

# “Status,” Inter-Normativity, and Socio-Professional Differentiation among Construction Workers in Douala, Cameroon

Africa Spectrum

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/00020397241272223

journals.sagepub.com/home/afr



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## Abstract

Based on qualitative research conducted in the construction sector in Douala, Cameroon, this article analyses the contractual practices that underpin employment relationships between construction actors. The aim is to provide an account of the social dynamics that lead to the differentiation of employment conditions in the construction sector beyond the binary categorisations that set formal against informal in analyses of African labour markets. The central argument here is that, beyond formality, the relationship between stability/protection and uncertainty/precariousness is based on the category of status, defined as the “perceived quality” of workers. Employment relationships based on status are organised through interrelated legal, social, and moral norms (inter-normativity) that contribute to differentiating socio-professional experiences. This is illustrated through a series of case studies, ranging from the salaried segment of the construction sector to the large market of auto-construction dominated by micro-entrepreneurs.

Manuscript received 12 December 2023; accepted 23 July 2024

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**Keywords**

Cameroon, Douala, status, inter-normativity, socio-professional differentiation, construction sector

**Introduction**

The construction sector in Douala, in Cameroon, is characterised by socio-professional differences between workers. Some workers benefit from (sector-specific) socio-professional stability and protection, while others experience daily precariousness and are sometimes exposed to forms of economic exploitation. These differences manifest in a context where state regulation of employment relations remains uncertain. Additionally, it is a context where formality has little influence on exchanges between employers and employees. In such a context, the production of employment conditions does not obey the classic labour market dichotomy of formal versus informal employment. In this duality, formal employment is conceived through legal contracts between employer and employee and usually has a certain degree of job security. Informal employment, on the other hand, escapes official norms. It represents a precarious space in which different forms of exploitation develop, rendering it what some authors have depicted as the cradle of a “new precariat” (Munck, 2013).

In practice, such a clear-cut binary is rare. In the construction sector in Douala, for example, we may find workers in “formal employment relationships” based on legal contracts. Still, their employment conditions are characterised by precariousness and economic exploitation. At the same time, we may observe bricklayers and ironworkers engaged in employment relationships with no apparent formality. Nonetheless, they experience something close to professional stability. This stability comes from regular remuneration and additional benefits from their employers. Therefore, there is a mixture of stable and precarious employment conditions across the various putatively opposing market segments.

To overcome the formal/informal opposition, in this article, I argue that the production of employment conditions in Douala’s construction sector is based on “status,” which is understood as the “perceived quality” of the worker who is engaged in a specific employment relationship (Podolny, 1993). This status is based mainly on the category of “competence” and on the hierarchical configuration of the sector. The diversity of status leads to an unequal distribution of precarity/stability for engineers, qualified technicians, and labourers. Sometimes, this occurs independently of any legal contracts that may bind employers and employees. To understand this social mechanism, my approach is founded on an analysis of contractual practices (Favereau et al., 1996) between employers and employees. I aim to establish a detailed understanding of the multiple rules (legal, practical, social, moral) that organise these status-based employment relationships and differentiate the employment conditions of workers.

My analysis draws on qualitative research, carried out as part of a doctoral project, in the construction sector in Douala during fifteen months (from August 2020 to June 2021 and then from March 2022 to June 2022). I conducted eighty-one semi-structured

interviews with contractors, labourers, and technicians from different trades and in various types of employment. The study also relies on direct observations of working conditions and relations between workers on sites. The collection and use of materials received the oral consent of the respondents. The interviews were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of specific details that could lead to the identification of the respondents. The material used in the article has been analysed thematically, with an emphasis on the organisational rules of employment relations and the experience of work for workers.

## **Understanding Employment Relationships Through Contractual Practices**

The hierarchisation of the labour market and the differentiation of workers' employment conditions have been analysed in various economic sectors in Africa: transport, mining, and industry, to name but a few. Benjamin Rubbers (2019), for example, analysed the segmentation of the labour market following the liberalisation of the mining industry in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He highlights structural differentiations in recruitment and remuneration methods, and between expatriates and local workers, who are themselves differentiated according to whether they possess qualifications. There is significant gender-based differentiation in mining, as there is in construction: women are generally in the minority on construction sites and mining operations (Pugliese and Musonda, 2021). Beyond nationality, qualifications, or gender, race has also been discussed in the production and distribution of working and living conditions. This has been well documented in the case of Chinese companies in Africa, where disparities in professional treatment have been noted on industrial sites, sometimes involving violence between Chinese and local workers (Amougou et al., 2022; Lee, 2017). Work in urban transport (Cissokho, 2014 for the case of Senegal), or in the social world of apprenticeship relations in craftsmen's workshops (Morice, 1987), have pointed to the relevance of seniority – or even generational factors – between more and less experienced workers in the production of occupational inequalities.

