
the

Humanitarian Leader

Evaluating humanitarian projects in Cameroon: When local consultants try to redefine North-South asymmetries

JEAN ÉMILE MBA



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Abstract

Since 2013, Cameroon has been a priority area for humanitarian action, and international expertise has long been used to evaluate and monitor humanitarian projects in this country. However, COVID-19 imposed restrictions on international mobility, causing access issues for outside experts, a process that had already begun prior to the pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 merely exacerbated the immobility of international aid agencies that first started with the security crisis. So, while these agencies have long been reluctant to hand over the evaluation of humanitarian projects to local experts, the combination of security and health crisis has forced them to overcome this reluctance. Using the 'window of opportunity' model (Kingdon, 1984), this article shows how Cameroonian experts have benefited from the stagnation and immobility of international expertise in the country to take on the task of evaluating humanitarian projects. This repositioning in favour of local expertise has contributed to a redefinition of the power asymmetries between the Global North and South and of the relations of domination between national and international experts.

Leadership relevance

This paper discusses the unique 'window of opportunity' presented by the twin crises of COVID-19 and the disintegrating security situation in Cameroon for local experts to take on the work of monitoring and evaluation in humanitarian projects. The author contends that the possibilities for genuine localisation that have stemmed from this should become legitimised, institutionalised and embedded in the everyday practice of INGOs, and calls upon leaders within African governments, the public and private sectors, and academia to reflect on and implement a substantial, real and lasting humanitarian transition away from the use of international experts in monitoring and evaluating African humanitarian projects.

Introduction

Many humanitarian organisations have not yet adopted a culture of academic research, though one of the biggest challenges that the sector faces today is the need to produce scientific knowledge about international solidarity projects to develop and support evidence-based interventions. Some organisations are slowly starting to become aware of this. When they have not set up their own research units¹, analysis departments², think tanks³ or foundations⁴, they develop partnerships with other think tanks⁵ or scientific journals⁶. In Cameroon, such cooperation projects between researchers and humanitarians are on the increase. The former recognise the latter's capacity for action. The latter recognise the scientific rigour of the former.

That mutual recognition encourages them to work together, to “move from mistrust to efficiency” (Ridde, 2021). This cooperation has long been fostered by international experts performing humanitarian evaluations, studies and research in the Global South. However, the travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19 have contributed to the immobility of this expertise, though it is also important to emphasise that in Cameroon this immobility is not new. The lack of international access predates the pandemic, which merely exacerbated a process that had already begun in Cameroon's high-risk security zones, where foreigners are strongly discouraged from travelling. Cameroon's stability was vaunted until 2013, but it is now suffering from a combination of security and humanitarian crises caused by armed groups and inter-community conflicts. These are multidimensional crises, possibly linked to other factors like climate change, epidemics, and food insecurity. In such a weakened country, whose sovereignty is fragmented by multiple allegiances, Westphalian state-centrism is challenged.

Nevertheless, for many years, international aid organisations were reluctant to transfer the management of humanitarian project evaluations to local stakeholders, although the health and security crises have pushed them to overcome this reluctance. It is also true that in many cases international experts continue to lead the assessment of these projects in Africa from afar, although the INGOS—having repatriated most of their staff—were

still forced to localise many of their monitoring and evaluation activities in order to cope with the mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

So, how did a crisis that should have alarmed the African continent suddenly become an opportunity to strengthen local expertise? Drawing on John Kingdon's ‘window of opportunity’ model (Kingdon, 1984), this article shows how security and health crises have contributed to changes in humanitarian aid evaluation practices, and begun to rebalance the relationship between national and international consultants, using the case of Cameroon as an example. But before we do, it is necessary to take a closer look at the issue at the heart of the research.

How did a crisis that should have alarmed the African continent suddenly become an opportunity to strengthen local expertise?

