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Note. Coat of arms of Cameroon. (Heraldry of the World, 2025)

Case Study Analysis

Cameroon

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this case study is to critically analyse the European Union's development aid to Cameroon guided by the New European Consensus on Development (2017) through the lens of Marxist international relations theory and to explore alternative paths of living using Arturo Escobar's post-development theory. Cameroon, a former German colony divided by French and British empires after WWI, gained independence during 1960-1961, forming a dual Anglophone-Francophone heritage. This historical partition, together with its religious and ethnic divisions, has led to multiple armed conflicts which shape the country today. Ruled by a dictator, Paul Biya, who has been in power for over 42 years, the country has a well-established one-party system with little political freedoms for the population. Economically, Cameroon remains heavily dependent on exporting raw materials like oil and cocoa (Workman, n.d.). EU, the country's largest trade partner, buying those products, supports the country through Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and aid programmes like the European Development Fund (EDF) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), focusing on governance, rural development, and infrastructure.

The case study tries to uncover the actual state of EU-Cameroon relations, arguing that while EU aid is framed as helping to improve governance and development, the actual effect is the reinforcement of Cameroon's economic dependency on its raw resource exports and its autocratic regime. Using Marxist theory, it provides a critique on how external aid is used as a tool of influence, reinforcing Cameroon's solely peripheral role in the global economy, benefiting European markets and local elites over the country's population. Additionally, Escobar's post-development approach highlights how the EU's attempts to apply its Western-centric universalist development framework have failed to recognise local context, calling for prioritisation of Cameroon's unique historical and cultural context.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN POINTS OF HISTORICAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND CAMEROON

- **Historical Background**

Cameroon was initially colonised by the German Empire in 1884 (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003, p. 10), but following Germany's defeat in World War I, the colony's territory was divided between the British and French empires, under the League of Nations mandate (p. 23). The French territory became known as French Cameroon, while the British mandate was split into Northern and Southern Cameroons.

French Cameroon gained independence in 1960, while British Cameroons held referendums in 1961, with mostly Muslim (Ostien, 2012, p. 4) Northern Cameroon voting to join newly formed independent Federation of Nigeria while in the southern part more than 70% voted to join newly established Cameroon (African Elections Database, 2011, British Cameroons Plebiscite section), becoming Western Cameroon, one of the two federative parts of Federal Republic Cameroon. This dual inheritance – Anglophone and Francophone, created a political tension and led to a conflict in the future.

Following the vote of the National Assembly, Ahmadou Ahidjo (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003, p. 34), who was already holding the position of Prime Minister of French Cameroon, became the first president. However, the hopes for a democratic future soon disappeared as Cameroon officially became a one-party state in 1966. His rule lasted until 1982, when he resigned in favour of then-Prime Minister Paul Biya (p. 69), who still retains power today.

Despite it's not hidden dictatorship nature, that "has gotten more and more violent and brutal" (Kah Walla, as cited in Atabong, 2023) over time, during the Cold War officially non-aligned Cameroon leaned towards France and Western Powers, deepening ties with France, which remains a key player in Cameroon's politics and economy. This helped Cameroon to achieve relative political stability, avoid isolation and attract Western investment for economic growth.

- **Current Situation**

Today, Cameroon is a country marked by political and economic consistency by regional standards. President Paul Biya, who has been in power since 1982, retains the title of the second-longest ruling president in Africa (Atabong, 2023, para. 11). While nominally Cameroon holds regular elections, they lack transparency and fairness, intentionally excluding many voters, with many others, particularly from the younger generation, being disengaged from the democratic process (Freedom House, 2022, paras. 3, 7, 8). The ruling party, RDPC, continues to dominate political life, with opposition members being regularly detained and arrested, forcing many to seek refuge in neighbouring countries (Cajetan, 2021, para. 1).

