

‘FAST-TRACKING’ DECENTRALISATION FOR SUSTAINABLE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE IN CAMEROON: LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND CURRENT IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Since 1996, Cameroon opted for a ‘piecemeal’ (gradual) decentralisation process, adapted to its specific cultural and political realities. This gradual process and the intricacies inherent in the decentralisation policy framework, it seems has not only led to a very slow process of implementation but after more than two decades, it has also been unable to meet citizens’ aspirations for an ‘empowered citizenship model’ that would have enabled local democracy to flourish for inclusive local development and peace. For instance, it is widely believed by Cameroonians and the international community that the now 5-year long bloody armed conflict that started in October 2016 in the English Speaking North-West (NW) and South-West (NW) regions is partly the result of the failure of the form of the state-a *decentralised unitary state* adopted by the postcolonial government in the January 1996 Constitutional revision. Faced with this state of affairs and other governance and development challenges, the President of the Republic of Cameroon, H.E. President Paul Biya’s sees effective decentralisation as a key route out of the current predicaments and therefore decided to ‘accelerate’ (fast-track, to use his words) the decentralisation process in order to ‘quickly address’ citizens grievances related to negative governance practices, as contained in his New Year 2018 message to the nation on 31 December 2017. Hence the objective of this article is to analyse and contemplate the extent to which Cameroon’s current decentralisation impetus can indeed achieve its goal. As such the fundamental question in that informs this article is, *what are the implications of Cameroon’s past experience with decentralisation for this renewed impetus of Fast-tracking decentralisation in Cameroon for sustainable local development and peace?* Constructed around a critical review of relevant literature and a qualitative research design through a desk-based inquiry and interviews with key decentralisation stakeholders, this article arrives at important conclusions. Perhaps, the most striking finding of this article is that while the trend towards fast-tracking the decentralisation process gives hope for a deep democratic governance for sustainable local development and peace, in Cameroon, when implemented without a certain degree of ‘local democracy’ the process becomes constrained and ‘arrested’ at the point implementation. In other words, when the decentralisation policy is shorn of its local democratic ideals and the weak democratic culture of participation remains unaffected by the decentralisation reform in a country context such as Cameroon, characterised by an enduring legacy of authoritarianism and exclusionary politics, the very purpose of the renewed decentralisation impetus can only be defeated despite the apparently ‘strong political will’ at the top of the leadership pyramid. It is exactly this paradox between policy and practice that need to be seriously considered if this ‘new face’ of Decentralisation in Cameroon is going to produce any sustainable local development and peace dividends.

Keywords: Cameroon, Decentralisation, fast-track, local democracy, peace, sustainable local Development.

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1. Introduction.

“Deepening and accelerating decentralization to make local authorities more inclusive and sustainable development hubs at the grassroots and crucibles of local democracy is one of the major thrust of the Seven-year: ‘Great Opportunities’ term of the office of the Head of State, His Excellency Paul Biya” (Georges Elanga Oban, Minister of Decentralization and Local Development) February 2019¹

The above statement by the Minister of Decentralization and Local Development indicates the current impetus and high stakes for sustainable local development through decentralization in Cameroon. In fact, in Cameroon, decentralization is viewed as a key governmental mechanism through which local democracy can be deepened and local development enhanced. In many developing parts of the world, including Cameroon, decentralization has been hailed as an integral part of democracy, good governance and local development and has become part of the broader public-sector reform process aimed at revitalising the local state in contributing towards making the third wave of democratisation work for ordinary citizens, especially the poor and marginalised groups. This has been based on the assumption that public sector decentralization reforms, which will make the state effective, efficient, responsive, accountable and productive, are necessary conditions for development at the local level.

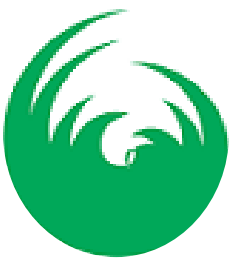
However, although the possible benefits of decentralization reforms have been well theorised, there still exist large research gaps between reform rhetoric and actual practice (Boone, 2003: 355). At best, results

¹ See Proceedings of the General Conference of Local Councils. Deepening Decentralization: A New face for local Councils in Cameroon, published by the Ministry of Decentralization and Local Development (MINDDEVEL), July 2019.

have been mixed. Often, legal changes have not produced decentralisation’s supposed benefits (ibid), whether in terms of deepening democracy, alleviating poverty, resolving conflicts and spurring socio-economic development (see Crawford and Hartmann, 2008). The manifestations of these dynamics have been very much apparent in contemporary Africa; where after several decades of decentralisation reforms, scholars of African politics and policy makers still seek to analyse the extent to which the reform indeed works for the poor and the underprivileged in the continent. Notwithstanding, Public sector devolutionary decentralisation is a reform that a number of African countries have turned to as they adopt policy strategies to deal with the vexing problems of bad governance, violent ethno-regional conflicts, poverty and local development.

In Cameroon, the decentralisation programme purports, in a legal, constitutional sense- promulgated in the 1996 Constitution, to be one of the main routes through which the national framework policy on democratisation that began in the 1990s can eventually be deepened for a sustained local democracy and development. What is interesting here is that since 1996, Cameroon opted for a ‘piecemeal’ (gradual) decentralisation process, adapted to its specific cultural and political realities. This gradual process and the intricacies inherent in the decentralization policy framework it seems has not only led to a very slow process of implementation but after more than two decades, it has also been unable to meet citizens’ aspirations for an ‘empowered citizenship model’ that would have enabled local democracy to flourish for inclusive local development and peace.