Aside from the logical relationships, such studies establish between socio-professional inequalities and socio-cultural characteristics, they also illuminate the variability of the forms and conditions of socio-professional differentiation, depending on the sector. While there may be similarities, there are notable divergences between industries (e.g. transport, construction, etc.). As such, case studies can greatly enrich global discussions on the complexity of employment dynamics in African economies. However, employment conditions in the formal (e.g. mining companies) or informal sector (e.g. urban transport) are analysed in the abovementioned literature as exclusive domains. These works insist on an *a priori* difference in employment conditions between the sectors, thereby reproducing the classic binary oppositions often applied to African (and Global South) economies.

The formal/informal opposition is also present in the literature on the construction sector and urban development in Africa. This opposition is linked to the urbanisation of African cities, which is often described as a two-speed process, with a “*de jure*

city” (according to official planning policies) and a “de facto city” (Mainet, 2008) linked to urban strategies for occupying space. These strategies are related to the generalisation of so-called self-building practices, which would have given pride of place to what Jill Wells (2001, 2007) has called an informal construction system. The binary division of the construction sector has induced a binarisation of the labour market, with the large informal sector employing mainly a precarious workforce (Mittulah and Njeri, 2003).

Understanding the construction labour market based on the formal/informal divide does not allow us to grasp the complexity of the forms and conditions of workers’ differentiation. Without proposing an exhaustive critique of these categories (which have been called into question many times in the literature; see Rubbers, 2007; Lautier, 2004; Roitman, 1990), it is useful to point out that the formal/informal binary has a strong ideological basis. After being coined by Keith Hart (1971–1973), these categories were popularised by the development industry (ILO, 1972).

The formal/informal opposition has been widely used to produce a simplistic representation of urban economies in Africa. This representation is based on a romanticisation of the so-called formal sector, which is supposed to be the hub of proper jobs (Ferguson and Li, 2018), and towards which actors in the informal sector should converge. Conversely, there is a negative view of the so-called informal sector (Portes, 2010), which has been presented as a space of uncertainty in which the working population is driven by a “subsistence ethos” (Ayimpam, 2014). The precariousness of the informal sector has made it the vector of a “pathological economy” and the symbol of social anomy (Schalkowski and Braig, 2023). It, thereby, legitimises policy interventions driven mainly from the outside by organisations, such as the World Bank or the International Labour Organisation.

The negative view of the informal, which favours political intervention, and the romantic perspective on the formal (in a clear evolutionist logic), have helped to homogenise a diversity of trajectories and experiences. This negative view has also favoured mechanical symmetries between informality and precariousness, as well as between formality (linked, for instance, to formal salaried employment and legal employment relationship) and job stability. One of the major points on which the formal/informal opposition is based relates to the absence of law and formalities – in economic activities that are often described as escaping state control. From this perspective, informal employment relationships are then analysed as the manifestation of a gap between a contractual economic regulation based on law and an essentially relational economic regulation. The latter is analysed as effectively excluding contractual elements from exchanges to favour arbitrariness and a certain precariousness in employment relationships. The weight of law and legal formalities in the production of employment conditions is overestimated. This limits our ability to grasp the entanglement of employment conditions if we explore the labour market through the classic oppositions between formal and informal sectors.

I propose to focus on contractual practices (Favereau et al., 1996) to better consider the production of employment conditions within the construction sector. This approach draws on the idea of moving away from thinking in terms of gaps and moving towards a sociology of the uses of law and formalities, as developed by Rubbers in the

introduction of this issue. An approach based on contractual practices enables us to grasp the nuances of employment relationships beyond the formal/informal opposition, as well as the employment conditions that arise from them. The analysis of contractual practices helps to investigate in greater detail the articulation of different normative registers that regulate employment relations. This is done by situating them in a particular hierarchical configuration linked to, for example, an economic sector (e.g. construction).

In approaching contractual practices, I draw more broadly on the contributions of legal socio-anthropology. In this approach, the contract is addressed, as a practice and a relationship (Gurvitch, 1940; Macneil, 1980) as well as an act of commitment between two parties that is never sufficient in itself: “not everything in the contract is contractual” (Durkheim, 1893). In this respect, the contract is situated and supported by active norms that contribute to the normativity of contractual practices (Belley, 1996a). Beyond contractual practices, these norms may be legal, social, or moral, depending on the context. Above all, they are interrelated, influencing each other reciprocally within the same system of exchange, producing what has been described as “inter-normativity” (Arnaud, 1989; Belley, 1996b). Normative pluralism, and the inter-normativity that follows, logically produce a diversity of contractual forms that are supported by singular (and interrelated) principles of obligation and by the hierarchical configuration of a specific economic sector. This articulation of contractual practices and inter-normativity, situated within a specific hierarchical configuration, is the theoretical stance taken in this paper to address the production and distribution of precarity and/or stability going beyond the formal/informal binary.

