

The Socio Political Crises and Implication on the Tourism Sector in the North West Region of Cameroon: Case of Mezam Division

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ABSTRACT

The socio political crises has negatively affected tourism in Mezam Division. The objective of this study is to examine the degree to which the socio political crises in Mezam has affected the tourism sector and the strategies that can be put forth to revamp the sector. Tourism which today has become a major engine of nation building in many parts of the world has not had its place in Mezam Division due to instability and insecurity as a result of the on-going socio-political crises plaguing this region.

Primary data were sourced from field surveys through the use of questionnaire and interviews. Using the snow ball sampling technique a convenient number of 50 copies of questionnaire were administered to the five sub-divisions of Mezam that are dominated with tourism activities, (Bafut, Bali, Bamenda II, III, and Santa Subdivisions).

Based on fieldwork the first results reveals that, the volume of tourists have greatly dropped since the socio political crises commenced. From 2016 – 2025, the volume of tourists into Mezam has drastically dropped. 66% indicated that few tourists (less than 1000 visitors) are received annually, 28% claim an insignificant number of (lesser than 100) tourists patronize this sector annually. Meanwhile, 6% indicated that many (more than 1000tourists) patronize this sector annually.

Secondly, the state of tourist attractions have been negatively affected with a majority of 58% respondents indicating that, many tourist attractions have been abandoned, 32% have partially been abandoned and 10% have not been abandoned. Therefore leading to a redundancy in the sector, this has caused some actors to divert into other economic activities such as agriculture (28%), petite trade (24%), other tourism activities (22%) and gastronomy (12%). The 22% of those that left other tourism activities have diverted into the production of tourists attractions like beads and embroidery. Other tourism operators in the embroidery and beads productions activity have forcefully migrated to other towns like Douala, Yaounde and Bafoussam.

Therefore, it is recommend that there should be an urgent call for effective dialogue amongst government officials and leaders of this armed groups so that peace can be restored. Key actors in the tourism sector should develop strategies that will revamp the tourism sector.

INTRODUCTION

Socio political crises is one of the major challenges which hinders the development of the tourism industry in many parts of the world. Tourist's destinations continue to face challenges because of increasing insecurity, violence, and terrorism as a result of socio political crises (KanlayanasuKho, 2014). Socio political crises is a situation where social and political structures within a society becomes unstable leading to political instability, and social unrest. In 2021, 98 socio-political crises were recorded globally. The cases were concentrated in Africa (40) and Asia (24), while the rest of the tension were located in America (12), and the Middle East (11)

and Europe (11). This incessant socio political crises continues to derail many economies. With the tourism sector not being left out (Escola, 2021).

Tourism an important economic activity in most countries around the world has direct and indirect impacts on the destinations, stakeholders, and residents hosting these attractions (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999). Recently, the industry has become one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in terms of job opportunities, export earnings, and prosperity generation (Swanson et al., 2013). It has therefore led to the regional and national development of economies. An estimated 1.4billion international tourists were recorded around the world in 2024, an increase of 11% over 2023. In the same year the African continent welcomed 74million visitors, marking a 7% increase compared to 2019 and a 12% rise from 2023 (United Nations Tourism, 2023). In 2024, Kenya experienced a noticeable increase in international tourist arrivals, welcoming 2,394,376 visitors with an impressive growth of 163.5% growth in 2024. Tanzania in 2024, was first in terms of source market increase, with an increasing number of tourists from 42,133 in 2023 to 203,290 in 2024 (Tourism Research Institute, 2025).

