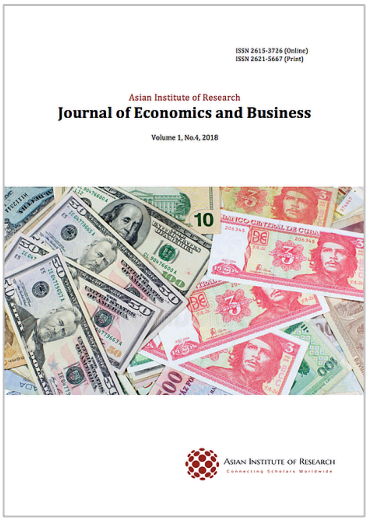

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Cameroon-Congo Economic Relations: A Basis of Propinquity and Trans-Border Trade Opportunities

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Abstract
Since independence, the Republics of Cameroon and Congo (Brazzaville) have not only established diplomatic relations but have also engaged trans-border trade as part of the said relations. These are made possible due to the contiguity of both states. However, Cameroon poses itself as the bread basket of the Central African sub-region as it takes a dominant position in the trans-border commerce among the countries here as is the case with Congo. Over time, the initiation of the Ketta-Djoum and Brazzaville-Yaounde Transport Facility Project came in as a morale booster to accelerate the commercial and other related trans-border activities between both countries. As such, this work argues among other things that despite such innovation, Cameroon maintains its dominant position in the commercial engagements which act as a binding force between the two countries.

Keywords: Economic Relations, Propinquity, Trans-border Trade, Opportunities, Cameroon, Congo

Introduction

Formal relations between the Republics of Cameroon and Congo were established in the years after the independence of these countries. Even though both belong to different regional groups such as the Customs and Economic Union of Central Africa (CEMAC), ECOWAS and CEMAC, they have, that notwithstanding, maintained economic and socio-cultural relations which make their relationship unique in the West African sub-region. Before delving into the relations between both countries, it is important that we trace the geographical propinquity of the two neighbours in order to understand better the bond or foundation on which their trans-border economic relations stand.

Location

Congo or Congo-Brazzaville is situated in west central Africa, bounded on the north by Cameroon (494 km) and the Central African Republic (487 km), on the east and south by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire, 1, 229 km), on the southwest by Angola (Cabinda enclave, 231 km) and the Atlantic Ocean, and on the west by Gabon (2, 567km). On the part of the south is the Atlantic Ocean which covers 200 nm. Formerly called the People's Republic of the Congo, it has a total area of 342,000 sq km (132,000 sq m) (CIA, 2014:2).

The Republic of Cameroon on its part is largely situated in Central Africa, bordering the Bight of Biafra between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea at 6 00 N, 12 00 E on the African continent. Specifically, Cameroon shares borders with six countries. On the West is the Federal Republic of Nigeria (about 1,975 km), on the North-East is the

Republic of Chad (1,116 km), on the East is the Central African Republic (901 km), and on the South there is Equatorial Guinea (183km), Gabon (349km) and Congo (494km). Meanwhile, the territorial waters (Atlantic Ocean) stretches on the west below Nigeria by12nm (Ibid.).

Ground Moves for Economic Cooperation

At the dawn of independence, most African countries decided to pull themselves into different economic and customs groups with the intention of working in synergy for the socio-economic development and for the general good of all. The leaders of the Central African Republic, Congo (Brazzaville), Chad and Gabon agreed to come together in order to sustain the economic services they were about taking over from the colonialists. They, therefore, resolved to establish a customs union, *Union Douarniere Equatoriale* (UDE) or Equatorial Customs Union (ECU) which came to fruition in 1961. A partial free area came into being comprising the UDE countries and Cameroon which were all members of the Franc Zone. In December 1964 the leaders of these states signed the Brazzaville Treaty which led to the birth of the Central African Economic and Customs Union (UDEAC) which replaced the UDE. It emphasized liberalizing exchange regulations between the member states, free trade, and movement among members, and fostering economic cooperation. Unfortunately, in April 1968 Chad and the Central African Republic withdrew from the union because they thought they were not benefiting enough from it. The Central African Republic only came back to the union in late 1968 while Chad did so in 1984 (Neba, 1999:211).