Health and safety: a dual context

The emergence of the first case of COVID-19 in China was the start of a wide range of pandemic response measures. In a number of countries, the public health crisis led to restrictions on international mobility. In Cameroon, a “government response strategy” was put in place as a public policy to contain the pandemic. In the Cameroonian Prime Minister's special declaration of 17 March 2020, the government issued several measures, including “the closure of land, air and sea borders” and the suspension of “the issuing of entry visas to Cameroon at the various airports”. Similarly, all the Schengen countries, the United States and Canada closed their borders (*New York Times*, 2020). On 4 September 2020, the European Commission adopted a proposal for recommendations for a coordinated approach to restrictive measures on mobility (Council of Europe, 2020). This public action was aimed at achieving greater policy coherence to contain the crisis and avoid member states adopting unilateral and fragmented measures.

Yet, the health crisis that began in March 2020 has had varying degrees of consensus about its severity as a global public health problem, and its inclusion on government agendas appears to be a process riddled with differing representations, meanings, and signifiers that were specific only to the stakeholders involved. Although some geographical areas of the world saw it as a global threat with cataclysmic consequences, others, on the contrary, saw it as an opportunity to reap some benefits. Fred Eboko and Sina Schlimmer (2020) point out that faced with fear of an apocalyptic collapse of African economies, Africa has emerged with a strong capacity for resilience. However, in Europe, a recent study has shown that these

¹ For example, the Research Unit on Humanitarian Issues and Practices of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Switzerland was set up in 2006 (<http://www.msf-ureph.ch/fr>)

² See Analysis Department of Médecins Sans Frontières - Belgium (<https://msfanalysis.org>)

³ See the Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (CRASH), Médecins Sans Frontières - France (<https://www.msfrash.org/fr>)

⁴ See the French Red Cross Foundation, dedicated to promoting scientific knowledge, ethical reflection and innovation (<https://www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr>)

⁵ See the Observatoire des questions humanitaires of the Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS) Groupe URD (<https://www.urd.org/fr/le-groupe-urd>)

⁶ See Alternatives Humanitaires (<https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr>)

restrictive measures have had more costs than benefits, particularly in terms of disrupting business travel (Martin and Rivard, 2020), with restrictions leading to not only substantial economic losses but also to standstill among international experts. In any case, because of these measures, Global North aid organisations in Cameroon were left to either cancel some activities in the country, or to start using local expertise.

However, there is another reason that explains the disappearance of international expertise in Cameroon—the security crisis. The pandemic undeniably had an accelerating effect on a series of realities already present in recent years (Vielajus and Bonis-Charancle, 2020). Well before the health crisis triggered by COVID-19, Cameroon was already being presented by certain diplomatic missions as a ‘red country’. In other words, it was a risk because of the security crises it had been experiencing since 2013: the crises caused by terrorist attacks by the Boko-Haram group in the far north of the country, incursions by Central African rebels in the east of the country and recent secessionist movements in the south and north-west regions. The combination of these armed conflicts had already placed Cameroon as a high-risk country for foreigners. We all remember the kidnapping of the French Moulin-Fournier family in Waza in the far north of the country on 19 February 2013 (Leduc, 2013), or the kidnapping of the ten Chinese workers in May 2014 in Dabanga (*Le Monde*, 2014). Events such as these are becoming more and more frequent and are causing anxiety among people in the West—hence the inclusion of six regions of the country on the security map of the French embassy in Cameroon, as areas not recommended for foreigners⁷. Understanding the health and security context in Cameroon provides a better understanding of the issues involved and leads to a conceptual and operational framework for this research.

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The research: concept and plan

From a public policy perspective, monitoring and evaluation is a scientific approach that systematically and objectively examines the process, product or the effects of a public policy or a program. Evaluation then assesses public interventions to produce knowledge that is credible, relevant and useful for the implementation of

⁷ See: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/conseils-aux-voyageurs/conseils-par-pays-destination/cameroun/>. Accessed on 21 April 2022.

public policies, based on defined criteria. Evaluation is a source of information that can be used before a decision is taken (ex-ante evaluation), during the implementation of a program (in itinere or concurrent evaluation) or after a few years (ex post evaluation) (Steve, 2010). However, the concept of ‘evaluation of humanitarian projects’, as understood in this paper, refers to activities commissioned by UN agencies and humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which consist of measuring the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact of humanitarian projects.

