

Research Article

The Spatial Occupation of Central Africans and Public Integration Policies in the Urban Community of Douala (Cameroon)

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Abstract

From the 1960s onward, the Central African Republic, like some former French territories, experienced political and economic crises as newly independent states. Migration at this time emerged as one of the responses to poverty for its people. Thus, Central African migration to Cameroon resulted from the successive wars that took place in the Central African Republic. Once in Cameroon, Central African nationals faced the reality of urban migration, which led them to settle in capital cities. Douala was one of the preferred destinations in the search for a better life. However, the analysis of socio-economic integration in this study encompasses the socio-economic integration policies of the Douala urban community. To this end, the study adopts a socio-historical approach, employing a mixed-methods methodology that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. Four groups of Central African nationals are the subject of this analysis: legal residents, refugees, asylum seekers and students. Their experiences during the period 2003 to 2020, as seen through the lens of labor market institutions, housing, health, and education, were assessed in comparison to those of Cameroonian urban dwellers, in light of the Douala urban community's public integration policies. The study's main findings show that living conditions are similar for these Cameroonians and Central Africans. However, legal Central Africans appear to integrate better into Douala than other categories of Central Africans, while refugees benefit from the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Keywords

Central Africans, Urban Community, Douala, Socio-economic Integration, Migration, Spatial Occupation, Capital City

1. Introduction

The city of Douala is one of the most important cities in Cameroon due to its economic activity. Today, it is the country's largest business center, home to numerous companies. Located on the Atlantic Ocean, Douala is one of Cameroon's main gateways. It boasts a port that was once the country's main port, earning it the title of economic capital [8]. The majority of Cameroonian businesses are based there, and its size

has also contributed to its status as one of Cameroon's major cities. Douala is also home to a large portion of the migrant population in Cameroon [6]. Besides the official languages of English and French, the city of Douala is home to a diverse range of Cameroonian ethnicities and a multitude of nationalities, giving it a multinational dimension with different cultures and social diversity [11]. These variations encourage the

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Douala municipality to promote public integration policies for the benefit of all its residents, including foreign nationals, by developing various activities in both the formal and informal sectors [6]. The municipality of Douala, wishing to promote socio-economic integration policies for the population it houses, with their different origins, is developing certain social policies with the aim of harmonizing social cohesion between the different foreign nationals in order to achieve living together in the municipality [7]. In the same vein, the municipality of Douala, concerned with the employability of its residents, has created several training centers for vulnerable individuals to promote employment [4]. Education is also part of these integration policies. The Douala urban community, among its objectives, also promotes housing for its residents based on their income to ensure their well-being.

2. Social Cohesion Policies Among Different Migrant Communities

The city of Douala, through its social dynamism, has initiated projects promoting coexistence among different migrant communities, projects that serve as indicators of sub-regional integration.

2.1. Social Dynamism and Opportunities Offered by the City of Douala

Douala is one of the most important cities in Cameroon. Due to its economic activity, it is the country's leading business center, home to numerous companies. Its access to the Atlantic Ocean gives Douala a port that was once Cameroon's main port. These various factors have attracted many businesses, earning it the title of economic capital [3]. Its considerable size (410 km²) and population of 3,793,000 inhabitants [11] allow it to be classified as one of the largest cities in Cameroon. The city also has a large foreign community. Besides the two official languages of Cameroon, namely English and French, Douala is distinguished by its ethnic diversity and the plurality of nations represented there [3], this gives it an international dimension. All these different characteristics call upon the urban community of Douala to develop integration policies for the benefit of its entire population, including foreign nationals, by integrating certain activities from both the formal and informal sectors [6]. Thus, with the aim of promoting socio-economic integration policies for its population, regardless of their origins, the municipality of Douala is developing certain social policies to foster social cohesion among the various migrant communities, thereby promoting peaceful coexistence.

Douala is a cosmopolitan city with several religious denominations: 56% Christian, 24% Muslim, and 20% practicing local religions [6]. With a dense population, the city of Douala is home to approximately 240 tribes speaking over 208 lan-

guages, with some thirty consulates and around fifty nationalities.

2.2. Mechanisms of Coexistence in the Douala Urban Community

Faced with this situation, the Douala Urban Community has developed mechanisms for coexistence to implement social integration policies with all its constituent groups and nationalities [6]. The principles of coexistence have been defined as follows:

- 1) Promote harmony and peace within society.
- 2) Integrate cultural diversity as an asset for boosting the city's economy.
- 3) Include all segments of society in fostering cohesion in all economic activities, whether formal or informal.
- 4) Build and maintain human relationships based on trust, where the entire community accepts diversity and community life.
- 5) Encourage collaboration, not competition.
- 6) Promote the harmonious use of urban space to ensure everyone's presence.
- 7) Promote the harmonious use of urban space to ensure everyone's presence.