The Anglophone Crisis, originating way back to referendums in 1961 and following repressions of the English-speaking population, escalated in 2016 from peaceful protest against long-lasting “political and economic marginalization” (Gaffey, 2017, para. 4) to violent conflict in the form of guerrilla warfare. These fragmented separatists, consisting of at least 7 factions (Amara, 2024, para. 2), have not taken control of major cities like Buea or Bamenda but hold consistent control over remote and rural areas in the region (see Figure 1). The firm and violent government response has led to over 6,500 casualties and 584,000 people displaced (International Crisis Group, 2025).

In the far north, Cameroon also faces pressure from jihadist Boko Haram insurgents, based in bordering regions of Nigeria. While it does not hold control over any large settlements or significant infrastructure (see Figure 1), the group has recently escalated its activities. For example, in March 2025, the group killed 12 Cameroonian soldiers in an attack near Lake Chad (Akua & McMakin, 2025) and was generally noted by “increased hostage-taking tactics” (UNFPA Cameroon, 2025). Overall, the war in the north has killed more than 3000 Cameroonians and displaced around 250,000 (International Crisis Group, 2025).

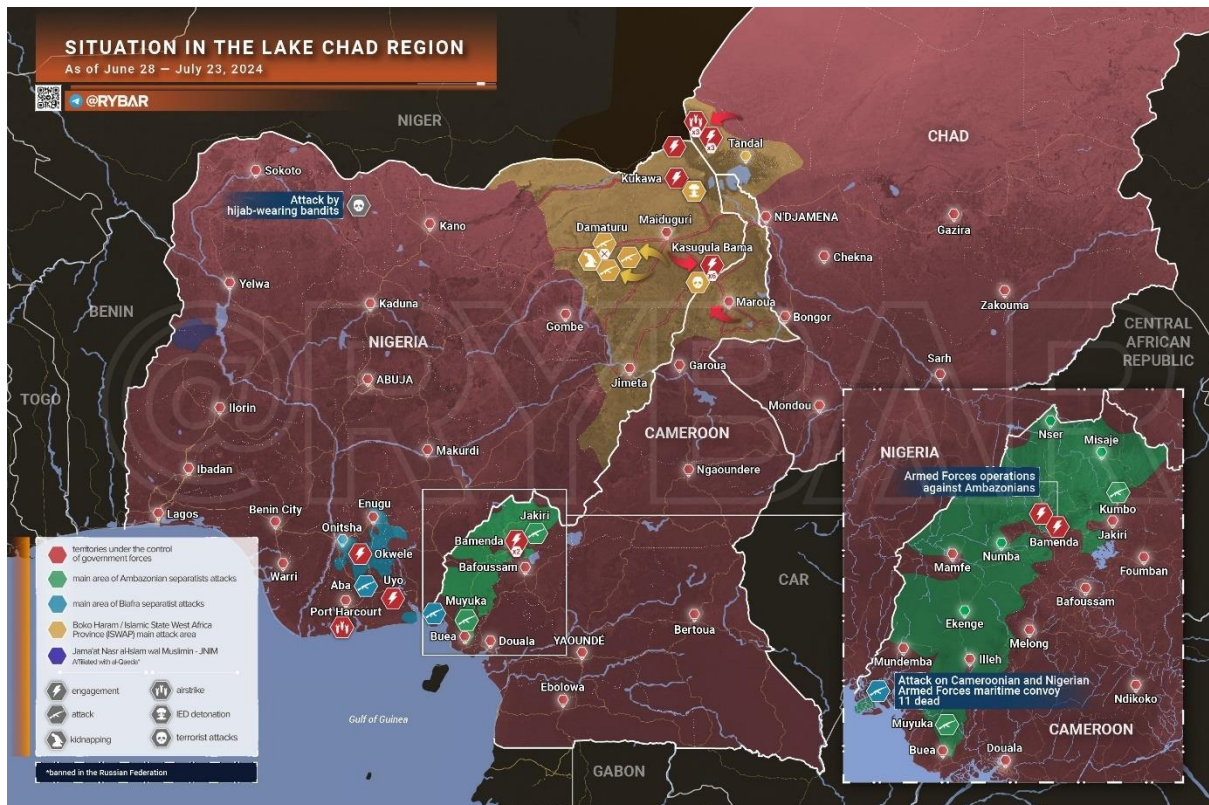


Figure 1. Map featuring areas of control by the Cameroon government, Ambazonian separatists and Boko Haram as of July 23rd, 2024 (Rybar, 2024)

