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Humanitarian aid and economic development: Analysis of sustainable resilience strategies for refugees in the Minawao camp (Cameroon)

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Abstract: In a context of refugee precarity, the article highlights the significance of inclusive economic models for sustainable resilience amidst protracted crises, examining the interplay between humanitarian aid and economic development within the Minawao camp. Initially established as a temporary solution, the camp now shelters over 76,000 Nigerians fleeing Boko Haram violence. The study focuses on analyzing initiatives implemented to promote economic empowerment and resilience for refugees within a sustainable humanitarian framework. Through a combination of survey data, document reviews, and interviews, findings reveal that while these initiatives align with Sustainable Development Goal 8, they remain limited and insufficiently adapted to the skills and needs of the refugees. The camp's geographic isolation and the passive involvement of the Cameroonian government further exacerbate the refugees' dependency on humanitarian aid. Consequently, the study advocates for greater host-state involvement beyond theoretical agreements, the diversification of economic opportunities beyond the camp, adjustment of empowerment programs to meet refugee needs, and strengthened funding through innovative partnerships.

Keywords: refugee; sustainable humanitarian; empowerment; economic resilience; Minawao

1. Introduction

Migration is an inherent part of the human condition and is the result of a variety of motivations, whether voluntary or forced by conflict and natural disasters. According to the United Nations Development Programme, over a billion people will be migrants by 2050 (Leanza, 2021). Today, this displacement affects around 37.4 million refugees, 40% of them are in sub-Saharan Africa (HCR, 2024b). Two out of three of these refugees are in a situation of protracted displacement, lasting several decades, with no real prospect of a durable solution (Alalouf-Hall and Audet, 2020; Barbelet and Wake, 2020). In most cases, they have found refuge in camps established in low- or middle-income countries bordering the conflict at the origin of their migration (Anwar et al., 2024; HCR, 2024b; Phillimore, 2021; Walelign et al., 2022). This is the case of the refugees in the Minawao camp in Cameroon, which was set up in 2013 to accommodate Nigerians fleeing Boko Haram violence.

Designed as a temporary and emergency solution, Minawao Refugee Camp (MRC) has become a permanent home for Nigerian refugees, whose numbers continue to grow. In 2015, the camp hosted 44,808 refugees, and by December 2023, it was home to 76,987 refugees. This situation is certainly justified by the lack of lasting peace, but also by the fact that the mass migration of refugees is still perceived as a short-term problem (Adams and Al-Husban, 2016), and the refugee camps that house them, therefore, remain permanent. This situation generates an almost continuous

increase in humanitarian needs and associated costs (Alalouf-Hall and Audet, 2020). However, there is a significant gap between the needs of refugees and the resources available (Nations Unies, 2018; Zakir Hossain, 2021). The subsidies that compensate for the risks are taking a hit, leaving refugees in a vulnerable situation. The issue of vulnerability, which is increasingly becoming a major challenge for refugees whose temporary stay is becoming permanent, requires durable solutions that must lead to their empowerment and resilience (Alalouf-Hall and Audet, 2020; Nations Unies, 2018). Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the link between humanitarian assistance and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the need to strengthen community resilience in a sustainable humanitarian context has been recognised and established (Besiou et al., 2021; Cassam-Chenaï, 2020). This recommendation was reaffirmed in December 2018 with the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees, by 181 states including Cameroon. On the ground, this desire, coupled with the impact of the duration of crises, has pushed humanitarian interventions towards long-term approaches focusing on reconstruction, rehabilitation and the empowerment of beneficiaries (Gabiam, 2016; Obah et al., 2021).

In this sense, one of the durable solutions promoted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR for short HCR) for the empowerment of refugees in the camps is support for the development of Income-Generating Activities (IGAs) for refugees, and support access to employment. The aim is to make sustainable humanitarian aid operational by putting in place economic mechanisms that enable refugees to become part of the local economic fabric, thereby reducing their dependence on aid. This UNHCR objective is supported by research that argues that, refugees' economic resilience is strengthened by investing in refugee-related businesses (Kluge et al., 2018), creating livelihoods in camps (Malhotra et al., 2023), and switching to cash assistance, which promotes both their well-being and their integration into the local economies (Alloush et al., 2017). Furthermore, in the context of protracted displacement, and despite unusual circumstances, refugees manage to create an economy based on the exchange of goods and services within the camps and, between the camps and surrounding host economies (Alloush et al., 2017).

However, the success of the UNHCR's durable solutions approach depends on several contextual parameters, including the nature of the cohabitation with the host population, the policies of the host state and the effectiveness of the initiatives of humanitarian organisations and the refugees themselves (Loschmann et al., 2019; Oyaro, 2017). As a result, a common criticism of these interventions is that they lack sufficient empirical evidence to assess their true effectiveness in the long term. Using refugees in the Minawao camp as a case study, this study is part of a global perspective to understand how humanitarian aid is evolving towards economically viable and sustainable solutions. The MRC provides an interesting framework for exploring this interaction between humanitarian aid and refugees' economic development, to draw on lessons from the field to address practical needs.

Indeed, the MRC is the only site established in Cameroon to receive Nigerian refugees. It is located in the Sahel zone of the Far North region of Cameroon, which is known for its long dry season, estimated at seven months a year (Kodji et al., 2021). It is about 70 km from the Nigerian border and about 30 km from the commune of Mokolo, to which it is administratively attached. This location isolates it from urban

centres and large conurbations, leaving it in the middle of a rural area. Over the years, the exchange of goods and services within the camp has created an economic dynamic that has strengthened its position as the largest refugee camp in Cameroon and Central Africa (Mahamat, 2021). The daily life of refugees in the camp is punctuated by basic household activities (housework, community life, economic activities where possible) and the actions of humanitarian agencies. After ten years of existence, the latter have established social infrastructures to meet the growing needs of the refugees, including: Three health posts, two security posts, six nursery and primary schools, one secondary school, eleven social protection facilities, more than 3051 emergency traditional latrines and a drinking water supply system. Despite their shortcomings, the fact that these services are free and accessible provides the refugees with an essential minimum of social support, which in part structures community life and influences the dynamics of sociability within the camp. With a population of more than 76,000 refugees at the beginning of 2024, the MRC has benefited from a strong presence of international humanitarian organisations, the involvement of UN agencies (WFP¹, UN Women² and HCR) and sixteen government structures since its creation (HCR, 2024a). The linguistic specificity of the refugees, who come from an English-speaking country to seek refuge in the French-speaking part of Cameroon, reinforces this particular attention. In addition, the camp operates in a fragile geopolitical and security context, fuelled by the resurgence of Boko Haram attacks in both Nigeria and Cameroon. Both are developing countries already plagued by poverty and major humanitarian crises.

