



**OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR
SOUTH-WEST REGION**

**2023 ANNUAL REPORT SUBMITTED FOR THE
HIGH ATTENTION OF H.E. THE PRESIDENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON**

DONE IN BUEA, JANUARY 2024





REF N° _____/SWR/OPIC/PS

Buea, the: _____
Le

**H.E. THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC
HEAD OF STATE
C/O THE MINISTER OF STATE, SECRETARY-GENERAL
PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON
YAOUNDE**

SUBJECT: FORWARDING LETTER

Your Excellency,

In conformity with the concluding provision of Article 4(1) of Decree N° 2020/773 of 24 Dec 2020 to lay down conditions for discharge of the duties of Public Independent Conciliator in the North-West and South-West regions;

I have the honour, most respectful, to forward here-enclosed, for the very high attention of H.E the President of the Republic, the original of the Annual (Administrative) Report for the year 2023, of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator on the state of relations between citizens and Regional and Council Services.

Kindly accept, your Excellency, the assurances of my esteem for your high office and person.

Public Independent Conciliator
South West Region

TABLE OF CONTENT

GENERAL OVERVIEW.....	1
RESUME EXECUTIF.....	6

PART I

STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE SOUTH-WEST REGIONAL ASSEMBLY.....	10
--	-----------

PROJECTS CARRIED OUT BY THE REGIONAL ASSEMBLY.....	12
--	----

PART II

FUNCTIONING OF LOCAL COLLECTIVITIES OF THE SOUTH-WEST REGION AND RELATIONS WITH CITIZENS

ON THE STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE COUNCILS OF FAKO DIVISION.....	15
--	----

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND OTHER COUNCILS OF FAKO.....	19
--	----

RELATIONS WITH THE COLLECTIVITIES OF MEME DIVISION.....	28
---	----

RELATIONS WITH THE KUMBA CITY COUNCIL AND ITS ATTENDANT LOCAL COUNCILS.....	28
--	----

STATE OF RELATIONS WITH COLLECTIVITIES OF MANYU DIVISION.....	32
---	----

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE COUNCILS OF KUPE-MUANENGUBA DIVISION.....	37
---	----

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE COLLECTIVITIES OF LEBIALEM DIVISION.....	41
--	----

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND COUNCILS OF NDIAN DIVISION.....	44
---	----

PART III

ACTIVITIES AND FUNCTIONING OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR.....50

I.FIELD ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR IN 2023..... 51

 IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR FOR THE YEAR 2023.....52

II. ROUTINE ACTIVITIES IN THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF OUR MISSIONS.....56

III. SYNOPSIS OF THE PARTICIPATION OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR IN IMPORTANT ADMINISTRATIVE EVENTS.....59

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED.....63

RECOMMENDATIONS.....65

CONCLUSION.....68

GENERAL OVERVIEW

During the period under review- the year 2023, the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator carried out its activities in an atmosphere characterized by a relative improvement compared to the operational context of the past two years. However, it would be misleading to consider this assessment as depicting a general or sustainable improvement on the terrain throughout the Region.

To the contrary, it is simply a realistic assessment from the observation that several of the local collectivities within our Region functioned in a comparatively more stable and serene atmosphere, capable of enabling the Municipal authorities and their collaborators of the council administrative services to ensure the delivery of better services as well as the expansion of these services to some areas or localities to which it was previously impossible to guarantee services delivery.

Overall, in spite of this relative improvement in the operational context of the South-West Regional Assembly and our local collectivities, the situation remains that, as a result of the prevailing atmosphere defined by the social and security crisis that continues to affect all forms of socio-economic, administrative and even political activities within the North-West and South-West Regions, the functioning of these local collectivities still witnessed an attendant negative impact.

As it has been the case since the beginning of this regrettable situation, the different administrative units and corresponding local councils are not affected to the same extent. In this light, whereas some areas have seen the functioning of their local councils virtually or totally paralyzed during the past seven (07) years, during the period under review, some local councils that experienced a severe paralysis of their routine activities have began witnessing a slight improvement through the progressive return of the population and a timid resumption of economic and social activities, illustrated by the reopening of more schools, the re-start of periodic markets or other commercial activities.

Whereas it may be assumed that the disparities referred to herein-above could be observed mainly between the level of functioning of local collectivities from one Division to another, it is also relevant to underscore that such disparities were still observed to exist even amongst the collectivities of the same administrative unit. Expressed differently, there is none out of the six (06) Divisions of the Region wherein all local collectivities were able to demonstrate the same level of vitality or capacity to respond to the needs and expectations of the citizenry in the various localities or zones that make up the council areas.

In this connection, in conformity with the general picture presented in the annual reports of 2021 and 2022, FAKO Division was once again the administrative unit within which the majority of local councils functioned to a more or less satisfactory extent because the citizenry were able to effectively seek and obtain various services from the Council administrative services.

In the same-vein, our official visit in the month of November 2023 to Lebialem division and field reports reveal that out of the remaining five Divisions of the Region, the local councils of Lebialem Division still maintained a near status quo recording either a barely minimal level of activities or operating in a sporadic manner. The persistent insecurity and very poor state of the road network either from DSCHANG to MENJI, the Divisional headquarters or from one collectivity to another within the Division constitute the principal factors put forward as having continued to undermine and negatively impact the functioning of the three (03) municipal councils of the Division.

From a graphical or statistical perspective, the functioning of local collectivities within the other four Divisions, namely KUPE-MUANENGUBA, MEME, MANYU and NDIAN could be evaluated to fall between the two yardstick administrative units represented by FAKO on the positive side and LEBIALEM on the still-lagging behind stand point. However, this rather global or blanket assessment could cause a misinterpretation of the realities on the

ground. Indeed, a few councils of some Divisions fall into the same category with some of the Councils of Lebialelem as they were equally characterised by an insignificant level of operationality or service delivery to the populations.

Mindful of the importance of this assignment and of the need to ensure that the content of the report submitted to the highest Authority of our country is based on objectivity, the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator elaborated and supervised the administration of questionnaires involving 1092 persons throughout all six Divisions of the South West Region.

The questionnaire sought to capture the opinions of respondents about the level of awareness about the missions and functioning of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator as well as the state of relations between citizens and our Regional or local collectivities as reflected through the delivery of various services or their general performances on the terrain. Slightly different from the nature of a random sampling of opinions, our institution ensured that the questionnaires were administered to persons representing specific socio-professional groups such as service providers, market vendors, taxi or motorbike drivers, shops owners, council agents, civil servants, youths, officials of civil society organisations etc who are considered as representing categories whose activities are either directly supervised by council administrations or interact more frequently with these council services.

In the same light, in order to avoid globalizing these opinions, the questionnaire was elaborated to reflect the perception of satisfaction levels concerning aspects such as the organisation of marriages and delivery of civil status documents, hygiene and sanitation, the collection of market revenue (tickets), the management of the activities of taxi drivers and motorbike riders, the perception of attitudes of corruption or practices of discrimination, maintenance of secondary roads etc.

An analysis of the responses obtained reflects varying rates of approval or dissatisfaction, attaining over 70% satisfaction rate in several council areas

concerning the organisation of marriages and the issuance of civil status documents. On the other hand, the areas that show a weak approval rating concern the perception of practices of corruption wherein 44% of respondents deplore such negative practices as well as hygiene and sanitation where only 28% of respondents, especially in the urban areas consider the efforts of their council administrations as satisfactory.

In terms of structural organisation, this annual report will be presented under three main parts in the following sequence:

- Part 1 shall be devoted to examining the relations between citizens residing within the South-West Region and the Regional Assembly which has, as a Regional authority or decentralised regional collectivity, the responsibility of carrying out activities, projects and actions aimed at ensuring an amelioration in the living conditions of the population of the entire Region.
- In the same light, Part II will examine the state of relations between citizens or Service Users of the local collectivities -City and Municipal councils of the six Divisions comprising the South-West Region. As proximity structures of local governance, this section of the report will be more elaborate, examining this relationship per Division because it is obvious that the rhythm and quality of the delivery of services to citizens cannot be homogenous or identical from one administrative unit to another or even within the different councils of a specific Division.
- Deriving from the evaluation carried out under Parts I and II, Part III will present a synopsis of the activities of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator as it deployed itself to ensure the accomplishment of its missions during the year 2023.

The presentation of the conventional or routine activities of our institution will, as of necessity, be accompanied by a review of challenges

or difficulties encountered during the performance of these duties, eventual recommendations and a conclusion.

It is my earnest hope that the structural presentation adopted for this 2023 Annual Report of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator for the South-West Region will ensure ease of consultation or cross-checking of relevant information and analysis on specific aspects or domains, rendering it convenient for exploitation and overall comprehension.

RESUME EXECUTIF

Au cours de l'année 2023, période prise en compte dans l'élaboration du présent rapport annuel, les activités des collectivités territoriales décentralisées ont été menées dans un environnement qui continue d'être secoué par la crise socio-sécuritaire affectant les régions du Nord-Ouest et du Sud-Ouest depuis plus de six ans.

Toutefois, l'on ne pourra s'abstenir de reconnaître qu'en dépit de la persistance de cette atmosphère, il a été observé sur le terrain une relative amélioration permettant ainsi aux administrations de certaines collectivités de mieux se déployer en vue de répondre aux attentes des citoyens relevant de leurs zones de compétence.

Nonobstant cette appréciation ou évaluation globale, il convient de souligner que le rythme de fonctionnement de ces collectivités locales a varié d'une circonscription administrative à une autre, voire même à l'intérieur d'un même département car, la crise sécuritaire qui constitue aujourd'hui le principal handicap à une meilleure expression de la gouvernance locale n'a pas impacté l'ensemble de circonscriptions administratives avec la même intensité.

Dans certaines collectivités territoriales décentralisées, cette relative amélioration du contexte opérationnel a été mis à profit afin d'étendre des prestations attendues à un plus grand nombre de citoyens. Alors que l'on peut s'en réjouir pour ces efforts louables fournis par cette catégorie d'acteurs de la gouvernance locale, il y a également lieu de relever, pour le déplorer, le fait que même avec cette évolution positive constatée sur le terrain, d'autres élus locaux et services administratifs des communes chargés de répondre aux besoins et attentes des populations se soient contentés de maintenir le statu quo, assurant le stricte minimum alors qu'un peu d'engagement et de dynamisme aurait permis de faire mieux au profit de ces populations.

Dans ces circonstances, le bilan de l'état des relations entre les citoyens et les collectivités territoriales décentralisées de notre Région est mitigé et le reflet des efforts d'encadrement fournis par les élus locaux chargés de l'animation, au quotidien, desdites structures ou institutions régulièrement dotées des moyens affectés par l'état pour l'accomplissement de leurs missions.

A titre comparatif, le département dont les collectivités locales ont, comme par le passé, affiché un niveau de fonctionnement peu susceptible de produire un impact significatif sur leurs populations est le département du Lebialem. A cet égard, connu comme figurant parmi les circonscriptions administratives les plus sévèrement impactées par l'actuelle crise sécuritaire, l'état de dégradation des routes aura accentué l'enclavement de ce département et contribué aux difficultés rencontrées au sujet du fonctionnement de ses collectivités.

