

Cameroon

Towards the Just City in Africa

*Urban Life and Waste
Management Reform
in Bertoua and Kribi*

Imprint

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Background

Africa's population is set to double by 2050, with two-thirds of the population being absorbed by cities, representing 950 million new urban dwellers (OECD/CSAO, 2020). In Cameroon, this rapid urbanization has already taken a disordered form. Douala and Yaoundé, the country's two largest cities, have grown without adequate planning, leaving residents struggling to access essential services such as education, healthcare, clean water, housing, transport, energy, and sanitation.

The waste crisis illustrates the scale of the challenge. Each year, Cameroon produces around six million tons of waste, yet less than 40 percent is collected. Plastic and fermentable waste dominate, while hotel waste almost entirely recoverable remains largely untapped. With municipalities under-resourced, informal collectors and recyclers have stepped in to fill the gaps, but they operate under unsafe conditions, without protective equipment, training, or social security.

Although Cameroon has established legal frameworks for environmental management such as Law No. 96/12 of 1996 and Order No. 001/MINEPD-ED of 2012, the reality is that adminis-

trative hurdles, high costs, and the absence of financial or tax incentives prevent many actors, especially young entrepreneurs and associations, from participating effectively in the sector.

The consequences of this mismanagement are profound. Waste accumulation undermines urban health, deepens inequalities, and threatens sustainability. These realities make the waste sector not only a pressing urban challenge but also a strategic entry point for the **Just City Project in Cameroon**, which seeks to embed principles of justice, equity, and sustainability into the country's urban future.

1. Challenges and Conflict

The waste sector in Cameroon is marked by deep inequities and persistent conflicts that affect both those who work within it and the communities meant to benefit from sanitation services.

- **Lack of safety equipment, training, and social security:** For workers, the daily reality is one of vulnerability and neglect. Many operate without basic safety equipment, training, or social security, exposing themselves to health risks and insecurity. The absence of structured training means they often lack knowledge of safe handling practices, proper waste sorting, or awareness of their rights as workers. Without social security or health coverage, accidents, injuries, or illnesses can push them deeper into poverty.
- **Poor wages, irregular payments, and corruption in contract awards** Many workers receive low and inconsistent pay. Their wages are often low and irregular, while corruption and favoritism in the awarding of contracts distort fair competition, rewarding connections over merit.
- **Marginalization and lack of recognition by authorities:** Waste workers are often stigmatized and excluded from social recognition, despite their essential role in maintaining urban health and sanitation. This lack of recognition not only diminishes their dignity but also perpetuates social hierarchies that undervalue essential labor.
- **Unfair competition and abusive invoicing practices** Informal and formal actors clash, with some exploiting loopholes to overcharge or obstruct others, creating instability in the sector.
- **Exclusion and Inequities in Waste Management Services.** Households and communities often face irregular and inadequate waste collection, resulting in the accumulation of garbage in streets and public spaces. This inconsistency undermines public health and urban cleanliness. At the same time, vulnerable groups such as the elderly and persons with disabilities are marginalized, with limited or unequal access to sanitation services. Their exclusion deepens existing social inequalities, leaving disadvantaged populations more ex-

posed to environmental hazards and reinforcing systemic inequities in urban service delivery.

Together, these challenges reveal a cycle of neglect, mismanagement, and mistrust that undermines both the dignity of workers and the well-being of communities. Breaking this cycle requires not only infrastructure and resources but also a reimagining of waste management as a space for justice, equity, and shared responsibility.

2. Solutions and Approach

Guided by the **Just City Principles**, interventions in Bertoua are designed to transform waste management into a system that is inclusive, dignified, and sustainable. The city was chosen for its active operators, administrative openness, and growing sanitation awareness, making it fertile ground for progressive change.

In the immediate strategy, the focus is on empowering people, strengthening institutions, and raising awareness.

- **Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI):** Youth and women will be trained in waste recovery, opening pathways to employment and entrepreneurship. Research will be published on waste management practices and workers' conditions, while assessments of human impacts will ensure that policies reflect lived realities.
- **Dignity:** Waste workers will receive training on labor law and social security, equipping them with knowledge of their rights. Advocacy will push for improved working conditions and formal recognition of their essential contributions.
- **Democracy:** Worker unions will be strengthened to amplify representation and collective bargaining power. Transparency in contract awards will be championed to dismantle corruption and favoritism.
- **Public Safety:** Awareness campaigns will promote sustainable waste management practices, while households will be trained in waste sorting, fostering community responsibility and healthier environments.
- **Sustainability:** Training in green entrepreneurship and sustainable practices will encourage innovation. Environmental costs, such as greenhouse gas emissions from incineration, will be assessed to guide eco-friendly decision-making.

3. Next Steps

As Bertoua moves into the next phase of transformation, the vision is to achieve **structural resilience and systemic change** in waste management. The following are envisaged next steps that are crucial in realization of a just waste management in Bertoua, Cameroon.

- **Strengthen International and Development Partnerships:** to engage multilateral organizations, international NGOs, and donor agencies as partners in environmental protection, urban justice, and human rights.
- **Deepen State and Private-Sector Involvement:** to mobilize private sector actors such as construction firms, recycling industries, and logistics companies to co-invest in infrastructure and innovation.
- **Foster Decentralized Cooperation:** to build partnerships between municipalities in Cameroon and local authorities in northern countries with proven urban justice models and to encourage joint projects in areas such as waste management, green mobility, and inclusive urban planning.
- **Create Frameworks for Mobility and Knowledge Sharing:** to establish a regional platform for experience-sharing among cities participating in the Just City Project. To organize regular forums, workshops, and study tours to promote cross-learning and innovation.
- **Hackathon and grassroots innovation:** to organize waste hackathons that generate practical, scalable solutions for recycling, upcycling, and circular economy models. These events should not only bring together entrepreneurs, engineers, and policymakers but also target schools, universities, and local communities to spark grassroots creativity.

Towards the Just City in Africa Urban Life and Waste Management Reform in Bertoua and Kribi

The Just City Project showcases compelling stories of urban transformation across African cities, illustrating how communities, local governments, and civil society are working together to build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban spaces. Through case studies from Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, the project captures diverse urban realities and innovative responses emerging from rapidly changing city contexts.

Each case study follows a clear journey from challenge to change, examining the forces shaping each city, the key urban issues and affected communities, and the strategies used to address them. By highlighting outcomes, lessons learned, and links to wider regional and global agendas, the collection offers practical insights and inspiration for advancing just urban development across Africa and beyond.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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