

# DECENTRALIZATION AND UNION OF MUNICIPALITIES IN CAMEROON: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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**Abstract:** *In Cameroon, decentralization has enabled the establishment of local authorities which are administrative structures which, unlike the State, do not act in the name of the general interest, but in the name of the interests of the population of a specific territory. Intercommunality being an emanation of decentralization embraces many issues including local democracy, local development, and good governance at the local level. Thus, the management of public services, spatial planning and economic development are all issues at the center of intermunicipal collaboration, which is based on optimal satisfaction of the vital needs of populations despite the limited resources of a single municipality. The aim of this article is to provide, from a historical perspective, an analytical grid on the contribution of intercommunality, in this case the union of communes, to the development of populations. The central argument developed in this text is that the syndicates of communes which were born in Cameroon following decentralization (law of 2004), participated greatly in the development of the localities covered by the latter, but certain structural brakes, institutional and financial constraints have reduced the development impetus driven by this form of intermunicipal cooperation. Through a descriptive and analytical method, we show that the commitment of municipal unions, although bearing fruit for local populations in terms of water and sanitation, remains insufficient because it is littered with several obstacles.*

**Keywords :** Intercommunality, Syndicate of communes, Decentralization, Sanitation.

## 1. Introduction

The frantic search for alternative solutions to the development crisis in Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular has led to the promotion of new paradigms of administrative management and the economy. The multisectional effort of centralization that was necessary for a long time is no longer necessary. On the contrary, it is decentralized activities that appear to be the springs of tomorrow's economic power (B. Mougnole Mvondo, 2018:2). Decentralization can be defined as the transfer of a certain number of competences from the State to the local authorities having a certain autonomy, including financial. Municipal unions were born in Cameroon during the colonial period. However in 1987, many problems contributed to the dissolution of these unions. But in 2004 we note the revival of these council unions. It is in this perspective that several unions of municipalities are born such as the Union of Municipalities of Mbam and Inoubou (SYCOMI), the Union of Municipalities of Nyong and Kéllé (SYNCONIK), the Union of Municipalities of Lekié (SYNCOLEK), and the intermunicipal syndicate of the highlands, etc. In doing so, what is the contribution of SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI and SYNCONIK in local development? What are the difficulties encountered by these forms of intercommunality in the development process? and the intermunicipal syndicate of the highlands etc. In doing so, what is the contribution of SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI and SYNCONIK in local development? What are the difficulties encountered by these forms of intercommunality in the development process? and the intermunicipal syndicate of the highlands etc. In doing so, what is the contribution of SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI and SYNCONIK in local development? What are the difficulties encountered by these forms of intercommunality in the development process?

In an analysis favoring the exploitation of archival sources, oral, written, digital and a field survey, the description and analysis of the data made it possible to structure this study in

two main parts, namely: The contribution of the unions of the communes in the process of development of the local populations, and, the difficulties of the implementation of the process of development by these unions of communes.

## **2. The strength of municipal unions in Cameroon**

With the advent of modern times, the nascent theory of a State with subdivided powers appeared as necessary. The Cameroonian State through the process of decentralization will make local authorities a real place of democratic life. The municipal union therefore appears as a form of intermunicipal organization whose goal is to carry out works that will contribute to the development of the population. How can we apprehend the notion of intercommunality and commune union? What are the challenges involved in setting up municipal unions? What concrete contribution have they made to the local population?

## **3. Emergence and evolution of municipal unions**

Before presenting the historical development of municipal syndicates, it is wise to outline the contours of the notion of intermunicipal cooperation and municipal syndicate.

