

Assessing the Role of NGOs in Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Improvement in Idenau, Southwest Region, Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

The growing need to address persistent socio-economic challenges affecting vulnerable populations has contributed to the expansion of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) globally. NGOs have become key development actors, particularly in providing humanitarian assistance, financial support, capacity building, and livelihood improvement interventions. However, their grassroots-level contributions remain under-researched, especially in developing countries such as Cameroon. This study examined the role of NGOs in promoting economic empowerment in Idenau, Bibunde, Southwest Region of Cameroon. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data collected through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. A total of 394 respondents were selected using stratified random and systematic sampling techniques. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and ANOVA. Findings revealed that NGO interventions significantly contribute to entrepreneurship development, employment creation, financial support, scholarship provision, and infrastructural development. The study recommends strengthened public–private partnerships and improved government collaboration with NGOs to enhance funding, coordination, and data sharing for more effective programme implementation.

Keywords
Capacity Building
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Introduction

Improving livelihoods has remained a central global development concern since the post-World War II era, particularly in vulnerable and developing communities. The emergence and growth of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been driven by the need to address widespread socio-economic challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment [1]. Historical crises, including the famines of the 1970s and 1980s, significantly contributed to the rapid expansion of NGOs worldwide [2]. Although NGOs have a long-standing presence in humanitarian work, their modern institutional form is relatively recent, dating back only a few decades [3]. NGOs operate as complementary actors to government institutions by providing essential services such as education, health care, financial assistance, and capacity building. They often take the form of charities, foundations, associations, and non-profit organizations [4]. Through these roles, NGOs help bridge gaps in public service delivery and contribute to human development and poverty reduction.

Across Africa, NGOs have become critical actors in addressing unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment through economic empowerment initiatives such as microfinance, skills training, and income-generating activities [5]. The rise of NGOs in Africa was partly influenced by structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, which intensified inequality and weakened state welfare systems [6]. Empirical evidence shows that NGOs significantly contribute to financial empowerment. For example, microfinance institutions have reached over 10 million clients across Africa, improving access to credit for small businesses and entrepreneurs (Consultative Group to Assist the Poor [7]. The International Fund for Agricultural Development [8] further reports that microfinance interventions can increase household income by up to 20% within two years. Similarly, BRAC programmes have demonstrated a 30% increase in household savings through combined financial literacy and credit schemes [9]. However, challenges persist, including dependency concerns, inadequate funding, and weak coordination among stakeholders, which may limit long-term sustainability [10, 11]. The African Development Bank [12] also notes that less than 30% of NGOs have stable funding sources, constraining their operational effectiveness.

In Cameroon, NGOs play a vital role in humanitarian assistance, community development, and livelihood support. They contribute to providing shelter, food aid, education, clean water, and empowerment programmes for vulnerable populations [13]. The ongoing socio-political crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions, combined with insecurity in the Far North, has increased displacement and humanitarian needs, with over one million internally displaced persons recorded [14]. In response, organizations such as the World Food Programme [15] have

supported food assistance, cash transfers, and nutrition programmes benefiting thousands of households.

NGOs play an important role in improving the livelihoods of vulnerable populations in Idenau, especially following the Anglophone crisis, which has led to an influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into the area. This population increase has placed pressure on limited resources and social services, resulting in challenges such as inadequate housing, poor sanitation, cholera outbreaks, limited access to clean water and healthcare, and food insecurity. To address these problems, NGOs such as the World Food Programme (WFP), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Foundation (LUKMEF) provide humanitarian assistance, shelter, healthcare, water and sanitation services, and economic empowerment programs aimed at improving livelihoods and resilience. Despite these interventions, there is limited research evaluating the effectiveness of NGO activities in improving livelihoods in Idenau. This study is therefore necessary to assess the contributions of NGOs, identify existing challenges, and propose strategies for improving sustainable livelihood support in the community. The study specifically aims to examine livelihood support programs implemented by NGOs in Idenau, and assess their interventions in the area of economic empowerment and food security for improved livelihoods.