Quite a number of reasons influence tourists travel decisions to various destinations of which security is primordial (NyongAbam, 2020). A tourist's decision to visit any attraction is influenced by the political stability and security of that country Ankomah and Crompton (1990). Therefore, evidence of unrest has a negative bearing on the tourism sector, which will result to a fall in number of tourist's visit and tourism revenue (Muzindutsi et al, 2016). Neumayer (2004), indicates that violence, terrorism, and other forms of domestic insecurity affects visitor inflows to countries across the world. In Africa, where the tourism sector is mainly sustained by visitors from other continents, socio political upheavals causes the number of tourists visits to drop, leading to a fall in the foreign income generation (Musavengane, et al., 2020). With other factors like the abandonment of tourists site, relocation and even switch of operators to other different economic activities. Incidences of political instability affects visitor inflows to countries across the world. Egypt's experience over the last decades is a case in point. The 2005 Sharm El Sheikh attracts and the 2006 attract on the city of Dahab led to the death of 23 Egyptians and tourists, this led to a national loss of 8% of foreign tourism receipts in 2006. Same in 2013 where the ousting of president Morsi led to instability resulting to a drop from 11.5million trips in 2012 -9.5 million trips in 2013(Shediach, et al 2015). In Kenya, the violent political crisis of 2008 led to the death of 650 people, grossly affected the tourism sector. The Mara Serena Safari Lodge (World famous Masaai Mara National reserve) that used to be heavily booked from late December to February witnesses a drop (35%) in number of tourists. This led to a fall in the income generated from the activity, which also affected the payment package of those who depended entirely on this sector.

The crises in the study area began since 2016 with a simple protest by teachers and lawyers which has degenerated into a socio political crises between the government and armed groups. This crises have been characterised by lock downs, kidnappings, loss of lives and property which have discouraged many economic activities especially touristic activities. For over 9years, with the prevalence of the crises, the tourism sector has been negatively affected such that the numerous touristic potentials in this area have not fully been exploited for meaningful development.

This has significantly led to the decrease in the number of tourists due to safety concerns, damage of cultural attractions, diversion and migration of key actors to different activities and towns respectively which is the main concern of this research. Addressing this current crises will go a long way to bring peace and stability that will promote and develop the tourism sector.

The study area

Mezam Division is situated within the high land area of the North West Region of Cameroon. It is located between longitudes 09°8` and 11°51` East of the Greenwich Meridian and latitudes 5°40` and 7°50` North of the equator with a land surface area of 1,841.45km² (Mbanga, 2020). Administratively, it is divided into seven sub-divisions, namely; Bamenda I, II and III, Bafut, Bali, Santa and Tubah (Figure 1). It is bordered to the west by the South West Region and Momo Division and Bali Sub-divisions, to the north by Bafut sub-division, to the Northeast by Tubah Subdivision and to the South by Santa Sub-division (Lawrence, et al., 2020).

