

Developing resilience in times of emergencies among youths in cameroon

Asangha Ngufor Muki

Cell number: 237674104164

Email: ngufor@gmail.com

Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education,
The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Abstract

The Anglophone crisis in 2016 and the outbreak of the COVID-19 global health emergency in March 2020, in Cameroon have tremendous effects on the entire population in Cameroon and the world at large. Both emergencies and its economic and social impacts have disrupted nearly all aspects of life for all groups in society especially the youths. People of different ages, however, are experiencing its effects in different ways. For young people and especially for vulnerable youth, the Anglophone crisis and COVID-19 crisis poses considerable risks in the fields of education, employment, mental health and disposable income. Moreover, while youth and future generations will shoulder much of the long-term economic and social consequences of the crisis, their well-being may be superseded by short-term economic and equity considerations. In this light, this paper focuses on developing resilience in times of emergencies among young people in Cameroon as well as creating resilient communities so as to avoid exacerbating intergenerational inequalities and to involve young people in building societal resilience. Governments need to anticipate the impact of mitigation and recovery measures across different age groups, by applying effective governance mechanisms and policies in order to help youths to be able to overcome and bounce back in times of emergencies. This paper, therefore addresses two emergency situation within the Cameroonian context (the Anglophone crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic) vis a vis its impact on education and health of youths. It continues by examining Resilience, risk reduction and sustainable development, building resilient communities in times of emergencies, technologies for building the resilience of communities and key policy messages.

Introduction

Young people are central to the demographic dividend and remain players in and advocates of social transformation and development in many spheres of life. The enormous benefits young people can contribute to can only be realized when their rights are protected and investments are made in their education, employment, health, empowerment and effective civil participation. Several initiatives on youth education and employment have been undertaken in Africa, but these need to be deepened in order to achieve the full potential of young people in contributing to poverty reduction and sustainable development especially in times of emergencies such as armed conflict and disease outbreak such as the covid-19 pandemic. The health and well-being of the planet's largest generation of youths will shape both the future of the world's health and the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to health, nutrition, education, gender equality, and food security. With the SDGs, comes a renewed and expanded focus on youth's health and well-being (Hashiguchi, 2018).

The outbreak of armed conflict in the two Anglophone regions (Northwest and Southwest) of Cameroon in November 2016 and the recent COVID-19 pandemic in March, 2020 is disrupting every aspect of people's lives especially the youths in an unprecedented manner. While many of its implications, such as confinement-related psychological distress and social distancing measures, affect all of society, different age groups experience these impacts in distinct ways. With the gradual transition of government responses from immediate crisis management to the implementation of recovery measures, several concerns are emerging, such as increasing levels of youth unemployment and the implications of rising debt for issues of intergenerational justice, as well as threats to the well-being of youth and future generations. With the

outbreak of such emergencies in Cameroon, youths find it difficult to develop and realise their aspirations and goals especially as their education and health is at stake. In this light, this paper focuses on developing resilience in times of emergencies among youths in Cameroon.

The context (impact of emergencies on the education and health of youths)

Since October 2016, the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon have been gripped by a devastating socio-political crisis. In the two years since it erupted, this crisis has evolved from a dispute between the Government and Anglophone lawyers' and teachers' unions over professional and labour rights claims, through a peaceful demand for state reforms that would resolve the 'Anglophone problem', to a violent armed conflict between government forces and armed groups that claim to be fighting for the restoration of the independence of the territory of the Southwest and Northwest regions. A major new challenge arises in those regions at the end of 2017 when the socio-political crisis that had prevailed since 2016 has turned into an open armed conflict, generating large population displacements and acute humanitarian needs. According to OCHA Situation Report No. 2 (January 2019) insecurity and violence have forced more than 400,000 people to flee their homes, with serious consequences on livelihoods and living conditions. Around 351,000 IDPs and 372,000 people in the host community need water, sanitation and hygiene services. In addition, the violence has forced over 32,000 to seek refuge to neighboring Nigeria. Many of the conflict-hit population especially youths are suffering severe emotional stress. About 3,700 unaccompanied or separated children need urgent assistance and psycho-social care.

