

# “STAKEHOLDERS APPROACHES IN WATER CONFLICTS RESOLUTIONS AND PEACE BUILDING IN CAMEROON: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION”

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## Résumé

*Le conflit est une réalité de la vie et faire face à ce phénomène nécessite de solides compétences interpersonnelles. Cette étude examine le rôle joué par le gouvernement, les autorités traditionnelles et les ONG dans la résolution des conflits liés à l'eau et la garantie de la paix au Cameroun. Les conflits liés à l'eau sont en augmentation au Cameroun et les facteurs à l'origine de ces conflits semblent s'intensifier, notamment la croissance démographique, la pollution et pratiques agricoles. L'étude s'est principalement appuyée sur des données secondaires comprenant des articles de revues, des livres, des thèses et des journaux. En cas d'analyse de données, l'analyse de contenu a été employée. Les résultats ont révélé que les différentes parties prenantes sont très respectées car elles jouent un rôle important dans la lutte contre les conflits liés à l'eau et le renforcement de la paix au Cameroun. Tout comme aucune solution unique n'éliminera l'insécurité de l'eau, heureusement, une grande variété d'approches a été mise en place par les parties prenantes pour résoudre les conflits liés à l'eau. Enfin, l'étude conclut que même si beaucoup a été fait par ces acteurs dans la résolution des conflits autour de l'eau, il existe encore des insuffisances.*

**Mots-clés :** *Parties prenantes, conflits de l'eau, gestion de l'eau, société civile*

## Abstract

*Conflict is a fact of life and dealing with this phenomenon requires strong interpersonal skills. This study examines the role played by the Government, Traditional Authorities and NGOs in solving water conflicts and ensuring peace in Cameroon. Water-related conflicts are on the rise in Cameroon and factors that drive such conflicts seem to be intensifying, including population growth, climate change, pollution and agricultural practices. The study predominantly relied on secondary data that include journal articles, books, thesis and newspapers. In case of analysis of data, content analysis was employed. The findings revealed that, the various stakeholders are highly respected as they play an important role in curbing water conflicts and enhancing peace in Cameroon. Just as no single solution will eliminate water insecurity, fortunately, a wide variety of approaches has been put in place by these stakeholders to solve conflicts over water. Finally, the study concludes that even though much has been done by these stakeholders in solving these conflicts over water, there are still some inadequacies.*

**Keywords:** *Stakeholders, Water conflicts, water management, civil society*

## Introduction

During the History of humanity, numerous water conflicts, accidental and/or deliberate, have been reported and in some instances, water has been used as a weapon of war. (Tulloch, 2008: 10) The United Nations recognizes that water disputes result from opposing interests of water users, public or private. (UN Water Development Report, 2020) Since prehistoric times, water conflicts have occurred as a result of a wide range of tensions and/or violence, which have rarely taken the form of traditional warfare waged over water resources alone. (Angelakis et al., 2021) Water has historically been a source of tension and a factor in conflicts that starts for several reasons including territorial disputes, fight for resources and strategic advantage. In some cases, water was used directly as a weapon through its ability to cause damage through deprivation or erosion of water resources of enemy populations. Access to water is a key challenge in Cameroon, both in terms of quality and quantity. A minority of the people manages to secure enough water to meet their needs and a fifth of the communities rely exclusively on unimproved sources.

Central Africa's possession of the second largest global reserve of dense rainforest attests to the relative abundance of water in Cameroon. (Mbiatem, 2017: 67) Yet inappropriate management of these resources as a result of financial constraints associated with the construction and management of systems has hampered the ability to respond to the demands of the growing populations. This has often been a major source of grievances. In recent years, however, rural Cameroonian populations have developed a range of grassroots water projects, to seek positive change, but these water projects still faces some problems. (Ibid, 2017) The availability of water supply in many rural and urban areas of Cameroon has significantly lagged for the past two decades, while demand has increased tremendously. Many community development projects have suffered stagnation or complete failure due to conflicts resulting over water. Thus sustainability can be achieved when equity, accountability and transparency are put in place by using key aspects such as social justice, self-reliance and empowerment of the local people. Water is a state property in Cameroon and the state is responsible for protecting and managing the resource as well as making it accessible to the people.

