

Institutional Reform and Capacity Building of Public Managers: Effects of Decree No. 2018/666 of 5 November 2018 Reorganising the ISMP on Cameroonian Public Managers

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ABSTRACT

The modernisation of Cameroon's public administration depends largely on the development of the competences of managers responsible for steering public policies and organisations. It is within this perspective that Decree No. 2018/666 of 5 November 2018 reorganised the Higher Institute of Public Management (ISMP), the principal institution responsible for the continuing education and professional development of senior State officials. Yet, despite the strategic importance of this reform, few studies have examined its concrete effects on the capacity building of decision-making managers, particularly in the field of educational management. Drawing on the author's doctoral thesis, this article analyses the effects of implementing the 2018 Decree on the capacity building of decision-making managers in educational management in Cameroon. The study is grounded in a theoretical framework combining Bertalanffy's systems theory, the transactional leadership theory of Burns and Bass, and positive-feedback theory inspired by Wiener's work. A mixed-methods approach with an interpretive orientation was adopted. Data were collected from twenty-five former ISMP trainees through semi-structured interviews and analysed through a thematic procedure informed by NVivo software.

The findings show that the reform has served as a lever for the professionalisation of training, promoting a closer alignment between pedagogical content and the professional realities of public administrations. Participants also reported substantial improvements in their strategic-analysis, leadership, change-management and decision-making capacities. The reform introduced by the Decree strengthened their professional autonomy and their capacity to act within public organisations. Nevertheless, the study also reveals certain limitations, notably inadequate post-training follow-up arrangements, difficulty in transferring some acquired skills to professional settings, and the persistence of content considered overly theoretical. These findings confirm the importance of institutional reforms in developing the strategic competences of public managers, while underlining the need for organisational support capable of consolidating the effects of training over time. The study thus contributes to an understanding of the mechanisms of public decision-maker capacity building in Cameroon and opens avenues for improving continuing professional development policies within the civil service.

Keywords: ISMP; Decree No. 2018/666 of 2018; educational management; public managers; leadership; institutional reform; continuing professional development; strategic decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

By setting the requirements, applicable rules and standards for vocational training in Cameroon, the State has been able to guarantee the legitimate and equitable access of all citizens to professional development. Depending on the level of intervention or the content concerned, such training may be initial or continuing. Law No. 2018/010 of 11 July 2018, which establishes the general legal framework and the fundamental orientations of vocational training in Cameroon, defines it as a process "intended to provide knowledge, competences and skills for the sole purpose of ensuring a competent workforce, taking particular account of the quantitative and qualitative needs of employers and employees."¹

Earlier, in 2003, without going further back into approaches that were more functionalist than performance-oriented, a project to support vocational-training reform in Cameroon was designed, monitored and jointly financed with the African Development Fund.² From June 2004, the five-year project was expected to pursue three foundational objectives: create the institutional conditions for an effective vocational-training system; improve the fit between vocational training and employment; and facilitate the transition from training to employment. Before that date, vocational training was generally organised at three levels according to the educational level of the human resources entering the labour market: the informal-sector training subsystem, which produced nearly 80% of future workers, most of whom were self-employed; the subsystem for training middle-level technical managers from CETICs (industrial and commercial technical education colleges) and vocational high schools, of whom around 85% reportedly did not meet employers' practical requirements despite their theoretical training; and the higher-education subsystem in universities and training schools, which produced higher technicians and engineers.

From the period of African independence onward, young African public administrations embarked on modernisation initiatives intended to improve public service delivery and governance, which are essential to institutional performance. In Cameroon, this took the form of a succession of administrative reforms, largely oriented towards the professionalisation of the public workforce and sustained efforts to strengthen the managerial capacities of public decision-makers through the recurrent adaptation of training arrangements to contemporary public-action requirements. Alongside this broader restructuring, the ISMP (Higher Institute of Public Management) underwent an evolution that can be described through key phases relating to the definition of its missions and operation. Established in 1985, the ISMP experienced a foundational decade of effective implementation that was essential to its sustainability, followed by progressive alignment with New Public Management (NPM) standards from the early 2000s.

