

## ASSESSMENT REPORT ON CHILD LABOUR



Danish Refugee Council

Southwest Region, CAMEROON

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## 1. Introduction

Child labour and humanitarian crisis are intrinsically connected. The fragile conflict situation characterized by instability, distortion/destruction of sources of income, school closure, disruption of safety nets and lack of alternative descent work opportunities creates conditions for child labour. The ongoing crisis in Cameroon NW/SW continues to increase violence, exploitation, and abuse against children. In the Southwest region, many children have been separated from their primary caregivers and most of them have become victims of different forms of exploitation. Evidence from child protection monitoring, Key informants, and focus groups discussions has highlighted the destabilization of functional family and community structures as a consequence of the crisis, thereby weakening the protective environment for children in this conflict affected communities. Within these affected communities, child labour (CL) or Worse Forms of Child Labour has been one of the glaring consequences of the crisis which has caused psychosocial distress, injuries and retarded the proper developmental process of children. Children may be driven into work for various reasons. Most often, child labour occurs when families face financial challenges or uncertainty – whether due to poverty, sudden illness of a caregiver, or job loss of a primary wage earner. The consequences are staggering. Child labour can result in extreme bodily and mental harm and even death. It can lead to slavery and sexual exploitation and in nearly every case, it cuts children off from schooling and health care restricting their fundamental rights. Whatever the cause, child labour compounds social inequality and discrimination. Unlike activities that help children develop, such as contributing to light housework or taking on a job during the holidays, child labour limits access to education and harms a child’s physical, mental and social growth. In this context, many children face emotional and physical problems due to their difficult life circumstances. Moreover, these issues are exacerbated by the fact that many have been out of school for months or years and their parents have lost their livelihood due to the crisis.

## 2. Objectives

### **2.1. General objective.**

To conduct a comprehensive assessment on child labour and inform strategies to prevent, mitigate and respond to child labour.

### **2.2. Specific objectives**

- To understand the scale and severity of child labor.
- To identify pre-existing and new forms of child labor.
- To understand the risk and protective factors.
- To understand the needs of children engaged in child labor and their families.
- To identify available services and community structures.
- To generate evidence-based data for advocacy and effective response.

### **2.3. Expected results.**

Data from this exercise will enable DRC to develop concrete strategies to prevent and mitigate child labour and work with key stakeholders at the level of the communities to strengthen the protective environment around children in line with child labour and advocacy with government agencies.

### 3. Methodology

#### Sampling and selection of sites for data collection

DRC used the purposive sampling technique in order to target the most affected populations in hard-to-reach communities (communities where we observed high prevalence of child labor from one-on-one identification and feedback from CFS facilitators). The table below shows the distribution of sites and number of participants per community. From the 7 locations that were targeted, all the communities had children (including adolescents), IDP population, returnees, and host communities. DRC prioritized high risk areas which are considered most volatile and tried to balance between rural and peri-urban communities for better representation. The team reached 237 persons for the FGDs (targeting men, women, adolescent boys and girls). The table below summarizes the number of communities and participants reached.

S/N	Community	Adults		Adolescents	
		Male	Female	BOYS	GIRLS
1	Owe	6	12	7	18
2	Sanje	2	16	4	11
3	Muyuka	4	11	5	11
4	Malende	9	15	5	6
5	Mondoni	2	18	6	8
6	Cam Dev	3	11	13	6
7	Scipio	2	8	6	12
<b>Total</b>		<b>28</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>72</b>

#### Ethical Consideration

In each community, DRC staff explained the objectives of the assessment, procedure for conducting the FGDs and obtained consent from the participants. The participants were also separated by age and gender for safety concerns during the FGD sessions. Adolescents who could not share their personal experiences (for sensitive topics like sexual violence, sex for survival and association with armed groups) during the group sessions were encouraged to have individual sessions with the staff where PSS were administered following their needs and referral.

#### Data Management

Data from the FGD sessions were transcribed and summarized into themes, addressing the different objectives. The data was collected by the Child Protection Team (5 persons) and restitution was done daily through the data collection phase to ensure that the data gotten from the field remained consistent with the set objectives. Possible bias from the FGDs were mitigated by direct observation and secondary data.

