

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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CAMEROON

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN CAMEROON



PROTEGE QV

Serge Daho, Avis Momeni and Emmanuel Bikobo
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Introduction

Cameroon is a lower-middle-income country located in the West Central African region, and is bordered by six countries including Chad, Nigeria and Gabon.

Faced with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the government of this country of more than 25 million inhabitants¹ spread over 475,000 square kilometres implemented several measures to contain the virus. These included social distancing and the use of electronic communications and digital tools for education and distance learning. This, together with e-working, lead to an increase in the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the country.

In the context of a surge in demand for the internet, this report discusses how a reliance on the internet impacted the right to education in Cameroon during the pandemic. It also suggests recommendations to help civil society use the internet effectively, and to advocate for digital rights.

Background

Cameroon, like many states in the world, was not spared by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of what then appeared to be a global health crisis, the government adopted 13 measures to prevent the spread of the virus in the country, which entered into effect on 18 March 2020.² Later on, five additional measures still aimed at curbing the pandemic were taken by the government.³ These governmental actions ranged from the closure of all public and private school facilities from nursery to higher education, to the prohibition of gatherings of more than 50 people. The measures changed people's lifestyles deeply, and rapidly increased internet usage for social interaction,

e-working, information sharing and online studies. However, internet usage in Cameroon is hindered by limited internet access,⁴ costly internet data, poor connectivity, underserved rural areas and poor internet speeds.

According to the Inclusive Internet Index 2020,⁵ the country was ranked 102nd overall out of the 105 countries assessed (and tied for 13th place among 30 Sub-Saharan African countries). This means that the increased use of the internet in areas such as education or for distance work as advocated by the public authorities was not possible for most.

Accessing the internet: An uphill task for many Cameroonians during COVID-19

According to the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, "Access to the internet should be available and affordable to all persons in Africa without discrimination on any ground."⁶ The government's efforts in Cameroon to curb the COVID-19 pandemic created a range of knock-on consequences for the ICT sector, and its infrastructures and services, as access to the internet became both a key channel for authorities seeking to manage the crisis, and for citizens seeking to accommodate its exigencies.⁷

There are legal provisions relating to the right to access electronic communications, notably Law

1 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cameroon/overview#1>

2 <https://www.spm.gov.cm/site/?q=en/content/government-response-strategy-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-19>

3 Emmanuel. (2020, 13 April). Fight against coronavirus: Government takes additional measures. *Cameroon Tribune*. <https://www.cameroon-tribune.cm/article.html/31736/en.html/fight-against-coronavirus-government-takes>

4 "In January 2020, 7.8 million people were connected to the internet in Cameroon, according to a report published by Hootsuite and We Are Social, two organisations that monitor internet and social media feed. With that number of users, the internet penetration rate reached 30% in the country in January 2020." *Business in Cameroon*. (2020, 24 February). Cameroon: Internet penetration rate up 30% YoY in Jan 2020, with the addition of 570,000 news users. <https://www.businessincameroon.com/economy/2402-10003-cameroon-internet-penetration-rate-up-30-yoy-in-jan-2020-with-the-addition-of-570-000-news-users>

5 The Inclusive Internet Index, commissioned by Facebook and developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit, seeks to measure the extent to which the internet is not only accessible and affordable, but also relevant to all, allowing usage that enables positive social and economic outcomes at the individual and group level. <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/performance/overall?highlighted=CM&year=2020>

6 The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms is a Pan-African initiative to promote human rights standards and principles of openness in internet policy formulation and implementation on the continent. For more information, see: <https://africaninternetrightrights.org/en/declaration>

7 Lewis, C. (2020). Digital divisions: COVID-19 policy and practice and the digital divide in Africa. In African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms Coalition, *The impact of COVID-19 on digital rights in Africa*. <https://africaninternetrightrights.org/en/node/2553>

N°2010/013 of 21 December 2010 governing electronic communications, which states in its article 4 that “everyone has the right to benefit from electronic communications services, irrespective of his or her geographical location within the national territory.” Further on, article 28 (para 1) requires “Cameroon’s telecommunications operators to provide communications services of good quality, at affordable rates and in an uninterrupted manner.”

