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Shrinking Civic Space and the Role of Civil Society in Resolution of Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon

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Cover Image

Figure 1: Lawyers from Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon protesting in late 2016 before escalation of Cameroon Anglophone conflict

Photo credit: Eric Shu, BBC News (30/11/2020) <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-55130468>

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Executive Summary

With over 3000 people killed, more than 200 villages burnt, over 750,000 people internally displaced and 1.3 million people in need of assistance, there is an urgent need to resolve the Cameroon Anglophone conflict. This is a highly neglected conflict between the Cameroonian military forces and armed separatist groups which has been ongoing since October 2017. The armed separatist groups are fighting for an independent state called 'Ambazonia', comprising the country's two English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions. This report captures the voices and experiences of local civil society organisations (CSOs) – an important but largely marginalised voice – in their efforts towards conflict resolution in a challenging environment. Findings stem from an empirical pilot study conducted by Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) and partners from the African Leadership Centre, Nairobi, and the University of Buea (UB), Cameroon. The pilot study brought together 15 CSOs from the two English-speaking regions in a one-day workshop to learn about their organisations' experiences in conflict resolution, the challenges they faced, and the strategies adopted to overcome such challenges. The workshop discussions were then followed up with six in-depth interviews with selected CSO leaders. The voices and experiences of the diverse CSOs are examined within the framework of two contrasting discourses: the important role of CSOs in conflict resolution and the phenomenon of 'shrinking civic space' for CSO action.

The study notes that while the operational structures of CSOs are increasingly constrained by government restrictions and by security threats stemming from the civil war situation, local CSOs from the affected English-speaking regions of Cameroon have, nonetheless, made significant efforts to resolve the conflict. These issues are elaborated in this report, which is laid out in seven sections.

The introduction briefly examines the current conflict and efforts towards conflict resolution before justifying the need to examine the role of local CSOs within the context of increasing restriction of civic space in Cameroon. It concludes by briefly elaborating on the research methods. Thereafter Section Two locates the research within two strands of relevant scholarly literature: the local turn in the conflict resolution literature towards 'peacebuilding from below'; and that of 'shrinking civic space' for civil society activities. The third section provides the historical background to the longstanding 'Anglophone

problem' in Cameroon that morphed into a civil war in 2017 and which has pitted Cameroonian government forces against separatist armed groups in the English-speaking regions. It notes that the current conflict has its roots in the legacies that stem from Cameroon's unique colonial history and the nature of post-independence settlements. The subsequent empirical sections focus on the three main objectives of this pilot study: Section Four on the contributions of CSOs in conflict resolution; Section Five on the challenges they face; and Section Six on the strategies that CSOs adopt to counter the civic restrictions and to contribute to conflict resolution efforts. Section Seven concludes by summarising the findings, noting the following:

- CSOs within the English-speaking regions of Cameroon are in a difficult and paradoxical situation that pits their important role in peacebuilding from below within the context of shrinking civic space for their actions. Such restrictions are due to a tightening of government legislation and military crackdown on protests and gatherings that have not received written authorisation.
- CSOs have reoriented their activities towards resolution of the conflict by engaging with most-affected communities to provide humanitarian relief and psychosocial support, by building an evidence base of human rights violations and war crimes by both parties, and by highlighting the conflict's adverse consequences for citizens.
- CSOs have worked to rally community support, built coalitions with other CSOs and networked with international NGOs in advocacy work towards peaceful resolution of the conflict. Such strategies have enabled CSOs to counter shrinking civic space and remain visible as conflict resolution actors.
- Working through coalitions and interacting with both government and non-state armed actors has given CSOs more power to maintain pressure for conflict resolution.
- Dialogue with local communities has also enabled CSOs to act as mediators in bottom-up processes, enhancing local agency and bringing the views of those affected into policy spaces.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a pilot study into the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in efforts being made to resolve the current 'Anglophone' conflict in bilingual Cameroon. The warring parties are the dominant Francophone state and armed separatist groups calling for an independent state of 'Ambazonia' in the two English-speaking regions, Northwest and Southwest Cameroon. This is a neglected and underreported war (Norwegian Refugee Council 2019). The current crisis commenced in October 2016 with peaceful protests led by 'lawyers in wigs and teachers in suits' to protect the English legal and educational systems against Francophone assimilation. It subsequently degenerated into a civil war in 2017 as armed separatist groups emerged following government repression of the mass protests. The consequences have been severe, especially for civilian populations in rural areas, with almost daily violence and atrocities in the Southwest and Northwest regions since October 2017. Numbers killed vary from official figures of 3,000 to reports of 12,000 people (France24 2019; Kamguia 2020), with at least 750,000 displaced, and hundreds of villages destroyed (UNICEF 2018). Moreover, 700,000 children are out of school, with 80% of schools closed (UNOCHA 2019), due to a schools boycott, enforced by the separatists, protesting educational injustices against English-speakers. A June 2019 report documents killings, rape, kidnappings, torture and unlawful imprisonment (CHRDA and RWCHR 2019). The frequent subjection of women and girls to rape and other forms of gender-based violence is especially shocking and disturbing, with the same report stating that 'more than 75 percent of women interviewed had experienced physical or sexual violence' (CHRDA and RWCHR 2019: 33). While unlawful killings and severe human rights abuses have undoubtedly been committed by both sides (Willis et al. 2019: 21-28), documentary evidence indicates that the Cameroonian security forces are responsible for a majority of the killings and burning of homes, and for a greater level of indiscriminate violence (Willis et al. 2020: 35-36).

There is an urgent need to end the violence and resolve the conflict, yet there is a current impasse in such efforts. The main official attempt at conflict resolution thus far has been the government-organised 'Major National Dialogue' from 30 September to 4 October 2019. This was unsuccessful in making any progress (Köpp, 2019; Hendricks and Ngah, 2019). It was criticised for only including a narrow set of elite actors and excluding

key actors from the dialogue. Not only were the major separatist groups (Chimtom 2019) excluded, but also the participation of peaceful civil society groups and women's organisations was highly restricted (Ahmed 2019). Some analysts even doubted the sincerity of the government (International Crisis Group, 2020; Willis et al., 2020: 85), with the military crackdown in the Anglophone regions intensifying immediately afterwards and the government seemingly determined to pursue a military solution. Calls for more 'inclusive dialogue' have come from the Vatican and the Swiss government, offering to mediate peace talks (International Crisis Group, 2019). However, such external calls remain top-down and elite-driven and have not been successful. Therefore, this study turns its attention to the role of local CSOs, predominantly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in conflict resolution efforts, of which little is known. In so doing the study builds on notions of a bottom-up or grassroots approach to conflict resolution: what is, at times, referred to as the 'local turn' in peacebuilding. Yet, it is also evident that local CSOs are faced with an especially difficult context where their space for manoeuvre and action is limited by government constraints and by the conflict environment itself – often referred to in the scholarly literature as 'shrinking civic space'. Therefore, the main objective of the study is to examine the conflict resolution efforts made by CSOs, the constraints they face, and their responses to such constraints. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways do local CSOs engage in conflict resolution efforts?
2. What are the key challenges faced by CSOs in such efforts to resolve the Cameroon 'Anglophone' crisis?
3. What practices do CSOs employ in attempts to overcome such constraints and how effective are they?

The study was carried out by researchers from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, UK, the African Leadership Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, and from the University of Buea, Cameroon. To address these questions, primary data was collected in Cameroon between January and May 2020. A full-day 'consultative dialogue workshop' was held in Douala, Cameroon, on 29 January 2020 with representatives from 15 Cameroonian CSOs, all involved in conflict-related activities centring on humanitarian

responses and conflict resolution. The CSOs could all be described as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with professionally-qualified staff. They ranged from women's organisations to youth-led associations, human rights groups, a teachers' association, and humanitarian and development organisations. They included national organisations as well as regional and local ones. All were operational either in the Southwest and/or Northwest regions, the two 'Anglophone' regions, though some also had a base in the capital city Yaoundé. Two organisations were national branches of international organisations. The workshop encouraged CSOs to engage in mutually beneficial discussion and reflection and was composed of two main components. First, the morning programme involved three sessions, each facilitated by one participating NGO. These sessions explored the roles that CSOs have played in conflict resolution efforts, the challenges faced, and the capacity needs of CSOs in conflict resolution. In these three sessions, the facilitating NGO introduced the topic, gave illustrations from their own work and simultaneously raised issues for general discussion. The afternoon session involved participants being divided into two groups for 'focus group discussions' (FGDs), with a common list of questions posed by the workshop organisers. A final session entailed reporting back on the conversations in each FGD, with the opportunity for further summative discussion. Subsequently, follow-up semi-structured interviews were held in May 2020 with senior representatives from six key CSOs. The interviews were carried out in Buea, the capital of the Southwest region. For all interviews, a guide containing nine key questions was used in the same way. Each interview took up to 50 minutes and was carried out at the interviewee's preferred location, making it possible for the issues to be discussed in-depth. The interviews complemented the FGDs as interviewees provided more detailed explanations of some of the issues discussed during the January 2020 workshop.

This report is divided into seven sections. After this brief introduction, the second section locates the research within two strands of relevant scholarly literature: the 'local turn' in the conflict resolution literature towards 'peacebuilding from below', and the 'shrinking civic space' for civil society activities. The third section provides background information on the current 'Anglophone conflict' that has pitted Cameroonian government forces against separatist armed groups in the English-speaking regions, yet has its roots in the legacies that stem from

Cameroon's unique colonial history and the nature of post-independence settlements. The subsequent three sections provide the substance of this research, based on the primary data. The fourth section outlines the contribution of CSOs to conflict resolution, while the fifth indicates the challenges faced in the context of shrinking civic space, and the sixth highlights the strategies adopted to counter these challenges. Finally, the conclusion summarises the overall findings.

2. Conflict Resolution, Civil Society Organisations and Shrinking Civic Space

This section situates our research within two somewhat contradictory strands of recent scholarly literature: the 'local turn' in conflict resolution, also referred to as 'peacebuilding from below', and that of 'shrinking civic space'. While the former focuses on the increasing significance of CSOs in conflict resolution, the latter highlights the limits to CSOs' activities in contexts where the state endeavours to shrink available civic space. Within four sub-sections, the first two introduce the key concepts of 'conflict resolution' and 'civil society' used in this research, followed by brief reviews of the literature in the areas of 'peacebuilding from below' and 'shrinking civic space' in the third and fourth sub-sections respectively.

2.1 Armed conflict and conflict resolution

Armed conflict can be of international or national character (Stewart, 2003). It has received much scholarly attention, but there is no single definition for it in politics and international humanitarian law literature. However, several scholars and practitioners have adopted the definition of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) which states that armed conflict is 'a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year' (Themnér and Wallensteen 2013: 1; Wallensteen 2019: 371).

