

Social and Environmental Vulnerability of the Urban Poor: Evidences from Yaounde Center Region of Cameroon

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Abstract

Most urban centres in the sub-Saharan African countries have been experiencing a rapid increase in their population, Cameroon inclusive. It is partly explained by the presumed better living conditions and urban expectations. Once there, migrants are faced with different realities of high living cost, unemployment, increased house rents, poor sanitation amidst others. In an effort to cope with these prevailing conditions, the migrants become vulnerable to indecent lifestyles, and environmentally unsafe zones exposing them to all sorts of risks. Substantial literature exists on rural-urban migration but coping strategies to the social and environmental dilemma in the urban milieu remains elusive. This paper, therefore, sets out to fill this knowledge gap through an in-depth investigation of the resilient measures adopted by the urban poor and the legal provisions for a safety and healthy living styles in urban Yaounde as prescribed by the law. To attain the objective, secondary data were collected from archival documents in the regional delegations of town planning and ministerial departments in charge of housing. Also, urban planning policies and Council Development Plans for the various councils in Yaounde were exploited including the exploration of relevant websites. Primary data were obtained via a sample of 200 inhabitants in the seven Sub-divisions in the town of Yaounde. This was achieved through the use of a purposely structured questionnaire. Interviews (N=10) Focus group discussions (N=5) and direct field observations were other relevant sources of primary data. Spatial data were collected with the use of a GPS for localisation and exploitation of GIS software for other relevant cartographic data. Content and quantitative analysis were used. Results indicated that poverty is the main driver to social and environmental vulnerability which is manifested in different forms. The non-respect of legal provisions and prolonged administrative tolerance expose the urban poor to indecent socio-environmental conditions. The scenario in most cases has resulted to a significant and unexpected loss of lives and destruction of valuable property. Glaring examples include the most recent Mbankolo disaster in November 2023 that resulted to the loss of over 100 lives identified, homelessness, and loss of property with far-reaching effects. This study strongly recommends urgent proactive disaster measures, such as the resettlement of the vulnerable population in risky neighbourhood, exploitation of relevant cartographic data provided by the National Institute for Cartography (NIC) especially the modelling of risk areas amongst others. In fact, such scenarios should be treated as a matter of urgency and should even become part of government's emergency plan of action, not only for the city of Yaounde but for the country as a whole.

Keywords: Environment, social, vulnerability, Yaounde and risk.

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INTRODUCTION

The current trends of urbanisation in developing countries are closely related to urban poverty and informality especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The UN-HABITAT, (2008) underscored that more than half of the world's population lives in urban centres while over 1/3 of the population live in informal housing with a high incidence of poverty and exposure to all sorts of risks. Urban centres can be environments of extremely low or high risk, depending on a number of interrelated factors of which the presence of basic protective

infrastructure, quality and capacity of urban councils and legal town planning policies are significant to manage and control urban structures (Dodman *et al*, 2013). Oluwafemi, (2013) further emphasized that informal settlement can be said to be a spatial manifestation of certain living conditions which do not conform to formal planning and legal rules, standards and institutional arrangements, and the situations are often dynamic and complex, while poverty is the outcome of various dimensions of exclusions and deprivations. Most of the urban poor becomes very vulnerable to all sorts of risks both social and environmental, which are common in

Yaounde and Douala metropolitan towns of Cameroon. A good proportion of these urban poor are not always the autochthons but in-migrants seeking for employment solace, better living conditions and urban ambience.

Yaounde, the administrative capital of Cameroon since independence in 1961 is one of the fastest growing city not only in Cameroon but also in Africa with an estimated population of 6 million inhabitants (BUCREP, 2020) is characterised by a high and increasing number of urban poor who are highly vulnerable to socio-environmental risks both those living in lowlands and highlands. The increase in the urban population can be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s following the economic crises that led to the introduction of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) which did not help much but saw the massive movement of the rural population to the urban centres where the town of Yaounde was an excellent reference. Kanji, (1996) affirmed this by underlining that within these years low-income and slums areas in African cities generally became the fastest growing areas. Also, urban infrastructure started deteriorating since then giving way to slums and informal settlements on risky zones (Tchindjang, 2012). The urban poor in Africa is exemplified in Cameroon by the bulk of the population living in extremely poor and deprived conditions especially in the towns of Yaounde and Douala as earlier pinpointed.

