



## Redressing the Declining Fortune of the English- Speaking Subsystem of Education in Cameroon

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**REVIEW:** The article, “Redressing the Declining Fortunes of the English- Speaking Subsystem of Education in Cameroon”, written by Dr. Kenneth Ngu Foncha is a concise, scientific and in-depth review of the current state of Anglophone education in Cameroon which, as he states, is at the root of an ongoing armed conflict.

In it, Kenneth points out the many shortcomings of the 1998 law on education, among which is the fact that it avoids saying exactly who is in charge of determining what is taught. Then he shows how this is deliberately done so as to allow officials and politicians to meddle in educational affairs and take decisions which are characterized only by political scheming and expediency. He discusses the relationship between education and politics and denounces the unchecked political intervention from non-educational sources in educational policy and decision making which is principally responsible for the retardation in the evolution of the English system in Cameroon.

Kenneth also discusses what he calls, functional and territorial decentralization at this time when the government of Cameroon keeps talking about decentralization but finds it difficult to deliver on it. He shows how decentralization requires that some functions of the Ministry of Education be devolved by setting up two education Boards, (which will be managed by experts and technocrats in the field of education) one for the francophone system and the other for the Anglophone system, so as to make education more effective and efficient.

Dr. Ngu Foncha also takes on the issue of harmonization which has been a very sensitive issue in Cameroon. Since 1963, successive regimes in Cameroon have attempted to “harmonize” the two education systems nine consecutive times and each time the exercise has ended in fiasco and abandoned. Dr. Ngu describes exactly what should be harmonized and what not. He demonstrates that if harmonization is carried out with good faith and sticking to what is “harmonizable”, Anglophones will not need to be apprehensive as they have always been because they fear that any harmonization has always targeted their own system with the aim of dismantling it.

If this paper by Dr. Ngu Foncha is read viz a viz the “*Compendium of Government Actions/Measures To Address The Situation in The South West and North West Regions of Cameroon*” recently published by the government of Cameroon, it will be seen clearly that government just wasted valuable resources in organizing what amounts to less than a window dressing. It shows that the *actions/measures* taken were not meant to address what the government calls “*The Situation*” in the North West and South West but only to perpetrate STATE CAPTURE by a tiny group of political elite. To begin by describing the armed conflict in the North West and South West whose roots can be traced to past decades as “*The Situation*”, is either an act of bad faith and intellectual and moral dishonesty or a deliberate attempt to promote the conflict even more.

Education is a science and educational policy and decision making, as Dr. Ngu states, are supposed to be the product of profound scientific reflection, research and experimentation, coupled with monitoring, assessment and reviews. Over the decades and even up to now when the conflict has turned into war, the government is still giving out only instructions. Reading through the government's compendium, one finds only a series of instructions from the minister, from the head of state, and so on.

That is why Dr. Ngu Foncha's conclusion that there is need to set up two education boards, one for each of the education systems in the country, is valid. This ties in with a memorandum which the Cameroon Education Forum (CEF) had forwarded to government in February 2016, just ten months before the entire Anglophone school system in Cameroon shut down on Monday November 21 2016 in protest against the continuous deformation of their educational system using these orders and instructions from politicians. The first recommendation in that memorandum was the requirement to establish two parallel education councils to co-exist.

## INTRODUCTION

The prevailing Anglophone Crisis has occasioned an excellent opportunity to reflect on the importance of educating children. The footages and commentaries that are common place since the start of the crisis compel us to ask how such horrors are possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Many still imagine that Africa's seemingly chronic carnage flows from inherent savagery among its populations. David Lamb in his book *The Africans* reinforced this notion when he wrote: "Below the paper-thin veneer of civilization in Africa, lurks a savagery that waits like a caged lion for an opportunity to spring". In this paper, I set out to provide reasons to refute this assertion by showing that education, or the lack of it, is the cause.

