Focus Group Discussion report:
Child Protection Needs in South-West Cameroon

Danish Refugee Council
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## Acronyms

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<tr>
<td>CAAFAG</td>
<td>Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups</td>
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<td>CPA</td>
<td>Community Protection Assistance</td>
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<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender Based Violence</td>
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<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>Individual Protection Assistance</td>
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<td>MSF</td>
<td>Médecins Sans Frontières</td>
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<td>NSAG</td>
<td>Non-State Armed Group</td>
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<td>NW</td>
<td>North West</td>
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<td>PFA</td>
<td>Psychological First Aid</td>
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<td>PSS</td>
<td>Psychosocial Support</td>
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<td>SSF</td>
<td>State Security Forces</td>
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<td>SW</td>
<td>South West</td>
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<td>UASC</td>
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1. Introduction

1.1 Situation context
Since its independence in 1960, Cameroon has been facing socio-political issues in the anglophone North West (NW) and South West (SW) regions. In late 2016, local lawyers and teachers mobilised over demands for respect of the region’s Anglophone educational and judicial systems. This escalated into armed confrontations, with the proliferation of non-state armed groups (NSAG) and the deployment of governmental military forces. This ongoing conflict has led to a complex humanitarian emergency with 2.3 million people in need in 2020 (OCHA), including more than one million school-aged children. The growing humanitarian needs have been enhanced by the COVID-19 outbreak, affecting the entire territory of Cameroon.

1.2 Methodology
This report focuses on data collected during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) organised by DRC’s child protection team in SW Cameroon in communities where DRC implements PSS group sessions with children and their parents/caregivers. Between the months of May and October 2020, DRC’s protection team conducted 24 FGDs with parents, caregivers, community members, adolescents and children from 7 different communities of the Fako Division (Bokova, Idenau, Liongo, Malende, Meanja, Mile 40 and Yoke). During these FGDs, DRC’s protection team met with approximately 600 individuals, girls, boys, women and men, from the age of 4 onward, on a voluntarily basis. Children received an age adapted information on the exercise to provide assent and their caregivers were also informed and consented on the exercise.

The objective of these FGDs was to discuss child protection risks and needs with communities, to improve their understanding of child protection issues, to raise collective awareness and to discuss how to prevent and respond to those issues faced by children in the communities.

Data from DRC’s protection monitoring in the SW region, from general observations of DRC’s child protection team, as well as data from external resources was used to complete FGD participants’ statements.

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1 Cameroon Education Cluster, Cameroon Education Cluster Strategy: North West and South West, January – December 2020
3. Child protection risks

3.1 Education

Being one of the issues at the origin and at the core of the crisis in the NW and SW regions, formal education has always been used by NSAGs as a political instrument. Since 2017, NSAGs have advocated and enforced a “no-school policy”, leading to public school closures for the past four years in many areas, leaving 700,000 children out of school in late 2020 (HNO). In spite of repeated calls from humanitarian and human rights organisations for education to be depoliticized, schools have been burnt, teachers and students intimidated, kidnapped and even killed, and some have seen their hands chopped off by members of armed groups. 53 percent of threats against buildings in communities have been directed against schools, according to community-based Key Informants.

An increase in attacks against education was reported by the Education cluster from August to October 2020, with events that seemed more violent than in previous years. In particular, on 24 October 2020, seven unidentified men stormed a school in Kumba, and randomly opened fire, killing eight students from the school. Between 1 September and mid-November 2020, 19 incidents in which students, education staff and schools were directly targeted were reported (HNO). As of November 2020, only 38 percent of primary schools (837 out of 1,358) and 25 percent of secondary schools (89 out of 263) in the SW region were operational (HNO). This was confirmed by 34 DRC Rapid Protection Assessments in 7 sub-divisions in the SW region, where 87% of key informants said there was an operational primary school in their community before the crises versus 27% now.

