

BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY, YOUTH MOBILITY AND BETTER LIFE IN THE FAR NORTH REGION OF CAMEROON

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This article portrays youth mobility in Cameroon as a means to escape poverty and to achieve a better life. Youth mobility though not new is, however, taking a new dimension as a result of Boko Haram's violent conflict. To explore how this violence has affected mobility, this study analyses narration of youngsters' escape experiences from Boko Haram and their ideas of how to achieve a better life, drawing on interviews in Cameroon's Far North Region. The study begins with the origin and regionalisation of Boko Haram, followed by the concept of youth, the evolution of mobility trends and better life. It then proceeds to narrations of escape experiences, places of destination and sheds light on mobility pathways and integration dynamics.

Keywords: youth, mobility, better life, Boko Haram, traumatic experiences, Cameroon

Insurreição do Boko Haram, mobilidade juvenil e vida melhor na região do extremo norte dos Camarões

Este artigo descreve a mobilidade dos jovens nos Camarões como um meio de escapar à pobreza e conseguir uma vida melhor. A mobilidade juvenil, embora não seja um fenómeno novo, está a assumir uma nova dimensão devido ao conflito violento do Boko Haram. Para explorar como esta violência afetou a mobilidade, o presente estudo analisa a narração de experiências dos jovens que fugiram do Boko Haram e as suas ideias de como alcançar uma vida melhor, com base em entrevistas realizadas na região do extremo norte dos Camarões. O estudo começa com a origem e regionalização do Boko Haram, seguidas pelo conceito de juventude, a evolução das tendências de mobilidade e a procura de uma vida melhor. Prossegue com as narrações de experiências de fuga, lugares de destino e lança luz sobre os caminhos da mobilidade e as dinâmicas de integração.

Palavras-chave: juventude, mobilidade, vida melhor, Boko Haram, experiências traumáticas, Camarões

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Insurgent groups are not a new phenomenon in some parts of Africa, as the examples of Al Shabab in Somalia (Ekwueme & Obayi, 2012) and the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad in the north of Mali (Mwangi et al., 2014) indicate. It is, however, relatively recent in Cameroon, notably in the Far North Region where the local population suffers from violent acts from Boko Haram, an insurgent Islamist group originating from neighbouring northern Nigeria. This group frequently targets citizens in their homes and in public spaces such as markets, bus stations, and places of worship with shootings, suicide bombings, abductions, and burning houses and property (Ekwueme & Obayi, 2012).

Between 2009 and 2012, the Boko Haram incursions into Cameroon were isolated and sporadic in many localities and limited to aggression, looting of shops, theft of cattle, small ruminants, food stuffs and burning equipment and tools that are difficult to transport (PAM Cameroun, 2014, p. 2). From 2013, the group became more actively involved in abductions, assaults, arms, drugs and vehicle trafficking. This is how the Far North Region became deeply affected by terrorism. The year 2014 marked one of the most catastrophic years, with almost a hundred registered attacks which resulted in deaths, injuries and enormous material damage (PAM Cameroun, 2014, p. 2). In early January of 2015, more than 80 people were kidnapped (IRIN News, 2015). As a direct impact of this human loss and the first-hand witnessing of some of these horrific acts, many people were forced to flee from their homes.

Following the declaration of war on Boko Haram by the President of Cameroon at the security summit in France, in 2014, the violence took a different twist with escalation resulting in the destruction of villages and large displacements of people. Human survival and coping mechanisms built around trade and agriculture were ruptured by the significant increase in the quantitative and qualitative nature of the violence. The increase in frequency and unpredictability, together with the employment of unconventional war tactics such as suicide bombing on soft targets like markets, churches, mosques and schools further degenerated the situation. A significant consequence of this rupture was a breakdown in the cross-border trade in the affected villages bordering Nigeria as the government shut down markets and international border crossings out of fear of insurgent infiltration. This breakdown in trade posed serious economic implications on a region that derives more than 60% of its income from trans-border trade with Nigeria and Chad according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER) (IRIN News, 2015). An estimated 70% of farmers in the Far North's three most affected divisions, Mayo-Sava, Mayo-Tsanaga, and

Logone and Chari deserted their farms, and many have missed out on key farming activities over the course of six months in 2015, such as timely planting (IRIN News, 2015). The prices of other basic commodities, such as corn, sorghum and petrol, rose by 20 to 80 percent from March 2014, according to MINADER. Fleeing this conflict has also taken a serious toll on schooling and formal education as most youth find it difficult to go back to school because of the direct threat on the lives of teachers and students.

The upsurge in Boko Haram's assault in Cameroon's Far North Region has resulted in the flight and internal displacements of large parts of the local population including the tens of thousands of Nigerian refugees taking refuge in the Minawao refugee camp within the Far North Region of Cameroon fleeing from Boko Haram's operations in their home country. Youth constitute an important part of this affected group. While poverty, unemployment, limited educational infrastructure and the search for better livelihood opportunities have always been a strong driving force behind youth spatial mobility in Cameroon's Far North Region (Schrieder & Knerr, 2000), the outbreak of violence due to the presence of Boko Haram marks a new twist. With the unprecedented wave of violence, increasing numbers of young people have been forced to move from their places of origin with fierce fighting to seek safer sanctuary in other parts of the same Far North Region, which has resulted in a high number of internally displaced youths facing problematic livelihoods and increasingly uncertain futures.

