

Renegotiating Citizen Participation in Local Governance in Africa. The Case of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

In most African countries, political liberation was supported by spontaneous people's movements and various constellations of civil society. The post-independent era witnessed the introduction of a one-party system, which fundamentally curtailed these freedoms which were at the centre of the decolonial debate in Africa. The liberal market ideology that pervaded economic and political spaces after 1990 heralded alternatives for civil society to self-organize for political change in the continent. In the Economic Commission for Central African States (ECCAS), the legislative framework for citizen participation in local governance processes and structures encountered steep resistance from political elites. However, exogenous factors, together with home-grown citizen initiatives to advance the well-being of the people, emerged. In post-independent Cameroon, citizen participation in local governance processes was shaped by the rigid political and, subsequently, economic systems that the country experienced. With the demise of the bipolar World, people fashioned different places of engagement through civil society spaces where expectations and conceptions of civic involvement were developed and articulated. This policy paper analyses the regulatory framework for civil society participation in local governance in the ECCAS sub-region. It also examines citizen participation in local governance processes and structures in Cameroon. The paper identifies key challenges inhibiting citizens from freely engaging in civic activities in the country and presents some policy directions ECCAS and the state of Cameroon need to take to facilitate the effective involvement of citizens in the associational life of the sub-region and of Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

There is a general understanding amongst local governance experts that citizens at the local level of government in Africa have been increasingly involved in administering their country's resources for development for several decades. Several reasons have been advanced for the increased participation of citizens in local governance in Africa, including, amongst others, the removal of restrictions on political spaces in the early 1990s and the decentralised political system that many countries on the continent eventually adopted. According to Ngalim (2014:88), this transition from the pre-1990 neo-centralism approach to a neo-liberal economic system is complicated by the fact that the neo-liberal approach stresses decentralisation, subsidiarity, use of public-private partnership and citizen participation in policy formulation and implementation. Critical policy decisions at the central political level aimed at devolving competence to local governments are becoming increasingly important. As a result, local governments are gaining authority and legitimacy in the political processes Ngalim (2014:88). Thus, the role of citizens in this transition is essential and has helped in the smooth functioning of local governments, especially as they are at the epicentre of delivering social services such as health and education.

However, local governments are to act as the locomotive of rural consensus building, providing essential services that are responsive to local wishes and conditions. Fundamentally, as Kersting et al. (2009:9) observe, local governments must constitute the local branch of government machinery, performing essential government functions in crucial policy areas. On the other hand, Cheka (2008:74) views local governance as the way the authority of the state is exercised in the administration of a country's scarce resources for development. Development agencies and policy organisations often habitually use public administration in qualitative terms to describe state institutions' administrative effectiveness and efficiency at the local government level. Similarly, it defines governance as the set of standards, strategies, and organisations by which a society administers its economic, political, and social affairs through interactions among the government, civil society, and the private

sector. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) sees governance as exercising political, economic and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels.

Citizen participation in governance processes at the local level is now a universal approach that affects both developed and developing countries alike. As Kersting et al (2009:9) further note, conditionalities attached to development aid and democratic processes and modifications in developing countries, especially after the demise of the bipolar World, have jolted many on the continent to partake in the democratic and governance processes in their local governance structures. While global political permutations and different historical contexts may have played a determining factor in how citizens participate in the governance processes at the local level, local realities and embedded institutional centralization of local governance structure influence how the process is perceived and domesticated.

In Cameroon, the uptake of citizen participation in local governance has been sluggish, primarily because of the centralized, top-down presidential political system the country has experienced since independence. This top-down, centralized governance system, as Ngoh (2004:427) contends, was exemplified by the one-party state since 1966 when political parties were dissolved and their operating mechanisms infused, including their respective leaders in favour of a unique party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU). Henceforth, and as Cheka (2008:76) opines, the CNU became the principal factor in determining the pace and space through which citizens could participate in the governance structures in their society. From the farmers' cooperatives and traditional authorities to the allocation of seats on local councils, the unique party determines state and society relations. Though the role of the party gradually shrank after the 1990 liberty laws, it is still a significant player in the local governance structure in Cameroon.

The domestication of legal frameworks to facilitate the involvement of citizens in local governance structures in ECCAS has been a challenging endeavour in the past decades. While civil society organizations and other non-state actors are generally allowed to operate in all ECCAS member countries, the overbearing stature of the ruling party coalitions in these countries has limited the free and voluntary participation of ordinary citizens in the governance structures at the local government levels. In other words, and as Oyewole (2018:1) observes, the efficiency of protocols, strategies, and structures for monitoring and measuring the participation of local people in the local governance spheres in the subregion is aimed at strengthening local content regulatory frameworks for creating sustainable domestic production linkages in the ECCAS subregion and improve regulatory compliance with the view to enhance the benefits of citizen participation in local government structures.

