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My Brother Before Me: The Role and Experience of Local Humanitarian Aid Workers in Eastern Cameroon

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My Brother Before Me:
The Role and Experience of Local Humanitarian Aid Workers In Eastern Cameroon

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Macalester College
Honors Thesis in Anthropology
Advisor: Professor Dianna Shandy
May 2014
ABSTRACT

In 2006, as violence escalated in the Central African Republic, people began to stream across the border into Cameroon. With them they brought children, cattle, and stories of the horrors they had escaped in their country. Shortly after the refugees’ arrival, humanitarian aid organizations from around the world followed suit, setting up their operations in Eastern Cameroon to provide support to the new arrivals. The international organizations set about hiring Cameroonians as support staff. The international organizations benefit from the locals’ language skills, familiarity with the area, and their understanding of culturally appropriate practices. Local staff makes up nearly ninety percent of all humanitarian aid workers, yet they are rarely written about or acknowledged. This paper addresses the dearth of literature on local humanitarian aid workers. In this ethnographic study, I describe and analyze the role of local humanitarian aid workers in responding to a refugee crisis as part of the global system of international refugee relief. Based on fieldwork conducted in Eastern Cameroon and Geneva, Switzerland, this thesis argues that local humanitarian aid workers are a vital bridge between international aid organizations and the refugee populations themselves and that a more in-depth examination of local aid workers can illuminate the broader framework of humanitarian aid. By using life narratives, I identify how local aid workers envision their own strengths and challenges, gaining an important insight into an often forgotten, yet integral, component of humanitarian aid and refugee relief.
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ABBREVIATIONS

The following is a list of abbreviations frequently used throughout this thesis.

CAR – Central African Republic
FARI – First Arrival & Response International\(^1\)
FICR – Fédération Internationale de la Croix Rouge
ICRC – International Committee for the Red Cross
IRD – International Relief & Development
OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
MSF – Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF – United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
WFP – World Food Programme

\(^1\) Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the organization and its employees.
MAPS OF CAMEROON
(Figure 1)

Map of Cameroon

Perry-Casteñada Library
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/cameroon_rel98.jpg

UNHCR Map: Refugee Settlements in Cameroon (UNHCR 2014a)

http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a03e1926.html
CHAPTER 1:
Introduction

It is cool inside the white SUV. The verdant foliage contrasts with the red dirt, accenting the potholes scattered along the road. Sylvie\(^2\) sighs deeply, leaning back into her seat. Sylvie prepares herself for the torrent of greetings she will face when she exits the air-conditioned bubble of the organization’s vehicle. In the field there will be requests for buckets, babouches, and salt. Sylvie will be invited to eat with families who have chosen to go hungry that day so that she may be properly welcomed. She has become close with many of the refugee and local families in the villages in which she works.

Hopping out of the SUV, she breathes deeply. There is a different smell in the field. She misses it when she must spend weeks at the Red Cross office. Sylvie urges her staff to prepare themselves for the positive attitudes she requires in the field; she reminds her coworkers that at the end of the day they can express their emotions to their families, but while with the refugees they must remain strong. Sylvie and her colleagues disperse. She continues down the main street, responding to inquiries about the health of her children, husband, and parents. At the corner of the road, Sylvie stops at a house. “Mbingé lam.” My child. An older man stands in the doorway, a walking stick in hand. Sylvie greets him and they sit down together.

Sylvie first met the old man last year. It took her four weeks’ worth of visits before she managed to convince him to enroll his five sons and four daughters in school. She is proud of him. She knows that communication is essential. She and her colleagues must be careful to approach the Mbororo without altering their culture. That the old man now calls her “mbingé lam” is her password into the community. Sylvie knows that in a sense she has been adopted.

\(^2\) All names have been changed to protect the privacy of my informants.
In 2006, as violence escalated in the Central African Republic, people began to stream across the border into Cameroon. With them they brought children, cattle, and stories of the horrors they had escaped in their country. Shortly after the refugees’ arrival, humanitarian aid organizations from around the world followed suit, setting up their operations in Eastern Cameroon to provide support to the new arrivals. Not only did the aid organizations bring surplus food and stability to the region, but they also brought a boost to the economy in the form of job opportunities and money to spend.

At first the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partner organizations offered short-term employment opportunities. A two-week food distribution contract in the Adamaoua. A three-week refugee registration trip in the bush near Batouri. The jobs were lucrative and the timing was good. Many of the temporary local employees were college students home on vacation. As the humanitarian aid organizations set up long-term missions and field offices in Eastern Cameroon, they looked for qualified Cameroonians to hire.

Although the Western media may portray it differently, humanitarian aid organizations rely primarily on local staff, or those people who are residents of the area, for support and labor on the ground. The international organizations benefit from the locals’ language skills, familiarity with the area, and their understanding of culturally appropriate practices.

As is fairly typical in the world of refugee response, the organizations in Bertoua – the capital of Cameroon’s East Region – use different systems for hiring employees,
according to their experience and education levels, as well as to their country of birth. Although there is some variation amongst the organizations, most often national and international staff members undergo different hiring processes, have different contract lengths, receive different trainings, and are paid on different scales. National or local staff is defined as employees originating from the country of operation. While some authors make the distinction between local staff, who hail from the specific region, and national staff, who may come from any part of the country of work (Stoddard et al 2011a:2), I do not differentiate between the two, but rather use the terms interchangeably. Of the half dozen or so international aid organizations currently operating field offices in Bertoua in partnership with UNHCR, only one has a Cameroonian Head of Mission. Exceptions aside, the Cameroonians working in Eastern Cameroon’s humanitarian aid sector work mainly as support staff and in assistant roles. Often ignored by the international community at large, the national staff of any humanitarian mission plays a needed role in bridging cultural gaps and in ensuring that aid is distributed effectively and efficiently, and in ways that are in line with local cultural norms.

According to studies and analysis of the ongoing international refugee crisis in Cameroon, the organized humanitarian response has thus far accomplished a great deal in terms of its goals of meeting the needs of the refugees while simultaneously enabling their integration into the host communities (African Union 2008:5; Amparan 2012; Butel 2012; Butel 2013; UNHCR 2009; UNHCR 2010; UNHCR 2014). Although it is still early in the process to fully evaluate the accomplishments of the humanitarian response, which would

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3 Stoddard et al (2011b:8) define national or local humanitarian aid workers as “paid personnel working on assistance programming in their home countries.”
require a longitudinal analysis and data that are not currently available, it is not too early in an evaluation process to identify key features that contribute to outcomes.

In this ethnographic study, I describe and analyze the role of local humanitarian aid workers in responding to a refugee crisis as part of the global system of international refugee relief. While this is a small part of a broader and more complex undertaking, this analysis is significant due to the dearth of literature on this topic.

My contentions are, therefore, threefold: first, I argue that local humanitarian aid workers are a necessary and overlooked component in the implementation of humanitarian aid; second, I argue that local humanitarian aid workers are a vital bridge between international aid organizations and the refugee populations themselves; third, I argue that a more in-depth examination of local aid workers can illuminate the broader framework of humanitarian aid. More specifically, by using detailed analysis based on life narratives, it is possible to identify how local aid workers envision their own strengths and challenges, thereby gaining an important insight into an often forgotten, yet vital, component of humanitarian aid and refugee relief.

_Situating Local Humanitarian Aid Workers in the Refugee Regime_

To appreciate the role of local humanitarian aid workers, one must first understand the larger context of humanitarian aid. The Oxford English Dictionary defines humanitarianism as the sense of being “concerned with or seeking to promote human welfare” (OED online). In 1859 Henry Dunant, the founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), wrote his seminal book, _A Memory of Solferino_, a sort of call to arms for an organized front that would help injured soldiers, no matter their nationality or
uniform. Dunant wrote of “the moral sense of the importance of human life” and of “a kind of energy which gives one a positive craving to relieve as many as one can” (Barnett 2011:76). Barnett describes Dunant’s humanitarianism as “compassion across boundaries” (2011:16).

The meaning of humanitarianism has slowly changed. To be called a humanitarian was not always a compliment. It was used as “a term of derision” in the nineteenth century, referring “to busybodies and people fond of telling others how to live their lives” (Barnett 2011:10). Beginning in the 1930s, journalists started to use “humanitarian” to describe the response to disasters, conflicts, and the like (OED). Barnett describes humanitarianism as “a morally complicated creature, a flawed hero defined by the passions, politics, and power of its times even as it tries to rise above them” (Barnett 2011:7). It is Henry Dunant’s and the International Committee for the Red Cross’s 1865 concept of humanitarianism, however, that, to this day, prevails. Theirs is an imperative to help others, defined by the values of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

Humanitarian aid, in its self-righteous motivation to help those in need, is most often credited as an inherently Western Christian idea (Barnett 2011; Guilhot 2012; Waters 2000), despite an imperative to help the stranger existing in many other religions and cultures. Stated as having begun as “a minor movement in isolated parts of the West” (Barnett 2011:8), humanitarian aid has been linked to the Christian ideal of service, manifested in the developing world for centuries in the form of missionaries. Humanitarianism also requires the Christian value of humility, “so that one can recognize the sameness of self in the other” (Orbinski 2008:4). Viewed today as a flow of goods and services, humanitarian aid has a defined West-East, North-South trajectory. It is only the
West, explains David Rieff, which has the power and money to intervene effectively in humanitarian crises (Rieff 2002:38). Bernard Kouchner, a founder of Médecins Sans Frontières, explains humanitarianism as a “Western ideology of human rights” (Rieff 2002:66). This differs little from the now-antiquated colonialist understanding that those in the Third World suffered because of a refusal to accept “Western civilization and science” (Rieff 2002:66).

In addition to the religious undertones of humanitarianism, scholars have focused on the ethics behind helping others as an explanation for a humanitarian imperative. Barnett points to emancipatory ethics by which he describes the reasons for humanitarian intervention, stating, “They improve the health and welfare of others who are too weak and powerless to help themselves” (Barnett 2011:11). Dunant’s wish in 1859 was to change people’s view of the enemy. He derived much of his momentum from the anti-slavery movement whose leaders had “urged their fellow citizens to recognize the humanity of people whom they had never seen and whose skin color differed from their own” (Barnett 2011:36). This novel idea influenced the International Committee of the Red Cross’s definition of humanitarianism as the organization established itself internationally with the goal of offering care to all people regardless of difference. And for the past century and a half, humanitarianism has leaned heavily on the overarching assumption that it entails helping people whose skin color differed from the humanitarian’s. Rudyard Kipling’s “white man’s burden” was expanded to include the sense of obligation that Westerners were supposed to feel for the poor, uncivilized, people of the developing world (Rieff 2002:60).

Humanitarian aid has changed in nature since the end of the Cold War (Abu-Sada 2012; Belgrad & Nachmias 1997:9). Capturing the world of post-Cold War aid, Fassin and
Pandolfi’s edited anthology discussing humanitarian intervention and its implications carefully dissects the consequences of intervention based on claims of states of emergency and exception (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010). The humanitarian enterprise is adaptive. Seybolt describes it as a system “in which interaction of structure and processes explain the quality of the response to environmental demands” (Seybolt 2009:1027). And likewise the humanitarian response to a refugee crisis differs greatly from the response to a natural disaster. It is this variation within the sector that allows for an in depth discussion of international refugee relief in particular. By using Fassin and Pandolfi’s (2010) understanding of humanitarian action as implicitly linked to the declaration of a nation in a state of emergency, I change the conversation as I bring local voices into what is typically thought of as a realm reserved for international experts and authorities.

Critiques of humanitarian response, intervention, and aid vary, but it is understood that there is ample room for improvement within the field (Polman et al 2010; Rieff 2003; Terry 2002; Waters 2001). Aid has been critiqued for speed of response (Goyens et al 1996); for its more recent militarization (Andelman 2009); for the potential harm it can cause (Lischer 2003; Pottier 1996), including a false sense of protection (Rieff 2002:13); and for the effects it has on the host country (Phillips 2003). In discussing the paradox of the humanitarian aid worker, Terry (2002) points to the varied reasons people choose aid work (Stirrat 2008) and the intense burnout aid workers are likely to experience (Walkup 1997). This thesis contributes to these critiques by asserting that the value of local aid workers must be taken into consideration for humanitarian aid work to be most successful.
International Refugee Response in the Context of Cameroon

To understand the dynamics of local and international employees, it is necessary to appreciate the broad contours of the international community’s response to flows of refugees across borders. The international refugee relief regime, which this thesis focuses on, has been written about as “an organization functioning as a global state,” in charge of managing refugee problems (Malkki 1995b:505). Some choose to think of the international refugee regime less as a system for refugee management, however, and more as an altruistic pursuit, studied through “the Good Samaritan bureaucracy” (Waters 2001:72).

The very idea of an international refugee regime can be traced back to Zolberg et al (Malkki 1995b). This regime has helped to consolidate the broad field of refugee studies, a field which previously lacked a theoretical basis (Malkki 1995b:507).

Of UNHCR’s three durable solutions for refugees, integration into country of first asylum remains the dominant path. As a signatory to every treaty on refugees (UNHCR 2014), Cameroon did nothing to prevent the flow of Central African Republic refugees into the country in 2006. UNHCR then arrived, recognizing the refugee presence as a crisis worthy of a humanitarian intervention, thus enacting what Fassin and Pandolfi view as the “dual reality of contemporary interventionism” whereby a state of emergency is declared and a “humanitarian government” is institutionalized as “a mode of response to situations of disorder” (2010:10). Soon after UNHCR commenced operations in the region supporting the refugee population, it was joined by its partner organizations, international NGOs from Europe and North America, as well as one African organization.

In focusing specifically on eastern Cameroon, I draw on Malkki’s assertion that specificity matters (1995a). By choosing to integrate a local, grounded context into my
research and this thesis, I demonstrate the importance of specificity and am better able to identify the quotidian goals, problems, and strategies of national humanitarian aid personnel, therefore underscoring my argument that local knowledge is valuable. The focus on eastern Cameroon supports my contention that the one-size-fits-all approach, as determined in Geneva, is not the best strategy, and it helps elucidate the central role local workers play in international refugee response.

The current situation on the ground in eastern Cameroon is evidence of a recent development in refugee response (Butel 2013). As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, the Mbororo refugees from the Central African Republic have ties to Cameroon and the local populations, thereby challenging the underlying assumption in refugee studies “that to become uprooted and removed from a national community is automatically to lose one’s identity, traditions, and culture” (Malkki 1995b:508). A “sedentarist analytical bias,” as Malkki terms it, exists in refugee studies. Clifford (1988) observes that culture is typically more closely linked to “‘rooting rather than travel’” (cited in Malkki 1995b:508). Movement across nation-state borders implies a loss of culture or identity (1995b:508). But in the case of Eastern Cameroon where the refugees are traditionally nomadic and to whom nation-state borders have no significance, according to Malkki there would be no loss of culture or identity. Analyzing the topic of international refugee response in a specific context (Malkki 1995a) highlights the fluidity and shared nature of culture as the close relationships between Cameroonians living along the border with the CAR and the more recently arrived Mbororo refugees are detailed throughout this thesis.

Host-refugee relations have been studied closely (Garimo 2006; Hansen 1999; Malkki 1995a; Trix 2000), helping to explain the experience of refugees. Although there can
be animosity between the two groups, host communities often benefit from the services provided to refugees, as is the case in Eastern Cameroon. Because the refugees are integrated with the local populations, the aid organizations have access to both the refugee and the local populations. Eastern Cameroon – comprising the East Region and the eastern Adamaoua Region – is considered the poorest region in Cameroon. The local populations have accepted the refugees, in part because by welcoming refugees into their villages, the local populations also benefit from longer-term development initiatives introduced by the aid organizations (Butel 2012; Butel 2013; UNHCR 2009). I have chosen to examine the host-refugee relationship not to document the refugees’ experiences, but rather to document the experience of the caretakers, people who are hosts in both a local and an international sense and who have a stake in the ultimate outcome of the international refugee response.

And so in the case of Eastern Cameroon, where the local population is also benefitting from the presence of the international humanitarian aid organizations, where does the separation lie between humanitarianism and development? Humanitarian aid, which is described as a short-term response to a crisis, can easily lead into development, a more sustained and sustainable concerted effort to produce lasting, durable change in a community or a region. Fechter, Hindman, and Malkki make comparisons between development and humanitarian aid (Fechter & Hindman 2011; Malkki 1995a). Both are “transformative,” Fechter and Hindman point out (2011). The two words are occasionally used interchangeably, as Gilbert (2005) does. I do not interpret the two to be synonymous, and so have been careful to not rely heavily on studies and literature on development workers. While I am aware of and attend to some of the issues raised in literature on
development workers (Crewe 1998; Esterly 2006; Fechter & Hindman 2011; Stirrat 2008), I have deliberately positioned my study to respond to the distinctive aspects of humanitarian work, functioning on a shorter temporal scale and with an assumption of differing notions of sovereignty, owing to an implied state of emergency (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010). In discussing humanitarian aid workers, I do, however, also draw on work in applied anthropology, namely the concept of a cultural broker (van Willigen 1993), as I discuss the anthropology of work below.

_Aid Workers as Employees: The Anthropology of Work in Aidland_

Aid workers are more often compared to saints than to wage labor employees (Stirrat 2008). Rather than focus solely on the altruistic side of aid work, this thesis draws on the anthropology of work to consider the ways in which humanitarian aid workers function within an employment setting. It achieves that by looking at the role of local aid workers within the structure of their employee/employer relationships to understand how, precisely, the experience of local aid workers plays out in a humanitarian response setting. Recent discourse on humanitarian aid workers argues that the anthropology of work is necessary for the study of humanitarian aid workers because people too often forget that aid workers “are workers, facing various workplace limitations and ideological conundrums” (Sen 2012:132). According to Sen, aid work has become too familiar and therefore academics are no longer interested in researching its particularities (Sen 2012:132).

While looking at aid workers through the lens of the anthropology of work has much to tell us about the realities of aid workers’ experiences as employees, there is very little
literature on this subject. The closest one comes in the literature to understanding aid workers’ identities as employees focuses specifically on development workers (Fechter & Hindman 2011; Sen 2012). While this literature is instructive, and recognizing the artificiality of the divide between development and humanitarian aid workers, it is nonetheless important to maintain the distinction between the two types of aid workers due to temporal differences, goals of sustainability, questions of sovereignty (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010), primary actors, and strategies for usage and inclusion of types of knowledge.