For instance, it is widely believed by Cameroonians and the international community that the now 5-year long armed conflict that started in October 2016 in the English Speaking North-West (NW) and South-West (NW) regions is partly the result of the failure of the form of the state-a *decentralised unitary state* adopted by the postcolonial government in the January 1996 Constitutional revision. Associated to this preferred *decentralised unitary state* has been the lack



of political will to implement a genuine and an ‘inclusionary democratic decentralisation’ policy framework that puts ordinary citizens at the centre of governance and decision-making processes that concern their individual and collective development.

Consequently, today the government more seriously considers effective decentralisation policy as a major way forward to help address the current problems caused by increased complexity of governance, growing demands for local empowerment and autonomy, intractable problems of local democracy and development and increasing federalist and secessionist demands linked to the ongoing armed conflict in the NW and SW Regions. This is evidenced in the Head of State, H.E. President Paul Biya’s New Year 2018 message to the nation on 31 December 2017. In his words: “... My dear compatriots, as you can see, our Nation is facing multiple challenges which we should address together in fraternity, with due respect for our institutions and in a spirit of national concord...”

Faced with this state of affairs, the Head of State saw effective decentralization as a key route out of the current predicaments and therefore decided to ‘accelerate’ (fast-track, to use his words) the decentralisation process in order to ‘quickly address’ citizens grievances related to negative governance practices. In his words,

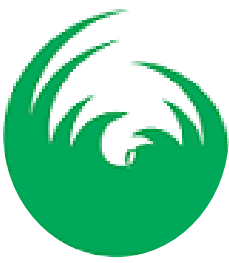
.... My dear compatriots my conviction that our fellow citizens desire greater participation in managing their affairs, especially at the local level, has been strengthened by the consultations I have held and the many opinions and suggestions I have received. In this regard, it is my firm belief that fast-tracking our decentralization process will enhance the development of our Regions. To that end, I have ordered the implementation of the necessary measures to speedily give effect to this major reform. In the same vein, the completion of the establishment of the institutions provided for in the Constitution will contribute towards

consolidating the rule of law and open a new page in our democratic process²...

The above response from the Head of State to the problems of democratic governance, development and socio-political instability in the country was further buttressed by the creation of a new ministry responsible for decentralization, *The Ministry of Decentralization and Local Development* (MINDDEVEL) in the presidential decree of March 2, 2018 (Decree No. 2018/191 of 02 March 2018). The President of the Republic followed by the appointment of Mr. Elanga Obam George as the pioneer minister to lead this crucial Ministry. The missions assigned to this ministry are in two specific areas: decentralization and local development.

Evidently, fast-tracking the decentralization process from the top of the state is another historical opportunity to start a new chapter in Cameroon’s socio-political life. Cameroon is currently embarked on an ambitious decentralisation program with a shift in original emphasis. The current national strategy to fast-track decentralization as a route out of poverty and conflict has been superimposed on the original goal of promoting local democracy, good governance and local development. However, an important reality to note here is that as current impetus of accelerating decentralisation for inclusive local development and peace comes with opportunities so it also comes with challenges and vulnerabilities. Hence the objective of this article is to analyse and contemplate the extent to which Cameroon’s current decentralisation impetus can achieve these aims. As such the fundamental question is, *what are the implications of Cameroon’s past experience with decentralisation in this renewed impetus of Fast-tracking decentralisation in Cameroon for Local Development and Peace?* On top of this key question lies others: should Cameroonians have any reason for hope or are they still between hope and despair in this renewed context of fast-tracking decentralisation? What are the potential vulnerabilities

² H.E President Paul Biya’s New Year 2018 Message to the Nation on 31 December 2017



and opportunities in this ambitious move from a ‘gradual’ to a ‘speedy’ process of decentralisation that aims at empowering citizens to take control of their own peace and development concerns?

2. Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, this article is designed around a critical review of literature on decentralisation with a focus on local development, conflict management and peace and is empirically grounded. It employs a qualitative research design through desk-based inquiry and observations (such as newspapers, the collection of legal texts on decentralisation, local government policy documents, and interviews with key decentralisation stakeholders. Qualitative Data for this study was obtained through interviews with key decentralisation stakeholders in October-November 2011 in 6 municipalities (Buea Council, Eseka Council, Douala II, Douala III, Douala IV, Yaoundé II and Yaoundé IV Sub-divisional Councils) within three (3) regions of Cameroon (South West Regions, Littoral and Centre regions respectively), and supplemented by more recent data collected from Yaoundé VII Sub-divisional Council in June 2017. The article also benefits from rich comments from the participants of the international conference organised by the *International Community of Diaconic Management (ICDM)*, Wuppertal (Germany) in partnership with the *Institute for Diaconic Science and Diaconic Management (IDM)*, Bieliefeld, Germany and the *United Evangelical Mission (UEM)*, from 7-12 November, 2021, in Bafoussam, Cameroon, wherein, I presented the paper titled: “Decentralisation in the Development and Peace of Cameroon.”

3. Theoretical Considerations: Promoting sustainable development and Peace through Decentralisation

It is perhaps necessary at this point to throw some light on the globally recognised nexus between development and peace and then figure out how decentralisation can be used as a political and technical mechanism to promote sustainable development and peace in a country context such as Cameroon where the forces of

clientelism and *neopatrimonialism* as well as the demands for ethno-regional autonomy remain high.

