

# **SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND PHYSICAL IMPACTS OF CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY IN EASTERN CAMEROON**

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**Abstract:** *The recurrence of conflict and violence in the CAR in the 1990s and early 2000s underpinned the movement of people from this country to Cameroon. The avalanche of people fleeing war, atrocities perpetrated by politico-military groups and highwaymen along the eastern borders, constitutes a serious security threat. This threat can be understood in terms of its immediate effects and long-term impacts on East Cameroon. The dynamics of these cross-border migratory movements have had direct repercussions on the political, economic, social and physical life of the populations of Cameroon's eastern fringe. Based on empirical documentation in the form of books, articles, press clippings and newspapers, directive and semi-directive interviews, and field observations of various actors and protagonists, this article aims, in short, to show and highlight the impacts of cross-border mobility on security in East Cameroon, a geographical entity contiguous with the Central African Republic.*

**Keywords:** Impacts, Cross-border, Mobility, East Cameroon.

## **1. Introduction**

In Central Africa, due to its geographical position (bordering almost all the countries in the sub-region) and its political stability, Cameroon has been hosting, since the early 1990s on its eastern side, populations fleeing exactions linked to socio-political unrest in CAR (UNHCR, 2013: 7), mutinies and various crises. According to statistics from the United Nations Population Division (UNPD), taking into account forced mobility, the total immigrant population in Cameroon was 246,171 in 1995, 228,383 in 2000 and 211,880 in 2005, or 1.2% of the total population. Forecasts by this United Nations agency put the number at 196,570 immigrants in 2010 (DPNU, 2009). This high rate of migration put Cameroon in a strong position. In addition to this massive influx of refugees (forced mobility), in the eastern part of the country, Cameroon experiences cross-border, seasonal and animal criminal mobility, facilitated by the fluidity of its borders and political instability. These mobilities are often at the root of arms trafficking, narcotics trafficking and serious crime, causing serious political, economic and humanitarian problems; the result of a major threat to individuals and communities alike. The avalanche of cross-border mobility is at the root of socio-political, socio-economic, physical, environmental and diplomatic insecurity in East Cameroon. There has been an avalanche of attacks and an upsurge in criminal mobility (armed gangs, hostage-taking, etc.), to the extent that people have described East Cameroon as a laboratory for mobility and social problems since the security crises in CAR. Indeed, the geographical position of East Cameroon with the Central African Republic has facilitated the fluidity of rebel factions and refugees who are difficult to control. Just this year, in Tocktoyo, a town on the border with the CAR, Police Commissioner Félix Ngando Ndalé was execrably murdered by Central African gunmen whose irruptions into Cameroonian territory are traditionally carried out in defiance of borders (Messing Menanga, 2014: 98). Events of this magnitude are intensifying and multiplying in this eastern fringe of Cameroon.

### **1. Cross-border mobility and growing social problems in East Cameroon**

The mobility of people between the Central African Republic and Cameroon has had an alarming social impact on life and social security in the eastern part of the country. Foreign immigration, which is difficult to control, has inevitably given rise to social problems such as

an increase in the number of robberies and assaults, hold-ups, depravity of morals and an upsurge in public health problems.

### **1.1 Trend in the number of robberies, hold-ups and assaults from 1990-2017**

The problem of insecurity is not a recent one in this part of the national triangle. A long-standing phenomenon, it has taken on worrying proportions since the 1990s up to the present day, characterized by migratory movements across the eastern borders with neighboring countries. As a result, robberies, physical assaults and armed robberies abound in the statistics of the law enforcement and defense services in charge of cross-border and urban crime. The phenomenon of insecurity in East Cameroon has existed historically since 1965 with the creation of a special gendarmerie post in Garoua-Boulai to alleviate the problems of constant theft and aggression in this part of the country (Kaiwé, 2017). However, since the advent of the mutinies and the violence in the Central African Republic in 1990, which was one of the corollaries, the populations of the eastern part have experienced and continue to experience turbulent times that remind them of the events of independence and have provoked a psychosis like no other. The 1990s coincided with the emergence of violent crime. This was characterized by robberies and assaults. Hard-to-identify criminal gangs roamed the borders, engaging in cross-border crime in towns and cities along the eastern border. The arrival of these people and the movements that have led to it have had a perverse impact on the security of people and property in the East, as the pervasiveness of various insecurities has called into question the lives of the population. Crime statistics show that the vast majority of thefts recorded between 1990 and 2012 were simple thefts.