These principles were established by the urban community to promote peaceful coexistence among the various communities and nationalities present. They are therefore considered public policies for the integration of the Douala urban community, aimed at fostering harmonious living among the different nationalities within the city [5].

Furthermore, actions are being taken to establish peace in all human endeavors to better guarantee the city's development: the development of social cohesion, the practice of solidarity without any discrimination, the mobilization of all socio-political actors around the values of the republic and culture, and the acceptance of racial, ethnic, and religious difference [6].

Thus, socio-economic integration practices are manifested through various initiatives:

"Living Together Evenings." These gatherings aim to bring together stakeholders operating in various economic sectors to promote unity not only among nationals from neighboring countries but also among Cameroonian nationals. These evenings have allowed individuals from different organizations to develop strategies for peace and social inclusion. Raising awareness of the values of the Republic is a key focus of these events, emphasizing social cohesion among the city's diverse population. It is also an opportunity to foster a sense of belonging for all, promoting cultural diversity to implement this public policy [6].

Furthermore, the organizing committee for this large-scale ceremony was established by the government delegate to the Douala Urban Community, with the support of various civil society organizations and international bodies. Their role is to

form an organizing committee for events related to socio-economic integration.

The Douala Urban Community has created other initiatives to implement social integration policies, including the "Peace in the Village" ceremony. This ceremony was established to celebrate and promote social dialogue, peace throughout the city, and social harmony [6]. Through this ceremony, the various stakeholders present have the opportunity to sign a declaration of peace to promote this value, integration, and social cohesion. It is also a time to highlight the values of the different communities in the city of Douala.

Other initiatives are underway regarding socio-economic integration in the city of Douala. Intercultural evenings are part of this context. These gatherings were designed to bring together all the cultures present in the city and promote intercultural exchange, enhance initiatives that foster national cohesion, develop a sense of belonging to society, and promote cultural diversity [6]. To implement these initiatives, the Douala Urban Community collaborates with the various consulates located in the city.

However, the activities that make up these intercultural evenings include: art exhibitions, cultural performances such as traditional dances, and food fairs. The objectives of these ceremonies are to bring together the various consular representations and the different Cameroonian communities established in the city around an organizing committee [10]. Thus, all foreign nationals, as well as those from Cameroon, can come together and form a social group [6].

These evenings also provide a platform for exchanges between various consulates, city officials, and members of different Cameroonian tribes. In the current representation of the city of Douala, some twenty nationalities and forty ethnic groups participate in their respective ways in these gatherings and exchanges. Given this diverse nationality, the gala evenings feature around one hundred traditional dances and nearly 200 dishes from various nationalities and regions [6].

3. Integration Policies Through Listening and Professional Integration Units

In an effort to promote socio-professional integration, the Douala urban community has created various listening offices to facilitate the integration of Cameroonian and foreign nationals in the city. The river drainage project, designed to reduce social impact, is therefore part of the implementation of this project [6].

3.1. The Creation of Listening Offices

Through the creation of listening offices, The Douala Urban Community (DUC) has implemented several joint projects:

- 1) The establishment of a framework for resolving disputes between individuals.
- 2) The development of strategies for managing household waste and rehabilitating road sections. To illustrate this

strategy, the Douala Urban Community's heritage officer explained it as follow:

"...The urban community, in order to promote socio-economic integration, very often organizes holiday internships to which migrants are invited to apply. Very often, the aim is to combat unsanitary conditions in the city of Douala. This is why the interns clean gutters and roadside areas. The time spent on these tasks depends on the scale of the job. These internships are paid. Our goal is to keep them occupied so they can meet their basic needs with the money that the urban community provides for them" (An official from the Douala Urban Community, 2020).

- 3) Proper management of sanitation infrastructure to improve health impact,
- 4) Developing social integration and the participation of everyone in the affairs of the urban community.

To better support these integration policies, the urban community has created eight listening centers located in traditional chiefdoms in certain neighborhoods of Douala. These centers have facilitated numerous interviews. As a result, thousands of households benefit from ongoing psychological support.

