



Cameroon's Youths, Radicalisation, Victimization and Conflicts: Pathways to Sustainable Peace since 2016

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Abstract

Review Article

This paper explores the complex role of youths in Cameroon's conflict landscape, moving beyond narratives of radicalization and victimization to identifying the pathways for sustainable peace. It argues that young people are both perpetrators and victims of conflict, and highlights their potential as agents of peace and development in Cameroon. The study emphasizes the need for inclusive approaches that address the root causes of conflict, such as unemployment and social exclusion, while also promoting education, vocational training, and economic empowerment. Furthermore, it advocates for the inclusion of youths in peacebuilding processes and decision-making, emphasizing the importance of their participation in shaping a more peaceful and prosperous future for Cameroon. The study examines the fact that youths are victims of injuries, displacement, trauma, disruption of education, employment, and social systems, and are vulnerable to poverty, forced recruitment, exploitation, and forced migration. The paper further argues that Cameroon youths are increasingly recognized as critical agents of change, actively involved in peacebuilding initiatives, community dialogue, and reconciliation efforts. They utilize social media and other platforms to mobilize communities, advocate for human rights, and demand accountability for violations. Based on primary and secondary sources, the study concludes that Cameroonian youths are not monolithic, and their experiences within conflict are diverse, encompassing both radicalization and victimization.

Keywords: Youths, Conflict, Radicalism, Victimization, Peace, Cameroon.

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Introduction

Around the world, youths are questioning the social contract and existing models of governance. Fragility, conflicts and unemployment exacerbated challenges and hurdles for youth living in fragile and conflict-affected societies like Cameroon (United Nations, 2021: 38). Young people's role in preventing and resolving conflicts, violence and extremism are essential to building sustainable peace. Despite being often adversely affected by

armed conflicts, young people are valuable agents of democratic change and as such should be actively solicited, empowered and engaged as part of building peaceful communities. However, their potential contribution and inclusion to effective peacebuilding has received little attention and support (Hopsu, 2021). This explains why Kofi Annan ascertains that "Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of



us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies” (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2022).

In Cameroon, young people in conflict-affected areas play diverse and often complex roles, acting as both victims and actors in conflict and human rights violations. They are targeted for recruitment into armed groups, forced into exploitative situations, or experience psychological trauma, while also being instrumental in peacebuilding initiatives and social movements. On 20 October 2017, President Paul Biya on his twitter remarked that “our youths constitute a major asset for the nation’s future. They are numerous and full of potentials, dynamic and ambitious, conquering and creative” (Biya, 2017). This indicates that, Cameroon youths can be change-makers by bringing fresh perspectives on current issues and can drive positive change in their communities if given the opportunities and empowered by stakeholders.

In Cameroon, a youth is generally defined as an individual between the ages of 15 and 35. This definition is aligned with the African Union’s definition in the African Youth Charter. While the official definition focuses on the 15-35 age range, some contexts or specific policies might use slightly different age brackets. For example, the National Youth Policy, adopted in 2006, also defines youth as individuals between 15 and 35 years old, while the World Health Organisation defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 (Mbwoye, 2024). It is important to state that Cameroon Penal Code provides different treatments to children depending on whether they are below the age of 10, between 10-14 years, or between 14-18 years; the Code recognizes that a minor or juvenile is any person aged less than eighteen (18) years (Ojong, 2017: 200). The growing Cameroon population predominantly comprises youths over 60 %. The humancentric approach is used to address the growing issues of youth radicalism, insurgencies, terrorism and rebel attacks in Cameroon, especially as youths are targeted, recruited, and forced to be part of the illegitimate movements for the fight against the state. In line

with this perspective, the Cameroon government, through the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education (MINJEC), established a National Commission on Youth Peace and Security (YPS) to accompany and provide intergenerational mentorship to young peacebuilders across Cameroon (Ngomna & Achaleke, 2025).

Several scholars have pointed out that youths are actors and victims in conflict and significantly contribute to society’s development and change. According to Ho, Clarke and Dougherty (Clarke & Dougherty, 2015: 52-62) 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 highlights a similar context, whose study revealed that youth engagement is critical in positive youth development through radicalisation or peace (Iwasaki, 2016). 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. Mbwoye (2024) reveals that barriers like unemployment, underemployment, corruption, poverty, and illiteracy have urged Cameroon 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.

