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**FAITH BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC
EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL
IMPAIRMENT IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON 1982-2025**

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DEDICATION

To

All those who uphold the dignity of Mankind

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation critically examined the role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) notably the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) and the Catholic Church in the socio-economic empowerment and inclusion of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon, spanning the period 1982 to 2025. The study's objective was to investigate the key role faith-based institutions played as primary empowerment agencies in the region, and assess the implications of their activities on the social and economic inclusion of Persons Living With Visual Impairments (PWVIs). The study adopted a qualitative, thematic and chronological approach in writing, Drawing extensively from primary sources, complimented by secondary literature. For crucial findings, the study revealed that: The geo-historical, socio-political, and economic setting of the North West Region characterized by centralized fendom structures, fertile agricultural landscapes, early missionary penetration, and strong communal traditions provided the historical preconditions for the emergence and sustainability of faith-based empowerment centers for the visually impaired. From 1982, the Tertiary Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi established the Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAM) resource unit in Bafut, followed by the Integrated School for the Blind in Kumbo by the CBC in 1984. These institutions pioneered braille literacy, vocational training, mobility orientation, and inclusive education in the region, operating initially under the medical model of disability but progressively transitioning toward a social inclusion paradigm. The empowerment activities of the CBC and Catholic missions spanned education, healthcare, economic and vocational training, social advocacy, sports and cultural integration, and digital empowerment, collectively dismantled structural barriers that had historically excluded PWVIs from societal participation. The implications of these activities included the entry of PWVIs into formal employment as teachers, lecturers, journalists, social workers, and counselors; their self-employment through cane weaving, beadwork, and petty trade; and their increasing participation in education from primary to university level. However, limited funding, inadequate institutional capacity, the multiplicity and mismanagement of empowerment organizations, and deep-seated cultural beliefs and stigma constituted persistent challenges that constrained the pace and depth of full inclusion. The study therefore submits that, despite the prevailing limitations, faith-based organizations most especially the CBC and Catholic Church missions served as the primary architects of socio-economic inclusion for Persons With Visual Impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS.....	vii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	ix
GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
Conceptual Clarification.....	4
Theoretical Clarification.....	9
Statement of the Problem.....	12
Research questions.....	13
Research objectives.....	14
Review of Related Literatures.....	15
Scope of the study.....	20
Sources and Methodology.....	21
Significance of the study.....	23
Research Difficulties.....	23
Structure of the study.....	24
CHAPTER ONE.....	26
BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AREA.....	26
Geographical Setting.....	26
Ethnic composition.....	32
Socio-political organization.....	38
Economic Activities.....	42
Conclusion.....	45
CHAPTER TWO.....	47
FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH-BASED EMPOWERMENT AGENCIES FOR PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON.....	47

Introduction.....	47
Institutional Foundations of Faith-Based Empowerment Agencies for the Visually Impaired in the North West Region of Cameroon.....	47
The Baptist Faith Based Institutional Evolution.....	48
The Catholic Church Faith Based - SAJOCAM Institutional Evolution.....	49
St. Joseph Children and Adult Home,.....	50
Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services,.....	54
Integrated School for the Blind/Inclusive School and Braille Center Kumbo.....	56
Conclusion	60
CHAPTER THREE	61
FAITH-BASED EMPOWERMENT ACTIVITIES IN THE NORTH WEST REGION FROM 1982.....	61
Introduction.....	61
Domains of empowerment.....	61
Educational Empowerment.....	62
Catholic Church empowerment activities in education	63
Cameroon Baptist Convention’s empowerment Activities in education.....	69
Economic and Vocational empowerment	76
Vocational activities.....	76
Agriculture	78
Healthcare empowerment activities.....	79
Social advocacy and societal acceptance.....	83
Sports and Cultural Integration.....	88
Digital Empowerment.....	90
Conclusion	92
CHAPTER FOUR.....	94
IMPACTS OF FAITH-BASED EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES, AND CHALLENGES IN THE NORTH WEST REGION	94
Introduction.....	94
Implications of the activities of Faith-Based Organizations.....	94
Economic implications.....	95
Integration into the Formal Employment Sector	96

Participation in Journalism and Media	98
Increased Access to Education.....	104
Challenges.....	105
Limited Funding.....	105
Lack of Capacity and Training	107
Multiplicity of organizations, Corruption and mismanagement	108
Deep-seated Cultural practices and belief patterns	110
Conclusion	112
CHAPTER FIVE	113
PEDAGOGIC EXECUTION OF FAITH BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOCIO- ECONOMIC INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON 1982-2025	113
Introduction.....	113
CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT	113
Lesson Outcomes	115
Teaching Aids and Their Pedagogic Relevance	115
Lesson Procedure	116
AN INDIVIDUAL LESSON PLAN ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FOR LOWER SIXTH ARTS ON FAITH BASE ORGANIZATIONS AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON.....	118
STATEMENT WORKING SHEET	120
Lesson Notes.....	124
GENERAL CONCLUSION	132
SOURCES CONSULTED.....	136

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADF	African Development Foundation
BCA	Bamenda Cooperative Association
BCHS	Baptist Comprehensive High School
CBC	Cameroon Baptist Convention
CBCHS	Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services
CBCHBS	Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services
CBM	Christoffel Blindenmission (Christian Blind Mission)
CBR	Community Based Rehabilitation
CHEF	Cameroon Health and Educational Fund
CMF	Christian Men Fellowship
CRTV	Cameroon Radio and Television
CUAPWD	Coordinating Unit of Associations of Persons with Disabilities
DPO	Disabled People's Organization
EDID	Empowerment Disability Inclusive Development
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FBO	Faith-Based Organization
GBHS	Government Bilingual High School
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GSS	Government Secondary School
GBHS	Government Bilingual High School
GTTC	Government Teacher Training College
HSUVI	Hope Social Union for the Visually Impaired
HTTC	Higher Teacher Training College
ICIDH	International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ISB	Integrated School for the Blind
ISBC	Inclusive School and Braille Center
JAWS	Job Access with Speech
JMBC	Joseph Merit Baptist College
MBOSCODA	Mbororo Social Cultural and Development Association
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

NVDA	NonVisual Desktop Access
NWCA	North West Cooperative Association
PCC	Presbyterian Church of Cameroon
PNDP	National Community Driven Development Program
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
PW	Persons with Disability (generic)
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
PWI	Persons with Impairments
PWVI / PWVIS	Persons with Visual Impairment(s)
SACC / SAC	St. Augustine Comprehensive College
SAJOCAH	Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home
SEEPD	Socio-Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities
SIEP	Social Inclusive Empowerment Project
TSSF	Tertiary Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi
UBa	University of Bamenda
UEB	Unified English Braille
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UYO	United Youth's Organization
WHO	World Health Organization

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Maps

1: The Administrative Organization of the Republic of Cameroon	28
2: The North West Region of Cameroon	29

Plate

1: SAJOCAH Resource Center	52
2: Integrated school for the blind/Inclusive School and Braille Center	56
3: Nkwen Resource Center	59
4: Visually Impaired Children of Nkwen Baptist Primary and Secondary school.....	75
5: Visually impaired involved in sports (goal ball).....	90
6: Visually Impaired Journalists broadcasting on Radio Hot Coco Bamenda and CRTV	99
7: Handwork (beads bags, necklace etc.) by visually impaired woman	100
8: Cane Weaved items produced by skilled visually impaired men	102

Pictures

1: Visually Impaired Students in the Resource Room at SAJOCAH	69
2: Liquid Soap Produced by Visually Impaired women	78
3: Persons with Impairemntns receiving medical check up from health persons	81

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities, including those with visual impairment, remain among the most marginalized groups worldwide.¹ Their social, economic and political inclusion into the labor market, or society's normal life was noted to be very insignificant, leading to a complete exclusion of these groups of persons in major daily economic activities. This progress is surely based on some organizational awareness schemes given that people with impairments suffered stigmatization reciting from different social considerations attached to their impairment. As time went on, significant progress was recorded in the way the society understood the abilities and contributions disabled persons could have on the social, economic and political welfare of any state.² This of course was due to the key role faith-based organizations (FBOs), disabled people organizations (DPO) or associations and other humanitarian organizations had played, in informing, sensitizing, advocating and empowering these categories of individuals. The move towards advocating for the inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWD) into all societal operating functions and equal treatment had been initiated as far back as in the 1800s³. Though these movements were not very popular at the time, their efforts were noted to have set the stage for future demands and humanitarian interventions.

Faith-based organizations historically, played a pivotal role in shaping the social and economic landscapes of communities across the world, especially in regions where government capacity to deliver welfare services was limited.⁴ Scholarly engagement with the nexus of religion and development revealed a dynamic field that interrogated how religious institutions contributed to social welfare, economic empowerment, and community resilience. FBOs encompassing religious congregations, church-linked institutions, and faith-oriented civil society actors were rooted in moral and theological imperatives that drove both spiritual care and tangible service delivery in education, health, and livelihood support.⁵ Scholarly works demonstrated that

¹ Claire Castle, "Attitudes of Employers towards People with Visual Impairment: A Scoping Review," *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences* 5 (2024): 138. 3984.

² Charlotte, Baker and Elvis Imafidon, "Traditional beliefs in form of attitude to disabilities in Africa: Why it matters, (Ambrose Alluninist: Lancaster University, 2008), 113.

³ Daniel R. O, "How We Come Together: Exploring the Participation of Youths with impairments in Disability Association of North West Cameroon," (Masters Dissertation in Development Studies, University of Netherlands, 2018), 5.

⁴ Wilbert Shenk, *Historical Roots of African Christian Thought*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 11.

⁵ Clarke Gerard, "Faith-Based Organizations and International Development," *Development in Practice* 18, no. 6 (2008): 835.

churches often had established social services in areas overlooked by the state, leveraging moral authority and social capital to foster development from below. For example, scholars like Clark contended that church institutions facilitated socio-economic development through mobilizing local networks and promoting communal welfare, though the empirical understanding of this role in many African contexts remains under-researched and fragmented.

The struggle for inclusion, and humanitarian support for PWI gained prominence in the 19th and 20th centuries, taking a more dynamic and institutional interconnected approach in the 21st century⁶. While pending a more accurate clarification as to what faith-based empowerment, and socio-economic inclusion implies, within the canons of the current study, it is imperative to first of all briefly define impairment and identify its various types, before settling on how these persons were inserted into the professional life of any state, taking the case of the visually impaired in the North West Region of Cameroon.

The concept of impairment originates from medical and functional approaches to human difference and is used to describe a loss or abnormality in bodily structure or physiological function. The World Health Organization (WHO), in its International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH), defines impairment as any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.⁷ From this perspective, impairment refers strictly to the biological or functional condition of the individual and does not, in itself, account for social or environmental factors. Scholars have emphasized that impairment is a descriptive category rather than a socially constructed one. Mike Oliver notes that impairment describes “physical, sensory or intellectual limitations” but does not explain the social disadvantages experienced by individuals.⁸ Meanwhile, Disability is a more complex and contested concept that extends beyond biological limitation to encompass social, economic, and cultural dimensions. The shift from a purely medical understanding to a social interpretation marks a significant development in disability studies. The social model of disability, articulated by scholars such as Mike Oliver, argues that disability is not caused by impairment but by the

⁶ Nadage C. Kita, “The Coordinating Unit of Associations of Persons with disabilities (CUAPWD) in the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in Mezam Division of Cameroon, 2005-2022,” (Masters Dissertation in History, University of Bamenda, 2023),3.

⁷ World Health Organization, International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps ICIDH, (Geneva: WHO, 1980), 27.

⁸ Mike Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), 11.

organization of society. Disability is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no account of people who have impairments.⁹ This perspective reframes disability as a product of social exclusion, inaccessible environments, and discriminatory attitudes. Colin Barnes further explains that disability is “the social oppression experienced by people with impairments”.¹⁰

In Cameroon, Christian missions and church institutions have a long history of engaging in education, health, and welfare activities, tracing back to the nineteenth century.¹¹ The Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) one of the most established faith networks in the country emerged formally in 1954, with antecedents in missions dating to the mid-1800s and has since developed a broad network of schools, hospitals, and social services. Likewise, other denominations such as the Catholic Church missions had significantly contributed to community welfare through schools, health centres, and social programs, particularly in the North West Region. By establishing empowerment centers in Bafut and Kumbo in 1982 and 1984 by the ST Francis Tertiary Sisters and the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services (CBCHBS) respectively, Catholic Church churches and the CBCHS emerged as major empowerment agencies in the region, with the CBCHS extending her empowerment initiatives to socio-economic and empowerment initiatives by 2009.¹²

These historical developments underscore the critical role churches have played not only in religious conversion but also in the social and economic transformation of Cameroonian communities. Missionary legacy projects in education and health have long acted as catalysts for socio-economic mobility, creating infrastructure that often outlived the original mission enterprises. Discussing FBOs as agents of empowerment necessitated us moving beyond simplistic notions of benevolence and delving into the complex interplay between faith, disability, and social justice. To this effect, the CBC and Catholic missions were observed to have positioned themselves in the region and nation at large as key stakeholders in the empowerment of persons living with impairments. It should be noted that, these faith base

⁹ Oliver 1996, 22

¹⁰ Colin Barnes, *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination*, (London: Hurst & Company, 1991), 2.

¹¹ Johnson E. Robert, *A global Introduction to Baptist Churches*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University press, 2010), 14.

¹² Janet Affah ET AL, “Socio-professional empowerment of persons with Visual Impairment in Mezam division of Cameroon, 1970-2022,” *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* 12, NO. 11(2025): 98.

organizations in their desire to shift from a charity base approach to that of empowerment, they all in one way instituted programs and service orientations that operated as locally based non-governmental organizations under the canopy of the said church institution.¹³

As earlier noted, faith-based health and education services, notably CBC and Catholic missions, had collaborated with partners to facilitate inclusive education for visually impaired students, demonstrating how religious organizations can act as conduits for specialized socio-economic inclusion programmes.¹⁴ Despite such contributions, there remains a significant gap in historical scholarship specifically examining how FBOs have impacted the socio-economic empowerment of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon. The region's socio-economic dynamics — shaped by church-linked institutions, mission legacies, and contemporary faith-based networks make it a compelling case for scholarly analysis that bridge religious history, development studies, and empowerment of persons with disabilities. This dissertation therefore situates itself at the intersection of these scholarly debates, seeking to illuminate how faith-based organizations both historical and contemporary have engaged with, supported, and empowered persons with visual impairment in the North West Region. By doing so, it contributes to broader academic conversations on the role of the church in social and economic development, while foregrounding the historically rooted capacities of faith actors to advance inclusive empowerment in contexts of marginalization.

Conceptual Clarification

For a fair analysis, it is important certain concepts that shape the study be given some empirical clarification. These include empowerment, socio-economic inclusion and faith-based organizations.

Empowerment

Empowerment generally refers to the historical process through which persons with visual impairment acquired the skills, resources, and opportunities necessary for meaningful participation in socio-economic life. Conceptually, empowerment encompasses education,

¹³Jannet Anga'ama. "Empowerment and Socio-Professional Inclusion of Persons with Visual Impairment in Mezam Division, North West Region of Cameroon, 1970-2022," (Unpublished PHD thesis, social History, University of Bamenda, 2025): 114.

¹⁴ Clark, 2008, 837.

vocational training, employment, income generation, and social recognition. Development historians emphasize that empowerment differs from charity in that it seeks sustainability and self-reliance.¹⁵ In the context of faith-based organizations, empowerment involved structured interventions such as literacy education (including Braille), vocational skills training, and institutional support systems that enabled visually impaired persons to overcome systemic exclusion. Thus, empowerment in this dissertation is understood as both a historical intervention strategy employed by faith-based organizations and a transformative outcome in the lives of persons with visual impairment.

Empowerment entered development and social-science vocabulary as a corrective to top-down, deficit-based models of welfare. Writing within community psychology, Rappaport framed empowerment as a process through which people, organisations and communities gained mastery over their own affairs, insisting that it was less a commodity to be delivered than a relationship to be cultivated, and warning that professionalised “help” often deepened dependency.¹⁶ Zimmerman subsequently refined this into the notion of psychological empowerment, distinguishing the intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural components through which individuals came to perceive and exercise control.¹⁷

From development economics, Sen reframed the concept through the capability approach, arguing that genuine development consisted in the expansion of the substantive freedoms—the capabilities—that people had reason to value.¹⁸ Poverty, in this reading, was not merely low income but the deprivation of capabilities; empowerment therefore meant enlarging the real opportunities available to a person to be and to do. Kabeer translated this into a definition that proved influential across the gender and disability literatures: empowerment, she argued, was the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where that ability had previously been denied them, and she located it in the interplay of resources, agency and

¹⁵ Escobar Arturo, *Encountering Development*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 45.

¹⁶ Julian Rappaport, “Terms of Empowerment/Exemplars of Prevention: Toward a Theory for Community Psychology,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 15, no. 2 (1987): 121–148.

¹⁷ Marc A. Zimmerman, “Psychological Empowerment: Issues and Illustrations,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23, no. 5 (1995): 581–599.

¹⁸ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

achievements.¹⁹ Freire's earlier notion of conscientisation supplied the pedagogical root of these formulations,²⁰ while Chambers pressed the practical corollary that the powerful had to surrender control if the marginalised were to set their own priorities.²¹ The World Bank's poverty work later consolidated the term, treating empowerment as the expansion of poor people's assets and capabilities to participate in, negotiate with and hold accountable the institutions affecting their lives.²² Across these strands, empowerment emerged as processual rather than a once-and-for-all endowment, relational in concerning the redistribution of power, and multidimensional in spanning the psychological, social, economic and political. Socio-economic empowerment, the concern of this study, denoted that subset bearing on livelihood, income, skills, assets and economic participation.

Inclusion

Inclusion arose from a parallel but distinct lineage. In disability studies it was inseparable from the social model articulated by Oliver, who relocated the "problem" of disability from the impaired body to a society organised around the needs of the non-disabled.²³ On this account, persons with visual impairment were disabled less by the absence of sight than by inaccessible environments, exclusionary institutions and disabling attitudes; inclusion accordingly named the obligation to dismantle those barriers so that disabled persons might participate as of right. Shakespeare complicated the model by insisting that impairment and its embodied realities could not be wholly abstracted away, yet he retained its commitment to inclusive social arrangements.²⁴ The principle also acquired normative force: the Salamanca Statement established inclusion as the guiding aspiration of education systems,²⁵ and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with

¹⁹Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435–464.

²⁰Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970).

²¹Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997).

²²Deepa Narayan, ed., *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2002).

²³Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

²⁴Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁵UNESCO, *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994).

Disabilities entrenched it as a binding human-rights standard, affirming in Article 27 the right of disabled persons to work on an equal basis with others.²⁶ The World Report on Disability subsequently documented the systematic exclusion of disabled persons from employment, education and services in low-income settings, and argued that inclusive measures were at once a rights imperative and a development necessity.²⁷ Inclusion thus denoted full and equal participation in the ordinary institutions of social, economic and civic life, achieved through the removal of structural and attitudinal barriers rather than through segregated provision.

The Nexus between Empowerment and Inclusion

Although the two concepts arose in different literatures, this study contends that they stood in a relationship of mutual constitution rather than mere adjacency. Inclusion without empowerment risked becoming tokenistic—a formal presence unaccompanied by real capability, the disabled person admitted to the room but unable to act within it. Empowerment without inclusion risked becoming illusory—skills and aspirations cultivated in individuals who remained barred from the markets, workplaces and institutions in which those capacities might be exercised. Read through Sen and Kabeer, inclusion supplied the enabling environment, the access and opportunity structure, while empowerment supplied the agency and capability that allowed a person to convert that opportunity into valued functioning. The one was the condition, the other the capacity; together they described the passage from exclusion to substantive participation. For persons with visual impairment the nexus was concrete: inclusive arrangements such as accessible training, Braille and assistive technology, and anti-discriminatory hiring, in the absence of empowering processes such as skills, confidence, organisation and capital, yielded participation without power, while the reverse yielded power without a place to exercise it.

Relating the Nexus to Faith-Based Organisations and Persons with Visual Impairment in the North West Region

It was within this conceptual space that faith-based organisations operated. Such bodies occupied a distinctive position in the development field because they fused service delivery with moral and communal authority. Clarke and Jennings observed that faith-based organisations bridged

²⁶United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (New York: United Nations, 2006), art. 27.

²⁷World Health Organization and World Bank, World Report on Disability (Geneva: WHO, 2011).

the sacred and the secular, mobilising theological commitments, congregational networks and material resources in ways secular agencies could not easily replicate,²⁸ while Marshall similarly noted their reach into communities that states and donors struggled to serve.²⁹ In the North West Region of Cameroon, where public provision for disability remained thin, this positioning mattered. Organisations rooted in the Christian traditions of the Grassfields supplied precisely the conjunction the nexus required: on the side of inclusion, accessible eye-care, rehabilitation, education and advocacy that lowered the barriers facing persons with visual impairment; and on the side of empowerment, vocational training, micro-enterprise support, self-help associations and spiritual affirmation that built capability and agency. The argument advanced here, accordingly, was that faith-based organisations contributed to the socio-economic empowerment of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region precisely by holding inclusion and empowerment together—addressing the disabling environment while cultivating the capabilities of the persons within it—so that visually impaired beneficiaries moved not merely toward presence in their communities but toward productive and self-determining participation in them.

Faith-Based Organizations

Faith-based organizations are defined as institutions whose identity, mission, and activities are inspired or guided by religious beliefs and values. Clarke and Jennings describe FBOs as ranging from congregations and mission agencies to church-linked development institutions.³⁰ in Cameroon, FBOs such as the Cameroon Baptist Convention, the Catholic Church, and other mission-derived institutions have played central roles in education, health, and social welfare. Their involvement in disability empowerment reflected a theological commitment to service, compassion, and human dignity. Scholars argue that African churches functioned not only as religious institutions but also as socio-economic actors responding to local needs in the absence or weakness of state structures.³¹ In this study, faith-based organizations are historical

²⁸Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings, eds., *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

²⁹Katherine Marshall and Marisa Van Saanen, *Development and Faith: Where Mind, Heart, and Soul Work Together* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007).

³⁰ Gerard Clarke, and Michael Jennings, *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

³¹ Iliffe 1987, 213.

agents of socio-economic change, whose interventions shaped the lives of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region.

Socio-Economic Inclusion

Socio-economic inclusion refers to the process of ensuring that marginalized groups have access to economic opportunities, social participation, and institutional support. According to the World Bank, inclusion involves improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of disadvantaged groups to participate in society.³² persons with visual impairment in many African societies experienced social exclusion rooted in cultural stigma and economic marginalization. Socio-economic inclusion, therefore, entails dismantling barriers to education, employment, and social participation. Faith-based organizations contributed to this inclusion by integrating visually impaired persons into schools, workshops, churches, and income-generating activities. In this dissertation, socio-economic inclusion is understood as the historical outcome of empowerment efforts, reflecting the degree to which persons with visual impairment were incorporated into productive and socially valued roles within their communities.

Theoretical Clarification

The conceptualization of disability has evolved significantly over time, shaped by changing medical knowledge, social attitudes, and institutional practices. Two dominant theoretical frameworks the medical theory and the social theory of disability have profoundly influenced how societies understand disability and how institutions respond to persons with impairments. These theories have not only structured academic debates but have also informed the practical interventions of faith-based organizations, particularly in their empowerment centres for persons with visual impairment. A historical examination of these theories, their critiques, and their appropriation by faith-based actors reveals a complex interaction between care, control, empowerment, and inclusion.

The medical theory of disability locates disability within the individual body, viewing it as a pathological condition resulting from disease, injury, or congenital abnormality. Within this framework, impairment is understood as a deviation from biological norms, and disability is

³² World Bank, *Inclusion Matters*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013), 15.

treated as a personal tragedy requiring medical correction or rehabilitation. The World Health Organization's International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps formalized this understanding by defining disability as a functional limitation arising from impairment, emphasizing diagnosis, treatment, and professional intervention.³³ Historically, this model dominated institutional responses to disability in Europe and was later transplanted into colonial and postcolonial African contexts through missionary medicine and Western biomedical practices.

In African societies, including those in Cameroon, early mission responses to disability were heavily influenced by the medical model. Churches established hospitals, rehabilitation homes, and special schools aimed at caring for and training persons with disabilities, particularly the blind. These initiatives were rooted in Christian ideals of charity and compassion, portraying persons with disabilities as objects of care and moral responsibility. While such institutions provided essential services—such as basic education, vocational training, and shelter—they often reinforced dependency and segregation. Disability historians argue that the medical model, by focusing narrowly on bodily deficits, obscured the broader social and economic structures that produced exclusion.³⁴

Scholars have subjected the medical model to sustained criticism. Mike Oliver contends that by individualizing disability, the model diverts attention from social barriers and legitimizes professional control over disabled lives.³⁵ Colin Barnes similarly argues that medicalized interpretations construct persons with disabilities as passive recipients of care rather than active participants in social life. From a historical perspective, this approach has been criticized for its failure to account for power relations, cultural meanings, and institutional practices that shape disability over time.³⁶ In the context of visual impairment, the medical model often justified segregated schooling and sheltered workshops without addressing exclusion from mainstream economic and social participation.

³³ World Health Organization, *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps ICIDH*, (Geneva: WHO, 1980), 27-29.

³⁴ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3(1999): 435.

³⁵ Mike Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), 47.

³⁶ Colins Barnes, *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination*, (London: Hurst & Company, 1991), 12.

In response to these limitations, the social theory of disability emerged in the late twentieth century as a radical rethinking of disability. Developed largely by disabled activists and scholars in Britain, the social model distinguishes impairment from disability, arguing that disability is produced by social organization rather than bodily limitation.³⁷ According to Mike Oliver, disability refers to the restrictions imposed by societies that fail to accommodate people with impairments.³⁸ This theory shifted analytical focus from cure to rights, from charity to justice, and from individual deficit to structural exclusion.

The social theory of disability has been particularly influential in reframing historical understandings of marginalization. It highlighted how inaccessible educational systems, discriminatory labour markets, and stigmatizing cultural beliefs transform impairment into disability. For persons with visual impairment, disability arises not from blindness itself but from the absence of Braille education, assistive technologies, and inclusive economic opportunities. Scholars such as Tom Shakespeare acknowledge that the social model provided a powerful political language that enabled persons with disabilities to challenge exclusion and demand inclusion.³⁹ However, the social model has not escaped criticism. Critics argue that its sharp distinction between impairment and disability overlooks the lived realities of bodily limitation, pain, and dependence. Shakespeare contends that the model risks underestimating the significance of impairment in everyday life and calls for a more nuanced approach that integrates biological and social dimensions.⁴⁰ Feminist disability scholars argued that the social model neglects care and interdependence, which are central to many disabled people's experiences.⁴¹ These critiques suggest the need for a balanced framework that acknowledges both structural barriers and embodied realities.

Faith-based organizations historically operated within this evolving theoretical landscape, often combining elements of both medical and social understandings of disability in their practices. Early church-run empowerment centres reflected medical and charitable approaches, emphasizing protection, rehabilitation, and moral care. Persons with visual impairment were trained in controlled institutional settings, often separated from mainstream society. These

³⁷ Oliver, 1990, 25.

³⁸ Oliver 1996, 22.

³⁹ Thom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 29.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare 2006, 41

⁴¹ Morris Jenny, *Pride against Prejudice*, (London: Women's Press, 1991), 10.

practices aligned with the medical model's emphasis on care and correction but also reflected theological notions of compassion and service⁴²

In contexts such as the North West Region of Cameroon, faith-based empowerment centres for persons with visual impairment illustrate this theoretical synthesis. While acknowledging the realities of impairment, these centres sought to dismantle social and economic barriers by providing Braille literacy, vocational training, and access to employment opportunities. Such practices demonstrate how faith-based organizations translated theoretical insights into historical action, functioning as mediators between medical care and social inclusion. The medical and social theories of disability represent two influential yet contested frameworks that have shaped historical responses to disability. While the medical theory contributed significantly to care and rehabilitation, it has been criticized for reinforcing dependency and ignoring structural exclusion. The social theory redefined disability as a product of social barriers but has been critiqued for downplaying embodied experience. Faith-based organizations navigated these theoretical tensions in practice, evolving from charitable and medicalized interventions toward empowerment-oriented and inclusive approaches. Their empowerment centres thus constitute important historical sites where disability theory was not only debated but actively lived and transformed.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, formal state provisions for the socio-economic integration of the visually impaired in the North West Region were limited, especially during the early decades following Cameroon's independence. In this vacuum, Faith-Based Organizations like the Cameroon Baptist Convention and the Catholic Church missions emerged in the 1980s, as pivotal actors, often pioneering initiatives in education, welfare, and skill development for this vulnerable population. Spanning a significant period from 1982 to 2025, these FBOs had provided various services, from establishing special schools and vocational training centers to leading advocacy networks that shaped the public perception of disability, resulting to meaningful transmutations in the social, economic and legislative ramifications in the North West and Cameroon at large.

⁴² Jean Comaroff, and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 216.

Their emergence in the educational, economic and social empowerment activities were observed to have filled gaps where government presence and services were weak or almost not available. Major strides recorded by these institutions with respect to empowerment and social inclusionary practices were the 2010 law on disability protection and promotion of rights, 2022 educational inclusive law and the increased participation of visually impaired in all societal functions. Despite this array of mutations in inclusionary practices, these empowerment agencies were consistently limited by a series of huddles which directly slowed down full inclusion in the region. It was within this prism that the researcher was spurred to examine the key role Catholic and CBC's missionary institutions have played in empowering and positioning the North West, as a leading polity in the empowerment of persons with visual impairment.

This study seeks to demonstrate that, despite the inherent limitations, faith-based agencies, notably the CBC and Catholic missions, played a central role in the socio-economic inclusion of the visually impaired in the North West Region and Cameroon at large.

Research questions

This study is comprehended and shall be divided into main and specific research questions.

Main research question

The main research question that guided the research was: how did Faith-based institutions emerge as major empowerment agencies in the North West region And what were the implications of their activities on the social and economic inclusion of the Visually Impaired?

