PEACEMAKING IN AN AUTHORITARAIAN CONTEXT IN AFRICA: PROMOTING PEACE FROM BELOW IN CAMEROON

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Abstract:

Cameroon, traditionally overlooked on the international peace agenda, has recently received increased attention due to mounting security challenges. Operating under an authoritarian regime that denies conflicts while promoting a narrative of stability, the course of international peace-from-below initiatives is profoundly influenced by this constrained political environment. Through in-depth case studies of three ongoing humanitarian crises—the Central African refugees' influx, the Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa Province insurgency, and the Anglophone conflict—this article contends that localized peace approaches, centring on grassroots reconciliation, may obscure broader structural issues, silence non-state political claims from below, and absolve the state of its responsibilities. Embracing such methodologies not only reinforces authoritarian dynamics but also exhibits a performative dimension, contributing to the establishment of a 'victor's peace' in the absence of military victory.

Key words:

Cameroon, peace from below, triple nexus, international aid, authoritarianism.

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WHILE CAMEROON HAS HISTORICALLY RECEIVED LIMITED ATTENTION on the international peace agenda, the country has recently garnered increased focus due to a series of ongoing security challenges[1]. Over the past decade, three humanitarian crises have unfolded within its borders[2]: instability in the neighbouring Central African Republic (thereafter CAR) has led to the displacement of 354,139 refugees in Cameroon's eastern regions; in the Far North region, the Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa Province (thereafter ISWAP) insurgency has forced 120,839 Nigerian refugees and 453,661 Cameroonians to flee; and in the North-West and South-West regions, the secessionist insurgency and government military repression have resulted in 621,591 internally displaced people (thereafter IDPs)[3]. In response, Cameroon became the first country to volunteer at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to implement the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (thereafter HDPN), making it one of the seven pilot countries for this approach[4]. This marks a significant shift as peace issues are a relatively new topic in Cameroon.

This paper aims to analyse the specific challenges encountered by international aid when implementing peace-from-below interventions in the country. The latter refer to programmes aimed at promoting peacebuilding by focusing on the local level, refusing any involvement in diplomatic, political, or military fields[5]. While the mechanisms linking local and national-level peace have been extensively studied in post-conflict settings, how these mechanisms interact

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[1] Manu Lekunze and Ben Page, 'Security in Cameroon: a growing risk of persistent insurgency', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57, 1 (2022), pp. 219–36.

[2] OCHA, 'Cameroon humanitarian need overview 2023' (Yaoundé, 2023).

[3] Data retrieved from the UNHCR Operational Portal, 31 December 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/country/cmr> (12 February 2024).

[4] HDPN Taskforce, 'Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus in Cameroon', *ReliefWeb*, 2021, <https://response.reliefweb.int/cameroon/humanitarian-development-peace-hdp-nexus-cameroon> (12 February 2024).

[5] HDPN Taskforce, 'Peace in the nexus in Cameroon' (Yaoundé, March 2022): <https://cameroon.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Peace%20in%20the%20Nexus%20in%20Cameroon%20-%20final.pdf> (12 February 2024).

with the official denial of any conflict by the authoritarian regime – as part of its long-standing 'propaganda of stability'[6] – is of particular interest. With case studies from each of the three humanitarian crises, this article investigates the potential pitfalls of international programmes that solely focus on local reconciliation. It argues that such approaches obscure broader structural issues, silence non-state political claims from below, and absolve the state of its responsibilities. By implicitly shifting the blame for instability and violence onto individuals, it also reinforces some of the dynamics that characterize authoritarianism in Cameroon and carries a performative dimension, contributing to the establishment of a 'victor's peace' in the absence of military victory.

This article draws upon data collected over two years of extensive fieldwork, conducted while working both as an aid practitioner and a researcher[7]. This dual role provided heuristic insights but also presented limitations and ethical challenges. Working as an INGO employee – as a Project Manager in Eastern Cameroon (from October 2017 to May 2018), then as a National Program Officer in Yaoundé, the capital city (from February 2020 to July 2021) – positioned me at the juncture where aid interventions are developed, negotiated, and implemented. Observations during bilateral or coordination meetings and on-site visits for aid projects were complemented by informal conversations, interviews, and exchanges with UN agencies, INGO employees, aid beneficiaries, state representatives, local authorities, and populations. Despite challenges in reconciling the ethnographer's perspective with the

[6] Fred Eboko and Patrick Awondo, 'L'État stationnaire, entre chaos et renaissance', *Politique africaine* 150, 2 (2018), pp. 5-27.

[7] My background as an anthropologist was one of the reasons the INGO recruited me, seen as beneficial for designing and implementing programmes. My status as a researcher was acknowledged by my hierarchy and colleagues and was explained to all my informants. Any opinions and views expressed in this text are my own and do not represent the views or attitudes of the organization, mission, or project with which I was associated.

imperative need for action within aid agencies[8], the triangular relationships formed among the ethnographer, aid institutions, and people targeted by assistance played a crucial role in shaping both the research and the necessary work within the INGO[9].

This 'multi-sited ethnography'[10] was conducted from a specific standpoint and encountered significant constraints in deployment. First, the primary focus of the INGO I was working for was supporting CAR refugees and, later, IDPs from the Anglophone conflict: like many other aid structures in Cameroon, peacebuilding was not its area of expertise. Additionally, due to my position as a practitioner, and security and access challenges in the Anglophone and the Far North regions[11], fieldwork was limited to the INGO's operational areas (Yaoundé and the East and Adamawa regions). I was unable to study the dynamics related to these regions at the local level, whose understanding relied on secondary sources such as interviews with stakeholders operating in those specific areas.

To supplement the data, a literature review was conducted, incorporating sources from aid organizations and academics in both French and English languages. 14 additional interviews

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[8] For further discussions, see e.g. David Mosse, *Cultivating development* (Pluto Press, 2005); Laëtitia Atlani-Duault, *Humanitarian aid in post-soviet countries* (Routledge, London, New York, 2007); Justine Brabant, 'Peut-on faire de la recherche au sein d'une ONG ?', *Genèses* 90, 1 (2013), pp. 42–61; Marion Fresia and Philippe Lavigne Delville, eds., *Au coeur des mondes de l'aide internationale* (Karthala, Paris, 2018); Imri Schattner-Ornan, 'Daily negotiations with state agencies in the field - reflections from refugee camps in Western Ethiopia', in *Authoritarian Practices and Humanitarian Negotiations*, ed. Andrew Cunningham (Routledge, London, 2024), pp. 123–44.

[9] For instance, in the Eastern region (see below), it helped to incorporate structural interventions aimed at reducing some of the factors contributing to agropastoral conflicts, such as fencing some farming lands (see Julie Baujard, 'Ni espionne ni avocate. La place ambiguë de l'ethnologue auprès des réfugiés', in *Terrains sensibles*, ed. Florence Bouillon, Marion Fresia, and Virginie Tallio (EHESS, Paris, 2005), pp. 125–43).

[10] George E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 1 (1995), pp. 95–117.

