



Volume: 03 Issue: 09 | 2022 ISSN: 2660-454X

<https://cajitmf.centralasianstudies.org>

The Dynamics of Covid 19 Pandemics, Anglophone Crisis on the Hospitality Facilities in the South West Region: Evidence from Buea and Limbe

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Received 16th Jul 2022,
Accepted 19th Aug 2022,
Online 17th Sep 2022

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Key words: COVID 19 pandemics,
dynamics, Anglophone crisis,
hospitality industry.

Abstract: The COVID-19 Pandemic introduced new dynamics in several sectors. However, there is limited evidence in the context of Cameroonian towns on how it has potentially reshaped multiple sectors. The case of the hospitality industry stands out clear in the towns of Buea and Limbe. Various sectors of the economy have suffered in varying dimensions. The hospitality industry is one sector that has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper examines the dynamics that have occurred in the hospitality sectors due to the COVID -19 pandemics and the political crisis on the hospitality industries in two of Cameroon's the cities. To generate data 200 respondents were randomly sampled from, 10 hotels. Structured questionnaires were distributed to hotel staff, 100 in Limbe and 100 in Buea. Structured interviews were administered to hotel managers or their representatives. Out of the 200 questionnaire distributed, 148 were recovered giving a participation rate of 74%. The data was analyzed and summarized using descriptive statistics and the results were displayed in graphs and tables. The findings revealed that due to the COVID-19 pandemics and the Anglophone crisis, the hospitality industry experienced a drastic fall of more than 80% in event tourism which is one of the major sources of income. This has adversely affected the annual budgets of the hospitality industry and some proprietors resorted to salary reductions of their employees while others simply cut down the labour force which added to the already existing unemployment problems. This study therefore recommends that massive vaccination and promotional activities remains the best way of reducing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hospitality facilities as well as other economic sectors. The government is also encouraged to find a lasting solution to the ongoing crisis in the English speaking region of Cameroon, that have paralyzed, socio- economic activities for close to six years today.

INTRODUCTION

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemics, the World Association of Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs) on May 2020, reported that service sectors, like the hospitality industry and travel tourism were the most venerable sectors. During the crisis of COVID-19 IPAs reported that 84% of hospitality services including services provided by restaurant were affected by the pandemic while 65% of travel tourism was negatively affected by the pandemic. This pandemic has reshaped the hospitality industry (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Hospitality Net, 2020; Qiu et al., 2020). The pandemic also risks slowing down progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Before, the outbreak of the corona virus in 2020 and its subsequent spread to nearly all parts of the world, the hospitality sector in Cameroon was promising. The sector employed several Cameroonians and contributed to the GDP of the country. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the government of Cameroon like that of other countries in an attempt to prevent the spread of the disease introduced preventive and barrier methods that produced devastating effects on businesses including the hospitality industries. On December 31st 2019 the corona virus was reported in the Wuhan, Hubei, China, On March 11, 2020. The World Health Organization (WHO) described the COVID-19 outbreak as a global pandemic. In (2020) WHO reported, over 2.3 million confirmed cases worldwide out of which 13,000 confirmed cases were in Africa. Reports by WHO indicate that as of January 2022 there were 293,750,692 confirmed cases of COVID-19, in the world and 5,454,131 deaths have been recorded. The countries of African and Cameroon in particular with poor health system are likely to suffered the effects of the pandemics more than other continents like Europe and North America (Alzoubi et al 2020).

on 6 March the first case of COVID-19 was registered in Cameroon. And by the end of April 2020 more than 7392 cases were recorded. By 4 June 2020 (MINSANTE), reported that Cameroon was seventh most infected country in Africa. Statics from WHO indicate that as of January 2022 Cameroon had registered 108,676 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,851 deaths. Faced with the rising number of infected cases, multiplication of different strands and a rising dead toll, the Cameroon Government implemented the WHO's prevention and response strategies such as the wearing of masks, the use of hand sanitizers, social distance, reduction in inter urban transportation and the closure of international borders (Tendongfor et al 2020). Hotels and catering, suffered were seriously affected. From April 2020, the population has been encouraged to get them vaccinated against the COVID19 virus as an effective means of reducing the spread of the virus, however the population has been quite hesitant to take the vaccines due to the controversies and conspiracy theories surrounding the vaccine.

