Cameroon: Flawed Decentralization & the Politics of Identity in the Urban Space

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Abstract

Urban governance policies in Cameroon within the past two decades of political and economic liberalization have witnessed significant administrative and political setbacks. While the government of Cameroon tacitly embraced decentralization as a viable administrative and political strategy for improving the management of cities, the process has been stalled by excessive state interventionism. This paper draws on the decentralization experience of the coastal city of Limbe in the southwest region of Cameroon to analyze the emerging trajectories of conflict embedded in the current decentralization drive of city governance. Based on interviews of some municipal officials conducted in May and June 2011, this paper makes the case that the current urban governance crisis in Cameroon is traceable largely to the weak political impulse of central government to effectively relinquish its traditional grip on power at all levels of society. This partly explains why cities in Cameroon have failed to deliver expected services to their clientele, the population, on a regular and efficient manner.

Index terms— Economic liberalization, effectively relinquish

past two decades of political and economic liberalization have witnessed significant administrative and political setbacks. While the government of Cameroon tacitly embraced decentralization as a viable administrative and political strategy for improving the management of cities, the process has been stalled by excessive state interventionism. This paper draws on the decentralization experience of the coastal city of Limbe in the southwest region of Cameroon to analyze the emerging trajectories of conflict embedded in the current decentralization drive of city governance. Based on interviews of some municipal officials conducted in May and June 2011, this paper makes the case that the current urban governance crisis in Cameroon is traceable largely to the weak political impulse of central government to effectively relinquish its traditional grip on power at all levels of society. This partly explains why cities in Cameroon have failed to deliver expected services to their clientele, the population, on a regular and efficient manner.

1 I. The Impulse to Reform

uring the last two decades, many countries in sub-Sahara Africa embraced decentralization as a new management strategy to render local government, broadly understood, more democratic, accountable, and responsive to the pressing social and economic needs of their citizens. The urgency of these reforms could, in part, be explained in a global socioeconomic context defined by large scale and rapid urbanization with concomitant social, economic, and political problems. These problems find concrete outlet in housing shortages, widespread unemployment, increasing poverty, environmental and sanitation problems, and failing social services in urban milieus. The said problems have been amplified by inadequate and sometimes contradictory political and administrative responses to the worsening physical and social infrastructure that are woefully in short supply, and have therefore, failed to respond in any meaningful way to growing pressures of rapid urban population growth in Africa (Tostensen et al, 2001;Olowu, 1999). With this growing urban crisis, the ideas associated with good governance emerged

with a strong normative bent, designed to respond to the urban crisis. Pressure by donor agencies such as the World Bank, essentially Author : Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Management Sciences, University of Buea, Cameroon, P.O Box 63, Buea. E-mail : mbuagbo@yahoo.com Preoccupied with governance issues that embrace the twin concepts of transparency and accountability, became integral to urban governance reforms in Africa. With accelerating urbanization, successful management of urban development processes in Africa attracted increasing importance **??**Gough and Yankson, 2001: 127-142) as this became the holy grail of reform efforts pursued in the sub-region. This explains the interventionist efforts of these multilateral Western aid donors. Because Cameroon, like many countries in the sub-region is facing an urban crisis, the government welcomed decentralization as a new management paradigm to successfully manage and cope with the expanding urban crisis in the country.

Foregrounding these reforms in Cameroon were efforts by a constellation of international lending agencies to address the over-bloated and centralized national bureaucracy. To achieve this goal, the size and powers of the central state had to be curbed. It was believed by these lending agencies this could be done by practically relocating some of these massive administrative and political powers enjoyed by the central government to sub-national administrative units, and in the specific case of urban governance reforms, to local councils. The overall prevailing common assumption that underscored these reforms was the belief that urban development in Africa could proceed only through a more proficient mobilization and deployment of local resources and resourcefulness (Simone, 2005). Such mobilization could best be accomplished through a comprehensive decentralization of governmental authority and financial responsibility to the municipal level. The elaboration, therefore, of a political and administrative framework for a more proficient management of urban spaces, or good governance, became the mantra for reinventing the city in Africa as an inclusive city. The overall objective was that these reforms would provide space and voice to all stakeholders at the grassroots, and ignite possible route towards inclusive decision-making processes -since decision-making is at the heart of good governance (Therkildsen, 2001). Moving, therefore, from a model of central provision to that of decentralization to local governments was expected to introduce a new relationship of accountability-between national and local policy makers-while altering existing relationships, such as that between citizens and elected officials **??**Ahmad et. al., 2005). This shift in the focus of This reorientation from a top-down to a bottom -up administrative and political formula was believed by its proponents to be the magic wand for achieving good governance, and thereby enhance economic performance. Also, the belief was that these reforms could usher in political participation by grassroots populations in the urban development process. Such devolution of powers theoretically meant these ideals could be translated into easy mobilization and more effective utilization of human and material resources at local levels to ensure sustainability of urban development projects in Cameroon, and elsewhere on the African continent where these reforms were embraced.