The question of how do young people navigate their displacements and lives' uncertain further trajectories is at the heart of this study. It also explores the integration dynamics in their new environments and how movement is geared towards attaining a better life. Would these youths prefer to go back home when the insecurity is over and calm finally returns or has Boko Haram's presence even caused upward social mobilities among displaced youth who prefer to stay in their new environments and work towards a better life? The study thus comprises an analysis of the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on the mobility of youth in Cameroon's Far North Region. To answer the above questions, research was conducted in selected settlements in Maroua, Mokolo and Mora. These sites were chosen for their high concentration of internally displaced persons fleeing Boko Haram attacks, with youth being the main target. Interviews were conducted with 12 displaced young people aged 15 to 32 in December 2015. Informants were selected using a snowball sampling technique with the help of two research assistants, doctoral students teaching at the University of Maroua, who also served as facilitators when the language was a barrier. Additionally, the

interviewed youths were observed during their different daily activities in their new environments.

This article portrays how youth struggle for a better life amidst forced mobility caused by Boko Haram. It first presents the origin and regionalisation of Boko Haram, followed by the concept of youth, an exploration of the evolution of mobility trends and the search for better life in Cameroon. It then proceeds to narrations of escape experiences and places of destination of mobile youths and sheds light on better life, mobility pathways and integration dynamics in their new environments.

Origin and regionalisation of Boko Haram

Boko Haram is an indigenous northern Nigerian Islamist militant group founded by Muhammad Yusuf in the early 1990s, and is committed to the propagation of Islam but more significantly to their fight against Western education which it views as a strategy to achieve hegemony and disrupt Islamic pietistic morale (Wahhabi scholars as cited by DIIS, 2015). In the Nigerian media, the group became known by a series of nicknames, such as Yusufiyya, Taliban and finally, Boko Haram (Ramzi, 2011). Boko Haram, among others, emerged from the fragmentation of the largest northern Nigerian reform movement, the Yan Izala. This movement was established in 1978 by Ismailia Idris. Incited by differences, it provoked disputes in ideology and theological argumentations amidst its Muslim opponents (Loimeier, 2012). The Yan Izala fought against many features of northern Nigerian society, rejecting all manifestations of allegedly un-Islamic characteristics including social customs like paying the bride wealth, extensive mourning and supererogatory prayers – often in the context of Sufi rituals, but also advocated for substantial reforms like the establishing of modern Islamic schools and political mobilisation of women (Loimeier, 2012). Ja'far Mahmud Adam, an ardent follower of the Izala movement, had many students, one of which was Muhammad Yusuf who later split from him to form his own group in the early 1990s, *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a wa-l-hijra*, which can be liberally translated as “the people of the Sunna [of the prophet] and the community [of Muslims] as well as [those who accept the obligation] to emigrate [from the land of unbelievers, i.e., the Nigerian state]” (Loimeier, 2012). In contrast to the Yan Izala movement, Boko Haram totally rejects Western education as well as the modern Islamic schools of the Izala movement. After the death of Muhammad Yusuf in 2009, the group adopted a new name, *jama'at al-sunna li-l-da'wa wa-l-jihad 'alamin-haj al salaf*, translated as “the community of the Sunna who fight for the cause [of

Islam] by means of jihad according to the method of the Salaf"¹, thus signalling a corresponding shift in the group's programme and a distinct radicalization from their former position of advocating for emigration to advocating jihad, defined as an armed struggle against the enemies of Islam (Loimeier, 2012). Boko Haram has become very notorious in recent years and its activities have also been reported in other neighbouring countries like Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Since 2009, the group has been unleashing mayhem against north-eastern Nigeria (Ekwueme & Obayi, 2012) and, by 2014, Boko Haram became stronger than ever and extended its area of operation in Cameroon's Far North Region (Zenn, 2018) with shootings, bombings, kidnappings, looting, and massive destruction of property. Beginning in 2015, the Far North Region became a major target for their attacks especially the Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga divisions where the group carried out several abductions of Cameroonian and foreign nationals. Although some have since been successfully retaken, others remain in captivity. Since May 2015, Boko Haram beefed up its gruesome attacks on Cameroonian soil resulting in soldier as well as civilian deaths. Attacks on Cameroonian villages that border north-eastern Nigeria have resulted in the displacement of more than 190,000 persons dispersed within the Far North Region (IOM/DTM, 2016).

