Cameroon:
Local Communities and Conflict Resolution During the Anglophone Conflict in the South West Region. Initiatives and Challenges

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Abstract: The paper discusses local communities' initiatives and challenges in resolving the Anglophone conflict in the South West Region of Cameroon between 2016 and 2023. The conflict that began in September 2016 as the Anglophone teachers and lawyers strike soon vitiated into calls for secession of the Anglophone regions of the country due to marginalization by the Francophone majority. By early 2017, the employability of arms by separatists alongside other tactics like ghost towns, kidnappings, and the maiming of civilians had prompted a government military response leading to a massive humanitarian crisis. While the conflict is still on, the situation seems to be returning to normalcy in some communities owing, not to the government approach to solving the problem but to various indigenous community initiatives. Informed by primary and secondary data, the study investigates the strategies adopted by local communities in resolving the Anglophone conflict in the southwest region of Cameroon. The paper also concedes the persistence of the crisis despite these initiatives and questions factors that mitigate against indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms that local communities have been propagating. It concludes that the anglophone crises far from serving as a platform for the English-speaking people of Cameroon to express their grievances was an opportunity for local communities to understand the complexities of war and a chance to re-initiate indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms which were rife in the pre-colonial days.

Keywords: Anglophone, Cameroon, conflict resolution, local community.

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Introduction

In 2016, grievances from the English-speaking regions of Cameroon rooted mainly in marginalization and discrimination by the majority Francophone-dominated government degenerated into a crisis (Guizanna, 2017). Although its organization and demonstrations were envisaged by many as weak, fragile, confused, and disoriented, giving a general impression that the outbreak might end prematurely, it has dragged longer than necessary and has become popularly known as the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. For over five years, the South West Region has been under siege with semi-urban towns and local communities acting as battlegrounds between separatist fighters and government forces. While the separatists aspire to secede and form a separate state that will incorporate only the two English-speaking regions as a means of escaping from discrimination and unwanted pro-French policies, government forces under the guise of guaranteeing the integrity and indivisibility of a reunited Cameroon, have remained resilient not to ensure such fragmentation. These dissimilarities led to constant attacks and recurrent exchanges on both sides especially in the South West Region due to her strategic position as an English-speaking region and her natural endowments in terms of resources. Owing to these intermittent attacks, the region has registered untold casualties in terms of lives and properties. According to Bang and Balgah (2022), about one thousand uniformed officers have been killed and over four thousand civilians have lost their lives with close to about one million internally displaced and more than sixty-eight thousand refugees in Nigeria. On the other hand, government institutions like schools, hospitals, religious institutions, and houses of top government officials have constantly been targeted and set ablaze as an expression of the ongoing war.

In a bid to avert these casualties, numerous peace processes have been initiated by local communities in the region to ensure that their societies return to normalcy. The main actors in these peace processes are the council of elders, regulatory societies, age grades, village organizations as well and cultural associations (Bang & Balgah, 2022). Through these actors, agreements, consensus, and social harmony were restored by using particular mechanisms of conflict resolution like joking relations, invocation of oral histories and ethnic relations, blood brotherliness, dialogues, educational talks, formation of vigilante groups, and threats of excommunication.

In a narrow sense, although the term conflict resolution will generally stand for the act of putting an end to a conflict, it has been dealt with in broad terms by varying authors. Zartman (1985) refers to conflict resolution as "the elimination of the causes of the underlying conflict generally with the agreement of both parties" (p. 8). According to him, the term resolution has been very difficult to attain especially when the underlying causes of any conflict were difficult to erase. On the other hand, Tafese (2016) saw the resolution of conflicts as "a process of peacemaking and a means of handling conflicts in

a society to create peace when conflicts occur either in family, groups or interpersonal relations" (p. 23). In his views, it is a means through which different societies handle differences at both individual and societal levels to avoid the escalation of violence, terminal hatred, and subsequent divisions in society. On his part, Otite (1999) preferred the term conflict transformation instead of conflict resolution. Otite (1999) defines conflict transformation as:

> *A particular problem-solving workshop is probably one of the best ways of transforming conflicts. Here dealing with quick solutions would be of secondary importance as focus is placed on the overall conflict process. In this respect, there must be sincerity, adequate consultation, and communication among actors, and where discussion and talking are open-ended. Conflicts have the tendency to wax, wane, and transform* (p. 9).

