

Remarks by Paul Simo (Cameroon)

Debating Challenges for Minority Protection: Webinar 3 – The interrelationship between conflicts; minority rights and the promotion of inclusiveness and stability

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Thank you, Moderator.

My remarks are in two parts: **first** on how the handling of minorities may have a bearing on conflict from the experience of Cameroon, and **second**, what international organizations should do (better) to address these concerns.

Cameroon's crisis in its historically English-speaking regions (Northwest and Southwest) which has been going on for 4 years, is quite well documented. At its core, the conflict is about a group with relative territorial *concentration* in one part of the country, that has **different characteristics** on: (1) **official language** use (English versus French), (2) **the educational system** they use (an English educational system versus the French educational system), (3) the **modes, usages, and content of the Justice system** (modelled on English Common Law, versus the continental Romano-Germanic or Civil Law system), and (4) the **system of governing these Regions** (primacy of elected leaders governing sub-national units, versus centrally-appointed Prefects and officials).

Structurally, while a federal system of governance had been attempted (in the country's first ten years of independence) to provide each of these language-based systems their own sphere of predominance, this was replaced. Over the past four decades, the country has been a unitary State with most features based on the centralist Bonapartist model, and officially bilingual (French and English). However the four areas previously mentioned are **quite centrifugal** in Cameroon: its populations who primarily use English as an official language (Anglophones) are quite reticent for the central State to control these areas – and especially when blended or combined with French-based systems, they fear the English systems lose out on their content – and with it, **educational, professional, social mobility, and developmental disadvantages** for primarily English speakers. Hence, complaints about injustice or unfair treatment.

A snapshot of Cameroon's composition: According to official data from Cameroon's Third General Housing and Population, conducted by its Central Census Bureau (BUCREP), of Cameroon's total population (data captured 2005 and released 2010), **only 12 % of Cameroonians are bilingual** (a percentage which may have improved but is unlikely to be much higher than **20% : 1 in 5** Cameroonians). As they go through education and acquire an official language, they mostly adhere to, or self-identify with one or the other official language system – hence the group identification dynamic. There was also *historical self-government* by the Anglophone regions (under the federal system) which fuels yearning for a period of more direct, proximate self-government.

The languages and their associated education and justice systems also have areas of territorial preponderance – their use is not dispersed across the country evenly. The country's official policies have been based on a “personality” principle of bilingualism which would have Cameroonians pick up both official languages and systems, but five (5) decades later, that is still not happening. In the historically English-speaking regions, the preponderance of speakers of English to French is 4:1, and 5:1. In the historically French-speaking regions, that preponderance is between 5:1 and 6:1 in favour of French. 75 to 80% of all students in the country's English educational system are located in the two historically Anglophone regions, while over 95% of learners in the French educational system are located in the historically Francophone regions. This means the concerned group (historical English users, or Anglophones) is “**territorially concentrated**” which specialists note is a key ingredient for minority groups to assert group political claims for more involvement in management of their affairs – and when unmet, can and has escalated into crisis and conflict.

Cameroon's governing establishment is **weary about the distinction between “Anglophones” and “Francophones”**. Parts of the establishment would rather even forbid those designations, worrying that they contribute to creating “sub-group” identities, which compete with a new “national identity”, which is considered sacrosanct to maintain unity of the Nation. Part of the weariness about sub-group identities is *historical*: the very existence of English/French regions resulted from colonial partition 100 years ago (a post-World War I agreement sharing German colonial booty), and parts of the larger Cameroon would later move off to join Nigeria – so territory loss (of any form) is feared. Yet, the authorities must frequently return to the reality of English and French based systems needing to co-exist – often resulting in **policy dissonance**. Illustratively, Government passed two laws on Christmas eve last year (24/12/2019). One Law, the Devolution Code, says the Anglophone regions would be afforded certain prerogatives “on account of their

historical and *language specificity*” – being a specific reference to the English-based systems they acquired. The other Law, an Official Languages Law, on its part says that the two official languages shall be used indistinguishably across the entire country, and the two historically Anglophone regions cannot mandate for instance that English be given priority in official transactions there.