Against this background, this research aims to analyse the economic mechanisms put in place in the Minawao camp and their contribution to sustainable humanitarian aid. It will explore the process of empowerment of Minawao refugees after ten years of the camp's existence while assessing the extent to which refugees have become self-reliant in line with the recommendations of SDG 8 ("Promote sustained, shared and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all") (Assemblée générale des Nations Unies, 2015).

2. Methodology

The data for this study come from empirical work in the Minawao refugee camp from June 2022 to December 2023. It is part of a broader research project on camps in protracted situations (in this case the Minawao camp), to examine humanitarian interventions in the light of the pillars of sustainable development. Access to the MRC was made possible after obtaining the necessary agreements from local authorities and the UNHCR Data was collected through a literature review, a questionnaire survey of refugees and semi-structured interviews with humanitarian actors and refugees in Minawao camp.

The document review was mainly based on the monthly activity reports available from 2015 to 2023. The questionnaire was sent out to 472 refugees. The average age of the respondents was 39 years and 88.56% of them had lived in the camp for at least 5 years. The respondents were 58.47% men and 41.53% women. 66.11% answered the questionnaire as head of household, while 24.79% were the wife of the head of household and 7.36% were an adult family member. The semi-structured interviews were mainly conducted with the teams from the agency responsible for the camp

management and the team responsible for the implementation and development of the livelihood component. These interviews aimed to gain a general understanding and overview of the measures taken to promote refugee empowerment and the resilience of neighbouring village communities. To ensure respect for the rights and privacy of the refugees, all personal data was anonymised and treated as confidential. The refugees were informed of the purpose of the research and gave their voluntary consent to participate in the interviews and questionnaires. The interviews with the refugees were facilitated by our prolonged presence in the camp, which allowed us to understand and verify the information we received.

3. Results

There is little information on the economic life of the refugees before they arrived in the camps and on the structure of the economy of Minawao before the camp was established. According to the questionnaire administered to the refugees, they were mainly farmers (66.10%), shopkeepers (13.77%) and housewives (4.66%), as shown in **Figure 1**. The occupations of tailor, mechanic and waving cap were very rarely reported.

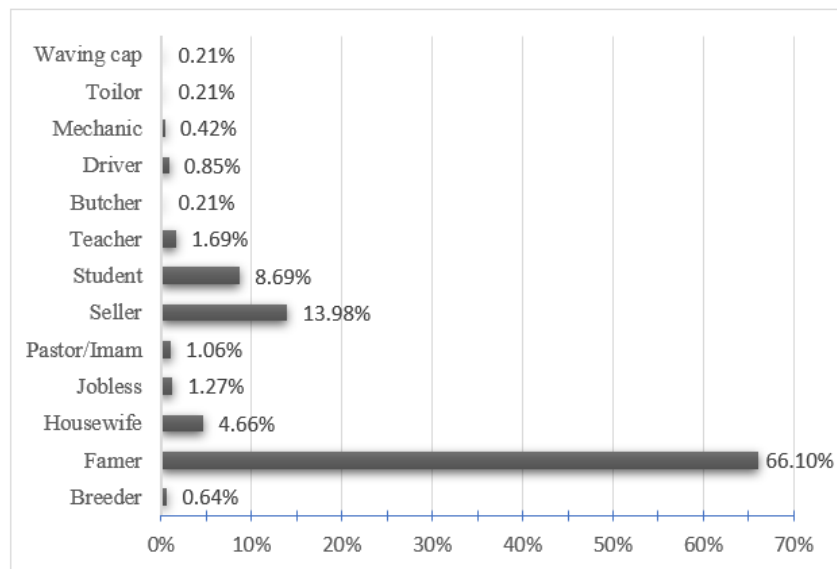


Figure 1. Original occupations of refugees.

Minawao had no population and no economy. According to the camp administrator, who had been in the post since 2013, the area occupied by the Minawao camp was a stretch of land used for grazing and agriculture (Aholou and Magne, 2024a). Once settled in the camp, the refugees enjoy many rights and obligations regulated by Law No. 2005/006 of 27 July 2005 on the status of refugees in Cameroon (see Appendix A). Article 9 of this law guarantees them the same fundamental rights as Cameroonians, such as the right to own property, to work, to take legal action, to social assistance, to the transfer of property, to housing and to freedom of movement. Article 10 insists on equal treatment for refugees and Cameroonians, particularly in the areas of work and education, with no tax exemptions for refugees. However, it is

the responsibility of refugees and humanitarian organisations to promote their empowerment.

3.1. Empowering refugees: A process that is understood but inadequately supported

Economic support focuses on livelihood development. This began four years after the camp was established, with support from Plan International, UN Women and Irish Aid. Three vocational training and apprenticeship centres have been set up in the camp to provide training in tailoring, carpentry and, for women only, introduction to computers. During the investigations in the camp, it was difficult to access the centres’ database. Visits to the centres and interviews with supervisors revealed that each centre practices positive gender discrimination, with women being the main beneficiaries of the training courses. Each centre trains around thirty candidates per year. The reason for this low number is, on the one hand, the lack of resources (material and financial) and, on the other hand, the fluctuating commitment of the candidates due to poverty. Initially numerous, they gradually drop out of the training for various family reasons, lack of motivation or economic reasons.

