

# The situation of indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon

## - Factsheet

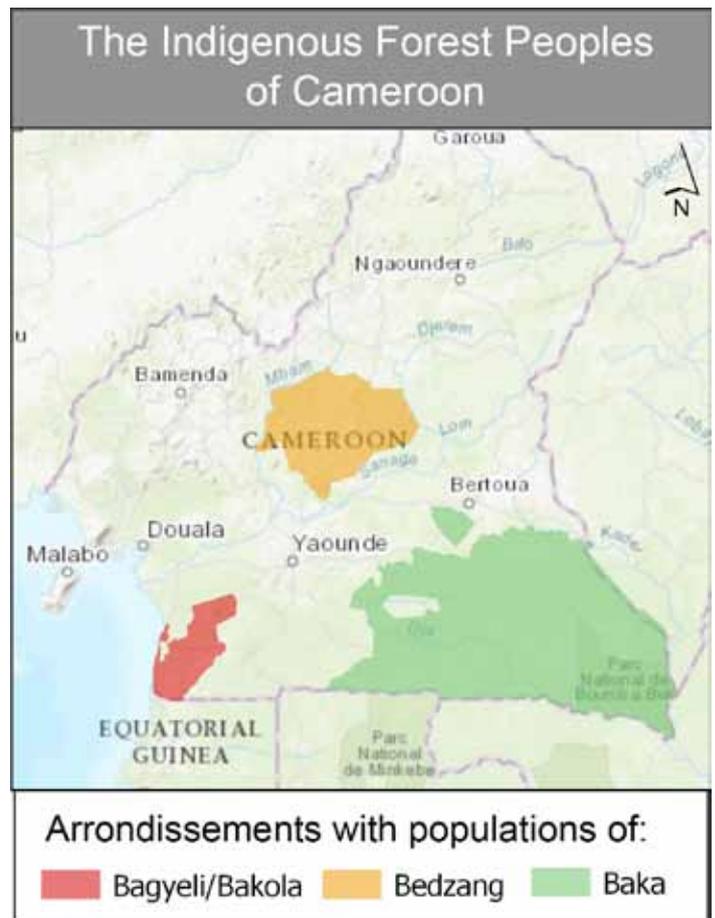


# Introduction

Cameroon is characterised by the extraordinary diversity of its population, with more than 250 ethnic groups. However, since its independence, the government's policy has been geared towards ensuring national unity, making it difficult to take into account the rights of indigenous peoples enshrined in international legal instruments. The constitution of 18 January 1996 does refer (in its foreword) to the concept of 'minorities' and 'indigenous peoples', but without referring to specific groups. In the absence of a legally defined definition of 'indigenous peoples', reference should be made to the international criteria for identifying such communities, for example by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Although there is no unanimously accepted definition in Cameroon, the state has acknowledged the existence of indigenous peoples according to these criteria before African and international authorities, as well as within the framework of the application of World Bank Operational Directive 4.20, among others.

There are two main groups of indigenous peoples in Cameroon that are widely recognised by civil society: indigenous forest peoples (Baka, Bagyeli, Bakola and Bedzang - pejoratively called 'Pygmies'), who are traditional hunter-gatherers living mainly in the forests of the Southeast and Central regions. The other group are the Mbororo, indigenous pastoral peoples who live mainly in the savannah areas of the East, Northwest and Adamawa regions. There is also a third group, the indigenous Kirdi mountain peoples located in the North of Cameroon.

Accurate population figures for these groups are difficult to obtain and those reported are unreliable because official government censuses do not publish disaggregated data by ethnic group (and many do not 'officially' exist, as they do not hold a birth certificate or national identity card). However, hunter-gatherer populations have been estimated at between 50 and 100,000, about 0.4% of the population (although numbers may be higher), while the pastoral population is estimated at about 1 million. Population figures for the Kirdi community are unknown.



## Mbororo communities:

Nomadic herders, with high concentrations in the North, Far North, Adamawa, Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon (although their presence also extends to other regions). They are part of a large group called the Fulani and are estimated at about 1 million people (12% of the population). They are subdivided into three main groups, namely the Jafun, the Woodabe and the Aku.

## Forest hunter-gatherer communities, divided into three distinct groups:

- **The Baka** with an estimated population of 40,000 people. In the South region, they are found particularly in the department of Dja-et-Lobo. In the Eastern region, they are found in the departments of Boumba-et-Ngoko, Haut-Nyong and Kadey.
- **The Bagyeli** are spread across the department of Océan and are estimated at about 4,000 people.
- **The Bedzan** are around 300 people. They are located in the transition zone between the savannah and forest, in central Cameroon (Mbam-et-Kim department).

Source : IWGIA 2017

# The socio-economic situation of indigenous peoples in Cameroon

The conclusion that emerges from the global observation of these peoples is that in comparison with other surrounding communities, they live in a more precarious socio-economic environment, which far from meets their subsistence needs and access to basic social services (i.e. health, education, communication, etc.).

