicative of strategic blocking of assistance by the government in order to avoid exposure of its abuses, which has potential security implications for the government both sub-nationally, as abuses can trigger unrest in other regions of the country.

Similarly, in Syria, the government denies access to certain organizations that are not willing to comply with the government's onerous constraints and efforts to instrumentalize aid. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has repeatedly been denied access to operate in government-controlled areas, while other aid organizations have a presence in those areas by virtue of compliance with government demands.(Youssef et al., 2023) Here, as in Cameroon, the Syrian government wishes to avoid funneling materials via assistance to its adversaries in the civil war that has plagued that state for over a decade. It is in both its security and economic interest to end the war as quickly as possible, so it has adopted an extremely denialist approach toward aid actors as a result.

Aside from evidence of access denial writ-large to entire crisis-affected regions, there are also cases that show how a government's approach to access denial can be more nuanced, levying restrictions only to certain areas of crisis-affected regions under its control. Again, in Syria, the movement of people and goods has been severely restricted and even blocked in areas under control of non-state actors. Specifically, shipments of cargo including humanitarian supplies and in-kind aid like fuel and other essentials like flour and medical supplies have been blockaded systematically from primarily Kurdish regions and displacement camps and sites. This is a prime example of a host government engaging in blanket access denial strategically, as applied only to certain areas of the country where its perceived supporters are, including sites where IDPs reside. As in Cameroon, the Syrian government seeks to strategically direct aid to places where it can bolster its supporters, while cutting off assistance to areas under the control of its adversaries.

Additional evidence of denial is found in cases where organizations have had to adopt remote management approaches in other states that face extreme insecurity and host government hurdles, as was necessary in Cameroon. Again, drawing on the Syrian case, this strategy had previously been implemented in

Syria where organizations that were denied access to host-government controlled territory operated remotely through local partner organizations. Organizations were able to do so with an established presence in neighboring states like Turkey for delivering aid to northwest Syria and from Iraq to affected areas in northeast Syria (ECHO, 2023). While remote management was partly adopted because of access restrictions stemming from violence, it was also a necessity, because, as in Cameroon, the government had imposed such onerous administrative impediments that made aid distribution and program operations difficult. This points to the Assad regime's strategic use of obstruction tactics to divert aid where it wanted and to block aid from areas it sought to weaken. This was clearly due to the regime's subnational security interests in aiming to reestablish territorial control in conflict zones.

Evidently, different features and manifestations of access denial have appeared in other contexts outside of Cameroon, indicating that this is not an idiosyncratic tactic employed by the Cameroonian government, but instead is a tactic available to, and indeed leveraged by, other governments of states where conflict and violence have triggered displacement emergencies.

But what of the other tactics that are perhaps more subtle than mere access denial? Bureaucratic impediments were likely the most applied and diverse tactics that the host government in Cameroon engaged in. In the following section, I illustrate how this mechanism is not unique to the Cameroonian context, where many different states around the world also employ bureaucratic impediments to hinder humanitarian aid strategically due to subnational political interests.

## **2.2 Administrative Impediments**

Bureaucratic impediments refer to a wide range of administrative hurdles the host government can impose to achieve obstruction by delaying operational processes. These can range from approaches like delaying or denying visa or diplomatic ID applications to imposing onerous approvals processes for operations.

These are likely the most employed group of tactics used to obstruct humanitarian aid allocation and distribution, likely because they are less

adversarial than blanket access denial and therefore better for diplomatic relations with foreign actors and the states they represent. Additionally, these tactics are the most easily concealed behind a façade of bureaucratic processes that can more easily masquerade as genuine attempts at governance rather than the more overt access denial tactics described above. There are therefore numerous examples of other states leveraging these bureaucratic impediments to obstruct humanitarian response. I review only a small selection below.

One of the most common ways that bureaucracy is leveraged is through mobility restrictions within the country (or besieged territory) that restricts the movement of goods and people. For example, in Palestine, the occupying-Israeli government imposes severe mobility restrictions by delaying visas or sometimes refusing to issue new or renew expiring visas of some humanitarian personnel, which has significantly disrupted aid delivery. (Associated Press, 2024) This even happened to aid professionals at the highest levels, including Lynn Hastings, the UN humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, who was obligated to leave Israel when her residence visa was revoked as a result of speaking out against Israel's actions in Gaza since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023. (Forey & Mraffko, 2024)

In the same vein in Somalia, the government imposed extremely arduous "quality assurance" processes at the Mogadishu airport and port that significantly delayed the delivery of humanitarian cargo. (Logistics Cluster, 2024) And in Sudan, organizations wishing to transport cargo, and personnel must obtain various levels of permits to operate, which can often require both national and state-level permits as well as permits from parties to the conflict, effectively limiting the freedom of movement by delaying operations due to the requirement of obtaining explicit authorizations for each mission. In one case, this permitting process delayed a planned mission of aid delivery to hard-to-reach areas for over three months. (OCHA, 2024)