[11] Aimé Raoul Sumo Tayo, 'Collecte des données, protection des sources et production des savoirs sur Boko Haram en contexte de paranoïa sécuritaire au Cameroun', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57, 3 (2023), pp. 713–30; Ludovic Lado *et al*., 'Faire du terrain en période de crise anglophone au Cameroun', *Africa Development* 46, 4 (2021), pp. 121–40.

were conducted between October and December 2021 with 4 INGO and 2 national NGO employees, 4 UN representatives, 3 actors from the development sector (World Bank, French Embassy, French Development Agency), and a Cameroonian Ministry representative.

The article is structured as follows: the first and second sections provide critical insights into the literature on peace-from-below and the long-standing representation of Cameroon as a peaceful country, respectively. The subsequent two sections use fieldwork data to discuss these theoretical components. Examining the process of submitting project proposals to the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) as an illustrative example, the third section analyses the definition of peace provided by international aid within this politically constrained environment. The fourth section presents case studies from each of the humanitarian crises and analyses the impact of peace-from-below approaches in Cameroon. The conclusion presents final reflections on the country's contributions to broader debates about local peacebuilding.

Promoting peace from below

In recent decades, 'peace-from-below' interventions have become pivotal in international peacebuilding. This approach emphasises the thorough contextualisation of mediation efforts and recognises the cultural dimension of conflicts[12]. It unites diverse institutions and actors committed to building robust connections among groups and individuals while fostering a 'culture of peace'[13]. Local populations affected by conflict are sees as the primary agents of

[12] John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for peace* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1995); Hugh Miall, 'Conflict transformation: a multi-dimensional task', in *Transforming ethnopolitical conflict*, ed. Alex Austin, Martina Fischer, and Norbert Ropers (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), pp. 67–89; Béatrice Pouligny, *Peace operations seen from below* (Hurst, London, 2006).

[13] Sandrine Lefranc, 'A critique of "bottom-up" peacebuilding: do peaceful individuals make peaceful societies?', in *Peacebuilding, memory and reconciliation*, ed. Bruno Charbonneau and Geneviève Parent (Routledge, London,

sustainable grassroots peace[14], with international peacebuilders playing a facilitating role through the establishment of structures like committees or platforms for conflict resolution and training in peaceful coexistence and nonviolent communication[15].

Peace-from-below emerges in response to the disappointing outcomes of state-building and peace programming[16], often linked to the imposition of models that lack local relevance[17] or disempower local actors[18]. Empirical case studies have urged a more comprehensive consideration of local peace dimensions[19] and an increased recognition of how international interventions face local resistance[20]. They have acknowledged the accomplishments and

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2013), pp. 34–52; Andreas Mehler, Denis M. Tull, and Miriam Glund, 'Dialogue as the new mantra in responding to political crisis in Africa? The cases of Mali and Cameroon', ABI Working Paper (Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, Freiburg, February 2021).

[14] Elisa Randazzo, *Beyond liberal peacebuilding* (Routledge, London, New York, 2017).

[15] Alvar Jones Sanchez, 'Peace committees for conflict resolution in Casamance: from popular illusion to political denial' (Fondation Croix Rouge, Paris, 2018).

[16] Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, 'The local turn in peacebuilding: a critical agenda for peace', *Third World Quarterly* 34, 5 (2013), pp. 763-83; Thania Paffenholz, 'Peacebuilding goes local and the local goes peacebuilding', in Tobias Debiel and Ulrich Schneckener (eds), *Peacebuilding in Crisis* (Routledge, London, 2016), pp. 210-26.

[17] Roger Mac Ginty, 'Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly* 36, 5 (2015), pp. 840-56; Stathis Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006); Roland Paris, 'Saving liberal peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies* 36, 2 (2010), pp. 337-65.

[18] Michael Ignatieff, *Empire lite: nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (Penguin Canada, Toronto, 2003); David Chandler, *Empire in denial: the politics of state-building* (Pluto Press, London, 2006); Séverine Autesserre, *The trouble with the Congo* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010).

[19] SungYong Lee, *Local ownership in Asian peacebuilding* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2019); Martin Ola Lundqvist and Joakim Öjendal, 'Atomised and subordinated? Unpacking the role of international involvement in "the local turn" of peacebuilding in Nepal and Cambodia', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13, 2 (2018), pp. 16–30.

[20] Stefanie Kappler and Oliver Richmond, 'Peacebuilding and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina: resistance or emancipation?', *Security Dialogue* 42, 3 (2011), pp. 261–78; Filip Ejdus, 'Local ownership as international governmentality: evidence from the EU mission in the Horn of Africa', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, 1 (2018), pp. 28–50; Oliver P. Richmond, 'Resistance and the post-liberal peace', *Millennium* 38, no. 3 (2010), pp. 665–92; Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell, 'Peacebuilding and critical forms of agency: from resistance to subsistence', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 36, 4 (2011), pp. 326–44.

capacities of sub-national and local actors and institutions in establishing order and fostering peace[21].

Despite increasing references to local ownership in peace interventions, progress has been modest[22] and a gap remains between theory and practice[23]. Scholars criticize how international interventions have diluted the concept of grassroots peacebuilding, reducing references to 'the local' to a 'rhetorical cover'[24] for similar top-down, externally designed interventions[25]. They also highlight a tendency to criticize international engagement in peacebuilding[26] to the benefit of oversimplifying and idealising indigenous, traditional, or customary groups, resulting in a preference for superficial engagement with specific, exclusive local elites[27]. Moreover, the term 'local' remains ambiguous[28], encompassing a spectrum from

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[21] Anna Kreikemeyer, 'Studying peace in and with Central Eurasia: starting from local and trans-local perspectives', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 14, 4 (2020), pp. 465–82.

[22] SungYong Lee, 'Reflection on the "local turn" in peacebuilding: practitioners' views', *Journal of Human Security Studies* 9, 2 (2020), pp. 25–38; Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, *Whose peace? Local ownership and United Nations peacekeeping* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017).

[23] Timothy Donais, 'Empowerment or imposition? Dilemmas of local ownership in post-conflict peacebuilding processes', *Peace & Change* 34, 1 (2009), pp. 3–26; Charles T. Hunt, 'How many turns make a revolution? Whither the "dialogue of the deaf" between peacebuilding scholars and practitioners', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, 4 (2023), pp. 333–50.

[24] David Chandler, 'The liberal peace: statebuilding, democracy and local ownership', in *Rethinking the liberal peace*, ed. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh (Routledge, London, 2011), pp. 77–88.

[25] Nina Wilén, 'Capacity-building or capacity-taking? Legitimizing concepts in peace and development operations', *International Peacekeeping* 16, 3 (2009), pp. 337–51; Stephen Campbell, 'Construing top-down as bottom-up: the governmental co-option of peacebuilding "from below"', *Vis-à-Vis: Explorations in Anthropology* 11, 1 (2011); Birgit Bräuchler and Philipp Naucke, 'Peacebuilding and conceptualisations of the local', *Social Anthropology* 25, 4 (2017), pp. 422–36.

