



Gender and Transformative Social Policy in Cameroon: A Call for a Paradigm Shift

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Executive Summary

This policy brief on gender and transformative social policy outlines key orientations developed through an iterative research process in response to the persistent inefficiencies of Cameroon's social policies since independence. Drawing on findings from the project "Gendered and Transformative Social Policies in Post-COVID-19 Africa (GETSPA)," which covers 42 African countries, including Cameroon, the brief sets out a framework for more effective, inclusive and transformative development in Cameroon. Transformative, gender-responsive approaches can drive inclusive and sustainable development. We therefore advocate for a paradigm shift in the design and implementation of social policies, aligning social policy with gender justice, territorial balance, and environmental sustainability.

Our key recommendations include: (1) Promoting social equity through fairer redistribution of resources. (2) Dismantling gender hierarchies that privilege men, while addressing systemic gender discrimination and violence against women. (3) Integrating economic and social policies to foster inclusive growth and long-term socio-economic transformation. (4) Advancing territorial equity by decentralising social policy and ensuring balanced development across regions. (5) Linking social and environmental policies by introducing ecological conditionality to safeguard the well-being of present and future generations.

Introduction

Social policies are vital for advancing gender equality and equity. They serve as powerful engines for economic, social, cultural, and ecological transformation across Central African states. In Cameroon, however, six decades after independence, social policies have remained largely ineffective. Despite modest improvements in living conditions, poverty, inequality, and discrimination, particularly against women, persist at alarming levels. Today, over half of the population still lives below the poverty line.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the country's challenges. For example, weak and poorly coordinated economic and social responses deepened insecurity, worsened vulnerability in already disadvantaged communities, and eroded both equity and social cohesion. Regional disparities in development were also intensified, weakening national solidarity and territorial cohesion. At the root of these challenges lies a persistent disconnection between social and economic policy.

Current social policies have been ineffective in producing the stabilising effects and growth stimulation essential for sustainable development.

A transition towards equity-oriented, transformative social policies is therefore urgent and necessary. The paradigm of 'gendered and transformative social policy' we propose offers a compelling alternative to traditional approaches. Like all social policies it is anchored in the vision of a desired social ideal. In Cameroon, this vision is: "Zero Poverty and Social Inequality by 2035." The overarching goal is to ensure social equity and well-being for all by 2035. To achieve this, the policy sets a general objective of eradicating inequalities in the redistribution of national wealth and bridging the gap between social and economic policy in a sustainable manner.

Realising this goal requires strategic interventions in five priority areas: Gender and Equity, Economic Transformation, Social Transformation, Territorial Transformation, and Ecological Transformation.

This policy brief outlines key guidelines for operationalising the gendered and transformative social policy paradigm. It is intended for state institutions, local and national decision-makers, parliamentarians, civil society, and traditional authorities committed to steering Cameroon towards equitable and sustainable development.

Methodological Approach

Under the project titled "Gendered and Transformative Social Policies in Post-COVID-19 Africa (GETSPA)," we conducted an 18-month research initiative (April 2021 to September 2022) using an iterative and participatory approach. This included a national study tracing the evolution of social policies in Cameroon from the colonial era through to the COVID-19 period. As part of the project, we organised a training workshop that brought together diverse social stakeholders, including representatives from the state, municipal authorities, economic actors, civil society, academia, and local communities. The workshop served as a platform to explore and critically engage with the emerging paradigm of gendered and transformative social policies. Additionally, we held a series of consultations with stakeholders aimed at identifying key social challenges and co-developing contextually relevant solutions.

Gender Equity: Breaking Gender Hierarchies and Reducing the Burden on Women

In Cameroon, social policies are still shaped by traditional hierarchies that define men as "breadwinners" and women as "housewives." These socio-cultural norms have institutionalised inequality, embedding discrimination, abuse, and gender inequity into the very fabric of policy design and implementation.

A transformative paradigm is needed to end this systemic devaluation of women that continues to undermine social progress. This requires confronting and deconstructing the cultural and social constructs that sustain gender hierarchies, while reshaping the logics and practices of social policy actors. Such an approach would dismantle outdated psycho-social models, fostering a new societal order grounded in gender equity and fairer, more inclusive policy outcomes for women and men alike.

Economic Transformation: Linking Social Policy and Economic Development

For social policies to become powerful levers of economic and social transformation, they must go beyond a passive focus on protection and welfare. Current approaches in Cameroon struggle to stimulate growth and address structural challenges. A shift is needed toward proactive, investment-oriented social policies that drive inclusive and sustainable development.

This will entail coupling traditional social expenditure with strategies that generate tangible economic returns. Such bold use of social policy would strengthen its dual role: providing immediate social impact while also fueling long-term economic growth and stability. By institutionalising the interconnection between social and economic policy, social investment can be systematically converted into productive economic investment.

Two critical economic effects will emerge from this transformation. First, there will be a stabilising effect in which stronger social policies act counter-cyclically by reducing fluctuations in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and household incomes, cushioning crises, and enhancing resilience to local and global shocks.

Second, the growth effect, whereby intensified social investment increases production, will raise GDP and drive poverty reduction.

Together, these effects will position social policy not as a cost, but as a strategic engine of sustainable development and economic transformation in Cameroon.

Social Change: Fair Redistribution of Wealth for Sustainable Transformation

The transition toward proactive social policies can positively shape economic growth and generate new resources to drive social transformation. To achieve this, Cameroon must reinforce systems that combat structural barriers such as tribalism, corruption, mismanagement, nepotism, smuggling, counterfeiting, inflation, embezzlement, red tape, impunity, discrimination, and injustice.

Central to this transformation is the fair redistribution of wealth. This involves a deliberate increase in the income of the poor and a corresponding reduction in income disparities, particularly through inflation control and market regulation. Such measures are essential to ensuring socio-political stability and fostering a more just society.