Schools have also been suffering from additional closures, for a period of approximately two and half months, as part of the government’s strategy to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Children who were sent outside the NW/SW regions to study therefore returned, exposing them to protection risks in the community, including child labour, and physical and sexual violence, as outlined in this report. During the FGDs organised by DRC, parents, caregivers as well as community members also underlined that the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic put additional pressure on their households, with children returning home and more mouths to feed.
To circumvent school closures in the NW and SW regions, some parents send their children to the West and Littoral regions, including to Douala, Limbe, Tiko and Buea, for better education opportunities and to escape insecurity in their communities. This however exposes them to higher protection risks as they are left on their own in urban areas. One parent in the Muyuka Sub-Division illustrates: “If schools were functional in my community, I would not have sent my children away”.

During DRC’s FGDs in the South-West region with parents of the community, DRC’s teams have witnessed the distress this situation causes to communities, with parents naming education as the most important aspect to focus on for their children. One parent in the Idenau community emphasized: “Education is for us what is most essential for our children. A child can always learn how to trade, but we prefer for them to go to school, and to learn something, learn basic numerical and writing skills.”

In an effort to take matters in their own hands, many communities in the SW have started informal community schools, often led by teachers who lost their jobs and who are paid small sums by the parents to teach their children in this informal setting. However, these informal schools have also suffered, sometimes being forcibly shut down by government authorities, further limiting the access to education of conflict-affected children.

Beyond the impact that school-closure has on children’s overall development, non-attendance of hundreds of thousands of children to schools has also left them on their own in insecure areas exposed to protection risks, often without supervision while their parents leave the house to work to meet their family’s needs. This has left children idle and without purpose or access to a safe environment for positive development. During DRC’s FGDs, participants from different sub-divisions repeatedly correlated school closures to the increase in delinquency of school-aged children. A parent from the Muyuka sub-division states: “In this community, [because of school destructions], children have become very stubborn and arrogant. Can you imagine, in my house, I am the one getting up in the night to open the door to my children instead of the other way round. They do exactly what they want.”

### 3.2 Child labour

Once of the direct consequences of school closures and the socio-economic crisis in the NWSW regions has been the increase of children’s engagement in child labour further contributing to a harmful child protection environment. Ongoing insecurity, displacement, frequent lockdowns and the economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak have placed enormous strain on the livelihoods of households in NWSW Cameroon. People have been unable to regularly access their fields, resulting in below average production was for the fourth consecutive year in the NW and SW regions and an increase in prices of staple foods. The total cultivated area decreased by approximately 40 percent as compared to years without conflict².

The combination of school closures and the challenging economic context forces many children to engage in child labour to support their families or to earn some money for their own needs. The Protection Cluster reported that children as young as seven years old are seen in the streets of urban centers operating small selling businesses or working as housemaid separated from their families and at times victims of exploitation (HNO 2021, Protection Analysis).

DRC’s FGDs in the SW region further substantiate the proliferation of child labour in the region. In FGDs with parents in different communities in Fako division, the parents unanimously agreed that a significant proportion of school-aged children were engaged in child labour activities. They reported that children mostly engage in snail hunting, wood collection and palm oil milling. Some children also learn a trade activity, do some farm work or in the coastal villages help fishermen in exchange of payment.

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² FEWS net, Cameroon – Perspectives on Food Security – Food Security improved in the Far North, but worsened in the Northwest and Southwest, October 2020 to May 2021
These activities often put children at higher risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. Children go snail hunting during the night, exposing them to a range of protection risks, including animal bites, injuries due to military/NSAG attacks, and sexual violence. Some children working in farms, cleaning or harvesting, are also more vulnerable to exploitation as farmers sometimes to not pay children for their work, as has been underlined by community members in Meanja. An 11 years old girl underlines: “After normal morning routines I go and help my mother cook, we go to the farm, go work odd jobs like prune palms, go to construction sites to teel grounds on foundation. Sometimes we don’t get paid and other times, we receive 200 Francs.”

In addition to children engaging increasingly in labour outside the house, they have also been more engaged in work inside the household. During DRC’s FGD in the Fako Division, children emphasised that one of the main reasons why they never engage in playing and game activities is the obligation to take care of household chores.

Girls are often requested to undertake cleaning, cooking or babysitting assignments and are often left at home on their own to look after the younger children, exposing them to protection risks. A thirteen-year-old girl in the Idenau community describes her routine by stating: “When I get up from the bed, I greet my parents, brush my teeth, wash the dishes and keep the house clean. I go and carry water which is about 30 minutes away from my house. I then arrange the house and cook food.” Another 12-year-old girl told DRC: “When I get up, I clean the house. After doing so, I bathe my four-year-old sisters and I babysit the toddler from morning till evening, when my mother comes back home from her petty trade.”