[26] Lundqvist and Öjendal, 'Atomised and subordinated?'; Severine Autesserre, *The frontlines of peace* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2021).

[27] Dahlia Simangan, 'A detour in the local turn: roadblocks in Timor-Leste's post-conflict peacebuilding', *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 5, 2 (2017), pp. 195–221.

[28] Van Leeuwen *et al*., 'The "local turn"'; Jens Narten, 'Post-conflict peacebuilding and local ownership: dynamics of external–local interaction in Kosovo under United Nations administration', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 2, 3 (2008): 369–90.

formal civil society organizations (thereafter CSOs), sometimes reliant on international rather than local legitimacy[29], to various community-based groups, including religious, women's or youth associations, and professional groups, occasionally dominated by (national) elites and interests[30].

While 'local ownership' or 'local turn' can be interpreted in radically different ways[31], peace-from-below may also be ideologically driven rather than empirically supported[32]. International interventions disseminate particular – often Western – conceptions of a peaceful society[33], resembling a modern-day *mission civilisatrice*[34]. Other scholars argue that supporting local capacity may be viewed as a means for Western advocates of liberal peace to circumvent

[29] Gearoid Millar, Jaïr van der Lijn, and Willemijn Verkoren, 'Peacebuilding plans and local eeconfigurations: frictions between imported processes and indigenous practices', *International Peacekeeping* 20, 2 (2013), pp. 137–43; Stefanie Kappler, 'Divergent transformation and centrifugal peacebuilding: the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *International Peacekeeping* 19, 5 (2012), pp. 612–27.

[30] Gilles Dorronsoro, 'Afghanistan : des réseaux de solidarité aux espaces régionaux', in *Economie Des Guerres Civiles*, ed. François Jean and Jean-Christophe Rufin (Hachette, Paris, 1996), pp. 147–88; Antonio Giustozzi, 'Afghanistan: transition without end. An analytical narrative on state-making' (Working Paper, Crisis States Research Center, London, 2008); Thania Paffenholz, 'Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research', in *The 'local turn' in peacebuilding*, ed. Joakim Öjendal, Isabell Schierenbeck, and Caroline Hughes (Routledge, London, 2017), pp. 41–58; Giulia Piccolino, 'Rhétorique de la cohésion sociale et paradoxes de la « paix par le bas » en Côte d'Ivoire', *Politique africaine* 148, 4 (2017): pp. 49–68.

[31] Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, 'The "local turn" in peacebuilding: a literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly* 36, 5 (2015), pp. 825–39.

[32] Anita Ernstorfer, Diana Chigas, and Hannah Vaughan-Lee, 'From little to large: when does peacebuilding add up?', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 10, 1 (2015), pp. 72–77; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 'The local turn'; Oliver Richmond, *A post-liberal peace* (Routledge, London, 2012).

[33] Meera Sabaratnam, 'Avatars of eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace', *Security Dialogue* 44, 3 (2013), pp. 259–78.

[34] Roland Paris, 'International peacebuilding and the "*mission civilisatrice*"', *Review of International Studies* 28, 4 (2002), pp. 637-56; Michael Pugh, 'The political economy of peacebuilding: a critical theory perspective', *International Journal of Peace Studies* 10, 2 (2005), pp. 23-42; Vivienne Jabri, 'Peacebuilding, the local and the international: a colonial or a postcolonial rationality?', *Peacebuilding* 1, 1 (2013), pp. 3-16.

accountability for unwanted outcomes in policy interventions[35]: by promoting local capacity, the responsibility for the peace process's outcomes is effectively shifted to those intervened upon. Furthermore, empirical research challenges the assumption that local initiatives inherently guarantee national-level peace[36].

Although local reconciliation projects hold value, these initiatives may divert attention from structural factors and be co-opted by national and political elites to deter international stakeholders from involvement in issues like elections, democratisation, human rights, or justice[37]. Case studies have demonstrated how authoritarian regimes benefit from restricting international peacebuilders to community-level interventions[38], allowing them to present local conflicts as isolated issues, retain control over national-level processes, and strengthen their

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[35] David Chandler, 'Post-conflict statebuilding: governance without government', in *Whose peace? Critical perspectives on the political economy of peacebuilding*, ed. Michael Pugh, Neil Cooper, and Mandy Turner (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008), pp. 337–55.

[36] Tobias Denskus, 'Peacebuilding does not build peace', *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4–5 (2007), pp. 656–62; Edward Newman, Roland Paris, and Oliver P. Richmond, eds., *New perspectives on liberal peacebuilding* (United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 2009); Claudia Simons *et al.*, 'Power-sharing in Africa's war zones: how important is the local level?', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, 4 (2013), pp. 681–706; Jason K. Stearns, 'The trouble with the Congo: local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding', *Review of African Political Economy* 40, 135 (2013), pp. 163–67; Philipp Naucke, 'Peacebuilding upside down? How a peace community in Colombia builds peace despite the state', *Social Anthropology* 25, 4 (2017), pp. 454–69; Jorg Kustermans, Tom Sauer, and Barbara Segaert, 'Peacebuilding's predicament: a dark mood among the experts', in *A requiem for peacebuilding?*, ed. Jorg Kustermans, Tom Sauer, and Barbara Segaert (Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2021), pp. 1–14.

[37] Will Jones, Ricardo Soares de Oliveira and Harry Verhoeven, 'Africa's illiberal state-builders' (Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford, 2013); Terrence Lyons, 'Victorious rebels and postwar politics', *Civil Wars* 18, 2 (2016), pp. 160-74.

[38] Daniel Christopher Watson, 'Rethinking inter-communal violence in Africa', *Civil Wars* (2023), pp. 1–30; Giulia Piccolino, 'Local peacebuilding'; Joanne Wallis, 'Is "good enough" peacebuilding good enough? The potential and pitfalls of the local turn in peacebuilding in Timor-Leste', *The Pacific Review* 30, 2 (2017), pp. 251–69.

influence on CSOs[39]. This allows other forms of peacebuilding that deviate from liberal norms and have been labelled as 'illiberal'[40] – describing 'a process of post-war reconstruction managed by local elites in defiance of liberal peace precepts on civil liberties, the rule of law, the expansion of economic freedoms and poverty alleviation, with a view to constructing a hegemonic order and an elite stranglehold over the political economy'[41]. Although this definition resonates with some characteristics of Cameroon, a major distinction exists: Cameroon does not fit the typical post-conflict context.

Cameroon, a peaceful country?

In Cameroon, peace initiatives face Yaoundé's scepticism and aversion to external interference and criticism. The country, wielding economic and political influence, is capable of 'picking and choosing' among programmes funded by international organizations and even among these

[39] John Heathershaw, *Post-conflict Tajikistan* (Routledge, London, 2009); David Jackson, 'Who won and who lost? The role of local governments in post-conflict recovery', in *The imperative of good local governance*, ed. Joachim Öjendal and Anki Dellnäs (United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 2013), pp. 350–82.

