

BPSA REPORT

Topic: The management of electronic waste in
Cameroon

*A journey to Cameroon, in the purpose of realizing my
master thesis*

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Context of my field work and my motivation

As a young Cameroonian student abroad, I believe it is important for us international students, from the global South to be aware of the current and persistent problems that our countries are facing. In this sense, we will be challenged to participate to the solutions seeking of those issues. The topic of my research “the management of electronic waste in Cameroon” enters in a context where the issues of bad governance in developing countries and the phenomenon of globalization together lead to unbalanced cooperation between the global North and the global South. The electronic waste flow from the global North to the global South is just one of the cases that highlights those issues.

With the day-to-day exponential rising number of electronic gadgets produced in the global North, it is of relevance to know where those gadgets land at their end of life.

In fact, most of the electronic waste from the global North ends in countries of the South. They are shipped as donations in form of “development aid” and secondhand devices to be reused, mostly to African countries to cite Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon, as most pertinent cases. Ghana even hosts the most famous electronic waste dumping site of the world, in its capital city, Accra, locality of Abogbloshié.

What interest us is not just the movement of electronic waste from the global North to the global South, but more, how this whole waste is being recycled. Still in 2015, around 75% of the worldwide e-waste was still recycled in hazardous conditions, exposing populations and the environment to critical health and ecological issues (Global e-waste monitor 2015).

My main preoccupation now as a young researcher is, to understand why this waste is kept sent to those countries that do not even have adequate facilities for the recycling. Truth wise, electronic waste contains very toxic substances such as lead, mercury, cadmium, well known as triggers of severe health issues as cancers, persistent headache, insomnia, lung infection and more. At an environmental level, it deteriorates the ecosystems and poisons living aquatic and subterranean species.

In countries of the South, due to the lack of adequate centers and equipment, people recycle the waste without any protection. They usually dismantle them with a hammer or stone and sometimes, burn the remaining particles, where the toxic elements are released into the atmosphere.

Despite the many attempts of some scientists and humanitarian organizations on solving this threat, the problem of electronic waste in the global South persists. Hence, the absence of strong policies on import and export regulations, still makes it possible for Western countries to ship their electronic waste to African countries.

As matter of fact, within the whole central African region, there is only one recycling center specialized in e-waste recycling, which is in Cameroon, Yaoundé. The presence of this center in Yaoundé made it more interesting to conduct my research there and see whether this center can entirely handle the process of e-waste recycling or not. But unfortunately, the informal sector is the one dominating when it comes to recycling, which means the threat is still persistent.

Anyhow, Cameroon imports a quite considering number of second-hand electronic gadgets from Europe and America. Frequently on the streets of Yaoundé and Douala (economic capital), you will notice the presence of electronic secondhand shops commonly known under the name of “brocante or flea market”. They resell all kind of electronic devices, and electro-appliances such as fridges, TV, computers, washing machines, etc.

Spatial repartition of the field work

The research took place in the city of Yaoundé.

Political capital of Cameroon

Population: Around 2.780.000 inhabitants

Area: Around 180 km²

Population density: 15,3/km²

Official languages: English and French

(Source: MINEDUH Cameroon)



My research was designed under a framed spatial repartition of the city, depending on the areas I that were relevant. It was divided into 3 main spots: the formal sector (administration and formal structures operating in the e-waste management), the informal sector (where the waste is being recycled and resold), the households (where we interviewed the population about their level of awareness on the topic).

The formal sector covered following administrative institutions:

- MINEPDEP (*Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development*)
- City of Yaoundé (responsible for waste management in the city)
- Solidarité Technologique (Formal structure recycling e-waste in Cameroon)



MINEPDEP: Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development



City of Yaoundé „hotel de ville”



Solidarité Technologique

The informal sector was in “Mokolo” and “Tsinga elobi”. The pictures bellow illustrates some important steps of the informal recycling of e-waste.



