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“Unable to Leave”: Refugee Management and the Forgotten Refugee Crises in the Lake Chad Basin

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The refugees in the Lake Chad Basin are at the very bottom of a hierarchy shaped by the inability of the international community to handle the global refugee crisis. Unable to leave, the Lake Chad Basin refugees have become nearly invisible as they are situated in poor and vulnerable states bearing the brunt of the crisis with little to share.

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Introduction

In 2019, 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide with 26.5 million of them being refugees.¹ About 85% are hosted in developing countries.² The public in Europe hears very little about them. When the European refugee crisis hit in 2014 and 2015, the humanitarian field was suddenly lifted to the top of the political agenda. What was until then a global refugee crisis suddenly

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became a “European crisis” defined within the parameters of security politics, and created a new hierarchy of “visible” and “invisible” refugees.³ “Visible” refugees are those who make it to Europe or have the opportunity to do so. “Invisible” refugees are those who cannot. In essence, it is a geographical hierarchy of proximity and distance created by the European dimension of the global refugee crisis.⁴ The

hierarchy has major implications on the dimensions in which the global refugee crisis is closely tracked and followed and those where it remains less so. Although Europe experienced a significant surge of migration during the crisis, the majority of the world’s refugees were then and still are hosted by weak and fragile states, and they are unable to leave because they are too poor.⁵ The implication is that such states with little to share bear the brunt of the global refugee crisis, overwhelming local integrative capacity and threatening to break down the globalised system of refugee management that was taken for granted.

The crisis manifests itself around the world and locally in various ways in different parts of the world. On the one hand, in Africa, millions are either internally displaced, for example, in Eastern Congo and Burkina Faso, or are refugees living in neighbouring countries, such as Somalians in the huge Dadaab camp complex in Kenya. Europeans hear very little about these people because they are not standing and knocking on Europe’s gates, as most of these refugees simply try to survive where they are. On the other hand, the Syrian refugees residing in Turkey or elsewhere close to Europe made the trip when it became clear that the Syrian war would not be short-lived. “Refugee crisis” became the headline all over Europe and humanitarian politics became the main subject.⁶ The European refugee crisis contributed to two further crises: one, a European crisis about Europe and the EU’s ability to respond, and a second, “real” refugee crisis mainly playing out outside Europe. The first has been the most visible, while the “real” one is invisible.⁷ This point is not to question Syrian and Iraqi refugees’ right to protection, but only to point out the geographical hierarchy at play.

A prime example of “invisible” refugees is the “forgotten” refugee crisis in the Lake Chad Basin. These refugees are seldom seen on the news. They are far away, nobody speaks for their cause, and they do not end up on European beaches and/or streets. The conflicts in Iraq and Syria created a lot of refugees, and many of them had the opportunity to come to Europe. The conflicts in Northern Nigeria involving Boko Haram also creates a lot of refugees, both internally and to neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, but these refugees do not have the opportunity to go to European countries. The same can be observed in the Horn of Africa and the Central African Republic. The refugees created by these conflicts primarily reside in fragile neighbouring countries.

¹ UN Refugee Agency, “Global Trends,” 2020, www.unhcr.org.

² Ibidem.

³ M. Bøås, “Den globale flyktningkrisen - de synlige og de usynlige,” 2017, <https://nupi.brage.unit.no>.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ UN Refugee Agency, “Global Trends,” *op. cit.*

⁶ “Migrant Crisis: One million enter Europe,” *BBC*, 22 December 2015, www.bbc.com.

