

# Endogenizing Humanitarian Aid

## Knowledge, Practices, and ALDEPA's Mobilization in Support of Victims of Boko Haram in Cameroon's Far North Region

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### Abstract

This contribution focuses on the endogenization of humanitarian aid, emphasizing the Local Association for Participatory and Self-Managed Development (ALDEPA), a non-governmental organization (NGO) active in the Far North region of Cameroon. As a process of integrating and adapting elements from an external system, society, or culture, endogenization here sheds light on the conditions under which decolonizing aid in the *Global South* is constituted. The study examines the ways in which moral considerations, rooted in the history, values, and culture of the populations in the Far North region of Cameroon, shape the logic of humanitarian assistance at the local NGOs level, and particularly within ALDEPA. The interaction between these local logics and those linked to the global context reveals North/South power relations as well as the structural asymmetries that pervade the humanitarian field. By mobilizing the concept of moral economy, the study aims to demonstrate that ALDEPA's humanitarian action is structured by values, emotions, and moral judgments, interacting with political, economic, and social logics. It highlights how aid decisions, resource distribution, and the definition of beneficiaries within ALDEPA are guided not only by technical or economic imperatives but also by conceptions of the good, the just, and moral duty. Thus, the main argument of this contribution rests on the hypothesis that mobilizing endogenous knowledge and practices within ALDEPA introduces a (gradual) paradigm shift, breaking with the universalist logic of humanitarian action. Aid endogenization within this organization is achieved through a combination of knowledge, discourse, and practices that beneficiaries identify. These endogenous knowledges interact with exogenous knowledge, producing a hybrid form of local humanitarian action. The methodological approach is qualitative and inductive, employing interviews, document research, and direct observation as data collection techniques.

### Keywords

Endogenous knowledge and practices, moral economy, humanitarian aid, Boko Haram, Cameroon

## Introduction

The Far North region of Cameroon is experiencing an unprecedented humanitarian situation. Since the end of 2012, it has become a stronghold for fighters of the Boko Haram (BH)<sup>1</sup> sect. Repeated attacks by Islamist militants, coupled with responses from national and international security forces (including the Multinational Joint Task Force [MNJTF]), continue to cause significant population displacements. The departments of Diamaré, Mayo-Tsanaga, Logone-et-Chari, Mayo-Sava, Mayo-Danay, and, to a lesser extent, Mayo-Kani, host numerous Nigerian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) under various arrangements.

Indeed, refugees are people who have crossed an international border, whereas IDPs have remained within their own country. The arrangements for accommodating these displaced populations differ. Refugees may be hosted in camps or integrated into host communities, often with the assistance of international organizations. IDPs, on the other hand, are primarily accommodated within host families or in spontaneous sites, as observed in the East and Far North regions of Cameroon (Mahamat, 2021; Lefort-Rieu, 2024b, chapter 3).

According to the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) for the Far North region of Cameroon, in August 2023, the number of IDPs was estimated at 453,661, while the number of refugees outside the Minawao camp was 48,165 (IOM, 2023). This situation has led to the continuous presence of national and international actors engaged in initiatives that, since 2016, have been reshaped in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach.

However, as humanitarian needs grew, the actions of international NGOs and United Nations agencies revealed limitations in their capacity to meet the needs of an increasingly large displaced population. A lack of understanding of the realities specific to the contexts of intervention has often been a major obstacle to the harmonious implementation of these external initiatives (Olivier de Sardan, 2021). This situation accelerated the resurgence of endogenous assistance<sup>2</sup> dynamics, structured around discourses, practices, and mechanisms related to the contexts of intervention.

This study focuses on the Local Association for Participatory and Self-Managed Development (ALDEPA), an NGO<sup>3</sup> that was active at the time of this study, in assisting victims of Boko Haram attacks. Due to its longevity (founded in 1998), experience, and strong local presence, this organization represents a paradigmatic case among local NGOs operating in the humanitarian field in the Far North of Cameroon. ALDEPA was also one of the first local NGOs in the region to engage in responding to the humanitarian needs arising from the Boko Haram security crisis. However, although this study is based on ALDEPA's frameworks and experiences, it does not seek to defend the organization's approach to humanitarian aid. Rather, through reflection on the concept of endogenization, it aims to contribute to the debate on the challenges, limitations, and dilemmas involved in aid decolonization.

The empirical approach relied on a qualitative and inductive methodology. The pre-survey phase, conducted in August 2022, allowed for the observation of the nature of assistance strategies implemented by ALDEPA. During the main survey, carried out between August and September 2024,

1 Boko Haram is not the name by which the fighters of the Islamist sect identify themselves. Initially described as “the Nigerian Taliban,” they more readily identify under the name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidawati Wal Jihad* (the Companions of the Prophet for the Propagation of the Sunnah and Holy War).

2 These dynamics are expressed in terms of local community action, the role of culture as a source of support, solidarity, and mutual aid at the community level, and the mobilization of local resources and knowledge to help victims of the crisis.

3 Within Cameroon's legal framework, an association is a general structure governed by Law No. 90/053 of 19 December 1990 on freedom of association, whereas a non-governmental organization (NGO) is a specific type of association, formally approved by the administration to carry out missions of public interest and benefiting from a special regime (tax and customs advantages, etc.), in accordance with Law No. 99/014 of 22 December 1999 governing non-governmental organizations. The distinction between an association and an NGO is therefore legal and administrative, with the NGO constituting a subcategory of association accredited on the basis of its impact and its compliance with missions of public interest. An organization is referred to as a local NGO when it is rooted in a specific community (village, town, or region). Its members and activities are primarily local, and it is not a structured subsidiary of a national or international entity, focusing instead on the realities and needs of its immediate geographical area. An international NGO, by contrast, is a private, non-profit organization independent of governments, with a transnational scope, recruiting members and operating in multiple countries for humanitarian, human rights, or environmental causes, and coordinating actions across national borders.

participants were selected based on their degree of involvement in humanitarian processes<sup>4</sup>. In total, 41 interviews were conducted with six officials from the Ministry of Territorial Administration, five social workers, seven local facilitators, four community leaders, nine NGO staff members (local and international), five refugees, and five internally displaced people. However, the focus of this reflection led me to give more voice to certain actors. The categories of analysis focused on endogenous knowledge and practices in humanitarian aid, perceptions of international/local aid initiatives, and the relationships between different actors in the humanitarian field in the Far North. Given the sensitivity of the context, I established contacts with people living in areas affected by armed conflict. Furthermore, scientific literature (books, articles, theses) and grey literature (reports from UN agencies and NGOs) were used to gather additional data needed for triangulation.

