

# *Bienvenue?*

## – NARRATIVES OF FRANCOPHONE CAMEROONIANS



A RUNNYMEDE COMMUNITY STUDY  
BY KJARTAN PÁLL SVEINSSON

RUNNYMEDE



## About Runnymede Community Studies

In reflecting on the changing nature of ethnic diversity in Britain, it becomes increasingly clear that we have to move beyond binary notions of white and non-white to explain the ways in which racisms operate, identities are formed and people live out their lives. The societies in which we live are becoming more diverse and will continue to diversify as migration patterns change, and the impacts of globalisation are reflected in labour markets as well as in transnational movement of capital.

This series of community studies aims to promote understanding of the diversity within and between different ethnic groups. Our intention is to build up a collection of studies which focus on communities; their demography, links to civil society, and key political and social issues. We hope that over time this will provide a rich resource for understanding how diversity is lived and experienced away from the necessarily crude ethnic monitoring form, in a vital and dynamic multi-ethnic society.

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# *Bienvenue?* – Narratives of Francophone Cameroonians

KJARTAN PÁLL SVEINSSON

## Francophone Cameroonians at a Glance

### Population and Geography

- According to the 2001 census, there were 2,021 Cameroonian-born people living in London.
- According to the calculations of one community organisation consulted for this study, there were 10,000 Cameroonians living on London in 2004.
- A large part of Cameroonians in the UK live in London. However, there are relatively large congregations of Cameroonians in other parts of Britain as well.

### Life in London

- Francophone Cameroonians have set up an abundance of community organisations, catering both specifically for Cameroonians and Francophone Africans generally.
- In addition to formal organisations, many Cameroonians have set up highly effective small scale informal networks, typically consisting of a few dozen people. The purpose of these networks is to provide each other with help and assistance not available elsewhere, ranging from finances to babysitting.
- Connections with friends and family back in Cameroon are of utmost importance; according to interviewees, most Cameroonians send remittances on a regular basis.

### Education

- According to a study commissioned by Southwark Council, the majority of Francophone Africans are university educated.
- Francophone Cameroonians find it difficult to get their qualifications recognised in Britain, and many are forced to start their education from scratch.

### Employment

- Deskilling is common, with university educated Cameroonians often finding work well below their level of education and skill.
- Many interviewees felt discriminated against in the labour market, partly due to their being African, partly because of language problems.
- Language is a barrier to employment, but this is not confined to language skills, which only become a substantial problem when combined with other language related difficulties. For example, interviewees stated that the British public makes an explicit connection between Francophone Africa and refugees. Given the stigma attached to refugees generally, this default association creates a host of problems for economic inclusion.

### Immigration and Asylum

- Traditionally, Francophone Cameroonians have emigrated to France, while Anglophone Cameroonians would find their way to Britain.
- Since the 1990s, French speaking Cameroonians are starting to show a preference for Britain.
- The majority of Francophone Cameroonians in Britain arrived in the 1990s.
- A large part of Cameroonians have claimed asylum in Britain. In the period from 1995 to 2003, a total of 3,020 Cameroonians applied for asylum. In the same period, 2,675 Cameroonian applications were rejected.
- Many Cameroonian asylum seekers complain that the British government does not recognise the gravity of the political situation in Cameroon.

## Relevant Organisations and Websites

### **BUCA**

#### **(Burkina Community Association)**

52 Shrubbery Road  
London N9 0PA  
United Kingdom  
Tel: 020 8887 0716  
Web: [www.bucaproject.org.uk](http://www.bucaproject.org.uk)  
Email: [info@bucaproject.org.uk](mailto:info@bucaproject.org.uk)

### **FAWAUK**

#### **(French African Welfare Association)**

537 Norwood Road,  
London,  
SE27 9DL  
Tel: 020 8766 5849  
Email: [fawauk@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:fawauk@yahoo.co.uk)

### **WACAH (West African Community Action for Health and Welfare)**

Unit 106, Weaver House  
19-21 Chapel Road  
SE27 0TP  
Tel.: 020 8670 8882  
Fax: 020 8670 8008  
Email: [wacahorg@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:wacahorg@yahoo.co.uk)

### **Le Guide Londonien**

Web: [www.leguide.org.uk](http://www.leguide.org.uk)  
Email: [info@leguide.org.uk](mailto:info@leguide.org.uk)  
CACOWEDA UK  
P.O. Box 55751  
E16 3XA  
Email: [cacoweda@aol.com](mailto:cacoweda@aol.com)

### **Central African Organisation**

Room 14  
71 - 72 Nathan Way  
SE28 0BQ  
Tel: 020 8331 4311  
Email:  
[centralafrica2000@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:centralafrica2000@yahoo.co.uk)

### **AFRIC (African Francophone Resource & Information Centre)**

19 Burbage House  
Samuel Close  
SE14 5RP  
Tel: 020 7635 1765  
Email: [afric3@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:afric3@hotmail.co.uk)

### **African Francophone Community Association (AFCA)**

Third floor, The Irish Centre  
Pretoria Road  
N17 8DX  
Tel: 020 8808 0999  
Fax: 020 808 0249  
Web: [www.francophone.co.uk](http://www.francophone.co.uk)  
Email: [info@francophone.co.uk](mailto:info@francophone.co.uk)

### **Cameroon Community Welfare Organisation**

258d Gloucester Terrace  
W2 6HU  
Tel: 020 7243 1662  
Email: [meguen2ko@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:meguen2ko@yahoo.co.uk)

### **Cameroon Forum**

Suite 501, International House  
223 Regent Street  
W1B 2QD  
Tel: 020 8432 0680  
Fax: 020 8805 8773  
Web: [www.cameroon-forum.co.uk](http://www.cameroon-forum.co.uk)  
Email: [info@cameroon-forum.co.uk](mailto:info@cameroon-forum.co.uk)

### **Cameroon Asylum Support Association UK (CASA UK)**

110 Woodvale Walk  
SE27 0EY  
Tel: 020 8761 6661  
Fax: 020 8670 0303  
Web: [www.casauk.org.uk](http://www.casauk.org.uk)  
Email: [casa\\_uk\\_org@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:casa_uk_org@yahoo.co.uk)

### **African Community Partnership**

2 Wildgoose Drive  
SE14 5LL  
Tel: 020 7635 9000 Email:  
[africap@btconnect.com](mailto:africap@btconnect.com)

### **African Community Welfare Association (ACWA)**

Durning Hall Business Centre  
Earlham Grove  
E7 9AB  
Tel: 020 8534 4453  
Fax: 020 8534 4453  
Web: [www.acwa-hafia.org.uk](http://www.acwa-hafia.org.uk)  
Email: [acwa@acwa-hafia.org.uk](mailto:acwa@acwa-hafia.org.uk)

### **African Families Support Services**

145a London Road  
KT2 6NH  
Tel: 020 8974 9993  
Web: [www.afss.org](http://www.afss.org)  
Email: [info@afss.org](mailto:info@afss.org)

### **Praxis**

Pott Street  
E2 0EF  
Tel: 0207 7297985  
Email: [admin@praxis.org.uk](mailto:admin@praxis.org.uk)  
[www.praxis.org.uk](http://www.praxis.org.uk)

### **Cameroon embassy High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon**

84 Holland Park  
W11 3SB  
Tel: 020 7727 0771  
Fax: 020 7792 9353

### **African Community Link**

140 New Cross Road  
SE14 5BA  
Tel: 020 7635 7095  
Email: [aflinkproject@aol.com](mailto:aflinkproject@aol.com)

### **African Families Foundation**

Peckham Settlement  
Goldsmiths Road  
SE15 5TF  
Tel: 020 7635 7788  
Fax: 020 7635 7788  
Email: [afrisam@aol.com](mailto:afrisam@aol.com)

## Introduction

One of the groups that have in recent years added themselves to the ethnic repertoire of London is Francophone Africans. Bringing with them a profusion of new cultural forms and expressions, their contribution to the city's composition is a valuable and enriching addition to the cultural life of Londoners. An excursion through parts of London is likely to reveal the great diversification of the African presence in the city, where the names and national flags of countries such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo and Cameroon can increasingly be spotted in restaurants, food stores, phone shops, clubs and money-transferring centres.

