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Research Article

The Cameroon Decentralization Project: Tool of Conflict Resolution or Seed of Discrepancies in the Governance of a Heterogeneous State?

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Abstract: Based on secondary data in the form of published books, papers, journals, reports and a critical analyses of primary sources in the form of interviews, newspaper, radio and television debates this article addresses the decentralization policy not only as a form of political organization and management of a state, but it attempts to prospective theoretical hypotheses regarding decentralization as an effective instrument for conflict management and prevention especially in a complex state with numerous ethnic groups and a dual colonial identity cohabiting side by side. While many decentralization experts assume thatcontext make a significant difference, the empirical analysis points to very similar that decentralization affects the conflict proneness of ethnic groups in a society. Those who stress the pacific effect of autonomy build directly on decentralization as a way to resolve conflicts over public goods provision by taking into account heterogeneous preferences among regions in a country. By improving policy responsiveness to as many people as possible, grievances can be avoided and peaceful avenues for political change provided to potential secessionists.Thus, this paper sustains that the policy of decentralization not only is an efficient instrument for conflict management, but it could prevent conflict in the long run and contribute towards an equitable distribution of wealth and balance development.

Keywords: Decentralization, conflict Resolution.

INTRODUCTION

Humanity since the creation of nations and states has witnessed a series of violent armed conflicts which has in itself provoked changes in international relations and the configuration of the State even though this was not the case with most African states that simply witnessed a transposition of the European state into Africa(L. Sindjoun, 2002a). As a matter fact the configuration of the form of state or government of the United States of America can necessary be linked to the American war of secession of 1861-1865.

The nature of conflicts has evolved over time giving rise to other new forms of conflicts, notably civil wars that at time have transformed to secessionist wars. Since the accession to independence by several African countries in the 1960s, these entities have increasingly witnessed wars of secession or wars of devolution. These wars are mostly spawned by attempts of marginalized ethnic, religious and regional groups to renegotiate the terms of incorporation into the state and the national political space. In many instances minorities or marginalized groups express their grievances and quest for recognition or separate identity in multiple ways.

Today, claims to self-governance by territorially concentrated ethnic groups are at the core of the political debates and struggles in many countries, including current-day Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, Spain, Ukraine, as well as Cameroon, to name but a few(L-E Caderman *et al.*, 2015). Faced by the prospects of state disintegration or civil war, the governments of these countries are confronted with the complex question how to counter such demands.

In the hope of placating separatists, governments often offer autonomy to disgruntled minorities. However, there is no guarantee that such concessions will have the desired effects. Indeed, states sometimes fall apart despite, or perhaps even because of, wide-ranging decentralization, as illustrated by the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia(Ibid).

For instance, The long-running civil war in the Sudan, rooted in the history of colonial divisions, uneven development, exploitation and marginalization between the North and the South, was reignited in 1983 following the introduction of *Sharia* Islamic law by the Numeiri regime and disputes over sharing oil riches,

and it persisted until the signing of a peace agreement in early January 2005 by which time more than 4 million people had been displaced and many more killed(R. Iyob and G. M. Khadiagala, 2006). But in the meantime, another regional conflict also based on the effects of marginalization and resource disputes, had erupted in the Dar Fur region (S. Totten and E. Markusen, 2006).

Within this quest there sometimes arises the problem of making different choices notably between decentralization, federation of dissociation (C.R Veney, 2006).Clearly, the most central (and thus also most hotly debated) question is whether decentralization affects the conflict proneness of ethnic groups in a society. Those who stress the pacific effect of autonomy build directly or indirectly on Tiebout's (1956) classical framing of decentralization as a way to resolve conflicts over public goods provision by taking into account heterogeneous preferences among regions in a country. By improving policy responsiveness to as many people as possible, grievances can be avoided and peaceful avenues for political change provided to potential secessionists (Hechter, 2000; Bakke and Wibbels, 2006).

Decentralization which has been ever-increasing in popularity for some time in public debates is not just as a tool for power-sharing but also as a means for ensuring good governance, fostering democracy and contributing to development. The concept is important in both stable as well as conflict-ridden societies and can play a role in post-conflict situations. This paper seeks to present decentralization as an effective conflict resolution and management instrument capable sustaining and development in a heterogeneous state of Cameroon with more than 250 ethnic groups and two colonial cultural identity groups(English and French).