Apart from mobility restrictions, host governments can also impose bureaucratic hurdles to program implementation that delay, impede or prevent aid delivery and give governments greater oversight of aid actor activities. For example, in Syria, aid organizations face complicated registration processes and are constrained in their choice of local partner NGOs and INGOs that they are

permitted to work with. (ECHO, 2023) This also aligns with its strategic behavior previously described in controlling the flow of aid due to its security interests in the conflict.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban has resorted to a number of bureaucratic tactics that have delayed aid operations and programs. For instance, in the past year it interfered with staff recruitment (e.g. by restricting women aid workers' participation), procurement procedures, and beneficiary selection; and negotiating officials also delayed signing the required "memorandums of understanding (MoUs)" with aid organizations. (OCHA, 2024) Further, the Taliban imposed a combination of mobility restrictions and extreme regulations restricting what is permissible in relation to women, which not only affected local populations' mobility, preventing potential women and children in need from accessing aid, but also prevented (or at least severely limited) aid organizations from maintaining female staff who are key to reaching women and girls who otherwise are only allowed to interact with male staff in the presence of a local man. (Barr, 2024) This severely limited the ability of aid organizations to reach women and children, which aligns with the Taliban's subnational political interests given its historical relationship in oppressing women and in maintaining control over populations who pose a threat to their political survival, just as those who espouse more liberal, western values pose.

In South Sudan, a bill was passed in 2023 that required NGOs to operate with 80% of in-country staff from South Sudan. Although this was ostensibly a good move to increase employment opportunities for nationals, it also represented a drastic change that required organizational restructuring to such an extent that it has caused significant operational delays, given limited time and scope for training in an environment with notoriously low human development. (Radio Tamazuj, 2024) On top of this, humanitarian organizations contended with lengthy bureaucratic procedures and unclear registration processes, which negatively affected operations in Central Equatoria, Unity and Upper Nile states. (OCHA, 2024)

Like in Cameroon, sometimes additional fees are incurred by humanitarian organizations, which hinders operations through the added administrative burden, by raising the financial cost of "doing business" in the country and also

sometimes by creating further delays due to disputes arising from administrative costs. This was seen in South Sudan, where the authorities there levied several new taxes and fees that obstructed the fuel supply due to disputes over these new taxes and resulted in the suspension of humanitarian flights chartered for airdrops of food aid. (United Nations News, 2024; Wudu, 2024) Although the taxes were eventually lifted, the government maintained them specifically for UN agency-contractors. (Machol, 2024) This is evidence of strategic obstruction of aid to prevent aid from reaching its adversaries.

Outside of contexts affected by ongoing situations of sub-state conflict and internal displacement, states that receive significant flows of refugees and other migrants like Greece, Egypt and Tunisia have also leveraged administrative barriers to advance their interests. In these situations, the goal is deterrence as migrant reception is considered nearly ubiquitously undesirable. These states achieve this through the establishment of a multitude of administrative barriers that effectively reduces migrants' ability to enter the country and essentially empowers these countries to return those who have managed to enter, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement in many cases.

In Greece, for instance, both local and international NGOs face prohibitive administrative barriers and complicated regulations that hinder response. Registration procedures in the country are onerous, requiring incredible levels of detail, which not only hinders operations but also makes them vulnerable to even greater government scrutiny (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024; Freedom House, 2024). And indeed, sometimes this scrutiny culminates in criminal investigations mounted against NGOs and journalists working on exposing government abuses to intimidate these actors (Reuters, 2024), which hindered response within the country for those actors by necessitating a scaled-back response. These procedures resulted in shutting down or significantly scaling back organization's entire presence and operations (Wallis, 2020). The Greek government's subnational politics that must be more responsive to its citizens to maintain its position in government means that widespread xenophobia and distaste for migrant populations in the country, as well as extreme economic hurdles since 2008-2009 Financial Crisis, mean that its response to migration is shaped by the attitudes of local populations in

receiving areas as well as those less affected in areas removed from contact with migrants.

### **2.3 Physical constraints**

As for physical constraints, while these can take many forms, I focus only on tactics leveraged by the host government to maintain its territorial control involving, for example, instances where supply deliveries are blocked or confiscated, or humanitarian staff are detained.

One such cited tactic that a government actor can employ is through the looting of aid cargo and other modes of sabotage of humanitarian operations. As in Cameroon, this is true in Myanmar where the military junta forces not only reportedly looted supplies but also co-opted and destroyed humanitarian facilities repeatedly. (OCHA, 2024) For instance, in June of 2024, government forces first looted a UN agency warehouse in Rakhine state that stored food and other essential supplies and then burnt the warehouse to the ground. (Burma News International Online, 2024) Elsewhere, in Syria, one actor reported that after the earthquakes in February 2023 a convoy of 100 trucks carrying aid was detained for seven days where the government only allowed it through after it was agreed that over half the aid would be diverted to the government to distribute at its discretion (Amnesty International, 2023). These are again strategic moves by these governments to prevent aid from reaching its adversaries and, when possible, to direct aid to its supporters.