Specific research questions

In order to effectively tackle the main research question, the researcher was guided by some specific questions which included:

1. How did the geo-historical, political and economic setting of the North West Region, set the pace for the emergence of Faith Base Organizations as empowerment agencies for the visually impaired?
2. How did faith base organizations emerge as agencies of empowerment for persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon?

3. How were the Visually Impaired empowered and integrated into the social and economic life of the North West Region of Cameroon through the efforts of FBOs?
4. What were the implications, and challenges of Faith-based empowerment initiatives on the inclusion of Persons with Visual Impairment?
5. What is the pedagogic relevance of examining the contributions and challenges faced by faith-based organizations in fostering the socio-economic inclusion of persons living with visual impairment?

Research objectives

A main research objective with five specific research objectives were conceived to guide this study.

Main Objective

To critically examine the emergence of Faith Base Organizations as major empowerment agencies in the North West Region of Cameroon, as well as the implications of their activities on the social and economic inclusion of the Visually Impaired.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine how the geo-historical, political and economic setting of the North West Region, set the pace for the emergence of Faith Base Organizations as empowerment agencies for the visually impaired.
2. Explore the faith base organizations that became the foundations for empowerment for persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon.
3. To probe into the empowerment activities of Faith Base Organizations, for persons living with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon.
4. Appraise the implications and challenges of Faith-based empowerment initiatives, on the inclusion of Persons with Visual Impairment.
5. Draw a teachable lesson on the contributions of faith-based organizations to the socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairment.

Review of Related Literatures

A good number of scholars have written works that were directly or indirectly related to this research which were worth exploring. These works exist in long essays, dissertations, thesis, articles, books and other publications. Hence there is a fairly extensive range of literature on the subject matter some of which shall be examined in the subsequent paragraphs. It should be noted that existing literatures on the debate of disability and disability inclusion for the past five decades occupied a central stage in scholarly debates. However, the position taken by these authors did not directly take the period of place in the North West Region, within the perspective of socio-economic inclusion of Persons with Visual Impairment (PWVI), thereby providing a framework for the current study. These literatures shall be examined thematically as follows.

Understanding disability

Several authors have articulated on the subject of disability highlighting their key causes or bases. In this light, the works of Werner, WHO reports, Maxwell, Buns, Wendy and Berinyuy among others remained instrumental to our understanding of disability and its root causes.

The works of the World Health Organization (WHO)⁴³, greatly inspired this work. Their reports in the Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness stated that several impairments either mental or physical affecting one's senses were caused by different inherent biological genes. While some of these impairments were acquired from life experiences and accidents. Focusing on visual impairment, it classified the various types and identified preventive measures to some and remedial solutions to some degree of eye diseases. The report instituted what was known as methods to fight against avoidable blindness, while other ways to manage and cope with visual impairment were identified. This report was very useful to the current study in that, it provided the researcher with ample knowledge on causes of disabilities, its types and preventive measures. This knowledge was useful to the current study in understanding impairments and its different types, especially visual impairment, with focus on how missionary institutions provided medical and social rehabilitation services to these individuals in the North West.

Corroborating the reports of WHO, the publication of American Medical Association⁴⁴, detailed extensively on various birth defects and the impacts on the society. Their analysis detailed on the viral causes of impairments in children especially during pregnancy. Their recommendations on how to avoid or reduce the prevalence of disability through healthy dieting and medical attention were quite educating. The work served as a key to awareness and an advocacy instrument that aided the researcher's discussion on social and economic inclusion in North West Region.

Werner⁴⁵ on her part have examined the different types of impairments from birth focusing on how each of these impairments affected the societal integration of these PWDs. Identifying key impairments like infant paralysis, numbness of the limbs, blindness and mental disorders. These

⁴³ World Health Organization, and International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness IAPB: VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1999).

⁴⁴ FJL Blasingames, *Today's Health Guide*, ed. W.W. Bauer (United State of America: American Medical Association, 1965).

⁴⁵ D. Werner, *Where there is no Doctor* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1988).

different types of impairments to her were caused by Poliomyelitis and Measles, with some genetic. Her analysis on how these persons could be given social integration and acceptance, identifying special facilities to empower these persons remained useful to the current study, as it provided additional knowledge on causes of impairments and how these persons could be socially inserted to the society from birth.

Reilly⁴⁶ while examining the causes of blindness during the colonial and post-colonial periods identified several causes of blindness amongst persons in different segments of the society. In 1911, he revealed that, conjunctivitis, trachoma, river blindness and witchcraft were among the highest causes of blindness in the colonies. As a response, they developed intervention strategies to curb its incident, by developing mobile ophthalmic units to educate the masses against such causes and how the society could help in integrating these persons into social life. The study was of prime importance to the current historical trajectories in that, it provided relevant information as to how visual impairment could be curbed or prevented.

Maxwell et al,⁴⁷ in their analysis projected women with impairments as most vulnerable persons of the society. They opine that, social structures and superstitious beliefs further compounded the difficulties women faced. Their impairments according some cultural settings were considered a response to their abominable acts, which sometime affected not only them but their children. Attempting to prove that women suffered more when impaired than men was equally given the period of place in the discussions sustained by these authors. Though not directly related to the current study, their findings remained useful to the current study that was focused on faith-based empowerment activities.

Empowerment and Inclusion

Affah⁴⁸ in her thesis on professional inclusion of the visually impaired in Mezam division of Cameroon, examines the historical trajectory of empowerment in Mezam and how different stakeholders collaborated to enhance the socio-professional integration of these category of persons into the formal labor market. her analysis reveals that, an array of stakeholders, had played pivotal roles to the socio-professional inclusion of PWVIS in Mezam division,

B.Reilly et al, *Blindness in British African and Middle East Territories 1948* (London: Colonial Office, 1948)

⁴⁷. J. Maxwell et al, *A health handbook of women with impairments* (California: Hesperian foundation, 1919)

⁴⁸ Janet Affah, "Socio-Professional empowerment of Persons with Visual Impairment in Mezam division of Cameroon,"

highlighting that inherent huddles had limited inclusion. The study was instrumental to the current study in that, it provided useful knowledge to empowerment initiatives employed towards fostering social and professional inclusion of PWVIS. The current study is however, different in that, it examines the specific role of faith-based institutions in fostering social and economic inclusion in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Moreover, while some scholars have struggled to identify and articulate on the different forms of disabilities, a good number of them rather were interested in identifying how these categories of persons could be empowered, lensing it from the key role DPOs, NGOs, FBOs and other civil societies have played in stimulating social economic and political empowerment of PWDs. They included Muffuh, Kita, Act alliance, Mbiydzenyuy, Fonyuy, Wendy and many others.

Writing on disable people's organizations and their contributions to the empowerment of PWDs, Chingna Kit⁴⁹ assessed the role stakeholders like the Coordinating Unit of Associations of Persons with impairments established in 2005, played in sparking and uniting the different associations of PWIs in Mezam and North West province, towards stimulating a more intentional change in the empowerment process of PWDs. She argues extensively that, CUAPWD through her different domains of interventions successfully empowered PWIs through their associations socially, economically and politically. The findings revealed in the research were indicative of the fact that, for any meaningful development to take place in the lives of PWDs, they must be actively engaged in all its facets of interventions. A role CUAPWD was noted to have exerted on PWIs through their existing associations, yielding wonderful results. This work was very instrumental to the current study in that, it provided useful insides into how faith-base institutions collaborated with DPOS to foster inclusion in the North West.

Muffuh⁵⁰ showed interest in evaluating the contributions of the Portsmouth Diocese which facilitated the success of Caritas Bamenda in the development of some communities. From the onset, she looks at their objectives and origins of caritas Bamenda. The nun concluded that, caritas did much in the domains of education and health with respect to empowering PWIs to become self-reliant. She equally zooms into the challenges affecting the empowerment process, stating that, societal barriers among other resource constrains limited the achievements

⁴⁹ Kita, 56-105.

⁵⁰ Benedicta Muffuh, *The Bamenda Portsmouth Link, the live wire of Caritas Bamenda*, (Mankon Bamenda: Archdiocesan Printing Press, 2015),.

underscored by the organization. Her attempt to examine *caritas* contributions in empowering PWIs in the domain of education and health in Bamenda archdiocese remained crucial to the current study, as it provides detail knowledge to the different strategies and domain of interventions instituted by faith based agencies in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Mbiydzenyuy⁵¹ while researching on the activities of Strategic Humanitarian Services (SHUMAS) in the North West, opined that the organization have been a major actor in stimulating and fighting for the social and economic empowerment of the vulnerable in the region. He identifies different domains of intervention like education, social welfare, agricultural programs, environment, water and sanitation, noting that their achievements in these sectors were enviable. His work remains resourceful to the current study in that, it provides some relevant knowledge to the role NGOs play in improving the living standards of the vulnerable generally in the North West. However, the current study investigates the historical trajectories of empowerment within the context of assessing how church based institutions occupied a central position in empowerment and inclusionary practices.

Writing on the role Faith Base Organizations (FBOs) play in conflicts round the world, Act alliance,⁵² established that FBOs have adopted a humanitarian approach towards managing conflict affected populations in different parts of the world, noting that their interventions strategies rejuvenated hope in those affected by man and natural disasters. He further articulated that though funding for FBOs were very limited when compared to circular NGOs, the impacts of their involvement in mitigating, empowering and protecting victims in crisis situations were far reaching. He highlights the key role these faith Base Organizations have on the livelihood of persons living with disabilities. Their achievements in disability empowerment and integration into society were rooted in the fact that they adopted grassroots approach towards their Christian communities affected by violence. It should be noted that during violence, some persons acquire impairments while those already living with impairments become the most affected. Empowering them through social service support and economic livelihood activities had a large impact to their inclusion to societal functions. Although the discussion sustained in the paper was from a global point view, the analyses were instrumental in shaping this research. This is

⁵¹ Joseph Mbiydzenyuy, “Socio-Economic Impact Within the North West Region”, (Master’s Dissertation, University of Yaounde, 2015):

⁵² Act alliance, “The Role of Faith Base Organizations In Humanitarian Response: A Reflection on the Unique Role of Fbos In Humanitarian Crisis,” (2015), [Http://Www.Christainaid.Org.Uk](http://www.Christainaid.Org.Uk).

because; his focus was on Faith Based Organizations who were key stakeholders in empowering PWIs in different parts of the world. But the current study adopts the approach of integrating the strategies employed by Catholic Church and Baptist institutions in shaping disability awareness in the North West Region.

Wendy,⁵³ while examining the key role the world of technology has played in empowering persons with impairments especially the visually impaired, argued that, assistive technologies like screen readers and other manufactured ICTs greatly contributed to the digital integration of PWIs in the world of technology, easing their professional integration in the global digital network. She adds that vocational training on the use of these tools remained primordial in the quest for full inclusion. Her highlights on the challenges that PWVIs faced and how both government and NGOs intervened to address these hurdles shed more lights to the plights of the visually impaired. Though her studies were limited to the experience of visually impaired persons in New Zealand, the findings were enriching to the current study in that, knowledge on socio-professional inclusion of PWVIs was very possible in the domain of tech and that vocational trainings on these tools were vital for full empowerment and inclusion in the North West Region of Cameroon.

As one can glean from the above literature, there exists yet no coherent and comprehensive study on the role of mission based institutions in the socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region,, combining both achievements and existing limitations. What we have are disjointed and incoherent studies on empowerment strategies and challenges, with none of these focused on the visually impaired in the North West Region at large. This work is therefore an attempt to fill the existing hiatus in disability empowerment and inclusion in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Scope of the study

The definition of the boundaries of this study is of great importance. As such, the spatial, diachronic as well as the synchronic scope are outlined. Starting with the spatial scope, this study shall be limited to the North West Region of Cameroon, with preference given to Bui, Mezam,

⁵³. W, E. Williams, *Assistive Computer Technology and Empowerment; The Vocational Experience of Blind and visually Impaired* (New Zealand: Massey University press, 2004)

Boyo, Donga Mantung, Ngoketujia and Momo divisions, all accommodating empowerment agencies owned and operated by faith base organizations, as well as institutions and societies where persons with visual impairment are resident or operating. The choice of the region remains pivotal to the study in that, it is the first region in the nation to have received an array of tailored efforts from faith base organizations towards persons with disabilities, the visually impaired inclusive, thereby shaping the narrative around inclusion for persons living with impairments in Cameroon.

The diachronic scope historically runs from 1982 to 2025. The year 1982 is central and take off point to the study because, it marked the establishment of the first special center for the visually impaired in the region, particularly in Bafut and then Nso, specifically designed to bridge the gap in the social and educational opportunities for persons suffering from visual impairment, signifying a start-up point in the transformation and social inclusion of these individuals into the educational life of the state, paving their path towards economic integration. The year 2025 sets the upper limits of the study as it was then that, the CBC, a leading empowerment agency in the region organized a national inclusive conference for different stakeholders in Cameroon, which further shaped disability inclusionary practices in the region and nation at large.

Thematically, the work falls within the confines of disability studies, empowerment and economic sustenance.

Sources and Methodology

For any study to be effectively carried out, the sources of data collection and style of writing remain very instrumental. The study effectively utilized both primary and secondary sources, with the primary sources representing about 70 percent of the entire study. The primary sources which have to do with interviews, reports, decrees, letters and pictures. They all became the backbone from which the researcher gathered useful facts related to the study. Visits to the empowerment centers and program units of some faith based organizations, offered useful information to how these actors like the catholic mission; Baptist mission centers empowered PLWIs in the Region. Reports on their origin, setups and activities carried out were gotten from their staffs and X-students. The data was useful in chapter two, three and four.

With respect to interviews, the researcher structured straight forward questions which were focused on the different experiences PWVIs faced, empowerment strategies and the impact of mission activities in the socio-economic and cultural inclusion process of PWVIs. Teachers, impaired persons, state administrators, civil servants, heads of institutions for PWDs, private sector workers and humanitarian employees constituted the list of informants. They were selected randomly to ascertain facts and impacts of FBOs in the region. The experiences of some visually impaired persons like Emmanuel Bafon, Peter Ngong Tonain, Sama chick, Samuel Nyincho and Desmond Kum Nji helped to corroborate the information obtained from other stakeholders in the region. Also, to ascertain the validity of facts, the researcher conducted group surveys to a series of disabled persons in Hope Social Union for the Visually Impaired (HSUVI) operating in the North West Region.

A good number of Pictures were taken as evidences of empowerment activities and inclusion into social and economic life of the region. These pictures which were taken by the researcher, with some extracted from the personal collections of some individuals further constituted first hand illustrations to the process of empowerment, and socio-economic inclusion. While some were presented independently as pictures, a good number were presented as plates, capturing a common idea, or providing clarity to an activity or operational center. Maps were equally presented in the study, to clearly show the study area, with some specific divisions highlighted as zones where empowerment centers were dominant.

For Secondary sources, published and unpublished documents were consulted. Published documents involved books and scientific articles, while unpublished documents included theses and dissertations obtained from the libraries of The Universities of Bamenda, Yaounde 1 and Buea. The documents consulted were related to disability studies and the role of different agencies in the empowerment process.

With respect to presentation, this study has made use of both the thematic and chronological approaches. Thematic, the work has been divided into themes for easy analysis and for better examination of the issues at stake. The chronological approach falls within the historical context of logical presentation, mindful of the sequence in which the various developments occurred in the empowerment process of PWIs in Mezam. The study still in terms of sourcing for materials, adopted the multidisciplinary approach. These sources in geography, cultural history and

disability studies were found to be valuable in the writing of this thesis. the study adopted a chronological, and qualitative method of data presentation while carefully utilizing the 18th edition of the Chicago manual of referencing. It must however be stated that the qualitative method predominated because of the limited records on empowerment and inclusion into the labor force of impaired persons. However, where statistical data was available it was utilized.

Significance of the study

This thesis is relevant to the scientific research community, disable persons organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations, the Cameroon government and the international community in several ways some of which are:

The work comprehended the unrelenting efforts of mission based institutions in stimulating full and effective inclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly the visually impaired in the North West region, taking into cognizance an appreciation of all its achievements.

Also, the work is relevant in that, it exposes to the public the nature and mood of operations of FBOs in ensuring the total inclusion of PWVIs in the socio-economic and political life of the north west region of Cameroon, thereby creating awareness, serving the purpose of advocacy and providing room for appreciation of these institutions, inviting new actors and the public to rejuvenate the fight for the full inclusion of PWIs in the participation of community development.

Research Difficulties

Series of hurdles stood on the way of this research which are worth mentioning. First, conceiving the topic was not a day's job, since we wanted something original and within the context of disability inclusion, where the researcher had gained scholarly trajectories'. To overcome this, the researcher had to consult books, seniors and seek guide from the supervisor in conceiving the topic.

Of equal importance was the fact that, accessing sources especially primary sources within the context of the Anglophone crisis made it challenging, as some pioneer resource centers like that in Bansa were found in areas considered by many to be insecure. This made movements quite challenging not to talk of accessing some informants that have been given some degree of

empowerment, but were still unemployed in remote areas. The multiplier effect of the crisis to this research is enormous, as it made informants not willing to cooperate especially when it comes to sensitive matters about the CBC and Catholic Church Church. With this, the researcher had to identify himself with the informants and notify them that the research was purely for academic purpose. Although this was done, many informants preferred that their identities be kept confidential especially those who spoke about the politics of empowerment, mentioning some stakeholders.

Another issue was the fact that most informants had lost memory of some of the issues that had occurred causing them to make a lot of generalizations. With this, oral interviews became the backbone of the study as the researcher targeted a cross section of persons living with impairments, as well as FBOs involved in their empowerment process, to grasp valid information on their mood of operations and levels of achievements.

Lastly, empowerment centers had lost track of their past student enrolment, which made it difficult for the researcher to ascertain the statistics of those that had received educational and vocational training in these centers. To overcome this, the researcher depended on the impaired learners directed to, for information about those they were with while in the resource room.

Structure of the study

This study is comprehended and divided into five chapters preceded by a general introduction and closed by a general conclusion. The general introduction presents the research proposal and the relevance of the study tapping inspiration from the existing literatures. The general conclusion summarizes key discussions and research findings stating clearly the researcher's opinions and recommendations.

Chapter one of the study zooms into a geo-historical presentation of the North West Region. It examines the location, climate, soils, relief, human and economic activities, ethnic composition, migration trends, socio-economic and political organization of the region, in view of establishing a nexus between the area and growth of missions and empowerment centers for the visually impaired.

Chapter two examines the foundations of faith based agencies in the North West Region of Cameroon. It provides a historical trajectory of mission bodies like the Baptist and Catholics,

growth of empowerment initiatives and centers, modus operandi and key partners of FBOs in the region.

Chapter three elucidates on the different domains of interventions for the socio-economic inclusion of the visually impaired in the region. These domains of interventions are discussed, to shade light to the key role these institutions play in fostering the independence of PWDS.

Chapter four on its part assesses the implications of FBOs empowerment initiatives, and the challenges faced by these institutions in their mission of fostering inclusion.

Chapter five wraps up the study by presenting the pedagogical relevance of the study in a Competency Based Approach lesson plan, while the general conclusion summarizes the study and presents the key findings.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AREA

Introduction

This chapter sets out to examine the geo-historical setting of the North West Region of Cameroon, relating how this natural environment, historical background, socio-political organization, and economic life of the North West Region provided the bases for the establishment and growth of Faith-Based empowerment agencies for the visually impaired. These aspects in geography constitute locating the study area, relief, drainage, and climate and soil profiles. Historically, the origin, migration trends and settlement patterns are to be analyzed, alongside the socio-political and economic setup of societies across the different historical periods in the study area, within the context of shading more nuances to how it facilitated the emergence of missionary empowerment centers and programs. The central argument to be sustained in the chapter is that; the geo-historical, economic and socio-political setting of the North West Region, paved the easy establishment and growth of Faith-Based empowerment centers designed for the socio-economic and professional integration of the visually impaired in the North West region.

Geographical Setting

The North-West Region of Cameroon occupies a distinctive geographical position within the Western Highlands of Cameroon, and this physical setting has played a decisive role in shaping human settlement, economic activities and institutional development over time. The region's location, climate, relief, soils and drainage systems have historically supported dense population concentration, agricultural prosperity and infrastructural development, all of which facilitated the establishment and sustainability of empowerment centres by faith based organizations, particularly designed to serve persons with visual impairment and enhance their socio-economic and professional inclusion.

Geographically, the North-West Region lies between latitudes approximately 5°40' and 7°10' North and longitudes 9°50' and 11°10' East⁵⁴. It is bounded by the Adamawa Region to the

⁵⁴ Aaron Neba, *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon*, (Bamenda: Neba Publishers, 1999), 227.

north, the West Region to the south, the South-West Region to the west and the North Region to the east(see map 1 and 2). The region is predominantly mountainous, with altitudes ranging between 1,200 and over 3,000 meters above sea level, particularly in areas such as Oku and Nso⁵⁵. This strategic location places the region at the crossroads between the Nigerian highlands and the southern Cameroonian forest zone⁵⁶. Nkwi and Warnier observe that such ecological constraints reinforced collective survival strategies and mutual support systems among Grassfields societies⁵⁷. These same traditions later informed community-based approaches to caring for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. According to Kimengsi and Gwan, this position historically encouraged interaction, trade and missionary movement across borders, making the region accessible to early European missions and later humanitarian organizations⁵⁸. Accessibility and regional connectivity were crucial in attracting mission bodies that later established educational and welfare institutions, including empowerment centres for persons with visual impairment.

⁵⁵ Etamo, 2007, 25.

⁵⁶ Neba, 1999, 228.

⁵⁷ Paul Nkwi and Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, (Yaounde: University of Yaounde, 1982), 6–8.

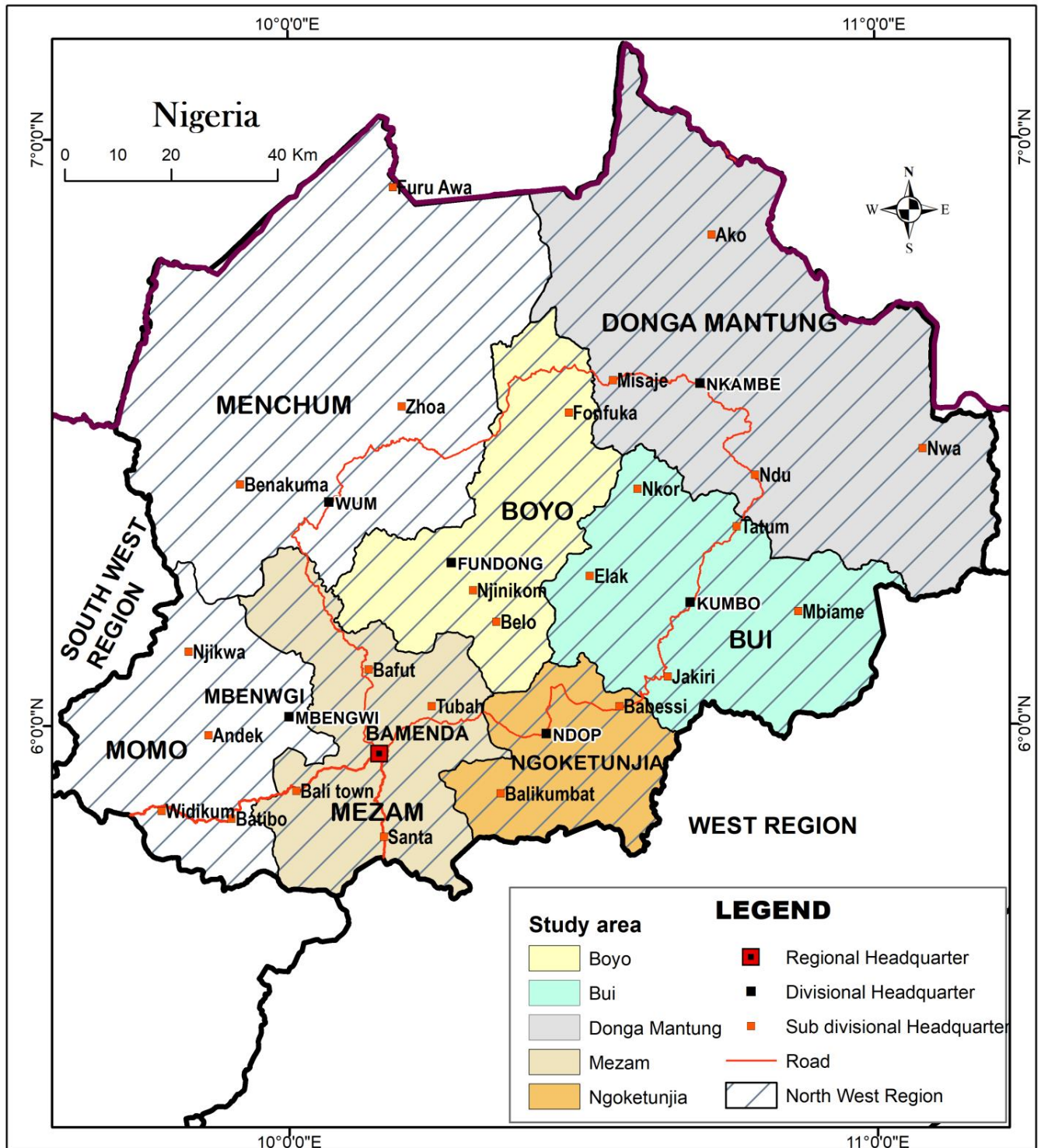
⁵⁸ J. N. Kimengsi, and S. A. Gwan, “Reflections on Development Planning in the North West Region of Cameroon,” *African Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2017): 33.

Map 1: The Administrative Organization of the Republic of Cameroon



Source: *Bertrand Bafon Tokoh, "The Cameroon Government and Anti-Corruption 1961-2019: Strategies, Implications and Outcomes" (Masters Dissertation in History, University of Bamenda, 2022).*

Map 2: The North West Region of Cameroon



Source: Cartographed by Bertrand Bafon Tokoh, 15 February 2026

In map one, the administrative setup of Cameroon as of 1972-1992 is depicted. This illustration reveals how the state of Cameroon is structured into ten regions, formally referred to as provinces prior to 2008. The administrative setup after independence was structured into provinces/regions, with each region made up of divisions. The North West region is illustrated in map two reveals that administratively, it is made up of seven divisions, with the divisions colored in yellow, pink and peach colors, situating divisions where early empowerment centers for the visually impaired had emerged and gained prominence. Their services as shall be discussed in the subsequent chapters later on extended to other divisions through partnership with some educational institutions. As observed, in the map, Mezam, Bui and Boyo divisions were earlier zones where missionary institutions had taken a central stage in activities of evangelization, healthcare, education and empowerment, with the Catholics and Baptist faith based institutions dominant.

Climatically, the North-West Region experiences a modified equatorial climate characterized by two distinct seasons: a long rainy season from March to October and a short dry season from November to February. Rainfall is generally high, ranging between 1,800 mm and 3,000 mm annually, especially in the highland areas⁵⁹. Temperatures are moderate due to altitude, averaging between 18°C and 24°C. This cool and healthy climate made the region attractive to missionaries during the colonial period, who preferred highland areas that were relatively free from tropical diseases common in the lowlands⁶⁰. The favorable climate enabled the long-term residence of missionaries and the operation of boarding schools, health centres and later inclusive empowerment institutions for the visually impaired, which required stable environmental conditions and year-round accessibility. Little wonder faith based organizations like the Roman Catholics and the Baptist took the central stage in shaping developments in the region, with empowerment centers like SAJOCAL and Integrated school for the Blind coming up by the early 1980s.

The relief of the North-West Region is dominated by rugged highlands, undulating plateaus and volcanic massifs, forming part of the Cameroon Volcanic Line. Altitudes range from about 600

⁵⁹ Neba, 1999, 227.

⁶⁰ Austen Ralph, *Northwest Cameroon: A Political Economy of Colonialism*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 109.

metres in the low-lying valleys to over 3,000 metres around Mount Oku⁶¹. This mountainous relief provided natural defense and security for early settlers, encouraging permanent settlement and political stability. Chilver and Kaberry argue that such stable settlements under centralized authority allowed for effective community organization and infrastructure development⁶². In the colonial and post-colonial periods, the plateau landscapes around Bamenda, Kumbo, Ndu and Bafut provided suitable sites for mission compounds, schools and residential institutions, including centres catering for persons with visual impairment, which required space, tranquility and long-term land security.

Closely linked to relief are the region's soils, which are predominantly volcanic and lateritic in nature. These soils are generally fertile and support intensive agriculture, particularly the cultivation of maize, beans, potatoes, cocoa yams and vegetables⁶³. Warnier notes that agricultural surplus in the Grassfields enabled communities to sustain non-farming activities such as education, craftsmanship and social welfare⁶⁴. This economic stability made it possible for local communities to support mission initiatives through food supply, labour and land donations. Empowerment centres for the visually impaired benefited from this agricultural base, as surrounding communities could provide food, vocational training opportunities and economic integration for beneficiaries.

The drainage system of the North-West Region was dense and well developed, consisting of numerous rivers and streams such as the Katsina-Ala, Menchum and Nun rivers, which drain into the Benue and Cross River basins⁶⁵. These rivers historically provided water for domestic use, agriculture and small-scale irrigation. They also shaped settlement patterns by encouraging the growth of permanent villages and towns along river valleys. Kimengsi emphasizes that reliable water supply and fertile valleys contributed to population concentration in areas such as Nso, Nkwen and Bafut, which later became focal points for mission and welfare institutions⁶⁶. Access

⁶¹ Emmanuel Etamo Kengo, "Coffee in the Economy of the North West Province of Cameroon, 1923–1993," (PhD diss., University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2007), 10.

⁶² E.M. Chilver, and P. M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*, (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 125.

⁶³ P. M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields* (London: H.M.S.O., 1952), 18–19.

⁶⁴ Jean-Pierre Warnier, *The Cameroon Grassfields: Historical Anthropology of Political Economy*, (London: Heinemann, 1985), 91.

⁶⁵ Neba, 1999, 229.