In recent time, there have been growing concerns in the management of urban poverty, the vulnerability of the poor and their coping strategies. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 with the aim of reducing poverty, ensuring justice and peace by 2030 have not achieve much so far. In the same year, the Yaounde City Development Strategy was elaborated and adopted (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa-UNECA and Yaounde City Council-YCC, 2020). In 2020, the Master Plan for the city of Yaoundé was designed to reinforce city development with the overall aim of improving the living environment of city dwellers (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development-MINH DU and YCC, 2008). The government delegate for the YCC embarked on demolition of informal buildings in the town of Yaounde to give the town a new look and to resettle those who

were living in risk prone areas. However, it was not very successful because the mission was highly resisted by the urban poor. In 2023, the YCC launched a project of modernising the town of Yaounde which actually meant upgrading slums and formalising informal housing and activities. Also, *Societe Imeubiliere Camerounaise* (SIC) under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development since the 1980s embarked on the construction of low cost building to deal with informal housing and provide decent housing (National Institute of Statistics-NIC, 2018). The efforts have not been very effective since there have a continuous proliferation of slums even within the core of the town. Urban poverty has remained a complex multidimensional and highly contested phenomenon that must be understood in terms of housing, activities, and jobs. The urban poor exposed to all kinds of vulnerabilities usually devise copying strategies for survival. This discourse opens up the way for us to evaluate the social and environmental vulnerability of the urban poor and how they cope with these dilemmas.

The study area

Sited at the southern Cameroon low plateau, Yaounde, is the administrative capital of Cameroon since independence in 1961. The town of Yaounde is the second largest growing town in Cameroon after Douala the economic capital. Yaounde has an estimated population of 6 million inhabitants. The town is subdivided into seven different municipalities, Yaounde 1-7 and each of the municipality has a council. The relief of the town has both high and lowland regions with many hills dotted all over the plateau. It is because of the numerous hills that the town earned the name the *Town of Seven hill* (YCC, 2015). Geographically, the town is located between longitude 3°45' to 4°0' north of the Equator and latitude 11°25' to 11°35' east of the Greenwich Meridian (Figure 1). Due to intense rural-urban migration, the town is made up of several ethnic groups from all over the national territory. Some dominant ethnic groups are the Etons, the Ewondos, Bamilikes from the western highlands and a handful of those from the grand north. The town carries out diverse human and economic activities which range from formal to informal (Tchindjang, 2015). The informal activities are largely carried out by the urban poor in a bit to survive the urban hardship.

