**GENERAL INFORMATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Yaounde, Cameroon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of the</td>
<td>Keep Water in Public Hands!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative Initiative:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of organization:</td>
<td>African Center for Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of organization:</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website:</td>
<td><a href="http://www.we-advocate.org">www.we-advocate.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category and Edition:</td>
<td>WATER. Transformative Cities Award 4º edition (2021-2022)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STORYTELLING**

**Summary**

Our campaign 'Keep Water in Public Hands' formed in 2019, a coalition of civil society, media, labor unions and grassroots to stop water corporates manoeuvre to force the government to privatize, again, the water sector. It has also brought the government to remove taxes on consumptions of 20 m³.

**Context and problem definition**

In 2018 Cameroon made an important step by renationalizing its water sector (CAMWATER) after ten years under private management. Since the end of that privatization, in 2018, CAMWATER faced issues to facilitate the access to water nationwide. Many voices pointed fingers at private corporates such as Biwater, Suez and Veolia, operating in the country, to be the ones sabotaging government efforts in order, not only to hinder the mission of modernization and reconciliation of the population with the public water service, but also to push the government towards another privatization.

It is in this context that the African Center for Advocacy initiated a campaign to keep water in the public hands and to heighten public awareness of water as a human right. We started...
the initiative in collaboration with other CSOs, unions, grassroots movements and community’s leaders to address issues related to rate increases, lack of public accountability and transparency, higher operating costs, worse customer service and loss of jobs, marginalization of rural areas and underprivileged communities under the privatization.

This has affected approximately 43% of the Cameroonian population. Local population of the rural areas as well as those marginalized urban populations in Cameroon with women and children bearing the brunt.

**Design and Implementation**

The initiative has been designed with a mission to change the perception that private management of water is better than the public and get rid of any attempt of privatizing, again, the water sector. This change has been possible through a holistic approach by including all the stakeholders (labor, communities, grassroots, media, CSO and academia). Three main objectives were defined:

1. Increase awareness and knowledge on the dangers and implications of water privatization;
2. Mobilize public and community support to prevent any attempts to privatize the water sector
3. Engage with key public stakeholders in ongoing discussions around the human rights to water.

The initiative has had three different stages that involved all stakeholders:
- The design of the initiative: staff, volunteers, community leaders, CSOs, grassroots and labor unions.
- Involving the affected group and media: those experiencing the problem, TV/Radio,
- Engaging decision-makers and partners: public officials, researchers, funders, etc.

The initiative faced many challenges related to the political context of the country, but due to our resilience and abnegation, we were able to put in place a mitigation plan that made it possible.

**Regarding the challenges faced:**

- Lack of response from the authorities about our meeting request;
- Lack of political will from the authorities to engage with us;
- Deny permission to organize rally: with the political context of the country, public demonstrations of any kind were banned;
- Not getting feedback from decisions makers or elected officials for a meeting request;
• We were unable to be part of the National Water Committee, which is a national body involved in the decision making process regarding water management in Cameroon;
• Unable to push (via lobbying) for a debate in parliament about water as a human right in Cameroon.

Our Mitigation plans:

• Leveraged our connections with local authorities to facilitate the abstention of all the necessary authorizations to organize close meetings.
• Utilized the alternative of addressing correspondence to government authorities to draw their attention to the issue of public water
• Avoided offending the sensitivity of government actors in our media intervention.
• Carried out local lobbying campaigns.
• Avoided encroaching on state security issues.

However, it remains the problems of involving civil society organizations in the decision-making process (National Water Committee) that needs to be solved and the recognition of water as a human right in Cameroon’s constitution.

Results achieved and Evaluation

Despite the difficulties faced on the ground, our initiative secured important results. We were able to push the government to remove the taxes for all consumptions under 20 cubic meters per household. The initiative has seen an increase of 20% of families connected to the national water distribution company. Due to our consistent media advocacy, lobbying, labor union engagement, the Cameroonian government invested in 2020, an amount of 27.3 billion FCFA (around 4.7 million dollars) for the rehabilitation, strengthening and extension of the drinking water supply in other parts of the country. Cities like Edea and Bertoua are an example. This action has increased the drinking water production capacity in these two cities by 56% and 88% respectively. That investment has directly impacted local communities irrespective of gender, age, disability, social status and geographical location. It has also contributed to reconciling populations with the public drinking water service and has strengthened our fight to push private corporates out.

Another result that we have achieved is about raising awareness. Cameroonians are now aware of the dangers and implications of water privatization and informed about water as a human right. At the early stage of this campaign, out of 1000 Cameroonians interrogated in Yaoundé, only 17% were informed about water privatization and 10% about the human right to water. We conducted the same evaluation in 2021, and have seen an increase from 17% to 88% and from 10% to 91%. This is because of our mass media advocacy and community engagement.
Information is continuing to be shared with media outlets & through the coalitions about the threats of water privatization and the importance of keeping water in the public domain. That will help to keep the momentum.

**Political Strategies**

For more than two years, we have made visible the threats over water privatization in Cameroon. Our strategy has been to kick start the struggle for water, render the conflict visible and bring debate to parliament about the need to reject any form of private corporate control of water. Unfortunately, we received a challenging response from the authorities about our meeting request to engage them and present our recommendations. Apart from that, there were also difficulties in engaging political leaders. We discussed with some political leaders individually through lobbying. Some were receptive but were reluctant to raise the issue in parliament.

This strategy has not born the fruits expected, but we are still pushing for the issue to be raised in parliament and the political actions to be taken.

