

The Cameroon National Youth Service Corps (CNYSC) as an Institutional Tool to Prepare Youths for Nation-Building: A Humancentric Counterterrorism and Nation-Building Perspective

Elvis Williams Mbwoe

Department of Political Science and Comparative Politics, Faculty of Laws and Political Science, University of Buea, Buea, Cameroon

Email: mbwoe.elvis@ubuea.com

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Abstract

Several studies have pointed out that youths significantly contribute to society's development and progress. Thus, this article discusses the extent to which youths, who make up almost 60% of Cameroon's population, although having been put at the centre of Cameroon's plans in achieving her national visions and expected to be drivers of nation-building, continue to face various challenges that create barriers to their involvement in nation-building—plagued with unemployment, underemployment, corruption, poverty, illiteracy, etc. The study reveals that these barriers have urged some youths to join terrorist and secessionist groups and, most unfortunately, view these extremist groups as vehicles to a better life and gaining a higher economic and social status. The humancentric approach is used as a solution to countering terrorism to bolster nation-building and to scholarly address the growing issues of youth radicalism, insurgencies and terrorism, which are very much still undiscussed. In Cameroon today, terrorists and armed secessionists have not only created violence but have also targeted, recruited, and forced youths to be part of their illegitimate movements that fight against the state. Given that Cameroonian youths are an essential factor in Cameroon's growth and development and central to government plans in the implementation of the nation's 2035 vision, this article, therefore, identifies, emphasises and proposes the critical need for a Cameroon National Youth Service Corps (CNYSC) programme, as an institutional tool that will positively impact on patriotism and national identity that can influence youth's intention to refuse to be rad-

icalised and coopted into terrorist groups. Also, utilising the comparative politics tool, a National Youth Service is not a new idea or concept in seeking solutions to issues that challenge young people worldwide. National Youth Services have already been implemented in many other countries and are working well for them. Countries such as Namibia, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and neighbouring Nigeria are a few of the many countries. From a nation-building perspective, a CNYCS programme would help youths contribute to the national economy, security, social cohesion, national integration, national unity and nation-building of Cameroon.

Keywords

Youth Participation, Nation-Building, Development, Government, Radicalism, Terrorism, Unemployment, Underemployment, Unity, Social Cohesion, National Unity

1. Cameroon's Sociopolitical Economy Overview

Like most African states, Cameroon also faces sociopolitical economic challenges. With a population of over 27.9 million (2022), located along the Atlantic Ocean, she borders the Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Nigeria. Often described as "Africa in miniature" for its wide range of landscapes and also known to be one of Africa's most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries, Cameroon is rich in natural resources, including mineral ores, oil and gas, timber, and various agricultural products. However, this resource endowment does not reflect her economic reality. Her poverty reduction rate lags behind its population growth rate, causing the overall number of poor people most especially youths to increase (*The World Bank in Cameroon, 2023*).

Moreover, since 2021, Cameroon has been experiencing high inflation, driven mainly by shortages and increases in prices of staple goods, which can be explained by the disruption of the global value chain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. This has impeded Cameroon's economic recovery and heightened domestic structural vulnerabilities. With government efforts to achieve the nation's ambitious economic emergence by 2035, Cameroon's economy is forecasted to remain moderately favourable over the medium term, but risks are tilted to the downside (*The World Bank in Cameroon, 2023*). The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party has, over the years, dominated Cameroon politics, ensuring the current political dispensation of decentralisation sees regional councils work with government ministries to pave the way for the gradual transfer of central government power to local governments in regions.

Until recently, Cameroon was commended by many observers, including the World Bank, as one of the most prosperous and stable countries in sub-Saharan Africa. However, Cameroon has, in recent years, been battling with terrorist at-

tacks by armed secessionists in the Northwest and Southwest and Boko Haram insurgencies in the Far North region.

In addition to other significant factors that may impede Cameroon's plans in achieving her national 2035 vision, it is easy to depict Cameroon's rich cultural diversity, bilingual nature, and varied natural resources as impediments to social cohesion; instead, in line with the nation's vision 2035, this resourceful, culturally diverse nature and growing youthful population have the potential for real strength and growth through the implementation of sound policies in good governance.

2. Introduction

Taking Cameroon's sociopolitical economy overview summarised above into context, this article identifies youths as key partners towards securing any peace and development within societies, communities and nations. By employing both humancentric counterterrorism and nation-building perspectives, this article will also seek to recommend and emphasise on the essential key duty by proposing an institutional tool that Cameroon as progressive republican nation could utilise as a youth centered initiative that would help encourage, empower and booster more youth participation towards nation-building initiatives especially those designed to securing peace, social cohesion and national development.