## **4. Definition of concepts: intercommunality and syndicate of communes**

Intermunicipality designates the different forms of cooperation existing between municipalities. It enables municipalities to group together within a Public Establishment for Intermunicipal Cooperation (EPCI). This grouping makes it possible either to provide certain services or to draw up real development projects. In the implementation of intercommunality in Cameroon, there are five possible forms, namely the intercommunality of services, development projects, the intercommunality forged by the communes themselves, the intercommunality institutionalized by the State and informal intercommunality. In the Cameroonian context, this concept is understood as a process that allows municipalities to put and manage all of their human, material,

The commune syndicate is then a form of intercommunality. It is an inter-municipal public establishment endowed with legal personality and administrative and financial autonomy. The syndicate of municipalities is in fact an EPCI created for a fixed period or without limitation of duration or for a specific operation. It is a question for the communes of refocusing the interest of such a grouping around the realization of important investments on the basis of the principle according to which the union makes the force (Practical guide of the cooperation and the solidarity intercommunal in Cameroon of the Ministry of Territorial Administration, 2010:26). The initiative comes mostly from a local elected official, most often from a mayor, who is the first to feel the need to move towards this pooling of resources.

As for the bodies of the union of municipalities, we have the union council composed of the mayor and two councilors appointed by deliberation of the municipal council of each unionized municipality, and the president of the union who is not necessarily a mayor (Finken, 1996: 21). The particularities of the municipal syndicate arise from the fact that it is a structure through which the municipalities of the same department or the same region can come together in order to carry out operations of inter-municipal interest<sup>1</sup>. It is a formal management structure which is, moreover, different from decentralized cooperation. Even if both work for the achievement of common objectives which is development, we still retain that decentralized cooperation which is a mode of transnational cooperation, is not based on administrative structures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Municipalities belonging to different regions cannot form a syndicate.

<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, Practical guide to cooperation and inter-municipal solidarity in Cameroon.

Similarly, the municipal union is different from the professional union, which is a group of people exercising the same profession, with a view to defending their professional interests, whose state body of recognition is the union clerk appointed by the President of the Republic to of the Minister of Employment and Vocational Training (Paho, 2020: 84). This clerk validates the creation of workers' unions governed by the labour code. As regards civil servant unions in Cameroon, the Minister of Territorial Administration grants approval.

However, what is the historical evolution of municipal unions?

## **5. Historical overview of the birth, evolution of communes and syndicates of communes in Cameroon.**

Intermunicipality was designed to overcome certain shortcomings noted at the level of Cameroonian municipalities (Report of the Ministry of Territorial Administration, 2010:26). Indeed, the administrative and political fragmentation of the territories into several municipalities of varying sizes, populations and resources limited their capacity for individual intervention. Similarly, several Cameroonian municipalities were heavily indebted. It is in this perspective that the initiative to create municipal unions will have its full meaning. However, this initiative is very old, it took shape long before the law of 2004 which again authorized the creation of municipal unions. In doing so, the history of municipal unions cannot be separated from that of municipalities.

Indeed, the desire of communities to take charge of their future and manage their own resources is old in Cameroon. As in all the countries of Africa south of the Sahara, the citizen had to be introduced to the management of public life. The concept of a territory managed by a municipal council was imported from colonization. Cameroon experienced its first experiences of decentralization during the colonial period.

The British colonizer, in order to integrate the traditional chiefs in the management of the territory's resources, set up the "native authorities" in 1930 along essentially ethnic lines. First, the fons of Bali, Nkom, Bum and Bansa in the division of Bamenda and the fon of bangwa (Fontem) in the division of Mamfe were constituted as native authorities assisted by tribunals and councils. Then four chiefs were also recognized in the districts of Victoria-Buéa. The responsibilities growing, the institution of the "native authorities" recorded progress, they began to take a collegial form, the authorities were less and less people, that is to say the traditional chiefs, but more and more local assemblies local councils. So, the current North-East Bamenda division had 18 "native authorities" in 1938. In 1944, the number of "native authorities" in this Region was twenty-three. (Levine, 1984:249). In 1950, all the "local authorities" were councils bringing together traditional chiefs and gradually elected personalities. The "local councils" after reunification became the "local governments" (Péguy, 2012: 10). In other words, the members of these local assemblies were for some designated by the Minister of the Interior (the traditional chiefs) and in the majority elected, the president of the council called chairman was appointed by the Minister of the Interior for a period of one year, and its vice-president was appointed by the council. the number of "native authorities" in this Region were twenty-three. (Levine, 1984:249). In 1950, all the "local authorities" were councils bringing together traditional chiefs and gradually elected personalities. The "local councils" after reunification became the "local governments" (Péguy, 2012: 10). In other words, the members of these local assemblies were for some designated by the Minister of the Interior (the traditional chiefs) and in the majority elected, the president of the council called chairman was appointed by the Minister of the Interior for a period of one year, and its vice-president was appointed by the council. the number of "native authorities" in this Region were twenty-three. (Levine, 1984:249). In 1950, all the "local authorities" were councils bringing together traditional chiefs and gradually elected personalities. The "local councils" after reunification became the "local governments" (Péguy, 2012: 10). In other words, the members of these local