The anthropology of work has proven useful for studying power dynamics in the workplace. By focusing on workers’ relationships, attitudes, and approaches, the anthropology of work offers a comprehensive look at employees in their places of work. This sub-discipline of anthropology has been critiqued, however, for its tendency to portray workers as “‘objects’ for study akin to what an earlier anthropology did to ‘primitives’” (Calagione et al 1992:10). Wright (2013) discusses hierarchy in the workplace, focusing specifically on how employees at all levels within a stratified system must have their voices “privileged.” It is only in this way, Wright argues, that the greatest success in the workplace can be achieved. By integrating applied understandings of the workplace into this study of local aid workers, we are better able to grasp the processes that hinder local humanitarian aid workers and to develop an understanding of how that affects the refugee response.

Bertoua’s local humanitarian aid workers are a part of an emerging middle class in sub-Saharan Africa. Duthie (2008) asserts that there is special prestige assigned to those in emerging middle classes who work for international companies and organizations. In
performing their prestige, the local aid workers create hybrid identities as they incorporate newfound socioeconomic status with previous and familial conceptions of daily life.

One such hybrid identity is as a cultural broker. Fioratta (2002) uses this term to discuss refugee resettlement caseworkers. Cultural brokers “stand guard over crucial junctures or synapses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole” (Wolf 1956:1075-76; quoted in van Willigen 1993:125). Additionally, cultural brokerage has been referred to as “an intervention strategy of research, training, and service” with goals of “making community service programs more open and responsive to the needs of the community, and of improving the community’s access to resources” (van Willigen 1993:125-126).

I draw parallels between Bertoua’s local aid workers and the resettlement caseworkers Fioratta (2002) discusses. In describing resettlement caseworkers and their role as cultural brokers, Fioratta writes:

Resettlement caseworkers act as ‘middlemen’ between their clients and the resettlement bureaucracy… They must be aware of the demands of the bureaucracy, and of strategies to meet these demands in a manner that allows them to make the most of their connections with the system. They work at the local level, serving as channels of access and communication between their clients and the national and international institutions that control resettlement processes at a global level (2002:8).

The resettlement bureaucracy Fioratta references functions much as the international refugee response regime does in Bertoua. As insiders who are able to interact with both refugees and the international bureaucracy, the local humanitarian aid workers in Bertoua skillfully act as cultural brokers between the two outside populations.

Writing About Aid Workers
In discussing local humanitarian aid workers and their identities within their places of work, it is necessary to understand how aid workers are defined both as employees and in the literature. Aid workers are most often referred to as people who come from outside the target area (Bjerneld 2009; Barnett 2008; Fast 2010). Barnett defines humanitarian aid workers as those people who work with “distant strangers” (Barnett 2008). Aid workers are often lumped in with the media and various others who come from abroad to help out with a crisis (Fast 2010). These shifting ideas of aid workers contribute to a lack of data and a general confusion when it comes to standardizing terms of reference for international and national staff members. Even in conducting interviews, informants used a variety of names to describe themselves and their colleagues.4

As has been indicated above, humanitarian aid workers are not often thought of as workers. Additionally there is little concrete data on them, making it challenging to isolate the numbers and types of humanitarian aid workers (Bjerneld 2009; Fast 2010). There is a notable lack of references to the numbers of aid workers globally, the gender divide, the countries they originate from, or other useful pieces of information. UNHCR and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) make rough estimates (OCHA 2014; Stoddard et al 2011a; UNHCR 2014a; UNHCR 2014c). Franks (2010) argues that it is nearly impossible to be entirely accurate in the media when referring to humanitarian aid because there is no initial understanding of post-colonial Africa, forcing journalists to instead gloss over or exclude certain important facts. This thesis then makes only occasional references to hard data on humanitarian aid workers, but it works to contribute qualitative data to the topic.

4 See taxonomy of Types of Humanitarian Aid Workers on page 58.
Contributing to the lack of empirical data, a large portion of the literature on humanitarian aid workers is written in memoir style by or about aid workers (Bergman 2003; Cain et al 2004; Cahill 2005; Danieli 2002; Orbinski 2008; Scroggins 2002). The aid workers reference their experiences, safety, and relationships, typically referring to local staff as reliable friends or as part of the background. In including aid workers’ stories in this thesis, I go further by contextualizing them in the broader field of international refugee response.

The security and safety of aid workers in their jobs is now one of the more popular topics in the humanitarian aid literature. As attacks on aid workers become increasingly widespread, international humanitarian aid organizations, along with the media, have begun to raise the issue of humanitarian aid workers’ safety (Georgieva 2013; Fast 2010; Martin 2005; Taylor et al 2012; Voice of America 2010). The International Committee of the Red Cross’s mandate to protect civilians stretches to include aid workers (Cahill 2003a). Although it is rarely acknowledged, national staff members make up the majority of victims in attacks, but international staff members are attacked at a higher rate (Fast 2010; Stoddard et al 2011a; Taylor et al 2012:6), a result of the disproportional representation of the two groups. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is a leader in the field of security and safety for humanitarian aid workers. They are changing the way international humanitarian aid organizations approach their workers with their recent report focusing specifically on national aid workers (Stoddard et al 2011a). This report is one of the only documents focusing specifically on local or national aid workers. By focusing on all aspects of national staff’s lives, this thesis contributes significantly to the literature on national staff.
In the past decade, scholars have begun to research stress and burnout among humanitarian aid workers (Ager & Loughry 2004; Cardozo et al 2012; Cardozo et al 2005; Ehrenreich & Elliott 2004; Eriksson et al 2009; IASC 2010; McFarlane 2004; O'Donnell 2005; Pross & Schweitzer 2010; Soliman & Gillespie 2011; Vergara & Gardner 2011). The sheer stress of working in a conflict setting or with people who are lacking basic needs has been enough for some humanitarian aid workers to quit their jobs or to no longer possess the skills to consider their work (Cohen 2000; Terry 2002; Walkup 1997). The Antares Foundation suggests managing stress through improved psychosocial care (Antares 2012). Although debriefing is suggested, humanitarian aid workers are loath to spend time sharing their problems or talking with psychologists because of the pervasive “it’s part of the job, we can handle it” attitude (Lupton Bowers, cited in Cahill 2003:65).

Throughout the many studies on stress, burnout, and psychological effects of humanitarian aid workers, however, there is minimal focus on the different types of stress and burnout that national staff experiences (Barton 2005; Mental Health 2013; Stoddard 2011a:i). A study published in 2013 by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University explains, “Research up to now has focused on international or expatriate staff; the new study looks at humanitarian workers who are nationals of the country where they work” (Mental Health 2013). Although there have been several other reports on the stress and burnout rates of national humanitarian aid workers (Cardozo et al 2005; Putnam 2009; Vergara & Gardner 2011), the Mailman study is the only one to look at the inequalities in treatment of national and international staff as a possible stressor for national aid workers (Mental Health 2013).
There is a wide range of handbooks with suggestions and advice for aid workers regarding the varied challenges they encounter (Cardozo et al. 2012; Cardozo et al. 2005; Cohen 2000; Comoretto et al. 2011; Ehrenreich 2005; Gilbert 2005; Hansen 1998; ICRC 2001; Sphere Project 2003; UNHCR 2007). Although not scholarly documents, these handbooks constitute a significant enough part of the literature to merit being examined. Throughout the various handbooks, there is a demonstrated deficit in suggestions for national staff (Cahill 2003a; Cohen 2000; Frank 2012; Michael Interview 2012). The International Committee for the Red Cross’s handbook discusses managing stress, but although it acknowledges different types of staff, it pointedly states that it makes no distinction when offering suggestions (ICRC 2001). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee’s handbook was the only one to give advice for the different types of needs of national and international staff (UNHCR 2007:469).

I have researched humanitarian aid workers with an eye to mentions of national or local aid workers, curious to see how – and if - authors write about local staff. Much of the literature simply references “humanitarian aid workers” with the underlying implication that the term refers specifically to international humanitarian aid workers (Cahill 2003; Danieli 2002; Gilbert 2005; Norris 2007). Some do recognize the difference however, but the terms are not standardized. Fast, for example, uses the two categories of “aid worker” and “national staff” to refer to the international/national divide (Fast 2010:366). Other iterations are “international” and “local” (Abu-Sada 2012; Lupton-Bowers, cited in Cahill 2003; Minear 2002; UNHCR 2007); “expatriate” and “national” (Eriksson et al. 2009; ICRC 2001; Orbinski 2008; Stoddard et al. 2011a); “external” and “indigenous” (Minear 2002); “Western aid worker” to refer specifically to international staff (Bjerneld 2009); “regional”
to refer to local workers (Martin et al 2005); “professional” and “resident” (Oscar Interview 2013); or “mobile” and “permanent,” the ICRC’s new, politically correct term (Oscar, Interview 2013). OCHA makes the careful distinction between “local staff,” people from that immediate region, and “national staff” or “nationally-relocated staff,” employees from the country of work, but who are from a different region (Stoddard et al 2011a:2).

The literature on humanitarian aid and humanitarian aid workers is broad, yet as has been demonstrated, there is a dearth of sources looking specifically at local or national humanitarian aid workers, despite the fact that they make up a majority of the world’s aid workers. National aid workers are often defined as “paid personnel working on assistance programming in their home countries” (Stoddard et al 2011a:2). All humanitarian aid workers’ stories must be included in the canon (Mental Health Digest 2013; Ray 2010). There have been some reports on the experience of national aid workers transitioning to international staff (Redfield 2012). After witnessing African local humanitarian aid workers’ voices being systematically silenced or forgotten, Ray (2010) argues that their stories must be told. This thesis builds on that and it offers a more thorough investigation of the dynamic lives of national humanitarian aid workers – relationships with their employers, with the refugees, with their family and friends, and beyond.

_Telling the Story: Cultural Life Histories of Refugee Workers_

Aid workers, the deliverers of humanitarian relief, are not always included in literature on humanitarian aid, but they are, arguably, one of the more important components of the effective delivery of aid (Fechter & Hindman 2011:2). According to Fechter and Hindman:
Only through investigating the structural impingements and seemingly mundane aspects of the lives of aid workers are the affective dimensions of ‘Aidland’ . . . revealed, affective aspects that unavoidably influence the aid product (Fechter & Hindman 2011:2-3).

But the question remains, why choose anthropology and, more specifically, why ethnography to examine humanitarianism? There are, in the words of Nicolas Guilhot, “deep-seated affinities” (2012:87) as well as “unsettling similarities” (2012:88) between anthropology and humanitarianism. By using ethnography as a preferred anthropological approach to literature on humanitarianism, researchers are able to better tailor attention to the issues at hand, while taking care to maintain the specificity of each case (Guilhot 2012:84, 86). Guilhot adds:

The contexts in which [anthropologists] work have often been reshaped by humanitarian interventions, democracy-promotion programs, human rights campaigns, or various developmental projects, as a result of which anthropologists have started to turn their ethnographic gaze toward humanitarian work itself and its inscription in specific cultural contexts (2012:87).

Guilhot explains that anthropologists and humanitarians work well together due to their shared production of knowledge and observations of a situation, often with the common goal of adhering to “an ethnographic approach while striving to find a critical vantage point” (Guilhot 2012:86).

Personal narratives shed light onto people’s lives. Marjorie Shostak (2000), in her life history of a San woman, is able to convey a detailed and meaningful picture of San life simply by allowing one woman to tell her story. Life history has the potential to draw out details and information that would not normally be shared or encountered. Anthropologist Gelya Frank argues that life histories are important because of their attention to detail and the way that they contribute to an “understanding that comes from diversity and
specificity” (2009:145). According to Robertson, “Life histories have the additional role of restoring understudied and underrepresented populations to history” (Robertson 2000:xi). By using life histories to tell the stories of the local aid workers in Cameroon, this thesis draws on their relative obscurity as reason for why their story must be told.

The anthropologist’s role in telling a life story is as the witness, Guilhot writes (2012:89). Anthropologists use what they see as “cultural narrative in our societies” (Guilhot 2012:89), which is similar to the local aid workers’ propensity to commentate the refugees’ experiences, something which appears instrumental to an understanding of the local aid workers’ own role in society. In the case of the local aid workers, I act as the witness to their stories, but they themselves are also witnesses according to Guilhot; the local aid workers function in a way as both outside observers and culturally informed insiders, allowing them to absorb the stories and situations of those they meet on the ground.

In a 1989 essay, Shostak furthers her argument for life histories, explaining that learning about a culture through hearing about people’s own lives, experiences, and perspectives is perhaps the most innately human method:

Indeed, the most important ethical message regarding life histories is not a restriction but an obligation: we should make every effort to overcome obstacles, to go out and record the memories of people whose ways of life often are preserved only in those memories. No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the personal narrative (Shostak 1989:239).

My informants’ stories and their own understandings of their roles as local staff members are highlighted throughout this thesis, enabling me to better convey the particularities and importance of the experiences of the fourteen local humanitarian aid workers in Bertoua featured in this study. This in depth look enables the reader to more closely relate to the
local aid workers’ experiences, thus gaining a deeper appreciation of the essential role of local humanitarian aid workers in the international refugee regime and of the importance of national staff, despite the dearth of literature on the local.

**Methodology**

Although national staff makes up approximately ninety-five percent of all humanitarian aid workers, they are surprisingly rarely mentioned in the humanitarian studies literature. A Fall 2011 Anthropology course on humanitarianism piqued my interest in the delivery of humanitarian aid. In particular, I was interested in Fiona Terry’s (2002) assertion that the paradox of humanitarian aid revolves around the potential for the humanitarian aid worker to negatively affect the populations they are supposed to be helping.

I engaged these ideas while undertaking an independent research project as a School for International Training student in Cameroon in September 2012. Curbed by the limitations placed on research with vulnerable populations by my home institution, I developed a study that sought to understand refugee issues through the lens of those people working with the refugees as humanitarian aid workers.

One of my preliminary observations was how few results came up on various search engines when looking for “national humanitarian aid worker,” “local humanitarian aid worker,” or “local staff in humanitarian aid.” Given this absence of literature on this population, I decided that larger multilateral humanitarian aid organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or the United Nation’s World Food Program would be a good starting point for accessing Cameroonians working in
humanitarian aid. It is difficult for outside researchers to obtain access to the United Nations agencies.

Instead, I took advantage of connections, and met with the director of RESPECT Cameroon, a branch of a Canadian NGO. The director of the organization detailed his organization’s own work in Yaoundé and explained the conditions the Central African Republic refugees face in Cameroon. The director proved instrumental in my making connections in Bertoua.

I moved to Bertoua and began my fieldwork in the beginning of November 2012. Soon after arriving I met with Dieudonné Ndanga, a Cameroonian PhD candidate in Visual Anthropology, who is originally from Bertoua and who was also conducting his fieldwork there, although on an unrelated subject. Serving as my advisor, Ndanga was generous with his time and endlessly supportive.

Eventually, I conducted sixteen interviews at six different international non-governmental and multinational humanitarian aid organizations. Upon making contact, I asked to meet with Cameroonian employees who frequently interacted with the area’s refugee populations.

The six organizations at which I conducted interviews are all headquartered in Europe or the United States. In an effort to diversify my informants, I contacted a humanitarian aid organization based in Africa. They explained that I would only be allowed to interview their staff if I could produce a letter of support from UNHCR. I assured them that I had already conducted several interviews at UNHCR, but they insisted on that piece of paper. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was unable to return to UNHCR to request a letter of support.
I conducted interviews at both nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations. While I understand that there are differences between the two types of organizations, due to the similarities of responses, I do not differentiate between employees of the two types. Additionally, since the internationally recognized refugee crisis began in 2006, many humanitarian staff members have worked at multiple organizations, including UN agencies.

I began my research with the following questions, drawing on Walkup’s theory of the four psychological stages of the humanitarian aid worker (Terry 2002; Walkup 1997):

How can one continue to work with the same strength, commitment, and devotion each day and not grow down-hearted by the unrealized needs of the refugee populations? What are the strategies that the humanitarian aid workers have developed in order to be able to continue this type of work?

My earlier hypothesis was that Cameroonians working with refugees develop strategies that permit them to continue their work day after day, to remain calm, and to stay balanced, despite the fact that they have received neither adequate training for this type of work, nor access to psychological services. The possibility of inaccuracy and cultural hurdles exists, however, as there is a chance that my informants did not fully understand my questions regarding psychological coping strategies because the idea of psychology “imposes European, Western, and North American values globally in a form of cultural imperialism” (Ager and Loughry 2004).

I eventually began to consider the locals’ work in the humanitarian field in conjunction with their relationships with the organizations’ expatriate staff members. How do the two types of workers interact? What do the local workers think of the refugee
populations? I only interviewed local staff members and I acknowledge that therefore there are biases present in the responses.

In conducting my interviews, I used Spradley’s ethnographic method (1979). I loosely structured my interviews, but I let informants take the conversation where they wanted it to go. I asked all of my informants whether I could record them. All but one person obliged. Participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that their identity would be protected by a pseudonym throughout the paper and that the recordings of the interviews would be stored in a protected file. All of the interview transcripts were coded by theme.

I encountered several limitations and difficulties throughout my study. My informants frequently suggested I speak with a refugee, and they would mention friends, family members, and neighbors. I was routinely forced to refuse these kind offers, something that perplexed some of my informants. Additionally, there were several cultural differences that complicated the research. I was conscious of coming off as rude, and so I never crossed my legs during interviews, and if my informant was a man, I did not look him in the eyes; rather I stared at his chin, squirming inside all the while.

A final challenge in interviews was the decision of whether or not to use the formal or informal second person in French. Having learned French in France, it is habitual for me to address any stranger or anyone in a higher position than me as “vous.” The French language operates differently in Cameroon, however, and people were not used to being called “vous.” This meant that often my informants interpreted my use of “vous” in the plural sense, and assumed I was talking about their organization. I switched to “vous-
mêmes" to try and express that I meant they, themselves. I would have conformed to the Cameroonian norm and used “tu,” but was uncomfortable how my position as a white person seemed to imply that I was deserving of more respect than my informants.