Contextualizing the War of Devolution in Cameroon

The recent secession of South Sudan raises a number of critical existential questions about the post-colonial state in Africa. In 1964, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) declared colonially inherited borders sacrosanct and not to be changed. Consequently colonial boundaries were transformed into international borders, thereby acquiring international status and applicability in international law. The rationale for this approach to colonial boundaries was the fear that the colonially produced African state would not survive if identity groups were permitted to break away. It was feared that any secessionist assertion would open a Pandora's box. The OAU and its successor, the African Union (AU), have thus pursued strict policies against any attempted secession, and secessionism has been seen as an act of criminality(R. Bereketeab, 2015).

The recognition of the secession of South Sudan, however, seems to have ushered in a new era in the history of self-determination and secession. It represents a watershed in the adherence to the regime of colonial borders. This is so because the independence of South Sudan represents a breach of the OAU/AU Charter, which has governed African border issues and statehood for over 50 years. Once breached, the sanctity of the colonial border principle may prove difficult to patch up again. The following crucial question comes to mind: is the AU aware of the gravity of its action? Further, does this recognition set a precedent when other quests for self-determination and secession on the continent have to be addressed? Has the Pandora's Box already been prised open? Just a few years after the independence of South Sudan following a prolong secessionist war, evens in Cameroon since 2016 seems to be taking the course like was the case in south southern. But it is worth situating in a brief manner the origins of the present socio-political crisis in Cameroon that has taken the form of a secessionist armed movement.

Historically, the German protectorate of Kamerun was established in 1884. In 1916 the German administration was overthrown by combined French-British-Belgian military operations during the First World War, and in 1919 the territory was divided into British and French spheres of influence. In 1922 both zones became subject to mandates of the League of Nations, which allocated four-fifths of the territory to French administration as French Cameroun, and the other one-fifth, comprising two long areas along the eastern Nigerian border, to British administration as the Northern and Southern Cameroons(V.J Ngoh, 1989, V.G Fanso, 1989).

In 1946 the mandates were converted into United Nations (UN) trust territories, still under their respective French and British administrations. However, growing anti-colonial sentiment made it difficult for France and Britain to resist the UN Charter's promise of eventual self-determination for all inhabitants of trust territories. In 1956 French Cameroun became an autonomous state within the French Community, and on 1 January 1960 proceeded to full independence as the Republic of Cameroon. Ahmadou Ahidjo, the leader of the Union Camerounaise, who hailed from northern Cameroon, was elected as the country's first President.

In the British Cameroons, which were attached for administrative purposes to neighbouring Nigeria, a UN-supervised plebiscite was held in 1961 in both parts of the trust territory. The British government of the day opposed there being a 'third option' for British Cameroonian voters at the time of the 1961 plebiscite: an independent state. This stance was widely supported by other governments at the UN. The British view was partly based on a conviction that such a state would not be economically viable, but also on the its wish that

both parts of British Cameroons should merge with Nigeria. However, things did not go according to plan and the southern part of British Cameroons voted instead to merge with French Cameroon. Voters in the Southern Cameroons opted for union with the Republic of Cameroon, while Northern Cameroons' voters chose to merge with Nigeria. The new Federal Republic of Cameroon thus comprised two states: one comprising the former French zone (Cameroun Oriental), and the other comprising the former British portion (Cameroun Occidental). Ahidjo assumed the presidency of the federation. He marginalized the radical nationalist movement, led by the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), as well as the federalist Anglophone political élites(V. Wees and B. Dahlin, 2017).

President Ahmadou Ahidjo gradually eroded political pluralism and strengthened his control over the political system. In 1966 the Union Nationale Camerounaise (UNC), was created as the sole legal party and it assumed full control of Cameroon's organized political and social affairs. In June 1972 the country was officially renamed the United Republic of Cameroon, thereby dissolving the federal state and reducing the powers of the sub-national states. The powers of the presidency increased significantly, at the expense of the Government and Parliament, and Cameroon became a highly centralized state(Ibid).

The evolution of these historical eventsundoubtedly resulted to what Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh (1997) qualified as the "Anglophone problem". Contrary to expectations from the 1961 plebiscite vote of 1961, this did not provide for the equal partnership of both parties, l*et al*one for the preservation of the cultural heritage and identity of each, but turned out to be merely a transitory phase to the total integration of the Anglophone region into a strongly centralized, unitary State. Gradually, this created an Anglophone consciousness: the feeling of being marginalized by the francophone-dominated State. In the wake of political liberalization in the early 1990s, Anglophone interests came to be represented first and foremost by various associations and pressure groups that initially demanded a return to the federal State.