3.2. Other Multifaceted Assistance from the Douala Urban Community

However, in its efforts to facilitate the socio-professional integration of the indigent, the Douala Urban Community provides support through various forms of assistance. The Bépanda Multifunctional Center (BMC) is one such facility used by the Douala municipality to support vulnerable populations, regardless of their background. To illustrate these actions, a senior manager from the center provided the following interview:

"...We provide support to vulnerable groups regardless of their nationality. We welcomed an orphaned child from the Central African Republic here. When we admitted him, he was only 7 years old. We paid for his schooling until the third grade. Today we provide him with vocational training. We are training him in carpentry. Our goal is to make them professional so that they can take care of themselves" (A manager of the Bépanda Multifunctional Center, 2019).

4. Educational Policies as a Means of Integration

The secular arm of the Douala Urban Community in matters of training and education is the Bépanda Multifunctional Center. With a budget of two hundred million for the year 2019, the center, whose management committee chairman is the delegate to the Douala Urban Community, should, according to the Cameroonian Ministry of Social Affairs, be a modern social structure offering certain services to the most vulnerable people, promoting socio-economic integration and financial autonomy [12].

4.1. Training Programs Offered by the Bépanda Multifunctional Center

Regarding the center's offerings, it provides training in various fields: hospitality, visual arts, welding, information and communication technologies, Braille, and even "schooling under a tree" (a type of informal schooling). These diverse training programs contribute to the Douala urban community's mission of uniting not only Cameroonian nationals residing in the city, but also foreigners. A senior official from the center shared some of their achievements in this regards:

"...The center's role is to promote the socio-economic integration of vulnerable people, including foreigners. We have trained about thirty Central African and Chadian refugees here. Today they are employed. Among them, about ten Chadian women have opened sewing shops in the surrounding area, and about fifteen Central African women are now not only seamstresses but also work in some restaurants in the capital. Five Congolese and Chadian children are receiving schooling. That's roughly what the multi-functional center has been able to do, to name just a few examples." (A manager at the Bépanda multi-functional center, 2020).

In light of the above, it is clear that the Douala Urban Community is making considerable efforts to promote the socio-economic integration of its residents, whether they are nationals or foreigners.

4.2. The Socio-economic Integration Policies of the Douala Urban Community as a Model of Integration Within the CEMAC Zone

The socio-economic integration policies of the Douala municipality are, in fact, models of integration within the CEMAC zone. Some Central Africans interviewed attest to the benefits of this multi-functional center:

"...I have a child with vision problems who is now receiving an education thanks to the Bépanda Multifunctional Center. When I arrived in Douala, one of my compatriots recommended the center to me. It's true that it wasn't easy at first, as I had to put together a file for my son to be accepted. It took a few months, and then I was contacted to discuss the process. The center trained my child to use Braille. Today, my child goes to school and takes classes like any other child. I think the center has helped me a lot, and I'm happy with all these efforts toward integration" (A Central African citizen, 2020).

5. Housing Policies of the Douala Urban Community

In recent years, the economic capital of Cameroon has invested in various real estate projects. These investments are part of the public housing policies for its diverse population, aiming to promote housing for all. The city of Douala is a metropolis with a population of approximately 3,400,000 to 3,500,000, thus requiring housing policies to accommodate all its residents¹.



Source: Figure by Serge Sabine Ntsama Onana, November 15, 2020

Figure 1. Social housing in the Yassa district (Douala 3).

5.1. Land Development for Housing Construction

Given its large population, Douala requires reliable public housing policies to accommodate its entire population. Among these policies is the development of specific areas for housing construction. These areas have been developed thanks to the urban community's partner companies in the building sector (see Figure 1). The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINHUD), the Cameroon Real Estate Company (CREC), and the Douala Development Corporation are among the companies partnering with the Douala urban community that invest in social housing.

These companies are therefore contributing resources to help the population of Douala find housing according to their income. This is also observed in some large cities in developed countries where vulnerable populations are supported by the municipality through social housing [2]. The difference is that in Douala, vulnerable populations find housing themselves based on their income. These areas are generally called sub-districts, which lack any urban planning and reflect overcrowding. These characteristics naturally determine housing prices. This is why vulnerable populations are found in these areas. The majority of the Central African population, living from small jobs and the informal sector and without high incomes, generally finds itself in sub-districts². Some have built temporary dwellings there using rather precarious materials, without adhering to the urban development plan. This has resulted in a rather undesirable appearance for these neighbourhoods. This is very often the case with the development of

¹ Fritz Ntonè Ntonè, Government Delegate to the Douala Urban Community [6].