Dismantling: Breaking the electronic waste into pieces to extract valuable material for retail or reuse. E.g., Copper, gold, Aluminum



Disposing of the useless parts. Components such as plastic coverage and any possible non-valuable materials are dumped with the household waste in the streets



Retail: Here, the important and valuable parts of the e-waste are used to fix old electronic appliances

Sate of the e-waste in Yaoundé

Giving the fact that I am still working on my findings, I cannot give an entire insight of the field work I have carried out in Yaoundé. Consequently, I will briefly give an idea of the current situation of e-waste management in Cameroon.

As you can see on the pictures above, we can identify different challenges related to e-waste:

- The disposing of e-waste

As in many other countries of the South, the problem of waste management in Cameroon is very importunate. The low level of awareness on waste disposition largely contributes to this chaotic situation. People are less aware of the dangers of e-waste and dispose them off (after dismantling) in the rubbish bins, mixed with organic, plastic, paper, and all kind of waste. Sometimes when the bin is full and is not collected by the company in charge of (HYSACAM: Hygiene and Salubrity Cameroon), people just dump the waste on the streets or in the nearest and easiest spot they identify (rivers). This later can cause other damaging problems such as floods, air pollution, water bone diseases.

- Lack of coping strategies between administrative institutions and the informal sector.

Though there exist some policies at the national level on the restriction of the e-waste import from abroad, it is undeniable that those policies still face some challenges when it comes to their implementation. The e-waste recycling almost belongs to the informal sector in Yaoundé. They employ many people along the broader chain of recycling, from collecting the waste from households, compagnies or the trash bin to the dismantling and sorting. Most of the scrap dealers in the field related that due to analphabetism, unemployment, lack of awareness,

poverty, lack of infrastructures, and absence of support from the state, they do not have better opportunities and therefore must remain in the business of e-waste. It is with the aim of sustaining their livelihoods that they involve in the activity. If the state does not create opportunities for youth, then opportunities might come from abroad, like e-waste.

Contact with resource people

Since the research included different actors from the administrative to the informal sector and households, it was necessary to early develop contacts that would lead me to those resource persons. Having lived and studied in Yaoundé before, I had some very important acquaintances at the university of Yaoundé I (old friends, course mates, teachers) and in the administration (old colleagues and friends working in the related sector), who helped me to get in touch with the resource persons I had to interview. Before travelling to Cameroon, everything regarding this section was at majority planned.

Also, I used the App LinkedIn to create some networks that could guide me to access to the resource persons. For example, I did not know anyone from the company “Solidarité Technologique” which was one of the main actors for my research. The process was simple: I first did some basic research on the supposed structures to see who the authorities are; Then entered their names on LinkedIn and search for them. Afterwards, I sent them an invitation to connect with me. For some, it worked, for others it did not. This can simply be explained by the fact not everyone that has an account on a social media platform is frequently connected. It did not lead me directly to the supposed authority, but it allowed me to connect to some employees who later directed me to the supposed authorities.

Challenges

Planning such a field work always encounters challenges, whether administrative, individual or in any other external form. But giving the fact that I am a native Cameroonian, the process was easier since there is no visa enquiry. Thus, I still faced some remaquable challenges.

At the individual level, it was not easy to simply select the different actors of my research. The original plan that was designed months ago before the journey was modified several times. At the beginning, I had more than 15 main actors, who all needed to be interviewed. Some never replied to my e-mails and others declined the interview. In those cases, I had to find alternatives to fill the gap, which was quite difficult. So, in the end I had to redefine the structure of my research in a way that the actors remaining will still make it interesting.

Another issue I faced was linked to the travel itself. It was very difficult to find a direct flight from Germany to Cameroon, or at least with one stop. The cheapest flight I found had more than two stops and would have taken me up to 30 hours to get to Yaoundé, though it usually takes around 10 to 12 hours with one stop. In the end, the most feasible option I had left was to take my flight from Paris. To get there, I first took a bus from Bonn, which lasted around 8 hours, and once in Paris took my flight.

In addition, a difficulty I had was related to the actual situation with the COVID 19. This pandemic made it more difficult, especially with the shut down of boarders for a long period of

time and entry restrictions. Even though I was fully vaccinated, I had to take a covid test 24 hours before my flight, at the cost of 75 euros.