⁶⁶ J. N. Kimengsi, *Environment and Development in the Cameroon Grassfields*, (Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2014), 67.

to water and stable settlements were essential for the functioning of residential empowerment centres for persons with visual impairment.

Economic activities in the North-West Region are largely agrarian, complemented by trade, animal rearing and small-scale manufacturing. The region's economy had long supported dense populations and vibrant local markets. During the colonial period, the introduction of cash crops such as coffee, into the grass fields as posited by Kengo in 1923, further integrated the region into the global economy and improved infrastructural development, including roads linking Bamenda, Kumbo and Ndu⁶⁷. These roads facilitated missionary movement and the transportation of educational and medical resources. In the post-colonial era, the same economic infrastructure supported the continued operation of empowerment centres, enabling access to supplies, staff mobility and community outreach.

In sum, the geographical setting of the North-West Region of Cameroon provided a highly conducive environment for the establishment of empowerment centres for persons with visual impairment. Its strategic location encouraged early missionary penetration, its favorable climate supported long-term institutional presence, its highland relief ensured stable settlements, its fertile soils sustained economic surplus, its drainage systems promoted permanent habitation and its agrarian economy supported social welfare initiatives. The development of empowerment centres in the region was therefore not accidental but deeply rooted in the physical geography that shaped human activity and institutional growth over time.

Ethnic composition

The North-West Region of Cameroon, located within the Western Grassfields, represented one of the most historically complex settlement zones in Central Africa. Its population composition was the result of long-term migratory movements, political realignments and negotiated settlements that unfolded mainly between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries⁶⁸. Far from being autochthonous communities that evolved in isolation, the peoples of the region such as the Nso, Oku, Bafut, Bali-Nyonga, Nkwen, Mankon and numerous smaller fondoms emerged through successive waves of migration whose trajectories and settlement choices profoundly

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Kengo Etamo, "Coffee in the Economy of North West Province of Cameroon, 1923-1993," (unpublished PHD thesis in economic history, university of Nigeria NSUKKA, 2007)33.

⁶⁸ Kengo, *Coffee in the Economy*, 137–139.

shaped their political institutions, social organization and later receptivity to missionary intervention⁶⁹. These historical processes had also conditioned the spatial distribution of mission-owned educational and welfare institutions, including early empowerment centres for persons with visual impairment.

Scholarly interpretations of Grassfields origins were observed to be dominated by four major migration traditions: the Tikar, Ngemba, Fulani and the Chamba. Nkwi and Warnier argue that the Tikar phenomenon should not be understood as a single ethnic migration but rather as a diffusion of a political culture characterized by centralized kingship, ritual authority and territorial control, transmitted by elite groups fleeing instability in the upper Mbam and Adamawa regions⁷⁰. These elite movements were often triggered by succession disputes, external pressures from Fulani jihads and the search for fertile land and defensible terrain.⁷¹ As these groups settled in the Grassfields, they established fondoms that became nuclei of political stability and demographic concentration⁷².

According to their own traditions, the Tikar who settled in the Grassfields originated from *tibati, Banyo, Kimi and Ndo*. The Tikar, under a chief called Mbum, who had migrated originally from Bornu to the territory, which now bears the name near Ngoundere from where separation occurred much generation ago at point somewhere between Ngoundere and Tibati. From where they settled in a vast plain watered by the Mbam River but increasing Chamba pressure, internal disagreements, and the desire for new land resulted in the splitting off of small bands⁷³. They travelled west and south west and eventually reached Bamenda grasslands. The fondom of Bafut and Nso claims seniority over other Tikar ethnic groups within the region, as Babanki, Bafreng-Nkwen, Babanki Tungaw, Bambili, Babugo, Oku, Ndu, Nkambe, Kom, and Bambui, just to name a few share the same cultural affinities within the Tikar tradition. The Nso fondom provides one of the clearest examples of this migration settlement process. According to Chilver and Kaberry, the Nso trace their origin to the Tikar area, from where Princess Ngonso'

⁶⁹ E.M. Chilver, and P. M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*, (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 115.

⁷⁰ Paul Nkwi Nchoji, and Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, (Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé, 1982), 52-55.

⁷¹ V.G. Fanso, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 44.

⁷² Fanso, 1989, 51.

⁷³ Tifor, 2022, 25.

led a migration southwards following dynastic conflict in the late fourteenth century⁷⁴. The Nso migration was neither linear nor abrupt; it involved a series of temporary settlements that allowed for the gradual consolidation of political authority and ritual legitimacy. The eventual establishment of Kimbo as a permanent capital marked the transition from migratory existence to stable settlement. This stability produced a highly centralized political system in which land was communally owned under the authority of the Fon and regulated through lineage heads⁷⁵. Such political coherence later facilitated sustained engagement with Christian missions, especially the Roman Catholics that had set foot in the area after 1906, which found in Nso society a receptive environment for long-term institutional investment. This explains why Christian missionary activities quickly developed in Nso with the Baptist and Catholic missions establishing dominance in the area between the years 1906-1949⁷⁶.

Oku shared similar Tikar-derived origins but followed different settlement logic. Fowler notes that Oku groups migrated into the volcanic highlands around Mount Oku primarily for security and ecological reasons, seeking isolation from external threats and access to fertile soils⁷⁷. While this settlement ensured cultural continuity and autonomy, it initially limited missionary penetration due to geographical inaccessibility. Consequently, formal mission-based welfare and empowerment institutions, including those serving persons with visual impairment later extended their services to Oku where there was a prevalence of blindness, when compared to Nso and Bafut⁷⁸. This contrast demonstrates how migration routes and ecological settlement choices influenced the uneven spatial development of social institutions.

Bafut traditions similarly trace their origins to Tikar migrations, with founders entering the Bamenda plateau via the Ndop plain before settling along strategic trade corridors. Warnier emphasizes that Bafut's settlement location facilitated early commercial and political interactions, positioning the fondom as a regional power long before colonial rule⁷⁹. This strategic settlement made Bafut one of the earliest points of contact with German colonial

⁷⁴ E.M. Chilver, and P. M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*, (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 118-121.

⁷⁵ Chilver, 1967, 125.

⁷⁶ Antony Ndi,

⁷⁷ Ian Fowler, *African Crossroads: Intersections of History and Anthropology in Cameroon*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997), 202-205.

⁷⁸ Interview with Emmanuel Bafon, Age 67, Teacher, Oku, 14 December 2025.

⁷⁹ Jean-Pierre Warnier, *The Cameroon Grassfields: Historical Anthropology of Political Economy*, (London: Heinemann, 1985), 76.

administrators and Basel Mission agents in 1893-1904. The early establishment of mission schools and churches in Bafut created an institutional foundation upon which later welfare and empowerment programmes for vulnerable groups, including the visually impaired developed. Thus, Bafut's migration history directly shaped its role as a mission hub in the colonial and post-colonial periods⁸⁰.

In contrast to Tikar-derived fondoms, Bali-Nyonga emerged from the Chamba migration of the nineteenth century. Nyamndi documents that the Chamba movement into the Grassfields was militarized and expansionist, resulting in the forceful displacement and assimilation of indigenous groups⁸¹. The outcome of expansionist was noted very glaring with the trend of migration and wars fought by the group between the years 1835-1900s, resulting to the breakaway of the Chamba's into seven different entities scattered across the Western Grassfield⁸². This violent settlement pattern initially produced social instability, which discouraged early missionary investment. However, once political order was established, Bali-Nyonga evolved into an important centre of mission education, though specialized empowerment institutions for persons with visual impairment did not develop in the area, it however, became a harbour for persons with visual impairment attracting the extension of empowerment initiatives for these individuals. than in older, more stable fondoms such as Nso and Bafut.

Peripheral chiefdoms such as Nkwen and Mankon emerged largely as offshoots of earlier Tikar settlements. Their proximity to what later became Bamenda town proved historically significant. It should be noted that, Nkwen migrated with the Bafut but whereas the Nkwen remained below the Bamenda escarpment, the Bafut went further towards the Mechum valley to found a larger kingdom. This was possible, thanks to the incorporation of other groups like the Bawum, Mambu, Mbebeli which had reached there earlier. Nkwi observes that missionaries and colonial administrators deliberately targeted such peripheral settlements because they offered political neutrality, population density and access to emerging transport networks⁸³. As a result, Nkwen in particular became a focal point for mission-owned educational and welfare institutions. The

⁸⁰ Warnier, 1985, 79.

⁸¹ B. Nyamndi Ndifontah, *The Bali Chamba of Cameroon: A Political History*, (Paris: Editions CAPE, 1988), 61-68.

⁸² Tifor, 2022, 26.

⁸³ Paul K. Nchoji, *Traditional Diplomacy in the Western Grassfields*, (Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé Press, 1987), 141-145.

presence of these institutions explains why empowerment centres, including those addressing visual impairment, developed earlier and more sustainably in Nso, Bafut and Nkwen than in many rural chiefdoms.

The Ngemba took resident in present day Bamenda and its surroundings well before 1830. In the third quarter of the 19th century, Mankon imposed its supremacy over other Ngemba groups and formed what was known as the Mankon confederation which covered Mbatu, Ndzong, chomba and Nsongwa. The Mankon influence did not however touch other Ngemba chiefdoms like a wing, Baforchu, Mbei, Alateting and Pinying in which lay above the Bamenda escarpment⁸⁴. The emergence of mission-owned empowerment centres for the visually impaired in the North-West Region must therefore be understood as the outcome of long-term historical processes rather than isolated humanitarian initiatives. Elbers and Okwamy argue that disability support in the region followed established missionary routes and settlement hierarchies created during the colonial period⁸⁵. Areas such as Nso (particularly the Kumbo–Ndu axis), Bafut and Nkwen combined centralized political authority, stable settlement patterns and early missionary trust, making them ideal locations for permanent welfare institutions. These historical conditions enabled missions to mobilize communal labour, negotiate land access with traditional authorities and sustain specialized programmes for persons with visual impairment.

Apart from the afore mentioned groups that were found in the north West Region, also came the Fulani and the Mbororos who settled originally around hilly and mountainous areas. This was in search of pastures for their cattle. Since they mostly practice pastoral nomadism, they settled around the highlands of Sabga, Oku, Kom, Messa, Menchum valley and Ndonga Mantum division. In Mezam for instance, The community was named Sabga after their leader Abdullahi Sabga. This people variously called Foulbes, Fulani, Mbororos, Aku or jofun originated from Mali, where they moved to Niger and then to Jofun(Kano state Nigeria. They migrated through several areas in Cameroon and Nigeria, and in 1870, arrived Tibati and Falkumre (Tignere), from where they moved to Ngoundere, Banyo and Galim. At Tibati, where Ardo Maya led the people, Hoba his nephew joined him. Hoba followers from Jofun came along, having passed through

⁸⁴ Shella Che, “ the Urbanization process of Bamenda 1972-2020,” (Masters dissertation in History, University of Bamenda, 2024): 31.

⁸⁵ Willem Elbers, and Auma Okwamy, *Disability and Social Institutions in North-West Cameroon*, (Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 2018), 39–45.

Baichi, Jaligo, Pola, Kugama, Yola and Concha. Hoba son Abdullai Sabga also became a leader and after Hoba death, decided to search for empty land. He then took his people westward to Ndawara, then to Bamugo and finally to Tingeh (Sabga) in Kedjon, Ketinguh, where he settled in 1905. With him were 23 men who settled alongside with hi in Sabga. Abdullai Sabga ruled till 1954 when he died.⁸⁶

The Fulani who are nomadic people hardly constitute a dominant element of the population. They are however found in substantial number in Cameroon, Burkina-Faso, Niger, Sudan, Guinea, Senegambia and Nigeria. They lived as scattered groups and as ethnic minorities because of their nomadic way of life. It was because of the scattered nature of their population that got different appellation in different places and in different languages. In French they are called *Peuls* and in English they are called the Fulani.⁸⁷ The movement of the Fulani from the Lake Chad area and Hausa land into the North West Region and Cameroon at large was a result of great epidemic that occurred in Darfur and spread to Sokoto in the year 1871-1897 attacking cattle.⁸⁸ As Nwenfor put it, it was the fear of another epidemic that forced the Fulani to migrate to Cameroon and not the extension of Saharan desert or the Jihad holy wars. According to Kaberry, they settled on the hill tops and valley areas of the North West Region. As they settled down in the area, they began interacting with the indigenes gradually and in the course of time, a steady relationship developed.

The population in this area has become more heterogeneous due to rural urban migrations. Other groups of people found in the North West Region were Ibos, Hausa, Bamilikes and individuals from diverse backgrounds. This resulted into the putting into place several economic activities and initiatives for survival which led to the establishment of empowerment centers and empowerment initiatives to fight for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities in general. Perhaps this explains why associations of persons with disabilities within the region clamor for better inclusion under the banner of Faith Based institutional setups⁸⁹.

⁸⁶ National community Driving program for Participatory Development (PNDP), diagnoses report for Kedjom Ketinguh Village, 2.

⁸⁷ Divine A. Nwenfor, "Coffee Economy in Tubah Sub-Division 1934-2005: evolution and socio-economic implications," (Masters dissertation in History, University of Yaounde 1, 2014) 35.

⁸⁸ Nwenfor, 2014, 35.

⁸⁹ Kita, 2023, 34.

The origin, migration and settlement patterns of groups in the North-West Region of Cameroon fundamentally shaped the region's institutional geography. Tikar and Chamba migrations produced centralized fondoms whose settlement stability, political organization and strategic location determined patterns of missionary engagement. Mission-owned empowerment centres for the visually impaired emerged not randomly, but along historical lines established by these migrations and settlements. Understanding this historical evolution is essential for explaining contemporary disparities in the distribution and sustainability of empowerment institutions across the region.

Socio-political organization

The socio-cultural and political organization of the North-West Region of Cameroon has historically been shaped by centralized authority, strong communal values and adaptive institutional systems that evolved across the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. These structures not only ensured political stability and social cohesion but also created conditions that facilitated the establishment and sustainability of empowerment centres, particularly those initiated by missionary bodies in education, health and disability support. The emergence of such centres must therefore be understood as a continuation of long-standing social and political traditions rather than a complete colonial rupture.

In the pre-colonial period, the North-West Region was organized into highly centralized political units known as fondoms or chiefdoms. Authority was vested in the Fon, who combined political, judicial and religious power, assisted by councils of elders, lineage heads and regulatory societies such as the Kwifon⁹⁰. Scholars such as Nkwi and Warnier argue that this centralized governance system allowed for efficient decision-making, collective labour mobilization and conflict resolution, which ensured social order and continuity⁹¹. Socio-culturally, Grassfields societies emphasized communal responsibility, mutual aid and collective welfare⁹². Social support for vulnerable members of society—including the elderly, the sick and persons with impairments—was embedded in kinship and lineage systems. This communal ethic, expressed through shared farming, rotational labour groups and lineage-based care, created a cultural

⁹⁰ Che, 2024, 38.

⁹¹ Nkwi and Warnier, 1982, 61.

⁹² Kwi, 1987,98.

foundation that later aligned easily with the welfare philosophies of missionary organizations. Pre-colonial settlement patterns also reinforced this system. Permanent settlements around palace centres created dense populations under centralized authority, making collective initiatives feasible. As Chilver and Kaberry note, these settlements were not merely political capitals but socio-cultural hubs where education through oral tradition, moral instruction and vocational training were transmitted⁹³. This tradition of structured learning and social responsibility later facilitated the acceptance of formal schools, vocational institutions and empowerment centres introduced by missionaries.

The regulatory society represented one of the most important institutions in centralized fpondoms. They most common of them were the *kwifon*, *kwifo*, *Nwerong* and *ngumba*. This society was an instrument of the Fon's authority and assisted him in the preservation of the customs and tradition of the land. It was seen in many areas as the executive arm of the government. Membership of the society excluded the Fon and members of the royal family. The reason for exclusion was to limit the Fon's power because it was the only body in the chiefdom that could question the actions of the Fon. This was the case in Bafut and Nso for instance, where the *Kwifo* and *Nwerong* respectively, could depose the Fon.⁹⁴ In general, the regulatory societies were there to maintain public order by identifying and punishing wrong doers⁹⁵. They also tried important cases such as those linked to witchcraft.⁹⁶ The regulatory society thus played a major role in the maintenance of peace and order in the fpondom. With the position of authority that these traditional institutions had, they in collaboration with their respective rulers allocated large parcels of land for missionary bodies who were noted to have stimulated socio-economic development in their communities. This explains why faith based organizations like the Cameroon Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian church of Cameroon and the Catholic Church missions all possess large parcels of land for their activities. Little wonder the empowerment centers for the visually impaired were easily constructed by these faith based institutions without facing the difficulty of limited land space to setup their structures and programs.

⁹³ Chilver and Kaberry, 1967, 129.

⁹⁴ Divine Fuhnwi Ngwa, "The Fon, Chiefs and the Peoples of Bafut in Conflict, Pre-colonial Period – 1968" (DEA Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde I, 2002), 62

⁹⁵ Fanso, 1989, 41.

⁹⁶ Tam, "The Penitentiary System in |Anglophone Cameroon", 49

The colonial period 1884-1961, marked a significant transformation but not a destruction of indigenous socio-political organization. German, and later British colonial administrations as from 1885 and 1922 respectively, adopted a system of indirect rule that relied heavily on existing traditional authorities. Fons and councils were recognized as Native Authorities, responsible for tax collection, local justice and community mobilization⁹⁷. This political arrangement preserved the legitimacy of traditional leadership while integrating it into colonial governance. Missionary bodies particularly the Basel Mission, the Catholic Mission and later the Baptist Mission benefited directly from this arrangement. By negotiating land and protection through Fons, missions were able to establish permanent institutions such as schools, hospitals and vocational empowerment centres.

Socio-culturally, missionary activities resonated with pre-existing communal values. Education, discipline, moral reform and care for the disadvantaged were framed not as foreign impositions but as extensions of indigenous ideals of social responsibility. In areas such as Nso, Bafut and Nkwen, chiefs actively encouraged missionary presence by providing them land for settlement and in some exceptional cases accepting the missionary structures (church) just next their palace. This was the case in Oku where the Fon had warmly received the Baptist Mission providing them land in Tolon and even constructing a church in his palace.⁹⁸ These areas subsequently became early centres of mission education and welfare. It is within this colonial missionary framework that the foundations for empowerment centres, including those serving persons with visual impairment, were laid. Elbers and Okwamy observe that disability support in North-West Cameroon emerged primarily through mission networks that already controlled education and health services, benefiting from community trust and established administrative structures.⁹⁹

In the post-colonial period that is from 1961, the socio-political organization of the North-West Region continued to reflect a dual system of modern state governance and resilient traditional authority. Although the post-independence Cameroonian state expanded its role in education and social services, traditional institutions retained significant influence over land allocation, community mobilization and social legitimacy. Nkwi argues that this coexistence allowed non-

⁹⁷ Austen Ralph, *Northwest Cameroon: A Political Economy of Colonialism*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 112.

⁹⁸ Warnier, 1985, 83.

⁹⁹ Elbers and Okwamy 2018, 41.

state actors especially churches and non-governmental organizations to operate effectively at the grassroots level, particularly in areas where state presence was limited¹⁰⁰. As a result, empowerment centres continued to flourish under mission ownership and management, often filling gaps left by the state.

Socio-culturally, the persistence of communal solidarity and church-centered social life reinforced support for empowerment initiatives. Churches became not only religious spaces but also centres of social organization, advocacy and service provision. Empowerment centres for the visually impaired and other vulnerable groups benefited from this environment because they were integrated into church and community life rather than isolated institutions. Local populations contributed labour, land and moral support, while traditional authorities offered legitimacy and protection. This continuity explains why empowerment centres in the North-West Region have demonstrated greater resilience compared to regions where communal and traditional structures were weaker.

Politically, decentralization reforms and the recognition of civil society organizations in the 1990s, further strengthened the role of local institutions in development. Mission-owned empowerment centres were able to collaborate with civil societies, non-governmental organizations, disable persons organizations/associations, councils, traditional rulers and international partners, building on historical patterns of cooperation established during the colonial period. The region's long tradition of negotiated authority and community participation thus continued to support empowerment initiatives well into the post-colonial era¹⁰¹. The socio-cultural and political organization of the North-West Region of Cameroon across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods provided a stable and supportive framework for the development of empowerment centres. Centralized traditional authority, strong communal values and adaptive political systems created an environment conducive to collective welfare initiatives. Colonial indirect rule and missionary engagement built upon these foundations, while post-colonial continuity ensured their sustainability. Empowerment centres in the region such as the Integrated School for the Blind in Kumbo, the Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAM) Bafut and the CBC SIEP Project Nkwen are therefore best understood as

¹⁰⁰ Nkwi 1987, 148.

¹⁰¹ Elbers, 2018, 51.

historically rooted institutions that evolved from indigenous socio-political traditions rather than externally imposed structures.

Economic Activities

The economic history of the North West Region of Cameroon is foundational to understanding how social institutions including faith-based organizations and empowerment centers for persons with visual impairment emerged and developed. Across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, a combination of agriculture, trade, craftsmanship, transport networks, and informal economic activities shaped local livelihoods, social structures, and community responses to social vulnerabilities. Over time, the economic foundations of the region provided both the means and the social ethos for organized communal action, including the establishment of disability-focused centers.

The North West Region's economy was predominantly agrarian. Smallholder subsistence farming was practiced on fertile soils that supported maize, yams, beans, coco-yams, and plantains across the different villages in the region. Land was communally held under chiefs, but actual control over cultivation rested with families and especially women, who played a central role in food production and household sustenance¹⁰².

The intensity of permanent cultivation on fertile soils supported high population densities and stable settlements¹⁰³. This agricultural base fostered social interdependence, with extended families and clans working cooperatively during planting and harvest seasons. Such cooperative patterns became social foundations upon which later communal initiatives including those by faith-based groups could build support for vulnerable populations like persons with visual impairment.

Animal rearing, particularly cattle, goats, and poultry, complemented agriculture. Livestock was a source of meat, manure, and social status; cattle exchanges and bride wealth payments cemented social alliances. Livestock markets also facilitated inter-village exchanges and contributed to early forms of regional trade networks¹⁰⁴. Trade within and beyond the Grassfields

¹⁰² P. M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields*, 18–19.

¹⁰³ M. B. Gleave and F. M. Thomas, "The Bagango Valley," *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 30, no. 2 (1968): 655.

¹⁰⁴ Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields*, 35–36.

was integral to the pre-colonial economy. Local markets allowed exchange of agricultural produce, crafts, and animal products. Goods such as palm oil, salt, and imported items from neighboring regions transited through Grassfields markets. Trade was largely informal, kinship-based, and regulated by indigenous norms, with market days rotating across chiefdoms. These early commercial exchanges laid foundations for later organized trading associations and cooperatives that would partner with missionaries and local churches for community development work.

Weaving and pottery production were important non-farm economic activities. Women often produced baskets, mats, and pottery for both household use and sale within weekly markets. These crafts contributed to household income, particularly in periods of food scarcity, and provided a skill base for later vocational training programs offered by faith-based organizations and empowerment centers. Transportation in the pre-colonial era relied on footpaths linking villages to markets. The emphasis on communal labor to maintain trails and paths reinforced collective action norms¹⁰⁵. Although rudimentary, these routes became the basis for later colonial road development and remain important for community access to schools, churches, and support centers.

Colonial rule ushered in a major economic transformation through the introduction and commercialization of Arabica coffee, which thrived on the highland soils and favorable climate of the North West Region. The British colonial administration as from the mid-1930s, encouraged coffee cultivation as a cash crop for export. The North West quickly became one of Cameroon's most productive coffee zones¹⁰⁶. Coffee's high value created new forms of market participation for rural farmers and catalyzed monetization of the local economy. Households began selling surplus produce and coffee beans for cash, which they used to purchase imported goods, pay school fees, and invest in community projects.

The cash economy facilitated the formation of cooperative societies. The Bamenda Cooperative Association (BCA)—later the North West Cooperative Association (NWCA) emerged to organize coffee producers, negotiate prices, and coordinate marketing. Although colonial authorities often dominated commercial channels, cooperatives empowered rural producers to

¹⁰⁵ Kemgo, 2007, 37.

¹⁰⁶ Frederick L. Wellman, *Coffee: Botany, Cultivation and Utilisation* (New York: Interscience, 1961), 93.

participate more effectively in the cash crop economy¹⁰⁷. These early cooperatives also became platforms for community education and social organization. Through collective action and pooled resources, members financed school buildings, community halls, and health outreaches. Such cooperative experiences laid the institutional groundwork for faith-based and empowerment centers, which utilized existing community trust and organizational capacity to provide specialized services. Under colonial rule, transport infrastructure was gradually improved to support the coffee economy, with roads linking coffee producing zones to coastal ports. Although many rural areas remained difficult to access, improved connectivity allowed greater participation in regional trade networks. Farmers sold coffee and food crops in larger markets, which encouraged mobility and the rise of market towns that became hubs for religious and social services.

Alongside formal trade and agriculture, informal economic activities such as seasonal labor exchange, petty trading, and artisanal craft sales continued to sustain rural households. These informal systems were flexible and adaptive and often became the first earnings of individuals who later engaged with church missions or empowerment programs for skills training and small enterprise development¹⁰⁸.

Pre-colonial and colonial craftsmanship such as weaving and pottery found new expression in vocational training programs operated by missions and later empowerment centers. Such programs equipped visually impaired persons with practical skills (weaving, craftwork, tailoring), enabling economic independence and social inclusion. Market gardening and informal trading created economic niches in which program graduates, including those with visual impairments, could participate. Local markets became sites where empowerment center trainees could sell crafts, produce, and services, reinforcing the practical impact of such initiatives.

Market gardening particularly around urban and peri-urban centers such as Bamenda, Santa, Ndop, Nso and Fundong became a dynamic economic activity. Seasonal vegetables and fruits supplied urban markets, generating income for families¹⁰⁹. The vibrancy of these small markets supported informal credit systems and community saving groups, some of which later

¹⁰⁷ Kengo, *Coffee in the Economy*, 137–139.

¹⁰⁸ Ralph, 110.

¹⁰⁹ Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields*, 35–36.

collaborated with faith-based organizations in funding vocational training for youth and adults, including those with disabilities.

While post-independence road development improved regional connectivity, many rural communities remained isolated. This uneven access increased reliance on local institutions for education, skills training, health care, and social support. Religious missions expanded their reach into remote areas, establishing schools, clinics, and later centers for empowerment and rehabilitation, especially for persons with visual and other impairments.

The informal sector remained critical, including petty trading, motorcycle transport (okada), tailoring, blacksmithing, and seasonal labor. These activities provided entry points for empowerment initiatives such as skills training workshops for visually impaired persons, often led by FBOs with community support¹¹⁰. The strength of informal networks allowed graduates of such programs to find apprenticeships, employment, or start small enterprises. The monetization of the economy driven by coffee, trade, and diversified agriculture provided households with cash resources that was mobilized to support church schools, mission hospitals, and later specialized centers. Tithes, offerings, and community fundraising financed the construction of buildings, purchase of equipment, and sponsorship of students with disabilities.

The economic activities of the North West Region spanning agriculture, trade, transport, craft production, and informal enterprise established both the material resources and the social frameworks necessary for the emergence of faith-based organizations and empowerment centers. Over time, these institutions became important actors in addressing social vulnerabilities, including visual impairment, by leveraging local economic strengths, cooperative traditions, and informal networks.

Conclusion

This first chapter of the study successfully elucidated on the geo-historical setting of the North West Region of Cameroon, relating how the natural environment, historical background, socio-political organization, and economic life of the North West Region provided the bases for the establishment and growth of Faith-Based empowerment agencies for the visually impaired.

¹¹⁰ Kita, 57.

These aspects in geography constituted locating the study area, relief, drainage, and climate and soil profiles. Historically, the chapter zoomed into an ethnic compositional analysis of the region, with aspects of origin, migration trends and settlement patterns analyzed, alongside the socio-political and economic setup of societies across the different historical periods in the study area, within the context of shading more nuances to how it facilitated the emergence of missionary empowerment centers and programs. The chapter demonstrated that, the geo-historical, economic and socio-political setting of the North West Region, paved the easy establishment and growth of Faith-Based empowerment centers designed for the socio-economic and professional integration of the visually impaired in the North West region of Cameroon. It is Against this prism that the next chapter gains prominence to examine the different faith based empowerment agencies present in the north west region, designed to foster socio-economic integration of the visually impaired.,

CHAPTER TWO

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH-BASED EMPOWERMENT AGENCIES FOR PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON

Introduction

This chapter examines the foundations of faith-based empowerment agencies that were established in the North West Region of Cameroon, with the specific mandate of empowering persons with visual impairment. The chapter identifies the Catholics and Baptist empowerment centers and partners, purposely to reveal how they took the lead and central stage in empowering persons living with visual impairment in the North West Region. The Chapter therefore, examines their historical evolution of missions, institutional development patterns and major centers and partner institutions for the empowerment and social inclusion of the visually impaired. The central argument to be sustained in this chapter is that, the development of empowerment centers for the visually impaired, within the context of their social exclusion, were spearheaded, operated and expanded by the Baptist and Catholic faith-based organizations, who became primary institutional actors in disability empowerment for the North West region and nation at large. The chapter is therefore relevant to the study in that, it provides a clear picture to the emergence of faith based institutions as major empowerment agencies in the North West region of Cameroon.

Institutional Foundations of Faith-Based Empowerment Agencies for the Visually Impaired in the North West Region of Cameroon

The development of faith-based empowerment agencies for persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon cannot be adequately understood outside the historical trajectory of Christian missionary activity in Southern Cameroons. As earlier posited, from the mid-nineteenth century, Christian missions particularly the Cameroon Baptist Convention and the Catholic Church established educational, vocational, and welfare institutions that later evolved into specialized services for vulnerable populations, including persons with visual impairments. As Ndi observes, the missionary bodies were among the most influential institutional actors in shaping education, social welfare, and leadership formation in the

region.¹¹¹ In this light, Christian missionary activities in the North West Region of Cameroon were therefore characterized not only by evangelization but also by a strong commitment to education, healthcare, and social welfare.

