

Information and Communication Technologies and The Socio-Economic Development of the North West Region of Cameroon

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Abstract:- ICTS and the socio-economic development of the North West Region of Cameroon evaluate the contributions of ICTS to the socio-economic development of regions. Qualitative research designs with the use of semi-structured interviews, and observation were used as a means of data collection. A lot of information also came from secondary sources. The data was analyzed to come out with the following findings. ICTs have contributed to the promotion of socio-economic activities including agricultural activities and employment within the region. ICTs promote the culture of the people as well as the general sensitization of the people. ICTs assist in tourism promotion through entertainment, advertising and security of goods and people. The educational sector of the region, through training in the ICT domains and scholarships offered by the ICT stakeholders such as MTN and Orange is not left out. ICTs interactions contribute in sensitizing the public on health issues focusing on AIDS prevention, vaccination and family planning, facilitating consultation, diagnosis and treatment.

Keywords:- ICTs, socio-economic development, livelihood, North West Region.

I. INTRODUCTION

Information is essential for facilitating economic activities and enhancing socio-economic development of regions. Traditional and modern ICTs are used to speed up circulation of information. For this reason, role of information in economic activities cannot be over-emphasised. ICTs primary purpose is to provide an enabling environment for the generation of ideas, their dissemination and use. ICTs in themselves provide employment as people tend to work in their production and in its distribution as well as in installation. In this era of information technology, just about everyone depends on information and communication on almost all aspects of life. It's has become a common feature of one life to wake up, check the cellphone for messages and notifications, look at the TV or newspaper for news, commute to work, read emails, take meetings and makes phone calls, eat meals with friends and family, and make decisions based on the information that we gather from those mass media and interpersonal media sources. How has ICTs contributed to improve the social and economic lifestyle of the inhabitants of the North West Region of Cameroon.

The article seeks to verify the impact of the use of ICTs in the socio-economic development of the region.

II. LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA

The North West Region is located within the Western highlands of Cameroon. It lies between latitudes 5° 40' and 7° to the North of the equator, and between longitudes 9°45' and 11°10' to the East of the Meridian. It is bordered to the south-west by the South and West Regions, to the south by West Region, to the east by Adamawa Region, and to the north by the Federal Republic of Nigeria,(Fig.1).