This recent shift in the profile of London's African communities has sparked scarce academic interest; little is empirically known about the settlement of the various Francophone African groups in the UK. This is an unfortunate situation, as it is clear that many of the issues faced by French speaking Africans are not necessarily shared by their English speaking neighbours. However, there are two notable exceptions to this academic indifference towards Francophone Africans in London. In *'La Nouvelle Vague? Recent Francophone African Settlement in London,'* David Styan attempts to gauge the extent to which "the Francophone presence in London is really a new and durable departure,"<sup>1</sup> as well as exploring the advantages and shortcomings of 'Francophone' as a descriptive category. In a less theoretically, and more practically, oriented manner, Southwark Council's Social Policy Unit commissioned a study in 2005 titled *Researching the Needs of the French Speaking African Community in Southwark*. The central objectives to the study were: "to make an assessment of the needs of the Francophone African community in Southwark; to evaluate the extent to which this community has access to mainstream and other service provision; and to enhance the council's awareness on Francophone community in the borough."<sup>2</sup> The study provides some important statistical information, such as on education, employment and access to health services,

providing a point of reference for this report.

In spite of these two important studies, many questions are still left unanswered. Why did Francophone Africans start to show an increasing preference for the UK in the 1990s? In what ways do their experiences differ from those of Anglophone Africans? Even basic data such as total numbers of Francophone Africans reaching Britain is largely missing or inadequate. While this study does not purport to provide final answers to these questions, we hope to provide a point of departure for further academic research as well as initiating a dialogue between community organisations, policy makers, and local authority representatives.

The choice of Francophone Cameroonians for this study largely derives from the unique insights they provide into the issues faced by Francophone Africans in Britain generally. Although the majority of Cameroon is French speaking, there is a substantial minority of English speakers as well. While the tensions between the two groups in Cameroon do not appear to translate over to London, most of the interviewees of this study stated that there is little contact between Francophone and Anglophone Cameroonians in London, where French speaking Cameroonians tend to form links with other Francophone African communities, while English speaking Cameroonians tend to associate themselves with other Anglophone Africans, such as Nigerians and Ghanaians. This may, to a certain extent, reflect certain differences in cultural preferences of the two groups; when the question of independence was raised in Cameroon, the English speaking part debated whether to join Nigeria or become part of Cameroon, and a secessionist movement, the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC), emerged in the 1990s. However, and perhaps more importantly for the theme of this report, the divide between the two groups also represents different barriers to social and economic inclusion they face in London, largely due to differing migratory experiences.

<sup>1</sup> Styan (2003: 17)

<sup>2</sup> Community Involvement and Development Unit (2006: 3)

## Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore interviewees' experiences of living in London, and what they perceived to be the main issues facing Francophone Cameroonians in London generally. For this reason, the methodology used was primarily qualitative, which is particularly apt in providing insight into the complex, subtle, and often contradictory views, experiences, motivations and attitudes of individuals. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 16 individuals,<sup>3</sup> of whom 14 were French speaking and 2 were English speaking, and access to interviewees was facilitated by community organisations as well as snowballing. Interviews were conducted in homes, offices, pubs, cafes and restaurants. The small sample size means that the results should not be read as statistically representative of all Cameroonians in London. The specific focus of this study was on Cameroonians from the French speaking part of Cameroon. However, as the majority of interviewees commented on the division between Francophone and Anglophone Cameroonians in London, two Anglophone interviewees were contacted for triangulation purposes, i.e. to add an extra dimension to the issues of community divisions. This does not mean that the study is representative of all Francophone Cameroonians either. A purposive sampling technique – where interviewees are selected specifically a) for their specific experiences or knowledge, and b) to capture the diversity and breadth of views within the sample group – was adopted in order to get as broad a perspective as possible. In this way, every effort was made to have a broad sampling range in terms of gender, age, length of time in the UK, etc. to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible. It must be noted, however, that attempts to contact Francophone Cameroonians achieving in their chosen profession proved unsuccessful, which obviously introduces a certain bias to the sample group. This should be kept in mind; if this report focuses on problems rather than successes, it should be noted that many interviewees did give accounts of 'success stories' of friends or acquaintances who had worked their way to a prominent place in life.

This report does not purport to represent a conclusive ethnographic account of the Francophone Cameroonian community. While the purpose of the study is to map out the main issues identified by the participants of the studies, this can only amount to a 'snapshot.' It must also be stressed that not every issue of importance can be identified or discussed in the report. For example, the small sample size does not allow for a detailed description or analysis of the great diversity within the Francophone Cameroonian community. It will be up to later studies to fill in the ethnographical details for a comprehensive understanding of life in London for Francophone Cameroonians.

<sup>3</sup> The names of Interviewees used throughout this report are not actual. They have been changed to maintain anonymity of the participants of this study.

## Background

### About Cameroon

Cameroon is sometimes called 'Africa in miniature.' Geographically, this western central African country presents every major type of climate, vegetation and geology Africa has to offer: a coastline on the Bight of Bonny, high volcanic mountains, deserts, tropical rainforests and savannah lands can all be found in Cameroon. Demographically, it is no less diverse, with its population of over 16 million

comprising over 230 linguistic and ethnic groups, encompassing a vast array of cultural forms and expressions. The official languages are French and English, which divide Cameroon into two linguistic and, to a certain extent, political sections. The English-speaking minority, approximately 20% of the total population, inhabit the Northwest and Southwest provinces. The French speaking majority live in the rest of the country.

Cameroon was initially 'claimed' by the German empire in 1884, in spite of the predominant role of the British on the West African coast, and the French along the Central African coastline. However, following Germany's defeat in World War I, the country was split between France and Britain to form French Cameroun and British Cameroons, respectively, with the latter being administered from Nigeria. Although colonialism brought as much affliction to the population of French Cameroun as it did in other parts of Africa, substantial agricultural as well as infrastructural development took place, while British Cameroons was characterised by neglect and disinterest on the part of the British colonial authorities. After World War II, voices demanding independence for French Cameroun became increasingly louder, while the debate in British Cameroons revolved around whether to join Nigeria or reunify with French Cameroun. Independence finally came for French Cameroun in 1960, but the British part was still split over whom to join. In 1961, a plebiscite was held on the issue, which resulted in the Muslim dominated Northern British Cameroons opting to join Nigeria, while the Southern part opted to join Cameroon. Importantly, however, political tensions have run deep between the Anglophone and Francophone parts of Cameroon, where English speaking Cameroonians feel they have been unfairly treated by the French speaking government. This situation has resulted in periods of sporadic conflicts and uprisings.