Conflicts arise from human rights violations (Thoms and Ron 2007), poor communication (Krauss & Morsella 2006: 146-147), or a clash of ideas and interests (Bornstein 2003; Schellenberg 1996: 8). While armed conflict is undesirable, it is viewed as part of normal human relationships (Katz & McNulty, 1994) and as part of political behaviour (Clausewitz, 1832). Neo-Marxist structuralists opine that the State's key role is the prevention of social conflict (Barrow 1993: 8). Yet, where this fails and conflict escalates, conflict resolution becomes necessary, particularly when none of the parties can win the war and/or the armed confrontation is having serious consequences for the rest of society.

Conflict resolution has been viewed variably in the peace and security literature. Wani (2011), for example, defines it as:

an umbrella term for a whole range of methods and approaches for dealing with conflict: from negotiation to diplomacy, from mediation to arbitration, from facilitation to adjudication, from conciliation to conflict prevention, from conflict management to conflict transformation, from restorative justice to peacekeeping (2011: 105).

However, peacebuilding has become the preferred approach to conflict resolution. Therefore, unlike Wallensteen (2002: 8), who offers a definition that suggests that conflict resolution brings together [only] belligerents, scholars such as Barnes (2006) and Assal (2016) have argued that local actors, notably from the sphere of 'civil society', must be included in the conflict resolution process if it is going to yield the desired results.

2.2 Civil society

CIVICUS, the global alliance of civil society organisations, defines civil society as 'the arena, outside of the family, the state and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations and institutions to advance shared interests' (2011: 8). There is an increasing wealth of scholarship on the role of civil society in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Scholars argue that one very crucial reason for civil society participation in conflict resolution is to imbue legitimacy in the process. Zanker (2013: 3), who looks at civil society involvement in mediation processes in Liberia and Kenya, contends that '[s]ince the entire population cannot attend peace negotiations, civil society groups become the people's representatives and their involvement improves the prospect of ownership of both the negotiations and the outcome.' Fischer (2011) also holds this view, but to Puljek-Shank & Verkoren (2017: 1), 'local legitimacy is not based on ethnicness *per se*, but CSOs' ability to skilfully interact with ethnically divided constituencies and political structures'.

Other analysts view the role of civil society in conflict resolution as one of mediation (Bartoli 2009: 407; DPI 2012; Greenderb, Berg and Lacatus 2011: 83; Mawlawi 1993), while Hamidi (2018) argues that civil society is a key actor in grass-roots peacebuilding. The literature also assesses the challenges faced by civil society in conflict resolution. In effect, peace-making so often seeks to reconcile warring factions that the tendency is

to recruit (members of the) civil society as mediator(s). Thus, the inclination is often to ignore the issues that led to fighting and instead focus on elite-pacts. As the purveyor of legitimacy, civil society can help to refocus the process by pushing for more inclusive participation and ensuring that conflict resolution stays relevant to the context. Also, belligerents often claim to represent national interests, but are often so much more interested in their own agendas that focusing only on their demands may lead to a situation where a new social order, one that more faithfully meets the aspirations of the people, is missed. Koko (2016:130), for example, demonstrated that the Congolese civil society understood that the second Congo war of 1998-2003, also known as the 'Great War of Africa', was 'merely symptoms of a quest for the new democratic order'. As such, civil society insisted that negotiations must:

seek to go beyond merely reconciling the warring parties to provide an opportunity for all national socio-political stakeholders to chart a new democratic path for the country. This perspective was to a large extent based on the experience accumulated during the National Sovereign Conference of the early 1990s (Koko 2016: 130).

However, peace processes, such as in Congo, that seek to bring together warring factions (the state party and insurgent groups), are termed 'official'. This is as opposed to 'unofficial' processes that are more grassroots. Das (2007) has determined that civil society can play a very important role in resolving conflict and building peace at the grassroots level. According to Das, civil society's role here is to:

negotiate across ethnic boundaries and make it possible for rival communities to live together in the same village, locality, or neighbourhood. For civil society groups to be more effective in peacebuilding, they must be socially integrated and develop synergy with other constituents and stakeholders (2007:1).

Therefore, despite various challenges, civil society is viewed as a key player in conflict resolution. Fischer (2011: 307) states that 'support for civil society should be further developed as a key element of development and peace politics, in particular in post-war regeneration

and peacebuilding'. He justifies the inclusion of civil society in conflict resolution in that it allows for views from the broader society to be heard instead of focusing on the needs of armed groups and warlords. He notes in particular that it is the only way women's voices can be heard in the process, and that it multiplies the 'chance of reaching a broader political and social consensus that is necessary to make peace agreements sustainable' (Fischer 2011: 307). However, some scholars do not find so much value in the role of civil society. For example, Bayart (1989) captures its existence as a fight to offset the domination of State, while Tester (1992) thinks its existence or non-existence is insignificant. Moreover, Subedi & Bhatta (2016: 25) think that 'the role of civil society [in conflict resolution] has been limited to securing interest for their own personal and organisational well-being and is largely captured and dominated by the elites'. Koko (2016) identified the same challenge in Congo where, in addition, there was a tendency for the political opposition and belligerents to view civil society actors as potential allies, leading to a politicisation of civil society.

2.3 Peacebuilding from below

Notwithstanding the above views on the potentially important role of civil society, conflict resolution in civil war situations has been predominantly a top-down process, often led by international organisations, especially the UN and national governments. Such elite-level approaches have mainly focused on the formulation and implementation of official peace agreements. However, top-down approaches have been subject to criticism. Pearson (2001), for example, emphasises that elite approaches to resolving ethno-political conflicts (as is the case in Cameroon) can be problematic because they undermine trust, and outcomes often do not reflect the needs of those most-affected local populations. Labonte (2012: 91) concurs, noting that elite approaches enable those in authority to 'control, shape and manipulate decision-making processes or institutions' for their personal interests at the cost of the populace. Mac Ginty and Firchow (2016) add to this analysis by noting that top-down or elite interventions, often propagated through the liberal peace paradigm and led by outsiders, impose a particular understanding ('hegemonic narratives') of conflicts and their resolution which seldom consider the perspectives of affected communities. In the face

of such criticism, a bottom-up or grassroots approach, often associated with John Paul Lederach (1997), has increasingly taken centre stage in peacebuilding discourses (Mac Ginty 2010, Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). It places emphasis on the 'significance of local actors and of the non-governmental sector and the links with local knowledge and wisdom' (Ramsbotham et al. 2016: 274). Some analysts consider such 'peacebuilding from below' as essential to resolving conflicts (Liaga 2017; Netabay 2007), most notably in Africa, given that such approaches create space for the needs, perspectives and practices of local communities to be included in conflict resolution processes (Pearson 2001). Further, as acknowledged by Urlacher (2008), bottom-up approaches recognise the resilience and efforts of local communities in navigating and mitigating daily challenges in the midst of conflict. Especially important within this perspective is the centrality of gender and recognition of the unique and crucial contribution of women to peacebuilding (Gizelis and Olsson 2015; Mazurana et al. 2013).

However, as Ramsbotham et al. (2016) note, peacebuilding from below is not a panacea nor without its complexities. Local communities are also 'sites of power asymmetry, patriarchy and privilege' (2016: 276), especially during population displacement, when traditional communal relations may have been replaced by 'new militaristic tendencies' (2016: 285). Civil society can itself be clientelist in nature (Goodhand and Klem 2005: 24, cited in 2016: 276), and local groups may not be benign actors but themselves subject to 'national and regional power plays' (2016: 285). Additionally, a bottom-up approach to conflict resolution is unlikely to be sufficient in itself. It brings the perspectives, needs and interests of conflict-affected communities to peace negotiations, but resolution of conflict is likely to be formalised in national-level agreements and in governmental structures and legal frameworks. Therefore, an interplay between local and national levels is required, perhaps mediated by legalised and professionally-staffed CSOs. However, the role that they can play is also influenced by the wider national context and the extent to which they are affected by 'shrinking civic space'.

2.4 Shrinking civic space

The concepts of 'civic space' and 'shrinking civic space' can also be subject to varying interpretations. According to Bossuyt and Ronceray (2020: 3), 'civic space refers to the public arena in which citizens can freely intervene and organize themselves with a view to defending their interests, values and identities; to claim their rights; to influence public policy making or call power holders to account'. Shrinking space (also closing space) in the light of the above can therefore be viewed as a situation where these freedoms and rights are increasingly under attack or facing various restrictions using legal and repressive (extra-legal) measures (Bossuyt and Ronceray 2020).

Studies on shrinking civic space have examined how governments around the world have enacted legislation and adopted informal measures limiting the scope and activity of civil society (Hossain et al. 2018: 10). Strategies employed have included administrative and political means, as well as violence and the domination of public space to stigmatise civil society for diverse reasons (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). These efforts at reducing civic space have affected the work of CSOs working in different fields, including development, democracy promotion, protection and promotion of human rights, and conflict resolution. Thus, unsurprisingly, scholarly attention has focused on examining the challenges and prospects for more active CSO participation in the advancement of human processes in these areas. Our focus here is on the literature that deals with the importance of civil society, the causes of closing civic space, the conflict resolution role of CSOs in contexts of shrinking civic space and how civic space can be expanded and improved.

The importance of improving civic space is recognised in the Resolution on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). Article 36, relating to the Means of Implementation, notes that a global partnership necessitates the inclusion of civil society among other actors. The dependability of all these actors means that civil society has a not insignificant role to play in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 which is to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development ...' (UN 2015: 25). According to Nyirabikali

(2016: 7), civil society 'can ensure that there is a thorough understanding of the real issues behind a conflict and facilitate inclusive participation in the elaboration of appropriate solutions and their implementation'. Despite the recognition of its role, including in peace processes, civil society continues to face challenges in carrying out its activities, notably in conflict situations.

Following the end of the Cold War in 1990, civic space experienced an unprecedented bulge, which saw CSOs able to act without fear of encountering official disapproval or state violence and without fear of acting outside the law (Hossain et al 2018: 13). This expansion, however, has been followed by the opposite phenomenon of 'shrinking civic space', especially in the last decade, whereby governments globally have sought to restrict the scope of civil society activity, notably through restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly and association (CIVICUS 2019). It is a phenomenon that has received significant attention from civil society actors themselves, notably from international civil society alliances such as CIVICUS and from international NGOs and thinktanks, as well as scholarly attention (Buyse 2018; Hossain et al. 2018; Poppe and Wolff 2017). While the opening of civic space in the 1990s was associated with democratisation processes, its subsequent closure is correspondingly interlinked with the global resurgence of authoritarianism and the consolidation of hybrid regimes in the past decade (Buyse 2018: 976). In this respect, the drivers of shrinking space are largely a function of 'wider political struggles between political, civic and economic actors' (Hossain et al. 2018: 15), most notably in contexts of autocratic governance.