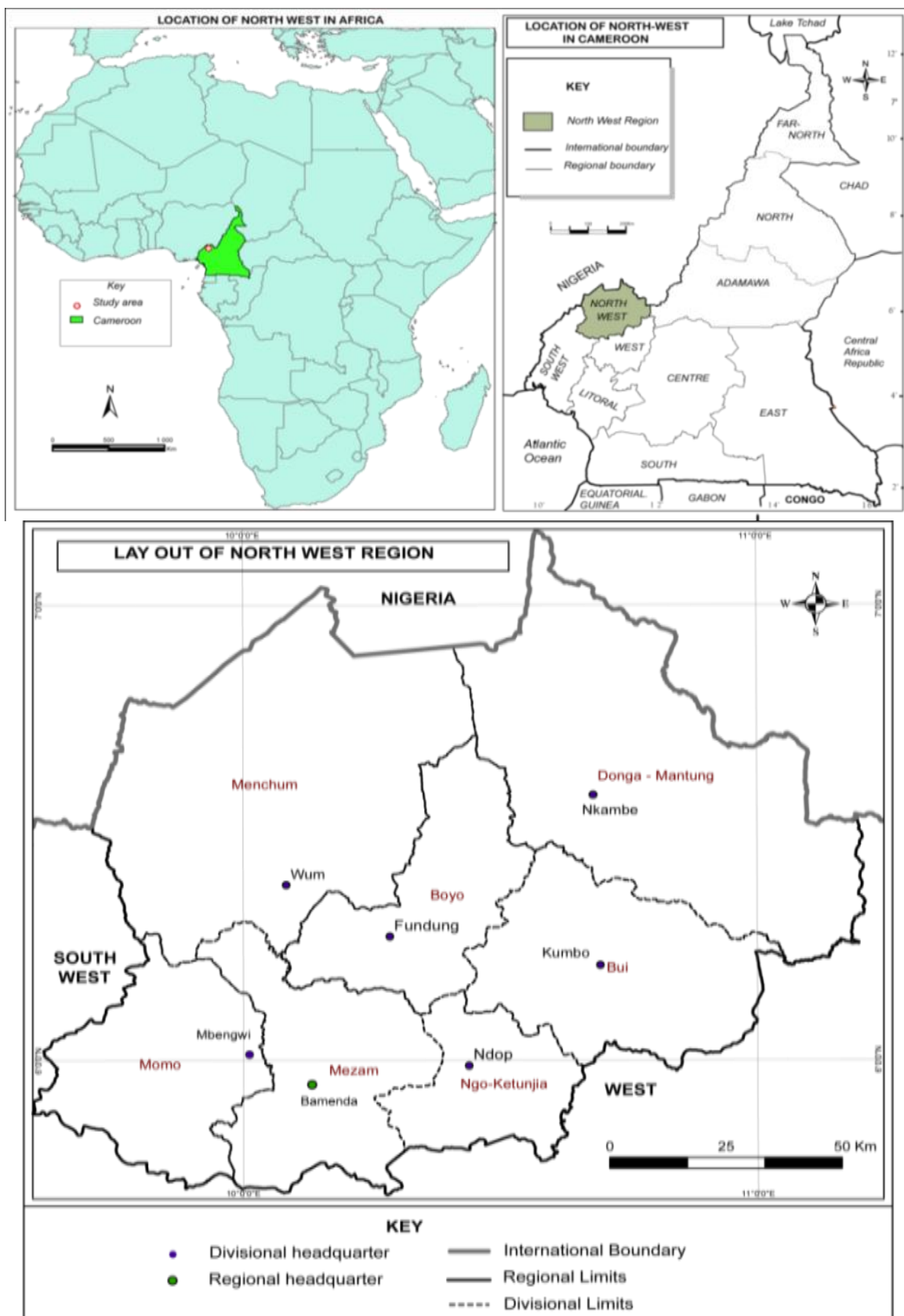


Fig 1:- Location of study area
 Source: Adapted from Wuchu (2016)

The region was in 1972 decreed a province with five divisions: Bui, Donga-Mantung, Menchum, Mezam and Momo. As from 2008, the province became the North West Region with seven divisions; with Boyo and Ngo-Ketunja added.

According to the final 3rd General Population and housing Census (GPHC, 2005) results, the North West Region represented 9.9%, of the population of Cameroon, with 1 728 953 inhabitants. With an economy deeply rooted in agriculture, industry plays a very small role in the economy of the North West Region.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many authors have worked on the link between ICTs and socio-economic development. Some of them are Ashraf, Grunfeld, Hoque, and Alam (2017) developed a framework to explain ICT-led socioeconomic development at the community level. Specifically, the authors looked at three community centers (BRAC Gonokendra) in Bangladesh, which provide economic and social programs to people and communities in situations of poverty. The framework also includes social constraints that may present obstacles to development. Thus while ICT may provide a means for socioeconomic development, social constraints, such as religious perceptions and mobility restrictions on women, need to be addressed to achieve the desired improvements to information access, employment opportunities, social status, education, and social awareness.

The World Bank Report “E-Development: From Excitement to Effectiveness” (Schware, 2006) highlights that “developed middle income countries and developing nations can reap benefits from having a healthy information technology (IT) supply sector. Rural based ICTs have the potential to impact on agriculture through increased revenues and diversification of agricultural production, made possible by delivering SMS-based price and crop information (OECD-DAC, 2004)

The role of ICT in economic development is expected to be manifested in productivity increase, enhancing the quality of life, reducing prices, creating new economic activities and new employment activities as well as generating wealth as noted by Pohjola, (2001). While Walters et al (2011) assessed the impact of community radio as a specific ICT tool in Indonesia and concluded that effective radio activities can make a significant change in a community’s life.

In 2010, Towela Nyirenda-Jere, explores the ways that ICTs can transform agriculture in Africa. She draws attention to the current status of ICTs in Africa and the promises they hold, such as the staggering growth of mobile phone use, the halting expansion of the fixed-line

telephone network and the disappointing growth of internet access. She argues that ICTs could facilitate the creation of networks locally, regionally and globally, leading to collaborative and knowledge-sharing approaches to problem solving and research diversification. Yet, the most prevalent use of ICTs in agriculture is providing farmers with information and advisory services through SMS, voice, web portals and call centres. Munyu, H. in (2000), in the same vein examined the role of ICTs in the African agricultural sector. Richardson, Don. (1996), and Jac Stienen, Zietse, Frans Neuman (2007) compliments the role of internet in farming systems in African agriculture.

