



Cameroon Gets Connected

HENRI FOTSO

'Globalization insights' is a series of feature stories told by journalists from Africa, Asia and Latin America – stories that give an insight into the perceptions and experiences of people as globalization unfolds in their environs. This project is jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and IPS EUROPA.

Mrs. Kamguia thinks nothing of spending half her daily income on an airtime card for her mobile phone. She needs to be connected as much as her family needs to be fed. Her husband too is connected. His phone rings in the evening when he is having dinner. Immediately he hangs up. The wife wants to know who called. The inevitable quarrel begins. The husband thinks the wife has spent too much on her airtime card, and the wife rages because she suspects it was a girlfriend who called at dinner time. Cameroon is playing its part now in these globalised quarrels.

The mobile telephone, once a luxury for a few privileged people, is now accessible to many who offer it as a token to their loved ones. Or, they buy them airtime cards. Nowadays, some girls will only date boys or men who can offer them a mobile telephone. "I cannot date a guy who can't buy me a mobile phone," says Annie, a student in Lycee Jos Douala.

But the mobile phone has brought also a globalisation of amenities. The mobile phone is an asset in many towns and villages in Cameroon. Mrs. Makenmou lives in Tse quarters in Bandjoun village, which has neither piped water supply, nor electricity. Ten years ago, this mama could not imagine that she could speak with her son (businessman in Douala, some 300 km away from the village) from her thatched roofed kitchen in the village.

Today, she regularly keeps him informed about her health, thanks to the magic of the mobile phone network that has penetrated deep into the hinterland. Mrs. Makenmou's mobile phone saved her life December 2004. She could immediately call her son after a high blood pressure attack, who in turn called a doctor in nearby Bafoussam, and asked him to attend to his mother.

In some communities, the mobile telephone is also frequently used to fight crime. One just needs to dial the security numbers 12, 13, or 17 to call the police, the gendarmerie or the army. A private radio station in Douala "Equinox FM" has a night programme where people attacked by thieves can recount their experience minute by minute. Thanks to this facility, many homes have been saved from thieves.

Another outstanding fact is the proliferation of call boxes as well as telephone repairers in the streets of all towns

in Cameroon. Both fly the colours of either Orange Cameroon or MTN Cameroon, the two mobile telephone companies who took over the business from Cameroon's state owned corporation CAMTEL in 1999. The arrival of these two operators has directly and indirectly created new jobs.

Not only have the two companies influenced people's behaviour, they have extended their networks to count about two million subscribers. A third operator is believed to be ready to join the first two. This will be to the advantage of the customers, since the law of demand and supply will definitely play in their favour.

In five years, the average price of a mobile phone has dropped sharply. But the spread has brought heavy demand, and the attractiveness of the mobile phone business led to its privatisation in 1999. The sale of rights to mobile companies, though, has brought little money to the state. Much of this money seems to have disappeared into the pockets of a few stalwarts of the regime, bringing to the limelight the crucial issues of corruption, good governance, and lack of transparency in the management of public funds as well as the opacity of the privatisation process in Cameroon.

The privatisation process has known problems for some time now ranging from the opposition of natives to the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), the controversy over the sale price of the lone water distributing company SNEC, to the unresolved case of Cameroon Airlines which now has aeroplanes only on lease.

The privatisation of the mobile phone business by Cameroon in 1994 was a decisive step towards globalisation and has remained one of the rare success stories of privatisation in the country. Examples of unsuccessful ca-

ses of privatisation abound. The national electricity company SONEL was bought over in the year 2000 by a U.S. company. Five years after they took over, many people have lost their jobs and Cameroonians confront the new phenomenon of power rationing. This has created untold problems and even led to the closing down of some companies.

But Cameroon is nevertheless steadily following its path into the global village in a journey marked by the sale of government owned companies to multinationals. This was the prescription of Bretton Woods institutes (World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) who saw it as the only way out of the economic crisis that gripped Cameroon and other African countries in the late 1980s. But the result is deplored by many Cameroonians who do not seem to have reaped the promised benefits.

The fact that these privatisations have turned out to be below expectations and because the companies have mostly been swallowed by multinationals has led many to see the change as just a reshaping of colonisation through the transfer of national sovereignty from nationals to international powers in the name of multinationals and globalisation, even if it is nice, mostly, to have a mobile phone.

About the author:

Henri Folso is a correspondent in Cameroon for Agence Internationale d'Images (AITV).

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Hiroshimastrasse 17
10785 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: ++49-30-26-935-914
Fax: ++49-30-26-935-959
Roswitha.Kiewitt@fes.de
www.fes.de/globalization

IPS EUROPA
Potsdamer Platz 11
10785 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: ++49-30-2589-4017
rjaura@ipseuropa.org
www.ipseuropa.org
www.ipseurope.org