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The Role of MAETUR and Local Councils in the Transformation of Urban and Rural Communities in Cameroon Toward a Modern African Nation

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Abstract

This article examines the institutional roles of the Mission d'Aménagement et d'Equipement des Terrains Urbains et Ruraux (MAETUR) and decentralised local councils in Cameroon's socio-spatial transformation. Employing a jurispolitical framework that integrates public law theory with political economy and development studies, the study analyses how MAETUR, since its creation in 1977, has functioned as a para-public vehicle for organised urban land development, while local councils, reinvigorated by the 1996 Constitution and the 2004 decentralisation laws now the 2019 law on regional and local authorities, have progressively assumed co-responsible roles in territorial planning and community development. The article argues that the complementarity between MAETUR's technical and regulatory capacities and the democratic legitimacy of local councils represents a potentially transformative but underexploited governance architecture. Drawing on documentary analysis, comparative political science, and field-level data from Cameroonian municipalities, the study identifies persistent challenges including institutional fragmentation, fiscal inadequacy, elite capture, and weak intergovernmental coordination that inhibit effective community transformation. The article concludes by proposing a convergent governance model that repositions MAETUR as a strategic partner of empowered local councils in the pursuit of a modern, inclusive, and spatially just Cameroon.

Keywords

MAETUR, local councils, decentralisation, urban planning, rural development, Cameroon, governance, juris political analysis, territorial development, modern African state

1. Introduction

The question of how postcolonial African states manage the spatial organisation of their societies transforming fragmented, underdeveloped communities into coherent urban and rural territories equipped with modern infrastructure and governance remains one of the most pressing issues in comparative political science and development law. Cameroon, often described as "Africa in miniature" for its remarkable ethnic, cultural, and ecological diversity, presents a particularly instructive case. With a rapidly urbanising population and deep rural hinterlands that continue to define the livelihoods of

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millions, Cameroon has experimented with a range of institutional mechanisms to mediate the relationship between the state, territory, and citizenry.

At the centre of this institutional architecture stand two key actors: the Mission d'Aménagement et d'Equipement des Terrains Urbains et Ruraux (MAETUR), a para-public body created by Decree No. 77/193 of 23 June 1977, and the network of local councils (communes) that constitute the primary unit of decentralised governance in Cameroon. Both entities exist within a broader normative and administrative framework that has evolved considerably since independence in 1960, particularly following the constitutional reform of 1996 and the landmark decentralisation legislation of 2004 (Law No. 2004/017 on the Orientation of Decentralisation; Law No. 2004/018 on the Rules Applicable to Communes; Law No. 2004/019 on the Rules Applicable to Regions). Together, these laws recalibrated the distribution of powers and resources between the central state and subnational authorities, creating, at least in juridical terms, the conditions for a genuine process of local self-governance.

Yet the transformative potential of this dual architecture MAETUR as a technical arm of the state, local councils as agents of democratic local governance remains only partially realised. The persistence of urban sprawl, informal settlements, inadequate infrastructure, and underdeveloped rural communities testifies to the gap between juridical promise and developmental reality. This article seeks to interrogate that gap, not merely to document it but to understand its structural and political determinants and to articulate a framework for reform.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical and methodological framework guiding the analysis. Section 3 provides a historical and legal overview of MAETUR's mandate and operations. Section 4 examines the role of local councils in community development under Cameroon's decentralisation regime. Section 5 analyses the institutional interaction between MAETUR and local councils, identifying both complementarities and tensions. Section 6 discusses the challenges impeding effective transformation of urban and rural communities. Section 7 proposes a convergent governance model for the future. Section 8 concludes.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

2.1 A Jurispolitical Approach

This article adopts a jurispolitical framework an analytical orientation that takes both law and politics seriously as co-constitutive dimensions of governance. As Loughlin (2003, p. 12) has argued, public law is not merely a technical instrument of administration but a "mode of political thought" through which power is organised, legitimated, and contested. In the African context, this insight is particularly salient: the post-independence constitutionalization of state structures and the juridification of administrative relations have produced normative frameworks that both enable and constrain political action at various scales.