This notwithstanding, several laudable initiatives have been taken by the Government of Cameroon, NGOs and traditional rulers to raise awareness and foster action on the issue of water conflicts and peace building. In recent decades, the improvement of potable water services has, at least rhetorically, been among the top issues on international and national political development agendas. (Rahaman & Varis, 2005: 15-21) More so, legislated institutional and policy reforms in several developing countries have been motivated by these international efforts. (Saleth & Dinar, 2005: 1-20) Furthermore, developed countries have pledged 0.7 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) for overseas development assistance to support infrastructure expansion in developing countries. (Hecht, 2004: 67-85) These efforts date as far back as the 1977 United Nations Mar de Plata Water Conference.

The sheer volume of the above initiatives reveals that, despite their different ideological underpinnings, the call to action by various levels of government and different stakeholders has become increasingly loud and clear. In addition, there has been a shift from sectoral thinking to cross-cutting approaches, with attention to such aspects as user's engagement in management and decision-making, the role of water governance and need for a more local approach to water management in order to promote sustainability of water systems. While all these initiatives can be considered laudable, their relevance can only be measured by the extent to which they translate into concrete, on-the-ground actions to promote access to safe, affordable and an adequate quantity of potable water.

By spotlighting the perspective of stakeholders on conflict prevention, resolution and peace building, Njoh (2006: 381-406) defines conflict management as a broad array of tools used to anticipate, prevent and react to conflicts. Thus a conflict management strategy will involve a combination of these types of tools. These tools are used to encourage the parties to open up, identify the real issues behind the publicity pronounced positions and find win-win solutions that leave both parties better off with the outcome. (Ibid, 2006) However, it is not possible to come up with win-win outcomes all the time but in order to succeed, trade off and compromise could be necessary. Along with its proactive focus, the conflict management approach also uses methods that involve negotiation, mediation, conciliation and consensus building. (Fisher, 1991: 45-100)

Conflicts over water have become a common feature in Cameroon, and as a result there is the need to ascertain the effectiveness of stakeholders in resolving such conflicts. The cost of inability of communities to manage disputes contributes to underdevelopment and poverty. One key factor that has been associated with successful project implementation and sustained development is peace. Peace building therefore becomes an integral part of development process in any given community and the need for vibrant stakeholders in conflict resolution becomes essential. In this paper, we are going to examine the role played by the government, NGOS, Traditional Authorities in water conflict resolution. Lastly, we shall attempt to look at the challenges faced by these stakeholders.

## **1. Role of the Government in water conflict management and peace building**

The government of Cameroon as an administrative body has put in place a number of strategies to help in the management of conflicts over water in the country. These strategies have gone a long way to curb these conflicts and ensure peace in the country. These have been done through a number of ways.

### ***1.1. Water Legislation***

A number of legislations have been put in place by the Cameroonian Government, governing water in the Country. The 1996 Law on the environment and the 1998 Law on water are the cornerstones of the current legislation of water. (PAWD, 2020: 1-20) Following the Framework Law on Environmental Management, No. 96/12 of 5<sup>th</sup> August 1996, Cameroon adopted law No. 98/005 of 14 April 1998 on the Water Sector, in which water is recognized as a national good that the state protects and manages, while facilitating access to all. (Ako Ako et al., 2010: 871-888) The law No. 98/005 of 14 April 1998 lay down regulations governing water resources in Cameroon. However, probably inspired by the constitutional provision on the right to a healthy environment and the other bundle of economic and social rights, the Cameroonian legislator passed the Water Code within the respect of the environment at management principles and public health protection. The Water Code expressly provided that, water is a public good or utility

which the state ensures its protection, management and facilitates access to all. (Tamasong, 2007:1-10)

More so, the measures of protection are clearly spelled out in the Code and violators come under heavy criminal sanctions without prejudice to civil claims. To ensure conservation, protection and sustainable utilization, the Code institutes a National Water Committee, an institution placed under the Ministry in charge of water resources. (Ibid, 2007) By the wordings of Article 2(1) of the Water Code, *“L’eau est un bien du patrimoine national don’t l’état assure la protection et la gestion et en facilite l’accès à tous.”* From the provisions of the subsection, the state ensures protection and management of water but only facilitates rather than ensures or guarantees access of it to all Cameroonians.