Measures taken to shrink space have been both legal and repressive (extra-legal). Legal and administrative restrictions include laws and regulations on registration and on foreign funding (Hossain et al. 2018: 15; Transnational Institute 2017: 5). Extra-legal measures include violence and intimidation at the hands of both state and non-state actors, with the latter often acting with impunity and official protection (Hossain et al. 2018: 14; Buyse 2018: 973). Other repressive measures include surveillance and censorship by the state – for example, by internet cuts, banning demonstrations and

restricting mobilisation, and practices of discrediting and delegitimising selected CSOs by public and private actors (Transnational Institute 2017: 5).

The annual CIVICUS *State of Civil Society Report* has been published since 2012. For a number of years, and even up to the most recent report (CIVICUS 2020: 12), it has consistently identified an overall global trend of growing civic space restrictions. Additionally, the CIVICUS Monitor provides empirical evidence and a (close to) real-time update and rating of 196 countries according to a five-level categorisation – closed, repressed, obstructed, narrowed and open space.¹ The most recent report based on CIVICUS Monitor data (CIVICUS 2019) indicates a continuing civic space crisis, with more countries having worsened their ratings than having improved them.² Cameroon continues to be rated as 'repressed', the worst but one rating, indicating that 'civic space is significantly constrained'. While the overall trend is clear, it is evident that the local political context must be examined at the country-specific level in order to identify the particular causes of shrinking civic space, the specific challenges faced by CSOs, and the characteristics, functions and strategies employed by the CSOs (Van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012:1068, cited in Hossain et al. 2018: 15). Conflict-affected countries, especially civil war scenarios, entail particular dynamics, notably in relation to questions of perceived security and securitisation.

Some attention has been afforded to the consequences for CSOs' contribution to conflict resolution in countries where civic space is under attack. There has also been some consideration to the consequences for CSOs and their role in conflict resolution in countries where civic space is under attack. For example, in Mali, Lode (1997) argues that by investing heavily in curtailing the power of the traditional leadership, France, the former colonial power, contributed to the closing of civic space. As a result, local CSO leaders – out of fear of repression – avoided taking initiatives for conflict resolution and instead largely supported government views on issues of conflict and justice. Yet, despite the hostile environment for CSOs, Nyirabikali (2016: 5) argues that CSOs played an important role in the implementation of the 2015 Peace Agreement in Mali.

1. <https://monitor.civicus.org/about/>

2. <https://civicus.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/GlobalReport2019.pdf>

3. Background to the Conflict and Civil Society in Cameroon

This section provides the historical background to the current conflict and explores the role and situation of civil society actors in Cameroon. Divided into three sub-sections, the first outlines Cameroon's colonial history, processes of decolonisation and post-independence developments at state level that underpin the current conflict. The second then examines the responses historically by Anglophone civil society actors, including scholars, to these questions of the state and national identity and their quest for greater autonomy. The third explores the vicissitudes of civic space in post-independence Cameroon, focusing on the notion of 'shrinking civic space' in the context of conflict.

3.1 Colonialism, decolonisation and the post-colonial state in Cameroon

Cameroon has a unique colonial history, the legacies of which underpin the current conflict. Cameroon first became a German colony in 1884, known as Kamerun, at the time when the major European powers carved up Africa between them at the Berlin Conference (1884-85).

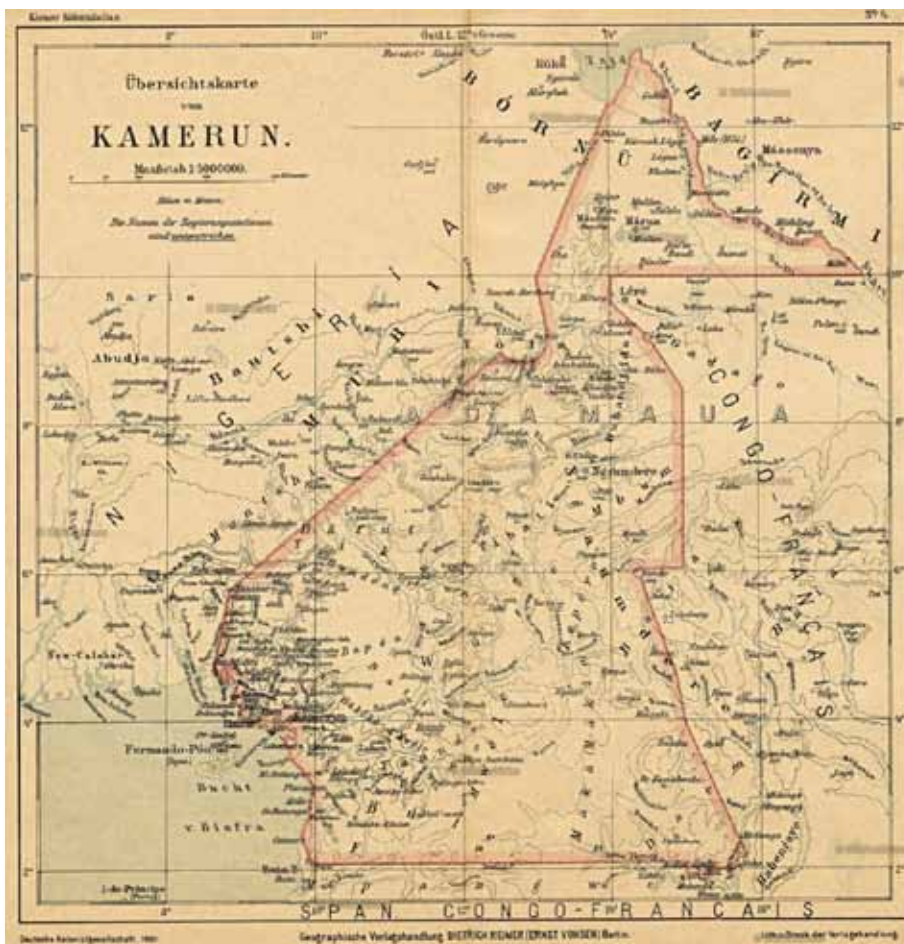


Figure 2: Boundaries of the German colony of Kamerun (1901-1918) (Munji, 2020)

However, German colonisation was short-lived. During the First World War, France and Britain invaded German Kamerun and defeated German forces in 1916. After the war, in June 1919, the country was partitioned between France and Britain under separate League of Nations mandates. This arrangement was later confirmed by the United Nations under the framework of a UN Trust Territory. French Cameroun amounted to 80% of the territory, while the British-administered 20% was referred to as British Cameroons, divided into British Northern and Southern Cameroons, and governed as part of Nigeria (Nfi 2014).

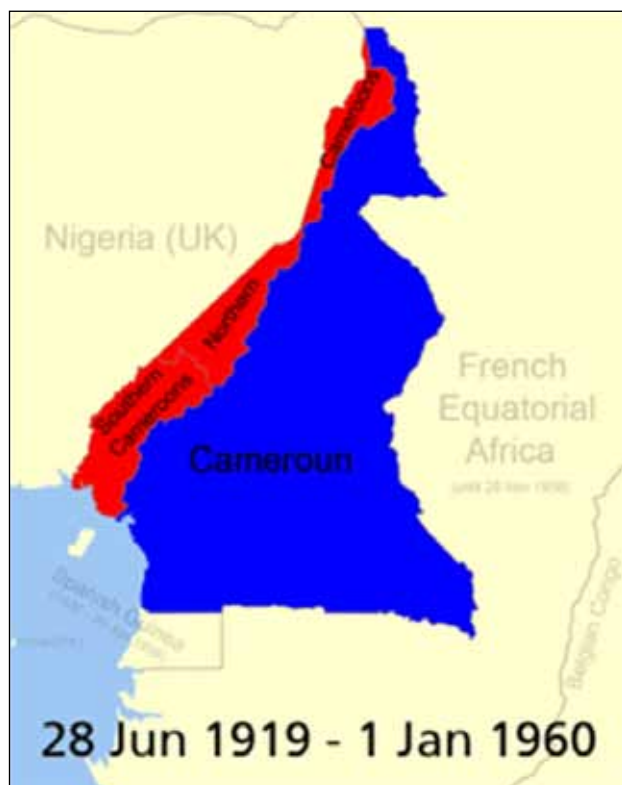


Figure 3: Partition of German Kamerun into French and British mandates of French Cameroun and British Northern and Southern Cameroons (1919-1960) (Cok, 2019).

In 1954, both parts of British Cameroons gained a quasi-regional status from Nigeria (Nkwi and Nyamnjoh 1997: 88). Following the rise of nationalist movements, this quasi-regional status resulted in a UN-organised plebiscite on 11 February 1961 for Northern and Southern British Cameroons to decide how they were to gain independence. Crucially, the people were not given the choice of a separate independent state. The plebiscite question was either to join French Cameroun, which had already gained independence on 1 January 1960 as the Republic of Cameroon (LRC), or to join Nigeria, which had gained its independence on 1 October 1960. The result was split, with British Southern Cameroons voting to join the Republic of Cameroon, while British Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria. Following the plebiscite, the Fouban Constitutional Conference in July 1961 discussed the unification process between the Republic of Cameroon and British Southern Cameroons. The resulting constitution of the Federal Republic of Cameroon (1961) opted for an indissoluble federal system (article 47 of the Federal Constitution of 1961) and thus the creation of the Federal Republic of Cameroon made up of two federated states: West (former British Southern Cameroons) and East (former French Cameroun). The Federal Constitution came into effect on 1 October 1961, effectively the date of Southern Cameroons' 'independence' from British colonial rule. It is worth noting, however, that the administering authority of the Southern Cameroons – the United Kingdom – did not attend the Fouban Constitutional Conference, whereas the UN Trusteeship Agreement stipulated that only the administering authority could negotiate international treaties on behalf of the Trust territory. Moreover, the union Constitution was not adopted in the House of Assembly of the Southern Cameroons and was not backed by a Treaty of Union to be submitted and registered at the United Nations Secretariat. Nonetheless, a federal system was important, given that the French and British colonial administrations had led to distinct styles of governance and public administration, including different legal and education systems, and, of course, different official languages.



Figure 4: Map showing boundaries of Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961, inclusive of West and East Cameroon (Munji 2020).

However, almost in contradistinction to federalism, it is noteworthy that the Federal Constitution established a highly centralised system with substantial powers in the hands of the President and very little autonomy for the States, notably West Cameroon (Elong 2013). Indeed, then President Ahmadou Ahidjo's intent to further centralise power in an authoritarian and unitary state soon became clear. In 1962, Ahidjo ended multipartyism in former French Cameroon with the creation of a single party, Union Camerooniens (UC). Initially, UC continued to collaborate at federal level with the dominant political party in West Cameroon – Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) – but in 1966 the two parties merged to form the Union National Cameroonaise (UNC), thus creating a one-party system in the federation (Bayart 1973). Then, in May 1972, a controversial referendum was held by President Ahidjo to approve a new constitution which abolished the federal system and created a unitary state. Following the dissolution of the federal system, the State of West Cameroon was divided into two provinces, the North West and South West Provinces, subsequently renamed as regions.