With related legal texts such as Law No. 2018/010 of 11 July 2018, vocational training in Cameroon is strictly regulated, from its foundations to the outputs produced. The difficulties caused by the sometimes inadequate alignment of curricula, the often incomplete professionalisation of training programmes, and weak coordination between training and administrative performance all fuelled debate on the need for a structural reform of the ISMP. Decree No. 2018/666 of 5 November 2018, reorganising the ISMP after the Decree of 11 October 2001 that had modernised it, constituted the necessary reform for strengthening public management in line with the incorporation of NPM principles developed by Hood (1991) and Osborne (1992). These principles now subject the public sector to an obligation to achieve results, as in the private sector. The emphasis on professionalisation, performance and the development of strategic competences among Cameroonian public managers constitutes the foundation of this restructuring Decree of 2018.

Notes

1. Law No. 2018/010 of 11 July 2018 is, in this respect, a framework for “equal opportunities for training in social terms.”
2. The evaluation report on the project to support vocational-training reform in Cameroon was prepared following an evaluation mission conducted in Cameroon from 21 July to 5 August 2003 by Mr Paul Dugna, a socio-economist working on behalf of the African Development Fund, which also financed the project.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to analyse the effects of implementing Decree No. 2018/666 of 5 November 2018, which reorganised the Higher Institute of Public Management (ISMP), and to revisit the capacity building of decision-making managers in public management in Cameroon. It forms part of a broader doctoral inquiry into the management of training engineering and the performance of public managers' strategic decision-making. This particular reflection focuses on the changes brought about by the 2018 reform, especially its consequences for the development of beneficiaries' decision-making abilities. The object of this study brings together an institutional reform, its effects on the training system, and its consequences for professional practices within

Cameroon's civil service. The complexity of such a process calls for a methodological approach that privileges lived experiences and observable transformations in the practices of the actors involved.

Research Design

This is an applied study using both descriptive and explanatory approaches. Although the methodology is predominantly qualitative, it is mixed because it draws on selected quantitative data that complement extensive qualitative information gathered from subject-related documentation and field investigations. Management and performance are notions whose qualitative assessment is often relative and difficult to quantify; nevertheless, numerical data on cohorts, infrastructure and other flows make it possible to better identify the factors that may influence the management and performance of the training engineering deployed through the ISMP. Most of the data are primary, even though the investigation was informed and strongly guided by secondary data. To gain a fuller understanding of the effects of implementing Decree No. 2018/666 of 5 November 2018 reorganising the ISMP, the study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative data. This choice reflects the need to assess both the scale of the reform's perceived effects and the institutional mechanisms capable of explaining them. The selected approach is sequential explanatory: an initial quantitative phase measures former trainees' perceptions of the transformations brought about by the reform, while a second qualitative phase deepens the interpretation of the results by gathering the views of the main actors involved in the management, use or strategic orientation of public human resources.

Population, site and sampling

In order to provide sufficient information and conduct statistical inference concerning the various characteristics of the study population, the sampling technique used in this study is mixed. It is predominantly non-probabilistic or non-random. Overall, the study applies stratified cluster sampling with clusters that are not proportional to one another. The sample comprises 85 respondents (75 former trainees and 10 managers), divided into two categories:

Quantitative sample

Seventy-five (75) former ISMP trainees trained after the entry into force of the 2018 Decree were selected through purposive sampling. Respondents came from several public administrations and held supervisory or managerial positions.

Qualitative sample

Ten (10) key informants were selected: two managers from the Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reform; two managers from the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development; one manager from the Ministry of Public Health; one manager from the Ministry of Transport; two managers from the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training; and two decision-makers from the Ministry of Public Service, as strategic users of the trained public human resources.

The Ministers responsible for Public Service and for Planning and Regional Development, identified as major strategic actors in Cameroon for the issue addressed here, could not be interviewed because of constraints related to their very demanding institutional schedules.

Data-collection instruments

The quantitative phase relied on a structured questionnaire comprising items assessed on a five-point Likert scale. The items covered training quality, content relevance, leadership competences, decision-making capacities, change management and professional performance.

The qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews to explore the organisational effects of the reform, observed transformations in professional practices, implementation limitations, and prospects for improving the system.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and means) and detailed Power BI analysis, a software tool that supports analysis. NVivo software was used in the analysis of the qualitative data. These approaches made it possible to compare beneficiaries' perceptions with those of institutional users of public human resources.

The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis supported by a coding logic inspired by NVivo, which enabled the identification of emergent categories and, subsequently, the triangulation of findings.