In using this theoretical stance, we see the emergence of a status-based labour market. Here, status refers to the perceived quality of the worker. In construction, this is based on the category of competence, that is, qualifications and experience, which determines the quality of their work as well as their probity. It is precisely this status that is the basis of the moral contract between employer (whether a legal company or a contractor in the auto-construction sector) and worker. It defines the employment conditions that the former reserves for the latter and leads to a better understanding of actual practices in companies and on building sites. These practices articulate the legal, social, and moral rules (inter-normativity) that lead to the differentiation between the site manager and the manual worker, and between the skilled technician and the labourer or apprentice.

## **What Makes the Construction Sector a Status-Based Labour Market?**

Two interconnected factors influence the configuration of employment relationships in the construction sector in Douala. The first is that this is a fragmented labour market. The diversity of construction practices produces multiple forms of employment relationships, and legal (standard) salaried employment is clearly not the norm. In Douala, the most widespread building practice is “auto-construction” by city dwellers acting as promoters (Canel et al., 1990). These city dwellers initiate the production of buildings and

rely on contractors, who are often not part of a legally constituted organisational structure. These contractors do, however, have teams of workers: they employ technicians and labourers, and often enlist the services of young apprentices. Contractors, technicians, labourers, and apprentices are usually not bound by standard employment relationships based on legal contracts. Agreements between the parties are usually based on their word, although, as we will see, documents may sometimes emerge at certain points in transactions. This non-salaried workforce, in the standard and formal sense of the term, is the largest in the construction sector.

Alongside the auto-construction market, there is a minority segment made up of legally constituted small, medium-sized, and large firms that carry out construction work for different types of customers. Small companies are the most numerous in this market segment. Their organisational structure is similar to that in the auto-construction in terms of mobilising their workforce. Legal salaried contracts may be granted to certain project administrators (e.g. site managers, site supervisors, monitoring engineers, etc.), while the actual workforce (made up of technicians and workers) is mobilised according to the model used in the dominant auto-construction segment. In other words, there is no actual legal employment contract between the employer and the workers. Alongside small companies, there are medium-sized and large companies, many of which are foreign (European, Chinese, North African, etc.). These employ project managers for their construction projects, but also engage technicians and labourers as salaried workers based on legally registered contracts.

The second factor influencing the configuration of employment relations in the construction sector is linked to the legal and institutional context, as well as to the way in which the state is deployed in the world of labour in Cameroon. By state, I refer specifically to the Labour Inspectorate, which is responsible for ensuring compliance with employment law. In so doing, it plays the role of a protective third party in the relationship between employer and employee to reduce the risk of abuse. In practice, the action of the Labour Inspectorate is limited and deeply constrained. First, it applies almost exclusively to salaried employment relationships, which means that its real field of intervention is the (legally constituted) company. Secondly, the Labour Inspectorate in Cameroon has no real power of coercion. It only conciliates in the event of a dispute between employer and employee. If this process fails, the professional dispute may be referred to the competent court. Finally, the day-to-day work of this administration is limited by the number of the agents it mobilises per district and the material resources that it can draw on, such as means of transport and subsidies. These prevent the administration from proactive deployment in companies. In practice, the Labour Inspectorate operates reactively, when appeals are lodged.

This mode of deployment has various consequences. Firstly, the Labour Inspectorate's interventions are confined to a small segment of the construction sector and effectively exclude employment relationships in the vast auto-construction market. Secondly, the possible intervention of the state as a protective third party is uncertain, even for legal companies and their salaried workers. Indeed, the Labour Inspectorate does not always guarantee effective protections for workers. Thirdly, the two abovementioned outcomes

lead to a market of highly inter-personalised employment relationships in the construction sector. These employment relationships are subject to the vagaries of intersubjectivity between employers and employees (Viti, 2009). In this context of hyper-personalisation of employment relations, the hierarchical configuration of construction plays a major role in shaping relations between employers and workers. There is a clear hierarchy between workers in the construction industry. Labourers and apprentices are at the bottom of the pyramid, followed by skilled technicians, and finally contractors, site managers, and foremen representing the highest socio-professional category. This hierarchical, skill-based structure impacts how workers are treated professionally, whether in the legal or the auto-construction market.

## **Project Managers**

The construction departments of legally constituted companies generally have two categories of workers: technical or project managers and manual workers. We will return to the latter in the next section. Project managers are also referred to as site supervisors, works managers, heads of the construction department, and so on. They are usually engineers or senior technicians in civil engineering, and sometimes architects. In most cases, therefore, they have university qualifications. Their job is to design and oversee construction: to create plans, issue invitations to tender, produce specifications, etc. They also coordinate workers on the site and monitor the work on behalf of the company. In short, they act as project administrators. Their competencies, on which companies are particularly dependent to win, design, and execute contracts, give these workers a central place in construction projects. This centrality impacts how they are treated by company management: a differential treatment that generally begins at the time of recruitment.