The spread of Boko Haram's attacks to Cameroon, Niger and Chad regionalised a crisis that was originally restricted to Nigeria. The efforts to contain the group by force by these affected countries have seemingly given it more strength, vigour and popularity. The group is now recognised internationally as a terrorist organisation. The spread of Boko Haram to Cameroon was catalysed by a number of factors. The porous nature of the border area with Nigeria facilitated their back and forth movement to Cameroon, with the country sometimes serving as a base for recruitment, strategic planning, training and a hideout. This situation was further compromised by the region's poverty-stricken condition with a lack of socio-economic, road and infrastructural development resulting from the government's failure to address these needs. Coupled with the region's high levels of illiteracy and youth unemployment and its semi-arid, unfriendly environment, it was not difficult for Boko Haram to infiltrate the area using radical Islam sermons and the promise of a Caliphate where justice and equity could reign and replace the present order of corruption and bad governance.

Many unemployed youths, especially males, join the ranks of Boko Haram in the hope of achieving upward economic and social status. According to the DIIS

¹ Salaf is a reference to the methodology used by Boko Haram to advance the cause of Islam through "jihad" – an armed struggle against the enemies of Islam, advocated for by Prophet Mohammed, and practiced by his companions (first three generations of Muslims).

Report of 2015, Boko Haram seems to easily recruit the young and destitute by offering them money, jobs, security and networks. And also by addressing their profound grievances related to failed governance, corruption and the absence of the possibility to have future aspirations in a region laden with underdevelopment and poverty. Moreover, ideas of masculinity and “how to be a man” played a significant role in their recruitment, as expressed in the following quote from Nagarajan (2015) cited by DIIS Report:

Boys and young men are pressured to join groups by threats to their families and incentivised by cash. Such pressure is difficult to resist. In northern Nigeria, gender norms and ideas of how to be a man oblige men to provide “bride price”² and be the family breadwinner. Faced with these responsibilities and high rates of unemployment, joining Boko Haram can offer livelihood opportunities. This is especially so, when manhood is synonymous with aggression and power. Add to these ideas the notion of a man’s responsibility to defend the community, whether from the encroachment of Western ideas or from the abductions and killing by Boko Haram (DIIS Report 2015, p. 24).

Although Boko Haram is widely considered a nuisance, it tends to attract some youths because it offers them a kind of stability through commerce, marriage, social services, identity and belonging in a region that seems to have been abandoned by the state. This may also suggest why Onyemachi (2010) explains that the lack of resources such as opportunity for employment may lead to youth criminality. Others, however, became victims of Boko Haram or, when they were luckier, managed to escape and turn this existential situation into a springboard to a better life.

Concept of youth, evolution of mobility trends and the search for better life in Cameroon

In this section, I will proceed with the concept of youth, followed by the evolution of mobility trends and the search for better life in Cameroon.

The concept of youth

Although many anthropological and psychological studies have coined the concept of youth as a developmental stage (Eisenstadt, 1964; Erikson, 1965; Fortes, 1984; Turner, 1967), the transition from childhood and adulthood is not fixed and stable (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006), and this period of transition

² The current term would be bride wealth.

between childhood and adulthood has recently been described as “waithood” (Honwana, 2012) to address young people’s struggle to achieve social mobility.

Youth is not just a biological expression that is restricted to a specific age group but differs according to the socio-cultural context and time. This may suggest why to call somebody a youth according Durham (2004) is to position the person in terms of a variety of social attributes including not just age but also independence, authority, rights, attributes, knowledge, responsibilities and so on. In Cameroon, the term youth is constantly negotiated and adapted to the context, with unemployment signalling a confirmation of their status as the lost generation despite the rhetoric flourished in official discourse that refers to them as the leaders of tomorrow (Jua, 2003). Characterised by high numbers of very energetic but unemployed young people that lack particular or definite means of livelihood, youth are ready to fit into any available mould of work or opportunity to make a living. This assertion is confirmed by Waage (2006) who, while studying youth in Ngoundere (Adamawa region of Cameroon), frequently got the response of “*je me débrouille*”, liberally translated as I am pushing, coping, managing, or figuring it out. According to Waage, this phrase is commonly used by young people when they give explanation as to how they deal with unforeseen and everyday life situations and challenges in Ngaoundere and in the rest of Cameroon. Young people usually voice the expression with a smile that highlights the significance of young adult in contemporary Cameroon of the qualities of resilience, flexibility, creativity and sociability as essential for coping with challenging demands. This indicates youth ingenuousness to new suggestions and possibilities for a better life in the midst of crisis. The lives and the future of young people today, in contrast to their grandparents, is characterised by a high degree of insecurity and unpredictability. Bourdieu (1998), in the same manner, affirmed that the future is uncertain for young people. In this uncertain or unpredictable environment, Jua (2003) stated that Cameroonian youth perceive themselves as the “unlimited” generation as they act in response by mapping out new biographical trajectories. Boko Haram insurgency has made it difficult for youth to set their lives along prescribed and desired life trajectories. In order to attend their goals mobility stands out as the most desirable yet the most difficult to attain.