Mission schools and health centers became the earliest organized social institutions in many communities. According to Ndi, these mission institutions functioned as “agents of social transformation,” producing a literate class capable of responding to social challenges and community needs.¹¹² Importantly, missionary education emphasized moral discipline, vocational skills, and communal responsibility. Although early missions did not explicitly articulate disability inclusion as a theological or policy objective, their welfare-oriented ethos laid the groundwork for later interventions targeting marginalized groups, including persons with visual impairments. In the North West Region, missionary-led institutions became the earliest sites where vulnerability, dependency, and social responsibility were institutionally addressed.

The Baptist Faith Based Institutional Evolution

As earlier stated, Baptist missionary activity in Cameroon began in the 1840s, with the arrival of Joseph Merrick in Bimbia in 1843 and Alfred Saker in Douala in 1845. These early missionaries established schools and literacy programs that emphasized self-reliance and vocational discipline. Under the North American Baptist Conference from 1931, Baptist missions expanded inland, particularly into the Grassfields and North West Region.

The formal establishment of the Cameroon Baptist Convention in 1954 marked a significant turning point. With its headquarters in Bamenda, the CBC institutionalized Baptist presence in the North West Region, facilitating closer engagement with local communities. Ndi notes that Baptist mission schools in Southern Cameroons produced teachers, catechists, and social workers who later became key actors in community development.¹¹³ Over time, this institutional infrastructure enabled the CBC to respond to emerging social needs. By the late colonial and early post-independence periods, Baptist health services and community programs increasingly encountered persons with visual impairments, who were generally excluded from mainstream education and discriminated upon socially. The CBC’s commitment to holistic ministry led to the

¹¹¹ Ndi 2016, 41–44.

¹¹² Ndi 2016, 47.

¹¹³ Ndi 2016, 53–56.

creation of schools, health services, programs and empowerment centers, one of which was their pioneer Integrated School for the Blind (ISB) established in Kumbo, just below the Bansa Baptist Hospital in 1984.

The emergence of CBC-affiliated special education centers, such as Integrated School for the Blind in Kumbo (Bansa), reflected a gradual shift from general welfare to targeted empowerment. Rooted in Baptist theology that had emphasized human dignity and service, this institution's core focus was the teaching of Braille literacy, vocational training, mobility orientation and social integration. It should be noted here that, such developments were a natural extension of Baptist social ministry, giving the institution a forth area of intervention which was social inclusion and disability empowerment, unlike its initial evangelism, education and healthcare service orientation.

The Catholic Church Faith Based - SAJOCAM Institutional Evolution

The Catholic Church as already discussed, formally entered Cameroon in 1890 through the German Pallottine Fathers. After the disruptions of World War I, Catholic missionary activity expanded under French Spiritan Fathers and Mill Hill Missionaries, particularly in British Southern Cameroons. Catholic missions established parishes, schools, and health facilities that became central to community life. In the North West Region, Catholic expansion intensified during the inter-war and post-World War II periods. This health oriented, charity based philosophy and educational legacy later proved crucial for the development of specialized institutions for persons with disabilities.

Catholic engagement with disability empowerment in the North West Region emerged from its broader social teaching, which emphasizes charity, human dignity, and preferential care for the vulnerable. Catholic-run empowerment centers and rehabilitation programs for the visually impaired were often integrated within diocesan education and health services. A notable example was the Saint Francis parish where the Saint Francis Tertiary Sisters established a disability empowerment center known as ST Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAM) Bafut, Mezam division of Cameroon, in 1976. This center became the leading healthcare unit where those who had mobility impairment issues were treated and rehabilitated. By the year 1981, the center was

expanded to cover other impairments like visual impairment, with a resource unit of SAJOCAH constructed and equipped.

This institution provided functional braille literacy, vocational skills, and psychosocial support, enabling visually impaired persons to attain a degree of independence and social participation. Ndi's analysis of Catholic mission education highlights the Church's long-standing role in institutional care, which later evolved into structured disability services.¹¹⁴ The development of faith-based empowerment agencies for the visually impaired in the North West Region must be understood as a historical process rooted in missionary institutionalization, guided by the medical theory of disability, whereby disability was considered a medical problem and not necessarily a social prejudice, as opined by Oliver. The mission understanding of disability accounted for their efforts to address the prevalence of impairments medically. This explains why all pioneer empowerment centers in the region established by faith-based institutions were always next to a healthcare unit or hospital, where these individuals were admitted for empowerment after all effort to treat the impairment had proven abortive, or assessed to be irreversible.

St. Joseph Children and Adult Home,

From its earliest days, the Catholic Church Christian Church had emphasized charity and care for the vulnerable, including the sick, the poor, and those with disabilities. This was rooted in the teachings of Jesus, particularly his emphasis on compassion and service to others (the parable of the Good Samaritan). Historically, this often manifested as providing shelter, food, and basic medical care. Over centuries, the Catholic Church established hospitals, orphanages, and other institutions to care for those in needs. Some of these institutions specifically catered to individuals with impairments. While often providing care, early approaches were paternalistic and focused on segregation rather than integration.¹¹⁵ This was the reality with the established Catholic missions in Bamenda formally operating as integra-part of the Buea Diocese. The mid 1970 witnessed a remarkable transformation on the administrative setup within the Catholic Church in Bamenda, with specialized segregated homes opened specifically for persons living

¹¹⁴ Ndi 2016, 62.

¹¹⁵ Graham Gordon, "The Distinctive Role of the Catholic Church in Development and Humanitarian response; 7 Ways the Church Makes a Difference," *Relief Web*, (2021): 2-48.

with different impairments, some of which were the visually impaired. Bafut in Mezam division became the first in the entire North West region, to have a specialized service center for the empowerment of persons living with impairments. This special center was known as Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home, Established in 1976.¹¹⁶ Though initially focused on healthcare giving and assistance for the physically impaired, Other Aspects like vocational training and empowerment were slated into the centers modus operandi afterwards, with preference given to the girl child and women since it had just next to it a school known at the time as St Joseph Vocational School for the girls.¹¹⁷ The institution though Catholic based, was slated to treat medically the physically impaired persons, while giving vocational trainings to those admitted, and was gender bias, as it admitted only women and was established and operated by the Tertiary sisters of St. Francis.¹¹⁸

The Tertiary sisters in SAJOCAH Mambu operated as an off shoot of Njinikom Catholic hospital that had been established decades earlier during the German and British rule. It should be noted that, this hospital just like any other healthcare unit in the territory of Anglophone Cameroon, had been focused on identifying persons with impairments and providing healthcare assistance to this category of persons, until the healthcare and charity based model was integrated with empowerment ideologies in 1981.¹¹⁹ The setting up of a resource unit in the center for the educational and vocational empowerment of the visually impaired was symbolic and marked a central stage in the history of the social and economic inclusion of persons living with visual impairment. Though established in 1981, the very first set of pupils admitted for braille empowerment was in 1982.¹²⁰ Its main objectives were to restore the dignity of the impaired and improved upon their living conditions. By the mid-1980s, the center had incorporated other services into her activities expanding their scope to cover the production of prosthesis, ophthalmological services of eye care, adaptable agriculture and cane weaving.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Interview with Peter Ngong, age 40s, X-student of SAJOCA, Nkwen, 13 October 2025.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Elisberth Yila, age 50s, formal student of SAJOCA, Trader, Bamenda, 17 May, 2025.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Victorine Ngabe, age 48, Director of the physiotherapy department, Mambo Bafut, 19 March, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Evelyn Shulika, age 56, Director of the Resource Room for the visually impaired SAJOCAH Bafut, 19 march, 2025.

¹²⁰ Interview with Evelyn Shulika,

¹²¹ Interview with Victorine Ngabe

This marked a significant milestone in the history of empowerment in Mezam and the North West region at large, as persons with impairments, including the visually impaired, aside from the specialized Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind in Buea, could conveniently receive training on the use of Braille and other vocational skills in this part of Cameroon. It should be noted here that, as an empowerment center, the admitted persons were expected to live in the center or around its vicinity. For those that came from other areas of the region or nation, The center offered temporary housing for parents and their caregivers, as there were dormitories that could house PWI, such as club foot; celebrate palsy and patients with amputated legs and their caregivers.¹²² It offered intensive physical therapy, classes for the visually impaired as well as job and skills training to those who found it interesting to become facilitators and workers in the field. Most of those who benefited from such trainings were relatives of the impaired persons who were living with them in the center(see plate 1 illustrating SAJOCAL).

Plate 1: SAJOCAL Resource Center



This plate illustrates the empowerment resource room for SAJOCAL where the visually impaired received their training in braille with major equipment like slates, stylus and the Perkins Brailier.

Source: extracted from Anga'ama Jannet album, 12 January 2026.

¹²² Interview with Ngabe,

It should be noted that, this center before admitting any child into the resource room for empowerment, conducted eye care checks in their ophthalmological department. This service which was introduced in 1983, brought in eye specialists that provided eye care screening and consultation for all categories of persons who suffered from eye related diseases like glaucoma, cataract and other eye related issues. It was upon their confirmation that these persons be it children or adults were enrolled into the empowerment center to be trained on braille and other vocational skills.¹²³ Thereby, paving the way for the socio-economic inclusion of the visually impaired in the nation.

Other important element that placed SAJOCAH as a major empowerment stakeholder or agency in Mezam division was the fact that, it had a well-organized machinery for empowerment, with the center operating just next to other institutions, establishing a strong network with other primary and secondary schools that integrated the learners into regular classrooms, with support from the center. The Catholic primary school Mambu- Bafut for instance, was made the first catholic inclusive missionary institution that integrated these impaired persons in regular classroom settings.¹²⁴ This therefore meant, the primary school just next to the center acted as a partner institution to the Catholic vision of empowerment, where the right to education of the child as provided for in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights and enshrined in the Cameroons Constitution was respected and upheld.¹²⁵ Other partner institutions which were even own and operated by the Catholic church included ST Joseph Comprehensive High School Bafut and St Augustine Comprehensive College Kumbo (SACC)¹²⁶ It should be noted here that, though SACC was situated far from SAJOCAH, some pupils who left SAJOCAH after completing their primary school continued their secondary education in Kumbo where the Integrated School for the Blind was found, and offered facilitation services to these learners. These were the only two catholic based secondary colleges in the entire region that graduates from SAJOCAH had regular mean-stream post primary education. Other partnered institutions SAJOCAH had established contacts with and provided the needed resources to ensure persons with visual impairments do not remain uneducated were non-Catholic institutions

¹²³ Interview with Elijah Chia, age 56, Resource Room instructor, SAJOCAH Bafut, 10 March, 2024.

¹²⁴ Interview with Ngabe

¹²⁵ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The Situation of Children and Women in Cameroon, (Yaoundé: UNICEF, 2016).

¹²⁶ Interview with Evelyn Shulika

like the government secondary schools of Bafut and Mambu where graduates from the resource unit in SAJOCALH were closely followed up.¹²⁷

The extension of Catholic engagement into secondary education through St. Joseph Comprehensive Inclusive College, in Mambu, SAC in Bango, and several other government schools in Bafut, Mambu and Bamenda, marked a significant shift from custodial care to inclusive academic empowerment. The institution's ability from 1983 to integrate visually impaired learners into mainstream secondary education while providing adapted instructional support, aligned with UNESCO's inclusive education framework, which emphasizes participation, equity, and access within ordinary schools.¹²⁸ Thus, the St. Joseph Children and Adult Home in Bafut represented one of the most enduring Catholic interventions in disability empowerment in the North West Region. Established under the authority of the Catholic Church, the center reflected the Church's longstanding commitment to social welfare, inspired by Catholic social teaching on human dignity and preferential care for the vulnerable.¹²⁹ In all, the institution provided a residential and educational environment for both children and adults with visual impairment. Its empowerment approach was multi-dimensional, encompassing, Educational empowerment, through literacy and numeracy using Braille, Functional independence, through orientation and mobility training, Vocational empowerment, particularly for adults, aimed at reducing dependency, and Spiritual and moral formation, reinforcing self-worth and community belonging. While critics argue that residential models risk reinforcing segregation, proponents like Barnes and Mercer, argued that in contexts marked by poverty, stigma, and weak public infrastructure, such institutions remain vital transitional spaces for empowerment.¹³⁰

Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services,

The Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS) was the primary organ of the CBC that positioned itself as an empowerment agency. It had over 38 health centers and 8 hospitals in

¹²⁷ Interview with Shulika,

¹²⁸ UNESCO, Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education, (Paris: UNESCO, 2009), 9. The Catholic Church's role here demonstrates an evolving institutional understanding of disability, moving toward rights-based inclusion rather than charity alone.

¹²⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, (Vatican City, 2004), 107.

¹³⁰ Barnes and Mercer 2010, 152.

2020, with the pioneer one situated in Banso (Kumbo) opened in 1949 by Doctor Chafee, and later on the Mbingo hospital established in 1952 as a leprosy settlement¹³¹. These hospitals provided healthcare services to the population of the entire North West region and Cameroon at large. Next to its hospitals was empowerment centers established to care for persons with disabilities like the visually impaired. Its existence as a service oriented organization provided for the system to ensure that those identified with different impairments like the leprosy cases in Bingo, attracted the institution to operate under the medical model of disability, where priority treatment and healthcare was given to persons suffering from such impairments. In the course of establishing mobile teams to visit the interior communities of the entire North West Region, they identified a good number of persons who were suffering from different visual problems, with its health centers in some areas of the region, like that of Nkwen, Banso, Ndu, Bingo and Oku consulting and treating several persons living with impairments. As the saying goes”, health is wealth” the healthcare organ of the institution identified patience and served as counselors to families and persons living with impairments.¹³²

Their use of the medical model of disability provided that, proper healthcare be given to those with impairments so as to treat or reduce prevalence, provoked the opening of different departments and centers in their healthcare units and hospitals like the physiotherapy unit, the ophthalmological unit, a general social service or counseling department and rehabilitation centers.¹³³ These different units especially the ophthalmological department of the institution consulted persons with eye problems and educated the masses on different eye diseases and preventive measures. For those that could not be reversed, or be managed such that the individuals could function or participate without limitation in societal normal life, they were then placed under special follow up, precipitating the need for a service unit for the visually impaired to be established for their rehabilitation. It should be noted that, the establishment of Mbingo health district by the CBC was due to the fact that those suffering from leprosy were carefully selected and resettled in the area for healthcare assistance and treatment.¹³⁴ This center which became a vocational unit too for rehabilitation of persons with special needs provoked the need

¹³¹ William Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists* (Scarecrow Press, 2009), 22.

¹³² Interview with Florence Jato, age 50s, staff of CBCHS, Nkwen, 14 November 2025.

¹³³ Interview with Samuel Bafon, age 50s, Director of CBCHBS, Nkwen, 13 January 2026.

¹³⁴ Interview with Esther Ndu

for another center to be established closed to the ophthalmological unit in Banso, since the special center in Bingo did not operate a resource unit for braille but rather vocational skills¹³⁵.

Integrated School for the Blind/Inclusive School and Braille Center Kumbo

In 1984, the organization opened their first empowerment center for persons with impairments in Kumbo as the integrated School for the Blind and another in Bingo for the hearing impaired in 2002. The CBCHS organized mobile teams into the different communities of the region, for community health care programs, during which they identified, oriented and admitted these impaired learners in the Integrated School for the Blind. This explains why visually impaired pupils travelled far and near into the center for empowerment.¹³⁶ It should be noted here that, the healthcare sector of the organization directly controlled the operations in the different special centers for persons with impairments in the CBC, in close collaboration with the Baptist educational board. This was because these centers operated under the medical model of disability whereby until proven not medically reversible, that the persons were empowered with literacy in braille for instance alongside with other vocational skills, before integrating them into regular primary schools and secondary schools around their districts or resource centers, for close follow up and assistance in the technical knowhow of transcription.¹³⁷ (*see plate 2 on ISB Kumbo*)

Plate 2: Integrated school for the blind/Inclusive School and Braille Center



Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, March 2026

¹³⁵ Interview with Denis Bamboo, age 50, administrator in CBCHBS, Nkwen, 11 August 2025.

¹³⁶ Interview with Joseph Kenchi, age 50, coordinator of CBR department of the CBCHBS, Nkwen, 17 May 2024.

¹³⁷ Interview with Nathan Chia, age 40s, resource room instructor for the CBCHBS, Nkwen, 11 June 2024.

The CBC also structured its services to cover both primary and secondary education, where persons with impairments could be integrated into for regular schooling. The organization in her department of education operated over 19 primary schools and 12 secondary schools which were noted to be all inclusive for persons with impairments. In Mezam, the institution created another special center for the visually impaired in Nkwen in 2018.¹³⁸ (*see plate 3 on ISB Kumbo*). This was the first empowerment resource unit of the CBC that was operating on Mezam grounds, unlike the rest that required the institution transport these individuals to Banso for rehabilitation. The establishment of the special center for the visually impaired in Nkwen Baptist Health Center premises, was due to the socio-political unrest that had resurfaced as an arm struggle in 2016. The effects of ghost towns, killings and school boycotts in the region punctured the empowerment process of these persons who had received their rehabilitation in Kumbo.¹³⁹ By establishing these special centers for persons with visual impairment, the CBC had positioned itself as a major agency for the empowerment of persons with visual impairments.

In 2009, the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services in her mission to fast track the empowerment process of persons living with impairments, introduced and opened up a new service or unit of the CBCHBS known as Socio-Economic Empowerment of persons with Disabilities (SEEPD).¹⁴⁰ This was more like the NGO unit of the organization, with the responsibility of stimulating full social, economic and political inclusion of persons living with disabilities across the national territory. With its base in Mezam, the organization adopted a Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) approach towards setting the stage for full inclusion and integration of persons with impairments. By adopting the Community Base Rehabilitation approach, the CBC had positioned herself into the different communities of the North West, where persons with impairments could be identified and shortlisted for empowerment.¹⁴¹ They were aided by the vast Christian community and influence their congregations had in the different tribes of the region.¹⁴²

Another key component of the CBC agency was the Empowerment Disability Inclusive Development (EDID) Program that was initiated in 2014. The EDID program was designed by

¹³⁸ Interview with Jacques Chirac Awa, age 45, manager of SEEPD program of CBCHS, Nkwen, 8 February 2024.

¹³⁹ Interview with Clarence Neigo Ngala, age 42, Administrative assistance of CBR SEEPD, Nkwen CBCHS, 23 October 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Jacques Chirac Awa, age 45, manager of SEEPD program of CBCHS, Nkwen, 8 February 2025.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Martin Bucha, age 38, CBR Field worker, Nkwen CBCHS 23 October 2025.

¹⁴² Interview with Joseph Kenchi, age 50, CBR coordinator for the CBCHBS, Nkwen, 17 May 2025.

the CBCHBS to further empower persons living with impairments through digital access and technical empowerment.¹⁴³ Targeting the age group of 0-25 years the core objective of the EDID was to empower children and youth with visual impairment, by fostering disability Inclusive development. It was also out to create an enabling environment which reduced environmental barriers that hindered effective and meaningful participation of children and youth with disability in the society. Thus, the program was aimed at mobilizing technical resources from within and without the CBCHS to strengthen the capacity of partners' organization working for the welfare of persons with impairments.¹⁴⁴

As the second empowerment agency and center that had developed in the region, ISB and SIEP represented one of the most influential Baptist initiatives for visually impaired learners in the North West and Cameroon at large. Its integrated model reflected Baptist educational philosophy that prioritizes community participation and social integration.¹⁴⁵ The school's empowerment strategy included; Braille literacy and adapted curricula, Use of assistive technologies, Psychosocial support and guidance, as well as Preparation for transition into mainstream secondary schools. Integration, as practiced in Kumbo and Nkwen, prepares visually impaired students for real-world social interaction, reinforcing the social model of disability by challenging exclusionary norms.¹⁴⁶

CBC SIEP Project Center, Nkwen

The CBC Social Inclusive Empowerment Project (SIEP) Center in Nkwen represented a more contemporary and development-oriented Baptist intervention. Unlike traditional educational institutions, the SIEP project focuses on economic empowerment, advocacy, and livelihoods.

Drawing on rights-based development approaches, the SIEP project emphasizes, Vocational training and income-generating activities, Capacity building for self-employment, Disability rights advocacy and awareness creation and Community reintegration and participation.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Interview with Florence Awa, age 40s, manager of the EDID program of the CBCHBS, Nkwen, 23 October 2025.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Florence Awa,

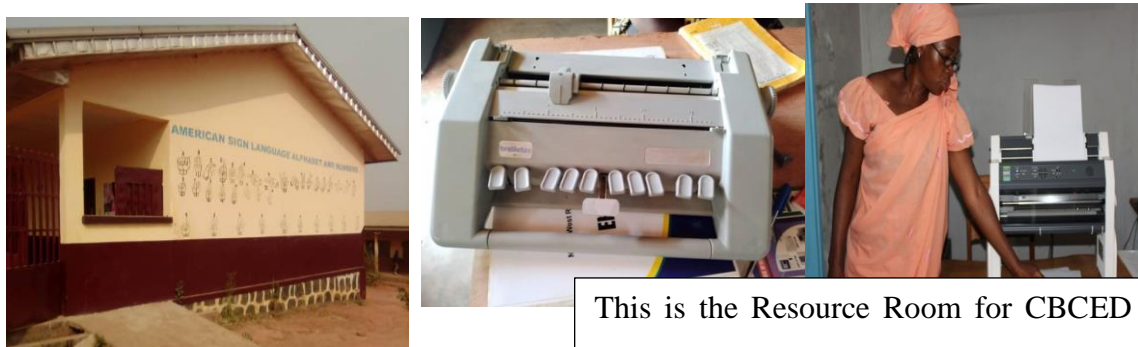
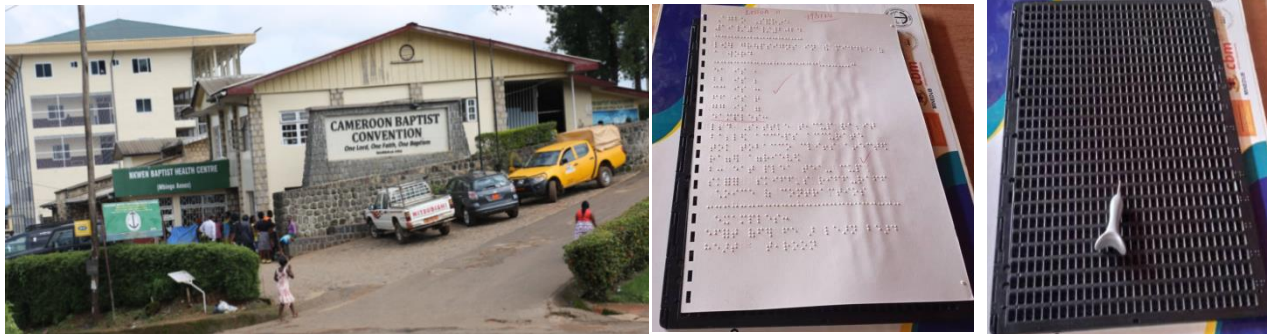
¹⁴⁵ Fletcher, J, *Baptist Education and Social Responsibility*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1998), 84.

¹⁴⁶ Roger Slee, *The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 32.

¹⁴⁷ DFID, *Disability, Poverty and Development*, (London: Department for International Development, 2000), 15.

This model reflects Amartya Sen’s capability approach, which defines development as the expansion of people’s freedoms to live lives they value.¹⁴⁸

Plate 3: Nkwen Resource Center



This is the Resource Room for CBCED where the visually impaired were trained in the use of braille. In the Resource Room was the various brailing equipment that aid the instructors in training the visually impaired. These equipment include, the slate, Perkins braille, embosser, and braille dots displayed.



Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, March 2026

Several Baptist secondary schools have established empowerment and inclusion units for visually impaired students under CBC supervision. These include; Joseph Merit Baptist College, Ndu, Chaffee Memorial Baptist College, Bansa, Baptist Comprehensive High School, Nkwen. These schools operationalize inclusive education by enrolling visually impaired students in

¹⁴⁸ Sen Amartya, *Development as Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87.

mainstream classrooms while providing specialized support such as Braille transcription, reader services, and adapted assessments. Research indicates that such hybrid models significantly improve academic outcomes and social integration.¹⁴⁹ Faith-based influence extends into public institutions such as; GBHS Kumbo, GBHS Bamising, Ndop and GBHS Bamenda.

Although state-owned, these schools benefit from faith-based technical support, teacher training, and resource mobilization. This collaboration illustrates what scholars describe as faith–state complementarities in social service delivery.¹⁵⁰—

Conclusion

This chapter was designed to examine faith-based empowerment agencies that were established in the North West Region of Cameroon, with the specific mandate of empowering persons with visual impairment. The chapter’s analysis established that Faith-based institutions like the CBC and the Catholic Church missions, had through their evangelical, healthcare given services and education, identified the prevalence of visual impairments in the different communities of the North West, who for ages were neglected, ignored and relegated out of the socio-economic and professional life of their respective communities, thereby prompting the need for empowerment, to which they took a central position in establishing special centers for the socio-economic and vocational empowerment of these neglected individuals as from 1982. It therefore, examines the historical evolution of missions, institutional development patterns and the special empowerment centers modus operandi. The chapters submits that, the development of empowerment centers for the visually impaired, within the context of their social exclusion, were spearheaded, operated and expanded by the Baptist and Catholic faith-based organizations, who became primary institutional actors in disability empowerment for the North West region and nation at large. The chapter’s relevance to the study is that, it provides a clear picture to the emergence of faith based institutions as major empowerment agencies in the North West region of Cameroon, paving the path for the next chapter to examine their activities of empowerment, that facilitated socio-economic inclusion of the PWVIS.

¹⁴⁹ Mel Ainscow, *Developing Inclusive Education Systems*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 115.

¹⁵⁰ Clarke Gerard, *Faith-Based Organizations and International Development*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 25.

CHAPTER THREE

FAITH-BASED EMPOWERMENT ACTIVITIES IN THE NORTH WEST REGION FROM 1982

Introduction

This third chapter of the study elucidates on the empowerment activities/initiatives carried out by faith-based institutions in the North West region of Cameroon, after the establishment of their special empowerment centers in the region. It focuses on the domains of interventions, activities carried out and the various programs developed to foster the socio-economic and professional inclusion of persons living with visual impairment in societies normal functions. The chapter's key trajectory is that, faith-based institutions had employed an array of initiatives geared at enhancing the socio-economic and professional inclusion of the visually impaired in the North West Region of Cameroon. This chapter is specifically relevant to the study in that, it provides ample knowledge to the key role mission institutions like the CBC and the Catholics play in shaping inclusive practices in the North West Region, and Cameroon at large.

Domains of empowerment

This section explores the different domains of empowerment, that Faith based institutions in the North West Region were engaged into, purposely to ensure that persons living with impairments, especially those with visual impairment were integrated successfully into societal normal functions. The need for empowerment as earlier discussed was because, this category of vulnerable persons were considered by the communities or the region and its metropolis, as people who needed just to be secluded from societal functions and given material and medical assistance. These domains of empowerment to be examined are categorized into different ramifications, with the objective of establishing an umbilical-cord between these empowerment activities and their social, economic rehabilitation and professional inclusion. This section examines these collaborative endeavors through the lens of distinct Domains of Empowerment, representing a critical aspect of inclusion and well-being. We will explore how mission based institutions were working within the domains of economic empowerment, education, social,

health and well-being empowerment, as well as the technological empowerment, to create a more equitable and accessible society for persons with visual impairments in the North West.

Empowering Persons with impairments in Mezam division was a shared responsibility that required coordinated efforts from different stakeholders notably the missionary based institutions that had taken a leading role in fostering empowerment and inclusion of PWDs. Here activities in the ramification of education, health, and sport, cultural and social acceptance will be examined.

Educational Empowerment

The universal declaration of Human rights promulgated in 1948 had stated clearly that, all humans irrespective of their color, race, origin, or even impairment have alienable rights.¹⁵¹ One of such rights accorded to all humans was the right to education.¹⁵² By education we mean, the sum total of all the processes by means of which people develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and other forms of behaviors that are of positive value to themselves and the society in which they live.¹⁵³ Prior to 1982, Persons with impairments especially those with visual impairments in Cameroon and particularly the North West Region, had constituted the most neglected and discriminated population of the society.¹⁵⁴ Their existence was limited to family care and assistance to survive at the home level.

Exacerbated by cultural believes, these persons were considered to have no role in the societal normal functions. The kind of education they received was much more of informal education whereby their mothers were assigned to guide them acquire some level of proficiency in local

¹⁵¹ United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, General Assembly Resolution 217A (III). Paris, December 10. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/1948>.

¹⁵² The word “education” originated from two Latin words “educare” and “educere”. The word “educare” means to “rear”, “to tame”, “to mold” or “to train”. Education originating from “educare” is viewed as the training or bringing up of children through character training and discipline, so that they live in accordance to certain standards set by the society. Hence educare is a teacher centered education where learners are seen to possess little or no potentials and only depend on the teacher in order to acquire these potentials. This means the teaching and learning process from this view will only be a one-way stream that is from teacher-learner(s). Conversely, “educere” is translated “to lead” or “to bring out”. Those who view education as originating from educere therefore regard it as involving the exposure of a child to condition/situations that will help the child’s nature to develop. From the two viewpoints, it is glaring to settle that education involves the training of a child in character and discipline in order to bring out inert/latent potentials. Educare is a learner centered approach to education. Teaching here can be seen as a give and take process between the teacher and his/her learner(s).

¹⁵³ Good Carter, *Dictionary of Education, 3rd ed* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973),11.

¹⁵⁴ Simon Njeke, “Special Education in North West Region of Cameroon,” 29.

language and basic moral ethics.¹⁵⁵ Such informal education did not extend out of the other functions those with no impairment were given. This was because there was a general belief that these impaired persons “were of no use to the family”, with some considering these children to be punishments for abominable acts.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, their exposure to what could be termed informal education was just to ease communication, and to a larger extent church services, since the church was demonstrating a more charitable approach towards these persons.¹⁵⁷ This meant they were being given some degree of biblical education about God by the Christian missionaries, notably the Catholic Church and the Baptist churches.