Additionally, as an interviewer, I wanted my informants to understand that I knew nothing, whereas they were far more experienced than me in the field.

Following my research in Cameroon, I conducted several additional interviews both over the Skype and in person. I maintained contact with one of my informants and we did an interview over Skype in March 2013, where he updated me on the effects of the coup d’état in the Central African Republic. I conducted an in-person interview with the same informant in Lyon, France in June 2013.

After an extensive process of trying to track down interviews in Geneva, I managed to secure an interview with an ICRC employee. He and I spoke for an hour; his was the first interview I conducted in English. I spent time at the United Nations Office at Geneva Library, and was able to access the UNHCR archives. A month later, in September 2013, I did a Skype interview, also in English, with a UNHCR employee.

What follows, therefore, are the observations I made and conclusions I eventually came to regarding the role and experience of local humanitarian aid workers employed by international humanitarian aid organizations in Eastern Cameroon. Left out of the spotlight, this is a population whose two-sided skills, goals, and strategies offer an important glimpse into the challenges faced by people in developing countries whose employers represent the limitless possibilities available in an increasingly globalized and transnational world.
Road Map

Chapter Two sets the scene, preparing the reader to better understand the context in which the humanitarian aid workers I describe live and work. This chapter describes Cameroon and the factors that precipitated the Central African Republic’s humanitarian crisis. In order to appreciate the local aid workers’ lives it is necessary to understand the social, political, economic, and cultural factors in Cameroon that have resulted in an abundance of educated, unemployed young people.

Chapter Three outlines the history of humanitarian aid from its beginnings as a religious imperative to its current global scope. This chapter introduces the major humanitarian actors and explores the inherent Western bias present in humanitarian aid. The chapter goes on to diagram the concept of local or national aid workers within the larger, globalized humanitarian aid industry.

Chapter Four draws on interviews with local aid workers to walk the reader through the daily lives and roles of local aid workers in Bertoua in order to present a detailed picture of the cultural and learned behavior of local staff. This chapter offers a contribution to the minimal literature on local aid workers. Viewing themselves as maintaining close relationships with both the refugee populations and the international aid workers, local staff members understand their role as a sort of bridge between the giver and the recipient. As I demonstrate the local aid workers’ ability to transition easily between the two roles, I argue that local aid workers incorporate local knowledge, idealistic and self-interested motivations, and coping strategies relying on familial support systems to ensure the effective and efficient provision of humanitarian aid in the Adamaoua and East Regions of Cameroon.
Chapter Five offers a discussion of the changing nature of the conflict in the Central African Republic and points to the local aid workers’ experience and extensive knowledge of the situation as instrumental in the heretofore success of the international refugee response. It goes on to use the position of local aid workers to discuss the inequalities inherent in the humanitarian aid sector. Chapter Five concludes by describing local aid workers on the international scene.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis, outlining the arguments presented in the following pages.
CHAPTER 2:

Contextualizing Cameroon’s Refugee Response

When an influx of refugees arrives in a new location, it is the locals who react first. Whether that reaction is one of welcome or of frustration and violence, however, varies from situation to situation. If the refugee flow merits a systematized response, larger national and international bodies arrive next, helicoptering in to offer help, and leaving when it appears that they have met the lowest common denominator of needs. While this thesis looks at the individual actors involved in humanitarian response – and more specifically at the local workers – it is the ultimately the role of the community as a whole and its success that ends up dictating the outcome of a humanitarian project. Pottier argues that favorable outcomes for humanitarian aid depend “by and large on a country’s politico-intellectual climate” (Pottier cited in Grillo & Stirrat 1997:203). I argue further that favorable outcomes also depend on the local staff and their understandings of both that politico-intellectual climate and of their country and region’s complicated histories that have – perhaps indirectly – influenced the humanitarian crisis. I therefore outline the history of Cameroon and the Central African Republic, alluding specifically to the factors precipitating the refugee crisis, in order to give the reader a more thorough understanding of the Cameroonian context.

While this thesis offers a commentary on the role and experience of local staff working for international humanitarian aid workers in general, I narrow the temporal and spatial focus by looking specifically at the refugee regime in the eastern Adamawa and East Region of Cameroon from around 2008 through the beginning of 2013 when I finished
my fieldwork. In an effort to contextualize that fieldwork, this chapter presents an abbreviated history of Cameroon and the Central African Republic, two former French territories, paying particular attention to the social, political, and cultural factors that have contributed to the current conditions of Cameroon as well as to the presence of nearly 100,000 refugees from the Central African Republic. Zolberg et al (1983) argues that to understand refugee flows, we need to look at matters regionally, rather than within the borders of the nation-state. I present that regional focus in this chapter.

History

Cameroon has long been a crossroads on the African continent. Located between Central and West Africa, the area has been home to many small tribal groups for thousands of years; no large kingdoms or central powers are thought to have existed in the area until the early nineteenth century. It was at this time that the Fulani, a historically nomadic Arab group, began migrating south from the Sahelian band. The Fulani – also known as the Fulbé or Peul – soon established centralized control throughout much of what are today the Extreme North and the Adamaoua regions (DeLancey 1999:xvi).

European presence in Cameroon dates back to as early as the fifteenth century, when Portuguese sailors began exploring down the West Coast of Africa. Cameroon’s name derives from one of these sailors’ thrilled announcement that a specific river in Cameroon was so full of shrimp that he decided to name it the Rio dos Camarões. The word “Cameroon” is believed to derive from the Portuguese word for shrimp.

The Germans were the first Europeans to colonize Cameroon in 1884. The region was known as the German Kamerun protectorate and remained under German control
until World War I. The Germans were mainly concerned with exploiting Cameroon’s natural resources, but in order to access those resources, they had to first penetrate the interior. This called for the construction of a basic infrastructure in the country, and so the Germans made an effort to build roads, bridges, and harbors and to implement educational systems.

Germany was forced to give up its colonies at the Versailles Conference in 1919 to pay reparations to the winning countries of World War I. The German Kamerun protectorate was divided between Britain and France. France received the majority of the region, while the British took over an area that became known as the Cameroons, comprising Southern and Northern Cameroon (See Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Map of Cameroon from 1901–1972. Available at: http://www.mappery.com/maps-Cameroon](http://www.mappery.com/maps-Cameroon)

As would be the case throughout much of Cameroon’s later history, the eastern part of the country was largely ignored. As was typical with state borders in Africa, ethnic groups were spread across the British-French divide. French Cameroonians expressed a greater interest in unification. It must be noted that Francophone Cameroon gained independence on 1 October 1960, the same day as Nigeria gained its independence. On 11 February 1961, Southern Cameroon voted to join the rest of Cameroon, while Northern Cameroon voted to join Nigeria. As the topic of reunification of the Southern and Francophone Cameroons began to be discussed in earnest, the Kamerun National Democratic Party assured Anglophones that there would be equality in the influence of
both regions and in "the preservation of their cultural legacies" after reunification (Konings 2005:283). On 1 October 1961, a year after independence, the two colonies unified as the Federal Republic of Cameroon and what was once Southern British Cameroon became known as West Cameroon. The political and economic attention of the new joint government focused primarily on central and western Cameroon, areas where the mixing of the two previously colonized groups was most prevalent.

Ahmadou Ahidjo led the independence movement in Cameroon and became the country's first president. A Muslim from the North, Ahidjo was a firm ruler. He quelled a rebellion that threatened to overthrow him in the early 1970s. Ahidjo was conservative in his decisions, and he succeeded in turning Cameroon into one of the more stable countries in the region. Ahidjo ruled Cameroon until 1982 when failing health forced him to step down. He chose his Prime Minister, Paul Biya, a Christian from the South, as his successor, surprising many people (DeLancey 1999; Ngoh 1987). Biya and the rest of the administration paid little attention to the East Region, until a growing economy began relying on the East's expansive forests and relatively small population.

Cameroon Today

Cameroon is considered the most linguistically diverse country on the African continent, with estimates of somewhere between 200 and 400 languages spoken throughout the country (DeLancey 1999, 2010). Bordering Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo, Cameroon is a member of the CEMAC – le Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l’Afrique Centrale. Cameroon's geographic diversity includes shoreline, jungle, savannah, highlands, and
desert. With a 2013 estimated population of around twenty-two million, Cameroon ranks in the top third of the world’s nations for its population size. More than half of the population lives in urban areas.

As of publication, Cameroon’s President Paul Biya was both the oldest and longest serving head of state in the world. Although considered a democracy, Cameroon did not introduce multi-party elections until 1990. Each election since then has been rumored to be rigged. The majority of the population no longer supports Biya’s tight control of the government. Cameroonians are ready for a change; the country has not prospered under Biya’s rule. In the past thirty years, the unemployment level has increased, while both the literacy rate and the life expectancy have decreased (CIA World Factbook 2014; DeLancey 2010; Konings 2005).

Despite being a perennial recipient of development aid, Cameroon has an inadequate power and water supply as well as a job shortage. Growth is hindered in Cameroon today by “slow-moving structural reforms, the short supply of electricity needed for industrial growth, recent widespread riots, and a view of government as corrupt and lacking transparency” (DeLancey 2010:143). While the country is self-sufficient in terms of food production (DeLancey 1999:xiii), it does not sell the surplus to any of its less successful neighbors, but rather offers the surplus at low cost in urban centers (DeLancey 1999:xxi). There is a huge wealth disparity, with the country’s money concentrated in urban areas (DeLancey 1999:xiv). Today’s GDP per capita is around $2300 (CIA). The unemployment rate is high, although exact estimates vary. DeLancey puts it at thirty percent with forty-eight percent of the population living below the poverty line (2010:143). It is estimated that Cameroon’s informal sector offers nearly ninety-five
percent of all available jobs. It is for these reasons that jobs with international humanitarian aid organizations are so attractive to young Cameroonians.

Refugees in Cameroon

While Cameroon’s political order may not be the most liberal, it has offered stability within the country, making it an attractive choice for refugee populations. According to UNHCR (2014a), in March 2014, Cameroon hosted just over 101,000 refugees with about 95,000 coming from the CAR and several thousand each attributed as Chadian and Nigerian. Lischer writes, “Minimizing humanitarian ‘collateral damage’ requires favorable conditions of political order in the receiving state” (2003:96). Nigerians have often crossed into Cameroon, claiming refugee status, and since 2000, refugees have left Chad to settle in Northern Cameroon. On June 21, 2008, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees stated that “‘the Cameroon government had demonstrated an exceptional amount of generosity and understanding by agreeing to play host to hordes of refugees from strife-torn neighboring states’” (DeLancey 2010:322). While the Central African refugees that my informants work with have easily integrated into the local community, due to a historically porous border, this may not be representative of all refugee populations in Cameroon: “In recent years, banditry in the northern parts of Cameroon has been blamed on Chadians” (DeLancey 2010:98).

In the East

With about 800,000 inhabitants, the East Region of Cameroon, nicknamed “the Forgotten Province,” is the most sparsely populated region in the country, while
constituting a fourth of Cameroon’s entire territory. Underdeveloped and with little industry, the East Region provides few formal employment opportunities for its youth. Students interested in pursuing higher education must move out of the region to Ngaoundéré, in the neighboring Adamaoua, or to another university city. Graduates who return home benefit from close kin networks, but face challenges finding jobs in this primarily subsistence-based region. As a poor region, the East has been privy to development grants and initiatives. Both international and national development projects, in need of skilled employees, have taken advantage of the unemployed college graduates, becoming a primary employer in the East.

The development projects have not reached their full potential, however. Progress has been slow and there remains a lot to be done in terms of infrastructure, technology, industry, and education. DeLancey writes, “Industrial, commercial, and tourism potentials are still undeveloped” in the East Region (2010:138). The East Region was only founded as an administrative zone in 1972. Its capital is Bertoua. Due to the primarily rural nature of the communities in the East Region, it has been challenging to establish a truly effective development project that can reach all corners of the Region (Pierre Interview 2012). Apathetic and concentrated on the larger urban areas, the government in Yaoundé, as well as international development projects, had nearly given up on the East Region. That is, until 2006 and the arrival of the first Central African Republican refugees.

Central African Republic – Factors Precipitating the Conflict

Unlike Cameroon, The Central African Republic, partly due to its landlocked location, was not of major interest to any colonial government. Known as Oubangi-Chari, it
was eventually colonized by the French, who divided its territory into large tracts of land which were rented out to European companies. These companies exploited the land’s natural resources and workers, contributing very little in the way of infrastructure or development. The French colonial government eventually built some roads, but the administration viewed Central Africans as a source of forced labor. Central Africans worked on farms whose products went directly to French troops (Van Hoogstraten 2014).

Although Oubangi-Chari was composed of a variety of ethnic groups, the people of the region began to form a national identity following the Second World War. Three thousand residents of the Central African region fought for France against the Germans, contributing to the development of a national – rather than ethnic – pride and identity. A year after the war, a Catholic priest named Barthélemy Boganda was the first African to be elected to France’s National Assembly. From the Oubangi-Chari, Boganda played a role in the region’s eventual independence from France, although he died in 1959, a year before independence. Oubangi-Chari became an independent nation on 13 August 1960 and was renamed the Central African Republic (Van Hoogstraten 2014).

The Central African Republic has suffered at the hand of corrupt and dictatorial politicians since independence. It does merit mentioning however that the CAR had the first female prime minister in sub-Saharan Africa in 1975. Due to the CAR’s rich uranium and diamond deposits, France remained involved in the country’s governance, supporting ruinous politicians even as the country’s debt increased sharply. The country approved a new constitution in 1986, but by the early 1990s the population began expressing its discontent with the government (Van Hoogstraten 2014).
The CAR finally adopted civilian rule in 1993 (CIA World Factbook 2014) and Ange-Félix Patassé became the Central African Republic’s first democratically elected president (Van Hoogstraten 2014). Patassé was not the answer the country was looking for and by the late 1990s, looting and violence had become rampant. The Bangui Accords were signed in 1997, to “reconcile competing political factions, reform and strengthen the economy, and restructure the military” (Van Hoogstraten 2014). The French military finally withdrew from the country the same year. The United Nations opened its peacekeeping mission in the CAR. The country continued to be plagued by attempted military coups, violence, and a huge deficit (Van Hoogstraten 2014).

In 2003, General François Bozizé succeeded to power in a coup d’état. He organized democratic elections in 2005, which he handily won. Conflict began following Bozizé’s election as rebel groups in the northwest and northeast of the CAR hindered progress and incited violence throughout the country (Amparan 2012; Issa 2006). In 2005, the CAR had only 5000 government soldiers (IRIN 2008) and as a result, the state had no ability to control the rebel groups. The rebels terrorized rural populations with random violence and frequent checkpoints along roadways where they often steal personal belongings, including animals, as a tax.

A majority of the Central African refugees who left the country are Mbororo, an ethnic group within the broader category of Peul or Fulbé people living in West and Central Africa. The Mbororo are Muslim and have traditionally worked as nomadic herders. They are found on both sides of the CAR/Cameroon border. “Le découpage a fait que certains [Mbororos] sont Camerounais, d’autres sont Centrafricains,” explained one of my informants
The Mbororos do not have “la notion de frontière. . . Tout ce qu’il sait c’est qu’il suit ses bœufs qui mangent des herbes là où il y a des bonnes herbes, ils entrent,” another told me (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). The arbitrary dividing up of borders means that “les mêmes familles [sont] aux deux côtés de la frontière” (Monique, Interview 11/19/12). Therefore when the violence began in the CAR, it was predictable for the Mbororos to travel west to Cameroon.

Some scholars believe that the Mbororo had settled in Cameroon before migrating to the CAR. It is thought that the Mbororo came from Nigeria in 1870 and settled in the Adamaoua. Although they tried to establish a centralized power, as an imitation of the Lamibé– the traditional leaders – of the Adamaoua, it did not take. There was a large migration out of the Adamaoua in the 1920s and many Mbororo left for the southeast Adamaoua or the Central African Republic (DeLancey 2010:244). DeLancey writes that Mbororo is a derogatory term, but as it is widely used in Bertoua and it was how my informants referred to the refugees and how the refugees referred to themselves, I will continue to use it.

So when violence wracked northwestern CAR, and the rebels targeted the Mbororo due to their cattle wealth, many Mbororo turned towards Cameroon as an escape route. As they entered Cameroon, “on les laissait entrer sans problèmes,” a local aid worker described (Thérèse, Interview 11/19/12). The Mbororo settled in villages throughout the Adamaoua and East Region. Some chose villages where they had relatives, while others were

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6 “The cutting meant that certain Mbororos are Cameroonian and others are Central Africans.”
7 The Mbororos do not have “the notion of borders. . . All they know is to follow their cattle who go eat grass there where the grass is good, and it’s there where the Mbororo enter.”
8 The arbitrary dividing up of borders means that “the same families are on both sides of the border.”
9 “we let them enter without any problems.”
welcomed by the autochthonous populations. The autochthonous populations, largely ignored by the government, were not in much better shape than the refugees. Despite this fact, however, the village chiefs were welcoming to the refugees and they gave the newcomers “un peu de manioc, un peu de farine, un peu de viande.” If the chiefs had not welcomed the refugees, Thérèse believes, the refugees would have ended up in a camp (Thérèse, Interview 11/16/12).¹⁰,¹¹

The presence of the refugees in Cameroonian villages was not without its conflicts. Since arriving, however, the international aid organizations have directed their projects towards both the refugee and local populations. “Les études ont montré que la vulnérabilité, au sein de la population hôte et des réfugiés est presque la même” (Jean Baptiste, Interview 11/19/12).¹² “C’est pratiquement la même souffrance” in the two communities (Monique, Interview 11/19/12).¹³ An employee at IRD, an American NGO, explained that the refugee and the autochthones “ont leur liens de fraternité . . . Pour toutes actions que nous menons, nous impliquons au maximum les autochtones” (Marie, Interview 11/23/12).¹⁴

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was the first on the ground to respond to the Central African refugee presence. The Cameroonian Refugee Law of 2005 (UNHCR 2011:15) mandates that registered refugees have, in a UNHCR employee’s words, “pratiquement les mêmes droits qu’un Camerounais” (Frank, Interview 11/20/12).¹⁵ This includes the right to education, the right to legal representation and justice, and the right to

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¹⁰ “a bit of manioc, a bit of flour, a bit of meat.”
¹¹ For more information on this topic, see Butel 2012 and Butel 2013.
¹² “The studies showed that the vulnerability of the host population and the vulnerability of the refugees is almost the same.”
¹³ “It’s practically the same suffering.”
¹⁴ “have their fraternal lines . . . For every action that we take, we try to implicate the autochthonous populations too.”
¹⁵ “practically the same rights as a Cameroonian.”
food, a local aid worker explained (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). The United Nations agencies have primarily been in charge of providing these resources to the refugees. The World Food Programme conducts routine distributions in refugee communities and the UNHCR partner organizations on the ground in Bertoua have implemented agricultural, avicultural, and piscicultural initiatives to help the refugees become self-sufficient. The partner organizations have also built schools around the region and have enrolled refugee children.