Evolution of mobility trends and the search for better life in Cameroon

As in many parts of Africa, mobility is not a new phenomenon in Cameroon. Rather, the country has an extended history of mobility both within and across its national borders (Mberu & Pongou, 2016). While economic prosperity, security and better life have always been key determinants of mobility, there have,

at the same time, been instances of involuntary mobility engendered by domestic and transatlantic slave trade as well as the colonial practice of forced labour (Röschenthaler, 2006). Since the pre-colonial period, participation in trade networks as well as pastoral mobility have characterised the lives of several of its people (Boutrais, 1995/96; Warnier, 1993). Internal mobility in different directions during pre-colonial times was mainly driven by the desire to establish new settlements, to escape warfare, invasions, Islamization or enslavement (Adepoju, 2008). Subsequently, the colonial plantations established in the colonial period attracted a large labour force mostly from the country's populous highlands of the Grassfields region (Ardener et al., 1960). Concurrently, rural to urban migration has become a consistent practice which today is gaining more momentum in a chain of movements from villages to towns to cities and abroad (Pelican, 2013).

Mobility towards the urban areas continued after independence. Infrastructure, education and employment opportunities as well as better health facilities made the towns and cities especially attractive for young Cameroonians from rural areas. Additionally, the economic crisis of the 1980s pushed young people to migrate in search of a better life. With a high intra-national mobility index estimated at 32.5%, the country has one of the highest rates of internal migration in Central Africa with over 90% of migrants below the age of 35 (Mberu & Pongou, 2016; Schrieder & Knerr, 2000). Because of the uneven distribution of economic and educational opportunities, the flow of internal migration is mostly directed from the northern and western regions to the urban centres of the country's central and southern regions. While the centre and littoral regions, with their major urban hubs of Yaoundé and Douala, are net recipients of intra-national migrants, they provide 26% of all inter-region out-migrants (Mberu & Pongou, 2016; Schrieder & Knerr, 2000). The Far North, West and North-West regions, on the other hand, supply about four times more inter-region migrants than they receive, and therefore are the major net labour donors, contributing 53% of all migrants (Schrieder & Knerr, 2000). Recently, in the Far North Region, the Boko Haram insurgency became a major cause of internal mobility that has led to the displacement of almost 200,000 people including youth, some of whom are not only fleeing for their lives but also seeking opportunities for a better life as well.

The concept of better life is relative and varies across individuals, countries, and scholarly examination. To Hans Hahn (2007), the concept of a better life implies how young men and women make use of migration in order to gain independence from their fathers and simultaneously achieve a self-contained position in society. According to Dorte Thorsen (2007), a better life comprises becoming big, seeing new things, eating good foods, being knowledgeable and

having a sense of well-being and a social status. To others, like Jeannett Martin (2007), it symbolises Western knowledge, attaining a certain level of education, progress, material wealth and social prestige. Similarly, Alonso (2011) contends that a better life can be attained through migration as it increases individuals' opportunities to better themselves, such as by improving their individual income, health, education and living conditions. Drawing on Julia Pfaff (2007), a better life requires a person to be independent and manage their own money and business, even if it is only on a small economic scale. These goals are imagined to be achieved by spatial mobility, i.e., by moving to a town or city or abroad. Pelican and Heiss (2014) conclude that while the task of making a better life is universal, the way people think and go about it is specific.

An overview of mobility in Cameroon, and more generally Africa, paints a relatively homogenous picture of the perceptions and aspirations of youth mobility. Scholars like Alpes (2011), Jua (2003), Nyamnjoh and Page (2002), and Pelican and Tatah (2009) portray the cause of youth mobility in Cameroon as being largely characterised by general feelings of disappointment and disillusionment: disappointment with the economic and political situation in Cameroon and disillusionment about the impossibility of realizing a decent future in their home community. In the same vein, Adepoju (2008) remarked that these youths are economically and politically driven from their communities of origin. Other authors look at youth mobility as conflict or violence-driven. In Nigeria, Onyemachi (2010) observed that youth are often displaced by conflict and that these displaced youths' security and welfare have often been jeopardised making them vulnerable to becoming victims in their new environment. Frequently, youth mobility is an undertaking that entails uncertainty but also inspires optimism when it applies to opening one's future instead of remaining in a foreseeable situation range of journey-related uncertainties (Hernández-Carretero, 2015). Accordingly, in the Cameroonian context, "better life" has both the economic dimensions of escaping poverty, accumulating money and accumulating material possessions but also the sociocultural dimension which entails the transition into respected adulthood as well as recognition of the new social status.