Figure 5: Contemporary regional map of the Republic of Cameroon, inclusive of English-speaking regions of Southwest and Northwest (Munji 2020).

This deepened the grievances of English speakers. As Fombad (2017: 38) stated:

The threats to the elimination of the Anglophone identity within the country were reinforced when on 2 June 1972 a new Constitution was introduced, and without regard to article 47 of the 1961 Federal Constitution which prohibited this, the federal system was abolished and replaced with a unitary system that was officially known as the 'United Republic of Cameroon'.

Subsequently in 1984, President Paul Biya, with Presidential Decree 84/01, renamed the United Republic of Cameroon as *La République du Cameroun*, thereby reinstating the name adopted at independence on 1 January 1960, before reunification with the former British Southern Cameroons (Republic of Cameroon 1984). As Fombad (2017: 38) notes, 'This was seen by many Anglophone Cameroonians as removing one of the last symbolic vestiges of the 1961 reunification of the two distinct communities'.

3.2 Civil society and the quest for autonomy of English-speaking Cameroon

The format for the decolonisation of the British Southern Cameroons in 1961 and the subsequent constitutional and administrative arrangements in Cameroon did not go without objection from the realms of civil society, notably from academics and lawyers. In his seminal essay, *Will we make or mar?* (1964), 'Professor [Bernard Nsokika] Fonlon, considered a regime of tax-gatherers and exploitation as an anathema; he abhorred a government of accumulation of private fortunes and the concomitant extortion of surplus value for the benefit of a few' (cited in Besong, 2005:4). However, the most virulent objection to Cameroon's constitutional and politico-administrative mutations prior to 1990 came from HRM Barrister Fon Gorji Dinka by way of an opusculé which he entitled *The New Social Order* (1985). What prompted Dinka's (1985) writing was President Paul Biya's unilateral decree and renaming of the country in 1984. Dinka (1985) described the 1972 referendum held by President Ahidjo as a constitutional coup, and President Biya's decree 84/01 as an act of secession of *La République du Cameroun* from the union with the Southern Cameroons. Dinka, however, simply said aloud what had already been the view of several Anglophone civil society activists and public personalities as early as 1962. Given the legally questionable way in which the union constitution and Federal Republic of Cameroon was created at the Fomuban Constitutional Conference in 1961, some Southern Cameroons civil society activists and nationalists had long contended that there was no legal basis for the union, arguing that the Southern Cameroons Order in Council, 1960 was still to be repealed (Southern Cameroons, 1960). Following the adoption of the 1972 Constitution, there was an ever-growing number of dissenting voices and objections to a constitution that was perceived as part of a well-oiled plan to deny Southern Cameroons' right to self-rule and dismantle its identity and freedoms. For those who held such views, this assimilation or annexation scheme had gradually been unpacked with measures such as the promulgation of Ordinance No. 62/OF/18 of 12 March 1962 relating to suppression of subversive activities (Federal Republic of Cameroon, 1962) and the repeal of political pluralism in 1966 (Berrih and Toko 2019: 34).

However, in contrast, Mbarga (1973: 363) argued that 'the procedure leading up to the 1972 referendum could not

legally be taken to task because the referendum was the work of an original constituent power acting *ex nihilo* and not a derived constituent power acting on the basis of the Federal Constitution [of 1961]' (cited in Nkot, 1999: 666). By this, Mbarga (1973) meant that the 1961 federation constituted a constituent power but then died and had no authority or influence on the 1972 referendum. However, the torrent of literature and memos that trailed Gorji Dinka's text fly in the face of Mbarga's position. These reflections mainly came from civil society actors in the English-speaking North West and South West Provinces, created in June 1972 and later renamed as regions (Northwest region and Southwest region) from November 2008 (Republic of Cameroon (2008). Ngwane (2003: 3) argued that these expressions 'were echoes of an emasculated community needing legitimate and rational packaging'. However, in the context of the Cold War, such objections were often quashed or simply ignored by the government led by Francophones or personalities whose origins can be traced to one of the indigenous groups of ex-French Cameroun, which now makes up the other eight regions of the Cameroun Republic.

Following the end of the Cold War in 1989/90, the debate resurfaced on the role of citizens in societal transformation in Cameroon in particular and in Africa in general, along with protest about the failure of African authoritarian states to provide minimum social, economic and political resources (Nkwi, 2006:1). In line with the wave of political liberalisation and democratisation that swept over sub-Saharan Africa at this time, Biya's government, in 1990, gave in to renewed pressure from civil society, notably students, trade unions, market women, lawyers, academics, and the church, and reinstated multi-party politics and democratic elections (Nkwi 2006). Most significantly for civil society activity, Law No 90/53 of December 1990 on Freedom of Association was enacted to provide a legal framework for the registration and activities of CSOs (Republic of Cameroon, 1990). In the course of these developments, a section of civil society, chiefly Anglophone, re-tabled the question of the form of the state.

The vibrancy of the Anglophone community to see the establishment of a more just, democratic and equal society was exemplified by the birth in Bamenda, capital of the Northwest region, of the Social Democrat Front (SDF), the first major opposition party in Cameroon, and the holding of the All Anglophone Conferences of 1993 (AAC I in Buea, capital of the Southwest region) and

1994 (AAC II in Bamenda). A proposed return to two-State federalism was the focal point of the 1994 AAC Declaration. However, the government refused to dialogue with leaders of the AAC, leading to the creation of the Southern Cameroons National Congress (SCNC) in August 1994 (Fonchingong 2013: 229), with the SCNC then launching a bid to separate the Southern Cameroons from the Republic of Cameroun (Achimbe, 2016: 513).

Responding to these tensions that had emerged nationwide in the context of post-1990 democratisation in Africa, Biya's government then embarked on constitutional reform. An amendment to the 1972 Constitution in January 1996 introduced decentralisation within the unitary state structure, with the devolution of some powers to regions, albeit under strict supervision of the central government. In spite of such decentralisation, largely effective only on paper (Caxton 2017), reflections on the form of the Cameroonian State and calls for its revision did not cease.

Against the backdrop of government's refusal to return to a two-State Federation, albeit a more concrete one, scholars like Anyangwe (2010) and Ayim (2010) revisited the problem of the botched decolonisation process for the Southern Cameroons. They argued that the formula of 'independence by joining' contravened the original United Nations (UN) Trusteeship Agreement and various UN laws and resolutions on the complete and unconditional decolonisation of African peoples and peoples elsewhere under colonial rule. Abwa (2015) has, however, refuted the existence of any basis for Anglophone self-rule. In *Neither Anglophones nor Francophones: all Cameroonians. Historical Analysis Essay in Tribute to the late Prof. M. Z. Njeuma* (2015), he argues that the Southern Cameroons cannot claim any existence outside the Kamerun boundaries. His school of thought has followers like LeVine (1971) and Elango (2006) who attempt to debunk an 'Anglophone' identity. Moreover, it is their dismissive and debatable views – Kamerun was a colony, not a State – and other similar arguments that have informed Cameroonian government policy on the Anglophone conflict. This approach produced over time a deepening malaise in the Anglophone community with ever-renewed grievances about marginalisation and increasing French influence. This erosion of the Anglo-Saxon heritage (language, culture, values) and Anglophone systems (political, educational, Common Law), in other words, of Anglophone identity, by political and administrative

practices of the Francophone-dominated government have significantly reduced the life chances of Anglophones. Over time, this has put them in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis their Francophone counterparts – the so-called 'Anglophone problem' (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997; West Cameroon Association 2016).

The longstanding nature of this 'Anglophone problem' has escalated from 2016 onwards to one of crisis and unprecedented conflict. As French influence in Anglophone institutions, notably law courts and schools, increased with negative consequences on standards and on access to justice and education, protests were again launched in October 2016 to decry the situation. As outlined in the Introduction, what began as peaceful protests by lawyers and teachers against the increased introduction of Francophone personnel and practices into courts and schools in the Anglophone regions subsequently escalated into civil conflict when government security forces responded to the peaceful protests by killings with machine guns and helicopter gunships, along with arbitrary arrests and torture. The initial peaceful protests in 2016 were led by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), which proposed a return to the two-State federation that had been agreed to at independence in 1961, but which had then been unconstitutionally terminated by the Francophone-dominated government in 1972. The brutal crackdown by the government against the peaceful protests in late 2016 and early 2017 led to separatist voices taking centre stage, with several armed groups emerging to fight for separation from French Cameroon and establish an independent state called Ambazonia, the name given to English-speaking regions of Cameroon by separatist sympathisers. In September 2017, the first attacks on Cameroon military forces were recorded, and on 1 October 2017, separatist groups unilaterally declared independence for Ambazonia, leading to military occupation of the Anglophone regions and commencement of the civil war.



Figure 6: Peaceful protest in English-speaking region of Cameroon before escalation of conflict in October 2017
 Photo credit: Pambazuka News <https://www.pambazuka.org/human-security/president-paul-biya-and-cameroon-s-anglophone-crisis>

Two years later, in response to internal and international outrage about almost daily atrocities and to calls for dialogue, the government organised a self-styled Major National Dialogue (MND) (Grand Dialogue National in French) in October 2019. The MND ignored the initiative of religious leaders who had called for an Anglophone General Conference as a necessary first step to identify issues for the MND and to select Anglophone representatives (International Crisis Group 2018:1). The MND was also heavily criticised as being a monologue, given that separatist groups and moderate CSO actors were not invited to participate, as well as a dialogue without partners (Petrih 2019). The MND did, however, make several recommendations, among which was a special status for Anglophones and the election of local governors (Chimtom 2019). Notwithstanding such recommendations, Dupuis (2019) concluded that

the MND achieved nothing, and observed that fighting between government forces and separatists intensified after the dialogue. Against this background, a more visible role for CSOs in resolution of the conflict could, therefore, make a difference. However, this is partly dependent on the degree of civic space available.

3.3 The state of civic space in Cameroon

The development of the civic space in Cameroon has largely followed the path of other African countries, as indicated in the preceding sub-section. Discussion on the subject shows that the civic space in Cameroon has undergone at least three phases of 'mutation' – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial – each characterised by varying degrees of civic activism in the

social, economic and political life of the state (Awason 2005; Aziz 2019; Forje, 1999; Nkwi 2006; Vubo 2008).