Project managers are recruited based on their qualifications (in civil engineering or architecture) and their experience in the building industry. Depending on the company's level of compliance with the labour code and the National Collective Agreement for Public Buildings and Works, they are usually recruited as higher-category workers. They are hired by the top management, and recruitment involves formalities (including a CV and a cover letter) and competitive selection between several candidates (including job interviews and examinations). In many cases, project managers enjoy a permanent contract associated with the ideal standards of decent full-time employment, job security, a guaranteed salary, and social benefits. Such positions are valued in the construction sector when one considers the overall scarcity of stable wage employment.

Beyond the principles, legislative frameworks, and written contracts offered, however, the experiences of project managers are not in line with the ideal of a "proper job." They are not exempt from wage arrears, dismissal, or technical unemployment when construction contracts become scant (as occurred at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic). Furthermore, they do not receive social benefits at times when many companies limit insurance and social contributions for their employees.

Nor, does the Labour Inspectorate systematically intervene in relations between employers and employees despite its role as the enforcer of social legislation on working conditions. This reinforces uncertainty in the employment relationships in which project administrators are involved.

However, it is precisely in the face of the uncertainty of salaried employment that the differences between project managers and blue-collar workers become clear. In most cases, project managers have the opportunity to build “profitable” employment conditions within the company. To cope with the social and professional uncertainties linked to the contingency of legal employment contracts, most of the project administrators I met could operate a fragmentation of their professional activity (Célérier and Monchatre, 2020) by developing parallel entrepreneurial activities related to construction. It is common for project managers to have their own building sites and to offer their services to private individuals. These services range from the design to the realisation of buildings. Between company and personal projects, project managers are half employees and half individual service providers, as one of them explained in an interview: “I am a technical director in a company and in the neighbourhood, I manage my building sites.”

This deployment beyond the company, which places project managers at the interface of salaried work and individual entrepreneurship, requires the day-to-day construction of a flexible professional situation. This flexibility has two socio-professional implications for the employee–entrepreneur. Firstly, it requires an ability to navigate between their company tasks and parallel activities. This socio-professional navigation, with its continuity between the organisational and the private sphere, is maintained through a combination of the autonomy granted to the worker and the constraints internal to the organisation. Autonomy emerges from the central position of the project manager in a construction project and the intellectual and mobile nature of their work. The intellectual aspect involves design and calculations, whereas mobility arises because, as overseers, they move easily from site to site. However, this autonomy is constrained by the priority that must be given to company sites. Project managers thus find themselves in work configurations where social time and space are intertwined. This requires significant management skills in terms of time, space, and relationships. Following Jacquot and Setti (2006), we can conceive of the social time of work in terms of container (meaning the duration, number of hours, period) and of content (meaning the activities carried out). Based on this approach, we see that in the movement between salaried employment and individual services, time is both discontinuous and sequenced. There is a temporal division of labour that removes the barriers between the office, work sites (both company and personal), and the home. The spheres of production and reproduction – workspace and living space – are thus merged. Evenings and non-working days are used to produce plans and monitor work sites.

Secondly, this professional hybridisation involves managing a range of relationships with different actors, such as departmental colleagues, the company hierarchy, technicians, technical contractors, and private clients outside the company. A significant portion of these relationships are within the company itself. Building relationships of



trust is required to facilitate days off-site and/or the use of company equipment for personal work. This trust is a product of the project manager's quality of work as well as services rendered to colleagues within the company. Ultimately, it enables the margin for manoeuvre that is granted to the project manager as an organisational reward, particularly by the company's top management. Beyond the services provided, the project manager's relational investments may also involve exchanging favours and forms of giving between colleagues. Small attentions, like offering lunch to the storekeeper in the spirit of building an intimate relationship, are likely to facilitate later requests to requisition equipment for work sites outside the company.

The story of Achille, a site supervisor for a real estate company in Douala, is illustrative of how project managers build and navigate professional flexibility between the company and their individual projects. Achille is a civil engineer with a permanent contract as a project manager. He is responsible for coordinating construction activities and marketing buildings for his company. In this role, he is the company's representative to the client during various phases of the project. The role involves being constantly present, both at the company's head office and on site, to monitor the work of the various parties involved in the projects: contractors, prime contractors, technical control, and so on. After six years with the company at the time of our interview in 2021, Achille claimed to have completed around 10 of the company's design, execution, and monitoring projects. The company depends on his skills, and he enjoys his employer's trust, as well as a great deal of flexibility in how he organises his work.