Better life achieved through mobility accelerates the process of maturing and of understanding and provides opportunities for youth to learn skills other than agricultural and artisanal production of tools and utensils and trade in the local markets. In some West African communities, migration has almost become a rite of passage for young men to achieve entry into the sphere of adulthood (Thorsen, 2006). Young males' economic dependence on their families serves as social barriers that prevent the younger generation from marrying and thereby becoming re-

spected adult members of their society and thus failing to achieve social recognition. This can be explained by the fact that labour migration especially for young men earns them the financial muscle required to pay the bride wealth at the time of marriage and, consequently, to attain a higher social status as well as meet the responsibilities of caring for their families. In these communities, youth migration is a symbol of success among their peers and often exclusively perceived as a process of intergenerational negotiation which leads to higher social positions after returning home (Ungruhe, 2010). According to Hernández-Carretero (2015), Senegalese migrants in Spain highlighted limitations imposed by structural circumstances related to scarce and badly remunerated employment, nepotism, high living costs, and extensive financial responsibilities towards family and friends as reasons for their mobility in search for opportunities of better life. These factors combined generate a condition of socioeconomic uncertainty in which young people, especially men, are unable to make the transition into socially respected adulthood by gaining financial independence, establishing and providing for their own families and assisting others (Buggenhagen, 2012). Christiansen et al. (2006) assert that a similar situation is common to youth in other parts of Africa. The mobility of young Africans from rural to urban areas or abroad is frequently motivated by the search for better employment opportunities, although other factors could include education and marriage, making migration a natural response by young people to a lack of opportunity that can help them to expand their life chances (UNICEF, 2009). This might explain why Alonso (2011) remarked that in an increasingly integrated world, people move across national borders despite significant restrictions, seeking the opportunities they have been denied in their own countries on foreign soils.

Escape from Boko Haram, mobility pathways and integration dynamics in new environments

How do the young people in this region – who have faced chronic poverty, frustrations and climatic uncertainties for decades, and, more recently, existential insecurity – imagine their future and try to improve their social and financial standings, if not by spatial mobility? And how have these youngsters managed to cope with Boko Haram insurgencies? The following narrations from my research in Cameroon's Far North Region will shed some light on how youth actively pursue opportunities and activities that will improve their standard of living through mobility to urban settings even amidst the horrors of insurgency.

In December 2015, I met Adama in the town of Mora in a shop where he was selling groceries. He was fifteen years old and had left his village Kolofata where he attended form three in the secondary school. He recalled how Boko Haram surprised them one morning in their house:

Early one morning strange people came to our village while we were asleep. They opened fire and killed our people. I did not see their faces because they were covered with black cloths. Our people started running. They were also using knives and killing the men and boys. In my neighbourhood, I saw them kill my friend's father and my brother's friend. They also carried away many people's possessions. They removed roofing sheets from the houses. If it was a thatched house, they burned it. I don't know where they took these things to. They also killed women and raped some. I ran into the bush with three members of my family. The other four members ran to a different direction. We were in the bush for five days. During this time, we ate leftovers from groundnut farms that had already been harvested. After five days of walking through the bushes we reached Mora. I am now staying in Mora with my father's friend together with my three siblings. As of now, I don't know the whereabouts of my father, mother and elder sister. I have not attended school since I left my home village. I have not seen my school friends as well.

Some people had friends or relatives in nearby Mora, to whom they could escape, others tried to reach Mokolo or went further on to Maroua. Boubakary, a 20-year-old woman from Kerewa, told me the story of how they escaped the village. I met her at the Maroua central market where she came to buy some materials for a tailoring workshop where she was an apprentice in December 2015. She left her village because Boko Haram burned down their family house:

We heard a woman shouting that our house was on fire. We started running out while the gunshots persisted. This time, we were the targets. We took the children and ran into the bush. We stayed in the bush for the rest of the night. At dawn, we came out of the bush to find out exactly what had happened only to see some dead and others injured. Suddenly, *pow, pow, pow* ... the gunshots resumed. We didn't know that those Boko Haram agents were still in the village. We ran back into the bush again and remained there for six days. There we ate roasted yams and groundnuts that we harvested from the farms in the bush. News reached us that mobile policemen had come to the village and that we should come out. We thought the killings had stopped until we started hearing that the killers are coming again with gunshots. Our people were being killed. They killed my parents. I saw them kill my father and his younger brother. The mobile policemen could not withstand them. They, too, ran. We ran back to the bush, which seemed to be safer.

They pursued us. When they caught up with us they separated the children and me from my husband and cut my husband's throat as we watched. He died. When I saw this, I went and held one of them and told him that I have nobody to take care of the children since they have killed my husband. I asked them to kill the children and me too. The others came and removed him from my hold. They left us. I took the children and we continued to move further into the bush with some other women and children. Some of the pregnant women gave birth in the bush. There was no water or anything and the babies died. One woman gave birth to twins and the twins died. Later, the woman died. There was nobody to bury the dead. We wallowed in the bush for three more days walking on bare foot. We then surfaced where we met some people on our way who sympathized with us and gave us food, water and slippers. After three days, they gave us transport money and we went to Mokolo. In Mokolo, I studied tailoring with my friend's mother who is an expert and deals with "big men and women". In two and a half years I think that I will be a "big woman", sewing dresses for "big people". My brother, who ran to Maroua town, started learning how to build houses with a friend, but later abandoned and is now on the street because there was nobody to advise him there. My other brother, who is 11 years, has abandoned school and joined other street children. No father to help him. I don't think I can return because my heart won't leave me in peace in my village after seeing my husband beheaded in front of me.