The paper thus seeks to:

1. Review regional framework(s) guiding public participation in local governance in ECCAS.
2. Assess the guiding legislative frameworks for public participation in Cameroon.
3. Assess the existing platforms and mechanisms for public participation in local governance in Cameroon.
4. Assess the role of civil society and other non-state actors in enhancing citizen participation in local governance in Cameroon.
5. Recommend policy strategies and mechanisms to enhance public participation in local governance.

Though the vital role of local fiscal autonomy in infrastructural provision cannot be overstated, there is a need for more insight into the fundamental role local governments have been called upon to play in stimulating economic development and social cohesion at the regional level.

METHODOLOGY

A review of citizen participation in local governance in Cameroon is not easy, considering the centralised and rigidly controlled system of political management in Cameroon. This is further compounded by the varied contested political interpretations of the foundation of the Cameroon state and its relation to various political and civil society constituencies. The critical challenge the research has encountered is to look for ways citizens can participate in managing their affairs. Moreover, the paper tries to seek how citizens could structurally transform the post-colonial state to make it responsive to the current developmental challenges the country is facing.

Therefore, the paper adopts two methodologies. First, it reviews the current literature on citizen participation in local governance in Cameroon and the CEMAC subregion in general. Second, it draws on field notes the research has gathered over several years in the subregion. Thus, this paper draws on secondary data from ongoing research in Cameroon and the Central Africa sub-region. Field notes from the 'role of local voices in the structural transformation of Africa' project were instrumental in shaping the policy formulation of the paper. As such, the paper draws from field notes using anthropological methods of observation and in-depth interviews with several organisations whose participation in NGO activities is analyzed against the background of the socio-economic and political crises Cameroon has experienced since the opening of political spaces in the country in 1990.

1. Legal regional frameworks for public participation in local governance in ECCAS

Created in 1983, according to the continent-wide reforms initiatives prescribed by the Lagos Plan of Action (1980), ECCAS comprises Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central Africa Republic (CAR), Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe. The Commission's primary objective is to direct the course of cooperation and physical, economic and monetary integration in Central Africa. Though initially, ECCAS had remained inactive for several years, notably because of the many conflicts in the region, it had in 2015 begun a process of reforms of the Institutions of the Commission. The reforms process of the Commission resulted in the adoption of the *Plan Strategique Indicatif a Moyen Terme* (PSIMT) covering the period 2021-2025 (see for example @ <https://ceeac-eccas.org/en/calendar/the-institutional-reform-of-eccas/>). The reform agenda of the Commission aims to accomplish a significant qualitative leap in the governance of the Commission and to make it a viable and robust subregional organisation capable of addressing the myriad economic and security challenges facing member states of the Commission. The PSIMT aims explicitly to harmonise the Commission's legal and institutional framework and all the components of the regional integration process within ECCAS. The process aims to streamline and domesticate economic and trade integration challenges, political and social stability, and physical and socio-cultural integration challenges. Fundamentally, the strategic plan strives to contribute to accelerating the process of rationalisation of the Regional Economic Commissions (RECs) in the subregion to create and capacitate a single REC in the subregion as prescribed by the Banjul African Union summit of 2006 (ibid).

Despite the reform processes initiated by the Commission, ECCAS is still confronted with institutional challenges because several members are also members of other sub-regional organisations. Burundi, Rwanda and the DRC are members of the Economic Community of the Great Lakes region. Angola and DRC are members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Cameroon, Chad, CAR, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, and Equatorial Guinea are members of Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), and Burundi and Rwanda are members of the East African Community (EAC). This has negatively impacted citizen participation in the local governance structures in their respective countries. It has negatively affected the institution's financial stability as members struggle to meet their obligations to the institution. It is worth noting that about a third of ECCAS countries are experiencing or have experienced conflicts. This explains why promoting peace, security and stability in Central Africa has been added to ECCAS's traditional tasks. Within the Peace and Security domains, ECCAS could be credited for creating within its operational structures such as:

1. The mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution is commonly referred to as the Council for Peace and Security in Central Africa (COPAX).
2. The Central Africa Early Warning System (MARAC). Its primary function is to collect and analyze data for the early detection and prevention of conflicts.
3. A Defence and Security Commission (CDS) consisting of the chiefs of staff of the national armies and commanders in chief police and gendarmerie forces from member states.

COPAX has been running a peace training institute in Douala, Cameroon, for security personnel from member countries operating in conflict zones. Within the COPAX framework, key conclusions on collective security were made, including establishing a Non-Aggression Pact and a Mutual Assistance Pact. The Non-Aggression Pact forbids any member from attacking or overtly expressing bellicose tendencies towards another member. The Mutual Assistance Pact urges member states to collectively come to the aid of a member whose security has

been threatened by a third party.

