

The President of the Senate;

The President of the National Assembly;

The President of the Economic and Social Council;

The President of the Constitutional Council;

**The First President of the Supreme Court and the Procureur
General of the said Court;**

Members of Government;

**Your Excellencies, Heads of Diplomatic Missions and
representatives of International Organizations;**

The President of the United Councils and Cities of Cameroon;

Government Delegates and Mayors;

Municipal Councillors;

Council partners

Dear participants at the General Conference of Local Councils;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Let me first thank the Government Delegate to the Yaounde City Council for the warm words he has extended to all participants at the first-ever “General Conference of Local Councils.”

The Government also expresses its gratitude to Mr. Alioune Badiane, a great friend of the Cameroonian municipal movement, who responded promptly to the organizers’ invitation. His masterly presentation, which has highlighted the contribution of decentralization in the emergence processes of African States, shows that the theme that brings us together is shared by the other countries of the continent and, particularly that our country is in the top tier in matters of decentralization in Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me take my responsibility to preside, as representative of the President of the Republic, the maiden “General Conference of Local Councils”, placed under his highly distinguished patronage. It is of course, for the President of the National Decentralization Board I am, a pleasant opportunity to be in the presence of our 374 heads of council executives, other stakeholders and partners of council life. The Government of the Republic is very sensitive to the efforts you make on a daily basis to translate the constitutional principle of free administration of regional and local authorities.

The “General Conference of Local Councils” was prescribed by the President of the Republic to explore ways of deepening decentralization at council level. Its holding at the beginning of this new seven-year presidential term of office, and after the creation of a Ministry dedicated to decentralization, is not the result of chance. The idea is to prepare the Council to take its full place and to play its full role in the building sites of the “Great Opportunities” seven-year term. It must better catalyze the opportunities created or to be created by the central state. Moreover, each council must be able to generate decisive opportunities for local development in its local ecosystem. The stated ambition of the Government is to turn councils into multifarious areas of opportunities for the people and the economic fabric, in line with the objectives of the National Decentralization Strategy.

Throughout these two days of reflection and self-criticism, the focus will be on ways of strengthening the foundations of the council institution, giving a fresh impetus to local development and, ultimately, giving meaning to the fundamental public policy of decentralization.

The road travelled by the Cameroonian local council, it must be recalled, is long and almost 100 years old. Indeed, this institution teaches that the “native courts” and “native authorities” in force since 1922 were embryos of a decentralized management of local affairs.

It is therefore understandable that the impetus given to our policy of decentralization since 1996, with the enshrining in the constitution of the decentralized unitary state, consisted in reinforcing local councils first of all. Indeed, on the very high-level initiative of the President of the Republic, the council landscape has been quantitatively and qualitatively modified.

The council map, which had 192 councils in 1982, i.e. 22 urban councils and 170 rural councils, has become significantly denser over the years. It now comprises 374 local authorities, i.e. 360 councils and 14 city councils, of which the heads of the executive are all represented here. This council map is not static, because the relevant council areas are a permanent construction. And, should the need arise, and should the assumption of local interests so require, the map could undergo other mutations in the future, in the well-understood interest of the people.

At the same time, the option of democratization in the designation of the governing bodies of the council has never been denied. Thus, in the landscape of decentralization in Cameroon, appointed municipal administrators are now a thing of the past. Municipal elections are organized regularly, making our councils real schools of learning democracy, civic engagement and politics, as already pointed out by the President of the Republic in 1987 in his book, *Communal Liberalism*.

Beyond these institutional advances, the course has been firmly towards devolution of powers and resources over the past eight years. Thus, from 2010 to 2018, twenty ministries devolved 63 powers, with corresponding resources amounting to more than 350 billion CFA

francs for the period 2010-2018. A further step has been taken for this financial year, thanks to the unanimously welcomed decision of the President of the Republic, to allocate an amount of 100 million CFA francs to each of the 360 councils, intended for investment, i.e. a total of 36 billion CFA francs, instead of the usual 5 billion representing the investment component of the Common Decentralization Fund.

Dear Mayors and Government Delegates, the use of this resource is a life-size test of your project management capabilities and your resolve to pilot development projects for the benefit of your fellow citizens. It is in the light of the results that you will obtain in this effort that the decision will be made to increase your investment appropriations even more and to one day achieve the desired bar of 10% of the State's public investment budget executed in Councils.

The broad outlines of the picture thus painted show that, despite the economic difficulties, the Cameroonian Council has remained and remains a priority for public authorities. On the achievements that I have just described very briefly, we must build the Cameroonian Council of tomorrow, by casting a keen look on each of its components. I will dwell on a few.

The local council is first of all a political instrument; political in the noblest sense of the word, that is to say, an exemplary place for the service of the community. On the political front, our councils are at the forefront of the promotion of local democracy and the permanent fostering of living together. They must remain so. As I said earlier, they are also valuable learning schools for democracy. Local electoral contests during municipal elections and debates within a municipal council are useful for the democratic spirit. Mutual tolerance, assumed contradiction, and pluralism of opinions deserve to continue to be established in the council environment.