Evaluations of humanitarian projects have already been at the centre of a great deal of discussion. While some authors have looked at the conflicts of interest observed in the conduct of evaluations (Pérouse de Montclos, 2011), others have focused mainly on their implementation and how they impacted a crisis (Rot-Münstermann, 2021), particularly with the contribution of new technologies (Ndenga, 2021). Some studies explain how evaluation methodology and approaches have been adapted to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 (La Rovere, Smith and Felloni, 2021) and how this new situation has allowed for some flexibility and innovation in order to maintain minimum standards of quality and accountability (Mivo Ndoubé and Onana, 2021). Without being exhaustive, this literature seems more expert than that from the social sciences, except for a rare work by Camille Laporte (2015), approaching evaluation as a policy object of development assistance. Certainly, some research has attempted to show the role of consultants in evaluating public policies as a form of emerging professional field (Matyjasik, 2010), but without ever addressing consultants from the Global South.

It is to shed light on these grey areas that this research focuses on these stakeholders, who are still marginal in the academic literature. These are local consultants, still referred to as local experts, who took advantage of the ‘window of opportunity’ opened by the health and security crises in Cameroon as a way of localising evaluation practices. This research aims to show that these two crises have contributed to the evolution of evaluation practices, leading to the repositioning of local expertise (national consultants), despite the catastrophes predicted to befall Africa. This evolution of practices, as a way of redefining power dynamics, refers to changes in the way project evaluations are conducted in times of crisis. The new context created by the security crises, which has been further amplified by the arrival of COVID-19, deeply transformed the process of these evaluations. These changes are of several kinds: the loosening of criteria for calls for tenders; the reconfiguration of strategies to gain access to the field; and the circumvention and reorientation of evaluation approaches, particularly with the introduction of subcontracting systems. These new practices have contributed to a relative redefinition of North-South asymmetries. In other words, they have helped to rebalance the structure of relations between national and international consultants and to deconstruct

the relations of domination that govern them. What we can see here is a clear desire on the part of the national consultants to try to redress these asymmetries with their international counterparts. The crises seem to have given them greater prominence because of their privileged access to the fields of study.

This research aims to show that these two crises have contributed to the evolution of evaluation practices, leading to the repositioning of local expertise.

By taking on this work, local stakeholders are expressing a desire for empowerment and independence. This process of empowerment is not simply an approach based on involving stakeholders in the implementation of humanitarian projects, it is a deep desire to 'localise' the evaluation of humanitarian projects. This would enable local stakeholders to achieve greater functional and operational autonomy, breaking away from dependence on the Global North. François Audet (2022) describes 'localisation' as "a collective process in the humanitarian ecosystem which aims to put local stakeholders at the centre of local decision-making processes". Some prefer to refer to this 'localisation' as 'humanitarian transition', defined as an "obligatory transition between a humanitarian paradigm that is running out of steam and a new aid system that is more in line with the concepts of human development, sustainable development and social change" (Mattei and Troit, 2016).

While these two concepts are being interchangeably used, in practice this leads to a great deal of confusion. 'Humanitarian transition' appears to be the most accomplished form of localisation. It expresses the idea that local stakeholders should have clear autonomy, taking the form of a 'de-Westernisation' of humanitarian aid. In other words, it is a process that consists of taking humanitarian aid out of Western hands in order to strengthen the role of local stakeholders (Bazin, Fry and Levasseur, 2010). However, as local consultants are still trying to balance power with their Western counterparts in Cameroon, this research leans more into the concept of localisation, which seems to cover practices aimed at including local populations and local stakeholders in the decision-making process. This practice implies a collaboration with the Global North, but does not necessarily lead to autonomy, nor does it necessarily eliminate the logic of domination with regard to certain forms of subcontracting that are still being perpetuated.