Otite (1999), in his view, saw conflict resolution in line with Zartman. According to him, resolution was unattainable, sometimes impossible, or even unnecessary since it implied an end to a conflict. He holds that major attempted solutions to most conflicts only ended up in changing the reactions of the parties either by pushing the conflict further or transforming it into another stage.

Conflict resolution here is, therefore, said to be the various means and ways put in place by local communities to ensure peace and an eventual end to the anglophone conflict. Among the local communities in the South West Region of Cameroon, conflict resolution does not only entail an end to war, and the acceptance of an accord or dialogue among them but also understanding and respecting ethnic relations, accepting and collaborating in dialogue, ensuring respect for the customs and traditions of the land and others, allowing for collaborations in the implementation of community acceptable decisions, respect for vigilante commands and participation in community work for development projects to build trust among them (Kariuki, 2014). This explains why, even after an effective resolution of a conflict or in the process of managing a conflict, peacebuilding remains an imperative part of the process when it comes to local communities. Most often, it is only when belligerents begin to understand their ethnic bonds, blood relations, customs, and traditions, witnessing changes in development, socioeconomic recovery, and reconstruction that conflict resolution is fully attained (Ngongo-Mbede, 2003). Conversely, local communities will be defined as a group of people interacting within a common geographical arena. The community might be bonded through blood as lineages or families with a common ancestry.

The study moves further from merely defining conflict resolution and local communities to look at the various initiatives employed by local communities in resolving the ongoing Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. It will also evaluate the different barriers or challenges that have deterred local community initiatives in the resolution process between

2016 and 2023. It seeks to answer questions like, what were the different initiatives employed by local communities to resolve the Anglophone crisis and why have these initiatives flopped? But before we probe into answering these important questions, it will be imperative to give a synopsis of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon.

Roots of the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

The conflict known as the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon today can be rooted in the activities of Western colonizers after World War I. After the First World War, Britain and France partitioned former German Cameroon into two unequal factions in 1916 (Eta, 2021). France had 4/5 of the territory and designated it French Cameroon and Britain had 1/5 of the territory and styled it British Southern Cameroons (Ngoh, 1996). While France ruled French Cameroun as a separate entity, Britain never took interest in instituting a separate administration for her part of the territory but rather preferred to rule it as an integral part of south-eastern Nigeria due to strategic and political reasons. On January 1st, 1960, French Cameroun was granted independence under France and in February 1961, British Southern Cameroons were granted independence through a plebiscite by joining the already independent French Cameroon known as *La République du Cameroun* (*Ibid.*).

 After independence, both factions went further to negotiate a union in Foumban[1] in July 1961 (Dze-Ngwa, 1996). At Foumban, French Cameroon advocated for a centralized system of government as against a loose federation by British Southern Cameroons bonded by a federal constitution (Ngoh, 1996). French Cameroun became the state of East Cameroon while British Southern Cameroons became the state of West Cameroon. Although both parties settled for a federation, a highly centralized system was put in place by President Ahmadou Ahidjo from former French Cameroon which gave powers to the federal executives more than state executives. This was further evidenced by transforming the country into a one-party state in 1966 (Dze-Ngwa, 1996), abrogating the federal structure and instituting a unitary state through a referendum on ~~the 20th of~~ May 20, 1972 (Ngoh, 2019). In effect, it gradually weakened the political and economic power of West Cameroon and gave East Cameroon an advantage over the West.

Given this, many West Cameroonians gradually began questioning the disequilibrium between the two states and accused the state of East Cameroon of disrespect for the federal constitution, discrimination, disrespect for agreements, centralization of power, and monopoly (Chem-Langhee, 1995). They were also aggrieved by the exclusion of West Cameroonians from policy-making, power sharing, and the economic exploitation

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1   Foumban is a semi-urban town found in the West Region of Cameroon, it remains a historical town in the history of the country for hosting the great event that gave birth to the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961.

of their areas (Dze-Ngwa, 1996). Manifestations of these grievances began in different ways to call the government to order. This was witnessed through writings from West Cameroonian intellectuals like Bernard Fonlon (1964) in his famous article "Will We Make or Mar" where he observed the political inequalities of the leaders of the two federated states. Furthermore, some Anglophone Cameroonians also attempted riots, organized strikes, and created a new political party; The Social Democratic Front (SDF)[2] in 1990 as a way of showing their dissatisfaction (Ndi, 2014) and called on the United Nations to look into their grievances (Konings & Nyamjoh, 1997). Through the "All Anglophone Conference" (AAC I and II in 1993 and 1994 respectively), they called for a return to a federation and made it clear that if the government should continue to neglect Anglophones, they would rise to proclaim their independence, protect, secure and defend their sovereignty as Southern Cameroonians (Dze-Ngwa, 1996).

