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Strengthening Child Rights through academic partnerships: the experience of UNICEF Cameroon in establishing child rights centers and mainstreaming child rights education

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Abstract

UNICEF Cameroon is pioneering a transformative initiative in West and Central Africa to institutionalize child rights through the establishment of Child Rights Centres (CRCs) in partnership with public universities, academic institutions, and specialized schools. These centres function as interdisciplinary hubs for research, education, and advocacy, designed to integrate child rights across academic disciplines, policymaking processes, and local governance systems. Inspired by models piloted in Georgia and then in Greece, the CRC initiative has been contextually adapted to Cameroon's national realities and is now shaping a uniquely African approach to child rights education and policy engagement.

Importantly, Cameroon is building on Africa's deep-rooted human rights philosophy, often overlooked in global discourse. Long before Western frameworks emerged, African civilizations articulated principles of dignity, justice, and solidarity. The *Charter of Manden*, proclaimed in 1236 in the Mali Empire, is one of the earliest codified human rights declarations, affirming the sanctity of life, protection from slavery, and respect for human dignity. Cameroon's CRC model reclaims this historical legacy to anchor child rights within African value systems.

The initiative is formalized through Memoranda of Understanding with eleven universities and specialized schools, guided by a co-creation methodology and a structured institutional roadmap. Each CRC supports interdisciplinary teaching, student-led research, and localized policy dialogue aligned with national development goals. Beyond higher education, UNICEF also partners with the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education to integrate child rights into school curricula, through teacher training and civic engagement and out-of-school children.

As Cameroon expands its CRC network across all ten administrative regions, it is also laying the groundwork for regional collaboration and cross-country learning, making it a frontrunner in shaping how child rights can be embedded in university curricula, local governance, and national education systems throughout West and Central Africa. This initiative reflects a strategic ambition: to transform Cameroon's academic and policy infrastructure into a regional hub for child rights innovation, grounded in both historical authenticity and future-oriented development.

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Short CV:

1. **Nadine Perrault** is UNICEF Representative in Cameroon. She is a lawyer by formation. With over 25 years of significant experience, she has held several positions at UNICEF, including at the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean in Panama. Before that, she worked at UNICEF headquarters in New York, where she was working on Child Rights issues. Ms Perrault was also a UNICEF Representative in El Salvador and Guinea-Bissau before her appointment to Cameroon.
2. **Fatimata Balandi Kirakoya** is the Chief of Social and Behavior Change Programme at UNICEF Cameroon. With over 25 years of experience in public policy, community engagement, and rights-based programming in 8 countries, she leads national initiatives to promote child rights, including the development of university-based Child Rights Centres and child-centered curricula across education levels.
3. **Casimira Benge** is the Chief of Child Protection at UNICEF Cameroon. With a background in law, she is a seasoned expert in child protection with over 35 years of experience in child rights, including 32 years at UNICEF, working across development and humanitarian crisis contexts. Her expertise in child protection covers armed conflicts, post-conflict recovery, forced displacement, and natural and climate-related disasters, spanning low- and middle-income countries in West, Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa, as well as Latin America.

4. **Albert Legrand Fosso** is a multidisciplinary scientist with a PhD in medical anthropology. Currently serving as a Social and Behavior Change (SBC) Officer at UNICEF Cameroon, he leads evidence generation and child rights promotion. His expertise spans anthropology, agriculture, and development, blending research with impactful programs. Passionate about global equity, Fosso integrates academic rigor and fieldwork to drive sustainable change.