At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for peaceful, inclusive and sustainable world by 2030. The agenda was officially launched on 1 January 2016, defining sustainable development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as “socio-economic and human development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (*United Nations General Assembly, Preamble of Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1, 21 Oct. 2015*). The Preamble of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 states:

“We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.” (*ibid*). This statement reveals the global recognition of the nexus between sustainable development and peace and vice versa, especially in a continent such as Africa, which despite global efforts, is still inundated with violent conflicts resulting from exclusionary and negative governance practices and poverty. The 2030 agenda for sustainable development is perhaps the broadest official interpretation of development that has ever been adopted: it includes economic growth, but also social inclusion, peace, justice and good governance, job opportunities and social and environmental protection, as well as an implicit valuation of the future in terms of development, investment and consumption decisions taken today. This implies that if world leaders and their people work together, they have a chance of meeting their citizens’ aspirations for, sustainable development and peace. Goal 16- (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) as depicted, is dedicated to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, the provision of access to



justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels. This goal implies that the achievement of peace, on national and international scale, is ultimately predicated upon building a transnational network of laws, institutions, and political processes that advocate the practices associated with peacebuilding and sustainable development. The path of this goal is outlined in an analysis of the politics and practice of inclusionary governance through the deepening of democratic norms which, as already noted, local government decentralization is seen as one possible route to achieve sustainable development and peace for all by 2030. Clearly, putting peace into the SDGs directs attention to (violent) conflict-preventing factors such as strengthening equity, inclusionary democratic governance and the rule of law. Sustainable peace therefore is not an idealistic picture of a society without conflict, but of a society that has the capacities, at all levels, to manage conflict effectively and constructively for sustainable development

The significance of governing by inclusion for sustainable development and peace is borne out through decision-making processes which reflect the principle of equal participation and the recognition and inclusion of the poor and marginalised in making policies which impact all major social groups within society (Paupp, 2000). Thus, in addressing the task of economic and political development, *democratic inclusion* in decision making is critical throughout developing and developed nations (ibid). As Peter Berger has noted :

Development is not what the economic and other experts proclaim it to be, no matter how elegant their language. Development is not something to be dedicated by experts, simply because there are no experts on the desirable goals of human life. Development is the desirable course to be taken by human beings in a particular situation. As far as possible, therefore, they ought to participate in the fundamental choices to be made, choices that hinge not on technical expertise but on moral judgment (Berger, 1976:59)

Hence, governing by inclusion is an approach to development that makes participation and inclusion the cornerstone of policy and practice. “It forces developmental states and developmental policies to recognise and to respect governing as more than managing the tensions and more than containing participatory and distributive demands.” (Paupp, 2000: 228). Governing by inclusion transcends the language of manipulation and control. In this critical sense, democracy is, of necessity, a subset of inclusion because the resolution of conflicts in institutionalised democracies depends most fundamentally on the implantation of norms of equal rights and opportunities for all citizens (ibid). Thus, it could be argued that inclusionary governance is a prescription for peace and long-term stability and provides the framework for economic growth and development, as well as the framework for democratic inclusion by constructing legal rules and norms that can empower new constitutionally constructed institutions that promote social justice by dealing more effectively with the citizen question. In this interpretation, long-term stability is achieved through a reconfiguration of citizenship as active rather than passive recipient of rights and the achievement of those rights, through state, market, and civil society that can transcend narrowly defined, exclusionary and egoistic agendas, As Marcus Raskin has noted:

“By definition, modern democracy is committed to all people being active subjects of their own history. Democratic adherence accepts the potentiality and the common sense of all people. The result is that a common good may be forged.” (Raskin, 1986: 37). Though opinions still divide regarding the extent and nature of reforms required for this kind of democratisation to proceed successfully, it has been suggested that increasing representation throughout society, decentralisation of power and creating participatory forms of local government would represent real steps forward (Judge 1999). Fundamentally, sustainable development and peace are inextricably linked, and while this is recognised in the new Sustainable Development Agenda, there is much



less certainty as to how this aspiration is being translated into practice at the national/local levels and what challenges are encountered. Genuine and Effective decentralisation as we have already seen, has been depicted by many governments in developing and developed countries as the panacea.

Decentralisation has come to be defined and interpreted in several ways in the academic and policy literature. Therefore, it is critical therefore, to make an effort to reflect critically on the meaning of the concept used in order to avoid polemics based on conceptual misunderstandings. In the context of the concern over the limited quality of democracy in many transitional societies, with regards to unresponsive and unaccountable democratic institutions, lack of effective citizen engagement, and empowerment (enhanced democratic governance), many scholars, policy makers, and the international community at large have in recent decades come to view decentralisation as a mechanism through which democratisation could be deepened and citizens reconnected to the government (see also Selee 2004 relating to Decentralisation in Latin America). In fact, countries around the world, particularly transition economies, have gone through a significant decentralisation of their government structures in recent decades (Hammond and Tosun 2011: 47).

Theoretically, at a very basic level, two approaches to decentralisation processes seem to prevail, and built around what one could term a pragmatic approach, and a political approach. The pragmatic school approaches the issue of popular participation in local government in the context of decentralisation processes (Cheema and Rondinelli, 1983; Rondinelli et al., 1989 Rondinelli, 1990). Essentially, decentralisation is viewed by the pragmatists as a policy tool that can be used by the state, often aided in these efforts by international organisations (adopts an essentially top-down approach). Thus, whereas the pragmatic school tends to neglect the political implications of decentralisation and focuses more on the immediate aspects of designing and implementing decentralisation policies, the political

approach (Boisier, 1987; Castells, 1983) puts the political aspects of decentralisation at the centre of its analysis. In essence, the political approach perceives decentralisation as a vehicle for political reform, or more precisely, a means to democratise a state apparatus which is considered the principal obstacle on the way to full democracy. Thus, while some see decentralisation as an important avenue for efficiency gain and improving the quality of government by enabling a direct link between local provision of services and local tastes (Oates, 1972, 2008) or again bringing officials ‘closer to the people,’ and facilitating the satisfaction of diverse local tastes (USAID, 2000; Ribot, 2001), others contend that decentralisation generates coordination problems, exacerbates state predation, and generates roadblocks to any change from the status quo (von Braun and Grote, 2000; Edmiston, 2002; Smoke, 2003; Crook, 2003; Jette, 2005; Yunusa, 2006).