Government authorities can also stop operations by interrupting activities or by detaining operational aid staff for questioning, often arbitrarily, and even arresting and prosecuting aid staff. This not only has direct repercussions for aid organizations' operations by potentially suspending some portion or all its activities but also often by serving as a deterrent to other organizations from repeating whatever actions the government deemed unpalatable, or in some cases (as in Cameroon) sometimes motivating an organization to cease operations entirely given the risks posed to staff.

On the less extreme end of the spectrum, this was seen in Myanmar as authorities responsible for displaced camp management interrupted operations in Rakhine state and detained staff for questioning under the pretense of

suspected affiliations with non-state armed groups. (OCHA, 2024) A more extreme manifestation of this tactic appears in Syria, where the government not only detained NGO staff but also prosecuted them for providing aid in opposition-controlled zones. (U.S. Department of State, 2022; Ibrahim, 2020)

Aside from co-optation tactics, government authorities also impose their control over infrastructure that enables humanitarian access, for instance through road and border closures, strict checkpoints, communications blackouts, and even restrictions on displacement camps themselves. For example, in Palestine, the Israeli government puts physical barriers to aid delivery in extremely strict checkpoints and disruptions to cargo and missions en route due to severe restrictions on allowing supplies to enter Gaza. (Amnesty International, 2024) In many of these contexts where there is ongoing conflict, like in Ethiopia, the government's road closures can severely impede humanitarian aid delivery and make it more difficult for target beneficiaries of assistance and reach distribution points. (FEWS NET, 2024) Similarly, in Sudan the Ministry of Foreign Affairs prohibited the use of the border crossing into Sudan from eastern Chad at Adré, which was previously the main access point and route for humanitarian supplies entering the Darfur region. (OCHA, 2024) And in Nigeria, the government closed down IDP camps, which subsequently forced IDPs to return to areas where they have more limited freedom of movement and are also sometimes out of reach of humanitarian response due to insecurity. (Protection Cluster, UNHCR, 2024) All of this signals the strategic influence of host governments on aid due to subnational political interests.

## **2.4 Perception influence**

Finally, host governments can also exert their influence through more discreet tactics that aim to strategically influence perceptions to their advantage. They can do this by influencing what information humanitarian actors use to make decisions; by limiting or trying to mask information to humanitarian actors; by instrumentalizing the media to negatively influence their adversaries' opinions of international organizations; and by spreading misinformation and rumors among local populations, so they come to fear or at least become wary of humanitarians.

These are likely the most difficult of the mechanisms to illustrate with supporting evidence, as these are dynamics that occur very much behind the scenes, necessarily out of the public eye given greater discretion is key to the various manifestations of the mechanism's effectiveness. Nonetheless, there are examples of this occurring outside of Cameroon where other governments also try to influence perceptions to their advantage by denying or downplaying either the existence of humanitarian needs or that populations in need are entitled to assistance.

For example, in Indonesia, where there is an irregular civil conflict ongoing between the West Papua National Liberation Army and Indonesian security forces in the West Papua territory or Western New Guinea, over 77,000 IDPs are estimated to have been displaced as of June 2024, many of whom are living amidst forested areas and have urgent needs (HRM, 2024b; OHCHR, 2022). Yet the central Government downplays their need for assistance. They do so by undermining UN agency statements, calling them "biased" and labeling their authors 'so-called experts', and by denying the existence of forcible displacements carried out by the government, attributing displacement to local conditions ranging from natural disasters to "tribal conflicts" and armed criminal activity (Strangio, 2022). What's more, this government has even denied that the region had been colonized—one of the root causes of the conflict spurring the displacement crisis in the first place (Morris, 2024).

Finally, in Nigeria, analysts suggest that requiring some organizations to use armed escorts (from the government forces), as well as often restricting aid to places secured by the state's military, negatively influences perceptions of aid organizations as impartial and neutral actors in the conflict. The reliance on military escorts therefore not only impacted aid organizations through physical constraints but also by influencing the degree to which they were viewed favorably and trusted by NSAGs, which undermined humanitarian access for aid distribution in places outside of government control, as it weakened the perception that aid actors were neutral. It also deterred decision-makers from allocating resources to these areas in the first place. (Humanitarian Action, 2024).



These all represent strategic host state behavior in leveraging aid to advance or protect the government's subnational political interests, and in these cases specifically, as a result of conflict security interests involving calculations of how aid flows might affect their political survival should it reach certain areas within conflict zones.

### **3. Potential for Further Research**

While I discuss the potential for further research in greater detail in the following and final chapter (9), I briefly discuss here one of the main avenues of potential research that stems from the limitations and boundaries of this research.