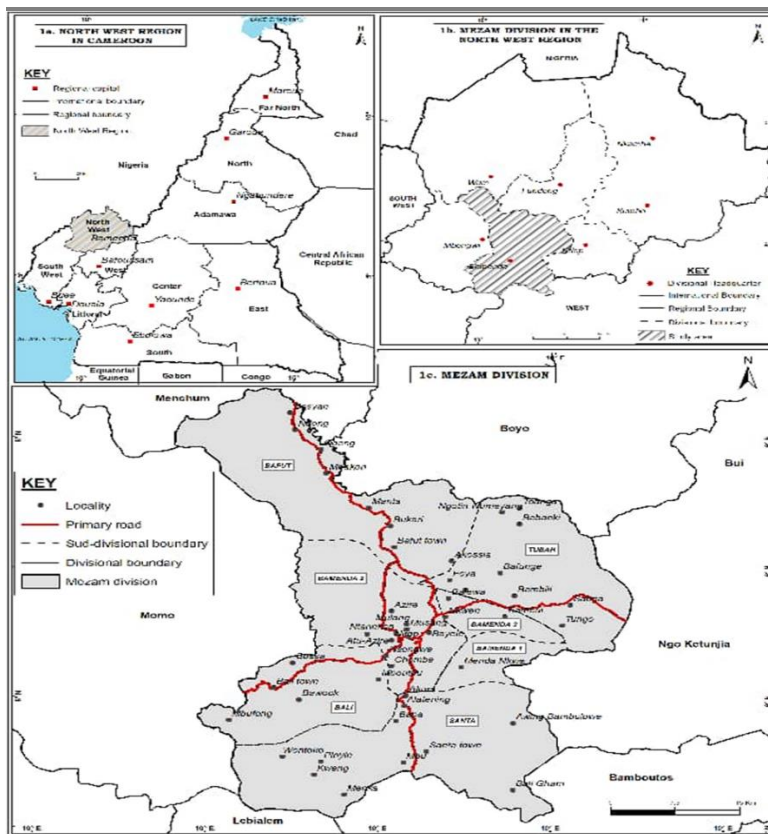


Figure 1: Map of Mezam Division

Source: NIC, 2020

METHODS AND TOOLS

The sample population for this study was drawn from five sub-divisions of Mezam which those dominated with tourism activities. They are Bafut, Bali, Bamenda II, III, and Santa Subdivisions. This study was based on both qualitative and quantitative data sourcing. Qualitative data sourcing was obtained through review of related literature on socio political crises and tourism. From both the regional and Sub divisional delegations of tourism, semi structured and unstructured interviews were granted to 4 key operators of tourism attractions and to the regional and divisional delegations of tourism. Documents which provided available information on the tourists' arrivals, and effect on the sector were consulted at the MINTOUL (Ministry of tourism and leisure). Documents like the visitors log book of some tourist's attractions (Bafut Fons Palace, Nkwen Fons Palace, Prescraft, Bamenda Handicraft cooperative society) were also consulted.

Primary qualitative and quantitative data of the study were collected at the level of households. Through the use of the snow ball sampling technique. Key actors were identified within the study area of the five subdivisions. These individuals were later asked to refer other potentials actors and participants who were surveyed as well. The aim of this was to obtain information and photographs of how the socio political crises has affected tourism and its activities. A stratified random sampling technique was used to distribute questionnaires and a number of 50 copies of questionnaire were administered in these sampled communities. Observations effectuated were both participants and on-the -spot with some officials of MINTOUL and key informants.

Qualitative data was processed using the in vivo data coding approach whereby categories of responses were identified, classified and then recoded on a prepare sheet as per the objectives. The themes were drawn from these different categories of codes identified which is an approach commonly used in qualitative data analyses (Strauss, 1987, Cope, 2003). The quantitative data was processed by use of excel and then presented in form of tables, bar charts and pie charts. Photos were obtained and displayed for better understanding of what is taking place within this study area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Findings in the study area indicates that the socio political crises has negatively affected the tourism sector of Mezam Division through decrease in the volume of tourists visits, destruction of tourists attractions, diversion of actors to other activities and migration to other towns.

Socio political crises and the volume of tourist visits

Results revealed that, the socio political crises has led to a reduction in the volume for tourists' visits within the study area. Based on questionnaires and interviews conducted in Mezam Division, there has been a drastic drop in the volume of tourists visit from 2016 to 2025. As compared with the number of tourists who used to visit before the crises begun. This was ascertained based on results obtained from the perception of tourist visits within the study area (Table 1).

Table 1: Annual Average tourist visits

Study area	No of respondents	Many (Above 1000)	Few (999-100)	Insignificant (100-0)	Total	%
Bafut	10	0	8	2	10	20
Bali	8	0	6	2	8	16
Bamenda II	18	2	11	5	18	36
Bamenda III	11	1	7	3	11	22
Santa	3	0	1	2	3	6
Total	50	3	33	14	50	100
Percentage	100	6	66	28	100	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 1 indicates that the crises in Mezam has affected the volume of tourists visits where 66% indicated that few tourists (less than 1000 visitors) are received annually, 28% claim an insignificant number of (lesser than 100) tourists patronize this sector annually. Meanwhile, 6% indicated that many (more than 1000tourists) patronize this sector annually.