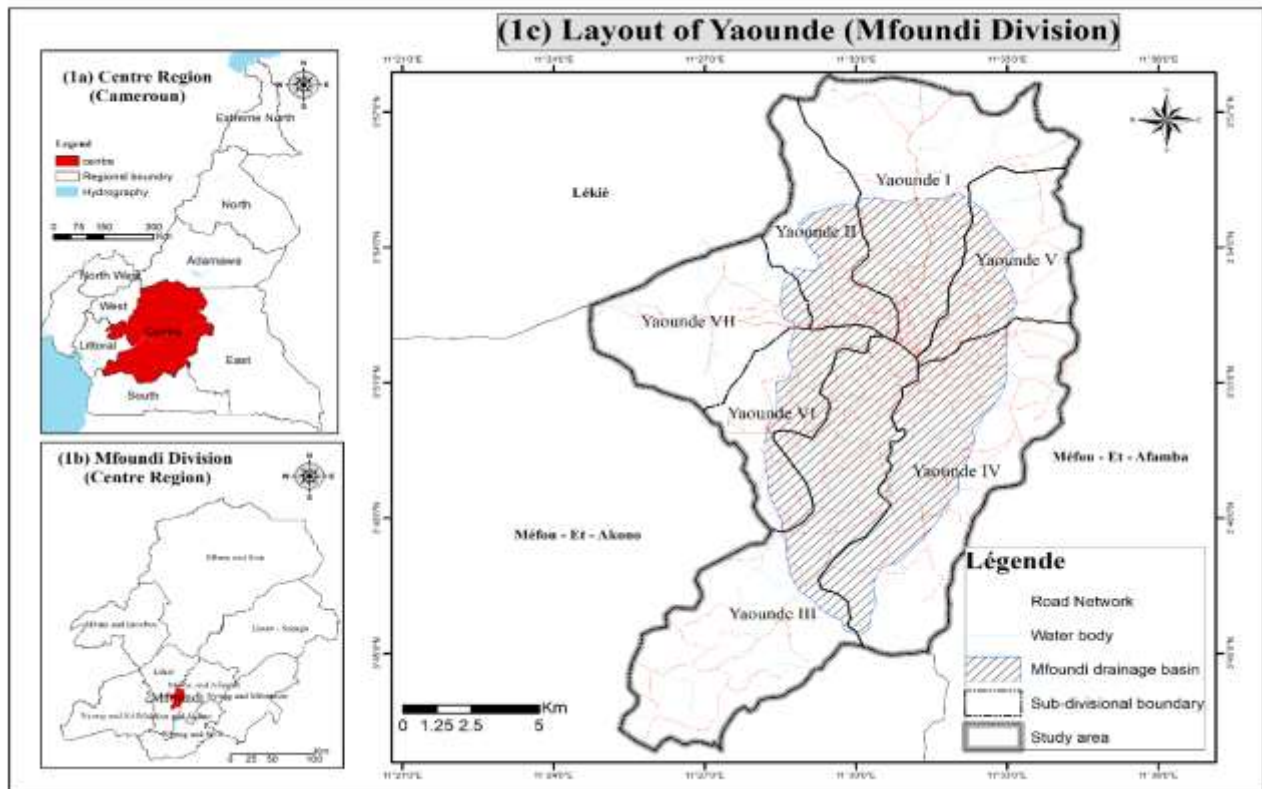


Figure 1: Location of the study area

Source: NIC, 2024

METHODS AND TOOLS

Data used for this study were both secondary and primary. Secondary data were obtained through a systematic exploitation of both published and unpublished documents. Archival documents, reports, Council Development Plans (CDPs), Decrees and laws from various ministerial and YCC departments were exploited for secondary data. Councils Strategic Development Plans, presentations, research papers and journals all constituted sources of secondary data. Also, audio visual information and exploitation of relevant websites to acquire the needed data were not left out. This was to contextualise and build a rich befitting literature and to fill knowledge gaps before the field data collection proper.

Primary data collection was a field exercise that was carried out with the aid of some field assistants. A 200 structured questionnaire was administered to the inhabitants of the seven municipalities in the town of Yaounde using a convenient sampling technique. The intension was to draw information about living conditions, survival strategies and activities they are involved in reason why mainly poor quarters were targeted both those in swamps and slopes. Direct field observations also constituted a significant method of primary data collection where photos were taken. 10 structured interviews and 5 focus group discussions were held with relevant resource personnel to have an insight

and in-depth knowledge about the vulnerability of the urban poor, their survival strategies and state actions in the remediation of the conditions. The various mayors or their deputies were instrumental for this purpose.

The use of a GPS and cartographic software such as; MapInfo, GIS data bases were all exploited for spatial and cartographic data especially as concerns the identification and modelling of risk prone zones in the town of Yaounde relevant for policy orientation and decision making. Data collected were treated and analysed using content, spatial and quantitative analysis.

Institutional and legal framework of urban poverty and vulnerability in Yaoundé city

The elaboration of the Council Strategic Development Plan (CSDP) in 2015 by the YCC in line with SDGs was to ensure a significant drop in the level of urban poverty as stipulated by SDG-1 (no poverty). It was also to, improve on urban infrastructure, and fight against informal and indecent housing and to improve the general urban environment. It is noteworthy to state that urban environment, population and town planning has been of concern to the State of Cameroon since independence. This partly explains why the government have created a number of structures and involved in the management of urban centres in Cameroon such as; ministerial departments, municipal councils, private sectors, civil societies and even development cooperation providers. Even at this, urban poverty, and

vulnerability of the urban poor has been a stumbling to attaining this goal.

The legal framework has greatly evolved for urban planning over the years: nascent at its beginnings, town planning developed firstly through the reproduction of Western colonial practices especially from France, and then through a proactive government policy (YCC, 2015). Law no. 66/10 of November 18, 1966, rendered effective by Decree No. 68/74 of March 27, 1968, set the basis of urbanization through building permits, authorizations to partition, institution of priority areas to be urbanized, etc. Ordinance No. 73/20 of May 29, 1973 repealed Law no. 66/10 and its Decree of application No. 68/74 constituted the new basis for urban development (YCC, 2015; Government of Cameroon-GoC, 2015).

The adoption of Law No. 2004/003 of April 21, 2004 governing urban planning in Cameroon and its five implementing decrees signed in 2008 constitute a major advancement and greatly revived the urban planning process. Some important innovations introduced by this Law included: empowering decentralized local authorities, clarifying the roles of the various stakeholders, formalizing the participation of populations and civil society, strengthening the responsibility of professionals in the urban sector (GoC, 2015). Being more specific, it sought to improve the planning process for human settlement areas of at least 2,000 inhabitants and to fix the general rules of town planning and construction applicable to the entire territory. This Law created four types of urban planning documents depending on the scale of the territory

concerned: the Urban Master Plan (PDU), the Land Use Plan (POS), the Town Planning Summary Plan (PSU) and the Sector Plan (PS). The PDUs and POSs are developed for cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and more particularly Urban Communities, regional or Divisional capitals with high development potentials. The PSUs are developed for cities of less than 100,000 inhabitants (GoC, 2015; Tchindjang, 2012; MINH DU, 2007). With special attention in the town of Yaounde, very little have been realised but rather, the urban poor have increased and slums and risky urban environments expanded exposing the urban poor to more risk and vulnerability. This discourse gives us the gateway to look clearly the state of the urban poor and how vulnerable they are to socio-environmental risk.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Urbanisation is indicative of welfare and prosperity, that it, is tagged with economic growth and development. However, high rates of urbanisation in African cities particularly in Cameroon seems to instead represent a veritable challenge since the bulk of urban dwellers live in poverty, in slums and are exposed to all sorts of environmental and social risks. Such risks, have claimed the lives of many individuals and continue to threaten many of the urban poor living in marginal zones. This poverty can be conveniently assess in terms of dissatisfaction of basic needs; feeding, clothing and housing conditions. However, the focus here is the vulnerability of the urban poor to both social and environmental risks.