The paper argues that the collapse of the school system in Cameroon, for example, is the central cause of the horrific scenes of violence witnessed throughout the ongoing war in the former Southern Cameroon. There has been a consistent adulteration of the education system in the last three decades. The central message here is that the Government of Cameroon for three decades abandoned its most fundamental responsibility - **the commitment to educating every child and educating them well**. I point the finger at the system not so much to criticize as to describe, to analyze, to break it down into its components to show where things went wrong. My intention is to enhance debates on how to redress past mistakes and unintended failures within the Cameroon educational system.

For the last thirty years education in Cameroon has been usurped by politicians with a focus on schooling. Schooling is not the same thing as education. The promise of schooling - getting children into seats in a building called a school, has not translated into the reality of educating children. For the majority of Cameroonian children, their lack of basic education is a burden they will bear forever.

When delivered well, education drives long-term economic growth, reduces poverty, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, encourages civic-minded values, reduces partisan divide, endows children with citizenship skills, and fosters tolerance and social cohesion. When children learn, nations prosper. Cameroonian children are not learning. No nation can rise above the level of its education.

Cameroon has two parallel education systems - one francophone and the other Anglophone, which are designed to co-exist and function separately. Yet, both systems lack all the four key school level components for learning, namely, prepared learners, effective teaching, learning focused inputs, and the skilled management and governance that pulls them all together. The system is poorly aligned with learning goals. This weakness is compounded by the limited policy implementation capacity of the ministries of education.

The most regrettable discovery is that these limitations are underpinned by political factors. Cameroon politicians see education as the appropriate sector for rewarding their cronies with public service jobs while impressing voters by lobbying for the creation and construction of schools that are visible, (and sometimes not visible since many schools are created on paper) but not functional. The result has been

the existence of many non-functional schools with a plethora of teachers and administrators who are not proficient.

Demands for decentralization have been resisted because of the fear of losing out on money-spinning centralized contracts. Cameroon is today trapped in low- learning gaps with almost zero accountability. The system has failed the schools and the schools have failed the learners.

My submission is for the creation of an autonomous or semi-autonomous educational council to manage the English Sub-System of Education in Cameroon. In this, I am adhering to international best and leading practices.

### **The Status of Cameroon Education**

The fortune of Cameroon Education is at its lowest ebb and today considered amongst the worst systems in the world- a reality we must admit. We have always rebuked reports, pronouncements and positions by educational accreditations, visitations and probing panels because we take them as criticisms rather than bases for policy dialogue.

Findings from education sector analysis confirm the poor fortune of our education. UNESCO Draft document of Sector Wide Approach, Education in Cameroon Code SPO/CM/2006/ED/RP/I published in 2006 reported a mal- functioning of the national education system with some startling revelations. The document articulated “almost half of the population of young people in Cameroon has not got a complete education (the minimum to enable them read and write at adult age).

In 2014 a ground breaking cross - national assessment evaluating learning outcomes was conducted for the first time in 10 Francophone African countries. Results of 2014 PASEC (Programme D’Analyse des System Educatifs de la Confemen) are even more astounding as Cameroon came in the 8<sup>th</sup> place in the provision of quality education. The results indicated the following:

1. Of the 10 countries that participated in PASEC 2014, Cameroon ranks sixth at educating its children, seventh at educating its poorest girls, and eighth at providing equal access to quality education. Cameroon is followed by Niger and Chad, a definition of how low we have descended.
2. Only 23 percent of Cameroonian children are completing primary school with sufficient proficiency in Mathematics and Reading as defined by PASEC.

The results highlighted the fact that only 5 percent of girls in Cameroon from the poorest quintile of households had learned enough to continue school, compared to 76 of girls from the richest quintile. This means the public school system in Cameroon has collapsed. The children whom the system is failing most are the ones who need a good education to survive.

The fact is now apparent that about 80% of children who leave primary school in Cameroon are lacking in basic literacy and numeracy. Addressing this situation remains a tall task as there is virtually no assessment data to inform reforms and experimentation to improve overall learning outcomes.