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 paper, therefore, deepens the roles of the youths as actors and victims in conflicts and human rights violations; presents the responses from the different stakeholders; indicates how the missing links in these responses could be adequately address through the implementation of national, sub regional and international frameworks; and recommends policy options and laws to make

youths key partners in sustainable peace building in Cameroon.

Role of Youths as Actors of Conflicts in Cameroon

In Cameroon, young people are significantly impacted by and actively involved in various conflicts, including the Anglophone Crisis, Boko Haram Insurgencies, and other forms of insecurities. Their roles range from victims of recruitment and radicalization by extremist groups to active participants in peacebuilding initiatives. Furthermore, youths are also affected by displacement, loss of livelihood opportunities, and increased vulnerability in conflict-affected areas. Discussions regarding the nexus between youth and violent extremism are controversial, with some scholars arguing that young people are perpetrators and victims of violence (Urdal, 2024), while others claim that they are contributing to building safe, secure and prosperous communities. McEvoy-Levy unifies these perspectives by suggesting that young people may play either role in situations of violent conflict – as perpetrators/victims or as agents of peace (Felice & Wisler, 2007).

Cameroonian youths play certain roles as actors in conflicts. Young people are increasingly recognized as critical agents of change, actively involved in peacebuilding initiatives, community dialogue, and reconciliation efforts. Firstly, their role as peacebuilders and conflict resolution agents in the Anglophone crisis and Boko Haram insurgencies cannot be minimized. Secondly, youths utilize social media and other platforms to mobilize communities, advocate for human rights, and demand accountability for violations. Thirdly, through community resilience, youth play a vital role in supporting their communities during and after conflicts, providing assistance to those affected by violence and displacement. Also, through innovation and adaptation, youths often demonstrate resilience and creativity in adapting to challenging circumstances, finding new ways to cope with conflict and rebuild their lives. Fourthly, driven by factors such as poverty, lack of opportunities, and political

grievances, Cameroonian youths were recruited and drawn into the armed Anglophone Crisis and the Boko Haram conflict in Far North Cameroon. Fifth, Cameroonian youths participate in violent extremism and are increasingly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment into extremist groups. Sixth, youths have participated in protests and demonstrations, sometimes resulting in clashes with authorities and human rights violations.

- Youth leaders have served as trainers of other youths. From 20 to 23 November 2024, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education, Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC) and the Cameroon National Youth Council hosted a Colloquium on the theme “Driving towards the Finalisation and Implementation of the Cameroon National Action Plan on Youth Peace and Security” at the International Relations Institute of Cameroon in collaboration with Search for Common Ground Cameroon as part of the Young Cameroon project funded by the European Union. This 3-day initiative which was supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Cameroon as well as UNFPA Regional Office for West and Central Africa and other partners aimed at propelling the finalisation and implementation of the Cameroon National Action Plan on the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) which has been advocating for peace and justice since 2016. During the Colloquium Youth leaders were privileged to train other youths on conflict, conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Achaleke, 2021).
- Youths have played the role of protesters and demonstrators demanding for positive change. On 14 March 2025, a group of youths from the North West region, led by members of the Cameroon National Youth Council, representing all the seven (7) Divisions (Mezam Division, Menchum Division, Bui Division, Ndonga-Mantung Division,

Ngokitunjia Division, Boyo Division, and Momo Division), staged a peaceful protest in Bamenda demanding the end to the Anglophone Crisis and calling on the Government to take action against Cameroonians in Belgium who allegedly molested and assaulted the Minister of Youth Affairs and Civic Education, *Mounouna Foutsou* and the Cameroonian Ambassador to Belgium, Daniel Evina Abe'e. The youths marched from the Customs junction to the Governor's office, demonstrating their solidarity and demanding justice for the alleged incident. This indicates that Cameroonian youth can be at the forefront of protests and demonstrations, demanding for positive change in the society.