In 2016, the Anglophone teachers and lawyers rose to denounce the use of the French civil law code and French education in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. The lawyers took to the streets on ~~the 3rd of~~ October 3, 2016 and the teachers took to the streets on ~~the 21st of~~ November 21, 2016 to denounce this injustice (The Post News Paper, 2016). Given this pressure, the government reacted by dispatching the police, gendarmes, and the military to the two regions to calm down the situation. The military response met with a counter-offensive from the separatist fighters and thence, armed confrontations surfaced between Anglophones struggling to separate and the government forces striving to avert such division. The fighting has been characterized by intermittent attacks, guerrilla tactics, rampant killings, burning, looting, and kidnapping of innocent people in the two English-speaking regions (Guizanna, 2017). The territory referred to as the English-speaking region of Cameroon covers the entire South West and North West Regions (formerly known as British Southern Cameroons) as we have seen above. In the southern part of it, is found the South West Region partitioned into six administrative divisions namely: Manyu, Lebialem, Kupe Manenguba, Ndian, Meme, and Fako divisions. These various divisions engulf numerous ethnic groups with the most renowned ones being Bakossi, Bakweri, Balondo, Bangwa, Ejagham, Bayang, Oroko, Ngolo, Isangele, Batanga, Boki, Anyang and Efik, etc. (Fanso, 1982), (See map 1). These groups have employed varying initiatives to resolve the ongoing conflict as seen in the subsequent section.

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2   The Social Democratic Front (SDF) party is an anglophone-oriented political party that sprang in May 1990 under the leadership of the late Ni John Fru Ndi as a means to express opposition to the French-dominated government. It remained the strongest opposition party in the country until 2018 when the MRC emerged from the West.

Map 1: Showing Administrative Divisions in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Source: Adapted by the author from the Administrative Map of Cameroon of 1982, NIC, Yaoundé

Local Community Initiatives in Resolving the Conflict

The consequences of the conflict within local communities like the destabilization of administration with chiefs fleeing from their fiefs, disrespected, killed, and deposed was a call for concern for local communities to resort to peace (personal communication, December 10th, 2022). On the other hand, the conflict dealt a severe blow to agricultural activities leading to low productivity and poor harvest. More seriously, community development was at a halt with numerous displacements of people into different areas while others took refuge in neighboring Nigerian villages (personal communication, December 10th, 2022). Due to the persistent ghost towns, education was also disrupted and many children from these local communities dropped out of school. However, it led to low standards of education, high illiteracy levels, and high crime waves like kidnapping, theft, rape, and drug consumption among youths. Those who fled to neighboring Nigerian communities were poorly treated and reduced to beggars (personal communication, December 10th, 2022). The situation raised a general outcry for an urgent need to resolve the conflict between local communities.

Local communities in the South West Region of Cameroon had varied institutions that were the pillars in managing and resolving conflicts among them. These were the council of elders, village councils, secret and sacred traditional societies like *Malle* among the Bakweri in the Fako Division, the *Mgbe* or *Ekpe* among the Bayang, Anyang, Ejagham, and Efik in the Manyu Division, and the *Mutamu* among the Balondo in Ndian Division (Nanji, 2022). The above institutions were supplemented by cult agents, diviners, and charmers who acted as spiritual guards in the community (Otite, 1999). The oldest of these institutions was the Council of Elders which was a traditional institution that comprised of reputable men of the society capable of exercising political and judicial functions (Onor, 1994). These were veritable elders who had indigenous and local knowledge of the community. It was made up of only the oldest members of the various families and the chief in every village (Eta, 2005). The council was headed by a chief, the traditional representative or custodian of the sacred societies, and some selected elders. Within the council were members of regulatory societies and traditional associations to ensure that, any decisions reached must be carried out and respected to the latter.