To Konings and Nyamnjoh(1997), it was only after the persistent refusal of the Presidential Paul Biya government to discuss this scenario that secession became an overt option with mounting popularity. The government's determination to defend the unitary State by all available means, including repression, could lead to an escalation of Anglophone demands and which the recent crisis that started since 2016 (J. Lunn and L. Brooke-Holland)

Since November 2016, the dominantly English speaking regions of Cameroon have witnessed incessant social unrest initiated by corporatist groups notably lawyers and subsequently teachers who sought the state to carry out a number of reforms and to ameliorate their working conditions. This protest that was initially championed by lawyers and teachers witnessed gradually witnessed a radical turn following government reaction. As a matter of fact, corporatist group who for the meantime had been engaged in a serious of dialogue with the government were suddenly arrested and sent to prison while others went on exile. The immediate result was the emergence of several radical and violent groups with main slogan being secession. These separatist groups had actually been engaged in serious armed confrontation with government forces. The result has been school disruption, destruction of public and private properties.

The reaction of the state was massive arrest and campaigns for school resumption. The international community has called for school resumption and pleading for dialogue to sort out this degenerating situation. The government have attempted in several ways to solve the situation especially with the creation of the National Bilingualism and Multicultural Commission and recruitment of 1000 bilingual teachers, awards of a subvention of 2billion to lay private schools and the creation of an English section to train magistrates of English expression at the national advanced school of administration and magistracy.

Public opinion opines that this crisis has resulted as a result of poor governance and the ineffectiveness of the decentralization process whose law of application dates since 22 July 2004. As a sustainable solution to this social unrest threatening the peace, security and development of the nation, most Cameroonians, especially the intellectual class and political leaders are of the opinion that only effective decentralization could resolve this crisis.

Cameroon's Decentralization Policy in Perspective
There is no concept of decentralization that could claim universal validity (UNDP, 1999).Depending on their professional background, people use the term in relation to differing concepts(J.M. Gohen and P.S. Peterson, 1996).Political scientists use the term political decentralization to identify the transfer of decision-making power to lower-level of government units, geographers and regional planners apply spatial decentralization in the aim of reducing excessive urban concentration, economists use market decentralization in the context of privatization and lastly lawyers and public administration specialists use administrative decentralization to describe the distribution of powers between different levels of government(Ibid).

In the strictest sense, decentralization is understood as "the transfer of planning, decision-

making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organizations, local administrative units, semi-autonomous and parastatal organizations, local governments, or nongovernmental organizations (De Vries, 2000). Therefore toD. Rondinelli (1999) centralization is understood to mean

the "transformation in the opposite direction. There are four types of decentralization: delegation to semi-autonomous or parastatal agencies, privatization, deconcentration and devolution to local governments as shown in figure one below.

Table 1.Types of Decentralization

Transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority	from the central government to;		
Its field organizations / Local administrative units	Semi-autonomous or parastatal organisations	Local governments	Private or non governmental organisations
Deconcentration	Delegation	Devolution	Privatisation

Source: Anna Katharina Schelnberger, "Decentralisation as a Means of Conflict Management: A Case Study of Kibaale District, Uganda", *Institute of Development Research and Development Policy,* Volume 181, 2005, p.12.

In the same vein, the concept of delegation is the transfer of decision-making and management authority for specific functions to public corporations or special authorities (Gohen and Peterson 1996). In this situation, the units to which authority is transferred are not under control of the national government, but typically they are legally accountable to it.Within the boundaries of the transferred functions, the authority of these units is very broad and includes planning and implementation of decisions (Ibid).

Furthermore, Privatization is the transfer of functions from government to voluntary, private or nongovernment institutions. This also includes the transfer of licensing, regulation and supervision of members to parallel organizations such as national associations of trade and industry, religious organizations, political parties or cooperatives (Ibid).

According to Cheema and Rondinelli(1983) deconcentration is often considered to be the "weakest"form of decentralization. It encompasses the redistribution of administrative responsibilities within the national government machinery. Finally, devolution as the most extensive and strongest form of decentralization means the transfer of functions and authority to local government units that is independent and substantially outside of the control of the national government(Ibid). From the ongoing presentation, it is important to present the decentralization as a conflict settlement tool.