Despite these challenges, Cameroon remains generally stable compared to its regional neighbours. It is classified as a lower-middle income country and benefits from international aid and foreign investment, including significant support from the European Union.

- ### EU Development Aid and Partnership Projects

The European Union is one of Cameroon's most significant development partners, providing help through multi-year programs, previously under the European Development Fund (EDF) and now, after being incorporated into the EU's general budget in 2021, through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI - Global Europe) programme, which will last until 2027.

During the 11th EDF (2014–2020), the EU allocated €282 million to Cameroon, with funding being distributed between initiatives in governance (€84 million) and rural development (€178 million) (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development, 2016, p. 77).

The programmes in rural development support agricultural activities and transport. For example, the Rural Electricity Access Project (PERACE), approved by the EU in 2019, is extending electricity access to villages in the far North, East and Northwest regions and is expected to benefit 2.5 million people (Beng, 2023). The EU also co-financed the construction of the Logone bridge connecting Cameroon and Chad (Travel And Tour World, 2025). This trend continued under the NDICI – Global Europe, with the loan of €91 million approved to Cameroon to boost infrastructure (PIAAFRICA, 2024).

Projects concerning governance mainly contribute to “consolidating the rule of law, fostering the reform of public finances and improving the business climate and management of natural resources” (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development, 2016, p. 77). A notable example is the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) action plan adopted in 2003, where the EU supported the establishment of the nationwide Legality Assurance System for timber. This initiative is aimed at combating illegal logging and promoting sustainable forest management in the country (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, 2021).

- **EU – Cameroon Relations**

Cameroon and the EU maintain strong economic ties, primarily shaped by the Economic Partnership Program (EPA) signed in 2009. This agreement “gives Cameroon duty-free quota-free access to the EU market with only an asymmetric and gradual opening of its own economy” over a period of 15 years (European Commission, 2009, para. 4).

Cameroon is the only Central African country to have fully implemented the EPA so far. The EU is the country’s top export partner, with The Netherlands leading with 23,2% market share, followed by France securing 12,3% (Business in Cameroon, 2024). The export primarily consists of crude oil, petroleum gases, cocoa beans, sawn wood and bananas, which combined represent 83,3% of all export sales (Workman, n.d.).

2. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATUS OF CAMEROON WITHIN THE GLOBAL SYSTEM

This chapter applies the Marxist theory of international relations to critically analyse the European Union's development approach to Cameroon. While the EU presents its policies as a tool for "sustainable economic, social and environmental development" (European Union, 2017, p. 2), the Marxist perspective identifies a fundamentally unequal relationship between core (developed) and periphery (developing) states, unveiling a "deeper, underlying – indeed hidden – truth" (Hobden & Jones, 2023, p.119).

- **Theoretical Framework and Relevance**

The Marxist theory of international relations, as outlined in the Communist Manifesto, which Marx and Engels (1848) co-authored, believes that all human history "is the history of class struggles" (p. 28). This logic, following the development of "monopoly capitalism" (Hobden & Jones, 2023, p.121), later evolved to describe relations between states – a dominant core exploiting a less-developed periphery. With this development, the "harmony of interests" between all workers stopped being the case, and the bourgeoisie in the core countries started exploiting the periphery to benefit their own proletariat (Hobden & Jones, 2023, p.121). This international system, serving the interests of dominant capitalist classes, leads to structural dependency, where developing states (periphery) are locked into a global capitalist system that prevents any autonomous development.