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In French Cameroon, it was not until 1941 that the mixed urban communes of Douala and Yaoundé were born. This municipalization will gradually extend with the creation of new municipal units, precisely six mixed rural municipalities in 1952. In 1952, all the administrative districts were endowed with a mixed rural municipality. In reality, the first mixed rural communes were created in the subdivisions of Djoungolo, Mfou, Okola, Sa'a, nanga-eboko, Akonolinga, Mbalmayo, Ebolowa, Ambam, Sangmélina, and Djoum. These rural communes are no longer administered by the head of the region (administrator-mayor) as in the case of mixed urban communes created by a mayor appointed by the high commissioner. The latter can be chosen from the staff of the administrative framework. The municipal administrator was chosen from three councilors appointed by an appointed municipal council. In 1955, the state of the communes was as follows:

**Table 1: State of municipalities in 1955**

Type of municipalities	Nature of the executive	Legislative body	number
Urban Communes of Douala and Yaoundé	Administrator-mayor appointed	Municipal commission with appointed members	2
Urban Communes of Garoua, Nkongsamba and Ngoundéré	Administrator – appointed mayor	Municipal commission with elected members	2
Urban municipalities of Bafang, Bafoussam, Ebolowa, Kribi, Mbalmayo, Edéa, Eséka and Sangmélina	Administrator-mayor appointed	Elected City Council, with two seats allocated by the High Commissioner	8
Mixed rural municipalities	Mayor appointed	Elected city council	59
<b>Total</b>			<b>71</b>

*Source:*M. Finken, communes and municipal management in Cameroon: institution *municipal, finances and budget, local management, municipal interventions*, India, Indiana University Press, 1996, p.12.

In 1955, there were already 71 municipalities throughout the national territory. All seventy-one communes, whether urban or mixed rural, were administered by an appointed administrator or mayor. However, the legislative body was different. The two urban communes of Yaoundé and Douala had a municipal commission with appointed members while the other urban communes had as their deliberative body, a municipal commission with elected members or an elected municipal council with two seats allocated by the high commissioner. As for the mixed rural communes, they had the elected municipal council as their deliberative body.

The existence of communes in both parts of Cameroon already opened the door to the creation of syndicates of communes considered as a form of intercommunality. It is in fact a

public establishment for inter-municipal cooperation (Verpeaux, Rimbault, Waseman, 2018: 116).

The appearance of syndicates of communes dates back to 1955. The decree of November 8, 1955 opened up to mixed rural communes of the same administrative region who so desired, the possibility of grouping together in a syndicate of mixed communes for works of utilities. intermunicipal. It is in this perspective that the commune union of Nyong and -Sanaga was effectively created on December 28, 1955, precisely by lawno.1489 of November 18, 1955 relating to municipal reorganization in French West Africa in French Equatorial Africa in Togo in Cameroon and in Madagascar.

After this first syndicate of communes, many others were created so that on the eve of the law of December 5, 1974 reorganizing the communes there were 14 syndicates of communes in Cameroon.

Law No. 74/23 of December 5, 1974 on municipal organization takes up the principle by stipulating that the municipalities of a department may either at the request of the supervisory authority, or by concordant deliberation duly approved, group together in a union to jointly carry out intermunicipal operations such as:

- The opening or maintenance of inter-municipal roads;
- The purchase and use of common road machinery;
- The operation of services by way of concession.