Table 1 summarises the assistance provided. It confirms the low numbers of young people in training and people in care. The figures are less than 1% for young people trained and 4% for people in care. These results show a growing gap between demand and the actual capacity of the assistance provided. Explanations provided by humanitarian workers indicate that “the resources allocated to the empowerment of refugees are decreasing and do not allow for optimal coverage of the identified needs, i.e., approximately 25% of the real needs are covered”. Moreover, the gradual reduction of budgets year after year exacerbates this imbalance.

Table 1. Humanitarian livelihoods performance review.

Year	Indicators	Value			
		December	September	June	March
2017	Percentage of people in care (aged 18–59) earning at least the minimum wage for more than 6 months a year	36% ^a			
2018					
2019					
2020	Percentage of young people aged 15 to 24 who have completed vocational and technical training	–	0.28%	–	0.29%
2021	Percentage of young people aged 15 to 24 who have completed vocational and technical training	100% ^b		1% ^c	0.60% ^d
	Percentage of people supported (aged 18–59) who have had their own business or have been self-employed for more than 12 months	4% ^e		–	–
2022	Percentage of people supported operating in the promising agro-pastoral and fisheries value chains identified	0%	100% ^f	0%	0%
	Percentage of people who received cash/voucher	0%	0%	0%	0%
2023	Percentage of people supported operating in the promising agro-pastoral and fisheries value chains identified.	95% ^g	–	–	–

Note: ^a: Rate of empowerment of refugees in Minawao camp; ^b: All the 22 young people targeted are cared for out of 11681, i.e., 0.19%; ^c: 69 out of 11,643 young people planned, i.e., 0.59%; ^d: 69 out of 11,753 young people planned, i.e., 0.58%; ^e: 865 out of 23,085; ^f: 576 people planned and reached; ^g: 918 people benefited out of a target of 968. Source: Data camp profile—HCR 2015–2022.

The table reveals that the evaluation of this sector of assistance is irregular, that the rate of empowerment of refugees is decreasing, and that only a small number of refugees are cared for over the years. According to the interviews, humanitarian actors question the morality and commitment of refugees as the main cause of these poor results. Either they misuse the support (material and/or financial) they receive, or their activities go bankrupt due to poor management. As far as the refugees are concerned, they deplore the subjective selection, the lack of relevance in the choice of types of IGAs and, above all, the lack of market opportunities outside the camp. According to the refugee president, the precariousness of living conditions also has an impact on the growth of an IGA. He claims that it is difficult to maintain an active IGA when you have few food resources to feed your family.

Of the refugees surveyed, 50.85% (compared to 46.15%) said they had never received any training or support in setting up an IGA. In contrast, 50% of refugees did not suggest any relevant guidance or support, as shown in **Table 2**. A closer look reveals that 10% of these refugees' suggested topics that were not considered by UNHCR. Of the remaining 40%, trade is a key area for refugees and it is important to train them and create opportunities for them.

Table 2. Proposition de formation émise par les réfugiés.

Categories	Details	Workforce	Total	Percentage
Return mitigated	Not needed formation	77	120	50.00%
	Nothing To Report	18		
	Irrelevant	9		
	No answer	16		
Agriculture	Farming	1	33	13.75%
	Farming and breeding	2		
	Farming and trading	29		
	Agriculture and health	1		
Livestock	Breeding	13	18	7.50%
	Breeding and trading	5		
Computer-assisted income-generating activities	Computer	3	7	2.92%
	Computer and carpentry	2		
	Computer and tailoring	2		
Tailoring	Tailoring	10	22	9.17%
	Tailoring and make charcoal	1		
	Tailoring and trading	5		
	Tailoring and Hat-making	6		
Trading	Trading	7	13	5.42%
	Trading farm tools	3		
	Trading and studies	3		
Mechanic	Carpentry	1	3	1.25%
	Mechanic	1		
	Carpentry and mechanic	1		

Table 2. (Continued).

Categories	Details	Workforce	Total	Percentage
	Development	1		
	Entrepreneurship	13		
	Move to America	1		
Others training or assistance	Orientation on self-employment	1	24	10.00%
	Peer education—supportive society	1		
	Support financially	6		
	Support on vocational training	1		

Of the 46.15% who had received support, 33.19% said that, this support had helped them to become self-sufficient, compared to 34.91%, while 31.90% remained sceptical. These results show that the current mechanisms are ineffective in empowering refugees in the absence of large outlets.

In addition to this assistance mechanism, the humanitarian system allows refugees to work for organisations operating in the camp as community relays. These are annual contracts administered by these organisations. **Figure 2** below summarises the total annual number of community relays in the camp, while **Figure 3** shows the average annual salary of these relays over the period 2015 to 2022 (details of the number of relays and their salaries by the assistance sector are provided in Appendix B). An assessment of these data shows that the number of community relays has been on a downward trend since 2019, as have their salaries since 2015. The number of staff and the monthly income are determined each year by each organisation according to its capacity. Compared to the minimum wage in Cameroon (36,270 CFA Francs since 2014), the salaries of the relays are controversial and need to be harmonised within the camps.

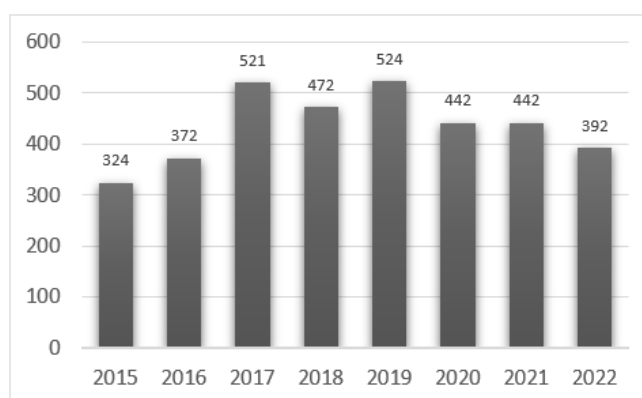


Figure 2. Total annual headcount of community relays.

