

Building the Future: civil society's contribution towards the emergence of the information society in Cameroon

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the information society in Cameroon has caused a number of disturbances, not least through civil society's involvement in the formulation of policies and strategies relating to ICT appropriation. For those familiar with the Cameroonian Government's tradition of secret-keeping, overcautiousness, and jealous protection of its prerogatives, recourse to third parties in formulating policies and strategies is a paradigmatic change, and one which cannot simply be explained by the complexity of the ICT phenomenon, the size of the challenges or pressure from international cooperation organisations .

This study aims to depict the partnership being built between the Cameroonian Government and its private sector and civil society partners to manage the development of a sector which has, through its own dynamic, almost broken away from State control. After describing the particular context of the emergence of the information society in Cameroon, and the inadequacy of the infrastructural, institutional and regulatory frameworks, the study will dwell on the specific role played by civil society in formulating strategies and policies, and propose ways to strengthen the synergy between the different players, remove the various obstacles to the creation of a favourable environment, and strengthen civil society's capacity for mobilisation and participation.

METHODOLOGY

There were essentially three stages in the methodology used: documentary research; collection of quantitative and qualitative data on policies, initiatives, players, organisations, manpower and any other information which could help to draw the most faithful portrait of civil society's actual involvement in the process of making decisions and formulating policies linked to Information and Communication Technology (ICT); semi-directive interviews and a questionnaire-based survey of the key players (government, private sector, international cooperation agencies, civil society).

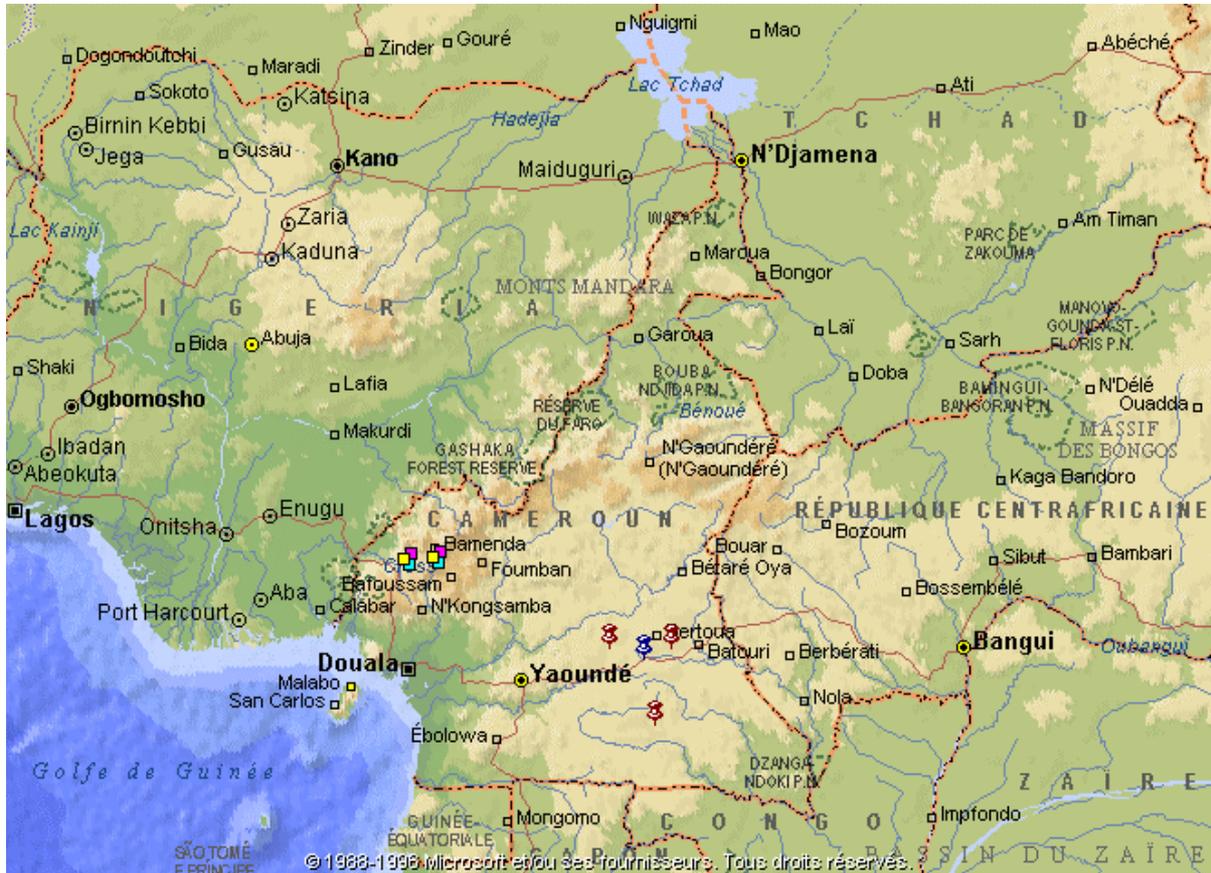
1. BASIC DATA ON CAMEROON

1.1. PHYSICAL ASPECT

The Republic of Cameroon is situated on the Gulf of Guinea, between 8' and 16' longitude to the east of the Greenwich meridian, and between 2' and 13' latitude north. At the junction of western and central Africa, the country is situated on one of the major faults in the Earth's crust, in a south-west/north-west direction. Cameroon covers an area of 475,440 km², which is

a little over 1% of the African continent. It is bordered to the south by Equatorial Guinea, the Congo and Gabon; to the west by Nigeria; to the east by the Central African Republic and Chad, and to the north by a portion of Lake Chad.

Cameroon has the shape of a carelessly-drawn triangle, with a base of 700 km and a height of 1,200 km. The relief is rugged, but with 2 major features: the Highlands and the Lowlands.