Decentralization a Peacemaking and Conflict Management Instrument

There are several and overlapping definitions of the concepts of peace making and conflict management. Borrowing UN's definition of peacemaking, Aning Kwesi(2004) define peacemaking as "the use of diplomatic means to persuade parties in a conflict to cease hostilities and to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the dispute". Peacemaking is thus the immediate process from cease fire to the implementation of a peace agreement. Whether peacemaking includes post-conflict elections, good governance, development, drawing up of a new

constitution, or presence and withdrawal of international peacekeeping troops, is all decided by the contents of the peace agreement(E. Braathen and S. B. Hellevik, 2008). Furthermore conflict management can be distinct as «designing appropriate institutions that structure and guide the existing conflicts in such a way that all conflict parties can be accommodated(A.K Schelnberger, 2005) or, more generally, as "the positive and constructive handling of difference and divergence"(P.Harris and B. Reilly, 1998). When these activities are linked to a long-term project of building peace, then it can be said that peacemaking has been superseded by conflict management.

Political instruments have gained increasing recognition in conflict management in Africa in the past decades. They cover a wide range of policies (including economic policy and poverty reduction) and institutions. The design of these political institutions is crucial for their ability to manage conflict. In Cameroon for example three areas of political and constitutional that could promote peace through conflict settlement arethe nature and structure of a state's rules of political representation,the form of the state's legislative and executive functions,and the territorial structure of the state. For instance, in the present constitutional dispensation of Cameroon, the Senate, regions and local governments represent the various channels of power devolution with an elective executive as provided for in the constitution of the republic. However, until recent the regions have not yet been put in place and the senate and local government function with very limited powers and resources for an effective decentralization. This last point looks at the variety of arrangements that can be used to devolve power, such as decentralization.

These arrangements integrate different groups at the national level while at the same time allowing distinctive identities and self-governance. Regarding their conflict management capacities, they can ensure minorities a measure of state power and offer them prospects for preserving their culture may forestall demands for secession and increase political integration of ethnic groups (E. S. Sundstøl *et al*., 1999).

Before being able to state that decentralization has an impact on conflict and can be used as an instrument of conflict management it is important to note strong centralization is a factor that intensifies or generates conflict as every decision comes from the center and the population at the periphery feel as been marginalized as everything including development projects are imposed on them without any formal consultation.

It could be considered such a factor if it contributed to the causes of conflict. Centralized states and central planning have led to increased income disparities between rich and poor and among regions. The living standard of the poorest part of the population has been found to decline and the numbers of people living in absolute poverty increased. Centralized states have been found to be vulnerable to abuse of powerand to lead to a lack of democracy. As a matter fact, one of the major causes of the socio-political crisis that has led to secessionist movement was the complain of the two English speaking regions are been marginalized politically, economically and socially.

Centralization may also result in national government providing services only in the capital and urban centers where government officials reside, but not in other areas of the country. This is the same situation in Cameroon where the most developed and populated cities are Yaounde which is the political capital and Douala which is the economic capital. The other eight regions are more or less equipped with basic socio-economic infrastructures. Centralized States have thus led to an increased in the unequal distribution of resources. But they have also intensified the imbalance of opportunities between rich and poor and between those living close to the center and those in remote areas. They have further led to inadequate or poor governance.

Now that centralization has been identified as a factor contributing to conflict, to what ex-tent and how exactly can decentralization work as a political instrument of conflict management? An interest in this field has developed only recently.One of the underlying principles of decentralization is that of subsidiarity.It implies that the higher and more universal level should only intervene when the smaller and more local level cannot manage the task. This is the case when the local level either fails or when the task can only be managed by more comprehensive social units.According to this logic a society should be able to manage its conflicts

better on decentralized levels than in a centralized state(kaze,2017).

Many conflicts (for example about land use, allocation of water, cattle rustling) have local starting-points. It is more likely to find answers (if not solutions) to local problems at the local level. Local decision-makers are closer to the problems, better acquainted with them and thus more likely to find a constructive solution.There are however also situations that cause problems at the local level, yet can only be addressed at the national level. The influx of refugees or migration can present such situations. The national government will need to address these. And of course there will always be national problems that can likewise only be addressed by the national government.

To Anna Katharina Schelnberger (2005)Decentralization can also be considered as a factor contributing to "structural stability". Structural stability is the realization of social peace, rule of law, respect for human rights and sustainable social and economic development. Its central idea is "the permanent stabilization of fragile and unstable phenomena within societies and states such that dynamic and representative political institutions will be able to bring about change, and resolve disputes within society on a non-violent basis (A. Mehler, 2002).

The common denominator among most authors that have published decentralization as a means of conflict prevention stress that decentralization can manage as well as intensify conflicts.The possible impacts are manifold and very much dependent on the specific circumstances. Decentralisation is in itself a conflictive process that can open up new arenas of conflict. It is a political process that impacts on the distribution of political power. In order to be able to transfer power and authority to local government units, power and resources necessarily have to be taken away from elites at the national level. Strong opposition can be expected from the losers of the decentralization process.With regard to the capacity of decentralized units to manage existing local conflicts it is important to note that they can of course only become active if they are called upon to do so by the population and if they have actually been granted authority to intervene and act in these situations.