In this scenario, the 'window of opportunity' expresses the amount of time that local consultants have to put a subject on the agenda or advance a cause, in order to start a 'humanitarian transition' enabling them to supplant their counterparts from the Global North.

Methodology

The population that participated in this research was composed of 30 Cameroonian consultants with varied professional backgrounds who had carried out at least one evaluation of a humanitarian project either in the context of COVID-19 or prior to the pandemic. Two consultants were mobilised from the outset to help identify other consultants, using the non-probability snowball sampling method of scientific research. Between February and May 2022, 30 one-to-one telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews were held with these national consultants. Most of the data used for this research came from these interviews, which were cross-referenced with data from around thirty humanitarian project managers who were also interviewed.

Loosening procedures

Prior to the twin crises, consultants were often recruited from international humanitarian organisations' headquarters and were then deployed to Cameroon to directly assess projects. But the health and safety crisis and the impossibility for international stakeholders to travel seems to have transformed these procedures. The conditions of eligibility in calls for tenders for the evaluation of humanitarian projects seem to have been loosened. Negotiations by mutual agreement or through intermediaries, or even by direct recommendation has emerged. Even when calls for tenders were issued, informal arrangements could be made to find another local consultant. These are the kinds of changes that have been observed during the pandemic in terms of organisations' attitudes, needs, and approaches. These changes varied from organisation to organisation and helped to speed up the relaxation of cumbersome procedures.

In the past, calls for tenders were published on the organisations' websites, but in a crisis context, consultants were often directly contacted, simplifying the procedure, and making it more flexible for local stakeholders. This easing of procedures means that international humanitarian organisations based in Cameroon must now contact their head offices so that they can directly identify local consultants, whereas in the past these head offices used to issue international calls for tenders, putting all candidates in competition. As one Cameroonian consultant said: "In a normal context, local experts would never have found themselves on shortlists. Today, they are gaining considerable market share, which traditionally eluded them, often finding it difficult to be shortlisted."⁸ International organisations have had to review their conditions to make it easier for local firms to compete. In the past, these calls for tender might require the head of mission to have experience of five similar assignments in three different countries and on two different continents.

⁸ Interview with a consultant from the Centre de Recherche d'Études Politiques et Stratégiques (CREPS) at the University of Yaoundé 2 on 12 March 2022 in Yaoundé.

This level of requirement used to systematically disqualify the local consultants, even when they could provide proof of five years' professional experience in their own country. The benchmark also appeared to be highly discriminatory against professionals from the Global South. One of the strategies used by local firms to get round this was to line up heads of missions from other organisations with proven CVs.

Greater flexibility in procedures contributes to the reduction of North-South inequalities and the promotion of local autonomy. Cameroon does not seem to be the only country to have adopted this autonomous, sovereigntist humanitarian approach. Other countries in the Global South have long been calling for a form of 'humanitarian sovereignty' to empower themselves and 'free their systems' from dependence on foreign aid. While international humanitarian aid has until now perpetuated asymmetries of power, a transition towards humanitarian sovereignty would help to reduce inequalities between stakeholders. In a recent study based in the Republic of Vanuatu, the authors (Savard, Audet and Leroux, 2020) show how the archipelago relied on its own human resources after expatriates left in the aftermath of Cyclone Harold in April 2020 and the onset of COVID-19: "Having repatriated the majority of their staff to countries in the Global North, many international NGOs were forced to localise their aid to cope with the restrictions on mobility imposed by the pandemic". This research shows how, following the damage caused by Harold and the closure of borders, emergency relief was deployed without foreign aid, mainly through local associations, in a context where humanitarian interventions were still largely led by foreign international agencies. This example of the importance of local expertise in crisis situations can no doubt be transferred to Cameroon. The loosening of procedures has certainly helped to give local consultants a 'more important' role, but it has also enabled the emergence of new subcontracting practices between stakeholders in the North and South, and given rise to new power dynamics within local NGO and consultancies.