There is dearth of evidence on the quality of students’ learning. Cameroon does not organise national assessments nor participate in international assessments. The government uses proxy measures (number of schools and classrooms, results of public examinations like the GCE and First School Leaving Certificate) to gauge education quality even though they are insufficient for evidence-based decision making. There is, therefore, an immense void between the surrogate indicators available on quality education and the robust data required to understand the full dimension of the learning crisis, target policy to address areas of need, monitor progress and get stakeholders accountable.

School systems in Cameroon are largely underfunded (according to the Global Partnership for Education suggested benchmark of 20% of GDP). Many lack infrastructure and are staffed by poorly trained teachers. In an effort to catch up with the Education for All (EFA) agenda, many inadequately trained teachers were recruited especially at the basic level.

The learning crisis, however, is far more than just funding and training. It is about Cameroon Education Ministries which define quality education as inputs, such as budget, student numbers, teachers and number of schools created rather than learning outcomes – skills, knowledge, values and competencies acquired.

It is about parents and the political class who lobby for the creation of schools and simply assume learning will take place. It is about the general definition of “quality” in education that has been reduced to a purely logistic challenge of expanding inputs like buildings, toilets, classroom, books, desks, trained teachers without any reference at all to actual learning outcomes. It is about school administrators who translate school accountability as a measure of how running credits are managed and not about what students learn.

The learning crisis is one that grows with each additional child that walks through a classroom door in Cameroon. Many children in those classes are learning nothing. Many are learning only a small fraction of the syllabus. The learning crisis is both deep and widespread. It is a crisis for our children, about 80% of whom abandon school believing they are failures. It is a crisis for their communities and Cameroon because the human capital theory of economics affirms that it is what workers know and not their time in school that makes them more productive and their economies more prosperous.

Education stakeholders and politicians in Cameroon continue to focus first on creating schools, and second, on inputs such as staff number and classrooms. Rarely do they focus on whether children are actually learning. Inputs are only effective when the education system runs on proper monitoring and accountability.

What is going on in the schooling process in Cameroon, that a child spends thousands of hours in school and yet, not master even the basic competencies? There is more at stake than the slow death of education. There may be a slow death of a civilisation. The educational foundations of our society have been eroded by a rising tide of patchiness that threatens our future as a people and a nation. Anglophones are witnessing the end of what used to be known as the Anglo-Saxon Education.

The Schooling-Learning gap in Cameroon is a systematic issue. The issues are; ill-equipped and poorly motivated teachers, unnecessary political intervention, over centralisation of decision-making, inadequate funding, and hurried plans without appropriate data. Lack of monitoring and evaluation of policies, projects, programmes and lack of accountability are characteristics of the system. That many of these concerns are hardly addressed is a function of systemic issues in education delivery than a simple lack of resources.

#### **LAW OF 1998 AND THE CRITICAL ISSUE OF CURRICULUM & HARMONISATION**

Perhaps the greatest peril to the English-speaking Subsystem of Education in Cameroon is the unchecked political intervention from non- educational sources. Education is, no doubt, profoundly implicated in the politics of culture. Schools are extensions of political mandates. Every education policy decision can be seen as being, in some sense, a political decision; what form, by whom, what resources, and so on. Politics is about power. Since not all can have what they want, the question is who does get what they want and who does not. What is required at the moment is for Government to divorce education from unnecessary politicisation.

The 1998 Law on Education avoided the fundamental issue of curriculum development politics. Section 19 of the law states that; the subjects for the various cycles and field of study as well as the terms and conditions for choosing and changing the said fields of study shall be determined by statutory instruments. This vagueness has provided the leverage for successive Francophone Ministers of Education to treat the Anglo-Saxon System with contempt on the pretext of Harmonisation. It is now evident that the President of the Republic was not appropriately guided on the issue. Law No 96/004 of the 14 April, signed by the President of the Republic to lay down guidelines for Education in Cameroon, is too general and simplistic to address the most critical issues of Education in Cameroon. Recent discontent expressed by Teacher Trade Unions in Cameroon which has now turned into an armed conflict bears evidence to this.