Another critical imperative is the improvement of living conditions across all segments of the population. This can be achieved through the implementation of national programmes aimed at universal access to essential services by 2035, including healthcare, clean water, education, housing, electricity and internet connectivity. It is vital to establish a universal social safety net. This system should incorporate positive discrimination in favour of vulnerable groups, ensuring that social protection and wealth redistribution mechanisms are inclusive and equitable.

Finally, social investment must actively promote entrepreneurship as a cornerstone of employment creation and poverty reduction, with special emphasis on empowering women and youth as drivers of innovation and sustainable economic transformation.

Territorial Transformations: Municipalising Social Policies for National Development and Regional Balance

The role of decentralised local authorities in shaping social policies remains limited, leaving regions struggling to contribute meaningfully to Cameroon's national development. Yet genuine territorial equity and regional balance can only be achieved when localities are placed at the heart of transformative gender-responsive social policy.

This requires a strategic shift from traditional social policies toward a framework of social geopolitics where national development is balanced, inclusive, and rooted in the strengths of all regions. The interconnection between social policies and territorial governance can be strengthened through four key levers:

1. Inclusive Policy Design: Actively involving local authorities in the formulation and development of social policies to ensure that interventions are contextually relevant and locally owned.

2. Municipalisation of Governance: Decentralising the management and implementation of social policies to municipalities, thereby enhancing responsiveness, accountability, and citizen participation.

3. Capacity Building: Reinforcing the financial, technical, and institutional capacities of local governments to enable effective delivery of social services and programs.

4. Municipal Entrepreneurship: Promoting local economic development through entrepreneurship initiatives led by municipalities. This includes municipalising efforts to combat unemployment and poverty, with a focus on stimulating the local economy and fostering innovation.

Environmental Transformations: Placing Ecological Sustainability at the Heart of Social Policies

In Cameroon, the relationship between social policies and environmental policies remains weak. However, in order to promote ecological and social sustainability, this interconnection must become central to the new development paradigm. Cameroon is currently facing multiple environmental crises such as climate change, recur-

rent floods, widespread pollution of soil, water, and air, as well as biodiversity loss. These challenges increasingly affect public health, economic stability, social cohesion and contribute to the persistence of poverty.

To address these issues, social policies should integrate ‘ecological conditionality’: a principle whereby access to social policy benefits are tied to compliance with environmental standards. This prerequisite would apply to individuals, municipalities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders who are engaged in development. By embedding ecological requirements into social policy mechanisms, the root causes and social impacts of environmental crises could be better regulated.

Such a conditionality would serve as a socio-ecological safety net for all populations, especially disadvantaged groups with low resilience to environmental shocks. It would also help reduce social inequalities that are created or exacerbated by environmental degradation. This way, if environmental challenges impose a heavy social burden on Cameroon, socio-ecological conditionality can ease this burden by fostering both environmental protection and social justice.

The institutionalisation of ecological conditionality is therefore not optional but an imperative. It represents a crucial step toward ensuring that social policies not only protect vulnerable populations but also safeguard the environment for future generations

Conclusion

Social policy occupies a central place within public development strategies. It is a powerful lever for social and economic transformation that Cameroon has yet to fully harness. In the face of mounting challenges and an increasingly uncertain global context, a paradigm shift has become urgent and necessary. This policy brief provides both broad and specific guidelines to support that shift towards gender-sensitive, equitable, transformative, and sustainable social policies, which are capable of guaranteeing continuous well-being and regionally balanced development across all sectors.

The shift we propose is anchored in the vision of “Zero Poverty and Reduced Social Inequality by 2035 in Cameroon.” Achieving this vision will depend on the state’s ability to integrate and align

economic, social, cultural, and ecological policies, ensuring synergy rather than fragmentation. Importantly also, the state would need to entrench good governance practices as a foundation for accountability, inclusivity, and effectiveness. Only through such a comprehensive and integrated approach can Cameroon address today’s complex crises while laying the groundwork for a sustainable and socially just future for all citizens.

Recommendations

We propose seven major recommendations to guide the transition toward equitable, gender-sensitive, and sustainable social policies in Cameroon:

1. Make social policy an engine of growth and development

Transform social policies from being perceived merely as consumers of resources into drivers of national economic development. This involves reinforcing human capital, increasing household purchasing power (through wages), improving infrastructure and basic services, and promoting the conversion of social investments into economic enterprises, particularly through youth-led and community development projects.

2. Engender the state

Ensure the full feminisation of democratic governance in social policies by empowering women in all decision-making processes (planning, implementation, negotiation, monitoring, and evaluation). This also requires measures that favour women and other vulnerable groups across all sectors.

3. Promote youth entrepreneurship

Encourage the creation of formal enterprises through social investments targeting youth. And facilitate the shift from subsistence or “survival entrepreneurship” to entrepreneurship based on capital accumulation and long-term poverty reduction. This will diversify employment opportunities, reduce mass unemployment, and expand the national tax base.

4. Empower territories

Accelerate the municipalisation of social policies while promoting municipal entrepreneurship, territorial solidarity, and regional balance. This decentralisation will strengthen local resilience and equitable development across regions.

5. Ensure sustainability

Integrate ecological conditionalities into all social policies through a socio-ecological pact or “Social Green Deal.” At the municipal level, this approach will align ecological, economic, and social priorities, ensuring that present actions safeguard the integrity and well-being of future generations.

6. Strengthen financing

Increase the level of funding for social policies by at least fivefold to enable stronger social interventions and to reinforce national social sovereignty.

7. Improve institutional and legal frameworks

Strengthen political, institutional, legislative, and regulatory frameworks to support the efficient implementation of transformative, gender-responsive, and sustainable social policies.

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