While international humanitarian aid has until now perpetuated asymmetries of power, a transition towards humanitarian sovereignty would help to reduce inequalities between stakeholders.

Reproducing the logic of domination through subcontracting

Following the example of Western consultants, subcontracting refers here to an operation in which the ordering party entrusts consultants with the responsibility of carrying out evaluation missions for projects that

they no longer have the capacity to execute. Since 2013, with the outbreak of the security crises, and continuing through to the health crisis of 2020, the positioning of local Cameroonian expertise has certainly progressed, but it remains under the regime of subcontracting systems, as these new markets were opened to nationals on the recommendation of Western experts, who still control the system from afar.

Nevertheless, as the dual crises continued, there was an explosion of expressions of interest from local experts. Three cases illustrate this situation. The first involves subcontracting between experts from the French firm F3E and those from the Cameroonian firm Multipolaire. Before the health crisis, the F3E network was already in the habit of carrying out study missions in Chad, the Central African Republic and Cameroon. Their studies, which required a specialised expertise, were mainly carried out by two consultants from the University of Bordeaux Montaigne⁹ and the University of Perpignan¹⁰. These were projects led by the NGOs Noé and AfrONet under the Facility for Sectoral Innovation for NGOs (FISONG) funded by the French Development Agency (AFD). However, in 2022, because of travel restrictions, the French consultancy F3E¹¹ delegated the conduct of their expert missions to the Cameroonian consultancy Multipolaire, as part of a project implemented by the French NGO Noé et Man & Nature¹² in Cameroon. Yet in this project, the leadership remained with the overseas consultants.

The second case illustrates a subcontracting practice between a Cameroonian consultant teaching at the University of Maroua in the Far North Region of Cameroon and a British consultancy firm, Jigsaw Consult¹³, which was selected to carry out the final evaluation of two education programs managed by Plan International Ireland between 2017 and 2021. The aim of the first program, entitled 'Education, Quality, Inclusive, Participative (EQUIP) program', was to guarantee the right to education for all children in Burkina Faso, Guinea-Conakry, Guinea-Bissau and Mali. The second, the Humanitarian Programme Plan (HPP), was designed to meet the needs of children affected by conflict and protracted crises in the region of the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon) and the Central African Republic. Both programs represented a significant, long-term investment funded by Irish Aid and Plan International Ireland. Due to the health crisis and the restrictions on international mobility, the Jigsaw Consult team was no longer able to travel and recruited

⁹ Elisabeth Hofmann, development socio-economist, lecturer and researcher at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne.

¹⁰ Karine Laroche, an agricultural engineer, brings her expertise to gender and agriculture, and in gender-sensitive studies of agricultural value chains and feasibility.

¹¹ The F3E network brings together a number of major players in the field of international cooperation and solidarity in France.

¹² Noé is a French non-profit association for the protection of nature, founded in 2001 by Arnaud Greth. The Noé association merged with the Man and Nature association, whose projects now form the Filières pro-biodiversité mission, with projects in Ghana, Chad and Cameroon. See <https://noe.org/histoire-noe>.

¹³ Jigsaw Consult Ltd is a firm registered in England and Wales.

a local consultant¹⁴ in April 2021. Jigsaw was limited to providing remote supervision of the project, but, as stated in this paragraph from the final report of the evaluation it was not a deliberate choice:

“A mixed approach was applied, with remote in-country data collection. This two-tiered approach involved four “targeted countries” (Burkina Faso and Guinea Bissau for EQuIP; Cameroon and Niger for HPP), in which research consultants residing in the four target countries carried out face-to-face data collection, while remote data collection was carried out by the Jigsaw Consult team from the UK, due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions” (Jigsaw Consult, 2021: 7-8).