On April 3, 1980, there were already 38 municipal unions in Cameroon which had a real need to open and maintain municipal roads. These unions through the machines acquired by the Special Fund for Intermunicipal Equipment and Intervention which had proceeded with the creation and maintenance of rural roads. This regrouping made of authority by the Ministry of Territorial Administration, had at the head of the structures, the first prefectural deputies. These unions of communes functioned until their dissolution by decision of the governmental authority in 1987. Several reasons militated for their dissolution, one of the fundamental reasons was related to the organs of the unions themselves. The executive of rural communes, for example, was appointed by the supervisory authority, and the Sub-Prefect was automatically mayor,

Similarly, the union's activities were carried out on behalf of the municipalities without their deliberative body having had to discuss them. In addition, unions did not operate on the basis of consensus or unanimous voting for decision-making. It was enough for a certain number of municipalities, on the basis of the quorum required, to agree for the decision to be taken. This way of proceeding had harmful consequences, insofar as the negative vote of a municipality had no effect on a decision adopted by the majority, the municipalities left behind began to resign (MINATD, 2010: 26). The problem of rivalry between the Prefects and their deputies was recurrent because the syndicate of municipalities released significant funds to manage. This dissolution of the municipal unions was harmful to rural development, the municipality being unable to carry out major development work in the locality on its own. These problems will lead the public authorities to authorize and reframe the role of municipal unions through the law of 2004. Therefore, what will they bring to local populations. What is the contribution of municipal unions, in particular Syncolek, Sycomi and Synconek, in the development of local populations?

## **6. Contribution of municipal unions to the development of local populations**

Municipal unions appear to be an important force in the process of local population development. The management of local affairs has become a communal responsibility with decentralization. (Ngane, 2019:73)

Local development is a well-documented and well-known concept throughout the world and its actions involve the improvement of the level, framework and living environment of a

given community through a harmonious integration of actions between different sectors of activity. It offers a comprehensive, integrated, community-based and horizontal approach to community development. Local development is a process through which the community participates in the functioning of its own environment in order to improve the quality of life of its residents (Sommet de Montréal, 2002:1). The establishment of an intermunicipal structure constitutes for the deliberative bodies a model of true expression and a framework for experimenting with democracy. This approach requires harmonious integration of economic, social, cultural, political and environmental components. The union of municipalities is one of the social actors of local development, what are its orientations?

### **7. Orientations and competences of municipal syndicates**

The syndicate of municipalities is nothing other than an inter-municipal public establishment intended to ensure inter-municipal cooperation and solidarity. This is what makes it a major organ of decentralization (Mougnole Mvondo, 2018:2). The stakes of intermunicipal cooperation and solidarity are enormous. This solidarity offers unions many opportunities such as:

- Intervene and work more effectively;
- Coming together for a large mobilization of financial resources and technical support from partners;

- Allow the most disadvantaged communities to benefit from the solidarity of others. (Mougnole Mvondo, 2018:2)

The main interests are then the realization of savings and the acquisition of better expertise by strengthening their capacities. Inter-municipal solidarity is based on solid principles that govern healthy inter-municipality, so that local authorities can comply with their commitment. As principle we have the specialty, the principle of exclusion, the principle of indirect representativeness, the principle of pooling. Intermunicipality in Cameroon is an asset. It also allows municipalities to be credible through more effective interventions despite the weakness of their resources. The major challenge of intermunicipal cooperation is to significantly promote the effectiveness and efficiency of municipalities in carrying out basic social development works, while avoiding errors due to ignorance of the specific data of local life. These syndicates are constituted for an intermunicipal utility, in particular the carrying out of equipment works such as the electrification of the participating municipalities, the construction of water points, the collection of household waste, sanitation, urban transport, also to develop it. genuine economic development, development or urban planning projects. The municipalities transfer some of their powers to this institution. It finds itself vested in their place with the powers of decision and execution. It is precisely in this sense that we can note the work carried out by several municipal unions such as: Syncolek and Sycomi, etc. in the realization of several development projects for the local populations. We then note the regulatory capacity of these unions in the field of water and sanitation. How can we concretely evaluate this contribution of municipal unions in the development of populations?