The MARAC and CDS protocols have also been established within the ECCAS security frameworks, together with the Central African Multinational Force (FOMAC). As part of the Africa Standby Force initiative, the FOMAC would conduct peace missions, maintain security, contribute to humanitarian relief, and assist other continental security initiatives. The presence of FOMAC forces in CAR indicates the success of the peace-building efforts of ECCAS. The various ECCAS security frameworks equally call for a multi-sectoral collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure peace and security in the region. This underscores the partnership between MARAC, the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) in facilitating the deployment of the European Union Force (EUFOR) to Eastern Chad and parts of CAR. The presence of EUFOR and FOMAC in the region has played a significant role in eliminating the systemic conflicts that have plagued the area for more than 20 years. These conflicts, it should be noted, pose severe challenges to peace-building efforts, requiring the mobilization of significant resources to support disarmament, demobilization and reintegration operations.

One of the main reasons put forward by several organizations for the tardive response by African RECs to conflict situations on the continent has been its interlocking membership and processes and procedures not streamlined according to preferences. It is within this understanding that ECCAS and CEMAC have clinched an agreement on the Regional Cooperation Strategy Paper for 2003-2007, subsequently leading to the merger of ECCAS and CEMAC. The amalgamation of the two entities would allow for a robust and purposeful realignment of strategies and objectives in realizing a political and monetary union on the continent. It would also allow for a strategic streamlining of the security apparatus of the more prominent institution.

The creation of the ECCAS's UN Human Rights Centre aligns with ECCAS's goal of abiding by and upholding the critical objectives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the region. Because several ECCAS countries were either emerging or experiencing conflict, creating the centre was more critical. Human rights violations, it has been noted, are a hallmark of these conflicts. Thus, the centre's objective of raising public consciousness of human rights and democratic values could not have come at a better time. The ECCAS - UN Sub-regional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa based in Yaoundé, Cameroon, intends to cooperate further with national Human Rights institutions in the member states in raising public awareness of human rights and democratic values, training research and provision of advisory services and technical cooperation in the field of human rights and democracy. According to the UNHCR (2001:3), the objectives of the centre were threefold:

1. Contributing to training personnel responsible for the management of activities relating to human rights and democracy.
2. Providing support for the creation and or strengthening of national institutions responsible for human rights and democracy.
3. Cooperating in disseminating international instruments relating to human rights and democracy.

The operationalization of the centre would, therefore, ensure that government departments and CBOs are schooled in human rights and democracy and raise public awareness of human rights and democratic values in all 11 member states of ECCAS.

The response of ECCAS concerning the energy crisis of the early 2000 was the set-up of the Central African Power Pool (CAPP) in April 2003. The primary objectives of CAPP were to establish a sub-regional setting for resolving energy problems and creating an electricity market. The hydroelectricity power generation potential of Cameroon and the DRC are well documented. Within this realm of thinking, ECCAS has streamlined the modalities for foreign investment in the power sector and has also established frameworks for marketing power generated in the region. The restricting physical environments of the Central African subregion has rendered the building and upkeep cost of infrastructure too high for any single member of the organization. Against this background, the ECCAS secretariat has established the commonly agreed master plan for Transport in Central Africa. The plan seeks to manage local transport endeavours to safeguard the development of land, air and sea transport systems in the region. It was also aimed at harmonizing the strategic infrastructure policies while maintaining the need to harmonize the reference networks for existing liaisons among member states of the sub-

region. Besides disenclaving the region, it has been noted that a good transport and telecommunication infrastructure will stimulate economic growth, fight poverty and inspire integration in the sub-region.

ECCAS has also been at the forefront of the EPA between the EU and the Central African subregion. The two have entered a treaty on Regional Cooperation Strategy Paper for 2003 – 2007, eventually leading to the merger of the ECCAS and the CEMAC. The EU and ECCAS have also signed an agreement to bankroll the support programme for regional integration in Central Africa worth 16 million Euros, which is meant to facilitate trade talks and institutional capacity among the region's entities. The convention would also strive to combine economic resources, strengthen the customs union, and to advance the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons.

As a regional economic community, ECCAS has implemented a tariff-saving scheme for intra-community trade known as the ECCAS preferential tariff. This preferential trade agreement gives preferential and levy-free produce from member states to be imported to other member states. Levies are, however, levied on goods from a third party. The activities of ECCAS should be able to be financed by the levying by member countries of the Community Integration Contribution of 0.4% of the value of imports from third countries. The trade agreement with the EU also indicates that the entire ECCAS region would be a free trade area by December 31 2007. The potential market created by such an agreement cannot be underestimated, considering that the region is home to more than 150 million people.