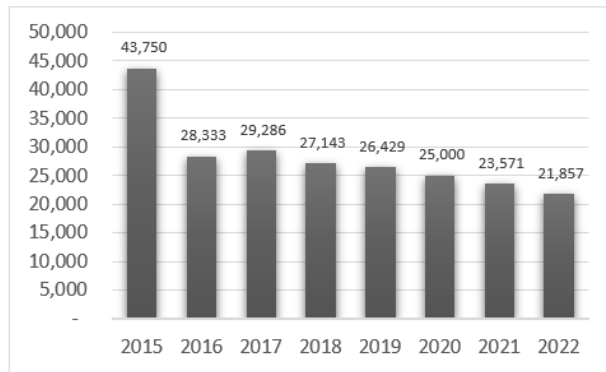


Figure 3. Average annual salary for relays.

The ineffectiveness of this system is reflected in the fact that refugees have relied on the Monthly Food Distribution (MFD) since the camp was established. According to the questionnaire administered to the refugees, as shown in **Figure 4**, 83.05% of the refugees reported the MFD as their main source of household income, followed by profit from an activity. Cross-tabulations of the responses showed that all other sources of income were grafted into MFD (see Appendix C), positioning them as complementary sources of income to MFD. Of the respondents who receive a salary or profit from an activity, 55.72% (as opposed to 10.17%) are unable to cover their monthly needs with this salary alone. 34.11% admit that this is only possible on average or with difficulty.

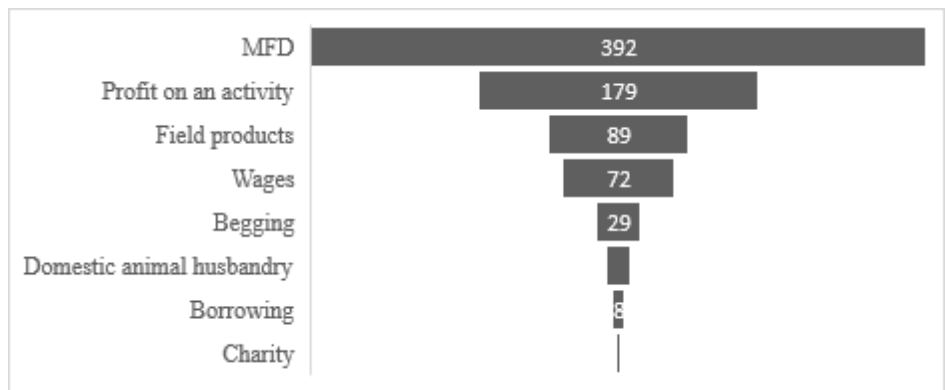


Figure 4. Frequency of choice of the main source of household income/food supply.

3.2. Empowerment of refugees by refugees

With an average of 436 community relays recruited and around 2% of young people trained per year for 1,7808 households (as of December 2023), refugees have embarked on income-generating activities to try to improve their monthly income. These activities are the real driving force behind the economic dynamism of the camp and, can be grouped into the primary and tertiary sectors. **Table 3** shows the diversity of the current occupations of the refugees interviewed. They are dominated by farmers (46.61%), community relays (5.08%) and volunteers (3.81%). A significant number (32.63%) are still unemployed. Among the refugees, teachers (3.60%) and shopkeepers (2.54%) stand out. A comparison with the occupations of the refugees before their arrival in the camp (previously seen in **Figure 2** above) shows a similarity

and continuity in the preferred occupations of the refugees, namely farmers and traders.

Table 3. Current main occupation of refugees.

Designation	Workforce	Percentage	Designation	Workforce	Percentage
Famer	220	46.61%	Students	10	2.12%
Voluntary refugee	18	3.81%	Tailor	2	0.42%
Community relay	24	5.08%	Secondary school teacher	17	3.60%
Unemployed	154	32.63%	Trader	12	2.54%
Pastor/Imam	5	1.06%	Traditional hat maker	2	0.42%
Mechanic	2	0.42%	Other	5	1.06%
Motorbike taxi driver	1	0.21%			

Source: Field surveys, 2022.

Despite the diversification of IGAs among the refugee population, these activities remain subsistence in nature and do not facilitate substantial savings, given that the monthly income is often insufficient to meet the family’s needs. As illustrated in **Figure 5**, the responses to the questionnaire indicate that the majority of households have a monthly income of less than 15,000 CFA francs per month (approximately \$24.93), while the household sizes range from four to six individuals. Notably, the refugees surveyed reported that they were responsible for six individuals.

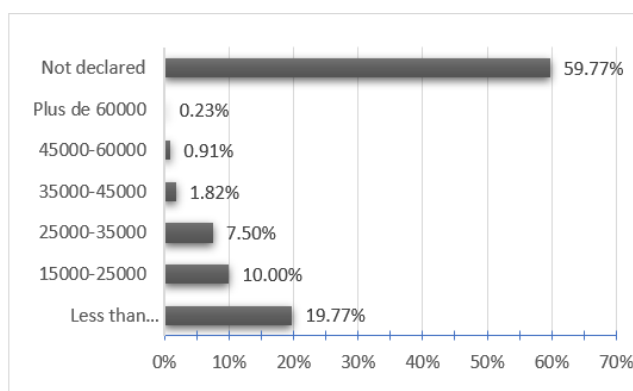


Figure 5. Salary or profit range on an activity.

In addition to the crops cultivated in scattered plots throughout the camp, the refugees’ economic activities are characterised by a surge in commercial activities, encompassing the sale of handicrafts and livestock products (such as hats, mats, farming tools, etc.) and food items. As shown in **Figure 6**.



(a)



(b)



(c)



Figure 6. Major economic activities in the camp, (a) camp market; (b) street vendors; (c) view of a camp shop; (d) hat-making; (e) roving livestock; (f) maize mill.

Source: Fields surveys, 2022.