A number of African countries could not sacrifice the much intended economic integration on the altar of political differences and tensions. They all had to look towards one direction in an attempt to channel their efforts in increasing intra-African trade and economic cooperation. For example, on 3 June 1966, the West African Customs and Economic Union (UDEAO), signed a convention, which came into effect on 1 May 1977, on new rates of duty applicable to goods exchanged between Senegal and Ivory Coast. It was later extended to Mauritania.

In spite of such moves, regional integration remained an anthill task for the economies of Central African countries. Regional trade or economic relations lags behind as opposed to trading with developed countries. For example, oil dominates 70 percent exports to European Union (EU) countries from this part of Africa with the exception of the Central African Republic. Other exports from Central African countries to the EU include bananas, cocoa, wood, copper, and diamonds. On the other hand, the EU exports manufactured goods to these countries in the likes of machinery, mechanical appliances, vehicles, pharmaceutical products, and foodstuffs. The EU went on to negotiate an Economic Partnership Agreement with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe in 2009 (European Union, 2017:3). Despite all of these, it is rather unfortunate that bilateral economic relations between some of these countries as in the case of Cameroon and Congo, no matter the magnitude, seems to be underestimated by some writers and institutions. It is based on this argument that we need to take a step in finding out what Cameroon and Congo got to offer in terms of economic resources. As such it is imperative, to begin with, an idea of what each had and still has in terms of natural and other resources.

The Congolese economy is based primarily on subsistence and plantation agriculture (cassava, maize, coffee, and cocoa among others) besides the exploitation of natural resources. The produces petroleum, timber, potash, lead, zinc, uranium, copper, phosphates, gold, magnesium, natural gas, and hydropower (CIA, 2014:p.2). Congo engages in extensive trade with the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Gabon, with which it is joined in the Customs and Economic Union of Central Africa. The country also has extensive commercial ties with France, the United States, and Italy.

Commercial activities are also important, primarily because the country provides key port and transport facilities for the Central African Republic, Chad, and Gabon. On the other hand, Neba (1999:209) states that Cameroon produces mostly agricultural and forest products which include cocoa, coffee, palm products, cotton, rubber, bananas, tobacco, and groundnuts. Besides the country also exports nonagricultural products such as petroleum (crude oil), bauxite, iron ore, timber, and hydropower (Neba, 1999:209; CIA, 2014:p.2). Nkenda, Nzouessin, and

Moussa (2014:p.12, p.16) argue that plantains, tomato, onion, cassava sticks, pepper, potato, peanuts, macabo, and avocado are largely among the products that Cameroon exports to its neighbours.

Trade Pitch in, Prospects and Quandaries

Since independence, the Republic of Cameroon has been constantly referred to as Africa in miniature, because it has a conglomeration of the physical, human and cultural characteristics found in different parts of the continent. Its endowment with natural and other resources, and its ability to produce food crops and other products to feed the populations of some of its neighbours, also earned the country the prestige of being denoted as the "bread basket" or "the nourishing breast" of the Central African sub-region. Nkenda (2010:7) and Nkenda, Nzouessin and Moussa (2014:p.2) maintain that in terms of agricultural and horticultural commodities, Cameroon is the main trading partner of each of the CEMAC states, of which Congo is a party, and trade balance is generally in its favour where its direction is a "one way" trend. In this light, therefore, Cameroon's imports from CEMAC countries are marginal.

Even before the creation of various regional groupings, Cameroon had dominated the Central African region in the trade with agricultural products. It was, however, unfortunate that for quite some time, especially between the 1960s and 1970s, there was the exhibition of the passiveness of economists in showing interest in gathering real statistics and other related information on trade not only between Cameroon and Congo (Brazzaville) but also in the rest of the region. According to Cameroon's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER), trade between Cameroon and Congo, besides other neighbours, is generally underestimated. The ministry’s hierarchy claims that the informal trade and strong socio-cultural proximity between Cameroon and her neighbours seem to be taken for granted by state agents like the customs’ services (MINADER-DESA, 2008 as cited by Nkenda, Nzoussin and Moussa, 2014:p.1).