The breakthrough came when we have partnered with the Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA), SYNATEEC (Syndicat National des Travailleurs de l'Eau et de l'Energie au Cameroun), and international organizations such as Corporate Accountability (CA) and Public Service International (PSI). PSI, CAPPA and CA have played a crucial role in our campaign by supporting us technically and financially to amplify our actions, relaying our initiative at the regional and international level.

SYNATEEC has helped us in mobilizing labor unions and sharing intelligence of what is going on from the inside.

**Communication and Cultural Strategies**

In 2020 we took an important step by putting forward a national and international strategy that made it known at the regional and international level that in Cameroon, there are threats to another water privatization that will violate, again, the human right to water.

We initiated a social media campaign on our Twitter and Facebook pages. Campaigns messages and slogans were prepared in English and French using the local jargon to make them clear for all. These messages were to sensitize and raise awareness about the menace of privatization and what government can do to improve the management of the
water sector in Cameroon. Moreover, articles and press statements were published on our website and in the media to highlight our position and rally allies around the campaign.

Special consideration was given to religious leaders in our communication strategies. In the Cameroonian context, they have a huge influence on their population and are, most of the time, heard by the political leaders when they raise a social issue such as water access for all.

Also, we were featured in local TVs such as Vision 4 to discuss the impacts of ten years of water privatization, and why Cameroon’s government must keep water in the public domain.

We also featured in several articles in Cameroon Report, Devex, Premium Times Nigeria, The Guardian Nigeria and Journal du Cameroon, describing how water corporates manoeuvre to take back control of the water sector in Cameroon, among others. International organizations such as Public Service International, Corporate Accountability, Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa and End Water Poverty wrote articles about our campaign, shared on their website, amplifying our campaign progress on social media. We were panellists during the first Africa Water Week against water privatization in October 2021 to share our experience and to empower other CSOs.

### Resources, Financing and Transformative Economy

We received individual donations and grants from partners, especially Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA). Corporate Accountability (CA) and CAPPA assisted us in strengthening our human and organizational capacities, mobilizing material resources, providing information and campaign strategies and building alliances for mutual support that enabled coordination where joint action was needed.

### Related legislations

Our initiative relied on this national policy enshrined in our constitution. Though the constitution does not explicitly provide for the water right, but it is admitted that the water right is an integral part of economic and social rights. It could, therefore, be considered that the constitution makes implicit reference to the right to water through its provisions for economic and social rights.

It is also provided in the preamble that every person has a right to a healthy environment, that the protection of the environment shall be the duty of every Cameroonian, and that the
state shall ensure the protection and improvement of the environment. Therefore, in this light, there is an implicit commitment to protect and improve on the water right.

Ministerial departments and other institutions, whose activities relate to or have implications on the right to water, liaise with the Minister of Water and energy under the National Water Committee. This committee takes part in decisions related to water management in Cameroon. As a civil society organization, we have requested to be part of that committee to represent the voices of the population. But up to now, we have not succeeded. However, there is hope, since there is an ongoing legislation review to integrate CSOs in that committee.

Ecological Transitions

Ten years of water privatization in Cameroon created rate increased, lack of public accountability and transparency, higher operating costs, worse customer service and massive layoffs. Layoffs reduced costs and increased private profits. These layoffs did not only devastate workers but also consumers and families. It has also exacerbated inequalities and private monopoly.

However, our initiative which aims at keeping water in the public domain and pushing out any attempt to privatize the water sector contributes to reducing the poor access to water, which is not only common in rural areas of Cameroon, where the need is greatest, but also in the capital Yaoundé, where 69% of households face at least four water shortages a month and 51% of water sources (wells and boreholes). Our initiatives also contribute to achieving human rights to water and other sustainable development goals such as education, health and reducing inequalities. Most importantly, this initiative fosters transparency and accountability in the management of the water, because the state is accountable to the population and is not looking for profit.

Lessons learned

Lessons learned from our experience campaigning against water privatization in Cameroon have to do, firstly, with the importance of a sound legal and recognized water as a human right in the country’s constitution. That recognition will ensure the existence of effective legal tools that we could rely on to push private’s corporates from any attempt to manage the water sector. Also, the state will be obliged of safeguarding water users’ interests and become transparent and accountable to the public in water management. Although we have encountered difficulties in putting the issue of water privatization and human right to water in
political debates / raising the issue in parliament to now, we are still following the process. We need to be part of the national water committee first.

Secondly, we understood that it is only the public sector that can improve both the coverage and efficiency of water services, making it available to all groups, despite their social status and geographical location. Water privatization should not be reconsidered, again, in Cameroon. They privileged areas where profit is bigger and risk-free. This means that there is a fundamental contradiction in resorting to privatization as a means for the expansion of the water networks and the connection of the poorest sectors of the population to the service.

Also, we have learned that when conducting a campaign against water corporates, it is important to build a coalition of national and international organizations that will help amplify your fight, share their experience, give you tips and intelligence. The thing that made the government reject, up to now, all privatization proposals are raising awareness among communities, mass media advocacy and international media echoing the campaign.

Last, but not least, communities participation, public awareness of water as a human right, access to information, and transparency in the administration of services and resources are fundamental to improving public actions and building trust among stakeholders. All the lessons are shared with other local and regional organizations through national workshops, webinars and mass media. The recent is the Africa Water Week against Water Privatization, in which we have participated to share our experience with other participants.

### EXTRA INFO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supporting documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ‘African governments must regain control of water sector’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. End Poverty: Governments must regain control of water sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Camwater: Do not give corporates (another) opportunity to control our water!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cameroun – privatization de l’eau: une manifestation contre le Banque mondiale a Yaoundé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. YOUTUBE video</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>