A primary limitation of this research is it does not fully capture dynamics in states that are classified only as receiving states of international migrants. This was partly intentional, given these states have received far more attention in the broader migration literature than lower-income contexts that I call "crisis-hosting states" here. Indeed, the research agenda of the politics of receiving state obstruction and denial in receiving states is already well under way in migration studies on immigration regulation and control (including punitive measures like detention, separation and deportation), bordering practices, nativist and anti-immigration dynamics, and citizenship and nationalist literatures. It is worth bringing these literatures into conversation with one another.

For instance, there is applicability of the dynamics found in receiving states like Greece, Costa Rica, Iran, Tanzania, or the United States and a state like Cameroon that both receives significant numbers of displaced people and is host to its own displacement crises. However, there are also distinctions between these two kinds of contexts that call for separate treatment as well.

The main distinction is because receiving states also tend to be higher-income, these places tend to administer their own aid responses, and the (typical) absence of "international organization-host government" interaction certainly changes the salient dynamics to an extent that warrants separate theorization, which future research should tease out.

What's more, while receiving states also practice obstruction and denial of assistance in some of the ways elucidated in this work, their behavior might manifest in additional strategies that try to deter inbound migration or forcibly return migrants from their territories. Future research could consider how this sub-set of that universe in which states contending only with receiving significant arrivals of migrant populations engage in other strategic behavior in addition to (and, perhaps, sometimes instead of) the menu of options available to states facing conflict emergencies within their own territories.

## **4. Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrated the generalizability of the mechanisms identified in this research by describing how these four categories of mechanisms appear in a wide range of contexts across the world. I did this by first defining the scope conditions of the mechanisms and argument, clarifying their potential for broader applicability and limitations, and illustrating how each of the four mechanisms emerged elsewhere in sometimes more similar but often quite different contexts too. The examples aimed to demonstrate that the four broad categories of mechanisms have broader generalizability.

While some examples highlighted nearly identical manifestations of the obstruction and denial tactics (e.g. Syria denying access to certain aid organizations and detaining aid workers), others represented the category (e.g. administrative hurdles) while its exact manifestation had not necessarily appeared in Cameroon (e.g. in the South Sudanese government's requirement that NGO be comprised of 80% nationals on staff). Finally, I then discussed one significant limitation of the research and its ensuing avenues for potential for further research.

In the following conclusion, I summarize what has come before in the previous chapters and, importantly, highlight the major contributions that this research makes as well as implications for policy and future research.

## Chapter 9. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated why some crisis regions that are clearly deserving of assistance receive less humanitarian aid than others. In adopting an immersive, comparative ethnographic approach, examining Cameroon's three crisis contexts showed how host governments can strategically influence humanitarian aid to advance their interests. More significantly, I illustrate how the government of Cameroon did so through four mechanisms of aid denial and obstruction: *i. Access denial; ii. Administrative impediments, iii. Physical constraints; and iv. Perception influence.*

The first chapter introduced the dissertation, aiming to synthesize the essential substantive contributions of the research, while Chapter 2 synthesized the key literature and situated the project in this literature, while also laid the foundations for the theoretical expectations of the research. Then followed a discussion of the methodological approach in Chapter 3 and several empirical chapters. The empirical chapters began by justifying the puzzles motivating this research and providing necessary background on the case and relevant humanitarian operational processes (Chapter 4).

I then detailed the relevant subnational political histories and security contexts and linked them to the Cameroon government's incentives in each crisis affected region, which illustrated the main causal explanation of divergences in aid allocation and distribution (Chapter 5). In the final empirical chapters, I showed how these emerged in aid distribution (Chapter 6) and allocation (Chapter 7) in different crisis regions in Cameroon. Finally, I showed how these dynamics extend beyond Cameroon to other African contexts as well as cases in the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania (Chapter 8). I conclude here by articulating the major contributions of this research to relevant academic literatures as well as implications for policy and future research.

# 1. Contributions & Further Research

This research makes several substantive contributions to three primary strands of literature: the politics of aid allocation and distribution, displacement, and political violence literatures, which I elaborate upon in the below sub-sections. Before doing so, I first highlight the principal theoretical contributions as well as the empirical contribution of this under-researched case.

## 1.1 Theoretical & Empirical Contributions

The major theoretical contributions of this work are twofold. First, this research builds greater understanding of how diverging subnational interests of host governments in states where conflict displacement occurs can shape aid response dynamics in different subregions. Second, it elaborates upon existing aid literature by examining both subnational aid allocation *and* distribution in undertheorized contexts where humanitarian assistance is distributed to conflict displacement crises. This work contributes to the aid allocation literature more specifically by adding to the limited but growing literature on these dynamics at subnational levels. It also contributes to the aid distribution literature as it examines understudied parts of aid processes in focusing on later-stages of allocating aid within crises and processes determining the extent to which distribution reaches its targeted beneficiaries. To date, aid distribution is significantly undertheorized, at least in part due to the difficulty in studying it, given the often-opaque nature of the process (Briggs, 2017). I further elaborate on these contributions to the aid literature in the subsequent section.

