

## Cameroonian Women in the Informal Petrol Trade: The Case of Bamenda City Council Area, 1980-2017

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**Abstract:** Women in the Bamenda Grassland have always been involved in different aspects of economic activities notably agriculture, local industry, and trade to sustain their households. Time and circumstances inevitably presented situations compelling them to take economic responsibility by complimenting men's efforts and supplementing family income. This study examines women's involvement in informal trade activities, particularly the petrol (commonly known as *fingue* or *zoa-zoa*) trade in Bamenda City. The article draws attention not only to the circumstances and contexts of women's involvement in the informal petrol trade but also to the cutting-edge role they played in the business. The study makes use of written, oral as well as online sources to sustain it thesis.

**Keywords:** informal, petrol, women, borders, Cameroon

### Introduction

The city of Bamenda—capital of the North West Region (NWR) of Cameroon—has been a theater for the growing phenomenon of informal trade in petrol commonly called “*fingue*” or “*zoa-zoa*.”<sup>1</sup> Women have become conspicuously active in this sector of trade. Several factors in the region at large, and the city of Bamenda in particular, have combined with women's limited choices to impose the necessity of involvement with informal petrol trading. As a result, young wives, young widows, single mothers, divorced, and other unmarried women became involved with the fuel business in the city of Bamenda as roadside vendors, wholesalers, and even importers of the product.

The involvement of women in informal cross-border trade has animated some scholarly discussions in the recent years. Tayo et al. argue that historically earnings from cross-border trade by women contributed to the gross domestic purse through tax on importation of goods, custom excise duties, and other charges as sources of revenue to the government.<sup>2</sup> Njikam and Tchouassi maintain that women were actively involved in informal trade in the Central African sub-region, including borders such as Cameroon-Gabon-Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon-Chad-Nigeria, and Cameroon-Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> They further aver that a majority of the women involved in cross border trade in these countries were Cameroonian. In another article by the same authors, they demonstrate the common features of the women involved in this activity in Cameroon: most were less educated, relatively young (33 percent aged 30-39), and in polygamous marriages.<sup>4</sup>

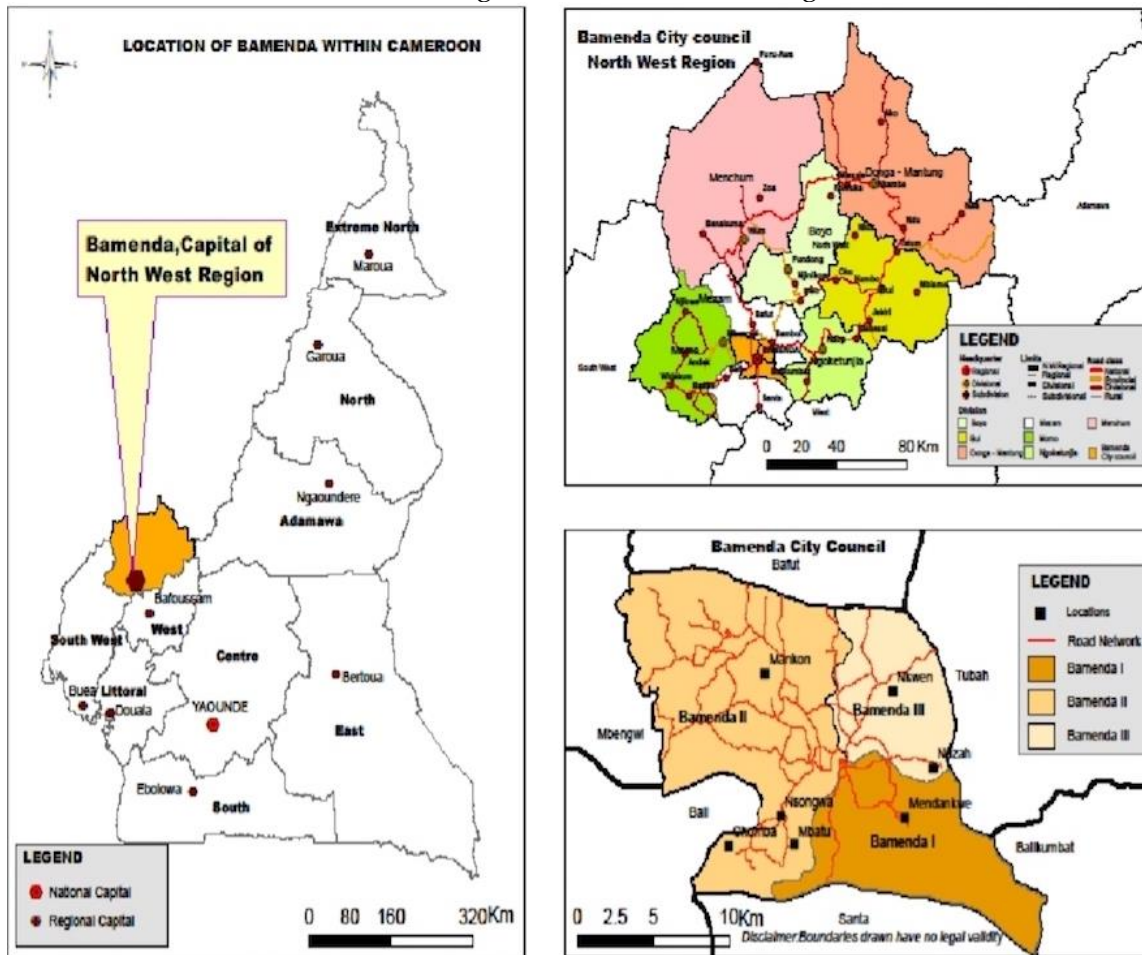
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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v20/v20i2a1.pdf>