Four layers of conflict within society can be used to illustrate the influence of decentralization on conflict.

Table 2. Impact of Decentralization on Conflicts in Different Layers of Society

Layer	Contributions to conflict management	Contributions to conflict intensification
Individual citizen and community / state	Proximity of government to the citizens Local democracy Responsibility and accountability Improved service delivery	Deficits in local democracy and incompetence of local councillors Incompetence, corruption and squandering lead to deteriorating quality of service delivery
Ethnic or other groups within a community / region	Local arena to carry out conflicts in a non-violent manner Participation Inclusive decision-making	Changes in the balance of powers, new majorities and minorities Central State loses its position as an arbitrator in conflicts
Differentregions	New possibilities for inter-district cooperation	Demarcation of district borders Need for inter-district cooperation Distribution of resources
Regions (and their population) and the central state.	Demand for autonomy is partly fulfilled Impetus for the formation of new coalitions Empowerment of geographically concentrated ethnic groups	Strengthened autonomy movements, secession Central state is weakened

Source: Anna Katharina Schelnberger, "Decentralisation As A Means Of Conflict Management: A Case Study Of Kibaale District, Uganda", *Institute Of Development Research And Development Policy,* Volume 181, 2005.

In Cameroon, among the many objectives of decentralization, it can be viewed asthe state strategy to restructure the centre-periphery, or central-local relations. E. S. Sundstøl(1999), just like the 22 July 2004 law of decentralization in Cameroon consider decentralization as the transfer of tasks and public authority from the national level to any public agency at the subnational level. Thus, decentralization is inherently territorial. There are many types of decentralization, depending on the scope of authority transferred and the character of the subnational institutions on the receiving end.

In conformity with Sundstøl(1999) opinion, we refer to decentralization in Cameroon as integrated and political range of tasks and authorities spanning multiple sectors transferred by the state, and the local institutions are based on political representation and have a territorially restricted mandate. A key question when examining a particular state of decentralization is to assess the extent of central control and local autonomy.

In every modern nation-state, politics has a territorial conflict dimension(S.N. Rokkan, *et al.*, 1973). Nation-state politics is about different factions of citizens competing for state power, i.e. the sovereign control of a territory within certain internationally recognized borders. The state controls and redistributes important resources. The nation-state usually creates a geographical centre for the concentration of state power and state resources a capital. Once there is a centre there are peripheries.

The centre-periphery relations become vital aspects of the political, administrative, social (class) and economic structures of a country. Modern politics deals not only with power and resources, but also with people's identities. Political actors fighting for state power may use any peripheral part of the territory as base for their popular mobilization. Unequal exchange between the centre and periphery, as well as unfair distribution of state resources between the regions, tends to lay claims for political groups with a particular regional support base. From this perspective, the territorial dimension adds considerably to the *'grievance'* theory of conflict formation. Grievance is usually operationalized in terms of economic inequality,marginalization, political repression, and lack of democracy (P. Collier and H. Ankie, 2004).

According to Nelson Shafir(2004) most scholars see civil conflicts as a consequence of "social grievances". David Keen(2000) combines political and economic grievances to explain conflict escalation. He believes that exploited groups outside the state are used by the groups that have access to the state. Grievance and rebellion is created within these exploited groups. Ethnic, linguistic, religious and other identities may overlap and stimulate regionally based grievances.

Identity concerns may become politicized when centre-periphery and inter-regional relations become disputed issues.

The solution to such situations is effective decentralization or what Einar Braathen and Sirin Bjerkreim Hellevik calls ''consociationalism''. Advocates of consociatialism promote systematic power sharing. Timothy Sisk refers to consociationalism as a systemof accommodation by ethnic and identity group leaders at the political centre (grand coalition cabinets), guarantees of group or regional autonomy (federalism and regionalism), guarantees of minority rights, "constitutionally agreed upon guarantees ensuring minority groups rights, in which minorities are "protected from the excesses of democracy qua majoritarian rule"(F.de Varennes, 2003) and "proportionality in all spheres of public life". Proportional representation systems are praised as the more consensual system, which is better equipped to suit the exigencies of ethnically fragmented societies like Cameroon. J. S. Wunsch(2000) supports this argument by positing that consociational system of central government, combined with a federal system and following the principle of subsidiarity (that the level which is closer to the targeted population should manage it) is the better in managing conflicts in African countries.