Although decentralisation is very prevalent, and its form and extent varies considerably across countries (Crawford and Hartmann, 2008: 8), there seems to be a broad consensus that current decentralisation efforts are of a *new quality*. (Rondinelli and Cheema 1983) For the first time since independence, the governments of many African countries have engaged in what has been described as ‘devolution’ (ibid) of power and resources to democratically elected sub-national authorities and emphasise the objective of promoting participatory and accountable forms of governance . Decentralisation in this case, is an ideological principle, associated with the objectives of self-reliance, democratic decision-making, popular participation in government, and accountability of public officials to citizens... (Rondinelli et al., 1989). This tendency has been captured in Manor’s concept of ‘democratic decentralisation.’³ Democratic decentralisation or devolution promotes local political participation and harnesses grassroots forms of

³ For a more interesting discussion on democratic decentralisation, see Manor (2004) ‘Democratization with Inclusion: political reforms and people’s empowerment at the grassroots. Journal of Human Development, 5(1): 5-29.



democracy (Manor, 2004; Midgley, 1986). In this view, devolution is the process of transferring decision-making and implementation of powers, functions, responsibilities and resources to legally constituted, and popularly elected local governments⁴. To use the terms of Manor (1995:5 cited in Crawford and Hartmann, 2008:9), devolution (democratic decentralisation), involves “the transfer of power and resources to sub-national authorities that are both (relatively) independent of central government and democratically elected”. Thus, in this article, the devolution of power necessarily intervenes with service delivery responsibilities, public finance arrangements, rebuilding institutional capacities for formulating and implementing decentralisation reform policies and for facilitating central/local co-operation. Hence, decentralisation is considered here as *a process through which the central government transfers responsibilities and power to the state institutions close to the local population, granting them administrative and financial autonomy as well as political legitimacy so that, with popular participation, accountability, responsiveness to the people, the production of goods and local services can be improved’ and hence contribute to inclusionary democratic governance, local development and peace.* Above all, the most important prerequisite for the success of decentralisation is to establish local participatory and accountability mechanisms through effective checks and balances.

In a nutshell then, the benefits of decentralisation include better information revelation as citizens preferences are easier to perceive at the local level (Oates 1972; Manin, Przeworski and Stokes, 1999), improve accountability since it is easier to link the performance of local services to local political

representatives (Peterson 1997), sorting by citizens as they move to jurisdictions that better match their policy preferences (Tiebout 1956; Ostrom et al., 1961) and improve fiscal management (Meinzeen-Dick and Knox, 1999). All of which lead to more efficient and less corrupt governments (Burki and Perry 1999; Fisman and Gatti, 2002) and increased democratisation and participation (Crook and Manor 1998) for local development and peace. As such, it is assumed that decentralisation can also increase “political stability and national unity by allowing citizens to better control public programs at the local level” (ibid). It is also argued that “by bringing government closer to citizens, decentralisation allows people to participate more effectively in local affairs, including identification of community priorities” (USAID, 2000) again, contributing to inclusive local development and peace.

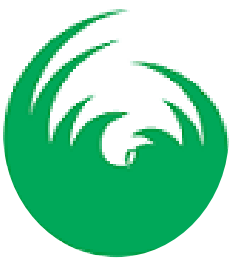
In a nutshell, decentralization is generally pursued because proponents argue that it can have positive impacts on local and national development, including poverty reduction and the achievement of the Sustainable development agenda 2030. The benefits claimed include:

- Improved allocative efficiency because local government is thought to be more sensitive to local priorities than a geographically distant central government
- Greater responsiveness to citizens
- Increased revenue collection via local taxes and charges
- Stronger accountability
- Prevention of ethno-regional conflict and peace promotion

However, some scholars have noted the possible damaging effect of partisan politics on local accountability. In this light, Ribot (2001) argues that “in countries such as Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Niger, Senegal and Zimbabwe, where candidates for local elections can only be chosen by political parties, they may be more accountable to the parties than to the local populations that ‘elect’ them”. In an empirical work conducted in Ghana by Crook and Sverrisson (2001:32 in Ribot, 2001) they note that “70 per cent of the

⁴ An interesting discussion on the various levels of decentralization can be found in Kauzya, J-M (2005) ‘Decentralization: Prospects for peace, Democracy and Development’, p.2.

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1.32.8768&rep=rep1&type=pdf>



population surveyed felt that the elected District Assembly was not responsive to their needs and 22 percent felt it was better under the previous system of un-elected authorities”. Their empirical evidence also found significant incongruence between District Assembly funded projects, and expressed popular preferences (ibid). As such, Crook and Sverrisson ended up concluding that local authorities deliver services unsynchronised with citizens input and attributed these outcomes to resources constraints, patronage politics, elite capture, making the decentralisation process to produce more conflict and underdevelopment rather than its supposed benefits of local development and peace. A detail and critical review of literature in this area shows that decentralisation has had a mixed effect on development and peace. The potential peace and development benefits of decentralisation are often not realised because of the following risks:

- Elite capture
- Loss of revenue through non-compliance and insufficient transfers from central

Government

- Corruption
- Weak administrative and management systems
- Low level of citizen participation
- Inadequately trained staff creating low capacity

With this, we now turn to the issue at stake, which is that of analysing and contemplating the development and peace prospects of current decentralisation impetus in Cameroon.

4. The Development and Peace Prospects of a fast-tracked Decentralisation Process in Cameroon

My Dear compatriots, together, let us make Cameroon a land of great opportunities for economic and social development in peace and Unity (H.E President Paul Biya's New Year 2020 Message to the Nation on 31 December 2019

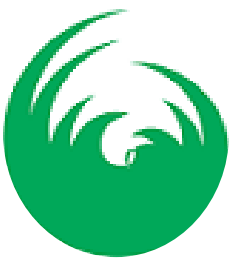
The above statement by the President of the Republic of Cameroon clearly indicates the current orientation of the Cameroon's development politics with is that of putting peace at the centre of her development processes and also putting development at the centre of her quest for peace and unity. However, it will be necessary provide at this juncture, the institutional and policy environment of decentralisation in Cameroon that informs the empirical analysis in this paper.