Drivers of social vulnerability

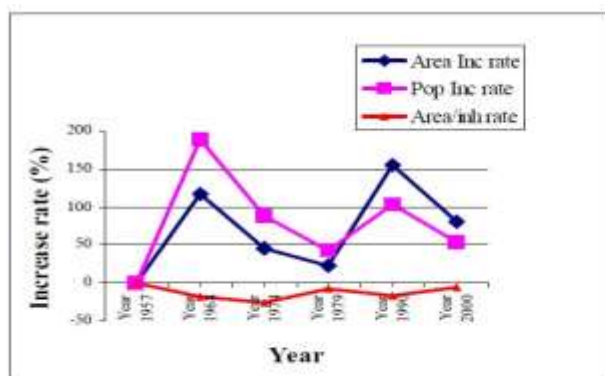


Figure 2: Population increase and variation index in Yaounde from 1957-2000

Source: Tchindjang, (2012); YCC, (2015)

Urbanisation, a social characters, modernity and globalisation has become a significant factor which has impoverish many in urban centres. Urbanisation rate in Cameroon increased from 37.08% in 1987 to 47.2% in 1997 and in 2010 it was rated at 52% with discrepancies within the towns, Yaounde and Douala holding more than 75% (Tchingjang, 2012; GoC, 2015; YCC, 2015) (Figure 2).

Since then, the rate of urbanisation has continue to grow since the 2000 creating more of problems in the town of Yaounde. Using our research instruments, a number of drivers of social vulnerability were pointed out caused by the increasing rate of urbanisation and an increase in the urban population who are basically found in poor or vulnerable quarters (Table 1).

Table 1: Drivers of social vulnerability in Yaounde

Municipalities in Yaoundé	Eff. Resp.	Drivers of social vulnerability				
		Poverty	Inaccessibility	poor housing	Crime and vice	Poor sanitation
1	30	12	5	6	3	4
2	28	9	4	8	2	5
3	30	11	7	4	3	3
4	28	8	6	5	5	4
5	28	5	2	8	7	6
6	28	7	3	11	1	7
7	28	8	6	4	7	3
Total	200	60	33	46	28	32
%	100	30	16.5	23	14	17

Source: Field work, 2024

Table 1 shows the various social vulnerability in the town of Yaounde. From the table, the outstanding of the social vulnerability was identified to be poverty 30%. This was observed in many quarters in the town of Yaounde especially in the inner suburbs of Briketerie and the Melen where most people were living in abject as identified by their housing conditions. As a matter of fact, all the rest of the social vulnerability were emanating from poverty and the fact that most people continue to flow into urban centres as earlier indicted by statistics from YCC, 2015.

Secondly, inaccessibility of most quarters (16.5%) made them vulnerable reason being that people cannot easily carry out emergency cases such as fire incidences, health emergency cases and the list is long. Interviews indicated that fire accidents have occurred in such poor quarters but fire fighters could not have access to quench it down which finally led to the lose of lives

and property destruction. More so, poor housing (23%) was also identified as one of the outstanding driver of vulnerability faced by most urban dwellers in the town of Yaounde.

Lastly, crime and vice and poor sanitation 14% and 17% respectively also projects high as key drivers of social vulnerability in the town of Yaounde. Field observations immediately confirmed to these vulnerability whereby most quarters were filled with dirt and stagnant water susceptible of causing malaria and other diseases that can emanate from dirty water. Also, crime wave was noticed to be very high in most of the quarters occupied by the urban poor such as; Briketerie, Tsinga Elobi, Melen amidst others (Plate 1).

Plate 1: Some social vulnerability in the town of Yaounde**Photo 1: Poor sanitation and housing in Melen quarter-Yaounde**

(A) Empty containers on gutters in dirty water in front of a house looking nasty and breeding mosquitos

Source: Authors, 03/02/2024

**Photo 1: Poor housing in Tsinga elobi quarter-Yaounde**

(B) Poor housing conditions with mud and plank walls broken in some parts

Source: Authors, 03/02/2024

During the dry season, the situation is porous and some of the inhabitants are even unable to stay in their houses when it rains. Interviews with some of the

inhabitants reveals that they are poor and cannot relocate to other safer areas. Data on characteristics of the inhabitants revealed that most of them were unemployed,

involved in informal activities, married with 3-5 kids and who hardly take three square meals a day. Field observations indicated that the majority of the urban poor lives in prohibited areas unsuitable for human habitation which may be flooded areas or accidented relief. The YCC, (2015) classified four types of areas not suitable for construction; river sides and lowland areas, future or existing road spaces, spaces with the status of industrial zones and spaces with the status of green spaces or high relief. Only the YCC can give a building permit to build in such areas. However, one can see anarchic and illegal occupations of slums and accidented hill slopes exposing them to social vulnerability and environmental risk which drives the marginal areas and its population to socio-environmental.

