

While the Government silences protests, the environmental alarm gets louder



In a country where more than half the population is unemployed and 51% of the people are living on less than two dollars a day it is more important than ever for natural resources to be managed in an intelligent and sustainable way. But the Government's development model is not sustainable. Desertification and the loss of biodiversity are serious problems and if not tackled immediately the population's well-being will be even more at risk. The Lom and Pangar dam project will displace thousands of people and ruin one of the richest ecosystems in the territory.

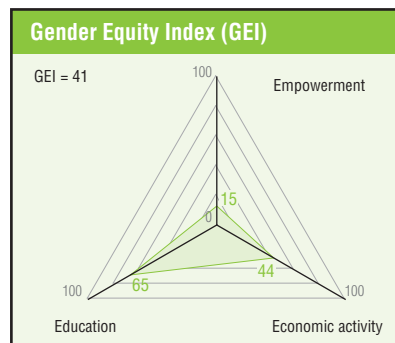
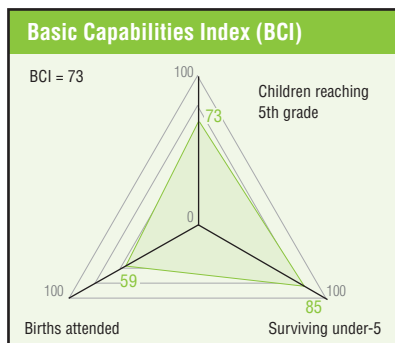
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Cameroon benefited from an increase in international oil and cocoa prices in the middle of the 2000s, but rising inflation¹ and the fact that wealth is very unequally distributed (the country's GINI rating in 2005 was 44.6²) mean the economy is even more vulnerable than before. According to the latest data, 51% of the people are living on less than two dollars a day and 17% on less than one dollar.³ The Government has announced measures to strengthen the economy, however it has committed itself to an unsustainable development model.

One upcoming project, for example, is a dam on the Lom and Pangar Rivers that the Government claims will alleviate Cameroon's energy shortage and stimulate economic growth. However it seems that the main beneficiary of this project will be the mining enterprise Alucam, which consumes around a third of the electrical power generated in the country.⁴

This dam will displace whole communities and cause a serious loss of biodiversity. The habitats of many animal species, including gorillas and chimpanzees will be submerged under the reservoir or destroyed when large swathes of trees in surrounding areas are cut down to make way for roads to link the dam to nearby cities. Yet official policy is to strengthen the country's energy generation capabilities at the expense of the environment and the Government is offering more facilities for companies engaged in unsustainable extractive activities.

In 2009 the stated number of people potentially displaced by the dam project increased to 28,000; this includes minorities such as the Baka, who have a history of discrimination.⁵



The Government's tendency to brush aside the rights of communities has been seen before, in 2000, when work started on the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline, a project that involved Petronas Malaysia, ExxonMobil and Chevron. According to a 2005 Amnesty International report, the project could "freeze the protection of the human rights of thousands of people who have lived in the area for decades."⁶ The pipeline project also caused large numbers of people to be displaced. Farmers in the area complained that they were barred access to their land and that ExxonMobil refused to return it or pay compensation. In some cases this meant communities were denied access to their only source of potable water.⁷

In the project contracts signed by the Government the enterprises in question had no human rights or environmental protection obligations and the agreements leading up to the commencement of the work were shielded by business confidentiality and were therefore not available for public scrutiny.⁸ The Government line was that the project was an opportunity for development that would make it possible to build new schools and provide better health service coverage. Not only were these promises broken, but the Government intimidated and detained many people who spoke out against the pipeline.⁹

The imposition of silence

In 2008 President Biya launched an initiative to make changes to the nation's Constitution and people took to the streets in the main cities to protest. These demonstrations were violently repressed and around 100 demonstrators and members of the security forces were killed. The civil society organizations involved in the protest movement have repeatedly claimed that the Biya regime, which has ruled Cameroon since 1982, is autocratic and has retained its hold on power only by rigging elections.¹⁰ In February 2011 Biya's security forces violently broke up a protest demonstration in which two of the participants were major opposition figures, Louis Tobie Mbida and Kah Walla, both of whom plan to turn as candidates in the forthcoming elections of October 2011. Mbida and Walla said they were mistreated by the forces of repression,¹¹ which had been tipped off about the possibility of the demonstration some time before and were able to quickly disperse protesters.