⁷ M. Bøås, “Den globale flyktningkrisen ...,” *op. cit.*

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The pattern across the Sahel, in the Lake Chad Basin and the Horn of Africa, is that the refugees there are mostly “invisible”. Northern Nigeria was at the centre of attention in the international media in 2014 when the Chibok girls were abducted, but international media, as usual, turned to other matters not long after. The lack of a media spotlight is not the only, and perhaps not the main

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problem either, but rather the lack of resources. The humanitarian funds for crises in these areas are chronically underfinanced by developed countries, with the consequence that the capacity of countries neighbouring conflict-affected areas to house refugees are at a breaking point.⁸ Lebanon, with a non-refugee population of 4.4 million people, houses an additional 1.5 million Syrian refugees, equalling a quarter of the resident population.⁹ That is hardly sustainable, and it means that it is the poor and more fragile states that are bearing the brunt of the burden to house the majority of the world’s refugees. This overload on local integrative capacity in areas close to Europe is an important reason for why the global refugee crisis that had existed for decades suddenly manifested itself as a “European refugee crisis” in 2014-2015.¹⁰ A further problem today is that the conflicts producing the most refugees, like the one in the Lake Chad Basin, are long-lasting with no end in sight.

The “Invisible” Refugees in the Lake Chad Basin

Since its beginning in 2012, the Boko Haram conflict has regionalised in the Lake Chad sub-region, affecting not only northeast Nigeria but also northern Cameroon, southeast Niger and southwest Chad.¹¹ More than 3.354 million people are displaced across the region. This includes more than 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)—2.191 million in northeastern Nigeria, more than 402,000 in Chad, 341,000 in Cameroon, and 85,000 in Niger, as well as 324,000 Nigerian refugees in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.¹² The crisis has been severely exacerbated by acute levels of food insecurity, malnutrition, and inability to control the spread of diseases. The conflict between the insurgents and the Multi-National Joint Task Force¹³ deployed with counter-insurgency tasks by regional states has caused widespread destruction of vital services and infrastructure, including roads, hospitals, schools, markets, as well as rendered unusable farm and grazing lands. Food and nutrition support are in urgent need, but despite this the level of international financial mobilisation remains relatively low.¹⁴ The conflict and the high level of insecurity have made food access and provision extremely hard, with pockets of famine along with high levels of mortality spreading throughout the territory. Violence and insecurity are severely crippling people’s livelihoods, preventing people from farming, grazing, fishing, and engaging in trade. Farmland is neglected while the lake and rivers have been declared off-limits by the four riverain governments. This comes on top of the forced closure of markets in the major urban centres of the Lake Chad region imposed by the four regional countries.¹⁵ Such dynamics are taking a toll on the civilian population: access to

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ The Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan—2021 Update,” 2021, <https://data.unhcr.org>.

¹⁰ M. Bøås, “Den globale flyktningkrisen ...,” *op. cit.*

¹¹ For an overview of the Boko Haram conflict, see: A. Thurston, *Boko Haram: the history of an African jihadist movement*, 2017, Princeton University Press; J. Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020.

¹² Statistics from the operational data portal of the UNHCR: <http://data2.unhcr.org>.

¹³ The Multinational Joint Task Force was created during the 1990s by Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger to cope with transnational banditry. Since 2015, with the escalation of the Boko Haram crisis, the task force has assumed mostly counter-terrorism functions.

¹⁴ “Lake Chad’s Unseen Crisis: Voices of refugees and internally displaced people from Niger and Nigeria,” Oxfam Report, 2016, www-cdn.oxfam.org.

¹⁵ For a discussion of how forced closure allowed Boko Haram to penetrate and extend its economic networks in local markets and the relief economy, see: H. Kiari Fougou, “Boko Haram, migrants forcés et conséquences économiques dans l’est du Niger,” in E. Chauvin, O. Langlois, C. Baroin, C. Seignobos (eds.), *Conflit et violences dans le bassin du lac Tchad*, Marseille, IRD, pp. 161-172.

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humanitarian protection remains highly volatile, as most of the refugee and IDP camps are located near major urban centres, which are increasingly hard to access from the countryside due to road insecurity and restrictions on movement. In such a context, humanitarian agencies are facing huge organisational and logistical challenges and can only access recently liberated territories with armed escort by the security and defence forces (SDFs).