Economically, Cameroon was amongst the most prosperous African countries following independence. The 1970s were a period of particularly rapid growth following the discovery of petroleum. However, during the 1980s the economy crumbled, for a combination of different reasons. The steep fall of prices of principal export products – including petrol, coffee and cocoa<sup>4</sup> – were coupled with poor internal political and economic management and spiralling household poverty induced by a World Bank/IMF structural adjustment programme.<sup>5</sup> The consequences have

been severe for most Cameroonians, whether one considers political, social or economic effects. Cameroonian economist Fondo Sikod has summarised these as follows: "unemployment of university and high school graduates, thus creating a new category of poor people; inequity in regional development investment by the state; gender and sex discrimination; cultural inequalities; political repression; and human rights abuses."<sup>6</sup>

The state of democracy in present day Cameroon is similarly defective. However, in spite of a range of charges – such as lack of political transparency, electoral fraud and intimidation of political activists – from a number of organisations criticising the Cameroonian political system, many members of the international community either ignore or silently endorse the political situation in Cameroon. Most importantly, perhaps, is the continued support the ruling Cameroonian People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) receives from the French government.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Takougang has suggested that the dramatic change from the near collapse of President Paul Biya's CPDM in 1992 to the dramatic and somewhat unexpected electoral victory of the CPDM in 2002 has as much to do with France's support of the party as it does with the President's prowess and skill as a politician.<sup>8</sup> In any case, human rights abuses are widespread in Cameroon and are often linked to political activity, even though this may not always be internationally recognised – a fact which several interviewees of this study were all too painfully aware of. In spite of rich governmental rhetoric to the contrary, little progress has been made in the last few years. Cameroon still scores low both on 'Political Rights' and 'Civil Liberties' in Freedom House's annual survey<sup>9</sup> – resulting in a 'Not Free' socio-political status – and Amnesty International produced a damning report on the state of Cameroonian human rights in 2004:

The government held on to power in presidential elections after using violence to disrupt peaceful opposition meetings. Political leaders were detained to prevent public meetings and demonstrations. One political prisoner died in prison, apparently from medical neglect. The government failed to investigate reports of torture, 'disappearances' or deaths in police custody independently or openly.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Subramanian (1994)

<sup>5</sup> Sikod (2001)

<sup>6</sup> Sikod (2001: 202-203)

<sup>7</sup> Gros (1995)

<sup>8</sup> Takougang (2003)

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House (2006)

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International (2005)

## Reasons for Leaving

Judging from the discussion in the previous section, a large number of Cameroonians have strong and instrumental reasons for leaving Cameroon. This was certainly the case for the majority of the people interviewed for this study, most of whom came to Britain in the 1990s, although some left Cameroon later. Some came as migrants escaping economic hardship and seeking a better life, but many also had first hand experience of political intimidation and human rights abuses. A large part of the sample was university educated and had professional careers in Cameroon. Due to the small sample size of this study, this should not be interpreted as statistically representative in its own right. However, according to the findings of a large scale study of the French speaking African community in Southwark, Francophone Africans in London tend to be well educated.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many interviewees said that it was their professional involvement in political activities that had driven them from Cameroon. As one interviewee, Alain, pointed out:

If you see a refugee, someone fleeing from their country, they must have been someone important there. Even if he is young, he must have been important, because if he was not important, he wouldn't have been persecuted. Especially those who are fleeing political things. But if there is war, things like that, yes, everyone can run away. But if people are fleeing political persecution, that means they must have been important.

This is true in the case of Cameroon. Civil war is not part of the problem Cameroonians are facing. Rather, it is the political repression, economic decline and social inequalities that people are escaping. Not everyone came as

asylum seekers, though, and some did not know that their experiences in Cameroon would qualify them as asylum seekers in the UK. Victor, who suffered severe physical maltreatment by government officials, fled the country without knowing anything about the asylum seeker process in Britain:

When I started the university, I couldn't finish the academy, because after, we have to stop the class, the police, the military, the gendarmerie,<sup>12</sup> they all come to the school and catch people because of your political view. And the situation was sometimes, 'OK, maybe next year it will be better.' The next year, the same thing. After, I got fed up, and thought, 'OK, I have to go and find my way to somewhere else.'

Importantly, however, none of the interviewees wanted to leave Cameroon, but felt that they were forced to do so. As Claude pointed out, during the period of economic growth, not many Cameroonians wanted to leave their country:

So many people were quite happy in Cameroon. They couldn't see the necessary to go outside Cameroon. But when things started to get tough in Cameroon – school not working, hospital, go to hospital, you can't get treatment, you can't go to school, you know, because no money, and you can't get job, you want to leave school to go to work, but you haven't got no job, what can you do?

In this sense, their decision to leave stems from a 'reactive necessity' rather than a 'proactive strategy of choice.'<sup>13</sup> Many saw life in London as a temporary, albeit extended, period away from their home country, to which they wished to return at some point in their lives.

<sup>11</sup> Community Involvement and Development Unit (2006)

<sup>12</sup> Gendarmerie is the military police in Cameroon.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. McIlwaine (2005)

## Cameroonians in London

### Two Communities

When speaking about ‘Cameroonians in London’ the first thing that needs to be elucidated is that the Cameroonian population in London is in fact divided into two communities: Anglophone and Francophone. The main focus of this study is on the experiences of Cameroonians from the French speaking part of the country. Thus, while the split between the two communities is an important factor shaping the Cameroonian presence in London, the discussion below will primarily reflect the thoughts and ideas of Francophone Cameroonians.

According to the interviewees, Anglophone Cameroonians were settling in London well before Francophones started arriving in significant numbers. Traditionally, Francophone Cameroonians would emigrate to France, while Anglophones would find their way to Britain. This reflected wider trends of African migration to Britain. Indeed, Styan has shown how, up until 1991, the largest African groups in the UK “came overwhelmingly from the four key former British West African colonies: Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and the far smaller Gambia. The top twelve sub-Saharan African countries of birth included none of the non-Anglophone countries.”<sup>14</sup> However, since the 90s, French speakers have increasingly seen Britain as a preferable destination.<sup>15</sup> As can be seen from table 1, the number of asylum applications made by Cameroonians in the UK rose swiftly to a peak in 2002, and have dropped since. The reason for the dramatic rise until 2002 is evident from the discussion above. The drop, however, is not due to an improved situation in Cameroon. Rather, it is the result of reduced opportunities to leave Cameroon, as well as stricter refugee and asylum seeker policy in Britain.<sup>16</sup>

It is, of course, difficult to say whether this rise in asylum seeker applications is due to an increase

in Francophone or Anglophone Cameroonians seeking asylum. However, given the recent increase in Francophone Cameroonians settling in London, one could reasonably assume that a large part of the asylum claims is made by Francophones. Still, access to reliable statistical data remains a problem; it is difficult enough to estimate the total Cameroonian population in Britain, let alone the number of Francophone Cameroonians in London. The 2001 census identified 2,021 London residents born in Cameroon. As with many other African groups, this is likely to be a gross under-estimate. In 2004, one community organisation consulted for this study had undertaken a survey of Cameroonians in Britain, which estimated that 10,000 Cameroonians were living in London that year; the ratio between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians is unknown. Other organisations were of the opinion that this number is now closer to 20,000. In terms of geographical distribution, interviewees stated that Francophone Cameroonians are widely distributed throughout the city, but appear to live primarily in north London (Edmonton Green, Tottenham and Wood Green), east London (Walthamstow and Barking) and south east London (Thamesmead and Plumsted).

In any case, the volume and variety of activities in which Cameroonians are involved indicate that the Cameroonian community in London is substantial. Apart from the vast array of community organisations set up and run by Francophone Cameroonians, there are also five Cameroonian restaurants in London and a nightclub catering specifically to Cameroonians. Furthermore, Cameroonians meet every Sunday in Hackney Marshes for eleven-a-side football matches; a ‘Miss Cameroon UK’ contest is organised every year; and *Le Guide Londonien*, a bimonthly magazine and webzine covering issues relating to Francophone Africans in London, is published by a Cameroonian.

Due to the longer history of London settlement from Anglophone Cameroonians and the relatively recent arrival of Francophones, many interviewees were of the opinion that the Anglophone Cameroonian community is better

<sup>14</sup> Styan (2003)

<sup>15</sup> The reasons for this shift in migratory patterns are multifarious, and relate both to diplomatic relations between Cameroon and Europe, as well as perceived prospects of a decent life in the two countries. The next chapter will discuss this in greater depth.

<sup>16</sup> See Refugee Council (2006). See also Immigration and Nationality Directorate (2007), where it is concluded that a drop in asylum applications is due to ‘good performance.’ Additionally, at the time of writing, there was a fierce debate on the deportation of Congolese asylum seekers, resulting in MP Rudi Vis introducing an Early Day Motion (EDM) to Parliament on the grounds of the deportations amounting to “a grave violation of their Article 3 human rights as provided for in the Geneva Convention” (EDMDetails, 2007).