However, social cohesion, education system, health system, administrative and traditional authority, peace and security are shaken. Some responses are recorded so far. The scale of the needs, however, requires that the various actors make additional efforts. The lack of security and inaccessibility of certain areas are forcing the humanitarian community to carry out a very rough needs assessment. As a result, information on the actual situation is largely inadequate. Only with reference to Education, by 2019, it is expected that more people will move and that girls' and boys' enrolment will continue to decrease, with serious consequences for their development, not to mention the immediate risks of abuse, forced labor, etc.

The impacts of the afore mentioned problem to surrounding populations are quite enormous and negative in that; it has led to rural-urban migration thus overcrowded towns, overcrowded homes, poor access to health and education, high rate of school dropout among many children and youths, street children, increase crime wave, sexual promiscuity and, high rate of promiscuity/sexual violence, high crime wave, high rate of unemployment, spread of diseases, untold suffering, unnecessary killings etc. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the majority of the displaced have fled into the bush with little to survive on. Others are hosted by local communities who are also grappling with adverse living conditions. Violence in the Northwest Region and Southwest Regions occurs almost on a daily basis, perpetuated by pitching armed separatists against Cameroonian government forces. The number of internally displaced persons as a result of the crisis in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon has increased according to the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, CHRDA. In a detailed report released on Thursday December 20, 2018, the CHRDA indicated that there was an upsurge of internally displaced persons as well as burnt down settlements as a result of the persisting crisis (CHRDA, 2018). About 274,908 (and counting) are internally displaced in the North West region while 278,867 (and counting) are displaced in the South West making it a 74% increase from the last census, the CHRDA. Most English speaking Cameroonians have fled their regions (NW and SW) and have sought refuge in neighbouring regions, namely the West, Littoral a Western regions of the country. This makes a total number of 553,775 (and counting) (OCHA, 2019).

In addition to the above emergency and its impacts, on Tuesday, March 17th, 2020, Cameroon announced the temporal closure of schools in response to the corona virus pandemic, as a measure to curb its spread. Everything happened so fast that individuals and academic institutions had no time to set up mechanisms to transition into 100% online teaching/learning to continue the education process for the duration of the shutdown. The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting every aspect of people's lives in an unprecedented manner. While many of its implications, such as confinement-related psychological distress

and social distancing measures, affect all of society, different age groups experience these impacts in distinct ways. With the gradual transition of government responses from immediate crisis management to the implementation of recovery measures, several concerns are emerging, such as increasing levels of youth unemployment and the implications of rising debt for issues of intergenerational justice, as well as threats to the well-being of youth and future generations.

An inclusive response to and recovery from the crisis requires an integrated approach to public governance that anticipates the impact of response and recovery measures across different age cohorts. “Building better” requires decision makers to acknowledge generational divides and address them decisively in order to leave no one behind. Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development evidence demonstrates that the pandemic has hit vulnerable groups disproportionately and is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities (OECD, 2020). For instance, young women and men already have less income at their disposal compared to previous young generations; they are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than people aged 25-64 (OECD, 2018) and less than half of young people (45%) across the OECD countries and its partner developing countries such as Cameroon express trust in government (Gallup, 2019). Intersecting identity factors, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and intellectual or physical disability, and socio-economic disadvantage may exacerbate the vulnerability of young people (e.g. poor health, homeless youth, young people not in employment, education or training and young migrants). Governments must therefore seek to anticipate the impact of mitigation and recovery measures both within and across different age cohorts to avoid widening inequalities. Economic, education and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been asymmetric across age groups. Current evidence suggests that young people are less at-risk in terms of developing severe physical health symptoms linked to COVID-19 than older age cohorts (WHO, 2020). However, the disruption in their access to education and employment opportunities as a result of economic downturn is likely to put the young generation on a much more volatile trajectory in finding and maintaining quality jobs and income.

