

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CAMEROON AND THEIR ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Almost five decades after independence, higher education in Cameroon is no longer a luxury but an absolute necessity. Increasingly, development planners and policy makers recognize that higher education is at the centre of knowledge production and knowledge production forms the basis for sustainable community development. In the last fifteen years, the number of state universities has moved from one in 1993 following the university reforms to seven in 2008.

Evidence from Higher education institutions all over the world points to its interconnectivity with challenges of sustainable community development

This paper addresses contemporary issues of health, education, sustainable consumption, gender equality and sustainable urbanisation with the objective to refocus higher education institutions towards achieving sustainable development goals.

Content analysis, focus group discussions and a survey of Cameroon's higher education institutions and actions towards sustainable development, were used to obtain logical results.

The visible trend suggests that Cameroon's higher education institutions are playing an active role to manage present and impending crises. However their pace is still slow and ineffective as compared to other nations such as Nigeria and South Africa. Therefore higher education institutions should influence dynamism in policy implementation and equally supervise the effective adaptability of these innovations in the various communities.

Key words: *sustainable development, higher education, partnership.*

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Introduction

Conventional education remains an indispensable factor in addressing critical challenges of development in the world. The pace of its evolution is equivalent to a nation's prosperity since interconnected issues such as democracy; human rights, social justice, globalization, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, science and technology require inclusive partnerships with the educational sector to guarantee sustainable community development.

Cameroon being a developing country has faced numerous challenges in its educational system especially in the dawn of the 21st century where the global market is increasingly becoming competitive. The question now is if present structures meet the aspirations of institutions that contribute positively in sustainable activities in the country.

Higher education which is the tertiary phase of the educational ladder must act as a catalyst for sustainable development. It has a special responsibility to conduct the scholarship and scientific research necessary to generate the new knowledge needed to train future leaders, as well as communicate this knowledge to decision-makers.

Historical Trends

In Cameroon the University of Yaoundé I and few professional institutions monopolized higher education from 1961 to 1993. Understandably, the platform for discourse was very limited. However, features around Yaoundé and Bonamoussadi in particular changed dramatically in terms of new culture including the visibility of

these cultures, and the formation of new pressure groups through student unions. Young Cameroonians became exposed to new learning and greater possibilities for action. This was manifested through the influence they exerted on political manifestations during the reintroduction of multi partism in the early 1990s.

The creation of five state universities in 1993 (University of Yaoundé I, University of Douala, University of Dschang, and the University of Ngoundere) was a major breakthrough.

Prior to the introduction of university education in Cameroon, only a handful of government and mission secondary schools existed and majority of the students had to leave their families and villages to travel hundreds of kilometers to obtain an education. Many children got separated from their culture and immediate family. This sometimes had little impact on their contributions to the community and the promotion of individual community values.

Behavioral changes were influenced by cultural perspectives that were either considered superior or simply accepted because of the absence of supportive structures.

Also, many children did not make it to these far away schools because their parents had no means to support such an elaborate journey. For those who made it, it was an agreed fact that they were superior in mannerisms and knowledge.

These flashbacks are necessary in view of the current situation in Cameroon. There are seven state universities and over 200 professional institutions of learning. The presence of these universities and professional institutions has witnessed massive construction of student's hostels, hotels, restaurants, internet centers and office

structures. There has been great generation of capital through the influx of business persons who have in turn increased the population. The major question becomes: How does university learning manage this cross section of individuals to the extent that the values of the community are respected and the resources are used in a sustainable manner?

Indigenous and traditional knowledge

Local knowledge and languages are repositories of diversity and key resources in understanding the environment and in using it to the best advantage for current and future generations. They foster and promote local cultural specificities, customs and values. Indigenous knowledge is also important for the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Socio-cultural activities such as the inter-university forum for arts and culture (UNIFAC) should be encouraged to create a sense of belonging among students from the same culture. For example the University of Buea encourages the formation of social clubs (some of them are purely intended for students of the same tribe) among students for solidarity.