The increase in insecurity within the study area, especially within the interior part of the study area, has discouraged tourists from patronizing. Unfortunately, the most enticing architectural, nature-based, arts and crafts attractions are located within the interior sub-divisions. Brutalization, the fear of being accosted by a stray bullet, kidnapping of visitors, and the increasing number of deaths recoded from the study continue to discourage tourists from visiting. Armed men are usually found along the road to major attractions like the Mankon, Bafut, Nsongwa, Bambui palaces and other prominent cultural attractions, further scares away tourists. Tourist attractions that are known for having tourists all year round like the Lake Awing, the Bafut, Mankon and Nkwen Palaces have very few tourists during this period. 6% tourist attractions that receive tourists despite this crises are attractions located in Bamenda II and III Subdivisions that constitutes the urban area of the division. The cosmopolitan and heterogeneous activities within these Subdivisions creates a conducive atmosphere for visitors to come in and go out at will unnoticed. It is worthy of note that amongst this 6% of visitors, 95% are nationals.

Further probing was done to show how tourist visits have dwindled as a result of the crises. The visitors log books of two prominent tourist sites were consulted on the number of tourist visits from 2017-2024 and the following results obtained (Figure 2).

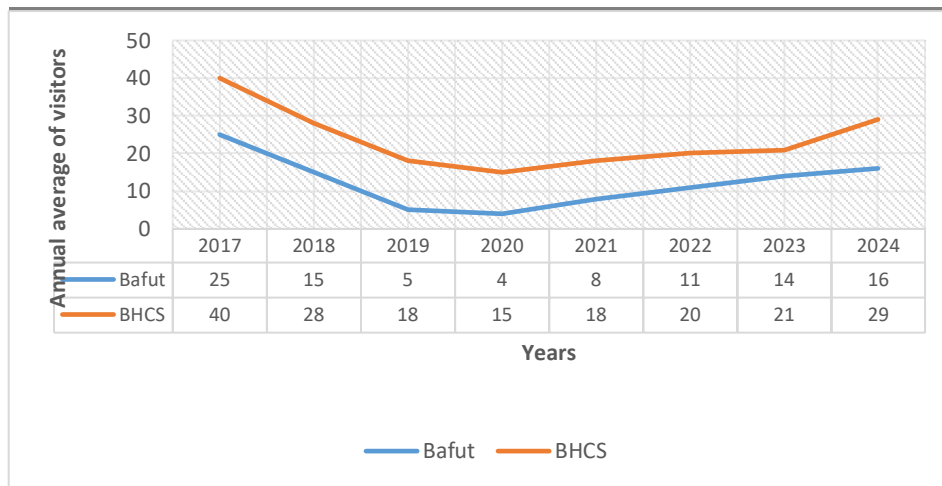


Figure 2: Annual Average of number of tourist visits

Source: Visitors' log books, 2025

Figure 2 shows the average annual number of tourist visit within the crises period. 2018-2020 witnessed a drop in the number of visitors to these tourists site. From 2021, the number of tourist visit started increased slightly as from 2021 with the organization of cultural manifestations which attracted tourists into the study area. The organization of the enthronement ceremonies of Fon Asaah Angwafor IV (Mankon), Fon Forchesiro II (Bamendakwe), Fon Chinelum Ngwashi of Akum, and that of the maiden edition of the Festival Heritage of Arts and Culture in November, 2021 recorded huge success that pulled volumes of tourists into the study area.

The head of service at the regional delegation of MINTOUL indicates that since the onset of the crises, the number of tourists keeps dwindling due to insecurity. From 2016 – 2025, tourists arrivals has been on a minimal scale of less than 10% as oppose to what was obtained before. Major touristic attractions and accommodation facilities are empty because very few tourists patronise. Leading to the poor state of tourist sites within the study area. This drop in the volume of tourists is the same case scenario with that of the Limbe Wildlife Center whereby, the crises have led to a drastic drop of tourists from 37.491 to 28.126 visitors in 2016 and 2017 respectively (NyongAbam, 2020).