The first initiative that was embraced by all elders in the various local communities in the South West Region was to regroup and reinvoke ethnic and communal bonds among their people. This was done through the holding and organization of village and ethnic groupings. An example was visible among the Bakundu and Bafo cultural associations in Meme Division in 2018, the Ejagham in Manyu Division in May 2022 under the auspices of the Ejagham Njemaya Development Association (ENDA), (personal communication, May 15th, 2022), the Lebang Development and Cultural Organization (LECUDA), Esoh-Attah Cultural and Development Association (ECDA) and the Njaogwi Fotabong III Development and Cultural Association in Lebialem Division in April 2022

(personal communication, June 26th, 2023). The main actors who were elders had as aim to restore social ties and enable the continued existence of the community. A particular mechanism used by these local communities was the narration of their oral histories. When the history of their origins, migrations, and settlements was recounted, each gathering became more of an ethnic reunion that rejuvenated family ties. The narratives depended on the undiluted comprehension of the society and its oral traditions by the elders. They acted as a gateway to restore social harmony among the people. Through these narratives, apologies were sincerely rendered with every youth properly intimated on his/her relationship and duties in the community. It arose in them the ultimate need for unity and the decision to stop all hostilities (Idem). This explains why such meetings have been consistent in the peace-making process and have even evolved to include government officials in the various divisions of the region. It has become generally acceptable among the people that, if such narratives could be given due consideration, they might lead to the discovery of blood-brotherly relations that might, in the short run restore the much-needed peace in the entire country. In the words of Malan Jannie (1997):

> *When Africans sit down to talk about a conflict, the talking usually covers all sorts of relevant backgrounds. It also explores the thoughts and intentions of others. Those taking part in the talks normally try to gauge how others are perceiving and interpreting their actions. When an elder from a family, village, or clan becomes involved in the talks, the traditional objectives are to move away from accusations and counter-accusations to soothe hurt feelings and to reach a compromise that may help to improve future relations* (p. 20).

Most of these local communities used oral histories and culture to explain how people viewed reality. The elders acted toward reconciliation, maintenance, and improvement of social relations. Tafese (2016) says:

> *African societies emphasize social harmony as the overriding ideology of social control. Moreover, the essence of conflict management in traditional African communities, states, and regions includes, removing the root causes of the conflict, reconciling the conflicting parties genuinely to preserve and ensure harmony to set the right setting for social production and development* (p. 23).

The decisions reached by many local communities were bonded culturally through traditional societies like *Malle* among the Bakweri in the Fako Division, the *Mgbe* or *Ekpe* among the Bayang, Anyang, Ejagham, and Efik in Manyu, and the *Mutamu* among the Balondo in Ndian (Nanji, 2022). These societies were unique and respected by all and sundry. Practically, they acted as regulatory societies in matters of conflict, development, land, health, and other issues concerning their communities (Atom, 2022). Correspondingly, it was difficult to disrespect or disregard orders from these societies, escape punishment, or commit a crime and run to another community. In this vein,

many local communities exploited the powers of such traditional societies by reviving them and restoring their roles within their different communities. Around the border areas of the Manyu Division like Ekok and Otu and Buea in the Fako Division, regulatory societies frequently performed acts of cleansing, displayed around the community, and called to question people who were accused of any hostilities. They were fined and asked to cleanse the land. These acts made it difficult for many to flawed orders from these associations (*Ibid.*). To ensure respect for decisions and keep the peace, threats of ex-communication from the community or ethnic group and oath-taking were often used by the chiefs, council of elders, and members of these societies within the different local communities. This was evidenced in Manyu communities like Ekok, Otu, Esagem, Babong, Nchang, and Eya-Nchang as early as 2017 when many youths of these areas became involved in kidnappings and killing of innocent people as a continuation of the Anglophone conflict (personal communication, April 10th, 2019). Ex-communication was a very dangerous and disgraceful thing to Africans in general because, as a people, they were socially, culturally, and emotionally attached to their villages and communities (Atom, 2022). In this regard, they preferred to accord respect to the decisions taken by the elders, chiefs, and traditional groups rather than disrespect them and attract sanctions. Thus, the initiatives ensured resettlement schemes, a return of both internally and externally displaced people, and an improvement in local capacities to reinforce and ensure sustainable peace and resolution to the conflict. As the African Union Commissioner for Infrastructure and Energy Abou-Zeid earmarked "peace, security and infrastructure development are inextricably linked and should be pursued simultaneously". In the course of resolving the conflict, these local actors were also involved in creating employment opportunities for former fighters and ensuring the socio-economic development of their communities. In this regard, development projects such as the reconstruction of bridges, town halls, burnt schools, hospitals, and traditional palaces were launched as a means to sustain peace. They were supported by the elites who offered funding opportunities for the reconstruction of their devastated communities. In mid-2023, the Lebang community in the diaspora under the leadership of Terence Atabong raised about fifty million CFA Francs for the rehabilitation of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College in the Fontem subdivision in Lebialem Division. Others compensated idle youths with money to startup businesses to stop hostilities (personal communication, June 26th, 2023).