The university could equally create museums to preserve artistic works and equally carry out research on their origins to help the kinsmen of the next generation. A classical example of such structures in Cameroon resulted to the smuggling of the *Afo Akom* to the United States of America.

Furthermore, research on food crop production in Cameroon by the Institute for Agronomic research showed that small scale farmers dominate in food crop production. The majority of farming operations are carried out by using traditional cropping systems and traditional crop varieties. This is important knowledge for food security in terms of what to plant and where to plant for maximum productivity and cooperation by the community. To encourage Manyu people to plant groundnuts has

potential for failure because the people rarely eat groundnuts. The same is true for the domestication of snails in Bamenda.

Cameroon has diverse climates that range from humid tropics on the West Coast of Africa to the Sahel zone in the Extreme North. Rainfall in the humid zones can be as high as 500mm with 250 rain days per year while in the sahelian north, total rainfall is less than 800mm. This in some part determines soil variety in composition, fertility and in their geographic distribution which in turn determines the kind of food crops planted across Cameroon (IRAD, 1987). Thus it is the place of higher education institutions to orientate the local population on what to plant.

Rural Development

In spite of rapid urbanization, majority of Cameroonians still live in rural areas. Education and training are essential in addressing rural poverty and rural exodus among youths to ensure sustainable development in these parts of Cameroon. This objective is constantly addressed through the increasing number of primary and secondary schools in rural areas. Even universities are moving into rural areas to capture the essence of knowledge from the micro level to the macro such as the African University of Tali, the University of Bandjoun, and the Seven Day Adventist College in Ayos. With the creation of such universities, other development is sure to follow.

Sustainable Consumption

Our choices as consumers today will impact the way people live tomorrow. Sustainable consumption means consuming goods and services without harming the environment or society. For example “*Eru*” is fast becoming a national dish. This increase in consumption needs and increase in production for consumers and to

equally avoid deforestation. Living a sustainable lifestyle is essential to overcoming poverty and conserving and protecting the natural resource base for all forms of life.

To achieve this objective, it is imperative that Cameroonians develop methods of food transformation and preservation. It also presupposes better management of waste either in terms of disposal or recycling. The various polytechnics in Cameroon therefore have the duty to develop machinery that can successfully handle issues of food transformation to reduce waste of resources. Green vegetables for example have very little life span but if properly preserved it may last longer. .

Health Promotion

Issues of development, environment and health are closely entwined – ill-health hampers economic and social development, hunger, malnutrition, malaria, water-borne diseases, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and injury, unplanned pregnancy, HIV & AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections are just some of the problems that have enormous implications for health.

Statistics from Earth Trends in 2003 show that 11.8% of adults (15-49) were infected with HIV or AIDS in Cameroon, and since the beginning of the epidemic, 210,000 children had been orphaned by AIDS by 2001. Access to improved water supply was much lower for rural areas with 39% as compared to urban areas with 78%. In Cameroon, malaria is the first cause of illness and death in children under five. 40 – 45% of adult complains is malaria and 35 – 40% of all deaths is malaria.

Higher education has a major role to play in the research and dissemination of information and statistics related to these issues and basic medical information are powerful ways to influence behavioral change. The school environment itself must be safe and healthy. Schools should act not only as centers for academic learning, but

also as supportive venues for the provision of essential health education and services, in collaboration with parents and the community. This is clearly what the universities are trying to achieve by building medical centers on campus and medical schools in the universities of Buea and Yaoundé I (the former is limited to staff and students while the later is for the general public).

Research centers could be created to build an enabling environment between young researchers and traditional doctors to standardize the development of traditional medicine and why not put forward a packaging system to reduce the reliance of conventional medication.

Gender equality

Discrimination based on sex is often structurally embedded. Gender issues must therefore be mainstreamed throughout educational planning – from infrastructure planning to material development to pedagogical processes. The full and equal engagement of women is crucial to ensuring a sustainable future. Since the pursuit of gender equality is central to sustainable development, female education is vital and could be achieved through the award of scholarships. This will help to reduce vices such as female genital mutilation, and prostitution.