Applied to the Cameroonian case, a jurispolitical approach allows us to examine MAETUR and local councils not merely as bureaucratic entities but as political institutions embedded in contested relations of power, resource allocation, and territorial governance. It enables an analysis of the law as it is written, the law as it is applied, and the political economy that mediates the gap between the two.

2.2 Decentralisation Theory and Local Development

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The theoretical literature on decentralisation offers a rich, if contested, body of insights for understanding local governance in Africa. Classical theories of fiscal federalism, associated with Tiebout (1956), Oates (1972), and Musgrave (1959), posit that the devolution of authority to subnational governments enhances efficiency by bringing government closer to citizens, enabling preference-matching between public services and local needs. More critical perspectives, however, caution against normative optimism, pointing to the risks of elite capture, fiscal transfers without genuine autonomy, and the reproduction of central state power at lower levels.

In the African context, scholars such as Olowu and Wunsch (2004), Smoke (2001), and Ribot (2002) have emphasised the importance of distinguishing between formal decentralisation, the legal transfer of authority and substantive decentralisation, characterised by real fiscal resources, institutional capacity, and political accountability. Cameroon's decentralisation trajectory, as this article demonstrates, has too often remained at the formal level, producing what Konings and Nyamnjoh (2003, p. 88) aptly characterise as "decentralisation without local power."

2.3 Methodology

The research draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include Cameroonian legislation, decrees, MAETUR official reports, the 1996 Constitution, and decentralisation framework laws. Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed scholarship in political science, urban studies, development economics, and administrative law. The analysis is also informed by qualitative insights drawn from fieldwork conducted in selected Cameroonian municipalities, including Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam, and Ngaoundere, as well as rural communes in the Adamawa and South West Regions. This multi-scalar approach enables triangulation between legal texts, institutional behaviour, and lived community experience.

3. Maetur: Historical Genesis, Legal Mandate, and Operational Trajectory

3.1 Historical and Legal Origins

MAETUR was created by Decree No. 77/193 of 23 June 1977 under the presidency of Ahmadou Ahidjo, at a moment of significant state-led developmental ambition in Cameroon. The creation of MAETUR reflected a broader developmentalist ideology that characterised much of Francophone African governance in the 1970s, one in which the state, guided by technocratic expertise and centrally managed institutions, was to be the primary engine of territorial transformation.

As a société à capital public (public capital company), MAETUR occupies an intermediate institutional position between a fully public administrative body and a private commercial entity. It operates under the dual supervision of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINHDU) and the Ministry of Finance, with a mandate centred on the acquisition, subdivision, servicing, and sale of urban and peri-urban land plots for housing and commercial development. The hybrid character of MAETUR combining public mission with commercial operations reflects the broader para-public tradition of many Francophone African states, in which the "strategic" sectors of the economy and territory remain under state guidance while being insulated from direct ministerial control.

3.2 Core Mandate and Functions

MAETUR's organic texts assign it four principal functions:

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1. the acquisition of land through expropriation or purchase;
2. the servicing of land plots with infrastructure (roads, drainage, water, electricity);
3. the development and maintenance of urban land registers; and
4. the sale or concession of developed plots to eligible beneficiaries, including individuals, cooperatives, and public institutions (Decree No. 77/193 of 23 June 1977). These functions position MAETUR as a key intermediary in Cameroon's land market, tasked with converting raw or undeveloped land into regulated, infrastructurally endowed plots accessible to urban residents.

In practice, MAETUR's operations have been concentrated in the major urban centres of Douala and Yaoundé, where the demand for formal land plots has been most acute. Between 1977 and 2020, MAETUR claims to have produced over 50,000 serviced plots and developed numerous residential and commercial zones, including the celebrated Cité Verte in Yaoundé and the Bonamoussadi residential area in Douala. These projects represent significant achievements in organised urban land development and have provided formal housing opportunities to segments of the middle-class population that might otherwise have been pushed into the informal settlements that characterise much of Cameroon's urban periphery.