Several studies have pointed out that youths significantly contribute to society's development and progress. According to [Ho, Clarke and Dougherty \(2015\)](#), there have been many instances where young people have spearheaded social changes, as noted by their growing influence in decision-making and debates across industries and various areas such as education, health, and research. Young people's engagement and participation have always been a central element in society, especially when youth-led initiatives create opportunities and benefits for growth and sustainability. [Iwasaki \(2016\)](#) also emphasised a similar context, whose study revealed that youth engagement is critical in positive youth development. The article will further indicate that the youth, being productive members of society should be granted necessary policy to help them also contribute to nation-building.

3. Youths and Nation-Building

Nation-building has various definitions. One provided, which is cited in the study of [Okeke, Ikeh and Oku \(2022\)](#), states that nation-building is "a state of developing the nation as well as making the citizens of a nation comfortable". Other definitions of the concept of nation-building recognise it as a process of fostering and creating a national identity and achieving collective well-being by meeting the needs and best interests of the people, in other words, promoting social cohesion. Nation-building focuses on developing a shared purpose and belongingness among citizens ([Okeke, Ikeh, & Oku, 2022](#)).

As the importance of nation-building is recognised in every society, the youths are consequently identified as one of the main actors in promoting it. The role youths play in nation-building cannot be overemphasised given their demographic advantage, youths have the pole position to help drive economic development, social change as well providing fresh energy and perspectives. The linkage between youth and national integration is clear because youths drive societal growth and development. [Idike and Eme \(2015\)](#) mentioned that the youth comprise much of society's labour power. Their character, skills, talents, and orientation are essential in defining a country's development and security pursuits.

Alongside this, the participation of the youths in peace-building, such as in the case of Nigeria, through the creation of the National Youths Service Corps, is noted to help promote peace and national unity.

4. The Role and the Challenging Situation of Youths in Cameroon

In Cameroon, the role of the youth is defined by its National Youth Policy, which was adopted in 2006. Even though some people still believe in the audacious statement that youthfulness is in the mind, the policy defines youths as persons between the ages of 15 and 35. It is also interesting to note that the growing Cameroon population predominantly comprises youths over (60%).

According to [Zukane and Tangang \(2017\)](#), youths in Cameroon are considered agents of peace and prosperity in the country. Yet, they are not fully involved in decision-making that impacts their communities and well-being ([Muntoh, 2020](#)). [Zukane and Tangang \(2017\)](#) revealed that adults hesitate to include youths in crucial decision-making due to generational conflict and a lack of communication between adults and youths. At the same time, youths are inadequately represented within decision-making bodies in Cameroon. Amidst the increasing population of youths, most Cameroonian youths face various challenges that create barriers to their involvement and engagement in the republic's significant affairs.

According to [Suwun \(2018\)](#), despite their demographic advantage, youths in Cameroon face various key challenges that compromise their socioeconomic potential. Some of these challenges include: Unemployment, poverty, and; lack of access to basic social security services, are prevalent among youth just to name a few. In a recent survey, 94% of the youth in Cameroon who are between 15 and 19 years old, and 84% who are between the ages of 20 and 24 are underemployed. [Botea and Del Bono \(2017\)](#) also revealed in their report that low productivity is the biggest challenge, which leads to unemployment and underemployment of the youths in Cameroon. This low productivity on the part of these young people may be attributed to some socioeconomic and cultural factors, such as the lack of interest in agriculture and their limited access to labour opportunities in urban areas. Alongside the issues of underemployment and

unemployment faced by Cameroonian youths are illiteracy and low educational attainment, which are other significant problems for this youthful population with potential. [Guiake and Zhang \(2019\)](#) noted that the Cameroonian education system model was criticised for lacking vision, and contributing to its young graduates' unemployment.

Additionally, access to education in Cameroon is difficult, which explains why youth illiteracy is a deep concern, notwithstanding government tremendous efforts to ensure every Cameroonian child has access to free education. In various studies, findings have entailed that high poverty rates in Cameroon made it even more difficult for the youthful population to acquire education despite opportunities of free education offered by the state as a tool that could lift many Cameroonians out of poverty ([Nadege & Nga Ndjobo, 2020](#)). The impact of poverty on education in Cameroon was also explored by [Tegoum and Hevi \(2016\)](#), entailing that because of the lack of resources to meet basic needs among poverty-stricken households, the level of education is low.

