



Education Governance in Conflict Zones: The Politics of School Boycotts and Lockdowns in Anglophone Cameroon

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Abstract: In conflict-affected societies, education governance often becomes a contested arena where authority, legitimacy, and resistance intersect. This study examines the governance of education in Anglophone Cameroon within the context of the ongoing crisis, highlighting how schools have become contested spaces of legitimacy, identity, and power, analyzing how the governance of schooling has been transformed into a struggle over sovereignty between the Cameroonian state and Anglophone separatist movements. Drawing on the political sociology of education and theories of fragmented governance, the study moves beyond narratives of passive victimhood to examine how non-state actors deploy education disruption as a strategy of resistance, while state responses oscillating between coercion, securitization, and symbolic reforms have further eroded local legitimacy. Using a qualitative case study design, the analysis combines longitudinal document analysis of government decrees and separatist communiqués (2016-2025) with semi-structured interviews conducted with educators, parents, students, and community leaders in the North-West and South-West regions. The findings reveal the emergence of a hybrid and shadow education governance regime in which the capacity to permit or deny schooling functions as a key indicator of local hegemony. While school boycotts are framed as collective resistance, their prolonged enforcement has generated internal social tensions as the educational, economic, and psychosocial costs increasingly outweigh perceived political gains. The article argues that restoring education in conflict zones requires an epistemically inclusive and conflict-sensitive governance framework that prioritizes local legitimacy, participatory decision-making, and the protection of education as a public good.

Keywords: Anglophone crisis; education governance, school boycott/school lockdown, fragmented governance;



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I- INTRODUCTION

Education systems in conflict-affected societies rarely operate as neutral public institutions. Rather, they are deeply embedded within struggles over power, legitimacy, identity, and territorial control. In many contemporary conflicts, schools have evolved from spaces of learning into strategic instruments of political contestation (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon is deeply rooted in the country's colonial and postcolonial history. Cameroon was initially colonized by Germany in the late 19th century, but following Germany's defeat in World War I, the territory was divided between Britain and France under League of Nations mandates. The French

administered the larger portion, while Britain governed two smaller territories (Northern and Southern Cameroons) adjacent to Nigeria (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003).

In 1961, following a United Nations organized plebiscite, Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria, while Southern Cameroons opted to reunify with French Cameroon. This reunification created a federal structure intended to preserve the distinct cultural and linguistic identities of the Anglophone and Francophone regions. However, the federal system was dismantled in 1972 through a controversial referendum, establishing a unitary state that many Anglophones perceived as eroding their autonomy and marginalizing their institutions (Ngoh, 1996). Over subsequent decades, grievances among Anglophones intensified, particularly regarding the dominance of French in administration, education, and the judiciary. These frustrations crystallized into what became known as the “Anglophone Problem”, a term describing the perceived political, cultural, and economic marginalization of English-speaking Cameroonians (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003).

In Anglophone Cameroon, the prolonged separatist conflict commonly referred to as the “Anglophone Crisis” has dramatically transformed education governance, rendering schools both symbolic and practical battlegrounds. The politicization of education in Anglophone Cameroon must also be understood within a broader struggle over knowledge production and legitimacy. As Manga Edimo (2021) observes, the Anglophone Crisis is characterized by competing cultural interpretations that shape how policies are framed, communicated, and received. For the government, keeping schools open is framed as proof of sovereignty and normalcy, reinforcing its legitimacy in the crisis regions. Conversely, separatist groups enforce boycotts and lockdowns to delegitimize state institutions, using school closures as a strategy to assert control and reject Francophone dominance. This multiplicity of interpretations contributes to governance incoherence. While separatist actors frame school shutdowns as necessary sacrifices for political emancipation, many parents and educators increasingly view prolonged educational disruption through a pragmatic lens shaped by economic hardship and intergenerational vulnerability. As a result, schools have shifted from being neutral spaces of learning to contested arenas of political struggle, leaving communities torn between safeguarding children’s right to education and protecting them from violence (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Nkwi, 2019; Awasom, 2020).