Socio political crises and the state of tourist attractions

The socio political crises have negatively affected the state of tourist attractions within the study area. The crises has led to the burning of tourist attractions, extortion from tourist operators, hijacking of some accommodation facilities by armed men, kidnapping and loss of lives have affected these potentials that have resulted to the present state of the attractions within Mezam. Some have been abandoned, others partially abandoned and have not been abandoned (Figure 1).

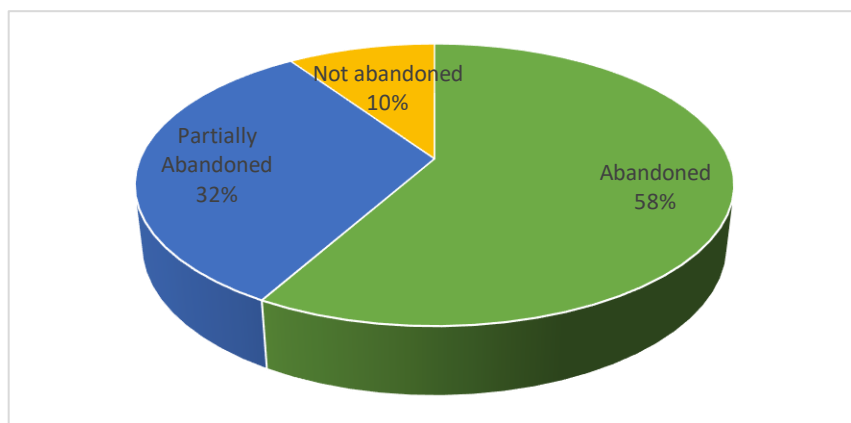


Figure 1: Socio-political crises and effect in Mezam Division

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Figure 1 indicates that, many tourist attractions (58%) have been abandoned, 32% have partially been abandoned and 10% have not been abandoned. 70% of the attractions are located in Bafut, Santa, and Bali subdivisions consisting the rural Subdivisions are dreadful zones for tourists. The Bafut palace that happens to be a UNESCO Heritage Site, instead of attracting tourists worldwide has rather been deserted because of the high degree of insecurity. Likewise the Bali and other palaces within this study area. Other accommodation sites have been hijacked by armed men which have discouraged tourists activities. This has even cause tourist operator to abandon the site resulting to depreciation. The Saddle Hill Resort in Bafut Subdivision was hijacked and transformed into a camp by a certain “general Alhaji” who rained havoc visitors and the population through kidnappings, extortion, and rape (Fongoh, 2020). This caused many employees to flee for their dear lives, thereby abandoning the site in ruins. It was until 2020 that Col Matiang Chales together with 300 combined forces launched an operation and neutralized this camp by killing these armed men. Unfortunately the site was already deserted and it will take time for tourists to gain confidence to start patronize. Establishment of some attractions that have been abandoned have been illustrated on Plate 1.

Plate 1: State of touristic attractions as a result of the socio-political crises



Photo 1: Tourist home Museum, Bafut



Photo 2: The Bafut Royal Museum

Source: Neba, 2025

Photo 1 shows the Tourist Home Museum of Bafut, with over grown vegetation because it was abandoned. Photo 2 is that of the Bafut Royal Museum that was locked down since 2018 because of insecurity manifested in the form of kidnapping, a rampant killings and looting of artefacts. For fear that this attraction can be hijacked and valuables stolen again, the best option was to close it. The number of tourist visits during this crises period did not encourage the operation of this Royal Palace Museum.