Materials and Methods

A. Study Area

The study was conducted in Idenau, a coastal municipality located in Fako Division of the South West Region. Administratively, Idenau was established by Presidential Decree No. 95/206 of 24 April 1995 and serves as the headquarters of the West Coast Subdivision. It is situated approximately 29 km from Limbe, between latitude 4.23°N and longitude 8.98°E, with an average altitude of about 300 m above sea level in the mainland areas and approximately 5 m in the maritime zone [16]. The municipality covers an estimated surface area of about 16 km^2 and comprises approximately eight villages with a population of about 38,000 inhabitants [16]. It is bordered to the north by the Mount Cameroon National Park, to the northeast by Buea Subdivision, to the east by Limbe II Municipality, to the south by the Atlantic Ocean, to the west by Bamusso Subdivision, and to the northwest by Mbonge Subdivision (Figure 1). Idenau experiences an equatorial climate characterized by two distinct seasons: a long rainy season (March to November) and a short dry season (December to February). Annual rainfall is high, averaging up to 4,000 mm, with peak precipitation occurring between July and September. Mean annual temperature is approximately 27°C, with relatively high humidity and low wind speeds (about 2 mph).

The population is distributed across three main housing types: temporary plank structures (locally known as "caraboat" houses), semi-permanent buildings, and permanent concrete structures, most of which are roofed with corrugated aluminum sheets. Transportation is dual in nature, comprising land transport in the mainland areas and water transport in the coastal/maritime zones. The area is endowed with diverse natural and ecological resources, including the Atlantic Ocean, fishing ports, beaches, mangrove ecosystems, forest reserves, waterfalls (notably in Etome and Enyenge), lava deposits (Bakingili and Idenau), crater lakes (Debundscha/Njonji), and active volcanic landscapes associated with Mount Cameroon.