Oben et al. maintain that culture restricts women’s access to and control over productive resources and in various ways subjugates them, thus acting as a constraint to their socioeconomic empowerment.<sup>5</sup> Kah’s study indicates that since the beginning of the Mandate period (1922), women of British Southern Cameroons were active in the informal trading activities. He reports that women of this territory boycotted the Douala market in protest against the imposition of price restrictions by the French administration after the partition of Cameroon.<sup>6</sup> Budi investigated the basis of the growth of illicit petrol trade in the city of Bamenda and the far-reaching attendant repercussions of this activity since 1999.<sup>7</sup> These scholarly works produced ideas that influence this work. However, the present article complements earlier discourses by highlighting the significant role women have played in the economic life and social well-being of their communities in general, and Bamenda in particular, through involvement in informal petrol trade. Undoubtedly, economic as well as socio-cultural factors prompted the involvement of women in this activity, which is not only considered risky but was hitherto almost entirely monopolized by men.

### Geographical Setting

Bamenda is not only the capital city but also the largest administrative and commercial centre of one of Cameroon’s most sensitive regions, the North West Region.<sup>8</sup>



Source: Bamenda City Council Development Plan, 2012

The city also serves as divisional headquarters of Mezam and hosts sub-divisional headquarters of Bamenda I, Bamenda II, and Bamenda III in accordance with the administrative system in Cameroon.<sup>9</sup> It is the gateway city to the Western Region and South West Region as well as an important point on the Trans-African Highway to the Central Africa Republic and Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> Bamenda has also been referred to as Abakwa and Mankon Town. Bamenda was the ethno-geographic term utilized by the Germans to correspond roughly to the conglomerations of the ethnic entities and people that were scattered all over the present-day North West Region, essentially a continuum of the grasslands occupied by the people who could all be grouped as the Menda People. The “Ba” affix therefore made the area to be called Bamenda meaning the people of Menda or the piece of land occupied by the people of Menda.<sup>11</sup>

## Methodology

This study uses interviews and focus group discussions to complement information culled from written sources. The study covers the three administrative sub-divisions of Bamenda, including Bamenda I, Bamenda II and Bamenda III with seats in Bamendankwe, Mankon, and Nkwen respectively. These districts were selected mainly because of the relative importance of the informal petrol trading activities in the areas. Apart from the fact that these sub-divisions are host to female street vendors of petroleum products, Bamenda II in particular is host to the largest depot (Ntaturu Park) of petroleum products imported from Nigeria. Most significantly, these three districts constitute the Bamenda City Council area.