Furthermore, some of the difficulties connected to the engagement of data related to trade between Cameroon and Congo (Brazzaville) could be attributed to the ups and downs in relations between both countries. In the mid-1960s, for example, Cameroon's relations with France and other western powers were on a good footing, but that with some of its neighbours declined. In fact, ideological discordancy and the continuous presence of guerrilla fighters of the proscribed *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) in Brazzaville strained relations between Cameroon and Congo. Besides, Cameroon also clashed with Gabon over the instant eviction of some Cameroonians from Gabon as well as quarrels over the marketing of Gabonese oil in Cameroon. In March 1968, presidents Ahidjo and Bongo managed to engage dialogue which brought an uneasy calm to the tensions. In January 1982 President Denis Sassou N’guessou of Congo visited Cameroon with the intention of improving bilateral relations and to discuss the trans-border trade with the Ahidjo government (Ndzi, 2016:p.4).

As earlier highlighted, some of the political or economic problems that pitted Cameroon against Congo and other neighbours could not melt off the trans-border trade in agricultural products which acted as the economic life wire of the Central African sub-region. Cameroon kept the trade commitment with Congo and other neighbours. Nkenda, Nzoussin, and Moussa (2014: pp 12-16) and Ndzi (2016:5-7) content that over 70 different agricultural and horticulture products are exported from Cameroon to CEMAC countries, of which Congo is a member, but only a few are marketed regularly over the 12 months of the year. The various authors go-ahead to identify some of the said products. These include, but not limited to, plantain, banana, potato, yam, groundnut, onion, tomato, cassava sticks, bell pepper, vegetables and fruits such as carrots and avocado. The authors maintain that plantain was and still remains the most important agricultural product in terms of regular tonnage reaching its peak during the first months of the year before declining to increase again as from the month of October. During the period when the export of plantain is at its lowest (July, August, and September), the tonnage of onion supply reaches its peak. Meanwhile, the export of tomato is constant with about 100 tons exported each month though the quantity of supply drops in the months of May, August, and September.

The point of contact pertaining to almost all commercial transactions is by land. For example, the Mouloundou and Kentzou trajectories serve as links with Congolese border towns like Sembe and Ketta. Besides Congo, Cameroon has many border outlets that enable the country to engage trade with the rest of its neighbours (see

Table I). Looking at table I, we can see that Cameroon has at least 11 border and market outlets to neighbouring countries. Most of the border markets are located in the South Region followed by the East, the Far North, North, and Littoral in descending order. As concerns trade with Congo, we realize that the main market outlets from Cameroon are at Mouloundou and Kentzou in the East Region of Cameroon. From these sales points, products like plantains, macabo, cassava, and vegetables are taken across the border to Congo. The towns of Mouloundou and Kentzou also stand as border market outlets to the Central African Republic.

Table I. Characteristics of Border Markets between Cameroon and its Neighbours

Border Markets	Border with	Geographical Location	Main Agricultural and Horticultural Products Exchanged
Abang Minko	Gabon	South (Olamze)	Banana, Plantain, Cassava, Stick, Vegetables, Beans, Tomato, Onion, Macabo, Pepper, Peanut, Potato
Kyo-Ossi	Gabon, Equatorial Guinea	South (Olamze)	Cassava, Stick, Vegetables, Tomato, Onion, Fruits, Macabo, Pepper, Peanut, Potato
Aboulou	Gabon	South (Ma'an)	Plantain, Macabo, Pepper, Peanut, Potato, Tomato
Idenau	Equatorial Guinea	South West (Idenau)	Okok/Eru, Garri, Potato
Garoua-Boulia	Central African Republic (CAR)	East (Garoua-Boulia)	Yam, Cassava, Peanut, Corn, Vegetables
Mouloundou	CAR, Congo	East (Mouloundou)	Pantain, Macabo, Cassava, Vegetables
Kentzou	CAR, Congo	East (Bomba)	Cassava, Corn, Macabo, Plantain, Peanut
Kousseri	Nigeria	Far North (Gfey)	Corn, Sorghum, Rice, Yam, Onion, Sugar Cane, Fruits
Amchide	Chad, Nigeria	Far North	Sorghum, Groundnut, Bambara Nut, Onion, Sugar Cane, Fruits
Mbaimboum	CAR, Chad	North (Touboro)	Sorghum, Groundnut, Bambara Nut, Onion, Fruits
Port Peschaud	Gabon, Equatorial Guinea	Littoral (Wouri)	All Commodities

Sources: Nkenda (2010:p.19) and Nkenda, Nzoussin, and Moussa (2014: p.16).