A commendable effort is already being made by the universities of Cameroon to promote equality between the sexes in terms of enrollment, employment and appointments. The University of Buea is exceptional though not the only university that has been able to enroll more girls than boys at a given time. In the academic year 2005/2006, the University of Buea registered 2500 females as opposed to almost 2300 males in the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences alone.

Sustainable Urbanization

Cities have moved to the forefront of global socio-economic change. Globalization and democratization have increased the importance of cities in relation to sustainable development. Most Cameroonians though found in rural areas are increasingly dependent upon cities for their economic, social and political progress. Urban areas undeniably pose potential threats to sustainable development. This can be witnessed in cities like Yaoundé and Douala where urbanization has brought massive but poorly planned construction. Congestion and pollution are rampant with people sick because of poor drainage systems.

However with responsible decision-making, cities hold promising opportunities for social and economic advancement and for environmental improvements at local, national, and global levels. Nonetheless it is important to create new higher educational institutions in the peripheries. This would lead to the emergence of new urban centers and the reduction of overcrowding in existing urban centers.

Education for Rural People

Higher living standards, better health, increased productivity, improved well being for women and their families, and good government all depend on widespread education. Therefore it would be beneficial to the community to have capacity building seminars organized by institutions of higher learning. In addition, the availability of focus group discussions would equally help to upgrade the knowledge of participants.

For example, the presence of the University of Buea in the Molyko neighbourhood has increasingly made the population to be familiar with the surveys, public opinion polls and focus group discussions carried out by both lecturers and students of the

university. Moreover, forums such as the Business and Employment Forum organized recently in the University of Buea benefited all the stakeholders of the institution.

Concerted Action towards Sustainability

There have been many world conferences on higher education and sustainable development. The focus of discuss presupposes that higher education has a very important role to play. In the 2001 Lunenburg Declaration on higher education for sustainability, the following factors were highlighted:

- Universities have resources that can be utilised to encourage a better understanding on the part of governments and the public at large of the inter-related physical, biological and social dangers facing the planet Earth, and to recognise the significant interdependence and international dimensions of sustainable development.
- They can emphasize the ethical obligation of the present generation to overcome those practices of resource utilisation and those widespread disparities which lie at the root of environmental unsustainability.
- The capacity of the university can be enhanced to teach and undertake research and action in society in sustainable development principles, to increase environmental literacy, and to enhance the understanding of environmental ethics within the university and with the public at large
- Universities can cooperate with one another and with all segments of society in the pursuit of practical and policy measures to achieve sustainable development and thereby safeguard the interests of future generations.
- Promote interdisciplinary networks of environmental experts at the local, national and international level in order to disseminate knowledge and to collaborate on common environmental projects in both research and education;

- Promote the mobility of staff and students as essential to the free trade of knowledge;
- Forge partnerships with other sectors of society in transferring innovative and appropriate technologies that can benefit and enhance sustainable development practices.
- Provide opportunity for dialogue and knowledge sharing amongst experts, stakeholders and policy makers

These factors are true of Cameroonian universities. In the University of Buea, students of the department of environmental sciences have labeled all plants and trees giving their biological and common names, and their basic uses. Equally, flowers and shrubs have been planted around the campus to enhance beauty and preserve plant species. This is directly linked to university teaching to increase environmental literacy and to enhance the understanding of environmental ethics within the university and with the public at large. Also, the university has provided at all points trash cans to collect dirt and recycles its waste into cooking gas.

Definitions of sustainable development require that we see the world as a system that connects in terms of space and time. Connecting space means for example that air pollution from the Northern region of Cameroon affects air quality in the Southern Region or neighbouring countries like Nigeria and Chad.

Do the decisions our grand parents made about how to farm the land continue to affect agricultural practice today? Some of these practices were very good but because some of these processes were not documented, vital information has been lost on some food varieties like corn, beans etc. Today, farmers must have higher levels of literacy to access and use market information, promote their products and negotiate prices and quantity with service suppliers and buyers. The university systems that are in place

today must therefore understand their interconnectivity with other areas of society and the importance of learning and research to enhance the sustainable use of resources.