Following a processual approach adopted by Boone (2003), this paper raises some of the concrete issues that underlie the struggle between different local authorities in the Limbe City Council. This is done in the backdrop of some of the dynamics of social and political changes currently taking place in Cameroon. This approach is driven by an empirical, rather than theoretical, linkage of the actual distribution of authority within an urban public space in the wider framework of expected changes in the process of reconfiguring power relationships between various city stakeholders. At the base of this analysis are the broad processes of decentralization, and the general outcome of these processes on reform of governance in Cameroon.

2 II. Decentralizing City Governance in Cameroon: Emerging Trajectories of Conflict

One of the social consequences of globalization, it has been pointed out, is the extreme economic decline, combined, against all conventional economic logic, with sustained high rates of urban population growth. This has resulted to the mass production of slums (Berman, 2006) in urban Africa. These physical and social conditions, especially of cities in Africa, tended to favour decentralization as a pragmatic response to these crises, especially in the wake of glaring inability by central governments to respond adequately to the increasingly vocal socioeconomic and political demands of their citizens (Saito, 2001). To bridge this gap between governments and their citizens, decentralization became one of the institutional reform efforts pursued in developing countries in general, and Cameroon in particular.

Partly in response to this urban crisis and the global ferment of democratization witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s, decentralization was enshrined in the letter and spirit of the 1996 constitution of Cameroon. This new constitution theoretically provided for the effective devolution of powers in such a way that local communities and municipalities could be empowered to manage their affairs (The Post no. 1004, Friday 21 November, 2008:2). On the heels of this constitutional provision, the Law on the Orientation of Decentralization of 17th July 2004 establishes, in Section 2, that, "decentralization shall consist of devolution by the state of special powers and appropriate resources to regional and local authorities. have legal personality and administrative and financial autonomy for the management of regional and local interests. They shall freely manage their revenue and expenditure within the framework of budgets adopted by their deliberative bodies (my emphasis). In the same vain, Law No.2009/019 of 15th December 2009 on the local fiscal system in Cameroon stipulates that city councils and sub-divisional councils shall not be entitled to the same sources of revenue. The fiscal revenue of the city

council (Section 115: 1 and Section 115: 2) shall delimit the revenue sources for city councils and subdivisional councils respectively. But a close reading of this law reveals that there is bound to be conflict between the different city councils and sub-divisional councils in Cameroon. This is because the sources of revenue are by far few, and the said law fails to state precisely the territory of operation of city councils (which subsumes sub-divisional councils), and finally, the same sources of fiscal revenue for city councils also In the specific case of the city of Limbe, the three sub-divisional councils are engulfed within the territorial boundaries of the city council, and to this extent, authorities of the Limbe City Council see the subdivisional councils as annex to the city council. This is because the territorial, administrative, and financial boundaries of the sub-divisional councils and those of the city council are flux, leading to confusion as to which authority is actually entitled to what resources, and which authority executes what development project within the city. In an interview with the mayor of the Limbe 1 sub-divisional council, he points, for example, to an ongoing conflict between Limbe 1 and Limbe 3 sub-divisional council over which council controls the Dockyard Area and Down Beach from which substantial revenue is generated from local fishing communities. This conflict is attributed to the very elastic nature of the financial regime earlier referred to governing local authorities in Cameroon, making it open to all kinds of (mis)interpretations. In the same vain, an administrative report of the Limbe 1 sub-divisional council dated November 26, 2009 reveals that a decision by the minister of urban development and housing with regards to the issuance of building permits, clearly stipulates that building permits remain the prerogative of subdivisional mayors. But the mayor of the Limbe 1 subdivisional council area states that the Limbe City Council, contrary to the said ministerial decision, still issues building permits, and adds that some of these 'unauthorized' structures are constructed on risky zones with potential for landslides and flooding during rainy seasons. This problem of which authority does what, and even of which authority owns what assets, the subdivisional mayor states, considerably slows down the activities not only of the sub-divisional councils, but of the city of Limbe as a whole. Rather than focus on substantial issues related to the daily challenges of life confronting urban residents, local administrators are driven by conflict of who is responsible for what. The conflicting nature inherent in the local bureaucracy means the Limbe City Council and the sub-divisional councils within the municipality both refer to the law on decentralization which does not explicitly define the respective areas of competence assigned to the different sub-divisional councils; and the Limbe city council on account of its supervisory status, appears to considerably dwarf the activities of the sub-divisional councils.