However, Achille maintains that his salary is not enough to cover his social and personal expenses, not to mention, he says, the salary arrears he experiences from time to time when, he believes, the company is experiencing periods of low activity. Moreover, he has ambitions to set up his own construction company at some point. For these reasons, he also offers construction design, monitoring, and execution services to private clients. Achille organises his time so that he is on company sites at the beginning and middle of the week and on his personal sites the rest of the time. To manage the latter, he relies on the autonomy of trusted workers on company sites, making occasional visits to coordinate and give instructions. He delegates tasks without necessarily having to be present on site every day. To be sure of the quality of the work on the different projects, he favours workers whose skills he has validated through repeated experience on building sites. Achille also uses weekends and non-working days to be more physically present on his own sites; this sometimes involves travelling outside Douala. At the time of our interview, Achille was preparing to resign from his job in order to set up his own company.

The status of project administrators is linked to the central role that they play in drawing on their technical and organisational skills to implement construction projects. This status guarantees them conditions of employment that enable them to navigate between the company and their individual projects. This negotiated flexibility in contractual practices between the employee-provider and the company is based on a legal (on the basis of a formal written contract) and moral (founded on trust, recognition, and reciprocity) inter-normativity.

## Salaried Workers on Trial Contracts

It is unusual for manual construction workers to be employed by a company in Douala's construction sector. As the majority of companies in the sector are small businesses, they prefer to employ project managers and to mobilise workers ad hoc on sites and for specific tasks (carpentry, tiling, masonry, etc.), as labourers or service providers. Most companies in the sector seek to maintain a reduced wage bill in the interest of profitability.

At the upper end of the sector are medium and large companies with significant logistical, financial, relational, and human resources. These companies have many employees, including project managers, but also workers who may be team leaders, technicians, or labourers. Although the managerial policies of these larger companies vary in terms of recruitment and management of the workforce, there are commonalities around contractual practices. In most companies, workers are divided into categories based on the National Collective Agreement for Public Buildings and Works. Labourers with no qualifications or experience are first-category workers. Second-category workers are technicians, who have experience and often qualifications. Finally, there are the team leaders (depending on the trade), who are technicians with experience, qualifications, and distinguished by their labour management responsibilities.

On most construction sites of medium and large companies, workers (both technicians and labourers) are recruited on a temporary basis through individual "legal" contracts linked to specific projects. These fixed-term contracts, which are also known as site or project contracts, commit workers to perform a specific task on the site and for a specific period, after which the contract is terminated. Many companies use trial contracts to hire workers on a temporary basis. The workers engage in a particular task, putatively on trial with a view to a permanent contract, under Article 28 of the Labour Code. However, the ambiguity of the law around the conditions for renewing this type of contract, coupled with limitations on the activity of labour inspectors, favours indefinite reiterations of temporary contracts. A worker may, for instance, be recruited as a bricklayer on a trial basis. When this contract comes to an end (corresponding with the end of the task), the worker may be rehired under another trial contract on the same or another site, rather than entering into a permanent contract as a bricklayer.

Abdou, a multi-skilled construction technician, has substantial experience of these temporary contracts. He was employed for 12 years by a French construction company. At the start of his career with this company, Abdou only worked on temporary contracts linked to specific sites or tasks. He told me that the company used to make him (and other workers) sign multiple trial contracts. During the interview, he stated that the company often ended the contracts at the end of each job before calling them back for another. Indeed, he said, he often experienced both contract termination and recruitment on the same site. Even though he now had a permanent contract, Abdou's salary was often in arrears and did not benefit from proper social insurance. During the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, he was made redundant, along with other workers, as the company reduced its workforce. His numerous appeals to the Labour Inspectorate

were unsuccessful, and Abdou told me that he had to abandon the process because he did not have the means to go to court.

When beginning work with a company, construction workers are repeatedly hired on temporary contracts. This can be prolonged over several months or even years: Abdou worked on temporary contracts for almost four years before getting a permanent contract. Despite the uncertainties that remain, as described above, a permanent contract is valued by many workers in the construction sector. In practice, however, the access to this form of employment is conditioned by the intermediary role played by team leaders.

Team leaders are the ones who recruit technicians and labourers on building sites. Depending on manpower requirements, they recruit and evaluate the workers and determine their categories, classifying some as labourers and others as technicians. This classification certainly takes qualifications into account but is primarily the product of an on-site evaluation, particularly for new recruits. Even for workers who have already worked on company sites, it is up to the team leader to decide on any changes in category and to facilitate a change of contract from temporary to permanent. It is with the team leaders that the workers negotiate the terms of their employment and, more particularly, their pay. Pay negotiations are individual, so workers on a site may not have the same pay even if they are in the same category. In most cases, the company management (human resources department) simply ratifies the proposals of the team leaders on worker category and pay. This mediation by team leaders can be a source of inequality on sites. Many workers are recruited in lower categories despite their qualifications and experience. These inequalities give rise to conflicts between workers and team leaders, but also to individualised negotiation (by workers) or collective negotiation (via workers' representatives) with the company management.