What's more, before 2013, the phenomenon of insecurity had always been observed in certain mining localities. This is the case of Bétaré-Oya, where the attraction of populations from all horizons created the rise of the phenomenon in 2000 after the revival of the solid mining sector by Cameroon. Armed assaults became commonplace. Gold miners lost their quest because of the development of the phenomenon of assaults on the roads leading to the site. Despite the existence of the mining police and the gendarmerie, assaults at the Bétaré-Oya, Colomine and Kambélé sites have increased with the Central African crisis. These violent attacks on gold miners are also perpetrated by highway criminals, who sometimes come from the country's big cities or from foreign countries. These gold miners are robbed of their gold and money (Jowe Yamo, 2016). The seizure of power by the ex-Séléka in March 2013, which was marked by the inevitable collapse of the Central African state, generated a surge of collective violence (Crisis Group, 2015: 1), the impact of which was the massive displacement of Central African populations once again to the nearest lands.

### **1.2. The proliferation of Mototaxis, increasing robberies and exacerbating urban and rural insecurity**

The cross-border mobility that has penetrated the capillaries of Cameroonian society has not been without consequences for urban and rural security (Evina, 1998). Indeed, this mobility has meant that the populations of the eastern part of the country live under the sway of bandits who scour the arteries of rural and urban localities. As a result, rapes, burglaries and hold-ups are reported every day at police stations in the eastern town (Sali, 2022:313). Robbery is perceived as an armed attack, with the main target being cash deposits, whose actors form a well-structured group to succeed in their odious act. It is therefore an association of criminals grouped around a boss and operating on the basis of a social division of labor within the group (Chouala, 2001: 11). In other words, it's a grouping of thugs with their own means of administering violence (Sali, 2022: 313).

From 2013 onwards, robbers began to invade East Cameroon, this time sparing no target and even attacking symbols of law enforcement. The years (2013, 2016, 2017) were marked by spectacular hold-ups. From July 30 to 31, 2016, in a single night, five cases of burglaries were recorded. These thieves, all of Central African nationality, sheared off the locks

and took a television set, a gas bottle, a smart phone and a computer from a shopkeeper's home in Mandjou (Passer, 2010).

### **1.3. The development of prostitution and the resurgence of public health problems**

The Central African war, which led to the massive displacement of the Central African population, claimed numerous victims among the population of the eastern part of Cameroon through the spread of infectious diseases due to the depravity of morals indulged in by many of the refugees. This has led to an increase in cases of prostitution and various other diseases. The practice of prostitution is condemned by morality in Central African society, insofar as it is considered an affront to modesty according to article 85 of the Central African penal code (Sali, 2022: 317). This phenomenon had become a veritable scourge throughout the country, with young girls giving themselves over to the joy of selling their bodies to the four corners of the Central African Republic in order to escape from want. This widespread phenomenon in the Central African Republic gradually spread to East Cameroon between 2000 and 2017, with the influx of new refugees and illegal immigrants.

For many, prostitution thus becomes a survival network (Ovono Essono, 2013: 269) that consists of putting one's body to good use. To this end, it appears to be a form of commerce, i.e. selling one's body to earn some kind of money. The vulnerability that characterizes some refugees leads them into this type of "trade" to be able to provide for their vital needs. But for other refugees, the phenomenon has become a veritable industry, as Jean Marc Ela points out: "In view of the serious situation, many women are organizing themselves to invest in the sex industry. As they say: "Our bank is our thighs, our buttocks and our breasts" (Ela, 1994: 112).

