

An Assessment of The Impact of Humanitarian Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities Affected by the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon and Their Experiences

Ambe Divine Neba

PhD student, Department of International Relations and Conflict Resolution, University of Buea, Cameroon.

E-mail divineam@yahoo.fr.

Abstract:

The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon brought clashes that began in 2017 between government forces and non-state armed groups seeking independence for the former Southern Cameroons. This attracted numerous humanitarian organizations with aim of protecting the vulnerable, especially Persons with disabilities (PWDs). Despite efforts to respect the enormous policy tools on humanitarian inclusion of PWDs, the affected PWDs still exhibit some frustration with humanitarian response. This raises the question if there has been enough inclusion of PWDs in humanitarian action to moderate their sufferings. To supplement secondary sources of data, the qualitative research method was employed in collecting primary data in the conflict Regions of North West and South West Regions with emphasis on interviews. The purposive, stratified random sampling and snowball sampling methods were employed in the selection of the study sample. The Findings showed a strong impact of humanitarian inclusion on the lives of affected PWDs. In this case, however, the level of humanitarian inclusion of PWDs has not been sufficient to greatly impact on the lives of PWDs. Concrete inclusive measures are therefore solicited from all humanitarian stakeholders operating within this context to avert the sufferings of PWDs.

Keywords: Humanitarian Inclusion, Anglophone conflict, Persons with disabilities

Introduction

The long-standing grievances among the Anglophone people of the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon led to widespread protests in October 2016 that morphed into an armed conflict in 2017. This was between government forces on one hand and armed separatists groups demanding for an independent state for the former Southern Cameroons otherwise known as Ambazonia on the other hand. In course of fighting, the belligerent forces used varied warfare, some of which led to a shift in battlefields and target. The attacks sometimes intentionally or unintentionally prey on unarmed civilians leaving severe impacts on them especially the most vulnerable persons like Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), the old, children and women. The worsening humanitarian situation in the two Regions of Cameroon led to an Emergency Response Plan (ERP) early in 2019 calling on international intervention. This attracted

the attention of humanitarian organisations that got involved to assist the affected population. For the worsening situation of these vulnerable to be improved upon, the humanitarian response needed to fully respect Core Responsibility 3 (Leave no one behind) of the Agenda for Humanity through the inclusion of such persons. This study estimates the impact of humanitarian inclusion of PWDs affected by the Anglophone conflict on their lives from when the conflict became violent in 2017. Despite so much energy put in to ensure the inclusion of PWDs in humanitarian response at all levels, they are still being treated with a lot of levity. PWDs are still to feel the impact of humanitarian response through a marked improvement in the experiences they are going through as a result of the conflict. PWDs still have evacuation problems and remain exposed to sporadic attacks. They constantly lack basic necessities due to misplaced priorities or lack of information and a lot of gender violence still

persists. A revision of their *modus operandi* of humanitarian stakeholders operating within this conflict framework is highly solicited.

Statement of the Problem

Enormous publications, policy tools and guidelines exist to enforce the inclusion of PWDs in humanitarian response to reduce their vulnerability during conflicts. Cameroon signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008 and ratified it in 2021, together with its Optional Protocol (OP). At the Istanbul World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) of 2016, PWDs were classified as a critical group under Core Responsibility Three (Leave no one behind) and need special care. This led to the adoption of the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. Consequentially, the Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action were issued by the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee in November 2019. Regional and domestic instruments also exist as the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples Rights of 1986, the constitution of Cameroon as well as Law No 2010/002 of 13th April 2010 on the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities. Despite all these, affected PWDs have not experienced a remarkable improvement in their predicaments following humanitarian intervention indicating that the humanitarian actors still treat them with a lot of levity.

Research Question

Is there a significant impact of humanitarian inclusion of affected PWDs on their experiences during the Anglophone Conflict?

Objective of the study

To assess the impact of humanitarian inclusion of PWDs affected by the Anglophone conflict on their experiences.