Ever since the outbreak of the COVID 19 Pandemic various sectors of the economy have suffered in varying dimensions. The hospitality industry is one sector that has been hard hit by this pandemic. Statistics from the world Tourism Organization (2020) indicate that due to the COVID 19 pandemic, 100 to 120 million direct tourism related jobs were at risk, with potential loss of 910 billion to 1.2 trillion US dollars and 1.8 to 2.8% loss of global GDP. With 56% less international travellers, 320 billion us dollars were lost in exports from tourism in five months, three times what was lost in 2009 economic crisis. These statistics are quite revealing of the magnitude to which this pandemic has taken its toll on the hospitality sector.

The socio- economic implications of the COVID 19 pandemic on the hospitality sector in the towns of Buea and Limbe has been quite devastating especially given that, the COVID 19 is occurring at a time when South West and North West Regions of Cameroon have been hard hit by the prolonged Anglophone Armed Conflict. With socio- economic activities paralyzed by lockdowns and regular ghost towns since 2016, which have reduced working days of the week. While it is difficult to quantify the human and material losses emanating from this armed conflict, it would be just to mention here that, dissociating the effects of the corona virus from the effects of this crisis on livelihood in a given sector

including hospitality remains and uphill task. It would be safe to say that, the COVID 19 pandemic came to make matters worse.

While we are yet to come to terms with the realities on how to content this monster, controversies surrounding the vaccine as a remedy have been put to question. The myths, beliefs, disbeliefs, only complicate the matters further. In the midst of a confused stage scenario, it is only germane for scholars to salvage a bad situation. This is almost an obligation to both social and medical scientists to synergize through a multidisciplinary research especially as all pointers are to the fact that COVID -19 is going to be around for quite a while. It is based on this premise that this study focuses on the dynamics of the COVID-19 on the hospitality facilities in Buea noted for its “Legendary Hospitality” and Limbe a “Town of Friendship.”

Study area and methods

Buea and Limbe are two urban settlements in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon. Administratively, Buea is the headquarters of the South West Region while Limbe is the headquarters of Fako Division. To the north east and east, are settlements like Muyuka and Tiko respectively while Limbe is bounded to the South by the Atlantic Ocean. Buea is located between latitude $4^{\circ}14''$ north of the equator and longitude $9^{\circ}20''$ east of the Greenwich Meridian While Limbe is located on. Latitude: $4^{\circ}01'N$ Longitude: $9^{\circ}12'$ (Figure 1)

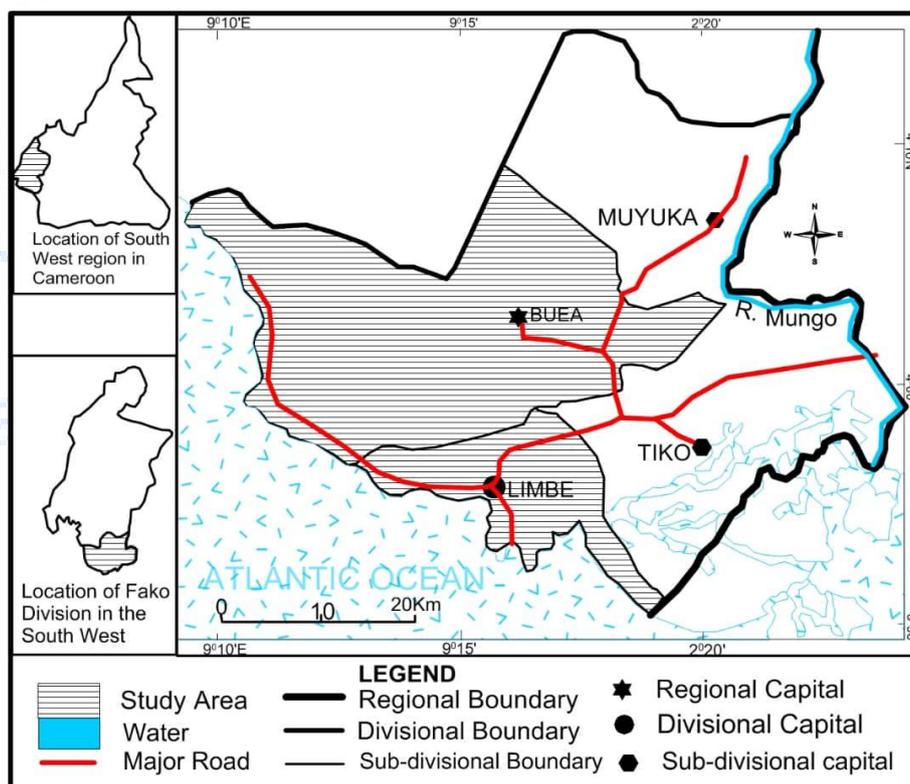


Figure 1. Location of Buea and Limbe in the South West Region

Source: Adapted from the administrative map of the South West Region of Cameroon

In order to assess the dynamics of the COVID-19 on the hospitality industry in the towns of Buea and Limbe, 10 hotels were purposely sampled. These hotels were selected based on their classification by the ministry of tourism as three, four and five star hotels. A total of 200 structured questionnaires were distributed to hotel staff, 100 in Limbe and 100 in Buea and structured interviews were conducted with hotel managers or their representatives. Out of the 200 questionnaire distributed, 148 were