They are several actors who make the entire process of trans-border trade between Cameroon and Congo and other CEMAC countries practicable. Nkenda (2010:pp.21-22) and Nkenda, Nzoussin, and Moussa (2014: p.18) maintain that about 90 percent of the retailers are adults. Of this figure, about 23 percent are women while 70 percent are men. Children under 18 years play a less important role in the formal cross-border trade in the area and therefore represent only 07 percent of the traders. These authors further claim that most of the children carry small quantities of goods on behalf of their parents or guardians who are traders and most of whom live in the border towns.

Generally, the trans-border trade brings to Cameroon some remittances that help in the running of its economy. In terms of figures, the example of trans-border trade between Cameroon and Congo and a few other neighbours in 2008 would buttress this point. In 2008, for example, Cameroon's exports to Congo through the Moloundou trajectory amounted to 17,818 tons while the Kentzou point of exit registered 18 tons. This means in that year, a total of 17,836 tons of trade items were exported to Congo from Cameroon. In terms of value, the products marketed fetched for Cameroon the sum of FCFA 2,962,956,487 which stood at 11.5% of the country's remittances from trade with its CEMAC neighbours (see Table II).

Meanwhile, Ndzi (2016:p.4) and Nkenda (2010:p.23) postulate that transporters play the intermediary role of moving the goods from one point to the other. Big carriers such as trucks and pick-ups can transport up to 20 tons of products to the markets. Rickshaws and wheelbarrows are also among the means of trans-border transport. According to Nkenda (2010: pp. 7-8), the balance of trade is in favour of Cameroon in the intra-CEMAC flows except for Equatorial Guinea and to a lesser extent the Congo. The reason here is that these two serve as countries for the transit of imported products from other parts of the world into Cameroon. Such merchandises include red wine and cigarettes.

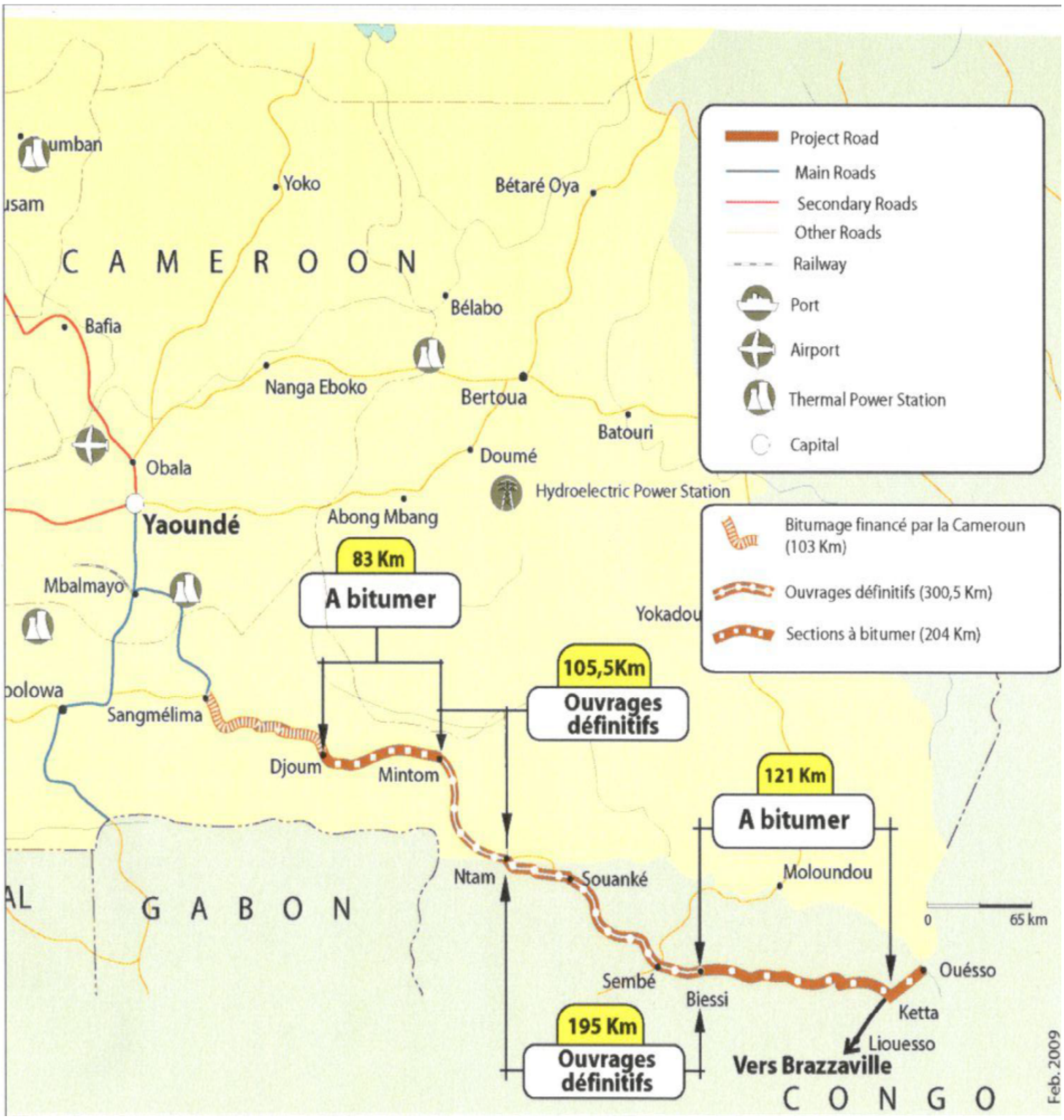
Table II. Quantity and Estimated Values of Products Exported from Cameroon to Congo and Some Selected Neighbours in 2008