Literature Review

Mardini (2022:1), makes a study of PWDs in armed conflicts bringing out the vulnerability of these persons. Persons with pre-existing disabilities face additional challenges and risks once an armed conflict breaks out. Accessing and receiving the basic necessities for survival, such as food, water, sanitation, shelter, healthcare and humanitarian aid, become arduous, if not impossible. Fearing for their lives and security, when many are forced to flee their homes, persons with disabilities are often left behind. Women and girls with disabilities face an increased risk of sexual violence. Institutions housing or caring for persons with disabilities have been targeted or used as human shields.

In the same light, Rohwerder (2017) and Priddy(2019) highlights some indicators on the risks or vulnerabilities women and girls with disabilities face during conflicts. To her, PWDs may have difficulty accessing humanitarian assistance programs, due to a variety of societal, attitudinal, environmental and communication barriers, and are at greater risk of violence than their non-disabled peers. Women and girls with disabilities are “particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), but they may have difficulty accessing support and services that could reduce their risk and vulnerability” (Rohwerder, 2017:12).

Priddy sets a good foundation to this study. Her paper exposes the holistic experiences of PWDs when confronted by armed conflict. It exposes the weaknesses of belligerent forces in respecting international conventions and the impact of such actions on PWDs. It is based on this that this research seeks to work on the case study of Cameroon to see how far this applies with view of creating awareness on the sufferings caused by the Anglophone conflict so a lasting solution can be sought.

Lange (2020) identifies a number of things to be done to enforce inclusion and reduce suffering of PWD including a paradigm shift in mentality to recognize PWDs as key actors of humanitarian

response and not just beneficiaries and capacity building of actors at field level

Theoretical Review

Several theories have been developed to explain the impact of humanitarian inclusion of PWDs on their lives during conflict. The theories used in this study include the Human Needs theory and the Functionalist theory. The main proponent of the Human Needs theory was the psychologist, Abraham Harold Maslow. Maslow's theory explains human motivation based on the pursuit of different levels of needs. These needs begin with the most basic before moving on to the advanced. The theory proposes that all humans have certain basic universal needs for survival and when these are not met, frustration is likely to occur or peace will be disrupted leading to further conflict. These needs are not simply food, water and shelter. These essentials include both physical and non-physical elements needed for human growth and development as well as those things humans are innately driven to attain. This implies there is a pyramid of needs and each need has a specific ranking or order of obtainment (Maslow and Frager, 1987:112). Maslow's needs pyramid starts with the basic needs such as food, water and shelter. These are followed by the need for security, safety, then the need to belong or love, need for self-esteem and finally personal fulfilment.

The Human needs theory is very relevant to this study. According to Abaho (2020:2), despite all efforts at mediation, negotiation and military involvement as a means of resolving conflicts in Africa, if the essential needs of people are not met, the efforts might be futile. It is therefore imperative that humanitarian stakeholders do all to see that all affected people in conflicts like the Anglophone conflict are taken care of. The theory helps in the understanding of some fundamental aspects of human behaviour. Needs theorists understand that needs, unlike interests cannot be traded, suppressed or bargained for. An inability to satisfy needs breeds a sense of neglect and frustration which can cause more problems

amongst those affected by the Anglophone crisis. To understand the appropriate needs of PWDs, there is need to bring them into the humanitarian circle.

Functionalism emerged in the 20th century and is associated with authors such as Emile Durkheim, Talkot Parsons, Herbert Spenser and Robert Merton who dominated American social theory in the 1950s and 1960s (Gomez-Diago, 2020). The French Sociologist, Emile Durkheim, in his "Division of Labour" (1993) makes a clear cut formulation of the concept of function. According to him "function of social institution is the correspondence between it (the institution) and the need of the social organism". This means a social institution satisfies the need of society. The vital need of a society is the maintenance of solidarity in the society (integration of the society).