Governance in conflict zones is often characterized by contested authority, weakened institutions, and fragmented decision-making, with education frequently caught in the crossfire. In such contexts, state actors struggle to maintain legitimacy and service delivery, while non-state groups assert parallel forms of governance through coercion, boycotts, or alternative structures (Mcloughlin, 2014). Schools, in particular, become arenas where governance challenges are most visible, as communities must navigate competing pressures between the state’s insistence on continuity and armed groups’ enforcement of shutdowns. This dynamic undermines the stability of education systems, erodes trust in institutions, and exacerbates humanitarian crises, as seen in Anglophone Cameroon where prolonged school closures reflect broader struggles over sovereignty and identity (UNESCO, 2011; World Bank, 2020).

The prolonged school boycotts and lockdowns in Anglophone Cameroon have had devastating impacts on communities and learners, deepening social and economic vulnerabilities. Thousands of children have lost years of formal education, creating a “lost generation” with limited prospects for employment and civic participation (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Teachers have been displaced, intimidated, or forced into silence, while parents face the dilemma of protecting their children from violence versus safeguarding their right to education. Communities have also experienced weakened social cohesion, as the absence of schooling erodes shared values and opportunities for collective development. The long-term consequences include heightened poverty, intergenerational trauma, and reduced capacity for peacebuilding, underscoring how the politicization of education in conflict zones extends beyond classrooms to reshape the very fabric of society (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2017).

The state, meanwhile, continues to advance policy narratives grounded in administrative legality and national unity, often disconnected from localized meanings attached to schooling. Manga

Edimo's analysis illuminates why these divergent perspectives rarely converge into a coherent policy dialogue, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and non-compliance that sustain educational paralysis. Since 2016, recurrent school boycotts and enforced lockdowns have disrupted educational provision across the North-West and South-West regions. What began as professional grievances articulated by teachers' unions (figure1) has since mutated into a sustained political strategy employed by non-state armed actors seeking to delegitimize the Cameroonian state. In response, state authorities have oscillated between militarized enforcement and administrative withdrawal, producing an unstable governance vacuum. Governance failures in contexts like the Anglophone Crisis reflect not only institutional incapacity but also contested epistemic authority among state, community, and transnational actors.

Against this backdrop, the central objective of this study is to critically examine how education governance operates in conflict zones, with particular focus on the politics of school boycotts and lockdowns in Anglophone Cameroon. Ultimately, the article aims to highlight not only the immediate consequences of disrupted education but also the broader implications for peacebuilding, social cohesion, and the future of governance in fragile contexts.

Figure1: Image of lawyers peaceful protest that led to the crisis



Source: <https://www.stopblablacam.com/culture-and-society/1511-199-two-anglophone-lawyers-beaten-up-in-buea>

II-LITERATURE REVIEW

Education systems in conflict-affected societies are rarely neutral institutions. Rather, they often become sites where political authority, cultural identity, and legitimacy are contested (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004). Scholars have shown that in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, schooling may reproduce social divisions and reinforce domination rather than promote cohesion (Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008). In such settings, education governance is inseparable from broader struggles over state authority and political control.

Governance in conflict zones is frequently characterized by hybrid political orders, in which state institutions coexist and compete with non-state actors for authority over public goods, including education (Boege et al., 2009; Mampilly, 2011). These arrangements complicate policy implementation, as formal state authority does not necessarily translate into local legitimacy. In Anglophone Cameroon, schools have become symbolic markers of sovereignty, rendering education governance a highly politicized and contested domain. Recent contributions in critical policy studies emphasize that governance failure cannot be fully explained through institutional weakness alone. Instead, policy outcomes are shaped by struggles over expertise, knowledge, and meaning (Fischer, 2009; Fischer et al., 2017). Expertise, far from being a neutral technical resource, functions as a form of power that privileges certain actors while marginalizing others (Eyal, 2019). Manga Edimo (2021) extends this insight to the Anglophone Crisis by demonstrating how competing expert discourses emanating from state elites, international actors, civil society, and local communities produce persistent policy deadlock. Within the education sector, these epistemic

struggles manifest in divergent interpretations of school boycotts and lockdowns. While separatist actors frame school closures as acts of political resistance, the state portrays them as security threats or administrative disruptions, and communities increasingly view them through pragmatic lenses shaped by safety concerns and economic survival. This multiplicity of meanings undermines policy coherence and sustains educational paralysis.