[40] Jones *et al.*, 'Africa's illiberal state-builders'; Giulia Piccolino, 'Winning wars, building (illiberal) peace? The rise (and possible fall) of a victor's peace in Rwanda and Sri Lanka', *Third World Quarterly* 36, 9 (2015), pp. 1770-85; David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran, 'Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management', *Cooperation and Conflict* 53, 4 (2018), pp. 486–506; Ntagahoraho Burihabwa and Devon Curtis, 'Postwar statebuilding in Burundi: ruling party elites and illiberal peace', *International Affairs* 97, 4 (2021), pp. 1221–38.

[41] Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, 'Illiberal peacebuilding in Angola', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, 2 (2011), p. 288.

organizations themselves[42], echoing strategies employed by other countries, such as Rwanda[43], that have maximized their agency and resisted international demands. A notable instance in Cameroon is the rejection of mediation offers regarding the Anglophone conflict from the Swiss and Canadian governments, as well as from the Vatican[44].

This stance aligns with the government's 'propaganda of stability' (*propagande de la stabilité*)[45], wherein Paul Biya's authoritarian regime persistently portrays Cameroon as a peaceful country which, unlike many others on the continent, has avoided major armed conflicts since independence. The only exceptions included the conflict between the government and the rebel *Union des Populations Camerounaises* in the first decade after independence[46], and a low-intensity conflict with Nigeria regarding the sovereignty over the oil-rich region of Bakassi Peninsula[47]. Some scholars posit that until the mid-2010s, Cameroon 'enjoy[ed], more than most other African countries, relative peace and stability by virtue of the fact that it is one of

[42] Ndiva Kofele-Kale, 'Cameroon and its foreign relations', *African Affairs* 80, 319 (1981), pp. 197–217; Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, 'Donors and the making of "credible" elections in Cameroon', in *Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa*, ed. Tobias Hagmann and Filip Reyntjens (Zed Books, London, 2016), pp. 119–38; Lekunze and Page, 'Security in Cameroon'.

[43] Filip Reyntjens, *Political governance in post-genocide Rwanda* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013); Eugenia Zorbas, 'Aid dependence and policy independence: explaining the Rwandan paradox', in *Remaking Rwanda: state building and human rights after mass violence*, ed. Scott Strauss and Lars Waldorf (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2011), pp. 103–7; Rachel Hayman, 'Funding fraud? Donors and democracy in Rwanda', *ibid*, pp. 118–31.

[44] International Crisis Group, 'Cameroon's Anglophone crisis at the crossroads' (African Report, Brussels, 2017).

[45] Eboko and Awondo, 'L'État stationnaire', p. 18.

[46] Richard A. Joseph, *Le mouvement nationaliste au Cameroun* (Karthala, Paris, 1986); Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, and Jacob Tatsitsa, *Kamerun ! Une guerre cachée aux origines de la Françafrique, 1948-1971* (La Découverte, Paris, 2019).

[47] Justice Mbuh, 'The Bakassi peninsula dispute', *International Law and Conflict* (2004), pp. 1-29; Ndubuisi Nwokolo, 'Peacebuilding or structural violence? Deconstructing the aftermath of Nigeria/Cameroon boundary demarcation', *African Security Review* 29, 1 (2020), pp. 41-57.

the continent's very few countries that have not experienced the trauma of *coup d'état* and military rule'[48].

Despite a representation of Cameroon as 'a haven of peace' (*un havre de paix*)[49], the absence of war does not diminish several instances of social unrest and civil protests, leading some scholars to refer to 'peace by deterrence' where violent strategies are employed to prevent the escalation of violence and maintain control over the population[50]. The mobilizations and protest movements of the post-independence years (1960s-1970s) faced severe repression by a regime that sent political prisoners to camps. After a period of easing in the 1980s, repression resurfaced in the 1990s with demands for multipartyism, taking on both violent and insidious forms[51]. In the early 2000s, growing insecurity caused by general frustration over the social and economic situation justified the creation of an operational command force (*Brigade d'Intervention Rapide*, thereafter BIR), which has faced accusations of extrajudicial killings[52]. The authorities employed new control measures during protests, fostering a situation of

[48] Tangie Nsoh Fonchingong and John Bobuin Gemandze (eds), *Cameroon: the stakes and challenges of Governance and Development* (Langaa RPCIG, Bamenda, 2009), p. 2.

[49] Expression officially used in a speech by Paul Biya to the diplomatic corps in Yaoundé on 30th December 1985. His predecessor, Ahmadou Ahidjo, used similar formulas: "island of peace", "country of peace and prosperity", "land of peace and welcome". See Claudine Ambomo, *Analyse d'un discours politique présidentiel : étude lexicométrique (Paul Biya, Cameroun, 1982 à 2002)* (Université de Besançon, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2013); Clébert Agenor Njimeni Njiotang, *Le discours de Paul Biya à l'ère du multipartisme au Cameroun* (Université Bordeaux III, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2018).

[50] Audhild Steinnes Heum, *"They say we have peace": perceptions and practices of peace in Northern Cameroon* (University of Bergen, unpublished master's thesis, 2016), p. 58.

[51] Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, 'La démobilisation collective au Cameroun : entre régime postautoritaire et militantisme extraverti', *Critique internationale* 40, 3 (2008), pp. 73-94.

[52] Oben T. Mbuago and Celestina Neh Fru, 'Civil society and democratization: the Cameroonian experience', *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 18, 2 (2003), pp. 133–48; Amnesty International, 'Right cause, wrong means: human rights violated and justice denied in Cameroon's fight against Boko Haram' (London, 2016); Amnesty International, 'With or against us: people of the North-West region of Cameroon caught between the army, armed separatists and militias' (London, 2023).

'collective demobilisation' (*démobilisation collective*) among Cameroonian civil society[53]. This aligns with the global pattern of 'shrinking civic space', where governments have sought to limit civil society activities through legal and extra-legal means since the mid-2000s[54]. Constraints, administrative restrictions, intimidation, and violence towards civil society have intensified due to the 2014 Law for the suppression of Acts of Terrorism, enacted in response to Boko Haram attacks in the Far North region[55], and the ongoing Anglophone conflict[56].

Additionally, Yaoundé attributes unrest to external factors, evident in ongoing humanitarian crises. In the northern regions, Boko Haram attacks are portrayed as primarily a Nigerian issue spilling over into Cameroonian territory[57]. Similarly, the growth of extremism among some young Muslims is explained not by socio-economic factors fostering radicalization, but by their education abroad[58]. In the eastern regions, insecurity is attributed to rebel groups from neighbouring CAR[59], while in the North-West and South-West regions, non-state armed groups are depicted as traitors supported by the diaspora and illegal networks from

[53] Pommerolle, 'La démobilisation collective'.

[54] Antoine Buyse, 'Squeezing civic space: restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights', *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22, 8 (2018), pp. 966-88.