Countries of Destination	Border Markets	Quantities (in Tons)	Value (in FCFA)	%
Gabon	Aboulou	19,346.35	4,569,328,727	12.4
Equatorial Guinea	Kyo-ossi, Idenau	63,726.25	17,986,656,508	41.2
Congo	Moloundou, Kentzou	17,818 + 18 = 17,836	2,962,956,487	11.5
CAR	Mouloundou, Groua-Boulia, Kentzou, Mbaimboum	8,677	1,697,869,653	5.6
Chad	Amchide, Mbaimboum	45,869	10,639,870,720	29.5
TOTAL		**155,454,60**	**37,856,682,095**	**100**

Source: Compiled from Nkenda, Nzoussin, and Moussa (2014: p.24).

Over the years, several moves have been made by the Central African countries just as in other regional groups to forge greater integration among them which they considered as a condition *sine qua non* for economic development and prosperity. In fact, one of the major challenges or obstacles towards the realization of this goal remains the lack of good transport and other related facilities linking these countries. In an attempt to exterminate the nightmares, some of these countries took the bold step to develop and/or improve on the roads and other communication networks in an attempt to further boost their economic relations. This was the case of Cameroon and Congo that agreed to embark on the Ketta-Djoum Road and Brazzaville-Yaounde Corridor Transport Facility Project which was to commence in 2010 and reach its completion point in 2014. The highway was to connect the two capital cities of these countries, that is, Brazzaville and Yaounde (see Map 1).

Map 1. The Ketta-Djoum and Brazzaville-Yaounde Road Project Area



Source: African Development Fund (2009:p.30).

The Ketta-Djoum and Brazzaville-Yaounde transport network scheme was conceived in February 2009 and was approved by the African Development Fund (ADF), in September that same year. The project was to start in January 2010 and was expected to be completed by March 2014. The Ketta-Djoum road (504.5 km) is a major road link on the 1,612 km highway which connects Brazzaville and Yaounde. The construction or road development scheme was divided into two phases. The first phase, on the Congo side, was to concentrate on the Ketta-Beissi section (121 km) and Beissi-Cameroon border earth road (195 Km). On the Cameroon side, the main focus was on the Congo-Mintom earth road section (105.5 km) and the paving of the Mintom-Djoum section (83 km). The second phase had to do with the paving of the remaining Beissi-Cameroon border earth road section (195 km) from within Congo. On the Cameroon side, there was to be the paving of the remaining Congo border-Mintom earth road section. The entire project was estimated to cost FCFA 208,640,000. Of this amount, the ADF was to contribute FCFA 61,900,000 as grant and FCFA 59,270,000 as interest-free loan. On its part, the government of Congo was to contribute FCFA 80,880,000 as investment budget while that of Cameroon was to provide FCFA 6,590,000 as investment budget (African Development Fund, 2009:pp.iii-iv).