A l'opposé, bénéficiant d'un environnement globalement stable et sécurisé, le département du FAKO a demeuré, à l'instar du niveau de fonctionnement observé dans les années antérieures, la circonscription administrative dont les collectivités locales ont démontré des capacités opérationnelles permettant une relative satisfaction des besoins des citoyens dans une majorité de ces communes. Ainsi, l'interaction relevée au quotidien entre les usagers et les différents services des administrations communales constitue un indice fiable d'une évaluation de l'état des relations entre les citoyens et ces collectivités locales.

Toutefois, consciente de l'importance du présent rapport et dans le souci de s'assurer que le contenu soumis à la très haute appréciation du Chef de l'Etat reflète l'objectivité, notre institution a élaboré et supervisé la conduite à travers l'ensemble des six départements de la région, d'un sondage sous forme d'un questionnaire administré à un total de 1092 répondants.

L'objectif recherché à travers ledit questionnaire était de recueillir les impressions des citoyens et usagers des services communaux au sujet des

relations entretenues avec ces collectivités, évaluées en termes de diligence et de la qualité des présentations offertes aux Usagers.

A cet effet, alors qu'il pourrait paraître similaire à un sondage classique à bien des égards, nous l'avons conduit de manière relativement différente en ciblant des catégories socio-professionnelles précises, notamment les prestataires de services (opérateurs économiques) au profit des communes, propriétaires des boutiques louées auprès des services communaux, des buyam-sellam et autres commerçants au sein des marchés construits, les conducteurs de moto-taxis, responsables des organisations de la société civile etc dont les activités les mettent en contact quotidien avec les autorités municipales ou responsables des services communaux.

Dans le même esprit, dans l'optique d'éviter l'amalgame dans les réponses, le questionnaire a été structuré de manière à permettre une évaluation du niveau de satisfaction relatif à différentes catégories de prestations telles que l'organisation des mariages et la délivrance des actes d'état-civil, le domaine de l'hygiène et de la salubrité à travers le ramassage des ordures ménagères, la disponibilité des toilettes publiques dans les espaces collectifs (marchés, gares routières), la perception des actes de discrimination ou de corruption, la collecte de l'impôt forfaitaire, l'entretien routière, l'approvisionnement en eau potable etc.

A l'issue de cette opération, une analyse des informations recueillies nous a permis de constater des taux de satisfaction atteignent 70% à l'endroit de certaines communes notamment du département du FAKO pour la qualité des prestations et la diligence relative aux prestations susmentionnées. En revanche, cette analyse révèle également des préoccupations avec un taux de 44% de répondants dénonçant ce qu'ils considèrent comme des pratiques de corruption ou de discrimination à l'endroit des usagers. Plus préoccupante est le secteur du ramassage des ordures ménagères dans les agglomérations avec seulement 28% de répondants s'estimant satisfaits.

Dans sa présentation structurelle, le présent rapport annuel comporte trois parties. La première partie est consacrée à l'examen de l'état des relations ou rapports entre les citoyens et l'assemblée régionale dont les actions et interventions sur le terrain sont censées avoir un impact positif sur le quotidien desdits citoyens à travers l'amélioration de leurs conditions de vie.

La deuxième partie fera une évaluation de l'état desdits rapports avec les collectivités locales en l'occurrence les mairies de villes dont la Région du Sud-Ouest en compte deux ainsi que les trente-et-une commune de la Région. En tant que structures de proximité en contact directe avec les citoyens et appelées à assurer une participation effective desdits citoyens dans les actions touchant leur vie au quotidien, l'état des rapports entre ces derniers et leurs collectivités peut permettre d'avoir une idée sur les bienfaits du processus d'implémentation de la décentralisation dans un contexte marqué par le transfert progressif des ressources financières correspondant au transfert des compétences.

Quant à elle, la troisième partie traitera du fonctionnement des Services du Public Independent Conciliator à travers son déploiement sur le terrain et les différentes actions ou activités menées au cours de l'année 2023 en vue de l'accomplissement de ses missions.

PART 1

STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE SOUTH-WEST REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Following its initial years of functioning which could be considered as a period of apprenticeship and laying the foundation, pursuing the laudable actions undertaken in 2022, the actions of the Regional Assembly in 2023 contributed to the consolidation of the healthy relations which have been established between citizens in various parts of the Region and their collectivity.

Naturally, this positive relationship was not perceived in the same manner across the different administrative units of the region for comprehensible reasons. As determined by the prevailing security situation on the terrain, some administrative benefitted from more projects than others because the atmosphere permitted their realization. However, it is important to point out that in conformity with the pattern observed during 2022, the Regional Assembly carried out projects in all six Divisions of the Region, thereby demonstrating not just a progressive mastery of the terrain but also a conscious effort to respond to the priority preoccupations of the local population.

Considering that its mode of deployment on the terrain and activities differ from the classical activities of local collectivities that maintain direct interaction with citizens or Service Users who approach them to obtain various services such as civil status documents, building permits, the allocation of market spaces, the coordination of activities in motor parks, garbage disposal in urban centers etc., it is through the pertinence of the choice of envisaged projects and the effective realization of these projects that the actions of the Regional Assembly can contribute to an improvement in the livelihoods of citizens and establish or sustain positive relations with them.

In this regard, the choice of projects executed in various localities of the Region under the auspices of the Regional Assembly in 2023 were an illustration of concerted action and consensus on the basis of development

priorities brought up by Regional Councilors from their constituencies. A general examination of the break-down of these projects reveals that five major sectors received special attention, namely: Health, Education, the provision of potable water, Electrification and Road maintenance. From this global evaluation, it can be observed that about 70% of total projects fall in the social domain, making it the priority sector of attention in 2023 and about 30% for the economic domain represented notably by a number of important roads maintenance projects.

An analysis of the allocation of these roads maintenance projects shows that the main beneficiary Divisions were LEBIALEM, MEME and NDIAN which encounter severe problems of accessibility or enclavement. Consequently, the execution of these projects produced a relatively positive impact on the livelihoods of the local population by facilitating not only the movement of persons but also of agricultural produce in these localities.

In the same light, the authorities of the Regional Executive Council and entire councilors of the Regional Assembly deserve to be commended for the special attention paid to the domains of electrification, the provision of drinking water and health; especially as it is well established that there is a close link between access to good drinking water and the overall health of the population. From a quantitative perspective, out of a total of fifty-six (56) projects realized by the Regional Assembly, twenty-two were in the domain of rural and urban electrification whereas eighteen (18) were in the sector of the provision of potable water, covering localities in all six Divisions of the Region.

Whereas the inhabitants of each beneficiary locality would salute the realization of a project in their area, a qualitative analysis reveals that both in terms of the population size of beneficiary localities and probability of impacting livelihoods, some of the executed projects had a more significant impact on the wellbeing of the population than others. Categorized per Division, some of these high impact projects include the following:

PROJECTS CARRIED OUT BY THE REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

DIVISION	PROJECT DESCRIPTION	OBSERVATION
FAKO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction or grading of earth roads in 03lots. Lots1:6km road in Mutengene. - Construction of boreholes and water supply in four lots. Lot 3: Electric borehole with overhead tank at MOWOTE and MBONJO (Limbe). - Construction of boreholes and water supply in 04 lots. Lot4. potable water supply at MISSELELE, Phase II. - Installation of solar street lights on 04lots. Lot1: Idenau Town. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project received in August 2023. - All completed and received on different dates in August 2023.
KUPE- MUANENGUBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Solar electrification of some villages in Bangem sub-division (Ekante, Muelong, Nuasum and Poala). -Provision of solar street lighting in Tombel town. -Provision of medical accessories for the x-ray machine in the Tombel District Hospital. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project received in July 2023. - Project received in July 2023. - Project received in July 2023.
LEBIALEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grading of the road from 3 corners Alou to Kongho to Letia and Mmockbin market. - Installation of solar street lights in Nkongle and Ntemzem. - Rehabilitation and extension of potable water supply network in Ngoh to Essoh Attah Village. - Construction of water tank and supply of potable water from Echeh-Nchuh to EFONG. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project completed and received in October 2023. - Project received in July 2023. - Project received in June 2023. - Project received in July 2023.
MANYU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of a solar powered borehole at MBINJONG with water tank. - Solar lighting of Eyumojock town. - Solar lighting at Akwaya town. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project received in July 2023. - Project received in July 2023. - Project received in July 2023.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of a block of two classrooms in some localities in the South-West Region in 04 lots: lot2: GSS Mile 22. - Rehabilitation of Mfuni water supply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project received in August 2023. - Project received in July 2023.
MEME	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of a cement paved road in Kumba town, phase II. - Construction /Grading of earth roads in 03 lots. Lot 3: Earth road in MBONGE Marumba. - Installation of 10 solar street lights for 3 corners Bekondo, 10 at Big Bekondo and 10 at Big Massaka Lot 1. - Installation of 20 solar street lights at Big NGBANDI Lot 3. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project received in November 2023. - Project received in August 2023. - Project received in July 2023. - Project received in July 2023.
NDIAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction/ grading of Earth roads in 03 lots. Lot 2. Earth road in Ekondo-Titi - Construction of a fence and a science laboratory in some localities in the South-West Region. Lot 1: GBHS Ekondo-Titi, phase II. - Construction of a fence and a science laboratory in some schools in the South-West Region: Lot2 GHS Isangele phase 1. - Supply of medical equipment at TOKO hospital. - Electrification using solar panels in Betengue Balue-NDIAN. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project received in August 2023. - Project received in August 2023. - Project received in June 2023. - Project received in July 2023.

A content appraisal of these sample projects per Division reveals that the Regional Assembly is striving to sustain healthy relations with citizens of the Region through the diversification of projects selection with emphasis on priority sectors. However, notwithstanding the establishing and preservation of such healthy relations, it is a little regrettable that whereas the realization of several of these projects ought to be complementary with similar actions undertaken by the local councils, some of which have individual budgets corresponding to over a billion, representing about 30% of the budget of the

Regional Assembly, these commendable actions of the Regional Assembly are serving more as substitution for the absence of high impact projects by local councils.

This observation is illustrated by the realization of solar street lights in the headquarters of several local councils such as Tombel town, Tinto township, Nguti town, Eyumojock town, Idenau town etc which are relatively active councils whose separate budgets are adequate to envisage the execution of such electrification projects whose average cost is CFA 25million.

Over and above the physical realization of projects that are contributing to the building of a commendable level of trust and healthy relations with citizens, there remains a lingering interrogation about the capacity and willingness of these grassroots political leaders-the ninety Regional Councilors to use these positive performance as an effective sensitization tool towards the population in order to achieve more visible results for the return to a more peaceful atmosphere within the Region. The prevalence of a more peaceful atmosphere in areas that were previously classified as “red zones” as a result of the active involvement of these local political leaders in peace sensitization campaigns would be an even more tangible indicator of the nature of relations between the institution and citizens of the Region.

