



Housing Land and Property in the Far North of Cameroon

Violent crises in the Lake Chad Basin region have caused mass displacement and affected access to housing, land and property rights (HLP) in the Far North of Cameroon. Securing access to land and improving living conditions are essential to address the basic needs of affected populations for both the short and long-term.

Introduction

The ongoing armed conflict in the Lake Chad Basin region has caused mass displacement in northeast Nigeria and the Far North of Cameroon forcing people to flee the violence and abandon their homes. This Far North of Cameroon is currently hosting some 89,000 Nigerian refugees, 236,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 59,000 returnees. The situation remains fragile with an estimated total of 2.1 million in need of assistance.

The vast majority of IDPs and 30,000 out-of-camp refugees have found refuge in host communities. NRC's research from 2018 shows that many have no formal or written agreements to secure their tenure. Limited access to agricultural land and livelihoods opportunities, along with protracted displacement, is exhausting financial means and placing additional burdens on already scarce resources of displaced persons and the communities hosting them. This situation is increasing the risk of forced eviction and

secondary displacement and having a negative impact on living conditions and social cohesion.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programme has carried out an assessment of HLP challenges for communities affected by displacement across the departments of Mayo-Tsanaga, Mayo-Sava and Logone-et-Chari in the Far North of Cameroon. This briefing note presents the main findings and recommendations of this research.

HLP challenges during displacement

The assessment identified the following main challenges faced by displaced persons in accessing HLP rights in the Far North of Cameroon:

- ***Living conditions in hosted accommodation.*** The majority of IDPs are living in hosted accommodation with a high level of cohabitation of multiple families.

Host families have welcomed IDPs into their homes without any formal arrangement or rental agreement in place. As the displacement has become protracted, it has led to a deterioration of social relations between host communities and their guests.

- **Living conditions in rented accommodation.** Many IDPs are living in rented accommodation and report overcrowding and high rental prices. Displaced families have exhausted their resources and, in the departments of Mayo-Sava and Logone-et-Chari, many cases of unpaid rent were reported. IDPs are often left with no option but to join an informal settlement or to move from one accommodation to another.
- **Access to land and the construction of shelter.** In the Far North of Cameroon, there are no formal mechanisms for attributing land to displaced persons in the medium to long term. IDPs are only granted temporary access to land to build temporary and precarious shelters (in straw). With the deterioration of these basic structures, they are now seeking to replace them with mud shelters. However, this has implications for the status of the land and customary authorities have stated that 'the land on which shelters have been built by displaced persons cannot be considered to belong to them'.
- **Access to land for livelihoods.** Host communities and local leaders rent agricultural land for cultivation to IDPs for a fee or part of the harvest (sharecropping). While this might meet immediate needs, there is no formal modality for longer-term and safe access to agricultural land for displaced persons.
- **Displaced women's HLP rights.** Women face significant difficulties in securing rights over land and/or inheritance rights. This situation has been exacerbated by the crisis. The Cameroon Constitution guarantees women the same property rights as men. However, in practice, the attribution of land is handled by social and customary norms and the interpretation of religious laws. Women are not permitted to own or inherit land but may be granted access to land to grow food for household consumption. However, all economic transactions are controlled by the male head of household and, upon the death of their husband, women may be evicted from land by family members. As renters, displaced women report also being forcibly evicted from land by owners. Rental contracts are for the most part verbal and landlords may not respect the terms of the agreement if a woman is unaccompanied by a male relative.

- **HLP and legal identity documentation.** Issues around property rights have been aggravated by the absence of legal identity documentation. For example, in order to approach the land administration to initiate any formal procedure in respect of land, it is necessary to present proof of identity. The research revealed that women were more likely to be affected by lack of documentation with a specific impact on their HLP rights. For example, lack of documents attesting to a marriage can affect a women's ability to access inheritance rights or rights over property during matrimonial disputes.
- **Undocumented and illegal HLP transactions.** Social and economic pressures have led to a proliferation of illegal land transactions and transaction which are incorrectly executed. This has led to land speculation and an increase in disputes. IDPs are victims of multiple sales or renting of the same parcel of land or property and face insecure tenure or a loss of assets as a result.

Typology of HLP disputes

1. Disputes related to contracts

- Disputes related to rental agreements. Many IDPs have opted to rent rooms or properties but with insufficiently clear and documented rental agreements, which leave their rights unprotected and increases risks of arbitrary and/or unlawful eviction. Disputes are arising between landlords and tenants as available resources are exhausted and the displaced find themselves without the means to meet rental obligations.
- Disputes related to non-repayment of loans of agricultural land and merchandise. IDPs may gain access to host community agricultural land on the basis of an agreement to pay a portion of the harvest to the owner. IDPs may also borrow merchandise on the agreement that the value of the goods will be repaid with interest. These types of arrangements existed prior to the conflict but are now practised more widely. However, IDPs are facing challenges in repaying these debts leading to a rise in disputes.

