“North – West tripartite Meeting”

Workshop to set up a mechanism for access to Information and Public Data in the North-West in times of Crisis

Date: 15 - 16 January, 2020
Location: Blue Pearl Hotel Bamenda
The two days workshop started on Wednesday 15, January with arrival and registration of participants as from 8:30 am. After an opening prayer from one of the participants, Amambo Carrey Pride, the general facilitator Mokun Njouny Nelson officially opened the meeting at 10:30 am. He reminded participants of the particular context under which the meeting was holding as reflected in the theme of the workshop.

All 18 participants including journalists, civil society organisations and the administration were present.

The Executive Secretary of ADISI, Paul-Joel KAMTCHANG then gave a brief history of ADISI Cameroon and its activities. He also pointed out some objectives of the meeting including:

- Identifying the main problems hindering access to information and public data in the North West region of Cameroon in times of crisis and propose a mechanism to ease such access.
- How journalists, civil society and government can work together to provide verifiable information on the ongoing Anglophone crisis.

The stage set participants were ready for all three presentations scheduled for the day.

I: Paul Joel Kamtchang introduces the theme of the workshop
1. Situation of freedom of the press and access to information in the North West Region of Cameroon in times of crisis: The way forward – ANNEX 1

This topic was handled by Gideon Taka, veteran Journalist, member of the Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalist CAMASEJ.

According to him “When journalists are targeted society as a whole pays a price”.

In his presentation he focused on topics such as:

1. Introduction
   - What the press can do and how to go about a peaceful solution.
   - Identification of press organs in the NWR of Cameroon
   - Field performance and sources
   - Some difficulties encountered by reporters in the field
2. The start of the conflict and the fatal confrontation
- The Anglophone teachers and lawyers complaining of cheating along the professional line.
- The sprung up of an Anglophone militant movement.
- The head of state declaring war.
- The agitating movement already transformed into a separatist movement.
- Statements made by President Paul Biya after the last swearing in.

3. Situation of practicing journalist in the region
- Pains endured by some journalist i.e. arrest and kidnapping carried out by police or separatists
- Low professional Performance and output.

4. The way forward
- Journalists should use appropriate language for targeted audience
- Ensure objectivity and fairness in reporting
- Investigate and understand situations before reporting
- Verify your sources and make attributions correctly.
- Journalists should respect general ethics especially relating to the honor of source person
- Training of journalist

Some media laws should be reviewed.
- This relates to the roles journalist can play to stop the war.
- Redefinition of who a journalist is in Cameroon.

In summary Gideon Taka concluded that;

- Peace is a greater solution.
- Journalists most check their feelings or it can be disastrous.
- Journalists can be highly respected or feared.
- Freedom is not absolute.
- Unprofessional media report influences the nature of the crisis unless it was intended to produce negative results.

2. Difficulties faced by Civil Society Organisations, CSOs in the North West in accessing information in times of crisis. – ANNEX 2

The paper was presented by Fon Nsoh the Coordinator of the Community Intitiative for Sustainable Development – COMINSUD.
He pointed out that CSOs need information to determine needs, establish extend of problems, plan and organize interventions, assess coverage and measure change. He however expressed regret that this was costly due to; - Government: Authorization process, and nuemrous bottlenecks. In conclusion he noted that information manipulation can have a double impact; reducing or escalating a crisis, just as information collection can bring about conflict between the government and civil society.

3: Fon Soh in full talk of the conditions of access to information and working of the company in the North West Region

3. Government measures taken to facilities the access of journalists and citizens to information in times of crisis

The last presentation was done by the Chief of Service for Public Communication for the North West, Bassang Victory, sitting in for the Regional Delegate for Communication.
She agreed that given context of the ongoing socio-political crisis in the English-Speaking Regions there was an urgent need for a mobilization of the press and for quality communication, information that is exact, pertinent, complete, pluralistic and above all unquestionable that so as readily serves public opinion. She remined that “Freedom of speech, a free press, freedom of association, syndicate freedom, the right of revolt are all guaranteed by defined conditions of the law.” Mme Bassang all mentioned some international conventions ratified by the Cameroon government to assure a free press; the international pact on politics and civil rights (PIDCIP), the African charter on Human Rights and the people (CADHP) amongst others.