One observation remains: humanitarian<sup>5</sup> aid has evolved remarkably since the early 1990s. The triumph of capitalism, the rise of criminal networks, the surge of extremism, and the resurgence of inter-state wars have reinvigorated debates on compassion in both political and academic fields (Nouwen, 2004; Hours, 2010; Lainé, 2013; Savidan, 2018). However, the rise of “politics of pity” (Boltanski, 1993) in Africa has a more complex history. They maintain a close connection with the colonial civilizing mission, which was followed by development-oriented agendas and then by so-called emergency aid (Matasci & Desgrandchamps, 2020). International humanitarian aid thus emerged as an instrument to refine and extend the power relations of countries and agencies from the Global North (Atlani-Duault & Dozon, 2011). As a result, aid provided by *Global North* countries to the *Global South* has been subject to various conditionalities and was consequently assimilated into a form of neocolonialism (Micheletti, 2011).

The issue of aid decolonization<sup>6</sup> in Africa remains highly relevant. Indeed, it has been the focus of numerous academic gatherings in recent years<sup>7</sup>. Yet, this decolonization, one of whose major corollaries is the “localization<sup>8</sup>” of international aid, has struggled to take hold in Cameroon. Structural and circumstantial factors explain this situation: on one hand, the lack of financial resources and weak structure of local NGOs, which are often relegated to subcontractor roles by international NGOs (Wade, 2023, p. 86); on the other hand, the excessive dependence of national/local associations on external aid and the specific constraints posed by the country’s post-authoritarian and extroverted context in Cameroon (Pommerolle, 2008; Cazabat, 2016).

This study aims to contribute to research on transformations in humanitarian aid through a decolonial lens. By focusing on endogenization, the objective is to explore how it informs decolonization of aid and North/South power relations in the humanitarian field. Here, endogenization refers to the local appropriation of humanitarian action, reflecting a process of integrating and adapting elements from an external system, society, or culture. This process involves institutional actors, NGOs, and local communities. This conception of endogenization invites us to consider that in Cameroon (as elsewhere), initiatives that could be described as local and/or state humanitarian action already exist (Molo Zogo, 2023; Minfegue, 2023). Assessing humanitarian aid in light of this reality requires

4 Here, humanitarian processes refer to structured mechanisms aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering, and protecting human dignity during crises, while respecting the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

5 In the context of this reflection, humanitarian action is understood as a set of activities aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering, and preserving dignity, guided by principles such as humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Agisilaou & Boz, 2025). The term nevertheless encompasses a diversity of interpretations depending on the actors and contexts involved (Lefort-Rieu, 2024b).

6 By the decolonization of aid, we mean the challenging and reorientation of deeply entrenched power imbalances within the structures that have long defined aid. This applies to intervention policies and procedures, as well as the behaviour of aid professionals (Gwana Passa, 2024).

7 Among the most recent initiatives, we can mention The Junior Researcher’s Institute organized by Global Africa/CIHA from 27 October to 2 November 2024 on the issue: “Humanitarian Relations and the Reinvention of Africa’s Future: Genealogies, Current Practices, and Decolonial Imperatives”; the webinar held on 14 June 2024 by the Centre for Research, Training and Publications (CRTP), in collaboration with the Movement for Community-Led Development (MCLD), entitled: “Decolonizing Humanitarian Aid in Africa.”

8 The use of quotation marks reflects the caution required in employing this term, given the ambiguity surrounding both the objectives attributed to the process it refers to and the nature of the actors involved. The “localization” of aid presents numerous ambiguities, which lie mainly in the gap between discourse and practice, the blurred definition of local actors (who are heterogeneous), persistent power relations (with international NGOs dominating local actors), funding challenges (with financial flows directed toward the Global North), and the difficulty of transforming the system toward greater local autonomy (Magen-Fabregat et al., 2024; Audet, 2022).

situating the discussion within global conversations on both the ethical implications of humanitarian action (Mattei, 2014; Grünewald, 2007; Richey, 2018; Theodossopoulos, 2016) and the relationships between humanitarian actors and affected populations (De Torrenté, 2013; Rahmani, 2012).

The analysis emphasizes endogenous knowledge and practices, in relation to exogenous knowledge and practices perceived as belonging to another value system (Hountondji, 2019, p. 15). Referring to endogenous knowledge and practices means invoking a community's intrinsic knowledge, shaped by its history, culture, and environment (Tourneux, 2019; Kane et al., 2025; Akaffou, 2023). However, these bodies of knowledge and practices are not immutable. They have a history and may be subject to debate, tensions, and negotiation. Applied to the humanitarian field, endogenous knowledge refers to the knowledge, skills, and methods of assistance developed locally by a community, deeply rooted in its cultural, social, and environmental context.

Two main perspectives polarize the debate on humanitarianism in Africa. The first, more optimistic, view it as a dynamic that improves individuals' living conditions and environment (Manga Kalniga & Ambe, 2021; Obah et al., 2021). The second perspective is critical, emphasizing the highly Northern or unilateral nature of humanitarian action (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009; Olivier de Sardan, 2011; Micheletti et al., 2010). Proponents of this view argue that humanitarian interventions in Africa are designed and implemented from the *North*, reproducing colonial patterns, albeit in a softer form, and preventing African beneficiaries from "emerging from the great night" (Murithi, 2009; Atlani-Duault & Dozon, 2011; Mbembe, 2013; Matasci & Desgrandchamps, 2020; Lynch, 2022).