UNHCR tailored its work to be able to serve the refugees spread out in disparate villages throughout the East Region and parts of the Adamaoua. This enabled UNHCR and the humanitarian aid organizations that soon arrived in the area to aid both the refugee and the local populations who had initially offered what little aid they could to the refugees. An employee of UNHCR’s Protection Team said, “On essaye de les intégrer dans nos projets sur le terrain pour que les conflits d’intérêt ne se posent pas.” And that strategy has resulted in peace on the ground. “Aujourd’hui sur le terrain c’est très très calme… Même les nationaux se disent que les réfugiés sont leurs frères” (Frank, Interview 11/20/12).16 They are so integrated that today the local populations “s’épousent déjà les réfugiés” (Paul, Interview 11/18/12).17

The spatial placement of the Central African refugees in villages and the cohabitation of the two groups have been favorable for a holistic approach to the needs of the two populations. The situation differs from that of refugees who are in camps where

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16 “We try to integrate them in our projects on the ground so that conflicts of interest don’t arise.”
“Today on the ground it’s very very calm… Even the national staff remarks that the refugees are their brothers.”
17 “are already marrying the refugees.”
there is little possibility for development and integration. Angela Butel (2013) has documented the situation in Eastern Cameroon in her thesis, “Humanitarianism and the ‘National Order of things’: Examining the Routinized Refugee Response in Eastern Cameroon.” She argues that the structure of the refugee response in Eastern Cameroon sets an example for effective refugee responses elsewhere in the world. My work builds on this by using the case study of the local humanitarian aid workers in Eastern Cameroon to demonstrate the importance of local staff in the successful implementation of an international refugee response.
CHAPTER 3:

The Invisibility of Local Aid Workers in the Humanitarian Sector

Refugees arrive daily at the whitewashed walls of the UNHCR field office in Bertoua. They knock on the blue metal gate and wait for someone to let them in. They look around, impressed and somewhat intimidated by the well-maintained gardens and fleet of white SUVs. They have been told by friends, family, and neighbors that coming to the UNHCR office will solve their problems. They can obtain food – the UNHCR office shares its compound with a WFP distribution center – and will receive a refugee identification card as they sign up for distributions and initiatives organized by the various humanitarian aid organizations operating in the region. The Central African Republic refugees latch onto the promise of food, education, and inclusion in Cameroonian society and so they show up at the compound.

Humanitarian aid, as we know it today, is a relatively new concept. Although a moral imperative to take care of others has existed for millennia, humanitarianism as a way to describe and distinguish benevolent actions and intentions emerged in the mid-nineteenth century (Barnett 2011; ICRC). Throughout the past century and a half, humanitarianism has been increasingly used to describe reactions to conflicts, famines, and natural disasters. Many of the organizations at the forefront of today’s humanitarian movement came into existence during the first half of the twentieth century, defining and redefining humanitarianism as politics and conflicts throughout the world changed. These organizations’ employees, the world’s humanitarian aid workers, are arguably the most important tool in the delivery of aid to every corner of the earth. In order to fully grasp the
context in which aid workers, and more specifically, national aid workers, find themselves, it is necessary to understand humanitarianism and the humanitarian enterprise, as they exist today.

Humanitarianism is an inclusive and widely applicable term. The phrase “international humanitarian aid” has the potential to refer to militaristic interventions in the name of humanity, peacekeeping, development, emergency relief following a natural disaster, as well as to provision of basic needs to refugees. For brevity’s sake, I have narrowed my description of humanitarian aid to what one might call “international refugee relief.” I define and refer to international humanitarian aid with an eye to the humanitarian response specifically directed at refugees, as outlined in the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

To understand humanitarian aid, we need to examine the actors. This chapter looks at both the organizations and the people themselves who are chiefly responsible for the movement and delivery of aid. In discussing the human actors in aid, we need to appreciate that there exist two distinct groups – local and expatriate. I argue that appreciating the fault line between these two groups of actors is key to understanding the inequities present in the humanitarian aid sector and in understanding how this expansive industry functions on a global scale. In this chapter, I situate local aid workers within a larger globalized industry in order to further my assertion that local aid workers are a necessary and overlooked component in the implementation of humanitarian aid. I argue that no discussion of humanitarian aid is complete if devoid of attention to local staff members.
Humanitarianism Today

Humanitarianism and humanitarian aid have changed from Dunant and the International Committee of the Red Cross’s initial conceptions in the mid-nineteenth century. Humanitarianism has had three distinct periods: from its adoption as a cause in Geneva in 1863 to the start of World War Two, which Barnett refers to as “imperial humanitarianism;” from World War Two through the end of the Cold War, termed the period of “neo-humanitarianism;” to today’s “liberal humanitarianism” (Barnett 2011:7), begun after the fall of the Soviet Union. Others hold that modern humanitarianism began in 1971 when Médecins Sans Frontières was founded with the conviction and understanding that it is impossible to remain totally neutral in the face of atrocities and human rights abuses (Barnett 2011; Orbinski 2008; Rieff 2002:27).

Humanitarianism is seen today as a form of global governance, synonymous with the broad influence of the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, or the World Bank. Humanitarian aid has increasingly become more hierarchical and institutionalized (Barnett 2011:8). The humanitarian ethos has emerged, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, as “the reigning utopia for well-intentioned people in the West” (Rieff 2002:92). Despite the living legacy of the late nineteenth century ethicists’ understanding of humanitarian aid as “a global architecture of care for distant strangers” (Barnett 2011:9), humanitarianism is entering into a new phase. Scholars say it is moving away from its Western bias. Whereas “humanitarian assistance” was once the accepted term within the industry, “humanitarian action” replaced it in the early 1990s in an effort to include the agency of all those involved (Bjerneld 2009:13). The new humanitarianism for a new millennium has been described by Fiona Fox, a British relief specialist as “‘Principled,
ethical, and human rights-based. It will not stand neutral in face of genocide or human rights abuses” (Rieff 2002:314).

This assertion, that humanitarianism and the humanitarian enterprise are growing increasingly de-Westernized, is not necessarily accurate. The humanitarian sector remains grounded in the West. Although there are upwards of 4400 humanitarian NGOs in operation around the world, the dominant groups remain the International Committee of the Red Cross, United Nations agencies, and five other “mega” NGOs18 (Taylor et al 2012:9), all based in Western Europe or the United States. This group of organizations spends, on average, 38% of the total humanitarian annual expenditure, despite the fact that fewer than 20% of humanitarian NGOs are international (Taylor et al 2012:28-29). International NGOs spent approximately US $2.8 billion in 2010 (Taylor et al 2012:9).

A majority of the money spent by humanitarian aid organizations comes from bilateral and multilateral aid, typically financed by wealthy Western governments; only about six percent of humanitarian funding comes from the private sector (Taylor et al 2012:34). The United Nations agencies are funded by the regular contributions of member states, whereas private organizations look to bilateral and multilateral aid for funding. The United States Agency for International Development is the largest government donor agency in the field of humanitarian aid (Taylor et al 2012:34). In order to solicit contributions from smaller governments who may not have a structured government relief agency, the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) was created in late 2005. Its purpose is

18The five “mega” NGOs featured in Taylor et al’s 2012 ALNAP report were Medecins Sans Frontières, Catholic Relief Services, Oxfam International, Save the Children, and World Vision International (Taylor et al 2012:29).
to channel government funds into smaller organizations so that governments do not have to spend time or energy managing projects (Taylor et al 2012:34).

Non-governmental organizations, despite their names, are often constrained by government and political interests. United States legislation allows American-based NGOs to accept as much as 80% “of their resources from nonprivate sources.” Although there is less data available, European-based NGOs are also estimated to receive a significant amount of their resources from labor, social, and political movements (Minear 2002:70). It is not unusual for private donors or donor governments to give money with a specific geopolitical interest in mind (Taylor et al 2012:23). As noted in Chapter Two, this can pose a significant negative impact on a humanitarian crisis when there are no geopolitical interests, as is the case with the Central African Republic. Regardless of how humanitarian initiatives are funded, rarely is the full demonstrated need met. The humanitarian sector required US $13.4 billion in funding in 2013, yet donors met just 60% of the demonstrated need (OCHA 2014:11).

*International Humanitarian Actors*

Although the International Committee of the Red Cross was founded in 1863 to offer aid to those in need, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN’s refugee agency, was not established until 1951. The UNHCR was founded as a direct response to the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by World War Two. The United Nations and the High Commissioner for Refugees established the internationally accepted definition of a
refugee in 1951. This definition was broadened in the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 1967), including anyone who had become a refugee after 1951. This was especially important in an African context where many nation-states had achieved independence after that date.

Many of today’s leading humanitarian organizations were founded during the first half of the twentieth century. A majority of these organizations began with a specific focus, whether regional or religious or both, and eventually branched out to include victims of a variety of humanitarian crises around the world. The United Nations agencies, including UNHCR, the World Food Programme, and UNICEF, remain the primary humanitarian actors in crisis zones. It is these agencies that “try to set the political as well as the operational agenda” of the mission and of the various NGOs working in a region (Rieff 2002:118).

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent movements, comprising the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Secretariat of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC or FICR in French), and the 187 member National Societies of the IFRC, has its own mandate, separate from that of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Taylor et al 2012:33). The Red Cross Movement has held strongly to its mandate, refusing to bend, even under pressure. The most famous outcome of the ICRC’s steadfastness was during the Biafran War of the late 1960s. A group of young doctors, desperate to call international attention to the atrocities being committed by the Nigerian government and choosing to ignore the ICRC’s value of neutrality, branched off from the established humanitarian movement to found Médecins

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19 UN Definition of a refugee: someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR 1951).
Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). MSF, known as the “perpetual naysayer” of humanitarian aid organizations, prides itself on its willingness to expose the injustices and limitations often institutionalized in the humanitarian aid regime (Rieff 2002:119).

A common premise of humanitarian organizations is to care solely for “strangers” (Rieff 2002:21). The predominant image that these organizations advocate is that of “the caring white adult looking after the bereft, needy black child” (Rieff 2002:72). As Barnett has said, humanitarian aid organizations give to and care for “distant strangers” (Barnett 2008:237; Barnett 2011:15). This is not altogether accurate, however. Of the 274,000 humanitarian aid workers worldwide in 2010, approximately ninety percent were national staff (Taylor et al 2012:9), caring for people who were not at all distant strangers.

Humanitarian aid workers, regardless of their country of origin, are seen as “the real heroes of refugee emergencies and genocidal wars of ‘ethnic cleansing’” (Rieff 2002:20). The prestige accorded to aid workers has rapidly increased since the end of the Cold War (Rieff 2002:94) during Barnett’s period of liberal humanitarianism. In accordance with the increasing visibility and prestige of humanitarian aid workers, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1502 in 2003 “which declares deliberate attacks against humanitarian actors or peacekeepers a war crime” (Fast 2010:365-366). There is a growing professionalization of the aid sector overall (Burkle 2013). A wide variety of handbooks is available to prepare individuals for the difficulties of humanitarian aid work. There have also been calls to standardize the requirements needed by aid workers, including certificates and required diplomas (Burkle 2013; Cahill 2003a). These courses are largely focused on international aid workers who work in the field or on the ground.
The staff of humanitarian aid organizations, working at headquarters, complements those aid workers working on the ground. About a half of headquarters staff have taken a break or retired from working on the ground and have chosen to remain in one location (Oscar Interview 2013). Those aid workers on the ground, who tend to be young (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010:53) and whose jobs are defined by short contracts, frequent moving, and distance from their family or home country, are the aid workers most often imagined by Westerners. Crossing “moral, political, social, and cultural boundaries” (Barnett 2011:36), these international aid workers’ goal is to do no harm “while attempting to mitigate horrors most people in their home countries are at best dimly aware of” (Rieff 2002:22). By using terms like “on the ground” or “in the field,” international aid workers distance themselves from the “countries, tragedies, and destinies” of other people (Rieff 2002:6).

While I have mentioned some types of humanitarian aid workers, the many varieties of humanitarian aid workers require additional differentiating. The taxonomy below clarifies the various types of humanitarian aid workers that I have identified in my research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinds of humanitarian aid workers</th>
<th>International aid workers (mobile)</th>
<th>Field office staff</th>
<th>Country headquarters staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian aid workers at field offices/active missions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local aid workers (resident)</td>
<td>Nationally-relocated</td>
<td>Administrators/Professional</td>
<td>Security/Technical (although less common)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locally-based</td>
<td></td>
<td>Security/Technical</td>
<td>Day Workers (no formalized processes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administrators/Professional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian aid workers at headquarters</td>
<td>Managing staff</td>
<td>Mobile staff (expats)</td>
<td>Security/Maintenance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3 Taxonomy of Kinds of Humanitarian Aid Workers
Although national staff comprises the majority of humanitarian aid workers, international staff receives far and away the most recognition for the work. The media, especially, contributes to the wrong assumption that only international actors play a part in humanitarian aid. The media supports the impression of the “preponderant externality of the humanitarian enterprise” and it ignores the participation of host governments and civil societies (Minear 2002:65). Fast adds, “Media reports often collapse ‘foreigner’ with ‘aid worker’” (Fast 2010:368). White, expatriate workers “make better copy than locals performing the same tasks,” Minear writes (2002:65).

International staff members are not always prepared to work in a specific area, however. International aid workers arrive at new jobs with fresh ideas and a lot of energy, bringing with them connections and memories from past experiences (Redfield 2012:370). “Beyond a rapid briefing, few arrived equipped with much historical background to the project, and fewer still spoke anything other than international languages,” Redfield writes, referring to international staff in Uganda (2012:370). International aid workers “claim to be in solidarity with the objects of their compassion,” yet their relationship with the target populations “contains its own inequalities” (Barnett 2011:34). Gilbert writes of the difficulties of the international humanitarian aid worker's relationship with the target population:

The reality of accurately listening to someone who not only holds different values and assumptions about the world, but who also may have very different priorities from those of the aid worker, and who may want of the aid worker something very different from what the aid worker assumes s/he is there to give, can be deeply challenging (Gilbert 2005).

With little attachment to the specific location, international staff members are at risk to make cultural blunders or to plan projects that may not be appropriate for the area. They
do not necessarily have an adequate understanding when it comes to the “political, economic, and cultural contexts in which they work” (Abu-Sada 2012:62). International staff is reminded that behaviors that may be normal at home may have different consequences on the team (MSF 2003:18-23). But when adequate attention is given to hiring international staff based on their “ability to manage relationships in cross-cultural situations,” as Minear has suggested (2002:72), hiring international staff members can be a smart decision.

International aid workers sometimes are, however, the best choice for certain humanitarian jobs. In cases of tense security situations, international staff’s status as foreigners can partly insulate them “from the outcome of both local politics and individual risk” (Redfield 2012:370). For example, during the genocide in Rwanda, neither MSF nor the ICRC lost expatriate staff, but they lost hundreds of national staff members (Orbinski 2008:164). By having no ties to local militia, factions, or political parties, international staff can conceivably work with less pressure and suspicion than national staff are subjected to (Oscar Interview 2013; Redfield 2012:363). There have also been movements, of late, that encourage local integration or integration of local knowledge in missions (Redfield 2012:369).

There are several fundamental differences between international and national humanitarian aid workers. For the most part, international staff is compensated on the same scale as employees working at headquarters (Stoddard et al 2011a:2), while national staff is in a different pay category with a significantly lower average salary.

Other differences between the types of aid workers involve evacuation. In cases of violence or renewed conflict, expatriate aid workers are airlifted out, while there is no
guarantee for national staff members (Fassin 2011:223; Michael Interview 2013b; Redfield 2012:370). Lastly, international aid workers, as First World citizens, as Rieff calls them, have the choice to expose themselves to a “world of suffering, injustice, violent death, want, and cruelty that is the lived reality for so many people on this planet” (Rieff 2002:43).

There is a joke told about the international humanitarian aid worker who finally climbs out of his white SUV’s air-conditioned interior, at which point one local says to another, “I didn’t even know those people had legs” (Redfield 2012:369).

*National Humanitarian Aid Workers*

Although they may be rarely discussed, national staff, as was noted earlier, comprises ninety to ninety-five percent of all humanitarian aid workers (Taylor et al 2012:30). This means that only five to ten percent of an estimated 274,000 humanitarian aid workers in 2012 were international workers. But those nearly 260,000 workers receive minimal attention. Minear offers an overview of the scale of focus of the humanitarian world. “The humanitarian enterprise remains predominantly expatriate in design, culture, and accountability, almost irrespective of the particular state of local organizations in crisis countries” (Minear 2002:129).

Who are these elusive national aid humanitarian aid workers? There is no agreed-upon term of reference for local staff.20 For purposes of this thesis, I refer to them as national humanitarian aid workers or alternately national or local staff. While some choose to distinguish between national staff, whom they define as nationals of the country, and local staff, defined as nationals from the specific area of interest (Stoddard et al 2011a:3), I

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20 See this discussion on page 25 in Chapter 1.
have decided not to. Throughout my fieldwork, I came to realize that the national or local staff’s understanding of the country and its culture, mores, and languages set them so far apart from the international staff that it was important to look at the nationals of the country as a group in contrast with the expatriate staff. I acknowledge the potential lack of nuance in drawing this dichotomy, but I hold that the overall differences for national and international staff working in the humanitarian aid sector justify this. National aid workers can be defined as paid employees working in their home countries for international humanitarian aid organizations (Stoddard et al 2011a:2). I make the distinction of international aid organizations here because I wish to distinguish nationals of a country working for an international organization from those nationals working for a local organization; in the context of this thesis, their jobs, roles, and positions within the humanitarian enterprise are different.