Resilience, risk reduction and sustainable development

Conceptually, resilience is usually associated with the idea of recovering from shocks. Some of the definitions of resilience emphasize stability and the return to an original state. In this case, important elements for the assessment of resilience are the threshold of disturbance that the system can sustain and still return to an original state, and the time that it takes. Other definitions emphasize the transformation and adaptation of a system to changing circumstances. A common element of the different definitions of resilience is the idea that recovery in a changing environment requires the capacity to withstand, absorb and adapt to shocks or shifting conditions (Folke, 2006). Building resilience is a common thread across global development frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda,¹⁸ the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030,¹⁹ the Paris Agreement,²⁰ the Agenda for Humanity,²¹ and the New Urban Agenda.²² For example, the SDG 11 explicitly aims at increasing resilience of cities and human settlements, and several SDGs’ targets are directly related to resilience, such as target 1.5 on building the resilience of the poor to reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Targets related to risk and resilience in the Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable development goal	Targets related to risk and resilience
Goal 1: Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere	Target 1.5: By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability.
Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	Target 3d: Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks.
Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning	Target 4a: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

opportunities for all	
Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.	Target 9.1: Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and trans-border infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all. Target 9.a: Facilitate sustainable and resilient infrastructure development in developing countries through enhanced financial, technological and technical support to African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing states.
Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	Target 11.c: Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials.

Source: (Morton, Pencheon & Squires, 2017).

The several definitions of resilience and its importance in different global frameworks reflect the fact that resilience is a multidimensional outcome of development. The higher the level of development of people, communities, institutions, economic sectors or governments, the higher the potential resilience that they have against shocks. The term “potential” is used because the level of resilience is only revealed after the shock, and sometimes only in the long-term. Strategies for building resilience, therefore, could be like those to promote development, in its several dimensions, but with an emphasis on proactively preventing or minimizing the negative effects of shocks (ESCAP, 2012).

Building resilient communities in times of emergencies

A community is a useful unit for considering resilience because it puts at the centre of the analysis the people, who can act within their sphere of influence, while at the same time considering the social interrelations, economic activities, assets and infrastructure that are at their reach (IFRC, 2012). More so through sustainable livelihood activities such as farming, carpentry, mechanics, craft, fishing, animal rearing, blacksmithing and petty businesses such as trading, investment in life skills through traditional preparation strategies has been drawn from the firm belief that young people are agents of change with the potential of taking a leading role in socio-economic development of their communities as they transition from childhood to the world of work (Tchombe, 2011; Fomba, 2011; Asangha, 2015). The exact boundaries of communities are flexible and when considering small villages in remote areas, the community is more easily circumscribed geographically, economically and socially, as compared with people in a neighbourhood in a large city. Nevertheless, the focus on community resilience contrasts with a focus on the resilience of cities, regions or nations, and draws the attention to issues such as last-mile infrastructure, local governance, first responders, early warning, grassroots solutions and traditional, local and indigenous knowledge.

Considering the three dimensions of sustainable development, a resilient community is organized socially in a way that sufficiently empowers their people - women and men, girls and boys - to be better able to absorb and adapt to shocks (Table 2). It has the capacity to assess hazards and vulnerabilities, plan for contingency, integrate risk reduction into local development plans, promoting learning and capacity to replicate good practices (Kafle, 2012). It should be connected internally and externally, bringing together areas and sectors that had previously been disconnected, (Salvia & Quaranta, 2017). Linking with local government agencies and non-governmental organizations. It should also be organized, strengthening the sense of agency of individuals and organizations, increasing social cohesion, (Berno, 2017) involving women, the youth and vulnerable groups in decision making, increasing trust within the community, reducing the risk of conflicts, and having the ability to create local solutions in response to local problems (Barr & Wright, 2012).