2. Legislative frameworks for public participation in local governance in Cameroon

Development and democracy experts continue to highlight the need to encourage citizen participation in local governance structures as a fundamental mechanism of local development in Cameroon. However, development thinking in Africa, especially after 1960, has always taken a top-down trajectory. The various 5-year development plans adopted by many countries on the continent focus on deploying development experts from the national to the local level. In some cases, foreign experts were employed to drive development conception and implementation at the local level. The collapse of the 5-year development plans in the 1980s and the intervention of the World Bank in facilitating development and poverty reduction approaches in many African countries necessitated alternative strategies to involve the community in facilitating development at the local level. More so, there was a need to ensure that citizens effectively participated in local governance structures the government had established. Cameroon was not left out in this post-5-year development plan development thinking and relinquished some core development competence to local councils.

Nevertheless, before the enactment of the Constitution of January 18 1996, local governance in Cameroon functioned under a highly centralized and rigidly controlled government structure. The pre-1996 Constitution was framed within the context of a one-party system which restricted citizen participation in local governance to ruling party loyalists. Nevertheless, as Kofele-Kale (2011:513) notes, Cameroon, like many other African countries, is decentralizing significant functions formerly exercised by the central administration to local governments. Notably, the current devolution of political and administrative power to local governments was the guiding principle of the January 18 1996 constitution, an amended version of the 1972 unitary constitution (Ibid). The 1996 constitution allows for the creating of regional assemblies in all ten regions of the country (See, for example, Cameroon Law No 96-January 18, 1996, to amend the Constitution of June 2 1972). Article 1 (1) (2) of the January 18 1996 Constitution declares the Republic of Cameroon as a decentralized unitary state with three distinct governance levels: Central government, Regions and Council. It further devotes eight articles of the Constitution to regional and local establishments as the basis of decentralization in Cameroon. According to Kofele-Kale (2011:516), Article 55 (2) of the Constitution states that Regions and Local Councils are Public Corporate Bodies that are supposed to be freely administered by elected councils, though Article 55 (3) of the Constitution gives the government supervisory powers over the councils.

In 2004, the National Assembly adopted three pieces of legislation on decentralization. These include Law No 2004/017 of July 22 2004, on the operation of Decentralisation, which lays down the general rules applicable to Councils; Law No 2004/018 of July 22 2004, to Lay Down Rules applicable to Councils, Law No 2004/019 of July 22 2004 to Lay Down Rules applicable to regions and Law No 2009/019 of December 15 2009 on Local Fiscal System (Ibid). A careful review of the implementation strategies of these legal frameworks reveals a

binary approach in the country's decentralization plans. This hybrid approach takes the approach of political and administration decentralization. Besides administrative and political decentralization processes, the Regions and Councils are constitutionally authorized to encourage economic, social, health, educational, cultural and sports development in their spheres of jurisdiction.

The decentralization process in Cameroon took a faster pace in 2016 when teachers' trade unions and lawyers associations in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon demanded the restructuring of the teaching and legal professions in these provinces to allow for the respect of the Anglo-Saxon cultures and traditions. The teachers and lawyers' strike later morphed into a secessionist armed struggle. After a consultative national dialogue, the government, in 2020, grants significant autonomy to all the ten regions, with the two English-speaking provinces given 'special regional status.' The special status grants the English-speaking provinces a regional assembly with a Regional President elected by all municipal and district councils. The House of Chiefs was also established. The President of the House of Chiefs would assume the position of Deputy President of the Regional Assembly. While the administration was still appointing Regional Governors, the devolution process in Cameroon seems to have been completed as prescribed by the 1996 constitution. The devolution process also witnessed significant citizen participation in ensuring that regional structures had requisite financial and human resource autonomy.

Another area of critical citizen participation in local governance in Cameroon is the role of communities in managing land and forest administration in the country. Suffice it to note that the late 1880s saw the establishment of colonial rule in Cameroon, and soon after that, the land tenure system and forest administration became the prerogative of the colonial administrators. Post-colonial governments did not temper with colonial imposed forest management system and virtually upheld the notion that the forest belongs to the government. One noticeable development was that the post-colonial government did little to constrain the people to follow a particular conservation method or to apply a specific land tenure system. As Jolanda van den Berg & Karen Biesbrouck (2005:231) note, a lack of a coherent forest and land tenure system, challenges began to appear within the government forest policies after the economic crisis of the late 1980s and 1990s. Legal reforms were anticipated as part of the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the sustainable administration of tropical forests and biodiversity. The World Bank initiatives came on the heels of the 1974 Land Ordinance in Cameroon, which put the state at the centre of forest management. However, the comprehensive 1994 Forest Law in Cameroon enforces a forestry administration by regulating access to and the administration of transferrable forest resources such as trees, wildlife and fish (Ibid). The Law demarcated forests by their physical look and included all land shielded by vegetation with a predominance of trees, shrubs and other plant species. The 1994 forest law in Cameroon, as in all Congo Basin rainforest countries, makes the state the sole custodian and chief manager of all forests in the country and the region. The Law granted the state special rights to exploit forest resources and apportioned corporate companies and the local population the rights to access and exploit forest resources (Ibid).