As further illustration of the internecine conflict among the different local authorities, the government delegate of the Limbe City Council addressed a letter January, 2007," to the mayor of the Limbe 1 subdivisional council. It requests the latter to evict the premises housing its administrative structures. The letter states, inter alia, "you always interfere in the management of the city council property without prior negotiations?I wish to draw your attention to the fact that the property of the former Limbe Urban Council has never been partitioned? The Limbe 1 council is accommodated temporarily in the property of the Limbe City Council?it shall be better if you start thinking of building your own structures?" As a direct consequence of this conflict between the Limbe 1 subdivisional council and authorities of the Limbe City Council, the said mayor says these administrative obstacles amount to what could be described as "nogo-zones." The mayor says, "There are many conflicting roles?the no-go-zones are too many for our council?The markets are not controlled by this council?The motor parks are controlled by the city council?All key revenue generating areas are controlled by the city council?" This is illustrative of the contradiction inherent in the law on decentralization, which tacitly affirms the administrative and financial autonomy of local authorities in Cameroon. As a consequence, the social and financial space enjoyed by sub-divisional councils are negligible, as the supervisory mandate exercised by city councils through appointed government delegates significantly infringes, and actually constricts the activities of sub-divisional councils. This politically motivated interference by city councils is regardless of Section 124 of the Law on Decentralization in Cameroon which explicitly says that "the setting up of a city council shall entail the transfer to sub-divisional councils of powers and resources to the said councils in accordance with the provision of the law." But these powers and resources are not clearly defined, leaving room to all sorts of competing interpretations and conflict among different local authorities of municipalities. This explains why the Limbe City Council, for example, meddles, and actually frustrates development activities of the sub-divisional councils under its supervision.

The broad implication of this confusing and conflicting nature of the local bureaucracy in Cameroon is demonstrative of the fact that sub-divisional councils have far too few income generating sources to warrant any meaningful development projects in their locality. Frustrated by the lack of clarity of the decentralization laws, and of the snail pace of the decentralization exercise in Cameroon, the mayor of the Limbe 1 subdivisional council says, "?We do not really understand whether we are going in for decentralization?We are not given the necessary means to work on the ground?But we have all good letters of intent from Yaoundé?Taxes from major income generating sources are collected by the city council?.While sub-divisional councils only receives subventions from the city council, The individual here obviously refers to the appointed government delegate, who acts as supervisory authority of sub-divisional councils and who, exploits the confusion in the law on decentralization to run the municipality arbitrarily, without due consideration to the wishes of locally elected officials and those of the population who elected them. What determines the subvention granted to sub-divisional councils is not clearly spelt out, a situation which has led to the political instrumentalization of the supervisory powers of the government delegate to frustrate the activities of the elected mayors. The mayor of the Limbe 1 sub-divisional council reports that the subvention received from the city council is so negligible that the sub-divisional councils

can hardly pay salaries of their personnel, talk less of financing local development projects. And the mayor of the Limbe 2 sub-divisional council adds that subvention from the central government is at best ad hoc. This is understandable, given the cash strapped nature of the central government which has very limited financial resources of its own to pursue development priorities in the country.

In this connection, Gough and Yankson (2001) are therefore right to argue that decentralization and good governance management promoted by the World Bank and other lending agencies remains too statecentred, too top-down, too narrow, formalized, and essentially technocratic. This generally explains why local authorities in Cameroon cannot keep up with the demands of demographic pressures and the exponential growth of cities in the country. Bates (1994) has analyzed some of the paradoxes of these 'reformist' drives in Africa, such as the generally weak political impulse to reform, which could also explain why reforms of urban governance soon petered out, as in the case of Cameroon, to usher in an accountable and participatory governance scheme.