Table 1. Applications received from Cameroonians for asylum in the UK, excluding dependants. (Source: Heath et al., 2006)

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Number of applications	175	95	245	355	380	615	505	360	290	3020

Table 2. Refusals of asylum, exceptional leave, humanitarian protection and discretionary leave to Cameroonians, excluding dependants. (Source: Heath et al., 2006)

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Number of applications	155	165	80	230	500	440	525	335	245	2675

internally organised, and has formed alliances and associations – both officially and socially – with other Anglophone African countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana. There was also widespread sentiment that the Anglophone community is antagonistic towards the growing presence of their Francophone compatriots, and would rather they kept on going to France. This is obviously connected to the tensions evident in Cameroon between the French and English speaking parts of the country. While most of the interviewees did have Anglophone friends or acquaintances, this was more on an individual than collective level, and they generally felt that they did not have access to their networks or association. Still, there was a great sense of pan-Cameroonian sentiment, and many lamented this situation, as it was seen as an obstacle for Cameroonians to come together and fight for improvements, not only in Britain, but in Cameroon as well.

When you are a Cameroonian, even when you are black, even when you are white, even when you are yellow, we are the same person. We come from the same country. The only difference is the language. But they live together, and treat us like an enemy. We are French speaking, so we are part of the people who persecute them. They believe that we are not part of the same country. (Claude)

### Francophone Cameroonians in London

Even when narrowing our discussion down to the 'Francophone Cameroonian community' we

run into certain difficulties. Most interviewees commented on the great diversity within this broad category. This should hardly come as a surprise, since Cameroon boasts over 230 ethnic and linguistic groups. Those in London of the same ethnic origin in Cameroon, it was said, tend to stick together to a great extent, forming small and unofficial, but highly effective, social networks. At the same time, however, the Francophone epithet is useful to a certain extent, because it highlights a common experience of migration to and/or seeking asylum in Britain. Indeed, Bernard was of the opinion that the common experiences and problems resulting from being Francophone Cameroonian in the UK were forging a greater sense of solidarity: "We are becoming stronger. Three or four years ago, it was not like now. But because of these problems we are facing, Cameroonians started thinking that we have to be together to be strong. That's what we are doing right now."

Importantly, however, this solidarity is not confined to Francophone Cameroonians, but extends to encompass the different Francophone African groups as well. Indeed, compared to the relatively small number and recent arrival of Francophone Africans in the UK, there is an abundance of community organisations which cater for Francophone Africans generally,<sup>17</sup> many of which are run by Cameroonians. A large number of interviewees were in one way or another involved in community organisations, as volunteers, service users, or indeed as directors. This should not be automatically taken to mean that most Cameroonians are involved in community organisations. The majority of interviewees were, after all, contacted through such organisations. However, the number of organisations run by or directly involving

<sup>17</sup> This has been noted by Styan as well, who states that community groups "have proliferated in recent years to provide services for migrants from French-speaking African countries" (Styan, 2003:27).

Cameroonians is striking,<sup>18</sup> as is the great emphasis placed on pan-Francophone African issues in the work of many of these organisations.

### Barriers to Participation

One reason for this great variety of community organisations is the common feeling of encumbrance in British society, which is directly connected to being Francophone Africans in Britain. A common theme running throughout the interviews was the expression of Francophone Cameroonians as both invisible and voiceless in British society. Although discrimination and racism featured strongly in this respect, this was not the only factor contributing to invisibility and voicelessness. Lack of confidence resulting from language difficulties and lack of knowledge of the British system was also said to contribute. In this respect, five main interconnected barriers to full participation in British society were identified in interviews.

#### *Language Skills*

First and foremost, none of the Francophone interviewees spoke English when they first arrived. This presented them with problems in the labour market as well as in education. Language was a particular obstacle in job interviews, but was also cited as a general problem in terms of integration and acceptance:

Marcelle: At first it was so hard, I couldn't hear the language properly. And you know, integration is not that easy.

Interviewer: So what was most difficult in terms of integration?

Marcelle: The most difficult was, like, finding a job, you know? I was understanding a few words in English. So finding a job, like when I go for the interview, sometimes I couldn't understand at all what any Englishman is saying.

This explicit connection between employment and integration was central to the interviewees'

narratives. Most interviewees said that their ideal situation in Britain was one in which they could *contribute* to the host society. This reveals a strong desire to be accepted, since acceptance demands contribution. Acceptance, in turn, leads to inclusion and increased capacity of economic participation. Language skills are central to this equation, as Bernard explains:

We feel that we are not part of the community. Sometimes because of the language barrier. Most of Cameroonians, when they come in this country, they find it very, very hard to socialise with other people, because of the language barrier. Because of the culture. Because Francophone culture is very, very different from the English, or from the British culture. So when Cameroonians come from Cameroon, and come in this country, they find it very difficult to integrate, to socialise with other people.

The problem in this instance is not an unwillingness to adapt to British society, but the obstacles language poses in doing so. On a more positive note, however, all interviewees placed great emphasis on learning English, and spoke excellent English at the time of interviews. Indeed, this stems from instrumental reasons for wanting to adapt to the majority society. If language skills lead to acceptance, and acceptance leads to enhanced prospects on the labour market, the emphasis placed on learning English is understandable.

#### *Administrative Systems*

Secondly, and connected to the previous point, many interviewees commented on how the British administrative system is different from the Cameroonian system, which largely follows the French model. This was most apparent in terms of education. A large part of interviewees had studied at university in Cameroon, and had a hard time getting their qualifications recognised in Britain. This was partly because they did not know how the British education system works, but some also said that references were a problem. As many people fled persecution because of their political activities, attaining references from their home university is

18 Compared to Bolivians, for example, who are of similar size and started arriving at a similar time, the Cameroonian capacity to organise and fight for communal rights is striking. There are probably structural reasons for this, rather than cultural, as a large part of the Bolivian community fall under the category 'irregular migrants' in the UK which severely limits their ability to organise themselves (Sveinsson, 2007). The relatively high proportion of asylum seekers amongst Cameroonians, however, makes organisation an easier administrative task.

problematic. As a result, many felt that they were taking on jobs well below their level of skill.<sup>19</sup> Bernard, for instance, who was a journalist in Cameroon but only found work as a cleaner upon arrival in the UK, said that his experience was commonplace amongst his Francophone Cameroonian friends:

We have Cameroonians who come in this country who were doctors in Cameroon. Or university lecturers. You have people coming here who are intellectuals. But when they come here, the first problem they have is that, because we come from French system, they don't recognise our diploma here. We have to get into this system in order for the British authorities to recognise our diploma. And that could take 3 or 4 years. That means that you have already been to university in Cameroon, and when you come here, they have you start at the beginning.

### *Discrimination*

The third barrier to social participation, as outlined by interviewees, is the discrimination they have had to endure as Francophone Africans. Their African-ness figured prominently in this, as Marcelle made clear when describing British attitudes towards Africa: "All the things coming from Africa, it's like it's the worst things. Why?" Nonetheless, discrimination was also intricately linked to language. This, many felt, set them apart from their Anglophone compatriots. Brigitte, who had a hard time finding work suitable to her skills, said:

Cameroonians in London, they want better jobs. They don't want to be cleaners and doing minor jobs every time. So they want people, like white people, to trust their capacity. Even when they go for an interview, even if they don't have the English accent, they can still speak English clearly. They just need some people to trust what they can do, what they are able to give. This is

difficult, because there's almost like double discrimination, one because you're black, and second because you don't have the English accent.

It should be added that many interviewees felt that they lacked the proper tools to defend themselves against this type of discrimination, exactly because of difficulties of communication.

One explanation given for this situation is the connection British people tend to make between Francophone Africa and refugee issues. This somewhat complicates the language barrier discussed above. Even when interviewees had learned good English, many felt that due to their accent, they were identified as refugees by default. As there is discrimination against refugees generally, their identification as refugees would consequently lead to discrimination: "And when you come with your French speaking accent, they just say, 'Oh, this is one of them. This is a refugee.' And you know what the media thinks about refugees. So this discrimination comes generally for French African, black African. This is true" (Alain).