Cameroon's complex topography accounts for its climatic diversity. Rainfall decreases from the south to the north: 1,700 mm of annual rainfall close to the Gabonese border (11 months of rain), to 500 mm on the shores of Lake Chad (3 months of rain). The average annual temperature increases gradually from the south to the north, and from the coast to the inland regions of the country. The temperature is relatively constant in the South. The climate in the North is hot and dry. The two main winds are the harmatan and the monsoon. The two main seasons are the wet and dry seasons, with more or less marked variations between the South and the North.

2.1. DEMOGRAPHY

In 1999, the Cameroonian population was estimated at nearly 16,000,000 inhabitants, with 49.3% men and 50.7% women. The density is approximately 32 inhabitants per km². The rate of natural increase is close to 2.8%, which accounts for the population's youth (63% under 25, of which 47% are between 5 and 24 years old). French and English are the official languages. Cameroon, considered as an Africa in miniature, reflects this in its linguistic diversity, with nearly 240 human groups recorded.

Table No. 1: Principal Indicators of Human Development in Cameroon

	1999	2000	2001	2002
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT				
Life expectancy				50,0
Adult literacy rate (pop. over 15 years)				75,8
Gross school enrolment ratios (primary and secondary)				43
GDP per inhabitant (PPP)				1 703
Life expectancy index				0,42
Education level index				0,65
GDP index				0,47
Human Development Indicator (HDI) value				0,512
Difference in classification according to GDP per inhabitant				0

Table No. 2: Population Trends

POPULATION TRENDS	1975	2000	2015
Total population	7,5	14,9	20,2
Annual population increase rate (in %)	2,7		2,0
Urban population (as a % of the total)	26,9	48,9	58,9
Population under 15 years (as a % of the total)	43,1		39,5
Population over 65 years (as a % of the total)	3,7		3,8
Total fertility rate (per woman)	6,3		5,1

4.3. ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Cameroon has a very centralised presidential regime. The President is elected for 7 years through direct popular vote, and his mandate can be renewed once. Parliament comprises two chambers: the National Assembly (180 deputies elected through direct popular vote for 5 years) and the Senate (still to be established). Although there are 10 Provinces and approximately 50 departments, there are no regional authorities. However, after years on the back-burner, there again seems to be a demand for decentralisation following the last government reorganisation and the creation of the post of Minister of Decentralisation.

On the political level, only five of the institutions for which provision was made by the 1992 Constitution are fully operational:

- The Republic's Presidency;
- The Government;
- The National Assembly;
- The Economic and Social Council;
- The Supreme Court;

The Constitutional Court and the Senate are still to be established. On the political level, 1990 saw the move from a one-party to a multi-party state. Transition difficulties have led to elections being constantly contested since 1992. Nearly 150 political parties are fighting for the popular vote, though there are two dominant parties: the RDPC (in power) and the SDF. On the linguistic level, the two official languages (French and English) have allowed the country's participation in Francophonie and in the Commonwealth, after years of resistance.

4.4. URBANISATION

Population growth of recent years, coupled with the effect of village impoverishment, has led to substantial migration towards the towns, to the point where it was estimated that 50% of the population was living in urban areas in 1997. Two metropolitan areas share the functions of an economic capital: Douala (with nearly 2 million inhabitants) and Yaounde, the political capital with over a million inhabitants. These two cities are linked by towns like Garoua in the North, Bamenda in the North-West (between 200,000 and 250,000 inhabitants). Bafoussam in the West, Nkongsama on the coast, and Maroua in the extreme north, have between 150,000 and 200,000 inhabitants.

4.5. MACRO-ECONOMIC DATA

Although it is a relatively rich country, Cameroon has experienced a drop in economic activity since 1986, and a severe financial crisis which forced the authorities to suspend civil service recruitment, and also to enforce massive lay-offs, before cutting back on investment, and suspending payment of public debt. This blow was especially hard as the country was emerging from two decades of uninterrupted growth.

The crisis ended in the appearance of severe macro-economic imbalances which shook the very foundations of the national economy. Various Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were then implemented to reduce these imbalances. With mixed results, since the fixed objectives were minimal, and often limited to certain sectors (water, power, telecommunications).

Since 1986, the country seems to have renewed its cycle of economic growth, with an annual average rate of 4.7%, and a GNP of nearly US\$8.6 billion, approximately \$600 per inhabitant. The country is endowed with one of the best primary economic bases (CIA World Factbook, 2002), as a result of its oil resources and its favourable agricultural conditions, which justify its continued role as a supplier of raw materials. It primarily trades with its former colonial powers, thus reflecting the high level of financial and political interest that France has in the country. Although foreign investment fell 72.66% between 1984 and 1998, there is an obvious shift in trend if one considers the increase from a rate of 18.8% in 1997/8 to 20.1% in 1998/9, with French companies at the head of the list (World Investment News, 2002).

However, some factors are hardly conducive to the creation of a development-friendly environment. Of the 91 countries in the world listed in Transparency International's 2001 Corruption Perceptions Index, Cameroon is in 84th place, together with Azerbaijan, Bolivia and Kenya. In Africa, only Uganda (88th) and Nigeria (90th) are lower on the list. Three years previously, in 1997 and 1998, the country had ranked last. A national observatory on corruption was created in 2000 to fight corruption. However, cumbersome administration and an overcrowded civil service are considered as the main economic problems, according to the convention of IMF economic policy (CIA Fact Book 2002).

Current economic structure is dominated by agriculture, which contributes 43.4% of GNP and 70% of the labour force; industry contributes 20.1% of GNP, and the services, 36.5% of GNP.

Only 13% of the labour force theoretically works in industry and commerce. Estimates of the unemployment rate vary from the official rate of 23% to the 1998 estimate of 30% (CIA World Factbook, 2002). The country's unofficial data estimates it to be approximately 40%.

2. INVENTORY, REGULATORY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ICT SECTOR

2.1 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

1.1.1 (N)ICT or ICT?

New Information and Communications Technologies (NICT) refer to the ensemble of electronic machines, networks and programmes able to be interfaced to recognise, transmit and process digital data. They offer a range of computer and telephone network-related tools, whose technical function is to provide the possibility or the potential to create, edit, store and transmit documents, provided these are encoded in the required format.