A similar experience with decentralization in Ghana (GTZ 2008) attests to the widespread difficulties of implementing these reforms in sub-Sahara Africa. The government of Ghana launched an ambitious decentralization program in 1998 to address key developmental challenges aimed at reducing poverty and social inequalities. But the experience revealed limited success because, like in Cameroon, it lacked a comprehensive policy framework on decentralization, and full implementation of administrative decentralization. And local authorities possessed limited capacities for an efficient and adequate provision of services to citizens which was assigned to them under the decentralization program. This explains why the district assemblies of Ghana, which are the basic administrative, political, and planning units of the country, incorporating typical local government functions and power, including revenue raising to promote service delivery at the local level have ended in a vicious circle. They have been unable to carry out development projects because they have little revenue. Also, the creation of parallel structures and forms of authority has led to an "institutional jungle " (Francis and James, 2003), complicated, as in the Cameroon case study, by differing political allegiances at the local level, leading to tensions.

Such a fuzzy accountability framework, and overlapping and conflicting local authority structure explains the confusion and ambiguity, and therefore, the failure by the central government to provide adequate resources to new local council areas in Cameroon. Consequently, elected local officials such as mayors quickly lost their legitimacy because of their inability to provide the development benefits promised under the now crippled democratization option. Thus while it is claimed that decentralization can provide social cohesion (Scott, 2009), this empirical research appears to point to the opposite direction, and challenges such optimistic presumptions. The reality exposes the fractured and tense atmosphere generated by so-called democratic decentralization in Cameroon. The process has exacerbated simmering conflicts at the local level, especially in the context of a plural and multiethnic society (Mbuagbo and Tabe, 2012; Mbuagbo and Fru, 2011). This partly indicates why decentralization has been instrumentalized by locally appointed elites to foster their own interest, as well as those of their political masters at the centre who imposed them in those positions in the first place. Appointed government delegates in Cameroon owe their loyalty more to the central government where their careers are determined, rather than to local populations of their municipalities. The interest of these appointed officials are bound to significantly deviate from those of local communities, while at the same time the daily concerns of inhabitants of cities are jeopardized and compromised by the parochial concerns of imposed local authorities.

Following our case study, assumptions about decentralization leading to empowerment of local city inhabitants appear to clearly be at variance, and actually clash with the local pattern of authority, sometimes, as Berry (2004) explains, creating new forms of social and political exclusion. In the context of urban governance reforms in Cameroon, competing claims to authority and efforts to decentralize political authority and administrative prerogatives at the level of city councils has given rise to local power struggles over scarce resources. Such a situation has complicated and subverted the process of local development and democratization that reform processes were actually intended to enhance. Decentralization as administrative and political strategies for rolling-back the state and empower local people through strengthening local structures of governance has, therefore, registered a dismal failure in Cameroon. As a consequence, it could be said that the proximity principle-that decentralization C Year moves government closer to the people, and induce higher accountability and efficiency in service delivery **??**Caldera et. al. 2010) is suffering from a bureaucratic inertia. This is principally because it is at the mercy of several local power brokers who, have different visions of decentralization, and are therefore competing with each other to control the decentralization agenda (Smoke, 2003). The current administrative and political logjam observed in the decentralization of city governance in Cameroon has alienated local residents who feel excluded from the process (Eyong and Mbuagbo, 2003), a situation which has further eroded the local tax base of municipalities, resulting to significant revenue loss (Mbuagbo and Neh Fru, 2011) as citizens demands for redress through an accountable and transparent local governance scheme are taken hostage by an undemocratic urban governance project. Decentralization has therefore created more conflicts at the local level, by creating powerful new conflict drivers in the form of imposed local officials, leading to a breakdown of social cohesion (Scott, 2009) within urban spaces in Cameroon.