In order to implement these different laws, some instruments have been developed. Firstly there is Decree No. 2001/161/PM of 8 May 2001 to lay down the roles, organization and functioning of the National Water Committee (CNE). In its article 2, this decree stipulates that the committee is responsible for:

- Studying and proposing to the government all measures or actions likely to ensure the protection and sustainable use of water.
- Expressing its opinion on water issues and problems raised by the government.

Secondly, Decree No. 2001/165/PM of 8 May 2001 to lay down conditions for appointing officials to monitor and control water quality. In accordance with this article 1(3), the persons concerned are in charge of controlling water quality, research, signaling and prosecuting offences as stated in the provisions of the law governing water activities and its implementation instruments.

Thirdly, Decree No. 2001/165/PM of 8 May 2001 specify on the modalities for protecting surface and underground water against pollution. In its article 15, this decree stipulates that, “Individual or corporate bodies owning installations hooked up to public or private sewage systems, artificial drainage channels or waste water treatment plants, shall be subject to the payment of a sanitation tax in accordance with the modalities laid down in the financial bill”.

Lastly, Decree No. 2001/216 of 2 August 2001 to set up a trust fund for financing development projects in water and sanitation. This is to ensure sustainability of investment in the sector. These legislations put in place

by Cameroon have helped in curbing water conflicts as non compliance to the laws will always lead to sanctions.

### ***1.2. Cameroon's Adoption of the Dublin Principles concerning integrated water***

The Dublin Principles on water and sustainable development, also known as the Dublin statement, was a meeting of experts on water related problems that took place at the International Conference on water and the Environment (ICWE), Dublin, Ireland organized from the 26-31 January 1992. (Moriarty et al., 2000: 1-4) The Dublin Statement on water and Sustainable Development recognize the increasing scarcity of water as a result of the different conflicting uses and overuses of water. (Ibid, 2000)

Cameroon adopted the Dublin principles concerning Integrated Water Resource Management in the year 1992, (Ako et al., 2010: 871-888) which is aimed at promoting coordinated development and management of water, in order to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital eco-systems. (Info Resources, 2003: 90) In the absence of proper water management, conflicts within countries often arise because of competing water uses and from competing jurisdictional mandates of agencies dealing with water issues.

In Cameroon, competition over water is already evident where more than 90% of installed electricity generation relies on hydropower. Competition over water use for agriculture and domestic purposes is already evident in the country. With an integrated approach to water resource management, there are important institutional dimensions to help avoid such conflicts related to water management.

During the Conference at Dublin, four principles were adopted. The Conference Report set out recommendations for action at the local, national and international levels based on the principles.

- Principle No. 1- Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment.
- Principle No.2- Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels.
- Principle No.3- Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.

- Principle No.4- water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good.

The government of Cameroon is doing its best to adhere to the Dublin principles through the celebration of the International Worlds Water Day (22<sup>nd</sup> March). International water day is celebrated worldwide in Cameroon every 22<sup>nd</sup> of March. This day is celebrated to create awareness on the issues causing water scarcity, and how they can be ameliorated. Through this medium, the government increases its efforts to ensure continuous access to safe water for all, irrespective of gender, age, disability, social status and geographical location.