The mapping work presented in **Figure 7** revealed the existence of two markets, 24 shops offering a range of products, four market squares, 17 mills, four workshops, and one bakery, not including the stalls erected in front of the shelters. It should be noted that these figures are not representative of reality, as some refugees were reluctant to register, and other activities were potentially closed. Of the two markets, one is located within the confines of the camp, spanning 1.44 hectares, and is colloquially designated as the Dubai market. The second market is situated on the northern periphery of the camp, occupying an area of approximately three hectares and designated as the Minawao-Gadala market.

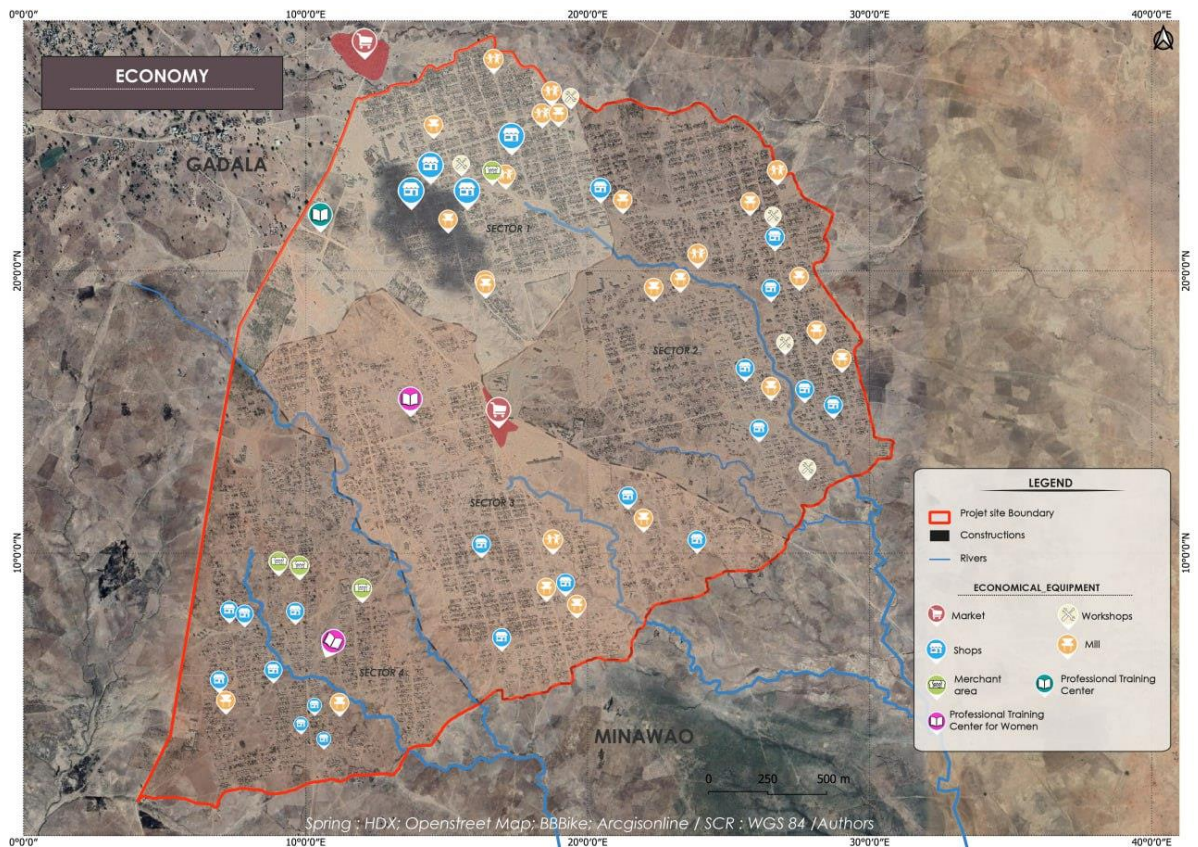


Figure 7. Mapping summary of economic activities in the Minawao camp.

3.3. Influences of the economic dynamics of refugees in the Minawao camp

The progressive development of the refugees' agricultural and commercial activities has facilitated increased interaction between the camp and neighbouring localities. As illustrated in **Figure 8**, the results of the questionnaire survey indicate that 34.11% of refugees reported peaceful coexistence with the host communities. Nevertheless, cases of discrimination (15.89%) and gender-based violence (8.47%) were reported. About economic interactions, refugees indicated that they are confronted cases of multiple leasing of agricultural land to multiple individuals simultaneously, double selling of goods, and underpayment of refugees' services (exploitation).

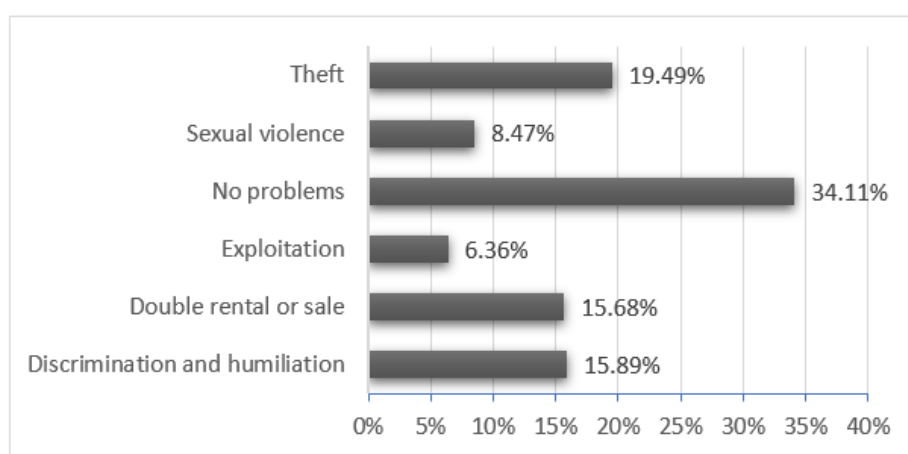


Figure 8. Refugees' difficulties with the host community.

