

## Introduction

In 1998 and 1999, the German NGO Transparency International, the most cited source in corruption discussions, gave top spot to Cameroon in its ranking of the world's most corrupt countries. That shaming honour came as a wake-up call to the Cameroonian authorities, who then decided to hit the nail on the head in order to weed out the scourge.

In reality, Cameroon did not wait for the Transparency International ranking before taking resolute steps towards achieving good governance. From the moment he came to power in 1982, the head of state, Paul Biya, made "rigour" and "moralisation" his chief battle horses – even if the results have been weak. This led to the government's will to fight corruption being questioned.

However, more resources have been committed by the Cameroonian government in the past few years to help curb the problem.

## Policy and political background

Government commitment to combating corruption has led to a number of initiatives with several structures being created to serve as watchdogs, notably:

- ... Decree No 098/273 of October 1998 creating the ministry in charge of the Supreme State Audit. This aimed at winning a threefold battle: dealing with the ethical behaviour of managers and public bookkeepers; achieving the good management of public affairs; and the fight against corruption.
- ... The National Governance Programme that came into effect on 31 August 2000 and aims, among other things, to consolidate the rule of law and to fight corruption.
- ... The National Anti-Corruption Observatory, also created in 2000 and intended to educate Cameroonians on the need to stop corruption.
- ... The anti-corruption cells within ministries created in 2001 by former Prime Minister Mafany Musonge.

... The Court of Auditors of the Supreme Court governed by Law No 2003/005. It is equivalent to a court of accounts and reviews the accounts of certified public and other practising accountants.

... The National Agency for Financial Investigation (ANIF)<sup>1</sup>, created by Decree No 2005/087 of May 2005, following the regulation aimed at eradicating and preventing money laundering in Central Africa.

... In March 2006, the drive against corruption followed the creation of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC)<sup>2</sup>, which is the last mechanism to be established and add its voice to the others. It is the main anti-corruption agency in Cameroon and was established by Decree No 2006/088, replacing the National Corruption Observatory in May 2007.

## Using ICTs to fight corruption in Cameroon

But how strong are these organs? Do they use information and communications technologies (ICTs) to help fight corruption in Cameroon? How far have they succeeded in turning the tide? In fact, many have been likened to toothless bulldogs, with their sporadic reports and actions considered as cries in the wilderness.

Despite the technological advances available to them, the aforementioned entities scarcely use ICT solutions to roll back corruption, apart from the ANIF. However, there are a few existing cases that could be labelled success stories.

Among the series of concrete actions undertaken thanks to the use of ICTs is the Computer System for Integrated Management of State Personnel and Salaries (SIGIPES)<sup>3</sup>. It was initiated in June 2000 with the objectives, amongst others, of setting up an effective filing system, fighting against corruption, and eliminating "ghost workers". It also created a single database for the entire government personnel, taking into account, in real time, all transactions.

SIGIPES includes an electronic interface named AQUARIUM that allows agents and members of the public to follow the processing of their applications<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> www.anif.cm

<sup>2</sup> www.conac-cameroumet

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reform (2002) SIGIPES & AQUARIUM: More transparent handling of personnel files in Cameroon www.egov4dev.org/Transparency/case/sigipesshtml

Before SIGIPES, the processing of applications and the management of internal files was awed by corruption, laziness and poor handling of the documents (duplicating of already signed documents, the changing of names, double salary payments, and so on)

Similarly, in 2007, Cameroon launched a reform of its customs administration which included the transborder Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA). This new system is a useful instrument in the management of procedures and rules for handling files for customs clearance. Just months after its implementation, initial results were encouraging (including lower corruption, higher revenue collection and shorter clearance times). Thanks to the new programme, the use of continually updated data as a means of controlling the quality of services was implemented. Inspectors were then aware that their superiors were actively checking up on them via the computer system. The computerisation of the procedures distanced customs officials from users, limiting opportunities for corruption. Ever since its implementation, ASYCUDA is helping the state maintain the 27% of its national revenue generated by the payment of customs duties.<sup>5</sup>

Besides this, Cameroonian Minister of Finance Ousmane Mey, alongside the directors general of some 13 commercial banks in Cameroon, signed a protocol agreement in April 2012 to facilitate the payment of customs duties. According to the agreement, all those clearing goods at the Douala seaport are required to pay customs duties directly to the banks – making the customs process easier, simpler and less prone to corruption and embezzlement of state funds. For the moment the measure is applied only to bigger importers and represents only 20% of customs duties income. It will be gradually extended to individuals.