Drivers of environmental vulnerability

Field observations revealed that most of the urban poor where located in marginal lands (highlands and lowlands). It areas were noticed to be unhealthy and even prohibited by the council authorities. However, based on the fact that most of the inhabitants were poor,

they were forced to continue staying there despite the probation of the council authorities. It is important we examine the drivers of environmental vulnerability on highlands and lowland areas.

- **Highlands areas (hilly areas and slopes)**

The town of Yaounde as earlier mentioned in found on the Cameroon southern low plateau where there are many highlands and lowlands. Tchindjang, (2012) underscored that more than 80% of Yaounde dwellers are poor and 60% lives slums in hilly slopes and marshes where access to land is cheaper. Field observation revealed that hill tops in the town of Yaounde were all inhabited though they were accidented and prohibited by the urban councils. More so, they were practising activities that could fragilise the slopes by causing all sorts of environmental risks. Many examples can be identified such as the case of Damas and Mbangkolo where hundreds people lost their lives. These dwellers in the highlands attack residual hill crest to create quarry in order to cope with vital needs (housing, health and food).



Photo 3: A completely inhabited hilly slopes in Nkolbissong

Such areas are usually exposed to all forms of risks such as landslides

Source: Tufoin, 12/02/2024

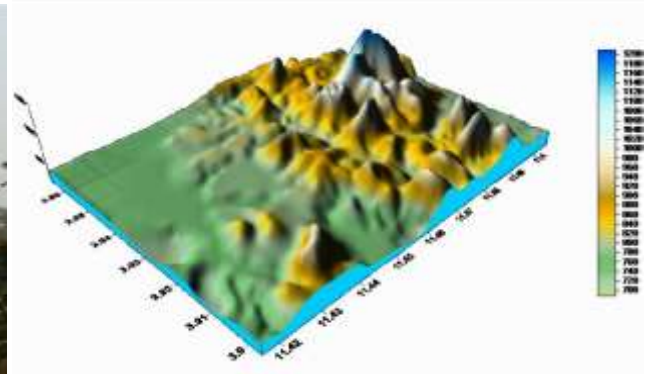


Figure 2: A digital elevation model of the of Yaoundé

As indicated by photo 3, most of the hill tops and steep slopes are inhabited fragilising

Source: NIC, 2024; Tchindjang, 2014

Plate 1: Cases of landslides incidents in some quarters in Yaounde



Photo 4: A landslide incident in Mbankolo, March 2023. Over 150 deaths

Source: CRTV 7:30pm News, 08/03/2023



Photo 5: A landslide incident in Damas, September 2022. Over 32 deaths

Source; CRTV 7:30pm News, 16/09/2022

Apart from these areas where landslides are very common in the hill tops in the town of Yaounde,

most of the slopes and hill tops still remain very fragile and susceptible such risks. Despite the warning from the

municipal authorities and the fact that such areas are prohibited, the urban poor still continue to settle there and construct substandard houses. The reason most of the people settle here is basically because of cheap land. Inhabitants revealed that they do not even have plans of leaving the area any moment soon. Apart from this, the lowland areas are even more susceptible to floods and exposure to water borne diseases.

• Lowland areas

The lowland regions in the town of Yaounde are many and are mostly marginal lands inhabited by the urban poor. The United Nations Development Program-UNDP, (2021) noted that poverty in urban slums in

Yaounde is rapidly growing where 29% of the population is and 20% of the population lives below the poverty line estimated at 78.000frs CFA/year (156\$ US or 118£). To cut down expenses, people try to settle in slums where houses are cheap which is a major problem and a vulnerability to them both in the social and environmental perspective. Environmentally, most of the urban poor in lowland areas lives in slums and are very vulnerable to diseases and floods which were understood to be very recurrent in such areas given the fact that they are living in informal buildings and having limited access to potable water. To this effect, floods modelling was conducted in the town of Yaounde and results indicated that areas inhabited by the urban poor were largely exposed and vulnerable to floods.