## **2. Role played by NGOs**

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are an aspect of civil society, without Government representation that embarks on conflict reduction, welfare scheme, empowerment and employment. (Tanga and Fonchingon, 2009: 84-96) They play an important part in conflict resolution, through their ability to build inter-communal links, facilitate reconciliation and address the root cause of conflicts. (Funteh, 2005: 45) In Cameroon, NGOs became popular with the liberalization of association and civil rights organization by the law No. 90/053 of 19<sup>th</sup> December 1990. (Thibault, 1995) NGOs have played a great role as far as the management of water conflicts is concerned in Cameroon. Some activities of NGOs in conflict resolution have been examined below.

### ***2.1. Swiss association for Technical Assistance (SATA-HELVETAS)***

HELVETAS, the Swiss Association for International Corporation, (SIAC) which was formerly known as SATA (Swiss Association for Technical Assistance), started its development cooperation in the former West Cameroon federated state as early as 1962. (Monteh, 2019: 64-81) HELVETAS during its forty-five years of activity in Cameroon was mostly involved in the provision of potable water in the rural communities, rehabilitation of farm-to-market roads, bridges, community centers and other infrastructural buildings in Cameroon. (Ibid, 2019) Helvetas worked closely with the community Development Department (CDD) of the Ministry of Agriculture. It first constructed 23 water points in the South West Region of Cameroon by 1963. Given

this encouraging take off and the zeal of community members, an agreement was signed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1964 between SATA-HELVETAS and the Cameroon government to extend SATA-HELVETAS' assistance to the whole of the country. (Waarde, 1990: 6-7)

By 1994, SATA-HELVETAS constructed 344 water points. It also had a total of 189 caretakers and 446 water project maintenance committee members. (Zimmerman, 1993: 57) Community development Department (CDD) technicians and staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also benefitted from training programmes on catchment protection and the maintenance of water systems. More or less standard approach for water catchment protection has been developed. This approach includes sensitization of the population, acquiring of land titles of the catchment area, setting up of a water management committee, training of caretakers and implementing protective measures. These protective measures worked well in most cases and the technical approach followed by Helvetas can be used as a good basis for any water catchment protection project.

More so, in 1994, a report written by Helvetas described an assessment of the situation in Bambui watershed. After an extensive interview program with local farmers, a clear socio-economic analysis of the problem was presented and a strategy proposed. This strategy centered on including different farmer groups, who appear to be endangering the catchment were included in the watershed committee, while Helvetas played the role of surveying the improved farming systems. (wunderlin, 1994: 40) A proposal was made that encompassed many aspects such as regulation of land ownership, training of farmers on good farming practices, establishment of tree nurseries, protection zones of water catchment areas, division of land rights among users and planning of land use.

The program was implemented at a great pace and four months later, significant progress was reported. Tree nurseries were set up, farmers were trained, collaboration between farmers in the watershed committee was successful and trespassers of the set agreement were prosecuted. The input from Helvetas Cameroon appears to have been very significant taking into consideration their financial contribution towards materials like rain coats, shovels, new water supply points, project housing, transport, tree nurseries and technical assistance. (Ibid, 1994)

Since land ownership was a recurring theme in water catchment protection, Helvetas Cameroon supported a project carried out by legal professionals into land tenure systems. Three workshops were held in Wum (Menchum and Boyo divisions), Kumbo (Bui and Donga/Mantung divisions) and Batibo (Ngoketunjia and Momo divisions) respectively. The workshops were held with involvement of the traditional councils, water management committees, landlords and Fulani adhors, councilors, Mayors and on one occasion the Regional Parliamentarian. One main conclusion from these workshops was that although there appears to be sufficient legal basis to allow proper protection of water catchment areas, insufficient knowledge of these rules results in improper protection water catchment and conflicts. (Mbufung and Tah, 2002: 10)

The work sponsored by Helvetas Cameroon in the Bamenda Grassfields in the last ten years shows a clear shift from very technical hands on assistance in the field to more advisory role towards councils in organizing these activities themselves. This evolution comes as a natural process where the organization learns from results obtained in the field and feedback given by partners. In general the approach of water catchment protection conceived by Helvetas Cameroon as a participatory approach. The approach used by Helvetas for catchment protection and management has worked well thus curbing water conflicts. Not every measure was equally successful in all sites, but they all found their uses in one or more places.