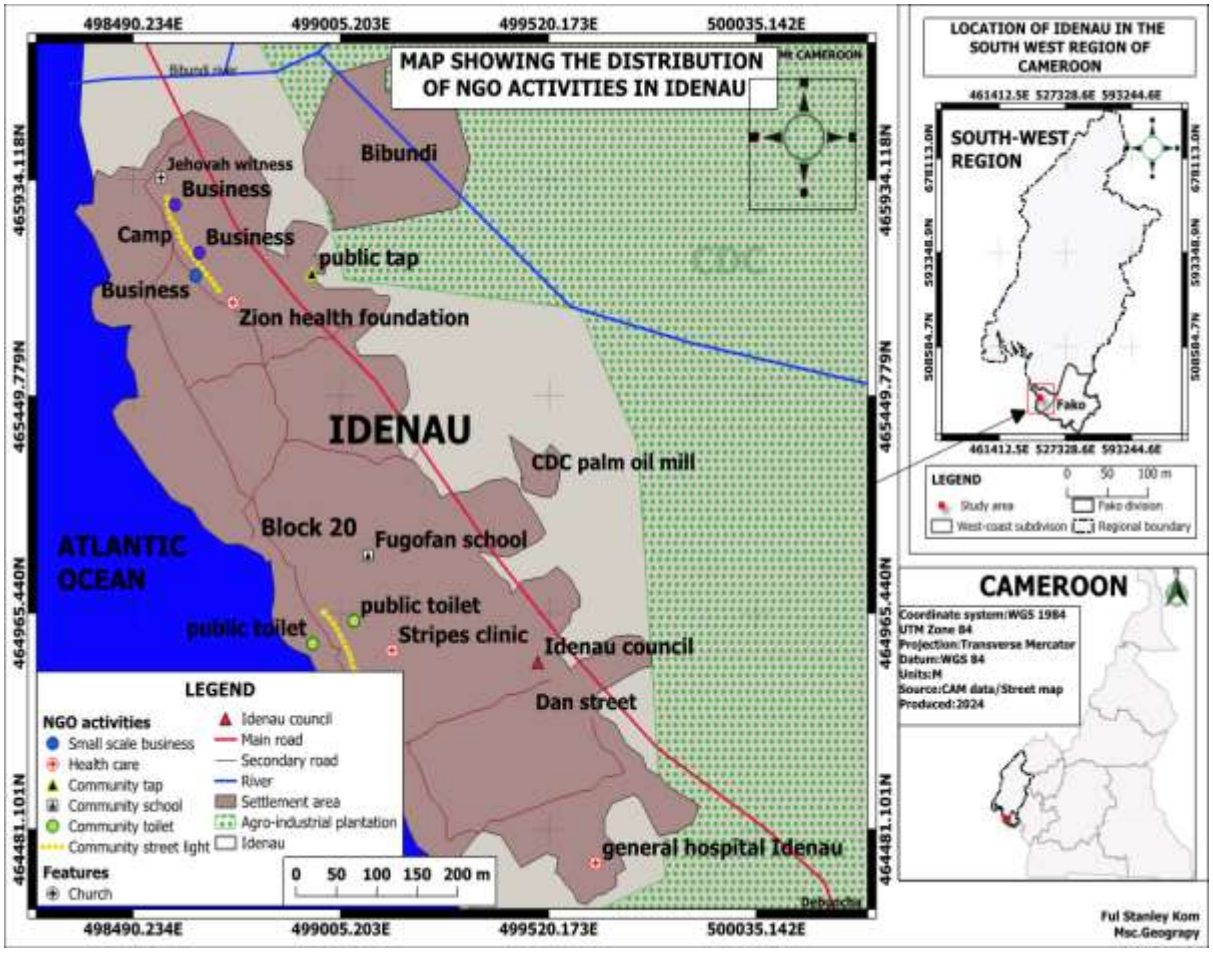


Fig. 1. Location of the Study Area in Idenau Municipality

B. Data Collection Methods

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of the contributions of NGOs toward livelihood improvement and economic empowerment in Idenau. The use of mixed methods helped the researchers to combine numerical data with the lived experiences and perceptions of beneficiaries, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and field observations. Structured questionnaires were administered to respondents to obtain quantitative information on the nature and extent of NGO interventions, particularly in areas such as livelihood support, financial assistance, employment opportunities, food security, healthcare, shelter provision, and capacity-building initiatives.

Qualitative data were obtained through key informant interviews conducted with NGO officials, community leaders, and selected beneficiaries, as well as focus group discussions involving internally displaced persons (IDPs) and residents. These methods provided in-depth insights into community perceptions, experiences, and the effectiveness of NGO interventions in improving livelihoods and resilience. Field observations were also carried out to assess living conditions, infrastructure, and ongoing NGO-supported activities within the communities.

Secondary data were collected from a wide range of documented sources including NGO reports, government publications, journal articles, books, conference papers, policy documents, census reports, institutional records, and internet sources. Relevant information was also obtained from humanitarian situation reports and publications from organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Foundation (LUKMEF). These secondary sources provided background information on NGO activities, displacement trends, livelihood conditions, and socio-economic challenges in the study area.

The target population comprised internally displaced persons and resident communities in Idenau who had benefited from NGO interventions aimed at improving livelihoods. Key study sites included Las Kombo, CDC Camps, and Block 20, which host a significant proportion of vulnerable households affected by the ongoing socio-political crisis and economic hardship.

C. Sampling Technique and Sample Selection

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed, involving stratified, random, and systematic sampling procedures to ensure representativeness and reduce selection bias. Stratified sampling was used in the Selection of NGOs. NGOs operating in the study area were grouped into different functional strata based on their areas of intervention. From these strata, six major NGOs were randomly selected for the study. These included: Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Foundation (LUKMEF), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), World Food Programme (WFP) and OUTREACH Organisation. The second stage was the selection of the sampled sites. Three areas were randomly selected and included: Bibundi neighborhood of Las Kombo, Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC) camps, and Block 20.

The third stage involved the selection of the sampled population for perception studies. A systematic random sampling design was used in selecting the households for interviews and questionnaire administration. Systematic sampling involved selecting a sample unit at random, then selecting every nth unit systematically. The nth unit varied depending on the number of households in the communities. In large communities, a step of 5 houses was chosen, while in small communities there was a step of 3 houses.

A total of 394 respondents were selected as follows: Block 20 had 200 respondents, which was the highest, CDC camps had 120, and Las Kombo had 74 respondents. The sample size was obtained from Slovin's method of calculating sample size.

D. Data Processing and Analysis

Data collected for the study were processed and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 4.21. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize and present the data. Tables, graphs, charts, and histograms were employed to facilitate the visualization and interpretation of the findings. Inferential analysis was conducted using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test the hypothesis that financial assistance, capacity building, and other economic activities provided by NGOs do not significantly contribute to the economic empowerment of beneficiaries. The ANOVA was used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in economic empowerment across the relevant groups. Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$).

Results

A. Contributions of NGOs to Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Improvement

The study examined the contributions of NGOs toward economic empowerment and livelihood improvement among residents of Idenau. Particular attention was given to the role of NGOs in entrepreneurship development, employment creation, financial assistance, infrastructural development, education support, and alternative income-generating activities within the community.

Findings, as shown in Fig. 2, revealed that NGOs have made significant contributions to improving the living conditions of vulnerable populations in the area.