recovered giving a participation rate of 74%. The questionnaire was structured to capture information on the number of tourist visitor between the periods 2015 to 2021, revenue impact, event organizations, job security, and customer preference and travel behavior. Secondary information was sourced through the review of relevant articles in order to understand the gaps in literature to be filled. Complementary information was obtained from the end of year reports of the regional delegation of tourism and leisure for the south west. Administrative clearances were obtained from the Director of Higher Institute of Transport and Logistics of the University of Bamenda, while ethical clearances were obtained from the regional delegation of public health and the Buea health district office.

Data analysis: Data collected for this study was entered into the Epi. Info Version 7.2. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used in analyzing the data. The analyzed data was summarized into percentages using descriptive statistics and the results were displayed in graphs and tables.

FINDINGS

Covid 19 situation in the South West Region and hospitality facilities

In September 2021 a total of 64133 RDT tests were conducted with 2672 positives, 112 were healthcare workers, 4 were pregnant women and total of 45 deaths recorded (1.7%). The monthly positivity rate was 15%, and 804 Polymerase chain Reaction (PCR) tests were conducted, with 42 positive (positivity rate=5.2%) (Table 1)

Table 1 COVID-19 situation in the South West Region of Cameroon September 2021

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Sample tested (RDT-PCR) | 64.133 |
| No of positive cases | 2672 |
| Health care workers infected | 112 |
| Pregnant women infected | 4 |
| No of deaths | 45(1.7 %) |

Source: North-West and South-West Health Cluster COVID-19 Epidemiological Bulletin (2021)

In the South-West region, Fako Division has one of the highest rates of COVID-19 infection rates in the country. In Buea, a total 16541 persons were randomly tested between January and December 2021 and 1439 positive cases were detected and 31 deaths recorded (Table 2)

Table 2 COVID-19 situation for the Buea Health District: January to December 2021

| Month | No tested | No positive | No deaths |
|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| January | 412 | 18 | - |
| February | 611 | 48 | 0 |
| March | 5114 | 224 | 0 |
| April | 2560 | 214 | 8 |
| May | 595 | 88 | 0 |
| June | 223 | 11 | 0 |
| July | 146 | 4 | 0 |
| August | 215 | 33 | 0 |
| September | 2478 | 360 | 20 |
| October | 2478 | 175 | 0 |
| November | 704 | 9 | 0 |
| December | 1027 | 255 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 16541 | 1439 | 31 |

Source: Buea Health District office 2021

Information gathered from the Regional delegation of tourism and Leisure for the south West indicate that, there are a total 113 hotel facilities in Buea and Limbe (Table3).

Table 3 classification of hotel facilities in Buea and Limbe

| Locality | Number of classified hotels | Number unclassified hotels |
|----------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Buea | 17 | 31 |
| Limbe | 27 | 38 |
| Total | 44 | 69 |

Source: Regional Delegation of Tourism and Leisure South West 2021

Out of the 113 hotel facilities, 44 are classified, that is they have been ranked from one star to five star hotels, based on the standard criteria of the quality of services and leisure facilities provided while 69 are unclassified and are commonly referred to as motels and inns. However for the purpose of this study the following hotel facilities were considered Mountain hotel, Parliamentarian hotel, WDC Hotel, Eta Palace Hotel and Saint Clair Hotel for Buea. The facilities that were considered in Limbe included, Seme Beach Hotel, Fini Hotel, Atlantic Beach Hotel, Sun shine Villa Hotel and Rose Garden Hotel (Table 4)

Table 4 Hotel Facilities sampled

| Serial number | location | | | | No of questionnaires | returned |
|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------|
| | Buea | Number of questionnaire | returned | Limbe | | |
| 1 | Mountain hotel, | 20 | 15 | Seme Beach hotel | 20 | 18 |
| 2 | Parliamentarian hotel, | 20 | 17 | Fini hotel, | 20 | 16 |
| 3 | WDC hotel, | 20 | 12 | Atlantic Beach hotel | 20 | 12 |
| 4 | Eta Palace | 20 | 14 | Sun shine Villa hotel | 20 | 13 |
| 5 | Saint Clair hotel | 20 | 16 | Rose Garden Hotel | 20 | 15 |
| Total | | 100 | 74 | | 100 | 74 |

Source field work 2021

Table 4, shows that 10 hotels were sampled for this study, five in Buea and five in Limbe.20 questionnaire were distributed in each of the hotels to the hotel staff and the response rate was 74% in both towns.