Boys, on the other hand, are often instructed to participate in family businesses or more physical tasks. One 13 years old boy illustrates: “After the usual house chores, I follow my grandmother to the farm. The farm is very far so we have get up as early as 4am to prepare and leave by 5:30am. The farm is about 70 minutes’ walk from the house. On a good day, we should be back by 4pm.” Another child adds: “I follow my mother to go sell fish at the beach, we spend our entire day at the beach. I am unable to play or visit my friends.”

### 3.3 Physical and sexual violence

#### 3.3.1 Sexual Abuse

In the SW region, the insecurity due to the conflict has developed an environment conducive to harassment, sexual assault and abuse of children, with the absence of institutions and capacities in these areas to ensure security or follow-up of sexual abuse cases.

According to DRC’s protection monitoring conducted during 2020, ten percent of DRC’s 331 Key Informants covering 20 locations in the Fako and Meme divisions, consider that women and girls are particularly at risk of sexual harassment or sexual exploitation in their communities. Key informants also reported that two of the main concerns for women and girls’ safety is the presence of Security State forces (42%) and the presence of NSAG (27%).

Children in the NWSW are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) as a direct consequence of the violence but also as a negative coping mechanism from families forcing their children, especially girls, into child
marriage and consequent early pregnancy. FGD participants told DRC that “Sexual violence continues to increase as the crisis develops and gradually becomes normalised”. In the FGD in Malende, participants said that certain areas of their community are commonly considered as “no-go” areas, where harassment has become the norm, especially for young girls.

It was clear in the different FGDs that sexual violence is widespread but instigates insufficient response on behalf of community members out of fear to intervene. Numerous examples of retaliation against individuals who undertook to help sexual violence victims have been mentioned in the different FGDs. In one of the communities, for instance, a young girl was raped, and a community member called on Doctors Without borders to take her to the hospital. This community member was then beaten up by armed group members as it was considered that she exposed the community to strangers. Such incidents frighten community members, who fear to offer their own help or to seek for external help and further impacts victims of sexual violence.

One man told DRC how this fear can have a deterrent effect on taking action in sexual violence situations: “Last night, I heard one girl screaming, but I was afraid to raise the alarm because that place is a drug dealer spot.”

Beyond the trauma that sexual violence causes, it also increases the number of early pregnancies young girls. A caregiver in the Fako Division confirms: “Many children in the community as young as 14 now have unwanted pregnancies, some as a result of rape, some as a result of promiscuity. Most of the girls who have been raped don’t even tell their parents and the parents will only see the stomach getting big.”

One community member tells the following story: “We came across a case whereby a 27-year-old community member who lives close to my farm, was sexually abusing young girls, starting from the age of 5. I noticed he had an unusual behaviour, as he called one of the little girls playing around the houses from time to time to his house. Once the child would enter inside the house, the man would lie down on the floor, with his head outside the door in order to ensure that he could see anyone coming towards his property […] When community members started investigating the man, he ran away from the community. We later realised that he had sexually abused a large number of boys and girls who were afraid to speak out.”

- **Isolation of children**

Based on results of FGDs in the SW, one of the factors leading to the increase of sexual violence seems to be the isolation of children. This isolation can be explained through school closures, and to farming being the major economic activity in the communities in the region which forces parents to leave to the fields and leave their older children (at the age of 11 or 12 years old), mostly girls, look after their younger siblings, cook or clean the house. During the DRC’s FGD with parents and caretakers in the coastal community of Idenau, 95% of the parents indicated that they do not spend much time with their children. One parent explained: “We do not spend much time with our children because we have to think about means to take care of them. It is even worse for some of us who are single parents. We can spend approximately two hours with the children per day. During the day, children are left on their own or kept under the supervision of a good-will neighbour, who does not go to the farm or run his business. We know it is risky but there is little we can do about it”.

Participants told DRC that they have witnessed a number of girls who have been sexually assaulted when left alone at home. In Idenau, a parent stresses: “Unfortunately, incidents have happened. For example, a small girl was raped by a neighbour. The neighbour took advantage of the little girl because he knew the mother was not around. We leave them in God’s hands trusting that nothing evil will befall them.”