The term ICT lost its "N" along the way to the year 2000. It refers to the designers' original intention to link together data processing machines through the telephone network, for communication purposes. (D'Attilio, 1998, p.1)

2.2. CONTEXT

The history of the Internet in Cameroon dates back to 1991 when, with the help of Coopération Française (Agency for French Cooperation), a pilot research and training project was created at Yaounde's Polytechnic School. However, it was only in 1997, with the inauguration of the first access node by the Prime Minister, that there was an explosion of public use of the internet (between 1999 and 2002). This was despite poor quality of service, mainly due to poor connection speeds, and the bad condition of the supporting telecommunications network. On the Government level, the first years of the internet were marked by conflicting policies, implemented by several organisations under various ministerial departments. In the absence of a coherent government policy, it is the private sector that is taking the stage, and organising the development of the Internet in its own manner. To the point where today, an ECA-financed study on NICI strategy for a population estimated to be nearly 16 million inhabitants, counted 40,000 users with a direct connection to the internet, and 600,000 users who rely on public networks with internet access, especially through close to 600 cybercafes in the country (PLAN NICI, CEA-PUD, 2001).

The sole telephone provider (CAMTEL) today has two internet access nodes (Yaounde and Douala) and accommodates 49 internet providers (ISPs), 21 private installers, a traffic termination, a radio message system, a shared-resource radio network (MTN), and one official (CAMTEL) and two or three unofficial suppliers to the space sector.

The public's infatuation with cybercafes has led to a substantial migration of public telephone booths towards these public internet access sites, and has led to the four-fold increase of the available computer infrastructure. There are nearly 600 cybercafes throughout the country,

with a high concentration in Yaounde and Douala. They are equipped with an average of 10 computers, have an average of 3 employees (mostly women), and an average of 200 visitors per day. The average salary is 60,000 CFA francs which, in constant francs, seems better than other sectors of activity.

The fixed telecommunications network serves 37 towns, with a total of nearly 100,000 subscribers, 67,000 of which are connected to the digital exchanges in Yaounde, Douala and Buea. The fixed line penetration rate is approximately 0.7% (Source MINPOSTEL 2002). Rural telephone service, which aims to cover 70% of rural populations who, because of their weak purchasing power, are not of any commercial interest to the operators, makes use of 9,109 lines that service 72 localities. 40% of connections are non-operational because of breakdowns and lack of spare parts to repair defective equipment. Other projects to bring services to nearly 2,000 villages are under study. Moreover, 92 other localities will be provided with community telecentres (telephone, fax, internet, etc.) thanks to funds for The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC).

Two operators share the Cameroonian mobile market (Orange and MTN) and have a total of 700,000 subscribers, with a penetration rate of 4.5%. This network has undergone remarkable growth in 2 years, moving from 5,000 subscribers in the year 2000 to 700,000 today. MTN predicts that its own subscriber base will reach 1,200,000 by the end of 2004.

The obsolescence of various tools used today to develop ICT services reflects the state of those used for telecommunications. Various plans to develop telecommunications infrastructures have not taken account of the introduction of internet services. This lack of forward planning has had an obvious effect on the quality and quantity of the ICT training infrastructure. The connections offered to new modem clients are 28 kbps, a speed which is difficult to achieve because of the poor quality of the telephone lines. Moreover, some potential customers cannot even access services because of network saturation or the very bad quality of their telephone line.

CAMTEL, the traditional provider, offers 64 kbps connections to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) through its national backbone on two copper wire pairs. The support structure used is the same as that of the telephone network, and was not intended for data transmission. The comparatively slow data transfer rate cannot be improved because of the poor quality of the networks and cables.

Moreover, the possibility of connecting subscribers to the backbone is only possible in the towns of Douala, Yaounde, Limbe, Tiko, Kumba and Muyuka. Through digital channels, it would have been possible to offer direct connections in the towns of Bafoussam, Garoua and Ngaoundere. However, the instability of the channels and the poor quality of transmission on these connections would make them practically unusable for data transmission connections. In addition, network saturation and cumbersome administration, likely to discourage a large number of companies wishing to make use of direct connections, demonstrates to what point these infrastructures, which were established to meet telecommunication network development needs, are inadequate if not unsuitable for real ICT expansion.

ICT acquisition costs are also a discouraging factor, likely to be an barrier to electronic education, trade and exchange projects. Insufficient development of the internet infrastructure is evident at the level of service provision, where costs remain high, and are an impediment to internet development. In a study carried out within the scope of the Information Society's

quarterly publication “Le Défi numérique”, Cameroon features as one of the countries where the cost of internet access is highest in the world: 72,000 CFA francs per month for 40 hours of browsing, on top of subscription costs which are between 25,000 and 75,000 CFA francs depending on the usage pattern. (Le Défi numérique 001, April 2002). In addition to these economic and technical difficulties, there is insufficient bandwidth. The data transfer rate on international connections since the introduction of the internet is scarcely 10 mbps. Despite the exemption from customs duties on computer imports, the penetration rate is still under 0.1% (Source MINPOSTEL 2002). The cost of acquiring a complete computer system (computer and printer) is on average approximately 1.5 million CFA francs, which is the annual salary of a Category A worker in the Cameroonian civil service.

Nearly all software is imported. However, it should be emphasised that various accounting and management software applications are increasingly being developed or adapted by local enterprises.

There is hope, however, in the form of the SAT3 groundstation being put into service in Douala, the installation of fibre optic along the line of the Chad/Cameroon pipeline, particularly to serve the Northern region, and interconnection with certain neighbouring countries such as Chad and the Central African Republic; the construction of a Douala-Edea-Yaounde-Bafoussam-Douala fibre optic loop; and the digitalisation of certain inland exchanges, with the introduction of new value-added services.