Another step that was embraced by all local communities in the South West Region was the need to collaborate with security officials to support government actions that were aimed at erasing any disequilibrium between the two factions (personal communication, December 10th, 2022). This was manifested by acting as spies and informants to security officials to help them figure out the main propagators of violence in their communities, averting hate speech, and acting as intermediaries between former fighters and the government to enable them to drop their weapons and be admitted into the

disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation centers created by the government after the national dialogue in 2019 (Presidency of the Republic, Decree No. 2018/719 of ~~30ᵗʰ,~~ November 30, 2018). They constantly provided relevant information on the activities of gangs and youths involved in various atrocities like the killing of security officers, innocent women and children, and kidnappings. In this way, they believed that peace would return effectively while development would follow (personal communication, December 10ᵗʰ, 2022). Local chiefs on their part were charged with receiving and accommodating voluntarily retired or runaway fighters. They handed them to the military to be taken to the demobilization centres. A case in point was the Otu village community along the frontier which has successfully sent about five former separatist fighters to the Buea center as of 2019 (Idem). Although many feared for their lives, the creation of these centers by the government was to ensure a smooth transition and transformation of ex-fighters by training them to acquire certain professional skills so that, they could be reintegrated into their various societies (Presidency of the Republic, Decree No. 2018/719 of ~~30ᵗʰ~~ November 30, 2018). Eminent cases came from the Ndian and Lebialem Divisions where about twenty-five separatist fighters surrendered in 2022 and in the Manyu Division along the Mamfe-Eyumojock-Ekok and Otu axis, about fifteen fighters also surrendered as of 2022 (personal communication, December 10ᵗʰ, 2022).

Aside from their collaboration with government forces, local communities have in their various capacities organised educative talks and dialogue groups under the control of educated elites to preach peace to their people (Atom, 2022) The Fako, Manyu, and Lebialem Divisions were champions in this domain. These three divisions have more than twenty elite groups and associations that constantly organize group discussions with their youths to educate them on the ills of violence and war. In Otu for example, the Otu Development and Cultural Association (ODECA) was constituted to incorporate security officers and experts in peace and conflict issues. The first collaborative talk that took place between the ODECA, the village community, and the security officers was held on ~~the 18ᵗʰ of~~ January 18, 2017 from 8. a.m. to noon (personal communication, December 10ᵗʰ, 2022). Unfortunately, the situation did not change until May 2018 when another crucial meeting was held between elites, security officials, and the villagers. On the other hand, the people of Lebialem have also organized peace conferences. A notable example was that held on ~~the 16ᵗʰ of~~ April 16, 2022 in Buea. During this session, papers on conflict resolution approaches, peacekeeping methods, and peace-building initiatives were presented. This triggered a response from the local community where many of the people agreed to collaborate and pleaded to all concerned to be able to release appropriate information to guide the security men. However, the situation yielded very little results as expected in the villages, although seemingly the killings were not as rampant as previously. On the other hand, between January 2018 and December 2022, the elite groups from the Local communities of Ekok, Otu, Eyumojock, and Ekang in Manyu Division organized five dialogue sessions with the divisional officer, the mayor,

the local chiefs, and the villagers as participants. These sessions took place on January 12th, 2018, ~~15th~~–May 15, 2018, ~~10th~~–April 10, 2020, ~~16th~~–December 16, 2021 and ~~13th~~ May 13, 2022 (Idem). The sessions dealt mostly with educative talks on topics like war, peace, conflict resolution mechanisms, and other professional training workshops to enable the local people to acquire skills that may occupy them aside from war (personal communication, November 22, 2022).