### **8. The contribution of Syncolek and Sycomi and synconek to local development**

In Cameroon, the coverage of drinking water needs reaches 44%, but only 28% in rural areas. But the national rate of breakdowns on the networks on the rural hydraulic structures is close to 50%, which is why in 2010 the State entrusts the management of the rural hydraulic structures to the municipalities in order to improve the situation. Thanks to the support of foreign partners Syncolek and Sycomi have contributed to the water supply of their populations and to sanitation.

- **The contribution of the union of municipalities of Lekié and Mbam and Inoubou in water.**

The Syndicate of municipalities of the Lekié department will participate in the establishment of water points in its municipalities, thus participating in the development of its community. The most visible achievements are those of the municipality of Lobo. Thanks to the project called Sustainable Project Management for Water and Sanitation in the municipality of Lobo (MODEAME), the municipalities covered by SYNCOLEK, in particular the municipality of Lobo, have improved the daily lives of more than 5,000 inhabitants.

This project had a significant socio-economic impact, including:

- Reduction of costs related to access to drinking water;
- Faster access to water, allowing the development of related activities;
- Reduction of the difficulty of finding water;
- Equality in terms of access to water in the village;
- Improvement of the quality of life (Experts-Solidarity Report, 2017: 9).

With regard to Sycomi, it was first conceived in the associative form called ASCOMI (Association of Municipalities of Mbam and Inoubou), it became a union of municipalities of Mbam and Inoubou (SYCOMI) after the law of 2004. This union brings together 9 departmental communes such as: the commune of Bafia, Bokito, Deuk, Kon Yambetta, Ndikimeki, Nitoukou, Makene and Ombessa. The main motivation for its creation was to pool the resources of municipalities and to seize the opportunity offered by potential partnership requirements in Europe. SYCOMI carried out activities and carried out projects. He negotiated a partnership with IRCOD-ALSACE (Regional Institute for development cooperation of the former Alsace region in France), this partnership has also enabled the union to make several exchange trips and study the problem of water in the department of Mbam and Inoubou (Ndoki, 2019:11). The implementation of the GEMI project (Governance of Water in Mbam and Inoubou), then of the SPIC-Eau (Intermunicipal public service and citizen involvement for water and basic sanitation) enabled the population to have access to drinking water. This GEMI project was largely financed by the water sector of the European Union with the help of various municipalities and populations benefiting from the project. The objective of this project was to rehabilitate boreholes and mini water supply, as well as the construction of new boreholes. Eight of the nine municipalities have joined this SPIC-EAU project. Thus, out of a hundred water points to be rehabilitated, sixty points have been rehabilitated. twenty-five water points have been constructed. Beneficiary populations have been made aware of good practices aimed at protecting water quality. SYCOMI has in its objectives provided for spare parts to ensure the maintenance of these water points.

SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI are not the only unions to have thought about the development of the local population in terms of drinking water supply, we can also note the projects in progress in this direction of the Syndicat de Communes du département du Nyong and Kelle (SYNCONYK).

Created in 2008, this union includes ten municipalities in this department such as: Biyouha, Dibang, Bandjock, Matomb, Eséka, Nguibassal, Ngog-Mapubi, Makak, Messondo, Bot-Makak. This union of municipalities, following exchanges with SYCOMI, which showed a fine example of local development, updated the road map of the department of Nyong and Kélé with the assistance of the departmental trade delegate (MINATD, 2010:58). Similarly, in order to eradicate poverty in the municipalities covered by SYNCONYK, several other projects benefiting from the support of Germany and the Cameroonian State are in progress. These include the project to set up a road rehabilitation and construction brigade, a drilling workshop and the rural electrification project (MINATD, 2010:58).

In addition to the establishment of water points in the municipalities covered by SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI, the quality of water and the prevention of waterborne diseases have

been taken into account. Water quality in the departments of Mbam and Inoubou was poor (MINATD, 2010:58). In 2008 out of 258 water points analyzed, only 39 had acceptable quality, twenty-two water points were declared out of service. Of the two hundred and fifty-eight water points, more than a hundred required natural treatment and sanitation around the water point (Chague Njumeni, 2013: p 24). Sycomi reviewed the quality of the water in the municipalities for which it was responsible.