PART II

FUNCTIONING OF LOCAL COLLECTIVITIES OF THE SOUTH-WEST REGION AND RELATIONS WITH CITIZENS

ON THE STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE COUNCILS OF FAKO DIVISION

As outlined in the general overview, the local collectivities of FAKO Division are amongst the few throughout the Region whose level of functionality could be considered to have enabled a relatively satisfactory performance of their duties in an attempt to respond to and meet the aspirations of the citizenry.

In this regard in examining the state of relations between the population and their local councils within this Division, we will begin with the Limbe City Council which is one of the two existing in the South-West Region. This approach is explained by the consideration that an examination of the state of relations deriving from the functioning of this special collectivity virtually also covers the same purpose for the Limbe I, II and III Councils which comprise the scope of competence of the City Council for the benefit of the same citizens.

During the year 2023, the state of relations between citizens and the Limbe City Council was generally satisfactory although relatively dampened by the fact that the officials of this collectivity were observed by the population as having suspended some of the previous flagship socio-cultural activities that habitually cemented a healthy and favorable relationship with their collectivity. These activities include the popular holiday football tournament in both the Male and Female categories as well as the Limbe FESTAC whose renown had grown beyond FAKO Division and the South-West Region as a veritable platform for social communion and consolidation of the spirit of living together amongst the various components of the cosmopolitan population of this city.

However, the officials of the City Council administration earned considerable approval from a cross-section of the population for their fight against manifestations of urban disorder especially within the City Center by ensuring relatively greater discipline in the activities of the category of inter-urban transporters known as “clando drivers” or clandestine transporters.

As it could be expected, while such actions were commended by segments of the population, the main actors in this irregular activity viewed the actions of City Council officials with deep resentment describing these actions as a form of harassment and a failure on the part of the City Council officials to show appreciation for what they consider as their own efforts and contributions to the fight against “ghost town operations” imposed by separatists, especially on Mondays or other targeted periods.

Another area of intervention of the City Council Administration towards which relations with the inhabitants of the Municipality was considerably mitigated is the domain of garbage disposal. Indeed, on numerous occasions in the course of the year, sentiments of discontent and dissatisfaction were recorded from a significant fraction of the population, especially in densely populated or crowded neighbourhoods about what they considered as the disappointing performances of the City Council administration or simply as its failure to ensure the regular removal of garbage and household waste within the city.

In a city that had earned admiration in the recent past as one of the cleanest cities of our country, the expression of such feelings of discontent from its inhabitants about a deterioration in the general standards of hygiene and sanitation could not positively boost the state of relations with the citizens.

To this situation, the explanation frequently advanced concerning the non-payment of expenses undertaken by the garbage disposal company – Hysacam is also an illustration of one of the areas of an absence of a cordial relationship between the City Council administration and its administrees.

Preoccupations about financial challenges were also witnessed through the relatively prolonged delays observed in the settlement of the bills of services providers or economic operators who do business with the City Council.

Beyond these areas characterized by relatively conflictual relations between the collectivity and its citizenry, it was observed that the City Council administration carried out other routine activities such as guaranteeing public access to civil status documents, the diligent examination of applications, granting and follow-up of building permits, the allocation and management of market spaces as well as the supervision of activities within motor-parks to ensure the protection of passengers and citizens seeking services therefrom.

From its deployment and performance on the field, it could be observed that the City Council administration received favourable reactions from its inhabitants concerning some interventions of its municipal police, some of whom have occasionally been deployed to assist school pupils' cross busy roads or regulate movements and traffic around some crowded junctions and market entrances.

On the other hand, during the rainy season which is usually quite long within the Region, covering over seven (07) months of the year, the occurrence of floods and mudslides triggered by heavy and persistent rains showed the limitations of the City Council or respective local council administrations of Limbe in the management of these emergency situations. This attracted expressions of disappointment because during 2023, the ordinary population and businesses registered huge material losses and destruction of property.

During these regrettable incidents which have become recurrent in several neighbourhoods or quarters of Limbe, the population expressed sentiments of frustration and concern about the inability of their collectivities to take adequate measures to ensure better drainage that could provide relative protection to citizens especially those living in low-lying areas close to sea level such as Down Beach, Church Street and Clerks Quarters.

Furthermore, although the territory of the Limbe III council (BIMBIA) constitutes an integral part of the jurisdiction of the Limbe City Council, citizens of various localities within this council area considered the interventions of the city council in their municipality as timid or non-existent during 2023 for some; an assessment that illustrates the absence of positive relations with these citizens.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND OTHER COUNCILS OF FAKO

In the examination of the state of relations between citizens and the other councils of Fako Division, the Buea Council deserves, for comprehensible reasons, to be given more special attention. Indeed, beyond the two City Councils of our Region, the Buea Council is the biggest of the thirty-one (31) local collectivities. As headquarters of the Region, recent indicators also illustrate that, it also has a high population density including a significant number of previously internally displaced persons, who now seem to have either become fully integrated into the community or no longer consider themselves as temporary residents.

Furthermore, as chief-town of the region, it regularly receives numerous personalities and persons from other parts of the Region and beyond, making it a good yardstick for an assessment of relations between it as a local collectivity and citizens.

During the year 2023, relations between the Buea Municipality and citizens or its residents were globally commendable. However, it is important to recognize that these relations were frequently fluctuating, dictated by specific situations or the nature of challenges faced by these citizens. Consequently, were these relations to be presented in a graphic manner, there will be periods of the year wherein the state of relations will be perceived to be more positive than at other periods.

In this regard, beyond a general assessment, there are a number of factors that have contributed to this positive state of relations with its residents or other citizens. These include:

- The positive response of authorities of the Buea Council during the severe flash floods registered in this Municipality during the month of March 2023 and subsequent relatively minor catastrophes. Indeed, although the occurrence of this disaster took everyone unaware, the

proactive approach and prompt interventions of the Lord Mayor in person, accompanied by his collaborators of the Council administration provided significant relief to the families of victims, the injured and others who were rendered homeless following the destruction of their homes.

Although carrying out these interventions without any established professional training in the domain of disaster management, the actions of officials of this collectivity during the emergency phase, deploying a caterpillar to open up blocked passages, clear debris brought down the mountain, and even deploying its personnel during active search and rescue operations of persons not accounted for, contributed in mitigating the immediate consequences and possibly preventing loss of more lives.

In immediate follow-up actions, the Council also began handling the medical bills of the injured and hospitalized, prior to the arrival of more comprehensive assistance from the Head of State. These actions considered as an act of compassion and solidarity greatly boosted relations between this collectivity and citizens, even with those not related to any beneficiaries.

In the same light, in conformity with the directives of Hierarchy concerning the holding of budget orientation discussions, the authorities of the Buea Council registered favourable reactions with its citizens, through the organization during the month of November 2023 of a Town-hall Meeting aimed at identifying the priority concerns of citizens of the Municipality as well as a subsequent working session devoted to budget orientation debates between the population and their locally elected officials.

Whereas what is beneficial to the population is realizing how effectively the resolutions or recommendations of such exchanges are translated into concrete actions, it should nevertheless be recognized that the organization of these participatory exchanges fostered healthy relations between the

Municipality and citizens who felt consulted and directly involved in the taking of decisions that are likely to have an impact on their welfare.

In other related activities, during the last quarter of the year, the officials of the Buea Council administration also carried out commendable follow-up activities aimed at protecting the health of the population, by insisting that the slaughtering of any livestock for commercial purposes and mass consumption be carried out, only at the approved slaughter houses where proper sanitary inspections could be conducted. Occurring within a context wherein it has been increasingly established that the mass consumption of sick or infected livestock could be a source of health epidemics, such follow-up and control activities earned the confidence of a cross-section of the population.

Besides these specific activities, the positive state of relations between citizens and the Buea Municipality has been relatively consolidated through the performance of its routine activities, namely:

1. The celebration of numerous marriages and the prompt delivery of civil status documents;
2. The relatively commendable maintenance of discipline and order within the local markets through the combined actions of the Municipal Police and the market masters or mistresses;
3. The regular examination of applications and granting of building permits as well as follow-up actions on the field to prevent random or arbitrary constructions that could contribute to urban disorder;
4. The relatively smooth and peaceful functioning of motor parks without passengers complaining about the usual inconveniences associated with this environment such as rampant theft from pick pockets, rudeness and even cases of violence.

In addition to the performance of these statutory duties, it was also observed that citizens expressed a commendable level of satisfaction about the manner in which the Municipal authorities used the media, including

community radio stations to ensure the dissemination of information on various issues – advertising projects, publishing project award results as well as general sensitization or explanations about envisaged actions.

However, notwithstanding these areas in which the performances of the Municipal authorities contributed to establishing positive relations between citizens and their collectivity, there equally exist domains in which the performances of Council administration were a source of concern, attracting negative observations or criticism from the population.

Prominent amongst these domains was the general hygiene and sanitation sector especially the removal of garbage and household waste in which the Council administration demonstrated noticeable shortcomings. Indeed, during the better part of the rainy season, the town and its streets were overwhelmed with heaps of decomposing garbage that represented a direct health hazard to those living within the vicinity of these garbage dumps.

Whereas it can be observed that the Council authorities and garbage disposal company – HYSACAM made relatively commendable efforts especially during the last two months of the year, the recurrence of this situation which was already highlighted in the 2022 annual report as an area of disappointment to the population, constitutes a strong indicator that, the area of waste management and disposal remains a sector in which significant efforts need to be deployed in order to improve relations through a more positive performance rating, meeting the expectations of the population who view this domain as having a close link to their overall health.

Similarly, the lack of action by the Council administration in ensuring the existence of public toilets in the markets which are usually crowded, stand taps for running water as a complementary hygiene and sanitation measure as well as the absence of slaughter slabs for slaughter and plucking of chickens, remained a source of complaints from market vendors and citizens who come to carry out their purchases in these markets.

Considering that the attention of the Municipal authorities has been formally drawn to this preoccupation without attracting any visible actions or initiative aimed at providing a remedy thereto, it is no surprise that the performances or rather lack of performance by the Council administration in this respect cannot inspire confidence or positive reactions from citizens who hold genuine expectations on these issues.

The same observations have been registered from the population about the absence of street lighting which is viewed as a contributing factor to insecurity in several neighborhoods.

As regards the state of relations between citizens and other collectivities of FAKO Division in 2023, the Muyuka council administration deserves to be commended for its efforts to pursue and sustain the trend established in 2022. Indeed, previously featuring amongst the most severely affected of local collectivities, not only within FAKO but across the South-West Region, the Muyuka council began undertaking, in 2022, a series of initiatives aimed at reversing the situation which had caused the council administration to be practically relocated out of its territory.

In this regard, after successfully re-implanting the council administration to resume activities from its official premises, the state of relations between this collectivity and citizens was observed as having been relatively positive during the year 2023. On account of this relationship, the council administration was able to function without any major interruption during the period under consideration.