With careful consideration, the 1994 law sharply contrasts the customary land tenure and forest ownership system as practised in several parts of the Congo Basin. In the rural areas and at the community level in Cameroon and the Congo rainforest countries, ownership of forest and farmland is recognized. Individuals and family heads exercise this ownership by regularly assigning family members to vacate pieces of land and forest. Jolanda van den Berg & Karen Biesbrouck (2005:233) further note that soil and other forest components are preserved through fallowing. It has been maintained that several Congo rainforest people continue to preserve rights to abandoned campsites and villages and surrounding land and vegetation. On the other hand, the indigenous forest-dwelling people, commonly called the pygmies, equally maintained ownership over abandoned campsites, parts of the virgin forest they plan to occupy and rivers they identify with high potential for fish catch and other resources.

However, the 1974 Land ordinance and the 1994 forest law deny these pygmies customary land rights. It forbids the lighting of bushfires without authorization of forest officials and completely outlaws clearing in the permanent forest zone of the national forest domain (Ibid). The encroachment of the state into the private ownership of land and forest produce, which in most parts of the Congo Forest are essential symbols of wealth and social standing, has led to some sort of resistance on the part of the local population to government conservation policies and land laws.

Self-reliance is another fundamental area that has shaped citizen participation in local governance and development in Cameroon. According to Fonchingong, C, & Fonjong, L (2003:84), self-reliance or community development offers a significant force in triggering the utilization of home-grown resources and, therefore, is one of the most critical approaches to promoting people's participation in determining their development. Headed by Fons (traditional rulers) in the grass fields of Cameroon, community participation in the building of bridges, roads, and familiar gathering places in the villages is a standard process in many villages in rural Cameroon. Cognizant of the vital role of community participation in the development of society, colonial administrators in the grassfields of Cameroon instituted what was commonly referred to as 'indirect rule'. The purpose of indirect rule was to maintain and reinforce the absolute power Fons in the grassfields wield within their community. The centralization of power in the hands of the Fons enables him to mobilize community members for development purposes in the community.

However, self-reliance or community development is seen as a state of mind that respects one's own mental and material possessions as the primary considerations to draw on in searching for one's aims in fulfilling immediate needs and wants (Ibid). Importantly, and as Fonchingong, C, & Fonjong, L (2003:84) observes, self-reliance is situated within the conversation of community development and is linked to related concepts such as self-help, mutual help, indigenous participation and rural development. Self-reliance, manifested in Cameroon through Village Development Associations and Farmers' Cooperatives, which have morphed into Community Credit Unions, promotes the need for the community to facilitate their condition using home-grown ingenuities and resources available at their disposal.

3. Platforms and mechanisms for public participation in local governance in Cameroon

Platforms and mechanisms for public participation in local governance in Cameroon are many and varied. In many rural areas in Cameroon, Village Community Projects, VCPs, Common Initiative Groups, and CIGs are platforms through which citizens participate in local governance and development endeavours in their communities. While VCPs have a distinct purpose, that of popular participation in village development projects, CIGs are dedicated to enhancing the development of sectoral endeavours with specific interests. The increasing importance of these platforms could be traced back to the 1980s, as the drop in cash crop prices negatively impacted rural economies in Cameroon. The impact of the economic depression was reduced government intervention at the local government level, and the government's capacity to achieve essential infrastructural endeavours in the country also diminished. As a result, the local population mobilized citizens and financial resources to undertake interventions in various local development initiatives, including microfinance development projects in remote rural areas (Ibid). The Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League (CamCCUL), which was created in 1968, is one of the most critical community development initiatives in Cameroon. At the time of its creation, as Litwiller, W (n.d. :1) notes, the Cameroon Credit Union leadership recognized the need for an organization that would deliver services to, as well as direct the activities of, Credit Unions operating in the country. With limited access roads and practical coordination skills, the leaders of the League sensed that only collective endeavours on the part of the various credit unions would allow them to reach the lending savings potential of the target population adequately (Ibid). More than half a century later, the founding objectives of the CamCCUL have mainly been met, as demonstrated by the remarkable evolution of both the League and the credit union movement. With a network of over 208 credit unions, CamCCUL is a member of the Banking Commission of Central Africa, COBAC. In the past decade, CamCCUL has reported total assets of USD 306 million and a gross loan portfolio of USD 188 million to 81,000 borrowers (See Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League @ <https://camccul.cm/#> accessed on 09/09/2022). The League has also reported over USD 240 million in deposits held for about 300,000 depositors. Thus, the CamCCUL initiative is perhaps one of the most essential citizens-driven development platforms in Cameroon.