### *Poverty and Lack of Finance*

Fourthly, poverty and lack of finance was seen as a fundamentally marginalising element where participation in British society was concerned. Many interviewees said that they had endured financial hardship in London, a view that was endorsed by the members of community organisations as being true of a large section of the Francophone Cameroonian population. Low pay and low skill employment is common, even amongst those with university degrees. Apart from being an affliction in its own right, poverty also has implications for inclusion. For example, two interviewees said they were not able to send their children to playgroup as this was too expensive. Taking part in wider society is also difficult on a meagre salary, as Alain explains:

One weekend, I said to my friend's kids, 'OK, let me take you to London Bridge.' It was like they were discovering a new city! But they were born in London, they're nine years old, and have never been to the city centre. They don't know where London Bridge is. They don't know

<sup>19</sup> This situation is confirmed by the study on the French speaking African community in Southwark, where "96 people out of 138 that are in employment indicated that the jobs they are doing do not match their skills" (Community Involvement and Development Unit, 2006: 5).

where Westminster is. Because the mum, when they go to school, she takes them on Saturday, they just do the thing, they stay home and maybe visit friends near the house. And some people grow up like that until they're 17 or 18 years old.

### *Lack of Confidence*

Fifthly, and a direct consequence of the previous four barriers, interviewees said that a lack of confidence was a major problem for Francophone Cameroonians. This had a wide ranging effect on a number of fronts. For example, many interviewees complained that in spite of being university educated in Cameroon, their degrees or qualifications were not recognised in Britain. This led them to taking jobs well below their level of skills, which adds further to feelings of marginalisation: "We have a lot of skills. But when you get here, it's useless. You can't use it. Even if you could, you're just not confident. We are not confident. We don't think there is a space for us here" (Alexandrine). Claude said that he had all sorts of dreams and plans – in fact, quite feasible business plans – but simply did not know how to implement them, and lacked the resources and knowledge to follow them through. As Marcelle put it:

Some Cameroonians, when you go to school, they just laugh at you. They say, 'Why are you going to school for? You can't even get a better job anyway. No one can give you a better job, you can't work in any office. So don't waste your time. Just try to work in any factory, try to save a little bit of money, because no one will give you a good job.'

This lack of confidence, largely a result of the combination of language difficulties and discrimination, works as an impediment when dealing with situations where they actually have rights. Under these circumstances, the assistance of organisations is of paramount importance. Marc, who works for a Francophone African community organisation, described the situation in these terms:

Over here, the first problem people have, and we're doing a lot in this organisation to help them, is to translate their certificates into British standard. If they don't have that support, they will be missing something. You see someone with Bachelor in law, doing agency work or nursing, because he doesn't have good information. The problem is lack of information. Lack of orientation. That's what we're trying to do here. One lady phoned me the other day saying she's doing access to psychology. I said 'No, you have Masters in psychology! You should ask the university to translate the certificate into the British standard. From there, they will tell you where to go.' And she went to the university and she called me and said, 'Yeah, you're right!'

### *The Five Barriers Considered*

Taken together, the five barriers to participation in British society, as identified by the interviewees, illustrate with great clarity how and why many Francophone Cameroonians feel both voiceless and invisible. A number of interviewees expressed a feeling of being forgotten and neglected. One important consequence of this is the lack of service provisions that take the distinct problems of Francophone Africans into account. Due to the lack of information – or more accurately, the barriers language and understanding of the British system place on accessing information – many Francophone Cameroonians rely on community organisations for advice. However, exactly because of the invisibility and voicelessness of Francophone Cameroonians, it is hard for organisations to prove to potential funders that there is a need for their services.<sup>20</sup> Alain expressed his frustration in these terms:

Organisations like us, we don't even have money. Because the community is not having the voice, they're not heard. So sometimes you find it difficult to justify the people you're working with. And because they're not there, they're not visible, you cannot claim money, and say, 'OK, I'm asking for money for these people.' Sometimes they will ask you, 'How many people do you have?'

<sup>20</sup> Studies such as the one commissioned by Southwark Council are critical in this respect. Indeed, as a result of that study, there are now plans to set up a Francophone community centre in Southwark.

Even when you come with the statistics, people will not believe you. If I tell you that in Enfield alone, there are hundreds of Cameroonians living in Enfield alone, sometimes people will not believe.

It would be misleading, however, to portray Francophone Cameroonians as victims of circumstance with no influence over their own lives or ability to change their own situation. In spite of the adversities and setbacks described above, Cameroonians show great resourcefulness in collectively overcoming these difficulties.<sup>21</sup> Bruno was very clear on the reasons for this: “It’s not about waiting for others to help us; it’s about us being able to do something on our own.” The striking number of, and level of participation in, community organisations has already been mentioned. Indeed, when those who had set up their community organisations were probed on what had driven them to do so, the typical answer was:

When I first came in this country, my experience was very bad. I had serious problems to integrate in this country and to socialise with other people. And also all the problem I had as an asylum seeker. And that’s one of the reasons I set up this organisation. To help other people like me, to avoid facing the same problem I faced when coming in this country. (Bernard)

The importance of the work of these organisations was described as invaluable by a number of interviewees: “Because the first time, imagine, if they took you to one organisation, you don’t feel alone anymore. And you feel a little bit safe. Here, you can talk with someone. You can express your feelings to someone who understands you” (Brigitte).

However, the extent to which community organisations can help is limited. For this reason, many Cameroonians have set up highly effective

small scale social networks. These are of an informal nature, often comprised of people of the same ethnic or linguistic background in Cameroon, and typically consist of only a few dozen people. It is exactly here that the diversity *within* the Francophone Cameroonian community becomes apparent.<sup>22</sup> The purpose of these networks is to provide each other with help and assistance not available elsewhere. The social aspect of these networks is of great importance, and through them people felt able to express and celebrate their Cameroonian-ness. However, practical aspects of mutual help in difficult situations were of equal significance. This, interviewees explained, is a trait they bring with them from Cameroon:

For us, Africa is a very warm society; you can have help for any problem. You can’t throw people away just because you think they can take care of themselves. If you have food, you have to share it. It’s just a warm society. And we bring it here in London, we try to help each other, and give each other comfort. (Marcelle)

In this sense, resources are pooled and distributed when needed. For example, several interviewees said that they could not afford to pay childcare, but that fellow Cameroonians would help them with babysitting when needed. Another important example, mentioned by the majority of interviewees, is help to deal with personal crises arising either in Britain or back home. Should someone fall ill, there would be communal assistance. Should someone die, money would be collected for the body to be sent back to Cameroon.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, everyone placed great weight on their relations with friends and family back in Cameroon, as will be discussed in greater depth in the *Connections with Cameroon* section. This carried with it a certain anxiety, as Bruno explains: “This is what most of the travellers dread: they ring from home and tell you that you’ve lost your parents. Like the time that they rang me, they rang me up to tell me that my father’s gone. This is the kind of information you are dreading the most.” When these situations arise, people generally feel obliged to go back home. However, tight finances can make this a problematic task, in

<sup>21</sup> This was also noted by in the Southwark study, which states that one of its “most interesting findings was the incredible enterprising culture of this community and their ability to engage in self-help” (Community Involvement and Development Unit, 2006: 5).

<sup>22</sup> It must be noted that due to the small sample size of this study, the data can neither adequately describe the structure and extent of this ethnic diversity, nor its dynamics. Suffice it to say here that internal diversity is an important feature of the Francophone Cameroonian community in London.