According to the African Development Bank (ADB) (2009: pp. 3-4) and the African Development Fund (ADF) (2009: pp. iv-v), the successful implementation of the first phase of the project was aimed at providing a permanent connection between Cameroon and Congo. They intimate that it would help to boost trade between the two countries as well as in the rest of the Central African sub-region, and would contribute to poverty reduction in the area. The ADF went on to make a sound judgement of what it thought would be some of the benefits of the transport project by the time it came to fruition by arguing that:

> Besides helping to develop trade between the two countries [Cameroon and Congo], the project will also contribute to strengthening regional integration in Central Africa by permitting the inter-connection of highways linking Cameroon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Central African Republic. The direct project beneficiaries are the transport system users as well as dwellers within the project impact area (Sangha District in the North of Congo and Cameroon's South/South East Provinces [now South and East Regions]. The project is expected to not only improve the movement of people and goods between the two countries but also to open up areas with significant economic potentials in Northern Congo (agriculture, ore, timber, etc.) and in Cameroon's South East. Furthermore, the project will help reduce overall transport costs and improve living conditions of people dwelling along the road (Ibid.:p iv).

In addition, the result-based logical framework of the road project gave total assurance that the expected long-term progress would see the rate of commercial transactions between Cameroon and Congo increase from 04% in 2009 to approximately 15% as from 2014. In terms of value, transactions were estimated to rise from FCFA 55 billion in 2009 to FCFA billion as from 2014. Overall travel speed on the Brazzaville-Yaounde road axis was expected to move up from 30 km/h in 2009 to 80 km/h by 2014 (ADF, 2009:p.vi). This means that lesser time would be taken to deliver supplies using the new road network. This would be of great benefit to business persons. Apart from reducing the fatigue suffered on the old roads, traders would also gain time to safe the perishable products and to engagement other activities. After all, is often said that "time is money."

Apart from the expected increase in commercial transactions and the lesser time taken to supply products at various destinations, the Brazzaville-Yaounde project was to bring in other benefits to its users. The project was to make provision for the passing of an optical fibre, the construction of two weighing stations to control heavy-duty trucks transporting products, and the provision of checkpoints for security alongside facilities such as latrines and drinkable water. Besides, road safety sensitization campaigns and HIV/AIDS/STI campaigns were to be organized periodically along the said axis in order to promote the safety and social wellbeing of traders and other users. The project itself was to accommodate at least 5,000 direct and indirect jobs with an additional 2,000 permanent jobs (ADB, 2009: pp. 3-4; ADF, 2009: pp. vi-vii).

In spite of the efforts made in sustaining trade between Cameroon and Congo as well as other states in the Central African sub-region, a number of challenges still help to render this mood of integration near illusive. For example, there still exist little integration of the production systems. Thus, in relation to trade statistics, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported in 2001 that the share exports between CEMAC members stood at only 1.15% of total exports in terms of formal trade. Again, laid down principles of trade are hardly respected because of the obnoxious behaviour of police and gendarmerie officers on the road at border posts. They impose and extort high informal taxes from traders and transporters out of state regulations. To cross the border, traders pay at least FCFA 1,000, but no receipt is issued to them. In addition, the traders must also have a visa which costs FCFA 31,000 (IMF, 2001, as cited by Nkenda, Nzoussin and Moussa, 2014: p. 5). These are just a few of the nightmares that bedevil trans-border commerce between Cameroon and Congo and by extension other Central African states.

Conclusion

As ordained by nature, Cameroon and Congo are bound to live and interact together. This spectacle also applies to the rest of Cameroon's neighbours. In fact, one of the principal conditions that guides man's existence is the ability to satisfy some if not all of his basic needs. Food items fall within these priorities, and one of the means to get such products from areas of plenty to areas of scarcity is through trade. In order to improve trade and stimulate the advancement of the African continent, many countries went into regional groupings to create a common pool from which their common interest could be promoted. Within the confines of the region Central African sub-region, Cameroon poses itself as the “nourishing breast” or “bread basket” of the area. This is thanks to its endowment with natural blessings in terms of its geographical and ecological advantages which gives it the ability to produce and supply agricultural and horticultural items to its neighbours. Like it does to other states, Cameroon dominates trade with Congo. In all, several moves have been made over the years to improve on trade relations between these two countries, ranging from the strengthening of bilateral relations to the improvement of communication facilities. That notwithstanding, the attempts at forging greater integration are usually marred by a number of obstacles or impediments. Be it as it may, however, the propensity for Cameroon-Congo economic relations stands tall in the hub of the daunting challenges.

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