[55] Boris Bertolt, '"L'ennemi est parmi nous". Les usages politiques de la loi antiterroriste au Cameroun', *Journal des anthropologues*, 154-155 (2018), pp. 85-107; Modeste Mba Talla, 'Cameroun : entre criminalisation de l'action collective, élections et gouvernance de la neutralisation', *Bulletin FrancoPaix* 3, 2 (2018), pp. 1-8.

[56] Nancy Annan *et al*., 'Civil society, peacebuilding from below and shrinking civic space: the case of Cameroon's 'Anglophone' conflict', *Conflict, Security & Development* 21, 6 (2021), pp. 697-725.

[57] Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, 'Les violences dans l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun : le complot comme outil d'interprétation et de luttes politiques', *Politique africaine* 138, 2 (2015), pp. 163-77.

[58] Heum, *"They Say We Have Peace"*.

[59] Calvin Minfegue, *Espaces transfrontaliers, territorialités et conflictualités en Afrique centrale* (Université Grenoble Alpes, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2020), pp. 202-5.

abroad[60]. This externalization of instability aims to uphold the image of a united and stable Cameroon in the face of growing contestation[61].

In addition to this externalization and 'propaganda of stability', Cameroon actively seeks a leading role in regional and international peace and security operations[62]. It hosts the International School for Security Forces (thereafter EIFORCES), dedicated to training military personnel for peacekeeping operations, and the African Union (thereafter AU)'s continental logistics base. Since 1992, Cameroon has participated in almost all UN peacekeeping operations, including in the neighbouring CAR where it maintains, since 2014, one of the largest troop contingents. Yaoundé also plays a central role in regional mediation within the Economic Community of West African States[63] and has committed to providing components for the brigade of its African Standby Force (thereafter ECCAS). The country is actively involved in the global 'war on terror', receiving support from Europe and the United States. While the fight against Boko Haram has bolstered some organizations such as the Chad Lake Basin Commission, whose influence and mandate increased due to the conflict[64], Cameroon became a focal country of the Lake Chad stabilization strategy, the AU's first comprehensive

[60] Richard Agbor Ayukndang Enoh, 'Interactions between the government and diasporas: the West-African case of Cameroon', *Diaspora Studies* 7, 2 (2014), pp. 75-87; Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Hans De Marie Heungoup, 'The "Anglophone crisis": a tale of the Cameroonian postcolony', *African Affairs* 116, 464 (2017), pp. 526-38.

[61] Marie Morelle and Mathias Owona Nguini, 'Le réveil des crises camerounaises', *L'Espace Politique*, 35 (2018); Lekunze and Page, 'Security in Cameroon'.

[62] Manu Lekunze, *Complex adaptive systems, resilience and security in Cameroon* (Routledge, London, 2019).

[63] Yves Alexandre Chouala, *La politique extérieure du Cameroun* (Karthala, Paris, 2014).

[64] Joseph Vincent Ntuda Ebode *et al*., 'The Boko Haram conflict in Cameroon: why is peace so elusive?' (Friedrich Ebret Stiftung, Yaoundé, 2017).

stabilization strategy[65]. Additionally, it participates in the Multinational Joint Task Force, a regional initiative combatting the Boko Haram insurgency.

Considering these intricate national, regional, and international factors, what does it mean for international stakeholders to promote peace from below, especially given that the state's attitude towards civil society and civic action in Cameroon 'has been one of both caution and repression'[66]?

'Peace in Cameroon is a very delicate issue': the example of the UNPBF

In recent years, the prevailing perception of Cameroon as a peaceful country has been challenged. In 2014, the government officially declared war on Boko Haram. Military mobilisation was further reinforced by troop deployment in the North-West and South-West regions since 2017. As a result, in addition to responding to humanitarian needs, the focus of international interventions in the country has shifted towards addressing conflict drivers and promoting peace. As a symbol of this shift, Cameroon became eligible for the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (thereafter UNPBF) in 2019, and an official UNPBF office was established in Yaoundé.

These recent developments can be interpreted as part of the 'diplomacy of windfall effects' (*diplomatie des effets d'aubaine*) that characterizes Paul Biya's regime: the ability to capitalize on situations, events, or changes in context for which it may not necessarily be

[65] Ebenye Mbappe Sonne Dipoko, 'International involvement in sovereign states: the role of the AU in the preservation of peace and security in sub-saharan Africa. the case of Cameroon', *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences* 21, 4 (2023), pp. 85–93.

[66] Temngah Joseph Nyambo, 'The legal framework of civil society and social movements', in Emmanuel Yenshu Vudo (ed), *Civil society and the search for development alternatives in Cameroon* (African Books Collective, Dakar, 2008), pp. 46-58, p. 47.

responsible, but which it manages to turn to its advantage[67]. Discussing peace remains a sensitive topic in Cameroon due to the government's propaganda of stability, as well as its mistrust and hostility towards external interference and criticism. While the peace sector has long been poorly represented in the country, organizations closely related to promoting local peacebuilding, like Search for Common Ground or InterPeace, are not present in Cameroon – and, according to a UNPBF employee, 'they are not necessarily welcome either'[68].

The process of submitting project proposals to the UNPBF exemplifies the authorities' strong suspicion regarding the peace sector. This process involves two stages: international NGOs and UN agencies initially submit a concept note to the UNPBF headquarters in New York. If approved, they are authorised to draft a full project proposal that must be signed by the country's authorities. Typically, the government reviews the approved concept notes, and NGOs and UN agencies incorporate its recommendations into the project proposal. However, Cameroon demanded also to proofread the fully drafted project proposals, in order to review their content and potentially veto them. In September 2020, candidate NGOs and UN agencies were informed about a meeting with the Cameroonian authorities, which the UNPBF Cameroon team presented as 'more of a political than a technical issue'[69]. The purpose of this meeting was to explain the activities, areas of intervention, targeted results, and budget of each project proposal. NGOs and UN agencies were advised by the UNPBF Cameroon team to emphasize that their project proposals target populations displaced by the 'crisis' in the North-West and South-West regions but without a direct intervention in these regions: 'avoid talking about working in these regions because it is a highly sensitive topic for the authorities'. They were also invited to share the content of their presentation with the UNPBF Cameroon team

[67] Jean Koufan, *La politique étrangère du Cameroun* (forthcoming), p. 277.

[68] Interview, UNPBF officer, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 4 November 2021 (my English translation).

[69] This quote (and the following): UNPBF officer, Yaoundé, 30 September 2020.

beforehand ‘because [we] are a little aware of government sensitivities – and we can provide guidance if necessary. […] Peace in Cameroon is a very delicate issue’.

Although the UNPBF is now permanently established in the country, Yaoundé does not have an official peacebuilding strategy to date. The Recovery and Peacebuilding Strategy for 2018-2022, jointly developed by international actors and the government, does not include the Anglophone conflict (see below) and has never been officially signed and adopted by Cameroonian authorities[70]. Consequently, peace sector has been given a specific definition: international interventions aim to ‘contribute to sustainable positive peace’, which is understood as ‘inherently local’ and does not ‘include national-level interventions’[71]. To understand the issues and consequences, the following section successively analyses peace-from-below interventions implemented in each of the three humanitarian crises.