Even before the current crisis, the Lake Chad region faced huge infrastructural and environmental challenges.¹⁶ The post-colonial history of scarce public investment in all four countries fuelled marginalisation: poorly managed tensions regarding resource access and exploitation created the

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ground for often armed contestation and gradual environmental degradation. Competition over fishing, farming, and grazing lands was uncontrolled long before the Boko Haram conflict erupted, while basic services, such as access to healthcare or education, were hardly present beyond the major urban centres. High rainfall levels, coupled with increasingly high temperatures, have exacerbated weather-related issues: the timing and amount of rainfall, as well as the variability of water levels in rivers and the lake, have made livelihoods unpredictable and insecure. Such

unpredictability has made planning of economic activities (farming, grazing, fishing) complicated and tense, while soil erosion and increased possibilities of droughts expose communities to food insecurity. Fishermen, for example, compete for increasingly scarce resources, and their access to various waters is often dependent on armed protection. Semi-nomadic herders, faced with shrinking water access, often remain to graze their animals around urban centres or farm sites, thus increasingly raising the chance of conflict. In this context, armed groups connected to Boko Haram have proliferated and recruited especially among unemployed youth, fostering a climate of increased armed violence.¹⁷ Membership in armed groups provides not only a regular wage (more or less) but also a wider sense of belonging and respect among societies that are dominated by entrenched age, gender, and ethno-linguistic hierarchies.¹⁸

The combined effect of insurgent proliferation and counter-terrorism measures has set in motion large-scale displacement of local communities. As the exploitation of communities and human rights abuses multiply, the majority of internally displaced communities choose to find sanctuary in neighbouring areas that are lesser affected by high levels of violence. Humanitarian assistance to communities located in hard-to-access locations has triggered differentiated aid provision. The displacement prompted the clustering of different communities in areas already exposed to fragile systems subject to resource exploitation and environmental stress. Therefore, the impact on livelihoods and natural resources is exacerbated. Efforts to strengthen communities' resilience and adaptation capacity have produced an extremely low outcome as the combined effect of climate stress, demographic clustering, state-imposed restrictions on movement, and armed rackets by insurgent groups has made livelihoods extremely vulnerable.

Such vulnerability has a profound impact also in terms of social cohesion, as levels of trauma and psychological distress affect large shares of local communities, and increased inter-community tensions have eroded trust among and between citizens, institutions, and non-governmental organisations.

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The level of assistance in refugee camps is at the bare minimum, especially in view of the rising number of people seeking aid. In Nigeria, the camps are organised and serviced by the National

¹⁶ For an overview, see: G. Magrin, M.A. Perouse de Montclos (eds.), "Crise et développement La région du lac Tchad à l'épreuve de Boko Haram," AfD, 2018.

¹⁷ A. Iocchi. "The margins at the core: Boko Haram's impact on hybrid governance on Lake Chad." *Limited Statehood and Informal Governance in the Middle East and Africa*. Routledge, 2020. 123-140.

¹⁸ "Motivations and empty promises: Voices of former Boko Haram combatants and Nigerian Youth," *Mercy Corps*, 8 April 2016, www.mercycorps.org.

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Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), which also provides some support even though the main bulk of food and humanitarian services comes from NGOs like the Global Initiative for Peace, Love and Care, the Christian Association of Nigeria, and the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Nigeria, and international NGOs like Medecins Sans Frontieres and the Red Cross. The provision of services is more or less regular but insufficient as NEMA is under-resourced and the population of recipients grows day by day. As a result, the majority of IDPs lives in makeshift tents and overcrowded environments prone to the spread of diseases and increased tension. Issues of malnutrition, restrained food access, and disease outbreaks are so high that in many cases IDPs choose to return to their home territory or just leave the sites. IDP sites around Lake Chad are demographically composed of young and female households in the majority of cases. Such a situation tends to exacerbate gender-based abuses: sexual exploitation, trade by barter, and domestic violence are the main issues identified by humanitarians in the sites. Sometimes, forms of domestic violence in households where male figures are present appear as a result of the tension generated by women's empowerment programme. NEMA, in collaboration with NGOs, sometimes engages in training or vocational programmes targeted to women, such as sewing and tailoring, which present women the opportunity to become economically responsible for the households, a trend often opposed by their husbands, who can turn abusive.