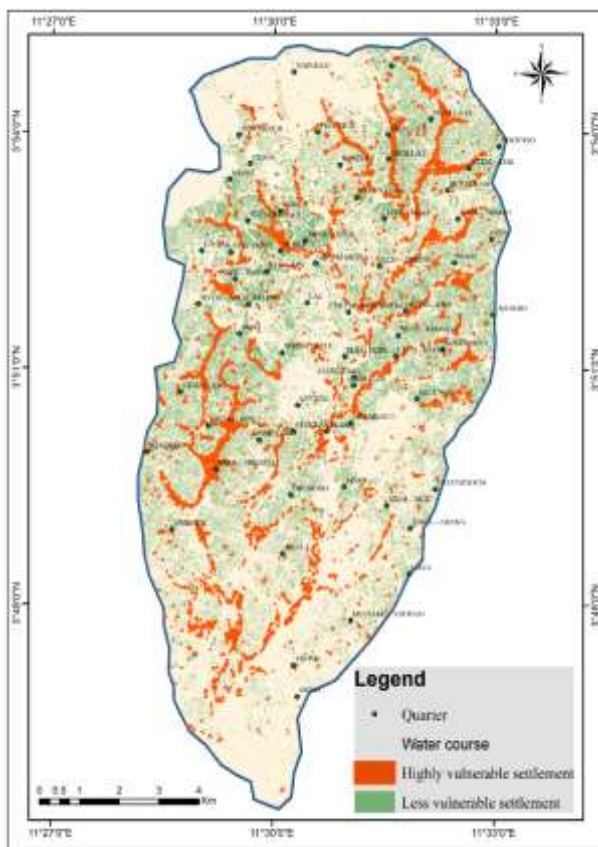


Figure 4: Highly vulnerable and less vulnerable basin of Yaounde in the drainage

Source: NIC, 2024 and field work, 2024

Figure 4 shows the highly vulnerable areas to environmental risk. These settlements were via observations were noticed to be mostly inhabited by the urban poor such as the case of Melen elobi, Tsinga elobi, Mokolo elobi and even Post Central though it is not made up of a poor quarter but frequently experiences flooding making it very vulnerable to floods and even the risk of

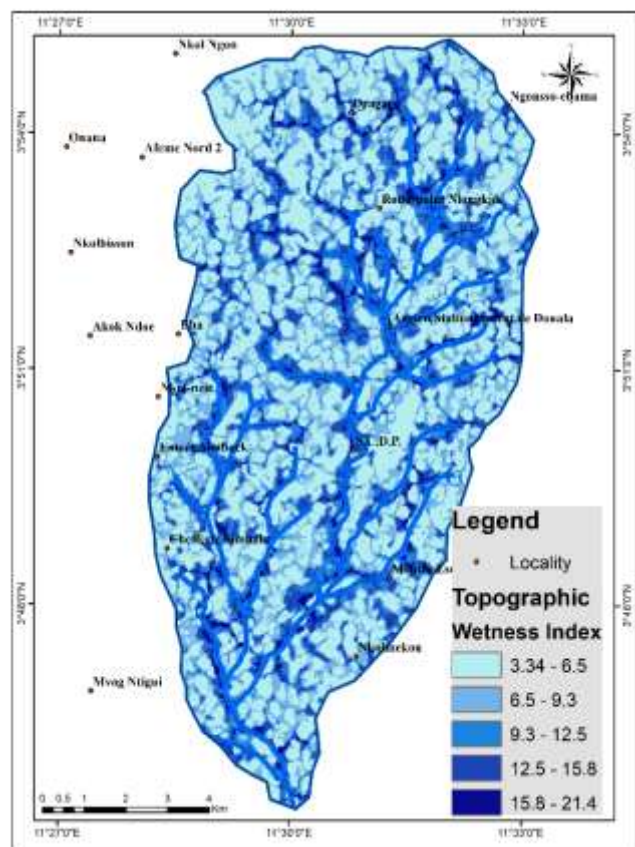


Figure 5: Topographic wetness index for drainage basin of Yaounde

Source: NIC, 2024 and field work, 2024

polluting and infecting the water sources. Figure 5 points out wetness topographic index which gives an idea about the about the occurrence of floods in the study area particularly on the drainage basin of the town. Figure 6 and 7 shows the relief and areas vulnerable to floods in the town of Yaounde.

