

The Anglophone Crisis and its effect on Small Business Operations: The Case of Buea

Dr. Pippie Hugues

Introduction

Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, which originated from legal and educational grievances in 2016, has become one of Africa's most recent battles for liberation. This crisis has quickly transformed into a secessionist political conflict, posing a significant threat to the country's unity. If it's not given much attention, it could result in more consequences than it currently does. (1). The English-speaking population in Cameroon, constituting 20 percent of the total population is experiencing a sense of discrimination, which led to the outburst of the crisis. Their discontent became evident towards the close of 2016, as a result of various sector-specific grievances that transformed into political demands, ultimately resulting in strikes and riots (2). The ongoing crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon represents the most severe and intense phase of a conflict that is characterized by a linguistic divide, a consequence of colonialism. This divide signifies deeper grievances related to a sense of alienated identity and perceptions of structural inequality. While the crisis initially appears to revolve around the linguistic and cultural identities, a closer examination reveals that it was rooted in broader issues concerning the relationship between the English-speaking and French-speaking Regions of the country. Some of these issues include marginalisation, the differences between the legal systems, political representation and discrimination. Moreover, it sheds light on the challenges posed by the country's centralized governance model (3). In late 2016, the Anglophone through "The Cameroon Anglophone Civil

Society Consortium" put forth a core demand that reflects the continued desire of the Anglophone population to reinstate the two-state federation, which served as the foundation of the initial union established in 1961. Buea, the capital of the South West Region of Cameroon was considered the fastest growing town economically within the Region prior to the Anglophone crisis. The rate at which businesses were growing, with a vibrant Mayor in the person of Late Mayor Ekema Patrick Esunge, the town of Legendary Hospitality as it is known was on the list of Cameroon's growing towns economically. The President of the Republic His Excellency Paul Biya made same declarations when he visited Buea for the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Renunciation in February 2014 when he said "Today I can see that Buea has changed a great deal. I hope that you are also of the same opinion. I hope that you too see the same things I see" (4). All this changed with the outbreak of the Anglophone crisis. Businesses were shut-down, some relocated to neighbouring Douala, while some business operators were killed. The aim of this paper is to highlight the effect of the Anglophone crisis on business operations in Buea, the impact of the crisis on business operators, the challenges they face and finally to make policy recommendations on how they can survive within the crisis.

Effect of the Anglophone Crisis on Business Operations in Buea

Numerous internal and external measures have been implemented since the eruption of the Anglophone Crisis in 2016 to tackle pressing concerns. Despite the



implementation of various initiatives such as the Grand National Dialogue, the Special Status for the Northwest and Southwest (NW-SW) Regions, the Reconstruction Plan, the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) initiative, the Swiss Peace Initiative, and the Canadian-led negotiation process, the crisis persists without any signs of diminishing (5). After seven years, Cameroon has yet to discover a sustainable path towards achieving lasting peace, and the conflict remains relentless. The adverse effects of this prolonged crisis are evident, with businesses collapsing and shutting down, national revenue plummeting, poverty on the rise, human rights violations being committed, and school attendance failing to reach pre-2016 levels due to persistent separatist lockdown. Anglophone Cameroonians, particularly residents of Buea, are known for their strong work ethic, with agriculture being the primary economic driver in the town. The cultivation of coco yams, yams, tomatoes, and plantains in this area is highly regarded both locally and internationally, contributing significantly to the Region's GDP by approximately 20%. Situated at the base of Mount Fako, the town benefits from a favorable climate that attracts a growing population. Additionally, Buea is home to several esteemed institutions of higher learning, including the University of Buea, the Catholic Entrepreneurial University, and various private professional schools, making

it an attractive location for business activities. The advent of the crisis made businesses like QUIFEUROU , HAND TO HAND, which deals with the supply of building materials to shut-down. In terms of small businesses, the effects were untold as most farmers could not get access to their farms as a result of the many lock downs called by separatist fighters, the constant kidnapping and unnecessary killings. A place like Molyko which was considered the melting pot of business operations in Buea was a no-go- zone as stores were always locked for fear of either being burned down or owners kidnapped.

Impact of crisis on Business Operators in Buea

The crisis in the Anglophone region has led to the displacement of more than 900,000 individuals within the country and forced around 60,000 people to seek refuge in neighbouring Nigeria. Many of those affected have sought safety in the predominantly French-speaking areas and have taken shelter in the forests and bushes (6). In conflict-ridden villages, approximately 80% of the population has fled their homes in search of safety (7). The impact of the crisis is particularly severe in Buea, where numerous Villages have been nearly emptied of their inhabitants. Villages

such as Bonakanda, Mapanja, Tole, Maumu, Lissoka, and Wonya Mokumba are on the brink of extinction due to the ongoing crisis. These villages were once vibrant farming communities, hosting the livelihoods of their residents.

Challenges faced by Business Operators in Buea

Business operators within the town of Buea are facing severe challenges, some are fighting for survival. Most business operators obtained huge loans from banks and credit unions to set up businesses as a result of the fast growing nature of the town. Now, with business dwindling, the repayment of these loans is becoming more difficult. Relocating a business to a new site or town like Douala where operators lack mastery of the market is a major challenge for those who even have the opportunity to relocate. Others who can't relocate due to lack of capital are either forced to wind-up or put up with the current situation. Council authorities make matters worst constantly chases business operators to pay taxes despite the slow nature of business turnover. This again has caused many business operators to close their doors.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Entrepreneurial activities play a crucial role in the economies of African nations as a whole, and specifically in Cameroon. It is comforting to know that multiple attempts are often necessary before achieving a positive outcome. Both failures and successes contribute to the development of resilience. Resilience is defined as the capacity to continue leading a purposeful life even in the face of hardship or adversity. Individuals acquire resilient abilities through their daily experiences, which can be either extraordinary or unexpected. Without resilience, individuals would struggle to engage in the entrepreneurial behaviors necessary for starting businesses or pursuing new ventures. Consequently,

resilience enables individuals to grow and thrive in the face of challenges, rather than retreat. Positive emotions serve as a protective shield for resilient individuals, allowing them to flourish instead of succumbing to negative reactions.

The Anglophone crisis has been deemed as an inevitable outcome of the incumbent government's failure to properly address and manage emerging socio-economic and political risks over the course of several decades. For nearly 8 years now, violence has become a pervasive element of socio-economic, cultural, and political life, creating an environment of heightened insecurity (8). Despite the prolonged conflict and its increasing severity, the government has remained steadfast in its refusal to engage in discussions with separatists regarding the form of the State, (specifically, independence from French Cameroon) even with the assistance of an international mediator. The government continues to rely primarily on military tactics to address the crisis, while separatists have shown determination to persist in their fight for independence. The continuation of fighting is having a negative effect on business operators in Buea as the separatists have as target to get Buea under their control. Therefore, this paper is recommending that for business operations to continue amidst this crisis, they must develop other means to market their products such as electronic/digital marketing. This will avoid physical contact and will reduce the rate of dangers between the buyer and the seller. Again, the paper is recommending for lower interest rates on loans to business operators who have remained in business despite the crisis to be able to sustain their businesses.



Dr. Pippie Hugues
Policy Analyst,
Nkafu Policy Institute