<sup>23</sup> Again, this is confirmed by the Community Involvement and Development Unit (2006) which reports similar findings.

which case people may rely on their networks to raise the funds:

If one Cameroonian lost maybe his father, or mother, in Cameroon, all the people will come and assist. That's our tradition. If I know you lost maybe your mother, I have to come and stay with you all the night. You know, we got some ceremony like that. And when we finish, sometime we can contribute as well, to help you to buy flight to go back home. (Victor)

Importantly, there was a general understanding that collective barriers must be collectively challenged. A common goal was to become part of British society through contributing to it. For this reason, Francophone Cameroonians join up their efforts with other Francophone African nationals, exactly because they have a common experience of marginalisation which they may not necessarily share with Anglophone Africans. This is not to say that the French language is central to Francophone Cameroonians' identity and sense of self. Indeed, Victor illustrated this clearly when he expressed his antagonism towards all things French, including the French language. In a similar vein, Styan has refuted the notion of a 'Francophone African' identity in London. While acknowledging the importance of the French language as the principal *lingua franca* in former French and Belgian colonies in Africa, he also states that, for the Congolese in London, "the degree to which the French language is the source of solidarity and communication with other Francophone Africans seems far less sure."<sup>24</sup> Styan rightly concludes that a definitive 'Francophone' label ignores the vast diversity within this group. However, the Cameroonian presence in London provides an interesting case in point. Most interviewees said that Anglophone Cameroonians associate themselves more with Nigerians and Ghanaians, while Francophone Cameroonians were more

likely to socialise with and seek support from their French speaking neighbours. While Styan may be right in doubting the French language as the source of this solidarity, let alone identity, for Francophone Cameroonians it is the French language as a shaping factor in the migratory process which compels Francophone Cameroonians to seek support from others in a similar position.

### Why London and not Paris?

Given the problems and barriers which Francophone Cameroonians face in the UK, the inevitable question arises why, during the 1990s, they started to show a preference for Britain over France. These changing migration patterns reflect a wider trend amongst nationals of former French or Belgian colonies generally, as noted by Styan.<sup>25</sup> This issue was discussed at length with interviewees. While many stated that "Most of the time, when people leave their country, they don't really know where they are going, because most of the time, they just want to escape. They don't worry about where to go" (Henri), most also acknowledged that there is a growing preference for Britain, for which three explanations were given: 1) diplomatic and political ties between France and Cameroon were blamed for much of the current situation in Cameroon, which made it both abhorrent and dangerous to live there; 2) Britain was seen as both more tolerant and less imbued with racism than France; and 3) in spite of problems faced in the labour market, the many interviewees felt that there are more opportunities in Britain than in France. We shall consider these individually.

### *Diplomatic and Political Ties*

Many interviewees stated that France is still an influential force in Cameroon, and that the French authorities are in control of the political and economic situation there. Most were antithetic to the current Cameroonian president, Paul Biya, who has been in power since 1982, allegedly with the backing of the French authorities. These claims are not unfounded. Takougang has outlined the French support of the Biya regime, ranging from financial support to prevent its collapse to endorsing elections considered dubious at best by many other nation states.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Styan (2003: 33)

<sup>25</sup> Styan (2003)

<sup>26</sup> Takougang (2003). Additionally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that former Canadian president Joe Clark, who led the observers in the 2004 elections, stated on behalf of the Commonwealth that "elections were poorly managed and 'lacked credibility'" (UNHCR). On the other hand, "the representative of the International Organisation of the Francophonie said that the Cameroon polls were generally 'well organized' and had taken place 'in accordance with the legal provisions and regulations'" (ibid.)

A major reason for French support for the Biya regime was the fear that a victory by the SDF led by Fru Ndi, an anglophone – since the SDF [Social Democratic Front] posed the most threat to President Biya and his ruling CPDM – might deprive France of its economic dominance in Cameroon by forging a much closer relationship with the United States, Britain, and other European nations.<sup>27</sup>

The interviewees endorsed Takougang's argument, and many had themselves fled the oppressive Biya regime. Given the association between France and the autocracy that forced them to flee their country, it is understandable that France would not be their first choice of residence. Not only would they then be living in and contributing to the country that colludes with the ruling Cameroonian party, but some considered France a dangerous place as well. Victor depicted this dilemma with clarity, and is worth quoting at length:

All this situation in Cameroon, it was France that was behind. But it's not just Cameroon. I start hate France since this thing happened in Burundi, in Rwanda, because they were behind all this. Since that time, I never really liked any French person. Not individual person, but the French government. They're always behind all these things in Africa. And I think for me, as well, it's gonna happen to Cameroon. There was people who were living in France, but France was no good for me. Because the political party in Cameroon got so many agents in France. So if they know that you were one of the persons who was making trouble in Cameroon, they may deport you, they may catch you and send you back. And when they catch you and send you back, maybe your family will not see you again. So for me, it was not a nice country for me. I even started hate to speak French.

In this way, the condemnation of the government in France also serves to strengthen pan-Francophone African sentiments amongst French speaking Cameroonians. Interviewees empathised and identified with nationals of other Francophone African states, such as Ivory Coast, and blamed the French authorities for the situation there as well. Some said that they were fearful that the tragedies in other former French or Belgian colonies could repeat themselves in Cameroon.

### *Multiculturalism and Human Rights*

The second reason given for the growing preference for Britain are connected to the perception of Britain as a tolerant society which respects human rights, both in policy and day to day life. France, on the other hand, was considered to be rife with racism. On a policy level, the declared multiculturalism of Britain was said to be beneficial to small groups such as Cameroonians:

It is a good philosophy for us, a good policy. To help people build, within themselves, their culture, their civilisation. What we love in this country is, when you come, with your culture or your civilisation, they don't wash your brain. Like in France. France wash your brain. Here, you come with your culture, you come with your personality. Because British people, British system believe that the UK should be a place of exchange, where people come together, and everyone could give what he has to build a better community. (Bernard)

Apart from allowing Cameroonians to foster unity amongst themselves, so important in the fight against invisibility and voicelessness, Britain's multicultural policy translates into a more tolerant and positive attitude amongst the British, who many interviewees felt were open to diversity, especially when juxtaposed to France. Many had friends or family in France whom they had visited several times. Each time, some said, they go to France they have bad experiences of overt racism and supremacism. While most interviewees had personal experiences of racism in the UK, whether racist abuse in the street or

<sup>27</sup> Takougang (2003: 432)

prejudice in the workplace, what multiculturalism has to offer on an individual level, interviewees explained, are tools to identify and deal with racist comments or conduct. As Victor explained: “The difference, since I’ve been living here, the law in England protect the minority. And because you’ve got a law that punishes, maybe, verbal racism, you’ve got a law that protect that. In so many countries in the world, I don’t think they’ve got the same law.”

### *Inclusiveness of the Labour Market*

The third reason is directly connected to the second one, which is the perception that the British labour market is more inclusive than the French one, which makes it more accessible for Africans. Although structural discrimination exists in Britain, interviewees believed that it does so on a much smaller scale than in France, where they said that an African name can debar people from even reaching the interview stage. Edmond, who lived in France before moving to London, said that this was a strong factor for wishing to come to Britain, particularly because of his obligations to friends and family back home: “You know, in Africa, when one family got one person outside Cameroon, that means that you’ve got more than 25 people behind you that you have to look after.” For this reason, it is important to live in a society with employment prospects. Even considering the severe deskilling common amongst Cameroonians in London, there is work available, and some interviewees said that London presents opportunities for ethnic minorities to grow and develop their skills: “So the word is that this society is one of the more tolerant societies. If you want to make it, you can actually make it, regardless of the colour of your skin, your background. But black people don’t easily have good jobs over there [in France]” (Bruno).

