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POLITICAL AND BUREAUCRATIC CHALLENGES IN HUMANITARIAN AID COORDINATION AMONG ORGANIZATIONS IN FAKO DIVISION, CAMEROON

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Abstract

This study assessed the influence of political and bureaucratic challenges on the coordination of humanitarian aid among organizations operating in Fako Division, Cameroon. A qualitative research design was employed, using interviews and document analysis to gather data from twenty humanitarian workers drawn from international and local NGOs, United Nations agencies, and government institutions. Thematic analysis revealed that political interference and bureaucratic procedures significantly hinder aid coordination. Political interference was reflected in restricted access, selective authorizations, and political influence over beneficiary targeting, which weakened neutrality and collaboration among agencies. Bureaucratic challenges, including lengthy administrative procedures and duplication of approval systems, delayed project implementation and reduced operational efficiency. However, humanitarian organizations adopted several strategies to manage these constraints, including collaborative engagement with government authorities, strengthening inter-agency networks, and promoting advocacy and policy dialogue. The study recommends that organizations sustain structured engagement with government bodies, the Cameroonian authorities streamline administrative processes, and inter-agency advocacy be reinforced to safeguard humanitarian neutrality and improve coordination efficiency. The findings highlight the need for cooperation, procedural reform, and consistent dialogue to ensure timely and equitable humanitarian assistance in Fako Division.

Index Terms: Bureaucratic challenges, Coordination, Fako Division, Humanitarian aid, Political interference.

Introduction

Humanitarian assistance to populations affected by armed conflict is critically undermined by political and bureaucratic constraints. In numerous contexts, the capacity of organizations to deliver aid is diminished by delays in authorizations, restrictions on freedom of movement, and interference from state or non-state actors. For example, in the English-speaking regions of North-West Region and South-West Region of Cameroon, humanitarian authorizations must be obtained from the Governor's office and humanitarian actors regularly face road-blocks and demands for payment at checkpoints by both non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and

government forces (Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan, 2021).

This study directs attention to the specific environment of the Fako Division in the South-West Region of Cameroon. The division is situated within a broader humanitarian setting in which more than 4.7 million people across the country required humanitarian assistance in 2023, and where access constraints continue to slow timely aid delivery (Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan, 2023).

In Cameroon, the main constraints to humanitarian access include insecurity, poor road infrastructure, floods and other natural



hazards, and crucially, restrictions imposed by authorities or armed groups on the movement of people, assets and humanitarian workers (Cameroon Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2024). These constraints are accompanied by bureaucratic impediments such as written authorizations required from local administration, roadblocks or checkpoints, and movement restrictions associated with lockdowns or curfews (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024).

Moreover, coordination among humanitarian actors is affected by both political interference and bureaucratic requirements. A study of humanitarian relief in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon identified that poor coordination, manifested in duplication of efforts and lack of information sharing among NGOs, civil society organizations and international agencies, hampered collective results (RSI International, 2024). Local NGOs in Cameroon have also cited that they operate under heavy government regulation and constraints, limiting their neutrality and operational independence (The New Humanitarian, 2025).

In the Fako Division, which is embedded in a zone impacted by the Anglophone crisis, humanitarian organizations therefore face unique challenges in coordinating aid delivery. The presence of active armed groups, movement restrictions, and demanding administrative procedures add layers to the operational environment. For instance, the more than 3,655 internally displaced persons recorded in July 2023 in the North-West and South-West regions, including Fako, highlighted that access to affected persons remains highly challenging for humanitarian partners (Journal du Cameroun, 2023).

Politically, the humanitarian sector operates amid a climate in which aid is sometimes perceived as an instrument in the broader contestation between state authority and non-state actors. Authorities and armed groups may both impose checkpoints, demand payments or detain aid workers, and thus the humanitarian endeavor becomes entangled with issues of power, legitimacy and control (Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan, 2021). Bureaucratically, the requirement for multiple authorizations, frequent inspections, delays at checkpoints, and the need for formal coordination with local government increase the cost, time and risk associated with aid delivery (Cameroon Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2024).

Given these conditions, coordination among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division is affected in two major ways. First, political interference may influence which organizations are permitted to work in which areas, which types of aid are accepted, and how data is shared. Second, bureaucratic impediments may delay or interrupt the chain of operations from needs assessment through distribution. Examining how these two interlinked sets of challenges shape humanitarian aid coordination is therefore timely and essential.

The political and bureaucratic environment in which humanitarian organizations operate in Fako Division significantly shapes the coordination of aid delivery. Understanding these barriers is necessary to strengthen coordination, improve access to affected

populations, and reduce gaps and overlaps in assistance. This paper therefore aims to assess how political and bureaucratic obstacles affect the coordination of humanitarian aid among organizations operating in Fako Division.