3.3 Limitations and Critiques

Despite these achievements, MAETUR's operations have been criticized on several fronts. First, the institution has been repeatedly challenged by land tenure insecurity, as the legal complexity of Cameroon's dual land law system combining customary rights with state-derived title under the 1974 Land Tenure Ordinances has generated conflicts over acquisition and compensation. Second, MAETUR's pricing mechanisms have been questioned for placing developed plots beyond the reach of low-income urban residents, effectively serving a middle- and upper-income clientele and replicating rather than resolving urban spatial inequalities. Third, MAETUR's predominantly urban orientation has left rural communities largely outside its operational mandate, creating a structural asymmetry in state-led territorial development between urban and rural Cameroon.

Fourth, and most relevant to this article's argument, MAETUR has historically operated with limited coordination with local councils, despite the overlap in their territorial mandates. The institution has tended to function as a vertical appendage of the central state, planning and implementing projects with minimal input from elected local authorities and the communities they represent. This centralist operational logic has both undermined the democratic legitimacy of MAETUR's interventions and limited their development impact.

4. Local Councils in Cameroon's Decentralisation Regime

4.1 Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The 1996 Constitution of Cameroon marked a decisive, if gradual, reorientation of the country's territorial governance structure. Article 55 of the Constitution explicitly recognises decentralised territorial collectivities communes, regions, and any other entity established by law as constitutive elements of the Republic, endowed with legal personality, financial autonomy, and the authority to govern themselves through elected councils. This constitutional recognition was translated into operational legislation through the three decentralisation framework laws of 2004, which defined in detail the composition, powers, resources, and responsibilities of communes and regions.

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The 2004 General Code of Regional and Local Authorities (CGCTD) subsequently consolidated and updated this legislative framework, providing a comprehensive juridical foundation for local self-governance in Cameroon. Under this Code, communes exercise competences in a wide range of domains, including local economic development, land management (foncier), primary education, basic health infrastructure, local roads, sanitation, water supply, and cultural affairs. The Code also establishes mechanisms for intergovernmental transfers notably the Special Decentralisation Fund (FEICOM) and sectoral transfer resources as well as instruments for intermunicipal cooperation.

4.2 Local Councils as Agents of Community Transformation

In normative terms, Cameroon's local councils are well positioned to serve as primary agents of community transformation. As elected bodies with democratic mandates rooted in local communities, they possess a degree of political legitimacy that appointed central state bodies, including MAETUR, cannot replicate. The principle of subsidiarity enshrined in the CGCTD suggests that governance decisions should be made at the lowest level consistent with efficient and effective public service delivery, implying a presumption in favour of local authority in matters of community planning and development.

Research conducted in Cameroon's municipalities reveals a growing, if uneven, effort by local councils to exercise their developmental mandates. Several communes notably the City of Bafoussam, Ngaoundere and certain rural communes in the South West Region have developed credible local development plans (Plans de Développement Communaux, PDCs) and have invested resources in local infrastructure, markets, and community facilities. The introduction of participatory budgeting processes in some communes, supported by international partners such as GIZ, SNV, and UN-Habitat, has further demonstrated the potential of local councils to serve as genuine platforms for citizen engagement and community-driven development.

4.3 Structural Constraints on Local Council Effectiveness

However, the developmental effectiveness of Cameroonian local councils remains severely constrained by multiple structural factors. First, fiscal insufficiency represents perhaps the most fundamental challenge. Despite the constitutional guarantee of financial autonomy, local councils in Cameroon are heavily dependent on central government transfers, with own-source revenues derived largely from local taxes, market fees, and licences—constituting a modest fraction of total budgets. FEICOM transfers, while significant in absolute terms, are often unpredictable in timing and conditioned by central government priorities.

Second, technical and human resource capacity remains weak, particularly in small and medium-sized communes. Many local councils lack qualified urban planners, engineers, accountants, and legal advisers capable of formulating and implementing complex development projects. Third, elite capture the colonisation of local councils by political, economic, and ethnic elites pursuing private interests has in many cases diverted local resources away from community development toward private enrichment and patronage networks. Fourth, the persistence of strong central state tutelage (tutelle), even in the post-decentralisation era, continues to limit the effective autonomy of local councils, with prefects and senior divisional officers retaining significant powers to review, suspend, or override council decisions.