While the law clearly articulates that the English-Speaking Subsystem and the French-Speaking Subsystem shall co-exist, each preserving its specific method of evaluation and award of certificates, it explicitly avoided the most critical concern of all education systems: Who determines what is Official Knowledge?, the explicit academic content that students are intended to learn and the implicit social content that lies within and contextualises academic content. Put differently, the law did not address the politics of who decides what should be learned in schools. It failed to state where the authority over curriculum lies.

At the heart of schooling, is the curriculum. Curriculum is central to education at all levels in the world. Curriculum is a policy and a technical issue, a process and a product, involving a wide range of institutions, actors, and accompanying challenges. It is the medium through which educational institutions seek to translate societal values into reality. Through the curriculum, educational institutions actualise what the society considers as actual learning.

Anglophones must be sincere enough to accept the fact that their present curriculum begs for reviews as there is an urgent need for value orientation and re-orientation. Quite critical is the imperative need for a paradigm shift from theoretical curriculum implementation to practical approaches in the theory and practice in education. **What most Anglophone Children learn today is not basically central to Cameroon.**

It will, again, be foolhardy for Anglophones to resist harmonisation in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Harmonisation when embarked upon in good faith, is all about integrating different curricula/programmes so that there is standardisation and uniformity. It ensures the articulation between institutions and programmes. It synchronizes systems, standards, programmes and benchmarking quality assurance. Harmonisation, especially the curriculum, is a monumental task.

The need for these changes has, today, provided the alibi for some civil servants to imagine that they have the competence to tell schools what to teach. **Anglophones are, in reality, saying Francophones should not tell them what counts as knowledge, the ways in which it is organised, who is empowered to teach it, and what counts as an appropriate display of having learnt it.**

Any efforts at harmonising the two Sub-systems in Cameroon must first address the legitimate concerns of:

1. Who sets the criteria? (Whose reforms are these and who benefits?)
2. What are the criteria for setting the priority order?
3. What are the assumptions on which both the criteria and priority orders were fixed?

Curriculum development is about selecting the most “important aspect of culture for transmission to the next generation”. One of the key questions to ask in the political context of Cameroon is “Who makes the selection and whose culture is considered more important?”

The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of the nation. It is always part of a selective tradition, someone’s selection and some group’s vision of legitimate knowledge. This group in Cameroon, of course, is the dominant Francophone.

The decision to define some group’s knowledge as the most legitimate, or as official knowledge, while the other group’s knowledge hardly sees the light of day has always met with resistance. The dynamic relationship between social and cultural aspects of the curriculum must be respected in Cameroon.

The action of successive ministers of Higher Education in Cameroon must be appropriately guided. Postsecondary institutions have a powerful influence on school curriculum, especially in secondary schools through the settings of entrance examinations to their institutions. Since secondary schools often see themselves-and are broadly seen by students and parents- as preparing students for further studies the schools may find themselves quite constrained by requirements set by higher education institutions.

There is a hidden agenda in every curriculum formulation and implementation policies. This explains why Anglophones have always remained apprehensive in the issue of harmonisation.

## **WAY FORWARD**

In the present context where the government is experiencing the pitfalls of centralised education service provision, the advantages of decentralisation have become extremely appealing. The process of decentralisation can substantially improve efficiency, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of service provision compared with centralised systems.

Decentralisation can take different forms. One major distinction is between functional and territorial decentralisation:

Functional decentralisation refers to the distribution of powers between authorities that operate in parallel (for example; one Ministry responsible for Basic Education and another Ministry responsible for Higher Education and Research, a separate examination authority or accreditation /inspection authority operating within the Ministry of Education).

Territorial decentralisation refers to the distribution of authorities amongst the different geographical tiers of Government such as central/federal government, State, Regions, Provinces, District and Schools.