The cultural politics is shaped not only by present-day encounters, but also by historical and contextual factors that influence how policy actors perceive problems and solutions (Strassheim, 2017; 2019; 2020). This perspective helps explain the persistence of contested education policies in settings where historical grievances are deeply embedded. The sociology of expertise suggests that “expert” status is not simply a technical designation, but a social and political one that shapes the legitimacy of knowledge claims in policy settings. Eyal (2010, 2019) demonstrates that expertise emerges through relational power dynamics, where certain actors are recognized as authoritative while others are marginalized or dismissed. This resonates with education governance in conflict settings, where different actors (state, civil society, separatists) compete to define what counts as valid evidence and whose knowledge should determine educational policy.

Munja (2020) approaches the Anglophone crisis from a governance perspective, arguing that weak and exclusionary institutions in Cameroon have exacerbated tensions in the Anglophone regions. His comparative analysis of Cameroon and Rwanda highlights how the absence of accountability and inclusiveness undermines state legitimacy, fueling discontent and resistance. Munja proposes institutional reforms through mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), emphasizing that strengthening governance structures is essential for resolving the crisis and preventing further fragmentation. Integrating his perspective into the study of education governance underscores that school boycotts and lockdowns are not only symptoms of conflict but also reflections of deeper institutional weaknesses that demand structural reform.

Sunjo’s (2019) analysis of the Anglophone crisis provides a critical lens for understanding how education governance is disrupted by both legitimate grievances and opportunistic exploitation. While the conflict initially emerged from deep-seated frustrations over political and cultural marginalization, Sunjo shows that separatist actors increasingly sustain school boycotts and lockdowns through economic opportunism, including extortion and illegal taxation. This hybrid mix of grievance and greed complicates efforts to restore education, as schools are not only symbols of resistance but also resources to be controlled. His findings underscore that the politicization of education in Anglophone Cameroon cannot be explained solely by identity struggles; it is also perpetuated by opportunistic behaviors that erode community trust and prolong instability.

The relationship between education and conflict is paradoxical. While education is often promoted as a peacebuilding mechanism, it can also exacerbate tensions when perceived as culturally exclusionary or politically instrumentalized (Davies, 2004; Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008). In fragile states, schooling becomes entangled with questions of identity formation, state penetration, and symbolic domination (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bush and Saltarelli (2000) identify the “two faces” of education in conflict: one that fosters social cohesion and another that reinforces division. In Anglophone Cameroon, the latter has predominated as educational institutions became proxies for state authority.

International organizations have highlighted the devastating impact of the crisis on education. UNESCO (2011) and UNICEF (2021) stress that schools in conflict zones often become battlegrounds, with closures eroding social cohesion and denying children their fundamental right to education. Human Rights Watch (2019) documents targeted attacks on schools and teachers in Anglophone Cameroon, framing education as both a casualty and a tool of political struggle. These findings align with Nkwi (2019), who argues that the politicization of education reflects broader governance failures and identity tensions.

Governance in conflict zones is rarely monopolized by the state. Instead, it becomes fragmented among state institutions, armed groups, traditional authorities, and civil society (Boege et al., 2009).

Non-state actors often derive legitimacy not solely through violence but by controlling social services, including education (Mampilly, 2011). School boycotts in Anglophone Cameroon reflect what Migdal (2001) terms “state-in-society” dynamics, where competing authorities seek compliance through everyday governance practices rather than formal sovereignty alone. Recent scholarship has further emphasized that the persistence of the Anglophone Crisis cannot be fully explained through institutional weakness or security dynamics alone, but must also be understood as a crisis of contested expertise and policy knowledge. Manga Edimo (2021) advances this perspective by conceptualizing expertise not as a neutral or technocratic resource, but as a socially embedded and culturally mediated practice. Her analysis demonstrates that policy responses to the Anglophone Crisis have been shaped and constrained by competing expert discourses operating across local, national, and international arenas.

According to Manga Edimo (2021), the Cameroonian state’s policy framework has largely privileged centralized, state-centric forms of expertise that marginalize local historical narratives, cultural interpretations, and lived experiences of conflict-affected communities. This epistemic imbalance contributes to policy paralysis, as alternative knowledge claims advanced by civil society actors, religious institutions, diaspora networks, and local communities are either delegitimized or excluded from formal decision-making processes. Within this context, education policy emerges as a particularly contested domain, where expert authority is continuously challenged and redefined.

This insight is critical for understanding why school boycotts and lockdowns have endured despite their widely acknowledged social costs. Rather than reflecting collective consensus, these measures persist within an environment of epistemic fragmentation, where no single actor possesses uncontested authority over the meaning, purpose, or governance of education in the Anglophone regions.

III- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on theories of fragmented governance and the political Sociology of Expertise to analyze education governance in Anglophone Cameroon.

The Fragmented Governance Theory explains how authority and decision-making are dispersed among multiple actors rather than concentrated in a single, coherent system. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, governance is not monopolized by the state but is instead contested across state institutions, non-state armed groups, international organizations, and community networks (Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012, Migdal, 2001; Boege et al., 2009). Citizens experience governance as fragmented and inconsistent, with public goods such as education becoming arenas of competition rather than neutral services. Applied to the Anglophone crisis, fragmented governance is evident in the education sector: the state insists on reopening schools to project authority, separatist groups enforce boycotts and lockdowns to delegitimize state institutions, NGOs intervene to provide emergency support, and communities establish informal schooling arrangements. This multiplicity of actors demonstrates how governance of education is fractured, contested, and negotiated, reflecting broader struggles over legitimacy and sovereignty.

To deepen this analysis, the study integrates insights from the sociology of expertise, which conceptualizes expertise as a socially constructed and politically embedded phenomenon (Eyal, 2010, 2019). As Fischer (2009) argues, policy decisions are shaped by cultural norms and discursive practices rather than purely rational or technocratic reasoning. Manga Edimo’s (2021) hybrid cultural boundary approach builds on this perspective by emphasizing how policy expertise in the Anglophone Crisis is produced across cultural, historical, and institutional boundaries. Manga Edimo (2021) argues that policy expertise in the Anglophone Crisis is produced through interactions among diverse epistemic communities, including state officials, international actors, separatist movements, and local populations. These communities operate within different cultural repertoires and historical reference points, resulting in competing interpretations of governance, legitimacy, and resistance. In such contexts, policy deadlock arises not merely from political disagreement, but from the absence of a shared epistemic framework capable of reconciling divergent knowledge claims. Applied to education governance, this approach helps explain how the

regulation of schooling becomes a symbolic and practical indicator of authority. The capacity to permit or prohibit education functions not only as an exercise of coercive power, but also as a claim to epistemic legitimacy (an assertion of who has the right to define the social meaning of education during conflict).

IV- FINDINGS

Findings reveal that separatist actors frame school boycotts as acts of communal resistance, asserting that “liberation precedes education.” By enforcing lockdowns, these actors symbolically demonstrate their capacity to override state authority at the grassroots level. Fischer (2009) argues that policy deliberation is shaped by cultural politics and discursive power, rather than purely rational-technical decision-making. This insight helps explain why attempts to configure education policy in conflict zones often fail: dominant discourses overshadow alternative cultural knowledge, leading to policy outputs that lack local legitimacy.

The prolonged disruption has produced hybrid governance arrangements where access to education in some localities depends on informal negotiations with armed groups. In some communities, clandestine schools operate with tacit approval, illustrating how governance adapts under constraint. The emergence of shadow education governance structures and informal schooling arrangements reflects not only institutional breakdown, but also unresolved epistemic struggles over authority. These findings align with Manga Edimo’s (2021) argument that policy deadlock in the Anglophone Crisis is rooted in the coexistence of multiple, competing knowledge systems, none of which commands universal legitimacy.

Both state and non-state actors suffer legitimacy erosion. Parents increasingly question the moral authority of prolonged boycotts as economic hardship, illiteracy, and youth delinquency intensify. The enforcement of school lockdowns by non-state actors illustrates how governance is enacted through symbolic control over social institutions rather than formal administrative authority alone. At the same time, the state’s reliance on coercive enforcement without epistemic engagement exacerbates local alienation. As Manga (2021) suggests, such dynamics produce governance environments where compliance is fragile, negotiated, and often temporary. This epistemic fragmentation helps explain why education governance remains unstable even in areas with a visible state presence, and why communities increasingly resort to informal or clandestine educational practices as adaptive responses. While public discourse emphasizes unity, interviews reveal internal dissent. Many families engage in “quiet resistance” by sending children to private, informal, or Francophone schools, undermining the boycott’s coherence.