The decentralization process in Cameroon is another vital platform through which ordinary citizens can participate in the local governance structures in Cameroon. Devolution of competence in Cameroon is anchored on three pillars: the state, regional and local authorities. While elections and other general mobilization of the citizenry are administered at the state level, the coalface of citizen participation in local governance in Cameroon is perched at the regional and local levels. The 1996 constitution allows two important local governance structures to operate in the regions (former provinces). These include the regional council and the President of the regional council. The regional council (regional parliament) is elected by indirect universal suffrage by

regional members of municipal councillors. Kofele-Kale, N (2011:519) opines that the regional council's members elect the President. The regional council's President is the region's leader and is aided by a regional bureau comprising a senior vice president, a vice president, two questors and two secretaries. In the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, the Deputy President of the Region is the President of the Regional House of Chiefs. According to the Special Status granted to the two regions, the provinces are financially autonomous and are required by Law to reflect the sociological composition of the region, and the President must be a native of that region (Ibid).

A key platform through which ordinary citizens participate in local governance in Cameroon is at the City Council level. City Councils are special councils created from an urban centre. City Council Councillors are indirectly elected among local councillors that comprise the City Council. Several factors can influence the decision to elevate an urban council to a city council. The key determining factor is the population of the area. A town with more than 300,000 inhabitants can, by a presidential decree, be elevated to a City Council. An urban area's sociological composition can also justify its elevation to a City Council. The primary objective of the sociological consideration paradigm is to ensure that the rights of a minority ethnic group within an urban area are protected. The Law also contends that the obligations of the majority group in the urban area should be equally respected.

Local authorities or ordinary councils constitute a vital deliberative organ of citizens at the local level of government in the country. While population size is a determining factor, local councils play essential roles in the development discourse in rural areas of the country. Councillors at the local councils are elected by universal suffrage and concern themselves with the socio-economic, cultural and health challenges of the people at the local level. They are tasked with executing local development projects, delivering essential social services, and performing other tasks to enrich citizens' living situations with their respective areas of competence (See Njoh, 2011:103). The current decentralization processes in Cameroon have transferred special rules and resources to enable the councils to carry out their obligations.

Another critical area in which rural dwellers have been involved in governance processes in the country is managing health care in rural areas. Mbako, J.D. et al (2017:98) contend that more than 90% of Cameroon's population is in danger of malaria, with about six to eight mosquito bites per person per night. As a result, 41% of people suffer at least one incident of malaria each year, with the primary mortality among women and children under five years of age (Ibid). To counter this, the government of Cameroon has initiated the Integrated Health Centres (IHCs) approach, whereby local peasants are empowered by the government to participate in the management of health centres in villages and enclaved areas in the country. Besides the management of Health Centres, the IHCs approach aims to spread information on the prevention and control of diseases in rural areas. The IHCs concept came about as a result of the perpetuated shortage of health workers, necessitating task-shifting to a different corps of skilled and semi-skilled workers to provide services to the hard-to-reach groups of people in the country (Ibid). The involvement of the community through the IHCs approach presupposes the formation of support groups, inspiring and engaging whole communities to get involved in health intervention to change norms and habits to improve their health at the local level.

The IHCs approach has equally been at the forefront of sensitization, prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS in IHCs in rural areas in Cameroon. Sponsored mainly by Plan Cameroon, the HIV/AIDS sensitization and prevention programme is a community-specific facilitative process to expand new ideas to promote lifestyle changes in impoverished rural communities. The underlying objective is to ensure that communities improve their health and contribute to decisions that affect them.

4. The role of civil society and other non-state actors in enhancing citizen participation in local governance in Cameroon

Civil society organizations are essential actors in the development process of countries and have increasingly played a significant role in shaping and driving government policies in various areas of public life. Though the operational abilities of civil societies to impact society largely depend on the regulatory framework in the society in which they operate, their role in strengthening democracy and development on the continent cannot be overemphasized. While the concept of civil society has been contested, few on the continent would deny that

what we perceive as civil society today is the agency between family and the state. Notably, many argued that civil society is an area where disengaged and isolated individuals interact on the basis of utility and recognition (See, for example, Muzondidya, J, & Nyathi-Ndlovu, L, 2010:25). In essence, many see civil society as a sphere composed of economic, cultural and political activities resistant to the incursions of the state.

The promulgation of the 1990 Law on Freedom of Association or Law relating to Political Parties led to the liberation of the socio-cultural and political space in Cameroon. It led to a dynamic and vibrant civil society sector in Cameroon. The passing of the 1990 Law led to the formation of, among others, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), a militant socialist-leaning political party which calls for better opportunities for all Cameroonians and the unbanning of the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC), which was at the forefront of the decolonial struggle in Cameroon. Besides these two political parties, the country registered more than 100 political parties in the run-up to the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections. Pascal, A.N (2022:4) holds that the 1990 law states that political parties shall be formed and shall freely carry out their activities within the framework of the Constitution. It is important to note that the pre-1990 Cameroon Constitution made it difficult for the multi-party-political system to operate in the country. However, the operational principle of the 1990 laws was predicated on the fact that parties would operate based on the diversity of candidates in an election, as was the case during the single-party epoch.