This troubling first-hand narrative in the preceding section provides a glimpse into what is behind the large numbers of people who have moved from their home places as their lives become severely threatened and they have to look for alternative survival and coping strategies. As Lindley (2009) observed in Mogadishu, migration is a common response to the disintegration of livelihoods and takes various forms from temporary to permanent to acute and massive. In an analysis of violent conflict and mobility, Zetter and Purdekorva (2011) ascertained that violent outbursts of conflicts are followed by large internal displacements and cross-border flows of peoples. This directly mirrors the situation in Cameroon's Far North Region with large internal displacements of people and a high influx of refugees from Nigeria following the onslaught of Boko Haram.

Not all have managed to escape the gunmen of Boko Haram. 22-year-old Aminatou from Ashigachia in the Mayo-Tsanaga division of the Far North Region of Cameroon was living with her uncle in Mora when I met her selling beignets. She recalled that she was roasting maize with her brother in the afternoon when they were surprised by armed men:

My brother wanted to run when he saw them, but he only heard the pow, pow, pow in the sky and he surrendered. I was afraid and full of panic. One of the men moved towards me and the other one moved towards my brother. They took the two of us to a forest that I did not know. We met some other people there. Together with the others who were mostly youths, we were taught a doctrine which is against anything that came from the West, especially education. There, I was able to identify one of our neighbours who had disappeared suddenly and whose whereabouts was not known. I was separated from my brother. We could not communicate anymore. We were given poorly prepared millet in the evenings. Anyone who refused to eat would be tortured or even killed sometimes. I had no choice than to eat to live.

Some days later, the kidnappers called me out from among the others and asked me to follow them. They took me to join some other women. These women were involved in the preparation of food. I joined them in the cooking but was a little afraid. One evening those men forcefully slept with me and that is how I became pregnant. Some months later, when they discovered that my stomach had started protruding, I was escorted by one of those men to the bush and abandoned there alone. Again, in panic and confusion, I went and hid myself under a big tree. I did not know when I fell asleep. The following morning, I took off, not knowing exactly where I was heading to. After moving for two days in the bush, I came across some Cameroonian army people in the bush. I breathed a sigh of relief, saying thanks to Allah. I was brought to Mora and from there I traced my way to my uncle who lives here. For the meantime, I am assisting my uncle's wife in frying and selling puff-puff [beignets] while waiting for my uncle to decide which trade I can learn. I don't want to return because I fear being kidnapped again.

From the above narration of escape experiences, the escalation of this violent conflict from 2014 on seems to be the immediate cause of the unprecedented youth mobility which accounts for a good percentage of internally displaced persons in this conflict affected region. Lindley (2009) further demonstrates that people flee violent conflict areas when survival and coping mechanisms breakdown. In this study, the breakdown of survival and coping strategies results from conditions that forced farmers to abandon their fields and crops, which led to a sharp drop in the harvest. In addition, these farmers who deserted their farms and those who can no longer be sustained have missed out on key farming activities, such as timely planting leading to food insecurity in the future. Furthermore, rearing and trading cattle and small ruminants, one of the region's mainstays, have been seriously hampered as they are either looted or abandoned by their owners due to insecurity.

The cumulative effect is increased poverty because agriculture is an important source of income and food insecurity for an already impoverished people. Youths were particularly affected by the burning of some schools and the precipitated closure of others following repeated attacks and the circulation of threats from Boko Haram, which plunged them further into the limbo of uncertainty about the future. Due to the huge financial losses incurred by families, their ability to ensure the education of their youth has seriously been endangered. These outcomes substantiate Lindley's (2009) conclusion that there are three main types of changes that precipitate outmigration: the loss of human capabilities (loss of immediate family members, physical assault, rape, loss of limbs); the loss of financial and physical assets (cash and savings, structures, equipment); and the loss of socio-political protection – for example, membership in certain groups, which was an asset before and now becomes a liability. Insurgency alongside its effects on the disruption on livelihoods has caused unprecedented mobility and displacement.

The trajectory followed by these youths on the path to seeking out a better life often takes a long winding course involving several stops of taking temporal refuge in the bush before embarking on the long difficult road to safer places determined by the location of relatives, friends and more peaceful towns such as Mora, Mokolo and Maroua. Zetter and Purdekova (2011) affirm that mobility is a complex process determined by strategies for survival (personal safety, livelihoods), available networks of support, and by improvisation, exercised, though, in highly constrained and unpropitious circumstances. According to IOM/DTM (2016), 70% of internally displaced persons in the Far North Region because of this insurgency live in host communities with families because of strong historic, cultural and ethnic ties between the populations of the Lake Chad region; while 16% reside in spontaneous sites; 10% in rented housing; 3% in collective centres; and 2% in the open-air spaces. In contrast to the situation in the Far North Region, Raeymaekers (2011) reported that youth in a situation of extreme mobility faced by displaced people in Butembo, Congo were not well received but rather faced marginalisation and discrimination from the autochthonous host community where majority had to find shelter in “spontaneous sites” and often with family members whose recipient capacity is very limited or ad hoc settlements such as abandoned, dilapidated buildings or improvised dwellings. Once in their new environment, these youths seek ways to integrate themselves by acquiring skills that would permit them make a living.