The present postcolonial phase can also be viewed in two distinct periods: the era of the first Republic under President Amadou Ahidjo (1960-1982) and that of the second Republic of President Paul Biya (1982 to present). As Aziz (2019) notes, in Amadou Ahidjo's era, what was considered 'civil society' was loosely referred to as the 'the voluntary sector', and was mostly composed of religious denominations and agricultural work parties. Such organisations were generally encouraged and supported by the state in the provision of economic and socio-cultural services, while political parties and civic organisations were forced into a single party structure – the Cameroon National Union – to form a centralised one-party state. Thus, the role of 'civil society' in Cameroon's first Republic was largely restricted to socio-cultural and menial economic issues. This trend continued into the second Republic until the 1990s, following the formal adoption of political pluralism in 1990 (Vubo 2008).

The post-1990 period witnessed a dramatic transformation in the 'voluntary sector' in Cameroon. Ngam Nkwi notes that religious groups and other associations became more vibrant and vocal as they focused beyond socio-cultural and economic issues and were 'bent on opening and expanding the political space' (Nkwi 2006: 95). During the early 1990s, individuals, students, religious groups and other organisations became more interested in seeking redress to the economic, social and political woes that were affecting Cameroonians. Indeed, political activism during this time was marked by what Aziz (2019: 54) referred to as 'civilian group militancy' for freedom, justice and good governance against what was perceived as the authoritarian and repressive one-party regime of Paul Biya. As noted above, in December 1990, Biya's regime bowed to pressure and enacted Law No. 90/053 on freedom of association, thereby repealing Law No. 67/LF/19 of 12 June 1967 on the labour code (Federal Republic of Cameroon, 1967). This launched the new age of civil society in Cameroon, and subsequently over 3,000 associations mushroomed in Cameroon (Tsanga 2013: 4). These are comprised of both official registered associations and non-registered ones. Registered associations include NGOs, trade unions, cooperative movements, common initiative groups, private media, churches, professional

associations, development associations, student associations, and feminist organisations. In addition, other non-registered groups engage in significant activity within the civil society space, notably separatist movements, religious fundamentalist groups, ethnic movements and secret societies (Nyambo 2008: 48). As the categories suggests, these CSOs are involved in different aspects of life in Cameroon, spanning social, religious, cultural, economic and political aspects.

However, despite the flurry of activity to establish CSOs and the initial optimism that was generated, the civic space shrank almost as quickly as it emerged, with sustained military crackdown on protests and demonstrations. For example, between March and August 1991, dozens died in violent clashes with the army across the country, including on the University of Yaoundé I campus (International Crisis Group 2010) and on 6 June 1992 when government troops attacked Ndu Market and killed men, women and children and tortured dozens (Cameroon News Agency 2017). Nyambo (2008) notes the attitude of the state in creating a legal space for civic action in Cameroon 'has been one of both caution and repression' (2008: 47). In other words, while the primary legislation on Freedom of Association – Law No 90/053 of 19 December 1990 – granted rights and freedoms for individuals and groups to create associations, the same law and subsequent ones and their texts of application also curbed such rights. For instance, Law No 90/053 also states that, apart from public utility associations, CSO cannot obtain subventions, gifts or donations (article 11) (Nyambo 2008). Access to legitimate support, including financial support, is critical in enabling the work of CSOs. Thus, any law prohibiting access to funding limits the ability of CSOs to thrive in an already challenging (financial) resource context like that of Cameroon. Moreover, the state has wide-ranging powers to dissolve any CSO if it feels the said association threatens the security of the state, especially regarding national integrity and unity. Thus, politically, there are limits to what CSOs can get involved in, especially when it concerns discussion on the form of the state – a major issue widely regarded as the main bone of contention in the current Cameroon 'Anglophone' crisis (Awason 2020; Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997). For instance, on 17 January 2017, at the start of the current crisis, Cameroon's Ministry of Territorial Administration issued an order banning the activities of the Southern Cameroon

National Council (SCNC) and the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) – a group of CSOs who had led the peaceful protests that emerged in late 2016 (Amnesty International, 2017). The government then arrested and imprisoned some CACSC leaders, while many others fled the country (Bama, 2017).

This is not atypical; a common constraint on the civic space in Cameroon is the harassment, intimidation and attacks on CSO activists and human rights defenders. The CIVICUS Monitor, an index which measures civic space globally has, for the past four years, classified the civic space in Cameroon as repressed (CIVICUS 2020). This means that the work of CSOs is regularly impeded, and they face threats of de-registration and closure by the state. In addition, active individuals and civil society members who criticise power holders risk surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury and even death. Thus, despite the plethora of CSOs registered in Cameroon since the 1990s, the civic space in Cameroon has largely remained constrained. CSOs can operate but only under strict, at times self-imposed, limitations. They understand that if they step out of line and act in a manner that is perceived by the state as oppositional, they risk unwelcome attention and potential repression from state authorities.

In sum, despite the resurgence of CSOs in the early 1990s and the formal registration of large numbers of NGOs, the civic space in Cameroon has remained limited, especially for organisations engaging in the broad political sphere. Available civic space was then subject to further shrinkage with the escalation of the Anglophone crisis from late 2016. A clampdown on CSO activities occurred, most notably the banning of the Consortium (CACSC) on 17 January 2017, and the space for CSOs has subsequently remained highly restricted. The government appears to perceive any effort to contribute to the resolution of the conflict as against its interests, or worse, as terrorism. Perhaps this limitation of civic space was most apparent in the government's obstruction of the initiative of religious leaders, led by the Archbishop Emeritus of Douala, Cardinal Tumi, to organise an Anglophone General Conference in August 2018 and again in November 2018, thus obstructing articulation of the grievances of the English-speaking population. Yet, despite such constraints, local CSOs in the Anglophone regions have responded in a variety of ways to the conflict and its adverse effects on local populations, as examined in the next section.

4. Contributions of CSOs to the Resolution of Cameroon's 'Anglophone' Conflict

Several roles have been attributed to CSOs in conflict situations. Some of the main contributions include mediation and facilitation of dialogue; information and citizen education; participation of citizens in local security governance and early warning mechanisms; advancement of positive societal values; and organisation of associations for economic and social development (Cooper 2018: 9-10; Nyirabikali 2016: 7-10). While the banning of CACSC and imprisonment of its leaders in January 2017 threatened to even deny the symbolic existence of CSOs in the Anglophone regions, many CSOs have risen to the challenge and have been actively engaged in peaceful attempts at resolution of the ongoing Anglophone conflict. We now turn to examine the role they have played so far. We identify five inter-related areas where CSOs have contributed to conflict resolution: humanitarian relief; peace campaigns; documentation of human rights violations; trauma healing; and peace education.

4.1 Humanitarian action

The provision of humanitarian relief is considered by some scholars and practitioners to be an important conflict resolution activity. It is perceived by Bigdon and Korf (2002: 3), for instance, as one of the activities that local and international NGOs can undertake in efforts to transform a conflict. Most CSOs involved in this study indicated their role in providing humanitarian relief, notably to internally displaced persons (IDPs), both within the conflict zones and in other parts of the country where they have sought refuge, and to civilians who remain in their communities within the affected areas. Faced with the urgent needs of local populations due to the conflict, some NGOs have reoriented their activities entirely from development to humanitarian work. Humanitarian relief such as food, medicines and shelter has been provided, at times in conjunction with international organisations. Many areas in the conflict zones are inaccessible to international organisations, including UN agencies, and thus the role of local NGOs has been crucial. Lange and Quinn (2003: 7) contend that 'inter-community dialogue and community-level peacebuilding may be fragile without humanitarian assistance to material needs, like food, shelter and health'. They note that such material assistance strengthens the capacity of the affected population to resist the effects of violent attacks by making available food and shelter, among other needs (Lange and Quinn 2003: 21-22).

Our findings were that the provision of humanitarian relief to affected civilian populations in Cameroon was important for two interrelated reasons: basic needs and solidarity. First, the adverse impact of the conflict on affected civilian populations has made it imperative that CSOs respond to their immediate needs through the provision of food, health services and shelter, including to those IDPs who have fled into the bush to seek refuge. Some organisations have conducted preliminary needs assessments to determine the basic needs of the people and identify those most in need of humanitarian support, with provision of immediate relief. Such assessments have then guided the humanitarian intervention strategies of international organisations. Other local CSOs have focused on the most vulnerable, for instance people with disabilities, who may have limited access to humanitarian assistance, as well as less opportunity to escape from the violence. Second, as well as an essential response to the deprivations suffered by civilian populations, the provision of humanitarian assistance has been significant in expressing solidarity and enhancing the legitimacy and reputation of the CSOs in their engagement with local communities and groups of IDPs. The humanitarian relief provided has demonstrated concern and practical support for local people, and shown the preparedness of CSO workers to take risks in entering the conflict zones, given the threats coming from both the military and armed separatists. For example, some CSOs have gone to remote villages in order to reach injured persons and transport them for treatment to Doctors Without Borders based in some major cities. Threats were real, with CSO staff sometimes kidnapped by armed separatists. Related to their humanitarian work, CSOs have also provided livelihood training to assist those, notably IDPs, who have been deprived of their livelihoods. For instance, one organisation undertook a project called 'Empower Her' which provided training in sewing and hairdressing for 25 female IDPs.

4.2 Peace campaigns

Another important contribution of CSOs has been that of waging campaigns for peace. Workshop discussions revealed that female-led CSOs, in particular, have been very active and vocal in campaigns such as 'Back to school', 'Stop burning health facilities', 'Stop the killings', 'We want dialogue' and 'Cease fire', aimed

at bringing national and international attention to the ongoing atrocities. Such campaigns were given particular impetus by the establishment, in May 2018, of the Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) by leaders of women's organisations and individual female activists. As the organisation itself states, it was 'born as a result of the crisis with the mission to contribute as catalysts and agents of peace in the two troubled regions of Cameroon'.³ SNWOT has undertaken various activities at different levels, and direct peace campaigning has been a central element.



Figure 7: Members of Southwest/Northwest Women Task Force (SNWOT) protesting in Buea, Cameroon
Photo credit: Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) (2020)

3. <https://snwot.org/about-us/>

One effective action has been 'lamentation campaigns', for example, undertaken in 2018 in the regional capitals of Buea and Bamenda and involving the participation of over one thousand women. Through wailing, the women's lamentation called for a ceasefire and dialogue between the conflict parties,⁴ as well as seeking to bring more national and international attention to the crisis (Tebeck 2019). The condemnation of the war by women wailing publicly is a revered conflict resolution ritual in most communities in Cameroon and is seen as a condemnation of violence (Wright 2015). The lamentation campaigns were major events that attracted significant media coverage. Other public demonstrations have called for a ceasefire and peaceful resolution of the conflict, with SNWOT activists adopting an orange headscarf as a symbol of nonviolence.