Thus, Durkheim considers solidarity as the vital need as without maintaining solidarity in society, the society may break up and may not remain a society. The theory greatly calls for social solidarity or the feeling of being part of a larger social group. This social solidarity would serve as "social glue" (Durkheim, 1993:16). Having a sense of belonging is important as it helps individuals stay together and maintain social stability. If PWDs are not integrated into the entire process of humanitarian action, then they are not socialized into the norms and values of that action and therefore pose a problem to the society as a whole

Data Set and Methodology

The study offers an empirical analysis applying the Cameroon case to illustrate several theories what PWDs go through each time there is conflict and humanitarian action comes up. The study, therefore, made use of secondary data that has been collected and analyzed by someone else. Secondary data has been obtained from a number of sources including books, reports, journals, radio and TV programs and the internet. This source provided the required background information, helped in building credibility for the research report and helped to clarify the problem as the

exploratory research process was carried out. This source was used to triangulate the primary data collected later in the process.

For more reliability of information, the qualitative research method was used to collect primary data. Using purposive, snowball and stratified random sampling methods, interviews were conducted with selected PWDs in both the North West and South West Regional headquarters of Bamenda and Buea respectively. The theme of the interview was guided by the research question. The data collected were first transcript into textual data. During this process, all audio records were carefully listened, and the responses of the participants were typed. Thereafter, the transcript data were analysed using the process of thematic analysis whereby concepts or ideas were grouped under umbrella terms or key words. In this context, single words, clauses and sets of words or phrases were used to develop themes which emanated directly from the participants statements.

Themes or codes were deduced for every statement. During the coding it was assumed that any theme that emerged at least once was relevant. The existence of themes was therefore considered more important than frequency or grounding. After taking the generalization of themes into consideration, a translation rule was created to allow the streamlining and organization of the coding process so that what was being coded is necessary. This stage enabled the defining of the meaning of every word/theme, and what they stood for to know where to code each statement. Qualitative data collected were first transcript into textual data. Thereafter, the transcript data were analysed using the process of thematic analysis

Key Findings

Findings indicate a strong influence of humanitarian inclusion on lives of PWDs. PWDs have been greatly affected by the confrontations and therefore rely so much on humanitarian assistance. Most of them have been abandoned to themselves as many people flee out of the conflict zone. They hardly have easy means to be

evacuated and are usually exposed to violence. The female PWDs often face a lot of sexual violence especially from armed men to satisfy their sexual desires. Worst still, the violence destroys the economic structures on which the PWDs rely and sever them from the family and community support they had been receiving. These, amongst others have been the challenges which are expected to be addressed through the intervention of humanitarian organisations. The humanitarian organisations operating within the framework of the Anglophone conflict have been striving to carry out their operations following the various guidelines prescribed by international conventions. Efforts have been made to enforce the inclusion of PWDs so as to lessen their sufferings. These include efforts to ensure identification of PWDs, sensitisation of PWDs on their rights, building the capacities of Organisations of PWDs, encouraging their participation, training stakeholders and providing complaint and feedback mechanism.

Despite these efforts, findings still indicate a low level of inclusion to reduce the impact of humanitarian response. Many PWDs still remain in abject poverty because they do not get the information on assistance. The assistance given hardly satisfies the aspirations of the beneficiary because they are sometimes seen as needy persons who need anything they bring. The PWDs still feel unsafe to go for assistance and often avoid stigma. Very few take part in aid distribution which leads to bias and discrimination. The humanitarian organisations hardly clear off the environmental barriers which makes access difficult thus increasing misery. Some sets of PWDs as boys still remain exposed to violence since most organisations are focused on some sets of people like women. They usually feel neglected by the government due to poor follow up mechanisms.

Discussion of Findings

The study intended to find out the impact of humanitarian inclusion of affected PWDs on their experiences during the Anglophone conflict. In

other words, it intended to find out if the experiences of PWDs affected by the conflict are moderated or affected by the inclusion of these PWDs during humanitarian response. The results of the findings indicate a strong relationship between the experiences of PWDs affected by the Anglophone conflict and their inclusiveness in humanitarian response. The level of inclusiveness varies from one place to the other. In areas where there is more inclusion of PWDs in humanitarian response, the less the sufferings of these PWDs. On the other hand, where there is less inclusion of PWDs in humanitarian response, there is bound to be more suffering on the part of PWDs. Findings indicates that there is adequate information available to educate humanitarian stakeholders on inclusive humanitarian response, but the implementation is not enough. As such, PWDs continue to be treated with a lot of levity with severe consequences. This can be seen in the social, economic and political aspects.