2. Conflicts around natural resources

- Disputes related to the use of water points. The additional demographic pressure on local communities caused by displacement has exacerbated pre-existing competition for water. In Mayo-Sava department, disputes between IDPs and host



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communities were reported regarding access and management of water points. It was claimed that certain IDPs were selling potable water from wells, which was considered both an affront to the hospitality of the host community and a loss of earnings for them.

- Conflicts between pastoralists and agriculturalists. In Makary and Logone-et-Chari departments, interviews indicated a high frequency of conflicts between pastoralists and agriculturalists, also reflecting an inter-ethnic conflict between the Kotoko and Choa Arabs. These tensions have increased along with displacement and the additional pressure placed on natural resources.

3. Family conflicts

- Inheritance disputes. Inheritance disputes were reported in relation to land and property. Women often face challenges in claiming their inheritance upon the death of their husband. In addition, one key informant described disputes arising where adults were required to hold property on trust for children in the family (often nieces or nephews) but failed to act in good faith in the interests of the beneficiaries.
- Eviction of women. Under customary norms, a woman's right to HLP is often dependent on their husband and in the case of the separation or the death of a spouse a woman will face challenges exercising these rights. The eviction of women from the family home was a commonly reported problem. It was also reported that female victims of sexual violence may face social stigma preventing them from accessing adequate housing.

4. Institutional conflicts

- Conflicts related to administrative procedures and land speculation. The land management system in Cameroon considers certain types of land transactions illegal (for example the sale of public land). Nevertheless, social and economic pressures have led to a proliferation of such transactions. Other transactions are not executed correctly leading to disputes over the status of the property. This can leave land vulnerable to speculation.
- Double renting and double selling. The increase in demand on housing has resulted in cases of multiple sales or renting of the same parcel of land. A key informant provided an example of a host community member who had rented his parcel of land to two separate tenants. It was necessary for a third party to

intervene in the resulting dispute and assist one of the parties to reclaim the rent paid.

- Absence of civil and identity documentation. Issues around HLP rights have been aggravated by the absence of civil and identity documentation. The research revealed that women were more likely to be affected by lack of documentation with a specific impact on their HLP rights. For example, lack of documents attesting to a marriage can affect a women's ability to access inheritance rights or rights over property during matrimonial disputes.

Recommendations

The following are priority recommendations for the promotion and protection of HLP rights. They are directed at humanitarian organisations in coordination and consultation with the Cameroon authorities:

- **Ensure that HLP is integrated into humanitarian responses.** HLP should be integrated into humanitarian interventions, such as shelter, food security and livelihoods, to prevent the risk of eviction and exploitation and to strengthen the safety and resilience of those affected by the crisis. The donor community should fund HLP programmes as a key component of the humanitarian response.
- **Improve IDPs' living conditions and security of tenure.** It is important to increase access to HLP programmes that provide legal aid and related support with rental agreements. Awareness-raising activities can also increase understanding between landlords and displaced households and help strengthen security of tenure and community cohesion.
- **Conduct additional research on the HLP rights of women** affected by displacement in the Far North of Cameroon and identify practical solutions to support their enjoyment of HLP rights. The provision of free legal assistance and awareness-raising activities on the equal rights of men and women to HLP and access to justice will support women to claim and enjoy these rights during displacement.
- **Build the capacity of statutory and customary authorities to protect HLP rights** and collaboratively resolve an increase of HLP-related disputes in displacement locations. This can include training on legal standards and dispute resolution skills, as well as the provision of coaching and technical assistance.



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Sources

The findings in this note are from a study conducted by NRC in the departments of Mayo-Tsanaga, Mayo-Sava and Logone-et-Chari in the Far North of Cameroon. Researchers conducted key informant interviews with over 105 IDPs and host community members. Key informant interviews were held with representatives of ministries, local authorities, international and local NGOs, as well as local associations and UN agencies. The full report can be found at: <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/forced-displacement-and-access-to-housing-land-and-property-in-the-far-north-of-cameroon/>

About NRC

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent humanitarian organisation working in crises across 31 countries helping to save lives and rebuild futures. NRC has worked for over ten years with conflict-affected communities to improve their access to housing, land and property rights. In the Far North of Cameroon, NRC is implementing programmes in the areas of livelihoods and food security; education; shelter; and information, counselling and legal assistance (ICLA) in three departments: Mayo-Tsanaga, Mayo-Sava and Logone-et-Chari.

- Links to other relevant information: <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/forced-displacement-and-access-to-housing-land-and-property-in-the-far-north-of-cameroon/>

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