Consequently, membership in any political party in Cameroon must be based on the person's free will. More importantly, nobody shall be forced to belong to a political party nor be harassed because he belongs or does not belong to a political party (Ibid, quoted in). However, a Section of the 1990 Law states that:

'Associations founded in support of a cause or in view of a purpose contrary to the Constitution, the law and public policy, as well as those whose purpose is to undermine especially security, the integrity of the national territory, national unity, national integration or the republican character of the state shall be null and void' (Ibid, quoted in).

Thus, though the Law recognizes the freedom of persons to form associations, the object of such an association must conform to the Constitution of the country. In this regard, the operational manual of an association or a political party would have to be approved by the relevant ministry responsible for internal public order. If any association or political party goes against these fundamental principles, the association or political party would not be authorized to operate in the country. With the liberation of the socio-cultural and political spaces, political parties, trade union federations, and student movements led the conversation for a just political playing field hitherto occupied by the one-party system.

The role of political parties in mobilizing people to participate in the socio-cultural and political life of Cameroon has been significant. When Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, resigned as President on November 4 1982 and handed power to his constitutional successor, Paul Biya, on November 6 1982, challenges within the ruling Cameroon Nation Union led to fundamental changes in the political establishment with the rebranding of the CNU to Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM) in March 1985 (See for example Ngwane, G, 2014:104). The reformed ruling party did not last long, as President Paul Biya cautioned party militants to prepare for competition during the CPDM party congress in 1990. Before the announcement of political pluralism at the CPDM congress in 1990, suffice to note that when the leader of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), John Fru Ndi, applied to form a political party in April 1990, the entire political establishment in Cameroon went into a frenzy. The application to form a political party was guided in terms of the preamble of the Cameroon Constitution, the 1990 law on press freedom, the 1990 law on freedom of association, the 1990 law relating to political parties, the 1990 law to lay down regulations governing public meetings and processions and the 1990 law to institute a national identity card (Ibid). With the announcement of the official launch of the SDF on May 26 1990, the entire population of the Northwest province and, importantly, many politically conscious Cameroonians tuned to radio stations to follow the launch as it unfolded in Bamenda. Though the government banned the launch, sporadic gathering of people around town continued throughout May 26 1990. Six people were killed, and many were maimed by forces of Law and order.

Though the SDF boycotted the March 1992 parliamentary election, the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP) got 68 seats, the former unique ruling CPDM party was only able to garner 88 seats in a 180-

seat parliamentary, the Cameroon Peoples Union got 18 and the Democratic Movement for the Defence of the Republic, MDR, got 6 (see for example http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2053_92.htm accessed on 11/09/2022). With a 92 to 88 seat balance, the opposition could control the Cameroon parliament after the 1992 elections. After boycotting the 1992 parliamentary elections, the SDF contested the 1997 elections and got 43 seats. Meanwhile, the UNDP, the main opposition party in the 1992 legislature, garnered 13 seats. At the senatorial level, the first senate elections occurred in Cameroon in 2013 and the second in 2021. The SDF has been the only opposition political party to control a region in the Senate. During the 2013 indirect election, the SDF won Adamawa and West Regions. In the 2021 elections, the party was able to control the Northwest Region. While some political parties later aligned with the ruling CPDM, it did not take away the fact that the entry of opposition political parties into the political space changed the configuration of the political map of Cameroon.

One of the fundamental achievements of liberating the socio-cultural and political space in Cameroon was the ability of people with specific interests to demand protection of their interests within the Cameroon polity. In this regard, sectoral trade union movements and teachers and students formed pressure groups to advance their sectoral interests. As a result of the liberation of the political space, students at the lone University of Yaoundé in 1990 demanded reforms in the higher education sector in Cameroon. Two fiercely opposed student groups emerged, the *Parlement* and *Auto-defence*. Fokwang (2007:314) opines that the *Parlement* consisted of individuals who advocated for political liberalization, the cancellation of registration fees at the University of Yaoundé, the reintroduction of financial aid given to students and the reduction of food prices in university restaurants.

On the other hand, Auto-Defence's objective was to protect public property and students on university campuses. Though politicians instrumentalized the student groups for their exigencies, a vital outcome of the tense socio-political situation on campus was the decongestion of the University of Yaoundé as the government took the initiative to create five universities across the geographical and linguistic regions of Cameroon. Though the state has since created four more universities in the country to cover all ten regions, young people and students' role in facilitating higher education reforms in the country cannot be overstated. The tenacity of their demands, the clear articulation of their message, and the objective views in which some of the demands were presented made university reforms in the country realizable.