- **Contribution in Sanitation of water and around the water point**

The word sanitation refers to all the means of collecting, transporting and treating wastewater before it is discharged into rivers or into the ground. It is strongly linked to public health due to many diseases linked to an unhealthy environment. It aims to ensure the evacuation and treatment of waste water and excrement while minimizing the risks to health and the environment (Larousse, 1979). With the support of European partners, the two municipal syndicates ensured the sanitation of the living environment of the populations. The ecological sanitation provided by the MODEAME project in the department of Lekié has an environmental impact that deserves to be noted. Indeed, it revolves around ecological sanitation. The project has set up ecological latrines. This technique promotes the reduction of health risks related to human excrement and the production of fertilizer and organic matter which helps preserve soil fertility and increase agricultural productivity. This technique also allows people to become aware of the role they can play in climate change. (Experts-Solidarity Report, 2017: 9).

From a health point of view, the needs in terms of public health are emerging in a conscious way among the local population because households are now adopting good hygienic practices appropriate for the improvement of their long-term living environment. And, the progress made in public health has an economic impact in terms of lower health expenditure. Thus, nearly 324,000 people have benefited from drinking water in the municipalities of the two departments. It is clear that intermunicipal cooperation promotes local development, relaunches the regional planning policy. Thus, at the national level, it is a question, with the consent of the municipalities, of setting up a network of the territory which makes it possible to respond to the challenges that arise in the country in terms of land use planning,

This participatory management promotes the development of the local population of the municipalities covered by the syndicate, in the sense that those who carry out the activities have a certain right to decide on this practice (Tsamo, 2008:11). The partners are the first experts who can provide relevant information on a given situation. They hold the means to develop, correct or transform reality. It is in this perspective that Fontaine thinks that in order to be able to speak of participatory management, participation must relate to real acts of management (Fontaine, 1992:516) and in the specific case the actual acts of management here deals with water supply, water quality, sanitation of the territories of the municipalities mentioned above. We can therefore conclude in view of the above that the population's access to drinking water and basic sanitation have been provided by SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI, which is in fact a strength of this form of intercommunality called syndicate of communes. This reflects the development of the population of Mbam and Inoubou because trade union action in development cooperation is above all the democratic appropriation of development strategies. The union has always considered development cooperation and solidarity to be synonymous (Wandja, 2009:2). Today, many other unions must also demonstrate their development effectiveness in terms of development outcomes and contributions (Ryder, 2009: 8). which is in fact a strength of this form of intercommunality called syndicate of communes. This reflects the development of the population of Mbam and Inoubou because trade union action in development cooperation is above all the democratic appropriation of development strategies. The union has always considered development cooperation and solidarity to be synonymous (Wandja, 2009:2).



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SYNCOLEK, SYCOMI and SYCOLEK have a very vital role in society, they are integral parts of civil society as a whole and contributors to development as social partners. (Akouete Beleki, 2010:5) By setting up the decentralization process, the political hierarchy had understood that it was an essential way of development (Babagnack, 2014:9), however, the municipal unions resulting from it will not escape the structural, institutional and financial problems that will break this momentum of development.

### **9. The weaknesses of municipal unions in Cameroon**

The objective pursued by decentralization is local development, there is no sustainable decentralization without a real improvement in the living conditions of the populations (Kuaté, 2014:15). However, the local development momentum launched by Syncolek, Sycomi and Synconek within the framework of intercommunality was blurred by multiple structural, institutional and financial difficulties.

### **10. Structural and institutional weaknesses**

Structural and institutional brakes will break the momentum of development of localities by the unions of municipalities.