## ***2.2. SCANWATER***

SCANWATER is a technology developed in Scandinavian countries in the 1980s, to provide good and potable drinking water probably in Sweden. (Sanguv, 2014: 107-111) For this technology to be able to succeed in other countries there was the need for the transfer of technology and technological know-how. SCANWATER is a project that is being funded by Scandinavian countries. She has constructed water schemes in Cameroon, especially in the Bamenda Grassfields Region. This NGO is a high technological project, which is a national project whose purpose is to provide good drinking water to rural areas as a result of scarcity of water. Due to the cultivation of crops and water unfriendly trees beside the catchment areas, SCANWATER was seen as the only source that could keep water roaming in the rural areas. So this

project is for rural and local areas, where water crisis are the talk of the day.

It was commissioned to build the first water station towards the end of 1980. The building of new schemes continued until 1992, when about 335 schemes had been installed in medium-sized villages and small towns. Water is most often obtained from bore holes. After pumping, it undergoes simple treatment process by aeration, followed by filtration and chlorination. (Yenshu, 1998: 41-48). It is later distributed through public standpipes and a few private connections and power is normally supplied by a diesel-powered generator, but sometimes electric pumps are used.

SCANWATER was introduced in Bui Division of Cameroon in the 1990s, because of the alarming water crisis in the interior of the villages in the Division. (Ndonko, 2021: 17-26) Water crisis occurred when there was an inadequate supply of water to meet the needs of the community villages, such as Kyarn, Giyarni and Lassin had frequent water shortages. This came as a result of mismanagement of water used for irrigation in topography and relief. In these areas, survey was carried out and discovered that constructions of SCANWATER systems could be able to supply the whole population and even guarantee that there will be water in the long run. This project was important because it took in to consideration the sustainable impact of development, provided good drinking water to a large community, helped in the prevention of water-borne diseases, curbed water conflicts and created employment considering the sustainable impact.

Furthermore, SCANWATER projects created employment in so many communities due to the high intensity of labour that was needed and also the need of workers after the project has been completed and handed to a few persons that were trained to manage it. These persons were paid for their services thus increasing their per capita income. SCANWATER has played a great role to fight against water conflicts through its activities in Cameroonian communities as seen above.

### **3. Role played by Traditional Rulers**

Conflicts existed long before colonization of Africa and it was the task of traditional leaders to solve these conflicts. Most of the African societies still prefer the use of traditional and informal justice and

reconciliation forums to help in resolution. This is because, most of the populations still live in rural areas with limited infrastructures in the state justice systems and the unfair justice systems provided at the formal courts, which tend to favour the rich in the society, hence it cannot be trusted. (Bercovitch, 1992:110-150) So it is important to recognize them in water conflict management in Cameroon.

Traditional rulers play decisive roles in water conflict resolution. This is because of the relevance accorded to them by their subjects coupled with the fact that they believed to communicate with the gods of the land. The role of traditional rulers in peace building is as old as the institution itself. Peace building is part and parcel of African pre-colonial social systems geared towards reconciliation, maintenance and improvement of social relationships. (Wartman, 2000: 79) The methods, processes and regulation seem to restore a balance to settle conflict and eliminate disputes. In this regard, traditional rulers play a vital role in peace building at the grassroots level as part of the cultural heritage of the people.

Choudree (1999) also argues that, “traditional conflict resolution possesses strive to restore balance, settle conflicts and eliminate disputes hence the traditional elders not only resolve conflicts by virtue of their position in society. In addition, traditional leaders tend to develop peaceful relations while the political figures make deals to stop the conflict or by resolving the conflict in war meaning that wisdom is often ignored”. This has been the case in Bambili whereby the traditional authorities worked hard to bring a peaceful co existence between the Bambili people and Babanki-tungoh over Lake Bambili. This shows the importance of traditional rulers in conflict resolution over water, because many people still believe in their cultural practices and traditional institutions. (Ibid, 2000)