Conflicts, disasters, and famines, among other humanitarian crises arise in an area, affecting local populations and attracting the attention of international agencies. Upon arrival, international aid organizations set out to hire local staff. They hire a diverse staff to fill both professional or managerial roles as well as logistical and technical spots. UNHCR views national staff as vital to their organization’s success because of the national staff’s deep understanding of the “local situation.” National staff members tend to be “sensitive to issues that often escape the notice of the international staff member” (UNHCR 2007:469). As will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, national staff members often have an advantage in that they speak the local language and are familiar with the regional culture (Redfield 2012:364; UNHCR 2007:469). There are, of course, instances when international staff members are more practical than local staff.
Despite their relative invisibility, it is widely acknowledged that national aid workers do the majority of the work (Minear 2002; Redfield 2012:375; Stoddard et al 2011a:1). Minear describes local humanitarian aid workers as “understandably distressed at bearing the lion’s share of the humanitarian burden yet being marginalized in the public eye” (Minear 2002:65). It is the repetitive, day-to-day tasks, a vital yet unexciting part of every mission, that national staff members are most often tasked with. Their work is vital to the success of the mission, but it is not glamorous in the way that an international humanitarian aid worker’s decision to move to a developing country may be (Redfield 2012:364). Carina Ray writes that this contributes to the misconception:

That Western aid workers are saving Africans. Sure, many of the big aid organisations have expatriate staff on the ground, but they are few in number. By and large Africans make up the vast majority of aid workers in Africa. And this is as it should be (Ray 2010:78).

The recognition that national aid workers may often be a more strategic hiring choice than international aid workers has slowly been gaining some traction. There has been a trend since the 1990s in some humanitarian aid organizations “to employ more local experts and other kinds of local personnel” (Bjerneld 2009:15). It has been considered “a more ethically correct solution” to hire predominantly national aid workers (Bjerneld 2009:15). And since the 1990s the trainings and preparation of national staff has changed. As Oscar, a Human Resources employee at the ICRC in Geneva commented to me, “Levels of education have changed in many countries … so we can reduce slowly [the number of] mobiles on certain functions and start to recruit residents” (Oscar, Interview 7/31/13). MSF has similarly made an effort to “decolonize” its two staffs (Redfield 2012:360).

But even if international aid organizations may have a larger number of national staff members, there remain discrepancies in the treatment of the two staffs. Clothing and
the respect accorded to each employee play a part in this. By virtue of their white skin, international staff members are perceived to have more authority in many situations, making it challenging for the local staff to direct projects in certain communities (Redfield 2012). And in order for locals to appear more professional, they are not able to wear the “campy clothes” favored by expatriate staff when on the ground, featuring neutral shades of linen and cotton, harkening back to the safari outfits favored by colonialists. Referring to a national aid worker in Uganda, Redfield writes, “To perform her role she had to demonstrate formality and distance” (Redfield 2012:365). The clothing choices and tendencies of national staff are, in a way, a necessary form of code switching. Clothing and appearance have the potential to either group the local humanitarian aid workers with international staff and the organizations or with the refugees and their lack of resources. Cameroonian take care to dress formally and to wash every day. The light linens of the expatriate staff are anathema to Cameroonian’s conceptions of formality and business attire.

From salary to contracts to unemployment, national aid workers are disadvantaged relative to their international counterparts. International and national staff are paid on two different scales (Oscar Interview 2013; Redfield 2012; Stoddard et al 2011a:3). Despite instances when national and international staff members possess similar job qualifications, experience, and training, the structure of aid organizations’ human resources departments differentiates between the two groups (Oscar Interview July 2013). The premise behind this is that when international staff members return to their home countries a salary that may have been adequate in a developing country will not be sufficient at home.
First Arrival and Response International\textsuperscript{21} (FARI), a French humanitarian aid organization currently operating in Eastern Cameroon, provides a starting salary of approximately $2350\textsuperscript{22}/month for its expatriates working as Project Directors. In contrast, Michael, one of my informants who was recently promoted to Assistant Head of Mission at FARI Cameroon, is paid about $630/month.\textsuperscript{23}

In addition to salary differences, FARI approaches its national and international employees’ training and development differently as well. In an effort to increase his professional capacity, Michael has attended several humanitarian professional trainings run by BioForce, a humanitarian professionals development organization based in Lyon, France. Despite the direct benefit these trainings have had on his job performance, FARI has refused to compensate Michael for the trainings. The BioForce training Michael attended in Burkina Faso in May 2012 cost him around $100 a day. Michael concedes that he is lucky that BioForce has allowed him to take time off for the trainings. “Si aujourd’hui je me retrouve Assistance Chef du Mission,” Michael explained, “C’est parce que réellement j’ai fait cette formation” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12).\textsuperscript{24}

Another discrepancy in the treatment of the two staffs occurs at the end of a mission. When a mission is completed, humanitarian aid organizations look to begin decreasing capacity. The work has moved away from basic needs and towards development projects, which some international humanitarian aid organizations will do to a small extent. When a mission leaves, there is no guarantee of a job for national staff, although there is an “increasing reliance on national staff and local partners to remain

\textsuperscript{21} Name has been changed to preserve the anonymity of the organization and its staff.
\textsuperscript{22} The equivalent of 1700 € as of February 28, 2014.
\textsuperscript{23} Salary is 300,000 F CFA.
\textsuperscript{24} “If today I find myself the Assistant Head of Mission, it’s truly because I did that training.”
where international staff members have left” (Stoddard et al 2011a:1). According to Oscar, the ICRC employee, “residents” – his term for national staff – have only two options. They can grow with the organization, hoping to find another posting elsewhere within their country, or, “if the person wants to and is able to expatriate, [they] can go away as a mobile and work somewhere.” Only about fifty national staff members expatriated throughout the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movements in the past year, Oscar told me in July 2013 (Oscar, Interview 7/31/13).

The question of expatriation of national staff becomes more difficult when it is in reference to South-South migration. Should a Cameroonian working in Mali, for example, be elevated to the ranking of international aid worker within an organization’s hierarchy? Michael, the Assistant Head of Mission at FARI, described that working in Mali would elevate him to the level of international staff, meaning that his salary would more than double (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). Redfield, on the other hand, writes about a Ugandan driver who has chosen to work over the border in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in order to receive the prized “international” designation. Redfield questions whether or not the Ugandan driver working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo deserves the same salary as a Chinese doctor working in the DRC (Redfield 2012:367). The answer is not obvious, but it is clear that education, experience, and training must be taken into account when estimating salary. In the case of the Ugandan driver and Chinese doctor example, despite their differences in careers and necessary training, it is fair that the farther an individual is from home, the more they should earn as the hardships of adapting to a new locale are compounded by their distance from family and the comforts of home.
The uncertainty of future employment that accompanies the end of a mission is extremely stressful for local aid workers who, while often on short-term contracts, are still taken by surprise by the abruptness with which funding for a mission can be cut off. This stress, augmented by the everyday stress and challenges of working as a humanitarian aid worker, can be overwhelming for national staff. Extensive research has been conducted on the psychological effects of stress experienced by international staff, but relatively little research has been conducted on this aspect of national humanitarian aid workers’ experiences.

National and international humanitarian aid workers are exposed to different stressors. The Antares Foundation’s purpose is to provide support for humanitarian aid workers. A recent report by the Foundation explains, “In designing and implementing stress management programs, the agency should systematically think about the distinct needs of each group” (Antares 2012:7), referring to the disparate experiences of national and international staff. The Antares Foundation’s Guidelines report that the most commonly reported stressor among national staff was “economic or financial problems” (2012:10). The Guidelines explain the unique needs of national staff; they “may face stress not shared by international staff.” It is possible that “they and their families may share with other refugees unusually difficult living conditions, legal prohibitions on working or on sending their children to local schools, and uncertainty about the future.” In some cases, it is the refugees themselves who are hired to work. Additionally, “differences in pay and benefits or promotion between national staff and international staff or perceptions of lack of respect from international staff may also be sources of stress” (2012:11).
Psychosocial care has been looked to as a possible stress management tool. As will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter, national staff members have large local support systems. This does not protect national staff from being disproportionately affected by the recent rise in violence against aid workers, however. The Aid Worker Security Report, published by Humanitarian Outcomes, asserts, “National staffers make up the majority of victims in attacks on aid operations” (Stoddard et al 2011b:6). In more intense security areas, local staff “carry out aid activities” while international staff are in guarded compounds (Stoddard et al 2011b:6). National aid workers face the trauma of violence in addition to the fact that they may be in the midst of the humanitarian crisis as well, “as residents of the locale being served.” Local aid workers “also take on the added burden of helping their neighbors, friends, and others in the humanitarian capacity” (Barton 2005:43).

Conclusion

When a refugee crisis occurs, host governments welcome the help of large international aid organizations, equipped with budgets in the millions and experienced and professional personnel. But without local aid workers, these organizations are limited in their capacities, despite the wealth of resources at their disposal. In the same way, I contend that the literature on international aid cannot be fully accurate if devoid of discussion of the role of national aid workers. Rather than fall back onto the Western bias upon which it was founded, humanitarian aid – and more specifically international refugee relief – has the potential to acknowledge and convey the integral role filled by the bystanders and passers-by whose too-often invisible contributions are overlooked.
Local staff, however, brings a breadth of experiences and knowledge, although different from those of international staff. Local humanitarian aid workers are a vital part of the global humanitarian aid and refugee relief regimes; they are those actors who arguably can relate to and understand the crises the best of anyone, as they bridge the gaps between the refugees and the global aid sector.
CHAPTER 4:

Cultural Insiders: Bridging the Gap Between Refugees and the International Sector

On a hot day in November, three Cameroonian women sit together under the thatched roof of an open-air bungalow. They eat lunch and chat amiably about their families and their neighborhoods’ recent gossip-worthy stories, taking a break from the serious and stressful topics they focus on during the workday. Across the green yard, dotted with papaya plants, sit three French expatriates, stationed in Cameroon for a limited amount of time. All six are employees of First Arrival and Response International, a French humanitarian organization. They are on their lunch break; the Cameroonian women carefully unwrap the banana leaves from around their koki while the French employees share a bottle of red wine, taking sips each time they put down their cigarettes.

I am sitting in the bungalow with the Cameroonian women. I listen to their chatter and eventually begin asking questions of my own. I tell them that I am interested specifically in the experiences of Cameroonians working with refugees. The three Cameroonian employees start by explaining the work of the organization and begin to talk about the refugee presence in the area and the job opportunities that have accompanied the refugees’ arrival. Two of them have previously worked in development and, as a result, have felt prepared for the work. Thérèse, by far the most talkative of the group, starts to explain her and her colleagues’ relationship with the refugees. Thérèse underscores the proximity of the Central African Republic border and the ethnic groups found on both sides. Sophie, sitting next to her, contributes, explaining that she was raised by her grandparents,
a couple who took in many orphans. Working with the refugees is not so different from that, Sophie reasons. She grew up offering support to those in need around her.

It is not just the lunch choices that distinguish the Cameroonian nationals from their white expatriate co-workers; the three women’s previous experiences contribute to their understanding of the situation and the ease with which they interact with the refugee populations. My conversation with the women was short. They had to return to the cool interior of their office for a staff meeting. Over the next few weeks, however, as I continued speaking with Cameroonians working for the international humanitarian aid organizations peppered on the streets of Bertoua, I began to more fully understand the roles and experiences of national aid workers employed by international humanitarian aid agencies.

This chapter aims to present a detailed ethnography of the lives of Cameroonian nationals working in Bertoua for international humanitarian aid organizations. This close examination of Cameroonian refugee aid workers influences the broader frame with which this thesis examines the role of national staff in the international aid sector. The local workers interviewed in Bertoua view themselves as having close and influential relationships with the refugee populations which they believe facilitate their goals as employees of international humanitarian aid organizations. I argue that local aid workers are a vital bridge between the international staff and the refugee populations. By drawing on previous experience in development work, local knowledge, idealistic and self-interested motivations, and robust coping strategies such as relying on familial support systems, local humanitarian aid workers contribute significantly to the provision of humanitarian aid. I also argue that local aid workers tacitly withhold some of these skills and strategies, thereby augmenting their own roles within the international refugee
response. While my analysis reveals the complex and often invisible position of national humanitarian aid workers, I also argue that the roles of local humanitarian aid workers merit far more scrutiny than they have received thus far in the literature.

National aid workers, most often excluded from a discussion of humanitarian aid workers, experience their work in a different way than international staff. Carina Ray calls for greater attention to be focused on national staff. She argues that their stories must be told due to their integral contributions to the aid sector (Ray 2010:78). Throughout my interviews, informants expressed surprise or disbelief that anyone was interested in hearing their own personal stories. They are habituated to taking a back seat when it comes to outsiders’ interest in the aid mission. The following chapter gives fifteen Cameroonian humanitarian aid workers a voice as I use their stories to outline an argument for the indispensable nature of local humanitarian aid workers, showing what lies under the surface, out of view of the everyday picture of international refugee relief. I do this by documenting the rich lives, dilemmas, and the complexity of this neglected sphere of humanitarian work.

A New, Yet Familiar, Work Environment

When the arrival of Central African Republic refugees in Eastern Cameroon attracted the attention of international humanitarian aid organizations, job opportunities suddenly arose in the region. The jobs were attractive both to people already working in the development sector as well as to students and others in search of a job. I argue that as Cameroonians were hired as drivers, logisticians, security guards, and program associates, they transitioned easily into work in the humanitarian aid sector, bringing with them memories of childhoods exposed to poverty, experience in implementing development
projects, and an intimate familiarity with the refugee populations due to shared religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, thus resulting in an ability to be more useful in their work, requiring less training and support.

Suffering is seen as a fact of life in Cameroon and its neighboring countries, and the local aid workers are no strangers to that. Nathan, in an interview, spoke about a classmate of his in primary school whose family did not have enough money to provide lunch for him each day. Nathan, now an employee at an American relief organization, began sharing his food with this classmate everyday at lunch. It was only after becoming an aid worker that Nathan understood the significance of this story and the impact it has had on his understanding of the refugees (Nathan, Interview 11/20/12). My informants cite the extreme poverty and malnutrition they have witnessed in Cameroonian villages – some while growing up in those areas – as having been a form of preparation for humanitarian work. Monique explained well:

C’est vrai que même dans nos localités d’origine – parce que nous sommes Camerounais – dans nos villages, il y a déjà ces misères là... D’une certaine manière ou d’une autre, cette souffrance n’est pas très très étranger, ce n’est pas très très nouveau pour nous (Monique, Interview 11/19/12).

Michael, a colleague of the three women I interviewed in the bungalow, described his childhood in Northern Cameroon, replete with frequent floods and droughts, as having prepared him for humanitarian work (Michael, Interview 11/20/12). Nathan added that memories of his adolescence are both inspiration and preparation for his work today. Early exposure to suffering not only inspired my informants to enter into caring professions, but

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25 See Appendix B for general information on informants.
26 “It’s true that even in our home areas – because we are Cameroonian – even in our villages there is already misery there... In one way or another or another this suffering isn’t very very strange, it isn’t very very new for us.”
it has also prepared them in their conduct and in their understanding of what is necessary for those who are in need. This exposure has meant that it is less likely that Cameroonians working with the Central African refugees will be emotionally distraught in the face of the misery and the unrealized desires of the refugees. As Frank, an employee at UNHCR, told me, “Ça fait en sort que les Africains sont tous des potentiels réfugiés” (Frank, Interview 11/21/12). This desensitization and practicality, combined with my informants’ development-infused knowledge of solutions for local problems, has resulted in workers especially equipped to respond to the refugee presence in Eastern Cameroon.

As humanitarian aid jobs opened up in Eastern Cameroon, many people made the transition from the development sector to the new humanitarian aid sector. Qualified and prepared for work in humanitarian aid, these local aid workers have found that in most cases they have been able to integrate trainings and an understanding of the balance between limited resources and the needs of the target populations. In describing his previous work in development, a Cameroonian UNHCR employee said, “J’étais au contact de la population depuis très longtemps. . . Je peux me dire que j’ai mis mes expériences dans des projets que j’ai connu ailleurs au service du HCR” (Frank, Interview 11/20/12). Marie, an employee at International Relief and Development in charge of organizing the American organization’s work on the ground, recognized that those workers with experience in development are better prepared to work with refugee populations. She added that she believes the two go hand in hand. “Pour moi l’humanitaire est une suite logique du

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27 “In a way, all Africans have the potential to be refugees.”
28 Seventy-five percent of my informants mentioned that they had begun working for humanitarian aid organizations as a result of their previous work in the development sector.
29 “I have been in contact with the refugee population for a very long time. . . I can say myself that I make use of the experiences I have had outside of my time with HCR.”
développement – ce sont deux choses qui amènent la paix en réalité” (Marie, Interview 11/23/12).

In the specific case of Eastern Cameroon, where refugees have settled throughout the region’s villages, there is a high degree of integration between the refugee and local populations, resulting in the sharing of development and humanitarian aid initiatives, a bonus for the government in Yaoundé that, according to my informants, has not actively worked to develop the East Region. Local populations have benefited from the recent humanitarian relief projects, including well and latrine construction, and refugees have benefited from initiatives to enroll local children in newly renovated and funded schools. David began working with refugees only three weeks prior to our interview, but he credits his work for a local development organization with having enabled him to jump right into his job. “Ayant réalisé le plan du développement de la commune, je connaissais déjà les problèmes qui vivent les population hôtes ainsi que les populations réfugiées” (David, Interview 11/19/12).