5. Maetur and Local Councils: Complementarities, Tensions, and Governance Gaps

5.1 Legal and Institutional Complementarities

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A careful analysis of the normative frameworks governing MAETUR and local councils reveals significant complementarities that, if activated through deliberate institutional design, could produce powerful synergies for community transformation. MAETUR possesses technical expertise in land servicing, cadastral management, and infrastructure development that most local councils lack. Local councils, conversely, possess democratic legitimacy, proximity to communities, and legally assigned competences in local planning and land management that MAETUR lacks. The combination of MAETUR's technical capacity with local councils' political legitimacy and local knowledge could, in theory, generate what Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 545) call "collaborative governance" arrangements that bring multiple public institutions together to jointly produce better governance outcomes than any could achieve independently.

Indeed, the CGCTD and its implementing regulations envisage a form of institutional partnership between para-public bodies and local councils in the domain of urban and rural planning. Article 81 of the CGCTD, for example, provides that the Master Plans (Plans Directeurs d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme) that govern urban land use in Cameroon's cities should be developed in consultation with the relevant communes, giving local councils a formal role in the planning processes that MAETUR implements. Similarly, the General Urban Planning Code establishes a framework for communal land use plans (Plans d'Occupation des Sols) that should in principle guide MAETUR's land development operations at the local level.

5.2 Observed Tensions and Governance Gaps

In practice, however, the relationship between MAETUR and local councils has been characterised more by disconnection and occasional tension than by functional complementarity. Several governance gaps can be identified. First, planning disconnects: MAETUR's urban development projects have frequently proceeded without meaningful consultation with local councils, particularly in the major cities of Douala and Yaoundé, where multiple autonomous planning authorities including MAETUR, the Urban Community of Douala (CUD), the Urban Community of Yaoundé (CUY), and sectoral ministries—operate in overlapping and often conflicting mandates. The resulting fragmentation of planning authority has produced spatial incoherence, infrastructure duplication, and weak accountability.

Second, financial asymmetries have historically structured a power imbalance between MAETUR and local councils. MAETUR, as a para-public entity with access to state resources and its own commercial revenue streams, has operated with considerably greater financial autonomy than many financially strapped communes, reinforcing a hierarchical rather than collaborative relationship. Third, political dynamics, including partisan differences between local council majorities and the central government, have at times introduced political friction into what should be primarily technical and developmental relationships. Local councils perceived as opposition strongholds have, in some cases, found MAETUR and central state bodies less cooperative and less willing to channel resources through them.

5.3 The Rural Development Deficit

The governance gap between MAETUR and local councils is particularly acute in rural Cameroon. MAETUR's operational mandate explicitly includes rural terrain (terrains ruraux), and its name references both urban and rural development. In practice, however, MAETUR's activities have been overwhelmingly concentrated in urban and peri-urban areas, leaving rural communes with minimal access to the institution's technical and financial resources. Rural local councils, operating with the smallest budgets and the weakest technical capacities, are thus left to manage complex land development and community infrastructure challenges with the fewest institutional resources.

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This rural development deficit has significant implications for Cameroon's broader developmental trajectory. With an estimated 40–45 percent of the population still residing in rural areas, and rural communities serving as the foundation of the agricultural economy that employs the majority of Cameroonian workers, the institutional neglect of rural territorial development represents both a social injustice and a structural economic constraint on national development.

6. Challenges Impeding Effective Transformation

6.1 Institutional Fragmentation

One of the most persistent structural challenges in Cameroon's territorial governance landscape is institutional fragmentation the multiplication of actors with overlapping mandates and insufficient coordination mechanisms. In the urban planning and development domain alone, Cameroon has multiple ministries (MINHDU: Ministry of Housing and Urban Development , MINFI :Ministry of Finance, MINATD: Ministry of Territorial Administration, MINTP: Ministry of Public Works), para-public bodies (MAETUR, Société Immobiliere du Cameroun, CAMWATER), urban communities, communes, and regional authorities all claiming some jurisdiction over land use, infrastructure, and development planning. This institutional overcrowding, far from generating healthy institutional competition, tends to produce inter-institutional disputes, policy incoherence, and collective action failures in which essential development functions fall through the governance gaps between agencies.