- Youths have organised training workshop to train other youths on peacebuilding. On 25 July 2025 at Mbankomo in Yaounde, Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC), in partnership with Search for Common Ground Cameroon, organized a training is currently implementing the YOUNG Cameroon project aimed at promoting youth empowerment and peacebuilding in Cameroon. The Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop on Protection, Safeguarding Awareness and Digital Safety, was dedicated to fostering youth empowerment, engagement and improving the role of young people in peace processes in Cameroon. Looking ahead, this Training of Trainers workshop was a vital step in the ongoing commitment to creating a safe and supportive environment for the youth. To return and actively involved in advocacy for human rights, promoting social justice, and peacebuilding in their communities across Cameroon.
- Since 29 January 2025, young people bring identity and hope to children affected by humanitarian crises by acting as volunteers to make it easier for every child to have a legal identity. In Zamalva,

a small village in the Mokolo municipality, dedicated youths of the Réseau communautaire de protection de l'enfance (Recope), walk long distances to reach families in remote areas, identifying children without birth certificates and assisting them in obtaining their passports for life. Their work is part of the multi-sectoral emergency response for children in areas most affected by conflict and crisis project, which is implemented by UNICEF in partnership with Action pour le respect des droits de l'homme et la dignité Humaine (ardhu). This initiative is made possible through joint funding from the central emergency response fund (cerf) and UNICEF. The project aims to provide a comprehensive emergency response in the areas of water, hygiene and sanitation, nutrition, and protection for vulnerable children and youths who are most affected by conflict and crisis in Cameroon (Beguel, 2025).

Youths as Victims of Conflicts in Cameroon

In Cameroon, many conflict situations have particularly devastating effects on youths who have been victims of forced labour, recruitment into militias, and child prostitution. Many more are displaced, arrested and imprisoned, separated from their families, or orphaned, and are undertaking a long, painstaking process to rebuild their lives after conflicts.

Youths are victims of conflict and human rights violations as seen from several instances. Firstly, children and youth were often recruited by both state and non-state armed groups, facing the risk of physical and emotional harm. Secondly, the Anglophone Crisis and Boko Haram insurgencies have forced youths to flee their homes, leading to displacement and increased vulnerability to human rights abuses. Thirdly, youths are victims, especially as these conflicts have disrupted access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, disproportionately affecting young people. Fourthly, youths have been victims of psychological Trauma, and

exposure to violence and loss has led to long-term mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Finally, youths have been victims of targeted violence in Cameroon, based on their perceived association with a particular ideology or groups like Boko Haram and Amba armed fighters. Some circumstances and events of victimization of youths in Cameroon include the following:

- On 14 February 2020, six Cameroonian soldiers, accompanied by armed Mbororos and Ambazonian detractors, carried out a massacre of civilians, majority youths, in Ngarbuh, two quarters of Ntumbaw Ntumbaw Village, in Ndu, Donga-Mantung Division, North West Region. Independent journalist Jess Craig, on assignment in the region for the Swiss-based publication, reported that 21 civilians, majority youths, had been killed including 13 children and one pregnant woman (Craig, 2020). The attack was part of the Anglophone Crisis, in which so many youths have been victims.
- In March 2017, Boko Haram recruitment tactics in the border communities changed, taking advantage of the growing poverty and lack of opportunities for youths in the Far North Region, recruited and promised to pay youths between 300,000 CFA Francs and 400,000 CFA Francs (US\$600 – US\$800) each month. The governor of the Far North region, Midjiyawa Bakari lamented that “It is unfortunate that some of our young people are joining this hate group (Monde, 2025),” and advised them to work closely with the Government for the return of peace in the region.
- Around 25 % of children and youths between the ages of three and seventeen are still unable to go to school in the conflict-ridden regions of North West, South West and Far North Cameroon, according to the Cameroon Education Cluster. More than 488,000 children and youths are thus deprived of their right to education. About 2000 schools, corresponding to 41 % of schools in the two troubled regions, are still not functioning (Atabong, 2025).
- On Wednesday 4 October 2023, Ambazonian Defence Forces (ADF) armed fighters publicly executed two youths in Guzang, a village in Batibo Sub Division, Momo Division in the North West Region (Mboh, 2025). Accused of being informants to Government Security Forces, the two youths were taken to a junction and publicly executed in front of villages as a sign of warning. On 15 February 2025, the mortal remains of the self-styled separatist fighter, General Emmanuel Effang, who masterminded the public execution, was presented at the same spot at Guzang Market square by the Momo Divisional Officer, Fouda Etaba Benoit Nicaise (Emmanuel, 2025).
- On 7 June 2025, Anglophone youths who escaped from the Anglophone crisis were attacked with machetes and knives and their families driven out of home, and their residence set ablaze in Banen, a village in Ndikinmeki Subdivision in the Mbam-and-Inoubou Division, Centre Region of Cameroon. Over 400 youths and men orchestrated by traditional rulers were involved in the attacks. The attacks which were highly condemned by government officials, stemmed from land disputes, initially given to Anglophones for free by the locals (Cameroon News Agency, 2025).
- In March 2020, twenty (20) female youths and women were raped by government soldiers in Ebam in the South West Region. Between February and December 2020, the United Nations documented over 4,300 cases of sexual and gender-based violence in the Anglophone regions following the ongoing crisis. Almost half of cases involved sexual or physical assault or rape, while children were victims in around 30 percent of cases. At 16 years old, Sandra, was stopped at a police