In a crisis context, ‘localising’ evaluation activities are used as a last resort.

This shows us that, in a crisis context, ‘localising’ evaluation activities are used as a last resort. As Marie-Claude Savard, François Audet and Marie-Pierre Leroux (2020) explain, it demonstrates the lack of willingness from international stakeholders to relinquish control of the interventions to local stakeholders. While local consultants expected greater autonomy, their colleagues in the Global North reinforced the remote control of these evaluations.

Finally, the third case shows a subcontracting system in the context of the ‘Third Party’ evaluations carried out by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). UNICEF usually organises supervision missions for the funding it has granted to different NGOs. Since 2021 and because of restrictions related to COVID-19, the UN has subcontracted some of these evaluations to the Cameroon Association for the Development of Evaluation (CaDEA). These partnerships, which used to be for UN experts only, are now being extended to local experts, as this consultant explains:

“Local expertise is in no way inferior to Global North expertise, which only has the advantage of being better supervised. The intrinsic expertise isn’t the problem, it’s the working conditions and the critical mass that make the difference. In the Global North, it’s easy to identify two or three colleagues to work with. Here, it’s more difficult because we have so little expertise. When I’m looking for experts to carry out the economic analysis of a project, I can assure you that I don’t find them easily, because the handful

that do exist are already busy working for the United Nations, the government or international NGOs”¹⁵.

Cooperation between international organisations and those in the Global South overcomes a recognised obstacle: access to the field. But it also means that international standards can be adapted to benefit the local stakeholders involved.

Cooperation between international organisations and those in the Global South overcomes a recognised obstacle: access to the field. But it also means that international standards can be adapted to benefit the local stakeholders involved. The networking of Multipolaire and Arc Audit & Consulting (AAC) within the RFE and the Russell Bedford International Network shows us a good example of this and also helps to build the local workforce. AAC, for example, has recently aligned itself with the American International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) for financial audits, with the intention of entering a fruitful collaboration with the ‘big four’, as can be seen from the following comment:

“Some NGOs arrive in Cameroon with foreign firms already recommended by their head office. They will be told to work with ‘big four’ international firms such as KPMG, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), Ernst & Young or Deloitte. Some of these firms have offices in Cameroon, a pivotal country in Central Africa, where expatriates and Cameroonians work together. That is why we at AAC had to be part of these networks, so that we had a certain standard, a view, so that we could present our statements in the same formats as the London and Paris firms”¹⁶.

Because of the security and health situation, which has led to the immobilisation of international teams, Cameroonian experts are increasingly developing networks with their counterparts in the Global North. This reinforcement of long-distance collaboration has largely promoted the subcontracting approach, which is certainly mutually beneficial between stakeholders in the North and South, but which does not support and encourage real autonomy for local stakeholders. To bypass this system of power relations, several Cameroonian companies, research centres and individual consultants have positioned themselves within international networks based on cost-benefit equations with the intention of redefining North-South asymmetries.

¹⁴ Lecturer at the University of Maroua, Cameroon.

¹⁵ Interview conducted by telephone on 31 March 2022, with a consultant from Multipolaire and current President of the Réseau Francophone de l’Évaluation (RFE).

¹⁶ Telephone interview with an executive from AAC, 30 March 2022.

Attempts to redefine North-South asymmetries

Despite the interdependencies that seem to remain, local consultants want to take further advantage of the ‘window of opportunity’ that has opened up. Unfortunately, this window appears to be very small. Indeed, the ‘windows of opportunity’ opened with the security and health crises, are limited in time, given their context and contingency. This period is equivalent to the three “streams” described by Kingdon: facilitating the meeting of a public problem (problem stream), a solution to the problem (policy stream) and a favourable political context in which to define an agenda and the rules of the game (political stream). The first “stream” corresponds to the period during which the security and health crises became urgent concerns (problem stream). During that specific time, “people are convinced that something can be done to improve the situation” (John Kingdon, 1984). The second “stream” comes into play when solutions are being found to the problems (policy stream). The final “stream” represents the way in which the authority manages and addresses the problem through rules and a plan (political stream).