Workers' dependence is linked to their subordinate status in the hierarchy on work-sites. Workers with the least qualifications, experience, and longevity in the company are subject to the most acute forms of casualisation and the attendant uncertainties. These workers experience precarious employment, which is nonetheless based on the "manipulation" of legal labour standards. In an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of their "legal" jobs for companies, some workers also enter the auto-construction market, working on building sites or doing maintenance work on homes. Idriss has chosen this route and relies on his professional networks and reputation to find opportunities outside his contracted workdays.

In fact, manual workers under contract on company construction projects usually enter the auto-construction market on weekends, holidays, or during the dead periods between two temporary contracts. Unlike project managers, one of the conditions for employment with a company is that workers must be fully committed to be on-site during working hours. This implies greater control and discipline of workers by the company management and is implemented daily by team leaders and project managers.

Finally, because of their low qualifications and experience, workers enjoy a subordinate status in the company hierarchy. Contractual practices force them into precarious employment conditions, based on the uncertainty surrounding probation and the possibility of professional mobility within the company. The employment conditions of trial

workers are the product of a normative tension between the written and legal norms of the trial contract and the practical norm of the open-ended trial. The hope generated by open-ended employment, and its advantages, fosters a sort of perseverance in the worker, and opportunism in the company, in a context of salaried employment scarcity. All this occurs in a space characterised by limited institutional control and the contingent presence of the state as an intermediary between employer and employee.

## **Skilled Technicians in the Auto-Construction Market**

Those who construct buildings in Douala are mostly individual contractors in the auto-construction market. They recruit technicians and labourers to carry out various tasks on their sites. Labourers are most often recruited spontaneously for menial tasks that do not require any specialised technical knowledge. Technicians with recognised expertise, on the other hand, are in great demand. They are mobile and likely to work on different sites depending on the opportunities available. Individual contractors are particularly dependent on them for the execution of their construction projects. As the latter are not organisational actors who bind themselves to workers through individual legal contracts, they develop other contractual practices to build sustainable working relationships with technicians – who then benefit from a valued status due to their skills – after a first successful working experience.

This is revealed in the story of Monkam, who has been an entrepreneur in the auto-construction market since 2017. When Monkam was younger, during his secondary school years, he started working on building sites as a labourer. He was brought to the construction sites by “big brothers” from the neighbourhood whom he assisted and who trained him on the job in various building trades. It is worth noting that the use of family categories of elder and junior to establish hierarchical relationships is widespread in various forms of social interactions in Cameroonian society. Therefore, this phenomenon is not limited to the construction sector. It is in this socio-cultural and socio-professional context that Monkam considers these more experienced and older workers as his older brothers though they are unrelated. The use of family categories is common in the construction sector. It is used, in particular, to mark the hierarchical, or sometimes generational, differences between workers. Monkam developed a passion for construction, and, after obtaining a scientific baccalaureate, decided to specialise in civil engineering and sought entrance to public training schools. After several unsuccessful attempts, he finally joined the University Institute of Technology of Douala where he studied civil engineering up to the master’s level. From the first year of university, he started offering small construction and building repair services to individuals. He needed labourers and, above all, good technicians for his projects. He first enlisted the services of some of his technical mentors who had trained him at the beginning of his experience on building sites, then schoolmates with whom he had worked on building sites, and finally the technicians he met on building sites. He now has a team of 11 technicians with different skills.

In such arrangements, the durability of working relationships is determined by past affinity experiences in different social settings (at school, in the neighbourhood), or by

those experienced with working on building sites. This helps to produce a singular working relationship between contractors and their technicians. It is often through this mechanism that teams are built and that solidarity networks between technicians can be formed. The work site is the privileged place where the contractors identify “good” technicians. They then work to maintain relations with them so that they can mobilise them for future projects. It is customary for contractors to have their preferred masons, plumbers, carpenters, tilers, and so on. This working relationship is primarily based on mutual trust. On the contractor’s side, trust manifests as a recognition of the worker’s technical capabilities. At a certain point, this recognition leads some contractors to delegate tasks on different sites to technicians, giving the latter more autonomy. Delegating in such a manner, beyond the recognition of expertise, also implies trust in the worker’s probity, particularly in the management of equipment or the use of materials. Stories of misappropriation of cement, paint, and other construction materials are common on building sites. As a result, there is distrust of technicians who are said to be in the habit of cutting corners, for example, on the number of cinderblocks that are supposed to be used to build walls.

For workers, trust is linked to the integrity of the contractor-employer, which can be assessed by the consistency and regularity of remuneration. “A good boss is a boss who pays well and does not play with the technicians’ money,” a young bricklayer emphasised during an interview. However, the bond of trust is also reinforced by reciprocity between entrepreneurs and their workers. This reciprocal relationship is based on contractors sharing favours and financial largesse with their technicians. For example, it is customary for entrepreneurs to implement positive reward systems in their teams to encourage good work and integrity. This often takes the form of bonuses on top of the payment negotiated at the start of a job. Off-site, the contractor may act as a “father” or a “brother” and provides personal and spontaneous financial assistance to a worker who is ill, even if this is not related to work on-site. After site accidents, the contractor takes personal charge and, depending on the seriousness of the injuries, may pay for all or part of the medical care, since most construction workers (especially in this market segment) have almost no social insurance. The contractor thus becomes the personified insurance for workers in the face of the risks and uncertainties of work.