checkpoint and asked for her national identity card, which is not issued until age eighteen (18). After failing to produce one, the soldiers abducted Sandra and took her to a forest far from her neighbourhood. She said “They raped me brutally to the extent that I could not even feel my own body. They turned me into a playing ground and treated me like dirt, what they did to me is worse than death” (Ngala, 2025).

- On 11 August 2020, suspected separatist fighters filmed themselves executing a young girl, Comfort Afiri, accused of dating and spying for a soldier (International Crisis Group, 2022).
- On 1 March 2020, in Ebam village in Eyumojock in the South West Region, over 50 Government soldiers attack 75 homes and raped over twenty women and girls (Craig, 2025).

Responses of Stakeholders to Youths Radicalisation and Victimisation

In recent years, Cameroon has witnessed new waves of youth radicalism that have taken the lives of many Innocent victims. While radicalisation requires interventions by stakeholders to protect the security of people and assets, prevention needs to look beyond strict security concerns to development-related causes of and solutions to the phenomenon. The root causes of violent extremism are complex, multifaceted and intertwined, and relate to the structural environment in which youths radicalization can start to take hold. Growing horizontal inequalities, unemployment, poverty, perceptions of injustice, human-rights violations, social-political exclusion, widespread corruption or sustained mistreatment of certain youths, are considered important push factors or drivers for youth radicalisation and victimisation in Cameroon. Some key responses and steps taken by Government and other stakeholders to address youth challenges include the following:

- The Government, through the National Employment Fund (NEF), which is at the

forefront of this fight against youth unemployment, designed a programme called the Urban Special Employment Programme (USEP), or "Programme Spécial d'Emplois Urbains" to integrate unemployed young people, through development, redevelopment, sanitation and improvement of social services in the cities (NEF, 2025). The results of this programme include: decreased in the urban unemployment of youth; reduced insecurity in the cities; increased income for young people and reduced poverty; embellishment of the cities and the living environment of the populations; and training of young people in sanitation and urban infrastructure construction.

- The Government of Cameroon has also responded by taking measures in line with the implementation of the recommendations of the Major National Dialogue (Teke, 2020). These measures include: the release of about 300 persons, majority youths, detained for misdemeanours in connection with the crisis in the North West and South West Regions; the creation of the National Advance School for Local Administration (NASLA); the creation of the Common Law Section at the National School for Administration and Magistracy (ENAM); the Presidential Plan for the Reconstruction and Development of the North West and South West Regions; and above all, the special *recruitment of 1000 young bilingual teachers in secondary schools* (Sobseh, 2024).
- On 30 November 2018, President Paul Biya signed a degree creating the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) to reintegrate youths involved in radicalisation and the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in the North West and Southwest Regions of Cameroon, and the Boko Haram insurrection in the Northern Regions of Cameroon. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

most times operates contemporaneously with transitional justice processes in the conflict affected societies in Cameroon (Monteh, 2021). As part of measures implemented to re-integrate ex-combatants from the Islamic Sect, Boko Haram, a transit Center was created in Mora and Meri, Far North Region of Cameroon which has recorded about 1112 returnees have been recorded since November 2021. In the Far north (290 men, 275 women, 297 boys and 25 girls) and about 130,690 ex-combatants occupied the said camp in 2022. This has helped in fostering peace and reducing the rate of insecurity in the region.