Apart from the above-discussed initiatives, many communities especially those along the Cameroon-Nigeria boundary notably in divisions like Ndian and Manyu resorted to the creation and formation of vigilante groups. These groups can be visible in communities like Ikang, Isangele, Eyumojock, Otu, Ekok, and Nsanakang. They were duly registered and recognized by both the military and the administrative officials like the divisional officer and the sub-divisional officer. Vigilantes acted as security wings in the community and constantly checked the activities of opportunists from the opposite side and reported to the elders in their various communities (personal communication, December 10, 2022). The Ekok vigilante was created as early as April 2018 while the Otu vigilante came later in December 2018 and that of Eyumojock was created in December 2018 as well (Idem). Moreover, vigilantes in these areas acted more as intermediaries between the military and the local people. They were responsible for guarding the villages at night and during farming periods (Idem). As a means to ensure their safety, many of these local communities fortified them with traditional war charms like the *Ejah* among the Ejagham in Eyumojock Sub Division. The vigilantes have succeeded to a particular extent in ensuring a high degree of calm, a return of many displaced persons and others who fled into neighboring Nigeria for safety (Idem). Through them, local communities in the South West Region ensured the reconstruction of roads and houses that were erased by the war and effective participation in community labor. They also engaged the local communities in financial and material contributions to assist war victims who were ready to return to their various communities (Idem). In 2019, the mayor of Eyumojock in Manyu Division through the support of the vigilantes and the military raised more than ten million CFA which was used to purchase basic needs to sustain and support the vulnerable population of their different communities (personal communication, December 10th, 2022). These initiatives went a long way to help drive the peace process to a near-acceptable end. It aided in the restoration of communal bonds, respect, and social harmony among the people. Around the Ndian and Manyu areas, women and children were offered matrasses, food, and rechargeable lamps in February and March 2019 respectively to enable them to cope with the harsh conditions (personal communication, November 10th, 2022). Generally, these communities have most often called for continued collaboration amongst their members as a means to end the conflict. Some border communities around Manyu resorted to swearing on cults and oath-taking among members to ensure that whatever decisions were reached should be binding (Ojang Enow Cyprian, Personal Communication, April 10, 2019). Despite

all these efforts, local communities' initiatives have met with undesired results owing to the enormous challenges.

Challenges to Conflict Resolution Initiatives by Local Communities

Within the different local communities in the South West Region, there has been the existence of spoilers. These are people who join the peace process yet destroy and distort it for personal gains. They act as spies on both sides and therefore constitute a major obstacle to any attempted peace initiative by these local communities. These communities also harbor informants from separatist groups who give constant information on any individual who is collaborating with the security forces and once caught, the individual is killed outrightly without judgment (personal communication, December 20th, 2022). This situation has created fear and panic within varied communities, especially in the Lebialem, Fako, Ndian, and Manyu divisions. Communities like Muea and Ekona in the Fako division, Alo, Eso-Attah, and Wabane in the Lebialem Division, Ekondo Titi, Bekora, and Lobe in Ndian Division, Nchang, Otu, Eyumojock, and Bodam in Manyu Division have witnessed untold casualties in terms of human lives due to spread of information from spies on both sides (Idem). This has deterred the conflict resolution process within communities as many fear that any revelations are paid for by the dead. Peace has therefore remained wanting with many communities still being victimized and used as battlegrounds for fighting between soldiers and separatist groups. Some communities have initiated projects for the return of escapees and displaced persons, but the continuous existence of fighting and rampant killings has prevented these efforts from yielding any desirable fruits.

On a more serious note, local communities have been marred with conflicts even before the emergence of the anglophone crisis. This has affected the resolution processes as certain communities saw the war as an opportunity to destroy efforts by neighboring communities to return to normalcy. Before the advent of the conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon, the South West Region registered more than one hundred inter-community conflicts with the most recurrent being land and boundary conflicts emanating from Manyu and Ndian Divisions (Atom, 2020). Moreover, most of the border communities around these divisions have also had trans-border disputes with neighboring communities in Nigeria (*Ibid.*). The crisis therefore served as an opportunity for the different propagators of these intercommunity conflicts to fuel violence and continue their misdeeds under the banner of separatist fighters. Pre-existing inter-community disputes have retarded any efforts at peace within these communities through intermittent attacks and rampant killings from neighboring villages claiming to be separatist fighters. The different initiatives like the return of refugees and reconstruction projects that were adopted by communities like Otu, Ayaoke, and Ekang in Manyu were futile due to attacks from neighbors (*Ibid.*). Such attacks resulted in numerous casualties that injected fear into the returning population. These fears served as a stumbling block to