Boys are also subject to sexual harassment. Participants in Meanja explain that these women offer boys some money in return for sex. They come to the boys’ houses, presenting themselves as family friends or neighbours, and at the first opportunity of being alone with them, pressure the boys into sexual intercourse. DRC’s protection team has also recorded cases of sexual abuse within the household. As result of the influx of IDPs into the Mile 40 community for example, families live in more limited spaces than before. Children often sleep in the same room or in the same bed as their parents or other family members who have been reported to take advantage of them.
- Sexual assault at work

FGD participants told DRC that girls working very late at night selling boiled eggs, colanuts or cow skin (“canda”) are exposed to sexual violence to a greater extent. FGD participants in Meanja told the story of a girl who had not sold all her cow skin during the day and continued her work at night, when she met a man who offered her some money in exchange of sexual favours. The girl felt compelled to follow the man to compensate the loss of money due to the unsold articles. She feared being beaten by her employer if she had not sold all the food. Girls working in restaurants and bars were also reported to be highly exposed to sexual harassment.

- Abuse by parties to the conflict

Both parties to the conflict have been accused of abusing their power and using physical and sexual violence. FGD participants have reported rapes and sexual abuses committed by NSAGs on young girls. One member of the community explains: “In this community, if you have a beautiful young girl in your house who is admired by a NSAG member, the latter will threaten you and forcefully take your child to the bush to rape her. They will then bring the girl back. It is traumatising for both the child and her family, but there is nothing the community can do because NSAGs have guns and we don’t.” Community members in the SW region have also witnessed sexual harassments on behalf of the military. Participants illustrated: “Girls who go to their farms are often stopped by the military and ordered to give them their phone numbers. Girls feel obliged to abide by the request. When girls then blacklist the number and meet the same military forces, they suffer from harassment. This has pushed some girls to blacklist the numbers and move out of the community to other communities”.

In one of the communities, a 14-year-old boy living in the communities’ orphanage emphasises: “Constant harassment from the military at the orphanage made us move from the orphanage to another building.”

- Prostitution

A fifteen-year-old girl in the community of Idenau explains: “Many girls have gone into prostitution. Most girls lost their source of income due to the crisis and have resorted to prostitution.” During the FGD in one of the communities, participants confirmed that many girls of the community have engaged in sex for survival, from the age of twelve onward. Many of these girls get pregnant. The communities have witnessed cases where the teenage girls tried to abort the pregnancy by taking some plants and died as a result because of lack of knowledge on the right plants to use.

A 35-year-old woman from another community concludes with an alarming statement: “Sexual activities among young girl have increased. My niece, who stays with me, got pregnant at the age of 15. She was raped. I don’t even know the author of the pregnancy, but I am just happy that she gave birth safely.”

3.3.2 Domestic Abuse

The conflict has led to the breakdown of family structures and has left parent stressed and often unable to cope with their children. FGD participants told DRC several similar stories of parents who get violent quickly and increased alcohol use among many (particularly men) to cope with the stress of the conflict leading to increased physical violence within the household, especially against women and children. According to children’s testimony in five different communities, parents have become violent towards children, often insulting and abusing them. One adolescent girl from the orphanage expresses her concerns: “Our orphanage mother is always isolating herself from us and does not treat us well.”

A 10-year-old girl from the Lions community, depicts: “Since we started to stay with my grandmother, she is always going to the bush. My mother always leaves me and my younger siblings in the house the whole day. If she comes back and I have not cooked, she will beat me and will start crying saying that she is tired of suffering with us.”
The situation appears to be quite alike in numerous communities of the SW region. An adolescent girl from the Yoke community describes: “Our neighbour ran from their house and spent three days on the street just for the fact that the stepmother threatened she was going to beat her up.”

In Meanja, an 11-year-old girl explains: “When my father comes back home drunk, he will first ask for food. If my mother does not give him any meat, my father will start beating her, he will then hit us and then sleep.” Likewise, in the community of Bokova, an adolescent boy stated: “My uncle’s wife hates me and accused me of stealing. This is why my uncle beat me like a snake and locked me up without food for two days. When I came out, our ‘quarter-head’ reported the incident to the police. My uncle threatened the man not to interfere in his family life. Look at my back and my legs, it is still paining me today.” DRC’s protection team authenticated the injuries of the children and met with the uncle for mediation and counselling sessions and worked with a local partner for further follow-up.