Nonetheless, life in London is not entirely straightforward, as has already been discussed. While Britain’s multiculturalism was seen as a beneficial policy for Francophone Cameroonians, it certainly has its limits. As was mentioned above, all interviewees expressed a clear desire to contribute positively to their host society. Indeed, most conveyed a sense of appreciation for Britain giving them a chance to contribute. However, most also described difficulties in

trying to do so. Thus, there is prejudice and discrimination in Britain, and there was a general feeling amongst the interviewees that in the current political climate, Africans would be amongst the first group to lose out if the labour market contracted or became saturated. In this respect, many said employers show a preference to employ people from Eastern Europe, so that even the lowest paying jobs would become out of their reach:

Yesterday I was speaking with one Cameroonian guy, he’s looking for a job. And he said that, since those 10 countries from Europe, since they joined the European Union, it’s very hard even to get a cleaning job. For Africans. It’s like they prefer to give the jobs we were doing before, to those countries. That is why I say it’s going to be very hard for us. Black people are complaining, Cameroonian are complaining. Everyone is looking for jobs, and it seems that every little mistake you do, they just sack you. (Marcelle)

This illustrates well the precarious and vulnerable position many Francophone Cameroonians find themselves in. The widespread belief that employers generally prefer to give jobs to Eastern European migrants reflects an uncertain reality. Again, the problem is not exclusive to Cameroonians, but a pan-African predicament. However, many said that the ‘Francophone’ aspect in many ways sets them apart from Anglophone Africans, which further demonstrates the advantages of speaking of a ‘Francophone’ African unity in a political sense: “Cameroonian is part of the French African community living in London. This discrimination is not just about Cameroonian. It’s about the French speaking African community. We have the same language problem, we have the same skin, and we are African” (Bernard).

## Connections with Cameroon

### Remittances and Pressures from Home

Connections with friends and family back in Cameroon were of utmost importance to all interviewees. As Edmond explained, a whole host of people back home depend on members of the diaspora to send money back home. This view was confirmed by others: “There is not a single Cameroonian who will come to you and say to you he or she doesn’t send money back home. There is not a single individual who would say that to you. It’s a duty, you have to send money” (Bruno). Indeed, Fleischer has argued that kinship and family ties are central influential factors in regards to all major decision making in Cameroon. The decision to migrate, she states, is no exception, where “migration decisions depend on the decisions taken by their kin.”<sup>28</sup> Migration is therefore expected to benefit the extended family, and migrants “are subject to performing many duties and responsibilities towards their relatives who enabled them to migrate.”<sup>29</sup> For instance, those who fled political persecution, and therefore were not able to return to Cameroon, saw their migratory experience as an opportunity to help their family back home, who may have made considerable sacrifices to help them leave the country. Henri explains:

As I said to you earlier, most of the time we leave our country because of political reasons, because of the persecution. What happens? Sometime we escape from prison, sometime you just have to go suddenly. So the family has to struggle to pay the ticket for the flight, do this, do that, so we can travel. How could we come over here and forget about them?

All interviewees said that they send remittances as regularly as they possibly can. Even during times of unemployment or low income, there is immense pressure to send money, as some

people back home are not very understanding of the situation many Francophone Cameroonians find themselves in when in London:

For some, the parents don’t understand. So even if they don’t work, they have to do whatever to try to send money. Some are very, very poor. If you don’t send, maybe £5, they can’t even pay the rent, but you have to do whatever you can to send the money. And some parents can’t understand, ‘Ah, you’re in Europe and you can’t even send money!’ No one can believe you. (Marcelle)

Victor felt that this pressure was so overbearing that he was reluctant to answer his phone in times of tight finances. He said that he had effectively become a resource to his extended family, so even his cousins would call him for assistance: “My cousins always call me, ‘I’ve got my 5 year old, he can’t go to school, can you send me £3.50 to put my baby into the school?’ And you cannot send only £3.50, he may call you back and say, ‘OK, I need a schoolbag,’ so you have to send £20 to cover all those things.”

Becoming a financial resource did not only have consequences for the interviewees’ life in London. The interviewees generally said that they did not go back to Cameroon as often as they would want to. Some were obviously not able to go back, as the political situation barred them from doing so. For others, however, going back on a regular basis is simply too expensive. Apart from the price of the plane ticket, there was immense pressure as well to share the benefits of living in London. As Marcelle, who went back to Cameroon for the first time this summer since she moved to London in 2003, explains:

It was nice, seeing my parents, my brother. But when you are coming from here, everybody is expecting something from you. And that makes it very hard. So you have to organise yourself before

<sup>28</sup> Fleischer (2006: 26)

<sup>29</sup> Fleischer (2006: 26)

going there. And people will come to you and say that they want a car, a house. They think you have all the money in London.

Remittances were not only considered important for individuals; the interviewees were quite aware of the economic importance of remittances for Africa as well. Indeed, the economic and political situation of Cameroon was high on the agenda in interviews, and interviewees generally felt that, as part of the diaspora, their duty to send remittances was also connected to contributing to the development of Cameroon. All were highly alert to the role remittances play in international development, dwarfing international aid,<sup>30</sup> and some commented on this being an under-rated tool. Echoing Docquier – who states that remittances “should be seen as an explicit component of the development policy of the rich world”<sup>31</sup> – Bruno commented on the lack of interest in making remittances more cost effective for migrants:

The situation back home is difficult. There is endemic poverty back home. When you talk about development in Africa, how come you never mention remittances? Billions of dollars are being sent back home, every year from the diaspora. Every time you make a report, you don't want to allude to those remittances. It is important. All the money you're sending home for small businesses; all the money you're sending home to do this and that. It is massive, it's more important than what the government is sending through agencies. The people of the diaspora, what they're sending back home is massive money. So how come they don't want to help people here so they can send more money back home? That's a problem too. (Bruno)

As has already been stated, many of the interviewees did not want to leave Cameroon,

but fled because of their political involvement. Thus, it was exactly their aspirations for a better Cameroon, through political activities, that ultimately drove them out of the country. As Bernard explained: “Cameroonians are very close to their country. They like their country. They are seriously involved in the political situation in our country, the social situation in our country. But most of them are not allowed to go back home, because of political problem.” However, remittances were not the only avenue for development; many interviewees wanted to return to Cameroon at some point in their lives, and were keen on using skills acquired in Britain for the good of Cameroon.

### **Brain Drain, Brain Waste, Deskilling and Development**

Social scientists do not agree on the actual effects that the phenomenon of ‘brain drain’ actually has on developing countries. While some argue that brain drain contributes to further impoverishment of the developing world,<sup>32</sup> others maintain that a limited rate of skilled migration from developing countries could result in a ‘win-win-win’ situation, where migrants, sending country and receiving country all benefit. Docquier, for example, reasons that:

The emigration of skilled workers is usually blamed for depriving developing countries of one of their scarcest resources, human capital. Although many studies emphasized positive feedback effects of the brain drain (in the form of remittances, return migration, diaspora externalities, quality of governance and increasing return to education), international agencies and many scientists often turned a deaf ear to these effects and considered them as negligible.<sup>33</sup>

The question of brain drain was raised by a number of interviewees, many of whom had experienced severe deskilling in Britain. As has been outlined above, this caused frustration both in terms of loss of capacity for personal development as well as the reduced opportunity to earn a proper living and thereby increase the remittances sent back home. There was an

<sup>30</sup> Sander (2003)

<sup>31</sup> Docquier (2006:)

<sup>32</sup> Tanner (2006)

<sup>33</sup> Docquier (2006:2)

additional element to deskilling, however, which was brought up in a number of interviews. This was the effect deskilling has on the prospects of one day returning to Cameroon with experiences and enhanced skills acquired in the UK, or using these skills to set up links between Britain and Cameroon.

A number of interviewees commented on how European degrees are of high value back home, and how professional development in Britain could be used to contribute to development in Cameroon. Already having a strong base on which to build, this should, they felt, be an uncomplicated task. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case, which not only hampers the development of human capital within the Cameroonian diaspora, but has an adverse effect in Cameroon as well. Claude was painfully aware of this:

My life, normally, is not in London. Because I want to do good things for my country. If everyone in Cameroon left the country and came in Europe, who is going to do things in Cameroon? No one. When you got something, you have to go back and show people the thing that you learned. Because here, you've got so many people, how many engineers, doctors, some of them here are doing stupid things like cleaning.

Indeed, Claude had a degree in economics from Cameroon, and after several years of – in his opinion – menial jobs such as cleaning and factory work, had started his education in London from scratch. He was planning on returning to Cameroon after finishing his education, "Because I want to do good things for my country." However, getting to the position where he felt ready and able to do so has taken several years more than he deemed necessary. As Bernard said, this can set people back 3 or 4 years.