In many other cases, gender-based exploitation and abuses come at the hands of the military personnel in charge of the site's security. In nearly every camp, shortages of proper provisions for the many households have triggered power dynamics between the largely male-dominated and relatively wealthy management teams and the largely female recipient population: vulnerable women are therefore subjected to the authority of more powerful men. In some cases, humanitarians have been reported to have used their access to resources to lure women into sex in exchange for goods.¹⁹ "Survival sex" comes to be performed for exit passes or an extra ratio of food and often targets women who cannot rely on any male member in their household. A concurrent phenomenon is that of "cheap wives"²⁰ in which households arrange weddings with men from the local communities to reduce food pressure and in hopes of receiving some cash. However, most of the times, such arrangements turn into a kind of marital entrepreneurialism with lower costs to the men: first of all, the bride prices are getting increasingly low due to the large number of women; second, the possibility for husbands to divorce shortly afterwards often leaves the household with one more mouth to feed, as the women frequently return pregnant.

Consequences for the Host Country Population

Refugees impose a variety of security, economic, and environmental burdens on host countries but

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they also bring along a flow of resources from international humanitarian assistance.²¹ This means that an influx of refugees can produce a wide range of effects, both positive and negative, for the host country population.²² In Uganda, the Nakivale settlement has engendered a struggle between newcomers and hosts, producing winners and losers.²³ There, refugees enjoy the relative stability of Uganda's political landscape and other

¹⁹ K. Adebajo, "Sex For Survival: How Officials Use Underage IDP Girls As Objects Of Pleasure," *Premium Times*, 20 September 2020, www.premiumtimesng.com; "Women in displacement camps in Nigeria resort to transactional sex for survival," *UN News Centre*, 9 June 2016, <https://news.un.org>.

²⁰ H. Matfess, "Women's empowerment meets male resistance, sexual exploitation in Nigeria camps," *The New Humanitarian*, 22 February 2017, www.thenewhumanitarian.org.

²¹ K. Jacobsen, "Can Refugees Benefit the State? Refugee Resources and African Statebuilding," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40(4), 2002, pp. 577-596 (retrieved 10.06.2021 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876026>).

²² I. Bjørkhaug, "Revisiting the Refugee-Host Relationship in Nakivale Refugee Settlement: A Dialogue with the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 8(3), 2020, pp. 266-281. <https://doi.org>.

²³ J. Maystadt, P. Verwimp, "Winners and Losers among a Refugee-Hosting Population," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 62(4), 2014, pp. 769-809; M. Kreibbaum, "Their suffering, our burden? How Congolese refugees affect the Ugandan population," *World Development*, 78, 2016, pp. 262-287. <https://doi.org>.

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benefits, such as the legal protection as refugees, provision of aid material, and the allocation of plots of land. In the host community, small landowners in close vicinity to Nakivale are in constant fear of having their land expropriated, while big plantation owners, being relatively distant from the settlement, are safe from Nakivale's expansion to neighbouring lands. Moreover, they are still close enough to attract a labour force from Nakivale, which they can pay less than the locals. The latter also lose out in the markets because the food production in the refugee settlement is subsidised by international humanitarian organisations and refugees can therefore sell their food cheaper.²⁴ Such economic dynamics reinforce class divisions in which those at the bottom of the ladder pay the most and risk losing everything. Given that Uganda is a relatively well-functioning and stable state, the replication of a protracted refugee situation like in Nakivale could have even more dire consequences in the context of the scarce resources and insecurity present in the Lake Chad Basin.