Quantitative findings (75 former trainees)

Indicator	Agreement (%)
Improvement in decision-making capacity	87.2%
Strengthening of leadership	76.7%
Development of strategic competences	89.3%
Improved team management	75.0%
Adaptation of content to professional realities	88.0%
Improvement in change management	70.3%
Overall satisfaction with the reform	84.3%

These results are summarised by the broadly positive assessment of the trainees shown in Figure 1 below.

Overall measurement of the impact of training on trainees

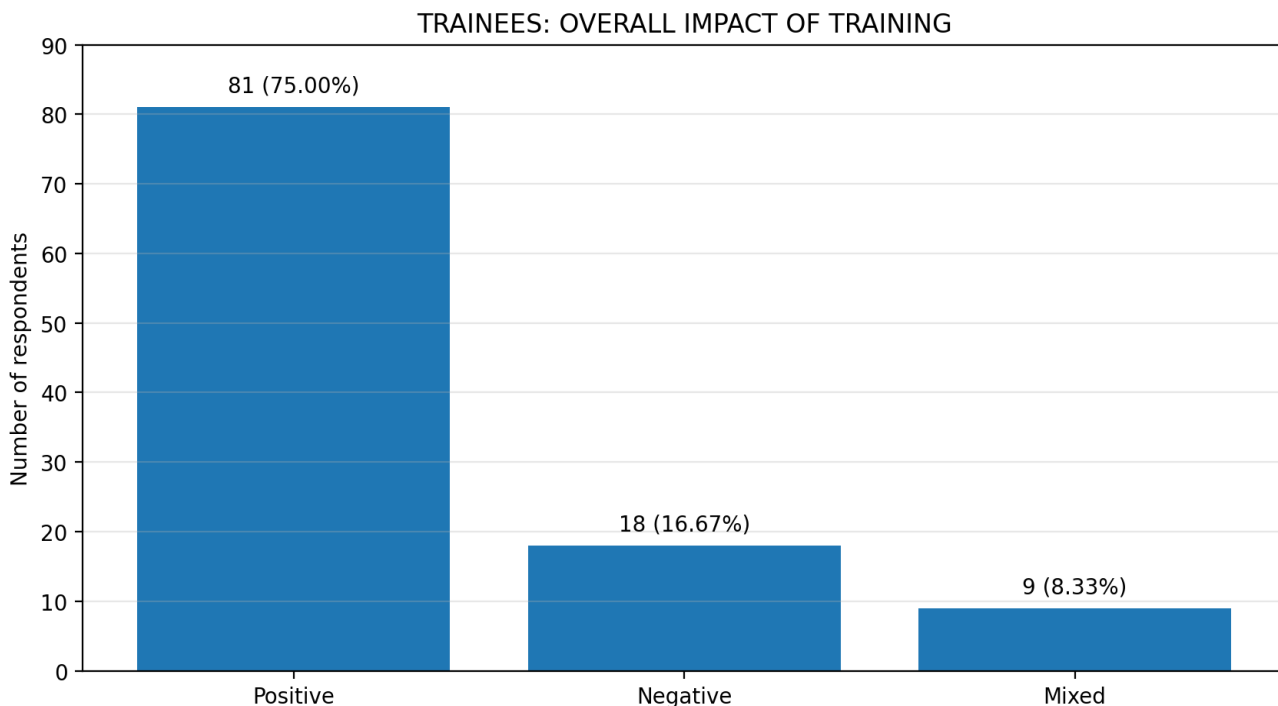


Figure 1. Overall impact of training on trainees, prepared by Mbala Nko Marthe P. using Power BI and detailed with ChatGPT on 2 June 2026.

Qualitative findings (10 key informants)

The thematic analysis produced five major categories: increased professionalisation of training; strengthened decision-making competences; the emergence of a performance culture; contribution to administrative modernisation; and shortcomings in post-training follow-up.

Triangulating these themes with beneficiaries' views and the assessments of institutional users provides a richer understanding of the issue. It makes it possible to assess the reform both as a training arrangement and as a public policy for competence development. The strategic competences developed now condition decision-making and, consequently, leadership; they logically lead to improved change management.

A cross-analysis of training assessments by ministry reveals the information below:

Ministry	Overall satisfaction score /5
Public Service	4.5
Planning	4.3
Vocational Training	4.2
Health	3.9
Transport	3.8

The breakdown of variables is as follows:

Dimension	Variable	Mean score /5
Training quality	Content relevance	4.4
Capacity building	Decision-making autonomy	4.2
Leadership	Team management	4.0
Performance	Problem-solving	4.3

The first observation is that former trainees awarded the highest scores to:

- content relevance (88%);
- strategic competences (85%); and
- decision-making (83%).