She noted that information on the crisis is managed by public authorities in conformity with the Governmental communication strategy. In effect, information collected in the field is systematically transmitted to the central services through appropriate channels. From there, it can be exploited and communicated in the form of press conferences, press releases, press statements as necessity demands, by the government spokesperson.

The multiple presidential addresses, interviews and press statements of the Minister of Territorial Administration, the numerous exchanges of the governor of the North West Region with the local Press, are all means through which government attempts to inform the press and the population on the current sociopolitical happenings and environment of the Region.
In conclusion she said with no direct intention to withhold information, the governmental communication strategy translates the will of public authorities, to inform in the most possible way the press and the population on the crisis rocking the English regions.

**DAY TWO**

The second day of the workshop on Thursday January 16, 2020 was more practical as participants split into three working groups to reflect on different thematics.

**GROUP 1: Mechanism for collaboration between stakeholders to ensure access to information**

The discussions resolved that all involved; government, press, Civil Society Organisations, traditional and religious authorities and the international community should work in synergy. As for mechanisms it was recommended that they improve on communication strategies by increasing press outings through conferences and releases. The use of Hot Lines and Suggestion boxes where the population could put their worries anonymously was also encouraged.
GROUP 2: Choice of tools to facilitate journalist access to information sources

Group members recognised that journalists were a middle-pin in the communication process and should assume their role. As such it was suggested that besides formal and informal trainings that should also be equipped with state-of-the-art gadgets so as to be professional. As much as possible they should endeavour to put away their individual opinion and passion in reporting during crisis.

5: Nelson Mokun oversees the smooth running of the group exercises

GROUP 3: Topics to handle inorder to better inform public opinion on the Anglophone crisis

Participants were unanimous that that Anglophone crisis was under-reported reason why it may not be getting the necessary attention especially from the international community. As such this group was tasked to come out with thematic areas that may be adequately reported and that needs to be put on public space.

The following non-exhaustive topics came up:
- How lock downs and ghost towns in the Anglophone Regions was affecting economics activities in other Regions
- How are teachers in these Regions coping without schools
- The state of traditional authorities and institutions
- Coping with a parallel health crisis
- The excesses of state and non-state actors
- The dilemma of humanitarian action
- How persons with disabilities are faring
- The plight of host communities
- Thinking ceasefire, peace and reconciliation

6: A view of group work

Closing the workshop, a visibly satisfied Paul-Joel KAMTCHANG, Executive Secretary of ADISI-Cameroon promised that ADISI will sponsor the production of features stories relating to the crisis. He said their intention was to draw national and international opinion to the plight of the Anglophone population. This he concluded was in their hope that a rapid solution will be sought to the crisis.
Bamenda, 16 January, 2020

1. Situation of freedom of the press and access to information in the North West Region of Cameroon in times of crisis: The way forward – ANNEX 1

Pa Gideon Taka Journalist - CAMASEJ

INTRODUCTION

‘When Journalists are targeted, society as a whole pays a price’.

“Without the ability to protect journalists, our ability to remain informed and contribute to decision-making, is severely hampered”. UN Secretary General (2019)

• We are living witnesses of the bloody war that is taking away so many lives, especially the lives of young people who are fighting to gain what is generally called Ambazonia. The war has been raging for close to four years and there is no evidence that it can end soon.

• The guns are doing their killings, and we think the press can join in the dance to educate all protagonists on the importance of ending the war or bringing a peaceful solution.

• The press can face the challenges by using all media organs in the region to educate not only the fighters, but also war planners on both sides, that killing human beings cannot bring a lasting solution, peace is the better solution.

II. THE STATE OF PRESS ORGANS

• Identification of Press organs in the NWR of Cameroon

1 There are about 15 vibrant radio stations in the NWR, all adequately serving local audiences, very few are online for wider audiences. Few TV stations (4) hit the airwaves briefly but folded up after a while.

• The number is still climbing.