Data collected a few years before the crisis by Cameroon’s official National Institute of Statistics showed several warning signals on the dashboard. A [*Governance, Peace, and Security Survey*](#) conducted as part of Cameroon’s 4th National Household Survey in 2014 (two years before the crisis) showed that the perception of being unfairly treated among the population of these two historically English-speaking regions was high, and their trust in the State administration, quite low. And the data contained clues that these were regionally-specific levels of discontent – significantly higher than in the other parts of the country. Anyway, the conflict has set in: **in 4 years, it has resulted in over 500,000 persons internally displaced, 40,000 refugees, and thousands of civilian deaths.**

So, what are the **three (3) key issues or challenges we wish to highlight, in particular to the attention of international organisations** (especially the United Nations system, World Bank, and regional development banks) as they engage situations such as ours.

First, is that despite all the reminders, policy commitments, or guidelines to date, despite the spread of their activities (UN Country Teams, World Bank Country Offices) and resources deployed in these countries (the WB’s country portfolio in Cameroon is 1.6 billion US dollars, the African Development Bank’s is 2.2 billion US dollars), **these institutions are still “missing” some of these minority-driven conflicts before they occur, or in their incipency.** To our knowledge, *no long-term development planning framework for Cameroon, whether its Government’s Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (2010-2020), the World Bank Country Assistance Strategy, or the UN Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs) over the past 10 years foresaw what has morphed into Cameroon’s most serious domestic conflict in over four (4) decades.*

This looks like a terrible “miss” and one may wonder how come so many international partners engaging in a “stable” country where they can travel around and get a real feel for potential sources of discontent, could miss such a societal cleavage with conflict-generating potential. The answer does not lie in the “newness” of the Anglophone crisis’ latest iteration, which seemed to boil up from nowhere in 2016. A hard-working graduate researcher or intern, spending a few

months using basic research tools (academic journal articles) could have compiled a quite compelling literature survey, of the tomes that have been written over 3 decades, on various dimensions of Cameroon's Francophone/Anglophone issue. That information, triangulated by engaging various segments of the Anglophone community (such as educators, legal practitioners) could have provided critical insights that a problem was looming ahead. We cannot afford, in today's world with incredible information tools and connectivity, to still have key "misses" of this nature – where a problematic national issue is not "picked up" in planning by its key partners.

Of course, in these minority issues, it **cannot be left exclusively to the respective Governments to "set the agenda" or put the issue on the table**. National policy is itself "conflicted" over how to treat the divide (Anglophone/ Francophone) so more often than not, it will just be kept quiet in government's formal strategy documents – that silence is then what effectively disappears the issue from being formally integrated into Government and its partners' development planning – because you don't plan to address what you don't see. Partners should be including this, in "policy dialogue" with Governments even more. They cannot distance those issues as "political" or place them in a broad category of "governance" – if development partners have read the country situation well, between them (multilaterals, development banks, bilaterals) they can find ways to raise, and make Governments pay preventative attention to these issues.

Second, are "sectoral misses". These are the preoccupying situations in which international actors and organisations are actually "working" in a *specific sector in which a minority group faces particular constraints or challenges, or an area that is highly centrifugal* (minority, sub-groups are seeking opt-outs or to self-manage them), and then their planning and/or programming actually "misses" or worse "further compounds" the predicament of the minority group in question. Two examples I will cite are in the domains of Education and Justice, which are hotly contested ones in Cameroon's context.