5. Government Efforts and the Education Challenge

The Cameroon government is aware that it may not be able to achieve its objective of a more significant achievement policy of the Head of State, which culminates in the country's emergence by 2035, without taking the youths along. It has made efforts to improve the educational sector, such as making primary education compulsory and accessible in Cameroon, even though availability and accessibility remain an issue. The availability of education in Cameroon is aggravated by factors such as the lack of teachers, school infrastructures, especially in rural areas, and lack of sanitation facilities like toilets, among others.

The accessibility of education, on the other hand, is affected by factors such as the existence of indirect fees like books, uniform costs, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) levies, inaccessible locations of most primary schools, and the inequality between girls and boys in terms of access to education, et cetera ([Kamga, 2011](#)). Other issues in Cameroon's education sector include the lack of a coherent and adequate policy and attention towards youths with special needs. There are also problems regarding monitoring, assessment, research, and coordination of formal and informal education activities ([Amungwa, 2018](#)). All of these contribute to the low literacy rate of the Cameroonian youth, as demonstrated by its low ranking in terms of child-friendliness in Africa ([Cockburn, Hashemi, Noumi, Ritchie, & Skead, 2017](#)).

The government of Cameroon also acknowledges the importance of youths in nation-building by having a full-fledged government ministry purposely created for youth activities and empowerment. The Ministry of Youth and Civic Education is responsible for coordinating and supervising Cameroon's National Youth Policy. In addition, there are other sister ministries like Employment and Vocational Training, Sport and Physical Education and a host of others that the state has been using to prepare the youth for nation-building.

Over the years, the Government of Cameroon has also supported its young

people in various ways. For instance, it has supported youths through special agencies such as the Urban and Rural Youth Support Programme (PAJER-U). It also encouraged young farmers through the Young Farmers Support Programme (PAIJA). It recruited thousands of youths into public services over the years, with a glaring example of the recruitment of young people into public service between 2010-2024. More government efforts that include putting the youth at the centre of government agenda were noticed in 2009, when the government created the National Youth Council (NYC) with representation in all ten regions, to foster dialogue between the youths of Cameroon and other institutional stakeholders such as the government, civil society, foreign and international bodies.

Although NYC serves as an ideal forum for the expression and consultation of the youths, it seems it has been, in no way, the solution to the numerous youth problems in the country. For such reasons 2012, the National Civic Service for Participation in Development Agency (NCSPDA) came into being. Here, the government ensured thousands of young volunteers were well-trained and were granted financial support. However, the fact that the NCSPDA is only concerned with unemployed youths willing and ready to acquire occupational skills and civic training means that the problem of youths, especially young graduates, continues to rise. Amidst the efforts made by the government to prepare the youths for nation-building, the young people of Cameroon continue to lag.

6. The Growing Issues of Youth Radicalism, Terrorism and Insurgencies

Nowadays, Cameroon is experiencing growing issues of youth radicalism and insurgencies, which are very much still undiscussed.

The Boko Haram incursions are some of the most prominent examples in Cameroon, where acts of violence have been committed, causing deaths and displacements. However, aside from the implications that have been created by the spread of Boko Haram to Cameroon, the increased prevalence of youth terrorism is also a growing problem in the country. Studies have indicated that high unemployment and poverty levels in Cameroon urged some youths to join Boko Haram (Afu, 2019). Most of these youths viewed extremist groups as their vehicle to a better life, gaining a higher economic and social status. As further revealed by Afu (2019), Boko Haram could efficiently recruit some of the youths to join its ranks by offering them jobs, security and money. They also emphasised addressing significant grievances associated with corruption, poverty and poor governance, which further urged some of the young people to be part of their group. Specifically, Mohammed Yusuf, the leader of Boko Haram, had preached severally about various political and socioeconomic issues, which increased the intention of the youths to join (Onuoha, 2014).

In addition to Boko Haram incursions, the Anglophone crisis in the South-west and Northwest regions of Cameroon also demonstrates the growing risk of youth terrorism in the country. The crisis, now considered one of the most se-

vere in Cameroon's history, has created a variety of threats to Cameroon's bilingual heritage of the country. When lawyers and teachers made peaceful protests in 2016 to express their opposition to the use of the French language in the English-speaking regions of the country, it was followed by state repression and, consequently, insurgence of secessionists (Bang & Balgah, 2022). The secessionists had not only created violence and distraught but had also recruited Cameroonian youths to be part of their illegitimate movement to fight against the state. In the report by Fofe (2020), it was mentioned that the separatists mainly targeted young people, forcing them to be part of their group. Otherwise, they would be killed. Such violence and pressure had left some of them with no choice but to end up joining camps against the state.