## Poverty

Indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon live considerably and visibly below the poverty line. Although there are no published figures, it is generally recognised that indigenous peoples are among the poorest in the country (which is why they merit special attention from the Ministry of Social Affairs as 'vulnerable populations').

## Access to education

Mbororo have a higher school enrollment rate than indigenous forest peoples, among whom the rate is still very low. This is linked, among other things, to the gap between the official policy of free primary schools and the reality that there is a lack of schools, lack of teachers, and school equipment is unaffordable, which creates a real barrier for indigenous education. Nevertheless, the government of Cameroon, along with several international and national organisations, are working towards education for indigenous peoples. However, many programmes have faced challenges and in reality have not effectively taken into account certain parameters that are essential for the success of children's education.

- Most of the programmes are not adapted to the seasonal activities of indigenous groups;
- Premature severance from their mother tongue often occurs early in the life of indigenous children as they are compelled to learn the official languages (English and French) at the pace of the national curriculum;
- Textbooks do not take into account the unique profile of indigenous children in government schools;
- Indigenous languages are not in common use in teaching in schools.

## Livelihoods and employment

The main livelihoods of indigenous peoples are based on small income-generating activities. The main sources of income are:

- Selling hunting products (indigenous forest peoples): Indigenous forest peoples excel in hunting. They also collect forest products, fish and gather traditional medicines.
- Nomadic livestock farming (Mbororo): Cattle represent not only a source of wealth, but provide security in terms of food and way of life. Agriculture is also becoming increasingly important as a source of income and food self-sufficiency among the Mbororo people.



Traditional medicine is a means of livelihood and a source of income for indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon. © FPP

## Access to health care

Access to health services remains a major concern for indigenous peoples in view of the high mortality rate due to difficulties accessing basic health care and the low rate of vaccination coverage. This inaccessibility to health care is accentuated by discrimination observed in health centres, and the high cost of medications which are beyond the reach of these groups. In addition, health facilities are located far from indigenous communities, and even more significantly, national health programmes often do not fit with the seasonal lifestyle of these communities. The growing constraints of land access and deterioration of forests as a result of industrial expansion affecting their access to traditional medicines have also had a negative impact on health.

## Land access

Customary land rights are of fundamental importance to indigenous communities. Cameroonian legislation does not recognise indigenous peoples' right to customary collective property on their ancestral lands. This lack of recognition of their land rights is further accentuated by Order no.74-1 of July 6, 1974, which establishes land tenure in Cameroon and makes material development a fundamental condition of obtaining an (individual) land title. This legislative provision completely goes against the way of life of the indigenous peoples who rotate periodic activities on their lands (which are held collectively). Indigenous peoples only exercise the right of use which is not in fact a definitive property right, and makes them vulnerable.

In fact, the challenges of indigenous peoples' access to land have increased over time with different government policies aimed at connecting them with neighboring communities, who have for the most part subjected them and made them their "property". This conditions both their access to land and consequently, to resources. The other factor is related to the increased resource needs of the state, which sees the wealth of the land and its resources as an important means of achieving its budgetary targets. There is an increasing allocation of concessions (forest, mining, agro-industrial or conservation) to companies or state entities, which limit or prohibit the right of access to land to those communities, who are increasingly constricted and dispossessed of spaces from which they derive almost all of their vital resources.

## Legal framework and national policy

Despite the recognition of certain groups as indigenous peoples at international level, the official position of the government is that there are no indigenous people in Cameroon (or that all the inhabitants of the country are indigenous people). Yet, in the context of projects funded by the World Bank, for example, under which the policy on indigenous peoples must be respected, the government does recognise them in this way. Examples include the National Programme for Participatory Development (PNDP) and the Forest and Environment Sector Programme (FESP) running over the last 8 years and, since 2011, a study on identifying indigenous peoples using United Nations' criteria-based analysis. Therefore, despite the illusion created by the constitution, it seems there is no formal legal recognition of indigenous status and despite recent developments, the human rights of indigenous peoples are not yet established in Cameroon.

Indigenous communities face numerous human rights violations (which are difficult to characterise due to lack of disaggregated statistics). Some examples are:

- Food insecurity, as well as the non-recognition of their customary uses of wildlife resources (bushmeat) or the right of free access to land for pasture;
- Lack of customary land rights;
- Lack of political representation, especially in the case of indigenous forest peoples;
- Systemic discrimination and marginalisation, including through the lack of administrative recognition of their separate villages and the large number of indigenous peoples without official documentation (e.g. birth certificate, national identity card, etc.);
- Disproportionately high rates of illiteracy among indigenous peoples (especially indigenous forest peoples).

There is no legal framework that can ensure the full recognition of indigenous peoples in Cameroon. National policy tries to comply with the requirements of certain international partners who sometimes impose guidelines for consideration of the specific needs of indigenous peoples, but it appears to be a game of interests, from which one can conclude that the Cameroonian government is not interested in voluntarily advancing on the question of 'indigenous peoples'.