Decentralization is a mechanism for peace and conflict management by granting groups which have been neglected an additional political space and resources for taking part in decision-making (M.Haug, S. Arild, 2005). As such, decentralization as a tool of peace making and conflict is a prerequisite for peace and stability for the state of Cameroon with powers and political will to redistribute national resources to optimally sized municipalities and ensure competent local administrations under effective democratic control. In that way, the government is brought closer to the people, it is more capable to include and respond to the people's grievances, and it can pre-empt central-local conflicts. Thus decentralization can play a significant role towards good governance and development.

Decentralization and Social Cohesion for Sustainable   Peace and Development

Decentralization and social cohesion are both concepts which entail and explore participation and inclusion. Decentralization addresses changes in the style of governing and advocates participation of a wide range of not only political but social groups in government. It also highlights the importance of involving the local population so that it can influence the decisions of government (W. Bartlett and V. Popovski, 2013).

To D.Green (2012) Social cohesion is a fuzzword which can carry multiple meanings and nuances and is laden with normative values, making it very difficult to arrive at a common definition. The concept became popular in development discourse at a particular juncture in the late 1990s. Developed countries that had embarked on neo-liberal policies and prioritized economic growth had become aware of the growing forms of social and economic exclusion in their societies (J. Jenson, 2010). Strong social policies were deemed as necessary to mitigate the negative impact of social and economic exclusion on social relations between diverse groups in society. These social policies were intended to produce a more 'cohesive' society. Three concrete strategies to strengthen social cohesion were proposed by the OECD, Council of Europe as well as France: (i) a focus on employment and social rights through the incorporation of the informal sector into the modern sector (V.E. Tokman, 2007) (ii) improving legislation to better protect workers' rights, and (iii) combining flexibility for workers with employment security.

The fact that the concept of social cohesion emerged in a western context to address problems of industrialization and urbanization raises questions with respect to its analytical value when examining other contexts with very different historical trajectories. However, more recent literature, has approached the concept of social cohesion as highly relevant to contexts of rapid social and political transformations as well as times of fragility when relations between different groups can sometimes be under extreme strain.

In view of the above, the term social cohesion is relevant to examining the Cameroonian context, one in which the crisis in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon needs a deep re-organization of political and social power between citizens of French speaking regions of Cameroon.While definitions of social cohesion vary, most have elements of the two dimensions, namely (i) the inequality dimension and (ii) the social capital dimension(Ibid). The inequality dimension concerns 'the goal of promoting equal opportunities and reducing disparities and divisions within a society.

This is clear with the Cameroonian context where English speaking Cameroonian claimed they do not feel or insufficiently represented in state institution. This also includes the aspect of social exclusion, whereas the social capital dimension concerns the goal of strengthening social relations, interactions and ties and embraces all aspects which are generally considered as the social capital of a society. Social cohesion is considered an important aspiration for development policy because cohesive societies are meant to have found ways of dealing with difference and diversity without recourse to violence and separation. This is particularly pertinent for heterogeneous societies like Cameroon where there is

no demographic demarcation between different groups of ethnic or identity affiliation and where there has not been a drift towards dealing with difference through separation (i.e. federalism and independence).

S. Kaplan (2009) notes that 'Cohesive identity groups with long common histories naturally develop their own sophisticated political, economic, and societal system of self-governance. This system includes various mechanisms to regulate political relationships, police members' behavior, lower the cost of various transactions between members, and encourage the security of property. Conversely, a multiplicity of competing identity groups, when combined with weak formal state structures, does not always result in bloodshed, but it does always cripple efforts to promote development. This toxic combination: the absence of social cohesion and the lack of a set of shared, productive institutions prevents states from fashioning a robust nationwide governing system, yielding instead a host of chronic problems, ranging from state illegitimacy to high transaction costs and corruption (Ibid).

There have been various approaches to promoting social cohesion which are partly a reflection of the political inclinations of the actor proposing them. According to the OECD report(2011)*Perspectives on Global Development*, the OECD definition of social cohesion is premised on the relationship between (i) social repertoires of trust embedded in social capital, (ii) the necessity for social inclusion of those on the fringes and (iii) opportunities for social mobility - all linked together. While there is nothing new in engaging with social mobility in terms of social capital, inclusion, and mobility,nevertheless the policy implications emanating from such a definition do matter. The focus is on institutional reform through highly technocratic economic interventions such as improving human resource management and performance based budgeting and promoting horizontal cooperation across ministries. The OECD report, focuses on fast growing developing countries, and hence may not apply to many contexts whose economies do not fit this description.