Farming takes place mainly around the camp, particularly during the rainy season. Commercial activities are concentrated in the Minawao-Gadala market. This market was originally known as the Gadala market and was managed by Cameroonians. The sustained influx of refugees and their interest in commercial activities has led to a significant expansion of this market, with 70% of its traders now comprising refugees. Furthermore, the establishment of the camp has facilitated access to Minawao and has enhanced mobility by constructing an access road to the camp. During the survey period, it was also observed that local young people were engaged in the construction of latrines and other activities within the camp.

The mobility generated by the existence of the camp extends between Mokolo (30 km north from the camp), Zamaï (about 15 km of the camp), Maroua (75 km south of the camp) and Nigeria. The results of the questionnaire administered to the refugees indicate that 38.14% of respondents have a regular job outside the camp, in comparison to 61.86% who do not. This is illustrated in **Figure 9**. These activities are concentrated in the localities surrounding the camp, including Gawar, Lougéré and Gadala, and extend as far as Nigeria. Furthermore, the mobility of the refugees is intensified on market days in the localities concerned, as they move towards these locations to purchase supplies or sell their products. On Thursdays, the designated market day in Minawao-Gadala, individuals from the neighbouring villages of Mokolo and Zamaï arrive to procure essential supplies and fresh produce.

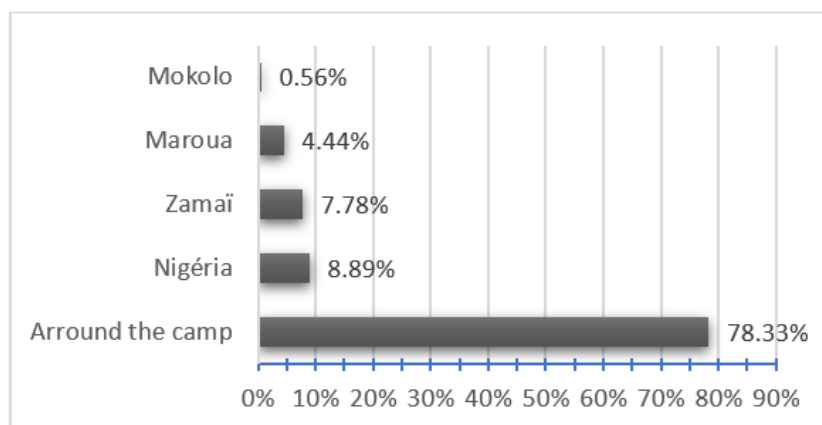


Figure 9. Place of work outside the refugee camp.

The 61.86% of respondents who did not engage in regular activity outside the camp nevertheless said that they travelled for personal needs, in particular on market day for purchases (49.32%). Additionally, 22.26% of respondents stated that they travelled daily for activities such as collecting firewood and making small purchases. The remaining 28.42% of respondents reported traveling only at weekends and for other reasons.

4. Discussions

The economic resilience of refugees, as sought by the UNHCR in the MRC, is mainly a question of achieving SDG8. This goal promotes the development of opportunities, training and employment for new generations, accompanied by an increase in skills for sustainable employment (Assemblée générale des Nations Unies, 2015). In the light of the results developed, a fairly critical assessment is presented, with little real empowerment of the refugees in the camp.

The empowerment strategy applied in the camp is focused on vocational training, recruiting refugees as community relays and supporting the creation of IGAs. Although this approach is laudable, it has ultimately proven ineffective for some reasons, including a discrepancy between the economic profile of the refugees and the programs offered by the UNHCR. The initial results demonstrate that the economic profile of refugees, before and within the camp, is characterised by a significant proportion of individuals engaged in agricultural and trading activities. This reflects the rural realities of their localities of origin and their aspiration to prioritise these activities as the main channels for their empowerment within a framework of reproducing their means of subsistence and social class (Boeyink and Falisse, 2022). Therefore, the training and support provided for the establishment of IGAs in sewing and carpentry do not align with the needs of the majority of refugees. This reflects the divergence of perspectives between the refugees and the programs implemented by humanitarian operators (Barbelet and Wake, 2020).

These authors argue that humanitarian operators are constrained in their ability to translate their theoretical understanding of empowerment issues into practice. This discrepancy in perspectives indicates the existence of a more profound issue, namely the failure to consider the opinions of refugees and even to evaluate their level of comprehension of aid. The lack of comprehension of the actions of humanitarian

workers, the absence of transparent and prompt information, and the failure to consider refugees' perceptions result in the proliferation of rumours, refugees' non-adherence to a program and frustration (Barbelet and Wake, 2020). This analysis may provide an explanation for the low level of involvement of refugees from the Minawao camp in the training program.

Furthermore, the dearth of market opportunities reinforces that refugees are less involved in the programs offered by the UNHCR, which in turn affects their economic resilience. This factor is exacerbated by the spatial exclusion of the camp, situated on the outskirts of a non-urban area devoid of meaningful economic activity. While it is true that refugees settle in low-income countries (Alloush et al., 2017; Anwar et al., 2024; Walelign et al., 2022), this latter often settle them in poor regions of their country, as was the case of camps in Cameroon and Tanzania respectively (Arsenault, 2024; Boeyink and Falisse, 2022). Particularly in Cameroon, the Far North region, where the Minawao camp is located, is recognised as the most disadvantaged region due to the absence of a state presence, which has been the subject of minimal development projects (Arsenault, 2024). The author emphasises (2024) that it is with the presence of humanitarian actors and their funding that the State will profit from situation by sending more civil servants to the region.