4.1 The Institutional and Overall Policy Framework for Decentralisation: From progressiveness to acceleration?

The local council as an institution in Cameroon its historical roots long before the country's independence. Since then, we have witnessed the gradual 'municipalisation' of Cameroon's territory, consolidating by the 1974 reform. Moves toward effective decentralisation in Cameroon are rooted in the long search for a political and administrative system more suited to the local culture of managing public affairs; since the envisaged transformation would affect a longstanding practice that is difficult to dislodge. For instance, the complex history, coupled with the strong network of 'institutionalised clientelism.' Because of all these considerations, including a plethora of administrative, bureaucratic, economic and practical concerns, the government of Cameroon opted for a *progressive (i.e gradual or evolving)* approach to its decentralisation process, respecting the principles of *subsidiarity*, and *complementarity*, in the power sharing exercise.⁵ Hence, it is vital to note that after the January 1996 constitutional promulgation, it took Cameroon almost a decade (eight years, to be specific) before the passing of the three decentralisation laws on 22 July 2004, which partially abolished certain provisions of the laws of 1974 and 1987 to organize councils and set up city councils, respectively.

These new laws and others are currently the main pieces of legislation on local government in

⁵ For details, see Republic of Cameroon (2008) : Guide for Mayors and Municipal Councillors. Yaounde: a joint publication by FEICOM, French Embassy and MINTAD.



Cameroon, defining the limits of transferred authority at each level of decentralisation. They comprise:

- Law No. 2004/ 017 on the orientation (guidelines) of decentralization.
- Law No. 2004/ 018, on the rules applicable to councils.
- Law No. 2004/ 019 on the rules applicable to regions.

The stakes behind these three laws on decentralisation are quite high as the decentralization process forms part of the national policy on democratisation and state modernisation. The piece of legislation that emphasises the democratic governance and local development dimension of decentralisation is contained in Law No. 2004/017 of 22 July 2004 on the orientation of decentralisation. *Section 2 (1) states that “decentralisation shall consist of devolution, by the State, of special powers, and appropriate resources to regional and local authorities” and section 2 (2) stipulates that “decentralisation shall constitute the basic driving force for the promotion of development, democracy and good governance at the local level”.* In this regard and in accordance to Section 7 of Law No. 2004/17 of 22 July 2004 on the orientation of decentralisation, “*any devolution of power to a regional or local authority shall be accompanied by the transfer by the state to the former, of the necessary resources and means for the normal exercise of power so devolved*”. Hence, the *graduation/progressiveness principle* according to the decentralisation laws, shall refer to the progressive devolution of power (**Guide for Mayors and Municipal councillors, 2008: 12**). This principle actually implies to a situation whereby the transfer of authority is spread over time and is done in packages (phases) or levels. In which case, the State shall gradually transfer special powers and appropriate means to regional and local authorities (ibid). Considerately, the complementarity principle shall necessitate consultation, cooperation and collaboration between the State and local authorities (ibid: 12). Through this structure, it is envisaged that the goal of balanced development and social justice could be attained (**Les Atouts Economique du Cameroon;**

2007; 2013). It is therefore, clear that the 2004 decentralisation law has the promotion of local development, democracy and governance as its main impetus.

In light of the above, a significant step taken by the law maker (the Head of State) in 2008 was the promulgation of two presidential decrees: decree No. 2008/013 and 2008/014 of 17 January 2008 to organise and specify the rules governing the functioning of the National Decentralization Council chaired by the Prime Minister and the Inter-ministerial Committee on Local Services, chaired by the then Minister of Decentralization and Local Development. These two organs are respectively charged with the follow- up and evaluation of the decentralisation implementation process as well as the preparation and follow-up of the devolution of powers and resources to Regional and Local Authorities. The January 1996 Constitution also provides for the Senate and the Regional councils. Article 20 of the constitution state that the Senate represents decentralised bodies. In this upper chamber of parliament, each region is represented by ten Senators, seven elected by indirect universal suffrage from each region and three to be appointed by the President of the Republic. The bill creating a Senate was passed in the June 2006 Legislative sitting (Forje, 2006:12) and this took the government of Cameroon nearly another decade to hold the first senatorial elections (held on 14 April 2013) for a five-year period. As such, Cameroonian municipal councillors again went to the polls on 25 March 2018 to vote the next cohort of senators wherein the ruling party had an overwhelming victory by winning 63 out of the 70 available seats and the main opposition party SDF won the remaining 7 seats (in the North-West Region only). The Head of State subsequently appointed the 30 remaining senators in accordance with the constitution.

Decree No. 2008/376 of November 12, 2008 on the administrative organisation of the Republic of Cameroon; also saw the transformation of Provinces into Regions. In terms of local governance, the first powers were transferred to the councils by the central government in 2010. In accordance with the principle



of progressiveness, in 2018, 63 powers were transferred by 21 ministries, with corresponding resources, amounting to more than 350 billion CFA. (opening address, Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute during the General Conference of Local Councils on 6-7 February 2019).