This narrow institutional approach may provide donors with the possibility of focusing on extremely depoliticized technocratic interventions that will not incur the wrath of authoritarian regimes or those that are most resistant to change. However, it is questionable whether this particular approach to social cohesion is relevant to societies suffering from no social relations among groups as a consequence of identity or ethnic heterogeneity.

Another approach to social cohesion is the focus of Marc *et al.* (2013)on the cultural and social norms/identities that are needed to create solidarity across groups as highlighted in the World Bank's

Societal Dynamics and Fragility Report. The term social cohesion was described as a convergence across groups in society that provides a framework within which groups can, at a minimum coexist peacefully.In this way, social cohesion offers a measure of predictability to interactions across people and groups, which in turn provides incentives for collective action. The proposed approach exposes the dynamic nature of ever-changing relationships, in the sense that it is a reminder of the need to move beyond static conceptions of group identities.

However, the main proposition that: 'when groups see their interests as converging with those of others, they become more connected to other groups and ultimately have more incentive to collaborate. Convergence thus serves as an essential element for collective action can serve to conceal highly unequal power relations (Ibid). For example, due to extreme power inequalities, a minority that suffers from political and social discrimination may see that it has no option but to show convergence with the majority. However, this would not produce a cohesive society since the minority's convergence is informed by the conditions of choice which are inherently unequal.

Another approach which combines the social, economic and political variables dimensions of social cohesion is that proposed by Norton and De Haan (2012) who define social cohesion as the capacity of societies and social groups to peacefully and inclusively navigate social change, while enhancing individual and group rights and freedoms. Norton and De Haan argue that in practical policy terms, this requires (i) accounting for low levels of social exclusion, (ii) empowerment of minority and disadvantaged groups, (iii) promoting low levels of violence, and (vi) strengthening institutions for peaceful management of rapid change(Ibid).

This approach benefits from the social dynamics approach of Marc *et al.* (2013)but is a more comprehensive approach because it (i) creates a greater balance between a societal approach and a statist approach, (ii) makes more explicit and central the notion of inclusive policies and rights, and (iii) recognizes the need for dealing with inequalities as well as forging collective identities.

Norton and De Haan's (2011) perspective on social cohesion is however far less developed than the other approaches with respect to the methodological approaches to its assessment. However, both author's approach inform this study in view of the relevance of the four dimensions highlighted above for a context like Cameroon.

Nevertheless, social cohesion and decentralization can be useful as a policy tool to support progressive developmental change in Cameroon, it needs to avoid a bias to the established social and

political order and a bias to cultural and social homogeneity. If power hierarchies between groups are ignored, then the bid for creating solidarity can mean a re-enforcement of existing hegemonic normative frameworks based on the beliefs and ideas of the majority. The focus on creating social harmony and solidarity in the concept of social cohesion may lead, in more extreme cases, to an emphasis on participation of people, irrespective of whether they are participating out of a sense of inclusion or whether their participation is forced or for performance purposes. For example, J. Chan *et al*. (2006) argue that 'social cohesion requires only people's participation, cooperation and mutual help; as such it does not presuppose values like tolerance or respect for diversity, or vice versa. This kind of understanding of social cohesion when using proxies such as participation without looking at power relations says nothing of the quality of social relations existing between those co-operating and therefore says nothing about whether a society is cohesive or not.

Decentralization, Social cohesion and stability

There is a burgeoning literature suggesting that one of the measures that can promote social cohesion and deal with identity and ethnic conflict is decentralization.J. P. Tranchant (2007)advocated that the devolution of power from the centre to the groups that have been marginalized reduces their vulnerability to discrimination and increases their sense of control over their own affairs. On the field of ethnic and identity conflict, it is supposed to dampen strife by giving groups control over their own affairs and by insulating minorities from predatory politics from the centre. The implicit assumption here of course is that the conflict is occurring in cameroon is within groups that occupy different demographic parts of the country; hence the devolution of power would go to those groups in the periphery(M. Tadros, 2013).

Effective devolution of power may re-enforce unequal power hierarchies between the majority and minority on a local level. Kaplan (2011) contends that one of the advantages of decentralization in relation to social cohesion is that it grants the ruling powers legitimacy in the eyes of the people. In this light, a shift from state-centric to more local level governance would enhance the legitimacy of the political order. Cameroon could use its numerous local identities, local capacities, and local institutions to promote its development. This is because a fragile state's formal governing structures undermine all of these indigenous assets. As a consequence, a weak state cannot leverage its people's histories and customs to construct effective formal institutions with wide legitimacy; nor can it draw on the social capital embedded in cohesive groups to facilitate economic, political, and social intercourse; and nor is it able to employ the traditional governing capacities of its citizens to run the affairs of state.