This can be done by borrowing from specific areas of learning in order to better address the specific needs of our society.

Following the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, June 1996, some areas of concern in education were highlighted:

- The expanded vision of basic education needs to be applied both in policy and practice
- More resources must be found for basic education
- The recruitment, training and status of teachers must be improved
- The quality of education must be improved to enhance learning achievement
- More emphasis is still needed for girls' and women's education
- Basic education must be made more available to children, youth and adults with special needs and
- More attention needs to be given to develop adults' numeracy and literacy skills and on sustaining these skills (UNESCO, 1998).

Cameroon has endeavoured to achieve much of the above. In partnership with the private sector and churches, rural people have access to at least one primary and secondary school. Many vocational centres are open for informal training and NGOs have fostered adult literacy programmes.

In its recent developments, the University of Buea has launched a long distance learning programme for Grade I teachers on education and curriculum, to improve their standards and provide improved quality teachers to basic education. This directly ties in with Tedesco (1997) who points out that school attendance does not necessarily

mean achievement, and that it requires more attention to other variables such as teachers, methods and management.

Limitations

Developing countries especially Cameroon face various structural challenges. Students frequently have difficulties in accessing learning materials resources. Textbooks are often rare, expensive and not always up-to-date. Students and teachers have to work with limited means to acquire textbooks and learning materials.

Another obstacle to education can be the lack of infrastructure, especially in rural areas. The recent colloquium on E-learning that held in Yaoundé I in July 2008 addressed the challenges of structural difficulties in education and how they can be overcome through E-learning. E-learning can help to overcome physical distances and open up new opportunities for students in rural areas who have difficulties to attend classes on campus.

As an example, Cameroon's oldest university, the University of Yaoundé I - the only university in the country until 1993 – has encountered a dramatically increased number of enrolments. Today the university needs to provide tuition and facility access for more than 33,000 students.

The number of teachers remains very limited as to cater for the creation of the six other new universities, i.e. the University of Buea, the University of Douala, the University of Dschang, the University of Ngaoundere, the University of Yaoundé II and the University of Maroua (August 2008), which was created in response to the growing number of students and in order to distribute education facilities more evenly throughout the country.

The introduction of the Bachelor-Master-PhD (BMP) system of education in state universities in the 2007/2008 academic year is a laudable effort which should be copied by other stakeholders in the educational sector. The BMP system is more professionally oriented and makes the students ready to the demands of the job market unlike before.

Recommendations

Therefore, to implement sustainable development action, higher education institutions should:

- Ensure the continual review and updating of learning materials to reflect the latest scientific understanding of sustainability;
- Ensure that the reorientation of teacher education towards sustainable development continue to be given priority as a key component of higher education;
- Provide continuing education to teachers, decision makers and the public at large on sustainable development;
- Encourage all educational institutions to include in their activities a strong component of reflection on values and norms with respect to sustainable development;
- Raise awareness and increase understanding of the importance and relevance of technology assessments and risk assessment;
- promote the creative development and implementation of comprehensive sustainability projects in higher education, and all other levels and forms of education;
- Increase attention to the international dimension and provide more opportunities for inter-cultural exchange in the learning environment;

- Increase a focus on capacity development and intensified networking among institutions of education;
- Promote stronger integration of training and research and closer interaction with stakeholders in the development process.

Conclusion

With the evolution of the educational system in Cameroon, it is evident that economic, cultural and social practices are bound to change. To effectively compete and impress itself on the world, Cameroon must seek progress in all domains by actively promoting the acquisition of knowledge.

In a world of massive, continuing and unpredictable social and technological changes, education has a particular significance as a means of both understanding and coping with complexities (UNESCO, 1998)

The ultimate goal of education for sustainable development is to impart the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills needed to empower people to bring about the changes required to achieve sustainability. Quality education for sustainable development needs to be based on state of the art knowledge and to continually review and update curricula and teaching materials accordingly. It needs to serve teachers, other professionals and all citizens as life long learners to respond to society's challenges and opportunities, so that people everywhere can live in freedom from want and fear, and to make their unique contribution to a sustainable future.

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