### 4. Presentation of Findings

#### 4.1. Which children are most at risk of (specific types of) child labor in the crisis context?

Data from the FGD discussions highlighted the different categories of children vulnerable to child labour in the context of the ongoing crisis. The most recurring categories included out-of-school children, child-headed households, separated and unaccompanied children were the most at risk to child labour. At the start of the crisis, education was heavily politicised as NSAGs instituted a “No school” policy as a strategy. This was followed by attacks on schools, teachers and children which greatly affected children’s access to safe and quality education. In 2022, NSAGs authorised the creation of community schools but these institutions are poorly equipped and staffed. This limited access to education increases children’s vulnerability to child labour. Frequent attacks on education also goes a long way to affect the frequency of school attendance. The self-imposed shut down of schools by NSAGs sent most children home and forced them to engage in different activities around the community. Over the years, the NSAGs have authorised community schools in hard-to-reach communities of the region but unfortunately this has only been for the primary level thus still leaving a gap for the adolescents who intended going to secondary schools. From the FGDs conducted, we realised child labour is mostly carried out among adolescent boys and girls who have not had that opportunity to return to school either within or out of the community. It could be noticed that unaccompanied and separated children who are out of school were more at risk to child labour in the communities.

Unaccompanied and separated children were seen to be more exposed to child labour than children living with their biological parents. Escalating violence, insecurity and the effect on school attendance forced children to flee while parents send their children to more stable communities to get access to education and safety. Host families tend to experience pressure on their family resources which can cause caregivers to engage children in income generating activities in an effort to supplement family income. Unaccompanied children living on their own or in groups in a rented space engage in income generating activities to be able to support themselves.

Another category of children highlighted during the FGD sessions were child-headed households. Parents and caregivers have lost their sources of livelihood either as a direct effect of the crisis or a consequence of the crisis. Some households have lost their fathers/parents in the course of the crisis, which forces children to accept adult responsibilities in order to support their vulnerable parents and younger siblings. Even though both adolescent boys and girls are forced to bear adult responsibilities, adolescent boys are more vulnerable to engaging in extreme forms of work as they are often seen working in quarries, palm plantations and construction sites.

In the rural communities, children are engaged in activities such as snail hunting (done late into the night), sand extraction from rivers, oil milling and working in palm plantations, breaking cocoa pots, working in construction sites (carrying water, sand, cement for those constructing), timber transportation among others. According to testimonials from the FDGs, children as young as 5 years old work in farms, walking long distance to reach their workplaces where they are hired to weed, plant, harvest and dig holes for products such as cocoa, yams and oranges. Other children between 8-17 years old work transporting goods by pushing wheelbarrows as heavy as 100kg or in construction sites transporting sand, cement, planks, water, and others digging. Girls as young as 9 years old are also reported to work mostly selling food in markets and quarters. These children work long hours doing physically taxing jobs in harsh conditions as illustrated by this statement from a 13-year-old girl:

*“I don’t want to continue working again because last week I spent 4 days in the farm working from 6am to 5pm with very little food”. (9-year-old boy)*

➤ **Risk factors**

The engagement in child labour further exposes children to other protection risks. Spending several hours unsupervised and often working in sites far away from their home puts children at heightened risk of arbitrary arrest, kidnapping, CAAFAG, GBV (especially girls), sexual harassment, school dropouts, harm and injuries which cause enormous medical setbacks. Additionally, not having the opportunity to play and spend time with their friends due to their obligation to work robs children of a healthy childhood and may affect their cognitive and social development.

GBV, sexual harassment and exploitation was prevalent among older adolescent girls involved in child labour in all surveyed communities. This was the case of work done by girls (snail hunting, selling in bars, sex for cash) which required them working late into the night. It was noticed that some community members exploit their desperation by refusing to pay them or pay less than what was agreed after the job has been done, raping girls when they go out late at night for snail hunting, harassing the girls in bars with little or no concern from the bar owners as a community member explained:

*“Most men now go to bars to admire and flirt with these young girls and for your bar to sell you are forced to bring in some of these young girls. Some men even go to the extent of touching them and the bar owner will not intervene as it is what attracts customers to her bar”. (Adult male, 45 years old)*

Adolescent boys were seen to be more exposed to arbitrary arrest, becoming CAAFAG, victims to harm and injuries with serious medical repercussions. Among these risk factors, arbitrary arrest was said to be more prevalent in all the communities surveyed as children associated with the NSAG were targeted mostly by the SSF. With the loss of the livelihood of their parents and caregivers, most of the adolescent boys are attracted to joining the NSAGs who promise them power fame, and money in their communities.