To appreciate diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study, thirty-two informants including men, women, and administrative officials involved in the informal petrol trade were interviewed. Five focus group discussions (five to seven persons each) based on structured discussion topics were organized (one in Bamenda I, two in Bamenda II, and two in Bamenda III). Of the thirty-two interviewees, fifteen were of the age range 17-34, fourteen 35-60, while three were above 60. Twenty-two women were interviewed (excluding those involved in focus group discussions). Most of the women (eighteen) fell within the age range 28-43 and generally had low household incomes. While few of the women were unmarried, some were widows and single mothers. The questions were both closed and open-ended to obtain in-depth information on the activity.

## Women and Informal Petrol Trading

Different circumstances have contributed to the involvement of women in the informal petrol trade in Bamenda. The involvement of women in the *finque* trade became most evident in the post-independence era, particularly after the economic crisis of the 1980s that affected Cameroon. The economic crisis was caused by a generalized fall in the prices of agricultural produce in the world market.<sup>12</sup> This situation seriously shattered the economy of Cameroon in general and Bamenda in particular. The high dependence of the city on agricultural produce meant that the crisis greatly affected its inhabitants and especially the women who were directly implicated in agriculture. In actual fact, before the crisis, the country experienced a comfortable economic position marked by high level investment, increased employment in skilled and unskilled professions, increased production of raw materials, and encouraging

prices of agricultural produce in and out of the country.<sup>13</sup> This situation changed drastically. Many people lost their jobs as a result, and even those who still worked were paid poorly.<sup>14</sup>

Cameroonians found themselves in a dire economic situation which pushed them almost immediately into searching for coping strategies. The economic crisis pushed women into desperation created by the need to sustain their families from economic scourge. Goheen states that:

[...] most women in addition to being heavily involved in food production and assuming the burden of provisioning the household, take prime responsibility as home managers, child bearers, and caretakers of children and the elderly. Women have borne the brunt of economic crisis; it is they who had to find the means for families to survive.<sup>15</sup>

This economic situation caused women to enter male-dominated economic spaces in order to check their poverty through informal trade.<sup>16</sup>

The crisis was followed by a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that left many families in difficult economic conditions as dependence on formal sector employment for household provisioning became more tenuous.<sup>17</sup> Some important parastatals in Bamenda Grasslands like the Wum Area Development Authority (WADA) and the Nkambe Area Cooperative Union Limited employing many were either closed down or restructured. Caught in this web, the women of Bamenda—like their counterparts elsewhere in the country—not only began petty businesses trading in second-handed products but they also began trading in petroleum products obtained from Nigeria. Women's involvement in the informal sector of the petrol trade was thus seen as a "coping strategy" for many families in Bamenda. The crisis indeed moved many women to the center of economic activities. The eventual liberalization of the economy by the government enabled the involvement of more women in this sector of trade.

From this background, the view of Anthony Fai is particularly instructive. In an interview, he observes:

The difficult economic situation which followed the years after the economic crisis pushed Cameroonians from across the board, some of whom had lost their jobs as a result of the crisis went for "anything" to survive. There is no doubt that the trade in illicit petrol in the City of Bamenda began with the advent of the crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Goheen further captures that "women's wrappers were worn and faded [...] as they gather around the cooking fires to share a gossip about market prices and strategies on how best to sell dear and buy cheap to maximize time and money."<sup>19</sup>

More recently, the economy of the Bamenda City Council (BCC) administrative area comprises both the formal and informal sectors, involving "friendly and competing interest groups."<sup>20</sup> Women engage in farming (both crops and livestock rearing), small scale processing (cassava into *garri* or milk into yoghurt), tailoring, embroidery, and soap manufacture. Formal employment in the tertiary sector includes both private companies and government offices.<sup>21</sup> Though these activities employ a good number of women, from November 2016, economic activities witnessed a slow down due to the "Anglophone crisis."