The third factor behind the failure of the refugee empowerment strategy in the camp is the lack and/or decline of funding to support refugee projects and activities. According to aid workers in the refugee camps in the East of Cameroon (Mbile, Lolo, Timangolo, Gado-Badzaré), this is the main problem that remains (Michel and Rosine, 2023). In Minawao, the gradual reduction in humanitarian budgets has resulted in a significant decline in the number of refugees receiving training and support to establish an IGA, as well as a reduction in the remuneration of community relay workers. As Aholou and Magne (2024b) point out, this represents a significant challenge that affects all areas of assistance in the Minawao camp. It also contributes to the inefficiency of humanitarian agencies in meeting the minimum standards required in the camp. This situation is common in protracted refugee camps. They suffer from a decline in the effectiveness of assistance in general due to donor fatigue as in the case of the Zaatari camp set up in 2012 (Adams and Al-Husban, 2016) and their efforts, particularly in livelihood promotion, are insufficient and inadequate (Anwar et al., 2024).

At the same time, refugees' ability to integrate economically depends on the host government's institutional framework, which must facilitate their access to economic opportunities (Hynie, 2018). If the UNHCR's refugee empowerment and resilience strategy proves ineffective, it could lead to the introduction of a highly restrictive policy and regulatory framework in Cameroon, similar to the approach taken in Tanzania (Boeyink and Falisse, 2022), in Malaysia or Jordanie (Barbelet and Wake, 2020). By contrast, Cameroon is a host country that offers a permissive legal framework that is favourable to refugees (Arsenault, 2024; Michel and Rosine, 2023). By the provisions outlined in Law No. 2005/006 of 27 July 2005 on the status of refugees in Cameroon, refugees are entitled to the same rights as Cameroonian citizens concerning economic inclusion and the development of their activities, without any form of discrimination. However, there has been a notable lack of practical action taken by the state to empower refugees. In fact, it adopts a model of passive support

(Lefort, 2020) which enables it to reduce expenditure on the provision of services that it would not otherwise be able to provide. This passivity is exacerbated by the minimal presence of the state in the Far North region of Cameroon. In the context of the geocentrism of power in Cameroon, the country's asymmetrical governance contributes to the disparities in development between the regions (Arsenault, 2024). Mahamat (2021) describes this as the concept of the minimal state, where the government of Cameroon fulfills only the most basic obligations, lacking an efficient policy for the supervision of refugees and displaced persons. The majority of monitoring and supervision is therefore carried out by humanitarian workers, in particular, the UNHCR or the WFP.

Despite the intricate nature of these developments, the camp refugees, as Bose (2021) describes them as lifelines to spaces in decline, have infused Minawao with economic vitality through the Gadala-Minawao market. They serve as catalysts for regeneration, introducing social heterogeneity to communities and fostering economic prospects for the local economy (Bose, 2021; Loschmann et al., 2019). However, it is a subsistence economy where the overwhelming majority have a monthly income that is insufficient to meet the needs of their families (Michel and Rosine, 2023). In the Gado-Badzaré camp in eastern Cameroon, the findings of Barbelet and Wake (2020) reveal that aid workers are aware of this situation: "They consider the intervention to have been a success because, after three months, the majority of refugees were still engaged in the activity supported by the NGO, albeit without making a living from it". Consequently, a considerable number of refugees are compelled to engage in low-skilled, low-paid employment, where the probability of achieving financial stability is minimal. This is due, in part, to the prevalence of exploitation and discrimination as was the case in Minawao, as evidenced by the experiences of refugees from the Doro camp in Southern Sudan in Kampala, Uganda (Oyaro, 2017) and in Tanzania with Burundian refugees. Moreover, the low probability of refugees' IGAs prospering is due to restricted access to local markets and sustainable opportunities. In the absence of training and support adapted to economic inclusion, refugees are limited to jobs as tailors, carpenters and livestock farmers. While purchasing power in the camp is 931 francs (Bolivard and Brangeon, 2017), the camp is located on the outskirts of a rural area where buildings are mainly made of clay bricks.

Against this backdrop of change, the various challenges described above mean that refugees are in a precarious state, and justify their dependence on humanitarian aid, particularly MFD. Surveys have shown that this is the main source of income for 83.05% of refugees, while all other sources of income are grafted onto MFD, positioning them as complementary sources of income. In Tanzania, this is the case for 95% of the Nyarugusu refugees (Boeyink and Falisse, 2022). In Lebanon, United Nations reports confirm that food aid represents a crucial source of consumption for Syrian refugees (Al Zoubi et al., 2019). The reliance on the MFD presents a dual challenge in the Minawao camp: Food rations are insufficient but are sold in order to make up for the various food shortages or to finance an IGA. It seems likely that this IGA will fail. As demonstrated by Magne et Aholou (2024b), over the period between 2015 and 2023, humanitarian assistance was unable to reach the standard of 2100 kilocalories per month per refugee (Kcal/month/R). The authors describe the food insecurity faced by refugees, particularly since 2019, with ratios ranging from 1903

Kcal/month/R in 2019 to 1280 Kcal/month/R in 2023. The authors posit that this insecurity is compounded by two factors: The lack of diversification in the rations distributed and the practice of selling a portion of the food rations and nutrition kits distributed for children under the age of five. In this context, households with limited resources or income-generating capacity are significantly more likely to experience a lack of dietary diversity (Al Zoubi et al., 2019) whereas an additional income, however small, could help to remedy the food insecurity of many households (Anwar et al., 2024). This dependence on aid in Minawao camp is supported by the cumulative effect of, on the one hand, the implementation of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to the refugee empowerment strategy without a local contextualisation. On the other hand, the refugee crisis is still largely regarded as a short-term phenomenon, rather than a long-term issue, within the context of a sustainable humanitarian framework (Adams and Al-Husban, 2016; Barbelet and Wake, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to gain insight into and evaluate the economic dynamics of refugees residing in the Minawao camp within the framework of sustainable humanitarianism. The various analyses have identified the challenges facing these refugees, particularly in terms of economic empowerment and resilience. Notwithstanding the aforementioned efforts, the camp’s refugees continue to be vulnerable, situated between inadequate humanitarian assistance and unsustainable livelihood activities. Despite the implementation of empowerment initiatives, such as vocational training and IGA support, these have proven ineffective in addressing the economic needs of refugees. The key limitations include a lack of funding, a discrepancy between the training and support provided, and the refugees’ skills and aspirations for empowerment. The economic and geographical marginalisation of the camp has resulted in the failure of the strategy that was put in place. Consequently, the current efforts have been unsuccessful in achieving SDG 8 and significantly transforming the economic living conditions of the refugees, who remain largely dependent on food distributions and humanitarian assistance in general. In their efforts to build their resilience, the refugees have been able to fuel an economic dynamic in Minawao, although it remains a subsistence economy.