Table No. 3 : Subscriber data

YEAR	CELLULAR SUBSCRIBERS	FIXED SUBSCRIBERS	POPULATION	PENETRATION RATE IN %
1999	4 000	80 000	14 500 000	1.17
2000	5 000	80 000	14 854 000	1.65
2001	250 000	100 000	15 377 182	2.91
2002(MAY)	450 000	120 000	15 917 629	4.32

2.3 REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

One of the main concerns of civil society and the private sector is the ICT sector’s regulatory framework, which is still under development. This concern is linked to the relative newness of the internet’s introduction in Cameroon, and especially to difficulties with coordination and harmonisation experienced by the different organisations that were responsible for designing and implementing Cameroonian policies and strategies in this sector at one time or another. In order to end this lack of harmony, Decree no. 2002/092 of April 9, 2002 came into being, establishing the Agence Nationale des Technologies de l’Information et de la Communication (National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies) (ANTIC), and its organisational and operational framework. It was given a large range of functions, relating to infrastructure, regulation and security as well as building human capacity in the deployment and use of ICTs.

Before this Decree, the telecommunications sector had undergone a major change in 1998, marked by the adoption of a series of legal measures, most importantly that of Law 89/014 of July 14, 1998 which regulated telecommunications in Cameroon, and made provision for approximately ten regulations, two of which were published on the same day in September

2001 (Order 2001/830/PM of September 19, 2001, defining methods for authorising telecommunications networks operation, and Order 2001/831/PM of September 19 defining methods for authorising telecommunications service provision). In essence, the Decree establishes the end of public monopoly in the telecommunications sector. It leads to the dismantling of the Government department responsible for telecommunications, and the establishment of a new legal framework, notable for its distinction between private and public networks, and the institution of 3 sets of provisions, according to the nature of the activity, namely:

- Provisions for exclusive or concessionary rights ;
- Provisions for regulated competition or authorisation ;
- Provisions for free competition.

2.4 INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

For a long time, the ICT institutional environment in Cameroon has been marked by confusion, as evidenced by the increased number of command posts. The resultant conflicts of jurisdiction not only delayed the emergence of the information society in a country with enormous possibilities, but also the birth of a strong civil society. At one time, no fewer than 7 command posts were claiming leadership in this sensitive and challenge-filled sector. The creation of ANTIC in April 2002, with links to the President of the Republic, was to put an end to this confusion. However, the delays in its actual launch froze all the important initiatives. The various institutional players who are to draft the outlines of the Cameroonian information society, or those who were involved in some way in its development, are listed below:

The Agence Nationale des Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication (National Agency for Information and Communications Technologies) (ANTIC), still in its embryonic stage, will be responsible for:

- Encouraging the involvement of all citizens in the information society;
- Encouraging the emergence of a modified legal framework, particularly to protect people and goods;
- Placing information and communication technologies at the service of education and research;
- Placing information and communication technologies at the service of individuals and businesses as well as officers of the State and public organisations by promoting easy access to essential public information;
- Promoting e-commerce;
- Encouraging access to knowledge.

The Agence de Régulation des Télécommunications(The Telecommunications Regulation Agency) (ART) is a high level independent administrative authority, whose objectives are :

- To ensure respect of the principle of equal treatment for operators in the telecommunications sector;
- To ensure respect of the provisions of concessionary agreements, general conditions, and Government authorisations;

- To ensure arbitration, before any legal recourse, of disputes between the Government and telecommunications operators that arise during Government's exercise of its terms of reference.

The Comité ad hoc Inter-Ministériel sur les TIC (The Ad Hoc Inter-Ministerial ICT Committee). Created by Prime Ministerial Decree, this committee was charged with advising the Government on issues relating to ICT strategy. Its activities came to an end the day after the establishment of ANTIC was announced, in December 2001.

Le Programme d'Action Gouvernementale pour la société de l'information et du savoir (The Government Action Plan for the Information and Knowledge Society) (PAGSIS). This programme, under the supervision of the Ministry of Scientific and Technical Research has the role of advising the Government on ICT acquisition, training and research strategies in Cameroon. Designed on the French model, this programme has not yet been launched.

The Centre Nationale de développement de l'Informatique (The National Centre for Informatics Development) (CENADI). Under the supervision of the Ministry of Budget and Finance, CENADI was the first organisation (1984) charged with designing Government strategy for its acquisition of information systems. With the emergence of the information society, its current terms of reference are :

- Implementation of ICT-related government directives;
- Advisory services to state, parastatals, and possibly private enterprises and local communities for better ICT appropriation;
- Popularisation of ICT in the Government, and pertinent training of technicians:

The Centre National de Développement des Technologies (The National Centre for Technology Development) (CNDT). Under the authority of the Ministry of Scientific and Technical Research, CNDT is the monitoring organisation for Government ICT acquisition.

The Observatoire des Nouvelles Technologies de l'information et de la communication (The Observatory of New Information and Communications Technologies) (ONT). Under the authority of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, ONT is responsible for following the development of information and communications technologies, and anticipating their impact on telecommunications needs and infrastructures in Cameroon. It plays an advisory role to the Government.

The Centre des Ressources Multimédias dans les Écoles Publiques (Centre for Multimedia Resources in Public Schools) (CMR). This organisation was created in December 2001 on the occasion of the inauguration of the Multimedia centres at the Leclerc and Bilingual high schools in Yaounde. Their objective is to promote ICT appropriation by students and teachers. These are reference centres which will be progressively extended throughout the country.