32-year-old Aicha had arrived in Mora in December 2014 after her husband was killed by Boko Haram. She pointed out that she and her children felt more at

home and safer with their relatives in Mora, whom they knew well from regular former visits. They felt that it was easier for them to start a petty trade in Mora to sustain the family and send the children to school than being a farmer in the village (interview, Mora, December 2015). Other young people also felt that despite the traumatic experiences they had survived and the homes in the village they had left behind, they appreciated life in town because it enabled them to better pursue their goals. 24-year-old Musa, who escaped from his village in January 2015 after Boko Haram burnt down his farm, explained:

Being in Maroua town alone is an opportunity I've been seeking for long. In the village, I had nothing more to do than labour on the farm, but here I have the chance to make some money for myself by selling goods on the street. It is difficult and painful, but I hope things will get better for me. I will eventually marry and settle with my family here in Maroua (interview, Maroua, December 2015).

While most youths decided to acquire money-making skills in the informal sector by learning a trade, very few (2) still thought it was necessary to pursue education as a means to achieve a better life, albeit later and not immediately. This is corroborated by Ibáñez and Moya (2009) whose analysis of the impact of conflict induced displacement in Colombia revealed that to avoid further deterioration, households rely on costly coping strategies (effective short-term but with important negative long-term impacts), such as interrupting school attendance to increase their participation in labour markets among older children. Some interviewees see their current places as temporary settlements where they could make some money that will permit them to proceed to the main economic urban hubs of Douala and Yaoundé or eventually abroad where they could make a better life with higher earning jobs. Souleman, aged 27, resided in Mokolo with a friend when I interviewed him in December 2015. Before, he had traded Nigerian petrol, commonly called *zoua-zoua* across the border to Cameroon, but then fled from his village of Kolofata in November 2014. He stated:

I prefer to be with my friend because he is hardworking and ambitious. With his networks to other people in regions like Yaoundé, Douala and Bamenda, he has a lot of money and can link me up with one of his friends. I can work with them, make my own money and become rich like him. With the money, I will be able to get married, ride in a car, and take care of my own family. If I succeed, I would prefer to return to my village if calm returns because home is home.

In all these examples, these youths are optimistic with glimpses of hope shining through the dark pictures painted. The hope of making a better life keeps them

alive and going. Although various scholars (Alonso, 2011; Hahn, 2007; Martin, 2007; Pfaff, 2007; Thorsen, 2007) maintain that the desire for a better life is a desire to gain independence, knowledge, prestigious social status and to improve their income, the youth in the Far North Region of Cameroon also see the better life as being able to change their locations and activities, wear beautiful dresses, connect with successful business people as well as to ride in a car. 24-year-old Bintu, for example, was a farmer in Mozogo village before Boko Haram killed her husband and kept her in captivity for one year together with her 2-year-old son. She escaped during a confrontation between the Cameroonian army and the insurgents. With her aunt, she saw her dream of becoming a dress maker herself come true:

I prefer to stay with my aunt who is a tailor in Mora so that I will learn how to make beautiful dresses, and later start making my own money through dress making. I want to be a big tailor making dresses for big men and women like ministers. To me, making money, dealing with big people and putting on beautiful dresses would make life better. I don't think of returning because I would be constantly reminded of the tragic moments I lived there (interview, Mora, December 2015).

To the youths I have interviewed, better life culminates in being able to emerge from poverty and make enough money to attain and maintain better living standards for oneself and their family. This is translated in engagement in trades or related entrepreneurial activities. Ali, too, who managed to flee from his village Kolofata to Maroua in November 2014, does not want to return to the village, but prefers to stay with his uncle there,

as he might be able to introduce me to some of his businesses or link me to work with some of his friends who are big businessmen in Maroua town. This will enable me to learn a trade and very soon I will start making my own money. I would prefer to remain here or continue to a better destination than return to the village.

Most youths (10) who were interviewed in their current places of residence seemed to be afraid of going back to their home as the trauma of what they witnessed first-hand and the warning messages left behind by the insurgents are too great to consider returning. Adamu, cited at the beginning of this section, has a similar vision:

I am now being trained as a shopkeeper and in the future, I should be able to set up and run my own shop. Two of my brothers are learning embroidery while the other is a motor bike rider, working for somebody. The choice of these different

trade activities was guided by our father's friend who believes that it can fetch us more money a short time from now. With all the terrible things I witnessed, I don't think I would return to Kolofata (interview, Mora, December 2015).