Pauline Ravinet (2019) also explains that when these three streams come together, ‘windows of opportunity’ open. But they close just as quickly when the events that caused them to open are no longer relevant. Here, COVID-19 as an international public health problem and the different security crises have created a ‘window of opportunity’ in Africa, which has been seized upon by national consultants. The latter are increasingly questioning humanitarian aid, perceiving it as a Western expression of international solidarity. The so-called ‘aid recipient countries’ are showing a growing desire for more autonomy in the management of the activities that affect their populations. It seems like they are no longer willing to depend on international aid that they consider far removed from the concept of partnership, too asymmetrical and not in the interests of development and poverty reduction.

This may well be the case in Cameroon, where the country is now seeking to establish itself as a key player in humanitarian operations. This illustrates the state’s desire for more autonomy in controlling the actions that will affect its population, as seen in the Anglophone crisis, with the CFAF 12.7 billion Emergency Humanitarian Assistance Plan (EHAP) for the populations of the North-West and South-West regions (Republique de Cameroon, 2018). This ‘state humanitarianism’ is also illustrated in the positioning and proliferation of public research centres which supply many consultants from state universities to organisations to evaluate humanitarian projects—another indication of the desire of local stakeholders to take ownership of the whole expertise process. The rise of academic expertise in the evaluation of humanitarian projects is getting more and more important. This academic awakening, combined with a strong desire for empowerment, seems to herald a rebalancing of asymmetrical relations between the North

and the South. The involvement of the Centre d’Études de Recherche en Paix Sécurité et Intégration (CERPSI) housed at the University of Maroua, and the positioning of the Centre de Recherche d’Études Politiques et Stratégiques (CREPS) and the Bureau des Études Stratégiques (BESTRAT)¹⁷ at the University of Yaoundé 2, illustrate this desire for more autonomy. These think-tanks are increasingly providing strategic and operational expertise to international organisations. Their investment in Cameroon’s humanitarian sector could perhaps serve as a wake-up call for the development of strategic autonomy.

However, the Cameroonian state is not the only entity battling for autonomy in managing humanitarian aid. The involvement of the private sector can also be seen in certain consultancies, such as the Bureau d’Études Vision Positive du Développement (VIPOD) and Nouvelle Dynamique pour le Développement (N2D Sarl)¹⁸. Some national consultants have even started to set up their own structures to implement humanitarian projects, such as the Centre d’Appui au Développement Local Participatif Intégré (CADEPI)¹⁹, based in Mora in the Far North of Cameroon, and the Centre pour la Promotion et la Défense des Droits de l’Homme (CPDDH)²⁰, based in the same area. We do not want to fall into the trap of Afrocentrism here, but our aim is to show how national consultancies are positioning themselves as key players in the evaluation of humanitarian projects. Whether it is public or private, the positioning of national stakeholders within project evaluation networks could toll the bell for the dominance of international stakeholders. In both cases, a humanitarian transition is taking place, a transition that is questioning the asymmetrical “centre-periphery” dependency (Samir, 1973; Moyo, 2009; Etounga Manguelle, 1985).

¹⁷ BESTRAT, based at the University of Yaoundé 1, has been working with the American firm Social Impact Inc since 2021 on the evaluation of the “OIT northern Cameroon initiative cluster evaluation” project. They are also working with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung on a number of crisis-related activities in Cameroon.