#### **-Recurrent cases of malaria, measles, polio and other epidemics**

The massive arrival of refugees has transformed the sites into zones of intense malaria transmission. The influx of refugees has led to their concentration in overcrowded camps. Camps where, unfortunately, access to drinking water and healthy food is not always easy. These camps are a priori an ideal environment for the spread of infectious diseases, notably polio, measles and even more so malaria (World Bank, 2005, p.58). These refugees, infected as they cross rural areas, will then expose the local population to malaria, as described above. Since the influx of Central African immigrants, the health situation in the eastern part of Cameroon has been quite worrying (Ndoyong, 2015: 71). This is justified by the ever-increasing number of consultations. According to the health services in the east, the number of consultations in the Garoua-Boulai district hospital, to take just one example, rose from 500 to 3,500 from 2014 to 2015 (MINSANTE, 2015). The sources of this increase include the reappearance of measles and polio epidemics and the resurgence of waterborne diseases such as infectious diarrhoea and typhoid fever (UNHCR, 2014, 2015).

#### **-Vulnerability to food insecurity**

To begin with, it's not easy to talk about food insecurity in Cameroon if one looks at the political discourse of the past and present. Indeed, these discourses valorize, magnify and sing the hymn of a Cameroonian model of food self-sufficiency, making it the granary of Central Africa (Socpa, 2005: 19). However, in the eastern part of Cameroon, bordering the Central African Republic, the problem of food security has attracted the attention of the Cameroonian authorities since the crises in that country. This problem is described by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER) Henri Eyebé Ayissi during the 38th World Food Day celebrated on October 16, 2017 in these terms: "migrations are gaining in intensity and generating serious consequences on the socio-economic activities, food security and rural development of the countries concerned (Cameroon Tribune n°11477/7676, 2017).

In recent years, food production in East Cameroon has not kept pace with the demographic growth of the urban population and surrounding villages. As a result, the areas hosting Central African refugees face complex challenges, including access to food. The

number of food-insecure people is increasing in the eastern part of the region. In the Central African refugee zone in the east, 15% of the host population is food insecure (Rapaid EFSA, 2014). Among host population households, 15.5% are food insecure with less than one percent severely food insecure (WFP, 2014: 35). These figures compare with those of July 2013, when among host population households, 6% were moderately food insecure and none food insecure (WFP, UNHCR, 2013: 33). Similarly, among refugee households arriving since December 1, 2013, 37% were moderately food insecure and 8% food insecure (UNCHR, SI, 2015: 10).

## **2.The implications of cross-border mobility for the economic and social life of Cameroon's eastern fringe**

Cameroon and the Central African Republic share a large number of elements that make them natural partners, including a common but porous border, populations with the same cultures, reflecting linguistic similarities and having maintained in the past intense exchanges that have generated high mobility of people and goods, common problems dealing with border security management (MINEPAT, 2014: 2).

### **2.1. Sectoral effects of migratory flows**

Since the 1990s, the influx of Central African populations into East Cameroon has not been without consequences for the national economy in general and for the local economy and social well-being (Ndoyong, 2015: 75) in particular. On a sectoral level, the after-effects of the security crisis, the consequence of a migratory flow that is not always well controlled, are felt not only in transport and trade, but also in the accommodation and leisure sectors, as well as the environment. Criminal mobility has had a negative effect on the transport and trade system. As a result of criminal mobility, cross-border insecurity has paralyzed transport and trade activities between Cameroon and CAR. This paralysis results from regular border closures due to clashes between rebel factions (Séléka, Anti Balaka) and Cameroon's armed forces (Sommo Pende, 2010).