Tourist arrivals and nights spent in hotels Buea and Limbe from 2015 to 2020

The number of tourist arrivals as well as the number of nights spent in hotel facilities in Buea and Limbe dropped drastically. In 2017, 116360 tourists visited and spent 173 nights in the hotel facilities that were selected for this study. In 2020 barely 31965 tourists visited the same hotel facilities and spent 54 nights recording a drop of 84395 in absolute terms (Table5)

Table: 5 Tourist arrivals in Buea and Limbe from 2015–2020

| Year | Tourists arrivals in thousands | Number of nights spent |
|------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 2015 | 69332 | 94 |
| 2016 | 70088 | 103 |
| 2017 | 116360 | 173 |
| 2018 | 81335 | 116 |
| 2019 | 30242 | 457 |
| 2020 | 31965 | 54 |

Source: Regional Delegation of Tourism and Leisure South West 2021

The drop in the number of tourists arrivals and the number of nights spent was directly reflected in the drop in annual revenue, consequently the contribution of these hospitality facilities to the GDP, witnessed a drastic decline (Figure 2).

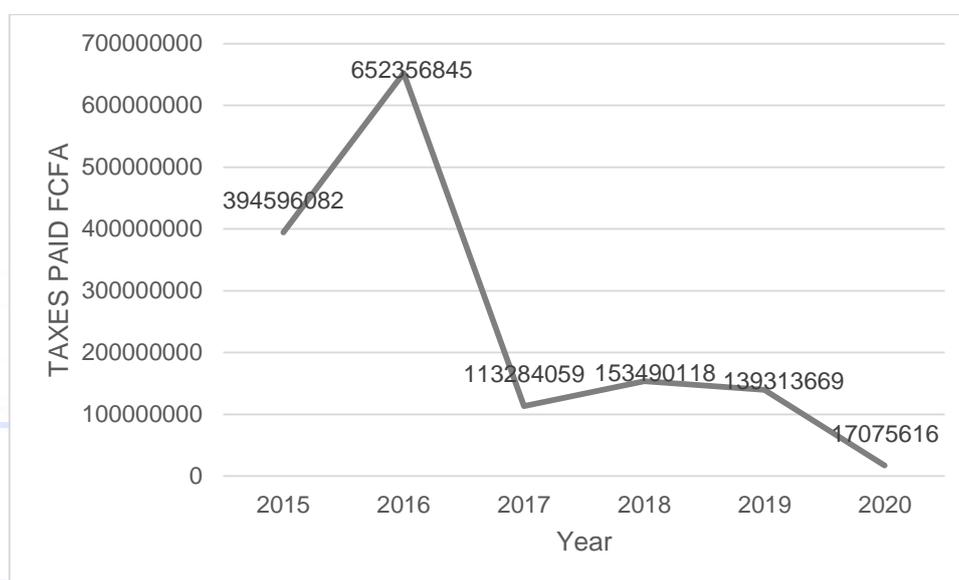


Figure 2: Taxes paid into the government coffers

Source: Source Regional Delegation of Tourism and Leisure South West 2021

Figure 2 above indicates that the annually contribution in terms of taxes paid to the government treasury by the owners of hospitality facilities that were sampled for this study dropped from 652356 845 in 2016 to 17075616 in 2020. Given that taxes are the main sources of revenue to local councils, the drop equally meant a reduction in the annual budget of the local councils and consequently, the ability or capacity of these councils to carry out their investment projects for local development were consequently compromised. The graph shows that before the COVID-19 period revenue in term of tax collection were over six million CFA annually in 2017 but dropped significantly to less than two million in 2017 perhaps because of the ongoing Anglophone crises and the situation became so dramatic in 2020 where revenue dropped to less than one million CFA because of the double effect of COVID-19 and the crisis that has persisted in the English Speaking regions of Cameroon since 2016.