a) Fragmented Education Governance

Since 2016, education governance in Anglophone Cameroon has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from routine administrative regulation to a fragmented and hybrid system shaped by securitization, symbolic reform, and humanitarian substitution. What began as professional grievances by Anglophone teachers and lawyers rapidly evolved into a sustained political strategy in which schooling became a key site for asserting and contesting authority and therefore, education governance has become fragmented. The fragmentation of education aligns with the findings of (2020), who argues that weak and exclusionary institutions in Cameroon have created governance vacuums exploited by both separatists and communities. Munja’s emphasis on institutional reform through mechanisms like the APRM supports the observation that fragmented authority undermines education delivery and legitimacy. Similarly, Nkwi (2019) highlights how schools became contested spaces, reinforcing the idea that governance in education is fractured across multiple actors. Similarly, Manga (2021) argues that the Anglophone crisis is marked by policy deadlocks and inaction, as multiple actors contest authority without producing coherent solutions. This resonates with your finding that education governance is fragmented across state institutions, separatist groups, NGOs, and communities. Her “hybrid cultural boundary approach” highlights how governance is fractured along cultural and institutional lines, explaining why schools become contested spaces of legitimacy.

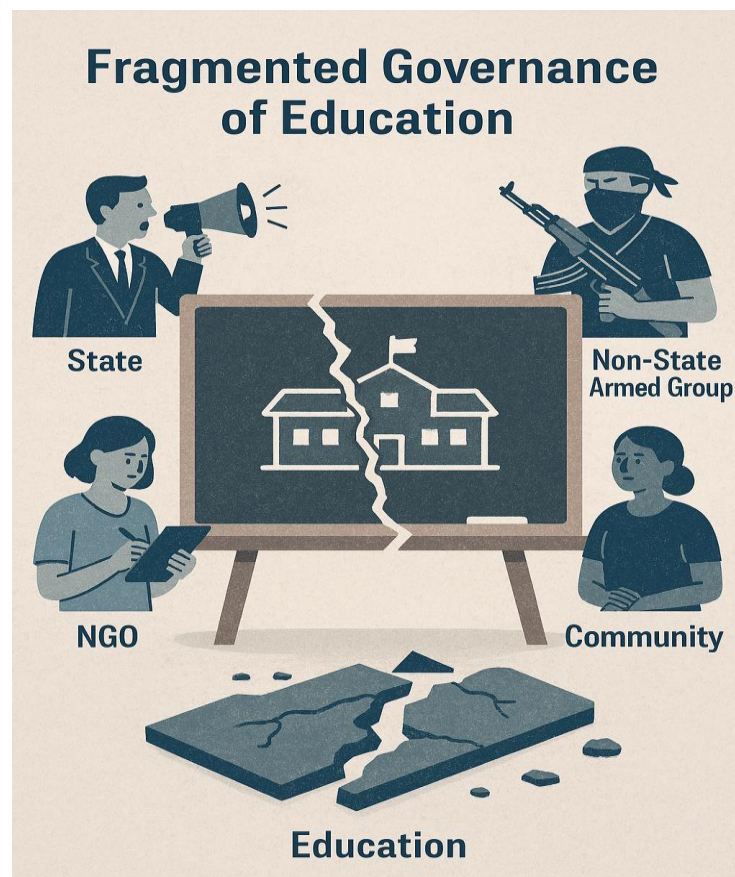
Early government responses during the early years of the conflict relied on ministerial circulars, ad hoc dialogue committees, and administrative negotiations. However, these instruments failed to address underlying grievances related to marginalization, eroding trust in state education authorities. From 2017 onward, the state increasingly securitized education governance through internet shutdowns, military deployment, curfews, and the application of anti-terrorism legislation (Taye, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017). Schools were redefined as security spaces rather than learning environments, sharply reducing attendance and teacher participation.

Despite repeated ministerial directives mandating school reopening, effective governance remained elusive. Separatist actors exercised de facto control over schooling through intimidation and enforcement of lockdowns, while communities navigated schooling decisions based on safety and survival rather than compliance with state policy. In parallel, humanitarian actors introduced emergency education interventions that prevented total collapse but operated largely outside formal state systems, further fragmenting education governance (UNICEF, 2020).

The 2019 Major National Dialogue and subsequent decentralization reforms symbolically acknowledged Anglophone grievances but failed to produce substantive changes in education governance. Limited devolution of authority and the exclusion of key conflict actors meant that schooling practices remained largely unaffected (Manga Edimo, 2021; Fombad, 2020). Education governance has since stabilized into a managed stalemate characterized by overlapping authority, contested legitimacy, and persistent educational precarity.