National politics have remained fixed on the notion of national unity and therefore will not consider diluting this by allowing consideration of different distinctive identities. In its national strategy, Cameroon has a specific policy on indigenous peoples that does not agree with the United Nations and African Commission criteria and nomenclature regarding indigenous peoples.

Cameroon's policy is that there are no indigenous peoples (as defined by the United Nations) in the country.

Thus, the administration vacillates between two terms as suits them, sometimes using *"marginal populations"* and other times *"Vulnerable Indigenous Populations"* which is the accepted term in the policy and programmes of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In 2007, Cameroon voted in favour of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and adheres to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and several other international instruments, but has not ratified the ILO's Convention 169.

## Overview of challenges and recommendations

The challenge of fair and equitable integration of indigenous peoples into the national community is far from over in Cameroon. The government is reluctant to meet the requirements of international legal instruments to protect the rights of these communities, despite its international commitments.

Several bodies that manage these international instruments have noted the unequal and precarious status of indigenous peoples, especially with regard to the lack of recognition of customary land rights. In 2014, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed its concern *"at the discrimination and marginalisation that these different groups continue to experience in the enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights"*. The Committee was also concerned about the *"infringement of land rights"* of indigenous peoples, and recommended that the state *"enshrine in law the right of indigenous peoples to own, use, develop and control their lands, territories and resources"*, and to *"consult with the indigenous peoples concerned and to cooperate with them to obtain their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) before the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources"*.

We cannot raise these many challenges without making reference to the Sustainable Development Goals and their central theme to *"leave no one behind"*. Cameroon is involved in this process, which has been developing slowly since 2015, but which nevertheless seeks to contextualise and prioritise these different objectives. Cameroon plans to integrate 46 of the targets into its strategies, municipal development plans, departmental programmes and action plans of development partners. The SDGs are a catalyst for achieving national goals to make Cameroon an emerging country by 2035. They also aim to ensure human rights for all, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. They are finally bringing together the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental.

### General recommendations

- Conduct a review to look at land issues and the management of natural resources, with the objective of legal reform that will ensure that indigenous land rights and ways of life are recognised and protected;
- Broaden the remit of the Commission on Human Rights to give a specific mandate on monitoring issues relating to the rights of indigenous peoples in Cameroon;
- Establish a mechanism to ensure the participation of indigenous peoples in national politics;
- Indigenous communities should have separate administrative recognition at the national level, rather than being linked with neighbouring (non-indigenous) villages.

### Recommendations to specific sectors

- Ensure training of indigenous health workers;
- Provide free maternal and infant healthcare -up to age 5- for all indigenous children (care and medication);
- Ensure free primary school provision for indigenous peoples. Education programmes in schools attended by indigenous peoples could also include more practical lessons, as well as adapting the school calendar to the indigenous seasonal calendar, and providing classes in and on indigenous languages;
- Protect areas of high cultural importance for indigenous peoples;
- Provide support for the development of economic and livelihood activities aimed specifically at indigenous peoples.

# Citizenship – the situation of indig

Source: Plateforme Gbabandi (2018).



## Difficulties and obstacles to obtaining citizenship documents

- Most births take place in the forest and not hospitals
- Long distances to the civil status centres to register births
- High levels of illiteracy among indigenous forest peoples
- Complex procedures for obtaining birth certificates, national identity cards and voting cards
- Unaffordable costs for registering births and obtaining documents (both direct and indirect costs for transport etc)
- Lack of awareness and information among parents
- Discriminatory treatment
- Complexity of obtaining birth certificates for adults

## Impacts of lack of citizenship on indigenous forest peoples

- Limited possibilities to travel outside of the community
- Frequent harrassment and intimidation
- No ability to vote
- No ability to report a crime
- No formal employment
- Limited ability to register for schooling
- No ability to register for a land title
- No ability to run for political office
- No ability to register for obtaining water, electricity and other services



# Indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon

## Recommendations for improving access to citizenship

- Raise awareness among indigenous communities about the importance of birth declarations, birth certificates and national identity cards
- Train officers and secretaries of the civil status centres on how to better accommodate indigenous peoples in birth registrations
- Create new secondary civil status centres close to communities
- Extend the deadline to register births for children born outside of hospitals
- Organise three-monthly caravans to collect birth declarations and distribute birth certificates among indigenous communities
- Abolish fees associated with obtaining birth certificates
- Train indigenous leaders as agents of the civil status centres to allow them to support the collection of birth declarations in communities
- Develop special, simplified and free procedures to establish birth certificates and national identity cards for adults who have never had them
- Organise a registration campaign for indigenous adults



**35%**

cannot vote in elections.



**47%**

do not hold a valid citizenship document (higher in women).



**69%**

of children under age 5 have not had their births registered (twice the national average).





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