Moreover, the management of council affairs cannot be the exclusive preserve of the organs instituted. The strengthening of local democracy in the digital age can only make citizen participation more effective, facilitated by modern means of communication. Local councils have to take up the challenge of participation, which is itself the channel of involvement of the elite eager to connect or reconnect with the land. Participation is also the most likely way to allow the local ecosystem to benefit from the proposal strength of civil society. However, as the President of the Republic reiterated in the second edition of his book, *Communal Liberalism*, the full democratic participation of citizens in the management of their respective municipalities is guaranteed both by the competitive and free election of leaders and by regular consultations of the people on their own initiative or on that of the leaders.

The attractiveness of our councils to youth is still insufficient. The dynamism of the Cameroonian youth will find in the council a privileged field of expression if we manage to dust off the council institution to make it attractive and get it more involved in social, sporting and cultural activities. It is up to us to make councils real “community houses”, by inclusive definition, with council boards representative of the extreme youth of our societies. We will also give meaning and soul to our communities by gradually providing these life facilities that attract youth, like libraries, playgrounds, amusement parks, multimedia rooms, cultural centres, municipal pools, and so on.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The revitalization of local democracy is indispensable. It is inseparable from providing a new face of council governance. This “Conference” will contribute to this. The future of our decentralization process is a stake here. In this respect, it is important to recall the cardinal principle of decentralization enshrined in Article 55 of the Constitution, namely free administration by elected council boards and

bureaux. It follows that the central organs of Councils and City Councils are respectively the elected Council Board and the elected City Council Bureau.

Elected councils have broad powers, but they are not sufficiently used. The law to lay down rules governing councils has a general clause of powers for the council board or bureau. It states that the council shall rule on the affairs of the municipality by resolution. Therefore, it is at the same time an impetus, orientation and control organ.

The improvement of council governance undoubtedly involves the upgrading of the role of deliberative bodies, primarily responsible for the administration of regional and local authorities. The rules and regulations governing elected local officials being finalized should contribute to this. It lays the groundwork for ethics governing municipal councillors, based on their commitment to defending local affairs and will confer rights to the local elected representative, while imposing obligations on him. This should result in a stronger commitment to the exercise of municipal councillors' mandate.

The Government is also sensitive to requests to increase the number of municipal councillors in some municipalities, which are requests reasoned by the desire for adequate representation of the various sociological components. They will be examined while respecting prescriptions in the law to lay down rules and regulations governing councils.

The council executive cannot be outdone in this important project of renovation of council governance. The council executive is the face and voice of the Council. Whether it is the mayor or government delegate, our cities need to be headed by leaders able to formulate a vision and to translate it into actions, indefatigable servants of the cause of local development, builders anxious to leave a positive and lasting impression. Being a mayor in the context of Cameroon's cities and

countryside, where so many things are to be imagined and done to improve the living conditions of our people, is not a sinecure, but a vocation, a mission that we must accomplish with commitment, passion and self-sacrifice. Because decentralization goes hand in hand with local development, the mayor is, first and foremost, the main agent of development in his territory. It is therefore the responsibility of political parties to invest in this function men and women whose profile corresponds to the increasingly high demands of this function, both visionaries and managers, imbued with a high sense of service to citizens.

As for the State, it will continue to promote the conditions for the effective exercise of the executive function within our councils. This is how one must understand the reinforcement of the incompatibilities and respect of the legal requirement of residence. In Cameroon, one is no longer a half-time or part-time mayor, but full-time, with a remuneration attached.

This is time to recall that one of the irreversible achievements of the current municipal term is effective remuneration for council leaders, decided by the President of the Republic, with an annual State budget share of more than 2 billion CFA francs. Residency requirements will be strengthened accordingly.

I want to emphasize that the legislator wanted the council executive to be collegial, composed of the mayor and his deputies or the government delegate and his deputies, as a genuine team of local development workers. When team spirit is not there, the performance of the executive suffers. Good governance in the council executive function is shared governance, where the chief executive assigns tasks to his deputies, and delegates them, as the law provides, a part of his powers. Grabbing and monopolizing the executive function by one person in some of our councils and city councils is therefore a flaw that

must be corrected, as no energy is too much in the execution of local development missions.

The new Council governance, which we must build on the recommendations of this “Conference”, also requires redefining the balance between two constitutional requirements: autonomy that underpins decentralization and supervisory powers, which are its essential corollary. The option of streamlining supervisory powers chosen in 2004 and the new architecture that gives the administrative judge a prominent role deserve to be reinforced in this respect. Representatives of the State, senior divisional officers in the case of municipalities and city councils, will play both in the stricter register of supervisory powers, but also in that of counselling and assistance. This is also the meaning of the draft decree on the mechanisms of collaboration between de-concentrated State services and regional and local authorities.