Exposed as above, Southall and Wood (1996) are therefore right to claim that a return to freely elected local councils in Africa has little to do with democracy, unless those bodies have some genuinely effective powers and a reasonable degree of autonomy. The local bureaucracy in Africa is still mired in political competition among different local authorities for control of minimal resources to the extent that they have proved unable

to perform their task. In the case of Cameroon, the central government has been only too prepared to step in by appropriating the limited powers it grudgingly granted to elected local officials through imposed officers in what is now a stalled decentralization option. Obviously, the return to multipartysm in Cameroon has offered no meaningful indication of a reversal of the formally overcentralized political power (Joseph, 1978) which has retained its repressive instincts of conduit of state repression (Ndegwa, 2002). The case in point is, the sequential theory of decentralization (Falleti, 2004) which takes into account the territorial interests of bargaining actors, and incorporates policy feed-back effects in the process of integrating fiscal, administrative and political elements as key determinants in the evolution of intergovernmental balance of power-has not in any significant measure increased the powers of locally elected mayors and councilors. This is due largely to the deliberate withholding of financial, administrative, and political authority by state appointed agents, such as government delegates. As such, the current rhetoric of democratization has been accompanied by faltering implementation of decentralization of city governance in Cameroon. While this could also be blamed on lack of competence and capacity given the complex nature of the decentralization process, the national and local political environment in which implementation is expected to take place is clearly and generally not propitious.

3 III. Decentralization and the Politics of Identity in the Urban Space

Given the above crisis within which city governance in Cameroon is caught, the mayor of the Limbe 2 sub-divisional council declares that the local population of the municipality has completely been sidelined by the decentralization process. While devolution of powers is theoretically supposed to engender participatory development, which is the true meaning assigned to decentralization, the mayor of Limbe 1 council area corroborates the claims made by the mayor of Limbe 2. He says: "The more they claim to give with the right hand, they take with the left," a situation that amounts to recentralization. In this way, development priorities are still defined by the centre irrespective of local felt needs and realities on the ground. Such an administrative and political posture is a clear rebuff to the idea that in remaking every day life work in complex urban settings, emphasis has to be placed on understanding the role of local institutions and organizations, and peoples perceptions of what makes urban life **??**World Bank, 1999). To what extent, for example, has the local population and institutions in Cameroon been mobilized to marshal local resources and resourcefulness for poverty reduction so as to engender an inclusive governance pact in cities in Cameroon? Clearly, central authorities are hesitant to relinquish authority to grassroots. On the contrary, inadequate local government structures have actually amplified the urban crisis in Cameroon with a degree of uncertainty as to who actually governs, and this has actually defeated the whole notion of accountability. This interventionist and obstructionist role of imposed officials in Limbe and other cities in Cameroon (Mbuagbo and Tabe, 2012) has led to heightened conflicts at the local level, promoted inefficiency, and exacerbated the urban crisis. This situation only goes to strengthens **??**oone's (2003: 358) argument that contrary to the positive theory of institutions, institutions are rather created to represent the interest of the powerful, and state-society relations have not been significantly modified under the now stalled (Mbaku, 2002) As the case in southern Cote d'Ivoire (Boone, 2003) illustrate, reforms of city governance in Cameroon is yet to witness anything substantial by way of transfer of resources or administrative prerogatives to the newly created sub-divisional councils and the mayors and councilors elected to run them. The mayor of Limbe 1 sub-divisional council puts it bluntly: "The government delegate has no electorate to report to. He is answerable to the central government, and he cannot be voted out." This is an admission of the inability of locally elected officials to effectively operate under their democratic mandate. The experience of the city of Limbe can easily be generalized to cities in Cameroon that have witnessed imposed authorities on locally elected officials (Mbuagbo and Fru, 2011; **??**buagbo and Tabe, 2012). Conflicts between local officials in cities in Cameroon are widespread, and have further incapacitated an already weak and inefficient administrative structure that is supposed to implement them. Added to these administrative hiccoughs, powers are yet to be effectively devolved. This brings into sharp focus the inability of locally elected officials to effectively establish their legitimacy and win confidence from the public. Cameroon's picture reflects a highly hesitant commitment to administrative and democratic decentralization, especially as the central government has over the years been socialized in the tradition of centralized party-based control; and today, following the forced democratization option, is worried about the consequences, particularly in cities and regions where opposition political parties are strong and firmly entrenched.