The question I will attempt to answer is as follows: What changes are brought about by mobilizing endogenous knowledge and practices in humanitarian aid within the NGO ALDEPA in Cameroon's Far North? The hypothesis advanced here is that such mobilization introduces a (gradual) paradigm shift, breaking away from the universalist logic of humanitarian action. The endogenization of aid within this organization unfolds through an engineering of knowledge, discourse, and practices in which beneficiaries recognize themselves. These endogenous knowledges interact with exogenous knowledge, producing a hybrid form of local humanitarian action.

The analyses carried out in this study are grounded in the theory of moral economy of humanitarianism. Informed by the reflections of Fassin (2009; 2012) and enriched by the work of Trémon (2024), this theory postulates that humanitarian actions are structured by values, emotions, and moral judgments, interacting with political, economic, and social logics. It examines how aid choices, resource distribution, and the selection of beneficiaries are guided both by technical or economic imperatives and conceptions of the good, justice, and moral duty. The study focuses specifically on the workings of this moral economy in the Far North of Cameroon and the participation of local humanitarian actors in it<sup>9</sup>.

This reflection is structured around two main sections. The first situates the emergence of humanitarian action in the Far North by tracing the historical conditions that made it possible (I). The second examines the local appropriation of modern humanitarian practice, with particular emphasis on the NGO ALDEPA (II).

## From Social Aid to Humanitarian Action

This section highlights four points that help introduce the foundations of the endogenization of humanitarian action and the paradigm shift it entails. These points are: the context in which associations and NGOs emerged (1), the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency (2), the shift of local NGOs into the humanitarian field (3), and the meanings underlying the desire to provide assistance (4).

<sup>9</sup> In this study, the term refers to the collective of local actors organized within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and engaged in providing assistance to victims of various crises (security-related, environmental, etc.).

## *Local NGOs: Born of Democratization*

Analyzing the conditions under which NGOs emerged in Cameroon, particularly in the Far North region, reveals a dynamic resulting from the convergence of three factors: (i) the economic crisis of the late 1980s and the withdrawal of the state; (ii) the democratization of the 1990s, accompanied by a restructuring of institutional relationships between the state and civil society organizations; and (iii) the awakening of civil society, manifested in a proliferation of NGOs and associations engaged in development sector.

Indeed, the multiplication of NGOs in the Far North of Cameroon coincided with the awakening and strengthening of civil society within a context of growing poverty and inequality (Abega, 1999). Some also associate this period with state disengagement (Mercoiret, 1990). This dynamic dates back to the 1980s–1990s, a period marked by crises in African states, often concurrent with the implementation of neoliberal policies (Eboko, 2015). Inades-Formation<sup>10</sup> was the first NGO to initiate interventions in this region in 1973. At that time, the associative movement had no legal or formal recognition in Cameroon; only a few informal women's groups and associations existed (Ndengue, 2016).

At the dawn of the 1990s, as part of the democratization process, Cameroon established an institutional framework governing relations between the state and civil society. With the adoption of Law No. 90/053 of December 19, 1990, on freedom of association, the associative movement experienced unprecedented growth at both local and national levels. At that time, local NGOs did not yet exist; only religious associations and those active in development were present. The same period saw the adoption of Law No. 90/056 of December 19, 1990, relating to political party activity. Apolitical associations then provided services to vulnerable populations. They were all non-profit, and remain so to this day in the vast majority of cases.

The economic recession at the end of the 1980s was also a decisive factor, for at least two reasons. First, it encouraged many local actors, particularly associations, to focus on development issues. Second, it led to a major shift in the modalities of aid provision to African countries, through the official introduction of political and democratic conditionalities (Robinson, 1995; Gibson et al., 2015). International aid to countries in the Global South thus became conditioned on compliance with principles established by *Global North* countries.

In December 1999, Law No. 99/014 of December 24, 1999, governing non-governmental organizations, came into force. It allowed associations that had operated for at least three years, were in compliance with taxation, and had certified activity and financial reports to evolve into NGOs. As stated by the head of ALDEPA: “At that time, only international agencies conducted explicitly humanitarian operations in the Far North of Cameroon, primarily focused on emergency interventions (floods, droughts, epidemics, etc.)” (Interview on August 28, 2024, in Maroua).

The few existing local NGOs (notably ALDEPA) primarily operated in the realm of social assistance for disadvantaged populations and vulnerable groups. Issues related to gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>11</sup>, child protection, early marriage, hunger, health, and nutrition received particular attention (interview on September 4, 2024, with an ALDEPA official in Maroua). This social assistance was already imbued with values of mutual aid, charity, sharing, and benevolence, as it aimed to support people in need. The emergence of Boko Haram would soon mark a decisive turning point.

## *The “Boko Haram Crisis” and the official Shift to the Humanitarian Field*

The surge of humanitarian action in various localities in Cameroon's Far North is rooted in the “Boko Haram crisis.” Since the end of 2013, the region has been targeted by armed groups claiming affiliation with the jihadist movement. The recurrent attacks have caused numerous deaths and serious injuries. They have also led to significant population displacements at both local and international levels, resulting in a highly complex humanitarian crisis.

<sup>10</sup> Inades-Formation represents a pan-African network of associations under Ivorian law working for equitable and sustainable development in Africa.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to domestic violence and any other form of violence against women.

Moreover, the vulnerabilities generated by the violence between security forces and Boko Haram militias have led to a massive influx of foreign NGOs into the region. They have also encouraged the emergence of various local associations and NGOs engaged in assisting victims (Wade, 2023, p. 85). However, there are still relatively few local humanitarian NGOs in the Far North. Most associations are established by socio-professional groups (students, academics, and various workers).

Initially, local NGOs primarily operated in the field of development (Zelao, 2023, p. 98). Most of them were not established as humanitarian NGOs. In the Far North, the Boko Haram phenomenon was the trigger for local NGOs to officially enter into the humanitarian sector. The example of ALDEPA<sup>12</sup> is particularly illustrative in this regard.

### *The shift of local NGOs into the humanitarian field: a focus on Aldepa*

Founded in 1998 and legalized in 2002 in Maroua (the regional capital of the Far North) as an association, ALDEPA initially had “nothing to do with crisis or conflict situations” (interview on August 28, 2024, with the head of the NGO ALDEPA in Maroua). Its actions were mainly oriented toward supporting disadvantaged populations and vulnerable groups. The association also engaged in local development initiatives, focusing on specific areas such as poverty reduction and gender considerations, etc. Later, ALDEPA applied for NGO status under Law No. 99/014 of December 24, 1999, governing non-governmental organizations. By 2017 (the year it obtained official accreditation), ALDEPA became one of the first recognized local NGOs in Cameroon’s Far North.