Socio political crises and diversion in the tourism sector

The socio political crisis has paralyzed the growth and development of the tourism sector in the study area. Income generated from this activity during this crises period is very minimal, given the fact that tourist's activities are very inefficient. This have caused tourist operators to switch into other economic activities like petit trade, gastronomy, motto bike transportation and agriculture as a means of survival. Others have diverted to different tourism activities that are very much flexible like embroidery, and beads work (figure 2).

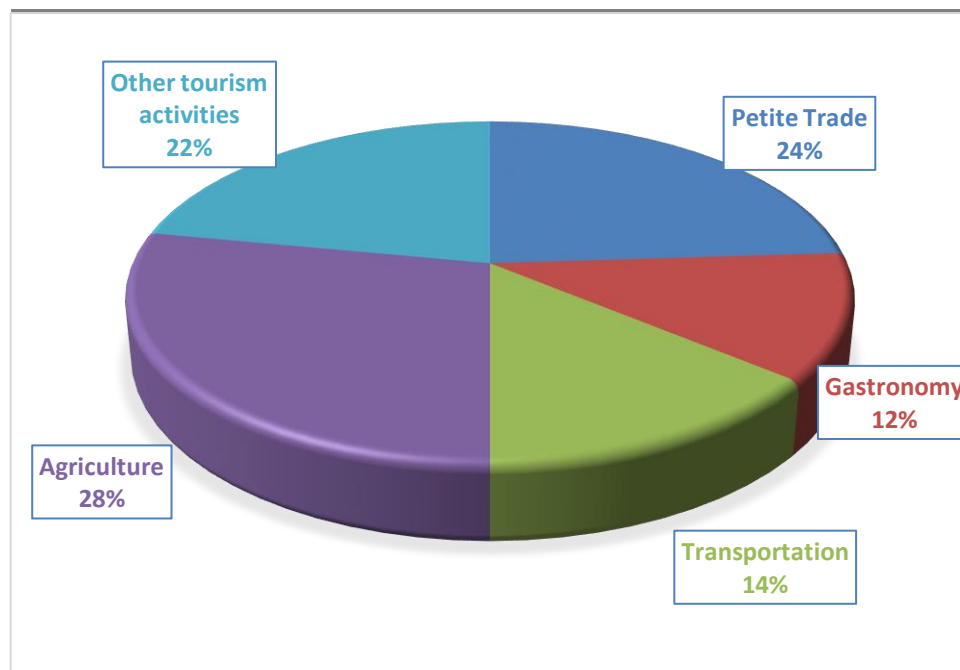


Figure 2: Alternatives chosen by operators of the tourism sector of Mezam

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Based on field survey, a majority of (28%) tourists' operators have diverted to agriculture, followed by petite trade (24%), other tourism activities (22%) and Gastronomy with 12% respondents. Further probing indicates that agriculture was the next option tourism operators in the rural subdivisions chose and petite trade with other tourism activities were the next best options for tourism operators in the urban subdivisions (Figure 3).