To improve the impact of empowerment programs, solutions can be proposed, focusing on the development of market opportunities beyond the boundaries of the camp, and the adaptation of training to the skills of refugees. To achieve this, enhanced coordination among the various stakeholders is essential. The Cameroonian government could play a central role by adapting labor market policies to integrate refugees and facilitate their access to formal employment. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for their part, would be tasked with developing training programs tailored to the skills of refugees and the local economic needs, while promoting microcredit initiatives and entrepreneurship. The UNHCR and other UN organizations could mobilize additional resources by exploring non-traditional humanitarian partnerships with private sector companies interested in supporting refugees through socially responsible investment projects. This approach has yielded positive results in refugee camps in northern Ethiopia, enabling the provision of energy

to both refugees and host communities (Moreno-Serna et al., 2021). Finally, the establishment of working groups comprising all relevant stakeholders would ensure effective coordination and clear delineation of responsibilities in the implementation of these initiatives. After reading a few case studies, it is worth highlighting two main recommendations. Strengthening the MFD through the application of cash transfers could considerably improve the socio-economic conditions of refugees, allowing them to save and diversify their diets, as was the case for Burundian refugees (Boeyink and Falisse, 2022) or Syrian refugees (Al Zoubi et al., 2019). Second, there is a need for inclusive policies on livelihood diversification (Walelign et al., 2022; Zakir Hossain, 2021) and transparent management of refugees in general and the process of empowerment and economic resilience in particular (Barbelet and Wake, 2020).

These research findings and recommendations presented herein offer a promising avenue for future inquiry, particularly about the potential implementation of inclusive local economic models in refugee camps, with due consideration of the specific socio-economic contexts involved. In addition, it would be relevant to complement the present study with longitudinal research to follow the economic development of refugees in Minawao camp over several years. Such an approach would provide a better understanding of the lasting effects of economic empowerment and allow for early identification of any necessary adjustments. Because, the question of refugee economic integration demands sustained attention, particularly in a world where humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly frequent and prolonged. In particular, this issue represents a significant challenge for Africa in its pursuit of development (Michel and Rosine, 2023).

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Notes

¹ World Food Program.

² The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

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Appendix A. Extract from Law No. 2005/006 of 27 July 2005 Concerning the Status of Refugees in Cameroon

Art 9: Without prejudice to the provisions set forth in Chapters I and II above, all fundamental rights and provisions outlined in Chapters II, III, IV, and V of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to refugees, as well as the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) Convention of 10 September 1969 concerning refugees, shall apply to any refugee lawfully residing in Cameroon, within the limits of rights granted to nationals. These rights include, but are not limited to: Non-discrimination; the right to freely practice one's religion; the right to property; freedom of association; the right to access the courts; the right to work; the right to education; the right to housing; the right to social and public assistance; freedom of movement; the right to obtain identity and travel documents; the right to transfer assets; the right to naturalization.

Art 10: (1) For the exercise of any professional activity, whether salaried or not, and without exemption from taxes and duties, as well as regarding social benefits tied to such activities, persons recognized as refugees are granted the same status as nationals; (2) Refugees receive the same treatment as nationals with respect to access to education, school and university enrollment fees, and costs associated with university service centers.

Appendix B. Annual staffing of community relays with their salaries

Sector	Years	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Health	Not Received (N.R)								
Education	Workforce	142	144	151	153	133	173	N.R	
	Salary	N.R							
Water Hygiene Sanitation	Workforce	48	50	50	75	75	88	88	N.R
	Salary	20,000	25,000						
Shelter	Workforce	5	8	6	6	5	5	3	3
	Salary	50,000	60,000						
Mass media	Workforce	10	10	05	05	30	30	30	20
	Salary	20,000					30,000	25,000	
Civil protection (vigilance committee)	Workforce	140	140	140	140	84	84	84	84
	Salary	3000	5000						
Social protection	Workforce	12	50	50	50	50	53	82	82
	Salary	20,000				25,000	30,000	N.R	
Environment and energy	Workforce	15	10	10	10	10	03	25	25
	Salary	20,000	25,000	30,000					
CCCM	Workforce	20	30	30	85	85	85	85	135
	Salary	20,000	15,000		25,000	20,000			45,000
Annual headcount	392		442	442	524	472	521	397	349

Appendix C. Main sources of household income

Main sources of household income	Frequency	Percent	Main sources of household income	Frequency	Percent
Begging	25	5.30%	MFD and Begging	2	0.42%
Domestic breeding	2	0.42%	MFD and Domestic breeding	6	1.27%
Loan/Borrowing	7	1.48%	MFD and Field products	34	6.75%
Salary	21	4.45%	MFD and Charity Begging	1	0.21%
Profit on an activity	14	2.97%	MFD and Profit on an activity	102	21.61%
Profit on an activity and Field products	1	0.21%	MFD and Salary	20	4.24%
Loan / Borrowing and Begging	1	0.21%	MFD, Domestic breeding and Field products	3	0.63%
Profit on an activity and Salary	3	0.64%	MFD, Domestic breeding and Profit on an activity	1	0.21%
Salary and Profit on an activity	4	0.85%	MFD, Field products and Profit on an activity	40	8.47%
Salary, Field products and Domestic breeding	2	0.42%	MFD, Profit on an activity and Salary	13	2.74%
			MFD, Salary and Field products	7	1.49%
			MFD, Salary, Field products and Domestic breeding	1	0.21%
			MFD, Salary, Profit on an activity and Field products	1	0.21%
			MFD	161	34.11%