From 2013 onwards, Cameroon’s Far North region has been plunged into a climate of insecurity, marked by the kidnappings of foreigners and attacks that killed hundreds of people (Crisis Group, 2016). In response to growing humanitarian needs in crisis-hit areas (Kolofata, Mora, Dabanga, Amchidé, Kerawa, Limani, etc.), local NGOs, previously focused on development objectives, adapted or redirected their interventions, as noted by the head of Aldepa:

In 2013, refugees began arriving, and in 2014, attacks were recorded in Cameroon. This situation meant that NGOs and associations already active in the development field could not remain idle. They started providing assistance to affected people—women and girls who were victims of GBV, children whose parents had been killed or had disappeared, children who were injured, or those apprehended in connection with terrorism. This is what triggered a transformation, so that today these NGOs or associations continue their development activities while having expanded their services in the humanitarian field. (Interview on August 28, 2024, with the head of ALDEPA in Maroua).

The selection of these targets was influenced by the orientation of the organization, whose initial objective is, as noted by the head of ALDEPA, “to assist vulnerable groups” (Interview on August 28, 2024, in Maroua). However, this transformation from social assistance to humanitarian action (Collovald, 2001) was not radical. Like other organizations (ALVF<sup>13</sup>, ACEEN<sup>14</sup>, etc.). ALDEPA maintained its initial areas of activity. It simply intensified its humanitarian interventions by providing various services to individuals whose vulnerability had been exacerbated by the crisis.

Furthermore, to better meet humanitarian needs and align with the requirements of international partners, ALDEPA gradually developed specialized expertise by recruiting professionals from diverse backgrounds, as emphasized by the head of the organization: “Human resources are the strong arm of the organization. We recruit professionals from different backgrounds: sociologists, lawyers, social workers, psychologists, economists, and also specialists in development and social sciences for development” (Interview on August 28, 2024, in Maroua). However, at the time of its creation, the qualifications of candidates were not a major criterion in recruitment, as noted by the head of ALDEPA:

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that ALDEPA was initially a local NGO headquartered in Maroua (capital of Cameroon’s Far North Region). However, it has gradually taken on a national scope, as evidenced by the expansion of its activities into the East, North, and Adamaoua regions.

<sup>13</sup> Association de Lutte contre les Violences faites aux Femmes (Association for the Fight against Violence against Women).

<sup>14</sup> Alliance Citoyenne à l’Éducation pour le Développement et l’Environnement (Citizen Education Alliance for the Development and the Environment.)

Today, the minimum requirement for recruitment is a bachelor's degree. Recruitment is competitive and conducted through a call for applications. We seek the best profiles. Initially, when we created the organization, this was not the case because some of the people at ALDEPA had either a BEPC<sup>15</sup>, or training from ENIEG<sup>16</sup>, the veterinary school, or the agricultural school, but they had some form of training. At the beginning, we did not have sufficient resources and were not very demanding regarding profiles. We did not yet have international partners (Western NGOs and United Nations agencies) imposing specific profiles and an organizational model. These individuals have also developed within the organization and, over time, became professionals. (Interview on August 28, 2024, in Maroua)

In doing so, ALDEPA underwent a structural NGO-ization process, marked by a pursuit of professionalization and a neoliberal bureaucratization dynamic. Characteristic features of this process include increased individualization of power and authority, greater instrumentalization of relationships, adoption of a more competitive recruitment approach, and the establishment of a formal hierarchy and division of labor (Lang, 2012, p. 67). In this way, ALDEPA has developed as an NGO, and its current form contrasts with the decolonization project in which it seems to participate. One of the paradoxes of decolonization lies at this level. Despite often laudable intentions, NGOs in the *Global North* (frequently inspired by Western models, centered on external donors, and employing a discourse of misery) sometimes reproduce colonial dynamics, creating dependency and a “staging” of aid (Gwana Passa, 2024).

### *The Foundations of Humanitarian Action in Cameroon's Far North*

In the Far North region, many foreign humanitarian NGOs share the belief that humanitarianism is based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence as noted by two officials of the NGO Public Concern: “Humanitarian work requires a love for humanity, equality and fairness in selecting the people assisted, and the freedom to act without constraint. These requirements constitute the very essence of humanitarianism” (Interviews on September 10, 2024, in Minawao). These principles, established by Henri Dunant in 1859, are now “universalized” within the humanitarian sector. However, the variation in the levels of interpretation is partly linked to the role attributed to beneficiaries in the conception and implementation of aid (Mattei, 2014).

Historically, beneficiaries were often perceived as passive victims, receiving aid decided and organized by external actors (Kovács et al., 2010). The emergence of the resilience paradigm, which positions local populations and structures as first responders in crises situation, introduced a notable shift by recognizing the agency of beneficiaries (Malkin, 2015). Yet, these changes have remained minimal, and their effects on the structuring of international aid interventions have been relatively marginal (Hilhorst, 2018).

At a more local level, however, the humanitarian action of local NGOs is rooted in mobilizations based on the values, norms, and socio-cultural obligations of communities, structured around compassion, solidarity, and human relationships. The moral dimension plays a central role. In Cameroon's Far North, acts of humanity continue to play a prominent role, expressed through ordinary forms of care and mutual recognition. These acts are reflected in modest gestures offered by local communities, whether to a “brother” or “sister” in distress, whether from here or elsewhere: a glass of tea or a local drink (*chai* or *arki*), a handcrafted object, a traditional dish, stories (*taalol*<sup>17</sup>), shared moments, and mutual recognition. This ethic of compassion is part of the recognition of the distress of others and the desire to alleviate it (Martinez, 1998). It is rooted in ancient customs and anthropological values. Expressed locally in the Fulani dialect (*fulfulde*), charity (*sadaka*), mutual aid (*walliteego*),

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16 Teacher Training College for General Education

17 The *taalol* (singular of *taali*) is a classical type of tale found throughout Africa. Among the Fulani (Foulbé), however, it is reserved exclusively for children and ordinarily exists only in oral form. Nothing in particular distinguishes Fulani tales from those of other ethnic groups.

sharing (*sennduguo*), assistance (*ballal*), aid (*walliinde*), benevolence (*moyyere*), and hospitality<sup>18</sup> are principles or values that structure the relational DNA of communities in the Far North of Cameroon (Ali Emat, 2017; Avalaye, 2022; Avodo Avodo, 2024).