This work then follows this same direction as the previous authors to show how ICTs has improved the life of people within the North West Region, people who are essentially consumers of ICTs and their products.

IV. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In order to effectively verify the hypothesis that ICTs contribute positively to the socio-economic development of the North West Region, and to evaluate the variables, socio-economic development presented as the dependent variable and ICTs considered as the independent variable, appropriate instruments for measurement of variables were used. Primary and secondary methods of data collection were used. Literature review related to ICTs, culture and socio-economic development was consulted from different websites.

The ‘another’ development paradigm together with the theory of local development are the basic theories used in this work. While the former focuses on community participation in development projects defining participation as a process of empowering people to participate in identifying development problems or designing development programmes. The latter, considers the endogenous potentialities of territories, economic and non-economic factors that influence local development process.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Contribution of ICTs to employment in the North West Region

Though the North West Region is basically an area of consumption of ICTs, running and trade on ICT equipment offers employment both directly and indirectly to a good number of the inhabitants of the region. ICTs operating in the North West have contributed significantly to improving the employment situation of the region. If we take only the case of traditional ICTs for example, table 1 indicates some of the structures and their employment records.

Table 1 is indicative of the good news brought about by the intervention of ICTs in the economy of the region in terms of employment.

Structure	Number of Workers
CRTV/North West	Over 30 workers including journalists, technicians and animators
Cameroon Tribune	8 persons
Abakwa/CNTV	12 persons
Foundation radio	13 persons
Donga Mantung Community Radio	10 persons
Ngoketunjia Community Radio	10 persons
Oku rural radio	10 persons
Savannah Frontier Radio	10 persons
Voice of Moghamo	10 persons
Bui community Radio	Benevolent workers
STV/Nord-Ouest	2 persons
Dan Broadcasting System	3 persons
Canal 2/Nord-Ouest	1 person
BBC/Nord-Ouest	1 person
The post newspaper	Two persons
Afrique Nouvelle/RTN	10 persons
CBC Radio	10 persons
Christian Gospel Radio	Voluntary
Radio Hot TV/Horizon TV	13 persons
Equinoxe TV	2 correspondents
LMT TV	1 correspondent
Eden Newspaper	1 correspondent
Frontier Telegraph	Unspecified
The chronicle	Unspecified
The farmer's voice	Unspecified
The herald	Unspecified
The Horizon	1 correspondent
The Star	1 correspondent
Something Useful	Unspecified
The Watchdog	Unspecified
World Echoes	Unspecified

Table 1:- Distribution of Communication personnel in the region
Source: RDR/MINCOM North-West, 2019

The television and radio stations as well as newspaper agencies provides a number of jobs. This is done directly by employing technicians and journalists who relate the public with information. These people are devoted to serving the community by providing information, and entertaining the population with diverse programmes. They are in turn given a wage that helps them in sustaining their families. The figure could have been very spectacular, if all employment figures were available. However those available show a heavy weight on the employment level of the region.

As observed from table, the traditional ICTs of the region employ and serve a good number of people in the North West. Without the radio, television and newspaper agencies, a certain proportion of the population would have never been employed. It should be noted that the table indicates direct employments offered by the agencies. However, there are a good number of people who got their jobs through information from one of the agencies but such

data was difficult to get. What of the number of people involved in distribution of newspapers? When all these are considered, the role of ICTs in employment cannot be underestimated.

Going by the aspect of trade on ICT equipment such as radio, television, computers, telephones etc, it is noted that ICT playing considerable roles in providing employment. What of the cybercafés, documentation centres that employ a good number of people as discussed in chapter four. Without such media, many would have been without jobs within the North West Region.

B. ICTS and improvement in agriculture

ICTs help farmers in diverse forms such as in production and marketing. Quoting Sera Williams (2011) in Wuchu 2019, access to ICTs makes it possible for farmers to find and share information with other communities and keep up to date with weather forecast which assist them in increasing yields. ICTs also comes in

once harvested, the internet or telephone helps farmers gain entry to new markets. Radio broadcast detail the symptoms and treatment for crop diseases, videos demonstrate pest control techniques and web pages provide satellite imagery and analysis of local soil and vegetation. These tools help farmers plant the crops most suited to the region and the expected weather and increases their crop's resistance to pest, all of which enable them to significantly increase yields. Additionally developed software collates and distributes market data to farmer's mobile phones so that once their crops are ready they have information necessary to secure a good price for their produce.