Nathan, the employee who had shared his sandwiches at lunch, had not realized how beneficial his experience in development work in Cameroon would be to his new position at IRD. “En réalité, je n’aurais pas dit spécifiquement oui, mais je peux [maintenant] dire que dans le développement rural il y a quand-même certaines dispositions qui nous préparent déjà à aller aider ceux qui sont dans le besoin” (Nathan, Interview 11/20/12).

Experience working in development in the region not only means a familiarity with the terrain and the populations, but it has offered local staff an emotional connection. 

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30 “For me, humanitarianism work is a clear next step from development work – it is these two things that truly bring peace.”
31 Having realized the development plans of the community, I already knew the host population’s problems in relation to the refugee population’s.
32 “In reality, I wouldn’t have specifically said yes, but I can [now] say that in rural development there are already certain dispositions/characteristics that prepare us to help those who are in need.”
preparation as they continue working with impoverished and in-need populations. And it is when this development experience is combined with a local perspective that local aid workers have the greatest impact. Marie contributed, “En tant qu’habiter dans le monde du développement c’est des choses qui ne nous gênent pas de tous” (Marie, Interview 11/23/12).33

Yet even if the humanitarian sector has brought with it challenges and processes for the Cameroonian who had previously worked in development, the refugees themselves are not strangers. Humanitarian aid workers are often challenged by a need to create meaningful connections and to establish a rapport with the refugees. Although Barnett describes humanitarian aid personnel as those people who work with “distant strangers” (2008:237), the local staff members are familiar with the culture, religion, language, and values of the Central African refugees. The local aid workers’ understanding of the refugees, their gender divisions and cultural norms, allows the aid workers to function at the interior of the refugees’ preexisting social structures, and therefore have less of an adverse impact on the refugees.

An understanding and an awareness of the ways of the community are vital for the implementation and sustainability of projects and initiatives on the ground. The aid workers with whom I spoke said that due to ongoing interactions with the Mbororo, they know now exactly how to present themselves when in refugee communities. “Maintenant, quand tu viens pour travailler avec eux,” Thérèse, the garrulous FARI employee explained. “Tu sais que l’homme Mbororo n’aime pas comme ça, n’aime pas être ceci, et c’est ça qui va donc te permettre de facilement intégrer dans la communauté” (Thérèse, Interview

33 “In terms of getting used to the development world, it’s those things that don’t bother us at all.”
Barnett writes, “Humanitarian action has strong roots in notions of ‘community’” (2008:238). As members of the community, the local aid workers in Bertoua that I interviewed spoke about the two different communities they are now part of: the refugee community and that of the international aid organizations.

Often in interviews my informants shared their opinions on the importance of understanding the target population. “Il faut réellement connaître ce qui est le peuple – la culture – Mbororo, avant de mieux intervenir auprès de cette communauté,” Michael explained. He added, “Il faut connaître la localité où on part, les habitudes, comment les gens se comportent” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). Cultural knowledge, such as gender roles and strategies for discussion, permit the aid workers to avoid the problem frequently found in the humanitarian sector whereby the workers do not understand the target population’s culture and as a result their work is not as effective as it could be (Rieff 2002; Terry 2002). “Il faut aller vers [les réfugiés] sans déranger leur culture. Moi je respecte beaucoup leur culture,” Sylvie explained (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12). “Donc tout dépend de l’approche,” Marie elaborated (Marie, Interview 11/23/12).

And in some cases, this approach has been carefully adapted to ensure efficacy with the Mbororo. Michael explained the Mbororo tendency to be closed off regarding their problems. They are a proud people. They do not show their weaknesses. “Un Mbororo peut mourir de faim mais quand tu vas l’appeler, ‘viens manger!’ Il va te dire, ‘Non, ça va, je viens de manger.’” Michael continued, smiling, “C’est après la réunion qu’il sera proche de toi, pour

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34 “Now, when you come work with them, you know that the Mbororo don’t like this, don’t like to be like that, and it’s that [knowledge] that is going to therefore permit you to more easily integrate in the community.”

35 “It is necessary to really know who are the Mbororo people and what is the Mbororo culture before being able to better intervene with this community.”

36 “It is necessary to approach [the refugees] without disturbing their culture. Me, I respect their culture a lot.”

37 “Therefore everything depends on the approach.”
te dire que par rapport à ce problème réellement, voilà, voilà” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). ³⁸ Local and international staff alike must learn how to engage in a culturally appropriate manner with the Mbororo. The local aid workers have a leg up, however, due to their proximity to Mbororo and Peul populations. Sylvie, a Red Cross employee who was hired for a new job by UNHCR the day after our interview, explained how she has adapted her work to the strict gender roles of the Mbororo:

\[
C'est interdit à une femme de s'asseoir là où les hommes s'assoient. Je m'assieds là où les femmes s'assoient. Donc quand c'est comme ça, ils voient que tu t'intègres à leur culture et puis ils sont plus ouverts et puis ton message peut passer\] (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12). ³⁹

While the Cameroonian aid workers are familiar with and respectful of the Mbororo culture, they must be prepared to occasionally modify the lifestyles and the daily customs of the refugees so that they may have an elevated quality of life. For example, First Arrival and Response International staff has run educational programs to change Mbororo conceptions of hygiene in order to encourage the refugees to begin using newly installed water pumps and latrines. Michael, the Assistant Head of Mission at FARI, is direct in his approach. “On peut dire écoute, ta culture peut évoluer” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12).⁴⁰

“We observons un peu leur manière de fonctionner, et nous leur apportons d'abord l'assistance technique” (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12).⁴¹ Michael described how, for example, it is necessary to change certain habits in order to improve health among the refugees. The

³⁸ “A Mbororo can be dying from hunger but when you call him to come eat, he's going to tell you, 'No, that's okay, I just ate.'”
³⁹ “It's after the meeting that he will come close to you to tell you all about his real problems, and you see…”
⁴⁰ “One can say listen, your culture can evolve.”
⁴¹ “We observe a bit their manners of functioning and we contribute, above all, technical assistance.”
Mbororo are used to drinking river water, but the humanitarian workers explain to them that “ça fait mal quand on boit. Il faut prendre l’eau du forage.” Michael sums it up, “Ça devient une éducation” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12).42

The local aid workers’ understanding of and close relationship with the refugees are made more substantial and effective by their adopting of fictive kin structures (Stack 1974) when interacting with the refugees. International staff is inducted into these roles as well, but language barriers can be insurmountable. The pseudo-familial role is on the local staff members are pleased to have specifically apply to them. It is the local aid workers’ way of establishing their stronger connections to the refugees in contrast to the expatriate staff members’ more paltry relationships. The local aid workers, like the refugees, have grown up with the custom of calling older women “Maman,” and older men “Grand-Père” or “Oncle.” It is common for the local aid workers to describe the refugees as family. Monique, an employee at FARI, explained that Cameroonians and Central Africans are brothers “puisqu’on a des mêmes peuples qui sont sur les deux côtés de la frontière” (Monique, Interview 11/16/12).43 Sharifa, who works at IRD, mentioned that in her work with refugee populations, “Je trouve mes sœurs, mes frères.” This idea of fraternity extends towards shared behaviors and the food that the two populations eat. Sharifa continued, “Si je descends sur le terrain, je trouve un réfugié en train de manger la banane, s’il me donne, je veux prendre, je mange. Parce que je mange la même nourriture que lui. Et il mange la même chose que moi” (Sharifa, Interview 11/23/12).44

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42 “It hurts when we drink that. One must take the water from the pump. It becomes an education.”
43 “Because we have the same peoples on both sides of the border.”
44 “I find my sisters, my brothers.”
“If I go into the field and find a refugee eating a banana, if he gives it to me, I take it, I eat. Because I eat the same food as him. And he eats the same thing as me.”
Sylvie, the Red Cross employee, has used her idiom of kinship with the refugees to her advantage. A current goal of Bertoua’s humanitarian organizations is to enroll all children – autochthonous and refugee children alike – in school, as primary education is a right of children in Cameroon. Many Mbororo men hesitate to send their sons and daughters off to school. They prefer that their sons become herders and that their daughters stay at home. Sylvie recounted one story of a father with nine children who refused to enroll them in school. “Et puis je souris, je dis, Papa, tu sais pourquoi je sais écrire?” Sylvie remembered. “Moi, je suis une fille, c’est parce que je suis allée à l’école. Vos filles ne sauront pas écrire si elles ne vont pas à l’école” (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12). Sylvie used their implied relationship as a father and daughter to finally convince the Mbororo refugee to send his nine sons and daughters to school.

Cultural similarities and relationships rooted in family structures help the local aid workers understand the people with whom they work. Not all of my informants are Muslim, however, and not all of them considered themselves to be of the Peul ethnic group from which the Mbororo descend. My Christian informants, however, have worked collaboratively with their Muslim colleagues and with the refugees to familiarize themselves with the Mbororo culture. Despite being a Christian, Thérèse has drawn on her familiarity with Islam and her experiences with Mbororo neighbors, and has shared that her religion has not been a barrier to her relationship with the Mbororo. “On est devenu maintenant comme une famille, comme des frères et des sœurs” (Thérèse, Interview

45 “And so I smile, I say, Papa, do you know why I know how to write?”
“Me, I’m a girl, it’s because I went to school. Your daughters will not learn to write if they don’t go to school.”
46 See Appendix B: Cameroonian Informants Chart for more information.
Some refugees have even begun referring to the local aid workers as refugees, evidence of the refugees’ enormous respect for and comfort level with the aid workers and their white logo-emblazoned t-shirts. Thérèse laughed as she recounted how the refugees often greet the local staff members by saying “Sanou réfujée!” in Fulfulde (Thérèse, Interview 11/18/12).

Communication with the refugees is integral to the work of the aid organizations and their employees. Even if an interpreter is used in aid work, there are worries that meaning may be lost or that the impersonality of a three-way conversation can hinder the development of trust and connections between the refugees and the humanitarian workers.

All of my informants – except for two who are in the process of learning it – speak Fulfulde, the language of the Mbororo refugees. Some also speak Mboum and Mbaya, among other languages. Marie, the fieldwork coordinator at IRD said, “Je parle parfaitement le Fulfulde, je n’ai pas de problèmes, je n’ai pas besoin d’interprète. . . Je travaille directement en Fulfulde donc on se comprend très bien. Et même les membres de l’équipe qui sont sur le terrain, on se comprend mutuellement” (Marie, Interview 11/23/12).

Sharifa similarly explained, “Ça me beaucoup plait parce que nous parlons la même langue. . . Donc j’explique mieux et ils comprennent très bien, très facilement quand je parle avec eux” (Sharifa, Interview 11/23/12). As far as I could tell, none of the international humanitarian aid workers speaks Fulfulde. Few of the refugees speak French and thus it is the local aid workers’ job to communicate with them.

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47 “We’ve now become like a family, like brothers and sisters.”
48 “Hello refugee!”
49 “I speak Fulfuldé perfectly, I don’t have problems, I don’t need an interpreter. . . I work directly in Fulfuldé so we understand each other very well. And even the members of the team who are on the ground, we have a mutual understanding.”
50 “That pleases me a lot because we speak the same language. . . Therefore I explain better and they understand very well, very easily when I speak with them.”
to communicate messages to the refugees, playing directly into the local aid workers’ bridge role between the refugees and the international staff.

As Marie explained, Fulfulde is not only useful in communicating with the refugee populations, but can also be used to communicate with the host populations who live with, cooperate with, and benefit from the refugees. The presence of Fulfulde speakers like Marie and Sharifa also helps to habituate the refugees to Cameroonian or expats who may arrive to work with them but who do not speak Fulfulde. The refugees see “que leur sœur aussi travaille dans l’humanitaire” (Sharifa, Interview 11/23/12) and they become more comfortable with and trusting of aid workers as a result. This added benefit of a shared language helps the local workers not only in their work in the field, but it also contributes to their success in the offices of these international agencies. Expatriate supervisors’ forays into the field are facilitated by the cultural bridging the local workers have previously done.

But why aren’t the international staff able to learn the same cultural strategies that the local workers possess? I argue that the local aid workers enact their own agency by tacitly withholding strategies for success. By enhancing their own local cultural competency, national staff is able to create an increased sense of importance for themselves, underscoring their own usefulness. At the same time, due to the logic of intervention, both hierarchical and structural barriers prevent local knowledge from flowing upward. At FARI’s Bertoua office, for example, international staff rarely stays longer than ten months. By the time an expatriate employee has settled in and begun familiarizing him or herself with the terrain, they can be more than halfway through their tenure in Cameroon. The Cameroonian staff members understand this frequent cycling

51 “that their sister also works in humanitarianism”
through and so they are hesitant to convey strategies and practices they have developed. The assertion of a cultural niche and a sense of indispensability contribute to the fulfillment the local workers find in their jobs, as does the relative job security they enjoy as employees of international aid organizations.

*The Self-Interested and the Altruistic: Motivations for working in humanitarian aid*

“Some are motivated by a feeling of power and superiority, some by guilt, some by the possibility of religious redemption and salvation, some by a desire to demonstrate their goodness to themselves and to others” (Barnett 2011:15).

The local aid workers in Bertoua are thrilled to have landed jobs with international humanitarian aid organizations. By working for an international organization, family and friends accord them an elevated level of prestige and the salary, although not as high as some assume, is relatively impressive. While money and prestige serve as motivating factors for the aid workers, so too do the desire to do good, the sense of fulfillment gleaned from the work, and the generous hospitality glimpsed often in the African value of hospitality (Dev 2003; Fall 1990). The local aid workers, nationals of a country with an unemployment rate hovering at thirty to forty percent, are no doubt motivated by both a moral fulfillment and pride at having an international status job. This section details the local aid workers’ motivations for working for international humanitarian aid organizations as the bridge between the international aid workers and the refugee populations.

“Working for the whites” was often repeated among my informants to describe how they view their jobs. The prestige that accompanies working for an international aid organization is huge in Bertoua. By working for and with white people as well as by being
seen riding around in the telltale white SUVs of the aid organizations, local humanitarian aid workers have described themselves as the envy of their friends. Prestige – or presumed prestige – is a motivating factor for local aid workers. When, as a student, Michael was offered a position on a food distribution with Care, he was most excited about riding in an SUV with air conditioning and the white logo-emblazoned t-shirt he was given. “Quand on roule dans des grosses voitures, c'est tout le monde qui croit que c'est beaucoup d'argent” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12).52 The salary he was paid for the short twelve-day distribution also pleasantly surprised him.

International aid organizations, flush with money from powerful donors – both governments and private – typically offer national staff a locally competitive salary, thereby attracting more workers. The local aid workers refer to the salary as a nice bonus for working in difficult and stressful situations on a daily basis. “D'abord c'est un travail,” Thérèse remembered. “Je vais aussi avoir une bénéfice qui est mon salaire”53 in addition to the immaterial reward of satisfaction. Thérèse explained that while she is motivated by her salary, “tous travaux méritent une salaire, mais parfois à certains moments, on ne regarde pas le salaire” (Thérèse, Interview 11/16/12).54 Michael shared that the initial attraction of the refugee relief industry for him was the money. He has since found the work to be morally rewarding as well, but he still appreciates the salary.

Michael was the local aid worker with whom I spent the most amount of time. He alluded often to money throughout our conversations; it was a topic that was never far from his mind. Some days he believes that he is earning enough money, but he also

52 “When we drive in the large SUVs, everyone sees us and believes we are rich.”
53 “Above all, it’s a job. I’m also going to benefit from my salary.”
54 “Every job merits a salary, but occasionally, at certain moments, we don’t look at the money.”
explained that while his goal is to save money, he faces different expectations from his family.

There is an assumption that by “working for the whites,” local aid workers are suddenly wealthy. This is partly true. Local aid workers are paid well relative to many of their peers and family members. Compared to the international staff, however, local staff members are paid quite little. Because of the communal nature of society in Cameroon, there is an expectation amongst families that the most successful member will share with his relatives. Redfield writes about the challenges national staff of MSF faced in Uganda regarding the sharing of their salaries. “Surrounded by needy kin, national staff remained at risk of appearing selfish as well as corrupt” (Redfield 2012:364). Michael described his situation at home:

_A la maison c’est des amis, c’est de famille qui vient poser des problèmes, parce que Michael travaille avec des blancs ! Forcement il y a beaucoup d’argent et pourtant ce n’était pas ça. Donc il y a ce volet, la famille n’a pas apprécié que je me lance dans un travail qui n’est pas stable_ (Michael, Interview 11/21/12).

The instability Michael references is that of the aid organizations. He worries that when funding runs out, he will be left without a job. According to Michael, the international aid organizations take few measures to ensure the wellbeing of their staff after funding runs out. For that reason he saves much of what he earns. Michael does his best, however, to be generous with both his family and friends. And he finds that by spending his money in the right way, he derives moral satisfaction from its use as well:

_D’une salaire que je sais que je gagne dignement, ce n’est pas peut-être dans un autre boulot – à ce moment quand j’enlève 200 francs, je te donne, je sais que

55 “At home it’s friends and family who come and tell you their problems because, as they say, ‘Michael works with the whites!’ They really believe there’s a lot of money, although that’s not at all true. So there’s that component where my family doesn’t appreciate that I’ve thrown myself into this unstable work.”

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Although money may remain a frequent focus and worry for the local aid workers, it is by no means their only motivation for engaging in humanitarian aid work. When he returns home at night, Michael told me, “Je me rend compte que l’objectif c’est plus important que l’argent qu’on devait me payer” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). And Michael’s fellow local aid workers in Bertoua share this understanding.

From a sense of fulfillment to pride to compassion, Bertoua’s local aid workers point to a variety of altruistic sources of motivation for their tireless dedication to the humanitarian aid sector and the nearly 100,000 Central African refugees in the area. While these motivations are not necessarily different from those that international aid workers cite, focusing on local aid workers allows us to better understand how and why local staff members depend on altruism and idealism for inspiration. Some explain that, much like international humanitarian aid workers’ reasoning, they are grateful to live lives of abundance and therefore feel that it is their duty to help. Thérèse remembered video footage she saw on television of the Ethiopian famine of the mid-eighties. From then on, she said, “Je cultivais toujours cet aspect d’aider” (Thérèse, Interview 11/16/12). Frank credited his sense of responsibility to his religion. As a Christian, he feels that it is his duty to help those less fortunate (Frank, Interview 11/20/12).