In northern Nigeria, when Boko Haram reached its current height of territorial control and activity in 2014, waves of IDPs suffered acute food insecurity, which put additional stress on host families.²⁵ Forced migration led to increased pressure on local shared resources. Such a situation entails the risk of making the host population along with the IDPs dependent on humanitarian aid. In the Diffa region in Niger, researchers have warned that the hosting of refugees and IDPs may cause a syndrome of dependency on humanitarian aid as the region is badly prepared.²⁶ The host populations in the Lake Chad Basin are usually as poor as the refugees fleeing from insecurity. The problem is that continued dependence on aid could increase tensions between displaced populations and unaided host populations.²⁷

In southern Chad, the World Bank found both positive and negative impacts on the local host population from the influx of refugees.²⁸ On the one hand, Chadians have for the most part welcomed refugees with generosity and hospitality. The influx of refugees brought in external humanitarian actors providing social services such as elementary schools and medical care, which seemingly benefitted the host population living nearby the camps. On the other hand, the local host population also pointed to negative impacts of the influx of refugees regarding the use of land, environment, and shared natural resources.²⁹

The refugee situation in the Lake Chad Basin has become protracted, as the security crisis has lasted for more than a decade and will continue to ravage the region for the foreseeable future without a durable solution.

We see that the consequences vary for the host populations in the Lake Chad area and that an influx of refugees can have a positive impact on the host population. However, the refugee situation in the Lake Chad Basin has become protracted, as the security crisis has lasted for more than a decade and will continue to ravage the region for the foreseeable future without a durable solution. This means that refugees will have to endure a long-term encampment,

with the consequences that has for the host population.

The Consequences of Global Hierarchies

Unable to leave, the majority of refugees in the Lake Chad Basin find themselves in a "protracted refugee situation". And so, they remain "invisible", living in limbo without any durable solution in the near future. Developing countries will continue to bear the brunt of the burden by housing the majority of the world's refugees, with the consequences it has for the host population. At some

²⁴ M. Bøås, *The Politics of Conflict Economies: miners, merchants and warriors in the African borderland*, Routledge, 2014.

²⁵ I. Emmanuel, "Insurgency and humanitarian crises in Northern Nigeria: The case of Boko Haram," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 9(7), 2015, pp. 284-296, <https://doi.org>.

²⁶ Y. H. Daouda, "Poverty and living conditions with Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: the case of southeastern Niger," *Review of African Political Economy*, 47:163, 2020, pp. 126-134.

²⁷ G. Magrin, M.A. Pérouse de Montclos, "Crisis and Development: The Lake Chad Region and Boko Haram," Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), research document, August 2018, Paris: Agence Française de Développement, www.afd.fr.

²⁸ C. Watson, E. Dnalbaye, B. Nan-guer, "Refugee and host communities in Chad: Dynamics of economic and social inclusion," *World Bank*, 2018, <https://documents.worldbank.org>.

²⁹ Ibidem.

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point, national concerns may trump international obligations to receive and host refugees, upending the international refugee regime. Such a situation is unfolding in the conflict-ridden Horn of Africa where Kenya recently decided to close the Dadaab and Kakuma camp complexes housing more than 400,000 refugees.³⁰

Refugee camps are by their very nature and according to international law temporary arrangements.³¹ However, the moment a state allows the establishment of refugee camps, they have a tendency to take on a life of their own. The state cedes some of its functions to a range of external actors who will in turn develop entrenched interests, meaning that the external actors will lobby for funds to continue performing those functions.³² Many actors, international and domestic, develop vested interests in the running of refugee camps, resulting in path dependency where the cost of reversing the previous decision to allow refugees in becomes very high for the receiving state. Therefore, an important question to ask is when will the concerns of the sovereign state trump its international obligations? In the case of Kenya, that limit seems to have been reached. Three decades after the first waves of refugees entered Kenya from Somalia, the protracted refugee situation has yet to be solved. The long-term encampment of refugees has led to major security concerns for the Kenyan government as the jihadist group Al-Shabaab has been able to infiltrate the camps and use them as bases of operation for attacking Kenyan targets. Therefore, national security concerns have reached a point where the refugee situation has become intolerable for the political establishment. Kenya's decision to close the camps highlight major structural flaws in the international refugee regime, which is failing to seek durable solutions for refugees.³³