As recently as 2018, the **World Bank approved an [Education Reform Support Project for Cameroon](#)**, for a total cost of 130 million USD. The project has lofty goals for Cameroon "as a whole" : (a) enhancing equitable access to quality pre-primary and primary education, (b) strengthening education system management, and (c) the recently identified additional priority of supporting the education needs of public schools in host communities with refugees. However, while it "adds" resources to an already relatively well-funded sector by Government (whose total education sector funding commitments in primary, secondary, vocational/

technical, and higher education exceed 1 billion USD/year), the Project does not, amidst a dire situation where the English education system is in the epicentre of a crisis (*politically over its long-term management arrangements, school closures and low enrolment due to conflict and displacement, its teacher/workforce morale sapped by the fights over that educational system*), specifically address the problem. It is unclear whether the separate English/French school sub-systems had been clearly identified as a potential conflict-generator, and so factored/prioritized as a policy priority. It has demonstrated its capacity now to spiral the country into conflict.

The **second example of a “missed” sectoral opportunity is in the Justice sector.** A few development partners engage Cameroon on this sector, in particular the European Union, in the framework of its 6-7 year [National Indicative Program of Cooperation](#) (2014-2020). It prioritizes the Justice sector for engagement under its Governance Pillar. However, the said program (signed 2 years before the crisis erupted) did not pick up signs or sources of “tension” arising from the Justice system, notably the repeated complaints by English-using legal practitioners, which boiled over in time to the crisis and conflict.

Yet, these were already visible and palpable at the time – notably complaints about the cross-regional uniformization of certain laws, especially the Business Laws Treaty (OHADA), which incidentally was actively supported by several development partners (World Bank, others) – a good regionalisation of laws initiative when viewed globally, but with a disproportionately adverse impact on lawyers trained from and using the minority language/system within Cameroon. In pursuing “greater good”, minorities can get boxed in, or pay a high price.

A better **conflict sensitive approach by Cameroon’s partners in the Justice sector** would have “obligatorily” included specific *policy dialogue* on what the concerns and constraints were that English-speaking legal practitioners, lawyers, and litigants were facing, from which would have emerged *programmatic responses* which would have helped diffuse the situation, alleviate the impacts felt by the minority legal culture, and avoid conflict. Unsurprisingly, the Government’s own Justice Sector Strategy (e.g. 2011 – 2015) made no reference to the Common Law-Romano Germanic law culture differences within the country. The country does not formally recognize itself as bi-jural, so it won’t bring that issue forward. Partners engaging with countries need to go and fetch the issues to bring to the table, even “sensitive” ones for host Governments.

Third, is the physical and spatial disconnect between international organisations in countries (which are generally centrally based in the country’s

capital) and minority situations and people. International organisations (UN, World Bank, Regional development banks) are necessarily accredited to national capitals, and that is where they invest the most presence and network development. This means that a minority situation, especially if territorially-based or concentrated in region of the country, can “skip” their attention – if they do not have a strong policy for working on and engaging the sub-national tiers (Regions, Municipalities, Zones) within a country.

In the study of processes of devolution and the building of capacities of local governments, Municipalities, Regions and other sub-national layers or tiers of Government to assume greater responsibilities, the same challenge has been expressed. International organisations have been found to have challenges to support countries to undergo devolution, decentralisation, or regionalisation processes, because by definition, they “enter” a country from its central level institutions (such as Ministries) who become their primary interlocutors. In these processes to alter the balance between Centre and Periphery, the former (existing power base) has less incentives to effect the reform than the latter, and existing political arrangements may make *direct foreign access to sub-national tiers or lawyers of Government impossible*.

Therefore, international organisations need to *understand their own vulnerabilities and build in measures to self-correct them*. In these situations (territorially concentrated minorities) they **need to have clear strategies for engaging the sub-national governance space, including through geographic presence in such regions**, and also ensuring their network of contacts, information, and analysis sources is well-informed (and sensitive to potential cleavages). If a group is not brought to the fore by national counterparts (and possibly because of policy dissonance which does not really “recognize” the group’s existence) development partners need the savvy to **cultivate contacts and build a base of information nonetheless** – because official channels will likely not furnish them with a fully accurate picture of the dynamics.

Thank you for your kind attention.

References: Selected Data and Information Sources used

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