Dependable feedback from the terrain shows that the council administration was able to ensure the provision of routine services comprising the delivery of civil status documents, a resumption in the issuing of building permits which had been suspended during a period of over four years, the organization and functioning of markets and quite reassuring, a resumption of the use of the municipal mortuary.

One of the major indicators of the positive state of relations between this collectivity and citizens is the fact that although the municipality as a territory remains amongst the red zones of the prevailing security crisis, the council premises and other facilities used by its administration were no longer the target of attacks by separatist fighters as it was the case in previous years.

Similarly, the council administration was able to regularly collect routine taxes from within its constructed township markets and shops that have progressively reopened their doors. The steady improvement in the level of economic activities observed within the town during 2023, whereas the town had remained seriously paralyzed for over four years, was a concrete illustration of the comparatively positive state of relations with the local council administration.

Indeed, in the past years, businesses that collaborated with the council administration by opening their doors or paying taxes became immediate targets of separatists who often reacted through setting such businesses on fire or vandalizing them. A tangible illustration of this improvement in the state of relationship was provided through the recent adoption of the 2024 council budget which witnessed an increase attributed to the council's ability to collect taxes as well as having expanded its scope of activities.

After these positive actions crowned by the holding of the sessions for the adoption of the Administrative and Management accounts as well as for the examination and adoption of the 2024 budget, it will be of interest to observe how the officials of this local collectivity conduct their activities in this year 2024 in a bid to meet the expectations of the citizenry or seek to sustain the positive actions and strengthen the relative trust and confidence established in 2023.

Alongside the LIMBE City and BUEA Municipality, the TIKO Council remains one of the major municipalities of FAKO Division and the South-West Region in general and constitutes a collectivity of interest not only as a result of its geographical location at the gateway into and out of the Region but also

because of its rapidly increasing population, some of whom took up residence in the Council area as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) during the prevailing crisis.

True to its performances in 2022, the administration of the Tiko council maintained generally healthy and stable relations with its citizenry, ensuring the uninterrupted provision of regular services to the population. Beyond classical services such as the delivery of civil status documents, the follow-up and issuance of building permits, the coordination of the functioning of township markets, the officials of the Tiko Council introduced a cultural innovation that attracted positive reactions from its inhabitants.

This cultural innovation was materialized by the organization of the maiden edition of the TIKO cultural festival bringing together the diverse communities within the municipality as well as several sporting and folklore activities. The timing of the event towards the end of the year 2023 and the massive mobilization and participation of grassroots populations served as an indicator of the cordial relations that exist between the council administration and its residents.

In the same light, the collectivity also earned some admiration from the population through a commendable organization and coordination of the functioning of the motor parks especially in the town of Mutengene where these premises have usually been the source of numerous inconveniences such as cases of theft, loss of luggage or physical violence. The laudable initiative in this sector was also accompanied by the extension of the use of numbered jackets by motor bike riders. This initiative of better organizing the activities of motor bike riders received favourable reactions from the population who consider it as likely to curb acts of insecurity about which numerous citizens frequently point accusing fingers at motor bike riders suspected of active complicity in the commission of acts of criminality.

In the same vein, the council held both sessions for the adoption of its administrative and stores management accounts as well as the examination and

adoption of the 2024 budget. It is useful to highlight that although these sessions maybe viewed as a formality, the passionate debates leading even to the disruption of sessions in some localities illustrates that the smooth organization of these sessions is often an indicator about the state of relations.

However, notwithstanding these globally positive relations, the area of hygiene and sanitation remained a domain in which inhabitants continue to express relative disappointment. As regards garbage disposal within the township areas for example, citizens drew attention to the disturbing situation in the vicinity of Mutengene markets and the Regina Pacis college, all situated along the main highways from Douala-Buea and Douala-Tiko-Limbe. To these concerns, the citizenry also re-echoed the absence of running water to improve hygiene in these crowded areas.

Similarly, in 2023, another domain which was observed to be a source of unhealthy relations between the Tiko council administration and the population was the sector of meeting the aspirations of service providers or contractors. Indeed, as if in a repeat of the situation observed in 2022, the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator once again received and examined some complaints from contractors against the Municipal Executive for the protracted delay and even what they viewed as a deliberate refusal to pay bills for services rendered.

In this regard, contrary to some of the cases examined in 2022 wherein we pointed out that some of the projects were duly executed and received under the mandate of the former Mayor, one of the disturbing cases for 2023 was about services provided and officially received by the current Mayor who after taking the commitment to collaborate towards an amicable settlement, surprisingly did a volte face which left the complainant in frustration and bitterness even when the attention of this municipal authority was drawn to an emergency health situation concerning a close relative and dependent of the complainant service provider.

Confronted with such a situation that can only be interpreted as blatant bad faith, our institution was compelled, in conformity with the regulations in force, to address a report to the immediate supervisory authority-the Senior Divisional Officer for Fako Division in the hope that the Mayor would demonstrate a greater consciousness that the raison d'être of council administration services is satisfying the genuine preoccupations of the citizens rather than causing them to feel unduly penalized. This action was in conformity with to section 370(3) of the General Code of Regional and Local Authorities which states “where his injunction is not heeded, the Public Independent Conciliator shall prepare a special report which shall be communicated to the defendant and the Representative of the State in the local authority concerned”.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND COLLECTIVITIES OF MEME DIVISION

Similar to the context of local collectivities of Fako Division, the Councils of Meme Division equally functioned in an atmosphere characterized by a relative amelioration compared to their operational context in 2022. As a logical corollary, it could be expected that the Councils ought to have provided better services to the population and established a positive relationship therefrom.

In similarity with Fako Division, Meme Division also has a City Council – the Kumba City Council that covers the territory of the Kumba I, II, III Municipal Councils. On the same basis of the impact the actions of this special collectivity are expected to have on relations with citizens across the sphere of these three Local Councils, we shall not examine them separately except in circumstances where there are specific observations.

A-RELATIONS WITH THE KUMBA CITY COUNCIL AND ITS ATTENDANT LOCAL COUNCILS

During the year 2023, relations between the Kumba City Council and its Service Users and inhabitants were perceived to be unhealthy, characterized by recriminations and expressions of disappointment from a majority of the local population over what they consider as the non-delivery of various important services.

In this light, the protracted delays or non-execution of several earmarked and duly budgeted projects drew interrogations from the population about the benefits of decentralization, if local authorities who are fully aware of the priority preoccupations of citizens fail to meet these expectations.

Beyond the non-realization of several envisaged projects, part of the disappointment of the population was also attributed to the fact that most budgeted projects were described as being almost systematically awarded to the

same few economic operators to the detriment of the greater number of local economic operators who have been left with sentiments of resentment or bitterness.

Even more unfortunately, some observers have pointed out that whereas the public perceives projects to be awarded to only a few economic operators, the reality is worse as such observers indicate that the overwhelming majority of these projects are actually executed by the City Mayor using surrogate business names. These criticisms have not militated in favour of positive relations between this important collectivity and its citizens who repeatedly highlight two primary objections, namely:

- a) The violation of the principle of conflict of interest whereby the vote-holder has sidelined other service providers and has become the main economic operator towards the Council over which he exercises authority, thereby sacrificing his role as the guarantor of equity or impartiality in the award of contracts between competing economic operators.
- b) The issue of granting priority of payments to contracts executed or services provided by these surrogate business entities, while the few economic operators who occasionally benefit from contracts suffer prolonged delays in the payment of their own services.

Another consequence of this regrettable situation, which has equally contributed to the poor state of relations with this local collectivity is what is described as an attitude of discrimination in the selection of earmarked projects with some neighbourhoods feeling sidelined for the benefit of others considered to be favoured on the basis of personal considerations instead of pertinence.

As a result of this generally unenviable atmosphere, several citizens complained even to the immediate council supervisory authority, some extremists amongst them not hesitating to express regrets and disappointment

about what they view the error made in electing this Head of the City Executive into office.

It is in the same light that some have expressed dismay that the same Municipal authority demonstrated amazing disregard in refusing to execute directives from H.E the Minister of Decentralisation and Local Development as well as from the Governor of the South-West Region on the payment of the bills of a citizen considered to have been the victim of injustice.

Brought to our attention, we also invited the Kumba City Mayor for an amicable examination of the matter, not in order to bring in any new analysis but rather to reach an understanding with the City Mayor on the most convenient approach to ensure these payments in conformity with the high directives mentioned above but to our amazement, this local authority responded to our initiative with total indifference to say the least.

However, as if to make-up for these shortcomings, the inhabitants of parts of the City expressed joy about the actions of the municipal authorities of Kumba I whose dynamism in the delivery of services contributed to reassuring the populations through the realization of some projects that positively impacted their livelihoods.

Beyond the three municipalities that constitute the Kumba City Council, MEME Division possesses two additional local councils in the MBONGE and KONYE councils whose level of functioning could not match that of the Kumba I, II and III councils and with varying relations with citizens.

During the period under consideration, the MBONGE council administration confirmed the positive trend observed during 2022 by sustaining relatively stable relations with inhabitants of the municipality. This was rendered possible by the fact that in spite of the challenges of insecurity and inaccessibility during a better part of the year, the Head of the Council Executive is resident at council headquarters.

As a result of this uninterrupted functioning, guaranteeing access to Service Users on a regular basis, the citizens feel the effective presence of their

collectivity even though services provided were essentially the core services of most council administrations namely the issuance of civil status documents, the supervision of the functioning of markets, support to some schools within the municipality as well as the follow-up of the execution of earmarked projects.

This action which was initiated a few years back by the Municipal authorities in order to encourage and sustain the then very fragile return to school in numerous localities of the Region has now become a routine action, attracting favourable comments from parents, students and even some school officials who consider it as a concrete step towards peace-building and a progressive return to normalcy.

Against this backdrop of relative confidence between citizens and their local council administration, the municipal authorities ensured the organization and holding in its official premises of the sessions for the adoption of the administrative and stores management accounts as well as that devoted to the examination and adoption of its 2024 draft budget.

Contrary to this situation that prevailed within the MBONGE council area, the KONYE council administration recorded the weakest level of functioning amongst the five local councils of MEME Division. As a corollary, the state of relations between citizens and their local collectivity was observed to be timid and purely symbolic.

Indeed, whereas this municipal council is one of the few within the Region to be situated along a tarred road-the Kumba-Mamfe road which makes it very accessible as concerns the urban center, the council administration remained unable during the year 2023 to ensure regular and stable functioning of its services.

STATE OF RELATIONS WITH COLLECTIVITIES OF MANYU DIVISION

Whereas the general assessment of the operational context for collectivities of the Region is that this context witnessed a relative improvement making it possible for the Council administrations to establish positive relations with citizens through the provision of expected services, the situation was disappointingly different in Manyu Division. In 2022, it was observed that out of its four local councils, two functioned in a relatively optimal manner thereby rekindling hope within its citizenry of witnessing an improvement in subsequent years.

To the contrary, during the period under review, the collectivities of this administrative unit presented a highly mitigated picture as the Eyumojock and Mamfe Councils which showed promising prospects in 2022 were unable to reproduce these performances and thereby create a positive impact on the majority of the population.