Secondly, I would also like to highlight how choosing to center this research on Cameroon as a case has made an important contribution that otherwise might go under-appreciated. The empirical chapters make a substantive contribution by producing and recording rich knowledge about Cameroon, a state that does not attract much attention from scholars working on sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps most obviously, I contribute by specifying sub-regional political and security dynamics and history about an understudied state and contribute contextual knowledge relevant to several regions of sub-

Saharan Africa, given Cameroon's position at the intersection of the Sahel and west and central Africa.

What's more, academic research in French-speaking states, especially lower- and middle-income states like those found on the African continent, remain understudied by scholars who publish in the most influential anglophone academic journals. This research aims to shore up some of this gap by detailing and synthesizing the most significant historical and political relationships within the country primarily in the post-independence period. Scholars wishing to pursue further research in Cameroon will hopefully be well-served by such a centralized synthesis of subnational political relations between different regions and the central government.

My hope is that this will serve as a useful starting point for any research conducted in the country (one that I wish had existed prior to my own research), as to date most English references entail detailed histories related to narrow themes or are so encyclopedic that if subnational relations are ever made explicit, they are buried amidst mountains of other contextual content. Working in an understudied state had its advantages, but the dearth of well-synthesized knowledge on the contexts of interest certainly was not one – peer-reviewed or not – and indeed made working in such a place challenging, though rewarding as well. Because Cameroon offers such rich potential for research, and because it has given so much to my own work, it is my aim to reciprocate even if in a small way to elevate it as a viable option to scholars embarking on future projects.<sup>139</sup>

### 1.1.1 Limitations and Further Research

There are many ways that obstruction and denial can take place, and this work was not able to unearth and depict them all, especially because different manifestations of the mechanisms can look different depending on the context, for instance when comparing states that are either conflict-affected or are only receiving states. Future research could elaborate on these dynamics in other contexts to demonstrate the full range of tactics available and elaborate on the

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<sup>139</sup> In this vein, I encourage scholars and other researchers or readers to get in touch to discuss possibilities, as I would be very happy and willing to advise.

linkages to specific outcomes for affected populations. While qualitative approaches would be best positioned to achieve those specifications, quantitative research could also contribute by parsing out to what extent different tactics are prevalent across contexts in cross-national studies or better leverage data on humanitarian aid flows to demonstrate inequalities of response by crisis, region and program type.

Finally, I was unable to unearth clear divergences in host state policies toward crises and populations over time, which certainly occurs in many places and would warrant future study in building understanding of divergent host state behavior toward humanitarian aid.

## **1.2 Contributions to the Politics of Aid Literature**

This research contributes to two broad strands of the existing politics of aid literature. First, because most of the relevant literature has concentrated on national-level aid allocation, this project makes a substantive contribution by examining subnational allocation as well as aid distribution, both of which are undertheorized in the literature. Second, I contribute to this literature by furthering the agenda on the agency of host governments (or, recipient states, as they are called in the development aid literature). Specifically, I elaborate upon their behavior toward aid, expanding upon the menu of options available to them beyond mere (mis)appropriation and leveraging fungibility.

### **1.2.1 Aid Allocation and Distribution**

It may surprise some readers that most of the literature examining the politics of aid allocation has focused on development aid rather than humanitarian aid when there is clearly great potential for divergences. What's more, the literature that does exist on humanitarian aid allocation tends to be limited to disasters rather than emergencies stemming from conflict or violence. This work expands on the current knowledge of the politics of foreign aid by elaborating upon dynamics of an understudied form of aid, which may also have potential application in furthering understanding of development aid dynamics, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

In addition to bolstering research in a different form of aid, the aid allocation literature is also under-theorized, as it has focused mainly on foreign aid at the national level. Scholars have stressed the need to advance research on aid allocation – particularly in the context of conflict. Aid distribution is even more under-theorized sub-nationally, especially of the micro-foundational assumptions about aid processes and flows to beneficiaries (Findley, 2018).

Therefore, I contribute to the literature on aid allocation by offering theory-building insights relevant to humanitarian aid allocation *and* distribution sub-nationally. And I do so by building understanding of aid allocation and distribution processes through micro-foundational empirical work that contributes to this gap by examining why certain regions and crises within a state receiving aid are allocated and distributed more aid than others. I also contribute by specifying mechanisms that the government leverages to influence allocation and distribution processes in conflict-affected contexts.

Finally, although this work is most relevant to aid allocation and distribution and is distinct from the aid effectiveness literature, it has important implications for those working on aid effectiveness that should be of interest to scholars advancing that agenda, as obstruction and denial in aid allocation and distribution are clear intermediaries in ensuring aid effectiveness is optimized.<sup>140</sup>

### 1.2.2 Host Government Behavior

The current literature on recipient or host government behavior toward aid has typically focused on how states misappropriate funds or alleviate their public spending budgets, so they are able to spend more strategically (i.e. the fungibility debate).

