

Introduction

1. Following up the 3rd Cycle: in total the Cameroonian government received 196 recommendations from other states; and out of these, Cameroon supported 133 recommendations and noted 63. Recommendations highlighted key themes such as acceptance of international norms, Cameroon's constitutional framework, violence against women and the right to education.
2. In regards to the acceptance of international norms, recommendations called on Cameroon to Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, Ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography¹.
3. The emphasis of ICO's report is the protection of minority rights, and its interactions with other rights and freedoms protected under international law - this is in line with the organisation's special focus and area of expertise. As a result, this report is primarily concerned with the human rights issues pertinent to the ongoing Anglophone Crisis. ICO continues to be alarmed by the reports of the escalation of violence and insecurity which exacerbate humanitarian needs. Evidence suggests the prevalence of killings, kidnappings, arbitrary, detention, force recruitment, displacement, rape, abduction, destruction of property, attacks on schools and medical facilities².
4. In preparation of this report, ICO has held interviews with local stakeholders. The interviews highlight a number of persisting human rights issues mentioned in the matrix of recommendation from the 3rd UPR cycle. Local stakeholders specifically point to actions by government forces and separatists as the driving force behind human rights violations. Those most affected by human rights violations expose the intersectionality of minority rights and rights concerning vulnerable peoples, such as women, children and persons with disabilities.
5. ICO welcomes the Canadian initiative which offers an opportunity for the Cameroon peace process, however, ICO is concerned by the reported resistance from government officers to engage in the talks with Anglophone separatists and urges Cameroon to engage meaningfully in the peace process. Failure to engage in an inclusive peace process is likely to worsen the situation of human rights in the country for minorities, lead to further loss of lives and contribute to the growing humanitarian crisis³.

¹ Human Rights Council, 2018. Matrix of Recommendations, Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/cm-index>

² UK Home Office 2020, pp. 27. Country Policy and Information Note Cameroon: Internal relocation, Accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948170/Cameroon_-_Internal_relocation_-_CPIN_-_V1.0_Final_Gov.uk.pdf

³ Crisis Group, 2023. Canada Initiative Offers Opportunity for Cameroon Peace Process, Accessed at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/canada-initiative-offers-opportunity-cameroon-peace-process>

Cross Cutting issues

Right of Minorities relating to the Right to Participate in Public Life and the Right to Cultural Equality

6. ICO welcomes Cameroon's effort to address minority rights issues through national dialogue, in particular in regards to bilingualism. Since 1972, Cameroon's legislative framework to protect the right of linguistic minorities to participate in public life and the right to cultural equality. ICO recognises that Cameroon has steps to increase the recruitment of Pupil Magistrates of English Expression into The National School of Administration and Magistracy of Cameroon⁴ and has translated Cameroon's penal code into English.
7. However, as reported by local stakeholder's, ICO is concerned that significant progress has yet to be met. This is supported by Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM)⁵ who highlight that the calls for "bilingual and bijural systems of Cameroon" have not been addressed in a meaningful capacity. Reports from local stakeholders highlight the gap between the de jure and de facto application of these norms. It is reported that despite the de jure bilingualism of the country, domains such as the justice system, education, public administration, and local administration have given insufficient attention to bilingualism in public service. Current barriers deny the anglophone minority the right to participate in public life and the right to cultural equality⁶, due their underrepresentation, exclusion and marginalisation from public structures.
8. ICO also welcomes the creation of the national commission on bilingualism and multiculturalism created by decree No: 2017/013 of the 23rd January 2017. However, secondary research and discussion with local communities suggests that the commission has not yet prioritised the perspective of the community in regards to the successful implementation of constitutional provisions on the promotion of bilingualism⁷. Additionally, the commission does not have a transparent framework for open data on its activities, impact and findings.
9. The protection of the Right to Public Life also comes into question when considering the civil society environment. During the last periodic review Cameroon supported recommendations to engage in inclusive and permanent dialogue with civil society as well as address concerns on the protection of freedom of expression, assembly and

⁴ MINFOPRA 2021, pp.1 Order 005210, The Minister of the Public Service and Administrative Reform, Accessed at:

https://www.minfopra.gov.cm/images/2021/DDRHE/ENAM/50_Pupil_Magistrates_English_ang.pdf

⁵International Service for Human Rights, 2022. CERD Committee reviews Cameroon's record on racial and ethnic discrimination, Accessed at: <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/cerd-committee-reviews-camerouns-record-on-racial-and-ethnic-discrimination/>

⁶ Office of the High Commissioner, 2013. Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations Human Rights System. Fact Sheet 9/ Rev 2, Accessed at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/fs9Rev.2.pdf>

⁷ National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. Accessed at:

<https://www.ncpbm.cm/en/commission/ncpbm-brief>

association⁸. However, CAWOPEM highlights that Cameroon has yet to create an enabling environment for civil society and human rights defenders. Local stakeholders are similarly concerned by the shrinking civic space in Cameroon pointing to a poor track record of protecting freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and association, especially concerning human rights defenders⁹. Local stakeholders suggest this issue has been compounded by the conflict, reporting that rallies and protests organised by the members of the Anglophone community are unfairly denied by senior divisional officers in Cameroon's ministry of territorial administration.