Parental abuse, described by children as parents’ incapacity to handle emotional stress and expressing it through physical violence, undoubtedly results in drastic consequences for the children’s wellbeing, but also has an important repercussion on their behaviour. Participants to various FGDs underline that children often become more hostile or brutal after witnessing acts of violence in their communities/households, a behaviour enhanced by repeated lockdowns and curfews. Sometimes, parental abuse can even have irreversible consequences such as in the Mile 16 community, for instance, where it was reported that a child had become permanently disabled as a consequence of the harsh beating of his mother.

### 3.4 Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups (CAAFAG)

As highlighted by different protection cluster partners, reports from the field indicate that young boys, but also young girls, have joined non-state armed groups, some in search of revenge for arrests, killings and harsh treatment of family members, some in search for livelihoods, while others have been abducted and forcibly recruited. During DRC’s FGDs in the Fako division, community members from five different communities underlined that some children have expressed the wish to join NSAGs. A majority of these participants mention children are practising to use guns, using banana stems, from the age of four, and include fight and weapons in their play. Most children have learnt from a young age to recognise and differentiate the sounds of different NSAGs and military weapons. Parents expressed their concern regarding the increased violence amongst children. One of the community leaders in the Fako Division states: “The children are getting wild and with the number of children in the community, we are afraid.”

DRC’s child protection team likewise noticed children’s fascination towards NSAG’s habits and behaviours especially following prolonged lockdown periods such as the one imposed by NSAGs prior to elections in early February 2020. DRC’s team observed children masking their faces with their clothes as a way to reproduce the clothing NSAGs wear. DRC’s Child Protection staff also discerned the frequent use of NSAG nicknames, such as “odeshi” (which designates the magical power that prevents bullets from penetrating the body) or “commander” among young children. DRC furthermore noted that children engaged in role-play, whereby they divide themselves into two groups, one impersonating the State Security Forces (SSF) and the other the NSAGs and pretend to shoot each other with toy guns they built themselves. These games sometimes developed in real fights, resulting in injuries. Concerns regarding similar behaviours were also raised by parents during FGDs.

The adoption of NSAGs’ habits and practices is developing as a means to seek revenge on the military, for arrests or violence used in the communities. The participants to the FGDs underlined that some children experience dreadful treatment on behalf of the military, as they force men and women to undress before the children and then beat them up. A 55-year-old mother expresses her resentment: “Life has change for the worst. We are living as if we are not living. My family has suffered because my son was killed by the military and one got missing before coming back.” In the Muyuka sub-division, a parent recounts that one child of his community saw the military during lockdown and asked one of them: “Do you want to shoot us?”
The trauma experienced by the children sometimes encourages them to join or cooperate with NSAGs. For instance, in one of the Fako communities, the FGD participants mentioned one orphaned boy who joined the NSAGs as he believes that the conditions with the NSAGs are better than the ones he is experiencing at the orphanage.

### 3.5 Delinquency

The harsh environment in which children evolve has led to an increase in children’s daily delinquency. Parents from the various communities in which DRC has led its FGDs have complained about their children’s language use (often described as rude and violent), as well as behaviour, encompassing unhealthy habits, violent acts, increased time spent away from home where no parental supervision or restriction takes place. In the Mile 40 community, a parent complains: “I have to wake up at night to open the door for my children when they come back late almost every day.”

#### 3.5.1 Sexual activity

During the many FGDs organised by DRC in various communities, participants highlighted an increase of sexual activity among children, in particular for girls from the age of 9, and boys from the age of 13, resulting in an increase of unwanted pregnancies. In the communities of Malende and Meanja, community members observed an increase in such behaviours following the school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They explained that due to the lock-down, many children who had left the community came back, indoctrinating children from the community with new ideas and practices related to sex. In Malende, community members pointed out a particular spot in the community where boys and girls as young as 10 years old engage in sexual activities. A community health work in Meanja, a 30-year-old woman, said she has witnessed an increase in the rate of early pregnancy among girls from the community.