Like many in the humanitarian aid industry (Cain et al 2004; Orbinski 2008; Scroggins 2002), the local aid workers in Bertoua point to the nature of their work’s moral

56 “I know that I earn my salary in a dignified manner, different perhaps from another job I might have – those times when I hand out 200 francs, I know that it’s a deeply personal action. And that’s what I work hard to be able to do. So when I hand out my money, I’m proud of myself.”
57 “I understand that the objective is more important than the money that they’ve paid me.”
58 “I have been developing that desire to help forever.”
fulfillment as a motivating factor. Thérèse said that personal satisfaction was the main reason she works in a position as a service provider (Thérèse, Interview 11/16/12). Frank, a trained anthropologist working as a Protection Officer at UNHCR, explained that when he sees the results of his work, he is very happy. It is that contentedness that motivates him to continue (Frank, Interview 11/20/12). Monique summed up the local aid workers’ quest for personal fulfillment:

Je crois que ma plus grosse récompense, ma plus grande satisfaction est lorsqu’on réussit à léger les souffrances, plus que je vois des gens contents de travail qu’on a battu, pour moi c’est la plus grosse satisfaction (Monique, Interview 11/19/12).59

Nathan, a newly hired employee at IRD, an American humanitarian aid organization, finds his personal fulfillment and motivation in the refugees’ smiles. As he works, he tells himself that each action he takes that day will result in someone smiling the following day. Nathan sees his personal satisfaction as a role reversal of sorts. “Je peux dire vraiment,” he told me, “Que j’ai gagné le plus avec l’action humanitaire” (Nathan, Interview 11/20/12).60 The view of his work that Nathan expressed to me is rosy, to say the least. There are, of course, days when the local aid workers return home unsmiling and frustrated, having spent the entire day in the office or having dealt with a particularly challenging distribution. These days were not often spoken about in my interviews, the local aid workers’ positive inclination perhaps evidence of the positive attitudes they choose to adopt when doing this work.

The refugees’ appreciation and gratitude for the aid workers’ efforts is both inspiring and moving for the local staff. Unprompted, one third of my informants

59 “I believe that my largest reward, my biggest satisfaction is as soon as we succeed in lightening the suffering, the more that I see these people content as a result of the work we've completed, for me that’s the largest satisfaction.”
60 “I can really say that I have earned the most by participating in humanitarian action.”
mentioned stories about occasions when, owing to the compassion they feel for the
refugees and the dedication they commit to their work, they were motivated to go above
and beyond the call of duty, either by working outside of their paid hours or by giving some
of their salaries to people in need. “Il peut arriver que tu trouves un réfugié, il n’a pas à
manger. Tu enlèves ton argent pour qu’il puisse acheter de la nourriture,” Thérèse explained
(Thérèse, Interview 11/18/12).61 I do not illustrate this willingness to go above and
beyond to imply that it is a trait unique to local staff, but rather because the national staff is
able to draw on local connections and resource in order to more successfully offer help
when someone is in need. Frank, the UNHCR Protection Officer, recounted a situation
where a refugee in need arrived at his office, his family in tow. The refugee didn’t have any
money and he didn’t know where to sleep. There was nothing that HCR could do due to a
complication with the man’s refugee status, so Frank had to send the man and his family
away. But that night, he said, “J’ai eu le mal à dormir. J’étais obligé de partir dans mon
compte la nuit, sortir mon propre argent, appeler le monsieur au téléphone et dire, tout ce que
je peux te donner, c’est ceci. Il y a un hôtel [où] tu peux dors [sic] avec ta famille.” He added,
“Ça, ce n’est plus le HCR. Parce que je n’arrivais pas à fermer les yeux comme ça” (Frank,
Interview 11/20/12).62

Michael disclosed a similar story. His team was doing a bucket distribution for
vulnerable refugees.63 A refugee approached him, saying that he was in need of a bucket.

61 “It can happen that you find a refugee, he doesn’t have anything to eat. You hand out your money and then
he can go buy food.”
62 “I had trouble sleeping. I felt obligated to go to my money stash during the night, take out my own money,
call the monsieur on the telephone and say, everything that I can give you, it’s this. There’s a hotel where you
can sleep with your family. That’s no longer HCR. Because I just can’t close my eyes to problems like that.”
63 A refugee may be classified as vulnerable for the following reasons: a pregnant woman, someone who is
handicapped, an elderly person, a single parent family, unattached children, someone with a chronic illness.
(Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12).
Michael knew that he did not have enough buckets for the vulnerable refugees, never mind this man, who had not been classified as vulnerable. The man, trying to retain his dignity, pestered Michael discretely, expressing his desperation for a bucket. Michael took 1000 F CFA out of his pocket and gave the money to the man to buy a bucket. This type of personal distribution is something Michael has done since he began working in the humanitarian sector. He began with food distributions. “On me payait 10,000 CFA par journée, mais je me retrouve en train d'enlever cent, cinq cent, pour donner au réfugié pour payer le pousse pour amener leurs denrées à la maison.” Michael was ready to hand out his own money because, he said, “J'ai compris qu'il y avait un besoin plus important que l'argent – c'était de venir en aide de ces personnes” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). It is by generously offering additional help to the Mbororo that the local staff in Bertoua understands their own importance to the international refugee relief regime.

Thérèse, the talkative FARI employee, finds that the inspiring nature of humanitarian work encourages her to devote as much as she can to her job. “Et moi je dis, si j'ai cette possibilité d'aller un peu plus loin, de faire un peu plus, moi je pourrais le faire” (Thérèse, Interview 11/18/12). Thérèse added that she is often motivated to go a bit further because when “tu aimes faire quelque chose, tu le fais de tout ton cœur… Parce que tu vois comment tu te déploies, tu fais des efforts parce que tu veux que des gens soient aussi à l'aise” (Thérèse, Interview 11/18/12).

64 About $2.  
65 “They paid my 10,000 CFA per day, but I find myself in the process of handing out 100, 500, to give to a refugee to pay for a pushcart to bring the goods to the house.” “I understood that there was a need more important than money – that was to come to the aid of these people.”  
66 “And I say, if I have this possibility of going a bit farther, to do a bit more, me, I can do that.”  
67 “you love to do something, you do it with all of your heart… because you see how you react, you make an effort because you want the people to also be at ease.”
The final motivator my informants cited is the oft-discussed concept of African hospitality. This motivator is unique to the local aid workers and nearly every single local staff member interviewed mentioned it. It results from the local staff’s role as Cameroonian citizens and by extension hosts to the refugee populations. Framing an international refugee response as a guest-host interaction bestows increased understanding and meaning to the experience (Trix 2000:250). The desire to go above and beyond combined with the notion of African hospitality has resulted in an efficient aid network in Eastern Cameroon, staffed by workers whose personal attitudes and efforts towards the refugees mirror their organization’s impacts.

Cameroonian are always ready to welcome their relatives, their friends, or even strangers into their homes. Minear explains, “African traditions of hospitality run deep. Many communities espouse an ethic that embraces sharing food, clothing, and shelter with people in need and reaching out to strangers” (2002:59). The local aid workers in Bertoua see the tradition of African hospitality as a duty. Local humanitarian aid workers have incorporated this principle into their approach. Thérèse defined African hospitality as an adage, saying:

Quand tu viens en Afrique, même si tu sors d’un autres pays, on t’accueille, on te donne là où tu peux t’asseoir. . .Quand tu viens, on sait que même-si on a préparé pour une personne, on va diviser le plat, et on va manger ensemble. . . Même s’il faut qu’il dorme sur ta porte, il peut dormir. Le fait que les maisons soient petites n’est pas un handicap (Thérèse, Interview 11/18/12).  

68 “When you’re in Africa, even if you come from another country, we welcome you, we give you where to sit. . . When you come, we know that even if we have prepared for someone, we’re going to divide up the plate, and we’re going to eat together. . . Even if it is necessary that he sleep in your doorway, he can sleep there. The fact that the houses are small isn’t a handicap.”
This welcoming spirit has been expanded to include the refugees. Michael said that at some point, differences between himself and the refugees cease to exist. “A ce moment on s’en fou. On dit que c’est l’homme en face de nous et c’est l’homme qu’il faut assister” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). Frank expressed that due to the close and caring relationship between the local aid workers and the refugees, humanitarian aid “est devenue presqu’une partie de notre vie” (Frank, Interview 11/20/12).

Coping Strategies

Whether or not the Cameroonian aid workers credit their motivation to the money they earn, the moral fulfillment they glean, or both, the work is demanding. The Cameroonian humanitarian aid workers with whom I spoke acknowledged that their work is difficult. Like with all humanitarian aid workers, there are days when it is difficult to continue, when they think that they will never have a positive impact on the populations with whom they work. Coping strategies are suggested for humanitarian aid workers to deal with the difficulties they face in their work. The literature on humanitarian aid describes many coping strategies, nearly all of which are geared toward international staff. Minear writes that local aid workers have their own coping mechanisms. “Traditional coping mechanisms for dealing with major emergencies exist at the family, community, and national level” (2002:60). I argue that due to a large repertoire of coping strategies and a reliance on family, religion, and local resources, national staff are particularly well equipped to handle the inherent challenges of the humanitarian aid sector.

69 “At that moment we don’t care anymore. We say that that’s my brother before me and that’s the man whom it’s necessary to assist.”
70 Humanitarian aid “has become almost a part of our life.”
Coping strategies are necessary. An aid worker who is too stressed to work is useless in the fast-paced, stressful environment of a humanitarian mission. Michael understands this and in his post as Assistant Head of Mission, he makes sure that his local – as well as expatriate – colleagues are in good spirits. At some point, he confessed to me, humanitarian aid workers, too, are in need of assistance. “C’est ma conclusion. Un gars qui est dans l’humanitaire, s’il n’est pas bien encadré – à un moment il devient plus vulnérable même que ses réfugiés” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). The goal of coping strategies then is to mitigate the stress aid workers are exposed to on a daily basis.

The majority of local aid workers I spoke with had not undergone any trainings or orientations before beginning their jobs at the international aid organizations’ field offices in the East and Adamaoua regions. In each interview, a question was asked about the informant’s first day on the ground. I wanted to better understand the shock the local aid workers felt upon their first exposure to the situation on the ground in the rural and remote areas and how and in what ways those feelings have changed as the local staff have adopted and adapted coping strategies.

If a humanitarian aid worker is not adequately prepared for that first day and for the initial shock of seeing the suffering and immense need of the refugees, it can be a challenging learning experience. Abdou, an HCR employee, learned an invaluable lesson on his first day of work. A refugee had come to his office and had told his story. The story was so upsetting that Abdou refused to share it with me. The man departed after finishing his story. Abdou went into the bathroom and cried. The UNHCR receptionist found Abdou in the toilets and demanded that he not cry. If we cry, the receptionist told him, it makes the

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71 “That’s my conclusion. A guy who’s in humanitarianism, if he's not trained well – eventually he becomes even more vulnerable than his refugees.”
situation with the refugees worse. “*Ils perdent leurs espoirs si tu pleures*” (Abdou, Interview 11/22/12).72

It is not only the first day of work that proves to be difficult and depressing. “At the end of the day,” Walkup writes, “[Aid workers] must face the emotional conflict and guilt when they return in their air-conditioned vehicles to eat and relax in the relative comfort of their headquarters, homes, or compounds” (1997:41). Frank, the UNHCR Protection Officer, said that he continues to occasionally cry at night, five years after he began his job in humanitarian aid. “Il y a des cas qui arrivent qui coulent les larmes” (Frank, Interview 11/20/12).73 Michael described how his team sometimes makes videos while doing distributions on the ground. The nights when he returns home and watches the clips, “*Je passais plus de temps à pleurer,*” he said.74 Michael knew that it was necessary to find a better way in which he could express his feelings. He doesn’t drink beer – a common de-stressor among humanitarian aid workers. Instead Michael began writing. He hopes one day to publish his work so that the world may know the stories of the Central African refugees, but for the moment, he uses it to channel his emotions from the day’s work (Michael, Interview 11/21/12).

In addition to crying, an inability or a forgetfulness to eat was a common symptom among my informants, as it is for international staff too. Sharifa, an employee at the American NGO, said that in the evenings, she thinks about the many humans who do not have anything to eat or drink. “Ça dérange beaucoup, ça me fait trop pitié,” she told me. She speculated, “*Dans les années qui vont venir, est-ce que le Cameroun peut avoir aussi ce genre*  

72 “They lose their hopes if you cry.”
73 “There are those certain cases that make you cry.”
74 “I spend a lot of time crying.”
de problème?” (Sharifa, Interview 11/21/12).75 Thérèse, Michael's talkative colleague, is more realistic in her approach, a useful thing for a humanitarian worker. “Il faut que je mange pour avoir de la force… Toi même, tu tombes malade, comment est-ce que tu vas aider [les réfugiés]? (Thérèse, Interview 11/18/12).76

A default strategy among my informants was religion. Many of them go to church weekly, and some of my Muslim informants spoke of praying five times a day, occasionally in their offices and sometimes while out in the field. Prayer centers the local aid workers and provides time for reflection and introspection. While this is a common and practiced coping strategy for all types of humanitarian aid workers, the local aid workers benefit more because they can continue to be an active presence in their religious communities. Local staff, by living in a familiar area, doesn’t have to find a new church or mosque community, but rather they can continue as before, drawing more heavily on their communities in times of increased stress.

Several of my informants exercise as a way to destress. Sylvie, the kindly Red Cross employee, said that she walks. “C’est pour aérer le cerveau” (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12).77 Marie listens to music and she tries to travel “un peu hors de la zone de l’opération” (Marie, Interview 11/23/12).78 According to Colleen McFarlane, “Recreational breaks… may be important for mediating the effects of traumatic stress allowing staff to ease their stress, rejuvenate and readjust” (McFarlane 2004). When Michael becomes too depressed, he reminds himself, “On ne peut pas vivre leur histoire. On ne peut pas vivre leur vie, mais on

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75 “It really moves me, I feel so much compassion.”
76 “It is necessary that I eat in order to have strength… You yourself, if you fall sick, how are you going to help the refugees?”
77 “It’s to air out my brain.”
78 “A little bit out of the zone of operation.”
peut plutôt apporter une assistance” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). This ability to step back from the situation and rationally analyze it is made all the more possible because of how grounded the local staff are, especially due to being able to spend time with family and friends.

My informants’ proximity to their families is one of their primary sources of support. Nearly every aid worker with whom I spoke mentioned their family, visiting their family, or spending time with their family as vital to maintaining their equilibrium. Sylvie, whose children and husband live in Yaoundé, said, “Moi, j’ai eu la grâce que j’ai une famille qui me soutient beaucoup, face au travail que je fais” (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12). Sylvie tries to visit her family biweekly. Nathan explained that seeing his wife and children every day is what keeps him sane (Nathan, Interview 11/20/12).

I asked my informants what would be different if they were doing humanitarian work abroad. Michael was straightforward in his preference to work at home. “Forcement ici au Cameroun, Est et Adamaoua, je connais presque tout le monde. On me connaît.” Michael contrasted his experience with that of the French Head of FARI’s Cameroonian mission. “Il vient, personne ne le connaît, et il ne connaît pas la réalité du terrain” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). McFarlane writes that for humanitarian aid workers who work outside of their home countries, “Comprehensive training about the country, security, medical care, psychological stress management, team building and cultural differences of the host country are likely to curb the potential for psychological distress” (2004).

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79 “We cannot live their story. We cannot live their life, but we can sooner bring them assistance.”
80 “Me, I am blessed to have a family that supports me a lot regarding the work I do.”
81 “Truthfully, here in Cameroon – East and Adamoua – I know just about everyone. And they know me.”
“He comes, nobody knows him and he doesn’t know the reality of the land.”
Several years ago, Abdou, a UNHCR Protection Officer, was recruited for a job outside of Cameroon. He decided to stay, however, in his natal land. Abdou explained that when he is abroad, he is always conscious of the distance between him and Cameroon and therefore he believes the work becomes harder. Abdou listed the reasons why he chose to stay in Cameroon. He can travel wherever he’d like in the country; he does not worry about insecurity or his safety. He travels often to his parents’ village. “Ça amène l’équilibre psychologiquement,” he said (Abdou, Interview 11/22/12). This contrasts sharply with international aid workers who often accept overseas contracts, deliberately seeking travel. Abdou’s acknowledgement that travel, no matter how exciting, is exhausting is pertinent when discussing aid workers and their capacity for work in stressful areas. By staying closer to home, Abdou has facilitated the maintenance of his psychological health.

Psychological resources have become imperative for humanitarian organizations. Cardozo (2004), Ehrenreich (2004), Eriksson (2009), McFarlane (2004), and Walkup (1997) all recommended psychological support as indisputably necessary for humanitarian aid workers. But all of the aforementioned studies discuss humanitarian workers employed abroad. There is very little research on support services for local humanitarian aid workers. But perhaps this is because, as my informants said, it is less difficult to work in one’s home country, or it may connect to my informants’ culture in which psychological support or health is not discussed.

Nathan acknowledged that he works better in his home country. “Lorsque vous êtes dans un autre pays, vous ne savez pas trop – est-ce que c’est sûr? Est-ce que vous avez votre

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82 “That brings psychological stability.”
sécurité?” (Nathan, Interview 11/20/12). In responding to my question, Michael described what he imagined would happen if he were to work in the United States. “Je ne sais pas ce qui m’attend sur ce côté. Il faut préparer une descente sur le terrain” (Michael, Interview 11/21/12). However it is precisely this preparation, which has been proven vital to an aid worker’s success, which has been overlooked for the local humanitarian aid workers in Bertoua. But in employing culturally sensitive strategies in order to progress their work, the local humanitarian aid workers have relied on pre-existing forms of support and have devised their own coping strategies, allowing them to work sensitively and effectively in the humanitarian aid sector, without losing their motivation.