Though the detailed origins and manifestations of this crisis are beyond scope of this article, accumulated grievances in the Anglophone Regions (North West and South West) emerged against the Francophone-dominated government, driven by resistance to policies seen as both assimilationist and marginalizing. Events in 2015-16 eventually resulted in sporadic demonstrations and then degenerated to armed conflicts. Attempts to resolve the issue through dialogue bore little fruit, thus leading to systematic calls for the return to federalism and ultimately, secession.<sup>22</sup> Most immediate for this study, the armed conflicts in Bamenda forced even more women to resort to the petrol trade as their businesses witnessed a slowdown. This was the case with Caroline Muluh who in an interview contends that:

I have sold fruits for the past two years, but the business slowed down due to the advent of the crisis that we now witness. I decided to join the petrol trade because at least it moves though increasingly slowly because students who should have been in school are all into the business. At the end of the day, am sure of selling three gallons (of 30 litres each) which can fetch me some 6000FCFA take home profit (translation by author).<sup>23</sup>

The roadside petrol business at least had a relatively quick turnover partly due to its affordability in relation to the National Oil Refinery (SONARA) fuel. This argument is succinctly captured by Sih in her newspaper article when she avers:

Another aspect that fuels the trade is the cost of a liter of *fingue* which sells at between 450 and 500 FCFA in Bamenda and even less in Bali, Batibo, Widikum, and Mamfe as you move towards Nigeria as compared to a liter of “essence” at the filling station that sells at 639 FCFA in Bamenda and up to 690 FCFA in Mamfe.<sup>24</sup>

The degree of affordability of *fingue* was attractive to many car owners in Bamenda due to the difficult economic situation of the city. They thus provided a ready market for roadside fuel, thus increasing its turnover.

Apart from the difficult economic environment, improvement in transport networks also encouraged the involvement of women in the informal petrol trade. The completion of the Bamenda-Mamfe-Ekok-Abakaliki-Enugu stretch of the Trans-African Highway No.8 in 2010 greatly boosted informal importation of fuel from Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> In fact, before the completion of this road corridor, the transportation of fuel into Bamenda was largely through the Ndu-Kumbo-Ndop-Bamenda stretch of the Ring Road which made the business difficult for women in particular due to the seasonal nature of the road.<sup>26</sup> The completion of the Bamenda-Enugu corridor has made travelling to Mamfe and Ekok on the border with Nigeria both cheaper and quicker.<sup>27</sup> As Walters Nula Lonyonga testified, “it takes less than 24 hours or a day for me to bring products from Nigeria through Ekok-Mamfe for supply in Bali and Bamenda.”<sup>28</sup> The improvement in transportation through this stretch has resulted in more women becoming wholesalers, expanding business from their initial position as retailers.

Lastly, the city of Bamenda faces increasing unavailability of lands for agricultural activities. It has become more difficult to access lands for agriculture due to increased land values and growth of the urban population. The growth in the population is projected to require the area of land over the next fifteen years approximately the size of presently built-up areas.<sup>29</sup>

Women in the Bamenda City Council area who want to engage in effective farm work have to move to areas in the peripheries—including Bambui, Mankon, Bafut, Bamendankwe, Akum-Santa, and other suburbs—where access to lands is relatively easier. In this situation, some women have transitioned to informal petrol trading activity.