This suggests that the 2018 reform helped bring training closer to professional realities.

Interpretation

Managers in the ministries most directly involved in human-resource management appear to perceive the effects of the reform more positively. Technical ministries (Health and Transport) express greater reservations about the transfer of acquired skills.

Another observation is that Power BI makes it possible to construct a correlation graph between the dimensions of the survey. For example, training quality can be related to decision-making capacity through the coefficient $r = 0.74$.

This very high correlation suggests that the more respondents judge the training to be relevant, the more they report being able to analyse, anticipate and make decisions over time.

The NVivo analysis enabled the identification of four nodes with different frequencies that nevertheless converge in demonstrating the success of the 2018 Decree:

Node hierarchy

Node	Frequency	Dominant excerpts
Node 1: Transformation of training engineering	91 references	Professionalisation; contextualisation; competence-based approach; case studies.
Node 2: Decision-making capacity building	85 references	Autonomy; responsibility; confidence; initiative.

Node	Frequency	Dominant excerpts
Node 3: Organisational leadership	69 references	Coordination; team management; communication; mediation.
Node 4: Institutional limitations	57 references	Lack of follow-up; administrative mobility; lack of resources; resistance to change.

In particular, the analysis of the decision-maker group led to the thematic matrix below:

Respondent group	Professionalization	Capacity building	Leadership	Institutional impact	Limitations
Managers / decision-makers	Very strong to strong	Very strong to strong	Strong to moderate	Moderate	Strong to very strong

Interpretive analysis

Trained managers speak more about their competences, learning and professional practices. Decision-makers, in contrast, refer more often to administrative performance, the quality of human resources and organisational outcomes. This reflects two distinct ways of interpreting the reform.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS IN THE CAMEROONIAN CONTEXT

Several lessons emerge from the analysis:

First lesson

The reform appears to have noticeably improved the perceived quality of training engineering. This conclusion aligns with the orientations of the 2018 Decree, which explicitly sought to modernise the ISMP, professionalise public managers and develop a performance culture. The findings therefore partially confirm the objectives of the reform.

Second lesson

Capacity building appears to be more individual than institutional. In other words, managers report having acquired skills, tools and methods whose usefulness as resources is widely recognised. However, the decision-makers interviewed point out that administrative structures do not always make it possible to make full use of these gains. In the Cameroonian context, this observation is particularly important because competent managers often remain subject to administrative red tape, excessive centralisation, hierarchical constraints and very limited access to the resources necessary for their work.

Third lesson

Systems theory is largely confirmed because the Decree affects organisational arrangements, pedagogical methods and programmes. These changes produce more qualified outputs and promote better capacity building. It is nevertheless important to note that the systemic loop remains incomplete because positive feedback is limited: administrations hardly ever have mechanisms for tracking graduates, impact indicators, or a genuine policy for valuing acquired competences.

Fourth lesson

The findings qualify the promises of New Public Management. Indeed, the reform has strengthened individual effectiveness, managerial capacities and the dissemination of a results culture. However, it has not yet fully transformed governance arrangements, institutional practices or public decision-making mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The cross-analysis using Power BI and NVivo suggests that the reorganisation of the ISMP through the 2018 Decree has produced significant positive effects on the capacity building of public managers, particularly in leadership, strategic competences and decision-making. This is so despite pedagogical, intentional and cultural challenges specific to the Cameroonian context. While this study has highlighted the opportunities and benefits brought by the reform to Cameroonian public management, it has also revealed the still underexploited connection between the methodological management of pedagogy, competence transfer and organisational performance. The results nevertheless show that the transformation of human resources is more advanced than that of public organisations. Consequently, the lasting effectiveness of the reform depends less on the quality of training delivered than on the capacity of Cameroonian public administrations to create an environment conducive to the effective mobilisation of acquired competences. This conclusion is one of the most pertinent findings of the doctoral thesis from which this article is drawn, because it clearly establishes the link proposed between training engineering, managers' capacity building and strategic-decision performance in Cameroon's public sector. The study therefore goes beyond a fragmented vision of training and situates it within a systemic dynamic of public governance. The objective should no longer be merely to ensure the existence and operation of vocational-training schools, but to enable them to attain the role they should play at the heart of the public-governance system. In Cameroon, this could involve establishing a body for monitoring, evaluating and refocusing training and public human resources, composed of trainers and governance experts.

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