However, it took the government of Cameroon another decade (11 years to be more precise) to promulgate the necessary bill putting into place Regional Councils. This came as a result of the Major National Dialogue of 30 September-04 October 2019 prompted by the search for a peaceful and sustainable solution to the ‘Armed Conflict in the English speaking North West (NW) and South West (SW) Regions, which led to the adoption by parliament in December 2019 of Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 to institute the General Code of Regional and Local Authorities. This Decentralisation code also gave rise to the *Special Status* for the NW and SW Regions. This Special Code under the current ‘accelerated decentralisation’ process is aimed at giving more autonomy to these two English speaking regions due to their linguistic and cultural specificities. However, this so-called *special status* alongside the regional councils is yet to be fully implemented though the Presidents of the Regional Councils and other key members are already functional. In fact, according to the document, *Paul Biya : Unique Acuity. Le Temps des Opportunités, A publication of the Civil Cabinet. Published in January 2021*⁶, December 6, 2020 marked the culmination of the process of setting up decentralization bodies in Cameroon with the elections of regional councilors. As the document puts it, for the first time in its history, Cameroon organised an election to designate the very first regional councilors in the deliberative assemblies of the ten regions. On this occasion, more than 24 000 voters, including 10 236 municipal councilors and 14 002 traditional rulers, went to the

polls to elect those to sit on these bodies. Composed of two electoral colleges, they elected 700 divisional representatives and 200 representatives of traditional rulers. The election was a first of its kind also for traditional rulers whose political role was thus reinforced, and who were enthusiastic to be part of this movement by presenting more than 110 competing lists..

In this same line, Prime Minister, Head of Government, Chief Joseph Dion Ngute promulgated decree No. 2019/0829 of 22 February 2019 to set the allocation of the *General Decentralisation Grant* to empower Cameroon’s 360 local councils. Out of the total of FCFA 49.8 billion for the Grant, FCFA 36 billion is the General Investment allocation. This amount is shared equitably to the 360 Councils, meaning that each council is allocated FCFA 100 million for the financing of advanced council projects registered in the project logbook of the Ministry of Decentralization and Local Development (Cameroon Tribune No. 11821/8020 of Tuesday April 09, 2019). However, it is important to note that although the budget for decentralised local authorities (regions and councils) was increased fivefold in 2019, from FCFA 10 to 49.8 billion (€15.2 to €74.8 million), it only represented 1 per cent of the national budget of CFA 4,850 billion (€7.4 billion) in 2019. Notwithstanding, at the moment, councils already have administrative and fiscal powers devolved to them.

Certainly, this new legal framework including the general decentralisation code for regional and local authorities put in place in 2019, creates an environment that represents an irreversible step forward for the process of decentralization. In this context, *decentralisation in Cameroon is construed as,*

a governance and local development tool that corresponds to the specificities of a country with many varieties and unique sociological complexities. Its goals are therefore to reinforce the powers of local actors in order to ensure more balanced development policies nationwide, promote local democracy by involving citizens in

⁶ Paul Biya : Unique Acuity. Le Temps des Opportunités, A publication of the Civil Cabinet. No. 65, January 2021, pp.22-23



the management of local affairs, prioritize management at the local level to take into account the needs of the population and improve their standard of living, empower local elected officials and the population, based on the principle of participation⁷.

Hence in the context of this article, decentralisation in Cameroon is taken to be *the process through which the central government transfers responsibilities and power to the state institutions close to the local population, granting them administrative and financial autonomy as well as political legitimacy so that, with popular participation, accountability, responsiveness to the people, the production of goods and local services can be improved and hence contribute to inclusionary democratic governance, local development and peace.* Seen in this way, the final goal of decentralisation in Cameroon is to give the possibilities to local populations to organise and realise their local potentials by giving a ‘certain degree’ of autonomy and discretionary power to regional and local authorities that will permit them to work on behalf of their local populations.

5. The General Code of Regional and Local Authorities and the Special Status for the NW and SW Regions

Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 to institute the General Code of Regional and Local Authorities was enacted notably after the Major National Dialogue, held in Yaoundé from 30 September to 4 October 2019. This Code reflects the renewed commitment of State authorities to fast-track and deepen decentralisation, on the one hand, and the aspirations of the population to participate in the management of local affairs, while respecting national unity, territorial integrity and the supremacy of the State on the other hand. This code defines the general framework of RLAs; the status of locally elected officials; the rules of organization and functioning of Regional and local Authorities; the

specific regime applicable to certain RLAs and the financial regime applicable to RLAs. Specifically, it sets the general framework of decentralisation by strengthening the principles relating to the guarantee of free administration and the functional autonomy of RLAs. Moreover, the law enshrines the principle of exclusiveness in the exercise of powers transferred to RLAs. In addition, financial resources related to transferred powers are no longer listed in the budgets of ministries, but are directly allocated to RLAs. Furthermore, rules on state supervisory authority have been revised, including the substantial easing of the powers of administrative authorities, who henceforth shall only ensure the control of legality and provision of advice and not be involved in the appraisal of opportunity. In order to strengthen their financial capacity, the law provides that the portion of State revenues allocated to RLAs, under the General Decentralisation Fund cannot be less than fifteen percent (15%). The code proposes new measures, notably the exploitation of minerals that cannot be leased, recruitment and management of staff of nursing and paramedical integrated health centres and subdivisional health centres, and recruitment and management of teachers of day care centres, primary schools, and nursery schools. This law also breaks away with the practice of appointing Government Delegates and enshrines the election of city mayors chosen by city councillors.

An important innovation regarding the organization and functioning of regions lies in the implementation of a **SPECIAL STATUS** for the NW and SW Regions. In this connection, the law establishes a special legal regime that gives the NW and SW regions, powers commensurate with their specificity. These relate in particular to their participation in the development of national policies pertaining to the English subsystem of education and justice, in line with the common law sub-system, creation and management of regional development missions, as well as status of traditional chiefs. The other notable specificity concerns regional bodies in the NW and SW regions which are: The Regional Assembly and the Regional

⁷ Ibid, p. 26.



Executive Council. The Regional Assembly, a deliberative body, exercises all the powers devolved to the regional councils by the laws in force. The Regional Assembly is also composed of ninety (90) regional councillors elected for a five-year term of office. It comprises two houses, the House of Divisional Representatives and the House of Chief. Finally, as another major innovation, the law provides for the establishment of an ‘independent public conciliator’ in the NW and SW regions.