#### 3.5.2 Drugs

The increased use of drugs, especially amongst adolescents was also repeatedly reported during FGDs. Participants underlined that children from the age of 8 have been engaging in ‘gang’ activities including: smoking and going out at night, dating older men and women, and using drugs, in part due to peer pressure to follow these bad habits. A 61-year-old man in Malende corroborates: “Young boys who take that drug are called Malians here, because they become wild: they do not know who is who after using tallan.” Similar opinions are disclosed by the majority of parents from other communities who agreed that drug consumption and abuse has increased in the community, especially among children.

A 48-year-old woman from the Yoke community sheds some more light on the issue from her personal experience: “I usually leave my children with my neighbour so that I can go to the market. One day, I came back and realised that my son had followed other children to the rubber plantation, where some children usually take their drugs. This made me scared, especially as the child would not open up to me on whether he had tasted the drug or not. Unfortunately, I cannot stop my business to sit at home, otherwise my four children will die of hunger.”

#### 3.5.3 Petty Crimes

In the five communities of the Fako division where DRC conducted FDGs, participants emphasised that following school closures, children started to concentrate on making some money. Although many children engaged in different forms of child labour, some children have resorted to stealing. A 33-year-old woman in Meanja describes to DRC: “Some of the children are now engaging themselves in dangerous activities in the community, such as theft.”
Stealing has become the only way of earning some money for some boys. A 14-year-old boy from the Idenau community explains: “The boys who used to carry rice or fish can’t do that anymore because of the increase of labour demand is too high for the available jobs. These boys have resorted to stealing and banditry.”

FGD participants reported that certain children steal from the bush or farm products from other communities and sell the products in order to earn some money. A 52-year-old woman was victim of robbery of her farm in Meanja: “I went to the farm and noticed that two boys (about 13 and 14 years old) were holding a bag of cassava. When I asked them why they stole from my farm, they threatened to beat me, the bigger one even pushed me on the ground. These children are very wild in this community.”

Other children are excluded from games if they do not engage in stealing. A 14-year-old boy from the Idenau community reveals: “I don’t play because most of the games boys play here involve stealing. For example, for a child to play in the game house, he will need to have money to bet and as most boys my age don’t have the money they tend to steal from their parents.”

In the Mile 40 community, community members have expressed their worries in relation to stealing in order to pay for drinks, smoke and drugs. Community members have linked these behaviours to school closures.

3.6 Lack of legal documentation

Lack of civil or legal documentation is also a key child protection issue in the NW and SW regions of Cameroon. Lack or loss of birth certificates as a result of displacement and destruction of homes will limit children to attend education facilities when this becomes possible and makes children more vulnerable to exploitation or trafficking, as well as arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly for boys aged 14 and over.

53% of key informants in DRC’s 34 Rapid Protection Assessments in 7 sub-divisions (see graph) reported that less than half of the population in their community has birth registration documents. The main barriers to access civil documentation according to protection monitoring key informants are documents fees (34%), restrictions on movements (29% as well as transportation costs (27%). NSAGs have blocked humanitarian organisations from assisting individuals to obtain civil documentation including birth certificates, considering it to be a legitimisation of the central government.

In the Fako Division, participants to the FGDs have expressed their concern about children leaving the community to sell products in the market being at risk of arbitrary arrest because they do not have legal documentation. Most of these children have been harassed at check points, boys have been undressed to check marks belonging to certain NSAGs, and some children have paid just to cross check points on their way
3.7 Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC)

The draft Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) 2021 highlights that a growing number of UASC has been reported in 2020 (5,816 unaccompanied children and 16,240 separated children recorded against 2,500 UASC identified in 2019) caused by family separation as a direct consequence of the crisis and regular attacks on villages forcing family members to scatter, but also as families send children to urban centers to continue their education, or seek economic opportunities. Some of these children have been reported to end up being involved in some of the worst forms of child labor or survival sex, as confirmed in DRC led FGDs in the Fako division.

Key informants in 34 Rapid Protection Assessments done by DRC in 7 sub-divisions in the SW region, estimated that 9% of the population in their community consisted of Unaccompanied and Separated Children.