7. National Youth Service Programmes

Aware of the challenges youths face, the United Nations General Assembly in the year 2000 called on member states to implement the World Programme of Action for the youth. These challenges, notwithstanding, only reiterate the need to develop and implement an initiative that is primarily intended to help the youth and prepare them for nation-building. The initiative would not only increase youth's engagement or participation in national integration but would also be a valuable tool in addressing existing problems in the country that have been affecting them.

Utilising the comparative politics tool, and National Youth Service (NYS) Programmes are not a new idea or concept to implement in seeking solutions to issues that challenge young people worldwide. NYSs have already been implemented in many other countries, such as Namibia, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and neighbouring Nigeria are few of the many countries that have already implemented it. Nigeria has the NYSC, an organisation dedicated to increasing youth empowerment and promoting national unity (Deebom & Daerego, 2020).

Generally, an NYS is a government-led initiative to develop the skills and abilities of young people while also giving them opportunities to serve their communities and enhance national unity (Peters, 2017). It is a primary organisation that may be charged with placing youth development at the centre of nation-building. It trains the youth through some voluntary services geared towards strengthening youth participation in service delivery of national significance to imbibe in them civic and occupational skills. According to the South African National Youth Service Policy Framework (2022), the NYS is transformative in nature. It can be broadly defined as the involvement of young people in activities which provide benefits to the community whilst developing the abilities of young people through service and learning.

In most cases, the NYSs may require three major model categories (NYSPR, 2021-2022).

The first model targets vulnerable unemployed youths, youths who are considered outlaws and youths who may be disabled. These youths are offered skills,

occupational experiences, and civic training, strengthening their ability for social inclusion and employability.

The second category or model focuses on voluntary services offered to graduates from tertiary or higher learning institutions. Graduates ready to enter the job market may lack the required skills or experience. By providing voluntary services to the community, the soon-to-be professionals can learn about real workplace settings through this NYS work experience. For instance, the NYS of some countries (Ghana and Nigeria) makes it mandatory for graduates to serve a year in public service. This model of the NYS provides the newly qualified graduate with the opportunity to obtain practical experience in the economy's public or private sectors and the chance to satisfy the human resource needs of the institutions.

The third and last model aims to absorb youths who cannot afford to further their studies in higher learning institutions. Here, the NYS may provide vocational training that can help equip them for a successful transition into the next stage of their lives (NYSPR, 2021-2022).

Therefore, based upon the analysis above, a recommendation to create an NYS in Cameroon is identified and emphasised.

8. Cameroon National Youth Service Corps

In proposing the Cameroon National Youth Service Corps (CNYSC), the goal is to ensure that the youths of Cameroon are able to accomplish their objectives through the support of the government, which provides opportunities for growth and improved well-being while also increasing national integration, social cohesion or national unity. It basically models the South African National Youth Service, which focuses on increasing youth involvement and employability by targeting areas such as education, employment and training.

Such an NYS program in Cameroon may be instituted to cover all model categories, making it mandatory. It should target youth groups of all types: graduates, unemployed young people, school drop-outs, and young people in conflict with the law. This would make Cameroon's NYS peculiar and different from the National Civic Service Agency for Participation in Development, which may be considered the nearest form of an NYS even though it only concerns itself with the third model type of the NYS programme.

The CNYSC may also be instituted as a unique government initiative with a Board of Directors and Management to pilot its affairs and would have to work with accredited partner institutions and other national youth services providers to identify emerging employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for the youths (CCAB 2017).

According to [Chauke, Malatji and Obadire \(2021\)](#), the essential element in this kind of NYS initiative is coordination between the key stakeholders, resources and standards to ensure that the implementation of the program leads to the achievement of the established objectives. Also, the proposal to create the CNYSC should be rooted in the fact that national development becomes more

effective if the youth are carried along. This was emphasised by James (2021), implying that the programme helps increase the youth's sense of national patriotism, which shapes them to become good citizens. Since the program is intended to promote nation-building among Cameroonian youths, it subsequently recognises the importance of increasing the engagement of young people in decision-making and in essential activities that foster national unity.

The benefits of having an NYS in Cameroon lie in how it will improve youth capabilities that can increase their employability and participation in the community and country's affairs. As mentioned previously, Cameroonian youths are faced chiefly with problems that relate to education, employment and the risk of radicalism, extremism, and becoming terrorists due to lack of patriotism. When it comes to education, this program contributes to the improvement of education and training of young people, which means that issues regarding accessibility, costs and availability will be addressed.