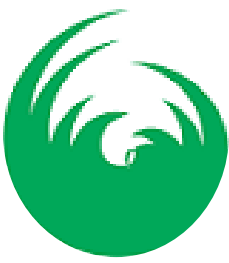
Evidently, despite the initial slow decentralisation process there are still many achievements that have been registered with regard to the Cameroonian decentralisation process. However, we also believe that there are deficiencies that need to be tackled carefully and expeditiously in order to provide a ‘prudent platform’ for the implementation of the ‘fast-tracked’ decentralisation process especially at this time when the country is facing serious peace and security challenges. In fact, more than two (2) decades after the entry into the Constitution of Decentralisation, it is important to note that the Cameroonian local council has not yet found its full potential nationwide due to some setbacks and the fundamental questions are: *what are the implications of Cameroon’s past experience with decentralisation in this renewed impetus of Fast-tracking decentralisation in Cameroon for Local Development and Peace?* What are the potential vulnerabilities and opportunities in this ambitious move from a ‘gradual’ to a ‘speedy’ process of decentralisation that aims at empowering citizens to take control of their own peace and development concerns?

6. Lessons from the past experience and current implications for fast-tracking the Decentralisation process for sustainable local development and Peace.

Based on the analysis of data collected 2011 and 2017, and other past studies, and reflecting on Cameroon’s current ambitious and ‘accelerated decentralisation process, the improvements to be made concern in particular the following vulnerabilities and deficiencies.

- Failure to fully implement the existing normative framework and the poor functioning of some organs and bodies.⁸
- Strong collaboration based on the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity between central and local authorities is also deemed relevant for the success of decentralisation. Between early 2007 and June 2008, a group of Consultants (the Axes Management Agora Consulting) conducted a diagnostic study under the instruction of the then Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation (MINATD) entitle: “Synopsis of the Study on Decentralisation and the Deconcentrated Organisation of the State of Cameroon”. It was a continuation of the study on the ‘Modernisation of the Territorial Administration’ that started in 2006 with the intention of MINATD being to facilitate the implementation of decentralisation through an adapted *deconcentration*⁹. The fact here is that in Cameroon, deconcentrated and decentralised authorities are expected to work collaboratively following the principle of complementarity. The study found a lot of shortcomings in the relationship between deconcentrated and decentralised authorities that affect the effective implementation of decentralisation. In particular, it found a remarkably low level of trust and cooperation between the two parties and made recommendations to that effect.
- The issue of collaboration between Local Council and the Civil Society is also key to the functioning of effective decentralisation. Section 18 of the law on the orientation of decentralisation also recognises civil society organisations (CSOs) as key partners in

⁸For details, also see the *Cameroon’s National Development Strategy 2020-2030 for Structured Transformation and Inclusive Development*, published by the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development in 2020
⁹ See, *Synopsis of the study on Decentralisation and the Deconcentrated Organization of the State of Cameroon*.

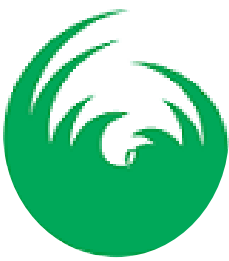


decentralisation. It stipulates that they may work in conjunction, on a contract basis, with regional and local authorities for the attainment of certain goals or execution of public utility projects. The private sector on its part has a vital technical contribution to make in the decentralisation process. The general legal framework of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) is defined by Law No. 2006/12 of 29 December 2006 to institute the partnership contract system. One particularly prominent private partner in Cameroon's decentralisation is the Cameroon Employers' Union (GICAM) with head quarters in Douala. However, according to the data collected and analyzed within the in 2011, 2017 and 2019, local council authorities and civil society organizations (in the form of NGOs) have a suspicious and tensed working relationship. While local council authorities figured local NGOs as 'irresponsible partners' and 'intruding' into their sphere of operation in the delivery of local services and therefore avoid working with them, NGOs on their part accused local council authorities of corruption and incompetence.

- There is also the problem of inadequate provision and access to basic social services. In the current decentralisation context, citizens' political participation is institutionally limited to the five-yearly elections of their Municipal council representatives through the political party list system. This means in effect that citizens can hold their representatives to account for their actions. However, besides electoral accountability, citizens' participation (input) in the affairs of their local councils is limited to consultation by their elected representatives (municipal councillors). Thus, other forms of institutionalised citizen participation mechanisms, such as forums, public hearings, participatory budgeting, neighbourhood committees remain largely

absent in the decentralisation framework, even though some local councils are currently experimenting with such participatory mechanisms. So there remains the problem of low citizen participation and lack of transparency and accountability in local public affairs. Council authorities engaged in the delivery of local services unsynchronised with citizens input (that is, without meaningful citizen participation) and this does not add up to the requirements for inclusive local development and peace through decentralisation.

- Not only the councils are undemocratically organised in terms of political representation (with few youths and female councillors), but local councils are also limited in terms of 'critical voice' in their executive and deliberative organs. Local Councils suffer from poor leadership and differential participation in decision making among key council actors, which in turn act as a disincentive to deepening democratic governance and contributing to local development. This observation facilitates the conclusion that men still hold the dominant power in council decision-making processes and female councillors feel less empowered and less professionally fulfilled vis-à-vis their male counterparts.
- Local council officials also complained about the complexities inherent in the decentralisation laws and that the laws are difficult to understand and to operationalize. Hence, there is mismatch between skills and expertise of councillors and some mayors vis-à-vis the complex policy frameworks in today's local administration. According to some of the research participants, councillors are voted because of their popularity and not in terms of any formal training in the field of local public administration or even political development, and so they get into the councils without the prerequisite knowledge to carry out their



required tasks. Sometimes even councils that have developed their council development plans with the help of (development partners) hardly put them into use. The combine effect is poor performance of local taxation and financial mobilisation which is a hindrance to the financial autonomy of local councils; insufficient quantity and quality of human resources and deficit in infrastructure and equipment. Senior staff members in the councils still need basic training in elaborating medium and long-term council development plans, and in formulating, executing, monitoring and evaluating their own budgets.