The Marxist approach is especially relevant in the context of EU-Cameroon relations because it allows to move outside of the state boundaries and analyse deeper economic and social structures. It offers a people-centred view revealing how development aid serves the interests of economic elites rather than society in general. This is essential for understanding how the EU's development aid in agriculture, infrastructure, energy and governance bypasses the deeper political core, personally controlled by Paul Biya for over 42 years.

Adding the concept of neocolonialism enriches this analysis by framing the EU not just as a development partner, but a (former) colonial power that maintains its influence through economic control rather than brute force.

- **Application of Marxism to EU-Cameroon Relations**

The EU officially frames its relationship with Cameroon around the ideas of peace, democracy and development, as it is stated in the New European Consensus on Development (European Union, 2017, p. 14). Though different tools such as the European Development Fund (EDF), since recently the NDICI, and the EU–Cameroon Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), the EU provides Cameroon with economic aid and develops its economic relations with the country. However, when seen through a Marxist lens, these initiatives appear as a strategy to consolidate market access, enable more resource extraction and maintain geopolitical stability in the country.

The EPA, for example, requires Cameroon to progressively remove the tariffs on European goods. While this may sound beneficial for consumers, it harms local industries, preventing them from developing, since they cannot compete with subsidised European products without tariffs on products from outside. This locks Cameroon's economy to exporting its raw materials and importing manufactured goods, completing the loop of Cameroon's role as an exclusively peripheral economy in a capitalist system.

- **Aid as a tool of influence**

The EU's liberal rhetoric of promoting sustainable development visibly contrasts with its practical support for Cameroon and its autocratic regime. Many of the EU-funded programs, such as rural development or infrastructure projects like PERACE or the Logone bridge, fulfil two parallel goals. Firstly, they improve the logistics in underdeveloped areas, making the extraction and transportation of natural resources, essential for European markets, more economically viable. Secondly, they serve as a legitimacy tool for the Cameroonian bourgeoisie, allowing the state to claim successes in development without challenging its autocratic nature.



Figure 2. Cameroon's President Paul Biya greets French President Emmanuel Macron at the presidential palace in Yaoundé, Cameroon, July 26, 2022 (Essigue, 2022)

The regime of Paul Biya, which is fundamentally non-aligned with EU core values, has been treated positively in the international arena (see Figure 2) and consistently benefited from EU support while facing extremely limited pressure to implement any meaningful democratic reforms or organise fair democratic elections.

This strategic approach ensures that while the Cameroonian proletariat receives minor improvements, the power structure remains the same. As Rosa Luxemburg (1913) argues in her book “The Accumulation of Capital”, capitalist powers expand into new markets not just out of altruism, but for their goods, their new raw materials and new labour forces (proletariat) to exploit (p.358). It needs that to absorb the surplus production, and to sustain the accumulation of capital (p.359). And to achieve this exploitation, capitalism, which in this case is represented by the EU, “depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and social organisations existing side by side with it” (p.365). By doing business with Biya’s regime as normal, the EU maintains a stable, cooperative elite that, in return, provides resource access, masking this exploitation under the façade of “partnership” (European Commission, 2009, para. 1).

- **Conclusion**

From a Marxist perspective, the EU's development approach to Cameroon represents a modern form of colonial control, where the direct physical control of a country has been replaced by total economic dependence. By providing resources through state-controlled institutions, selectively supporting rural development and infrastructure projects, and avoiding any critics of a Biya's dictatorship, the EU keeps the loyalty of benefiting Cameroon bourgeoisie, ensuring stable cooperation with European interests of exporting exploiting Cameroon's natural resources while the proletariat sees no structural change in their political and economic position.