Economic impact

Socially, the Anglophone conflict has created a lot of social implications on PWDs which humanitarian organisations are bound to resolve. Most PWDs have been unable to carry out sustainable economic activities due to their impairments. For those who do, they have been forced to abandon them because of instability that has disrupted supply as well as the market. In some cases, the economic structures as workshops are completely erased by government forces that use burning as a war strategy to force the separatists to surrender. For this reason PWD affected by the Anglophone conflict can't afford or have very little access to their basic necessities which are vital for their daily life. This breeds frustration as advocated by Abraham Maslow in his human needs theory and therefore solicits assistance from humanitarian organisations to provide the basic goods.

Unfortunately, humanitarian organisations in most cases simply provide what is available or what donors offer and easy to get. The basic necessities of the different groups of PWDs are hardly

known. They are constantly being looked upon as persons in need and not as persons with rights capable of defending such rights. Participation at the various levels of the humanitarian cycle is generally low. Very few are called up at the planning stage and at the end they are simply offered some basic commodities like food items, bathing and dresses. The idea of economic sustainability is hardly taken into consideration. The experiences they go through as a result of the conflict are poorly addressed since they are not at the core of humanitarian response. This aggravates the frustration of the affected PWDs. This deficiency ties strongly with the findings of Madini (2022). According to him, accessing and receiving the basic necessities for survival, such as food, water, sanitation, shelter, healthcare and humanitarian aid, become arduous, if not impossible. In turn, this imperils these individuals' ability to live a dignified life.

These findings were also in line with those of Rohwerder (2017). To her, people with disabilities have been found to form one of the most socially excluded groups in any displaced or conflict-affected community. They may have difficulty accessing humanitarian assistance programs, due to a variety of societal, attitudinal, environmental and communication barriers, and are at greater risk of violence than their non-disabled peers.

Political impact

There are a good number of international and local regulations on the functioning of humanitarian organisations to maintain the dignity and rights of PWDs. The findings of the research portray insufficient integration of PWDs in issues that could guarantee their safety and defend their rights during the conflict. Most affected PWDs desire to remain invisible for self-protection and to avoid stigma. Many decide to migrate to nearby Regions where they become a serious social problem to the state. Because of this, it becomes difficult for the humanitarian organisations to access such people and ameliorate their situation. PWDs are poorly informed on conflict developments in the two Regions and remain

highly exposed to violence. Whenever there is fire exchange, people flee leaving behind PWDs who lack the means of evacuation to safer areas. Fearing for their lives and security, when many are forced to flee their homes, persons with disabilities are often left behind, or simply cannot leave, facing the challenges and barriers exacerbated by military operations.

The Drakoni International Humanitarian Law Centre Fact Sheet (2021) had advanced this issue as one of its findings which conforms to the findings of this research. To the fact sheet, persons with disabilities are denied their right to flee the violence because warnings, evacuation routes, and emergency information are not very accessible to PWDs. PWDs are not given adequate training by the humanitarian stakeholders to know their rights. The government of Cameroon and other humanitarian stakeholders do not involve PWDs enough in peacebuilding processes. Even though enshrined in the Cameroon constitution, the follow up mechanism remains wanting. Unless PWDs get involved at all stages of humanitarian action, such barriers will never be addressed. Diversity within the humanitarian sector causes favoritisms and excludes some people with disabilities.

More so, the findings revealed that persons with disabilities are widely seen as passive victims and are yet to be recognized and empowered to act as agents of change. They are not meaningfully consulted in humanitarian policy design, implementation and monitoring. As a result, their needs are hardly met as donors decide on what to give them without their consent. This goes against the Functional theory of Henri Durkheim because the relegation of PWDs in decision-making processes creates a dysfunctional society in which PWDs suffer more. PWDs form one of the systems or parts of the Cameroon and Anglophone society. When one of the systems becomes dysfunctional, it affects all other parts and creates social problems, prompting social change.