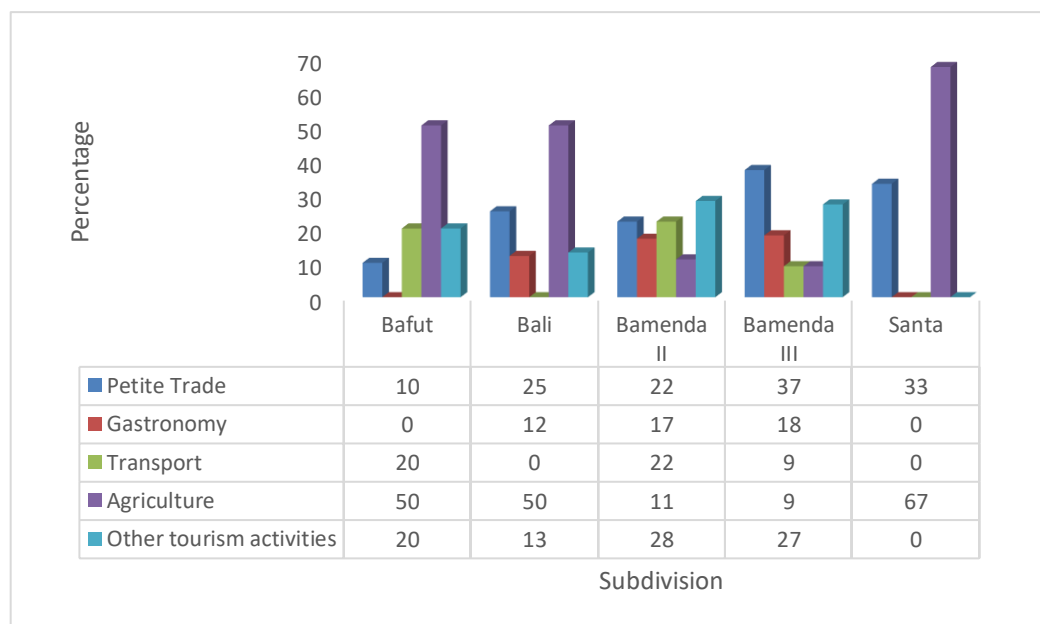


Figure 3: Alternatives chosen by operators of the tourism sector of Mezam

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

In Bafut, Bali and Santa the rural Subdivisions, tourists operators diverted more to agriculture with 50%, 50% and 66.7% respectively which constitutes the rural subdivisions of Mezam. This is so because agriculture which is the main activity in these rural subdivisions is carried out by almost everybody either as a fulltime or part time activity. Therefore tourist's operators who practiced part time agriculture were forced to switch fulltime. Contrary to Bamenda II, where other tourism activities (28%) with petite trade (22%) dominated and

in Bamenda III, petite trade (37%) and other tourism activities (27%) that happens to be the urban subdivisions of the study area.

Other tourism operators especially those of the handicraft sector forcefully migrated to other towns which are stable and have a ready market for their products leading to loss of craftsmanship. This has a negative bearing on the tourism sector in Mezam because in subsequent years even if the area becomes stable these operators will not move back. Other subdivisions with enormous touristic potentials suffer the same fate. Nfor et al (2022) also indicated that the population of Belo subdivision has been affected by the socio-political instability rocking the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon. This instability has resulted in massive displacement of people within and out of the North West Region. This has slowed down cultural-socio-economic activities (tourism sector) in the subdivision in particular and the region in general. The number of operators in the arts and craft sectors that have migrating to establish in other towns keeps increasing as the crises continues.

Furthermore, 40% workers have lose their jobs within the sector because the establishment could not make provision for their pay since income generated from the activity is very negligible to run the activity and pay workers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveals that the tourism sector of Mezam Division is richly endowed with the possession of both natural and man-made touristic attractions. It is rather unfortunate that touristic activities have been faced with socio political crises that started from 2016 up till 2025. It has impacted negatively in this sector through the decrease in the volume of tourists into this area. The few tourists that have made attempt to visit are nationals who mostly visit attractions within the urban Subdivisions of Bamenda II and III. The most enticing attractions found within the rural subdivision have received an insignificant number of tourists so far. Touristic sites have been abandoned because of insecurity and reluctance of operators to keep running them since they are not making profits. Armed men often stationed along tourist attractions like palaces have that scare away visitors. Tourist attractions have been abandoned and substituted for other economic activities. A good proportion of those producing cultural items like embroidery and beads works have easily migrated to Bafoussam, Yaounde and Douala to re-establish there. With all these negative effect on the sector, there is an urgent call for effective dialogue amongst government officials and leaders of this armed groups so that peace can be restored. After effective dialogue has been done and peace restored, key actors in the tourism sector will have to work hard, to develop strategies that will change the negative impression that international tourists have about the security of this this study area. So that tourists can freely and confidently patronise with no hitches. This will restore tourism in the study area as well as other economic activities that have suffered the same fate.

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