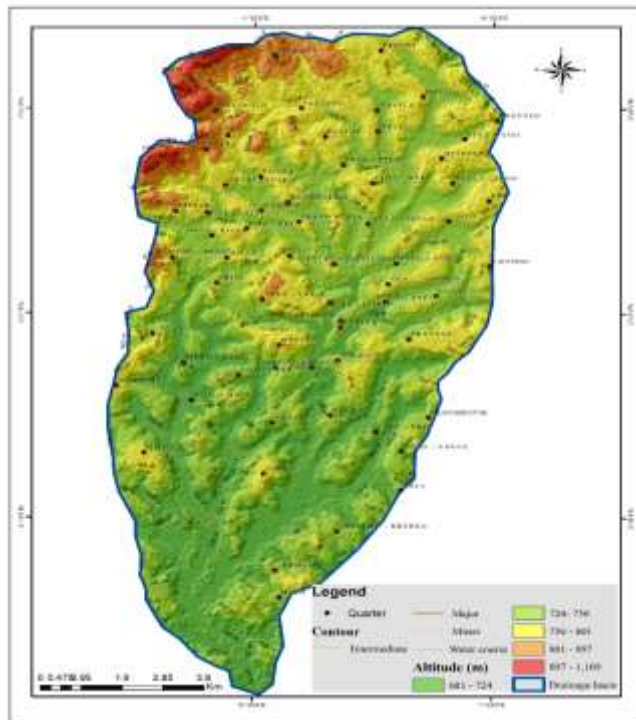
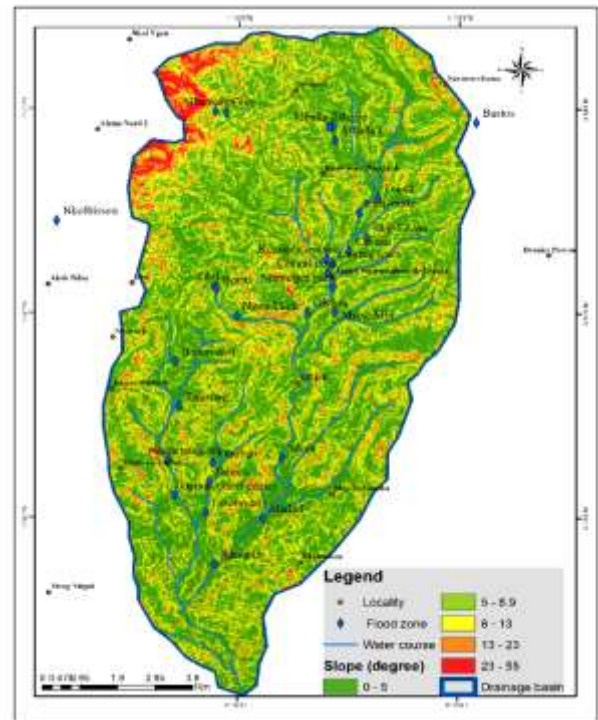


Figure 6: The relief of Yaounde and inhabitants
Source: NIC, 2024 and field work, 2024