Catholic Church empowerment activities in education

The Catholic Church was a key stakeholder in the empowerment process of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region, since the institution has championed the rehabilitation process of persons with visual impairments in the region. Aside from its charity based model of assistance the mission had been known for, it had adopted a medical social approach towards improving on the lives of persons with impairments in and out of the region. By medical social approach, we mean, after successfully evaluating the patient to have an irreversible condition by medical experts, they thought of how the persons could be managed medically and still given the opportunity to be socially reintegrated into the society’s normal functions. Such understanding was the bases for the eventual establishment of different special centers for the empowerment of persons living with impairments in different areas of the region, one of which was in Bafut, Mezam division of the region. Their position as a faith based organization, had given the institution the prioress in directly establishing contacts with their Christians, some of whom were impaired or had impaired relatives and children.¹⁵⁸

The need for special educational centers came from the fact that, impairments were viewed by the different indigenes of the villages in Mezam as a curse or punishment for abominable acts.¹⁵⁹ Consequently, these impaired persons especially the visually impaired had no access to education or some form of literal empowerment, except for the informal exposure to some

¹⁵⁵ Carter, 29,

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Samuel Nyingcho,

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Samuel Nyingcho,

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Ferdinand Nkwine, Age 45, a theologian, Yaounde, 12 August 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Samuel Nyingcho,

traditional values and customs enshrined in the moral ethics of the said community. All they could receive from their communities or homes was limited to feeding and daily care. In some families these persons were abandoned home while others went about their activities, resulting to their complete segregation from societal functions, one of which was education.¹⁶⁰ The Tertiary sisters in the mid-1970 quickly changed that narrative when a medical care unit in Mambu Bafut, operating as an Integra-part of the-Njinikom Catholic hospital was transformed into a special educational institution, where persons with visual impairment were empowered and reintegrated into the society.

As posited by Affah, Bafut found in Mezam division was the first community in the entire North West Region to have a specialized service for the empowerment of persons living with impairments.¹⁶¹ This special center was known as Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home, established in 1976.¹⁶² The center initially was focused on healthcare giving and assistance for the physically impaired, due to their inclined medical approach towards persons with impairments. When it was realized that, for most cases, their conditions could not be completely reversed, thoughts of how they could be reintegrated into the society and reduce their vulnerability, brought about the idea of transforming the center to a rehabilitation center. Though initially designed for those with mobility impairment, the center later on expanded its scope to cover even those with visual impairments in the early 1980s. In 1981, the first visually impaired person was admitted into the institution and trained in vocational skills. A year after the institution introduced braille and the first pupils with visual impairment were taught braille in 1982. One of its first admitted pupils at the time was Elizabeth Yila. She was admitted in 1982 and trained in Braille and other vocational skills. Since the institution was initially designed only for the girls, she was admitted into the ST Joseph Vocational School for the Girls, as it was formally called¹⁶³

The establishment of the resource unit for the empowerment of the visually impaired in SAJOCAH in 1982 attracted a good number of persons living with visual impairments into the school. They were trained on how to write in braille for a year or two, depending on how fast the

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Nkwine,

¹⁶¹ Affah, 2025, 99.

¹⁶² Interview with Peter Ngong, Age 40s, X-student of SAJOCAH, Nkwen, 13 October 2024.

¹⁶³ Interview with Elizabeth Yila,

child could comprehend the writing technic.¹⁶⁴ Initially, the unit admitted more of adults and the elderly who were given some proficiency in braille and more attention in vocational skills like cane weaving. The purpose was to empower these persons to participate in their own way to the welfare of their family and society at large.¹⁶⁵ One will wonder what this writing called braille was all about. The history of this great invention to foster inclusion for the visually impaired was fascinating and at this point deserves some clarification.¹⁶⁶

The use of this tactile writing initially presented a serious challenge to persons with visual impairments in the North West, especially in the special school established in Bafut and operated by the Tertiary sisters of St. Francis. The experts who had been taught the writing came from Italy and a home-based assistant tutor was equally recruited from the Bulu Blind institute in Buea, as it was commonly called. The sisters trained their personnel to meet up with increasing number of pupils with visual impairment that were admitted into the institution over the years. By the year 1990, the SAJOCAH school had rehabilitated about 35 persons with visual impairments in vocational skills and braille literacy. By 1991, persons like Peter Ngong Tonain

¹⁶⁴ Louis Braille, American Foundation for the Blind, accessed October 26, 2023, [<https://www.afb.org/about-afb/history/people-hall-fame/louis-braille>] (<https://www.afb.org/about-afb/history/people-hall-fame/louis-braille>).

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Evelyn, Shulika, Age 56, director of the Resource Room, SAJOCAH Bafut, 19 March 2024

¹⁶⁶ Braille, a tactile writing system used by people who were blind or visually impaired, have a rich history rooted in military communication and had evolved into a universally recognized tool for literacy and independence. The precursor to braille was a tactile code called "night writing" developed by Charles Barbier, a French army captain, in 1808. This code intended for soldiers to communicate silently and without light on the battlefield, used raised dots and dashes to represent phonetic sounds. However, soldiers found it difficult to learn and interpret, as it was based on sound rather than spelling, and contained complex combinations of dots and dashes.¹⁶⁶ Louis Braille, who was blind himself since childhood, encountered Barbier's code as a student at the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. Recognizing its potential, Braille simplified and refined the system. In 1824, at the age of 15, he developed his own tactile code, initially using 12 dots. By 1829, he had perfected the six-dot cell that forms the basis of modern braille. The development he gave to the writing earned the writing his name. It was then named after Louis Braille, as braille representing six dot writing.

It is therefore a system of raised dots representing letters, numbers, punctuation marks, and other symbols. Each character is formed within a cell containing six dots arranged in two columns of three. By varying the pattern of raised dots, 64 different combinations can be created. People read braille by running their fingertips over the raised dots. It allows for the writing and reading of everything from novels and textbooks to music scores and mathematical equations. Braille was crucial for literacy, education, and employment opportunities for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. It initially met with resistance, braille gradually gained acceptance within the blind community. In 1854, it was officially adopted by the Royal Institute for Blind Youth, and its use began to spread internationally. However, different countries and languages developed their own variations of braille, leading to inconsistencies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, efforts were made to standardize braille codes across languages. One significant advancement was the development of "Grade 2" braille, a contracted form that uses abbreviations and contractions to save space and increase reading speed. More recently, efforts were focused on developing Unified English Braille (UEB), a single braille code for all English-speaking countries, aiming to further streamline communication and reduce barriers to literacy. The evolution of braille continued, with great innovations in the last decade tilted toward technological adaptation. This led to new machines and systems like refreshable braille displays and braille printers.

were admitted into the school for rehabilitation. It should be noted that, before the children with visual impairments were admitted into the resource room, they were screened by an ophthalmologist to confirm that their situations could not be corrected by medical glasses, lenses or surgery.¹⁶⁷

Once admitted into the institution, the resource room facilitators took out time to reorient at these children and youths that there was hope and they could make it in life, if they are determined. This was geared at preparing the children's mind to forget the stigma home and focus on the skills they were to be taught. Other rules and regulations of the school were spelt out to these impaired individuals, before proper lessons began. The resource unit for the visually impaired had the objective of teaching the pupils how to navigate using the white cane that was given to them by the school. This was known as mobility orientation, which played a key role in their integration into the society and self -independence. Aside from mobility, they were exposed to the new writing braille, teaching them step by step, how to use the six dots to establish the alphabets, words and mathematical signs. Once the pupil could master these aspects, they were equally taught on how to feel the dots with their fingers and identify the letters, words or mathematical sums.¹⁶⁸

A majority of the pupils admitted into the special center if not all, had not undertaken primary education. Fortunately enough, the center was just next to the Catholic Primary School Mambu. There these visually impaired pupils after successfully completing their formation in braille, were admitted into primary one, two or three, as the case could be and based on the child's aptitude.¹⁶⁹ It was the only primary school in the entire division that accommodated this category of learners in regular school setting, aside from the special segregated class session in the resource room. Their integration into regular schools particularly the primary schools was facilitated by the presence of the special center where their scripts and problems could be quickly addressed by the special educational teachers. Between 1991-1997, SAJOCAH had over 45 visually impaired admitted pupils with a few of them including but not limited to Peter Ngong, Edwin Nsah, Godlove Suh, God love Ngwa, Stanley Ngoh, Edwin Lontum, Esther Mukete and several others.(see appendix 1),

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Evelyn, Shulika, 56, Directress of the Resouce Room, SAJOCAH Bafut, 19/03/2024

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Evelyn, Shulika

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Elijah Chia, Age 56, Resource Room instructor, SAJOCAH Bafut, 10 March 2024.

Prior to 1997, a few of those admitted and rehabilitated in SAJOCAH after completion of primary education actually enrolled into secondary schools. While in SAJOCAH, only the girls like Elizabeth Yilla, Mary Ndchang and Manka Grace had enrolled into the Vocational School for the Girls in Mambu at the time. This was because the school was reserved only for the females. Consequently, the males who had received rehabilitation in the 1980s did not go beyond primary school within the region. As a result, many went back home without enrolling into secondary schools in the region. A few who continued post-primary education did so as from 1991. The first male pupil to leave the primary school Mambu and be enrolled into a secondary school as a visually impaired was Ngong Peter Tonain in 1997-1998 academic year.¹⁷⁰ He was admitted into Government Secondary School Bafut as it was known at the time into form one, under special arrangements with the school administration and teachers. The staff of SAJOCAH had promised to take care of the scripts during transcription. As the years passed by, several more of these impaired guys were admitted into GSS Bafut until a closer institution was opened by the government in Mambu in the early 2000s. It is worth noting that, these impaired pupils though living in the dormitories of SAJOCAH, paid their fees and feeding every term, with the sisters of ST Francis subsidizing the cost of running the special center. It should be noted that the Catholic secondary school Mambu was initially only for the girls as it was called the Vocational High School for the Girls and later on ST Joseph Comprehensive High School. The institution could only admit girls who were suffering from visual impairments but not the boys. This explained why they have to go right to GSS Bafut and GSS Mambu, or GBHS Kumbo and ST Augustine Secondary College, for their secondary education until 2016, when schools were shut down by the Anglophone crisis.¹⁷¹ The institution had admitted and rehabilitated over 100 visually impaired persons by 2022. In the 1980s and 1990s, the institution had graduated 44 pupils with the number increasing rapidly between 2000 and 2015¹⁷². (See appendix 2 some admitted visually impaired students in secondary schools).

Following the gradual resumption of schools most of who were privately and mission-based institutions the Comprehensive Secondary College was transformed into Catholic Comprehensive Inclusive College in 2019. This meant, those with visual impairment were

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Peter Ngong Tonain,

¹⁷¹ Interview with Evelyn,

¹⁷² Interview with Peter Ngong Tonain,

admitted into the school that same academic year 2019-2020. Their admission and schooling was facilitated by sponsors like the Lillian Foundation. This NGO operated under the canopy of the Catholic Church Church. In Bamenda, CARITAS Bamenda supported these pupils and students with finances to pay their fees and rents. Their targeted population was from 0-25 years of age.¹⁷³

A testimony of the researcher who is also a visually impaired goes as thus,

In November 2019, I received the sum of 100000 from the Lillian Foundation, situated in Mankon Cathedral, in partnership with CARITAS Bamenda, to pay my house rent in Bambili. This aid came at the most-needy period of my life and I was grateful to the funders and appreciated them through the coordinator of the unit at the time Pa Christopher. That year, I was told it was my first and last time to benefit from the grant because I was already 25 years old¹⁷⁴.

Higher education within the ranks of the Catholic Church was exclusively quite expensive for persons with visual impairments. These persons mostly have very poor backgrounds and as a result, did not have the needed finances to be educated in Catholic higher institutions of learning, like the Catholic University in Mankon Bamenda II. The Catholics known for their benevolence rather had supported all graduates from SAJOCAH who had their formation in the special center, and were in different institutions of higher education, most of whom have been admitted into the University of Bamenda and Buea. Each academic year, aside from providing school fees assistance or house rents through the Lillian Foundation and CARITAS Bamenda, to those below 25, the Catholics occasionally supported some of these impaired with money to take care of their school needs. This was the case with the Catholic Church in Bambili that through its Christians supported Desmond Kum Nji with rents in 2019. This was just an example out of many who have received support from many other catholic oriented services in 2020. Kum Nji in an interview opined that:

I have been a beneficiary of the educational support the Lillian Foundation gave persons with impairments since I was admitted into SAJOCAH in 2004. Though I did not know when I was registered to the Lillian financial support scheme for education, I benefited from the organization until I was in my second year in the university. Apart from the foundation, I equally have received financial support in paying my rents when the Catholic Church Parish of Bambili in 2019 and 2020 paid my accommodation. I must confess, their financial assistance from different Catholic institutions had contributed to empowering me to become who I am today, especially educationally.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Interview with Joel Dam, Age 40, Cathedral Bamenda, 14 June 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Bertrand bafon Tokoh,

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Desmond Kum Nji, X-student of SAJOCAH, teacher and post-graduate student of UBa, Bambili, 21 June 2024.

Picture 1: Visually Impaired Students in the Resource Room at SAJOCAH



Figure 7 depicts visually impaired (VI) students in the resource room at SAJOCAH illustrating the educational environment and support available for these students. The image shows a classroom setting with several students engaged in various activities. The student is using a Perkins Braille which suggests the use of adaptive technology to facilitate learning for visually impaired individuals.

Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, April 2026

Cameroon Baptist Convention's empowerment Activities in education

The CBC was a major faith-based agency in the North West, whose existence and activities were tailored towards evangelization and improvement of the lives of vulnerable persons, like those living with visual impairment. As a leading missionary body whose strives in disability inclusion were glowing, especially in the 2000s. Though designed to operate as a Christian based organization, its activities and pentacles cover several domains, one of which was education.¹⁷⁶

The Cameroon Baptist Convention health sector popularly known as CBCHS was the primary organ of the institution that was positioned as an empowerment agency. This was because the organization have also integrated the medical model of impairment which understood that persons suffering from different impairments such as vision lost or visual impairment needed

¹⁷⁶ Robert E. Johnson, *A Global Introduction to Baptist Churches* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200.

more of medical attention. With the understanding that these persons had a medical problem or impairment, they took the lead in providing medical care and social rehabilitation where necessary. This was the bases for the institution to setup a special educational institution in Bansa for the “Blind” in 1984, called the Integrated School for the Blind, and that in Nkwen in 2018, called the CBC SIEP project Nkwen, as a strategy of ensuring that these persons were educated.¹⁷⁷

While operating the school for the “blind” in Bansa, the institution admitted persons with visual impairments from all over the nation with a good number of these pupils coming from Bui division, Ndonga-Mantum, Ngoketujia, Mezam, Boyo and Menchum divisions. Since the CBCHS has its headquarters in Bamenda and major hospitals in Bingo and Bansa, the organization often had penetrated the different communities of the region to educate the population on the need to educate persons with impairments. The sensitization of the general public about the need to give their children who were impaired access to education played a key role in fostering the empowerment process of persons with impairments in the nation at large. No doubt, the Integrated School for the Blind in Kumbo became a dominant rehabilitation and empowerment center in the region and nation as from 1990. For the pupils admitted into the resource room, braille training was given to them. This represented a powerful tool to their gradual integration into the society. The key role the Integrated school for the Blind in Kumbo played in fostering social inclusion was in the field of education. Operated as an educational rehabilitation unit, the special center provided mobility orientation to these impaired learners, braille literacy, elementary education and basic hygiene.¹⁷⁸

While originally designed to empower visually impaired learners educationally, the center in Kumbo established partnerships with different private and public secondary schools in Bui division, where her Braille facilitators could easily be deployed. This explained why the institution quickly gained grounds in the region by the year 2000, attracting these type of learners from different part of the nation. The reason for this was because, most empowerment centers out of the region and Bui to be précised were not very inclusive and lacked the human and technical resources to foster the educational empowerment of these persons, especially after

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Magdalynne Kutua, Age 60, retired supervisor for the resource center for the visually impaired in CBCHS, Nkwen, 11 July 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Mary Mbu Funge, Age 50s, resource room instructor in CBCHS, Nkwen, 11 July 2024.

primary school. It should be noted here that, the CBCHS in collaboration with the Cameroon Baptist Educational Board had admitted and educated persons with visual impairments in all their institutions. This was due to the organizations kin interest in providing persons with impairments with all the needed opportunities to be educated¹⁷⁹.

It should be noted that, the Catholics, the resource room of the institution in Banso and that in Nkwen had a primary and secondary school next to their empowerment centers, where these pupils received their primary and secondary education. This strategy was used by both Faith Based Organizations because they had taken upon themselves to ensure that this category of individuals were not completely segregated from societal normal functions. The CBC primary school Kumbo from the year 1985, provided primary education to these impaired individuals who were often admitted into different classes(class two, three or four), according to their learning abilities and intelligent considerations. Their rehabilitation in the resource center in braille and other basic orientations, capable of enabling them function well, usually took one to two years for those who had never been to school at all, and less than a year for those who became blind while already at a certain level of education, especially post-primary education. Nkwen SIEP special center, as from 2018 admitted and educated children with visual impairments from class one to six. Being an inclusive primary institution, the school had all the needed resource materials that could enable them provide these learners the opportunity to be educated in a regular classroom with almost no prejudices.¹⁸⁰

In 1991, the Integrated School for the Blind successfully admitted the first visually impaired in the North West Region into a public secondary school. This was GBHS Kumbo with Daniel Chamba enrolled into form one. His appearance into the public regular classroom out of the special mission friendly primary school next to the rehabilitation center was one of its kind. The news of his presence in a secondary school quickly attracted those that had completed primary schools in other areas like Bafut and the west region to move into Kumbo, where dominance of the CBC in inclusionary activities was gaining more prominence. Schools like Joseph Meric Baptist College Ndu, Chaffee Memorial Baptist College Kumbo, ST Augustine Secondary College Kumbo, Government Secondary High School Bamisin, Government Bilingual High

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Chamba,

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Mary Mbu Funge,

School Kumbo and Bamenda, and the University of Bamenda by the years 1991-2012, had all become inclusive institutions where persons with visual impairment received their regular secondary education in the North West Region of Cameroon, supervised and assisted humanly and technically by the CBCHS, as far as facilitating learning for the visually impaired was concern.¹⁸¹

Between the years 1984 and 2024, the CBC's special educational center in Kumbo and Nkwen alongside it partnered institutions had rehabilitated and educated hundreds of visually impaired persons in the region. The statistics though not completely covered by the current study, the field research work revealed that 90 percent of visually impaired in the north west and neighboring west region had directly received their empowerment in a CBC establishment or partnered institution like the government schools and state university in the region. Persons like Daniel Chamba, Julius Kpunsack, Ngum John Nchung, Isabelle Wirndzerem, Dian Binla, Loveline Ndi, Rafael Neba, Lucy Tata and several others not mentioned here all received their first rehabilitation and empowerment from Baptist resource units (see appendix 3 on some X-students of CBC special centers). One key thing to note about the CBC was that, the institution was a major advocate for the education of persons with visual impairments. Understanding that most families that had this category of vulnerable persons were poor, the organization ensured that they lobbied for sponsorship for most of these children, especially after primary education. The Cameroon Health and Educational Fund (CHEF) through the CBCHS had sponsored a good number of visually impaired persons by providing the finances and resource materials needed to facilitate the educational empowerment process of these children. For instance, in 2010, Bertrand Bafon a visually impaired student received financial support from the CHEF through the CBCHS for his educational expenses¹⁸².

In 2009, the CBC introduced a new program known as Socio-Economic Empowerment of persons with Disabilities (SEEPD), which was designed to empower persons with impairments socially, economically and even politically. In the domain of education, the program played a key role in reshaping how education provided for persons with impairments, especially the visually impaired was done. In 2010, SEEPD advocated for the establishment of an inclusive

¹⁸¹ Interview with Bafon Emmanuel, Age 50s, visually Impaired, teacher, oku, 12 November 2025.

¹⁸² Interview with Bertrand Bafon Tokoh,

center in Government Secondary Schools in Bamenda. This was achieved in 2012 when the CBC through its SEEPD program, partnered with the PTA association of GBHS Bamenda to build and equip a resource room center for the school. This center became the first government resource unit in GBHS Bamenda to care for the visually impaired in both primary and secondary schools. This was a significant giant step realized by the CBC through its SEEPD program.¹⁸³ The program equally advocated for the inclusion of persons with visual impairments in other educational establishments in Bamenda like the University of Bamenda, providing resources and adapted materials for the university in 2019. Some of the materials provided for the university to fully operate a resource unit for persons with impairments were computers and braille embosser¹⁸⁴.

It should be recalled that, The University of Bamenda (UBa) was created on the 12th of December 2010; by decree No. 2010/371, after the installation of the first Vice Chancellor Prof Edokat Tafah Edward. The SEEPD team led by Prof Tih Pius, former director of CBCHS met the Vice Chancellor of the University of Bamenda in 2015. Top on their agenda was to discuss disability inclusion measures the university could undertake. The outcome of the meeting was the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in 2015. This MOU was aimed at facilitating collaboration and advancement in inclusive education, while providing the teaching staff of the university and students with skills that could foster the teaching learning, process for students with impairment in UBa¹⁸⁵.

The CBCHS was actively communicating with UBa in a bid to successfully attain the objectives of the MoU. To trigger the pedagogically inclusion of students with visually impaired, the CBCHS in 2017 donated equipment worth over 7.9 million CFA to the University of Bamenda, for setting up an inclusive resource Centre to facilitate teaching and learning for lecturers and students with visual impairment. The donation of the equipment was within the framework of a partnership formalized in 2015 between CBCHS and UBa.¹⁸⁶ These equipment included; eight desktop computers, a Perkin Braille machine, a projector, digital recorders, magnifier, JAWS

¹⁸³ Interview with Clarence Neigo Ngala, age 42, administrative assistant of CBR SEEPD, Nkwen CBCHS, 23 October 2024.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Jacques Chirac Awa, Age 45, Manager of SEEPD program of CBCHS, Nkwen, 8 February 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Resource Centre, UBa. 19/07/2024

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Clarence Neigo Ngala,

for (Job Access with Speed) windows, a three in one scanner, a photocopier and printer, nine talking watches talking calculators, football with jingles among others. During the handing over ceremony on June 19th, 2017 at UBa Campus the Director of CBCHS, Prof. Tsih Pius expressed satisfaction with the University of Bamenda. It was worth noting that by the MoU partnership, the CBCHS through her SEEPD programme was regarded as a technical partner by UBa on matters of disability, inclusion and development¹⁸⁷.

The CBC by 2015, had been collaborating with the university of Bamenda administration to braille entrance examinations into HTTC each year they have students register for the examinations. In 2015, 2016 and 2018, the organization braille entrance examinations for HTTC and transcribed the scripts of the learners who wrote in braille. Aside from transcribing, the Cameroon GCE examinations were transcribed by CBC braille specialist since 1996.¹⁸⁸ In 2014, the organization donated the GCE board an embosser for the brailing of exams scripts for those with visual impairments¹⁸⁹.

In order to facilitate the education of persons with visual impairment, the CBCHS implemented several projects on the University of Bamenda's campus. Some of these projects included the refurbishment of a resource learning Centre by 2020, building of accessible toilets for male and female impaired persons in 2021 and the construction of ramps leading to lecture halls by 2022. Capacity training workshops on how to better be inclusive in the teaching of persons with visual impairments were frequently organized by the CBCHS for the teaching and administrative staff of UBa. One of such capacity workshops were organized in 2015, 2018, 2019 and 2021, during which lecturers and administrators were taught inclusive practices.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷, Resource Centre, UBa. 19/07/2024

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Mary Mbu Funge,

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Clarence Neigo Ngala, Age 42, Administrative assistance of CBR SEEPD, Nkwen CBCHS, 23 October 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Florence Tunyi, 48, head of services for clubs and Associations, Bambili, 30 May 2024.

Plate 4: Visually Impaired Children of Nkwen Baptist Primary and Secondary school



Plate 4 illustrates the educational environment for visually impaired (VI) children at Nkwen Baptist Primary and Secondary School, highlighting the initiatives taken to facilitate their education and inclusion. The first image shows a classroom setting with empty chairs and tables, indicating a space designed for learning. The second image features a group of VI children standing outside, equipped with white canes. Their smiles and unity indicate a sense of community and support among the students. The presence of canes signifies their training in mobility skills, essential for fostering independence and confidence in navigating their surroundings. The last image captures students seated at a desk, actively engaged in learning. This setting underscores the importance of inclusive teaching practices, aligning with the initiatives mentioned in the text about capacity training workshops for educators on how to accommodate visually impaired students

Source: field notes by Bertrand Bafon, November 20, 2025

In all, the CBC remained a key agency in the empowerment process of persons with visual impairments in the domain of education. Educational materials tailored for the inclusion of visually impaired individuals for the most case was donated by the CBCHS to other stakeholders in the division. For instance, apart from donating to the university of Bamenda in 2017, and 2019, the institution equally has donated braille materials like slates, stylus, embossers, talking software's for computers like JAWS and NVDA alongside computers to the GCE Board, the

regional Delegation of Secondary Education for North West and ST Joseph Children and Adult Home Bafut, between the years 2014-2020 respectively.

Economic and Vocational empowerment

Faith-based institutions played a decisive role in the economic and vocational empowerment of persons with visual impairment in Cameroon, particularly in periods and regions where state intervention and private sector inclusion have remained weak. Among the most prominent actors in this domain were the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) and the Catholic Church, whose missionary and social service traditions have long combined spiritual care with practical responses to social vulnerability. Through vocational training, income-generating activities, literacy programs, and moral support, these institutions had contributed significantly to the socio-economic inclusion of visually impaired persons, especially in the North West Region of Cameroon. The ideological foundation of faith-based empowerment within both the CBC and Catholic missions was deeply rooted in Christian theology, which emphasizes the inherent dignity of every human being. Disability, within this framework, is not interpreted as a curse or personal tragedy but as a social condition requiring collective responsibility. Biblical teachings on compassion, service, and justice have historically motivated these churches to move beyond almsgiving toward structured empowerment initiatives. For the CBC, Baptist missionary ethics emphasized self-help, discipline, and productive labor, while Catholic social teaching, influenced by principles of human dignity and the preferential option for the poor, framed disability care as an obligation of social justice. These theological orientations shaped institutional responses that prioritized skills acquisition and economic independence for visually impaired persons.

Vocational activities

In the domain of vocational training, persons with visual impairment received training in the development of skills in weaving, hand craft and small-scale production of some detergents like Savon, Omo, Eau De Javel, Sanitizers and liquid soap. The government played a key role in this domain through its Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training. Persons with impairments in 2011, received training on vocational skills organized by the Ministry of Vocational training during which some two visually impaired persons were empowered on how to produce Omo and Savon. This training workshop was organized in collaboration with CUAPWD. This was due to

the consistent advocacy CUAPWD and the CBCHS have carried out in the division. In collaboration with the Ministry of Small and Medium Size industries, persons with impairments like Samuel Nyingcho were assisted with startup capital to boost their weaving activity¹⁹¹.

The CBCHS was a key empowering agency in the domain of vocational trainings, empowering persons with impairment on weaving skills. Persons like Nyingcho Samuel was the first visually impaired to receive empowerment in vocational skills of weaving in the Mbingo Rehabilitation Center in 1995. After receiving training on cane weaving, he returned to fish point hill Bamenda II where he operated a cane weaving workshop for over 20 years, during which he trained other persons with visual impairment in the craft like Stanley Ngoh. Added to the key role the CBC played was the vocational training given to impaired persons in SAJOCAH workshop. Persons with visual impairments like God love Suh, Ngwa God-love Julius Amabo and several others were given training in cane weaving by the Catholics as from 2000 to 2010.¹⁹²

Women with visual impairment were noted to have involved in vocational skills in the domain of producing liquid soaps, Omo and sanitizers. These were vocational skills the CBC through their workshops and training sessions, trained some of these women in producing these materials in 2017, 2021 and 2022. 18 persons with impairments most of whom were albinos were equally trained by CUAPWD in collaboration with the CBCHS in 2022, on how to produce some products for sell in their homes. These products ranged from Cocoa beverage, Bleach, Vaseline, Menthol Balm and Liquid detergent. They were all given start-up capital and material to start up their businesses thereby, fostering their economic empowerment¹⁹³.

The Women Empowerment and the Family in collaboration with Center for the Empowerment of Females with Disabilities trained women with visual impairment with the production of detergents and liquid soap. These women who were selected from Santa sub division received a three-day workshop during which a step-by-step guide on the production of detergent and liquid soap was given to them. These women were able to practicalize this and at the end of the seminar they were all given materials to produce in large quantities and market in their respective

¹⁹¹ Interview with Samuel Nyingcho,

¹⁹² Interview with Joyceline Ngum,

¹⁹³ Interview with Elizabeth Yilla,

communities. This was the first of its kind from the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family towards women with visual impairments in Santa Sub division in 2021.

Furthermore, the CBCHS in partnership with CUAPWD, took care of the bills of 7 women with impairments, some of whom were visually impaired in a training session on modern techniques of producing designer bags, shoes and dresses. This training was organised by the Bamenda women's empowerment centre in partnership with an expert sister centre in West Africa, in 2021. At the end of this exercise, these women with impairments were contracted by another civil society organization to further train 28 more internally displaced women with impairments. Among these women that were trained were visually impaired like Elizabeth Yilla and Loveline Lum¹⁹⁴. Girls like Bafon Collette and Bafon Stella were equally given some training in the second phase of the empowerment initiative. They were able to produce bags using beads, sandals, bangles and chains. The United Youth's Organization (UYO) provided these participants with start -up capital worth 50000 CFA each to boost their business in beads production¹⁹⁵.

Picture 2: Liquid Soap Produced by Visually Impaired women



Picture 2 shows an array of liquid soap bottles produced by women with visual impairments, highlighting their involvement in vocational skills training aimed at economic empowerment. Prominently displayed on the labels is the text "WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND THE FAMILY CENTER" along with the location "SANTA." This branding emphasizes the initiative's focus on empowering women and promoting their products.

Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, March 2025

Agriculture

Beyond vocational skills training, both the CBC and Catholic missions promoted economic empowerment through income-generating activities like agriculture. Graduates of vocational

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Loveline Lum,

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Collette Bafon

centers were often supported with basic tools, start-up materials, or small grants to establish independent livelihoods. In some cases, Catholic churches organized cooperative workshops where visually impaired artisans worked collectively under church supervision. Church networks also functioned as informal markets, as congregations were encouraged to patronize goods and services produced by visually impaired members. This model not only provided income but also enhanced social visibility and acceptance within local communities, challenging prevailing stereotypes of dependency and incapacity.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of UNO in collaboration with CARITAS Bamenda trained some persons with visual impairments in urban farming technics. This training that took place for one week in Cathedral Mankon in 2022 saw persons with visual impairment received training on how to keep fish and green gardens around their homes. At the end of the training, some persons with visual impairment in attendance like Peter Ngong, Bertrand bafon Tokoh, Vitalis Nde, Julius Amabo, David Mbimenang, Loveline Lum, Valentine Djomo and Elizabeth Yilla among others not listed here received either a fish pun and fingerlings to farm, or spices of different kinds to be cultivated in potable gardens donated by the organizers. They equally received financial assistance to boost the farming business worth 120000 CFA each¹⁹⁶.

The Catholics in SAJOCAH had provided in their curriculum training on how to carry out local farming at home. These pupils while in the resource room were taught some basic farming technics with some of them trained on how to rear animals like pigs. Though this was done with the assistance of their family relatives, a good number of them were noted to be involved in pig raring, while others in poultry farming. Individuals like God love Ngwa and Julius were noted to have received training on poultry farming¹⁹⁷.

Healthcare empowerment activities

Of equal importance was the fact that, health care for persons with impairments was greatly given attention to by the catholic, Baptist and even the Presbyterian missions. These Christian missionary bodies while operating under the Medical Disability model opened up their hospitals and clinics for persons who were suffering from impairments. Though they did not completely

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Julius Amabo, age 40s, cane weaver, 11 January 2026.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with David Mbimenang, age 50s, poultry farmer, Nkwen, 15 February 2025.

treat these persons for free, they for the most case organized free screening and testing for persons with impairments. This was because the persons with impairments came from poor backgrounds and could not afford medical bills often to do constant checks and ensure preventable diseases were tackled. For instance, the catholic through her Njinikom hospital and Bafut clinic in the 1970, consulted a variety of persons with impairments which provoked them to establish a special educational center just next to its healthcare unit in Bafut for persons with impairment. This unit have an eye department where even pupils with impairment were given eye care treatment and management while in school as from 1982¹⁹⁸.

The CBCHS on their part were key empowerment agents in the domain of healthcare for persons with visual impairments. Dedicated towards ameliorating the welfare of persons with impairments, the institution opened an eye department in her major hospitals of Banso, Bingo and Nkwen, between the years 1949, 1952 and 2017, when the health center in Nkwen Baptist center was transformed into a full flesh hospital.¹⁹⁹ These hospitals provided the population of the region eye care control and prevention services for PWI. Known for their dedication towards empowerment, the agency organized free screening campaigns for persons with visual impairment through the SEEPD program in 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2018, during which persons with impairments were screened on a variety of disease like HIV, Cancer, Urinary Track Infections (UTI) Non communicable diseases and eye problems. These categories of individuals during this screening were educated on how to manage, control and prevent these diseases in the society they live in²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Elijah Chia,

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Joyceline Ngum, age 30s, CBR staff of CBC, Nkwen, 17 November 2025.

²⁰⁰ Interview with Humphrey Njeba, Age 41, medical doctor, 11 January 2026.

Picture 3: Persons with Impairments receiving medical check up from CBCHS health persons



Plate 10 depicts a scene from a medical check-up event organized for persons with visual impairments and other individuals in need of healthcare services. The image provides insights into the healthcare initiatives facilitated by the CBCHS and its partnerships aimed at improving the welfare of persons with disabilities.

Source: field work by Researcher, Bertrand Bafon Tokoh, 12 November 2025

As the saying goes “health is wealth” faith-based organizations in partnership with the state and other non-state agencies like CUAPWD as from 2010, had carried out several advocacy campaigns for the inclusion of persons with impairments in all domains of societal life, including given them access to quality healthcare and treatment. It was against this prism that, CUAPWD, a lead organization for all Associations of Persons with Disabilities, signed a partnership with the CBCHS SEEPD program in 2010, to advocate and ensure persons with impairments in the North West Region were enjoying access to health care services. The outcome of this collaborative action from CUAPWD, the state and faith base organizations like the CBCHS yielded results in 2011, 2014, 2017 and 2022 when CUAPWD championed the sensitization process of persons with impairments about the different healthcare services available for them to access and benefit from. In this light, over 45 impaired persons some of whom were visually impaired benefited from laboratory testing in some diseases like HIV, hypertension, diabetes, Hepatitis B, prostate-cancer, cervical cancer and what was called “knowing your numbers”.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Interview with Samuel Nyincho, Age 50 former coordinator of CUAPWD, Bamenda, 11 October 2025.

Moreover, in 2013 and 2019, the CBCHS and CUAPWD implemented a series of healthcare service programs specifically for persons with impairments, some of which were for women and others for both males and females with impairments to ensure they were not suffering from some diseases without taking proper treatment. Some of the healthcare programs implemented by the CBCHS for PWI included, eye consultation, psycho-social services and counseling, screening of cervical cancer, prostate cancer, malaria and dental health. Some of these persons were treated and given drugs for free. This was the reality in the 2017 and 2018 healthcare programs that provided free drugs to over 42 persons worth 8000 FRS CFA each, while those with HIV were enrolled into the monthly drug subscription.²⁰² It should be noted that the community based approach of sensitizing persons with impairments on how to prevent, manage and accept some health conditions was adopted by the CBCHS Community Base Rehabilitation service unit to fast track the accessible nature persons with impairments were exposed to as far as health care was concern²⁰³.

In 2022, Seventy-two (72) leaders of Organizations of Persons with impairments in the 7 Divisions of the North West Region were empowered with knowledge and skills in Good Eye Health practices and the prevention of COVID-19 by the CBCHS. The workshop that held in Mezam particularly in Bamenda town, culminated in the leaders drawing a clear plan of action which guided their sensitization messages throughout the rest of 2022. In effect 61 Organizations of Persons with impairments and 53 community groups were sensitized in good inclusive practices in eye-care and COVID-19.²⁰⁴ Out of the 72 participants, 25 of them were from Mezam and their role in educating persons in their communities about health inclusion measures resulted to them empowering several key individuals in the communities of Pinyin, Awing, Bambui, Babanki, Bafut and Nkwen with inclusive health practices²⁰⁵. In Nkwen for instance, the district hospital declared a 50 percent reduction in the bills of persons with impairments whose incapacitated nature was 60%and above.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Interview with Humphrey Njeba

²⁰³ Interview with Humphrey Njeba

²⁰⁴ Interview with Vitalis Nde, 30 protection Officer of CUAPWD, Bamenda, 14 December 2025.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Kenchi,

²⁰⁶ Interview with Romarick Tume, 27, programme officer of CUAPWD, Bamenda, 22 April 2024

Social advocacy and societal acceptance

The social domain of empowerment was designed to fight against all forms of discrimination. It's about recognizing and dismantling the social barriers that prevented persons with visual impairments from exercising their agency, accessing opportunities, and participating fully in society. This was about more than just inclusion, but about creating a world where impairment was not a barrier to achieving one's aspirations. We will explore how interventions designed by faith-based institutions like the CBC and Catholics in collaboration with persons with visual impairments themselves, were crucial for shaping a more equitable society for all. In fact, imagine a world where accessibility isn't an afterthought, where attitudes are inclusive, and where PWVI have the resources and support they need to thrive. This is the vision that drives the social domain of empowerment for PWDs. It's a multi-faceted approach that tackles societal barriers head-on, from discriminatory policies and inaccessible environments to negative stereotypes and limited opportunities.

Cameroon, a nation striving for inclusive growth, had been faced with critical challenges in ensuring the full social inclusion of persons with impairments into the society. These categories of persons were often referred to as “those with no use” and discriminated upon at all levels²⁰⁷. Their segregation from the society was at its peak prior to the 1970. Although the government of Cameroon had initiated measures geared at stimulating social inclusion of persons with impairments into the society, its implementation mechanism was weak, consequently yielding fewer results. This explained why in 1982 when the current study takes off, the reality for many PWVI was still one of marginalization and non-participation in society²⁰⁸.

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), such as the CBC played a significant role in fostering the social inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in the North West Region of Cameroon. Their influence stems from their deep community roots, extensive networks, moral authority, and commitment to serving vulnerable populations. The CBC, in particular, had leveraged its

²⁰⁷ Interview with Nyincho,

²⁰⁸ Interview with Humphrey Njeba

religious teachings, social services, and community engagement to promote the well-being and inclusion of PWI²⁰⁹.

The CBC made use of its religious platforms (sermons, Bible studies, workshops) to promote a theology of inclusion, emphasizing the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of impairment. They had since 1982, challenged negative stereotypes and promoted acceptance and respect for PWI in their various congregations. They equally conducted awareness campaigns within their congregations and broader communities to educate people about disability rights, dispel myths, and encouraged inclusive practices. This was very visible in the 1980s, when the institution had established a special educational institution for persons with visual impairment. Through the Baptist radio, the community was educated on the rights of persons with impairment during which the population of Bamenda was sensitized over radio programs on the need to be socially friendly and accommodating to persons with impairments²¹⁰.

It should be noted that, the social exclusion of persons with impairments from society's normal functions was not only done by the community in which they live in, but also by their families of origin. This was impairment was considered as wish craft, with families having the belief that persons or children with impairment did not and could not fulfill the role that children are supposed to fulfill. An interviewee explained that the parents of these kids do not love the children. These are parents who believe that these children cannot be of any use to them when they grow up. A believe the societies in Mezam shared. This is because children in Cameroonian culture were very important, since they were part of the social wealth and were expected to take care of their parents when they are old. Children with impairment themselves were considered not able to play this role, and so consequently were discriminated upon. However, these traditional believes were being challenged by the key role NGOs and faith-based organizations like the CBCHS were involved in. they advocated that disability was a medical problem for the most case, and a combination of impairment, activity limitation and social participation. Through

²⁰⁹ Z. Mohammed "Easy Access, Easy Wins? Advocating for Inclusive Education in Cameroon," (Unpublished thesis, 2016): 31.

²¹⁰ Interview with Kenchi,

their advocacy, they successfully shifted the negative perception of impairment fostering more social inclusion²¹¹.

The overall objective of the SEEPD program of the CBCHS was to ensure social inclusion at all levels, be it education, community participation, economic activities and livelihood, political representation and participation and access to all government services and institutions²¹². During the first years of its existence, the SEEPD, advocated for social inclusion at the family levels. Educated parents, relatives and communities show how to socially include persons with impairment in their societal activities. Between 2009-2011, the program educated even the persons with visual impairment on their rights to be educated, exposing them to areas where they could be enrolled into educational institutions. As one of its major aims, the SEEPD, wanted to increase the number of students and pupils with impairment schooling in regular government schools in Mezam. This led to the first government center for inclusion in the division and region of North West at large in 2012.

The development of slogans like “Disability is not inability” by the CBC through her sensitization campaigns for social inclusion of persons with impairment, gradually changed societal attitude towards PWVI. Through this dictum, the general population and communities of Mezam division were educated on the abilities persons with impairment have and how they could actualize these potentials in them, if the society was more accommodating. These were messages of social inclusion carried out by the CBC through their SEEPD program in 2009, 2010 and 2011. During these campaigns, persons with impairments themselves, their families, Parents, teachers and Parents Teachers Associations were empowered on inclusive practices, with the regional delegates for secondary and basic education empowered and educated on inclusive measures within public institutions of learning in the division²¹³. This brought together divisional delegates for secondary education in the North West and sub divisional delegates for Basic education for empowerment in 2011-2012 successively²¹⁴.

²¹¹ Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services (CBCHS), “About SEEPD,” retrieved on 18 /11/2023, from [HTTP://CBCHEALTHSERVICES.ORG/SEEPDblog/about-SEEPD](http://CBCHEALTHSERVICES.ORG/SEEPDblog/about-SEEPD).

²¹² Interview with Jack Chirac

²¹³ Interview with Jack Chirac

²¹⁴ Interview with Eleanor Mbah

It is worth noting that, through lobbying, they directed their sensitization to a wide variety of audiences to create support for persons with impairments throughout the whole nation and communities of Mezam to be précised. The identified targeted audiences included; the general population, persons with Disabilities, parents of PWDs, school personnel, traditional community leaders, religious community leaders, mayors and staffs, regional authorities. The SEEPD activities to reach the targeted audiences were chosen according to a twin-track strategy and internal presentations. As already noted, within the first track, they empowered persons with impairments and their families, while providing mobility aid, communication devices, and awareness racing, training on rights and advocacy. In the second track, they implemented mainstream disability rights of persons with disabilities in all sectors of the society. This was to ensure persons with impairment fully participated and have access to all healthcare services, education, recreational facilities, and social services.²¹⁵

To achieve this, the CBCHS ensured persons with impairments were involved in the planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all action plans in all sectors of the society. As from 2012-2014, the focused was on training teachers on inclusive practices, appointed led persons within pilot schools and the donation of embosser for brailing of exams to the GCE board. Regional delegates were empowered; teacher training colleges like Government Teachers Training College (GTTC) Bamenda and the GCE board team were empowered. Activities geared at reaching a larger general public on inclusive measures resulted to 30 teachers trained on inclusive teaching practices, with over 50 targeted audience from the general public in the communities of Mezam sensitized and trained on inclusive practices from across different sectors²¹⁶. The outcome of these sensitization campaigns through knowledge provision and material donations stimulated the rate of social inclusion for persons with visual impairment in the North West Region, especially in the domain of education and healthcare.

These advocacy efforts of the CBCHS yielded positive results in the domain of social inclusion in that, a good number of visually impaired were found increasingly participating in sports and recreational activities like cultural festivals and musical shows. In 2020, persons with visual impairment performed at the regional delegation for arts and Culture for the first time. They

²¹⁵ Interview with Mirabel Fai, age 30s, staff CBCHS, SEEPD, 17 December 2025.

²¹⁶ Interview with Eleanor Mbah, age 40s, coordinator of Rehabilitation resource Center GBHS Bamenda, 11 May 2024.

equally performed in musical competitions in 2022, with persons like Kumo Louisa and Mishie Blaise participating in a cultural festival in Nkwen in 2022. The University of Bamenda have equally received the construction of accessible toilets for impaired persons in the University campus in 2022, as well as ramps to foster access to university lecture rooms. This among many other socially accepted behaviors from regional state authorities and institutions like UBa were thanks to the key role the CBCHS played. No doubt even at the level of social housing for students in the university, students with visual impairment just like any other impaired individual was given preference upon application as from 2019 academic year²¹⁷.

The Catholics and the Presbyterians on their part were very instrumental in promoting social inclusion for persons with visual impairment. Through their inclusive church messages, persons with visual impairment were noted to have participated in different church activities like singing, dancing and leading some aspects of the church programs. This social acceptance at the level of the church enabled Christians to understand the abilities persons with impairments were endowed with. In the Catholic church of Bambili, Mile IV and Bayelle, persons with visual impairments like Desmond Kum Nji, Peter Tonain and Nsah Edwin for instance were actively involved in church leading activities such as reading of “first and second readings” during service. Persons like Moki Midrate and Kumo Louisa were renounce singers and leaders in the church choir in Mile IV Namoh and Bambili respectively.²¹⁸ Others in the different catholic congregations in Bafut, Ntarrikun, Santa and Bali were noted to have participated actively in church activities, attracting admiration from other Christians. Persons with visual impairment have even led some church groups as presidents like the Christian Men Fellowship (CMF) of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon. One of such persons with visual impairment was Nyingcho Samuel, who was the president of CMF for two different terms of office.²¹⁹

In order to foster the inclusion of PWVIs into the social life of the society, the Catholic Church provided persons with visual impairments a hall to host their regular monthly social meetings in Bayelle in 2019. This became the meeting point of HSUVI members every last Sunday of the month. It should be noted that, these meetings have been initially held in the Dos office in Mile IV Bamenda III. The association has been suffering from a space where they could converge

²¹⁷ Interview with bafon,

²¹⁸ Interview with Midrate Muki, age 30, trader, Nkwen, 14 November 2025.

²¹⁹ Interview with Nyingcho

every month for their meetings and social interactions, and the only spot that welcomed them and gave them a permanent place was the Catholic Church²²⁰. Also, these persons through the catholic relief services have advocated for full inclusion into recreational facilities in 2017 during which some impaired persons were assisted to engage in singing competition²²¹.

Sports and Cultural Integration

As far as sport and cultural inclusion was concern, persons with impairment have been empowered to participate in sporting activities nationally and internationally. Persons with visual impairment in Mezam were involved in different sporting activities such as Goal ball.²²² This was the most common sporting activity persons in Mezam were involved into, with the government through its regional delegation for social affairs, Ministry of Sport and Physical Education donating Goal balls to some special educational institutions, like that in Buea and GBHS Bamenda²²³. Students with visual impairment in the University of Bamenda have participated in Goal Ball competition with other visually impaired sporting clubs in UBa campus and Yaounde, in 2018-2019. In 2022, the team performed powerfully in the national competition amongst the different visually impaired clubs organized by the national federation for the visually impaired, under the auspices of the Ministry of Sport and Physical Education.²²⁴ During these competitions, the social affairs and ministry of sports as well as the fans of the sporting activity massively supported the team from Bamenda, made up of some individuals like Desmond Kum Nji, Simon Tafah, Silas Mbuh, Clement Ndim Yuh and a host of others²²⁵.

Other sporting activities those with visual impairment were empowered to participate in included; Blind Football, Showdown, Athletics, Judo, Cycling, Chess, short put and Diskuss. Clement was noted to be a champion in short put and Diskuss as from 2021. He warned the national medal for best short-put and became an African champion for short put in Morocco, participating in world short put competition in 2022 in France. His achievements in sporting

²²⁰ Interview with John Achu, age 50s, visually impaired and trader, 13 November 2025.

²²¹ Interview with John Achu,

²²² This is a team sport specifically designed for athletes with visual impairments. Players use a ball with bells inside and must defend their goal by blocking the ball with their bodies. All players wear eyeshavees to ensure fair competition regardless of the degree of vision.

²²³ Interview with Fidel Tancho, Age 40s, president of the Federation for the Visually Impaired for the north West Region, Nkwen, 18 December 2025.

²²⁴ Interview with Clement Ndim Yuh,

²²⁵ Interview with Fidel Tancho,

activities were facilitated by the government empowerment and inclusive practices given to him during national and international competitions²²⁶.

As far as the role of faith-based organizations was concern, the Baptist and the Catholics were giant empowerment agencies in the domain of sports and recreation. The Catholics trained persons with visual impairments in SAJOCAH how to participate in sporting activities by training them on how to play goalball. The CBCHS equally empowered these individuals on how to play Goal Ball in their center in Nkwen. These different special educational institutions in SAJOCAH and Nkwen owned and operated by the Catholics and Baptist respectively have the Goal Ball for these learners with impairment. In their teaching curriculum at the resource room, they have sports as a subject where they were taught physical exercises and how to play ball.²²⁷ Even when they were admitted into regular schools, they participated in sporting activities aided by faith base organizations like the CBCHS. For instance, the CBC had donated sporting equipment's to the Government Bilingual Secondary High School Bamenda and the University of Bamenda in 2012 and 2019 respectively. This was to aid the students with visual impairment be integrated into sporting activities during sporting competitions organized by the schools²²⁸.

The CBCHS SEEPD program had also organized sporting activities for persons with visual impairments in Mezam in 2016. During this sporting competition, the visually impaired in the division converged in Bamenda town, grouping themselves into clubs. A Goal Ball match was organized in the CBCHS field in Nkwen during which teams of three persons competed among themselves, until a club won the competition. Each team was made up of three visually impaired players on each side, throwing the ball that have jingles embedded in them and played the ball by throwing with their hands. In participation were visually impaired who were traders, weavers, students from the university of Bamenda and GBHS Bamenda. Added to the Goal Ball competition was the marathon race organized too by the CBCHS for the visually impaired. During this race, which took place from Saint Paul Junction Nkwen to Commercial Street, Vitalis Nde emerged victorious winning the first position²²⁹.

²²⁶ Interview with Fidel Tancho,

²²⁷ Interview with Mary Mbu Fonge,

²²⁸ Interview with Eleanor Mbah,

²²⁹ Interview with Vitalis Nde Tangeh, age 30s, Visually Impaired and Protection Officer of CUAPWD, Nkwen, 11 December 2025..

Plate 5: Visually impaired involved in sports (goal ball)



The figure showcases various scenes of visually impaired individuals participating in sports, specifically focusing on the Goal Ball competition organized by the CBCHS SEEPD program in Mezam. This image captures players engaged in a Goal Ball match. The players are shown in dynamic positions, indicating active participation in the game. Their movements indicate a competitive spirit as they throw the ball and attempt to score, showcasing their engagement in the sport.

Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, November 2025

Digital Empowerment

Persons with visual impairment for a long time were considered people who could not make use of any digital technology, since they were “blind” and could not make use of technological

equipment like computers and phones. In 2011, persons with visual impairment in Mezam were gradually been exposed to the world of technology with them been empowered with knowledge in computer. The CBC through its partnerships with some American individuals like Barbra Johnson and the Thom Welty's family changed the narrative for persons with visual impairment in Mezam as far as digital inclusion was concerned²³⁰. Some individuals like Isabel Wirndzerem, Daniel Chamba and Bertrand bafon were trained by a digital expert from USA in 2013 to 2015 with each of these persons receiving a laptop computer from the Welty's Family, through a partnership with the Empowerment Disability Inclusive Development (EDID) program of the CBCHS.

The Empowerment Disability Inclusive Development (EDID) program which officially started in 2014 donated computers and established the first center for the empowerment of persons with visual impairment in Mezam division²³¹. This center had computers, photocopiers and several other equipment that were intended to train and empower persons with visual impairment in the city of Bamenda. The donation which was from the Thom Welty's family, through EDID program of CBCHS, to Hope Social Union for the Visually Impaired operated in mile III Nkwen. The center which was for HSUVI was managed by Tancho Fidel (a visually impaired individual) until March 2016 when it was officially handed over to HSUVI after an unexpected discovery. This center meant for the empowerment of PWVIs, have initially been operated as a private business of some individuals²³². Though the center was closed down by the CBCHS due to absence of a proper understanding between HSUVI executive and CBCHS in December 2016, it has however, exposed some persons with visual impairment to the world of technology, as a few were given basic computer knowledge²³³.

The Cameroon Health and Educational Fund (CHEF) in 2010, donated computers and braille machines to the Integrated School for the Blind. These digital tools which extensively covered the teaching of how to use these equipment's to the pupils of the resource room, went a long way to foster the digital inclusion of these individuals in the fast evolving technological world. In 2014, braille embosser was donated to the resource center in Kumbo and GBHS Kumbo. These

²³⁰ Interview with bafon,

²³¹ Interview with Florence Awa, age 40s, program manager of EDID, Nkwen, 4 January 2026

²³² Interview with Fidel Tancho,

²³³ Interview with Peter Ngong Tonain,

facilities radicalized the brailing of scripts for exams and transcription, while fostering the reproduction of text book into braille by the ST Barbara's center for the visually impaired in 2021, 2024 and 2025. In a related interview, some visually impaired stated that, it was thanks to the CBCHS, that they were able to come in contact with a computer and be trained in their usage.

The CBCHS and their program of EDID donated computers to persons with visual impairment in 2019 and 2021. Some persons with visual impairment that benefited from these donations included Belo Nuhu Ibrahim, Silas Mbuh, Desmond Kum Nji and Walters Zama. These computers became what these individuals used in their studies while in the university of Bamenda to do their research. Also, the EDID donated computers and embossers to the Government Secondary School Bamenda, University of Bamenda and Baptist comprehensive High School Nkwen, in 2017, 2019 and 2020 respectively. These computers were made available to ease the exposure of PWVI into the world of technology²³⁴.

Conclusion

This chapter successfully resonated a historical trajectory of empowerment activities/initiatives carried out by faith-based institutions in the North West region of Cameroon, after the establishment of their special empowerment centers in the region. It's focused was on the domains of interventions, activities carried out and the various programs developed to foster the socio-economic and professional inclusion of persons living with visual impairment in societies normal functions. The analysis of the chapter contended that, faith-based institutions, notably the CBC and Catholics had employed and implemented an array of initiatives geared at enhancing the Educational, health, social, economic and digital inclusion of the visually impaired in the North West Region of Cameroon. The findings of the chapter are vital to the study in that, it provided ample knowledge to the key role mission institutions like the CBC and the Catholics played in shaping inclusive practices in the North West Region, and Cameroon at large. Armed with this understanding, the next chapter shall therefore, discuss the challenges and impacts of the empowerment initiatives of the CBC and Catholic missions in the North West region of Cameroon.

²³⁴ Interview with Florence Awa

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPACTS OF FAITH-BASED EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES, AND CHALLENGES IN THE NORTH WEST REGION

Introduction

This chapter shall examine the historical impacts of faith-based empowerment activities on the socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairments in the North West Region of Cameroon. Drawing primarily from field evidence and institutional records, the chapter seeks to analyze how empowerment initiatives implemented by faith-based organizations notably the Cameroon Baptist Convention and Catholic Church institutions had transformed the social, economic, professional, and cultural positioning of PWVIs over time. The analysis shall demonstrate that, despite inherent huddles, the activities of faith-based organizations had relatively dismantled structural barriers to inclusion, enabling visually impaired persons to participate meaningfully in education, employment, leadership, digital spaces, and community life.

Implications of the activities of Faith-Based Organizations

Scholarly perspectives on disability inclusion have consistently argued that empowerment constitutes a critical pathway from marginalization to social participation.²³⁵ In the North West Region, faith-based actors operationalized this paradigm through context-sensitive strategies that reshaped both individual capacities and societal attitudes toward visual impairment. All activities and actions carried out by man had always produced varying degree of effects. The implications of Faith-Based activities on the social, economic and professional inclusion of persons with visual impairment in the North West region of Cameroon were observed to have positively transformed societal perception of disability and inclusion. In order for us to fairly discuss the impacts of empowerment activities of PWVIs, our analysis shall be classified into the economic, social, professional and digital domains of inclusivity attained in the North West by the Catholics and CBC missions.

²³⁵ Oliver, 1996, 32; Barnes and Mercer, 2010, 21.

Economic implications

Economically, faith-based empowerment activities disrupted long-standing patterns of dependency among persons with visual impairment. Prior to systematic interventions, PWVIs in the North West region were largely excluded from productive labor due to cultural beliefs that equated blindness with incapacity. This exclusion was reinforced by the absence of vocational training structures and access to capital in the North West Region of Cameroon before 1980. These factors put together reduced these individuals to begging or family support. This condition reflected what Barnes had described as the charity-based perception of disability, which denied impaired persons productive agency.²³⁶ Faith-based empowerment initiatives from 1982 onwards reversed this pattern by equipping PWVIs with vocational, entrepreneurial, and income-generating skills. From the mid-1990s onward, visually impaired persons increasingly engaged in informal economic activities such as cane weaving, basket production, beadwork, detergent production, and petty trading. These activities, though located within the informal economy, provided sustainable livelihoods and reduced dependency, changing their narrative from that of being recipients, to active producers and contributors to development.²³⁷

Testimonies revealed that empowerment initiatives from faith-based institutions altered household power relations. Samuel Nyingcho recounted that prior to acquiring vocational skills; he depended entirely on relatives for survival. But after receiving vocational training at the Bingo Baptist rehabilitation center in 1995, he established a cane-weaving workshop that provided him with stable income that enabled him to provide for his family and care for his children education and welfare.²³⁸ Such testimonies illustrated how empowerment translated directly into livelihood security and economic dignity. This transition reflected Sen's assertion that economic empowerment enhanced both material well-being and social respect.²³⁹

Women with visual impairment like Yilla Elizabeth, Lum Loveline, Fogang Lillian and Awa Linda just to name a few, particularly benefited from skills-based empowerment initiatives organized by the CBCHS SEEPD program in collaboration with CUAPWD and other NGOs, between the years 2015-2024, with many becoming economically active through handicraft

²³⁶ Barnes, 1991, 45.

²³⁷ Interview with Sama,

²³⁸ Interview with Nyingcho,

²³⁹ Sen 1999, 75.

production and small-scale trade. By 2024, these economic engagements had expanded steadily due to continuous training and support from empowerment agencies. These outcomes corroborated Sen's argument that economic inclusion emerged when individuals acquired the capabilities necessary to pursue valued forms of work.²⁴⁰

Integration into the Formal Employment Sector

Historically, persons with visual impairment in Mezam Division were socially constructed as economically unproductive and professionally incapable. This perception mirrored what Barnes described as the “charity model” of disability, in which impaired persons were viewed as passive dependents rather than contributors to development.²⁴¹ Prior to sustained empowerment interventions, PWVIs were largely excluded from formal employment and confined to street begging or family dependency. Faith-based empowerment initiatives gradually reversed this narrative. Through education, vocational training, and advocacy, visually impaired persons were increasingly integrated into both the formal and informal labor markets. As evident from field research, these interventions resulted in a steady decline in unemployment among PWVIs, particularly from the 1980s onwards.²⁴²

The establishment of SAJOCAH Resource Centre in Bafut in 1981, by the Tertiary Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi(TSSF), and the Integrated School for the Blind in Kumbo by the Baptist, now called Inclusive School and Braille Center Kumbo, marked a decisive shift toward professional empowerment through education and braille literacy [OBJ]. Former trainees of SAJOCAH and ISB/ISBC became some of the first visually impaired teachers in the region, formally recruited into teaching positions from the early 1981. a notable example were the pioneer teachers of SAJOCAH resource room, Nicolas Tamanjong and Feta Felix who were themselves impaired, and trained their peers who were letter on retained as braille teachers. Yilla Elisabeth was recruited as a braille teacher in SAJOCAH as from 1984-1990. While Chamba Daniel and Isabelle Wirndzerem were recruited by the CBCHS to teach braille in ISB Kumbo as from 2005 and 2015 respectively. The CBC SIEP project center Nkwen had in 2020 recruited Banadzem Goodness as a braille teacher and in 2023, the Inclusive School and Braille Center

²⁴⁰ Sen 1999, 74.