As regards the Council of Divisional headquarters, feedback from the terrain reveals that the bulk of its activities consisted essentially in the provision of routine services comprising in the delivery of all categories of civil status documents, the issuance of building permits and the follow-up of petty economic activities in its township markets.

Regrettably, this collectivity is observed to have entertained a negative relationship with segments of economic operators especially those identifying themselves under a loose association described as the “Manyu Economic Operators Union”. Essentially characterized by controversies and even tensions, this situation generally hampered any positive relationship between the council administration and this category of citizens because instead of establishing an atmosphere of serene collaboration which could be mutually beneficial, the suspicions, accusations and counter accusations fostered a negative relationship.

In the same light, as opposed to the hopes and expectations generated by the close of the year 2022 when the Council administration was perceived as

striving to expand its scope of provision of services or realization of envisaged projects to some neighbourhoods and localities outside the urban perimeter, over 70% of the activities of the Council in 2023 were concentrated within this urban center.

Naturally, this inability of the Municipal Administration to extend services or carryout projects in other localities or areas within its jurisdiction meant that citizens living within such localities could not benefit from any direct impact actions from their local collectivity.

In the same light, the administration of this local collectivity was unable to organize, in keeping with the directives of Hierarchy, the town hall concertation and budget orientation meetings that may have enhanced direct participation of the population and contributed to boosting relations with citizens.

However, as one of the two municipalities of the Division whose Mayor was regularly resident in the headquarters, the council administration was functional and enabled citizens living in the urban center to seek and obtain the routine services which constitute the core activities of most municipalities. Similarly, the council was able to hold the statutory deliberative sessions for the adoption of its administrative and stores management accounts as well as for the examination and adoption of its 2024 draft budget.

As regards the Eyumojock Council whose performances were highly commended in the year 2022, its state of relations with citizens were relatively satisfactory in 2023, partially sustained by the positive image established in the previous year. Indeed, while the council administration ensured a relatively normal functioning and accessibility to Service Users, beyond conventional services such as the delivery of civil status documents, follow-up of the functioning of township markets or other revenue-providing economic activities, the activities of this collectivity were essentially concentrated in Eyumojock and the border town of EKOK, known for its bustling economic activities.

The failure of the Council administration to carry out projects and activities in other localities within the council's jurisdiction could be attributed to the resurgence of acts of violence and criminality, which although sporadic or isolated, nevertheless created an atmosphere of insecurity. An illustration of this deplorable situation is the abandonment of the clearing of roadsides (travaux de cantonage) along the tarred road axis from Mamfe-Eyumojoek to Ekok. Naturally, the cleaning of these roadsides improves visibility and reduces the number of road accidents; a situation which should be beneficial to the population.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings over which segments of the population expressed disappointment, the Council Administration took an initiative at the end of the year which attracted favourable reactions and appreciation from the local population. The gesture of solidarity carried out by the Municipal authorities of this collectivity through the award of numerous gifts to some needy and vulnerable persons was positively saluted by inhabitants as a genuine act of solidarity especially as it enabled the beneficiaries to also have bright end of year celebrations.

As regards the state of relations between citizens and the Akwaya and Tinto Councils, these relations were essentially symbolic for both collectivities during the year 2023, corresponding to the rate of functioning of these councils.

In the case of the Tinto council, whereas the Head of the Municipal Executive was observed to be fairly present within his council area, the level of functioning of the council administration simply ensured accessibility to the few citizens still resident in the headquarters of this collectivity for the provision of essential services.

Operating in a context of near-total paralysis of socio-economic activities, potential Service Users and the population living in other localities outside Tinto such as TALI, FOTABE, MBANGA PONGO, EBEAGWA, SABES, TAKWAI, MFAITOCK I etc. could not feel the impact of the actions of their council from which they are almost cut-off. It is also useful to highlight that

although the Tinto Council like most local councils, was able to organize its administrative accounts and budget adoption sessions, both sessions took place in Mamfe-the Divisional headquarters and not within its own council premises or even territory.

Obviously, under these circumstances, the holding of town hall meetings or participatory budget orientation exchanges remained a remote idea that can only be contemplated with a return to greater security because the successful holding of these activities requires the mobilization of community stakeholders and their movement over relatively long distances.

From a comparative perspective in relation to previous years as well as with other councils of the Division, relations between citizens and the Akwaya council remained very timid characterized by only sporadic and symbolic interactions.

Indeed, due to the atmosphere of rampant insecurity that continued to affect all facets of activities in this vast and highly populated Municipality, the council administration faced teething difficulties in ensuring any effective functioning during the period under review. Characterized by a severe paralysis of its activities, even the delivery of civil status documents that represent the baseline service for a majority of local councils was also seriously affected.

Consequently, it was no major surprise that confronted by these challenges, the Akwaya council administration found itself compelled to hold both the administrative and management accounts session and that for the examination and adoption of its 2024 budget in Mamfe. The inability of any local collectivity to hold these statutory deliberative sessions either within its own premises or its territory of activity is the biggest illustration of the insignificance of the impact of its actions in the promotion of the well-being of its local population.

Overall, as it was already highlighted in 2022, the functioning of the local collectivities of Manyu Division and the state of relations entertained with the citizens in 2023 remained a mitigated picture which could best be summarized

thus: while laudable efforts were made during the year by officials of some of these local councils, the satisfaction of the needs and expectations of the population which can lead to the establishment of positive or healthy relations requires even greater efforts, dynamism and capacity to mobilize the adhesion of citizens to their actions.

However, the consolation that could be drawn from this disturbing reality is that trapped by the trauma of insecurity created by sporadic acts of violence, there were no manifestations of discontent or visible acts of protest concerning the below-average performances of their collectivities because citizens within the various collectivities were understandably more preoccupied about the physical survival of their families than assessing the relationship with their collectivities.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE COUNCILS OF KUPE-MUANENGUBA DIVISION

Apart from the council administrations of FAKO, MEME and NDIAN Divisions, the local collectivities of KUPE-MUANENGUBA Division could be considered as amongst those that entertained relatively positive relations with citizens within their territories of activities. However, just as it is the case with councils in other Divisions, the councils of Kupe-Muanenguba Division did not have a homogenous or identical rate of activities and consequently registered a disparity in the impact of their actions and relations with the population.

Amongst its three Councils, Tombel council demonstrated the highest level of vitality through its regular and uninterrupted functioning to respond to the expectations of its resident population. Through its consistency in the provision of routine services to Service Users and its participation in various official or public activities within the municipality, the council administration established a satisfactory relationship with a cross-section of the population.

However, it is important to highlight that during the year 2023, due to the atmosphere of insecurity that continued to persist in numerous adjoining localities which fall under the jurisdiction of this collectivity, the activities of the council administration were once again concentrated almost exclusively within the urban center of the council headquarters. As a result, the populations of large agglomerations such as EBONJI, ETAM, NGUSI etc with a high population density and huge economic potentials could still not access or benefit from expected services or projects.

Unfortunately, whereas this could be perceived as a shortcoming in the actions of the council administration, the enclavement of these localities situated along the 40km long Loum-Kumba road axis which has suffered severe deterioration during over six years of the prevailing security crisis also renders it highly difficult for the local council administration to envisage any

realizations within these localities that could contribute to an improvement of their livelihoods and thereby boost the relations with these citizens.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, one domain in which the Municipal authorities made laudable efforts towards sustaining positive relations with citizens was the provision of statutory or prescribed assistance to the nursery and primary schools within the framework of the minimum package. During the year 2023 and contrary to the situation that prevailed in 2021 or 2022, wherein a cross-section of parents and headteachers drew attention to the failure or prolonged delay by Tombel municipal authorities to make available this package, feedback showed a more serene collaboration which ensured the regular functioning of these elementary level schools, much to the satisfaction of parents after past years of disruption.

Regrettably, while this council administration had the potentials to take more initiatives capable of contributing to the welfare of its citizenry, there are preoccupations about the irregular presence of the Head of this council administration, a situation which the inhabitants believe does not enable the collectivity to function in an optimal manner to produce the expected results.

In the same vein, the uneasy relations with potential services providers or contractors constituted another domain in which the council attracted considerable criticism from inhabitants who, like in the case of the Kumba City Council, pointed out that the Head of the Council Executive promoted unhealthy competition by using or abusing her prerogatives as contracting authority to award any lucrative projects to business entities using surrogate names to the detriment of other contractors, especially indigenes who complain that they are not feeling the benefits of decentralisation.

Functioning within a relatively homogenous environment as opposed to the Tombel council area wherein the population is very cosmopolitan, the Bangem council administration maintained globally cordial relations with citizens within its municipality during the year 2023. This cordial state of relations was preserved as a result of the regular functioning of the council

administration, enabling it to respond to the basic demands for services by various Service Users.

In this regard, in addition to the celebration of marriages and the delivery of civil status documents, the council administration was commended for the participatory approach it has adopted by involving traditional rulers and representatives of the grassroots population in the follow-up of the execution of projects earmarked in their localities. The local population views this innovation not only as an illustration of transparency but also as a way of ensuring the proper execution of such projects with the watchful participation of representatives of the beneficiary population.

Similarly, the relative peace and calm observed within many localities of this council area during the period under review, leading to a progressive resumption of petty businesses and more especially agricultural activities for which the area is well known constituted a further indication about the positive relations between citizens and the municipal officials although the credit also goes to the patient actions of local administrative authorities who remained resident and some political leaders. The overall cordial relations with citizens was also demonstrated through their positive mobilization and participation in the mini-agropastoral show.

In this atmosphere, the council administration was able to hold the statutory sessions for the adoption of its administrative accounts as well as for the examination and adoption of its 2024 draft budget.

Amongst the three local collectivities of Kupe-Muanenguba Division, the Nguti council administration recorded a relatively timid level of functioning with corresponding timid relations with its inhabitants. However, it is useful to point out that pursuing the courageous actions undertaken in 2022, the Head of the Municipal Executive and collaborators earned favourable reactions from the local population in 2023 by ensuring a more regular functioning of the council administration on the ground after a period of total paralysis of its activities registered from 2018 to 2020.

Taking advantage of its more regular functioning and accessibility to the public, a commendable number of service users were able to receive attention and routine services from their council administration. Notwithstanding, it was also observed that as it was the case for numerous other local collectivities, the action of the NGUTI council administration were essentially concentrated within the urban center of the municipality. Consequently, a significant portion of its citizens residing within rural or peripheral localities remained virtually cut off from receiving any beneficial activities from their collectivity. This deplorable observation was attributed to the persistent insecurity in some localities and the enclaved nature of most of the municipality.

The council administration was nevertheless commended by its residents for its subtle approach which they viewed as gradually yielding fruits as seen through the progressive resumption of economic activities especially with the NGUTI urban center as well as the follow-up of the execution of some beneficial projects such as the execution of street lighting considered as a boost in the fight against insecurity and criminality.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE COLLECTIVITIES OF LEBIALEM DIVISION

From a general perspective concerning the three local collectivities of Lebialem Division, relations with citizens during the year 2023 were almost summary and symbolic. However, the picture does not apply evenly to each of the three councils taken in isolation as they did not have the same rhythm of functioning and impact on the livelihoods of the local population.