According to the findings of Wuchu 2019, Mama Therese Fonka, a potato farmer and retailer recounted her success story with application of ICTs. She explained how she benefited from a project jointly carried out by GenARDIS (Gender, Agriculture and rural development in the Information society) and the SB Mathur Foundation. The projects involved farmer groups from Bangang, Bafoussam and Kamina in the West Region as well as Gyendu-Santa in the North West Region. The farmers underwent training on how to make a call and how to send an SMS in order to get vital information in real time. The farmers were interested in knowing how much of what they produced sold in the national and international market, how much of farm inputs like fertilizers and pesticides costs and how much they could pay to get their produce to some markets etc. The farmer told us that the training helped them to understand the dirty role intermediaries played in denying farmers the chance to fully benefit from the fruit of their labour. She explained "we make a simple call to the wholesaler to arrange for the provision of farming equipment' according to her, improved potatoes seeds that they used to buy for 200FCFA, a kilogram from retailers in the open market now are bought for half the amount at the wholesalers. 'when people come from town claiming that the prices of foodstuffs have dropped in the market, I just make a phone call to the specific market to demonstrate that the person is telling a lie" instead of giving away 15 litres bucket of potatoes for the almost traditional CFA, 2000, we now sell at CFA, 3000 because those who buy from us to sell in Yaounde or Douala will do so for at least CFA 5000F CFA.

C. ICTS and the improvement of the health sector in the North West Region

ICTs are used to facilitate remote consultation, diagnosis and treatment. Public broadcast media such as radio and television as well as written press and mobile devices are effectively facilitating the dissemination of public health information related to disease prevention techniques. ICTs in all its forms have contributed to provision of health in the North West Region of Cameroon. In this section of the work we will concentrate on the particular case of health services offered by the Cameroon Baptist Convention's Health Board The Services range from village Primary Health Care to highly specialized hospital based care with an integration of other social services. The Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board Press Division officially started in 1996 with the

publication of a monthly Newsflash. The prime intention at the time was to keep friends and funding partners abreast of developments and latest happenings within the CBCCHB. The newsflash later became a medium through which staff were equally educated and informed on goings-on within the Board. The newsflash, which has evolved into a full-fledged newsletter, now serves as a useful medium for providing authentic, credible and verifiable information on diverse issues and happenings in the organization. The HB Chronicle which is 8 pages publication discusses some issues as concerned health provision in the region. This magazine is a monthly newsletter. Its content summarizes development and happenings during the month and updates stakeholders on regular issues within the organization. Radio programmes are broadcasted to discuss health and environmental issues, over CRTV National Station, and the Baptist radio at the Baptist centre in Nkwen- Bamenda. Partnerships have been signed with public media and the American media section to support activities of the institution. A CBCCHB website is available with the necessary information that can attract the public. The website is cbhealthservices.org. This website provides a handful of information to the public about the health board. One can discover from this that postal services, the telephone and the internet are essential to health provision in this region and following the words of the Director. If you want to contact the health board for any information, you have a choice between, post, phone or email. This makes the institution open and easily accessible to the population. A lot of wasteful journeys are avoided. Appointments to visit the hospital for specific cases are made either through email or through telephone before we ever get there. Our movements now become specific oriented thus time and financial management is enhanced. The ICT services of the CBC Health board have not only helped to improve on contacts, between patients and medical personnel but have improved on the performance and extension of health services.

Elsewhere, MTN foundation has assisted in the provision of health services with the North West Region. The foundation has engaged in ameliorating the quality of life of the community by engaging the fight against HIV/AIDS. Since 2005, the foundation donated an HIV/AIDS test kit to the Bamenda Regional Hospital which assisted much in screening exercise in this Region. The foundation in partnership with ONUSIDA and ACMS launched the y'ello Reglo programme to sensitize youths on the dangers of HIV/AIDS. In partnership with World Bank and others partners it launched the Caravan No SIDA to save the people of the North West Region starting 2006.