Not everyone had the explicit intention to go back to Cameroon, however. Some interviewees said that they have now made their life here. Nonetheless, the link with Cameroon remained strong, and a number of interviewees expressed

their aspirations to use their position in the UK to build links to Cameroon. Again, the interviewees both echoed and contradicted the academic literature on diaspora business networks. Docquier and Lodigiani, for instance, argue that by "creating trust, providing market information and reducing transaction costs, the diaspora abroad acts as promoting trade, investment and technology adoption in the origin country."<sup>34</sup> This would indeed be the ideal situation for many interviewees of this study. Bruno, for instance, was unsure whether he would ever return to Cameroon, "but what I'm thinking about is to be able to build a bridge. Which means, create a structure, use my experience from here, back home. Be the bridge between home and here. Not cutting that link. No. But enriching that link between the two countries."

The interviewees had several ideas about possible business ventures, ranging from freight services and shops selling Cameroonian products to phone shops and money-transferring centres. The problem, as Edmond explained, is that many people lack both the knowledge and confidence to implement their plans. Many interviewees said that they knew very well that business plans are implementable, and pointed towards the successes of other ethnic minority groups in this respect:

If you see the Somali people; Somalis, they've got business. Everywhere you see, phonestop, to call Africa. You want to call Africa, you go to the Somali people. From Tottenham to Stoke Newington, all the shops there are Somali shops. They are specialised in that area. I think they are more enterprise than us. They are no more intelligent, but they have achieved to do that. But we can do the same thing. But we don't know how to get the funds to run a business like that. That's my main problem. (Victor)

Indeed, building on links with contacts in Cameroon was often central to the interviewees' intentions of setting up businesses in the UK. This, some reasoned, would not only be beneficial for themselves, but for trading partners in Cameroon as well. One of Victor's ambitions,

<sup>34</sup> Docquier and Lodigiani (2006: 2)

for example, was to import coffee grown by his uncle in Cameroon. Again, however, confidence and knowledge acted as impediments:

Like I've got one of my uncle, he always call me. He grows coffee. There is a lot of coffee in my area, where my father is born. He's got a warehouse. He wants to sell coffee, but there are all these foreign people who come and say 'OK, for this batch, I will give you £20.' And he have no choice, he's gonna take it. And he call me here, 'Have you got no contact with people in England who want coffee, banana, all those things?' Phhh, I don't know where to find them. I know in myself I try, like on the internet, but I couldn't get the right person. It's the sort of thing like that. People want to move, but there's too many barriers.

This account was not unique to Victor; others had a similar story to tell:

All of us, we have parents or families who grow coffee in Cameroon, all of know of one person who do this kind of business. Again, the French people, or Belgium, they will come and buy it for very little money. Very, very little money. So this kind of link, from here to those in Cameroon, could be very beneficial. But how to go about it? (Alexandrine)

Docquier and Lodigiani have presented evidence that diaspora business networks are largely driven by skilled migration,<sup>35</sup> yet the skills of many Francophone Cameroonians are undermined once in Britain, which hampers their ability to use their skills to set up business networks. Thus, while Docquier's argument that a "positive rate of skilled migration (say between 5 and 10 percent of the native skilled labor force) is very likely to be beneficial for both sending and receiving countries"<sup>36</sup> is valid, the extent to which brain drain can be turned into the

advantage of developing countries largely depends on the policies of host countries. As is clear from the discussion of this report, the policy landscape in which Francophone Cameroonians find themselves in Britain is not conducive to turning 'brain drain' into 'brain gain,' neither in the UK nor indeed in Cameroon. The conditions to generate the potentially positive effects Docquier lists – "remittances, return migration, diaspora externalities, quality of governance and increasing return to education"<sup>37</sup> – do not seem to be present in the UK, neither for return migration nor transnational business networks.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the presence of Francophone Cameroonians is not a transient trend. Quite the contrary, Francophone Cameroonians have permanently settled in London, thus forming an extensive part of the city's cultural matrix. This is true of the entire French speaking African community. As Styan notes, "UK settlement from former Francophone colonies in Africa is now well established and likely to be a durable feature of the African presence in the UK."<sup>38</sup> For this reason, it is of utmost importance to get a clear understanding of the issues faced by Francophone Africans in London. The study conducted by the Southwark Community Involvement and Development Unit has gone some way to highlight shortcomings in service provision for this group,<sup>39</sup> and Styan has offered some theoretical considerations on 'Francophone' as a descriptive category. However, empirical investigation stops there. This report has attempted to add to this sparse knowledge base by inquiring into the outlook and experiences of one particular Francophone African group.

However, the methodological limitations of this study should not be underestimated, and many questions remain unanswered. A more detailed ethnographic account of the diversity within the Francophone African community is needed for a fuller understanding of the dynamics of intra-community relations. Similarly, the nature and extent of the inter-Francophone alliance alluded to in this report, as well as its

<sup>35</sup> Docquier and Lodigiani (2006)

<sup>36</sup> Docquier (2006: 3)

<sup>37</sup> Docquier (2006: 2)

<sup>38</sup> Styan (2003: 18)

<sup>39</sup> Community Involvement and Development Unit (2006)

limitations, is not fully understood. A clear understanding of the solidarity between French speaking African groups, or lack thereof – whichever may be the case – would give us valuable insights into the problems and issues Francophone Africans face in London.

The findings presented above do give us some clues. The divide between French speaking and English speaking Cameroonians in London indicate that linguistic factors play a substantial role in the migratory experiences of the two groups. This, however, is not entirely restricted to language itself. Certainly, the language barrier was cited as a major obstacle to full social participation, but some interviewees said that language is a barrier that can be overcome. Indeed, all of the interviewees had placed great importance on learning English, and were fluent at the time of interview. Language skills only became a substantial problem when combined with other language related difficulties. For example, interviewees generally felt that the British public makes an explicit connection between Francophone Africa and refugees. Given the stigma attached to refugees generally, this default association, they said, creates a host of problems for social and economic inclusion. Furthermore, having their qualifications recognised in Britain was problematic, resulting in many Francophone Cameroonians accepting jobs that are well below their level of education and skill. These language related impediments converge in a feeling of uncertainty and lack of self-confidence which has a wide ranging effect on a number of fronts, and adds further to feelings of marginalisation. Importantly, however, it would be a grave error to ignore the agency and great resourcefulness of Francophone Cameroonians in London, who are not willing to become helpless victims of circumstance. The extensive participation in community organisations, as well as the highly effective social networks set up to provide mutual help, illustrate the aptitude of Cameroonians to change – or if change is out of reach, adapt to – the adverse situations they may find themselves in.

Much can be learned from the Francophone Cameroonian community in London. The narratives described above are narratives of survival. Having to cope with often distressing and unfortunate situations, Francophone

Cameroonians show a diligent resilience in the face of adversity, thus clearly demonstrating the power of unity. Returning to Victor's admiration for the enterprising disposition of Somalis, however, it is clear that Francophone Cameroonians can also learn from the experiences of other ethnic minority groups in Britain. For this to happen, the need for forums and networks through which inter-community guidance and information sharing can be facilitated is becoming increasingly expedient. In spite of Francophone Cameroonians' immense capacity for self help in day to day life, the problem of self-confidence remains, a problem that could be challenged through sharing experiences. Indeed, many interviewees called for a deeper cooperation not only between Francophone Cameroonians and other 'hidden' communities, but between newcomers and the settled communities – including the British – as well. In this respect, it is apposite to end on Victor's considered words:

We've got to communicate with other groups, they've got experience in this country. I want to learn their culture. And you may be interested to know my culture as well. It's why we came here. To get a view of different cultures from different countries. It's why we are here.

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Since 1968, the date of Runnymede's foundation, we have worked to establish and maintain a positive image of what it means to live affirmatively within a society that is both multi-ethnic and culturally diverse. Runnymede continues to speak with a thoughtful and independent public voice on these issues today.



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