Amongst the three local councils of this administrative unit, the one whose level of functioning could be considered as relatively acceptable under the prevailing circumstances was the WABANE council. Even in its relatively laudable level of functioning, it is important to indicate that as it was already the case in 2022, the WABANE council administration continued to function in 2023, from within its municipal territory but out of the council headquarters.

Due to the security challenges on the terrain, it was observed that the council administration was only accessible to inhabitants of the localities of NTEMZEM and NKONGLE from where it has been functioning for the past years. Deriving from this proximity, the council administration was able to sustain a level of positive relations with the resident populations of these densely populated areas which are also well-known for their bustling economic activities and especially agricultural productivity.

Regrettably, these new dynamics mean that the resident population of several important communities of this council area such as Besali, Bechati, Folepi and lower Bamumbu remain virtually cut off from accessing services delivery from their council administration. Notwithstanding, it was quite reassuring to note that during the period under review (2023), although functioning from out of its administrative headquarters, the council administration was able to ensure the provision of routine services such as the delivery of civil status documents and the follow-up of the functioning of the Nkongle main local market.

In the absence of the provision of other expected services, this performance was considered as reassuring by the local population who equally commend the determination of the Head of the Municipal Executive who maintained a relatively stable presence on the field during 2023, thereby ensuring an acceptable level of functioning of the council administration.

It is within this framework that the council administration was able to organize and ensure the holding, within its territory at the locality of Nkongle, of the sessions for the adoption of the administrative and stores management accounts as well as for the examination and adoption of its 2024 draft budget.

To the contrary of the laudable performance of the WABANE council, the council of the Divisional headquarters-MENJI and its sister council of ALOU were unable to establish any stable relations with citizens during 2023 as reflected by reports of their essentially sporadic presence within their council territories.

To corroborate this perception of the irregular presence and intermittent level of activity within the jurisdiction of the council area, an interpretation of the data collected from the questionnaires administered to assess the level of public awareness about the existence of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator and accessibility to various council services reveals that only eighteen percent (18%) of citizens currently residing within Lebialem Division had access to routine services from their collectivities during the year 2023.

In comparison to other Divisions of the Region, this constitutes the lowest rate of accessibility to services from local council administrations throughout the Region and demonstrates how fragile the relations were between these collectivities and inhabitants of their council areas. Whereas this regrettable situation was attributed to the persistent atmosphere of insecurity, it should also be underscored that citizens who thus had no evidence of the presence and functioning of their local council can only view statements about the effective implementation of decentralization with skepticism.

In the same light, while the ALOU council administration was able to secure the holding of the sessions for the adoption of its administrative and stores management accounts, as well as for the examination and adoption of its 2024 budget, the MENJI council could not do so in its official premises or even within the Divisional headquarters.

Against the background of these weak and fragile relations within citizens of their collectivities, encouraging signals were observed through some recent actions of the MENJI council administration. Indeed, the purchase of a caterpillar and other road maintenance equipment in October 2023 was greeted favourably by the local population who have suffered from severe enclavement and inaccessibility due to the inability of designated contractors to carry out scheduled road maintenance works.

Consequently, considering the maintenance of secondary roads as one of their major priorities, the local population is eagerly looking forward to seeing an improvement in their daily lives through the facilitation of the movement of persons and goods. How this will be translated into concrete realizations can only be assessed at the end of 2024.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND COUNCILS OF NDIAN DIVISION

With a total of nine (09) local councils, the state of relations between citizens and the local collectivities of NDIAN Division varied from one council to another largely influenced by the level of effective functioning of each council administration. Overall, true to the situation observed during 2023, the day-to-day functioning of the councils of NDIAN Division was seriously influenced by specificities linked to its geographical location and challenges of accessibility.

An evaluation of their level of functioning and state of relations with citizens in 2023 shows that the collectivities of this administrative unit could be grouped into three (03) categories as follows:

- A- Those whose activities were relatively satisfactory such as Ekondo-Titi that remains the most vibrant local council of the area and to an extent Mundemba – the council of the Divisional headquarters.
- B- Those that recorded a symbolic level of functioning through the provision of routine services. The five councils of the Bakassi peninsular- Kombo Abedimo (AKWA); Kombo Itindi (NGOSSO); Isangele, Idabato and Bamusso all fall into this category.
- C- Councils whose state of activities was basically sporadic and not stable. The TOKO and DIKOME BALUE councils belong to this category.

A: In spite of its own challenges resulting from difficulties in accessibility and a persisting atmosphere of relative insecurity, the Ekondo-Titi council was once again the most functional council administration within NDIAN Division. Deriving from the quasi-permanent nature of its activities and proximity with its local population, it was able to preserve and sustain relatively satisfactory and stable relations with Service Users.

During the year 2023, citizens continued to seek and obtain routine services such as the delivery of various civil status documents, the issuing of building permits and the coordination of the functioning of markets and shops especially within the urban perimeter of the territory of this collectivity.

Obviously, the inability of the council administration to extend its activities and provision of services to areas outside the urban center was synonymous to the absence of any direct contact or beneficial relations with citizens living at the periphery. However, an analysis of field data obtained through the recently administered questionnaire reveals a high approval rate of its performances totaling sixty-two (62) percent in two categories covering very satisfied representing 34% and relatively satisfied, representing twenty-eight (28) percent.

In the same light, the council administration was one of the few that was able to hold its sessions for the adoption of administrative and stores management account as well as for the examination and adoption of the 2024 draft budget within its official premises.

Alongside the Ekondo-Titi council, the Mundemba council administration was also credited with relatively satisfactory relations between it and citizens. Drawing from the acceptable level of security in this Divisional headquarters and the effective functioning of several administrative services, the council administration equally registered a stable and regular functioning, enabling citizens to seek and obtain routine services.

Benefiting from this favourable context, the Mundemba council administration continued to guarantee access to basic services, essentially comprising civil status documents, the follow-up and encouragement of the functioning of nursery and primary schools within the town center.

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that just as it was the case for numerous council administrations within the Region, activities of the Mundemba council were essentially concentrated within the central localities or areas of its municipal territory, thereby depriving those living outside the urban

zone from any significant contact or benefits from the actions of their collectivity.

Similarly, its inability to extend activities and provision of services to citizens living in the suburbs or rural localities of the municipality was accompanied by a very weak capacity in the collection of local taxes which should have constituted its sources of internal revenue to enable it improve on services delivery for the benefit of the population.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, the effective presence of municipal authorities and personnel of the council administration established a laudable level of confidence with the population. It is in the same spirit that the council administration successfully organized and held the 2023 sessions for the adoption of the administrative and stores management accounts as well as for the examination and adoption of its 2024 draft budget.

B: In our examination of the state of relations between the local councils of NDIAN Division and the citizens therein, it was considered appropriate to devote a separate section to these relations within the local council administrations of the Bakassi peninsular. The *raison d'être* of this separate analysis is informed by the awareness that although these collectivities have their own specificities, they also have a major characteristic in common.

This characteristic concerns the composition of the population which is constituted of over ninety (90) percent by foreigners in some localities like IDABATO. Due to the peculiar activities of these foreign residents-essentially Nigerians who are primarily involved in fishing and various forms of trans-border trading, it is difficult to observe any positive impact from the state of relations between these local councils and the resident populations.

Furthermore, it is also relevant to draw attention to a curious aspect about the perception of these relations by this resident population of foreigners. In their perception as revealed from feedback obtained during our field missions, positive relations with the councils are synonymous with realizations by the council administrations for the benefit of the population without attracting any

corresponding or eventual obligations and responsibilities from the population by way of the payment of local taxes.

In this connection, feedback illustrates that during the year 2023, virtually all of the five councils that makeup the Bakassi peninsular area namely KOMBO ABEDIMO (AKWA); KOMBO ITINDI (NGOSSO); ISANGELE; IDABATO and BAMUSSO entertained relatively controversial relations with the local population due to any attempt by the council administration to collect the laid down local taxes from regular economic and fishing activities.

Closely linked to this reality is the fact that virtually all of these councils continued to function as in the previous years from subventions and financial resources provided by the state with little or no contribution from internal revenue. In other administrative units or local councils, the execution of projects and the functioning of the local collectivities is beneficial to a predominantly resident indigenous Cameroonian population but the reality is fundamentally different within the Bakassi peninsular where the essentially foreigner population benefit from similar projects but orientate their activities such as sales of fishing products towards a prominent neighbouring country, frequently resisting any positive collaboration with local authorities and carrying out almost no investments like the construction of personal houses to sustain an improvement in their living conditions.

Under the circumstances, the only council administrations which recorded a relatively different reality within the Bakassi peninsular are BAMUSSO, ISANGELE and KOMBO ABEDIMO that have a sizeable indigenous Cameroonian

population apart from various categories of civil servants working in these localities.

As regards the Bamusso council administration which again showed encouraging signs of dynamism during the year 2023, it sustained the already existing positive relations and undertook some actions that contributed to boosting these relations. In a council area which has a commendable indigenous

population co-habiting with the non-national Nigerian population, established most in the locality of Bekumu, the provision of electricity supply in mainland Bamusso was very favourably greeted by the population.

In the same vein, the efforts to build and preserve these cordial relations was also observed during 2023 through the peaceful co-existence observed between the Musgoum fisherman whose social integration within this council area has been greatly facilitated by the stable atmosphere prevailing within this locality. The only area of regret is the fact that several localities of the council area situated in the Boa Balondo plain remained essentially cut off from their council headquarters due to severe inaccessibility and could not benefit from any positive actions by their council administration.

Similarly, the Isangele and Idabato council administration equally made commendable efforts during the year 2023 to build confidence and trust with citizens of their municipalities. In Isangele, the council administration was credited with a water supply project in an area where potable water has always been amongst the highest priorities. In Idabato, the council administration continued to follow-up the construction of a concrete embankment to protect the population from aggressive erosion and the encroachment of the sea whose overflow caused significant material damage in the settlements some years ago.

Under these circumstances, the three councils, Bamusso, Isangele and Idabato organized and held deliberations for the sessions on the adoption of the administrative and stores management accounts as well as for the examination and adoption of their 2024 draft budgets within a relatively calm and peaceful atmosphere.

As indicated in the introductory paragraphs concerning the state of relations with local collectivities of NDIAN Division, the TOKO and DIKOME BALUE fall within the category of local council administrations whose functioning during the year 2023 was essentially symbolic. This evaluation is not new as the situation was already highlighted as regards 2022.

There were two obvious reasons used to explain the inability of these council administrations to maintain any effective presence on the field and so seek to have a positive impact on the population. These challenges are linked to the high level of inaccessibility to both council areas and the direct corollary of the present state of insecurity which continued to characterize most localities. Indeed, the council administrations of these administrative units continued to function from within MUNDEMBA-the Divisional chief town and thus remained essentially cut-off from citizens of their municipalities apart from sporadic actions occasionally carried out on the terrain and almost exclusively at the municipal headquarters.