Moreover, Law N°2015/006 of 20 April 2015 amending and supplementing certain provisions of Law N°2010/013 of 21 December 2010 establishes the Universal Service Access Fund (in section 34), whose resources are intended *inter alia* for “the development of electronic communications throughout the national territory.” The ultimate aim of the Fund is to ensure equal, good-quality and affordable access to services.

However, a survey commissioned by the Alliance for Affordable Internet⁸ in 2014 ranked Cameroon 40th out of 46 emerging and developing nations surveyed in terms of internet access costs, with an overall score of 17.1 (out of a possible 100). At that time, the country’s failure to launch an internet exchange point (IXP) and its failure to use the WACS and ACE⁹ submarine cables were blamed.¹⁰

To date, the same is true: the cost of internet access, as evidenced by a recent study commissioned by Facebook,¹¹ is still high despite the head of state’s commitment when he said in 2015 that his government would give the ICT sector “all the attention it deserves.”¹²

Notwithstanding incentives for widespread access to internet services, both access to and affordability of the internet remain a real challenge in Cameroon for poor communities in rural areas as well as in some disadvantaged urban areas. This was particularly the case during the coronavirus pandemic, hampering a shift to e-learning, even though this was a government-led initiative.

E-learning as a display of Cameroon’s unpreparedness to face one of the COVID-19 consequences

To ward off the spectre of a “blank year” and to ensure the continuity of education in Cameroon, the government responded to the pandemic by implementing various distance-learning programmes on radio, television and using the internet. With regard to primary schools, a solution called “*l’école à la télé*” (school on TV) was launched by the Ministries of Basic Education and Secondary Education with CRTV, the state-owned radio and television broadcaster, as a technical partner. This distance-learning programme ran from 6 April 2020 until 31 May 2020, with courses broadcast on TV in both French and English. This helped to ease learning from home for more than 7.2 million pupils and students affected by the closure of schools and universities due to the pandemic.¹³

At the higher education level, the minister reminded the heads of public and private universities, during a meeting held on 20 March 2020,¹⁴ of the urgency of an appropriate and concerted response so that the academic year could be continued. Among the measures adopted were the use of institutional digital platforms that were already accessible to students for online teaching and the use of social networks.

Reactions from students, teachers and education stakeholders pointed to a lack of preparedness and readiness among all stakeholders, including the government and private education providers, as well as the students themselves. Teachers and staff interviewed pointed to a lack of computer knowledge and training opportunities as a setback to an effective COVID-19 digital learning response.¹⁵ Most teachers lacked the necessary skills, and needed to be trained in e-learning and on the use digital learning systems. In most schools in the country, the only teachers who can boast knowledge in using ICTs are computer science teachers and other teachers who teach technical subjects.¹⁶ The same applies to

8 <https://a4ai.org>

9 The West Africa Cable System (WACS) is a submarine communications cable linking South Africa with the United Kingdom along the west coast of Africa, while the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) optical fibre submarine cable system serves 24 countries on the west coast of Africa and Europe. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Africa_Cable_System and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa_Coast_to_Europe_\(cable_system\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa_Coast_to_Europe_(cable_system))

10 Owono, J., & Blanc, F. (2014). *Internet and broadband in Cameroon: Barriers to affordable access*. Alliance for Affordable Internet. <https://a4ai.org/a4ai-releases-cameroon-case-study>

11 Ibid.

12 Excerpt from the Head of State’s Message to the Nation, 31 December 2015, <https://www.prc.cm/en/news/speeches-of-the-president/1612-head-of-state-s-message-to-the-nation>

13 Actu Cameroun. (2020, 23 April). Cameroun/E-learning : la difficile épreuve de l’enseignement à distance. <https://actucameroun.com/2020/04/23/cameroun-e-learning-la-difficile-epreuve-de-lenseignement-a-distance>