any effort at resolving the conflict. This was evidenced in Otu on the southern tier of the Cameroon- Nigeria boundary in late 2019. Due to rampant killings, many of the indigenes fled into neighboring Nigerian villages of Ekang, Mfaminyen, Ojock, Oban, and as far as the town of Calabar. However, in 2019, the Otu community initiated a peace venture by organizing a talk with the people in neighboring Nigerian villages to ensure the return of its community members. However, the idea never yielded any desired results because the village had previously had disputes with neighbors like Ayaoke and Ekoneman Awa (*Ibid.*). Youths from these villages constantly attacked Otu in the name of fighting for the freedom of former Southern Cameroons and this has frustrated any efforts made by the community for peace to reign.

Furthermore, the porous nature of the borders has also been a main contributor to deterring peace processes by the people. The Cameroon-Nigeria border on the southern flank was very open and loose (NAB, File, No.O.1545 Co-operation between Nigeria and Cameroon, October 1965). Its porousness stems from the fact that various communities sharing the boundary had uniformity in language and customs which they use to manipulate their entry and exit from either side and also due to the lack of security officers (Atom, 2020). Besides, the few that were there were corrupt in terms of receiving money from individuals and allowing contraband goods across the border. Some also got themselves involved in illicit businesses like the sale of small arms to local groups (Eyong, 2009). The porosity of the border gave the opportunity for spoilers to often cross and disturb or destroy any attempt at resolving the conflict by these local communities.

Lastly, conflict resolution initiatives by local communities have been left wanting due to gains accrued from the war by the belligerents. Efforts have been turned down by belligerents who act as spoilers in the peace process for either personal gains or group benefits. The crisis has led to the emergence of a new middle class whose wealth originated from war atrocities like kidnapping. The main targets were government officials and/or any person suspected of being financially buoyant to pay an admirable ransom. Others inclusive of security officers have engaged in illicit businesses like the sale of ammunitions and light weapons to enrich themselves. Also, the war has influenced persistent increases in the prices of basic commodities while transportation has skyrocketed (Atom 2022). In essence, the war has enriched a few individuals who see themselves as a new middle class which is ready to distort any peace initiatives from the communities to maintain their status quo. Edward and Oliver refer to this category of people as spoilers. According to them, spoilers are people with devious intentions either from within or outside whose intentions are to disrupt the process in pursuit of their aims (Newman & Richmond, 2006).

The South West Region in Cameroon harbors a good number of such devious people ranging from internal to external actors like the youths, elites, security officers, and the diaspora. These different groups of people pretended to join local communities

in identifying and securing the peace processes but later turned to obstruct and disrupt them for personal gains. They used these processes to gain fame and recognition (Newman & Richmond, 2006). It should, however, be understood that many youths from these communities who are illegally settled in Europe and America also used this war to justify their need for asylum in the West (Atom, 2022). The need to satisfy these personal or group desires has been a major obstacle to conflict resolution initiatives in the various communities in the South West. Persistent killings and kidnappings often inject fear and disharmony among the people and destroy any attempted efforts at ending hostilities. In a nutshell, most of the challenges faced by these local communities in the South West Region in resolving the conflict emanated from spoilers who were reaping fruits from the war.

Conclusion

This study has examined local community initiatives and challenges in resolving the Anglophone conflict in the South West Region of Cameroon. It has shown that, although local communities have employed numerous initiatives like revoking oral histories, and ethnic bonds, building social harmony, collaborating with security and government officials, formation of vigilantes and educational groups, creating community development projects for the benefit of all, and initiating financial contributions to help the poor and vulnerable people of their communities, they have met with varied challenges such as the existence of spoilers, porous borders and pre-existing inter community conflicts that have deterred the peace process and rendered their efforts futile. The paper concludes that the anglophone conflict far from serving as a platform for the English-speaking people of Cameroon to express their grievances was an opportunity for local communities to understand the complexities of war and the importance of peace. It will therefore be imperative for these communities to improve collaboration among, government officials and peace experts to enable them to identify potential spoilers to give sustenance to their numerous peace efforts.

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