Within ALDEPA, the practice of humanity is embedded in the *Pulaaku* (the Fulani code of honor)<sup>19</sup>, where sharing and hospitality are central. It is also linked to symbolic exchanges, social balance, and aesthetics, with traditional and religious aspects influencing practices (Dupire, 1970, p. 189; Seignobos, 2011, p. 15). As Fassin (2012) has shown, these moral registers determine the qualities and logics that guide individuals' judgments, their assessment of what is considered good and just, and the normative mechanisms they use to act. As explained by a member of ALDEPA:

For example, in the case of economic support, in some communities, we cannot, for instance, provide economic support for pig farming because these populations do not eat pork. The same applies to clothing support; we cannot decide to dress girls in trousers, as it would not be accepted. So, even in our assistance, we put ourselves in the place of these communities and provide them with what they are accustomed to. (Interview on September 4, 2024, with an ALDEPA staff member in Maroua)

These statements highlight two realities. On the one hand, they demonstrate ALDEPA's consideration of the knowledge, skills, endogenous practices, and customs of beneficiaries. Such an approach helps prevent the assistance provided by local humanitarians from being rejected by the communities they aim to support. On the other hand, and more strikingly, they reveal the integrative dimension inherent in taking these local knowledges and practices into account, in the sense that it aims to create an intervention environment that is more or less familiar, designed with and for the beneficiaries. Moreover, these knowledges and practices are embedded in logics of sharing and mutual recognition. Here, one observes an essential aspect of the moral economy, in which the system of values and principles, structured around respect for the thought frameworks of others (Trémon, 2024), guides the judgments and actions of ALDEPA staff.

However, this consideration is subject to certain conditions that can constitute operational, budgetary, and institutional constraints:

We intervene based on the resources available: assistance always requires financial means, which can be limited if the number of people to be assisted is too high; on the security situation in the intervention areas: our interventions primarily target zones that have so far been spared from armed clashes; and on the approval of the supervising ministry. (Interview on September 4, 2024, with a staff member of the NGO ALDEPA in Maroua)

This section has shown how the genesis and evolution of humanitarian action in the Far North of Cameroon shape the logics that govern the practices, discourses, and representations of the desire to assist among local actors. The suffering experienced by victims of attacks and armed confrontations has triggered a restructuring of local associative initiatives, fueled by a moral and social duty of solidarity. These categories, both emotional and political, are molded by the cosmologies, languages, and practices rooted in the daily life of communities.

## Practices and Discourses Embedded in Endogenous Realities

The endogenization of humanitarian aid and the power relations it reveals in Cameroon's Far North are perceptible through the use of local linguistic and cultural practices by local NGOs 1), the mobilization of indigenous healing practices 2), the use of local techniques in the entertainment of

18 In the Fulani code of honor (*pulaaku*), hospitality constitutes one of the cardinal virtues. During the time of Fombina (the southern periphery of the former Sokoto Empire), visitors and passing guests were warmly welcomed by the Fula people.

19 The Fulani dialect (Fulfulde) is the most widely spoken in the North of Cameroon (Far North, North, and Adamaoua regions) and in certain areas in Chad and northern Nigeria. This reality is rooted in the political history of these areas, marked by the jihad launched by Usman dan Fodio, a Fulani preacher, in the 16th century. The "Fulani domination" that took hold following this war has left traces still visible in the social, political, and economic organization of communities in the northern regions of Cameroon, despite the specificities of the different groups (Seignobos & Iyebi-Mandjeck, 2000).

youth beneficiaries 3), and flexibility in procedures and in engagement with intervention sites 4). However, the localization of aid does not constitute a radical break from the practices of international NGOs, given the nature of the relationships they maintain with local NGOs 5).

### *Linguistic and Cultural Practices Incorporated into Assistance and Restorative Justice*

Humanitarian interventions by local NGOs in Cameroon's Far North bear the imprint of the areas in which they operate. The use of vernacular languages and the respect for local customs occupy a central place. The systematic mobilization of distinct linguistic repertoires aligns with the diversity of sociological groups present in the region such as the Fulani, Mafa, Toupouri, and Mousgoum. These "endogenous technologies"<sup>20</sup> (Hountondji, 2019; Aguessy, 1989) allow assistance to be anchored in the realities of the areas of intervention and integrated into the daily lives of the beneficiaries. They also consciously or unconsciously contribute to a process of decolonizing the thought or the mind (Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, 2011), (re)connecting beneficiaries with the endogenous meanings of humanitarianism. Observations show that this approach leads to a gradual transformation in beneficiaries' perceptions of themselves, their circumstances, and those who provide aid to them. Testimonies gathered during group interviews with internally displaced people (IDPs) in Zamay illustrate this:

When we arrived here in Zamay, it was hard because we didn't know anyone. The local NGOs helped us a lot. They helped us with income-generating activities, food, and even healthcare. When they come, they speak to us in our languages. They speak in Kapsiki, or Moundang, or even Kanuri. They tell you that you will get through this, that this is your home too. It helps us, even though it is difficult. We consider them our brothers, and we feel at home when they come to see us. [...] Sometimes they give us booklets, which are translated into Fulfulde or Arabic, reminding us of the principles shared in our communities, such as respect, dignity, love, and sharing. This helps us better understand their messages and reconsider certain negative practices. With the booklets, the messages come across more effectively. (Interview on September 2, 2024, with a group of IDPs at the Zamay IDP site)

This testimony confirms the decisive influence of using local languages on beneficiaries' perception of local NGOs. Unlike some international NGOs, which sometimes recruit local staff limited to the role of translator during field visits, ALDEPA's staff take the lead in the presence of beneficiaries and consistently communicate in local languages, each having a thorough command of the dialect specific to their area of intervention:

There is a big difference between someone going to the field with their superiors asking them to translate the message being delivered to the beneficiaries and an ALDEPA staff member who takes the lead during field visits without needing to explain anything to me because I do not understand the local language. (Interview on August 28, 2024, with the head of Aldepa in Maroua)

The use of these practices (written translation of messages, contextualized storytelling, and reminders of community-specific principles) fosters forms of attachment (Paugam, 2023) between beneficiaries and local humanitarian workers.