4.5 MULTILATERAL AND BILATERAL PARTNERSHIPS

Other players with more or less direct involvement in establishing the ICT institutional environment are the United Nations and Bilateral Cooperation systems. Their activities and participation contribute toward shaping Cameroonian policy in this field. This is why it seems appropriate to list some of their main actions below:

4.5.1 United Nations System

- UNDP:

According to the information obtained from the ICT officer of the World Bank, UNDP is the focal point of the United Nations system for issues related to ICT for development purposes. As a result, the most important programmes linked to this problem area are managed by UNDP. Out of a number of UNDP initiatives in the ICT sector, the following are noteworthy:

1. NETAID: Netaid is a network of individuals and organisations determined to eliminate extreme poverty. It links those with available resources and means who wish to support projects, organisations or campaigns likely to make a real difference in the lives of the poorest children and families in the world. Its involvement is multi-faceted (schools, online volunteers). Its partners are recruited from within organisations such as CISCO, the Litswin Foundation and UNICEF.
2. SDNP Project (Sustainable Development Networking Programme): closed down;
3. Support to the business development exhibition. This project, initiated by the President of the Republic of Cameroon, enabled the Cameroon Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Mines to organise seminars on business creation in the main provincial towns in Cameroon between November and December 2001. One year later, it is still difficult to assess the real impact of these seminars on the creation of new businesses by youths, who were specifically targeted;
4. ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT Programme with the support of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). Now at the end of its phase II, TICAD II supports the following initiatives:
 - Development of an ICT policy and action plan;
 - SchoolNet: tele-education development network through Multimedia Resource Centres in private and public schools;
 - Internet Academies;
 - CATIIC: Asia-Cameroon Information Centre for Trade and Investment, whose objective is to promote partnership between the private sectors of Cameroon and Asia.
 - ECA/CA-SRDC (Economic Commission for Africa/ Central African Sub-Regional Development Centre):
 1. African Information Society Initiative (AISII). This initiative is a vision and a framework of action to enable Africa to bridge the digital divide with the rest of the world, and to expedite its entry into the information society. It was adopted and supported by most of the large African and international institutions and decision-making bodies, notably the OAU Summit in Yaounde in 1996, the ECA Ministers' Conference of Addis Ababa in 1996, the

meetings of African telecommunications ministers of the various African sub-regions in 1996 and 1997, and the G8 Summit in Denver in 1997. One of its mandates is to contribute towards creating employment, and improving the quality of life of African people.

- UNIDO:
 1. Advanced globalisation technologies;
 2. Industrial information;
 3. Salon électronique interactive permanent des entreprises (permanent Interactive electronic business exhibition) (SELIPE). This exhibition aims to create an interactive visual forum for Cameroonian businesses to promote their skills and products on the network of networks. Assigned to a group headed by a French person, there is some difficulty in realising the project, despite a strong business demand for it.

- UNESCO:
 1. Project for the development of a legal framework for the Cameroon information society, supported by UNDP's SPPD resources;
 2. Solar villages;
 3. Community radios and multimedia centres. UNESCO promotes the funding and set-up of community radios in Cameroon. The project originally aimed at the installation of 8 community radios in two years, but it was so successful that over fifteen community radios are in the process of completion.

- ITU :
 1. Promotion of e-business and telemedecine;
 2. Initiative for the creation of Internet training Centres in developing countries;
 3. Universal access programme, and multi-purpose community telecentres in rural areas. Within this component of the programme, ITU has recently helped the Cameroonian Government (Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication) to launch a project to establish 96 community-based internet centres in Cameroon. The project, which is worth 7 billion CFA francs, will be financed by HIPC funds.

4.5.2 Bilateral Cooperation

Bilateral partners also contribute in their own way towards shaping the information society in Cameroon. For the most part, diplomatic missions serve as information kiosks for possible participation by relevant organisations in their respective countries.

The Embassy of the United States: American cooperation is in the area of ICT training through programmes such as global, sectoral and targeted seminars (women, women journalists, and businesswomen). The emergency relief fund from the Embassy finances some acquisitions for use in training, but does not cover the purchase of computer equipment.

The Canadian High Commission: Canada participates in the ICT sector on the occasion of exhibitions and fora such as the ICT Exhibition, Yaoundé Net.com, etc. Outside of this specific participation, whose essential aim is to offer Canadian expertise in the domain, there

are other possibilities for the Canadian Government to contribute to the efforts to alleviate poverty, or to promote gender equality. The Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI)) and the GED Fund contribute in ways linked to poverty reduction or to functional ICT training. The Pro-Democracy Project is responsible for matters related to good governance and transparency.

Japanese cooperation: Japan's participation is essentially through its TICAD II programme, within the framework of UNDP. The TICAD project was a result of the Tokyo Conference, within the scope of the African Development Initiative. The TICAD project has helped to support the Schoolnet network, and plans to take responsibility for several community projects. Outside of this project, Japanese cooperation has a grant programme which contributes towards the construction of schools and training centres (as in the ASAFE case), and sometimes equipment provision. These grants, which can be up to 30 million, only contribute indirectly to the ICT field.

The Francophonie Agency: The Francophonie Agency essentially participates through 2 institutional authorities: ACCT and AUF, particularly with the regional centre of the virtual University. AUF has several programmes which specifically address the problem area of ICT.

The Embassy of France: The cultural section of Coopération Française has several programmes which allow contributions of modest sums in the ICT domain. Funds for media activities, for example, allow for contributions of approximately 2 to 3 million. For larger scale projects, it is the mechanisms of the Ministry of Cooperation that come into play, with all the consequent administrative delays.

German cooperation: The German Embassy coordinates the activities of the agencies under its supervision, such as GTZ, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, DED, etc. GTZ, the most visible branch of German participation, has no programme directly linked to ICT. Its involvement is more in the field of governance, democracy and the fight against corruption. DED funds are available from the Embassy for modest involvement in the fight against poverty.

5. ICT development policies and strategies in Cameroon

Cameroonian policies and strategies for ICT development fall within the scope of a number of initiatives and major declarations:

- The initiative of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), entitled “the African Information Society Initiative (AISI)”, adopted by the Summit of Heads of States of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1996 in Yaounde (Cameroon);
- The United Nations (UN) “Millennium Declaration,” adopted at the Millennium Summit of September 2000 in New York, by Heads of State and Government of the entire world;
- The 2002 “Bamako Declaration”;
- NEPAD;
- The French/ African Summit of Heads of State and Government.