The Government has gone to great lengths to silence the opposition. For example, in March 2011 it blocked an SMS service that provided access to the social network Twitter, which was widely used by members of civil society organizations to organize protest activities.¹²

1 Economy Watch, "Cameroon Economy," <www.economywatch.com/world_economy/Cameroon>.

2 Institute of International Education, "Atlas of Student Mobility: Cameroon," <www.atlas.iienetwork.org/page/48146/>.

3 Earthtrends, "Cameroon," <earthtrends.wri.org/povlinks/country/cameroon.php>.

4 N. Chinton, "El miedo fluye ante nueva represa," IPS, (2009), <ipsnoticias.net/nota.asp?idnews=93679>.

5 Ibid.

6 Amnesty International, *Oleoducto Chad-Camerún: un nuevo informe acusa a las empresas petroleras y los gobiernos de evadirse en secreto de sus obligaciones para con los derechos humanos*, (September 2005), <www.amnesty.org/es/library/asset/POL30/028/2005/es/b9a7ba6b-d4b1-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/pol300282005es.html>.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Amnesty International, op. cit.

10 David Wallechinsky, *Tyrants: The World's 20 Worst Living Dictators*, Regan Press, (New York: 2006)..

11 African News, "Brutal Suppression of Peaceful Protests in Cameroon by Biya Thugs," (24 February 2011), <africandictator.blogspot.com/2011/02/brutal-suppression-of-peaceful-protests.html>.

12 Afrol News, "Cameroon limits social media services," (9 March 2011), <afrol.com/articles/37542>.

Unemployment

According to a 2009 study by the National Statistics Institute there were 12 million people unemployed in that year. This number is absolutely shocking given that the population of the country is only around 18.2 million.¹³

The Government announced plans to tackle the problem, including a scheme to create jobs for young people who drop out of secondary school, but in April 2011 there were no fewer than 350,000 applicants for the 25,000 jobs meant to be created in the public service.¹⁴ Opposition groups have claimed that the programme is a “big fraud,” created to get votes in the upcoming presidential elections, and applicants also have expressed doubts about the scheme’s transparency and reliability.¹⁵ As a mission from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank pointed out, it would be very difficult for the State to find the money to pay for new jobs created in the public sector.¹⁶

The initial commitment to recruit at least 25,000 workers has already been postponed. In May, Emmanuel Bonde, Minister of Public Service and Administrative Reforms, said the original programme would be replaced by one of “gradual recruitment.”¹⁷

Desertification

One of the most pressing ecological problems in Cameroon is desertification. By the early 21st century the north of the country had been severely affected by this process and deserts were threatening to encroach on the jungles in the central region.¹⁸ In recent years desertification has intensified and brought with it soil degradation, food insecurity, rising poverty and massive migrations out of the arid northern areas.¹⁹

One of the causes of deforestation in the country is the cultivation of cocoa. The way this resource is exploited has traditionally involved clearing forest areas, and there is no doubt that the alarming condition of much of the land in Cameroon today can be traced to the 1980s when the Government promoted cocoa as an export crop. When cocoa prices on world markets went down, the Government’s response was to increase production; even more of the tropical forests were cut down and today the country’s ecosystem is suffering the consequences of that development model, which was completely unsustainable.²⁰

13 Cameroon Today, “Cameroon Government News: Rampant unemployment in Cameroon,” (May 2011), <news.cameroon-today.com/cameroon-government-news-rampant-unemployment-in-cameroon/6152>

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Theodore M. Ndze, “After Review Mission to Cameroon: IMF, World Bank, ADB Dissatisfied – Worried over 25,000 jobs creations,” *The Star*, (4 April 2011), <thestaronline.info/?p=507>.

17 Cameroon Today, op. cit.

18 J.N. Ndi, “Cameroon under threat.” *Le Monde diplomatique*, (2002), <mondediplo.com/2002/12/11cameroon>.

19 W. Van Cotten, “Cameroon: Stemming the Tide of Desertification and Land Degradation,” *Desertification*, (18 March 2010), <desertification.wordpress.com/2010/03/18/cameroon-stemming-the-tide-of-desertification-and-land-degradation>.