This relational dynamic means that the technician becomes, in a way, the *obligé* or client of the patron. This helps create loyalty between technicians and contractors. It should be remembered that, in the absence of legal formalities materially linking contractors and technicians in this segment of the labour market, the latter are mobile and can work on other sites, particularly when their boss does not offer them work. However, even when busy on other sites, these technicians remain available to their patrons. They may leave or delegate tasks on other projects to join the latter’s construction site. Trust and reciprocity are the cement of the relationship within teams of contractors and technicians who work on many sites on a long-term basis.

Employment relationships are also influenced by the trajectories of contractors. At some point, contractors are required to build credibility for their construction activities, particularly when they aspire to enter highly profitable segments of the construction

market, such as public procurement. Clients in these segments are often sensitive to legal formalities. Access to government contracts is determined, for example, by the ability to legally justify the employment of engineers and workers on construction sites, often by presenting employment contracts. This is how contractors (employers) prove, materially and officially, the veracity of their experiences in the construction sector.

Like many others hoping to win government contracts, the contractor Monkam understands the importance of materialising his working relationship with technicians in this way. To do this, he first registered his company and began to pay the taxes and fees imposed by the state on commercial activities. He also introduced signed, written contracts with his technicians. These contracts do not involve a legal declaration of workers. Their purpose is not to bring workers within the scope of legality but to create a record of Monkam's entrepreneurial activities in the construction sector. Although such formalities materialise the arrangements between the company and the technicians, their real function differs according to the ambitions of the entrepreneur. The contract, as a form of archive, is supposed to satisfy the requirements of the competition for public contracts. This dimension clearly distinguishes such contracts from those previously discussed.

Without necessarily leading to a break-up, this change was misunderstood by Monkam's workers. They saw it as suggesting mistrust on the part of their employer, who had once been their brother. Some were reluctant to submit to this formality, which seemed to call into question their probity and, more broadly, the relationship of trust between them and Monkam. Nevertheless, these contracts became a norm within the team, especially for technicians employed for six months or more. For Monkam, this was purely a precautionary measure for the future of his business. During our interviews, he repeatedly claimed that relations with his workers were based on trust and reciprocity. The writing of the terms framing labour relations had little structuring effect on the labour dynamic itself but tested the moral foundations of the contract between the entrepreneur and his technicians. Furthermore, they contributed to negotiating the relationship of the latter to legal normativity.

## Conclusion

This article shows the relevance of analysing contractual practices to understand the complex organisation of the labour market, as well as the dynamics of workers' employment conditions in Africa beyond the formal/informal opposition. The analysis reveals that, in contexts where the relationship with the state and legal norms is uncertain, the conditions of employment are based less on formalities than on the socio-cultural characteristics of the workers. The construction sector offers an interesting illustration of a labour market based on workers' status rather than on the presence or absence of formality in the employment relationship. It is based on status that distinctions are made between project managers and company workers. The former takes advantage of their flexible working conditions, which allow them to navigate between company projects and their personal construction-related projects.

In the uncertainty about wages and working conditions, reflecting the vagaries of legal contracts, a moral contract is instead established between the project manager and the company. This encourages a (positive?) flexibility of work and deployment outside the company, against a backdrop of a relationship of trust and reciprocity between the worker and the organisation. The entrepreneurial activity therefore becomes a means of constructing wage supplements in an overall dynamic of cooperation between the employee and the company. Faced with the increasing precariousness of salaried employment in Cameroon, wage supplementation has become a practical labour market norm in many economic sectors (Bapes, 2022). It is to be understood as compensation for shortcomings in the treatment of workers, lack of insurance, and the contingency of salaries. However, such adjustments to the employment relationship are only reserved for the upper echelons of the labour market in the construction sector.

This reality can also be observed in the employment relationships between contractors and technicians in the auto-construction market. These relationships present an interesting case of professional stabilisation. In a market where formalities and legal contracts are not decisive, employment relationships create stability, to the extent that forms of loyalty develop between contractors and technicians. Here, contractual practices foster reciprocal relationships that enable both contractors and technicians to benefit from the employment relationship. Contractors honour their contracts with their customers, and the technician obtains regular remuneration and bonuses.