### Changing Roles in the Petrol Trade

Though some women continue the selling of petroleum products along the streets, others are playing significant roles as importers and wholesalers as well as retailers of the product. However, women's involvement in this activity is still most marked in the retail sector. A significant number of those involved in importation of petrol are Nigerians, though some Cameroonians also participate in this aspect. Nigerian importers usually bring the product to Ekok (and other border areas such as Abongshie in Donga/Mantung Division) where they place stock in warehouses before selling to Cameroonian wholesalers.<sup>30</sup> These Nigerian importers must therefore establish and maintain contacts with Cameroonian wholesaler partners.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, Cameroonian wholesalers do also cross over into Nigeria to buy directly from sources there. In this sector, some women are also actively involved. Women acting as importers obtain the product directly from Nigeria through the Bamenda-Mamfe-Ekok-Abakaliki-Enugu road corridor.<sup>32</sup> The completion of this road corridor facilitated travel to/from Nigeria and risks of movement are reduced. It has become both easier and quicker to travel between Bamenda and Enugu, a distance of nearly 450km. As a result, women undertake the trip to Nigeria to buy fuel for selling in Bamenda.<sup>33</sup> Overall, however, this role is still largely carried out by men. However, those women involved in importation from Nigeria were generally perceived to be daring. So, the majority of women involved in the informal petrol trade are wholesalers and retailers.

As wholesalers, women could raise capital through *njangi* groups (local savings cooperatives) to invest in the business. This enables them to buy product from importers in large quantities and place stock in warehouses before selling to retailers. The Ntaturu Quarter of the Bali Park neighborhood in Bamenda has become renowned as a Nigerian petrol depot. Women own warehouses in this area for the storage and sale of this product.<sup>34</sup> Sidonie Nangah owns sheds in the depot for the storage of petroleum products. She began the business with a sum of 115,000 CFA borrowed from a *njangi* group.<sup>35</sup> Though facing a lot of challenges—largely emanating from harassments by the government agents charged with the fight against this product—Nangah vowed “never to quit the business for any reason whatsoever.”<sup>36</sup> Like Nangah, other women express their strong attachment to the business which testifies to its profitability and the sustaining effects for their families.

At the base of the distribution process for *fingue* in Bamenda are the retailers, mostly women. The retailers of *fingue* line the major streets in Bamenda where they establish makeshift kiosks for sales of the product. In this light, Sih proffers “A drive through the streets of Bamenda would reveal the true extent of the trade with makeshift road side petrol retailers lined along all streets and with some just meters apart like at the Ade Metal Street moving into Travelers where there are over 20 retailers within a 250 meter stretch of the road.”<sup>37</sup> Some of the major roads where makeshift kiosks are set up include the City Chemist Roundabout-Ngen's Junction, Ngen's Junction-Mobile Nkwen, Ngen's Junction-Total Nkwen, Mobile Nkwen-Mile 4

Junction, Hospital Roundabout-Ntarinkon, Hospital Roundabout-Travellers' Junction, and Hospital Roundabout-Metta Quarter-T-Junction, among others.<sup>38</sup>

Most of the women involved in the retail business do so as a means of diversifying into new forms of product to reduce risk of income failure. Caroline Muluh argued in a discussion with the author that a slowdown in her existing fruit business compelled her to get into the informal petrol trade which assures her a take home profit of at least 6000CFA daily.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Rafiatu Nyeh who sells *fiogue* at the Ntamuche neighbourhood at Mile III Nkwen-Bamenda maintains that she has joined the business because of similar circumstances. She explains that her husband's book business witnessed a slump and she had to get involved to ameliorate the family's financial situation.<sup>40</sup> Elvis Fongoh continues with his carpentry job while the petrol trade is run by his wife.<sup>41</sup>

### Implications of Women in the Petrol Trade

The involvement of women in the petrol trading business in Bamenda has far reaching ramifications. In evaluating the impact of the informal cross-border trade (ICBT), Njikam and Tchouassi assert that their respondents said: "[...] assisting the family was the most common advantage given by both male and female traders. Then, 25 percent of male and 22 percent of female traders gave supplementing the family income as advantage. The means of livelihood for children was given as an advantage more often by women (24 percent) than men (19 percent)."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, as indicated in the foregoing sections, some women got involved in the informal petrol trade to diversify and supplement family income. The activity has gone a long way to improve family income as it assures a daily take home of 6000CFA on the average.<sup>43</sup> Single and widowed women have also become less dependent on family members for financial assistance due to their involvement in this activity. An example of this situation is Ernestine Ma Fambe, who lost her husband seven years ago but leads a relatively independent life and can take care of her children.<sup>44</sup>