- Non-Governmental Organisations and civil society have also responded to youth's radicalisation and victimisation in conflict ridden zones. From 24 to 25 March 2024, the Community Initiative for Sustainable Development (COMINSUD), organised a two-day training workshop aimed at stimulating and enhancing the contributions of young and middle age women to peace promotion, socio-economic and political development in the North West Region within a crisis context (COMINSUD, 2025). The forum participants reflected and established practical pathways that would enable them to personally engage in peace works. Also, from 21 to 23 August 2024, Women in Alternative Action (WAA) Cameroon organized a peacebuilding workshop as part of the Voices of Youth in Cameroon for Peace (VOYCE) project. The workshops aimed at empowering youth in promoting peace, prevention of youth radicalisation and re-radicalization in the conflict communities in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. During the workshop, WAA Cameroon trained youths to promote communities free from gender-based violence, radicalization, stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion of women, youth and girls in Cameroon and Central African sub-region (WAA, 2025).

Recommendations to Make Youths Key Partners in Sustainable Peace in Cameroon

In order for the government of Cameroon as well as other stakeholders of conflict affected regions to galvanise the youths, combat youth radicalism, fight against human rights violations, prevent youth victimization, and reinforce state presence, the following recommendations need to be taken to consideration:

To the government of Cameroon:

- Guarantee formal and informal education for youths, channelling their power and energy into learning and sustainable development;
- Acknowledge and include young people as stakeholders in the process of peace and security building, bearing in mind that they have been both affected by conflict and they are the key to progress of the nation;
- Eliminate the catalyst of conflict, including those related to common challenges such as youth unemployment, poverty, inequalities and political exclusion;

To the Parliament and Senate:

- Enact laws and review existing ones that promote inclusivity and protect the rights of all citizens, including youths, as well as revise or repeal laws that are perceived as discriminatory or unjust.

To the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education:

- Provide training and capacity building programs for youths on peacebuilding, conflict resolution and civic engagement;
- Support and amplify youth-led peacebuilding initiatives, providing initiatives and funding to sustain their efforts;

- Launch awareness campaigns to denounce youths radicalization, promote peaceful coexistence, and constructive dialogue among youths.

To Politicians:

- Reject violence and incitement of youths, and instead focus on finding peaceful solutions to youths' challenges;
- Prioritize national unity, humanitarian assistance, work to bridge divides between Francophone and Anglophone Cameroonians and assist in providing basic needs to youths, woman, children affected by the conflicts.

To Civil Society Groups/Coalitions:

- Provide humanitarian assistance to youths affected by conflicts in Cameroon, including food, shelter, and medical care;
- Promote Conflict Resolution by facilitating dialogue and reconciliation between different extremist youth groups;
- **Monitor and report cases of youth radicalization**, human rights violations against youths and report on any abuses or victimisation that may occur.

To United Nations Agencies/European Union:

- Support and finance national initiatives that promote youth participation in peacebuilding, collaborate with local organisations including youth-led organisations to leverage their expertise in eradication youth radicalization;
- Document best practices in youth peacebuilding and share them with other organisations and stakeholders.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that Cameroonian youths are very instrumental in all aspects of conflict, peace and security. The study, which examined the role of youths as actors and victims of conflicts, especially the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in the North West and South West Regions and the Boko Haram Insurgencies in the Far North Regions, has argued that young people in conflict-affected areas play diverse and often complex roles, acting as both victims and actors in conflict and human rights violations. In the face of the economic and socio-political crises in Cameroon, youths have proven beyond doubt that they can be instruments of positive change through their increased involvement in programs and initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable peace, advocacy, dialogue and social cohesion. These initiatives are often perturbed by varied challenges such as unemployment, poverty and corruption. It is imperative, therefore, for all stakeholders to collaborate to create favourable conditions for youths to participate meaningfully in nation-building and peacebuilding processes.

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