International peace-from-below in Cameroonian crises

Counterinsurgency and supporting the state in the Far North region

In the Far North region, the complex array of conflict factors and situations[72] is often oversimplified through the prism of Boko Haram attacks[73]. According to the analysis of

[70] Government of Cameroon, European Union, World Bank, United Nations, 'Recovery and Peace Consolidation Strategy for Northern and East Cameroon (2018-2022)' (Yaoundé, 2018).

[71] HDPN Taskforce, 'Peace', p. 8.

[72] Saïbou Issa, 'Assessment of needs for the consolidation of peace in the Logone and Chari' (UNDP, Yaoundé, 2017).

[73] Robert Tayimlong, 'Fragility and insurgency as outcomes of underdevelopment of public infrastructure and socio-economic deprivation: the case of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 16, 2 (2021), pp. 209-23.

international stakeholders, violence and instability are attributed to a context where ‘chronic poverty and persistent violence render communities highly susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist movements’[74]. As a result, the focus is on peace-from-below projects that aim to ‘enhance ... the capacity of traditional mechanisms ... to prevent and mitigate conflict’ and ‘empower young people ... to resolve local conflicts before they escalate’[75]. In a context understood as a rise of religious extremism, a special focus is put on inter-community collaboration. As explained by this member of a local NGO implementing activities for an international organization, the first targets are the

> people displaced by Boko Haram. [...] In each community, we set up peace committees and train mobilisers who are responsible for conveying messages of peace. We also initiate small activities: [...] [for] example, Muslims meet in church to do housework, and vice versa [...] [to] promote peace and living together.’[76]

Despite involving 'local communities', these peace-from-below initiatives continue to perpetuate top-down, externally designed interventions. They also echo the media and official discourse, which avoids any discussion regarding the relatively easy infiltration of Cameroonian territory by the Boko Haram group, the absence of state presence in these regions, the population's distrust of the few state agents available, and the illegitimacy of the elites[77]. By overlooking the responsibility of the civil and military authorities, the peace-from-below framework contributes to a fragmented perception of the problem.

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[74] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Soutenir les mécanismes de consolidation de la paix au niveau communautaire et l’inclusion des jeunes dans les zones situées à la frontière entre le Tchad et le Cameroun', Project Document (approved version) (Yaoundé, 2018), p. 4.

[75] *Ibid*, p. 7.

[76] Interview, local NGO employee, online (Zoom), 22 November 2021 (my English translation).

[77] Pommerolle, 'Les violences'.

Additionally, conflict-affected areas are 'often depicted as being beyond the control of the state or as a collection of "territories without governance"'[78]. In the context of the 'war on terror', where Cameroon plays a pivotal role, international peace interventions aiming to 'prevent and mitigate conflict and violent extremism' also focus on counterinsurgency strategies, seeking to restore or strengthen state structures and authorities[79]. Since the beginning of the crisis, there has been a growing emphasis on supporting state initiatives, as evidenced by the evolution of the UNPBF projects in the region. In 2018, they primarily focused on the local level through activities aiming at 'enhancing community mechanisms for conflict prevention, countering violent extremism, and fostering social cohesion'[80]. However, the newly funded project in 2020 shifted its focus towards 'strengthening the authority and presence of the state', 'supporting the government in improving the reintegration process of former associates' of the Boko Haram group[81], and 'conducting awareness-raising campaigns and information sessions on the government's work and the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation (thereafter DDR)'[82].

While peace-from-below activities are increasingly orientated towards supporting government processes and initiatives, this shift needs to be analysed within the context of local conceptions of peace. Unlike military and political discourse, these conceptions do not equate peace with the eradication or arrest of terrorists. Instead, scholars working at the local level

[78] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Soutenir les mécanismes', p. 4.

[79] Géraud Magrin and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (eds), *Crisis and development: the Lake Chad region and Boko Haram* (Agence française de développement, Paris, 2018); Usman Tar and Bashir Bala, 'Boko Haram insurgency, terrorism and the challenges of peacebuilding in the Lake Chad basin', in Kenneth Omeje (ed), *Peacebuilding in contemporary Africa* (Routledge, London, 2018), pp. 142-165.

[80] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Soutenir les mécanismes', p. 17.

[81] For an analysis, see Moussa Bobbo, 'La politique nationale de DDR des ex-combattants de Boko Haram à l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun', (Notes de l'IFRI, Institut français des relations internationales, Paris, 2023).

[82] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Stabilisation et relèvement des communautés affectées par la crise sécuritaire à l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun', Project Document (approved version) (Yaoundé, 2020), pp. 8-12.

highlighted a non-binary approach that emphasises the discontinuous and immaterial dimensions of peace. Far from being solely associated with the cessation of violence and the restoration of state authority, 'peace' differs from the linear and future-oriented timeframes of the national counterterrorism efforts and international strategies (first eradicate, then rebuild). This discrepancy may explain why people are cautious about implementing international-style peace processes that follow successive stages (ceasefire, peace agreement, forcibly displaced returns, and DDR programme)[83].

Agropastoral conflicts and social cohesion in the eastern regions

In the East and Adamawa regions, international peace-responsive programming aims at 'reducing tensions/conflicts related to the use of natural resources for agropastoral activities'[84]. In these border areas with CAR, peace issues are analysed concerning refugee influx and its repercussions. The demographic increase resulting from these arrivals has heightened pressure on natural resources, leading to tensions between host populations and refugees[85]. This may have 'severe consequences'; 'recurring conflicts could undermine social cohesion and potentially lead to violence, involvement in terrorist groups, organised crime, rape, and murders'[86]. In response, peace programmes have emphasised trainings and awareness

[83] Cécile Dubernet and Pascal Borne Djeumegued, 'Initiatives endogènes de protection civile et conceptions locales de la paix au nord du Cameroun', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 250 (2023), pp. 282.

[84] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Est/Adamaoua/Nord : réduction des tensions/conflits liés à l'utilisation des ressources naturelles pour les activités agropastorales', Project Document (approved version) (Yaoundé, 2019).

[85] Catholic Relief Service, 'Social cohesion analysis: Cameroon' (Yaoundé, 2016).

[86] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Est/Adamaoua/Nord', p. 8.

campaigns for ‘community reconciliation’, establishing ‘local conflict management committees’, and creating ‘platforms for the peaceful resolution of agropastoral conflicts’.

