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## **REPORT ON THE ADISI CAMEROON MEETING ON SETTING UP A MECHANISM FOR ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND PUBLIC DATA IN THE SOUTHWEST REGION DURING CRISIS**



**LIMBE, SEPTEMBER 19 – 20, 2019**

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***Access to information project in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon in times of crisis.***

### **Reminder of objectives**

Promote access to information in both English-speaking regions during the crisis period.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- Establish a mechanism for access to information and guarantee the freedom of the local press
- Bring local authorities, civil society and journalists from the South West region together to discuss their professional relationships
- Develop a mechanism to facilitate access to information with the necessary tools adopted by participants
- Discuss new forms of collaboration to ensure that local citizens and national and international opinion receive quality information

## INTRODUCTION

At least 20 representatives of media outfits and Civil Society Organisations in the Southwest region met at the Atlantic Beach Hotel, on September 19 and 20 to deliberate on the above theme. After a round of introductions and a statement of purpose from the workshop organizer, the Southwest Delegate for Communication, Olive Ejang, officially launched the deliberations.



Mr Epié Engome Victor opens the working session of the meeting

## DAYS 1

It started with a brush-up of some fundamentals about Access to Information, notably the definition of key terms and the identification of tools and factors affecting access to information.

These preliminaries set the stage for three presentations on the state of Press Freedom and the Right of Access to Information in the Southwest region since the onset of the crisis in the two English-speaking regions.

- The first was by Leonard Kum, President of Fako branch of the National Union of Journalists, who noted the resilience of local media outfits in the face of
  1. the hardships imposed by the crisis,
  2. arbitrary restrictions by administrative authorities who go as far as declaring some media content as taboo;
  3. the vulnerability of media practitioners to discretionary interpretation of the deliberately ambiguous 1990 anti-terrorism laws.

He cited instances of journalists arrested for their reporting, and detained for nearly a year, as well as the media in the remote areas who face a double threat both from government troops and Non-State Armed Groups.



**Leonard Kum, President of the CNJC Sud-Ouest presents the situation of journalists and freedom of the press in this part of the country**



Attention was drawn to the fact that media houses are private investments whose proprietors may not accept an editorial policy which may lead to financial trouble. Other disturbing realities include

1. that, despite all the hype about freedom of information, there is no law obligating public servants to give journalists the information they require to do their work. It is therefore a matter of discretion;
  2. that both government and the separatists are active in a propaganda war which makes objective reporting extremely difficult;
  3. that the many hindrances to access bring into play a crop of untrained citizen journalists armed with little more than their smartphones, and not bound by professional constraints;
  4. That the rural exodus from conflict zones has forced many local media outfits to shut down;
  5. That foreign media outfits do get unfettered access to information by contrast to locals, perhaps as a public relations gimmick for the government;
  6. That the government uses the crisis as an exceptional pretext to discretionally revoke any instrument granting access to information.
- The second exposé focused on how access to information, or the lack of it, has impacted the work of local CSO during this crisis.



Elvis Ngbwa from Reach Out, outlines CSO's lack of access to information for their work

Among such impacts, Collins Ngwa from the Buea-based NGO, Reach Out, noted:

1. That CSO activities have shifted from developmental to humanitarian programs.
2. That Government is manifesting paranoia by deliberately blurring the line between political and nonpolitical information, and by its rather discretionary determination of who a CSO is.
3. That many communities earmarked for CSO aid programmes have become inaccessible and the CSOs are vulnerable to attacks from both sides;
4. That hostilities make it impossible for Human Rights activists to verify the reports they get.

To these and other impediments to the work of CSOs, synergy was identified as the most effective remedy.

- The third presentation, by the Regional Delegate for Communication, drew extensively from the AFEX report on the harsh conditions journalists in Cameroon work under.

The presenter blamed the snags journalists face on the abusive attitudes of administrators, but also on the ethical lapses of some of the journalists themselves.



**Olive Ejang, Delegate of Communication presents local government efforts to ensure freedom of the press and access to local information**

In her advocacy for journalistic professionalism she came down hard on journalists who neglect balance in their reporting, and those who do not do enough to get the facts right. Even when doors are slammed in their faces, resourceful journalists should be able to access information through inside sources, she maintained.

Participants took issue with the idea of anonymous sources. Journalists have a duty to protect their sources, but the anonymity of sources should not be used as a shield for publishing unfounded allegations.

Deliberately distorting facts to favour or hurt the people concerned is gutter journalism and must be shunned.