• Identification of actors in the business of news gathering in this Region: Administration, business actors, publishers, reporters & public.
• Global country statistics show that there are presently about 500 newspaper titles in the kiosks, 150 radio stations, and only 20 active TV stations in the country.

• **Media Organs:** Principally newspapers (Print), radios and TV (Audiovisuals)

1) **Reporters (+Columnists)**

Reporters are those who feed media houses with information.

- They nose around for information, that comes from news makers.
- They apply individual media house policies

2) **Publishers (+ non-professionals)**

Publishers are owners of the media houses who determine the wellbeing of workers

- determine policies of publications.
- Decide on recruitment and pay salaries
- Determine content of publication

3) **Editorialists**

4) **Field Performances and Sources (Reporters & Publishers)**

   - Meeting Politicians & Administrators (For Clarifications, if any)

5) **Some difficulties encountered by reporters in the field.**

   - a) Access to sources relating to officials. They either request anonymity or require clearance from their hierarchy.
   - They have the tendency to contest against content after publication, if it hurts.
   - b) The harsh nature of the law of defamation. It is a felony to commit defamation
   - c) Back in the house, poor working conditions, no salaries, no pensions.
   - d) No in-house training.

III. **THE START OF THIS CONFLICT, AND THE FATAL CONFRONTATIONS THAT ENSUED**

   - 1) A snappy background
• a) The Anglophone Teachers and lawyers complained of cheating them along professional-lines by the introduction of the French systems with intention of supplanting the Anglosaxon systems, what they consider a better option.

• b) An Anglophone militant movement sprung up, joined and took to presenting ultimatum for a return to the State of Southern Cameroons that existed at independence in 1961.

• c) The Head of State declared war against them and threatened hard times if they don't lay down their arms.

• d) The agitating movement already transformed into a Separatist movement, was asking for separation from the Republic of Cameroon, and since the government gave characteristic deaf ear, the separatist movement declared full intention to fight for the independence of the former British Southern Cameroons.

• e) The plight of the performing Journalist: He is between the devil and the deep blue sea.

• (f) After the last swearing in as President Paul Biya, declared: “warmongers who are jeopardizing our national unity and preaching secession should know that they will face not only the full force of the law, but also the determination of our defense and security forces.”

In his End of Year Address to the nation, the President said: “If my appeal to warmongers to lay down their arms remains unheeded, the defense and security forces will be instructed to neutralize them.”

• 2) The practicing Journalist in this region.

This is the background and the terrain on which active journalists in the NW region have to walk, if they want to write critical information on newspapers or broadcast a biting story on any audiovisual media.

• a) The working journalist here faces a precarious situation. - There is the unprescribed practice of self censorship.

• b) Here there are three major forces are in confrontation: - The Military (and the BIR), looking for “terrorists.”- The Separatists or Amba Boys, cunningly looking for “terrorists.”- Unidentified armed forces understood to be thieves or officially formed, always under the cloak of Ambazonia fighters.

• 3) Pains endured by some Journalists- Arrests and kidnappings carried out either by police or separatists, and some of them have suffered severe tortures.
4) Low Professional Performances and Output

- There is fear to venture into the field to report on events. Articles have consequently been less critical in tone and facts against Government or Amba Boys.

- Local foreign reporters’ stories have tended to be bland

- Many Journalists have relocated, to Yaounde, Dla, USA, etc
- Sales of space (print & audiovisual) have dropped
- Financially, the survival of private sector journalists is very low

- Is Cameroon a state of law?

1) Every administrator and all government office holders say yes, Cameroon is state of law.
- But rights of Journalists have been abused and constrained to live in fear.

2) Arrests of practicing journalists are current

3) The courts are slow as if waiting for hierarchical instructions (Justice delayed, justice denied).

IV. THE WAY FORWARD

Story writing

- Use appropriate language for targeted audiences.
- Ensure Objectivity and fairness in reporting and communication.
- Investigate and understand key situations/issues.
- Verify your sources and make attributions correctly.
- Respect general ethics especially relating to the honor of source persons

Some Media Laws Should be reviewed.