Another important civil society organization that has left an indelible mark on the political and educational map of Cameroon is the Teachers Association of Cameroon (TAC). Renowned for its fight in the early 1990s for the preservation and protection of the English educational sub-system in the Cameroon educational system, the TAC went into oblivion soon after its founder president, Azong Wara was appointed as the Registrar of the General Certificate of Education Board (see for example <https://cameroonpostline.com/tac-will-improve-teachers-capacities-students-performance-new-president/%E2%80%8B> accessed on 12/09/2022). With the opening of the political space in the 1990s, teachers of the English sub-system demanded reforms of the post-primary school system in Cameroon. Among some of the critical reforms demanded was the need to respect and preserve the English language as a learning and teaching tool. Demands were made to ensure that teachers and those with expertise and knowledge in managing teaching and certification are responsible for teaching and certifying students within the English sub-system. After several years of strikes, negotiations and compromise, the General Certificate of Education Board (GCEB) was created with teachers as the primary stakeholders.

The platform provided by the liberty laws of 1990 saw a slew of youth movements mushrooming into the public sphere. These movements incited panic among the older generations, who saw features that challenged the status quo in modern-day young people. The uneasiness exhibited by the older generation betrays their attempt to accommodate young people at the periphery of political and socio-cultural spaces. In this regard, young people started to envision and create different sites for action where their plans, concerns and ambitions could be articulated (Fokwang, 2007:314). One of the youth groups that emerged due to the asphyxiation of youth voices was President Biya's Youth, also known as PRESBY. The primary objectives of PRESBY were recruiting young people for active citizenship and as foot soldiers in defence of President Biya's ideals of rigour and moralization, as stated in his book, *Communal Liberalism*. Although PRESBY claims to be apolitical, its organizational outlook resembles that of the Youth Wing of the ruling CPDM. However, PRESBY has succeeded in mobilizing young people to participate in local governance processes in Cameroon.

5. Policy strategies and mechanisms to enhance public participation in local governance

Citizen participation in local governance processes in the ECCAS subregion and Cameroon has been negatively impacted by decades of one-party rule in the subregion. The legislative framework for civil society participation in the public sphere is equally constrained by repressive laws restricting fundamental liberties and freedoms. Though good practices from other parts of the World should serve as examples, an ECCAS and a Cameroon framework for citizen participation in local governance processes and structures should be developed. The following recommendations would help address citizen participation in the local governance processes in ECCAS and Cameroon.

ECCAS Subregional Secretariat

1. The ECCAS Secretariat should embark on a public campaign to review processes and frameworks that guide citizens of the subregion to participate in local governance structures in their respective countries.
2. Legislative frameworks should also be adopted at the subregional level to create a legal environment through which civil society could function.
3. The infusion of all other economic and monetary unions into ECCAS should be fast-tracked to ensure alignment and streamlining of unions in the sub-region.
4. The transformation of the ECCAS from a union into a commission should be fast-tracked to enable it to have the necessary supranational powers to pass protocols that are binding on member states.

To the State of Cameroon

1. The establishment of an independent and well-resourced electoral management Board whose members are appointed by political parties represented in parliament. For a balanced bench, a representative of civil society organizations should seat on the independent electoral board.
2. The government should ensure the neutrality of the forces of Law and order in the exercise of their functions.
3. The government should ensure that the independence of the judiciary is maintained and appointments to the bench is managed by an independent judiciary board.
4. The government should ensure that there is a constitutional provision on the status of the leader of official opposition. Such a person should have rights and privileges as those accorded to ministers.
5. The government of Cameroon should also ensure that there is effective devolution of competences to local authorities. Governors of Regions should be elected and entrusted with executive and fiduciary powers.
6. The state of Cameroon should also ensure that minority rights, be they linguistic or ethnic, are protected by the country's Constitution.

CONCLUSION

The task of encouraging citizens to participate in local governance processes in their respective spaces in the ECCAS subregion and in Cameroon is enormous. In a recent speech in Yaounde, Cameroon, French President Emmanuel Macron indicated that he would not have been President of Cameroon if he had been born in Cameroon. He noted that, though civil society does operate and make meaningful contributions to the functioning of the state, it has failed to make any credible contribution to shaping political discourse in the country. Another critical challenge the paper notes is the fragmented nature of political opposition in Cameroon. Statistics show that in 1992, opposition parties won 92 seats together instead of 88 for the ruling party, giving the opposition 51,1% representation in parliament (See Ngwane, 2014:108). In the same light, during the October 11, 1992, presidential elections, the CPDM garnered 39.98 % of the votes, while all opposition parties got 60.2%. With a voter turnout of 71,9%, if the opposition had presented a single candidate, it would have won the 1992 presidential elections. Thus, citizen participation in local governance processes is predicated on the notion that their action can change society. When citizens realize their actions will not have any impact, they usually abstain from participating in local governance structures. The fundamental idea is that citizens are now aware that only

their active participation can make a meaningful change in society, and the government, together with international civil society organizations, should provide the necessary help to ensure that the local population participate in local activities that benefit them.

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