Employment conditions are quite different for lower categories of workers, regardless of the market segment (enterprise or auto-construction). Manual workers on construction projects implemented by legal companies experience precarious employment. They work in conditions of instability and insecurity, linked to the contractual practices that govern their employment. These contractual practices legitimise hierarchical relationships between the project administrator, the team leader, technicians, and labourers. Such hierarchical relationships give rise to precariousness, particularly for workers with the least qualifications and experience, such as those who have been newly recruited. The precarious experience of workers in legal companies can also be observed in the auto-construction market for workers in the subaltern categories of labourer and apprentice, with significant similarities to other sectors where apprenticeship relationships are found (Morice, 1987; Viti, 2005). For reasons of length, I have not provided further empirical illustrations of this case, but the case of salaried workers is sufficient to illustrate the difference in socio-professional treatment, beyond formality, of workers according to their status.

An analysis of contractual practices sheds light on the complex regulation of employment relationships in the construction industry. The cases presented in this article highlight the inter-normativity underpinning contractual practices. Inter-normativity is reflected through the dual and intertwined legal and moral dimensions of employment relationships. On the one hand, the legal dimension, which is particularly marked within companies but is not absent in auto-construction, is based on references to law (through individual contracts) in work arrangements. The reference to law in the provided illustrations often implies practical norms (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). In several situations of exchange between employers and employees, practical norms are predominant, as

demonstrated by indefinite trial periods for salaried workers, and individual contracts within the auto-construction market which do not necessarily imply a legal declaration of workers. Such dynamics help to create a particular form of legality, one that neither conforms to nor contravenes labour law. On this basis, the classic opposition between formality and informality (based on compliance with the law), which is often applied to the labour market in Africa, finds clear limits in the construction sector.

On the other hand, the regulation of employment relations relies on other social (external) and sectoral (internal) norms linked to construction activity (Belley, 1996a). The dynamics of worksites illuminate a sectoral sociability specific to construction. Interactions between contractors, supervisors, technicians, and labourers (over and above formality) constantly call into play the categories of trust, reciprocity, and recognition of expertise and skills, as well as hierarchical subordination. It is based on this sectoral normativity that work on the sites is organised, hierarchies are formed, and teams are built. Furthermore, these sectoral norms are embedded in broader socio-cultural norms, linked to community relations and generational logics which, for example, enshrine the social submission of younger workers to their elders (Morice, 1987). In particular, this is what justifies and legitimises the invocation of life-long relationships (through the rhetoric of family categories) and subordination between workers. The articulation of these norms, which are specific (sectoral) and external (social) to the construction sector, is part of a multi-functional moral normativity that is particularly characteristic of work experiences. Depending on the case, this moral normativity can produce beneficial flexibility in labour relations (as for company project managers) or build loyalty between contractors and technicians. It also contributes to the precariousness of workers and apprentices under the rule of hierarchical relationships and subordination.

Between the legal and moral inter-normativity at the heart of work, the construction sector has all the characteristics of a semi-autonomous social field (Falk-Moore, 1973), which nonetheless enshrines a relative downgrading of legal categories. Legal standards, in the forms they take in the construction sector, are generally subordinate to the social and sectoral standards on which the moral contract at the heart of labour relations is based. The centrality of moral normativity in the various cases presented here is indicative of the presence, in the Douala construction sector, of a system of personalised and intersubjective relations of dependence between employers and employees. Based on worker status, this encourages differential treatment and socio-professional inequalities which, far from being spontaneous, are products of a complex social regulation of employment relations.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**


The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



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## Author Biography

**Ludovic Bakebek** is a doctoral student at the University of Liège. His research focuses on the regulation of labour in the construction sector in Cameroon. His thesis offers a critique of the concept of informal economy and, more broadly, of the developmentalist approach to the labour market in Africa. The author aims to open up alternative ways of understanding the complexity of urban economies in contemporary Africa.

## « Statut », inter-normativité, et différenciation socio-professionnelle parmi les travailleurs de la construction à Douala, Cameroun

### Résumé

S'appuyant sur une recherche qualitative menée dans le secteur de la construction à Douala, au Cameroun, cet article analyse les pratiques contractuelles qui sous-tendent les relations d'emploi entre les acteurs de la construction. L'objectif est de rendre

compte des dynamiques sociales qui conduisent à la différenciation des conditions d'emploi dans le secteur de la construction, au-delà des catégorisations binaires opposant le formel à l'informel dans les analyses des marchés du travail africains. L'argument central est qu'au-delà de la formalité, la relation entre stabilité/protection et incertitude/précarité repose sur la catégorie du statut, définie comme la « qualité perçue » des travailleurs. Les relations d'emploi basées sur le statut sont organisées à travers des normes interconnectées présentant des dimensions légales, sociales et morales (inter-normativité). Ces normes contribuent ainsi à différencier les expériences socio-professionnelles. Cette idée est illustrée par une série d'études de cas, allant du segment salarié du secteur de la construction au vaste marché de l'auto-construction dominé par des micro-entrepreneurs.

Manuscript received 12 December 2023; accepted 23 July 2024

### **Mots clés**

Cameroun, Douala, Statut, Inter-normativité, Différenciation socio-professionnelle, Secteur de la construction