- This relates to the roles journalists can play to stop the war.
- This approach will require an overview of various activities hitherto carried out in the different sectors of communication, a

- redefinition of who a journalist is in Cameroon, etc.
2) Strategies for Crisis Management

- a) It is widely acknowledged that a crisis situation that persists over a long period is one that was poorly managed at the beginning.

- b) If the Grand National Dialogue was organised three years earlier, the situation might have been different today.

- c) If Professional Associations, or religious institutions, were recruited early to carry appeasement language to their members, the situation might have been different today.

- d) If professional associations were recruited and empowered early in the crisis, the situation should have been different today.

3) Training of Journalists.

- a) Each Media Organ should have a training component for its reporters and editors.

- b) Editorial Policies should be inculcated into its work force.

- C) To avoid unprofessional writing, identified with with “Ngombo journalists” who fuel propaganda for their personal gain.

- d) To fulfil the requirements provided by law in establishing a media organ.

4) The Law on Defamation.

- a) Redefinitions to ensure dignity of the journalist.

  - Defamation should not be classified under FELONY, but as misdemeanour, to guarantee the dignity of the journalist, as it is in civilized countries.

- b) Poor Treatment of Arrested Journalists

  - Remand under police custody shall be expressly authorized by the State Counsel.

  - Such remand shall not be ordered on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays (section 119(4) CPC).

5) Peace Education

- Journalist organisations can be Partners in Peace Education.

- They have professional competences that can used when the need arises.

- Such competences can be harnessed professionally to solve a conflict situation like socio-political crisis that is paralyzing nearly every activity in the Anglophone regions of the country.
• All that needed is to empower the professional associations with appropriate tools.

6) The phenomenon of blogs on the Internet

• This mode of communication is new, and brought about by IT novelties.
• In this type, every one is a journalist
• It is a cacophony, noisy houses that are characterized by individual feelings and opinions.
• Writers' penchant, for or against government or Ambazonia, are always crystal clear,
• Readers always go home with truncated opinions and poor understanding of issues at stake.
• Because the writeups are done by untrained persons, you quickly understand their subjectivity

1 Objectivity in their style of reporting is absent, thus readers are misinformed and led to taking wrong decisions, as information is dysfunctional.

1 But we also know that if media reporting is not professionally carried out, the end result may negatively influence the nature of the crisis, unless it was intended to produce such negative result.

7a) An inventory of Existing NW Organisations and what they can do to achieving Peace.

- Cameroon Association of English-Speaking Journalists (CAMASEJ), with Chapter President, Ambe MacMillian Awa, meets frequently to review and discuss professional matters of general interest.

- Cameroon Community Network (CCMN), with National (Chapter) President Rose Obah AKAH. This organ has recently Renewed Vows towards De-escalting The Conflict In Anglophone Cameroon.

- Journalist Trade Union Association (JTUA) with President Barka Derrick. They organize training sessions to educate members on the rights, and also are prepared to defend them.

- Association of Cultural Journalists (ACJ), under MBOSCUDA. They cater for the wellbeing of members, also economically.

- All Anglophone Journalists Consortium Challenges (AACC).

- Cameroon Sports Journalists Association (CASJ) current coordinator is Richard Ndeh.

• 7b) All Religious Assemblies,
• - all Confessional Assemblies, should be called upon to support the effort to create an understanding for an inclusive dialogue.

• Media houses should agree on common activities e.g. Production of micro programmes on peace, conflict resolution or management and information, to which members of confessional groups can participate.

7: Workshop participants are receiving knowledge

• The main goal should be working towards conflict prevention and embracing dialogue.

• 8) Official Restrictions

    Tempering with the Freedoms of Journalists.

    • As an active journalist, the one who knows that the people depend on his findings to understand society better, he is therefore not afraid of any harassment at news making events.

    • Journalist should be able to criticize even inappropriate government action
• The great role that journalists play in peace building is writing stories that shape opinions.

• That is why they have to be trained and equipped in order for them to know what to write and what not to say, in order to preserve the peace and unity of the country.

- The law says he is free to gather information, treat and publish.

\textit{But he knows also that no freedom is absolute.}

• Individual freedoms can be restricted during normal or exceptional periods.