The governance of education in Anglophone Cameroon is highly fragmented, with authority dispersed among state institutions, separatist groups, NGOs, and local communities. Each actor exerts influence in different ways, often pulling in conflicting directions. This fractured governance structure undermines the coherence of education policy and service delivery, turning schools into contested spaces of legitimacy and control.

Figure 2: Conceptual illustration of fragmented education governance in Anglophone Cameroon, showing competing actors and fractured authority.



Source: Author's (Nayah) illustration (2026).

b) Politicization of Education as a Tool of Resistance and Control

The study reveals that education in Anglophone Cameroon has been transformed from a neutral public good into a contested arena of political struggle. Schools, teachers, and curricula have become symbolic battlegrounds where both state and separatist actors assert authority and legitimacy. For the government, reopening schools represents a demonstration of sovereignty and stability, while for separatist groups, enforcing boycotts and lockdowns is a means of delegitimizing state institutions and asserting resistance. This politicization underscores how education governance is deeply entangled with broader struggles over identity, legitimacy, and control. This finding resonates with Nyamnjoh and Konings (2003), who argue that the “Anglophone Problem” is rooted in historical grievances over identity and recognition, with language and education policies serving as flashpoints of contestation. Their analysis shows that schools have long been politicized as instruments of assimilation and domination, making them natural sites of resistance in the current crisis. Similarly, Nkwi (2019) highlights how schools in Anglophone Cameroon have become literal battlegrounds, where the struggle for legitimacy between state and separatist actors plays out most visibly. His work reinforces the observation that education is not merely disrupted by conflict but actively weaponized as a tool of political struggle. The politicization of education also reflects the corporatist demands of teachers and lawyers in 2016, as emphasized by Manga (2021). She argues that the crisis emerged from professional grievances that were ignored or mishandled by the state, leading to broader resistance movements. This supports the finding that schools are central to the crisis not only because they symbolize state authority but also because they embody unresolved grievances within professional and cultural communities. Furthermore, Sunjo (2019) adds another dimension by showing how separatist actors exploit school boycotts opportunistically, using them to consolidate control, extort communities, and project power. This opportunistic politicization of education demonstrates that schools are not only sites of ideological resistance but also resources manipulated for economic and political gain. Finally, the humanitarian consequences of politicized education, documented by Human Rights Watch (2019) and UNICEF (2021), reveal that learners and communities bear the brunt of this struggle. Prolonged closures deny children their fundamental right to education, erode social cohesion, and create a “lost generation” with diminished prospects for civic participation and employment.

c) Humanitarian Consequences

From our findings, it is evident that the humanitarian consequences of the Anglophone crisis are most acutely felt in the education sector, where prolonged school closures have created a generation of learners deprived of structured learning, socialization, and future opportunities. The denial of education in some communities has not only disrupted individual life trajectories but has also weakened community resilience, eroded social cohesion, and deepened intergenerational trauma. Teachers have been displaced or silenced through intimidation, while parents are forced to choose between the safety of their children and their right to education. These realities point to a broader developmental crisis in which education, a cornerstone of nation-building, has been systematically undermined. This observation finds support in the work of Folefac (2024), who argues that the erosion of youth education and health in the Anglophone regions undermines nation-building and civic integration. Similarly, Yenika (2024) documents the sharp decline in enrolment and rising dropout rates in the Northwest region, showing how insecurity forces families to withdraw children from school, thereby entrenching exclusion. From a cultural perspective, Ojong (2025) highlights how colonial legacies and language discrimination compound these humanitarian effects, as Anglophone learners face systemic marginalization in accessing education in their native language. Together, these perspectives reinforce the findings of this study that the humanitarian consequences of the crisis extend beyond immediate suffering to include structural exclusion, weakened civic participation, and the emergence of a “lost generation” whose prospects for social mobility and national integration are severely compromised.