It was observed with regret that very low salaries expose many journalists to corruption. This is the ultimate challenge to their integrity and self-esteem.

The discussions ended with a call for synergy among journalists, and between them and Civil Society.

## DAY 2

This last day was taken up by work in three groups, followed by presentations in plenary.

Group 1: had as terms of reference *the choice of mechanisms and the terms of stakeholder collaboration to guarantee the freedom of the local press and access to information.*



A view of group work

The group identified two categories of stakeholders. In the first category are the frontline actors, namely the government (notably the military) on the one hand, and the Non State Armed Groups on the other.

In the second category the group identified administrators, Civil Society Organisations, Faith-based Organisations, Traditional rulers, Entrepreneurs, Community leaders and local populations.



The Group also identified four types of information, namely

1. Crisis-related happenings
2. Changes in livelihood – shutdowns and disruptions
3. Effects on property – arson and looting
4. Demographics issues – deaths, displacements, etc.

Coming to the building of mechanisms for access to information, the group said these would vary from stakeholder to stakeholder, but on the whole it would require the journalists to

1. Be credible
2. Be seen to identify with the community
3. Be identified as responsible
4. Protect their sources
5. Build/strengthen synergy among themselves and with other groups in the community.



Presentation of the work in plenary

Group 2: had to deal with the Consensual Choice of Tools to facilitate Access to Information and sources. Tools identified were lumped into two groups – tangible and intangible.

Tangible tools refer to equipment enabling journalists to reach information sources, as well as gadgets for data collection and transmission. These include phones, cameras and means of mobility such as cars, helicopters and drones.

The use of drones, in particular, was considered salutary considering the poor road infrastructure and especially the physical inaccessibility of the zones hard hit by the crisis. But though they may be relatively less expensive than other means of mobility, not only is the technology catching on rather slowly, the drones run the risk of being targeted by both parties. There was unanimity around electronic media (social media in particular), as the most accessible and effective tool of access to information. However, the use of these media by people without training or integrity makes them potentially hazardous.

The intangible category of tools includes:

1. **Training.** Both theoretical and practical training are indispensable to equip journalists for information collection. This calls for both pre-service and on-the-job training through frequent refresher courses and workshops.
2. **Regulation of the media.** The application of laws and ethical standards governing journalistic practice has a very delicate role in access to information.
3. **Synergy.** This refers to the creation/consolidation of networking between stakeholders. It should be materialized by the creation of a database of information sources accessible to all stakeholders.
4. **Language.** As a tool of communication, language must be used to advantage – both to open doors to sources and to transmit the information to the public. Functional non-bilingualism among many public servants in the Northwest and Southwest is quite an inhibiting factor for access to information.
5. **Personality.** The public perception of the journalist's persona can either open doors to sources of information, or slam them in his face. Character and training have a huge impact here, and so does appearance which, in some cases, is hampered by the journalist's financial status.

The third and last group presented the outcome of their work on topics to be addressed to better inform national and international opinions on the Anglophone crisis.

A collation of their work and that of the other two groups produced a number of targeted recommendations:

**1. To the proprietors of media outfits**

- a. To ensure as far as possible that journalists are equipped with the proper professional tools to facilitate their work
- b. To ensure decent remuneration to immunize journalists against the temptation of corruption, and enable them to function with the required dignity

**2. To Lawmakers**

- a. To expedite the enactment of a legal instrument obligating public servants to make public data accessible to journalists and Civil Society actors.
- b. To work with journalist associations on a revised law defining who a journalist is.
- c. To allow journalists to propose and implement instruments regulating the exercise of their profession, just like lawyers and doctors.

**3. To CSOs and the media**

- a. To create a joint database of news sources which would include state institutions and opinion leaders, with a view to easing access to credible information.
- b. To create opportunities for continuous training in the sourcing and management of information on conflicts.
- c. To create/strengthen interactive platforms (networks, coalitions, unions) for primary and secondary stakeholders in conflict situations like the current context in the Northwest and Southwest regions.
- d. To encourage/strengthen partnership with corporate communicators and Public Relations Officers in public and private institutions.