In doing so, aid actors interpret tensions over resource access as community-based issues (between farmers/herders, local populations/refugees) when they are more linked to structural factors than to problems of ‘peaceful coexistence’. For this Cameroonian herder, if land and resource use conflicts have increased,

> The [main] problem is that there's no space left anymore! It used to be all grasslands, but then that *bokassa*[87] took over everything. … People are farming more and more land, and we’ve got to take our cattle deeper into the bush. … And just when you find a place to graze, someone shows up with a piece of paper saying they’ve got a mining permit for the area, so you must move your cattle elsewhere.[88]

The changing dynamics in rural areas, driven by demographic growth, climate change, and national development strategies, have challenged the traditional uses of natural resources and rural spaces[89]. These issues are exacerbated by the inadequacy of existing legal texts to address current realities concerning land and resource allocation for agriculture and livestock. Dissatisfaction among actors and the resort to ‘self-administered justice through violence’[90] stems from the insufficiency of regulatory frameworks and official references. By confining their projects to peace-from-below approaches, aid actors sidestep addressing issues such as land grabbing by foreign companies, large-scale traders, or corruption among local officials. Yet, the latter is one of the main issues raised by herders:

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[87] *Chromolaena odorata*, an invasive plant that cattle cannot graze on.

[88] Conversation with Cameroonian and refugee herders, Kette, December 2017 (my English translation).

[89] Claire Lefort-Rieu, 'Du conflit d’usages au prisme communautaire : penser les conflits agropastoraux et leurs réponses à l’est du Cameroun', *Afrique contemporaine* 274, 2 (2022), pp. 51-69.

[90] UNPBF Cameroon, "Est/Adamaoua/Nord', p. 10 (my English translation).

> Here in the Eastern region, if your cattle damage a farmer's field, the authorities always take his side, even if he's farming in an area meant for livestock. [...] Either you compensate him, or he goes to the gendarmerie or the sub-prefecture and there they will not only fine you but also ask for something extra. And if you refuse, they'll put you in jail.[91]

The lack of demarcation of agropastoral zones may be perpetuated by some authorities who, by exploiting their arbitration power for personal gain, benefit more from the proliferation of conflicts than their resolution. This has resulted in a 'politics of permanent conflict'[92]: within a context of recurrent predatory practices[93], administrative authorities play a role in perpetuating agropastoral tensions, as they have more to gain from the conflict than from resolving it.

Additionally, by attributing agropastoral conflicts to the recent influx of refugees, peace-from-below initiatives use an ahistorical lens and fail to recognize that agropastoral tensions have long existed and did not necessarily hinder mutually beneficial relationships between groups[94]. Moreover, they reinforce the government's tendency to assign responsibility for unrest to outsiders and simplify the conflicting parties, essentializing their identities and turning them into homogeneous rival groups. This aligns with the 'define, divide, and rule' strategy[95] employed by the authoritarian regime to exacerbate ethnic affiliations and maintain stability, particularly in challenging times[96].

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[91] Conversation with Cameroonian and refugee herders, Timangolo, November 2017 (my English translation).

[92] Mark Moritz, 'The politics of permanent conflict: farmer-herder conflicts in Northern Cameroon', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 40, 1 (2006), pp. 101-26.

[93] Mbembe, 'Epilogue'; Jean-François Bayart, *The state in Africa* (Polity, Cambridge, 2009).

[94] Christian Seignobos, 'Les Mbororo du Lom-Pangar. Mission sociologique' (World Bank, Yaoundé, 2011).

[95] Lekunze and Page, 'Security', p. 225.

[96] Luc Sindjoun, 'Identité nationale et "révision constitutionnelle" du 18 janvier 1996 : comment constitutionnalise-t-on le "nous" au Cameroun dans l'Etat post-unitaire? », *Polis* 1, 1 (1996), p. 13; Francis Nyamnjoh, 'Cameroon: a country united by ethnic ambition and difference', *African Affairs* 98, 390 (1999), pp. 101-18.

Shifting responsibility to individuals in the Anglophone conflict

While local populations in the North-West and South-West regions assert that 'peace is what everybody needs'[97], it remains a highly sensitive topic due to the government's direct involvement in an ongoing conflict, which Yaoundé largely refers to as 'a crisis'. This situation is linked to the authorities' 'hammer and lies' approach [98], which encompasses a counter-insurgency war and a disinformation campaign, amidst limited international pressure and interest in the conflict[99].

UN agencies and NGOs in Cameroon often confront suspicions and threats from authorities[100], compelling them to address the Anglophone conflict solely as a humanitarian crisis[101]. In 2020, when the United Nation Development Programme (thereafter UNDP) unilaterally decided to support the Presidential Plan for Reconstruction and Development (thereafter PPRD), it created tensions among aid stakeholders[102]. Armed groups interpreted this decision as international actors siding with the government in the conflict, leading aid organizations to become targets and encounter significant difficulties in (re)gaining access to

[97] Roxana Willis *et al*., '"We remain their slaves": voices from the Cameroon conflict' (SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, New York, 2020), p. 84.

[98] Chris Roberts, 'Pathways to peace in Cameroon: ten critical observations for the international community' (Canadian Global Affairs Institute, Calgary, 2022).

[99] Maurice Beseng, Gordon Crawford and Nancy Annan, 'From "Anglophone problem" to "Anglophone conflict" in Cameroon: assessing prospects for peace', *Africa Spectrum* 58, 1 (2023), pp. 89-105.

[100] Cameroonian Ministry of Home Affairs (MINAT), 'Déclaration du Ministre de l'Administration Territoriale sur les activités des organisations non gouvernementales (ONG), les associations de la société civile et les associations des droits de l'homme au Cameroun', 9 March 2020.

[101] Claire Lefort-Rieu, 'Education et formation professionnelle en situation de crises humanitaires : l'exemple des migrations forcées au Cameroun ', *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, 286 (2022), pp. 465-71.

[102] Observation during OCHA/INGOs monthly meetings, Yaoundé, 2020-2021.

the conflict-affected areas. Consequently, they often refuse to engage in peacebuilding in these regions. An INGO representative stated:

> Our interventions must remain independent for impartiality, not favouring either side [...]. Engaging in peace efforts could imply supporting a specific perspective, [...] which is not our role […] as promoting peace is a political objective.[103]

Interestingly, although the Anglophone conflict was initially meant to be included in the HDPN approach, both the government's sensitivity and the UNDP/PPRD event halted any further developments[104].

However, peace programming is not entirely absent from international interventions in the Anglophone regions, though these projects are shaped in very specific ways. They aim to 'reduce tensions at the community level ... by providing tangible peace benefits to the populations affected by this crisis'[105]. An employee of a Cameroonian NGO explained that

> incorporat[ing] peace promotion into our projects … has become mandatory if you want your project to be approved [by international donors] ... But honestly, I'm not sure whether this is truly relevant. In our reproductive health projects, for instance, we work with women and girls who are victims of the conflict, not with the belligerents. They suffer from this conflict, but they are not part of it ... They simply want the violence to end. So, I'm not sure whether there is a real need for reconciliation or peace promotion.[106]

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[103] Interview, INGO employee, online (Zoom), 17 November 2021 (my English translation).

[104] Interview, HDPN representative, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 04 November 2021. See also HDPN Taskforce, 'Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus'.

[105] UNPBF Cameroon, 'Est/Adamaoua/Nord', p. 4.

[106] Interview, local NGO employee, online (Zoom), 12 November 2021.