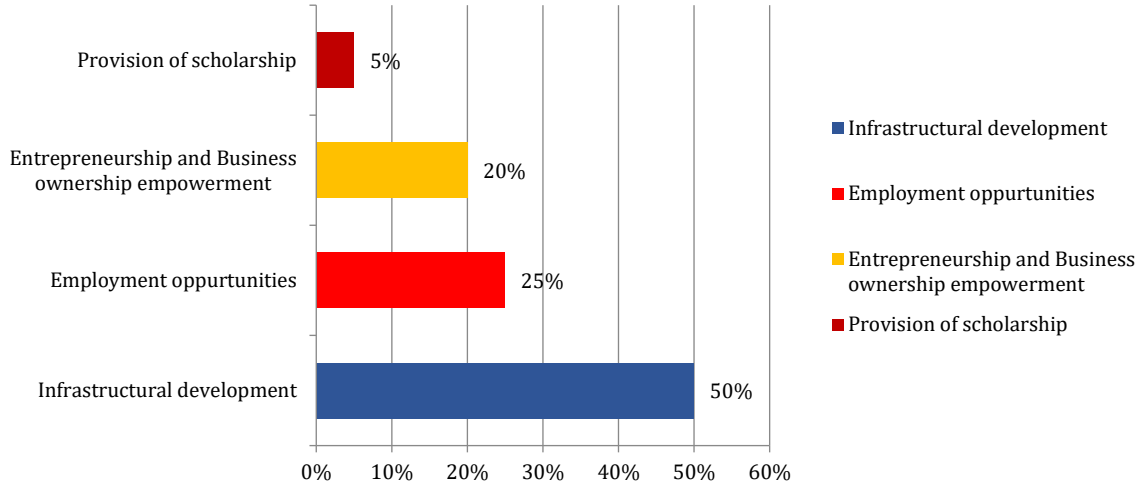


Fig. 2. The stake of NGOs' activities in the community

A majority of respondents (50%) indicated that NGO interventions were most visible in infrastructural development, including the construction of toilets, boreholes, schools, and streetlights. About 25% of respondents reported that NGOs contributed to employment creation through livelihood support programs and small business assistance. Furthermore, 20% stated that NGOs empowered community members through entrepreneurship and business support initiatives, while 5% acknowledged scholarship and educational support programs.

Field observations showed that NGOs such as NRC, DRC, IRC, WFP, REACHOUT, and LUKMEF have implemented several projects aimed at improving livelihoods in the community. These interventions, as seen in Fig. 3, include: the construction of toilets and potable water facilities, establishment of schools for internally displaced children, installation of streetlights to enhance security and night-time economic activities, and provision of financial support to women and small business owners.

Plates 1A and B show schools constructed at the CDC Camp in Fulgo Palms by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to support the education of internally displaced children within the community. The establishment of these schools has helped to improve access to education and reduce the educational burden faced by vulnerable households in the area. Plate 1C illustrates a streetlight installed at the CDC Camp by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in 2022. The streetlight has enhanced security, facilitated movement within the community at night, and promoted economic activities such as petty trading and other night-time businesses. NGOs also contributed to economic empowerment through cash assistance, vocational training, support for small-scale businesses, provision of agricultural inputs such as maize seeds, and assistance with house rents for vulnerable households. Women in particular benefited from micro-business support initiatives such as hairdressing, petty trading, and food vending activities.



Plate 1A: Toilet and Water Facility Constructed by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) at Block 20, Idenau



Plate 1B: Sanitation Facility Constructed by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) at Block 20, Idenau



Plate 1C: Streetlight Installed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) at CDC Camp, Idenau

Fig. 3. Some Infrastructural development by NGOs in the area

Interviews conducted with NGO officials further revealed that these organizations have been actively involved in health campaigns, food security programs, sanitation improvement, HIV/AIDS awareness, vaccination campaigns, and emergency humanitarian assistance. However, most NGOs reported financial and operational constraints that sometimes limit the scope and sustainability of their interventions.

The study assessed respondents' knowledge and satisfaction with NGO activities in the community. Findings showed that an overwhelming majority (97.5%) of respondents were satisfied with NGO services, while only 2.5% expressed dissatisfaction, mainly due to limited awareness or lack of direct collaboration with NGOs.