² This information was obtained from an official at the Ministry of Housing and

Urban Development for the Coastal Region in December 2020.

sub-districts in some sub-Saharan cities. Douala, with its significant influx of local residents settling there, sometimes arriving from inter-city travel, as well as international migrants, is no exception to the system applicable to African cities due to its capacity to promote services.

5.2. A Joint Effort Between the Cameroonian Government and the Urban Community Regarding Social Housing

Following these housing difficulties in the city, the Cameroonian government and the urban community have committed to building social housing for homeless people, even though the cost of this housing remains problematic for some Cameroonians and Central Africans [1].

To better guide all city residents, housing policies have been

developed. Central African nationals and disadvantaged groups also benefit from these policies. Among these policies, a number of social housing units have been planned for construction on 15 hectares within the city [13]. The Douala Urban Community and the Cameroonian government have therefore planned the construction of these units with the aim of creating new neighbourhoods to house homeless populations. These sites are generally referred to as "housing estates." In the government housing estate, of the 1,175 units, 560 are already available; in the Chinese housing estate, 660 are completed; and 12 buildings are under construction, providing 270 units. In addition to these buildings, 400 housing units are also under construction, of which 370 are already completed. These various housing projects are being built to accommodate populations seeking shelter. (An official from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development for the Cameroonian coast, 2020).

Table 1. Completion Status of Selected Social Housing Units in Douala (Figures and Percentages).

Social Housing Unit Names	Number Planned	Number completed	Number not completed	Completion Rate
Gouvernement Housing	1175	560	615	47,65
Chinese Housing	660	660	0	100
Cameroonian Housing Estate	400	370	30	92,5
Total	2235	1590	645	71,23

Source: Author based on data from an interview with an official from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development for the Cameroonian coast.



Source: Figure by Serge Sabine Ntsama Onana, November 15, 2020

Figure 2. Social housing in the Mbanga-Bakoko district (Douala 3).

The completion rate of these social housing units should be encouraged (see Table 1). Based on the number of units planned for homeless and vulnerable people, nearly half of the social housing units are already completed in the government

housing complex, while all the houses are ready in the Chinese housing complex. In the Cameroonian housing complex, almost all the houses are currently under construction.

Thus, the completion rate of these housing units is significantly higher than average, and some units are nearing completion (see Figure 2). In the government housing complex, more than a third of the planned units have been built. In the Chinese housing complex, all the planned units have been constructed. However, in the Cameroonian housing complex, almost all the houses have been built (see Table 1). Nevertheless, while these units are intended to house vulnerable populations, not all of these target groups are eligible for social housing because their incomes still do not allow them to pay the rent.

6. Conclusion

In short, the public policies of CEMAC, Cameroon, and the Douala Urban Community can be summarized by various measures: the evolution of standards on free movement, which, since the creation of CUCAS (the Customs Union of Central African States), have steadily improved with the expansion of

workers' rights within CEMAC. This progress has ranged from the elimination of entry visas to the introduction of a CEMAC passport, and further along, the acceptance of identity cards from any member state. Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all previously promising integration efforts, the border closures implemented by each CEMAC state were considered an obstacle to further integration [9]. However, Cameroon is developing integration policies, as evidenced by the support it provides to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to guarantee employment for all its citizens, including foreigners. Nevertheless, the civil service remains closed to foreigners, including citizens of the EMCCA (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa). Yet, the 2013 Additional Act clearly stipulates that all EMCCA citizens residing in a member state must enjoy the same rights as citizens of that host state. This is not the case in Cameroon. Therefore, the government, through the Ministry of Labour, promotes the employment of EMCCA citizens through seminars and conferences it organizes to train and guide EMCCA workers. However, given that socio-economic integration is a key issue in the city of Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon, with its large Cameroonian and foreign population, is obligated to promote several socio-economic integration policies. Thus, policies fostering cohesion among the various migrant communities are being implemented. Furthermore, socio-professional integration and support units have been established by the urban community to facilitate the integration of all residents of Douala. Finally, housing integration is a priority for the Douala urban community, aiming to guarantee housing for everyone according to their economic means. Therefore, social housing is being created for this purpose.

Abbreviations

BMC	Bépanda Multifunctional Center
CREC	Cameroon Real Estate Company
CUCAS	Customs Union of Central African States
DUC	Douala Urban Community
EMCCA	Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa
MINHUD	Ministry of Housing and Urban Development
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

Author Contributions

Serge Sabine Ntsama Onana is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts interest.

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