ALDEPA's mobilization of local cultural practices is also evident in resolving disputes related to early marriage and in strategies for reintegrating ex-Boko Haram fighters or associates into communities. In the first case, the beneficiaries' lack of legal knowledge<sup>21</sup> leads local NGOs to rely on endogenous dispute resolution mechanisms. The involvement of traditional and religious authorities is decisive:

20 By this concept, one should understand the whole set of knowledge, tools, and techniques produced locally, rooted in the culture and environment of a community.

21 It is important to note, as an ALDEPA staff member points out, that: "despite workshops organized by humanitarian actors to improve communities' understanding of legal texts in the Far North of Cameroon, many struggle to grasp the importance of complying with these texts due to their limited educational level and the influence of sociocultural norms" (Interview on September 3, 2024, with a staff member of the NGO ALDEPA in Maroua).

From a legal perspective, early marriage is an offense that can implicate not only the perpetrator but also the parents of the victimized girl or boy. Rather than exposing all parents, who are often unaware of the law, we favor a more amicable approach, bringing all parties together under the traditional authorities. If the marriage was initially celebrated before the traditional authority, it is up to them to undo it. (Interview on September 3, 2024, with an ALDEPA staff member in Maroua)

Although early marriage is a practice prohibited by NGOs, international organizations, and the State of Cameroon, resistance persists at the community level in the Far North. Attachment to sociocultural norms leads some families to resist messages about the prohibition of early marriage (Ngatansou Doumara & Bille, 2008). This resistance manifests in the reluctance of certain families to attend training workshops and awareness campaigns, as we observed during field visits with the NGO ALDEPA.

Regarding reintegrating strategies for ex-Boko Haram fighters or associates, local humanitarians also favor endogenous mechanisms. These include rituals known as “ritual gimol<sup>22</sup>” (Mohamadou, 1963), performed by elders, and ceremonies in which ex-fighters participate. Similar practices have existed in the North of Region Cameroon as part of the reintegration of people involved in highway robbery (Seignobos, 2011) and in Rwanda with the *Gacaca* courts, community-based justice systems implemented after the 1994 genocide (Allinne, 2022). Such engagements facilitate the reintegration of ex-fighters or associates and sanctify the forgiveness granted by communities, as explained by an ALDEPA staff member:

[...] We also have reconciliation initiatives because when these people [ex-Boko Haram fighters and associates] arrived, they were supposed to go through a DDR center, which did not happen. We identified all the cultural practices in the communities to help these people reconnect with their families. Sometimes your neighbor saw you cut their relative’s throat, but how can you live in the same community? There have to be rituals to ensure that you can live together. [...] Rituals were conducted, for example, in Mayo Moskota. We brought together ex-Boko Haram associates and community members. There was a celebration, and a traditional dish was prepared. The ex-Boko Haram members ate along with community members. During the lamb sacrifice, people drank the blood as a sign of alliance for what had happened, and the ex-Boko Haram members carried out work to acknowledge the wrongs committed. (Interview on September 3, 2024, with an ALDEPA staff member, Maroua)

These statements highlight the need to assign a central role to endogenous approaches in restorative justice practices. The key challenge is to involve communities so that they become genuine actors in the reconciliation process. Although it was difficult for us to meet people who participated in these ceremonies (due to the prevailing security situation in the areas where they take place), some tensions remain between former combatants and the communities, as noted by an official from the sub-prefecture services in Mora:

It is not always harmonious between the communities and the ex-Boko Haram members. You know, when someone who has lost a family member or loved one, or who has suffered any form of violence, sees their perpetrator, the first thing that comes to mind is to settle the score, to take revenge. And that is human. We are sometimes informed of tensions between certain ex-Boko Haram members who have turned to farming and some local farmers. But these generally remain limited to verbal exchanges and stigmatizing insults, without going further, at least up to now. (Interview on August 22, 2024, in Mora).

Despite the few tensions mentioned in this excerpt, restorative justice rituals appear to facilitate the reintegration of former combatants or associates into the community.

22 The “ritual gimoll” is a type of Fulani poetry whose origins date back to pre-Islamic times. It recounts pagan rituals that are still practiced today among non-Islamized Mbororo communities. With the spread of Islam, this ritual was abandoned and lost its religious significance, becoming part of the secular repertoire.

The use of sacrificial practices for community reconciliation has long existed. The anthropologist René Girard (1982), for example, showed that in so-called archaic cultures, the immolation of a scapegoat, whether animal or human, served as a means of restoring social order in contexts marked by intense rivalries.

### *Mobilizing Endogenous Entrepreneurs and Managing Cases Involving Women Formerly Held Captive by Boko Haram*

Endogenous health entrepreneurs, also referred to as contextual health experts (Olivier de Sardan, 2022), develop solutions that are both innovative and adapted to local realities. When treating trauma experienced by war victims, local humanitarians sometimes call upon healers or traditional practitioners (*mâalam*), who are mobilized to administer therapeutic rituals. The priority given to these healers, pastors, and traditional practitioners reflects a desire to valorize beneficiaries' everyday practices and cultural reference points, while recognizing the social legitimacy of these actors in processes of care and reconstruction. When such cultural practices are not mobilized, the healing process may take longer, as explained by a community relay in Zamay:

We have certain practices. When a person is delirious, we can refer them to a pastor or a traditional healer. This initiates the healing process and facilitates recovery because the person knows these are the local mechanisms that exist. When there is a problem, we first take the person to a pastor or a traditional healer who performs an incantation or uses a water source to communicate with the ancestors, and so on. When these rituals are not performed, the person may heal physically, but psychologically, it can still be a problem. (Interview on September 10, 2024, with a community relay in Zamay)