#### **Structural weaknesses**

The union of municipalities comprises two essential bodies, namely the union council and the president of the union. The president is entrusted with the administrative tasks of the union, in particular the execution of the deliberations of the union council, the management of the budget. He can also propose an organization chart, he represents the union in court and in acts of civil life, chairs committee meetings and executes its decisions. He prepares the budget, orders income and expenditure, prepares the presentation of the administrative account. He is in charge, after agreement of the committee, of concluding the markets, of subscribing in the forms established by the laws and regulations, namely leases, loans and all acts of acquisition, sale, transactions, exchanges; sharing, acceptance of donations and legacies<sup>1</sup>. The attributions of the president of the syndicate of communes are enormous. For lack of a technical and administrative body in some municipal unions, everything is concentrated around the president of the union. In several municipal unions, there is a lack of a technical and administrative body that can manage the affairs of the union. The intermunicipal administration must exist and expand.

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<sup>1</sup>TH.D. Obiegini, around 60 years old, mayor of the municipality of ndikinimeki, interview on March 10, 2020 in yaoundé.

This lack most often leads to the personalization of union organization. The case of the Public Organization for Intermunicipal Cooperation of Sanaga Maritime (OIPC)<sup>1</sup> is more illustrative. Indeed, created on March 22, 1995, this intermunicipal organization experienced this personalization problem. This strong personalization of this inter-municipality is due to the fact that the construction of an inter-municipal dynamic was carried essentially by an individual, the very one who had had the idea of setting up the inter-municipality. This accentuated monopoly led to the fall of this union as soon as its president resigned.<sup>2</sup> The poor structuring of municipal unions is not the only problem facing them, we can also note the institutional limits.

### **Institutional weaknesses**

At the institutional level, the law limits the framework for the grouping of municipalities. If the syndicate of communes cannot bring together communes from various Regions, it means circumscribing and limiting the development of decentralized territories, and consequently of their populations. The municipalities of the same department or the same region can, by concordant deliberations acquired by a majority of at least 2/3 of each municipal council, come together in a syndicate with a view to carrying out operations of inter-municipal interest. Intermunicipal dynamism should not be limited, it would reduce the impetus of municipal unions for the development of their populations. The challenges to be taken up by the communes in terms of development are almost the same everywhere, the geographical framework cannot limit the action of the syndicates of the communes.<sup>3</sup> On the ground there is a mismatch between the realities and the texts. There are municipalities that geographically rub shoulders, but cannot form a syndicate of municipalities because the law does not allow them. We note for example the communes of Ayos, in the Center Region, the commune of Nguélémedouka in the East Region and the commune of Minta in the Center Region. What are the financial problems linked to the local development ensured by the syndicates of municipalities?

### **Financial weaknesses**

The income of the budget of the association of municipalities includes the annual contribution of the associated municipalities, the participation of the municipal budgets in expenditure of inter-municipal interest, any subsidies from the State, and from FEICOM or any other bodies, income from property, furniture and buildings of the syndicate, income from services, loans, donations and legacies, miscellaneous and accidental receipts.

The unions of the communes do not easily submit themselves to the constraints of the financial world, the real savings capacity of the unions of the communes is not as brilliant as some of their administrative accounts would suggest, taking into account the existence of a significant public debt and all the unpaid bills that municipalities generally accumulate. We also note the debts of the communes and consequently of their unions vis-à-vis the concessionaires of public networks such as SONEL, SNEC and PTT. (Kom Chuenta, 1996:102). This debt is only increasing and has already reached more than ten billion. In the same way, the unions of municipalities, through their municipalities, accumulate a significant debt vis-à-vis FEICOM, suppliers and service providers. This can be illustrated by the table below:

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<sup>1</sup>It brought together nine municipalities namely, the urban commune of Edéa, the rural commune of Edéa, the commune of Ngambe, Dizangue, Pouma, Mouanko, Massock, Ndom and Nyanon.

<sup>2</sup>F. Bindzi Ebodé, around 60 years old, mayor of the municipality of Lobo, interview on March 1, 2021 in Sa'a.

<sup>3</sup>F. Bindzi Ebodé, around 60 years old, mayor of the municipality of Lobo, interview on March 1, 2021 in Sa'a

**Table 2: Loans and subsidies granted by FEICOM to municipalities and syndicates of municipalities (amount in millions of CFA francs)**

Breakdown by three-year period	1978-1980	1981-1983	1984-1986	1987-1989	1990-1992	Total
Subsidies	1376	110	2033	798	1281	5598
Loans	214	21	319	550	481	1585
Together	1590	131	2352	1348	1762	7183

Source: B. Kom Tchunte, municipal development and urban management in Cameroon: the challenges of municipal management in a decentralized system, Yaoundé, Clé, p. 116.