14 Siyam, S., Momeni, A., Daho, S., Amahata, L., & Bikobo, E. (2020). *Le respect des droits numériques dans le contexte de la COVID 19 au Cameroun*. African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms Coalition. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Rapport-de-recherche_Respect-des-droits-numeriques.pdf

15 Ajebe Akame, G., Bates Anoma, R. A., & Crockett, J. (2021). *Cameroon’s COVID-19 Pandemic Education Response and the Shift to Distance/Digital Learning*. Solidarity and Development Initiative. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Cameroon%E2%80%99s%20COVID-19%20pandemic%20education%20response%20and%20the%20shift%20to%20distance-digital%20learning%2C%20November%202021.pdf>

16 Siyam, S., Momeni, A., Daho, S., Amahata, L., & Bikobo, E. (2020). Op. cit.

students, with many unable to use a computer, let alone meeting the challenge of providing them with the necessary devices for distance learning.

Alongside this, internet services are not evenly distributed throughout the country, a problem compounded by multiple power failures and limited access to electricity. Similarly, even the CRTV signal is not available throughout the national territory, meaning that some pupils without internet access could not even benefit from the *l'école à la télé* initiative.¹⁷

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has sounded a wake-up call on how critical internet access has become to our daily lives. With social distancing measures in force across the world at the time of writing, we are now living online (to keep in touch with our families and friends, to work or learn from home).

Through measures limiting physical contact, the government has opened up the road to the widespread take-up of ICTs. This has resulted in numerous actors in the private and non-profit sectors setting up initiatives using the internet for online learning, online work and citizen training.

Unfortunately, physical isolation has starkly exposed the digital divide across the national territory. People in poorer areas of the country and those in remote and rural areas were not able to get online. This inequality had many consequences. For instance, without internet access or computers, and most of the time without electricity, many citizens fell behind in their education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how citizens become vulnerable when governments do not protect and promote human rights in the online environment. Since many have turned to the internet to reach out, the issue of digital rights has become foregrounded. This is exacerbated by the fact that during the pandemic, civil society has faced several constraints on its ability to carry out its work as a result of lockdowns, distancing and quarantine measures.

Action steps

The pandemic has exposed barriers to internet access in Cameroon (poor infrastructures, constant power failures, high data costs, lack of adequate access devices, etc.). While these barriers existed before, the pandemic has demonstrated the direct consequences of the lack of access, particularly in the education sector. This has potentially compromised the right to education for many citizens.

To allow civil society organisations to efficiently address this issue, in the context of a growing number of people moving online, the following action steps are recommended:

- Civil society organisations should collaborate, share their skills and upskill in order to be more efficient online and reach both a local and international audience. Voices are more powerful when they are put together.
- Investigate better ways to campaign online, including by learning about successful cases elsewhere in the world. For example, organisations could use a “smart switch” to reach intended audiences through online campaigns simply by using a hashtag.¹⁸ Online petitions as well as crowdsourced social media campaigns would also be effective. However, the possibilities and limitations of these sorts of campaigning tools need to be understood.
- Humanise digital communications as much as possible for online events. The message is as powerful as the messenger.¹⁹
- Build the capacities of both civil society organisations and citizens on cybersecurity issues and on the use of personal data.
- Inform citizens of their rights online and develop the necessary capacity to protect and promote these rights.

¹⁷ Journal du Cameroun (2014, 19 March). Le signal de la CRTV disponible dans deux localités de l'Est. <https://www.journalducameroun.com/le-signal-de-la-crtv-disponible-dans-deux-localites-de-lest>

¹⁸ Bowater, D. (2020, 23 March). How to advocate effectively in the age of COVID-19. *Devex*. <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-how-to-advocate-effectively-in-the-age-of-covid-19-96812>

¹⁹ Ibid.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2021-2022 Report
www.GISWatch.org