Later in February 2011, the region benefitted from this foundation through the anti-malaria campaign in Bambui during which over 3000 malaria test were conducted and drugs distributed alongside 2100 treated mosquito nets.

Orange foundation on its part has constructed latrines in Government School Old Town in Bamenda. The Orange love story in the North West Region came to its lamp light with the reception of latrines at the Government school old town Bamenda. An achievement sponsored by the Orange Foundation. These are quality toilets that will go a long way to reduce cholera in the school milieu. This is a sample of the modern toilet constructed by the orange foundation for pupils of Government School Old town in Bamenda. The foundation has successfully realized two water projects in the North West region. Belo and Sabongari have benefitted from this foundation and today are enjoying portable water.

D. ICTS and improvements in the educational sector of the region

The prohibitive cost of ICT equipment means that the vast majority of children in the developing World leave school having never touched a computer for example in a classroom. However, ICT skills are essential to level the playing ground between children in developing World and other parts of the World. With ICTs, teachers can gain access to up to date teaching materials while children are able to learn the ICT skills required for further education and higher paid employment.

In the North West Region, this need is pressing but much is being done to integrate ICT skills in children. The school curricula have been revised integrating ICTs at the primary school level. The case of Presbyterian schools within the region is a prominent example. The Presbyterian schools will be taken as example to illustrate integration of ICTs in education.

Presbyterian education board in Cameroon is working in collaboration with Computer Aid International to ameliorate access to ICT by the schools. The education board buys computers from Computer Aid at a reduced price (50% discount) and connects Internet to the computer laboratories. Where there is no electricity, generators are used. Presbyterian Secondary School Andek though with no electricity has an equipped computer laboratory that uses generators for energy supply. CPC Bali, PSS Azire, PHS Mankon, PSS Nkwen, PSS Mankon, PGSST, Bafut, PHS Nkambe, PHS Batibo all have well-equipped computer laboratories.

Computer Aid also offers trainings to teachers and trainers following the need and density of infrastructure. The PCCs has a school database, where their schools are connected and in this way material and information is exchanged easily. Elsewhere, MTN foundation has assisted the educational sector of the region. Through a school connectivity programme, some schools have benefited from MTN's largess.

In the domain of education, science and technology, MTN foundation has put in place a school connectivity programme. The programme is aimed at facilitating access of students of secondary school to ICTs, in the framework of the programme, the foundation has installed over 10

multimedia centres. Our Lady of Lourdes College Mankon has benefitted from this gesture with over 20 computers connected to Internet and a monitor who assures initiation of students into the New Information and Communication technology.

MTN through it back to school project has over the years worked hard to improve the sector in the North West Region. On September 19th, 2014 over 100 pupils of the Mbingfibieh primary school benefited from school materials, bags, exercise books, pens and other school materials. The garden for healing and education hosted the ceremony to handover school kits to underprivileged children of the North West Region. Over 400 inmates of structures such as shaping destiny Batibo, Harvest children home, Afoni children of hope, ACTOVC, Good Shepard and Garden of healing and education were provided with didactic material. The foundation intends to massively invest within the next four years in the construction and equipment of schools, capacity building of teachers and promotion of excellence in teaching science and technology.¹ Apart from MTN, Express Union each year, carry out a scholarship scheme whereby, best students in the GCE Examination are provided with at least one hundred thousand francs scholarship/grants.

Many students have equally gained admission into schools abroad with the help of the Internet. Some have not only gained admissions but scholarships and some even go to the level of jobs. This would not have been possible without the intervention of ICTs. Students that use ICTs in research perform better since an array of material is available for them to exploit. This is the case of students using the telecentre services in Jakiri and many other schools that are connected within the region. Students gain admission thanks to the diverse advertisements over the radio, TV and newspapers within and out of the region.

Lets us consider the case of the National polytechnic that is flourishing in the educational landscape of the region. The institution can be accessed through www.npbedu.org. This website permits the institution to communicate with its partners. In this website you can get in contact with the institution either through its post box, telephone numbers or email address. The web link permits students to apply online and to consult their results. The website opens to facebook and twitter amongst others which permits students to interact and gain knowledge. The institution has a modern computer laboratory with internet services available for students and lecturers. The institution equally runs a printing press which operates a secretariat and a laboratory.