Figure 8: Lamentation campaign by members of SNWOT
Photo credit: Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) (2020)

4. <https://snwot.org/about-us/>

SNWOT has campaigned for peace at different levels and by different means. As well as public demonstrations, SNWOT has made direct appeals to the government to resolve the conflict through holding press conferences. Additionally, on 10 December 2018, 150 members undertook a public march in Yaoundé calling for an immediate ceasefire and inclusive dialogue. In the lead up to the Major National Dialogue, SNWOT also visited the Prime Minister on 24 September 2019 to submit their recommendations on how they believed the dialogue could best be organised.⁵ When government was unresponsive, SNWOT persisted in demanding access and took direct action to gain entry into the official Major National Dialogue sessions in Yaoundé on 30 September 2019 in order to make women's voices heard.⁶

A key area of campaigning pertains to the incidents of rape and gender-based violence that have accompanied the conflict, with CSO representatives describing the situation as one of 'rampant subjection to rape' and 'wanton abuse of sexual rights of women and girls'.⁷ SNWOT, for example, has consistently drawn attention to issues of rape and gender-based violence in its campaigns and public demonstrations, as indicated in the placards in figure below



Figure 9: SNWOT campaigns for peace in the English-speaking regions
 Photo credit: Southwest/Northwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) (2020)

5. <https://snwot.org/cameroon-snwot-meeting-with-prime-minister/>

6. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

7. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

The inter-related nature of public campaigning and practical support is also evident here, with SNWOT and other women-led CSOs providing safe spaces for women and girls, including in the bush, as well as kits to ensure proper menstrual hygiene.

4.3 Documentation of human rights violations

CSOs have played a major role in documenting and reporting on human rights violations and other heinous crimes committed since the start of the conflict. CSOs for example have documented and reported on numerous mass killings, including that in the village of Ngarbuh on 14 February 2020 in which at least 21 people, including 13 children and a pregnant woman, were killed.⁸ Such documentation by the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and other NGOs has led to higher-level attention and, at times, investigations being undertaken, such as occurred in the case of the Ngarbuh Massacre (Human Rights Watch 2020). Above all, the documentation of human rights violations and campaigns for investigations into war crimes makes the need for a peaceful solution more visible to all parties. In a situation where mainstream media, especially Francophone media coverage, has been very limited, the work done by CSOs has served to remind the warring parties of their legal obligations and afforded some protection, albeit limited, to the civilian population. It was the view of one CSO representative that this has at least prevented some atrocities through an increased awareness of the consequences of violating human rights.⁹ This finding corroborates the argument of scholars such as Babbitt (2011) who contends that human rights issues are 'key components of parties' interests and concerns' and that human rights norms are important in reinforcing the idea that state sovereignty cannot be separated from its responsibility to protect civilians. Some CSOs such as CHRDA (Ajumane 2018) and the Cameroonian Association for Bible Translation

and Literacy (US House of Representatives 2018) have delivered statements on Cameroon's Anglophone conflict in important international policy spaces. In June 2018, for instance, the founder and chairman of CHRDA presented a paper on the Anglophone crisis at a hearing of the US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs (US House of Representatives 2018). CSO workshop participants felt that such testimonies have had some impact.¹⁰ Barnes (2006) contends that civil society initiatives are sometimes 'crucial in directing attention to a situation that is unacceptable but which has been avoided by the wider public, a silence that effectively underpins the status quo', adding that 'the very act of public disclosure and/or denouncing the situation can make the truth evident in ways that are very difficult to ignore and may empower people to take action to change the situation' (2006: 34).

4.4 Trauma healing

Another important contribution relates to issues of mental health and trauma healing. One of the problems associated with contemporary wars which makes conflict resolution difficult is trauma. Egbejule (2018) has shown that trauma is a major consequence of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict. In this research, the leader of one CSO noted that 'there has been an increase in mental health problems among youths as a result of the conflict',¹¹ Another confirmed that traumatic experiences were widespread, highlighting that 'the elderly, people that have experienced kidnapping, those with gun wounds, people whose houses and/or businesses have been destroyed, are all suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders'.¹² The widespread incidents of rape and gender-based violence is another source of trauma. It was stated by workshop participants that many people in the conflict areas as well as IDPs in the neighbouring towns and cities are suffering from trauma resulting from the experiences they have lived through since the start

8. Interview with CSO, 15 May 2020, Buea

9. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

10. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

11. Interview with CSO, 8 May 2020, Buea

12. Interview with CSO, 8 May 2020, Buea

of the conflict, and will need to heal to be able to relate with wider society in a peaceful manner.¹³ In response, CSOs have provided psychological and mental health support to women and children who have been affected by the conflict.¹⁴ For example, a consortium of four CSOs has established a network in the city of Kumba to provide psychosocial support and the referral of victims/survivors of gender-based violence.¹⁵ The objective of such healing is to help those affected to get relief from their pain and prevent potential conflict behaviour. Although there is limited research on the relevance of psychosocial relief in resolving conflicts (Cairns 1996; Shalev and McFarlane 2000), some scholars such as Herman (1992: 50) have shown that traumatic events, in addition to effects on the psychological structures of self, also affect the systems of attachment and meaning that link a person to their community. It is in this vein that Mujawayo (2014) has stated that 'people need to find peace inside themselves before they can build a peaceful society'. Bigdon and Korf (2002) identify trauma therapy as one of the activities that NGOs and other local actors engage in to contribute to long term transformative change in conflict situations.

4.5 Peace education

Civil society organisations have also contributed to conflict resolution by designing and implementing peace education/sensitisation programmes. One organisation, for example, carried out some training on peace education in the village of a staff member, which had been burnt down. The objective of the training was to educate the youths and convince them not to retaliate. The same organisation also organised a 'seminar to educate the victims and try to make them understand that all hope is not lost'.¹⁶ This is consistent with findings from other studies such as the one by Awinador-Kanyirige (2014) in Ghana in which he argued that peace education and peace talks initiated and implemented by CSOs helped to de-escalate ethnic-based conflicts between

the Konkomba and Nanumba/Dagomba ethnic groups and between the Gonja and Nawari/Konkomba groups in Northern Ghana. Similarly, Fischer (2011: 300) found that, following the end of the war in Bosnia in 1995, some CSOs became 'active in cross-border peace education, striving to establish norms of tolerance and deal with prejudices and enemy images'.

The above contributions show that CSOs have played a crucial role in identifying the needs and views of local people whose lives have been affected by the conflict, and have responded directly to these and brought them to policy spaces. For CSOs to effectively bridge the gap between local communities and policy actors, however, they need adequate resources and an enabling environment. The role CSOs can play in resolving the ongoing conflict is thus limited by the challenges associated with restricted and shrinking civic spaces in the conflict-affected regions, to which we now turn.

13. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

14. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

15. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

16. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

5. Challenges faced by CSOs

As discussed above, even before the outbreak of full-scale conflict between Cameroon's security forces and separatist fighters, CSOs in Cameroon already faced significant constraints after the start of mass protests in 2016. These ranged from restrictions on access to income, intimidation, physical attacks and threats of closure, most notably the banning of CACSC and imprisonment of its leaders in January 2017. The CSO representatives involved in this study noted how such restrictions intensified immediately prior to the outbreak of conflict and have persisted throughout. In particular, workshop participants identified the following constraints: administrative restrictions and manipulation; intimidation, control and surveillance of CSO activities; security threats and attacks on CSO properties and persons; and financial challenges. In addition to these constraints that stem from the external environment and the context of shrinking space, CSO representatives also noted some challenges internal to the NGO sector. These constraints and challenges are discussed in turn below.

5.1 Administrative restrictions and control

Administrative restrictions were noted as a major means of limiting CSOs' access to conflict-affected communities. While CSOs acknowledged that access problems could be due at times to geographical remoteness, it was the administrative restrictions that were most frustrating. For example, a recurrent issue for most CSOs was that 'Divisional [administrative] Officers do not issue authorisation for civil society organisations to carry out their activities in their various constituencies'.¹⁷ Thus, even when CSOs are able to overcome access issues related to geographical remoteness, local administrative officials do not grant access for them to visit such areas. This restriction therefore impedes on CSOs' ability to address the needs of some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in the conflict. Even when CSOs are finally granted access, they can be faced with other restrictions. A CSO representative noted that 'The military

interferes in the humanitarian deliveries of CSOs by sometimes wanting to accompany them to the field and by so doing endangering the lives of their staff through crossfire exchange with the Amba [separatists] boys'.¹⁸ While the military generally frames its accompaniment of CSO teams to rural locations as being for the 'security of CSO staff', the main intent is perceived to be surveillance of CSOs and their engagement with local communities and separatist fighters. Some CSOs have been accused of working with separatist fighters in the conflict, with staff monitored and questioned by the state secret service (Ngano 2020; Quenum 2020). Another administrative restriction is the censorship imposed on CSO activities. The participants noted that the government, through different administrative officials at the sub-district, district and regional levels, prevents CSOs from providing/ sharing information on the situation of people in the affected communities. A respondent noted that CSOs face a 'communication challenge. CSOs are not allowed to provide relevant information emanating from the field'.¹⁹ This could be seen as an attempt by the state to remain as provider of the sole narrative of the Anglophone conflict, silencing the voices and closing the civic space of non-state actors. The consequences of violation of such censorship can range from a fine to imprisonment or an outright ban, as meted out to CACSC.

5.2 CSO-government relations and sector discord

The representative of a teachers' organisation noted further complexities on how administrative manipulation impacted on CSOs' autonomy and ability to contribute to peaceful change, yet simultaneously perceived this as being partly dependent on CSOs' own decisions with regard to their closeness or distance from government:

...CSOs operate according to the context of the government. That means they operate the way the government conditions them to. In Cameroon, for a civil society organisation to operate freely

17. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

18. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

19. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

and significantly contribute to peaceful change, it will depend on the nature of its relations with the government. This implies that some of these CSOs are government-sponsored and operate within such contexts. Under such conditions, it is difficult for such CSOs to make meaningful contributions because they dance to the tune of the government. Sometimes CSOs can pressure the government to buy their ideas, but that depends on the level of autonomy and distance they maintain from government.²⁰

In such an environment of occasional suspicion, collaboration among CSOs is weakened where CSOs may be pursuing respectively different agendas dependent on their distance/closeness to government. However, some workshop participants went further in their critique of internal shortcomings within the CSO sector. It was stated that some CSOs are focused on 'promoting self-interests rather than collaboration', suggesting that they 'don't have the spirit to look beyond a selfish, self-centred syndrome', what was referred to as the 'pull him down syndrome'.²¹ Perhaps the banning of CACSC and imprisonment of its key leaders has intimidated others, resulting in a successful 'divide and rule' strategy by government. However, for some respondents, the crux of the problem of lack of collaboration lay with CSOs themselves, with some seen as 'selfish and exhibit[ing] a myopic mindset', while other CSO activists 'turn up [engage in conflict resolution efforts] but join politics'.²² This occasional discord between CSOs was exacerbated in a situation where some CSOs are perceived as sponsored by government and therefore supportive of government interests. The pursuit of individual interests, along with the 'divide and rule' strategy of government, means that there was 'lack of synergy among CSOs'²³ in conflict resolution efforts. This failure to engage in sustained collaboration makes the voice of CSOs weaker and consequently their engagement in addressing the conflict is less effective.