The parents and caregivers surveyed complained of the physical and health challenges their children face due to the horrendous work they are doing in the community to make money. It was noticed that children as young as 14 years old were involved in removing sand from the river and others transporting timber from the forest which is very dangerous and exposes children to snake bites, injuries, and illnesses such as hernia and pneumonia which had sometimes led to death.

The parents and caregivers explained that they were worried about the future of their children in the community as most of these children who have involved themselves in work are no longer interested in going back to school even when the opportunity arises. Some are said to have become very rude and arrogant towards their parents and other community members as they are mostly the ones providing cash for the management of the household.

➤ **Protective factors**

Within the community, most children and community members have developed means to protect children from child labour and exploitation. Report from the FDG shows that children in most communities surveyed have been advancing ways to protect themselves from exploitation and abuse.

In 4 of the communities surveyed, due to the heightened risk of sexual abuse in the night when they are going for snail hunting, the adolescent girls started forming small groups and decide when to go out for snail hunting and return in the same group. Some even decided to buy whistles that they could use to alert the community when they felt in danger.

In some communities, some groups have come together to sensitise members of the community and particularly parents and caregivers on the dangers of sending children out of the community to work.

A participant explained:

*“In this community we have heard of our children who went to be nannies being used as sales girls and prostitutes in bars and night clubs in the city so we don’t allow our children to be taken out again. If that must happen it is the council that must grant permission after thorough investigation has been done on the person who wants to take the child out of the community. Since this was done, we have not heard of such cases of exploitation again”. (Adult Female, 36 years old)*

#### **4.2. What are the characteristics of child labor in the pre-crisis and during the crisis context?**

Before the crisis, most school children had a routine of going to school during the week and going to help their parents in the farm during the weekends and holiday periods. In all the communities surveyed, the results showed most of the children during this period engaged themselves in farm clearing, harvesting of farm products for house consumption, haunting with their parents, snail hunting at a smaller scale, hawking during holidays to get money for fees and other school needs. It is explained that this was all seen to be normal as most of these children were doing so with the permission and supervision of their parents who wanted them to find an occupation or to have something to do to support the family during holidays or weekends.

With the start of the crisis, most parents lost the livelihoods, some families in semi-urban areas had an influx of IDPs, some of the children lost their parents and became unaccompanied and separated children and others child became head of households which led to an escalation in child labour as they were either forced by their care givers to get involved or did so to survive and take care of their younger siblings.

The survey showed that children (mostly IDPs) as young as 8 years are forced by their caregivers to sell snails, banana, ‘bitter cola’, within the communities and often are forced to sell all the products or are not allowed to return to the house. One participant testified:

*“I leave very early in the morning to go and sell and most days I return home very late, exhausted and hungry. When leaving I am told not to return with any of the products and even when I return late, I am beaten by my caregiver for staying out too long. Some days I go all day without food as I dare not use any of the money to buy food for myself. This has been very difficult for me to handle”. (Adolescent girl, 14 years old)*

This has forced the children to a tight corner as they have been seen late at night begging strangers to buy their products so they could return home. This exposes them to kidnapping, violence and sexual abuse.

Again, adolescents taking care of their younger siblings with the absence of their parents have been forced to do very hard labour with very little pay to meet up with the daily needs of the household. In most rural areas, such adolescents have been seen working under very harsh conditions in cocoa farms, oil milling sites, riverbanks, cutting and transporting timber. Some of the girls have been forced to go out of the villages to towns where they involved themselves into prostitution, babysitting, in order to send money back to the siblings in the community.

#### **4.3. What is the impact of the crisis on education (participation and levels of education) among children and adolescents?**

The information collected within the communities under survey shows the crisis has had a massive impact on education. The FDG demonstrated that in the 5 communities under survey, most of the children particularly in secondary schools have been out of school for as long as the crisis has started. After the halt in education by the NSAG in most of these communities, schools particularly the government schools which was the most prominent or available in these communities have not resumed since. Only some few

private schools and the approved (by the NSAG) community schools are now functional in the surveyed communities.