Apart from the involvement of the institution in using and offering ICTs equipment, associated ICT services such as documentation centres with computer secretariats and call box services are dotted all around the campus where students and non-students benefit from.

¹ The sun No.0252, 25 September 2014, p.10

E. ICTS and advancement of the tourism sector of the North West Region

The North West Region is well advanced in terms of tourism infrastructure. This is partly due to the rich cultural heritage of the region in terms of diversity in culture, natural scenery and the hospitality of the people. Here and there is a diversity of hotels, inns, restaurants that provide for local and international dishes. ICTs have provided a push to the development of this sector. ICTs are found to be useful in the areas of advertising the services offered, getting in contact with customers, online reservations, entertainment etc. this is why a click on the internet will provide you a diversity of hotels to choose.

A click on http://www.topstarhotelbamenda.com/about_us.html shows the website of top star hotel with the outer View of the hotel and a room which exposes the beauty of the hotel. Through its website you can programme a trip to Bamenda and spend a night at Top Star Hotel. The internet services within the hotel, the phone sets in the rooms and cabled television sets make the stay in this hotel comfortable.

Most renowned and highly frequented hotels within the region, such as Azam hotel, Blue pearl, Manfield Plaza, Pelican and Mondial hotel all 3 star hotels as well as the famous saddle hill ranch and resort 4 star hotels amongst others are highly connected to the world through internet services and available telephone services amongst others.

Looking at these cases, it is clear that the hotels make use of the three different forms of ICTs, though an inside look shows that there are television sets. Telephone either fixed or mobile is available for the potential users to contact the hotel staff and make reservations. Reservations are also made online and this eases movement of people who move with some degree of certainty of where they are to stay. Post Boxes are available as well as fax services. The Television is used for entertainment which is usually connected to cable network of satellite dishes. Internet connections are also an essential part of most of the hotels in the region especially those in Bamenda town. Youths especially prefer such internet connected Hotels to those without. All these hotel operators agree that there is an added value and brings in more people than expected and this has made the business to be productive these days. It becomes easy to make contacts and it was noted that hotels with no contacts are less visited, those without internet connections or cabled television or telephone services is not much considered by users today.

F. ICTs and improvement in the culture of the Region

ICTs are useful in accompanying indigenous people and communities achieve custodial ownership, rights of interpretation and commercialization over their own cultural heritage. ICTs should be noted is a vector of

globalization. Through the radio, television, internet etc people are getting in contact with different cultures and this has greatly modified the culture of the people. The youths are the age group that has been greatly affected. It is this age group that easily adapt to different cultures. It is common to meet young girls and boys dress almost half naked. This is the influence of television. Cultural and development associations of the region are taking advantage of this technology. Each time there is supposed to be a cultural manifestation, the people go to the media to announce and advertise their culture. The community radio and some local radio stations broadcast important programmes in local languages and most villagers take interest in listening to such programmes which in most cases helps them improve on language, agricultural practice health and education. When we take the case of the Babungo people of Ngoketunjia Division, we discover that their culture is being sold online. Go to www.babungo.org and you get information about the Babungo people. If you want to know about their museum, you log into www.museumcam.org/en/babungo/ where you will discover the museum, the legend, myth and history of the Babungo kingdom. Annual festivals that take place are equally blogged on the internet. For example, the Nikai festival is found on the Unesco website, UNESCO-portail.unesco.org/babungo. It is very common to find online communities in the internet pertaining to the Mankon, Nso, Kejom people where most information is being exchanged.

VI. CONCLUSION

The gains provided by ICTs, comes not only from the technologies themselves but also from their ability to facilitate technological recombination and change leading to innovation (UNCTAD, 2008). It is generally accepted therefore that transformations in the global economy can be fuelled by ICT-powered innovation. As such, it is imperative for Africa, and Cameroon in particular to continue to prioritise ICTs on its development agenda both within the primary and other sectors of the economy.

We can therefore round up our discussion by stating that, ICTs have contributed to the wellbeing of the inhabitants of the North West region. Through internet applications, telephone operations, radio and television as well as newspapers or the money transfer agencies. The people have witnessed improved access to education improved, employment situation improved and agricultural activities improved. The people are able to make travelling and lodging arrangements before displacements. Patients are able to make rendez-vous with medical personnel without displacements and some even make consultations on phone. Family ties have been improved through telephone contacts and this has greatly contributed to the family wellbeing.

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