- Local politics is still dominated by political patronage. By law, councillors are supposed to be creative in order to generate income for the council. However, findings revealed that it is the contrary that happens. It was evidenced that some councillors come to look for jobs and contracts in the council and once they are not given the chance, they sabotage the work of the council. This was particularly true in Eseka Council.
- In some of the councils studied such as in Douala IV and Buea, the ‘ethnic factor’ was also found to be problematic, in particular, the incidence of the ‘son and/or daughter of the soil’ syndrome which is gradually becoming a cause for concern in Cameroon. It appears that some persons who are mayors outside their council areas of origin are sometimes considered as ‘outsiders’ or even ‘stranger others’. This means that in times of ‘electoral uncertainty’ ethnicity can be mobilised by traditional (and even political) elites to deprive elected local authorities from their electoral legitimacy.
- One ‘gigantic’ administrative deadlock unearthed in some of the councils studied was the issue of ‘administrative discontinuity’ due to inter-party bitterness and uncooperative mentality of elected mayors. Within this realm

of local political dynamics in the councils’ administration, it also became somewhat clear that some mayors for fear that another political party might be elected to run the council, such mayors may even choose to cunningly disrupt key elements that facilitate the working of council administration just to destroy confidence in the incoming ‘opposition’ party and leave citizens with the remembrance of a good period of local government that could not ‘live long’.

- In nearly all the councils studied, the limited autonomy and capacity (largely administrative and financial), and limited discretionary power of elected local authorities appeared to be the ‘critical weakest links’ and downward accountability as the ‘critical missing link’ in the decentralisation chain in Cameroon.

Certainly, the combined effect of the above institutional and operational roadblocks to effective decentralisation, ‘arrested’ the decentralisation process at the point of implementation since its promulgation in the 1996 Constitution, prompting the current renewed impetus to fast-track the process. Such a paradox between policy and practice needs to be seriously considered as Cameroon embarks on this new phase with its high impetus and stakes.

Conclusion

Coming to the conclusion of the article, the fundamental question to ask is: *do Cameroonians have any reason for hope or are they still between hope and despair in this renewed context of fast-tracking the decentralization process?* Perhaps, the most striking finding of this article is that while the trend towards fast-tracking decentralisation gives hope for a deep democratic governance for sustainable development and peace, that also works for the poor and the underprivileged in Cameroon, when implemented without a certain degree of ‘local democracy’ it becomes constrained and ‘arrested’ at the point of implementation. In other words, when the decentralisation policy is shorn of its local democratic ideals and the weak democratic culture of participation



remains unaffected by the decentralisation reform in a country context such as Cameroon, characterised by an enduring legacy of authoritarianism and exclusionary politics, the very purpose of the renewed decentralisation impetus can only be defeated despite the apparently ‘strong political will’ at the top of the leadership pyramid. Put together, it could be argued that the extent to which the current decentralisation process in Cameroon can contribute to deepening and fostering democratic governance for sustainable development and peace in the country is a function of numerous institutional incentives within the national decentralisation framework, the constraints of the local political, administrative and financial system, and the degree to which citizens’ preferences will be formally represented and articulated in the local politico-administrative structure.

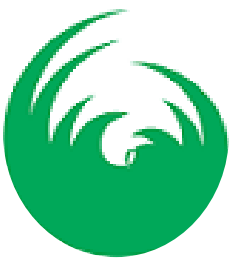
Hence, from the analysis in this paper, it suffices to state that despite many success stories in the decentralisation literature, devolved local government system is also replete with numerous failures. In this article, an attempt has been made to analyse the politico-economic factors that underlie the failure of the first phase of the decentralisation process that lasted for more than two decades and failed to deliver on its local development benefits. The issues unravelled prompt key policy stakeholders to contemplate how to navigate the vulnerabilities and ambiguities of the current phase of fast-tracking the decentralisation process for sustainable development and peace in Cameroon. Local government decentralisation advocates for the active participation of all citizens in the affairs that concern them. For the accelerated decentralisation process to proceed without getting involved in a ‘fatal accident,’ it is imperative that the government considers the challenges and vulnerabilities highlighted in the previous section, if the ‘fast-tracking’ of the decentralisation process is going to be effective in contributing to sustainable development and peace in the country.

Therefore, it would seem that fast-tracking the decentralisation process in Cameroon can be a panacea to the development and peace of Cameroon at this

critical moment in the socio-political history of the country. However, this has to be approached with prudence and would depend on a number of factors. For example, on whether the local and regional authorities are autonomous and have adequate discretionary power. Whether they are accountable to the citizens, whether the citizens have a chance to air out their views and whether the Local and Regional Authorities have the capacity and authority to spend the money generated to improve service delivery and therefore enhance their legitimacy. Greater decentralisation by fast-tracking does not necessarily imply greater democracy and development at the local level, let alone bringing the government closer to the people. Again, it all depends on the circumstances under which decentralisation occurs. The first problem lies with choice of the form of decentralisation that governments opt to choose and the design and how they succeed in navigating the vulnerabilities and implementation challenges encountered. All this, suggest the need, as Eaton et al., (2010) buttress, to go beyond the parameters of political “will” and “commitment” and embrace a rigorous analysis and understanding of the historical, politico-economic, socio-cultural and institutional dynamics that might serve to facilitate or obstruct societal transformation in a given country context such as Cameroon.

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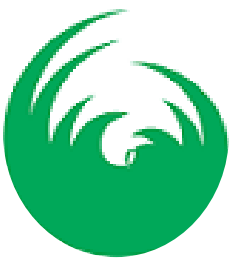
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