Table 1. Respondents' Knowledge and Perceptions of NGO Activities in Idenau

Knowledge on NGOs Activities	Disagree Frequency/ (%)	Agree Frequency/ (%)	Strongly Agree Frequency/ (%)	Total
Satisfied with NGOs' activities	10 (2.5%)	220(56%)	164(41.5%)	394(100)
Provision of Employment opportunities	44(11%)	200(51%)	150(38%)	394(100%)
Provision of Financial aid	15(4%)	129(33%)	250(63%)	394(100%)
Empower community members with entrepreneurship/skills	40(10%)	224(57%)	130(33%)	394(100)
Provide alternative income-generating activities	100(25%)	193(49%)	101(26%)	394(100)

With regards to employment creation, 51% agreed, and 38% strongly agreed that NGOs provide employment opportunities, whereas 11% disagreed. On financial assistance, 63% strongly agreed, and 33% agreed that NGOs provide financial aid to vulnerable households, while only 4% disagreed. Concerning entrepreneurship and skills development, 57% agreed, and 33% strongly agreed that NGOs empower community members through training and skills acquisition, while 10% disagreed. Furthermore, 49% agreed, and 26% strongly agreed that NGOs provide alternative income-generating activities, although 25% disagreed. Overall, the results demonstrate that NGOs have made significant contributions toward economic empowerment and livelihood improvement in the Idenau community.

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 2 illustrate respondents' perceptions of the different NGO interventions aimed at promoting economic empowerment and livelihood improvement in Idenau.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on NGO Contributions to Economic Empowerment in Idenau

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Empowered community members with skills	110	1.6364	0.48325	0.04608	1.545	1.7277	1	2
Provision of Financial aid	184	1.4783	0.50089	0.03693	1.4054	1.5511	1	2
Provide alternative income-generating activities	75	1.6667	0.47458	0.0548	1.5575	1.7759	1	2
Provision of employment opportunities	25	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
Total	394	1.5279	0.49985	0.02518	1.4784	1.5774	1	2

The statistics indicate that NGOs have positively contributed to economic empowerment in Idenau. The provision of alternative income-generating activities recorded the highest mean score (Mean = 1.67; SD = 0.47), followed by entrepreneurship and skills empowerment (Mean = 1.64; SD = 0.48), showing that respondents strongly acknowledged these interventions. Financial

aid also recorded a relatively high mean score (Mean = 1.48; SD = 0.50), reflecting the importance of NGO financial support to vulnerable households.

Provision of employment opportunities recorded the lowest mean score (Mean = 1.00; SD = 0.00), indicating unanimous responses among participants. Overall, the total mean score of 1.53 with a standard deviation of 0.50 suggests a generally positive perception and strong agreement among respondents regarding the role of NGOs in promoting economic empowerment and livelihood improvement in the community.

To test the hypothesis that financial assistance, capacity building, and other economic activities by NGOs do not contribute to economic empowerment, a One-Way ANOVA test was conducted. The ANOVA results (Table 3) show a statistically significant difference in respondents' perceptions of NGO contributions to economic empowerment in Idenau. The F-value of 15.002 and significance level (p = 0.001) indicate that NGO interventions such as financial assistance, entrepreneurship training, employment creation, and alternative income-generating activities have a significant positive effect on livelihood improvement in the community.

Table 3. ANOVA Results on the Contributions of NGOs to Economic Empowerment in Idenau

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10.159	3	3.386	15.002	0.001
Within Groups	88.035	390	0.226		
Total	98.194	393			

B. NGOs Food Security Interventions and Their Impact on Livelihood Improvement

The study also examined NGO activities related to food security in the study area. As shown in Figure 4.4, NGOs support food security through farmer education and sensitization, distribution of improved seeds and farming implements, and provision of food items.