## **OBSERVATIONS BY THE MEETING FACILITATOR**

1. Interest in the subject of the meeting was high and sustained, testifying to participants' concern about the issues it raised. We drew this conclusion from the attentiveness and liveliness of the discussions even after the lunch break which usually leaves participants in relaxation mode.
2. Unfortunately, hardly any of the heads of the media outfits or Civil Society groups invited found time to attend. The lively discussions were therefore among participants who do not have the leverage to implement any of the recommendations. It is our hope that, after reading the present report, the bosses of these structures will take up the issues with the seriousness they deserve.
3. We are writing the present report two weeks after the workshop, and this has given us the opportunity to see the implementation of one of its recommendations, namely the first steps to synergy building among participants through the creation of what already seems to be a very active social media forum. Our hope that it will be a veritable platform for the collective search for solutions to the problems raised, and not a socialization talk shop.



At the end of this training workshop on access to information and public data, media professionals and civil society actors also formulated their recommendations as follows:

### **1- The owners of the press**

- Care should be taken as much as possible to ensure that journalists have the appropriate professional tools to facilitate their work
- Decent remuneration must be provided to immunize journalists against the temptation of corruption and allow them to function with the require dignity

### **2- To the legislators**

- Accelerate the promulgation of a legal instrument obliging civil servants to make public data accessible to journalists and civil society actors
- Work with journalists associations on a revised law defining who is a journalist
- Allow journalists to propose and implement instruments regulating the performance of their duties like lawyers and doctors

### **3- To the civil society organization and media**

- A common database of sources of information, including state institutions and opinion leaders, should be created to facilitate access to credible information
- Create opportunities for continuing education in conflict information research and management
- Create or strengthen interactive platforms (network-coalitions-unions) for primary and secondary stakeholders in conflict situations such as the current context in the North West regions
- Encourage or strengthen partnerships with business communicators and public relations managers from public and private institutions

The training workshop therefore ends this day at 12h30 PM around overall meal encouraging better future encounters.

## ANNEXES

# Journalists, Civil society drilled on access to information, public data during crisis

By SIMON NDIVE KALLA

Journalists and some members of the civil society have been drilled on how to access information and public data during crisis period. This was during a two days seminar which started on Thursday September 19-Friday September 20, 2019 at Atlantic Beach Hotel in Limbe. The seminar, organised by Open Society Initiative for West Africa, OSIWA and National Endowment for Democracy, NED brought together Media proprietors, Journalists and civil society organisations.

According to Paul-Joel Kamtchang, the project coordinator of ADISI, the event is aimed at improving relations between local administration and local journalists. He added that it is also to develop a mechanism to facilitate access to information with the necessary tools adopted by participants and to bring local government, civil society and journalists from the South West Region



Organisers pose with participants

together to discuss their professional relationships.

Kam Leonard, President of SNIC South West Region regretted the fact that, "Because of the lack of security and means to access core conflict areas, many journalists lack direct access to first-hand information on developments on ground."

He also stressed that, most journalists in remote communities have fled to safer locations in towns, reducing the capacity of most city based reporters to

information on news happenings.

On her part, the Divisional Delegate of Communication for Fako, Olive Ejang Tebug said the media in Cameroon is averagely free but due to a low professional standard resulting from poor working conditions, poor salaries and lack of integrity on the part of media practitioners, some form of control is relevant in order to serve not only public interest but safeguard national goals.

She emphasised that, for a free press

to persist in Cameroon, there is need for a financial, psychology, structural and independent viable media system.

Olive Ejang challenged the participants to rise to the challenges of the times and shape society for the best, while urging journalists and other media workers in the digital age to seize the opportunity of the moment to uphold best practices and expand their influence.

"Let us change the narrative for the good of the society. I assure you that, irrespective of the challenges, the government remains committed to partner with the media in building a peaceful, free and just society. I encourage us all to contribute in enhancing the concept of living together within our society", Olive Ejang told participants.

During the two-day event, participants were drilled on better ways to access information from the administration, colleagues, social media etc. they also exchanged ideas and personal experiences during discussion sessions.

The Sun Website: [www.thesuncameroon.com](http://www.thesuncameroon.com)

1: Article written by a participant in the training

## EVALUATION

ADISI-Cameroun, une plateforme privée spécialisée dans la collecte des données chiffrées, vient de faire un recensement des arrestations et autres intimidations infligées par les pouvoirs publics aux hommes et femmes de média.