The fact that some trucks are parked in Garoua-Boulai is a clear sign of the disruption to truckers' activities, and hence to trade flows between Cameroon and CAR. This disruption has had the immediate effect of slowing down economic activity in both countries. As in a relationship of cause and effect, it is goods traffic that is seriously affected. According to Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) news of November 04, 2015 (economic dossier), Cameroon's GDP has fallen precisely because of the drop in trade to regional markets, mainly to the CAR (Ndoyong, 2014: 75), whose goods trucks were constantly being attacked on the road between Bangui and Garoua-Boulai. Measuring the scale of the consequences, the armed forces of MINUSCA, the United Nations mission, organized convoys to ensure the safety of transporters, this following the attack on Thursday August 27, 2015 on a convoy of military and civilian vehicles leaving Garoua-Boulai for Bouar. Another sector largely affected by the influx of migrants is the environment. Indeed, the impact of migration on the environment is widely decried. The settlement of thousands of refugees in certain sites in the East inexorably implies heavy pressure on environmental resources and a threat to ecological and biological balance (Ndoyong, 2015: 76). Presumably, refugees have no choice but to resort to firewood for culinary needs and for the construction of makeshift shelters. As the UNHCR and other NGOs have made no provision for supplying refugees with domestic gas, they will depend to a large extent on their immediate environment (Pouïra, 2011).

The truth is that criminal mobility and the transmigration of armed gangs have led to the deterioration of wildlife and the plant environment, with heavily armed bandits attacking protected species, looting available natural resources and carrying out cross-border raids. Attacks on Baka pygmy encampments, the Mbartoua cave and the Doumé fortress cast a shadow over tourism, which could contribute to economic development if properly maintained.

## **2.2. Implications for employment, public finances, households and basic necessities**

The criminal mobility of the Séléka rebel factions since 2013 and the migratory flows of Central African populations have affected several sectors of socio-economic life on Cameroon's eastern fringe. In addition to the sectors mentioned above, we have observed that employment, tax and customs revenues, public expenditure, agropastoral activities and the rising cost of living are all the consequences of the forced mobility of populations.

From the outset, the employment sector experienced a surge of activity in 1973 with the creation of the Société Forestière Industrielle de Belabo (SOFIBEL) in East Cameroon. This company provided many jobs for immigrants. However, in the 1990s, the company's activities came to an abrupt halt (Boussougou, 2010). This had a considerable impact on the employment sector. Many immigrants went into the informal sector, stealing, a scenario that will continue in 2013 with the influx of Central Africans.

The influx of immigrants to this region has not been without impact on the employment sector. While it's clear that most of the former refugees have become shopkeepers, we also note that the newcomers, because of their vulnerability, constitute cheap labor for the owners of leisure facilities (bars, restaurants, inns, hotels). The informal sector in the host society has played a role both in terms of its short-term capacity to absorb employment and its long-term production capacity (Boussougou, 2010). Refugees have not only lowered the cost of labor in the informal sector, but have also reduced the chances of young people in East Cameroon finding work (Ndoyong, 2015: 77). The lack of jobs, asphyxiated by the exponential development of the informal sector, has pushed some locals and Central African immigrants who want to earn big to enter the sale of products away from prying eyes.

Repeated exactions by the Séléka rebels since 2013 have darkened the world of economic transactions on Cameroon's eastern borders (Sai, 2022: 344). The disruption of trade caused by criminal mobility has had an impact on the regular and quantitative mobilization of tax and customs revenues by the services in charge of customs in the east. As the barometer of the health of public finances, customs is entrusted with a mission whose faithful execution is the guarantee of the realization of State programs or the coverage of public expenses (Pahimi, 2014: 119). Demographic pressure linked to the massive arrival of Central African refugees and Malian, Chadian, Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian immigrants in the eastern part of Cameroon since 1990 has not been without consequences for the household food basket (MINEPAT, 2014). It has led to a total metamorphosis of basic necessities in East Cameroon (Nangtour Natolrone, 2005: 34). The mobility of Central African herders and pastoralists to Cameroon has disrupted the agropastoral activities of the host pastoral society. Indeed, during their mobility, Central African immigrants, mostly Fulani and Mbororo, took with them their cattle herds and small ruminants (AnKogui, 2018). Central African pastoral mobilities have also spawned another zoonosis. This is anthrax a bacterial zoonosis caused by a bacterium called *Bacillus anthracis*. Contamination occurs when handling animals or ingesting animal products containing spores. The disease can affect humans, cattle, goats, horses and carnivores.