Social impacts

The humanitarian bodies operating within the framework of the Anglophone conflict have been

doing all to involve PWDs in planning, execution and evaluation of humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, they seldom involve PWDs of different types of impairment in order to get all their demands satisfied. The findings show that persons with physical disabilities struggle to flee and seek shelter without assistance and access to assistive devices. Involving organisations of persons with disabilities could make well available evacuation mechanisms. In the absence of this, they have been exposed to all forms of attacks and violence. In some cases, some are burnt in houses where they are abandoned as was the case in Nchualam, Mankon where a blind woman was burnt. This confirms the findings of a research carried out in Cameroon, Syria, CAR, South Sudan and Israel/Palestine by Human Rights Watch which claims that PWDs faced similar difficulties fleeing armed attacks on their communities. People who are blind or have low vision require support from others like humanitarian actors to flee. Persons with hearing, development, or intellectual disabilities often do not hear, know about, or understand what occurs during attacks and in this case become victimized by attacks. When such persons are not involved at the planning stage of humanitarian assistance, there is hardly the demand for such devices to remedy the situation. As such, they fall prey and suffer much as such aid hardly considers them.

The findings further revealed that women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), but they may have difficulty accessing support and services that could reduce their risk and vulnerability. This is shown by the numerous cases of rape that were recorded. This finding is in conformity with the findings of Rohwerder (2017) who highlights some indicators on the risks or vulnerabilities women and girls with disabilities face during conflict and crises situations. Women and girls with disabilities in conflict and crises experience 'double discrimination' as a result of their exclusion on the basis of their identity as women and persons with disabilities. Women with

disabilities are repeatedly discounted or forgotten in conflict, with government breakdown and insecurity, disruption in resources, re-evaluation of priorities, and the loss of support systems, making it easy to ignore them.

Again, the findings matched squarely with the Human needs' theory of Abraham Maslow. At the bottom of Abraham Maslow's pyramid are basic needs as food, water and shelter. Without these basic needs, PWDs cannot survive. Societal, attitudinal, environmental and communication barriers do exist that prevent them from having these basic needs fully from humanitarian response. Satisfying these lower-level needs is important in order to avoid unpleasant feelings or consequences amongst PWDs affected by the Anglophone conflict. They all need safety or security and need to have freedom from fear and anxiety.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

The study was carried out in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon affected by the Anglophone conflict, precisely in the Regional headquarters of Bamenda and Buea respectively. It had as overriding purpose to assess the impact of the inclusion of PWDs in humanitarian response on their lives. In other words to find out how the experiences of PWDs affected by the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon are influenced by their inclusiveness in humanitarian response. Using a qualitative research method, findings revealed that the inclusion has a strong influence on their experiences. Much efforts have been put in by the humanitarian stakeholders to respect inclusion policies, but unfortunately, PWDs have not been meaningfully consulted in humanitarian policy design, implementation and monitoring thus aggravating their sufferings.

PWDs' access to humanitarian assistance remains poor and the assistance hardly match with their needs. Many are left out due to poor data collection, many run away due to stigmatization, many still undergo trauma and poor health, gender violence remains high and PWDs still remain exposed to violence despite the inclusion

instruments to which Cameroon belong. It is therefore incumbent on the UN, the Cameroon government, humanitarian organisations and donors to consider the following:

Humanitarian organisations need to review the identification process of persons with disabilities; collecting and providing disability data disaggregated by sex and age, as well as observations on aggravating contextual factors. They should consult persons with disabilities at all the stages of a project (assessment, implementation, evaluation). They should encourage PWD participation in decision making and planning processes and work to eliminate existing barriers (physical, institutional and attitudinal) to basic services. Humanitarian stakeholders should sensitise staff and strengthen their capacity.

The UNO needs to intervene in Cameroon to enforce international laws and norms that protect the rights of persons with disabilities in armed conflict while the government of Cameroon, should review existing guidelines and policies like the constitution and work to ensure they become more inclusive. The government has created the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) program. She should ensure that this program is designed to be accessible and inclusive of PWDs recognizing their unique needs and experiences. A total shift in mentality by the entire society is highly solicited.

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