Some men acknowledge the significant changes their families have witnessed with the involvement of their wives in this activity. Elvis Fongoh testified that his wife's involvement in the business has given him the opportunity to continue his carpentry work.<sup>45</sup> This allowed the parents to educate their two children and to procure a piece of land for future construction.<sup>46</sup> Generally speaking, the informal trade has improved the income of many households in Bamenda, thereby increasing their standards of living.

Since the escalation of the "Anglophone Crisis" in November 2016—in part characterized by a boycott of schools—many girls have gotten involved in the activity as retailers. Consular Ugo's motivation to join the trade came from her aunt who is a petrol dealer.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Obasi's involvement as a supplier in the petrol trade is due to motivation from her mother who is an informal trader based in Mamfe, South West Region. Ostensibly, many a young woman in Bamenda have gotten involved in the activity as retailers along the major streets after the boycott of schools due to the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon.

In a similar vein, the involvement of women in the petrol trade has increased the volume of the business in the city. Informal trade in petrol has flourished despite the government's effort to contain it.<sup>48</sup> The growth in the volume of informal petrol trade is a result of economic difficulties, geographical factors (the proximity to Nigerian sources of fuel), and administrative

loopholes created by the inability of government to enforce regulations controlling petrol trade.<sup>49</sup> Though women might not be held responsible for initiating the current phenomenon of informal petrol trade, their involvement in the activity has increased the volume of the trade and further complicated government's efforts to contain it. As a result, the issue remains a thorny puzzle for the government as significant resources are dedicated to fighting the activity as part of a desperate attempt to protect government revenue and rid the city of fire hazards and other related health impacts. Little wonder therefore that women involved in this sector face challenges from official control brigades of the Regional Delegation for Water Resources and Energy, Custom Units, and Mixed Control Patrols. Some of the women testified the difficulties they face with these official units fighting the sale of the product in the city. Some women are arrested or detained and face other forms of harassment that occur almost on daily basis.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

The article set out to investigate the basis for the involvement of women in the informal petrol trade in Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon. Since the advent of the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, women generally began engaging in different economic activities to supplement family income. They became involved in the informal petrol business in Bamenda mainly as wholesalers and as roadside vendors (retailers). The involvement of women in petrol trade resulted in far-reaching attendant repercussions ranging from improvement in family income, involvement of more women, and increase in the volume of informal petrol trade in Bamenda—which became a great concern for the government. Cross-border trade, particularly from southeastern Nigeria, resulted in passage of numerous edicts, regular border checks, and street patrols. Yet the practice continues to grow with the active involvement of women in the city of Bamenda, providing resources to many families in a difficult economic environment.

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## Notes

- 1 The term *fingue* is of the Pidgin English origin while *zoa zoa* is of Igbo origin. Both terms are used to refer to the Nigerian fuel that is sold along the major streets of the City of Bamenda.
- 2 Tayo et al. 2017.
- 3 Njikam and Tchouassi 2011.
- 4 Njikam and Tchouassi 2011.
- 5 Oben et al. 2016.
- 6 Kah 2011.
- 7 Budi 2018.
- 8 Geographically, the North West Region is located around Latitude 5°15' north of the equator and stretches from longitudes 9°17' east to 11°25' east. It has a surface area of 17, 812 square kilometers. It is bounded by the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the north and north west, the Adamawa Region to the north east, the West Region to the south east and the South West Region to the west and south west. The North West Region is made up of Seven Divisions.

These include, Bui Division, Boyo Division, Ngoketunja Division, Mezam Division, Menchum Division, Momo Division and the Donga/Mantung Division.