While the EU's development aid policies may contribute to small-scale improvements in quality of life, none of these initiatives changed what keeps Cameroon peripheral, such as empowering civil society or changing solely natural resource-based economy. In truth, EU's genuine goal has never been to bring real change. The only real objective always was to keep Cameroon as a convenient raw-resource base. By maintaining a total economic control, locking the country in its western-aligned camp, and keeping the local elite happy it ensures a solid access to resources, a scheme in which Cameroon has no say, all while masking it under an image of a "partnership" that is "targeted at accelerating growth and development in Cameroon" (European Commission, 2009, para. 1).

3. ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO DEVELOPMENT

Cameroon's engagement with the European Union's development aid has shown only minor progress, looking more like neocolonialism, where aid serves the interest of the donor more than the recipient. As a result, such aid efforts have failed, leaving the country with two wars, poverty and authoritarian rule, with no visible way forward. This chapter shifts focus to explore alternative models that, rather than trying to imitate Western models, emerge from Cameroon itself. By applying Arturo Escobar's post-development approach, which stands in opposition to the universalist top-down nature of traditional development theories, we identify local community-led initiatives that fit the current context and philosophy of the region.

- **Theoretical Framework**

Arturo Escobar's post-development approach questions our dependence on concepts like "development", which imply there is a single, "universal" right way to develop, modelled after Western experiences. He argues that the very idea of "development" is not a neutral term, but a produced term that emerged in the post-World War 2 period to legitimise Western political and economic dominance over others. This idea constructs the term of the "Third World", countries like Cameroon as "undeveloped" or "lacking", framing that these societies "must catch up with the industrialised countries" to become like them (Escobar, 1995, p. vii). This is what is called the so unquestionably desired development – "the magic formula" (Escobar, 1995, p. vii).

Central to this idea stands an argument that development becomes the only solution, one that imposes an "amazingly ethnocentric" (Escobar, 1995, p. 4) Western model of economic growth and modernisation on societies with hugely different histories, worldviews and social structures. This universalisation does not only promotes the western way of thinking, but it also actively erases local knowledge. Development becomes a civilising mission that transforms complex reality into a singular vision defined by GDP, liberal democracy and industrialisation.

To counter this, Escobar proposes a "pluriverse" – a world where multiple, diverse ways of knowing, living, and practicing coexist, rejecting the idea of a single trajectory. Instead of using standardised, external solutions, pluriverse calls for a radical shift to

autonomy, where local communities define their own vision of the future based on their values and knowledge.

- **Escobar's ideas in Cameroonian context**

Cameroon, commonly described through the development lens as “undeveloped”, like the one “lagging behind”, presents a great example of how a “one-fits-all” Western model fails to address local complexity. EU-led initiatives, in their majority, apply standardised approaches, which presume that the local population in the given region of Cameroon has the same needs and morals as someone from Europe (Kerkhof, 2024, para. 2) and thus all societies should be on the same linear path of growth.

In Cameroon, this behaviour is visible in how development initiatives do not take into consideration local knowledge systems and cultural differences. For example, the EU's support for large-scale agricultural projects often overlooks traditional farming practices and the cultural and ecological significance the land can have to indigenous people. One of the instances is the EU-funded EcoNorCam project near Benoue National Park, which aimed at restoring degraded land through agroecological methods. While well-intended and well-funded, it faced challenges due to limited integration of local agricultural practices and cultural norms, which led to resistance in adopting new farming techniques and technologies (Bongben, 2024).

Escobar's theory also helps to reinterpret the language used in EU-Cameroon relations. Phrases such as “partnership for growth”, which was used in a look-alike EPA agreement with Ghana (European Union Delegation in Ghana, 2021) or “capacity building” mentioned in the New European Consensus on Development (European Union, 2017, p. 14), while might appear neutral and technical at first, assume hierarchical relations in which the EU has knowledge and resources, and Cameroon must learn. These assumptions reflect what Escobar calls the “development apparatus” – a network of institutions, policies and experts that reproduce western interests by shaping how the problems and solutions are framed.