But more recent work in this aid literature demonstrates that host governments have greater agency over aid allocation than conventionally assumed, demonstrating their influence in directing aid to regions within the country where their supporters are found (Abdulai & Hulme 2015; Briggs, 2012, 2014; Hodler & Raschky, 2014; Jablonski, 2014) and in restricting assistance

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<sup>140</sup> For more on linking aid allocation to aid effectiveness, see Bermeo, 2021.

when they fear it poses a credible threat to their political survival in bolstering their opponents (Bush, 2015; Chaudhry & Heiss, 2021; Dupuy, Ron & Prakash, 2016). And even more recent work that looks at host state behavior specifically in humanitarian aid has thus far only studied instances of host states rejecting offers of international assistance, attributing this behavior to reputational incentives and the host state's desire to signal competence (Carnegie and Dolan, 2021; Grossman, 2021).

Therefore, this work demonstrates that host governments receiving aid have a much greater repertoire to draw from when considering how to leverage aid flows to their advantage than mere misappropriation and fungibility – even when flows remain under the control of aid organizations. It also contributes by examining host government behavior and agency in relation to humanitarian aid in instances where it has accepted international assistance and how it does so in diverging ways at subnational levels.

### 1.2.3 Limitations and Further Research

This research examined a case that can be classified as both a host state to displacement emergencies where the source of displacement is conflict or violence taking place within the state's territory (i.e. the Lake Chad Basin and Anglophone Crises) and a receiving state of international migrants (i.e. CAR & Nigerian refugees, in addition to economic migrants not considered in this work). This variation was crucial in identifying the main puzzles and elucidated important dynamics that are generalizable in a wide range of contexts across the globe.

However, a limitation of this research is it does not fully capture dynamics in states that are classified only as receiving states of international migrants. Although receiving states exhibit some of the tactics elucidated in this work, as they are part of the broader universe of cases of states that are impacted by displacement, they also warrant separate consideration as a sub-set of that universe in which states contending only with receiving significant arrivals of migrant populations engage in other strategic behavior in addition to (and, perhaps, sometimes instead of) the menu of options available to states facing conflict emergencies within their own territories.



Therefore, even if there can be applicability of some of the dynamics found in Cameroon in receiving states like Greece, Costa Rica, Iran, Tanzania, or the United States, there are also distinctions between these two kinds of contexts that call for separate treatment as well. The research agenda of the politics of receiving state obstruction and denial in receiving states is already well under way in migration studies on immigration regulation and control (including punitive measures like detention, separation and deportation), bordering practices, nativist and anti-immigration dynamics, and citizenship and nationalist literatures. Nonetheless, these topics have been treated as a strand of migration policy literature, which has not always been brought into conversation with the contentious politics literature. Further research could aim to better incorporate this interdisciplinary social science literature with the order, conflict and violence literature. Others could also continue to explore dynamics in these contexts relevant to mechanisms of obstruction and denial of aid to migrant populations and compare them to states hosting ongoing conflict emergencies to identify the extent to which their tactics differ or align. Other directions could also examine how obstruction and denial relates to receiving states shirking responsibilities to help vulnerable migrant populations in need.

### **1.3 Political Violence Literature**

While this research perhaps most clearly makes significant contributions to the politics of aid literature, it also endeavors to build knowledge relevant to key political violence themes and dynamics as well. Significantly, political violence scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on more organized forms of violence like civil wars and violent extremist organizations rather than more diffuse, indirect forms of violence and negative peace. This research aims to shore up gaps by examining instances where aid and political violence intersect most obviously in elucidating how aid allocation and distribution vary in different conflict contexts and how a state actor can instrumentalize aid to deprive certain populations while it facilitates response to others. This has clear implications for improved understanding of state behavior in conflict contexts by building understanding of states' strategic engagement with humanitarian resources and how this might relate to its calculations regarding its adversaries. Less obviously,

aid obstruction and denial of humanitarian aid can (and should) also be conceived as a less direct form of violence, given the very real and often dire consequences this has for populations in need.

Additionally, the literature on the legacies of civil war has too often focused on either macro-level economic consequences or micro-level political and socio-economic outcomes typically at the individual level (Davenport et al., 2019). In that recent review article, the authors urged conflict scholars to examine consequences at the meso-level for different groups over longer time-horizons, which this research certainly contributes to when considering the link between contemporary dynamics in Cameroon and the Bamiléké War that took place from 1955 to 1960 and the state violence in the northern regions in the 1980s. This work can be understood as a study of the legacies of previous sub-state conflict and violence from several decades prior.