Objectives

The general objective of this study is **to** assess the influence of political and bureaucratic challenges on the coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division, Cameroon. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the extent to which political interference affects the coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division.
2. To determine how bureaucratic challenges influence the coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division.
3. To identify strategies adopted by humanitarian organizations to overcome political and bureaucratic constraints in coordinating aid delivery in Fako Division.

Research Questions

1. What are the strategies adopted by humanitarian organizations to overcome political and bureaucratic constraints in coordinating aid delivery in Fako Division?
2. Does political interference have any significant effect on the coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division?
3. Do bureaucratic challenges have a significant influence on coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division?

Literature Review

In conflict-affected settings such as the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon, political interference significantly affects how humanitarian actors coordinate aid. Bang and Balgah (2022) explain that the “lofty claims of state authority and non-state actors over territory” create what they describe as a “complex disaster emergency” in which neutrality, access, and aid coordination are compromised (p. 3). These conditions mean humanitarian organizations may be vetted, restricted or guided by political actors rather than purely by need-based assessments, thereby weakening coordination among agencies. In addition, governmental or armed-group actors may influence which organizations are permitted to operate, what data are shared, and how resources are distributed, reducing the effectiveness of inter-agency cooperation.

Administrative and bureaucratic barriers also represent major constraints on humanitarian coordination in Cameroon. The *Cameroon Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023* by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reports that “the main constraints to humanitarian access in Cameroon remain insecurity, poor road infrastructure... and restrictions by authorities or NSAGs on the movement of people, assets and humanitarian workers”

(UNICEF, 2023, p. 9). The “restrictions by authorities” phrase highlights how formal procedures, such as obtaining authorizations, moving through checkpoints, and coordinating with local administration, slow down humanitarian operations and complicate coordination between different actors. In a study on humanitarian leadership, Nyarko et al. (2024) observed that “bureaucracy and external influence” emerged as one of the ten major themes creating challenges for humanitarian workers (p. 8). These findings suggest that bureaucratic impediments do more than delay response; they undermine the ability of agencies to coordinate effectively across phases of needs assessment, resource allocation, and delivery.

Coordination mechanisms among humanitarian actors themselves are under strain in Cameroon. Although frameworks such as cluster-coordination systems exist, their effectiveness diminishes when actors cannot freely share information or when local organizations are constrained by political and administrative realities. A recent article notes that “local NGOs work under the control of the government ... so you are heading to a situation where the government can influence activities and intervention of local NGOs, because they won’t have powers to maintain neutrality and ... address needs” (AllAfrica, 2025, para. 4). When NGOs are regulated or perceived as aligned with political actors, trust among organizations diminishes, and coordination suffers. The same article adds that localization efforts were “not very effective ... and their role has been ‘quite limited so far’” in coordination structures (AllAfrica, 2025, para. 3). These patterns suggest that coordination among humanitarian actors in Fako Division may be especially challenged by both the formal mechanisms and the prevailing political and bureaucratic environment.

Security and access constraints in the Anglophone crisis regions add another layer of difficulty to coordination. According to the European Commission’s *Cameroon Country Profile* (2024), the number of recorded security incidents in the North-West and South-West regions rose to 7,035 in 2024, nearly double the figure for 2023 (p. 2). These incidents, along with poor road conditions and checkpoints, restrict the movement of people and assets, disrupt joint needs assessments, and hinder collaboration among agencies. UNICEF (2023) also reports that “humanitarian activities continue to be hampered in areas where displacement is high and access is low” (p. 11). In such environments, organizations may end up operating in solo, duplicating efforts or missing coordination opportunities because of limited access and differing risk levels.

Recent literature identifies practical strategies for overcoming political and bureaucratic constraints while improving coordination. Nyarko et al. (2024) emphasise that building internal leadership capacity and managing external influences are key steps for agencies operating in constrained environments. Meanwhile, UNICEF (2023) proposes “enhanced dialogue, advocacy, analysis, capacity building, planning and preparation” as ways to mitigate access challenges (p. 10). Although these approaches do not remove political or administrative interference, they show that

coordination can improve when humanitarian actors invest in relationships, shared data systems and local partnerships.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design which entailed collecting data through interviews and document analysis in order to assess the influence of political and bureaucratic challenges on the coordination of humanitarian aid among organizations operating in Fako Division, Cameroon. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the experiences and perceptions of humanitarian staff.

Participants

The population of this study consisted of workers in humanitarian organizations operating in Fako Division, Cameroon. A sample of 20 humanitarian workers was selected using a purposive sampling technique. The sample included workers in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, and government agencies involved in humanitarian aid delivery. Important informants within these organizations, such as program managers, coordinators, and field staff, were purposively selected.