5.3 Security threats

Another challenge for CSOs is the direct threat to life and property from both warring parties. The workshop discussions with CSOs' representatives revealed that the risk to their property and that of their staff is quite high since 'the military on their part considers everybody as an enemy and they shoot anyhow and do not seem to protect members of the civil society'.²⁴ For instance, the offices of the Network of Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa (REDHAC), an influential CSO based in Douala, Cameroon, has been broken into by unidentified armed men on several occasions, with documents and equipment confiscated on other occasions, and leaders and other staff subjected to continuous harassment and intimidation. Although the break-ins and other incidents have been reported to the police, no formal investigation has taken place (CIVICUS et al. 2017). Such a fate has befallen other CSOs in Cameroon (Human Rights Watch 2019). In addition, NGO staff can be targeted by the armed separatist groups. The very real nature of this threat was evident in that two members of CSOs present at the workshop had themselves been kidnapped by separatist groups in Kumba and Batibo respectively.²⁵ These experiences had been very frightening for both individuals and they had required time to recover from physical injuries and, especially, from the mental trauma.²⁶ Such risks clearly impact on CSOs' ability to effectively carry out their activities towards conflict resolution, echoing evidence from other cases that a threat to basic security for CSO staff makes it 'difficult for them to engage in and support peace making' (Barnes 2006: 46).

20. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

21. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

22. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

23. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

24. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

25. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

26. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

5.4 Financial challenges

The inability of CSOs to access legitimate funds through gifts and donations is a further strategic civic space constraint. Workshop participants noted that CSOs' lack of financial resources greatly impeded their ability to effectively contribute to conflict resolution activities. While foreign donor assistance, such as from international NGOs, could provide avenues for them to access financial resources, they are often only available with conditions. As one CSO representative noted, 'International organisations come with money and would always want to decide and dictate on what civil society should do and should not do'.²⁷ Moreover, such sources of income are highly competitive and many local grassroots NGOs miss out on them, greatly impacting on their conflict resolution efforts.

In sum, issues and challenges here are complex. CSOs operate in a difficult environment in a situation of conflict. Ultimately there is risk to the personal security of staff and an existential threat to the organisation. Such threats come from powerful and armed actors. In such contexts, CSOs may have little choice but to work within government-imposed parameters, while being somewhat creative in their interpretation. Yet there are also some difficult choices. Some CSOs may opt to gravitate more towards government as a way of protecting and promoting their own interests, resulting at times in a degree of discord within the sector. Competition between NGOs over financial resources is common in many contexts, but the additional challenges faced in a conflict environment, especially where manipulated by government, can exacerbate such divisions precisely when maximum solidarity and collaboration is required to end violence and achieve peace. We turn next to consider how CSOs have responded to such challenges and attempted to counter shrinking civic space.

27. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

6. Strategies to Counter Shrinking Civic Spaces

How can civil society open the space that is closing? Participants were invited to share the strategies they have adopted or believe they could employ to counter it. Despite all the challenges faced, participants have adopted several strategies aimed at overcoming such challenges in an environment where civic space is under attack. These include awareness raising; documentation; CSO mobilisation, networking and coalition-building; training and sensitisation campaigns; dialogue and communication. Workshop participants also considered neutrality, consistency, and building capacity in conflict analysis as important in pushing back against pressure on civic space.

6.1 Awareness raising by CSOs on their role

Participants were of the view that hostility towards CSOs by parties in the conflict was sometimes the result of limited knowledge of their role. They felt that people, including policy makers and conflict actors, could be ill-informed about the role of CSOs, and thus unable to distinguish between legal and non-legal restrictions on their activities. Difficulties in obtaining support outside of the Anglophone regions for CSO conflict resolution initiatives were also explained by the limited awareness of the conflict in other regions and within the international community. It is in this vein that women's groups organised a peace march in Yaoundé on 18 April 2019 (Kindzeka 2019) to raise awareness of the need to end the fighting and engage in a peaceful approach to resolve the conflict, inclusive of their role in this. Obtaining such outside support was also considered important by two rights-based organisations. They suggested that CSOs needed to raise awareness about the legitimacy of their activities among stakeholders and the wider citizen body using different channels including social media and traditional media spaces.²⁸ This is consistent with the argument of Ayvazyan (2019: 20) who states that raising 'awareness for the plight of civil society with the public is of great importance'. Ayvazyan regrets, however, that such campaigns organised by CSOs often focus on confrontational narratives, and cautions that awareness

raising 'should concentrate on the importance of civil society and its role in the development of society' (2019: 20). Similarly, Baldus et al. (2019: 24), in a study of civil society efforts in several cases to prevent civic space restrictions, found that awareness-raising campaigns, together with advocacy and targeted lobbying, were key to success.

6.2 Documentation and quality of data

Documentation of violent events in general and violations of human rights in particular was seen as crucial. Two aspects were considered important. The first was to link documentation of abuses by both sides to international human rights law and to send information of violations to international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Relating abuses to international human rights law makes the information more comprehensible for international human rights organisations and actors.²⁹ Networking with international human rights organisations helps draw the attention of the warring parties to the consequences of violating international law and the legal requirement to prevent atrocities.³⁰ Such networking also provides support to local human rights organisations and a degree of protection against retaliation from both warring parties in a context where their work is perceived as 'confrontational' by government and their own security regularly threatened by both the military and the separatists.³¹ The second important aspect was to ensure the accuracy of all such data. The representative of one human rights organisation noted that 'facts' obtained from social media sources were not always checked, and emphasised the importance of having reliable local people on the ground to corroborate accounts of atrocities. According to another workshop participant, CSOs 'cannot speak until they have the facts' and 'when government knows that what they [CSOs] are saying is true, then they cannot contest it'.³² This can mean the government is more likely to collaborate with CSOs if they consistently report accurate and factual information.

28. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

29. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

30. Interview with CSO, 15 May 2020, Buea

31. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

32. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

6.3 Mobilisation, networking and coalition building

Mobilisation into more effective organisational forms was another important strategy. This was most notable amongst women's organisations, especially with the formation of SNWOT in May 2018. By bringing together a variety of organisations to focus on one issue – the conflict and its adverse impact on women in particular – SNWOT was able to undertake various activities at different levels in a stronger and more effective manner, including the encouragement of local mobilisation. At the local level across the two regions, SNWOT had 'mobilised grassroots women's groups in areas plagued by current conflict'.³³ They sensitised such groups 'on different issues related to their security, health, reproductive health, sexual rights, especially within the context of conflict', with local women 'becoming more aware of their rights', notably around gender-based violence.³⁴ SNWOT's collective confidence and strength was indicated by the public demonstrations and sit-down protests discussed above, as well as their direct action to gain access to the official Major National Dialogue in Yaoundé. Women representatives stated that they would not have had the courage previously to take such direct action, but self-organisation and mobilisation as women had enabled them to do so.³⁵

Closely related to mobilisation is CSO networking and coalition building, also considered crucial by workshop participants. It was stated that it was not possible for CSOs to achieve impact if they worked in isolation.³⁶ Networking took place locally as well as nationally and internationally. As noted above, strong links with international organisations are especially important for local human rights organisations, enabling their voices to be heard and bringing abuses to national and international attention, and offering a degree of protection.³⁷

The most significant examples of coalition building are again SNWOT and the Civil Society Platform for Peace in Cameroon. SNWOT was formed as a coalition of women's

organisations and individual female activists, and its strength derives from this. Similarly, as noted by one representative, the formation of the Civil Society Platform for Peace in Cameroon brought together a coalition of over 30 youth-led organisations, bloggers and journalists. Its strength in numbers has reinforced its calls for an immediate ceasefire and genuine inclusive dialogue, and also provided impetus to the Back to School campaign.³⁸ There was general agreement among participants of the importance of coalition building in order to influence policies and decision making. It was especially recommended that individual CSOs should each focus on a particular 'niche' area and then come together in a united coalition in a synergistic way where different areas of expertise are complementary. As noted by Barnes (2006: 21), networks of CSOs working together can benefit from the strength that comes from unity in ways not available outside such frameworks.

6.4 Training and sensitisation campaigns

Another important strategy has been training and sensitisation campaigns at the local level. In what could be considered as a 'created space' (Cornwall 2002) in which to develop a critical consciousness, CSOs have undertaken training on peacebuilding as well as on various rights issues that are encountered in conflict contexts. For example, training workshops on peace building and economic empowerment for women have been organised by 'Mother of Hope Cameroon (MOHC 2020)', while similar training sessions organised by Local Youth Corner (LOYOC) on peacebuilding and countering violent extremism (BBC News, 16 June 2018) have targeted young people. Other CSOs have been training youths and women on community mediation skills and how to engage with community and family members involved in armed groups in attempts to persuade them to drop their weapons.³⁹ Women-led organisations have also undertaken much education work with young girls on gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual rights.⁴⁰ CSOs also equipped

33. Concluding Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

34. Concluding Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

35. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

36. Concluding Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

37. Interview with CSO, 15 May 2020, Buea

38. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

39. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

40. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

themselves better to deal with the new context of conflict by undergoing training courses themselves on conflict-related matters.⁴¹ One women's organisation, for instance, has built its capacity by having staff attend a number of UN training programmes in Cameroon and in Kenya on women's leadership in peace processes.⁴²

6.5 Dialogue and communication

Dialogue and communication at various levels was another important strategy pursued by CSOs, and again counters shrinking space by seeking to create space. Dialogue with people in local communities was prioritised by some organisations, while others focused on encouraging government to hold a more inclusive dialogue.⁴³ Some CSOs have also gone the extra mile by meeting directly with the separatists and with the government in attempts to persuade them to cease fire and meet at the negotiation table. Importantly, they have been able to access areas where the conflict is intense and have met with different local groups. This has enabled dialogue with communities about the conflict, its impact and how to resolve it. The perspectives of those most affected people are then fed back to government and diplomatic missions.