6.2 Fiscal Inadequacy and Dependence

Fiscal inadequacy remains a systemic constraint on both MAETUR's and local councils' capacity to drive community transformation. While MAETUR's commercial operations provide some financial independence, the institution depends significantly on state subventions and land concessions for major projects. Local councils, as noted above, are structurally dependent on central transfers, with limited taxable bases and weak tax administration capacity. The fiscal architecture of Cameroonian decentralisation, which allocates only a small share of the national budget to local governments, structurally constrains the developmental ambitions that the law assigns to subnational authorities. Smoke (2001, p. 9) has argued that decentralisation can only succeed when "the financing framework is adequate," a condition that remains far from met in the Cameroonian context.

6.3 Land Tenure Insecurity

Land tenure insecurity constitutes one of the most deep-rooted obstacles to both MAETUR's land development operations and local councils' land management functions. Cameroon's land law, rooted in the 1974 Land Tenure Ordinances, establishes a system in which the state claims radical title to all land, with private rights derived from state recognition. However, the co-existence of this statutory system with persistent customary tenure norms, the high cost and administrative complexity of formal land registration, and widespread corruption in land administration have produced a land market characterised by insecurity, dispute, and speculation. MAETUR's land acquisitions have repeatedly been delayed and contested by communities asserting customary rights, generating social conflict and project delays.

6.4 Weak Intergovernmental Coordination

Effective community transformation in Cameroon's multi-level governance system requires robust intergovernmental coordination mechanisms through which the central state, MAETUR, and local

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councils align their planning, investment, and regulatory activities toward common territorial development objectives. In practice, intergovernmental coordination in Cameroon remains weak, ad hoc, and often personality-dependent rather than institutionally embedded. The statutory coordination mechanisms that exist including the Departmental Coordination Committees and the Regional Economic Development Committees are insufficiently staffed and resourced, and are frequently overridden by informal centralised decision-making.

6.5 Gender and Social Inclusion Deficits

The transformation of urban and rural communities in Cameroon cannot be considered complete or genuine without addressing the systematic exclusion of women, youth, and marginalised communities from governance processes and development benefits. Research consistently documents the marginalisation of women from elected local councils—female representation in Cameroonian municipalities remains below 25 percent despite legislative progress and from formal land titling processes, which tend to favour male-headed households. MAETUR's beneficiary selection processes have similarly been criticised for favouring connected and politically well-placed applicants over lower-income populations. A modern African nation worthy of the name must embed gender equity and social inclusion as core governance principles, not peripheral afterthoughts.

7. Toward A Convergent Governance Model: Maetur and Local Councils as Transformative Partners

7.1 Principles of the Convergent Model

Drawing on the theoretical insights of collaborative governance theory, the African decentralisation literature, and the specific institutional realities of Cameroon, this article proposes a convergent governance model for the revitalisation of the MAETUR-local council relationship. The model rests on four foundational principles.

First, institutional complementarity: MAETUR and local councils should be explicitly positioned as complementary rather than parallel or competing institutions, with their respective technical, financial, and political resources pooled through structured partnership agreements. The legal basis for such agreements exists in the CGCTD and in the General Urban Planning Code; what is needed is the political will to activate and resource these mechanisms.

Second, territorial planning coherence: Cameroon must develop integrated territorial planning frameworks at the regional, departmental, and communal levels that bring MAETUR's technical planning capacities under the formal democratic direction of local councils. The current practice of MAETUR developing urban plans in isolation from elected councils must give way to participatory planning processes in which local councils set priorities, MAETUR provides technical expertise, and communities exercise meaningful oversight.

Third, fiscal solidarity and resource adequacy: The fiscal framework governing local councils must be fundamentally reformed to provide communes with adequate and predictable resources for developmental action. This requires both a greater share of national tax revenues for local governments and a reformed system of FEICOM transfers that rewards performance and penalises under-spending. MAETUR should also be mandated to allocate a defined proportion of its commercial revenues to cross-subsidise land development operations in underserved peri-urban and rural areas.