In addition to the search for education and economic opportunities, FGD participants reported to DRC that the worsening behaviour of children within their households as a consequence of violence witnessed has also pushed parents to send their children away, either to strangers or to distant relatives in the communities of Bamenda, Muyuka or Kumba.

A 36-year-old woman confirmed: “My child was becoming very stubborn, so I sent her to Muyuka to stay with my sister.”

Some children also ask to be sent away due to the harsh treatment they receive at home. A 15-year-old girl from the Idenau community explains: “Due to the crisis, I was taken away from my grandmother and sent to my mother. My mother maltreated and overworked me. I suffered for a long time and pleaded to be sent to another relative. After so much plea, she let me come to Idenau and has never called nor visited.”

A 55-year-old woman stresses: “Some children have become victims of multiple displacements, as they move from relative to relative. There is a rising need to empower the families and community focal points on how to handle children’s emotions and the dangers of multiple displacements.” Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are forced to work very hard to support themselves and their siblings. Community members sometimes take care of some of these UASC, providing them with shelter and, in turn, requesting that they take care of the younger children or hiring them for farm works.

In the Fako Division, some community members have given UASC a piece of land in order for them to cultivate the land and take of their siblings. In some communities, community members divide any support to the children who are in desperate situations. Nevertheless, there are no existing arrangements defining under what circumstances the communities provides support to the UASC. During DRC’s child protection work in the SW region, DRC teams met different UASC, who did not benefit from any help as the communities did not consider their situation to make them particularly vulnerable, making it at times difficult to identify UASC during community assessments.
UASC are particularly exposed to the risk of child labour, likely becoming domestic servants. A 15-year-old boy complained to DRC of being exploited in his host family: “I spend all my time working in the farm of my relatives and go to the markets and sell on market days”. He therefore had no time to spend with other children.

FGDs participants told DRC that they have witnessed the exodus of children, especially girls, towards bigger towns. Participants explain that this migration is sometimes voluntary – to escape from the crisis –, and sometimes induced – through promises of babysitting work or trips abroad – and then forced upon the children, by taking the children’s legal documentation as a threat in exchange of prostitution.

A fifty-three-year-old man illustrates: “Last week, I was in Bonaberi [Douala]. I went to a snack bar at night and saw seven girls from my community who went around the snack bar offering some rest to male clients. When I returned to the community, I explained this to these children’s parents. A few months later, two of these girls (aged 15 and 16) returned to the community. One was pregnant and the other was seriously sick.”

Another 39-year-old mother, from a different community adds: “My sixteen-year-old daughter’s friend came to the camp the other day and took my daughter with her to Buea. My daughter told me she must go and prostitute herself. I don’t even know where my child is staying in Buea.”

### 4. Recommendations

#### 4.1 Recommendations to humanitarian actors

- Improve needs assessments on child protection issues in the NW and SW regions to better inform the response, especially on the issue of Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC), both in the NW/SW regions and in the West and Littoral regions.

- Provide support to UASC by raising awareness on the protection risks associated with and prevention of separation of children, providing appropriate care arrangements, and supporting host families.

- Provide Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS) for children and their parents/caregivers.

- Use community-based approached to raise awareness on child protection risks in the community and identify and support community-based solutions.

- Support the reintegration of children associated with armed groups who want to leave NSAGs.

- Provide support in economic recovery, especially for households more at risk to send children away for economic reasons.

- Support occupational activities for children which are age and gender appropriate:
  - to relieve caretakers from the stress of knowing the children are idle,
  - to provide psycho-social support to children and positive mentorship.
  - To detect children in distress, having difficulties coping or facing difficult situations.
  - To reduce exposure of children to NSAG and protection risks.

#### 4.2 Recommendations to donors

- Continue advocacy efforts to allow access to education for children in the NWSW regions.

- Address the urgent funding gap for child protection programmes that work to prevent, mitigate and respond to the protection needs as outlined in this report.
4.3 Recommendations to parties to the conflict

- Acknowledge the humanitarian suffering created because of the ongoing crisis.
- Facilitate uninhibited humanitarian access to assist populations affected by the crisis.
- Actively participate in and promote peaceful and inclusive solutions to the conflict.
- Declare schools as safe zones and condemn any form of attack on education.
- Promote access to civil documentation, including birth registration to avoid exposing children to long-term protection risks.