20 Ndi, op. cit.

DSCE: LITTLE PROGRESS

The Strategic Document for Growth and Employment, designed to reduce poverty to a “socially acceptable” level, was launched in 2007.¹ The stated long-term objectives were to raise Cameroon to the status of a middle-income country, to industrialize and to strengthen the democratic process and thus bring about national unity. The plan was to tackle this task in successive 10-year phases with the overall targets to be reached by 2035. The goals the Government set for the initial phase were to raise annual average growth to 5% in the 2010–20 period, to reduce the informal sector by at least 50% by 2020 by creating thousands of jobs in the formal sector, and to reduce monetary poverty from 39.9% in 2007 to 28.7% in 2020.²

A 2011 review of progress towards the DSCE goals showed that 41% of the short-term targets had made a little progress, while 23% showed no advance at all. Only 5% of the goals set for 2010 were fully achieved.³ Similarly, some 45% of the immediate human development objectives registered slight progress and 6% made reasonable progress, but 34% of the indicators showed no change at all.⁴ As regards human development, the most encouraging areas were the fight against HIV and AIDS and the initiative to reduce maternal and infant mortality.

Regarding employment 14% of the indicators were stagnant and there was slight progress towards 72% of the objectives including promoting employment in the private sector, self-employment and formal employment. However, no progress was made in the effort to move workers from the informal to the formal sector.⁵ It was the same with regard to the means of production: there was hardly any progress towards most of the goals (60%).

1 Christine Andela, Jean Mballa Mballa and Samuel Biroki, “Cameroon: Aid must be more efficiently managed,” in *Social Watch Report 2010: After the Fall*, Instituto del Tercer Mundo, Montevideo, 2010, p. 80.

2 Ibid.

3 Dynamique Citoyenne, op. cit.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

In any case, the wealth generated at the cost of devastating the nation’s tropical forests did not improve the situation of the population; all it did was drive people who were especially dependent on forest resources deeper into poverty.

The main problems that desertification is causing today are that sources of potable water in several cities including Mbouda, Kumbo and Nkambe are drying up; there is generalized soil erosion and a loss of fertility, which increases the risk of landslides and floods (as happened in the city of Bamenda, for example); there are floods and sand and dust storms in the north; vegetation cover is being lost; water reserves are being polluted; and soils are showing higher levels of salinity and alkalinity throughout the country including the tropical green areas.²¹

Desertification is being aggravated not only by the Government’s unsustainable development model but also by informal logging by the poorest sectors of the population, which is happening even in the nature reserves.

Loss of biodiversity

Desertification is not the only environmental challenge the country is confronting as there is also a serious loss of biodiversity due to a number of different factors including overgrazing, pollution, poaching and over-fishing.²² Some 40% of the mangrove swamp ecosystem has been destroyed, 32 of the 409 mam-

mal species of mammals in the country are in danger of extinction and 14 of the 690 bird species will soon disappear along with 3 species of reptiles, 1 amphibian species, 26 species of fresh water fish and 67 plants species.²³

Conclusion

While the Government has launched an Action Plan for the Fight against Desertification – which includes various studies to analyse the causes and impact of the problem and sets out strategies to tackle it – and has attempted to follow the guidelines in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), neither of these efforts has made any appreciable difference, and desertification and soil erosion have been spreading and getting worse.²⁴

It is doubtful that the objectives of the Strategic Document for Growth and Employment (DSCE) (see box) can be reached, and it follows that the Government should make a more realistic action plan. The lack of information about the DSCE’s objectives and achievements should be resolved with an effective campaign to keep the public informed.²⁵ A serious obstacle is that monitoring progress towards the DSCE targets is hampered by a lack of data. Civil society organizations should be allowed greater access to indicators that are important for examining how the Government’s plans are progressing. Overall there is a need for greater transparency. ■

23 Ibid.

24 Van Cotten, op. cit.

25 Dynamique Citoyenne, *DSCE: Un an après, Quel niveau d’appropriation?*, (Yaoundé, 2011).