Traditional rulers play a pivotal role in settling water conflicts and are regarded as custodians of traditional law and receive a bulk of these conflicts over water. The guiding objective of the traditional justice system presided over by traditional rulers in Cameroon is to restore peace and harmony within the communities. This is done by ensuring that disputants and their respective supporters are reconciled. More so, the traditional rulers have employed the issue of compensation in Cameroon which is in concurrence with what Merry said. She argued that, the penalties focus on restitution in order to restore the status quo rather than punishment. It is with this view in mind that the role of traditional

leaders in the resolution of conflict was said to be the most uniting factor in the whole community and responsible for finding peaceful solutions to various conflicts that arose in the community and various groups they led.

These institutions of traditional rulers were virtually the only institutions of governance in the past. They played critical roles such as custodians of customary law and communal assets especially water, land and resources guardians, symbols of cultural values and religious practices, dispensing justice, enforcing contracts and also resolving conflicts. (Boege, 2006: 187) The art of resolving conflict is borne out of the belief that conflict which is inevitable could and should not be left alone. It therefore needs to be put under control by interacting with relevant parties to develop common generalizations or principles and practices that would return cordial relationships against violence.

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### **Challenges to Resolving Water Conflicts in Cameroon**

There is no doubt that stakeholders in Cameroon have in practical ways play important roles by engaging in conflict management and peace building in Cameroon. Despite all the efforts that have been put in place by the government, NGOs and traditional authorities to ensure the resolution of water conflicts in Cameroon, this phenomenon continues to persist. This has been as a result of some challenges. Bribery and corruption in the water sector continues to be the root cause of water conflicts that threatens the population of Cameroon and exacerbate environmental degradation. (Transparency International, 2008) Water is a resource without substitute. It is paramount to our health, our food security, our energy future and our ecosystem. But corruption continues to plague water management and use in all areas.

The impact and scope of corruption in different segments of the water sector ranges from petty bribery in water delivery to procurement related

looting of irrigation and hydropower funds, from covering up industrial pollution to manipulation of water management and allocation policies. More so, it is as well manifested by lack of sustainable delivery, inequitable investment, targeting of resources and limited participation of affected communities in developmental processes. (Fonteh, 2011: 53-60) Corruption's impact on water is a fundamental governance problem, yet it is not sufficiently addressed in the many global policy initiatives for environmental sustainability, development and food and energy security. More so continues increase in population, poor agricultural practices and climate change are a challenge to solving water conflicts in Cameroon. Crises of water quality and quantity are intimately linked with climate change. Water extremes affected by climate change continue to contribute to the migration and displacement of millions of people. This is already causing extreme events in many watersheds in the Cameroon, impacting communities.

Furthermore, efforts to address water conflicts require engagement with communities, stakeholders and governments at all levels that are deeply interests and perspectives. Experience shows that these efforts even when focused on a common goal, can face unexpected challenges, create tensions and leave some parties unsatisfied or some objectives unfulfilled. The parties continued fighting each other because the decisions and solutions put in place did not favour either of the concerned parties. Most at times a solution is found but one party is unsatisfied with it. It thus becomes likely that the issue will arise again.

## **Conclusion**

This study compliments the historiography of water conflicts and stakeholders' intervention and prevention of these conflicts in Cameroon. Stakeholders' engagement is an important tool in developing the common understanding of context that is necessary for making decisions that affect sustainable water management. The article has argued that, while stakeholders have successfully resolved and prevented many of such conflicts in the country, it has failed in some instances as a result of some challenges, thus part of the reason why conflicts over water still continue to persist in the area.

New challenges in managing water conflicts in Cameroon will surely emerge, particularly with the advent of increased variability due to

climate change and the growing globalized economy. To be prepared for this, parties should participate in conflict-resolution mechanisms and invest in institutional capacity with their neighbours. Systematic, holistic water management can provide the opportunity for more users to meet their basic needs and become economically resilient with respect to whatever new variables regarding management they face, thereby increasing water security. Concrete measures are therefore required to strengthen these stakeholders as agents of conflict

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