There are a number of applications, some implemented elsewhere, that have the potential to scale down corruption in Cameroon.

Crowdsourcing applications like Kenya's Ushahidi or Nigeria's Stopthebribe can be used to report incidents of bribes. Similar initiatives are springing up all over Africa. Through such initiatives and global ones like Bribespot and Corruption Tracker, ICTs are empowering people to take a stance against corruption, according to Transparency International. In the same spirit, a 24-year-old Cameroonian, Hervé Djia,

developed a mobile phone application called NoBackchick<sup>7</sup> (or “no more bribes”) in 2011 by merging mobile phone technology with email internet applications, search engines and social networking. NoBackchick provides consumers with the latest information on the cost of public service procedures. The idea is based on the belief that, if public service consumers get accurate information, the number of people offering money in exchange for services will significantly drop. Nevertheless, critics worry very few Cameroonians own the smartphones needed to use the new application.

The World Bank defines electronic government as the use of ICTs “to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability of government” and argues that “e-government helps to increase the transparency of decision-making processes by making information accessible – publishing government debates and minutes, budgets and expenditure statements, outcomes and rationales for key decisions, and in some cases, allowing the online tracking of applications on the web by the public and press. Cameroon has complied with that recommendation, but not to a very great extent. The Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon has an official website<sup>8</sup>, as do all of the country's 65 ministries. These have useful information on laws and decrees, as well as information on corruption and governance. However, public initiatives that provide for online services such as licensing and registration, which would limit encounters with public officials, have not yet been fully established. In July 2009, the National Agency for Information and Communication Technology (ANTIC) developed a strategy for the installation and use of information technologies within government institutions. The aim of the strategy is to harmonise practice within the different institutions and modernise and ease public administration.<sup>11</sup> The strategy has not yet been implemented.

However, until now there has been little done in terms of making the government's financial activities accessible to citizens and, in doing so, strengthening transparency and accountability efforts online. However, if in some sub-Saharan African countries the inability to use ICTs effectively to improve public service delivery and increase transparency can be blamed on the government's lack of capacity, this is not the

4 Momet, M. (2006) La Douane vers un système intégré de dédouanement grâce au SYDONIA. Le Confident 1 April. www.leconfident.net

5 Cantens, T, Raballand, G and Bilangna, S (2010) Reforming Customs by measuring performances: A Cameroon case study. World Customs Journal, 4 (2)

6 Ndouyou Mouliom, J (2012) Le paiement électronique des Droits de douanes devient effectif, Cameroon Tribune, 2 April

7 www.voanews.com

8 Hervé Djia has announced that he is designing a cheaper version

9 Gönlund, A (2010) Increasing Transparency and Fighting Corruption through ICT: Empowering People and Communities, Spider ICT4D, Stockholm

10 www.prc.cm

11 www.antic.cm/

12 We should point out however that digitisation in the country is still in its infancy. See Siyam, S Daho, S and Jabouin, E (2009) Cameroon, in Finlay, A (ed.) Global Information Society Watch 2009, APC and Hivos. www.giswatch.org/gisw2009

case in Cameroon. The Cameroonian government does not publish information about its financial activities and budgets because of the fear of inviting criticism and exposing corrupt behaviour<sup>13</sup>

Unlike some countries where access is threatened by governments wary of citizens using new communication tools,<sup>14</sup> the Cameroonian government is actively attempting to increase ICT penetration<sup>15</sup>

Civil society is also playing an active role in curbing corruption through the use of ICT. This is the case of Anti-Corruption Cameroon (ACC), which is conducting a project based on the view that a lack of knowledge is not the main obstacle to the fight against corruption. It relies on the belief that corruption in Cameroon relies not so much on the inability to know as on the inability to act. The project is therefore trying to empower citizens to actively fight the scourge, creating a tool (a mobile phone hotline) for the victims of corruption to file court cases against corrupt officials and, in doing so, to set a precedent, creating deterrence.