Instruments

An interview guide was used for data collection. The interview guide facilitated the collection of qualitative data on the experiences and strategies adopted by humanitarian organizations. The collected data were transcribed verbatim to ensure that the participants’ voices and experiences were accurately recorded.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through face-to-face interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants to gather more detailed information on the challenges and strategies adopted by humanitarian organizations. Document review was also conducted to gather secondary data on the humanitarian situation, policies, and guidelines relevant to the study. In this way, multiple sources of evidence were used to ensure data triangulation and enhance the validity of the findings.

Method of Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and document review were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data to identify patterns and meanings. The themes emerging from the data provided a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies adopted by humanitarian organizations.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards in research, ensuring the confidentiality, anonymity, and safety of respondents. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. The study also obtained necessary approvals from relevant authorities and organizations before data collection commenced. All data collected was stored securely, and respondents’ identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms and codes.

Results

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1

What are the strategies adopted by humanitarian organizations to overcome political and bureaucratic constraints in coordinating aid delivery in Fako Division?

Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed three main strategies: Collaborative engagement with government authorities, network strengthening through inter-agency coordination, and advocacy and policy dialogue.

1. *Collaborative Engagement with Government Authorities:* Fifteen participants explained that organizations have learned to maintain constructive working relationships with government offices to reduce political interference. Regular joint meetings with administrative officials were said to improve transparency in planning and approval processes. One respondent noted that “working closely with local administrators allows us to avoid unnecessary delays and to gain access to affected communities.”
2. *Network Strengthening through Inter-Agency Coordination:* Fourteen participants highlighted the importance of active participation in coordination clusters led by the OCHA. Through these networks, agencies share logistical resources, information, and access permissions, which help them navigate bureaucratic obstacles collectively. Documented minutes of coordination meetings showed improved communication between international and national actors since 2023.
3. *Advocacy and Policy Dialogue:* Half of the respondents reported that humanitarian organizations engage in ongoing dialogue with state representatives to promote less restrictive procedures. Policy briefs reviewed indicated that several NGOs, in collaboration with OCHA and the Cameroon Red Cross, have advocated for clearer guidelines on project approval and staff movement. These efforts were credited with a reduction in the number of administrative delays reported between 2022 and 2024.

Research Question 2

Does political interference have any significant effect on the coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division?

Two dominant themes emerged from the analysis: Restricted access and selective authorizations, and political influence over beneficiary targeting.

1. *Restricted Access and Selective Authorizations:* Seventeen respondents confirmed that political actors often determine which organizations are granted permission to operate in specific areas. Several NGOs reported being denied entry into conflict-affected zones due to alleged “security concerns”, even when conditions were safe. Review of OCHA’s 2024 humanitarian access

report showed similar patterns, noting that administrative restrictions delayed the delivery of food and medical aid to rural communities for weeks.

2. *Political Influence Over Beneficiary Targeting:* Ten participants emphasized that some government officials influence who receives aid, leading to perceptions of bias and mistrust among local populations. One participant explained, “political leaders sometimes prioritize communities that support their agendas, which undermines the neutrality of aid distribution”. This political interference was said to reduce collaboration among organizations and slow down decision-making during joint interventions.

Research Question 3

Do bureaucratic challenges have a significant influence on coordination of humanitarian aid among humanitarian organizations in Fako Division?

Two major themes were identified: Lengthy administrative procedures and duplication of approval systems.

1. *Lengthy Administrative Procedures:* Sixteen respondents stated that slow administrative processes within ministries and regional offices cause delays in project implementation. Approval for importation of relief materials and staff movement often requires multiple endorsements. Document analysis confirmed that these procedures could take several weeks, even during emergencies. Respondents explained that bureaucratic bottlenecks discourage donor agencies and reduce overall operational efficiency.
2. *Duplication of Approval Systems:* Thirteen participants observed that both national and local authorities often demand separate documentation for the same activity. This duplication increases paperwork and creates uncertainty about compliance standards. Organizations with limited administrative capacity struggle to keep up, leading to missed deadlines and strained relationships with coordinating agencies. Reports reviewed from the ANAPCO Humanitarian Coordination Forum (2023) emphasized the need to streamline authorization systems for faster response.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that humanitarian organizations in Fako Division employ deliberate strategies to overcome the political and bureaucratic constraints affecting aid coordination. The results also confirm that political interference and administrative barriers have a marked influence on the coordination of humanitarian aid. These outcomes align with existing literature on humanitarian operations in conflict-affected regions, reinforcing that both political control and bureaucratic bottlenecks are central challenges to effective aid delivery in Cameroon and similar settings.

Strategies Adopted to Overcome Political and Bureaucratic Constraints

The study identified three main strategies used by humanitarian organizations to navigate operational difficulties: Collaborative engagement with government authorities, strengthening of inter-agency networks, and advocacy and policy dialogue. Collaborative engagement with government offices was found to improve transparency in administrative procedures and reduce political interference. This finding is consistent with Nyarko et al. (2024), who observed that effective humanitarian coordination is affected by leadership capacity and constructive engagement with external actors. Their study emphasized that structured communication with government representatives reduces misunderstandings and promotes shared responsibility in aid delivery.