• There are administrative \textit{Procedures to Restrict Individual Freedoms}, and this relates to every suspected offender, under two periods, \textit{normal} and \textit{exceptional} periods.

• i) Normal Period- Briefly.

Law No. 90/054 of 19 December 1990 relating to the maintenance of law and order grants exceptional powers to administrative authorities to restrict individual freedoms by remanding suspects in custody (for the maintenance of law and order, take measures to remand a person in custody for a period of 15 (fifteen) days renewable)

• ii) Exceptional Period

Law No. 90/047 of 19 December 1990 relating to the state of emergency also grants special powers to administrative authorities. Section 5(7) of the said law empowers them, for instance, to “order the detention of persons considered dangerous to public security... for a duration of 7 days by Senior Divisional Officers and 15 days by Governors”.

iii) Custody and Awaiting Trial

• - Suspects may be placed in custody or awaiting trial for the commission of a felony or a misdemeanor within the context of preliminary inquiry.

• - The Examining Magistrate shall withdraw the remand warrant or grant the suspect self bail if, after a period of six months, in case of a misdemeanor or twelve months in case of a felony, he has not closed the preliminary inquiry (section 226 to 233 CPC)

2) Restrictions on Individual Freedoms

• Individual freedoms are indiscriminately guaranteed to persons residing within the national territory.
• The law may only restrict them. Consequently, the legislator has regulated all measures, which undermine these freedoms. Such restrictions are found in administrative and judicial proceedings.

**Group 1:**

**Some weakness of journalists**

• Bias, Inadequate financial means, material and technical means, Pressure to meet deadlines, Censorship, Intimidation from hierarchy and from government authorities, Conflicting sources of information, Lack/unavailability of credible resource persons, Cultural diversity particularly tribalism

• Effects of the social media. Editorial policy (bottlenecks arising from the fact that proprietors are politicians and businessmen, not journalists

• Fear of the unknown that may happen after making a report.

• Absence of capacity building workshop to improve journalists skills

• “Ngombo journalists” take bribe and falsify reports for their personal interest.

**Group 2:**

Alliances and Collaborations – With whom could media cooperate to de-escalate and improve the conflict situation?

Collaborator Action to be taken;

1. Civil Society (Teachers Trade Unions, parent Teachers Associations, Other unions etc) Sensitization and re-education

2. Churches and Mosques; Preach peace and can act as mediators

3. Government should Provide an enabling environment.
ANNEX 2

Difficulties faced by Civil Society Organisations in the North West in accessing information in times of crisis.

Fon Nsoh - Coordinator – COMINSUD

Introduction
The world of information has grown to be very complex and now than before, the statement information is power is truer than ever. While modern communication systems have enhance access to information, huge challenges still exist as to;

- What kind of information is available, from which source and for what purpose?

- So today there is a combination of political social and economic power play with information as varied actors such as government, economic operators and social
development actors have different information and communicate different facts and figures.

This has kept us in a big loop and tussle of:
- Questioning information
- Fake information
- Contradicting information
- Information gap etc.

**Difficulties faced by civil society organization in accessing information in times of crisis.**

1. **Why civil societies need information**
   - Information is needed to determine needs, establish extend of problems
   - To plan and organize interventions
   - To access coverage, access gap
   - Measure change

2. **Which information is needed by civil societies?**
   - Number of persons in need of basic services (Food, water, education, health care e.t.c.)
   - Number of persons suffering from poverty and hunger.
   - Number of persons affected by disaster.
   - Number of persons displaced internally and externally
   - Number of persons suffering from violation and abuse of rights
   - Number of persons who die from avoidable causes

3. **Sources of information to civil societies and difficulties to access this information**
   - **Primary source.** Information may be inadequate, incomplete or contested; access to source of information may be difficult because of cost and risk, affected persons not wanting to provide information for various reasons.
   - **Information from secondary sources.** Information may be limited, biased or contested, information may not be made available or the process to access it can be really long and costly.

4. **Cost of obtaining information**
   - Government: Authorization process
   - International community: Online
   - Primary source: Costly

**Main remarks**
- Information manipulation can have a double impact.
- Information collection can bring about conflict between the government and civil society.