²⁴¹ Barnes 1991, 45.

²⁴² Interview with Kum Nji,

Kumbo recruited Estella as a braille facilitator in their resource room. This milestone symbolized the breakdown of institutional barriers to employment and laid the foundation for subsequent professional integration.²⁴³

This outcome aligned with Sen's capability approach, which emphasized that development occurred when individuals were equipped with the skills and freedoms necessary to pursue valued life outcomes.²⁴⁴ Former trainees of SAJOCAH later formed the backbone of special education services in the region, training over an estimated 200 visually impaired persons in braille within their first three decade of service. Beyond being recruited as special education teachers, mission based empowerment initiatives facilitated the entry of PWVIs into mainstream public service. Government recruitment exercises, notably in 2010, absorbed visually impaired teachers into primary and secondary schools across the nation, North West inclusive. These appointments not only improved economic stability but also symbolically challenged entrenched assumptions about disability and competence .

In higher education, sustained advocacy culminated in the recruitment of visually impaired lecturers into public universities following protests in 2022. This marked a shift from token inclusion to rights-based recognition of professional qualifications [00]. One of such impaired individuals who were recruited as lecturers in the University of Bamenda due to the advocacy network of the CBCHS were Ngwa Suh and Tonain Peter between the years 2022 and 2025.(see appendix on the recruited visually impaired persons since 2010).²⁴⁵

Persons with visual impairment were equally integrated into the professional environment as counselors and consultants. They had often obtained their degrees in counseling and while operating or teaching, had equally played the role of counseling. Persons both impaired and those without, visited them for counseling services and orientation. These were services paid for by their clients and so, took the profession serious. In some special educational institutions, like that in Integrated School for the Blind Kumbo,(now known as Inclusive School and Braille center), CBC Nkwen and SAJOCAH, these individuals counseled parents of children with impairments, oriented their peers on different educational programs and lucrative professions they could

²⁴³ Interview with Ngong,

²⁴⁴ Sen 1999, 74.

²⁴⁵ Interview with Emmanuel Bafon, Age 50s, teacher, visually impaired, Oku, 15 February 2025.

engaged into, as well as offered consultancy services to a variety of persons on legal issues²⁴⁶. One of such individuals noted to be providing services in consultancy was Nyingcho Samuel who became a leading consultant to the development and growth of organizations, as well as issues related to disability rights²⁴⁷.

Apart from operating as consultants, PWVIs equally had been included into other professions such as social workers in NGOs. Nyingcho Samuel was a social worker trainer with the CBC and equally operated an organization for persons with impairments. Being the founder and first coordinator of CUAPWD and HSUVI, he successfully operated the organization as a leading disability right advocate and an NGO. Others who were into NGO activities as social workers included Vitalis Nde who was employed in CUAPWD as the Child Protection Officer of the organization since 2018. Bertrand Bafon had an NGO he operated aside from his teaching job known as ST Barbra Johnson's Center for the Visually Impaired, that was focused on providing books and Another readable materials to his peers with visual impairment in secondary and higher institutions of learning. Supported by the CBCHS technical team and resources, his foundation provided braille books and audio records of books to students of GBHS Bamenda, North West Regional Rehabilitation Resource Center and BCHS Nkwen between the years 2023-2025 respectively. The success story of some of these NGO social workers and leaders of organizations signified that they were successfully integrated into different stratas of the society, due to the empowerment activities of faith-based institutions.²⁴⁸ A key example was Samuel Nyingcho, formal coordinator of CUAPWD from 2005-2020, Peter Tonain, president of HSUVI since 2016, Bertrand bafon Tokoh, director of the Barbra Johnson's Foundation since 2018, Sama Chick, coordinator of CUAPWD from 2020 and Vitalis Nde, Child Protection Officer of CUAPWD since 2021, among others in and out of the north West Region of Cameroon.²⁴⁹

Participation in Journalism and Media

Faith-based empowerment activities also indirectly facilitated the integration of PWVIs into journalism and media. By supporting inclusive education and digital literacy, visually impaired graduates from institutions such as SAJOCAH, the University of Bamenda and Hibums

²⁴⁶ Interview with Nyingcho,

²⁴⁷ Interview with Samuel Nyingcho

²⁴⁸ Idem,

²⁴⁹ Interview with Ibrahim Belo Nuhu, age 28, teacher, Bambili, 15 April 2025.

Polytechnic entered radio broadcasting and media reporting. Individuals like Tancho fidel and Nsah Edwin exemplified how empowerment dismantled communication barriers and expanded professional horizons.²⁵⁰ From a scholarly standpoint, this development corroborated Goggin and Newell’s argument that access to communication technologies was central to disability inclusion in the public sphere.²⁵¹

Plate 6: Visually Impaired Journalists broadcasting on Radio Hot Coco Bamenda and CRTV



Source: Extracted from Nsah Edwin’s Album. 28 December 2025

The plate above is revealing of the key role persons with visual impairment play in the profession of journalism, especially news presentations and article writing. Nsah Edwin in the picture was chairing an entertainment program in radio Hot Cocoa, to the listening pleasure of the population of Mezam who were fans of radio Hot Cocoa. Just like him, many others have chaired radio programs as journalist in different radio stations, in and out of the division during their trainings. The second picture shows a renounce CRTV radio presenter Jean Pascal Somb Lingom, who was a visually impaired and had been working as a state reporter since 2010.

²⁵⁰ Interview with Edwin Nsah, Age 30s, Journalist, visually impaired, Bamenda, 14 March, 2026.

²⁵¹ Gerard Goggin, and Christopher Newell, *Digital Disability*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 89.

Others as indicated in the plate had operated online news report handles on social media with focus on disability inclusion.²⁵²

Access to Vocational skills and informal market

While formal employment expanded, the majority of PWVIs in Mezam Division were engaged in the informal economy. Faith-based organizations played a pivotal role in vocational empowerment, particularly among women with visual impairment. Skills training in beadwork, soap production, cane weaving, and petty trading enabled self-employment and income generation from the 1990s onward.

Persons with visual impairment for the most case lacked formal qualifications, licenses, or certifications, even though a few of them possessed the necessary skills and knowledge to perform the work. Their earnings were not officially reported, and they often lack access to benefits like health insurance or pensions. This was the condition most persons with visual impairment found themselves into.²⁵³ However, due to the key role the CBC SEEPD program and the SAJOCAL resource room workshop played, these individuals acquired competitive vocational skills that enabled them to produce detergents, liquid soap, bags that were made out of beads and petty trading food stuffs.²⁵⁴

Plate 7: Handwork (beads bags, necklace etc.) by visually impaired woman



The images depict the craftsmanship of visually impaired woman by name Yila Elizabeth, particularly focusing on beadwork and handmade products. The picture displays a variety of beaded products on a table. The items include bags and necklaces, highlighting the diversity of products created by visually impaired artisans. Overall, these images depicts the participation of the visually woman in the informal labour market

Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, February 2026

²⁵² Interview with Princely Kesah, age 28, Journalist and PHD student in UB, 14 August 2024.

²⁵³ Interview with Elizabeth Yila,

²⁵⁴ Interview with Rosaline Nying, age 40s, Directress of women Empowerment centre, Santa, 17 April 2024

As from 1996, due to the key role empowerment agencies had played, persons with visual impairments in the North West Region were engaged into operating workshops where they produced weaved baskets, cane cupboards and cane chairs. This though self-employed was a vocation and profession at the level of the informal economy to these categories of persons. Nyingcho Samuel revealed that, he started operating a cane weaving workshop after he was empowered with the skills in the CBC rehabilitation center in 1995. He has established his workshop at Fish point hill where he worked as a professional cane weaver for over 15 years, before retiring to work fully as a disability advocate and organizational consultant to young growing associations and organizations. During his days at the workshop, he has employed trainees and an assistant who aided him in his business. Sometimes he could realize hundreds of thousands from the sale of cane chairs and cupboards in a month. The activity and profession to him was very lucrative prior to 2015, when homes and families have made use of cane chairs and cupboards in their homes. The innovations witnessed in wood furniture production, dismantled the prioress of the sector reducing it to very few interested clients²⁵⁵.

However, it was a major sector where persons with impairments including the visually impaired have gained their self-employment or worked for someone in his shop. Persons like God-love Suh, Azingwi God-love, Ngwa Modest, Amabo Julius, Dinayen Abdul Hasan, Ngoh Stanley and many more were known in the north West, and Bamenda central town as professional cane weavers, who were visually impaired. Their successful inclusion into the sector enabled them to earn a living and become more productive to their societies and families, unlike when they depended for almost everything to survive. In an interview with one of the professional cane weavers, he testified that, the key role faith base organizations and some NGOs have played to their empowerment and successful integration into the society was a major reason, they became self-employed, capable of living independently due to the income they realized from their jobs every month

²⁵⁵ Interview with Nyingcho,

Plate 8: Cane Weaved items produced by skilled visually impaired men



Source: Field work by researcher, Tokoh Bertrand Bafon, November 2025

Digital Empowerment and Inclusion in the Knowledge Economy

Digital literacy emerged as one of the most transformative empowerment strategies in the 21st century. Prior to 2010, visually impaired persons in the north West Region were largely excluded from digital spaces. Faith-based initiatives, however, established computer centres from 2014 onward, equipping PWVIs with screen-reader technology and adaptive ICT skills. This empowerment enabled visually impaired individuals to study independently, conduct research, write professional reports, and operate businesses. The impact of digital inclusion aligned with Zhou et al.'s findings that computer competence significantly increased employment prospects

for adolescents with visual impairment. In the North West , digital empowerment leveled professional competitiveness and facilitated participation in the modern labor market.²⁵⁶

Reduction of Stigma, Discrimination and participation in sports and recreational events

Faith-based advocacy and community sensitization campaigns fundamentally reshaped societal attitudes toward visual impairment. Programs implemented by the CBC and Catholic institutions between 2009 and 2019 educated communities on disability rights and abilities, thereby reducing stigma and discriminatory practices. These interventions reflected the social model of disability, which located exclusion within societal structures rather than individual impairments.²⁵⁷ Testimonies from informants indicated that social acceptance in schools, markets, and public institutions increased significantly over time

Sports and cultural engagement constituted another dimension of socio-economic inclusion. Faith-based and state-supported sporting programs enabled visually impaired athletes to participate in goalball, athletics, and national competitions.²⁵⁸ Individuals such as Ndim Clement achieved national and international recognition, demonstrating the economic and symbolic value of inclusive sports. Similarly, participation in music and entertainment fostered visibility and self-expression. Artists like Nsah Edwin utilized empowerment platforms to produce and market music, thereby entering the creative economy.

The CBCHS SEEPD programs had also organized sporting activities for persons with visual impairments in Mezam in 2016. During this sporting competition, the visually impaired in the division converged in Bamenda town, grouping themselves into clubs. A Goal Ball match was organized in the CBCHS field in Nkwen during which teams of three persons competed among themselves, until a club warns the competition.²⁵⁹ Each team was made up of three visually impaired players on each side, throwing the ball that have jingles embedded in them and played the ball by throwing with their hands. In participation were visually impaired who were traders, weavers, students from the university of Bamenda and GBHS Bamenda. Added to the Goal Ball

²⁵⁶ Zhou, Li, et al. "ICT Use and Employment Outcomes of Adolescents with Visual Impairment." *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* 106, no. 6 (2012): 305–316.

²⁵⁷ Oliver 1996, 38.

²⁵⁸ Janette Affah Agama, ET AL, "Socio-professional Empowerment of Persons with Visual Impairments in Mezam Division, Cameroon 1970-2022," *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* 12, NO. 12(2025): 122.

²⁵⁹ Interview with Nde,

competition was the marathon race organized too by the CBCHS for the visually impaired. During this race, which took place from Saint Paul Junction Nkwen to Commercial Street, Vitalis Nde emerged victorious winning the first position²⁶⁰. His victory in the running race signified how vibrant persons with impairments were in the field of sport. It should be noted here that, this was a profession that some of them earned a living from it like Clement. Just like him, Emmanuel Ngwa had equally testified being a professional athletic who have participated in different competitions regionally and nationally.

Increased Access to Education

One major component of social inclusion was the phenomenon of increasing access to social services like education. It should be noted that, prior to the establishment of special educational schools in the North West Region in 1982 by the tertiary sisters of saint Francis Assisi and that opened in 1984 by the Cameroon Baptist Health Board Services, these individuals were largely excluded from education. By establishing these schools, they were given the opportunity to be educated in these special centers. By 1991, these individuals were integrated into regular secondary schools in the region with the very first in GBHS Kumbo, GBHS Bafut, GSS Mambu, JMBC Ndu, CMBC Kumbo, GBHS Bamisin, BCHS Nkwen, GBHS Bamenda, GBHS Elak Oku and the University of Bamenda.²⁶¹

Psychological Impacts; Self-Esteem and Confidence Building

A critical impact of faith-based empowerment was the restoration of self-esteem and confidence among persons with visual impairment. Prior to empowerment, PWVIs often internalized societal rejection, resulting in withdrawal and low self-worth. Empowerment initiatives validated their abilities and fostered personal confidence. Informants recalled that before the 1980s and early 2000s, PWVIs were treated as incapable and invisible. Over time, empowerment enabled them to assert their identity, demonstrate competence, and participate actively in society. Leadership roles, professional success, and public recognition contributed to psychological well-being and social affirmation

²⁶⁰ Interview with Vitalis Nde Tangeh, Age 30s, Visually Impaired and Protection Officer of CUAPWD, Nkwen, 11 July 2024.

²⁶¹ Interview with Kenneth Yenlanyuy, Age 47, teacher, Bamenda, 15 March 2026.

Challenges

Limited Funding

faith-based organizations played a crucial role in providing direct services and advocacy for PWVI in North West Region division, and Cameroon as a nation. However, these organizations especially the NGOs and DPOs have relied heavily on external funding from international donors, philanthropic organizations, and individual contributions. The availability of such funding was often unpredictable and subjected to fluctuations, making it difficult for these organizations to sustain their programs and plan for long term projects with assurance.²⁶² This was the problem faced by the SAJOCAH empowerment center and the CBCHS rehabilitation services. Each year, the success of their empowerment activities depended on the degree of projects accepted and funded by international non-governmental organizations like CBM, UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO, INTERSOS Plan International and World Health Organization, just to name a few.²⁶³

This limited financial support to carry out more inclusive activities as well as purchasing the needed technological equipment to boost their empowerment activities was noted by Edwards and Hulme, to have acted as a serious challenge, exacerbated by over dependence on External Funding.²⁶⁴ The reliance on external funding have compelled FBOs vulnerable to changes in donor priorities and funding cycles. When funding dries up, these organizations were forced to scale back their operations, reduce staffing levels, or even close down altogether²⁶⁵.

The CBCHS being a major faith-based organization in the North West region, that was known for carrying out empowerment activities, stimulating social change and professional inclusion for persons with visual impairment, they equally have faced the problem of limited financial resources. Though they were well rated in the national and international scene, with a stronger competitive hand for donations, their activities were still heavily relied on international institutions and foundations. Though the funds were often gotten for projects, they were often not

²⁶² Divine Njomo Cheki, and Paul Ghogomo, "The Status of Disability in Cameroon," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2016): 10.

²⁶³ Interview with Awa,

²⁶⁴ Edwards, Michael, and David Hulme, "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations," *World Development* 24, 6(1996): 961-973.

²⁶⁵ Michael, and Hulme, 965.

enough when compared to the population that was in need of empowerment in the division²⁶⁶. Infarct it was revealed by the project manager for SEEPD that, “we have the desire to empower all persons with disabilities to become self-reliant, but our mission is often limited by funds”²⁶⁷.

As one of the first human resource trainer in the region, the resources needed to empower other agencies both the state, NGOs and organizations of persons with disabilities, the resources needed were often very limited, thereby slowing down the process of empowerment. By 2025, the organization was still struggling to foster an inclusive environment for social economic and professional inclusion of impaired persons, with financial resources highly needed to completely address social barriers, donate the technological equipment needed for these individuals to be well empowered, reduce accessibility difficulties in public transportation, buildings and work places. This to the program manager of SEEPD was heavy and required more finances, since she was the only major organization in the Region that was lobbying for resources and establishing or donating to different stratas of the society progressively²⁶⁸.

Moreover, the Catholic Church in SAJOCAH since the establishment of the resource center for the visually impaired in 1982, was faced with the problem of financial resources needed to empower these children. As the first resource center in the division, it had to admit children who were visually impaired and of course were mostly from very poor backgrounds²⁶⁹. Educating the different communities of the Region about the availability of an empowerment center, resulted to some families abandoning their children in SAJOCAH for the institution to empower since most of their families have financial issuespayment of their fees and dormitory fees had to be subsidized to a certain level. Even with the subsidization, some families could not still respect the payment plan provided to them. This became a serious challenge to the institution, with the children sometimes returning home without completing their empowerment. The sisters resulted to lobbying for financial assistance from international partners like the Lillian foundation and

²⁶⁶ Custer Toke, “Opening up for Inclusive Education in Cameroon: Understanding frame resonance in NGO advocacy,” *MSc in Development Studies, Department of Communication, Technology & Policy, University of Wageningen*, (2017), 66.

²⁶⁷ Interview with Jacque Awa

²⁶⁸ Interview with Jacque Awa,

²⁶⁹ Interview with Elijah Chia,

CARITAS Bamenda for financial assistance²⁷⁰. Yet it still did not address the huge financial needs the center has to handle.

Resources that were very necessary for the empowerment of these individuals like embossers, computers, and licensed software's designed for computer literacy were still not available in the center right up to 2013. It was until 2014, when the CBCHS donated the center with an embosser. The needed finances to equip the center with modern technological equipment needed for full social inclusion were still very limited, to address the growing population admitted into the institution every year for rehabilitation and educational empowerment. Such difficulty purchasing modern tools for empowerment purposes limited the empowerment initiatives implemented in the center, with the students still not competitive enough in the world where at the level of professional inclusion, digital technology was eminent.

Lack of Capacity and Training

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) were often trusted community resources. They offered support to PWVI through social programs, religious education, or charitable activities. A case in point of a religious oriented organization was the Islamic cultural organization known as MBOSCODA and ADF. These organizations owned and managed by Islamic faithful's, have often supported persons with impairments in their communities within North West Region with financial assistance and rehabilitation support services²⁷¹. However, some of these faith- based organizations like the Islamic oriented institutions in North West Region did not have the proper training and capacity to foster inclusion in their communities, especially in areas like Old Town and Sabga. Such gaps hindered the Islamic organizations like Mbororo Cultural Organization and Development Association, located in Old Town, as well as African Development Foundation (ADF) in Mile III Nkwen central Mosque, from properly establishing inclusive centers exclusively for impaired persons, thereby increasing the gap for the social inclusion of PWVIs from Islamic backgrounds²⁷².

Meanwhile, not all FBO staff were trained with the capacity of being inclusive, the result being that some of their staff were very evasive and not very accommodating, due to limited

²⁷⁰ Interview with Elijah Chia,

²⁷¹ Interview with Ibrahim Belo,

²⁷² Interview with Jacque Awa,

knowledge and capacity to easily integrate varying impairments. This made organizations like the CBCHS and the Catholic Church, to unintentionally perpetuate harmful stereotypes, offer inappropriate assistance, or fail to provide accessible information. A situation which obtained in the 1990s, when disability inclusion was just gaining grounds in the division. In some areas ethics, hindered the empowerment of PWVI and reinforced their dependence on charity rather than promoting their independence and self-sufficiency²⁷³.

Multiplicity of organizations, Corruption and mismanagement

While the North West position as a host to many organizations dedicated to disability empowerment was appreciated, uncoordinated multiplicity of these organizations since the 2000s, both NGOs and associations of persons with impairments have resulted to significant problems, affecting the total progress recorded so far by these agencies towards full socio-economic and professional inclusion. One major implication of the growth of new organizations every day in the North West, with the aim of addressing the plights of persons with impairments, was an increase duplication of services and empowerment activities²⁷⁴. This was a serious challenge to Faith-based stakeholders of empowerment in the Region in that, several organizations provided the same services in the same geographic area, wasting resources and creating confusion for PWVI. The end result of such uncoordinated responses towards their social plights, was the exploitative tendencies some of these individuals with impairment resulted to, taking most empowerment activities not serious since they knew others were going to come with the same rehabilitation and material support²⁷⁵.

Conversely, critical needs were then overlooked because very few faith-based organizations like the Cameroon Baptist Convention and DPOs like CUAPWD, took the responsibility of addressing the core values of empowerment, with a majority of these locally based NGOs who lacked the capacity to tackle skill development and empowerment, much more tilted towards providing materials like food, mantras and monthly financial assistance²⁷⁶. This were direct assistance to improve living standards, but there were in themselves building over dependency in these material support, instead of empowering the visually impaired in remote areas of North

²⁷³ Fonyuy, 21,

²⁷⁴ Lorelei Nowell, S., Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules, "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 113.

²⁷⁵ Interview with Gerline Banfogha,

²⁷⁶ Interview with Jacque Awa,

West Region to become economically viable and productive. Coupled to this was the absence of a unified voice among all these organizations, especially the NGOs. The absence of such a unified voice among NGOs and some association of persons with impairment in most communities, provided the platform for exploitation of the PWVIs by these locally based non-governmental organizations for their selfish purposes, limiting progress tracking, as well as measuring the overall impact of interventions²⁷⁷. This made it difficult to demonstrate the value of the sector and attract further investment. Consequently, the overall impact of the sector was drastically reduced, hindering progress towards inclusion and empowerment.

In an interview with one staff of the CBCHS,, it was revealed that, for the most case financial resources donated for empowerment initiatives like education, capacity building and advocacy workshops, setting up of livelihood activities for persons with visual impairment in the Region were never completely implemented. Sometimes, a few individuals who were impaired were invited and empowered, with the rest of the projected population ghosted but reported to have benefited from the activity²⁷⁸. This explained why several NGOs kept multiplying in the Region since they knew it was a source of making earns means.

This therefore became a serious challenge not only to the livelihood of persons with impairment, but to organizations like the CBCHS and Catholics, hat have positioned themselves as agents of transformation for this category of vulnerable population. Funds intended for PWVI were siphoned off, reducing the quality and quantity of services available thereby, undermining the trust between organizations and the PWVI community, making it harder to engage PWVI into programs that advocated for their rights²⁷⁹. Coupled to this was the fact that, Corruption scandals went a long way to damage the reputation of the entire Faith-based sector, making it harder to attract funding and support from potential funders, especially with no tracked record of achievements²⁸⁰. HSUVI have suffered this faith in 2016, when a computer training center was donated to them by an American Family Doctor Thom Welty in partnership with the CBCHS in 2014, but the corrupt nature of those who managed the donation, rather had destroyed the interest the family had in stimulating socio-technological inclusion of PWVIs, necessary in the professional world.

²⁷⁷ Ebrahim Alnoor, and V. Kasturi Rangan, "What Donors Want," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 10, no. 4 (2012): 37.

²⁷⁸ Interview with Rita Djomo, Age 40, staff CBM, Yaounde, 11 February 2024.

²⁷⁹ Imrie, Rob, *Accessibility and Inclusion* (London: Routledge, 2012), 34.

²⁸⁰ Alnoor et al, 36.

It was noted that, though these challenges were prevailing, these agencies have struggled to address the limitations, so as to provide suitable grounds for full inclusion. It required a multi-faceted approach in which efforts were made by the Faith-based agencies in collaboration with national and international partners to; Strengthen Governance and Accountability, Developed a code of ethics for Faith-based actors in the disability sector, Established a national regulatory body to oversee the sector and enforce accountability, Promoted transparency in financial management and program implementation, Encouraged whistleblowing and protecting whistleblowers, Promoted Coordination and Collaboration, as well as Established a national disability coordination council in 2018.

Deep-seated Cultural practices and belief patterns

Deep-seated cultural beliefs and misconceptions about visual impairment were very dominant in the Cameroonian cultural landscape, as well as amongst the communities of North West Region division. There was the belief that, these children were impaired as a result of an abominable act performed by the parents, in most cases, the women were accused for such misfortune. In Awing, Nkwen and Bafut, a cleansing ritual was performed on the accused and impaired child, with the intension of addressing the situation, or seeking for forgiveness from the gods. Such prevailing circumstances reduced women who were mothers to such children to a laughing stock in the society²⁸¹.

Also, the societal belief pattern was that which had considered these individuals with impairments to be “useless” to the economic and social progress of the family. They rather have brought shame to the family image, thereby leading to their relegation to the background, at the mercy of family relatives and Christian institutions. To this effect, they were often neglected and given no proper attention with respect to education and other social welfare activities. A majority were allowed to survive on their own as beggars in their community markets. This situation greatly limited the social inclusion of visually impaired individuals in their respective communities²⁸². Exacerbated by social stigma and discrimination, they were not exposed to educational facilities, even when special educational institutions were eventually opened in the division.

In addition, the position of women in the cultural landscape of North West Region was that of being relegated to the background, subjected to obnoxious rites that were sometimes very

²⁸¹ Abimanyi-Ochom, J., and Mannan, Socio-cultural beliefs and practices and childhood disability in low and middle-income countries: a systematic review,” *Journal of Disability and Rehabilitation* 37, NO. 19 (2015): 1703.

²⁸² David Werner, *Disabled Village Children: A Guide for Community Health Workers, Rehabilitation Workers, and Families* (Palo Alto, CA: Hesperian Foundation, 1987), 76.

dehumanizing²⁸³. In such a prevailing gender bias society, women and girls who were visually impaired became compounded with an array of hurdles to overcome. Their exposure even to educational institutions was far fetch in the 1970 and 1990s, due to their impairment, not to talk of socially being integrated into other social structures of the society like marriage²⁸⁴.

It was in this prevailing social and cultural discriminatory practices and belief patterns, that Faith Base Organizations as from the 1990s, when the field was opened for Faith-based participation, , developed to fight for the respect of basic human rights, protection of the vulnerable and the social inclusion of persons living with visual impairment into the social fabric of Cameroon, North West Region inclusive²⁸⁵. The challenge faced by these faith based agencies like the CBCHS, SAJOCAH, was to counter these cultural belief patterns and foster meaningful inclusion in cultural behaviors.

Organizing advocacy visits, community sensitization campaigns, radio talks, printing of posters and capacity training workshops organized by faith based institutions like the CBCHS apparently did not completely wipe off the social stigma and discrimination some indigenes of the different communities of North West Region like Santa, Pinyin and Bali for instance still believed in as far as impairments were concern²⁸⁶. Such inability to counter socially structured belief patterns became one major key huddle they battled with, despite adopting different strategies towards enabling inclusion, the impact of their activities could not bring about a full social revolution, as there was limited change²⁸⁷.

The indigenous population still perceived the individuals with visual impairment to be in high need of social support, not capable of functioning independently, discriminated upon them in so many instances, like employment opportunities and marriage²⁸⁸. Little wonder this category of individuals despite the resources invested so far to their social and professional inclusion, through education, vocational skills and advocacies carried out, they still constituted the highest number of vulnerable individuals who were unemployed and not married, especially for their

²⁸³ Interview with Gerline Banfogha,

²⁸⁴ Interview with Loveline Lum,

²⁸⁵ World Health Organization, World Report on Vision, (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2019).

²⁸⁶ Interview with Florence Awa,

²⁸⁷ Interview with Florence Awa,

²⁸⁸ Abimanyi-Ochom et al, 1703-1713.

women. Very few of them were married to spouses with no impairment, most of whom were the males, with female visually impaired ladies only married to their fellow visually impaired peers.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the historical impacts of faith-based empowerment activities on the socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairments in the North West Region of Cameroon. Drawing primarily from field evidence and institutional records, the chapter seeks to analyze how empowerment initiatives implemented by faith-based organizations notably the Cameroon Baptist Convention and Catholic Church institutions had transformed the social, economic, professional, and cultural positioning of PWVIs over time. The analysis shall demonstrate that, despite inherent huddles, the activities of faith-based organizations had relatively dismantled structural barriers to inclusion, enabling visually impaired persons to participate meaningfully in education, employment, leadership, digital spaces, and community life.

CHAPTER FIVE

PEDAGOGIC EXECUTION OF FAITH BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON 1982-2025

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the pedagogic execution of the research topic in form of a teachable lesson to students of lower sixth arts. The aim of this pedagogic execution is to examine the teaching and learning strategies that can be used to effectively evaluate the key role faith-based organizations like the CBCHS and the Catholic Church missions played in fostering the socio-economic inclusion of persons living with visual impairments in the North West Region of Cameroon. The chapter takes into account the objectives of the lesson, lesson procedure, teaching aid, and the Competence Base Approach (CBA) lesson plan, showing stages in the delivery of the lesson and summary Notes. The chapters relevance to the study is that, it provides a practical approach to teaching the key role mission institutions play in enhancing social and economic integration of vulnerable groups and persons in a divest world, translating theoretical views into practical realities worth emulating.

CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

The topic of faith-based organizations (FBOs) and their role in the socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon, spanning the period 1982 to 2025, aligned substantively and pedagogically with the Cameroonian secondary school curriculum as prescribed under the competency-based approach (CBA) framework. The official History syllabi for Forms Four and Five of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level, as well as the Upper Sixth History syllabus for the GCE Advanced Level in Cameroon,

contained thematic areas touching on the history of development, civil society, social welfare, and the postcolonial state in Africa, within which this topic found direct curricular resonance.²⁸⁹

At the Ordinary Level, the topic was relatable to the theme of *Social and Cultural History of Africa*, particularly sections dealing with the role of religious institutions and voluntary organizations in social transformation. The involvement of FBOs such as the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) and the Catholic Church in establishing schools, rehabilitation centres, and livelihood programmes for the visually impaired constituted a measurable chapter in Cameroon's postcolonial social history. Patricia Bonner and others working on civil society in Africa had argued that faith-based organizations served as primary providers of social services in contexts where the postcolonial state had abdicated or been unable to fulfil its welfare obligations.²⁹⁰ This argument found specific illustration in the North West Region, where the Bridging the Gap programme and allied CBC health initiatives filled structural gaps in state provision for persons with disabilities.