These different initiatives, declarations and authorities show ICT to be an inevitable instrument for development, and an entry point into the Information Society. For example, in his introductory communication to the 21st Conference of French and African Heads of State and Government, held in Yaounde from January 15 to 17, 2001, the French President, Jacques Chirac made the ICT theme an important challenge for Africa, who should approach “this

revolution with confidence and vigilance". This confidence is justified by the fact that the African Continent has always been a society of communication, decentralised in networks. "Africa does not feel disoriented by the information revolution that is taking place in the world."

The Cameroonian Government seems to have integrated this data into its emerging strategy, which has made a political challenge of promoting access to new ICT teaching and training methods to the largest possible number. To accomplish this, information knowledge should become an basic skill in education. Such a programme can only be established on a participatory basis, and this offers a large number of opportunities to civil society, from its motivational to its mobilisation capacity.

Already, the focal points, strategic objectives and priority areas set out by Government are beginning to be covered by several studies and think tank groups. There is the start of a research corpus, but it is mainly directed towards understanding the impact of the new economy on the level of ICT use in the public and private sectors. This research is incomplete and biased for two reasons: it is essentially confined to the urban centres, particularly the towns of Yaounde and Douala. It only focuses on the given dimensions of the problem such as the level of appropriation and use. There are two types of research: academic and practical. Academic research on the effect of ICT on society dates back to the end of the 1990s. Some of the first research of this type was in 1998, and covered the level of ICT appropriation in the civil service on the one hand, and in private enterprise on the other. At that time, this research revealed an ICT penetration rate of less than 5% in government and parastatal areas, and close to 10% in the private sector. However, the focus of the research was the decision-makers' inclination towards technology, and receptivity by those responsible for ensuring its use.

In general, ICTs were considered as an instrument of power and were therefore essentially implemented only in the offices of the Civil Service Directors. In private enterprises, the same fear of loss of power predominated amongst senior management, as was clearly demonstrated by the CELLUCAM study in Edea. Since then, attitudes have changed a great deal, in terms of democratisation of ICT use, as well as perception of it as a development tool, to the point where the same study carried out at the beginning of 2002 showed a growing appropriation rate in the civil service. Close to 80% of ministries are equipped with computers, but there are varying penetration rates. There can therefore be 1 computer for 5 employees in the central services of the Ministries of Higher Education, Finance and Budget, and 1 for 100 in the less equipped ministerial departments. Approximately ten ministerial departments today have access to the Internet and a web site. In the private sector, there is the same infatuation, predominantly in SMEs, where the rate of appropriation is higher than in large businesses. The average rate is approaching 50%, although it is closer to be 30% in organisations with more than 100 employees.

With regard to utilisation, in the civil service 80% of usage is word processing and card games, with occasional recourse to spreadsheets. Private sector enterprises, beyond the highly specialised ones, are generally not very imaginative in terms of their use of computers. Even if they spend less time playing card games.

As for the public at large, the proliferation of cybercafes and the gradual reduction in access costs is attracting more and more users. According to academic research carried out in 1998, 70% of cybercafe users were young girls, who used them mostly for e-mail. This proportion approximately evened out in the research carried out in 2002. Though young girls continue to mainly use the internet for mail, young men use it to do research for university or work

projects, scholarships etc. Strong competition, seen in the establishment of cybercafes, and the more than 400-fold increase in the computer infrastructure between 2000 and 2002, has had the effect of decreasing access costs, which fell from 2,000 to 500 CFA francs per hour in less than 2 years.

These studies and think tanks groups take place in a context where the Cameroonian government is subject to many other demands from multi-lateral partners, including the World Bank and the IMF. Demands for good governance, transparency, democracy and the fight against corruption have led the government to order all its ministers ministries to develop sectoral strategies for better planning of future activities. These studies all have major shortcomings. In the absence of quantifiable data, they are making do with rough approximations. Their level of understanding of ICT reality is on the formal level, whereas the dynamic in this sector is largely on the informal level. It is the same with training needs. In view of all the existing types of training, little consideration is given in reality to the non-formal approach, which is in the forefront for the informal sector and few progressive NGOs, even though it produces convincing results.

6. Civil Society's contribution towards policy definition and decision-making

Civil society's contribution towards the formulation of ICT policies and strategies in Cameroon did not come about naturally. It is the result of a long process of attraction, development of a climate of trust, patient awareness-raising, and of the Government understanding the real contribution potential that civil society players have in defining relevant, efficient and realistic policies.

The involvement of civil society in political activities dates back to the 90s, called "les années de brasse" (the golden years) in Cameroon, at which time civil society actively contributed towards the democratisation process. From that moment on, its foray into the political arena allowed the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the opposition parties, who were badly organised, without agendas or programmes, to be overcome. The government has a bad memory of this time, and has consequently developed collaboration/mistrust, love/hate relationships with civil society. This ambiguous relationship can mainly be seen on the institutional level. Although the National Assembly voted in several laws relating to civil society activities, the Implementation Legislation signed by the Prime Minister gives increased power to the Ministry of Provincial Government to regulate civil society activities. As a result, civil society in Cameroon seems to be walking on a minefield, which considerably undermines its critical potential and its motivational capacity.

Owing to the patient action of certain civil society leaders, however, it was possible for the dialogue to be resumed. ICT policy formulation is influenced by, amongst other things, initiatives such as those of the new ACP-EU Accord, the HIPC initiative and NEPAD, which make civil society's participation in decision making one of the prerequisites of relevance, quality and applicability. Civil society is seen as an instrument to strengthen the State, through its capacity to demand that the State take note of, and be in touch with, the aspirations of ordinary citizens.

The preparation process for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is ardently arguing in favour of a tripartite think tank group. In Cameroon, that means not only the inclusion of civil society in all ICT related think tank groups, but also the inclusion of members of civil society in official delegations to international meetings.