Such community-level dialogue has engaged particularly with women, with SNWOT and its constituent organisations at the forefront. One focus of such dialogue has been on getting young people 'to drop arms'. Some CSOs have met with local government officials to engage them in discussions about international humanitarian law and the need to intervene in attempts to stop the shootings.⁴⁴ Such initiatives by CSOs have also involved dialogue with regional governors in the Northwest and Southwest regions, aimed at bringing local perspectives to their attention.⁴⁵ In this vein, it was felt important to build a strong communication network with both government and separatist organisations, talking with both

in a peaceful manner in which NGOs can be the 'voice of the people'.⁴⁶ The role of CSOs in facilitating dialogue that considers the experiences and needs of those most-affected civilians was considered crucial, not least because political representation has failed. Participants agreed it was imperative that local people's voices should be heard directly – what is necessary is 'not a dialogue in Yaoundé but in communities'.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding such views on the importance of dialogue at the local level, CSOs were afforded what can only be described as a very restricted role in the government-led Major National Dialogue, held from 30 September to 4 October 2019 in Yaoundé. This was a significant limitation on their influence, with 'very little space given to civil society actors'.⁴⁸ This restriction is what led SNWOT to take direct action, after persistent requests were ignored, to gain entry into the Major National Dialogue sessions. According to one female CSO representative, there was also a degree of self-critique of their lack of inclusion and a determination that 'next time they should be included more'.⁴⁹

Such efforts at open communication and dialogue with all parties were considered important for making their activities as CSOs less threatening to the warring parties and the population at large. This was especially aimed at countering the constraints associated with the warring parties; i.e. on the one hand the suspicions of the separatists of CSOs as working for the government and thus operating as spies, and on the other hand the suspicions of the government of CSOs as being oppositional and/or working with the separatists.

41. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

42. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

43. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

44. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

45. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

46. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

47. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

48. Focus Group Discussion, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

49. Opening Plenary, CSO Workshop, 29 January 2020, Douala

7. Conclusion

Cameroon is currently in a critical situation. Conflict rages between the military and armed separatists in the two English-speaking regions, with severe consequences for civilian populations, especially in the rural areas. The conflict is unprecedented in post-independence Cameroon and is in urgent need of resolution. Yet this is not an easy task, given the conflict's roots in the country's complex colonial and post-independence histories, with the so-called 'Anglophone problem' being a legacy of those histories (Konings and Nyanmjoh 1997). Moreover, it is a much-neglected conflict, both internally and externally. Internally, it is relatively unheeded within the Francophone regions, while the government currently seems to have little interest in resolving it other than by military means. Externally, it is a conflict that the international community has largely overlooked. We have examined this conflict with reference to two differing and somewhat paradoxical perspectives within the wider scholarly literature. On the one hand, in the peace studies literature, the role of CSOs in conflict resolution is emphasised in the recent turn to bottom-up or grassroots approaches to peacebuilding. On the other hand, recent literature in democratisation studies has noted the phenomenon of 'shrinking civic space' whereby many governments world-wide have sought to limit the scope and activities of CSOs through legislative and other measures. This closing of space has occurred partly because the significance of the role of civil society has blossomed globally in both democratisation and development processes in the 1990s and into the 2000s. CSOs within the Anglophone regions of Cameroon have found themselves very much trapped in this paradox. Their role is potentially crucial in seeking resolution of this terrible conflict, yet their operational parameters are increasingly constrained. Further, such difficulties are intensified where it is in the interest of the state to doubt the neutrality and objectivity of CSOs in seeking conflict resolution, so as to justify its repression of such actors. In this research, we have explored how CSOs have sought to contribute to the resolution of Cameroon's Anglophone conflict, the challenges they have faced, especially in the context of a shrinking civic space, and the strategies adopted in turn to counter such challenges. Our findings concerning each of these issues are summarised in turn.

First, CSOs in the Anglophone regions have contributed to conflict resolution efforts in direct and indirect ways. Indirectly, some development organisations have

reoriented their activities towards humanitarian efforts in terms of provision of food, shelter and medicines, notably for displaced people within the conflict zones. Such a response has been important both in terms of the immediate needs of most-affected communities and in gaining the trust of the overall civilian population, thus increasing the potential for the involvement of local populations in dialogue and conflict resolution efforts if and when they emerge. More directly, human rights-oriented organisations have responded by documenting violations by warring parties, important for holding both parties to account for abuses and crimes, and for raising international awareness of this oft-forgotten conflict. Additionally, some organisations, notably women's organisations like SNWOT, have engaged in peace advocacy, calling for conflict resolution through broad dialogue which is inclusive of women's voices. Women's organisations have also engaged in a 'Back2School' campaign in opposition to the closure of schools by the separatist groups. It is, perhaps, notable that campaigning organisations such as SNWOT are coalitions of a number of like-minded organisations, aiming to enhance their collective impact and to provide solidarity and a degree of protection against possible repercussions from the state as well as from the armed non-state actors. While all campaigns have remained strictly peaceful and non-violent, it is understandable that CSOs have generally stayed clear of advocating political solutions to the conflict, such as a return to the two-state federalism introduced in 1961, conscious of the fate of CACSC and its leaders in January 2017 and the state repression that would befall them.


Second, numerous challenges have been encountered by CSOs operating in such a difficult context. State administrative restrictions regarding access and movement within the conflict zones are manipulated and take on a politicised dimension, used as a means of surveillance and attempted control by the military and state authorities. Such restrictions make it difficult for CSOs to operate in the autonomous manner that they require. The implicit threats in such surveillance occasionally become explicit with the state secret services directly questioning CSO staff, accusing them of working with the separatist fighters. Paradoxically, CSO staff are also under threat from the armed separatists, sometimes subjected to kidnapping and accused of working with the military. Unsurprisingly, there can be a degree of self-censorship in activities undertaken

by CSOs in order to ensure that state repression or reprisals from the separatists are not provoked. Other challenges include the financial constraints often faced by NGOs, and the conditions that are often imposed by international funders. However, this common challenge for NGOs in developing country contexts is exacerbated by the legislation limiting sources of funding that is part of the shrinking space agenda. CSO representatives also identified a constraint within the sector, dubbed the 'pull him down syndrome'. Partly related to competition for scarce funds, this rivalry between NGOs is particularly unfortunate in such a challenging context where solidarity and collaboration between CSOs is so urgently needed.

Third, despite the challenges, CSOs have adopted several strategies to enable them to contribute to conflict resolution efforts. They have embarked on activities aimed at raising awareness of their role. This is important because measures to restrict civic space by the government and the targeting of CSOs by parties in this conflict, including deliberate efforts to discredit them, were perceived as occurring partly because of the limited understanding of their role. CSOs have also made efforts to raise awareness of the conflict in other regions of Cameroon where it is little understood. Another important strategy has been the documentation of crimes committed by the warring parties. By ensuring that data documented on the conflict is accurate, relating it to international human rights law and sharing it with international human rights organisations, pressure has been brought to bear on both parties in the conflict. Such documentation is considered important in ensuring that parties in the conflict fully comprehend the consequences of their actions and therefore appreciate the need to engage in serious negotiations towards a peaceful settlement. Another strategy adopted was that of mobilisation. CSOs worked to rally peers and other members of the community to support a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Networking with international civil society organisations and building coalitions of local CSOs also enabled CSOs to counter shrinking civic space and enhance their visibility as conflict resolution actors. Working through coalitions has given them more power to influence conflict parties to listen to their views. Shrinking space has also been countered by CSOs 'creating space' in which to develop critical awareness through training and sensitisation campaigns on peacebuilding and rights issues, notably with young people to 'drop arms' and

with women and girls on gender-based violence and sexual rights in conflict settings. Finally, dialogue and communication at various levels have also enabled CSOs to create spaces aimed at ending violence and resolving conflict. Importantly, dialogue with local communities has also enabled CSOs to bring the views of those most affected by the conflict into policy spaces.

We conclude with final thoughts about how this research contributes to discussions on peacebuilding from below and on shrinking civic space. The research confirms the significance of a bottom-up or grassroots approach to peacebuilding. This entails a peacebuilding process where the views and interests of affected civilian populations are not only visibly represented in peace negotiations, but also captured in any settlement, with their needs given utmost priority in the implementation of any peace agreement. This is especially important in a context like Cameroon, where the state authorities seem content to rely on a military solution to the conflict through the defeat of the armed separatists, with disregard for the English-speaking civilian populations who have been brutalised in the conflict. The importance of a grassroots approach is further emphasised where international authorities have been unsuccessful in getting the government to undertake dialogue and peace negotiations in any meaningful way, and thus reliance on elite actors for conflict resolution is not practicable or realistic. The role of CSOs, and especially NGOs, becomes particularly significant in such a context, and indeed our findings are that the CSOs examined here have made important contributions towards the resolution of the Anglophone conflict. Their role has been at least three-fold: to engage with most-affected communities and build an evidence base of the conflict's adverse consequences for citizens; to draw national and international attention to the conflict and its impact; and to maintain pressure for peace negotiations through interactions with both government and non-state armed actors. These different aspects of the role of CSOs all highlight the significance of local agency, a crucial element of peacebuilding from below. As part of such agency, it is vital that the experiences and perspectives of local Anglophone citizens are considered within all relevant fora and policy spaces, including their views on possible long-term solutions to the conflict. CSOs have a key contribution to make here as facilitators and mediators between local communities and regional and national level peace negotiation processes.



However, the research also confirms the complexities and difficulties of a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding in the context of shrinking civic space. As elsewhere, this is a very real phenomenon in Cameroon, one which entails the exercise of both visible and hidden power by the state in order to restrict the activities and influence of local CSOs. Conflict resolution relies on agreement by warring parties to the cessation of violence and to a subsequent peace deal. Yet, for CSOs, engagement with the state and non-state armed actors is no easy task, especially in a context where both warring parties are often unwilling to accept the participation of CSOs or their contribution as key stakeholders in peace efforts. A risk is also posed to the very integrity of the CSOs by their being labelled either as 'terrorist sympathisers' by the state or as 'state collaborators' by armed separatists. It is also very difficult for CSOs to raise the root causes of the 'Anglophone problem' in terms of the alienation and marginalisation felt by many in the English-speaking regions in the face of the assimilationist policies of the Francophone-dominated government. These are very significant challenges to CSOs if a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding is to have any substance or impact. Yet, for the CSOs studied here, the ongoing horrors of violence and war mean that 'doing nothing' is not an option. The various strategies aimed at overcoming such challenges have been noted. CSOs have defended their rights to freedoms of association and expression in terms of existing laws and legislative frameworks in order to counter shrinking space. They have also created new spaces, both in private and public spheres, in which to raise critical awareness and to advocate for peace. Their role in the search for sustainable peace can be considered important, if not indispensable, not least due to the long-standing cultural predisposition for inclusive dialogue in the English-speaking community of Cameroon. Yet the context is difficult, and the challenges are profound. Local CSOs have had to tread carefully and skilfully as mediators in bottom-up processes that enhance local agency in efforts towards conflict resolution.

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