10. Reports from local stakeholders describe the relationships between the government and civil society as antagonistic. In relation to the crisis, the government has repeatedly denounced the actions of NGO in the view that reporting by NGOs weakens the morale, action and reputation of the security forces. ICO notes that this issue was highlighted by The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and ACAT Littoral at the session of the UN Committee against Torture, on the occasion of the examination of the third periodic report of the government of Cameroon. The organisations called to the attention of the Committee the Cameroonian government's rhetoric blaming NGOs of spreading "sensationalist" information¹⁰. The US State government further reports that conditions for recognising NGOs were drawn out and "unevenly enforced" creating "legal uncertainty with [NGOs] activities tolerated but not formally approved"¹¹. ICO is therefore concerned that the State of Cameroon perpetuates a hostile environment for civil society.
11. ICO welcomes the collaboration from certain government ministries with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) such as the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family's work, providing technical assistance, training and capacity building. However, ICO calls for this support to be granted to all CSOs working in shared thematic areas to government ministries. A dynamic CSO environment is crucial to protecting the minority rights and the rights of vulnerable communities which are often disproportionately underrepresented.

Right of Minorities resulting to the Freedom of Expression, Torture and Detention

12. ICO welcomes Cameroon's decision to be a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR), the Convention against Torture, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, several allegations have come to light which – at best – calls into question Cameroon's protection of the legal rights found in these treaties and at worst exposes intentional disregard for the safety of journalists. These allegations refer to

⁸ Human Rights Council, 2018, pp. 98. National Report. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/cm-index>

⁹ United States Department of State, 2021. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2021, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Accessed at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/cameroon/>

¹⁰ International Federation of Human Rights, 2003. NGOs accused of spreading false and "sensationalist" information. Accessed at: <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/cameroon/NGOs-accused-of-spreading-false>

¹¹ United States Department of State, 2021

the death of a journalist Wazizi in prison¹² and the more recent kidnapping and death of Martinez Zogo¹³ in which the state is allegedly implicated.

13. Local stakeholders report that state authorities frequently harass and intimidate journalists. Local stakeholders point to the actions of Cameroon's National Communication Councils which they charge with introducing sanctions and suspensions to journalists as a way to silence unfavourable reporting. ICO is also concerned by the law which requires editors to submit two signed copies of their newspapers within two hours after publication, wherein fear leads to self-censorship¹⁴. Interviewees highlighted that attacks on Freedom of Expression are pervasive to Cameroon as a whole, but that the context of the Anglophone crisis has led to proliferation of tools (suspension of broadcasting, harassment and attacks of journalists, intimidation via social media) - and greater willingness to use such tools - to stifle criticism of government's actions and dissenting opinions.
14. Local stakeholders also reported that the increased presence of armed forces in the Anglophone regions has led to a militarisation of day-to-day law and order, of which women and young girls suffer the gravest consequences. ICO is concerned with reports of unauthorised search and seizure of private property, harassment, and intimidation of Anglophone communities. Local stakeholders explain that routine violations such as transgressions by armed forces create an environment of fear, intimidation amongst the community, and are not accurately reported.

Right of Minorities relating to the Right of Vulnerable Groups and Right to Education

15. ICO welcomes Cameroon's strides towards "gender equality and women's empowerment through major international commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Declaration of Heads of State and Government of the African Union on Equality Between Women and Men, and the Sustainable Development Goals"¹⁵.
16. However, local stakeholders report that women's livelihoods have been disproportionately affected by the conflict. The crisis has a disproportionate impact on women and girls' education, with a higher number remaining out of school since 2016. There is no tracking mechanism for girls who are in school nor schemes to provide financial support to parents for schooling; in the context of the crisis where education has been a site of conflict, existing patriarchal norms have been reproduced, and women and girls' education has been left behind. This reduction in women and girls school attendance coincides with a significant rise in teenage pregnancies. Whilst ICO welcomes

¹² UNESCO, 2022. *For additional context see: Reporters Without Borders 2023. UNESCO Director-General urges investigation into the death of journalist Samuel Wazizi in Cameroon*, Accessed at: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-director-general-urges-investigation-death-journalist-samuel-wazizi-cameroon?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab2000386214a8f62fc7c4338ef069cb0dcd2bc1ca84d751da4c1aeb41b2031f361a1608dcb0c87a143000356a6d4442a36f1ea0c4ab90fcf78e70cb28a16512302604a2ac02a42bc056ae390f438aef5bea9415cb6118b69e4c2a

¹³ Reporters Without Borders. Accessed at: <https://rsf.org/en/cameroon-findings-enquiry-journalist-samuel-wazizi-s-death-detention-must-be-published>

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ United Nations Foundation, 2017. *Ending Inequality Against Women in Cameroon*. Accessed: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/ending-inequality-women-cameroon/>

Cameroon's law that allows pregnant women and girls to stay in school, ICO is concerned that such legal reforms do not go far enough to protect women and girls' access to education by addressing the root causes of barriers to women and girls' education. ICO would also like to point that Cameroon is not party to 1960 UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education.