PART III

ACTIVITIES AND FUNCTIONING OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR

The activities and functioning of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator will be presented under three main sub-components as follows:

- I- A presentation of our various field activities carried out during 2023;
- II- Our routine activities and functioning in the accomplishment of the missions assigned to this institution;
- III- Participation in other administrative or official activities.

Before proceeding to this structural presentation of our activities and the functioning of the institution, it is useful to indicate that just as it was the case regarding the functioning of the Regional and local collectivities of the Region, the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator sought to accomplish its duties within the Region in a context still characterized by an atmosphere of insecurity in many localities although the general situation witnessed a relative amelioration as indicated in the general overview to this report.

However, we were able to carry out a significant number of activities in various localities and administrative units of the Region thanks to the kind assistance of the Representative of the State in the Region, administrative authorities in the areas in which we organized such activities as well as the Regional Officials of the Defence and Security forces whose presence enabled us to carry out activities lasting two days in unpredictable localities such as Mamfe in Manyu Division and Alou in Lebialem Division.

I. FIELD ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR IN 2023.

In a bid to avoid lengthy descriptive passages which may not facilitate reading and understanding or easy follow-up of our activities on the field during 2023, I considered it more appropriate to present these activities through a synoptic table. An exploitation of this recapitulative presentation will reveal that the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator deployed itself in various field activities in conformity with our pre-established Plan of Action.

In terms of coverage of administrative units, we were able to organize sensitization and concertation seminars in five out of the six Divisions of the Region with the exception of NDIAN due to challenges of accessibility with the only option being maritime travel. In the same light, our institution carried out activities in four out of the six Divisional headquarters to the exception of MENJI, Lebialem Division. In some administrative units such as FAKO and KUPE-MUANENGUBA Divisions, we were also able to hold activities in both the Divisional headquarters and other council localities.

It should also be highlighted that these seminars or concertation meetings did not involve the same participants or socio-professional categories as some targeted Municipal authorities, their deputies and collaborators heading core services for which there is a high demand from the population while others were organized according to the format for town hall meetings, bringing together frontline community stakeholders such as traditional and religious authorities, civil society leaders, market vendors, motor bike-riders, shop owners etc.

IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR FOR THE YEAR 2023

DATE	ACTIVITY	VENUE	CONVENOR	OUTCOME
12 th January 2023	<p>Seminar with Chiefs of Services of key services sought by Users of Local Collectivities of Kupe Muanenguba and Lebialem divisions Bureau Heads in charge of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Civil Status Registry -Town Planning and Construction -Urban Transport and Circulation -Hygiene and Sanitation; <p>Theme: “Meeting the Aspirations of Service Users by Reinforcing Collaboration with some Stakeholders of Local Collectivities.”</p>	Tombel Council Hall	Public Independent Conciliator	<p>-Awareness created on the duties of council workers towards users.</p> <p>-Participants more conscious of their obligations towards their municipalities.</p>
27 th January 2023	<p>Acquaintance visit of the Governor, Representative of the State to the premises hosting the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator for the South-West Region in Buea accompanied by the President of the Regional Assembly/ Bureau members of the Regional Executive Council, Civil Society</p>	Office of the Public Independent Conciliator	Public Independent Conciliator	<p>H.E. the Governor and stakeholders to acquaint themselves with the new premises from which we accomplish our missions.</p>

	Organisations, Religious and Administrative authorities among other stakeholders			
14 th February 2023	First Ordinary Session of the South-West Regional Assembly	Mt Hotel Buea	President, South-West Regional Assembly	-Special reports on development projects executed in the region in 2022. -Prospects for 2023
23 rd February 2023	Concertation seminar with City and Local Council stakeholders of Meme and Manyu Divisions on the theme: “Concerting with some Stakeholders of City and Local Councils on how best to meet the Aspirations of Service Users.”	Kumba I Council Hall	Public Independent Conciliator	-Rich exchanges between the participants and the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator. -Lord mayors/ collaborators appreciated the meeting at the grassroots levels and promised to sensitize their communities on the Missions of the Public Independent Conciliator.
19 th April 2023	Concertation and Sensitization seminar with the City Mayors of Limbe, Mayors of FAKO and Ndian Divisions and some of their collaborators on the theme: “Office of the Public Independent Conciliator (OPIC) and Major Stakeholders of City and Local Councils of Fako and Ndian	Limbe City Hall	Public Independent Conciliator	Consented to carry on with the sensitization on the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator in their respective municipalities.

	Divisions: “Reinforcing Collaboration to Enhance Local Governance for the Benefit of Service Users.”			
20 th April 2023	Meeting with Youths of the South-West Region on theme: “Pursuing Engagement with Youths of the South-West Region as partners in our actions at the Service of citizens.”	Limbe City Hall	Public Independent Conciliator.	Determined to be engaged in sensitizing their colleagues, relations and parents on the missions of OPIC through encouraging nonviolent communication.
07 th June 2023	Meeting in connection with the ongoing preliminary works for the rehabilitation of the Tiko Airport.	Tiko Council Hall	Governor, South-West Region.	Participated in order to have a direct idea about the expectations of community stakeholders about this important project.
07 th July 2023	Town-Hall Meeting with Stakeholders and Population of Manyu Division. On the theme: “Office of the Public Independent Conciliator: Engaging Manyu Community Stakeholders on How best to meet their Expectations for Quality Services from Local Collectivities”.	Mamfe Town Hall	Public Independent Conciliator.	-Fruitful seminar; the population of Manyu demonstrated understanding of the missions of OPIC and their rights and obligations as users of the council services. -Committed to sensitization of the population in their municipalities.

11 th August 2023	Invitation to the 5 th session of the committee to follow-up the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Major National Dialogue.	Mt Hotel Buea	H.E. Chief Dr Joseph Dion Ngute -Prime Minister, Head of Government.	12 points recommended on the pursuit of dialogue in order to bring peace for the development of the Region.
30 th August 2023	Town-Hall Meeting with Community Stakeholders of Kupe-Muanenguba Division on the theme: “Concerting with Community Stakeholders of Kupe-Muanenguba Division to improve Collaboration between Local Collectivities and Service Users.”	Bangem Council Hall	Public Independent Conciliator.	Traditional and Religious authorities committed to join in the awareness drive.
4 th -6 th October 2023	Capacity Building workshop for staff of the Office	Conference Hall OPIC-Buea	Public Independent Conciliator / CEPLODEV (Center for the Promotion of Local Development)	Participants drilled extensively on theoretical and practical issues related to improving performance during organizing fieldtrips.
09 th November 2020	Town-Hall Meeting with Community Stakeholders of Lebialem Division on the theme: “Office of the Public Independent Conciliator: Concerting with Community Stakeholders of Lebialem Division on Ways and means of Reinforcing Local Governance.”	Alou Council Hall	Public Independent Conciliator.	Awareness and sensitization appreciated by the different stakeholders who committed to continue with the sensitization drive.

Alongside these sensitization activities, local language broadcasters on at least twice a week basis used all the local languages of the South-West Region to also sensitize inhabitants of the region of the Missions of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator; who can bring a complaint and the complaint procedure from April to December 2023. Of added significance in this sensitization drive was the use of local radio stations in divisions that had one to inform, educate and raise awareness on the missions and activities of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator. Weekly live- programmes by staff of the Office were held in “pidgin”- the lingua franca, understood by majority if not all the citizens /inhabitants of the region in a bid to reach out to all categories of citizens and potential Service Users.

Overall, as it was the case for similar actions in the second half of 2022, emphasis was placed on pursuing sensitization in order to reinforce awareness at the grassroots about the missions and duties of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator because it was still and is still our observation, confirmed through findings of the recently administered awareness questionnaire, that notwithstanding consistent efforts in the past, a cross section of the population remains uninformed about the existence and regular activities of our institution.

II. ROUTINE ACTIVITIES IN THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF OUR MISSIONS

Alongside our field activities in 2023 as outlined here-above, we remained committed to the performance of the regular duties conferred on our institution. In conformity with these missions, these duties consisted in receiving, examining and amicably settling disputes submitted for our attention through complaints from citizens.

During the period under review, OPIC received and examined a total of thirty-four (34) complaints. Out of this number, twenty-seven (27) were

resolved within the laid-down time frame of less than two months. Actually, through our diligent actions, over 70% of these complaints were examined and amicably resolved within a month and others even more promptly thanks to a few cases of immediate collaboration from the council administration concerned.

It is also important to signal that while examining the complaints received in the course of 2023, we also continued examining and seeking solutions, especially at the beginning of the year to some of the pending complaints received in the last days or weeks of 2022 and which had not been conclusively resolved. Similarly, two (02) complaints received towards the end of 2023 were not totally resolved and are equally being given attention in the first weeks of 2024.

In terms of categories, the majority of complaints that could not be promptly resolved concern prolonged delays in the payment of contractors or, in some cases, what the complainants described as “pure refusal” by the council administration to pay these bills. In this regard, whereas a few cases could be attributed to occasional financial difficulties faced by some councils whose internal revenue collection was very low, there were also cases that could be assimilated to “bad faith” or some form of indirect discrimination.

Amongst these unresolved cases, three councils feature prominently, namely the Tiko Council, the Kumba City Council and the Buea Council.

In direct relationship to the need for the pursuit of our field sensitization and public awareness activities, it was observed that in spite of our regular interactions with representatives of all socio-professional categories or stakeholders, our institution continued to receive complaints from citizens in domains that do not fall within the scope of our missions. In reaction thereto, we continued to seize the opportunity to hold educative exchanges with complainants who came in person or to channel these complaints to the

competent services in cases where the complaints are submitted through intermediaries or the postal services.

Whereas during the accomplishment of our missions in the course of the year 2023, the discharge of the central duties incumbent on the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator remained the priority component of our actions, conscious of our status as a bona fide state institution, we also continued to mobilize ourselves and our collaborators in order to ensure our effective and active participation in important official events as well as other administrative or professional activities closely linked to our core missions.

In this regard, in conformity with the methodology adopted above and aimed at facilitating exploitation and understanding of specific parts of this report, we have presented these activities in a recapitulative table to avoid lengthy descriptive analysis.

However, we still deem it important to highlight four of these activities namely:

- Participation in a one-week benchmarking visit to Cape Town, South Africa, organized by the City Ombudsman, Cape Town.
- Participation in the workshop organized in Yaoundé by the British High Commission on “Promoting Decentralization in the North-West and South-West Region.”
- Participation in a capacity-building seminar jointly organized by the British High Commission and the National School of Local Administration (NASLA) for Administrative, Regional and Traditional Authorities of the North-West and South-West Regions on “Accountability and Good Governance”.
- Involvement in the elaboration and participation in the South-West Peace and Development Forum organized by Authorities of the South-West Regional Assembly.