As part of a wider strategy to stall and reverse the democratic option that prompted a broad range of administrative and political reforms in Africa, many African leaders adopted the rhetoric of democracy, while devising creative strategies to expunge the process of political competition from public life (Whitaker, 2005;Joseph, 1997). In Cameroon for example, as part of a wider effort by the government to further constrict the political space, the state prompted the mobilization of ethnic identities to weaken and fracture widespread demands from the public, especially in the heydays of democratization in the 1990s, for a more inclusive and accountable governance structure in the country (Mbuagbo and Akoko, 2004;Mbuagbo and Neh Fru, 2011). Ethno-regional politics were given official blessing in the January 1996 constitution of Cameroon which recognized the notion of autochthony, minorities, and regionalization of political life. By invoking national development

along identity lines, the government only widened social and political cleavages by fanning ethnicity, and as such significantly mitigated the likelihood of democratic consolidation in the country.

Exclusive citizenship propaganda that came to dominate the national political landscape in Cameroon (Geschiere, 1993) led to extreme alienation, especially in urban areas, of groups of citizens that were not included in the operation of the state on the nebulous premise that they were "strangers," and therefore not fit to participate in local politics **??**Mbuagbo and Tabe, 2012;Mbuagbo, 2002). The urban space, due principally to reasons of migration, became an arena where several localist movements erupted, with the intent of excluding "strangers." Consequently decentralization, or "bypassing the state" (Ceuppans and Geschiere, 2005), triggered fierce debates, especially at the local level about belonging, that is, over who could or could not participate in local politics.

As concrete expression of the governments involvement in fuelling and energizing such localist movements, especially in towns and cities with a largely immigrant population, the government tacitly endorsed demonstrations by autochthons in many cities in Cameroon following municipal elections of 1996 which, in many instances, were swept by opposition political forces which were erroneously described by the government as dominated by "strangers" (Mbuagbo, 2002). This move was designed not only to exclude supposed "strangers" or "foreigners" from local politics, but to fracture budding opposition political forces. Geschiere and Jackson (2006) and Konings (2001) have thus argued that by presenting autochthony as an alternative to the idea of national citizenship to local populations, and by invoking fears among these populations that they would be outvoted and dominated by more numerous immigrant populations in cities and towns, this inevitably feeds into the broader landscape of political imagination. This explains why during a nation-wide strike in February 2008, mostly by youths in urban areas protesting high cost of living and galloping unemployment, a number of placards in the city of Kumba in the southwest region of Cameroon carried the message, "Bafaws must go." A number of Bafaw elites read this ethnic backlash as a call to the annihilation of the Bafaws from what they consider their "homeland." In a meeting on March 2nd 2008 in Kumba, local elites of Bafaw extraction reacted in a communiqué addressed to the general public: "We of the Bafaw community are at a loss at the public display of hatred from your presumed brothers to a people who have traditionally been among the most hospitable in Cameroon to immigrant populations and strangers to whom we have given land" (The Detective, Vol. **??**6, No.2, 2008). As elsewhere in Africa, Geschiere (2004) highlights the connivance of national regimes with such localist movements, designed to exclude others, and point to the fact that the notion of "community," as the case of the Bafaws illustrate, is itself problematic because, it occasions fierce struggles over who really belongs where, particularly where scarce economic resources C Year have to be divided. With these developments in mind, Tacoli (2001) notes that increasing migration in Africa appears to be increasingly complex, bringing in their wake transformations which go hand in hand with the economic crisis, and reforms that together have radically changed urban labour markets in the larger cities, where, agricultural production have generally increased social polarization in both urban and rural spaces. From this standpoint, by-passing the state, or decentralization, has given autochthony politics a new edge, where citizens of the same country face mutual rejection, sometimes fuelled by economic considerations, and sometimes exacerbated by local state agents on ill-founded political and ahistorical claims that others do not belong.

The emergence, therefore, of these conflicts, especially at the local level in Cameroon within the framework of so-called decentralization, highlights the ambiguity that decentralization as devolution plays in situations of social and political conflict, especially in multiethnic contexts. In this connection, Braathen and Hellevik (2008) have demonstrated that while decentralization might be an instrument for power sharing, and therefore a source to mitigate conflict among various social or ethnic groups, it may equally be instrumentalized by political elites-at both national and local levels, to amplify conflict. This is particularly the case in the absence of interdependent central-local relationships, and as in Cameroon, imposed unaccountable local officials are used as cogs of the central government to ignite identity concerns and derail the process of local democratization. Rather than restructure centre-periphery or central-local relations, the presumed decentralization drive has actually foisted upon local citizens unelected representatives, and as such, fail to grant local autonomy to municipal authorities and grassroots populations. This is a case to demonstrate that the government of Cameroon is basically concerned with ideal, abstract legal codes of decentralization, while the practice actually disempowers those local populations decentralization was supposed to benefit.