Indeed, the significant qualitative and quantitative deficit of human resources, found in our regional and local authorities cannot be closed overnight; solutions to imagine are of several kinds. Temporary provision of the expertise available in State services is already being considered. A final posting of State personnel, maintained in the State’s payroll records, would be another significant contribution. It is understood that the most satisfactory solution, which the Government is already working on, is the establishment of a local public service. This major reform will be coupled with a sufficiently ambitious transformation of the Local Government Training Centre (CEFAM) of Buea.

It is at the cost of the completion of these projects on human capital, that is to say the generalization of councils with committed municipal councillors, a proactive executive and a more efficient administration, that the impacts will be felt in the areas. The attractiveness of the council area is largely dependent on these prerequisites. An attractive council is doubly beneficial at the socioeconomic level. On the one hand, it attracts public and private investment, both domestic and foreign; on the other hand, it manages to maintain productive forces on its soil, including young people who would otherwise be tempted by the sirens of internal or international migration. The attractiveness of the area is an asset that will inevitably translate into the Local Development Index (LDI), a local development measurement tool finalized by the Government.

This will require full ownership of global agendas such as Agenda 2030, the New Urban Agenda, Pan-African agendas such as the African Union Agenda 2063 and national strategies for sustainable development. The existence of council development plans in 329 municipalities is a precious asset on which we can base the desired changes of our regional and local authorities.

Council development plans and other town planning tools are not ornamental. Planning is good, enforcing the prescriptions of a plan and using it as a compass is better. How come that the existence of urban planning documents does not stop the exponential development of neighbourhoods of spontaneous settlements? How come the regulation of building is inoperative with the proliferation of anarchic buildings? Cameroon's mayor of tomorrow will also be assessed for his ability to enforce the law of town planning and building, to prevent urban disorder, to clean up the living environment of the population. The prerogatives that are recognized in this area are insufficiently used. The completion, in the next few months, of the draft instrument to specify

the legal framework applicable to municipal police will provide additional leeway for council executives wishing to prevent and effectively punish breaches of good order.

In the same vein of these missions that you carry out in the name and on behalf of the State is the registration of civil status events. Indeed, the ongoing modernization of our civil status registration system requires the involvement of council executives, as officers of main centres.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This “Conference” aims to give more speed and vitality to decentralization, at least to the component that is the council. Obviously, the spin-offs will be felt even at the regional level, since, as you know, the electoral college for the election of regional councilors is largely composed of municipal councillors.

Following the repeated commitment of the President of the Republic to decentralization, a consensus, increasingly broad for this government policy is reached in our society. However, some pockets of skepticism remain, especially among those of our compatriots who believe that centralization is irrevocably inscribed in the State’s DNA in Cameroon. Believe me, it is not so. The centre is not intended to be the alpha and omega of public policies. The periphery, resulting from decentralization or de-concentration, which is in daily contact with our fellow citizens, will have an ever more growing role to play. Indeed, to effectively mitigate the widespread feeling of extreme centralization, decentralization must be accompanied by additional horizontal and vertical de-concentration.

Decentralization, like de-concentration, is a call addressed mainly to ministries, central administrations, expected to effectively devolve powers and resources. This is what decentralization means for the most part. The holders of powers and resources to be transferred must play the game fully with councils, and more in the future with regions, whose scope of powers will be more substantial. The course set by the President of the Republic in his swearing-in speech is clear enough, when he said **(and I quote)** *“Measures will be taken as soon as possible to broaden the powers of local authorities in order to provide them with the means for greater autonomy”***(unquote)**.

In return, it is the responsibility of regional and local authorities to show that local management responds more effectively to the aspirations of our fellow citizens to quality basic services.

To do this, we must obviously resolve the preliminary question of the optimum financial architecture of our decentralization, based on a deeply renovated local taxation since 2009 and transfers of State resources in the form of appropriations in particular. This model, which incorporates the requirement of solidarity between municipalities, through financial equalization mechanisms and a pivotal financial institution, the Special Council Support Fund for Mutual Assistance (FEICOM), has shown its robustness and makes emulators elsewhere in Africa. This architecture is however to perfect with a view to improving the yields of local taxes and the taking into account of the financing of regions in particular. The excessive dependence of councils on additional council rates and the abandonment of other potential sources of revenue should challenge us. Just as we cannot avoid the question of non-tax revenue, which may result from income-generating economic activities that councils can carry out, according to their respective strengths.

The renovation work that brings us together for two days in Yaounde is decisive for the positive impacts it will have on the

functioning of the Cameroonian Council, but also for the lessons to be learnt in the announced commissioning of Regions.

I urge you, therefore, in your respective workshops to make a lucid and clear appraisal of the situation, before coming up with realistic, practical and pragmatic improvement proposals.

With that, I declare open the first “General Conference of Cameroon’s Local Councils”.

Long live decentralization and its indefatigable promoter, His Excellency the President of the Republic.

Thank you for your kind attention.