Figure 3: Image reflecting humanitarian consequences of the crisis



Source: <https://erudef.org/end-the-anglophone-crisis-in-cameroon/>



Source: <https://erudef.org/end-the-anglophone-crisis-in-cameroon/> and Aljazeera news

d) Education Governance and the Effects of School Boycotts and Lockdowns

Since 2016, the Government of Cameroon's response to the Anglophone Crisis has evolved through successive policy phases, beginning with administrative grievance management, shifting rapidly toward securitization and legal coercion, and later incorporating political dialogue and decentralization reforms. Despite the introduction of the 2019 Major National Dialogue, the decentralization framework, and socio-economic recovery programs, policy instruments have largely failed to restore educational normalcy or political legitimacy. Instead, the cumulative effect has been the emergence of a hybrid governance landscape characterized by overlapping authority, episodic normalization attempts, and persistent educational disruption.

School boycotts and lockdowns have not merely disrupted schooling in Anglophone Cameroon; they have fundamentally reshaped education governance by transforming education into a contested arena of authority, legitimacy, and control. While separatist actors initially framed school boycotts

as instruments of political resistance, their prolonged implementation has produced cumulative effects that extend far beyond tactical protest.

From a governance perspective, the persistence of boycotts has accelerated the collapse of effective state regulation of education. Although the government has continued to issue ministerial directives mandating school reopening, these instruments have increasingly functioned as symbolic assertions of authority rather than mechanisms of practical governance (Nkwi, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2019). As a result, education governance has evolved into a hybrid system in which formal legal authority coexists uneasily with local security logics, community decision-making, and non-state coercion, consistent with theories of fragmented governance (Migdal, 2001; Boege et al., 2009).

Prolonged boycotts have also entrenched educational exclusion and learning loss, with large numbers of children missing years of formal schooling. The uneven ability of households to access private or informal alternatives has deepened inequalities within Anglophone regions and between Anglophone and Francophone parts of the country (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2021). These disparities are not simply educational outcomes but governance failures, reflecting the state's inability to guarantee equitable access to a core public good.

In response to persistent closures, communities have developed informal and clandestine schooling arrangements, which, while demonstrating resilience, operate outside regulatory oversight. This informalization further weakens education governance by displacing the state as the primary education provider and complicating future system reintegration (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004). Over time, such arrangements normalize parallel systems of education that fragment curricula, assessment, and certification.

Beyond academic consequences, school boycotts have exposed learners to heightened psychosocial risks, child protection concerns, and economic vulnerability. Schools' traditional role as protective and stabilizing institutions has been undermined, increasing children's exposure to violence, recruitment, and exploitation (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These impacts reinforce cycles of insecurity and mistrust that further discourage school attendance, even during periods of relative calm.

Crucially, the persistence of school boycotts reflects deeper epistemic polarization over the meaning of education itself. As Manga Edimo (2021) argues, education in the Anglophone Crisis has become entangled in competing knowledge systems: the state frames schooling as a civic obligation and symbol of national unity, separatist actors present it as a site of resistance, and communities prioritize safety and survival. The failure of policy instruments to reconcile these competing meanings has entrenched governance deadlock, rendering education normalization efforts largely ineffective.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the governance of education in Anglophone Cameroon during the ongoing crisis, revealing aspects such as: fragmentation, politicization, humanitarian consequences and others. Together, these findings demonstrate that education is not merely a victim of conflict but a contested arena where legitimacy, identity, and power are negotiated. The fragmentation of governance reflects the erosion of centralized authority, with state institutions, separatist groups, NGOs, and communities all exerting influence in conflicting ways. Politicization underscores the symbolic power of education, as both a tool of state control and a medium of resistance. The humanitarian consequences highlight the failure of governance to uphold human security, with widespread school closures and youth exclusion undermining long-term development. These dynamics collectively reinforce the need to rethink education governance in conflict settings. A purely state-centric model is insufficient; instead, a people-centered approach that prioritizes human security, inclusivity, and accountability is essential. International actors, NGOs, and local communities must coordinate more effectively to restore education as a safe and neutral space. Addressing both grievances and opportunism requires transparent resource allocation, culturally

sensitive curricula, and mechanisms for rebuilding trust in institutions. Ultimately, education in Anglophone Cameroon must be reclaimed as a foundation for peace and development, rather than a battlefield of resistance and control. Without such reforms, the crisis will continue to erode the social fabric and deny future generations the opportunities they deserve.

RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

Restoring education in conflict-affected regions requires governance frameworks that move beyond institutional reform toward epistemic inclusivity. Scholars of deliberative democracy emphasize the importance of creating policy spaces that recognize diverse knowledge claims and cultural perspectives (Fischer, 2009; Fischer & Boossabong, 2018). In line with Manga Edimo's (2021) analysis, restoring education in conflict-affected contexts requires more than institutional reform or security stabilization. It necessitates an epistemically inclusive governance framework that recognizes the legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems involved in education decision-making. Conflict-sensitive education policy must therefore move beyond top-down expertise to incorporate local cultural understandings, historical grievances, and lived experiences of affected communities not merely as policy recipients but as legitimate contributors to knowledge production. Such epistemic dialogue is essential for rebuilding trust, restoring legitimacy, and protecting education as a public good rather than a contested symbol of authority. Addressing the effects of school boycotts and restoring sustainable education governance in Anglophone Cameroon requires moving beyond enforcement-based policies toward inclusive, legitimacy-building approaches. The persistence of school boycotts and governance fragmentation demonstrates that education recovery cannot be achieved through enforcement or institutional reform alone. Based on the findings, six policy directions are proposed:

1. Replace coercive reopening with community-centered education governance, involving parents, teachers, traditional authorities, and youth representatives. Such structures can rebuild trust and align schooling decisions with local safety realities, thereby restoring legitimacy to education governance.
2. Institutionalize epistemic dialogue, creating formal policy spaces where state, community, and humanitarian knowledge claims are recognized and negotiated (Manga Edimo, 2021; Fischer & Boossabong, 2018). Within the context of the Anglophone Conflict, it is necessary to create an inclusive forum where diverse voices could be heard. Deliberative analysis of Fischer & Boossabong, 2018 supports this claim by emphasizing that inclusive deliberative spaces where diverse voices are heard are necessary for legitimate policy solutions in culturally complex governance environment. In the context of education governance amid conflict, such deliberative spaces could foster deeper engagement between state actors, educators, students, and civil society. Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe (2011) describe the policy process as distributed across multiple actors and contexts, reinforcing the idea that education governance in conflict settings cannot be analyzed solely through state structures, but must include non-state and transnational actors. In line with Manga Edimo's (2021) call for epistemic engagement, policy processes must create formal spaces for negotiating the meaning and purpose of education during conflict. This includes recognizing community safety concerns and historical grievances alongside state and humanitarian expertise. Without epistemic dialogue, policy instruments will continue to encounter resistance and non-compliance.
3. Regulate and integrate informal schooling: Rather than treating informal and clandestine schooling as illegal or temporary anomalies, the state should develop transitional regulatory frameworks that integrate these initiatives into the formal system. This includes teacher accreditation, curriculum alignment, and learner assessment mechanisms that protect educational standards while acknowledging existing realities.
4. Prioritize psychosocial protection: ensuring schools function as safe and supportive environments. Schools should be re-established not only as learning spaces but also as safe environments that address trauma and fear, particularly for children affected by violence and displacement.



5. Embed education recovery within peacebuilding processes: By including DDR and community reconciliation initiatives, education governance cannot be isolated from the broader conflict context. School normalization should be embedded within confidence-building and peacebuilding initiatives, including ceasefire discussions, community reconciliation programs, and DDR processes. Education should be framed as a neutral public good rather than a political instrument.
6. Strengthen decentralization with real autonomy: Decentralization reforms must move beyond symbolic recognition by granting local education authorities meaningful decision-making power and resources to regional and local education authorities. Enhanced autonomy can improve responsiveness to local conditions and reduce perceptions of imposed governance.

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon demonstrates how education, often celebrated as a universal right and a pathway to development, can be transformed into a contested arena of power, identity, and survival. The findings of this study reveal that fragmented governance, politicization, and humanitarian consequences are not isolated phenomena but interconnected dynamics that mirror broader struggles over legitimacy and authority in fragile states. By situating education within debates on fragmented governance, human security, and politicization, this research underscores the need to rethink education not only as a technical service but as a deeply political institution. In contexts of conflict, schools become more than places of learning; they are battlegrounds where narratives of resistance, control, and opportunism collide. The Cameroonian case contributes to wider African and global scholarship by showing that education governance in conflict zones cannot be understood through state-centric lenses alone. Instead, it requires a people-centered approach that prioritizes dignity, inclusivity, and protection. Ultimately, reclaiming education as a neutral and empowering space is essential not only for rebuilding trust in institutions but also for laying the foundations of peace and sustainable development.

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