III. SYNOPSIS OF THE PARTICIPATION OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC INDEPENDENT CONCILIATOR IN IMPORTANT ADMINISTRATIVE EVENTS

DATE	ACTIVITIES	THEME	CONVENOR	VENUE	OUTCOME
17 th January 2023	Launching of the 2023 Budget in the South West Region		The Minister of Finance/ Governor of the south West Region	Buea Council Hall	Improving understanding of the various aspects of the budget for smooth implementation
2 nd February 2023	Meeting with a delegation from the European Union.	Examining prospects of drawing up a framework of cooperation with the European Union	Ms. Myrian Ferran, Head of EU Commission accompanied by the Deputy Director General to the European Union Head of Delegation-Mr. Philippe Van Damme accompanied by the Belgian Ambassador to Cameroon.	Mt Hotel Buea	-Exchange on best practices with Ombudsman Institutions around the world. -Also strengthen the capacity of local administrations
11 th February 2023	Celebration of the 57 th edition of the National Youth Day	Youth, Moral, Civic and entrepreneurship, rearmament, a guarantee for Discipline in Building a United and Prosperous Cameroon.	H.E. Governor of the South West Region	Independence Square, Buea	Took an active part in successful celebrations, observing the enthusiastic participation of youths.

22 nd -24 th February 2023	Capacity Building Seminar for Administrative, Regional and Traditional Authorities in the North-West and South-West Regions	Accountability and Good Governance	-Director General NASLA -British High Commission Yaounde	NASLA Major National Dialogue Hall	Accountability and Good Governance tools for effective decentralisation by strengthening of capacities of institutional actors in the grassroots.
8 th March 2023	OPIC Participates in Celebrations marking the International Women's.	For an Inclusive Digital World, Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality.		Independence Square, Buea	Integrating the female personnel of OPIC in celebrations considering the emergence of women as major actors in local governance.
16 th March 2023	Workshop organized by the British High Commission on Promoting Decentralization in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.	Prerogative and Reserve Powers of Regional Assemblies in the North-West and South-West Regions.	-Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office: -MINDDEVEL -African Leadership Centre	Residence of the British High Commissioner Basto Yaounde	Increased coordination among key stakeholders-the government, bilateral and multilateral partners, civil society organizations, Regional assemblies and councils to be encouraged.
02 nd May 2023	Courtesy Visit of the Minister of Decentralization and Local Development to the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator.			Office of the Public Independent Conciliator Buea	

06 th May 2023	On the occasion of the coronation of their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla		British High Commissioner, Cameroon.	Hilton Hotel Yaounde	Reception to celebrate Coronation.
12 th -13 th May 2023	South-West Peace and Development Forum	South-West Peace and Development.	President South-West Regional Assembly	Mt Hotel Buea	As a component of the Special Status, our participation in the conception and holding of this forum was considered by my office as a duty.
18 th - 20 th May 2023	Participation in various activities organized within framework of the 49 th edition of the National Day	Defense Forces and Cameroonian People in Harmony to Safeguard Peace and National Unity, Bedrock of a Strong and Prosperous Cameroon	H.E. Bernard Okalia Bilai , the Governor of the South-West Region	Independence Square-Buea	Joining other institutions and personalities in strengthening the spirit of patriotism and celebration of our National Day.
19 th June 2023	Preparatory meeting with Regional and Local Authorities (RLAs) and the PIC towards audience with COMSEC (Commonwealth Secretariat)		Minister of Decentralisation and Local Development	MINDDEVEL Conference Hall Yaounde	Synthesis of activities carried out done for presentation in the meeting of 20/06/2023.
20 th June 2023	Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Engagements with Cameroon		Ms Evelyn Pederson (Head of Strategy, Evaluation and Learning Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital division in Partnership with MINDDEVEL)	MINDDEVEL Conference Hall Yaounde	Understanding exigencies from partners for the move towards good governance.

21 st -23 rd June 2023	Colloquium of National School of Local Administration	Crisis Management within the Decentralization Context in Cameroon: Challenges and Prospects for Regional and Local Authorities		NASLA Hall Buea	
2 nd August 2023	National Women's Convention for Peace in Cameroon: South-West Regional Activities				Organized by a network female led Civil Society Organizations, we decided to participate in order to make inputs towards peace-building.
20 th October 2023	Talk Peace Project: South-West Regional Meeting	Combatting Disinformation in the South-West Region			Participation motivated by some consideration.
20 th -24 th November 2023	Benchmarking Mission to the City Ombudsman of Cape Town, South Africa		Ombudsman of the City of Cape Town South Africa	Civic Center Cape Town, South Africa	-Platform of collaboration created. -Lots of insights gained that will improve activities.

Alongside these highlighted activities, it was a source of delight and encouragement to have had the honour of a courtesy visit to our institution on 2nd May 2023, by H.E. the Minister of Decentralisation and Local Development during a working visit to the South-West Region.

It is important to underline that beyond serving as mere formalities, the participation of our institution in these official or professional events continued to provide us opportunities to interact with other major stakeholders and strengthen the capacities of some of our collaborators who are young and need to learn from such exchanges and training platforms.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

From a general perspective, in spite of the relative improvement indicated in the security context of the Region as compared to what prevailed in 2022, the biggest obvious difficulty encountered during the performance of our duties in 2023 was the persistent atmosphere of relative or high insecurity in some parts of the Region. Without finding it necessary to elaborate on this aspect, the situation continued to be demonstrated through sorrowful incidents that were registered in some localities during the period covered by this report.

Obviously, as a direct consequence, this situation continued to make it either impossible or ill-advised for our institution to carry out any field activities such as sensitization or public education workshops in such council areas. In the same vein and while reiterating our appreciation for the positive assistance and collaboration received from senior officials of the Defence and Security forces as well as their subordinates during the accomplishment of our duties in some administrative units, the constraints limited such logistical mobilization because in addition to requiring a high number of elements and military hardware, these same elements of the defence and security forces continued to be highly solicited for operational duties in various localities of the Region.

Closely linked to insecurity is the aspect of inaccessibility to several localities or council areas which are now totally enclaved due to the inability of public authorities to ensure the execution of road maintenance in such areas for over six (06) years today. The best illustrations of this situation are the councils of NDIAN, over 90% of which have only been accessible by sea, the councils of MENJI and WABANE (Lebialem Division), that of MBONGE (MEME) as well as TINTO and AKWAYA in MANYU Division.

Beyond these physical challenges are even more regrettable difficulties deriving from behaviour and the prevailing mentality or mindset observed within the population who constitute potential Service Users and, to a more disturbing extent, the municipal authorities or Heads of Council Executives.

Indeed, during our various field activities carried out in 2023 as well as an analysis of information collected through our public awareness evaluation operation, it was observed that a significant fraction of citizens continued to demonstrate an attitude of skepticism about the *raison d'être* and functioning of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator.

On the other hand, the elected municipal authorities who are our principal interlocutors and whose activities and those of their administrative services have a vital role in ensuring quality services delivery showed an increasing tendency of either high reluctance or visible refusal of collaboration in spite of the courteous and conciliatory approach which we have continued to adopt in our attempts to provide amicable solutions to complaints submitted to our institution by Service Users.

As reported in some sections of this report, some notorious cases of systematic refusal to collaborate or glaring “bad faith” shown by participating in the examination of complaints up to agreeing on the outcome but subsequently refusing to implement the agreed decision were reported to direct supervisory authority of the local councils who are the competent Senior Divisional Officers.

Unfortunately, as exemplified by the case of the Kumba City Mayor, some of these elected local authorities demonstrated disregard for directives even from higher public authorities and will also consider our reports as a mere formality with no consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Deriving from the observation that the performance of most council administrations continue to remain below expectations, in order to ensure that the populations at the grassroots effectively benefit from the process of decentralisation through the concrete achievements of local collectivities, it would be necessary for Hierarchy to instruct the Senior Divisional Officers who are the immediate supervisory authorities of these councils to pay greater attention to the concrete actions of the councils towards improving the living conditions of the citizens at the grassroots.

Indeed, a close analysis of their performances and achievements shows that there is a disturbing disparity between the general tendency of validating or approving administrative and stores managements accounts whereas the grassroots populations continue to complain about the prolonged neglect of their priority preoccupations in spite of the transfer of significant financial resources to local collectivities within the framework of the transfer of competences.

As regards the deplorable attitudes and tendencies of reluctance or refusal to collaborate increasingly demonstrated by municipal authorities, it is obvious that if no action is taken to put an end to such attitudes, this will seriously undermine the efficiency and effectiveness of the Office of the Public Independent Conciliator in the accomplishment of its missions.

The evolution of this regrettable pattern was amplified during 2023 by irresponsible declarations by some amongst such recalcitrant municipal authorities to the effect that as local elected officials belonging to the ruling party, they are under no obligation to cultivate positive collaboration with our institution in ensuring an amicable settlement of complaints as the Public Independent Conciliator has no prerogatives to either sanction or cause them to be sanctioned.

Consequently, it would be necessary to envisage making provision either within the framework of the General Code of Local and Regional Authorities or the instruments governing the discharge of duties of Public Independent Conciliator for corrective or administrative sanctions against municipal authorities where it is proven that refusal to collaborate is a deliberate act of defiance or disrespect of the institution.

In the same light, at a time when several local councils continue to exhibit serious difficulties in the removal or management of garbage, with accusations of unpaid bills for the services of the garbage disposal company HYSACAM, it is our humble opinion that there exist an innovative possibility to provide a lasting solution to this disturbing situation namely:

- Encourage councils to set up an autonomous garbage disposal company under the council's hygiene and sanitation department. However, in order to ensure the availability of adequate resources for this purpose, councils could be authorized through municipal deliberations to institute a symbolic garbage disposal tax per household.

As regard the observation that several councils administrations have been unable to have a satisfactory level of functioning and could accordingly not have any real impact on improving the living conditions of the citizens in these municipalities as a result of persistent insecurity, it may be important for the Government to review or reexamine the criteria as well as significance of amounts routinely allocated to several of these collectivities for the "purported" realization of projects, some of which are either never executed or summarily implemented, with such poor quality that within a few years, the population recommence petitions and agitation for the realization of the same projects.

Although such a measure may initially attract criticism, an allocation of resources using the criteria of effective and confirmed realization of previously allocated projects and proof of the effective

functioning of the council administration within their administrative territories would certainly, in the medium and long-term, cause present recalcitrant Municipal Executives or future postulants to these positions to do more towards a return to peace and regular functioning of the council administration for the benefit of the local population than remain contented with “ giving impressions of functioning” in order to continue receiving financial resources through various allocations from the state for no corresponding activities to the benefit of the target population.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the constraints, specificities of several collectivities as well as the challenges linked to a persisting atmosphere of insecurity in some localities of our Region, the authorities of the Regional Assembly and several Municipal authorities demonstrated a commendable spirit of resilience during the year 2023 and carried out several beneficial actions and projects that not only projected a positive image of their collectivities but also contributed to the credibility of the state and government of our country. However, considering that development remains a continuous and permanent quest, there is need for the major actors to show greater commitment to the promotion of the well-being of the citizens whose satisfaction remains the *raison d'être* for the systematic allocation of substantial resources to our local councils each year as well as the justification of government efforts to ensure the implementation and consolidation of the policy of decentralization.

The Public Independent Conciliator
South West Region