

Community Action Committees: key players in helping the displaced population

Bako has his phone ringing. Once again, it is another call from the town of Maine Soroa to inform him of the arrival of a new family who fled Nigeria. Bako's phone often rings. Bako's real name is Abderrahmane Ahmed, and he is the General Secretary of the Community Action Committee (CAC) of the commune of Maine Soroa, in the Diffa region. In Niger, community groups are old; they were institutionalized under President Seyni Kountche (1974-1983). The CACs are a new version established by Mahamadou Issoufou, the current President of the country.

Frontline Actors

Each of the 12 communes of Diffa has its own CAC group consisting of 6 people as much as possible representative of the local sociology. It includes a representative of the youth, women, traditional leaders, local authorities, religious authorities and media / community radio. Each member is appointed by his peers.

CACs play the role of intermediary between the authorities and the population, but also between aid actors, including UNHCR, and the population. No field mission could be conducted without the CAC being informed or taking part in the mission. They also have their own action plan.

The CACs of the Diffa region were born in April 2013 in the framework of the Peace Program through Development Phase II (PDEV II) funded by USAID and implemented by the NGO IRD (International Relief and Development). They had very little time to be in place: in June the same year, the first influx of refugees has positioned them in the frontline. UNHCR then came quickly to their side to train them on the international standards for the protection of refugees, reception mechanisms as well as on how to keep registration records.

No camps for the displaced people in Diffa. This is justified as the Niger government wants to keep control of the situation, however, it also translates into more operational

and logistical difficulties. Today there are over 50,000 people who have fled Nigeria. They are scattered across more than a hundred towns, villages and islands all along the border, on a territory of 300 km with a virtually non-existent road network.

The magnitude of the crisis went beyond the initial estimates and the humanitarian machine is sometimes cumbersome to start up. CACs played and still play a key role, particularly in the pre- registration of new arrivals, an activity that is the cornerstone of any operational planning.



Beram from the Bosso CAC de Bosso registering the new arrivals ©UNHCR

Volunteers and solicited persons

Members of the CAC are all volunteers, *"volunteering is mandatory for us"* as Boubacar from the CAC of Bosso underlines. Bosso is a town whose population has more than doubled in the last month. Beram, the representative of women in the same CAC, adds *"if people come to your house and you have nothing to give, you should at least help humanitarian agencies bring them something."* As for Bako, *"even if it is common sense to help people who were forced to leave their country, the fact that this crisis affects our municipality is also a source of motivation for us to volunteer."*

Things were not that easy at the onset. In human tragedies very often malicious people intrude. Boubacar recalls the first moments of crisis when *"discord caused by the arrival of many NGOs who wished to corrupt and exploit the situation to earn money had created much confusion and serious problems."* The town of Bosso is near Lake Chad, and the two hours and half that separate Diffa, a very eccentric town, had hitherto protected it from the drifts of cooperation... although the municipality would not have been against more development projects.

Today, the CACs have acquired more experience and are recognized by all, locals as well as displaced people. They develop an inclusive approach to integrate them in receiving newcomers and targeting of vulnerable people in need of assistance and protection.

Their growing role also translates into a significant time investment. *"In Bosso, I cannot walk over 100 meters without being asked"* Boubacar says. But, being at the forefront and close to the humanitarian community sometimes creates suspicion as Bako points out *"I am building a house and some people believe that I got the money from NGOs and UNHCR. Others think I'll even marry a second wife with the money."*

UNHCR and CAC: proximity and pragmatism



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UNHCR is now fully committed to the CACs to support them in their hard task. For each of them, the building of an office is planned. This physical space serves as a meeting place for members but also a neutral space to receive refugees and returnees.

But the crucial support provided by UNHCR remains that of the transmission of information: CACs collect information on the ground, the UNHCR team of Diffa shares also information downward with them. Understanding the mechanisms and functioning of humanitarian cooperation is not an easy thing. For UNHCR, it is essential that the CACs have clear and transparent information on the direction of future interventions so that they in turn can inform and sensitize the community. This strategy also helps protect the CACs and ensure their legitimacy.

Strengthening the CACs is an approach that is pragmatic in operational terms but also aims to maintain the peaceful coexistence that is prevailing among the displaced and the host community. This "social peace" remains the main absorption component of the current crisis. For UNHCR, it is important to avoid any disruption of this vital social balance. Representatives of the community are better able to understand and manage complex situations in a certainly more sustainable way. UNHCR is supporting them in this way, and will not substitute for community-based coping strategies.

In their mission, humanitarian actors remain dependent on donors. The proliferation of large-scale emergencies (Syria, CAR and South Sudan) coupled with declining public funding do not make the Diffa region a priority. Also, although Niger has so far been spared from attacks on its soil, it is not excluded that the security situation deteriorates which would automatically have a significant impact on operations. Lack of funds and security issues require UNHCR to adopt a pragmatic posture so that a reduction of its operation does not result in a vacuum in the field. The community approach appears once again the most appropriate solution.