This developing partnership is also supported by international cooperation, in the framework of thematic think tanks, such as the UN Cameroon ICT Group, which has an ambitious research programme on the various aspects of ICT appropriation in Cameroon. Also worth mentioning are the activities of the Colloque africain sur la recherche informatique (African Colloquium on Informatic Research) (CARI) that, in partnership with the United Nations University, the National Institute of Informatic and Automatic Research, and the University of Yaounde I, is leading several informatics research projects.

Cameroon has over 200 registered associations and NGOs, less than ten of which are recognised as being active in the ICT sector. Although this trend is changing quite rapidly because of the current phenomenon surrounding ICT, contribution towards policy definition and decision-making is made by a relatively small group.

These associations and NGOs essentially operate in 5 areas of preferred involvement: advice to public, private or cooperation players; increasing grass-roots knowledge; local training, including the establishment of community centres; research and studies; and specific gender or youth-oriented training. On average, they have been in existence for at least two years, operating on an associative basis for the most part, relying heavily on the work of volunteers; developing under precarious financial conditions, and directed by key figures from all walks of life: university, civil service, the religious arena, and private sector. The last statutory legislation stated that it was even possible for a single individual to form an association.

6.1 Associations that are most active in ICT

It would be difficult to comprehensively list associations and NGOs who claim they belong to the ICT world in Cameroon. For this list, we have taken into account effective presence in the field, participation in different fora for dialogue, and concrete achievements.

ASAFE is an organisation that supports and develops programmes for the advancement and empowerment of women and young entrepreneurs from underprivileged backgrounds. Created in 1989, ASAFE developed its programmes towards this goal, notably:

- In adapted management (calculation of costs, simplified accounting, some elements of marketing, etc.)
 - In providing information and awareness on business opportunities;
 - On supply sources;
 - On appropriate technologies;
 - Access to the internet for some;
 - Training in NICT for youths.

Address: www.asafe.org

Agro PME is an organisation which supports small and medium Cameroonian enterprises. At the ICT level, it provides them with expertise in marketing products and services on the internet. It has operated in Yaounde for approximately ten years.

Address: www.agro.pme.camnet.cm

Presse Jeune is an initiative that aims at educating young Cameroonians in the opportunities and possibilities of the internet. As well as publishing an awareness bulletin, Presse Jeune is the Page access point of Francophonie in Cameroon.

Address: www.pressejeune.org

Potential 2000 is an NGO that provides advisory services in ICT engineering and strategic management. For four years, it has carried out several studies directed at e-governance, telemedicine, etc. It has just put online an interface for all pharmacists in Cameroon, and is working on a telemedicine project.

Address: www.Potential2000.org

AFIC is the Association des Femmes Ingénieures du Cameroun (Association of Women Engineers in Cameroon). Its participation in ICT is essentially at the level of ICT think tank groups and gender issues, and through the organisation of seminars specifically for women.

APAC is the Association des Professionnelles Africaines de la Communication (Association of African Communication Professionals). Like AFIC, its involvement in the ICT field is primarily addressed at Women African Communicators. It is represented in Cameroon by two organisations: the African Bureau and the liaison office.

ANAIS.AC is the regional office of the Euro African ANAIS network (Advisory Network for the African Information Society). ANAIS is involved in the ICT field on 4 levels: consultation/advice on ICT; increasing grass-roots and decision-makers' awareness; publication of a specialised Quarterly called *le Défi numérique*; and training. With regard to training, Anais.AC favours the non-formal yet functional approach, which aims to make students immediately operational at the end of their training. The training is divided into modules, and aims at the socio-professional reintegration of a section of the population that is traditionally excluded from economic channels and the world of employment: high potential out-of-schoolers from under-privileged areas. The experiment started with mobile ICT training in neighbourhood community centres. Currently, ANAIS has entered a phase of establishing capacity building centres in poor urban neighbourhoods. These centres have four objectives: provision of ICT training to youths and women (Word, Excel, web design, graphic design); provision of a self-training centre for the strong performers; provision of a self-employment centre for tele-work; an internet browsing centre and an employment service. To these ends, ANAIS.AC is making strategic alliances with potential employers to try to adjust training to meet articulated needs.

ISOC Cameroon is the national chapter of the ISOC Society. Its activities are in line with those of the parent organisation. It was created in 2000.

Schoolnet Cameroon unfortunately evidences the difficulty that NGOs have in working in teams in Cameroon. This project had high potential, having contributed to the achievements cited as examples, but ceased all its activities after a power struggle and a failed take-over.

6.2 Challenges linked to civil society's contribution to decision making in Cameroon

Civil society's contribution towards the formulation of policies and strategies for the emergence of the Information Society in Cameroon is faced with a number of challenges: technical, institutional and human.

6.2.1 Technical challenges

The Government, in its PAGSIS orientation note of October 31, 2000, emphasised the fact that the development of data transmission infrastructures and facilitation of access for a large part of the population are the biggest technical handicaps facing the popularisation of Information Technologies.

In the majority of cases, rural areas are not serviced by telephone networks. Those that do have the service are confronted either with inadequate capacity, or obsolete systems that are hardly conducive to the development of services such as Internet, data transmission and others.

The reorganisation of the telecommunications sector and the current privatisation of CAMTEL will not really have an impact on the modernisation and development of the telecommunications network except in areas that show immediate profit-making potential. In the other areas, the State should take responsibility for their connection to the network. Hard to imagine.

CAMTEL's internet network is currently unable to meet the needs of customers, who find it difficult to get a stable and reliable connection. Moreover, there are interconnection difficulties between the private cellular operators (Orange and MTN). The substantial increase in the number of available lines has not led to smooth network operations, and consumers consider the tariffs to be high. For all communications, especially inter-city communications, a call from a mobile phone must transit through a fixed line before connecting to another mobile subscriber. However, the fixed network does not have the infrastructure needed to respond to mobile operators' demands.

6.2.2 Institutional Challenges

Despite the legislation establishing ANTIC, the ICT sector in Cameroon still seems chaotic. No fewer than 8 governmental players are claiming authorship or supervision of the national ICT policy. The results are power struggles and subsequent appeasements.