What's more, it is worth quoting Blattman and Miguel's (2010) conclusion that: "social and institutional legacies of conflict are arguably the most important but least understood of all war impacts". It was my hope from the outset that this project would contribute in some way to better understanding some of these legacies, which I believe I achieved in specifying the ways in which state institutions engage in mechanisms of obstruction and denial selectively, and, in this case, toward populations in the west of Cameroon that have previously demonstrated opposition and openly rebelled in a violent civil war. While the dynamics that this work elucidates in the western regions (of the West and Littoral especially) entail events from contemporary times, they can clearly be understood as legacies of the previous Bamiléké Civil War as specified in the argument applied to the puzzle of aid allocation.

Finally, I also contribute broadly to the political violence literature by elaborating on substate conflict dynamics from the understudied perspective of humanitarian actors, both local and international. This work also contributes substantively by elucidating how state behavior can vary in different irregular conflicts and in elaborating upon dynamics of contentious politics between the state, migrants, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.

### 1.3.1 Limitations and Further Research

One limitation of this research relates to time in that I was only able to thoroughly study the last decade of the crises in Cameroon when documentation and memories of dynamics were more readily available. Granted, two of three crises had not explicitly emerged in the previous decade, so this was mostly irrelevant to those contexts. Nonetheless, it surely would have been helpful to include the prior decade during which response to CAR refugees was ongoing, as it would have strengthened the work to have had greater insight into a more comprehensive evolution of response dynamics of the earlier period of the crisis and prior civil war. This could have better contributed to my understanding of response dynamics over time. I also could have contributed to the previously mentioned research agenda on longer-term legacies of conflict for groups of people rather than state-level or individual outcomes and impacts, another understudied strand of the conflict literature. Future research should aim whenever possible to capture those longer time-horizons, when possible, as they surely hold potential for variation worthy of explanation.

## 1.4 Displacement & Conflict Literature

It should be noted that this project was initially motivated by a gap in the literature relating displacement with conflict and violence that, until more recently, has typically examined refugees as opposed to accounting for other migrant groups and their interactions (e.g. Davenport et al. 2003; Moore & Shellman, 2007; Muggah, 2006). Displaced groups other than refugees also warrant attention, especially given they represent a larger share of migrants than refugees do globally.<sup>141</sup> More recent scholarship now expands the scope of this literature to include IDPs (e.g. Bohnet, Cottier & Hug, 2018; Hartman et al., 2021; Steele, 2017; 2019) and returnees (e.g. Ghosn et al. 2021; Schwartz, 2018; 2019).

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<sup>141</sup> For instance, IDPs make up a much larger share of global displacement than refugees: in 2000, there were 21 million IDPs versus 14 million refugees, and 71.2 million IDPs to 35.3 million refugees in 2022 (IOM, 2020; 2024).

This project specifically aimed to work on a context that involved displacement crises where both refugees and IDPs were present, not only to compare dynamics between these different populations, but also given clear potential for disparate behavior among relevant actors in the different conflict situations these populations imply. This points to an important contribution of this work in demonstrating how the politics of delivering humanitarian aid to situations involving refugees compared to certain kinds of IDPs can sometimes differ dramatically.

#### 1.4.1 Limitations and Further Research

Much of the earlier work examining displaced populations in conflict contexts tended to focus on displaced groups as vectors of insecurity and instability (Lischer, 2005; McCommon, 1989; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Zolberg, Suhrke & Aguayo, 1989). More recent research has added nuance to this depiction in showing that while displaced populations may have associations with violent outcomes (Bohnet, Cottier & Hug, 2018; Fisk, 2014; 2018; 2019), they are not necessarily vectors of violence and are indeed more often victims (Choi & Salehyan, 2013; Fisk, 2018; Savun & Gineste, 2019) and generally unassociated with a rise in terrorism in states hosting them (Bove & Böhmelt, 2016). While certainly there are instances where associations are valid, that this is assumed to apply to entire populations of people is clearly problematic.

This research demonstrated dynamics centering aid and state actors who, by way of either successfully or unsuccessfully delivering aid to populations, can condition the decisions of individual displaced people. Put simply, displaced populations that experience aid obstruction and denial may have greater incentives to join non-state armed groups to no fault of their own. While this work was unable to parse out these dynamics, it does specify necessary varying conditions to study the links between displaced populations and conflict and violence. Importantly, it also points to the notion that whatever association does exist between conflict and violence and displaced populations could be more conditioned by the agency of other actors, the host government in this case. Future research could and should examine this further.

Finally, this research was also unable to tease out significant divergences in government and aid actor response toward different populations of refugees in different crises or over time within crises, when this is bound to occur in other settings. Further research could examine this, as well as consider potential variation relating to other groups like returnees, economic migrants, and disaster or climate displaced populations. That research could examine the mechanisms of obstruction and denial outlined in this work or build upon these dynamics by unearthing other divergences in response separate from host government obstruction and denial of aid. Another fruitful avenue to pursue lies in specifying facilitation mechanisms and how these might emerge differently in disparate crisis or conflict contexts as well as apply differently to various populations.