Following the measures prescribed by WHO and the government of Cameroon, to reduce the spread of COVID19, where gathering of more than 50 people were prohibited, organization of event tourism which is one of the principal sources of revenue to the hospitality facilities reduced. Most planned events such as Marriages, funeral celebration, meetings and seminars were cancelled from the 11th of March 2020. In 2015 for example 764 marriage events were organized in the 10 hotels that were sampled in both Buea

and Limbe. In 2018 the number of marriage events was 722 and a drastic drop to 422 was experience in 2020 most probably due the respect of COVID- 19 prevention measures. Similarly, Funeral events dropped from 588 in 2018 to 262 in 2020. Seminars dropped from 996 in 2015 to 321 in 2020 and birth events fell to 421 in 2020. Meetings events dropped from 1344 in 2015 to 321 in 2020 (Table 6)

Table 6 Events Organized in Hotel Facilities in Buea and Limbe from 2015-2020

| Year | Marriages | Funerals | Seminars | Birthdays | Meetings |
|------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 2015 | 764 | 391 | 996 | 1021 | 1344 |
| 2016 | 966 | 344 | 833 | 723 | 1321 |
| 2017 | 971 | 588 | 762 | 621 | 966 |
| 2018 | 722 | 424 | 654 | 532 | 721 |
| 2019 | 868 | 321 | 577 | 521 | 641 |
| 2020 | 422 | 262 | 321 | 421 | 321 |

Source: field work 2021

From the statistics in table 6 above, the drop in event tourism meant that the total annual income in the hospitality facilities equally dropped, consequently it became difficult for hotel proprietors to continue to pay the workers. While some hotel proprietors decided to reduce the salaries their employees by half, others resorted to a cut down on the number of employed. This situation came along with stress, increased levels of poverty and unemployment (Table 5).

Services rendered in the hospitality facilities such as reservations, car rental services, restaurants became dysfunctional and employed staff in some hospitality facilities were sent on technical leave. Table 7 shows dynamics in the services rendered in the hospitality facilities in Buea and Limbe.

Table 7, Services render by Hospitality Facilities in Buea and Limbe between 2015 -2020

| Year | Reservations | No of car rental services | Restaurant services: No of plates of food of different variety sold |
|------|--------------|---------------------------|---|
| 2015 | 95365 | 146423 | 122664 |
| 2016 | 10426 | 154621 | 134336 |
| 2017 | 176312 | 121321 | 123455 |
| 2018 | 117899 | 11488 | 132317 |
| 2019 | 45758 | 11040 | 13421 |
| 2020 | 54433 | 2231 | 12131 |

Source: Field work 2021

Statistics from table 7 shows the dramatic decline in hospitality services such as room reservations. In 2017, despite the crises, reservations for room occupancy stood at 117899 but with the outbreak of the crisis there was a dramatic drop to 54433 in 2020. Other services such as car rental, number of plates of food consumed in a day also witnessed drastic declines.

CONCLUSION

Findings reveled the, in the towns of Buea and Limbe, following the outbreak of the COVID-19, the organization of events such as birthdays, funerals, conferences, marriages in hotel facilities witnessed a decline. The situation was worsened by the ongoing Anglophone crises which before the health crises had already paralyzed the sector due to ghost towns and lock downs. The transport and agricultural sector on which the hospitality industry greatly rely on, was equally paralyzed. The IMF and World Bank have st aside the sum of \$14 billion and \$150 billion, respectively, in order to reduce the adverse impacts of the virus on the economy (BEAC, 2020) which unfortunately has become another opportunity for corrupt

individuals to make more money. The COVID-19 pandemic and the political crisis in the restive Anglophone region have had significant negative repercussion on the hospitality industry. Therefore, the dynamics of COVID-19 on hospitality facilities and other economic sectors are aggravated in the context of conflict.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it strongly recommended that Policymakers should use the relief fund provided by international institutions to reduce the negative impacts the economic virus on various sectors of the economy as well as encourage massive vaccination. The government of Cameroon's can borrow up to 300 billion CFA to fund infrastructure (IMF, 2020). This can help to rebuild the economy form the basis for reconstruction in the crisis-hit North West and southwest regions of the country. Re investing in sectors like tourism and hospitality which have been paralyzed not only by the health crisis but by the protracted Anglophone Crisis can revitalize the economy, create more jobs and generate income into the state coffers.

Special promotion packages, such as cut down in the cost of organizing events, drop in the price of accommodation services, special offer for cancelled bookings, food; drinks can be an effective strategy to recover from the shocks.

The Cameroon government is encourages to engage in all peaceful negotiations at the national and international level in an effort to bring a lasting solution to the ongoing Anglophone crisis that has paralyzed the socio economic sectors in these regions for close to six years today.

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