At the Advanced Level, the topic engaged directly with themes in *African Economic and Social History* and *Contemporary Cameroonian History*, especially the analysis of non-state actors in development and the history of disability and inclusive education policy in Cameroon. The CBA framework, which required learners to deploy historical knowledge in solving real-life problems and situational challenges, made this topic particularly apt: students were expected to analyse how communities and organizations, rather than governments alone, shaped socio-economic outcomes for marginalised groups. As Samuel Tabi Egbe observed, the CBA in Cameroonian schools privileged the integration of local, national, and continental history to cultivate civic competencies and critical historical thinking.²⁹¹ A study of FBOs and visual impairment in the North West Region, rooted in primary sources and oral testimonies, furnished precisely the kind of locally grounded, historically evidenced content that the CBA demanded. Teachers could thus exploit this topic to develop learner competencies in source analysis, historical empathy, and the

²⁸⁹ Cameroon General Certificate of Education Board, *History Syllabus: Ordinary and Advanced Levels* (Buea: GCE Board, 2011), 18-24.

²⁹⁰ Sylvia Bonner, *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), 112.

²⁹¹ Samuel Tabi Egbe, *Teaching History in Cameroonian Secondary Schools: Principles and Practice* (Yaounde: Presses Universitaires d'Afrique, 2009), 87.

construction of evidence-based arguments--core skills stipulated across all levels of the History curriculum in Cameroon.

Lesson Outcomes

At the end of the lesson, learners should demonstrate measurable outcomes across the three domains of learning. It should be noted here that, These expected learning outcomes align with the competency-based approach, emphasizing not only knowledge acquisition but also application, attitudes, and social responsibility. These learning outcomes include:

- Clearly define faith-based organizations and explain their role as development agencies.
- Identify major FBOs in Cameroon, particularly those involved in empowering persons with visual impairment.
- Describe the various empowerment activities carried out by these organizations, including education, vocational training, healthcare, and advocacy.
- Explain the concept of socio-economic inclusion and relate it to real-life contexts.
- Analyze the impacts of FBO interventions, especially in reducing marginalization and improving livelihoods.
- Identify and explain the challenges faced by FBOs, such as limited funding, societal stigma, and infrastructural constraints.
- Engage in critical discussions and debates on the effectiveness of FBOs in development.
- Propose practical solutions to improve inclusion and empowerment in their communities.
- Develop empathy and respect for persons with disabilities.
- Demonstrate positive attitudes toward inclusion and equality.
- Appreciate the role of religious institutions in social transformation.
- Show willingness to participate in community-based support initiatives.

Teaching Aids and Their Pedagogic Relevance

Teaching aids play a crucial role in facilitating active learning, conceptual clarity, and learner engagement. In this lesson, two key aids are particularly relevant:

- A. Map of the North West Region of Cameroon

This map illustrates Divisions such as Mezam, Bui, Boyo, and Ngoketunjia where major empowerment centers and resource unit were established in the region. It is worth noting that these areas were where faith-based empowerment centres emerged

The use of the map enhances the lesson in several ways. One of which is, Spatial Understanding. Learners are able to visualize the geographical distribution of empowerment centres and understand why certain areas (e.g., Bafut, Kumbo, Nkwen) became hubs of FBO activities.

Moreover, it facilitates Contextual Learning, as The map helps link historical and geographical factors (such as accessibility, population density, and missionary presence) to the emergence of FBOs. It equally enhances Active Participation. As Learners can be asked to; Identify regions where empowerment centres exist, Explain why these locations were favorable

B. Pictures of Empowerment Activities

These include images showing Visually impaired learners reading Braille, Vocational training (weaving, crafts, agriculture), Inclusive classrooms, Health and rehabilitation services

Pictures make abstract ideas like “empowerment” and “inclusion” visible and tangible. This is because, Visuals evoke empathy and help learners connect emotionally with the realities of persons with visual impairment.

Also, pedagogically, Learners remember information better when it is presented visually alongside verbal explanations. Learners can analyze images and answer questions such as; What activity is taking place? And How does it promote inclusion?

Lesson Procedure

The lesson follows a three-phase competency-based structure:

A. Introduction Phase

At this phase, the Teacher begins with guided questioning:

- “Who helps vulnerable people in our communities?”
- Learners brainstorm and provide responses
- Teacher introduces the concept of faith-based organizations
- States lesson objectives clearly

B. Development Phase

This development phase takes place in three different phases.

Step one, the teacher introduces the concepts.

- Teacher explains FBOs and their roles
- Uses the map to locate key areas of activity
- Displays pictures of empowerment activities

Step 2: Guided Practice

- Learners work in groups to:
- Identify activities carried out by FBOs
- Discuss their impacts

Step 3: Analysis and Application

- Learners analyze a real-life situation or case study
- Engage in class discussion or debate

C. Consolidation Phase

- Teacher summarizes key points
- Learners ask and answer questions
- Teacher corrects misconceptions

D. Evaluation Phase

- Short assessment (oral or written):
- Definitions
- Identification of activities
- Analysis of challenges

E. Conclusion

- Teacher emphasizes key takeaway:
- FBOs are critical actors in development and inclusion
- Links lesson to real-life civic responsibility

AN INDIVIDUAL LESSON PLAN ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FOR LOWER SIXTH ARTS ON FAITH BASE ORGANIZATIONS AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON

Administrative Information	Pedagogic Information
Name of the Institution: GBHS Bamendakwe	Area of Study: Social Sciences
Name of teacher: Tokoh Bertrand bafon	Subject: citizenship education
Number on roll: 37	Module: Understanding the Contributions of Faith-Based Organizations to the Inclusion of Minority Groups and Vulnerable Persons
Average Age of Learners: 16 Years plus	Topic: Faith-Based Organizations as Agents of Socio-Economic Development
Duration of the Lesson: 1HR 30 minutes	Lesson: The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in the Empowerment and Inclusion of Persons with Visual Impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon
Period on the timetable: Thursday 9 45AM to 11 15AM	Family of situation: Learners are confronted with social exclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly the visually impaired, in their communities
Class: Lower sixth arts A2	Example of Situation: A visually impaired student in the community struggles to access education and employment but receives support from a church-run institution offering Braille training and vocational skills
	Category of actions: Analysis of social institutions and Community engagement
	Example of Actions: Learners propose strategies to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve inclusion of visually impaired persons in schools - Support local faith-based initiatives - Advocate for equal opportunities

	<p>Methodology: Brainstorming Guided Discussion Question–answer technique</p>
	<p>Instructional Didactic Materials: Map of the North west region showing major areas of empowerment Picture of different empowerment activities and inclusionary practices</p>
	<p>Previous Knowledge: Students have already studied different types of disabilities and societal discriminatory practices towards these persons</p>
	<p>Learning Objective: By the end of the lesson, students should be able to: - Identify major faith-based organizations involved in development - Explain activities carried out by these organizations - Analyze the impact of their interventions</p>
	<p>Justification of the lesson: This lesson is relevant because, It promotes inclusive education and social justice, and also helps learners understand real development actors beyond the state.</p>
	<p>Notion/concept:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) - Empowerment - Socio-economic inclusion - Visual impairment

STATEMENT WORKING SHEET

Stages	Essential Knowledge	Skills	Values	Teacher/student activities		Didactic materials	Methodology / teaching technic	Progressive evaluation	Duration
				Teacher	Student				
Introduction	What is a disability? What are some types of disabilities? How does society treat persons with impairments? Which institutions are fighting for the rights of persons with visual impairment in Cameroon?	Recall Explain identify	Critical thinking Curiosity Sense of memory	Ask questions React to students responses	Answer questions Listen Observe		Brain storming Oral responses Guided Discussion		10 minutes
Presentation	Definition of faith-based organizations A. Types of faith-	Critical thinking	Empathy Tolerance Solidarity	Explains Ask questions	Listens attentively Answer		Guided discussion Expository Oral	-What is the meaning of faith-based	1HR 15 Minutes

	<p>based organizations operating in the north west region</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Cameroon Baptist convention Health Board Services - Catholic Church in Bafut SAJOCAH <p>B. Empowerment Activities for PWVI</p> <p>B. Opening of inclusive educational centers</p> <p>C. Vocational skills training</p> <p>D. Digital training</p> <p>E. Capacity building workshops</p> <p>F. Social advocacy</p> <p>G. Healthcare empowerment</p> <p>C. Impacts of FBOs</p>	<p>Problem-solving</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Social analysis</p> <p>Civic engagement</p>	<p>Respect for human dignity</p> <p>Inclusiveness</p>	<p>Provide feedback to questions</p> <p>Present maps to students</p>	<p>questions orally</p> <p>Students observe</p> <p>kingly</p> <p>Asks questions</p>	<p>Picture of different empowerment activities</p> <p>Map of north west region showing the major divisions where empowerment</p>	<p>explanations</p>	<p>organizations?</p> <p>Identify some major faith-based organizations operating empowerment centers in the north west region?</p> <p>-what empowerment activities are carried out by these organizations?</p> <p>What are the</p>	
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	<p>activities</p> <p>H. Increase access to education</p> <p>I. Employment opportunities for PWVI</p> <p>J. Reduction in stigma and social discrimination</p> <p>K. Digital exposure</p> <p>L. Leadership and community participation</p>					centers are located		impact of their activities?	
Evaluation and assignment	<p>Define FBOs? And State 3 activities they carry out</p> <p>What key role did faith-base organizations play in empowering PWVIs?</p> <p>Assignment :</p> <p>Read and bring out five challenges faced by the CBCHS and Catholics in fostering empowerment</p>	<p>Critical reasoning</p> <p>Recall</p>	<p>Love</p> <p>Respect</p> <p>Unity</p> <p>Meaningful conversation</p>	<p>Asks questions</p> <p>Observe responses</p> <p>Copy assignment on the</p>	<p>Answer questions</p> <p>Copy assignment on their note books</p> <p>Answers questions</p>				5 Minutes

	of PWVIs			board					
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Lesson Notes

The Geo-Historical Context and the Emergence of Faith-Based Empowerment Centers

An understanding of the emergence and development of faith-based empowerment initiatives for persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon necessarily began with an appreciation of the region's geographical, historical, social, and economic setting. Located within the Western Grassfields of Cameroon a rugged, mountainous territory bounded by the Adamawa Region to the north, the West Region to the south, and the South-West Region to the west the North West Region possessed a distinctive ecological and human landscape that proved historically conducive to missionary enterprise. The region's cool and healthy highland climate, fertile volcanic soils, dense river networks, and relatively stable agricultural base attracted Christian missionaries from the nineteenth century onward, who found in the Grassfields both a receptive population and a favorable environment for the long-term operation of schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions. It was within this physical and ecological framework that the foundations of faith-based empowerment for the visually impaired were laid.

The human geography of the region further reinforced this developmental trajectory. The North West was populated by a mosaic of ethnic groups among them the Nso, Bafut, Oku, Nkwen, Mankon, and Bali-Nyonga whose origins were traced through complex migration patterns from Tikar, Chamba, Ngemba, and Fulani traditions. These migrations produced centralized fndom structures characterized by hierarchical political authority vested in the Fon, assisted by regulatory societies such as the Kwifon and Nwerong. Scholars such as Paul Nkwi and Jean-Pierre Warnier argued that these centralized political systems enabled efficient decision-making, collective labour mobilization, and the management of social welfare, traditions that later facilitated the establishment of missionary institutions by providing land, labour, and communal legitimacy. The Tikar-derived fndoms of Nso and Bafut, in particular, emerged as early centres of missionary engagement, their stable political organization and population density making them attractive sites for long-term institutional investment by both the Catholic Church and Baptist missions.

Economically, the region's pre-colonial base rested on subsistence agriculture, inter-village trade, animal rearing, and craft production, all of which were intensified during the colonial period

through the introduction of Arabica coffee cultivation by British colonial administrators from the mid-1930s. The monetization of the economy through coffee, cooperative societies such as the Bamenda Cooperative Association and later the North West Cooperative Association, and expanding trade networks generated the financial and social capital upon which both local communities and missionary organizations drew in funding schools, welfare institutions, and empowerment centers. It was therefore not accidental that Bafut, Kumbo, and Nkwen historically prominent centers of missionary activity, stable settlement, and economic vitality became the first sites of faith-based empowerment for persons with visual impairment from 1982 onward.

The Institutional Foundations of Faith-Based Empowerment Agencies

The development of specialized empowerment institutions for persons with visual impairment in the North West Region could not be understood outside the broader history of Christian missionary activity in Southern Cameroons. Both the Catholic Church and the Cameroon Baptist Convention had established extensive networks of schools, hospitals, and social services from the mid-nineteenth century onward, creating an institutional infrastructure that later provided the framework for targeted disability empowerment. The Baptist missions, introduced into Cameroon in the 1840s by Joseph Merrick and Alfred Saker, expanded inland under the North American Baptist Conference from 1931 and were formally institutionalized as the Cameroon Baptist Convention in 1954, with its headquarters in Bamenda. The CBC's theological emphasis on human dignity, self-reliance, and holistic ministry progressively drew the institution toward the social and educational needs of vulnerable populations, including those living with visual impairment.

The Catholic Church, which entered Cameroon in 1890 through the German Pallottine Fathers and later expanded under French Spiritan Fathers and Mill Hill Missionaries, had similarly established a robust welfare tradition in the North West Region rooted in Catholic social teaching on human dignity and preferential care for the poor and vulnerable. It was within this institutional framework that the Tertiary Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi established the Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAH) in Bafut, Mezam Division, in 1976 initially as a healthcare and rehabilitation center for the physically impaired. By 1981, SAJOCAH had expanded its mandate to encompass persons with visual impairment, and in

1982, the first cohort of visually impaired pupils received braille training within its resource unit, marking the inaugural moment of structured, faith-based empowerment for the visually impaired in the North West Region. Two years later, the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Services (CBCHBS) opened the Integrated School for the Blind (ISB) in Kumbo, Bui Division, in 1984, establishing the second major empowerment center in the region and reinforcing the CBC's position as a primary institutional actor in disability empowerment. Both institutions operated initially under the medical model of disability, whereby visual impairment was treated as a clinical condition requiring professional rehabilitation before social integration could be contemplated, a model that explained why both centers were situated adjacent to existing healthcare facilities SAJOCAH to the Njinikom Catholic Hospital and the ISB to the Bansa Baptist Hospital.

From these foundational centers, both the Catholic and Baptist institutions progressively expanded their empowerment infrastructure. SAJOCAH extended its partnerships to include the Catholic Primary School Mambu, St. Joseph Comprehensive High School Bafut, and St. Augustine Comprehensive College Kumbo, facilitating the mainstreaming of visually impaired learners into regular educational settings from the early 1980s. The CBC, meanwhile, established a second resource center in Nkwen, Mezam Division, in 2018 the CBC Social Inclusive Empowerment Project (SIEP) Center as part of its response to the educational disruptions occasioned by the Anglophone crisis from 2016. In 2009, the CBCHBS had also introduced the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (SEEPD) program, a community-based rehabilitation initiative that substantially broadened the scope of CBC's disability empowerment activities beyond the residential institution into the wider social fabric of the North West Region.

Domains of Empowerment Activities Education, Vocational Training, and Healthcare

The empowerment activities of faith-based organizations in the North West Region were organized across several interconnected domains, each of which contributed in distinct ways to the progressive socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairment. The domain of education constituted the most foundational of these interventions, given that prior to 1982, persons with visual impairment in the region had been systematically excluded from formal schooling a consequence of cultural beliefs that equated impairment with incapacity, and of the

absence of specialized educational infrastructure capable of accommodating their learning needs. The resource units established by SAJOCAH and the ISB addressed this gap directly through the teaching of Braille the tactile writing system invented by Louis Braille in 1824 and formally adopted by the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in 1854 alongside mobility orientation, numeracy, and hygiene education. Visually impaired learners who completed their foundational training in these resource units were progressively mainstreamed into regular primary schools adjacent to the centers, and subsequently into secondary and higher educational institutions across the region.

The CBC's educational empowerment activities were particularly extensive. By 2009, through the SEEPD program, the organization had advocated for and achieved the establishment of the first government-based inclusive resource unit in the Government Bilingual High School (GBHS) Bamenda, followed by the formalization of a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Bamenda in 2015, and the donation of computers, braille embossers, screen-reading software, and other assistive technologies to the university in 2017. These interventions enabled visually impaired students to pursue tertiary education within the same institutional environment as their sighted peers, while CBCHBS staff provided specialized technical support for transcription, adapted assessment, and academic accommodation. The CBC equally transcribed GCE examinations into Braille from 1996 and brailed HTTC entrance examinations in 2015, 2016, and 2018, demonstrating a sustained commitment to enabling visually impaired candidates to participate in the formal credentialing systems of the Cameroonian state.

In the domain of economic and vocational empowerment, both the Catholic and Baptist institutions organized systematic training programs that equipped persons with visual impairment with marketable skills, enabling them to participate in the informal and, progressively, the formal economy. SAJOCAH's workshops introduced cane weaving, animal rearing, and later detergent production for female trainees, while the CBCHBS's Bingo Rehabilitation Center trained visually impaired individuals in cane weaving from 1995, producing self-employed artisans such as Samuel Nyingcho a pioneer visually impaired weaver who operated his own workshop for over fifteen years and later became a leading disability rights advocate. From 2015 to 2024, the CBCHS SEEPD program, in collaboration with the Coordinating Unit of Associations of Persons with Disabilities (CUAPWD), organized vocational workshops in detergent production,

beadwork, modern bag and shoe design, and urban farming, equipping women with visual impairment in particular with the skills and startup capital necessary for small-scale economic participation. Healthcare empowerment formed a third major domain of intervention. Both the SAJOCAH and CBC institutions maintained ophthalmological departments and organized community health screening programs for persons with visual impairment, providing free consultations, early disease detection, and health education on the management of chronic and preventable conditions.

Social Advocacy, Sports, and Digital Empowerment

Beyond education and vocational training, faith-based organizations in the North West Region undertook sustained campaigns of social advocacy aimed at dismantling the cultural beliefs and institutional barriers that had long excluded persons with visual impairment from full participation in societal life. The prevailing cultural attitude in many communities of the region which interpreted visual impairment as a divine punishment for ancestral sin, rendering the impaired individual economically and socially worthless constituted one of the most formidable obstacles to inclusion. Through radio broadcasts on the Baptist radio station, community sensitization workshops, poster campaigns, and the deployment of the slogan 'Disability is not Inability,' the CBC's SEEPD program from 2009 to 2011 progressively educated families, community leaders, teachers, and local administrators on disability rights and the capabilities of visually impaired persons. These advocacy efforts were corroborated by the testimonies of informants who noted a gradual but discernible shift in community attitudes toward the visually impaired, particularly in urban centers such as Bamenda, where institutional exposure and public visibility of empowered PWVIs challenged long-standing stereotypes of dependency and incapacity.

Sports and cultural integration constituted a further dimension of social inclusion advanced by faith-based organizations. Both SAJOCAH and the CBC SIEP Center in Nkwen incorporated sporting activities particularly Goalball, a team sport specifically designed for persons with visual impairments into their educational curricula, and donated sporting equipment to inclusive secondary schools and the University of Bamenda. The CBCHS SEEPD program organized Goalball competitions and marathon races in Bamenda in 2016, bringing together visually impaired athletes from across the region in a public display of physical capability and

competitive sporting culture. Individuals such as Clement Ndim Yuh achieved national and international recognition in athletics winning a national medal in shot put and advancing to African and world-level competition in 2022 thereby demonstrating that sporting excellence was achievable regardless of visual impairment, and generating significant public visibility for disability inclusion. In the domain of digital empowerment, the CBCHS's Empowerment Disability Inclusive Development (EDID) program, launched in 2014 in partnership with the Thom Welty family of the United States, provided computers, screen-reading software (JAWS and NVDA), braille embossers, and digital training to visually impaired individuals, enabling their participation in the knowledge economy and the formal labor market of the twenty-first century.

Impacts of Faith-Based Empowerment on Socio-Economic and Professional Inclusion

The cumulative impact of faith-based empowerment activities on the socio-economic and professional inclusion of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region was historically significant, though uneven and incomplete. In the economic domain, empowerment initiatives from 1982 onward reversed long-standing patterns of dependency, as visually impaired persons previously confined to begging or family support became self-employed artisans, small-scale traders, and service providers in the informal economy. The vocational trainings of SAJOCAH and the CBCHBS transformed the economic agency of individuals such as Nyingcho Samuel, Yila Elizabeth, Lum Loveline, Fogang Lillian, and many others, enabling them to generate independent livelihoods and contribute to household welfare. As Amartya Sen argued, true development consisted in the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms, and the vocational empowerment offered by faith-based institutions in the North West constituted precisely such an expansion for persons who had previously been denied productive agency by both cultural stigma and institutional neglect.

In the professional domain, the impacts of faith-based empowerment were equally transformative. Former trainees of SAJOCAH and the ISB became the first visually impaired teachers in the region, with individuals such as Nicolas Tamanjong, Feta Felix, Yilla Elisabeth, and Chamba Daniel recruited as braille instructors within the faith-based empowerment centers from the mid-1980s. Government recruitment exercises from 2010 absorbed visually impaired teachers into primary and secondary schools across the national territory, while sustained

advocacy by the CBCHS culminated in the appointment of visually impaired lecturers including Ngwa Suh and Peter Tonain to the University of Bamenda between 2022 and 2025. Persons with visual impairment were also integrated into journalism and media, with individuals such as Nsah Edwin broadcasting on Radio Hot Cocoa Bamenda and Jean Pascal Somb Lingom serving as a CRTV radio presenter since 2010. Others operated as social workers, organizational leaders, consultants, and NGO administrators roles made possible by the combined effect of educational empowerment, advocacy, and the progressive dismantling of institutional barriers to professional participation.

Challenges and Limitations of Faith-Based Empowerment Initiatives

Despite the considerable achievements outlined above, the empowerment initiatives of faith-based organizations in the North West Region were consistently circumscribed by a set of structural, financial, and socio-cultural challenges that prevented the attainment of full inclusion. The most pervasive of these was the problem of limited and unpredictable funding. Both SAJOCAH and the CBCHS depended heavily on international donors among them CBM, UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO, INTERSOS, Plan International, and the World Health Organization for the financing of their empowerment programs. As scholars Michael Edwards and David Hulme observed, such dependence on external funding rendered NGOs and faith-based organizations vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities and funding cycles, often compelling them to scale back operations or discontinue programs when donor commitments lapsed. The SEEPD project manager candidly acknowledged this constraint, noting that the institution's desire to empower all persons with visual impairment was perpetually limited by insufficient financial resources.

A second major challenge was the multiplicity of organizations operating in the disability empowerment sector without adequate coordination or governance. From the early 2000s, a proliferation of locally based NGOs and associations claiming to work for the welfare of persons with impairments resulted in duplication of services, mismanagement of donated resources, corruption, and the erosion of donor confidence. A particularly illustrative case was the mismanagement of a computer training center donated to the Hope Social Union for the Visually Impaired (HSUVI) by the Thom Welty family in 2014, which was operated as a private business rather than a public empowerment facility, ultimately leading to its closure by the CBCHS in

December 2016. A third and perhaps most deeply entrenched challenge was the persistence of cultural beliefs and stigmatizing attitudes toward visual impairment across many communities of the North West Region. Despite sustained advocacy campaigns by the CBC and Catholic institutions, the association of impairment with divine punishment, social shame, and economic uselessness continued to limit the educational access, marriage prospects, and professional opportunities of visually impaired persons particularly women in rural and semi-urban communities. The intersection of gender and disability proved especially constraining, as women with visual impairment were disproportionately excluded from family support, education, and social integration, reflecting the broader structural marginalization of women in the cultural landscape of the Grassfields.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The discourse on inclusion and humanitarian support for persons with impairments gained significant prominence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, evolving into a more institutionalized and interconnected framework in the twenty-first century. Within this study, impairment was conceptualized from a medical and functional standpoint as a loss or abnormality in bodily structure or physiological function, while disability was interpreted through a social lens as a condition shaped by structural barriers, exclusionary practices, and societal attitudes. This analytical distinction proved essential in understanding how persons with visual impairment experienced marginalization and how institutional interventions sought to address these challenges.

In Cameroon, Christian missions and church institutions historically engaged in education, health, and welfare provision since the nineteenth century. The Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC), alongside Catholic Church missions, emerged as dominant actors in this domain, establishing extensive networks of schools, hospitals, and social services. The creation of empowerment centers in Bafut and Kumbo in the 1980s marked a significant turning point in institutional responses to disability, with subsequent expansion into socio-economic empowerment initiatives. These developments underscored the transformative role of missionary enterprises, not only in religious propagation but also in fostering socio-economic mobility and inclusive development.

Guided by some concepts and theories, the study exponentially clarified the concept of empowerment to mean all activities carried out by faith-based organizations towards enabling persons with visual impairment to be equipped with the needed knowhow and resources to freely function and relate in the society void of prejudices. This concept was equally seen as both deeply personal and structurally political. On the personal level, it involves gaining confidence, learning braille, acquiring digital literacy through screen readers, and navigating spaces independently. On the relational level, it includes being respected in the family, having the right to marry, raise children, or take leadership positions. Structurally, empowerment demands access to inclusive education, employment opportunities, healthcare, and participation in political processes. In essence, the debates surrounding the concept of empowerment reveal its complexity and context-dependence. Whether viewed as a process or outcome, individual or

collective, universal or culturally specific, empowerment remains a critical lens through which to understand the rights and experiences of persons with visual impairment in the socio-economic environment. For this group, empowerment must go beyond rhetoric and be rooted in practical

Meanwhile, the concept of socio-economic inclusion was given some inside meaning before diving into the crooks of the matter. Socio-economic inclusion was perceived to be that process by which individuals are provided the needed resources, technical knowhow and equal access to societal participation and independent growth. When applied to persons with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments, this concept becomes a complex interplay of rights, accessibility, training, discrimination, and empowerment.

A good number of theories were used to articulate the key role of FBOs in fostering socio-economic inclusion of PWVIs. In this connection, the social theory or model on impairment and economic models were given the pride of place, while meticulously utilizing the medical model theory to articulate the social understanding of disability and impairment, to sustain the major argument that, despite the laudable efforts instituted by the Baptist and Catholic missions, towards fostering effective empowerment and full socio-economic integration of persons with visual impairment, inherent challenges persisted limiting full inclusion.

For a well-structured analysis, the study was guided by five research questions and objectives. The research questions provided the premises for the study to set goals and provide reasonable answers as to the major provoking question focused on how persons with visual impairments were empowered and included into the socio-economic life of the North West Region by FBOs And what hurdles limited their inclusion process. The five subsidiary questions and objectives that emanated from the major worry resulted to the dissertation structured into five chapters with each chapter focused on a particular objective of the study.

To this effect, The first chapter established the geo-historical and socio-economic foundations of the study area, demonstrating that the environmental setting, historical evolution, and socio-political organization of the region created favorable conditions for the emergence and expansion of faith-based empowerment initiatives. It argued that these contextual dynamics were instrumental in facilitating missionary penetration and the subsequent development of specialized institutions targeting vulnerable groups.

The second chapter examined the emergence and institutional development of faith-based empowerment agencies, particularly those initiated by Baptist and Catholic missions. It demonstrated that these organizations became the principal drivers of disability-focused interventions, establishing structured centers and partnerships that positioned them as leading actors in the empowerment of persons with visual impairment.

The third chapter analyzed the nature and scope of empowerment initiatives implemented by these institutions. It showed that faith-based organizations adopted multi-sectoral strategies encompassing education, healthcare, vocational training, digital inclusion, and social integration. These interventions collectively enhanced the capacity of visually impaired individuals to participate meaningfully in socio-economic life.

The fourth chapter assessed the impacts and challenges of these initiatives. It established that faith-based interventions significantly transformed the socio-economic conditions of persons with visual impairment by promoting independence, professional integration, and social recognition. However, it also highlighted persistent challenges, including limited resources, infrastructural constraints, and societal attitudes that continued to hinder full inclusion.

The fifth chapter translated the research findings into pedagogical practice, presenting a competency-based lesson framework for teaching the role of faith-based organizations in social inclusion. This practical dimension underscored the relevance of the study beyond academia, demonstrating how its insights could inform teaching, awareness, and policy-oriented discourse.

This study submitted that the socio-economic inclusion of persons with visual impairment in the North West Region of Cameroon was largely driven by the deliberate and sustained interventions of faith-based organizations rather than by state structures alone. The CBC and Catholic Church missions emerged as central institutional actors whose historical legacy, organizational capacity, and moral commitment enabled them to design and implement effective empowerment strategies. It further argued that the transformation from charity-based approaches to empowerment-oriented frameworks marked a significant paradigm shift in disability engagement. This shift redefined visually impaired individuals not as passive recipients of aid but as active participants in socio-economic development. Additionally, the study demonstrated that faith-based organizations functioned as critical intermediaries between marginalized

populations and development opportunities, effectively bridging gaps left by the state. Their role highlighted the importance of integrating religious institutions into broader development and inclusion policies.

Based on the findings of the study, the research proposes that, Both state and non-state actors should establish sustainable funding frameworks, including public-private partnerships, to support the long-term operation of empowerment centers and programs. Also, There is a need for continuous capacity building for staff working in empowerment centers to ensure the delivery of high-quality, specialized services tailored to persons with visual impairment. The study ultimately reaffirmed that faith-based organizations were not merely supplementary actors but central pillars in the advancement of inclusive development in Cameroon. Their historically embedded presence, combined with adaptive and context-sensitive strategies, positioned them as indispensable agents in the ongoing pursuit of socio-economic inclusion for persons with visual impairment.

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