Following the same line of argument, points out that the devolution of power that empowers institutions that operate locally can provide a space for groups to participate in their own development space that might not exist at the central level.Community driven development if acting as a function of local governance, can reduce patronage and elite capture if well designed.

Local governance measures to support social cohesion may include supporting informal justice mechanisms (local forms of addressing conflict for example through customary laws and practices); the promotion of participation in local structures including service delivery and the encouragement of civil society to create bridges across groups. While these measures in and of themselves may have potential to be effective in certain contexts, is that they can also be used to re-enforce unequal hierarchies and deepen tribalism in a country like Cameroon. As such, efforts to foster solidarity across the advantaged and disadvantages groups can come at a cost: ignoring the underlying structural roots of inequality, and accordingly adopting policies that deal with them.

As Dixon *et al*. (2002) have suggested,research on common identification suggests that even when we are successful in creating more positive intergroup attitudes, encouraging people to evaluate one another more favorably, we may leave unaltered the conservative policy orientations of the historically advantaged. Viewing others as part of a shared in-group, it seems, does not necessarily promote support change in a structural or institutional sense. Moreover, members of dominant groups lean towards 'assimilative' forms of inclusion that preserve rather than challenge social inequalities.

A power analysis may expose how interventions such as increasing participation at the local level and involving local actor's needs to be careful as it can serve to perpetuate inequalities while giving them a mantra of collaboration, joint action and harmony(Tadros, 2013). For example, hidden power characterized by who sets the agenda and the term of engagement, what is to be kept off the agenda, who is invited, and who is kept out, determines the nature of relationships being forged under the 'social cohesion' mantra. If both groups have been raised to believe that it is natural/expedient for the stronger party to influence and shape the agenda, then through the invisible power of these normative values, such an assimilative form of inter-group collaboration is presented as a step towards social cohesion.

Visible power refers here to 'seeing who participates, who wins and who loses in these arenas. For instance, we can analyse which interests are able to maintain debate, whose interests prevail in key

decisions, such as on a key policy or budget decision, and whose voices and interests are present, but have little influence (Ibid). One of the limitations of focusing exclusively on visible ways in which power is exercised is that there is little attention being paid to those voices that are not being represented and the reasons behind it.

Hidden forms of power are used by vested interests to maintain their power and privilege by creating barriers to participation, by excluding key issues from the public arena, or by controlling politics backstage. They may occur not only within political processes, but in organizational and other group contexts as well, such as workplaces, NGOs or community-based organizations.

Invisible power goes a step further than hidden power because it does not look at the issues that are kept off the agenda, but the ways in which ideologies, values and forms of behavior influence how people think and relate to issues.

In this form of power, people may be unaware of their rights, their ability to speak out, and may come to see various forms of power or domination over them as 'natural', or at least unchangeable, and therefore unquestioned. Poor people, for instance, may accept their circumstance as the status quo even in the face of inequalities around them, internalizing dominant explanations of poverty.

Conclusions and Key Policy Messages

The republic of Cameroon is a decentralized unitary state with more than 250ethnic groups and two major identity groups; English and French speaking Cameroonians. The ethno-national crisis raised by teachers and lawyers trade union, coupled with problems of poor governance and local democracy has increasingly comforted the idea of making decentralization a tool for peace and social cohesion in a heterogeneous state like Cameroon.

Decentralization evidently involves a wide range of political, administrative and fiscal policies which can have vastly differently designs and approaches on development in Cameroon. It can also be formally pursued by the government or implemented through an informal delegation of powers to local actors. In this paper, we have examined the role of decentralization and social cohesion to peace, stability and development. Theact of devolution of power have been examined against the backdrop of a highly volatile political context in themajority English speaking parts of Cameroon, coupled with poor governance and the economic crisis threatening the central African sub region since 2016.

These entire put together has contributed to the present social tension in the majority English speaking areas of the country to an extend whereby education one of the most fundamental human rights have been taken hostage. In response to this crisis, the government of the republic has taken some important ranging from political, judicial and social order. In spite of, these strong measures, a wide range of ethnic and tribal manifestation is noticed in Cameroon, notably on social media networks.

All these are indications of potential conflicts if the state does not take appropriate and sustainable measures which consist among others putting in place effective decentralization for the promotion of social cohesion and development. Effective decentralization could relatively solve these problems and ensure sustainable peace and effective national integration.

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