These statements reflect beneficiaries' strong attachment to medical practices derived from their immediate context. They invite a critical examination of the relationship between so-called "Western" medicine and "traditional" medicine in humanitarian assistance contexts. Faced with international health norms and models, local humanitarians appear to resist (in a veiled manner), (re)negotiate, and adapt their health practices (Lefort-Rieux et al., 2023). These resistances, (re)negotiations, and adaptations are not radical within Aldepa. The fear of losing donors' trust explains this stance, as an Aldepa staff member affirms:

Many of the projects we work on are funded by donors, and we are required to meet certain of their requirements, under the risk of losing partnerships that still bring us both financial support and valuable experience. (Interview on September 2, 2024, in Maroua)

This fear weakens efforts to bring to the fore assistance and care practices specific to Cameroon's North regions. This observation highlights the complexity of the aid decolonization project, particularly the real conditions under which it can occur, given the asymmetric power relations structuring the humanitarian field.

The management of cases involving women formerly held captive by Boko Haram by local humanitarians is equally revealing of the place accorded to endogenous practices in assistance processes. Some women who were held captive by Boko Haram managed to escape from the forest, leaving their husbands behind. Years later, they experience significant difficulty rebuilding their lives and resuming marital lives due to uncertainty regarding the fate of their spouses, whose survival or continued captivity remains unknown. To address this situation, local NGOs call on the traditional leaders to examine the possibilities that would allow these women to rebuild their lives and remarry. The words of an ALDEPA staff member attest to this:

We also have cases of women who were former Boko Haram hostages, who were kidnapped along with their husbands in the fields, for example. When they return to the community without their husbands, they are unable to grieve because they do not know the situation of their husbands, who remain captive in the forest. To address this situation, we turn to traditional leaders. The women concerned are asked to perform rites, such as walking

barefoot, bathing in a stream, or distributing kola nuts at the market. The purpose of these rites is to purify them and allow them to remarry for those who wish to do so. (Interview on September 2, 2024, in Maroua).



Pictures 1 and 2: Meetings of ALDEPA staff members in Mora and Koza to register women who were formerly held captive by Boko Haram and have no news of their husbands.

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

This reality highlights the central role played by endogenous structures in processes of repairing injustices created by war. The use of specific rituals—walking barefoot, using dirty objects, bathing in a stream (*backwater*) to cleanse oneself of the spirits of the deceased, or sharing kola nuts at the market to signal a new social status—enables women who have no news of their husbands to rebuild their lives, should they wish to do so. However, an Aldepa staff member points out that: “[...] even though, at times, some women find these practices burdensome and occasionally humiliating, many participate in order to have the possibility of remarrying” (Interview on September 2, 2024, in Maroua). These practices are part of the cultural heritage of communities in the Far North region, as shown by a study conducted by the International Circle for the Promotion of Creation (CIPCRE, 2006).

### *Use of local materials to create items for the entertainment of youth beneficiaries*

In caring for young beneficiaries, the items used for their leisure activities within “child-friendly spaces” are aligned with the philosophy of endogenous realities. Modeling clay, Barbie dolls, and electronic gadgets (such as miniature cars) are often favored by United Nations agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO, etc.) and foreign NGOs. However, children from crisis-affected localities in the Far North often struggle to appropriate or use these items. By contrast, they are far more familiar with items made from locally available materials. Local NGOs, therefore, favor substituting these items for those provided by foreign humanitarians, as explained by an ALDEPA staff member in Maroua:

We benefited from modeling clay from outside, like chewing gum that children could use to make elephants, lions, and so on. But it was difficult! The children were used to playing with mud; we ourselves had played with mud; that’s how we made animals. With the modeling clay, some thought it was chewing gum that should be swallowed or eaten. So, when dolls arrived, we replaced them with maize stalks for young girls. All of this shows that local knowledge allows beneficiaries to feel at ease, as they would in their own environment. (Interview on September 2, 2024, with an ALDEPA staff member, Maroua)

This situation underscores a crucial issue of this reflection: the tension between the global standardization of humanitarian mechanisms and their adaptation to local practices. While the design of “child-friendly spaces” follows global protection standards promoted notably by UNICEF,

their effective functioning depends on multiple factors, including material availability, local skills, and cultural representations of play. The globalized conception of childhood conveyed by certain UN agencies and Western NGOs does not always align with local modes of socialization.

Local NGOs do not merely adapt; they vernacularize imported humanitarian mechanisms transforming “child-friendly spaces” into locally intelligible spaces (Levitt & Merry, 2009; 2011). These practices contribute to a hybridization of global norms (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012), in which endogenization appears as a form of cultural translation. The relationship between local humanitarians and beneficiaries and intervention sites is equally revealing.

### *A more flexible approach in relations with beneficiaries and areas of intervention*

Unlike foreign agencies, local NGOs demonstrate greater procedural flexibility. The completion of forms and administrative records often occurs after assistance has been provided, especially when urgency so requires.

Similarly, local humanitarians show closer engagement with intervention sites, which they do not always fully control. The use of motorcycles and canoes (to cross the Maga or the Mayo rivers) reflects a logic of self-sacrifice and personal commitment prevailing within local NGOs. This posture contrasts with the more distant, and sometimes detached, attitude of foreign agencies toward intervention sites and even toward beneficiaries themselves<sup>23</sup>. An ALDEPA staff member explains:

Let me give an example. When I was in Mokolo and worked in areas like Koza, we had motorcycles, and it was very practical. But when international NGOs go to the field, they travel by car. If the area becomes inaccessible, they turn back. They make a U-turn and act as if they are above others. When they go to communities, their only concern is to distribute items. But our approach aims to teach beneficiaries how to be independent tomorrow. No matter how much food we bring, no matter how much money we provide, if we do not show them that their locality is an invaluable resource where they can farm during the rainy and dry seasons, engage in vegetable gardening, and that livestock farming can also succeed there, it means we have understood nothing. (Interview on September 6, 2024, with an ALDEPA staff member, Maroua)

As this testimony shows, the flexibility of local humanitarians enables them to provide assistance in areas deemed difficult to access by foreign humanitarians. Far from reflecting simple improvisation, this flexibility speaks to the agency of local NGOs. It can thus be analyzed as a situated modality of humanitarian action: i) it enables local NGOs to act in emergencies without waiting for the validation of cumbersome protocols; ii) it constitutes a rational response to environments marked by insecurity, road inaccessibility, and volatile needs; iii) it may be understood as a form of organizational resilience (Hilhorst, 2018) acquired through experience. This flexibility is therefore structural rather than contingent, a competence intrinsic to local actors.