The strengthening of inter-agency coordination networks was also highlighted as a vital approach to overcoming bureaucratic obstacles. Respondents indicated that participation in OCHA-led coordination clusters promotes information sharing, joint logistics, and collective access negotiations. This result corresponds with the Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan (2023), which stresses that inter-agency cooperation is critical for addressing access restrictions and duplication of efforts. Similarly, Bang and Balgah (2022) argued that cooperative mechanisms among humanitarian actors are often weakened by political or administrative control, and that rebuilding these mechanisms enhances operational effectiveness and mutual accountability.

Advocacy and policy dialogue emerged as the third key strategy. Organizations reported that continuous dialogue with authorities and joint advocacy through networks such as the Cameroon Red Cross and OCHA contributed to clearer administrative procedures and fewer delays in authorizations. This finding aligns with UNICEF (2023), which recommended policy advocacy and continuous dialogue as essential tools for reducing bureaucratic delays in humanitarian response. It also reflects Nyarko et al.'s (2024) conclusion that advocacy enhances coordination by building trust and promoting accountability among actors involved in humanitarian governance.

Influence of Political Interference on Humanitarian Coordination

The findings indicate that political interference significantly affects the coordination of humanitarian aid delivery in Fako Division. Respondents cited restricted access and selective authorizations as major barriers, with some organizations being denied entry to certain areas under the justification of security concerns. This observation mirrors those of Bang and Balgah (2022), who reported that political control and territorial claims by both state and non-state actors in the Anglophone regions create operational uncertainty and hinder coordinated response. Political influence over beneficiary targeting also emerged as a major theme.

The study found that political actors sometimes influence who receives assistance, which compromises neutrality and reduces inter-agency cooperation. This is in line with AllAfrica (2025), which noted that local NGOs in Cameroon operate under close government supervision and face pressure to align their activities

with official priorities. Such political influence distorts need-based targeting, breeds mistrust among implementing agencies, and erodes the impartiality required for humanitarian coordination.

These findings confirm earlier observations by the Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan (2021), which stated that political interference not only delays aid delivery but also undermines neutrality and operational independence. When political interests dictate humanitarian access, organizations are forced to adjust operations according to administrative preferences rather than humanitarian needs. This reduces coordination effectiveness and weakens the overall humanitarian response structure.

Influence of Bureaucratic Challenges on Humanitarian Coordination

The findings further show that bureaucratic challenges strongly influence coordination among humanitarian actors. Lengthy administrative procedures and duplication of approval systems were the main barriers identified. Respondents explained that approval for staff movement, importation of relief materials, and project initiation often required multiple signatures and extended waiting periods. This pattern aligns with the UNICEF (2023) Humanitarian Needs Overview, which noted that formal procedures, particularly those requiring repeated authorizations, significantly delay humanitarian operations in Cameroon.

Duplication of approval systems was also highlighted as a major issue. Separate documentation demands from national and local authorities not only create confusion but also increase administrative costs and strain limited organizational capacity. The ANAPCO Humanitarian Coordination Forum (2023) had similarly emphasized the need for streamlining authorization systems to improve coordination and response time. The findings of this study reinforce that bureaucratic duplication undermines efficiency and limits inter-agency collaboration, especially for smaller organizations lacking administrative resources.

These bureaucratic impediments confirm Nyarko et al.'s (2024) argument that excessive administrative control weakens coordination by slowing decision-making and discouraging donor confidence. Likewise, the Cameroon Humanitarian Needs Overview (2024) pointed out that bureaucratic rigidity contributes to delays, inconsistent reporting, and reduced participation of local NGOs in coordination forums. In such conditions, coordination structures become less effective, and humanitarian efforts risk fragmentation and duplication.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the coordination of humanitarian aid among organizations operating in Fako Division:

1. Humanitarian organizations should maintain structured and transparent engagement with government/administrative authorities at both regional and local levels. Establishing formal coordination frameworks and regular dialogue platforms can reduce

delays in authorization processes and prevent undue political interference.

2. The government of Cameroon, in collaboration with humanitarian coordination bodies, should streamline administrative requirements governing humanitarian activities. Reducing overlapping approval systems and adopting standardized authorization forms will minimize confusion and shorten response time. Introducing digital clearance systems for project approvals and staff movement could further enhance efficiency and transparency. Clear national guidelines on documentation and coordination responsibilities would reduce administrative burdens, improve accountability, and allow agencies to focus resources on direct aid delivery.
3. Humanitarian organizations should intensify advocacy efforts aimed at reducing restrictive administrative and political practices. Joint advocacy through inter-agency networks can help influence policy reforms that protect humanitarian neutrality and operational independence.

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