## **2. Policy implications**

Beyond contributions to the academic literature, this research has significant policy implications. Many aid organization staff will already be aware of the mechanisms identified in this research – as they were the main participants who informed this work. Along with chronically limited funding, access issues remain their primary obstacle to effectively achieving their missions and targets in reaching populations in need. However, it is clear from this research as well that there is a disparity in knowledge between international and local humanitarians who are differently aware of various constraints and barriers to access. This research has potential to bridge this divide and potentially help relations between these different actors, especially given some local humanitarians explicitly said they thought disparities in response were the result of international aid organization neglect as opposed to government obstruction and denial. This perception is damaging to these actors' relationships, which could eventually constitute other barriers to response if local actors become wary of international actors that they do not view as allies. It would therefore behoove international aid organizations to take this risk into account and consider a more effective communications strategy with potential and current partner organizations.

In shedding light on the ways in which host governments wield their influence in obstructing and denying aid in humanitarian situations, this work is clearly critical of host governments. In doing so, it is my hope that this will give greater leverage to aid organizations and donor states when negotiating access if those actors are more aware of the variety of ways in which a host government can manipulate allocation and distribution, especially beyond the most obvious manifestations. For example, while many humanitarians are certainly aware of different manifestations of access denial, administrative barriers, and physical constraints, perception influence tactics operate more subtly and many aid workers were unaware of that possibility. Further, some of the former seemingly obvious tactics might only be so to certain kinds of aid actors or staff at different levels.

For instance, access denial writ-large is something organizational leaders would be directly involved with, but even middle-management might not be totally aware of the details, much less implementing staff on the ground. Conversely, physical constraints and on-the-ground administrative barriers are more likely to pose issues for implementing partners (e.g. local NGOs) and field staff, who surely report back to upper-level management and their contracting agencies, but certainly details are lost in transmission. The point is that the understanding of these dynamics within aid organizations is inconsistent, and building knowledge more consistently could have benefits in making operations and their many different moving parts operate more harmoniously when they are working with the same baseline knowledge and assumptions.

This said, of course, some of this information certainly has security implications, and aid organization leaders must make delicate decisions over what information is shared. While widely sharing the details of access negotiations with state leaders is unlikely to occur (and clearly inadvisable given the risks this would pose to the viability of a response), it does appear that the status quo of poor communication and synergy with local aid organizations has its risks for the acceptability of international aid organizations in certain regions in the mid-term if not the long-term. International aid leaders could at the very least consider ways to improve the lines of communication with local actors without sharing confidential information.

What's more, greater awareness among all kinds of aid organizations and actors of these modes of obstruction and denial would hopefully motivate improved monitoring of these modes of influence. This could better equip aid organizations to deflect at least some obstruction and denial efforts to protect the integrity of allocation decisions and any other portions of the aid response process under their control.

### 3. Conclusion

The dynamics of humanitarian access and host government obstruction and denial of aid that this work illustrated are symptomatic of broader distributive politics. While any state may engage in these politics, those who have little familiarity with more authoritarian settings may not appreciate the degree to which clientelism and discrimination can permeate every aspect of life in those contexts.

Virtually everyone I interacted with in Cameroon, even in the Centre, had a story of struggling (or indeed failing) to advance and achieve what they really desired by virtue of lacking the right elite connections — from soldiers to teachers to businesspeople to engineers to rideshare drivers, and even to children. When considering how humanitarian aid can be better implemented, particularly in avoiding access obstruction and denial, it can seem especially hopeless in more authoritarian contexts where clientelism and distributive politics are so pronounced.

And yet, some of those who should have the least hope, as they are among the most affected by discrimination and denial of assistance, are also the most hopeful. As one Cameroonian from the western regions told me:

*I want to make a life for myself. I am saving up now, because the dream is to have a nice life with a house and land and have children, of course. But then again, why have children in such a place? Why have a child when that's another mouth to feed who will become just like you in the same situation when there are no opportunities for him to make a better life? As a father, you do not want to have a child and see him 30 years later doing the exact same thing as you...you want to see advancement*

*for your children and the next generations...and that just does not happen here.*

*And yet, we keep fighting, because I may not see the change I wish to see in my country, but my hope is my children will. As we say in Cameroon, hope is what gives us reason to live — l'espoir fait vivre.*

Those of us working in fields related to aid therefore should not grow discouraged in the face of formidable obstacles that can seem insurmountable. Highlighting these obstructive dynamics should motivate rather than discourage efforts to rectify significant disparities in humanitarian aid allocation and distribution. Whether in furthering this research agenda by building understanding of dynamics and possible solutions, or through advocacy and policy initiatives, if those who have suffered from these oppressive and discriminatory politics can maintain a hopeful outlook, it behooves the rest of us to as well.



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