What is needed in the context of the present crisis is functional decentralisation -the establishment of education boards, shifting work load from centre. Part11 section 2 of the 1998 Law clearly articulates that; The State shall realise the above objectives with assistance from an advisory body, the national education boards whose organisation, functioning and duties shall be laid down by the decree of the President of the Republic.

The tasks of who determines what counts as official knowledge, the ways in which it is organised, who is empowered to teach it, and what counts as appropriate display of having learnt it should be off-loaded from the Ministries of Basic and Secondary Education in Cameroon. This can be achieved by:

### **A. Creation of Cameroon Educational and Research and Development Council.**

The headquarters should be in Buea alongside the Cameroon GCE Board. The main function of the council should be to develop and sustain a culture of strategic educational research and development that will inform the formulation and effective implementation of educational policies, as well as in other sectors of the economy. Statutory provisions should be established to guarantee its autonomy and sustainability.

Education policies ought to be driven by research findings and other empirical evidence. At the moment most reforms are based on instinct, personal priorities and anecdotal evidence. Therefore, the council must be managed by university professors only, with fixed mandates. The mistakes that were made in the creation of the Cameroon GCE Board should be avoided. The function should include:

- ✓ The development of curricular at all levels of the English Speaking Sub-system;
- ✓ Produce syllabuses and instructional material;
- ✓ Develop new techniques and approaches to curriculum development and implementation;
- ✓ Carry out studies in comparative curriculum;
- ✓ Develop and encourage the development of materials for languages taught in schools.

### **B. Development of curricular at all levels of English Speaking Sub- system**

1. The council should be responsible for the identification of problems in the English-speaking Sub-system in which research is needed and the establishment of the other priorities.
2. Assessing, monitoring and investigating any educational matter considered necessary either

independently or in co-operation with individuals, organisations or agencies.

3. Encouragement of research into educational problems and for that purpose to undertake, commission, incorporate and finance such research projects as the council assumes fit.
4. Compilation, publication or sponsorship of the publication of results of educational research, particularly in relation to the educational subsystem and the popularisation of such results where their recognition is in the Council's opinion of national importance.

**C. Produce syllabuses and instructional materials;**

- The council should be mandated to lay a key role in book development and the establishment of a reading culture.
- Formulating and implementing a national policy.
- Encouraging the expansion of local printing and publishing industry.
- Serving as a centre for the exchange of information on books and related issues.

Encouraging a reading culture through research and other relevant activities as well as effective book distribution.

**D. Development and encourage the development of materials for languages taught in schools.**

- Identification of language problems for the purpose of carrying out research into such problems and carrying out research thereto.
- Advice on and implement policies relating to languages.
- The development of materials for various languages taught in schools.
- Carry out language extensions services (including teachers training and linguistic courses).
- Provide adequate translation facilities necessary for development in Cameroon.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Moving decision-making closer to the needs of communities and finding the right balance of centralised and decentralised responsibilities will improve education provisions in Cameroon by focusing more on Cultural Differences and Learning Environments. In addition, it will improve accountability by giving incentives for quality performance to teachers and school officials. I do not presume that decentralisation is a universal remedy. When decentralisation is done without stating the roles of centralised authority and those of the centralised organs, it will lead to role conflicts.

Decentralisation, however, provides a new opportunity. When well- articulated, designed and implemented, decentralisation has the potential to improve service delivery and education quality. There is enough evidence to support the claim that countries with decentralised system show improvement in educational outcomes. It requires strong political commitment, leadership and shared vision among stakeholder to achieve stated goals.

The fear of decentralisation is that it reduces the power of Central Education Ministries. This apprehension is inflated by the fact that political elites understand decentralisation in the most extreme context of devolution, the permanent transfer of decision-making responsibilities in Education from the Central Government to lower levels of Government like Region and Municipalities or the transfer of authority to a body that can act independently or a body that can act without first asking for authorisation. Education cannot be fully decentralised but a balance can always be achieved between policy setting and implementation.