Deals made by the EU such as the Khartoum agreement and the agreement with Turkey reinforce these hierarchies and protracted refugee situations by continuing to place the physical burden of housing refugees on developing countries in crisis-hit regions. In 2016, during Kenya's last attempt to close down the refugee camps, the Interior Ministry stated that: "Our action is taken at a time when a growing number of countries—rich and poor alike—globally are limiting refugee entry on the grounds of national security. For much lower populations than Kenya has hosted for decades".³⁴ The streams of refugees and migrants will not dissipate in the near future. The failure to adequately offer aid to refugees in neighbouring areas puts these areas at risk of reaching a tipping point at which local capacity is completely overloaded or receiving neighbouring states decide to prioritise national concerns over international obligations as many developed countries have.

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Conclusion: What can be done?

The Lake Chad area has entered its second decade of a violent conflict in one of several "forever wars" in Sub-Saharan Africa. These "forever wars" create protracted situations of internal displacement and refugee streams to neighbouring countries, putting enormous stress on the affected states, which are often weak and vulnerable and showing little resilience. As we have shown, the Lake Chad states are bearing the brunt of the "forgotten refugee crisis" with these refugees at the very bottom of the hierarchy of the global refugee crisis, rendered "invisible" and unable to leave. As the sources of insecurity are unlikely to dissipate in the near future, what can be a working strategy in the coming years?

³⁰ "Kenya tells U.N. it will shut two camps with 410,000 refugees by June 2022," *Reuters*, 29 April 2021, www.reuters.com.

³¹ B.J. Cannon, H. Fujibayashi, "Security, structural factors and sovereignty: Analysing reactions to Kenya's decision to close the Dadaab refugee camp complex," *African Security Review*, 27(1), 2018, pp. 20-41.

³² A. Ghani, C. Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

³³ B.J. Cannon, H. Fujibayashi, "Security, structural factors and sovereignty ...," *op. cit.*

³⁴ A. Thurston, "Kenya's Threat on Camp Closures Exposes Some Hard Truths," *IPI Global Observatory*, 2016, <https://theglobalobservatory.org>.

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Many international meetings have been devoted to finding ways to bring peace, stability, and security to the region: the Oslo Humanitarian Conference in February 2017; the Consultative Group on Prevention and Stabilisation in the Lake Chad Region in 2017; the Abuja Conference to Save Lake Chad in February 2018; the Lake Chad Governors' Forum in Maiduguri in May 2018; and the High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Region, held in Berlin in September 2018. The majority of these initiatives discussed a menu of potentially feasible short-term humanitarian and political responses, resulting in action plans such as the Lake Chad Development and Climate Resilience Action Plan, set up by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (2015), the African Union's Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience, (published in 2018), and the UNDP/OCHA's Resilience for Sustainable Development in the Lake Chad Basin (2018). The majority of such plans have been focused on a set of pillars: enhancing political cooperation between affected states; improving service delivery by state actors; supporting livelihoods in a sustainable way; improving infrastructure; and ensuring environmental stability.

However, no single organisation or even a group of organisations can address the multi-dimensional

Encouraging efforts have been made for a more comprehensive, cross-sectoral, and impartial needs assessments to better link short-term humanitarian actions and long-term options to advance the resilience agenda.

crisis in the Lake Chad area without integrated and concerted action. Already, encouraging efforts have been made for a more comprehensive, cross-sectoral, and impartial needs assessments to better link short-term humanitarian actions and long-term options to advance the resilience agenda. An integrated risk-assessment should be the top priority of every stakeholder engaged on Lake Chad, as siloed responses and linear forms of ad hoc engagements have proven to be scarcely effective so far. An integrated risk-assessment would

allow an appreciation of the ground-level inter-connectedness of the everyday tensions, crises, and pressures. While no single organisation is big enough to be able to cater alone to the several urgencies that compose the multidimensional crisis in the Lake Chad Basin, the cooperative effort of different individual organisations can do much to at least enhance their efforts in limiting harm and adapting to the reality of the situation.

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