4 IV. A Fractured Civil Society and Urban Governance

In Cameroon, as in many parts of Africa, this essay has demonstrated that the twin processes of democratization and decentralization ironically triggered the politics of autochthony, which explains to a large extent why political institutions have failed to act as "disinterested arbiters of clashing interests" **??**Berman, 2006: 1-14). Such instrumentalization of ethnic identities has only added to the administrative and political holdup within the urban governance sphere in Cameroon, a situation that seem so pervasive that it has made considerable inroad into the character of so-called civil society, whose recent emergence in Africa was aimed at restoring and promoting a civic public realm **??**Bellucci, 2002). But the paradox is that so-called civil society itself which claim grassroots identity have been captured within the parochial and undemocratic nature of urban governance (Mbuagbo and Akoko, 2004) such that it has failed to serve as arena to galvanize the public for civic engagement at the local level. This explains why it has not been able to make the city work in spite of the undemocratic nature of city governance, and in spite of the political manipulation of ethnic identities. This lack of autonomy from the

political process means civil society has not been a viable source of resistance to the ethnic instrumentalization and bureaucratic repression of political life in Cameroon. This broadly explains why according to **??**ostensen and Vaa (2001), civil society lacks precise meaning in the African context. Assumptions that they combine in several ways to the promotion of the common good is simply not reflected on the ground in Cameroon. And also, the argument that NGOs, which are concrete expressions of civil society organizations, and which espouse this euphoric view that they could bring pressure to bear on the state and other public institutions, and hold these institutions accountable, equally appear not to be the case in Cameroon.

As proof, there seem to be a complete dissonance between local NGOs and local municipal authorities in Cameroon. The heads of three local NGOs in the provincial town of Buea in the southwest region were interviewed between the months of March and April 2011 on the relationship between their NGOs and the municipality of Buea on the one hand, and the local population on the other. The head of Nkong Hill Top, a local NGO involved in a wide area of community development projects disclosed that the municipality shows little or no interest in the activities of local NGOs. In addition to this lack of collaboration between local NGOs and municipal authorities, the boss of Nkong Hill Top complained of the local bureaucracy represented by several government agencies, which have completely ignored development initiatives undertaken by these local NGOs. On this score, he concludes that a vast majority of local NGOs now appear to function in isolation, with only sporadic encounters with local political and administrative officials during official ceremonies, such as during visits by, say, a minister from the national capital.

This lack of collaboration among various local governance agencies has amounted to a situation where these NGOs have been privatized, lack commitment to the local population, and essentially parochial in nature and scope.

Early optimism, therefore, about civil society as alternative routes to development in Cameroon has turned to cynicism. Their reach has at best been limited (Tanjong, 2008). Ndenecho (2008), Mbuagbo and Akoko (2004) and **??**enshu (2008) (Temngah, 2008), and a lethargic local bureaucracy that does not allow local NGOs to function smoothly within a more liberalized political space.

While it is thus claimed that civil society has recorded some successes in the sphere of urban management in Ghana (Gough and Yankson, 2001), the same can hardly be said of Cameroon. This is because the local bureaucracy exhibits problems of lack of coordination, both among the various elements of civil society, and between civil society and state structures. Also, while decentralization tacitly endorses civil society as important agents in the overall success in urban management in Cameroon, there are no formal structures designed to incorporate them in the decision making process. This disjuncture between the stated objectives of decentralization and the actual exclusion of elements of civil society such as NGOs in urban management in Cameroon is an indication of the global failure of both state and society to mobilize the necessary resources and resourcefulness at the local level for sustained urban development. Caught in the web of a local bureaucracy that is exclusive of locally elected officials, and a civil society that is essentially atomistic and isolated, the urban governance project in Cameroon has recorded a dismal failure. It is this failure that informs Jua's (2001) assessment that the persistence of the economy of affection in several African contexts accounts for the inherent contradiction in civil society, which are more often than not rooted in parochial expectations, that members of extended families, for example, would support one another. And in this case, if Bayart's metaphoric politics of the belly is any thing to go by, it has significantly impeded the development of civil society by failing to render it autonomous, standing above and beyond the state and society, yet relating to them in many complex ways. Due to this failure, Forje (2008) has commented, generally, that contemporary politics in Cameroon still draws inspiration from a centralized authoritarian governance structure whose public policy framework emphasizes division and exclusion, and polarization for purely political reasons. The wide gap recorded between the state, civil society, and grassroots populations is an indication that the government of Cameroon ironically did engage in glasnost without perestroika.