## **3. The political and diplomatic repercussions of mobility on Cameroon's eastern fringe from 1990 to 2022**

The prevalence of violence in Nigeria, CAR and Chad has had an impact on Cameroon's political landscape. The stay of refugees fleeing the atrocities in these countries has had both political and diplomatic repercussions.

### **3.1. The versatility of nationality and its impact on the electoral process**

The problem of acquiring nationality has always been a crucial issue in many countries around the world. Indeed, nationality is defined as legal membership of the

population of a state (Larousse, 2001: 1067). It is on this basis that an individual is recognized as belonging to a particular country (Todjimbe and Tsama, 2012: 71). In Cameroon, this nationality is acquired after birth, by operation of law or by a decision of the public authority (Amayena, 2012: 16). Cameroonian law also allowed children of foreign parents to be Cameroonian if they so wished. However, people sharing the same nationality are generally united by a community of territory, language, traditions and aspirations. In its June 1999 sessions, the National Assembly returned to the delicate question of acquiring Cameroonian nationality. The elected representatives of the nation of this legislature strongly denounced the ease with which foreign nationals stay in Cameroon and acquire the nationality of the host country (Nzekou, 1999: 24). To become established, you need a birth certificate, a certificate of nationality, a marriage certificate and an extract from the criminal record.

With thousands of Central African refugees and many foreign nationals filling the capital city of East Cameroon, it's difficult to say who is really Cameroonian if we have to rely on identity papers alone as a referent of Cameroonian nationality (Sali, 2022: 356). This is all the more true as refugees from the Central African Republic have their birth certificate issued, which is an important document in the acquisition of a certificate of nationality (Souman Zanminy, 2014 and Tamekue Tagne, 2008). But after observing the social environment in the eastern part of the country and meeting several Central Africans, it's surprising to see them with a Cameroonian national identity. How do they acquire it? In the light of oral sources gathered, it's by means of coinage, while others have taken advantage of the birth certificate issued to them by municipal and local authorities. For some, this means paying a bribe and requesting the complicity of police officers to support the process (Todjimbe and Ntsama, 2012: 72). For neighborhood chiefs and certain authorities, the stakes are electoral. In fact, the majority of traditional authorities are allies of the ruling party, and issuing identity documents to refugees gives them a large electorate (Taubic Falna, 2013: 145).

The acquisition of national identity cards by the general public calls into question the delicate issue of securing Cameroonian nationality mentioned in chapter two. Political entrepreneurs take advantage of the presence of refugees and foreign nationals to garner as many votes as possible during elections. This mania makes Cameroonian nationality versatile and sold-out (Badjangba Nken, 1993: 17). The versatility of Cameroonian nationality helps us to understand the impact of electoral migration on electoral deadlines in the eastern part of Cameroon (Taubic Falna, 2013, p.147). The influence of Central African refugees on voting is a truism insofar as we are surprised at police level to see them withdraw the original CNI indicates a Commissioner deploring it.

### **3.2. Increasing diplomatic and security crises between Cameroon and the Central African Republic**

The growing number of cross-border attacks and threats is a major factor in jeopardizing diplomatic relations between Cameroon and the Central African Republic. In some respects, these attacks by "noxious" criminals have triggered a diplomatic incident between the two states, potentially damaging their relations. This incident stemmed from the provocative action of Central African armed forces and criminal gangs. The incursions by Central African armed groups, which left one Cameroonian soldier dead and many others wounded in Gbiti on November 16, 2013, and the murder of a Cameroonian police officer in Tocktoyo on August 19, 2013, are illustrative examples of the complexity of the difficult relations between the two countries. This could justify, in part, Cameroon's procrastination in taking an active part in the Central African crisis in 2014 (Tamekamta, 2014). The Cameroonian president's almost habitual absences from subregional summits on the CAR were notable in this regard. This was the case at the extraordinary ECCAS summit on January 9 and 10, 2014 in Ndjamena devoted to the Central African crisis.