- **Alternative pathways**

Several community-driven initiatives in Cameroon show an example of post-development:

- 1. Kilum-Ijim Forest Conservation**

The Kilum-Ijim Forest Conservation in the Northwest Region demonstrates how indigenous knowledge can be integrated into conservation efforts. Through “indigenous conservation literacy programs” (Cameroon Gender and Environment Watch, 2023), which included storytelling, discussions and practical demonstrations, the initiative successfully expanded forest cover using best practices of indigenous forest conservation.

2. Tayap Ecological Orchards

In the village of Tayap, located in the Centre Region, the community has implemented a self-supporting and self-financing system of seed and tree nurseries, plantations of endangered forest species. More than 250 villagers have directly benefited from the initiative, and a solidarity fund was created to encourage women to start their own green businesses. This initiative has also led to the diversification of the local economy, with the developing facilities for eco-tourism (UNFCCC secretariat, 2023).

3. Analog Forestry in Kitiwum

In Kitiwum, the Centre for Nursery Development and Eru Propagation (CENDEP) has introduced a locally driven Analog Forestry approach in response to land degradation and deforestation. This technique of ecological restoration mimics existing local forest ecosystems, which “minimises external inputs” (Centre for Nursery Development and Eru Propagation, n.d., Analog Forestry section) such as chemicals and fossil fuels, recognising rural communities social and economic needs (CENDEP, n.d).

These, as well as other similar local projects, demonstrate how moving away from the western concepts of development and instead focusing on the local context that uses indigenous philosophy and knowledge can lead to self-sustaining projects that bring the local communities to real positive change.

• Conclusion

Arturo Escobar’s post-structuralist approach (Escobar, 1995, p. vii) offers a radical switch from the dominant Western-centric model of development promoted EU, though its New European Consensus on Development (2017). It calls us to see Cameroon not as “underdeveloped” but as different, with its own ways of knowing, being and

organising life. This idea challenges the thought of growth, modernisation and liberal transformation as a universally beneficial goal.

The application of Escobar's model to Cameroon shows that alternative, locally inspired paths are not only possible, but they already exist. Importantly, Escobar's ideas do not suggest abandoning all external cooperation - the pluriverse has never been about isolation, but about interdependence. What needs to change is the reversal of authority - from top-down aid to bottom-up autonomy (Escobar, 1995, p. 44). EU foreign aid policies should learn to allow Cameroonian communities to be a central pillar of their own future, to define progress on their own terms. Only by accepting a plurality of knowledges and diversity of ways of living, true transformational change can happen – not as a gift from outside but as a creation from within.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this case study analysis revealed that the EU's liberal development approach, framed through promoting peace, democracy and sustainable growth, failed to achieve structural change in Cameroon from its design. Instead, it serves to maintain economic dependency and elite loyalty, just what European colonial empires have been doing for hundreds of years. From a Marxist perspective, EU tools like EPA and NDICI-funded projects (e.g. PERACE, Logone bridge) secure market access and increase resource extraction efficiency, while legitimising Paul Biya's autocratic regime, which faces no real pressure for democratic reforms. This consolidates Cameroon's peripheral status, with its economy tied to raw material exports to Europe, ensuring that the European countries, which largely rely on undemocratic societies to maintain their prosperity (Luxemburg, 1913, p. 365), won't lose their raw resource source. Arturo Escobar's post-development approach further critiques the EU's Western-centric universalist model, which overlooks Cameroon's cultural differences and the potential of indigenous knowledge.

In my view, due to the above-mentioned dependency system, no change is likely to come any time soon. Paul Biya, who is already 92 years old, is likely to be replaced with a new face, which, whatever their populist slogans will be, which, however, will not change Cameroon's placement in the global world alignment. The anglophone crisis, given its recent escalation, is not going to run out of steam in any foreseeable future, and the Boko Haram insurgency is not something Cameroon will be able to control, as the root cause is in neighbouring Nigeria. If one day a government comes with a true goal to break the external control, initially, significant economic consequences will be inevitable, which itself challenges the idea of how long this government will politically survive, both inside and outside the country.

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