¹⁸ These consultancies have been involved with the final evaluation of projects including the “Intervention for the education of children and young people affected by the humanitarian crisis in the far north of Cameroon” commissioned by Plan International, with funding from ECHO (European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid), in 2018, for an approximate value of services of 3,500,000 FCFA excluding VAT, or 5,535.72 euros. (see <https://n2d-cameroun.com/document/Evaluation/20.N%C2%B08046PICMRACAMCDFY19.pdf>). More information on the many projects evaluated with involvement from the Cameroon private sector can be found on the N2D website https://n2d-cameroun.com/activite_2.html

¹⁹ CADEPI, coordinated by a lecturer at the University of Maroua, carries out several evaluations with humanitarian NGOs and United Nations agencies.

²⁰ Coordinated by an academic and human rights consultant, the CPDDH had already collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the evaluation of the project entitled “Regional Stabilisation Facility for the Lake Chad Basin”, in February 2021, https://procurement-notices.undp.org/view_file.cfm?doc_id=240745, consulted on 5 April 2022. The CPDDH is currently implementing a civil protection project in partnership with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the far north of Cameroon.

Security and health crises offer an opportunity to rethink the way humanitarian projects are evaluated, which for a long time was the preserve of Western consultants. These dynamics call for a real change in humanitarian action, beyond this unexpected transition period, and should reflect the shift from a paradigm of North–South solidarity, Western-centric in resources and practices, to a new multipolar model, more complex and based on concepts of partnership. As a possible response to the problems facing international humanitarian aid and the need to reform the sector, a ‘local’ and decentralised response to humanitarian needs has appeared on the political agenda. The Secretary-General’s report from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the resulting Grand Bargain called for responses that were “as local as possible, as international as necessary”. The health and security crises in Cameroon seem to have provided an opportunity to rebalance the relations between Global South and North stakeholders in the assessment of humanitarian projects.

The dynamics [outlined in this paper] call for a real change in humanitarian action ... and should reflect the shift from a paradigm of North–South solidarity, Western-centric in resources and practices, to a new multipolar model, more complex and based on concepts of partnership.

Conclusion

While the collaborative approach adopted by organisations in the Global North and South has undoubtedly helped to redefine the balance of power, the weaknesses of such collaboration are clearly evident. ‘Localisation’ seems to be seen as a solution of last resort, because “despite the commitment of the Grand Bargain, which promotes the autonomy, funding and knowledge of organisations in the South, we are struggling to establish localisation as a humanitarian vision. It only happens when expatriates can no longer go to the field” (Savard, Audet and Leroux, 2020, p78). Savard et al further explain that localisation “is not a last resort, but a first resort”. It is therefore regrettable that local consultants have been recruited on an ‘intuitu personæ’ basis rather than through institutional arrangements between humanitarian organisations and university-based research centres, for example. It is true that most consultants come from these research centres. However, in the field they often work on an individual basis. Without the ratification of agreements between structures, it is difficult to see how the legitimacy of local academic expertise can be strengthened. Private consultancies are also restricted in their impact, as they

are usually run by individuals, and when this person stops working, their expertise is lost.

The crises have undoubtedly brought about changes and overturned certain practices. They have created a certain dynamism and reinforced the idea of the vulnerability of actors in the countries of the Global North, deconstructing the angelism of their dominance. But we must not lose sight of the fact that these changes are still far from having a longer-term impact. They must continue beyond the pandemic and security contingencies. The current reopening of borders is ample evidence that COVID-19 was nothing more than a very short-lived ‘window of opportunity’, leaving us very sceptical about the real capacity to bring about a genuine humanitarian transition. It seems that international experts will not make way for local stakeholders brandishing the scarecrow of COVID-19. Indeed, it is unfortunate that this research could not give the floor to Global North experts to provide a fuller analysis, which seems to be its main limitation, though other studies may be able to remedy this and there is no doubt that further longitudinal research will make it possible to assess the sustainability of this dynamic. However, the main advantage of Kingdon’s model is that it provides an opportunity for the players involved to make substantial and structural changes. For that to continue, the role of synergies between African governments, their civil societies and the private sector must be questioned—especially if a genuine humanitarian transition is to take shape.

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