The cross-border insecurity that has arisen as a result of cross-border mobility situations has called into question the sulphurous neighborliness that was once the result of

economic factors and emotional relationships (Ngamondi, 2011). This stemmed from the competition for access to natural resources between the two countries and the almost obsessive fear of the refugee seen as a sword of Damocles hanging over the head of the regime in Yaoundé (Koufan Menke and Tchudjing, 2001: 337). This situation gave rise to a diplomacy of suspicion between the Central African Republic and Cameroon. The Cameroonian president's refusal to grant Michel Djotodia an audience in June 2013, while the deposed president Bozizé was on Cameroonian soil before flying to France, reflects this state of affairs (Lele, 2013). Following a diplomatic incident, negotiations initiated by his Central African peers finally enabled the Cameroonian President to reverse his decision (Tamekamta, 2014: 6).

Insecurity, on the other hand, is justified for citizens by the carelessness or corruption shown by the forces of law and order and security when dealing with refugees. In other words, once corrupted, those who were peacemakers become complacent in their duties. This absolute protection of refugees presents enormous risks. Not only can they go into hiding to prepare new attacks or affronts in their own country, but they can also prepare a rebellion in the host state or, to a lesser extent, acts of criminality (Lombroso, 2013). While safeguarding territorial integrity demands and requires active diplomacy and consequent means (Abouraman Halirou, 2013: 98), the multiplication of criminal mobility on the eastern borders squares the circle for Cameroon, whose glorifying praises sing the hymn of a stable country. Despite its position as a stable country in Central Africa, Cameroon is surrounded by countries that have experienced tumultuous wars and crises over the years. This could explain and justify why Cameroon receives multiple attacks and heinous crimes from these countries. Cameroon thus runs the risk of being such an unstable country when it receives criminal incidents.

### **3.3. The Central African crises and the rise of serious cross-border crime: Cameroon's diplomatic mistrust of the Central African Republic**

Political crises in the CAR have led to an exponential increase in cross-border crime. With these crises originating in neighboring countries, diplomatic relations are becoming increasingly strained. Central African rebels frequently occupy gem-rich mining areas in Cameroon for their own ends. To this end, the involvement of Central African soldiers or rebels in increasing insecurity along the common border is likely to aggravate tension between Cameroon and CAR, for example (Ngamondi, 2011: 134). The existence of criminal mobility between Cameroon and Central African Republic has added further problems to those already existing (Kaiwé, 2017). Indeed, with Central African rebel attacks and exactions, Cameroon views the CAR with diplomatic mistrust (Ngamondi, 2011: 135). As a result, Cameroonians living in CAR are not exempt from police harassment and discriminatory measures. This is why today, all criminal threats call into question relations between Cameroon and Central African Republic.

### **Conclusion**

In view of the above, political crises and cross-border mobility between Cameroon and Central African Republic between 1990 and the 20th century have triggered a host of problematic security situations in the eastern part of Cameroon. The prevalence of social, economic and politico-security problems is the result of these transnational, criminal and seasonal migrations. Thefts, physical assaults, the multiplication of criminal and environmental attacks are the situational occurrences in the eastern fringe. The presence of refugees and foreign nationals, who are difficult to control, is a serious security problem. The Central African herders who have infiltrated and penetrated the region have brought with them a number of diseases, which have had a number of consequences for Cameroonian pastoral society. In terms of taxation and customs, for example, the various movements have had a serious impact on tax revenues on the one hand, and on public finance on the other. As

for criminal mobility, it has had an impact on cross-border trade between Cameroon and the CAR, in that many traders are unable to move around freely to meet their commercial needs. From a political-diplomatic standpoint, this mobility has called into question the perfect security of Cameroonian nationality, and has had a political impact on elections in the eastern part of the country, in that many refugees fraudulently possess Cameroonian nationality and vote alongside the ruling order. The high level of criminality observed between CAR and Cameroon has jeopardized diplomatic relations between these countries since 1965, insofar as the Cameroonians regard this neighboring country as destabilizing the Yaoundé regime, given the threats it poses (Sali, 2022: 364).

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