## Les droits des journalistes passés au scanner

Fabrice BELOKO

L'étude rendue publique il y a quelques jours prend en compte une période précise. Ainsi, entre janvier 2017 et janvier 2019, une douzaine de journalistes du Cameroun ont été arrêtés, intimidés ou menacés par des acteurs étatiques et non étatiques dans le pays. Cela, observe ledit rapport analytique sur la sécurité des journalistes au Cameroun, est en grande partie dû aux troubles qui se poursuivent dans les régions anglophones du pays. En effet, la crise sociopolitique qui a débuté en octobre 2016 dans le Nord-Ouest et le Sud-Ouest a entraîné de graves violations des droits de l'homme dans la région, notamment des perturbations prolongées du réseau internet, des arrestations et détentions arbitraires de journalistes, pour rester sur le cas spécifique des rédacteurs du rapport. « Les journalistes qui exercent dans ces parties du pays sont régulièrement la cible des groupes séparatistes et même du gouvernement. En effet, des

journalistes qui y travaillent craignent pour leur vie. Ils font régulièrement l'objet de menaces et d'intimidation de la part des autorités locales et même centrales voyant parfois des programmes de leur média suspendus sur ordre. Les séparatistes ne sont non plus en reste. Les journalistes sont régulièrement la cible de leurs menaces. Atteignant de ce fait, leur indépendance ou les forçant à être les vecteurs de leurs informations/propagande de guerre visant le gouvernement ou l'opinion », apprend-on.

Des programmes TV suspendus aux articles de presse stoppés net par le patron du journal en passant par la suspension des émissions radio parce que le directeur de publication ne trouve pas son intérêt ou estime que l'élément risque de "blesser" le pouvoir de Yaoundé sans oublier des arrestations diverses des journalistes, Adisi-Cameroun ne laisse de côté aucun aspect de la vie des médias où les journalistes essuient des humiliations et intimidations diverses.

L'on note de nombreuses violations physiques et verbales sur les journalistes ;



Non à la persécution des journalistes.

leurs interpellations sur les lieux de travail de la presse privée à cause de leurs publications et les implications de manque à gagner pour le journal. De nombreux citoyens privés d'information. Certains hommes de média ont vu leurs matériels de travail confisqués par les forces de l'ordre, de nombreux journalistes devenus déplacés internes du fait des

menaces à eux brandies etc.

Des noms de journalistes sont cités à la pelle : Ambroise Awono de la télévision Vision 4, Caristan Isteri du quotidien Le jour, Ambe Macmillan de Waka Africa Media, Marvel Fonkwen du journal The Post, Michael Doppas de la radio Soleil FM, Athia Azohwi du journal Sun Newspaper. La liste est très loin d'être exhaustive. Douala, Yaoundé, Bamenda, Kumba et Buéa sont les lieux où les arrestations et atteintes à la vie des journalistes ont le plus eu lieu. Elles concernent 77 % des hommes et 23 % de femmes. « La protection du journaliste au Cameroun est un grand chantier qui nécessite l'apport des différentes parties prenantes. Celles-ci se démontrent dans tous les secteurs de la nation camerounaise », se convainc Adisi-Cameroun. Qui élabore des recommandations à l'endroit des journalistes, des pouvoirs publics et de la société civile. ■

2: An article by Fabrice Beloko

Access to information project in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon in times of crisis.



3: A post from the workshop on Twitter



**adisi\_cameroun**  
Atlantique Hotel Limbé



[Voir les statistiques](#)

[Promouvoir](#)



4: An Instagram screenshot

*Access to information project in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon in times of crisis.*



←

ADISI-Cameroun

⋮

137 Tweets

Tweets

Tweets et réponses

Médias

J'aime



ADISI-Cameroun @Adisi...

· 20 sept. ▾

Publication officielle ce 20 septembre 2019 à Limbe dès 13h.

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5: A view of the analytical report



## ADISI-Cameroun



137 Tweets

Tweets

Tweets et réponses

Médias

J'aime



**ADISI-Cameroun** @Adisi... · 18 sept. ✓

Autour de la même table, journalistes, société civile et administrateurs locales vont se parler et trouver un mécanisme consensuel de la protection de la liberté de la presse locale et d'accès à l'information en période de crise.

Limbe du 19 au 20 Septembre 2019

[#Osiwa](#)

[#NED](#)



1



2

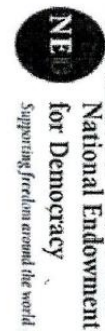


5



6: The announcement of the event

*Access to information project in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon in times of crisis.*



MEETING TO SET A MECHANISM FOR ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND PUBLIC IN THE SOUTH  
WEST REGION DURING CRISIS




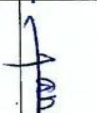












presence List

Atlantic Beach Hotel, Limbé September 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 2019
















SOUTH WEST TRIPARTITE






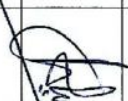



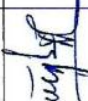





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