Although these data are old, the current situation of municipal unions created after the law of 2004 is not far from it. This table shows the exponential rise in loans and subsidies obtained by the unions of municipalities from FEICOM, which suggests a great financial weakness of these unions of municipalities. Thus, the operation of municipal syndicates is financed more by external resources than by its own resources.

### **The dependence of municipal unions on external resources**

The syndicates of the communes through their communes can no longer cope with the most urgent operating expenses, and the financing of investments poses problems. The search for solutions to these problems places the unions of the communes under the dependence of international donors or other Northern States which have financed their projects. On January 26, 1986, a loan agreement was signed between the Cameroonian government and the World Bank which granted an amount of 146 million US dollars for the benefit of local public authorities for the realization of operations such as the realization of urban infrastructure works and land development, the execution of a program of loans to municipalities and urban communities for the purposes of income-generating projects such as markets, bus stations,

The low financial contribution of the member municipalities, the negative external influence of the elites, the struggles for influence and leadership between the mayors, the absence of technical support for this inter-municipal dynamic contribute to the financial dependence of these associations of municipalities. (MINATD, 2010:58).

### **Conclusion**

The decentralization process through its various reforms has profoundly transformed the Cameroonian administrative landscape. Following these various reforms, the administrative landscape has been enriched with new bodies which are in fact players in decentralization. Among these, the union of municipalities as a complementary actor to the action of the municipalities.

These municipal unions, notably SYNCOLEX, SYCOMI and SYCONEK, all adhere to the concept of development for several reasons, namely to better respond to the problems of populations whose dimensions may be economic, ecological or cultural. They situate their actions on a sufficiently global scale to solve these problems (Guillon, 2021:2). Interaction between unions and communities strengthens both community mobilization and local governance. If these municipal unions are attracting attention, it is first of all because of their essential contribution to the development of local public services (Guéranger, Poupeau, 2019: 3) which brings to light the success of intercommunality in Cameroon, which is an indisputable vector and an effective means. They allow the municipal institution to carry out concrete and perceptible actions, guaranteeing a better implementation of decentralization, which is according to the orientation law the fundamental axis of democracy, governance and development in the local level. It is in the same perspective that SYNCOLEK and SYCOMI participated in the water supply of their communities, in the quality of this water and in sanitation. This dynamic of collaboration, even of partnership between several municipalities

is part, despite some pitfalls, in the capacities of municipal unions to meet the challenges of poverty in rural areas, especially in a context marked by both the economic recession and its corollaries. However, the impetus for the development of localities led by the associations of municipalities raised is sometimes hampered by the complexity of the laws, the poor structuring of the associations of municipalities and also a glaring lack of accounting capital which often makes them dependent on foreign capital. It would be wise to review the institutional and structural framework for a total contribution of municipal unions to local development.

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### Regulatory texts and laws.

1. Law No. 1489 of November 18, 1955 relating to municipal reorganization in French West Africa in French Equatorial Africa in Togo in Cameroon and in Madagascar.
2. Law of December 5, 1974 on municipal organization.
3. Law No. 2004/017 of July 22, 2004 on the orientation of decentralization.
4. Law No. 2004/018 of July 22, 2004 setting the rules applicable to municipalities.

### Oral sources

Nouns	Ages	Occupation	Date And Place Of Interview
Bindzi Ebodé, F.	60 years	mayor of the municipality of Lobo	March 1, 2021 in Sa'a
Obiegni, TH.D.	60 years	mayor of the municipality of Ndikiniméki	March 3, 2021 in Yaoundé
Baby.E	50 years	cooperation department	March 20, 2021 at FEICOM
Mne Ndongo	48 years old	Secretary at the cooperation department	March 15, 2021 at FEICOM
Essomba, M.	about 58 years old	Head of central municipalities	April 15, 2021 in Yaoundé