This is evident in the account of an IDP woman now residing in the Eastern region, explaining the reasons her family had to leave the North-West region:

> People are still facing threats. [Armed groups] hold individuals hostage, demanding millions [of FCFA], saying, 'If you don't pay, your children won't come home'. … As they have nothing, instead of fighting with the government, they fight us. Initially, their issues were with the government, and we weren't involved. But it overwhelmed them, and now they're targeting us. They raid houses, take cattle and children, burn down houses, and extort money. We've got too many problems now in Bamenda, too many.[107]

In examining the contributions of Cameroonian civil society organizations to conflict resolution and their challenges[108], scholars have emphasized how grassroots initiatives, responding to state constraints, use strictly non-violent methods and focus their advocacy on ending the violence – a strategy of 'adopting less confrontational lobbying campaigns, applying a degree of self-censorship, and working within the framework of ... (formal or informal) agreement with the authorities'[109]. My data indicates that this observation also applies to peace interventions endorsed by international stakeholders, with several consequences.

Firstly, local-level studies have highlighted that many Cameroonians emphasize the need to address national-level issues, not just focus on community reconciliation, to achieve legitimate peace[110]. Therefore, the effectiveness of a peace strategy is questionable if it

[107] Interview, IDP woman, Mandjou, Cameroon, 28 March 2021 (my English translation).

[108] Annan *et al.*, 'Civil society'.

[109] Jean Bossuyt and Martin Ronceray, 'Claiming back civic space. Towards approaches fit for the 2020s?" (European Centre for Development Policy Management, Brussels, 2020), p. 34.

[110] Gordon Crawford *et al.*, 'Voices from 'ground zero': interrogating history, culture and identity in the resolution of Cameroon's "Anglophone" conflict' (Conventry University, Coventry, 2022).

overlooks the resolution of the conflict's political root causes[111] and neglects engagement with institutions – which is precisely what people are requesting on the ground[112].

Secondly, by promoting community-level programmes aimed at 'training youths and women on community mediation skills to be able to talk to their brothers, sisters, and children in armed groups to drop their arms'[113], the responsibility for violence and conflict resolution is shifted onto individuals. This approach aligns with the state's perspective, which prioritises reconstruction and economic development projects in response to 'the Anglophone problem' but avoids addressing independence aspirations and political issues[114]. In this specific context, aid actors engaged in peace-from-below contribute to maintaining 'state peace' – which preserves the status quo – rather than facilitating a peace negotiated between the two parties[115]. Thus, promoting social stability at the community level becomes part of a political project, distancing aid actors from the neutrality they claim to uphold. It absolves the Cameroonian state from implementing political responses to a conflict whose origins and demands are fundamentally politics.

Conclusion

This study of international peace-from-below initiatives in Cameroon has illuminated the multifaceted challenges and unintended consequences of such efforts within authoritarian contexts. By examining the implementation and outcomes of these initiatives across three

[111] Beseng, Crawford and Annan, 'From "Anglophone Problem"'.

[112] Willis *et al.*, '"We Remain Their Slaves"', p. 84–86.

[113] Annan *et al.*, 'Civil society', p. 707.

[114] Government of Cameroon, 'Report of the rapporteur general of the Major National Dialogue' (Yaounde, 2019).

[115] Giulia Piccolino, 'Peacebuilding and statebuilding in post-2011 Côte d'Ivoire: a victor's peace?', *African Affairs* 117, 468 (2018), pp. 485–508.

distinct crises in Cameroon—the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, the Central African refugee situation, and the Anglophone conflict— this research highlights that peace-from-below is more than a 'rhetorical cover'[116] and does have tangible effects. Cameroon's case study contributes to a broader understanding of peacebuilding, offering insights into crucial discussions.

Firstly, the frequent oversight of the essential need to strengthen democracy and rebuild trust in state institutions, coupled with an emphasis on fostering local reconciliation and community resilience, illustrates how peace-from-below approaches shift the reconciliation burden onto the population. Not only do they overlook the root causes of conflicts and grassroots political claims, but they also dismiss the *substance* of people's grievances, implying that the *way* these concerns are articulated is detrimental and perilous to their fellow citizens. Moreover, by insisting that solutions lie at the local level, they participate in a global 'resilience' trend that has (re)gained importance into international aid interventions for the past few years[117].

Secondly, the analysis reveals how peace-from-below initiatives can inadvertently reinforce authoritarian narratives and practices. In Cameroon, these initiatives often align with the state's portrayal of a stable and harmonious society, thereby obscuring underlying tensions and grievances. Far from being unique to Cameroon, this phenomenon contributes to broader discussions about illiberal peacebuilding and the need to critically assess how peace initiatives can be co-opted by authoritarian regimes to maintain power and suppress dissent, 'as promoting peace is a political objective' – even at the grassroots level. The resilience of the Cameroonian state, despite internal conflicts and external pressures, speaks to the broader issue of authoritarian stability in conflict-affected areas. The state's strategic manipulation of peace-from-below initiatives to serve its political agenda—thereby avoiding substantial international

[116] Chandler, 'The liberal peace'.

[117] Campbell, 'Construing top-down'; Marc Welsh, 'Resilience and responsibility: governing uncertainty in a complex world', *The Geographical Journal* 180, 1 (2014), pp. 15–26; David Chandler, 'Beyond neoliberalism: resilience, the new art of governing complexity', *Resilience* 2, 1 (2014), pp. 47–63.

interference— also raises critical questions about the effectiveness and ethical implications of international interventions in authoritarian contexts.

Thirdly, the study highlights the geopolitical complexities surrounding peace-from-below efforts and the need to consider how the same geopolitical stakes and other 'stabilization' interventions may intertwine with or influence peace promotion at the local level. Cameroon's strategic importance in the fight against terrorism and its regional influence significantly affect the scope and nature of international peacebuilding activities, even at the grassroot level, illustrating the need for a multiscale understanding and study of peace promotion. If contextualisation matters in peace-from-below, it is not only at the grassroots level: the case of Cameroon underscores the necessity of also integrating broader geopolitical stakes, highlighting how international, regional, and local politics intertwine to shape the possibilities and limitations of peacebuilding.

Fourthly, far from dismissing the local level, this study provides fruitful insights into mechanisms through which peace-from-below initiatives conveniently legitimize a diluted perception of local peacebuilding bottom-up efforts lacking an 'up' element – a scenario more aptly described as 'peace below' rather than 'peace from below.' More specifically, the case of Cameroon calls for further investigation of how, by relieving the state of the need to implement political responses, the international peace-from-below initiatives exhibit a performative aspect and contribute to creating conditions for 'a victor's peace'[118] in contexts which do not fit a post-conflict setting characterized by military victory – not only though fragmented perceptions of problems, but also through what they do or refuse to do.

[118] Jonathan Goodhand, 'Stabilising a victor's peace? Humanitarian action and reconstruction in Eastern Sri Lanka', *Disasters* 34, 3 (2010), pp. 342-67; Piccolino, 'Local peacebuilding'.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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