When I landed in Yaoundé, I thought the test plus the vaccination card would lead me to directly collect my luggage. But it was not the case. I had to take another test at the airport after arrival, which took a long waiting time in addition to the very long journey.

After being well installed in Yaoundé, it was a bit difficult to focus on my work on the first days. My family and friends all wanted to see me and interact with me, which I can understand, after such a long time being abroad (5years). I had to discipline and organize myself to be able to coordinate my research and spending time with my people. The same was applied to my life rhythm. In Germany, I was very active into sports and quite disciplined when it came to my eating habits. But being home in Yaoundé, I was spoiled with traditional meals every day and did not find enough time to do some physical exercises. This made me a bit lazy on some tasks I had to do, where I found myself procrastinating. But luckily, I had to remind myself why I came to Yaoundé or in other words focus more on my research.

Changes in my country

After living abroad for around 5 years and studying a subject that relates to the challenges faced in the countries of the South, I realized a lot of aspects from an inside and outside view and got to understand why most African Countries are not really moving forward.

First the gender gap caught my attention. The mentalities differ a lot on how people perceive you as a young woman. During exchanges with some locals, I realized that women are still marginalized, and their role is still associated to housework and family duties such as taking care of the kids and husband, cleaning, cooking etc. However, the progress into quality education for all is very appreciative. Even in slums, most young females attend primary school and get at least a first school living certificate.

With evidence, I visited the school “Primary bilingual school le Jiré” in Etetack, Yaoundé. I have been working on this project to promote quality education for all in poor areas of the city by developing partnerships from abroad to support the kids in need, whose parents are not able to sponsor their education. At the end of my visit, I was very impressed to see how young girls are motivated to attend school and having dreams to becoming future female leaders in the world. It shows me the shift of mentalities and the awakens of the new generation, which is quite needed to ameliorate the situation of women at large and precisely African women.



Another effect that has changed was the climate. In fact, Cameroon has two main seasons: the drying and the raining season. There is light rainy season from May to June, short dry season from July to October, a heavy rainy season from October to November, and a long dry season from December to May. I arrived in the time of the short dry season (where it normally also lightly rains). So, I was expecting a comfortable weather (not too hot, not too dry). But at my greater surprise some heavy rain fell to the extent that some streets even flooded. And when came the sun, it was very intense and almost leading to headache after a long exposure.

This confirms the fact that the damages of climate change in countries of the south are very severe.

Apart from those aspects, the rest has not really changed in my opinion. We still face the same issues related to bad governance, corruption, unemployment, lack of infrastructures etc.

Possibilities on the employment market

Through the contact I kept with some important administrative authorities and the formal sector of waste management in Cameroon, I believe that having a master's degree from one of the most prestigious universities of Germany (University of Bonn) and practical work experience in important worldwide organizations such the United Nations, The Cross, C4ED would be of great advantage when it comes to employment. The opportunities are large in my field of study, geography. From environmental organizations to administrative structures, there is a lot of offers. Even in the private sector, there also exist some programs to support young entrepreneurs in the start of their business. Though the competition seems sometimes hard, and the opportunities are not enough for all graduated, I am convinced that returning home in the future would be helpful to my country and myself as an individual.

Final Note

My journey through my whole master's program in Germany and my field work in Cameroon motivated me to work harder because there is still a lot to do back home. Having access to quality education from abroad is not feasible for all youth. So, if we, international students from countries of the South have this opportunity, we should also be able to share the knowledge with those in need, because sharing is caring. By caring about our fellow ones, we will realize that we will make a bigger impact and participate to the well-being of our countries.

It is true that the political situations and social injustices in many countries of the South are still challenging; nevertheless, this should not discourage us from the work that is to be done there. And this, we can only achieve if we mobilize ourselves, from different academical, ethnical and professional backgrounds. My dream is to see countries of the South rising, in a way that they will be completely independent from foreign aid in all forms and fulfill.

I am very satisfied about my field work in Yaoundé. Despite the sometimes-difficult situations with the planning of field work and internships in our home countries, I would highly recommend every international student to taking the opportunity of the BPSA and give a chance to this eye-opening experience. It is very worth it!

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