## Conclusion

Since traditional approaches to improve governance (large-scale national awareness campaigns, sensitisation campaigns, a multiplicity of anti-corruption structures, and so on) have produced rather weak results in curbing corruption in Cameroon, experimentation and the evaluation of new tools to enhance accountability should be an integral part in the quest for improving the fight against corruption.

Promising cases do exist, such as SIGIPES or ASY-CUDA, and more recently the "NoBackchich" mobile application, which is unfortunately yet to be fully implemented.

Praiseworthy entities have been conceived and put in place in Cameroon to weed out corruption. Nevertheless, little has changed in any tangible manner.

The different anti-corruption agencies and commissions are not endowed with the adequate funding, power and mandate to carry out their mission. As an example, the Global Corruption Barometer report released in December 2007 by Transparency International highlights Cameroon as the country with the worst results, with 79% of Cameroonians admitting to having paid a bribe for services. We therefore strongly think that emphasis should be laid on ICT solutions to improve transparency and accountability in our country for, as Johan Hellstrom said, the very presence of computerised applications "decreases corruption and secret activities because it leaves footprints and audit trails."<sup>19</sup>

## Action steps

Cameroon's situation as far as corruption is concerned suggests that ICT activists should adopt the following strategies:

- ... Work hard to convince citizens that pushing for government accountability through the use of ICT tools is as important as any other development issues.
- ... Advocate for the establishment of an appropriate ICT infrastructure in the public and private sector to support the growing demand for ICTs.
- ... Advocate for the development of an empowered agency to fully appropriate and lead the expansion of e-government in Cameroon in terms of policy dialogue, the development of policies and strategies, and resource mobilisation.
- ... Make public one or many free mobile number services available for citizens to report acts of corruption via short message service (SMS).
- ... Advocate for e-government. When a country implements e-government programmes there follows a considerable reduction in corruption. Corruption often occurs because users interact with officials on a regular basis, to pay taxes, apply for a passport or driver's licence, or follow up on applications in ministries, etc. This interaction often leads to acts of corruption due to the lack of professional standards in public service.
- ... Advocate for the installation of an electronic system of grievances to increase government accountability and transparency.

13 However, the government accepted the conditions of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in March 2005, thus making oil profits a matter of public record. EITI aims at strengthening transparency in the oil sector.

14 It should be noted that prior to the 2011 hunger riots commemorated every 23 February, the government suspended MTN Twitter service for security reasons. See Siyam, S. Daho, S. and Bikobo, E. (2011) Cameroon, in Finlay, A. (ed.) Global Information Society Watch 2011 APC and Hivos. [www.giswatch.org/gisw2011](http://www.giswatch.org/gisw2011)

15 The country is deploying 5,000 km of fibre optic cable as part of a reliable, high-capacity telecommunication backbone infrastructure which will enable the coverage of the whole country. In addition, approximately 40 Multipurpose Community Telecentres have been constructed in rural areas, as part of a broader project that will cover the entirety of the country's remote areas, bringing basic telecommunications facilities and incorporating the greater masses into the stream of ICT activities.

16 ACC is an International NGO founded in 2005 to bring innovation to the anti-corruption arena. ACC Cameroon became operational in March 2008.

17 [www.kick-corruption.org](http://www.kick-corruption.org)

18 Cameroon was still ranked 134th out of 182 countries on the Transparency International Corruptions Perceptions Index 2011.

19 [www.dw.de/technology-lets-developing-nations-fight-corruption/a-15472938](http://www.dw.de/technology-lets-developing-nations-fight-corruption/a-15472938)