The power relations within the humanitarian field, as revealed by this ALDEPA staff member's comments, are equally striking. The motorcycle/car contrast reflects material and symbolic inequalities: air-conditioned vehicles, often perceived as spaces of retreat or protection, become symbols of distance and even social superiority; motorcycles, on the other hand, signal engagement in local realities, endurance, and the capacity to truly reach beneficiaries. These practices create an internal hierarchy within the humanitarian field, where international NGOs control resources while local NGOs control access to, and knowledge of, the field.

<sup>23</sup> However, this approach cannot be considered uniform or shared by all staff (both expatriate and local) of international NGOs and UN agencies. This observation stems from diverse experiences, but is consistently reported by Aldepa staff, who place particular emphasis on the attitudes of expatriate personnel.

Moreover, the self-sacrifice mentioned by this staff member (“getting wet,” crossing the Mayo, riding motorcycles, etc.) is not just logistical. It produces moral capital, fosters beneficiaries’ trust, and constitutes an identity marker of local humanitarian work. For local actors, being humanitarian implies embodying socially recognized values (courage, proximity, presence) as illustrated by the following excerpt and the accompanying images:

International organizations emphasize the support they provide, what they have given there, and so on. The important thing is not to distribute things, make donations, and leave without teaching beneficiaries how to become autonomous, without even sharing moments with them. It gives the impression of wanting to get rid of them, as if you were simply fulfilling a formality. You have to be close to beneficiaries; you have to be with them all the time. (Interview on September 6, 2024, with an ALDEPA staff member, Maroua)

Pictures 3 and 4: some ALDEPA staff members visiting villages in the Koza and Mogodé areas, where access (during the rainy season) can only be done by crossing streams.



Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

These statements and pictures reflect a certain moral dimension of “self-giving” or “self-sacrifice” that prevails in the humanitarian assistance practices of the NGO ALDEPA. These “ways of doing” (Certeau, 1990) and thinking have a performative character, insofar as they shape beneficiaries’ perceptions of local NGOs in comparison with foreign NGOs, as confirmed by the following remarks from an endogenous facilitator<sup>24</sup>, who is also a beneficiary, met in Mora:

We understand each other well with ALDEPA because they are always here. It’s not the same with foreign NGOs, who only come maybe twice a year, give us kits, and then leave. We wait a long time before seeing them again. By contrast, ALDEPA, ALVE, or even CESOQUAR<sup>25</sup> are with us all the time, and we are very close to them. (Interview on August 22, 2024, with an endogenous facilitator in Mora)

The use of endogenous modes of assistance fits within a broader logic of adapting humanitarian practice to the realities of intervention contexts. We can discern here a logic of disconnection in the sense described by Amin (1986), not implying isolation, but rather a withdrawal from the dominant logic of the global system, with a view to building models that take local contexts into account. Moreover, the relationships between local NGOs and international NGOs, structured around specific forms of interdependence (Zelao, 2023), converge toward this coordination, despite the underlying power dynamics.

24 Also known as “community relays,” these are individuals selected by NGOs within the communities to serve as informants, communicators, and mediators.

25 Circle of United Neighborhood Solidarity Educators

## Conclusion

Endogenizing humanitarian aid is revealed through concrete practices, discourses, and operational mechanisms. This study sought to answer the question of what changes are brought about by mobilizing endogenous humanitarian knowledge and practices within the NGO ALDEPA in the Far North of Cameroon. The central argument was that this mobilization introduces a (gradual) paradigm shift, breaking with the universalist logic of humanitarian action. The aid provided by this organization is deployed through a system of knowledge, discourse, and practices in which beneficiaries identify themselves. Approaching the issue through the concept of endogenization enabled us to reformulate the issue of the relationship between endogenous knowledge and global humanitarian mechanisms, and to highlight how local NGOs negotiate their position within an asymmetrical humanitarian field.

The analysis shows that endogenizing humanitarian assistance in the Far North of Cameroon takes the form of localized practices of psychosocial care, restorative justice, widowhood relief for women who escaped Boko Haram while their husbands remain in captivity, and child support within the framework of “child-friendly spaces.” These practices aim to adapt humanitarian responses to beneficiaries’ lived realities. Assistance provided by ALDEPA thus aligns with the core values of the region’s communities (hospitality, sharing, and humanity). However, the study also reveals deep tensions between global and local dynamics, shedding light on the North/South power relations that structure the humanitarian field. Persistent gaps remain between local and international NGOs in the ways aid is conceptualized and implemented. The financial dependence of local NGOs on international NGOs and United Nations agencies compels them to conceal certain endogenous practices.

This observation calls into question the aid decolonization project so frequently invoked in political discourse. While there is no doubt that the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which enshrined the Grand Bargain, played a decisive role in renewing ways of thinking about assistance in crisis contexts, the desired transformations have yet to fully materialize. Significant challenges remain. On the one hand, recognizing and valuing endogenous knowledge and capacities would, ultimately, enhance complementarity between local and foreign NGOs. On the other hand, access to funding and capacity-building for local actors is crucial to truly align humanitarian practice with the demands of aid decolonization. Moreover, while recourse to endogenous knowledge presents itself as an alternative for (re)thinking humanitarian assistance, it is essential to avoid essentializing such knowledge. This means not treating it as a monolithic, fixed, or “authentic” block, but rather as dynamic, historical, and constantly interacting with other forms of knowledge. The key challenge, therefore, is to situate endogenous knowledge within an ecology of knowledges, that is, to create bridges between local and global knowledge through dialogue and co-construction, with a view to more relevant and respectful humanitarian aid.

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