Civil society finds itself tossed on the waves of a challenge over which it has no control. In addition, this rapidly developing sector is seriously handicapped by the uncertainty which surrounds its deployment on the ground, because of the ineffectiveness of laws relating to its status. Moreover, there is no organisation to coordinate its activities. Such an organisation could act as a government intermediary, lead to more harmonious relations, and encourage a better division of energy for more impact. There are organisational problems linked to the difficulty of working in teams. The civil society players spend a considerable amount of their time tearing each other apart, and then appeasing each other, rather than promoting synergy. These internal struggles not only substantially affect their credibility, but above all, increase their mortality rate. Very few civil society players survive their first year of existence.

Civil society can, however, make a large contribution towards developing a regulatory framework conducive to ICT deployment. Some members contribute to think tank networks like Etoile, the think tank group led by UNESCO, or APC initiatives.

6.2.3 Human Challenges

The numerous challenges posed by integration into the Information Society have demonstrated the degree to which all economic and social development is determined by the

quality of human resources. Not only does the lack of sufficient human resources in terms of quality and quantity remain a difficult problem, but national ICT related skills are sadly lacking.

There are several reasons for this state of affairs:

- Absence of a national ICT training policy;
- Prohibitive access costs;
- Unsuitable training structures and programmes;
- Lack of information on the needs of the labour market;
- Inadequate training/employment;
- Lack of awareness of ICT challenges.

6.2.4 Financial Challenges

Funding insecurity is also a drawback that discourages many people in the long term. In Cameroon, there is no funding structure for civil society. Access to external funding is subject to restrictive legislation, even though it is hardly applied. Managerial incompetence in a large number of civil society initiatives has made donor agencies nervous to finance their activities. Consequently, the sector is not developing at the same rate as the grass-roots needs being expressed.

6.2.5 Limitations

Study of the inventory, regulatory and institutional frameworks of ICT training in Cameroon shows limitations in 3 areas: strategic, structural and operational.

On the strategic level, the absence of a clear vision, and coherent, realistic and measurable objectives makes all policies illusory in the long term. Consequently, despite an economic upturn, unemployment is still at unsustainable levels. There seems to be no synergy between employment policies and training opportunities. Youths and women make up nearly 70% of the Cameroonian population, over 40% of whom are affected by unemployment.

On the structural and institutional level, the delay in the effective launch of ANTIC has had a negative impact on the definition of a motivational and shared vision of the Information Society in Cameroon. This is partly because of the absence of real coordination between the activities undertaken by the different players in the ICT arena. Telecommunications infrastructures are, in the main, obsolete and inappropriate for most new ICT applications. The telephone penetration rate is very low, and even where the infrastructure exists, installation and subscription costs are too high for the average Cameroonian: 80,000 francs and 5,000 francs respectively. The insufficiency of available lines means excessive delays in getting a line (sometimes two years), which leads to tampering and much corruption. There is no real coordination at national level in the deployment of telecommunications infrastructures.

On the operational level, there are constant delays in implementing decisions, and frequent changes of ministerial department heads means an endless series of new beginnings.

In addition to these limitations, there is the prohibitive cost of hardware for the average Cameroonian, the non-existence of a national backbone, and the existence of internet access points only in the large towns. CAMTEL's constantly postponed privatisation has a negative impact on the quality of service, competitiveness in the sector, and the attraction of substantial

investment that could qualitatively improve technical supply. There are many factors which affect the internet penetration rate in the public at large, the private sector, providers, and the increase in traffic speed, which are an obstacle to distance education.

Another political factor is the absence of a funding policy for SME/SMI in general, and for start-ups in particular. Cameroonian banks do not invest in the ICT sector, and there are no ICT development funds. Unfortunately, there is also no supervisory organisation for ICT activities; no voluntary policy for human resources development; no critical mass of players for change in the ICT field; a weak civil society; lack of national expertise on a quantitative and qualitative level; poor ability of some players to work in teams, to network and to lobby; weakness of decision-makers in using relevant evaluation tools; non-existence of an operational technological monitoring system; an incomplete regulatory framework; and poor account taken of women and youths within the framework of the ICT development process.

On the training level, in addition to the organisational problems that undermine development, the educational policy and regulatory frameworks are poorly adapted to ICT training, and this is despite the various ministerial decisions recently taken with a view to widening the training on offer; the limited and unvaried ICT training programmes; poor institutional, organisational and human capacity for ICT training; difficulty of low-cost access to education for women and marginalised groups; poor development and recourse to free software in ICT training; lack of popularisation of new forms of ICT education, apprenticeship and training.

On the legal side, the vacuum created by the absence of regulatory texts is hampering the activities of this sector, and poses several problems: it is impossible for the State to fully play its role as a motivational force for ICT development; e-commerce has not taken off owing to the absence of an appropriate regulatory framework; there are problems linked to the security and authenticity of electronic documents; and signature, identification and content problems are all unresolved.

In general, there is no link-up between a policy of voluntary employment, an integrated training policy, and a fine-tuned ICT strategy.

6.2.6 Strategies for greater civil society participation

There are many strategies to ensure effective civil society participation. Firstly, it should be understood that the task at hand is such, whatever the field, that there will never be enough of us to accomplish it. All willing are therefore welcome. Then a good knowledge of the political environment and its players should be developed. Lobbying techniques and public relations methods should be acquired. Good relationships should be established with the media. There should be affiliations to international networks, which will provide the double assurance of complementarity in matters of expertise, and an appreciable information relay in case of a breakdown. Although this seems a great deal, it is surely the only way to walk the fine line between politics (for the most part discredited and disowned) and neutrality, a gauge of credibility and therefore of effectiveness amongst grass-roots populations. Moreover, the active participation of civil society's prominent members at the various meetings relating to the World Summit on the Information Society, currently under preparation; in AISI's activities; or in workshops and meetings organised by APC, will enable them to gain precious aptitudes and skills in an environment with continuous training needs.

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