The introduction, therefore, of democracy and decentralization as new forms of political accountability at both the local and national levels of Cameroon requires a profound understanding both of the nature of local and national politics, and the relationship between various actors on the ground. The current undemocratic urban governance scheme does not seem to favour the emergence, growth, and consolidation of a dense network of civic engagement uniting state and society within the urban public space. Thus by failing to involve the relevant players in the management of the urban space, and by resorting to parochial loyalties, the current urban governance structure in Cameroon has failed to win the support and trust of the population. This puts into relief Balls' (2005) claim that for institutions to gain citizens' trust, local representation is a key factor in organizations' abilities to earn the trust of citizens. The lack of coordination of actors at the local level, and the consequent failure to build linkages among the components of decentralization at the national, intergovernmental, and local levels has alienated the concern of local residents (Smoke, 2003) who, in turn, are unwilling to participate by paying local taxes for services which are not effectively and consistently provided. This attitude of non-payment as a form of resistance is a strong marker of the fact that the notion of democracy could be meaningful to citizens, especially to those at the grassroots, only when it is rooted in functioning local and participatory selfgovernance institutions that links local officials and citizens (Wunsch, 2010) in an inclusive governance pact.

5 V. Conclusion

Following the above discussion, current political and administrative reforms, or decentralization, could only be viable if it takes into account the existing social and economic complexities and local power dynamics in the evolution of a new governance paradigm. While institutional rules appear, theoretically, to provide for transparency and accountability in the formation and implementation of public policy in Cameroon, Berman (2006) has argued that generally, the state in Africa needs to be emancipated from the current neopatrimonial trappings which continues to account for

6 C

Year the entrenchment of individual and communal accumulation of wealth and power, and the chaotic pluralism of clashing institutional norms. And beyond the façade of official rhetoric of decentralization in Cameroon lies the privatization of state power, even at the very local level. In the supposedly on-going local governance reforms in Cameroon, this paper queues with the views of Mabogunje (1999) to conclude that at both the local and national levels in Africa, the overcentralized and over-bloated national and local bureaucracy is almost completely stripped of their rational and neutral sensibilities, and this requires reinventing and reimagining the state in Africa to emancipate local urban governance from the phenomenon of "the two publics" so aptly described by Peter Ekeh (1975). This is an indication that the African post-colonial state appears to be trapped in a resilient traditional authority structure which still commands the allegiance of a majority of Africans, including politicians and administrators, hence the difficulties in reinventing and reimagining a democratic and inclusive urban governance scheme. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]

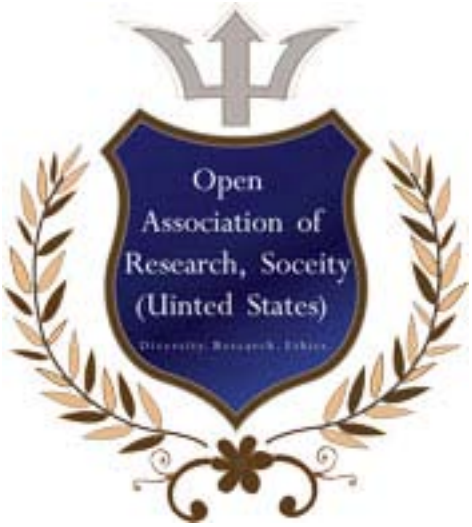

Figure 1: D

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Cameroon. This explains why these civil society organizations have not been able to scale up accountability and deepen democracy at the local level through a synergy with other governing structures such as municipalities. It is this gap between civil society represented by motley of organizations, and other local governing structures such as municipalities that account for their inability to effectively mobilize citizens for local development
demonstrated with the city of Cairo, that poor coordination of various actors on the ground is an indication that NGOs have emerged as complement to local government efforts to cope with various urban problems, but as the case in Cameroon has demonstrated, the paradox of this relationship lies in strict government control through a repressive legal framework

[Note: C]

Figure 2:

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