- 9 The Presidential Decree of 17th January 2008 dissolved its urban status and created Bamenda I (Mendakwe), Bamenda II (Mankon), Bamenda III (Nkwen) Councils and the Bamenda City Council.
- 10 MINDUH 2012, p. 10.
- 11 Nkwi and Warnier 1982.
- 12 Ngoh 1996, pp. 299.
- 13 Ngoh 1996, pp. 299.
- 14 Chu 2014.
- 15 Goheen 1996, pp. 333-334.
- 16 Fonchingong and Ngwa 2006.
- 17 One of the WB/IMF-imposed SAP conditions on the country was massive retrenchment of civil servants and salary cuts. This led to the loss of jobs by many family heads in Bamenda besides the fact that many others witnessed serious salary slashes which reduced their purchasing power.
- 18 Fai 2017.
- 19 Goheen 1996, pp. 333.
- 20 Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MINDUH) 2012, pp. 14.
- 21 Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MINDUH) 2012, pp. 14.
- 22 Ngoh 2019.
- 23 Muluh 2017.
- 24 Sih 2017.
- 25 Cameroon Web. "The ugly side of the new Bamenda - Mamfe -Ekok - Abakaliki - Enugu road." June 17, 2017. <http://www.cameroonweb.com/CameroonHomePage/regional/The-ugly-side-of-the-new-Bamenda-Mamfe-Ekok-Abakaliki-Enugu-road-327512>.
- 26 The Ring Road is the National Road No. 11 and has been one of the greatest concerns of the people of the North West Region of Cameroon. This Road was significant by virtue of the fact that it linked up all the five Divisions of the Region. However, some work was done on that Road and that made the ride from Bamenda to Kumbo relatively smooth.
- 27 Obasi 2017.
- 28 Lonyonga 2017.
- 29 The reasons attributed to this expansion were; the Establishment the University of Bamenda, the construction of Trans-African Road to Central Africa Republic and Federal Republic of Nigeria and natural growth rates which were all expected to accelerate urbanization not leaving out the construction of the Bamenda-Mamfe-Ekok-Enugu corridor which is still part of the Trans-African Highway. Ngock 2017; Ministry of Urban Development and Housing 2012, p. 11.
- 30 Nguefack 2017.
- 31 Nguefack 2017.
- 32 Obasi 2017.
- 33 Obasi 2017. It was worth mentioning that before the completion of the Bamenda-Mamfe-Ekok-Abakaliki-Enugu road corridor, movement to and from Nigeria was nightmarish

- following the poor nature of the road. Even the Abongshie-Ndu-Kumbo-Ndop-Bamenda stretch was also in a very poor state. Such situation made it difficult for women to be fully involved in the importation of fuel and other products from Nigeria.
- 34 Nangah 2017.
- 35 Nangah 2017. To surmount the numerous mixed control brigades, some of these women generally went through bush roads or bribed their way through with the product. This was a common feature of this trade in Bamenda.
- 36 Nangah 2017.
- 37 Sih 2017.
- 38 Budi 2018.
- 39 Muluh 2017.
- 40 Nyeh 2018. It is worth mentioning here that the presence of petrol kiosks along the major streets in Bamenda was almost a total violation of the Order N° 01 /97 MINMEE of 05 January 1998 which fixed modalities for the implantation of petroleum distribution stations. Article 3 of this Order indicated that the distance between two filling stations should be at least 500 meters. While Article 4 set a distance of 1000 meters away from the Presidency of the Republic, The Senate, The National Assembly, The Prime Minister's Office, The Governor's Office, The Senior Divisional Officer's Office and The Divisional Officer's Office. It further stated that such installations should be 100 meters away from school establishments, hospitals, churches, sporting facilities, markets and administrative buildings. See Budi, 63.
- 41 Fongoh 2017.
- 42 Njikam and Tchouassi 2011, p. 206.
- 43 Muluh 2017.
- 44 Fambe 2017.
- 45 Fongoh 2017.
- 46 Fongoh 2017.
- 47 Ugo 2017.
- 48 Budi 2018, p. 3.
- 49 Budi 2018, p. 3. See also Budi 2019.
- 50 Muluh 2017; Obasi 2017.