Table 2: Elements of a resilient community

5 Ps of the 2030 Agenda		3 Dimensions of Sustainable Development	Components of a resilient community	SDGs
Partnership	People	Social: sufficiently empower their people to be better able to absorb and adapt to shocks.	Knowledgeable and healthy; ability to assess, manage and monitor its risks; It can learn new skills and build on past experiences.	SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 10
			Connected. It has relationships with external actors who provide a wider supportive environment, and supply goods and services when needed.	SDGs 16, 17
	Peace		Organized. It has the capacity to identify problems, establish priorities and act. Involve women, the youth and vulnerable groups in decision making.	SDGs 5, 16
	Prosperity	Economy: has an economy that can adapt to changed circumstances and self-organize to continue functioning.	Increasing economic opportunity and diversification. Financial inclusion.	SDGs 8, 9
			Increasing economic opportunity and diversification. Financial inclusion.	SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11
	Planet	Environment: Able to carry out all its activities without harming the environment	Manage natural resources. Sustainable infrastructure and services, and sustainable production and consumption.	SDGs 12, 13, 14, 15

Source: (IFRC, 2012).

Technology for building the resilience of communities

The use of computers, tablets and smartphones, and the easy production of educational videos made available through the internet stimulate and support the development of e-learning and facilitate the access to relevant and timely knowledge and information, improving the capacity to cope to shocks. Mobile technologies can support in the process of building these capacities in innovative ways. For instance, mobile phones with video recording capabilities can be used to engage the community in producing mini-documentaries, disseminated via social media, showcasing ways that people in the community could build their own capacities to increase their sense of agency. These videos present and discuss the challenges faced by the community and possible solutions to increase social cohesion. They highlight the public services and formal and informal business available to the community to increase the awareness regarding the existing life-supporting systems (Ziervogel, Cowen & Ziniades, 2016). Mobile apps can also support the education efforts for building capacities to prepare, cope and recover from disasters. Digital games are an additional technological tool for building resilience. For example, the Extreme Event is an interactive role-playing game in which participants must build community resilience in the face of health adversities, by working together to make decisions and solve problems during an engaging, fast paced adversity simulation. Game-like programmes have also been used in computer simulation based training for emergency response (Pan, Su & Zhou, 2015).

Key policy messages

To build back better a better future for all generations, governments and international bodies should consider:

- Applying a youth and intergenerational lens in crisis response and recovery measures across the public administration.
- Updating national youth strategies in collaboration with youth stakeholders to translate political commitment into actionable programmes.

- Partnering with national statistical offices and research institutes to gather disaggregated evidence on the impact of the crisis by age group to track inequalities and inform decision-making (in addition to other identity factors such as sex, educational and socio-economical background, and employment status).
- Anticipating the distributional effects of rulemaking and the allocation of public resources across different age cohorts by using impact assessments and creating or strengthening institutions to monitor the consequences on today's young and future generations.
- Promoting age diversity in public consultations and state institutions to reflect the needs and concerns of different age cohorts in decision-making.
- Leveraging young people's current mobilisation in mitigating the crisis through existing mechanisms, tools and platforms (e.g. the use of digital tools and data) to build resilience in societies against future shocks and disasters.
- Aligning short-term emergency responses with investments into long-term economic, social and environmental objectives to ensure the well-being of future generations.
- Providing targeted policies and services for the most vulnerable youth populations, including young people not in employment, education or training; young migrants; homeless youth; and young women, adolescents and children facing increased risks of domestic violence.

Conclusion

Building resilience among young people helps them to gain skills for life that help them deal with, and manage challenging situations and circumstances that are unfortunately unavoidable in life. These can include managing unexpected change, going through transitions, dealing with daily hassles or a range of stressors. Resilience also helps young people to cope with unexpected traumatic events. The ability to deal with uncertainty, change and ambiguity are key skills. Learning skills for resilience during adolescence and early adulthood can make a real change to a young person's outcomes and success in life.

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