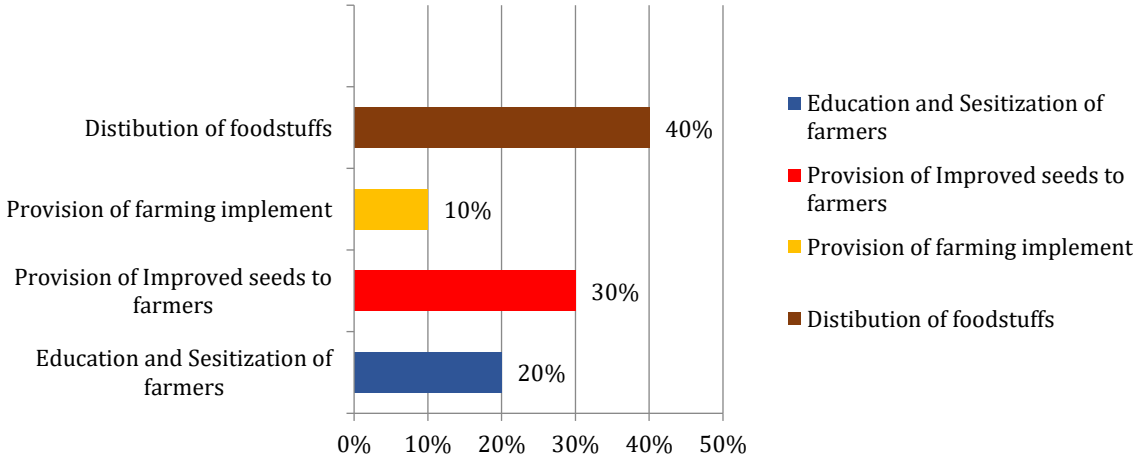


Fig. 4. NGOs Involvement in Food Security in the Community

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Findings from Fig. 4 show that 40% of respondents identified the distribution of food items as the primary NGO activity in the community. This was followed by provision of improved seeds at 30%, education and sensitization campaigns for farmers at 20%, and provision of farming implements at 10%. In the Bibundi neighborhood, LUKEMEF distributed agricultural seeds to farmers with the aim of increasing maize productivity. In addition, NGOs also provided basic food items including rice and groundnut oil to internally displaced persons residing in the area.

Discussion

Findings revealed that NGO interventions within the community primarily focused on entrepreneurship development, business support, employment creation, scholarships, infrastructure provision, and livelihood improvement. These findings support earlier observations that NGOs contribute significantly to community empowerment through service delivery, educational support, advocacy, and capacity building, thereby strengthening sustainable livelihoods [17]. Similarly, NGOs have been recognized for enhancing the socio-economic empowerment of vulnerable populations through microcredit schemes, skills training, social services, and awareness creation, particularly among marginalized groups and women [18].

The study further demonstrates that NGO interventions in Idenau have contributed to improving basic infrastructure and social welfare. Examples include potable water projects in CDC camps, sanitation infrastructure in Block 20 through support from humanitarian organizations, and civil documentation assistance for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Such interventions align with the argument that NGOs strengthen community resilience by expanding local capacities, promoting self-reliance, and supporting participatory development approaches [19, 20].

Moreover, findings indicate that organizations such as Lukmef, WFP, IRC, and other humanitarian actors implement projects related to food security, economic empowerment, and emergency assistance. Their interventions, including financial assistance and food support, reflect broader evidence suggesting that NGOs play important roles in supporting vulnerable populations during crises while simultaneously building long-term community resilience [21].

The findings demonstrate that NGOs contribute substantially to food security through farmer sensitization programs, distribution of agricultural inputs, provision of improved seeds, and direct food assistance. Such interventions are consistent with humanitarian and development literature emphasizing that food security programs should not only provide immediate food relief but also strengthen long-term resilience through improved agricultural productivity and livelihood diversification [22].

Furthermore, organizations involved in food assistance contribute significantly to poverty reduction by supporting both emergency responses and long-term livelihood recovery. Food security interventions have increasingly shifted from short-term food distribution toward integrated approaches that include agricultural support, market strengthening, and livelihood diversification [23]. Although international organizations continue to play central roles in global food assistance, concerns remain regarding sustainability, logistical costs, donor dependency, and institutional flexibility [24].

Overall, the findings suggest that NGO interventions extend beyond immediate humanitarian assistance to include long-term investments in community resilience, livelihood enhancement, health improvement, and social protection. However, sustained impacts require stronger coordination among stakeholders, increased local participation, and greater emphasis on sustainable livelihood strategies.

Conclusion

NGOs have played an important role in improving livelihoods and community well-being through interventions in healthcare, food security, infrastructure, economic empowerment, and social support. Their activities have enhanced living standards by creating income opportunities, strengthening community resilience, and improving access to essential services. As increasing population growth continues to place pressure on government capacity to provide adequate services, NGOs have become important partners in addressing development challenges. In communities such as Idenau, Block 20, and CDC Camp, NGO interventions have contributed significantly to sustainable development and livelihood improvement. However, sustaining these benefits requires stronger stakeholder collaboration, increased community participation, and improved coordination of development initiatives.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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