Like Adamu, other interviewees cannot imagine returning to their villages, fearing that they would be haunted by their traumatic experiences there. One of them, whose husband was beheaded by Boko Haram, said: "my heart won't leave me in peace in my village". Another 24-year-old informant favoured the development of the Maroua urban centre over the rural hinterland and hoped to settle, marry, and raise his family in Maroua. He considered being in Maroua a long-sought opportunity that, although it came amid crisis, he could not just let slip away. He thus achieved self-content position in his new environment.

Only two youths considered it better to return to their villages in case calm would be restored because of their inability to cope in town. One of them is Idrissou, a 17-year-old herder from Tourou, whose cattle had been stolen by insurgents in August 2015. Frustrated with the conditions in town, he turned to the street as a beggar. Therefore, not every youth who migrates succeeds with the quest for better life. Youth pursuit of better life amidst forced mobility caused by Boko Haram is often accompanied by uncertainties and misery which could sometimes and not always be surmounted. Idrissou muttered "Why do I need so much money [...]? If I could have back my cattle, I would not hesitate to return because that is what I could do best".

This situation contrasts that of Raeymaekers' observation of the complexity of mobility patterns where he highlights the "circular" aspects of migration, where:

a few extreme circumstances aside in which insecurity totally impedes a return to home regions [...] a more frequent mobility pattern among displaced youngsters actually consists of circular migration between their original homesteads and new urban environments, in which the latter remains the main but never the exclusive place of residence (Raeymaekers, 2011, p. 16).

In fact, the reasons for migrants' return to their origin are indistinct and vary between the causes of mobility, individuals, and are embedded in the cultural background from where the migrant originates.

The youths who fled Boko Haram's violence experienced a great deal of uncertainty. Having lost families, homes, property, and education, a prosperous future life course is quite at risk. However, their accounts show that they have not lost hope and that uncertainty can be productive. This may suggest why in Africa, Cooper and Pratten (2016) examined uncertainty as a social resource that

can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships and act as a source for imagining the future.

Conclusion

The quest for security and better life has propelled many displaced youths, fleeing insurgency, to pursue different livelihood options in other more peaceful settlements. In as much as this crisis brought untold suffering, human and material losses, it also brought along opportunities for achieving a better life amidst constrained circumstances. Mobility is fundamental at this stage because it is how young people full of plans, aspirations, frustrations, hopes and interests are ferried to their places of destination where long sought opportunities can be grasped and harnessed to make dreams become a reality.

At the places of destination, aspirations and hopes of better life are translated into concrete action through the acquisition of skills and knowledge, the application of which will eventually yield the dividends that guarantee a decent life and a self-contained position in society in the not too distant future. In their new environments, they no longer embark on their traditional occupations of farming and herding but rather engage effectively in activities involving training and acquisition of skills that will fetch them money in the short term that were not previously available. It is therefore likely that a better life can have a decisive impact on the direction and the speed of mobility.

Individuals mostly sought to acquire knowledge and skills from the informal sector in domains like dressmaking, embroidery, petty trading, catering, and motor bike transportation. The aim of integrating the informal sector was fuelled by the following markers of better life: the desire to acquire new knowledge and skills, improved individual income to shoulder family responsibilities especially vis-a-vis children, and improved wellbeing and living conditions in the near future. Other markers of better life were found to include gaining independence from parents, acquiring a comfortable social status such as being married and social prestige like owning a car and other assets that were all strongly linked to economic independence and financial prosperity.

Arrival at new destinations also opened windows of interaction with people already established in different lines of business that these youth deemed as already enjoying a better life and a source of inspiration compared to their counterparts in the suburbs. For some others, new destinations provide opportunities to prepare for migration to better and far off locations. Life threatening events not only have the tendency to push people out of their homes to seek refuge in safer

areas but might also provide platforms for new interactions, discoveries and coping strategies engagements.

Having fled from the horrors of Boko Haram, the dream of better life, often in the form of achieving economic prosperity and the prospect of a meaningful and fulfilled social life as adults, incentivised the efforts and time invested exploring avenues for making money in their respective places of destination. Although Boko Haram's violence has led to the loss of families, homes, friends, property and education, violence and life-threatening experience may also lead to better lives in the long run. As time goes on, youth are able to establish relationships as they move along and within their different activities that lead to the amelioration of the condition of living. Family ties were a very important determining factor in the choice of destination as most displaced youths chose to reside with relatives or very close family friends. Having the privilege to choose their places of destination with little or no restrictions certainly enhanced their human freedoms and consequently allowed them access to an enabling environment where dreams of better life will be nurtured into reality.

Although life threatening events and insecurity guarantee that the future of these youth is at risk, they continue to navigate their way through the informal sector. Therefore, mobility is a phenomenon that can be used to negotiate insecurity and life-threatening events and to acquire a new status. Security and freedom were found to be prime prerequisites for engaging in whatever activity was undertaken.

To a greater extent, displaced youth preferred not to return to their places of origin even in the event that violence would cease because of the opportunities to make a better life in their places of destination. Hence, while escaping conflict and insecurity and achieving better lives elsewhere, their mobility is finally a means to overcome general problematic livelihoods and poor living conditions at home.

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