Conclusion

The humanitarian aid organizations in Eastern Cameroon have quickly accomplished many of the international refugee relief’s initial goals. The agencies’ missions have now slowly begun focusing more on development as the basic needs of the majority of the refugee populations have been met. I would argue that this success is owing to the educated, competent, and dedicated local staff of the organizations. The humanitarian aid organizations currently working in the East and Adamaoua of Cameroon do not just hire local staff for menial tasks, but have relied heavily on their local staff for project development and implementation. I acknowledge that this is only a partial picture of humanitarian aid workers and the international refugee relief regime, but it is one that deserves attention.

83 “As soon as you are in another country, you don’t know much – is it safe? Are you going to be safe?”
84 “I do not know what is waiting for me on the other side. It would be necessary to prepare to go into the field.”
Despite their invaluable contributions to the missions, local staff consistently works in the shadow of the international aid workers. The Cameroonian staff may be better prepared and thus more qualified in a way for the work, but the hierarchy of the organizations is set up in such a way that a direct impact on the refugees does not necessarily translate to a higher status within the organization. As the Cameroonian humanitarian aid workers look to being rehired each year, they are interested in increased salaries and greater responsibility. The Cameroonian employees in some of the organizations I worked with have been promoted to management positions, but for the most part, the Cameroonians will never have the same status in their work as the international aid workers have.

But the local humanitarian aid workers have advantages over their international counterparts as well. By possessing development experience, understanding the refugees’ culture, and enacting well-developed, locally centered coping strategies, local aid workers continue to find meaning in their jobs while delivering aid effectively and in a culturally sensitive manner.
CHAPTER 5:  
Crossing Borders: From Local to International

In November and December 2012, as I conducted my fieldwork, it looked like things were about to change in Bertoua. The aid organizations, after having slowly transitioned into more sustainable development-oriented work, had met a majority of their mission’s goals for the region, and the international funders who had been so ready to give to the Central African refugees in 2006, 2008, and 2009, had recently turned their heads to Mali and Syria – bigger and more marketable humanitarian crises. My informants shared their worries about losing their jobs when the aid organizations left.

Several months later, in March 2013, Michael, FARI’s Assistant Head of Mission, was called to Yaoundé for a meeting at the UNHCR country headquarters there about the future of the East and Adamaoua humanitarian missions. It was announced that funding for the humanitarian aid projects in Bertoua would not be renewed after 2014. Michael, as well as all of his colleagues, would have to find new jobs, contributing to the unemployment levels in Cameroon. Michael saw himself and his employees as at risk for becoming Cameroon’s next vulnerable population (Michael, Interview 11/21/12; Skype Interview 3/24/13).

Documenting the events in Eastern Cameroon in the time since I finished my fieldwork, this chapter looks ahead to the future of the aid missions in the region and the impacts on the local staff members. It then goes on to place the national humanitarian aid workers within a shifting framework of humanitarian action and response at an international level.
Bertoua’s Humanitarian Response To Date

Bertoua’s international humanitarian aid organizations have extensive to-do lists. This is not to say that they have not already accomplished a lot in the area. A majority of Central African Republic refugees are integrated into local villages, possess UNHCR Refugee Identification Cards, have access to clean water, and nearly half of their children are in school. But as UNHCR has relied more heavily on its partner organizations, many of which have shifted their goals toward development initiatives, a lot remains to be completed. The aid organizations have recently partnered to begin revenue-generating activities in the region, some focused specifically on women. Agrarian schemes are underway as the Mbororo sedentarize. FARI runs a poultry program and the World Food Programme recently began a pisciculture project near Batouri.

The FICR/ICRC office in Bertoua runs a program for refugee women focusing on female participation in economic stimulation. The program, known as Activités Génératrices de Revenue (AGR), has the potential to contradict Mbororo culture, but Sylvie, the head of the project, tries to be sensitive. She explained how the AGR project can ameliorate the refugee women's quality of life:

Par exemple il y a beaucoup de femmes qui pensaient qu’elles ne devaient pas chercher des revenus. Leur rôle était d’être à la maison et d’avoir les enfants et puis ça arrêtait là. Maintenant il faut les amener à comprendre qu’elles peuvent ramener de l’argent. Elles en ont les moyens. Et ça va apporter plus à la femme là. Ça va apporter un peu plus à la famille (Sylvie, Interview 11/21/12).

Marie, the AGR coordinator at IRD, mentioned that already many Mbororo have left behind their nomadic lifestyles and now “ils sont presque sédentarisés,” (Marie, Interview 85)

85 “For example, there are many women who thought that they shouldn’t earn money. Their role was to stay at the house and to have babies and it ended there. Now it is necessary to help them to understand that women can earn money. They have the means. And that's going to bring more to each woman. It's going to bring a bit more to each family.”

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often thanks to initiatives spearheaded by the NGOs that work on the ground. The refugee women are encouraged to participate in the AGR programs. “Elles commencent à cotiser, cent francs, deux cent francs, toute les semaines – et quand on suit, on voit qu’elles ont la volonté, on apporte aussi un appui et elles commencent à faire les activités” (Marie, Interview 11/23/12). Marie added that her organization continues to oversee the women’s projects. The organizers on the ground provide support for the women who have just begun to earn money. After three months, six months, and after a year, the organizers evaluate the progress of the women.

UNHCR and its partner agencies in Bertoua have seen immense change since the refugees began to arrive in 2006. While conducting my fieldwork, I listened to informants explain how the nature of their work had changed over the past six or so years; aid organizations were no longer regularly registering refugees and instead were organizing educational opportunities and sustainable farming practices. I was given a rosy picture of a successful refugee response, including contented – if also tired – local aid workers and their international counterparts, patting themselves on the back for a job well done while simultaneously recognizing the significant amount of work that remained.

Resurgence of Violence in the Central African Republic

In the year and a half or so since I conducted this fieldwork, the refugee situation in Bertoua has changed dramatically, as it is wont to do in humanitarian responses. As I spoke with Michael over Skype in March 2013 about his meeting in Yaoundé two days prior, we

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86 “they are almost sedentary”
87 “They begin to save – 100 CFA, 200 CFA – every week, and when we follow up, we see that they have the will and the desire – we inspire them and they begin their revenue generating activities.”
also discussed the previous day’s news. Rebels had taken over the CAR capital in Bangui.

Michael told me that FARI was evacuating its expatriate staff to Bertoua. The FARI office in Bangui had been looted and the files and computers were gone.

In the twelve months since that Skype conversation, CAR has become international news, prompting a US and EU supported United Nations peacekeeping intervention. The American government confessed that it had no strategic or geopolitical interests in the region, but out of an obligation to humanitarian principles, it would send money to the UN peacekeeping mission, intervening with the use of soft power (New York Times 2014).

With the renewed influx of refugees into the East and Adamaoua Regions, the humanitarian aid organizations that had once changed the nature of their work to a longer-term time frame, are back at the beginning, so to speak, registering refugees and distributing identification cards. The work they have already done – the latrines, wells, water storage facilities, and educational infrastructure – will no doubt contribute to an easier integration of the newly arrived refugees.

One positive amidst the recent conflict has been the amount of media attention. Although few news sources point to Cameroon as a recipient of the displaced Central Africans, the recent conflict has garnered far more attention than did the conflict in 2006, which has been called a “forgotten tragedy” (UNHCR 2009). The more overstated religious nature of the renewed conflict has perhaps been a reason for the increased attention. The local staff in Cameroon, however, has continued to provide services to recently arrived refugees.

As of this writing, as the crisis continues and grows ever complicated, the expatriate staff of the international aid organizations continues to cycle through, helicoptering in for
finite contracts. The local aid workers are the constant, providing institutional memory and practiced strategies for providing aid and for coping with the accompanying stress. Today, as new refugees arrive, they are greeted by local staff members who speak Fulfuldé and who, comprehending the full extent of the local context, will make the refugees feel welcome and at home during the challenging transitional process.

The most knowledgeable amongst their colleagues, the local staff is comfortable and practiced in their jobs, familiar with the terrain, the conditions, and the culture and mores of the refugees. It is the international staff that must adjust to the broad cultural differences when arriving for a new contract in the region. The local staff does not often have a chance to experience this; many of them are content to work in the familiar setting of Cameroon. In May of 2013, Michael had his first experience as the outsider.

*From Local to International*

Michael looked around the room as he tried to decide where to sit. He chose a table occupied already by two white women. It was the first evening of a weeklong humanitarian training. Like the training Michael went to in Burkina Faso, this one was offered by BioForce, but unlike last time, it was taking place at the organization’s headquarters in Lyon. Sitting down at the table, Michael asked the women about themselves. One was a retired flight attendant looking to begin a second career in humanitarian aid. The other said she worked for FARI. Michael looked up, surprised. I work for FARI also, he told her. Her face lit up. She shared that she had just finished her third tour with the organization and had recently returned from Burma. Michael introduced himself. The woman was surprised that Michael, a national staff member, was at a training in France that cost 700 €, more than
he earned in a month. She was even more surprised to learn that FARI had not helped pay for Michael to attend the training. “Elle n'a pas compris que j'ai dit, qu'ils ne m'ont pas payé la formation,”88 Michael explained to me, shaking his head, a sad smile on his typically jubilant face (Michael, Interview 6/4/13).

On a sunny afternoon in early summer, I walked along the Rhône River in Lyon, France next to Michael. He shared with me stories from the humanitarian worker training he had attended two weeks before. It was Michael’s first time in Europe and it was fascinating to see how the tables had turned; whereas previously I had been the one uncomfortable walking down the street, now it was Michael who looked around bewildered at the lack of commotion and absence of vendors sitting on the sidewalk.

It wasn’t only with his environment that Michael had felt uncomfortable since his arrival in France at the beginning of the month. At the last BioForce training he had attended in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, there had been around twenty aid workers from eight different African countries and two women from France. At the training in Lyon, Michael was the sole African, enrolled with eight Europeans. The roles had reversed. Michael spoke of the overt differences between the two trainings. This training in France had lacked the chaleur, the warmth, of the Ouagadougou training, where the participants had become close friends within a period of days. Michael did not feel close to anyone here in Lyon and when, on the final day of the training, he had requested that the participants take a photograph together, one of the women had walked out of the room, refusing to be in the picture. At the BioForce training in Lyon, Michael was suddenly thrust into the position of the international humanitarian aid worker; he was uncomfortable with his surroundings,

88 "She didn’t understand what I had said, that they hadn’t paid for the training."
Michael appreciated the irony of the situation. Several days after the training had ended, he had traveled north to Paris to visit FARI headquarters. Michael had several friends at headquarters – all were delighted and surprised to see him. “Certaines m’ont demandé si j’avais expatrié. Ils ont dit, Michael? Non, c’est un staff national. Certaines croyaient que j’avais été recruté à Paris,”99 Michael explained, making it clear how rare it was for a national staff member to make an appearance at headquarters. Michael brought up money as a reason (Michael, Interview 6/4/13). The trip to France had cost him 3500€90 in total. It’s not possible for local aid workers to pay sums like that. Michael had borrowed money from friends and purposefully put off buying a house or a car and getting married. But it was worth it for him. Michael’s dream is to eventually expatriate and rise to the level of international staff member. It is a rare trajectory for a local staff member, but he is determined.

According to Oscar, a Human Resources Manager at the ICRC in Geneva, about fifty ICRC national staff members move to the international level each year (Oscar, Interview 7/31/13). That is out of the ICRC’s approximately 13,000 staff members globally. I asked Oscar why that is the case and why local staff are so often marginalized in the international refugee relief industry. He explained that up until recently, staff at headquarters has viewed the citizens of the countries where the Red Cross movements operate as uneducated and inferior. Oscar believes that in the past ten or fifteen years or so, however,

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89 “Certain people asked me if I had expatriated. They said, ‘Michael? No he’s a national staff.’ Certain people believed I had been recruited to Paris.”
90 Approximately $4558 as of June 2013.
education levels have risen in the developing world. He credits the spread of technology, and with it, globalization, as having a direct impact on these rising levels of education. Whether or not this is sound evidence does not matter as much as the effects of this assumption. “We can now slowly reduce mobiles on certain functions and start to recruit residents,” he told me, using the ICRC’s vocabulary for expatriate and national staff (Oscar, Interview 7/31/13).

These efforts are part of a broader initiative by the ICRC to restructure its hiring so that permanent, mobile, and resident staff are all hired based on the same criteria. Salary is complicated, however. Oscar explained that someone who lives in Geneva but is working a ten-month mission in Afghanistan, for example, is going to need to be paid enough so that he can pick up his life in Switzerland when he returns home. A highly educated Afghani living in Kabul and working for the ICRC may not necessitate 10,000 CHF91 a month in salary like his Swiss counterpart. These difficulties and confusion are to be expected as the ICRC begins to change what has been the status quo since the organization’s inception one hundred and fifty years ago. It is not just salary and hiring that need to change, however, but also attitudes towards national humanitarian aid workers

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91 Approximately $11300 as of March 2014.
CHAPTER 6:

Conclusion

Searching “international humanitarian aid worker” in quotes on Google brings up 674,000 results. In comparison, a search for “national humanitarian aid worker” in quotes brings up four results. “Local humanitarian aid worker” in quotes produces five.\(^\text{92}\) Despite Oscar’s assertion that the industry is slowly changing, there is something wrong with those numbers. Scholars of humanitarian aid agree that local staff members make up the majority of all humanitarian aid workers and that they do the majority of the work on the ground. And yet local humanitarian aid workers are seldom discussed beyond that (Minear 2002; Ray 2010; Stoddard et al 2011a; Stoddard et al 2011b). As cultural insiders who also understand and commiserate with the international humanitarian response, local humanitarian aid workers are, in a way, international aid organizations’ most valuable resource.

In spite of the increasingly globalized nature of today’s world, vestiges of colonialism are seen everywhere. The legacy of colonialism affects and influences many of those conflicts that today mandate an international humanitarian response. If these can be linked to colonialism, a time when local knowledge was specifically ignored, shouldn’t local knowledge now be sought out? The overwhelming Western bias of humanitarian aid smothers the credit that is due to local aid workers for their involvement in humanitarian response settings and for their vital role as bridges between the target populations and the international aid organizations. As the invaluableness of local aid workers has been

\(^{92}\) Google search data as of May 4, 2014.
demonstrated throughout this thesis, it becomes clear that it is time to call for attention to be directed towards local staff in the context of international refugee responses.

As an overlooked component of humanitarian aid, local staff should be recognized and commended for the skills and strategies they bring to the sector. Although international and national aid workers are employed by the same organizations and adopt the same goals and intentions, the fault line between the two groups of workers must be recognized. By defining the position of national aid workers within a globalized industry, this thesis has emphasized that fault line while crediting national aid workers for their local knowledge; familiarity with the surrounding cultures, religions, and languages; idealist and self-interested motivations; and coping strategies.

In using life histories, I have attempted to present the reader with a clearer understanding of the role of local staff within the international humanitarian aid sector. By paying close attention to how the local aid workers perceive their own positions within the world of humanitarian aid, the inequalities of the aid sector and the invisibility of local staff have become apparent, revealing the aid industry as one that helps and supports refugees while it simultaneously – either consciously or unconsciously – marginalizes its own local staff.

Conceptions of humanitarian aid and of international refugee response have changed dramatically in the decades since the end of the Cold War. But as the world becomes more connected, with advances in technology and education serving as equalizers, there is no reason why humanitarian commentary should continue to overlook such a vital and necessary component of aid. National humanitarian aid workers, comprising at least ninety percent of all aid workers (Taylor et al 2012), are invaluable to
the sector. As this thesis has argued, national staff, while a neglected facet of aid, is integral to the continued effective implementation of international refugee response. Positioned as they are between the refugees and the international aid workers, local humanitarian aid workers help to ensure smooth delivery of aid as they enact their status as cultural insiders amongst both the refugee populations and the international staff.
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\textsuperscript{93} All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of informants.

\textsuperscript{94} All of the offices mentioned are those located in Bertoua.
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APPENDIX A:  
Interview Questions for Research in Bertoua, Cameroon  
November 2012

The questions below are those that I used for my interviews in Bertoua. As I used the ethnographic method for these interviews, I did not ask every single question of each informant. I let our conversations progress naturally. In general, I asked many more questions than those listed below.

Ces questions ci-dessous sont elles que j’ai utilisées pour les entretiens à Bertoua. Comme j’ai utilisé la méthode ethnographique pour ces entretiens, je n’ai pas utilisé toutes ces questions avec chaque informateur. J’ai laissé notre conversation progresse comme elle voulait. En général j’ai demandé beaucoup plus de questions que celles que j’ai mises ici.

Est-ce que vous pouvez décrire votre rôle ici ?

Depuis quand est-ce que vous travaillez ici ?

Comment est-ce que vous avez commencé à travailler ici ?
   Comment est-ce que vous avez commencé à travailler avec les réfugiés ?
   Pourquoi est-ce que vous avez décidé de travailler avec les réfugiés ?

Est-ce que vous pouvez décrire un jour quotidien dans votre travail ?

Quelles sont les interactions que vous avez avec les réfugiés ? Est-ce que vous causez avec eux chaque jour ?

Comment est-ce que vous vous êtes préparé pour ce travail ?
   Est-ce que l’organisation a une formation que vous avez faite ?
   Est-ce que vous vous êtes senti comme si vous étiez préparé pour le travail avec les réfugiés quand vous avez commencé ce type de travail ?

Comment est-ce que vous décririez votre travail ? (Adjectifs)
   Quels sont les aspects les plus difficiles ?
   Quels sont les meilleurs aspects ?
   Comment est-ce que vous vous sentez le matin ? Vous avez envie de rentrez au travail ?
   Trouvez-vous votre travail comme récompensant ?
   Selon vous, qu’est-ce que c’est le but de votre travail ?

Comment est-ce que vous avez changé depuis que vous avez commencé à travailler avec les réfugiés ?
Qu’est-ce que vous pensez de votre situation comme Camerounais qui travaille avec des réfugiés Centrafricaines ?
   Est-ce que vous voyez des similitudes entre vous et eux ?

Pensez-vous que c’est la même chose pour les Européens, les Américains, ou les Canadiens, de travailler avec des réfugiés que pour un Africain qui travaille avec cette population dans son propre pays ?

(Si c’est une femme) Est-ce que vous pensez que c’est la même expérience de travailler avec des réfugiés pour les femmes Camerounaises que pour les hommes Camerounais ?
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