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in Nigeria has effectively incorporated training and development in order to improve the skills and abilities of the youths, especially among those in universities (Deebom & Daerego, 2020). Since not all Cameroonian youths can attend universities, the CNYSC would also have to make sure to improve the primary and secondary school curriculum in the country and also make available training that would help young people develop skills considered work experience, giving most youth better headstart employment. As mentioned by Nkamta (2017), curriculum development is a critical need in Cameroon to increase the employability of those young individuals who cannot continue their education in the university and have to work already. Therefore, through the CNYSC, school leavers will not feel disadvantaged and can still access opportunities for suitable employment in public, private and self-employment sectors.

The institutionalisation of the National Youth Service Corps in Cameroon would not only embed governance and high-performant culture among the young people but would go a long way in transforming Young Cameroonians into responsible citizens, instilling the spirits of self-reliance discipline, and encouraging patriotism. Volunteerism through the CNYSC would help develop common ties and promote nationalism among Cameroonian youths. This also would go a long way to reduce juvenile delinquency and prevent the enrollment of young people to be coopted into terrorist ranks. Therefore, implementing the CNYSC may address the risk of youth terrorism in Cameroon.

In line with the problem in the education sector, this kind of an NYS initiative, according to Chauke, Malatji and Obadire (2021), also helps reduce unemployment and underemployment among the youth. This is because the programme would help increase the employability of young Cameroonians, regardless of whether they have completed higher education. The South African NYS offers opportunities for the youths to gain vocational skills which can help them get a job. The program additionally allows young people to take on opportunities to become entrepreneurs, thus not limiting their options for a career, as they

can either become employees or become self-employed. Peters (2017) indicated that, as the initiative strengthens the youth's capabilities, they become more fit for income-generating activities. More so, as it furthers the learning of young individuals, enabling them to become current and future source of social capital for their country. By and large, the programme would be able to harness the potential of the youths through its provision of civic and occupational skills training.

Chauke, Malatji and Obadire (2021) noted in their study that this type of programme increases youth volunteerism and improves leadership, which means that young individuals would be more proactive in helping resolve socioeconomic challenges. Along with the increased involvement of the youth as a result of the programme, their awareness or consciousness about the current issues in the country will also be increased.

At the same time, the proposed CNYSC would help increase patriotism, especially now that the government has been encouraging young people to be more patriotic following the Boko Haram insurgency and anglophone crisis. The programme would be more helpful in ending separatist activities by preventing them from growing in numbers (Kindzeka, 2022). Because terrorist groups are not only using money as an incentive when recruiting youths, they are also preaching about issues and grievances related to governance and corruption; the CNYSC program and its impact on patriotism and national identity can influence the youth's intention to refuse to join these terrorist groups. This aligns with how the CNYSC can help youths contribute to the national economy, social cohesion, national integration, national unity and nation-building.

Cameroonian youths are essential to the country's growth and development. Through this proposal of creating a critically needed CNYSC programme, youths' roles would become more structured and visible for their challenges to be addressed. Undeniably, there is still much room for youth development and participation to optimise their capabilities and contributions to society. The state can always try to improve the well-being of the youth, and implementing a fit for purpose National Youth Service Corps in Cameroon can achieve this. More so, the program would provide opportunities for the youths to be employed, be more aware of national issues, and be more involved in nation-building activities. Overall, it would catalyse youth development and equip them for nation-building and the aspects of self-discipline and living together.

9. Conclusion and Recommendation

Implementing an NYS would be difficult and would require substantial resources, a political will, effective policy-making, and stakeholder coordination. However, the benefits this policy initiative can yield would exceed the costs it entails, especially as it would enable youths to acquire a national youth service experience, vocational education and certificates with employment opportunities upon completion. Such an institutional tool invoking the spirit of self-reliance

that encourages youths to develop skills for self-employment and empowerment, discourages radical intentions and co-option into terrorist groups, and reinforces participation would no doubt positively impact on youth's patriotism, national identity, social cohesion, national unity and contribution to nation-building. Therefore, this article strongly recommends that the government of Cameroon increase its budget for initiatives promoting youth empowerment and continue encouraging youth inclusion at the centre of government plans to achieve the nation's vision. This policy proposal needs to be highly considered and taken into action in pursuit of peace and development in Cameroon.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest with regards to the publication of this scholarly article.

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