Unfortunately, most of these schools only stop at the primary level leaving a big gap for these adolescents who were already at the secondary level and have been forced out of school since the crisis started. In order to keep themselves busy, some of the children started doing 'jobs' in the community to get cash, others involved themselves in different trades, others started agriculture, some left the communities in search for other opportunities in more stable towns, while others joined the NSAG. With all these put together, parents and caregivers now complain the children have little or no interest in returning to school even when the opportunity arises. One of the parents explained:

*"After years of staying home, my child refused to be sent to my brothers place in Limbe where he would continue his secondary education and get his certificates. He asked me if those that have gone to school and now working are being paid more than me. School or no school, all we are looking for money which I already have now."* (Adolescent boy, 16 years old)

The survey equally showed that the participation at the primary level was still very low in the private and community schools in the crisis affected communities. This was mainly because the fees levied on parents was too high for them to meet up. This affected mostly the IDPs who were finding it difficult to survive in these communities. As highlighted by a community member:

*"We pay up to XAF 45,000 for our children's school fees in the community before we even start looking for money to buy books and other school requirements for a single child. What if you have 3 or 4 children? whom must you send to school and take care of their basic needs? Most of us have lost our livelihoods due to the crisis. Sometimes we prefer to send them out to access government schools, but it is not cheaper as you will need pay rent for them a house in town, send food on a weekly basis and pocket allowance. And there is even that fear of what can happen to your child(ren) who are out sight without parental care. So, most times we struggle and send one to school and the others assist with farm work".* (Adult Male, 56 years old)

Most of the adolescent who participated in the survey said they were no longer interested in going back to school even if the opportunity arose. They now prefer to work and help themselves and family or better still do a vocational training or income generating activity. After being out for so long, they were not comfortable going back to school and starting from where they stopped as they believed they were way older to continue at that level so will prefer to work than go to school. One of the girls said:

*"I am already the mother of my own child, and I should be working to see that the child goes to school not me going back to school. I cannot even go back to school now because I have a lot of responsibilities and people to take care of and going to school now will not be of any help to me or my child".* (Adolescent girl, 16 years old),

It was noticed that some households in these communities were being taken care of by these adolescents as most of their parents have lost their livelihood and some getting older and not having that strength to work and take care of the house as they did before. In others, for them to meet up with the demands of the house, they are forced to work very hard which exposes them to child labour and other forms exploitation. One of the adolescents said:

*"I live with my father and two siblings in the house. My father is old and blind while my siblings are too young to do anything. My mother and relatives abandoned us when this predicament struck, my father, and I were now forced to take responsibility of the household. In order to take care of the basic needs of the family and send my siblings to school, I am forced to work very hard, and I do any job in the community*

*that could fetch me money. I work in peoples farms all day, I mill oil, and harvest cocoa depending on the season and job available during that period. Sometimes they pay me less to what was agreed but because I need to take care of the family, I am forced to take what is given because if I refuse my family will starve".*  
(Adolescent girl, 15 years old)

The survey also showed that most of these community schools did not have the qualified teachers and up to standard equipment to handle the children. During the peak of the crisis, most of the teachers in these communities fled the community in fear of losing their lives. Most teachers in these community schools are just hand-picked members of the community and a few who have had some mastery in teaching. There are doubts on the level and quality of education being thought in these community schools.

## 5. Recommendations

- Provision of livelihood support to parents and caregivers: having identified parental loss of livelihood as one of the contributing factors to child labor, it is important to design project activities aimed at supporting parents and caregivers through programs such as family business scheme income generating activities so that more children can return to school.
- Income Generating Activities and Skill development for adolescents who are out of school: adolescents who are unable to return to school should be provided with skill acquisition programs, IGA and vocational trainings that will reduce the level of child labor especially the worst forms of child labor which has hazardous consequences to children's development, health and wellbeing within the community. This will be more formal and organized, as it was noticed during the survey there were some local facilities where these children could learn a trade and have better orientation on managing a business. .
- Capacity strengthening: community teachers, traditional rulers and other women-led groups should be trained on child protection, how to work with families and communities to respond to child labour and other forms of exploitation to which children are exposed so as to reinforce existing positive protective coping mechanism of communities and to explore new options in close participation with them.
- Educational Support: school items should be provided to community schools to improve the learning process of the children. Children can also be supported through individual protection assistance, special need fund, and case management to have access to safe, quality and inclusive education.
- Awareness Raising: awareness should be raised in the community to both parents, caregivers and adolescents on the damaging effects of child labour on the health and cognitive development of children.
- To join forces with key actors working in the child protection and education sector to advocate on the risks and needs of children out of school and involved in child labour. This need to be done in parallel to other actions in order not to create negative effects on the families.
- Services: one of the limitations of this assessment was the lack of information about available services and community structures for children. Therefore, DRC will map existing services at the community level.