17. Additionally, gender-based violence (GBV) is reported to have worsened as a result of the conflict from within the home, as well at the hands of government and separatists' forces. GBV can have lifetime consequences on women's health. ICO welcomes the work by organisations such as Women for Change, particularly their thematic focus and participatory and inclusive approach to work. However, local stakeholders highlight that more systematic and coordinated initiatives are needed to address stigmatisation and cultural barriers which inhibit women from coming forward; that there should be greater coordination of the actions of CSOs, and adequate funding should be provided to tackle the issue. Therefore, the most effective actions in eliminating GBV will engage leaders of communities who are not external to these cultures, and can thus navigate them constructively.
18. ICO encourages the work of the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family on the mandate to eliminate gender inequality and protect women rights from the 2018-2020 National Action Plan. Although bills have been drafted to protect women rights, local women's rights advocates still find the state lagging behind in protecting women, especially rural women "who form the bulk of women with limited financial means"¹⁶. Any future activities taken by Cameroon ought to consider how human rights violations are experienced differently by women closer to larger cities or those living in rural communities. Local stakeholders also explain that issues highlighted are more severely experienced by rural communities. For instance, the early years of the Anglophone crisis suspended agricultural production in part of the North West and South Regions¹⁷, for farmers returning to farms, production cannot be re-established without significant training, agricultural equipment and capacity building. Rural women who practice subsistence farming as a source of living, have experienced a decrease in crop production which in turn affects their rights to food, security and safety. The profound vulnerability of women in living in rural areas, calls for further resources to ensure programmes and initiative intended to protect women's rights reaches those most at risk.

Right of Minorities relating to the Right of Labour

19. Local stakeholders also reported that many minorities are employed illegally by mining or logging companies. In some places, the State is almost absent, at best state presence was described as "conveniently timid and passive" by local stakeholders, towards non-State actors in the exploitation of minorities. ICO is also concerned by reports from local stakeholders of forced labour and exploitation, especially of that of children. Collected data suggests that children are mostly forced to work in agriculture (cocoa, cotton, tea and onion plantations) and fishing. The global security context of the country has also

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ UK Home Office 2020, pp. 6.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948170/Cameroon - Internal relocation - CPIN - V1.0 Final Gov.uk.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948170/Cameroon_-_Internal_relocation_-_CPIN_-_V1.0_Final_Gov.uk.pdf)

led to a rise of children being recruited by non-state armed groups. They serve for various purposes in this respect such as suicide bombers, fighting, collecting intelligence, sexual slaves, as well as other chores in makeshift camps and bases.

Therefore, ICO calls on the Working Group of the UPR to recommend that the Government of Cameroon:

20. Work towards systemic and coordinated action to address gender equality issues which could offer training, assign gender focus points at local authorities, and coordinate public health measures.
21. Support the creation of a second National Action Plan for Women, the first of which expired in 2020, incorporating lessons learned and feedback from CSOs dedicated to the protection and furthering of women's rights.
22. Introduce legislative reforms to protect human rights defenders. This work should cover both punitive measures (addressing the impunity for actors that target human rights defenders), and preventative measures. Preventative measures could be managed by the creation of an independent commission to audit state actions on Freedom of Expression - they would protect oversight via open channels of communication with broadcasters about infringements to freedom of speech. ICO also calls on Cameroon to implement the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.
23. Establish an enquiry into the reported discriminatory practices facing civil society organisations and create an independent cross-community committee of which ensures representation of minorities within Anglophone and Francophone communities, to oversee CSOs registration, decision-making process affecting CSOs, and protection of freedoms in line with international law. This would remove decision making processes on CSOs from the political sphere and induce separation of powers between the bodies responsible for the granting of licences to CSOs and state institutions.
24. Ensure that minorities persons are represented in the Cameroon Human Rights Commission, Cameroon Human Rights Commission (CHRC), as a replacement for the existing National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms (NCHRF).
25. Ensure the de jure powers granted to National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism (created in 2017) can be implemented in a de facto sense.
26. Engage constructively with the Canadian mediated peace-process, not only in its value to promote dialogue between belligerents, but through working in collaboration to create the environment and conditions for peace to be realised.
27. Ensure any measures actioned foreground an awareness that communities within Cameroon face multifaceted and intersecting threats to their freedom, rights and livelihoods.

Final Remarks

28. ICO hopes Cameroon can learn from the positive steps taken following former UPR recommendations. Specifically, we commend the ongoing collaboration between the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family and women-rights CSOs, which exemplify constructive participatory approaches to protecting the Right to Vulnerable Groups. We hope the significant contributing reason for success - sustained state and CSO collaboration - offers a framework which can be reproduced across diverse issue-areas.
29. This would ultimately work to create and then maintain the capacity of the Cameroonian state to successfully implement and action UPR recommendations.