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Fourth, democratic accountability and social inclusion: Both MAETUR and local councils must be subjected to stronger mechanisms of democratic accountability, including mandatory community consultation processes, transparent budget publication, accessible grievance mechanisms, and systematic gender mainstreaming in governance and development activities. The establishment of Local Development Observatories—joint citizen-government monitoring bodies could provide ongoing accountability infrastructure at the communal level.

7.2 Institutional Architecture

In terms of institutional architecture, the convergent governance model would reorganise the relationship between MAETUR and local councils around three key mechanisms. First, Communal Development Contracts (Contrats de Développement Communal) between MAETUR and individual communes or intercommunal groupings, establishing jointly agreed development objectives, resource contributions, technical responsibilities, and performance indicators for each planning cycle. These contracts would transform MAETUR from a top-down state agency into a responsive technical partner of elected local authorities.

Second, the consolidation and strengthening of intermunicipal cooperation structures notably the Communautés d'Agglomération and the Syndicats Intercommunaux provided for in the CGCTD to enable pooling of resources and planning authority across administrative boundaries. Given that urban and rural development challenges do not respect commune boundaries, effective territorial governance requires supracommunal institutions capable of coordinating at the relevant functional scale.

Third, the creation of a National Territorial Development Agency (Agence Nationale de Développement Territorial) as a coordinating and capacity-building body that brings together MAETUR, the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL), FEICOM, and representatives of local councils. This agency would serve as the institutional hub of the convergent governance model, facilitating information-sharing, capacity-building, and the resolution of inter-institutional disputes. Precedents for such coordinating agencies exist in Francophone Africa, including Senegal's Agence de Développement Municipal and Morocco's Direction Générale des Collectivités Locales, which offer instructive models for Cameroon.

7.3 The Path Toward a Modern African Nation

The vision animating this article's convergent governance model is ultimately political as much as technical: it is a vision of Cameroon as a modern African nation in the deepest sense—not merely a state with modern administrative structures, but a genuinely democratic, spatially just, and developmentally effective political community. In this vision, MAETUR serves not as an appendage of a centralising state but as a technical resource placed at the disposal of empowered local communities. Local councils are not merely administrative relays of central government directives but genuine arenas of democratic self-governance, capable of translating citizens' aspirations into territorial realities.

This vision is not utopian. Comparative experience from Senegal, Morocco, and South Africa all states that have invested seriously in subnational governance capacity and in the technical-institutional infrastructure of territorial development demonstrates that the combination of genuine political decentralisation with adequate technical and fiscal resources can produce meaningful improvements in urban and rural community conditions. Cameroon possesses the legal frameworks, the institutional heritage, and the human capital to follow a similar path; what has been lacking is political will and institutional coherence.

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8. Conclusion

This article has examined the roles of MAETUR and local councils in the transformation of urban and rural communities in Cameroon, arguing that the partial and fragmented character of existing governance arrangements has significantly limited the country's capacity to realise its developmental potential. MAETUR, created as a vehicle of state-led land development, has delivered important achievements in organised urban land servicing, but has operated with insufficient democratic accountability, inadequate rural reach, and limited coordination with local councils. Local councils, reinvigorated by the 1996 Constitution and 2004 decentralisation laws, have acquired significant normative authority but remain structurally constrained by fiscal insufficiency, limited technical capacity, persistent central tutelage, and, in some cases, elite capture.

The article has proposed a convergent governance model that repositions MAETUR as a technical partner of democratically empowered local councils, embedded in coherent territorial planning frameworks, adequate fiscal arrangements, and robust mechanisms of democratic accountability and social inclusion. The realisation of this model requires not only technical reforms but a deeper political commitment to the project of decentralisation an understanding, at the highest levels of the Cameroonian state, that modern nationhood in the twenty-first century requires not merely central state capacity but the distributed democratic energy of empowered communities.

As Africans reckon with the challenge of building states that work for all their citizens, institutions like MAETUR and local councils represent both the promise and the limitations of the developmental state model. The promise lies in the extraordinary potential of organised institutional action to transform territories and improve lives. The limitations lie in the persistent dangers of centralisation, technocracy, and exclusion. Navigating between promise and limitation—harnessing the technical capacities of the state while anchoring them in democratic accountability and community ownership—is the central governance challenge of modern Cameroon and, more broadly, of the emerging African political order.

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