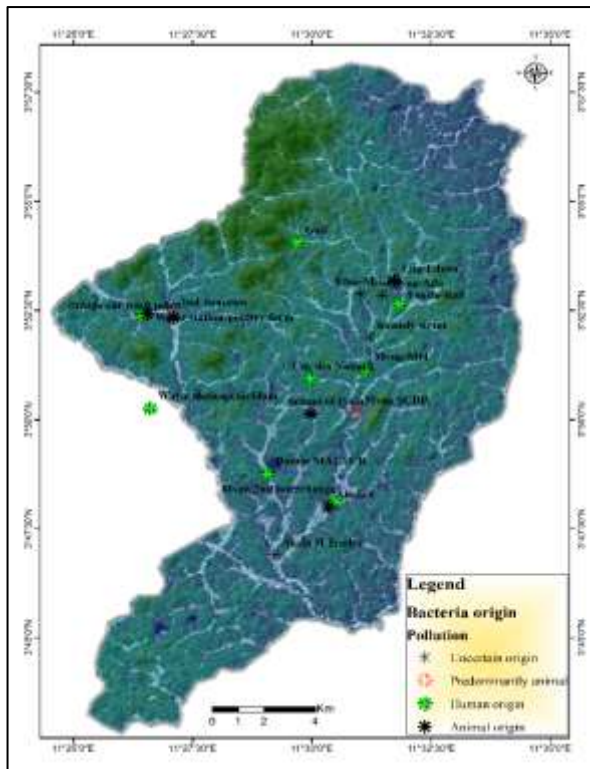


Figure 10

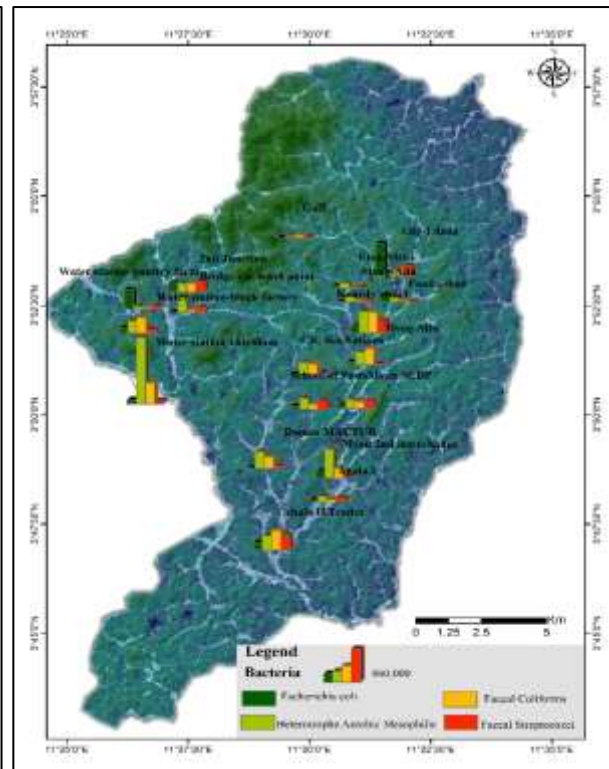


Figure 11

Figure 1 shows areas where waters samples were collected in some quarters in Yaounde while figure 2 shows faecal coliforms bacteria that was identified in the water sample. Figure 3 goes further to identify the various origins of the bacteria while figure 4 shows all the different type of bacteria that were identified in the water samples classified and spatialised on the map of Yaounde. All these shows clearly the vulnerability of the

urban poor to various types of diseases. Also, malaria resulting commonly stagnant water and other diseases like diarrhoea and typhoid were also identified to be common in slums in the town of Yaounde. Tchindjang, (2012) confirmed to this assertion by presenting some data on common diseases affecting the urban poor on the slums in Yaounde (Figure 12).

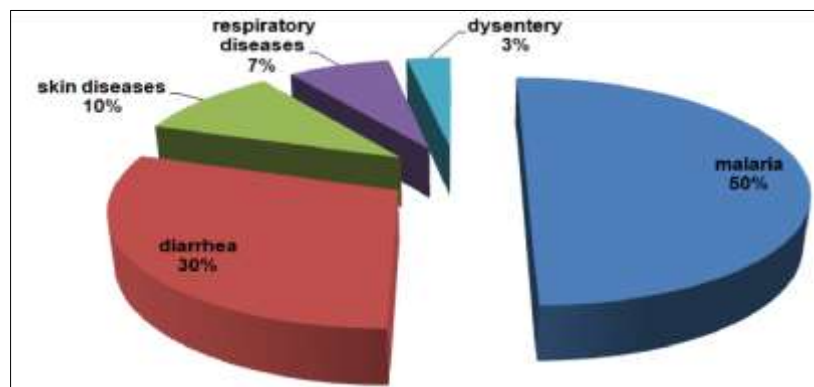


Figure 12: Common diseases affecting Yaounde slum dwellers

Source: Field work, 2024

Observations alone attested to the state of affairs and vulnerability of the inhabitants. Local clinics and medics around the vicinities of these quarters confirmed that such diseases were common in such areas base on their daily consultation records. Interviews noted that floods were at the origin of most these diseases affecting the urban poor found in the slums.

DISCUSSIONS

The increasing number of the urban poor in most urban areas in Cameroon is alarming and there is need to formulate more rigorous policies and follow them up to ensure that inhabitants should not construct on risky or vulnerable areas otherwise there will be continuous loss of lives. Hill tops and slopes for example

are very fragile because of gravity couple with human activities on such areas makes the slopes to be fragile and susceptible to all sorts risk which may be floods or landslides which are very common in the various municipalities in the town of Yaounde in the most recent cases being Damas and Mbangkolo. The situation in the low land region is even more frightful because of flooding which has far reaching consequences. These consequences stems of disease proliferation: malaria, dysentery, diarrhoea etc. which falls inline in the findings of Tchintang, (2012). On the social vulnerability, the urban poor are expose to informal settlements, poor waste management, unemployment which are all aspects to be well control and regulated by the municipal authorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Towards alleviating urban poverty and urban legal policies

Increasing living standards in urban areas by providing portable water and creating more formal jobs.

Building of a strong urban policy with local participation thereby integrating the local population and local authorities into the management of urban planning policies.

Reinforcing legal urban framework by preventing urban dwellers from settling in vulnerable areas as prescribe by the urban planning authorities.

CONCLUSION

The vulnerability of the urban poor is a current topical issue discussed by many authors. It is a critical subject matter that ought to be handled without any compromise considering the outcomes of such patterns in our cities. This very phenomena the urban poor and vulnerability has claimed many lives and continue to claim. The surprising thing there is that the urban poor are not still scared of living in such areas and municipal councils are very slow to act despite legal framework put in place to control urban planning. It is therefore important that we the State, YCC and other related stake holders stake the charge to control urban planning and ensure that vulnerable areas: hill tops, flood prone areas, steep slopes among others. As concerns, social vulnerability, it is important that that the State should control urban planning from the grass root level by limiting high population influx into the town of Yaounde. This is because rapide urbanisation coupled with economic stagnation have increased poverty in urban areas (Yaounde) making them to settle in swamps and slums and on prohibited urban spaces that are meant for other purposes. Controlling all these challenges gives way to sustainable life styles and driving towards sustainable cities and then, smart cities which are objectives of the Cameroon State by 2035 which is the emergency line.

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