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The HIPC's Staggering Privatization and Quandary in the Agro-industrial Sector in Cameroon and Labour Discontent in La Société des Héavéas du Cameroun (HEVECAM), 1996-2020: A Sequential Autopsy

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Abstract

The economic crisis that gripped Cameroon and several sub-Saharan countries in the 1980s called for pre-emptive measures to hold back the calamity. In a desperate need for assistance, they turned to some donor institutions like the IMF and World Bank. In response, the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative was imposed and subsequently modified into Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) where privatization was considered one of the kingpins or principal instruments needed to overturn the hazardous situation. The government of Cameroon was forced to short-list a number of agro-industrial and other state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for privatization among which was the Cameroon Rubber Company, La Société des Héavéas du Cameroun (HEVECAM). It was hoped that the privatization of this enterprise would lead to improved management, increased production and better working conditions. Unfortunately, the privatization of HEVECAM left behind a repugnant image of an enterprise which staggered along the way instigating many discontented workers to agitate against the new order. As such, this paper argues that the privatization of HEVECAM, as in other cases, was not a decisive solution to the revamping and rejuvenation of SOEs in Cameroon. The study reveals that the privatization of HEVECAM amplified the quandaries of the labour force thereby triggering an atmosphere of uneasiness between the workers and the management of the enterprise.

Keywords: agro-industrial sector, Cameroon, discontent, HEVECAM, HIPC, labour, privatization, quandary.

1. Introduction and Background

By the mid-1980s, there were visible signs that the African economies which for the most part depended on the exportation of raw materials to the west suffered due to a fall of the prices in the world market. This plunged them into economic crisis which left behind wounds that are still far from healing on the continent till this date. The situation was made worse by difficulties such as balance of payment deficits, government inefficiency, capital flight, embezzlement and the persistent and insidious phenomenon of corruption (Mbuku, 2004, p.398). These vices had far-reaching deplorable consequences of excruciating indebtedness, low-income earnings, poverty, falling living standards, galloping inflation amongst other daunting upheavals.

Following the penurious economic situation of the African economies, some international donor institutions posed to help Africa out of her economic quagmires. This drive was led by the

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Bretton Woods institutions, that is, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank). The Bretton Woods institutions therefore imposed the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) plan as a working instrument on Africa. The HIPC plan was adopted in 1996 as the donors intended to reduce the debts of the world's 41 most highly indebted poor countries to sustainable levels that they could afford to service. Out of the 41 countries identified, 31 of them were in Africa including Cameroon. The HIPC framework began with the decision point and ended with the completion point.

In 1999 the HIPC initiative was modified in order to make it easier for countries to meet the qualifying conditions for poverty alleviation. These included the implementation of the IMF and World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Attempts were also made to simplify the procedure that the beneficiary countries needed to follow in order to qualify. This was presented to them in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) with directives on how the money saved would be spent on the social sector. Amongst the conditionalities or 'pills' included the massive retrenchments of workers, trade liberalization, cumulative devaluation, the intensification of privatization, and free entry for transnational corporations amongst a sorted few. Cameroon was admitted to the HIPC initiative in 2002 and she had the aforementioned conditions to grapple with in order to arrive at the completion point on 28 April 2006. (Chia and Nsom, 2006, p.2). Nsom (5 2006, p.1) avers that the country was to benefit from a total FCFA 1,400 billion debt cancellation of its bilateral and multilateral debt over a period of 10 years. Ascending to this level, the "IMF saluted Cameroon for showing strong fiscal performance as well as the satisfactory implementation of structural reforms."

Arriving the completion point, however, left much to be desired. The path was thorny and the fulfillment of the said conditionalities did not mean an automatic recovery of Cameroon's economy. Following the euphoria that accompanied the IMF's declaration on 28 April 2006, some experts in the domain strongly believed that the expected "economic sunshine after decades of rain" was still very far in the horizon. For example, Isaac Tamba, an Economic Analyst and Lecturer in Yaoundé University II, warned that "the excitement and the high expectation could make Cameroonians lose sight of the reforms they are supposed to execute in order to enjoy the trappings of the HIPC-I completion point" (Nsom, 2006, p.1).

Indeed, there were several reforms that fell under the SAPs that were born under the HIPC initiative. Here, I have chosen only privatization which was one of the HIPC "pills," and the case HEVECAM to paint a clearer picture of the complexities that characterized the economic change. Against this backdrop, I have gone ahead to indirectly question the trustworthiness of the privatization "pill" as a cure or medicine for poverty alleviation and development in the agro-industrial sector in Cameroon. This stemmed from the fact that the process was characterized by indescribable challenges on the part of the government on the one hand, and the frictions that pitted workers against the new patrons on the other.

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2.1. The Staggering Privatization

Privatization is considered an important component of structural reform programs in both developed and developing economies. The purpose of such programmes is to attain higher microeconomic efficiency and to promote economic growth, as well as reduce public sector borrowing requirements through the eradication of unnecessary subsidies. The microeconomic model holds that the lackadaisical attitude of managers of public corporations stems from the fact that bankruptcy and other possible challenges do not pose a potential threat to them for it is in the government's own interest to "bail them out in case of financial distress." Privatization, therefore, is considered as a possible alternative given that it increases profitability and efficiency in both competitive and monopolistic sectors (Sheshinski and López-Calva, 2000, p.1).

In spite of the juicy picture of the microeconomic model, privatization does not represent a holistically positive marvel in all circumstances. Edoun (2015, pp.356) contends that while privatization generated positive results in the economy of some countries (especially in the west), it failed to achieve the same encouraging outcomes in others. The failure of privatization in stimulating economic growth in some developing countries is more often related to the fact that the primary aim of the takeover of a private actor is to maximize profits rather than making the interest of the workers and customers a priority. This, therefore, could be an explanation as to why some experts in the domain express mixed feelings on the developmental role expected from the privatization of State-owned Enterprises (SOEs). In several cases, the privatization process hardly involves the workers of an enterprise in the negotiation or decision-making process. Their total exclusion "reflects the bad on the issue of governance and its implication on SOEs."

Over the years, most developing countries depended on development models where the public sector was in charge of nearly all important facets of the economy. Amungwa (2009, p.86) maintains that the governments of developing countries adopted an overbearing control over the supply of credit, physical inputs, research and marketing of produce either directly or through agricultural parastatals. Similarly, reforms in agriculture in Cameroon were largely interventionist as production was mainly in the hands of SOEs. The state instituted numerous price controls, considerable input subventions from export taxes. This was the state of affairs before the economic crisis showed its ugly face in the mid-1980s bringing with it radical changes in the management of agricultural extension services in Cameroon.

In 1985/86 there was a drop in petroleum revenue due to the concurrent reduction in prices in the world market. Likewise, a decline in the terms of trade for crop exports also slowed down economic growth. The situation was aggravated by the fact that most of the income from exports was expressed in US dollars, of which the price against the CFA franc dropped by about 40 percent after June 1985 leading to serious balance of payment difficulties. In 1986/87 there was a sharp fall in the GDP caused by the fall in the export earnings for petroleum and agricultural products. For example, the budget deficit was FCFA 413.2 billion in 1986/87 (or 8.7% of estimated GDP) compared to FCFA 103.9 billion in 1985/86 (or 2.3% of GDP) (Tchoungui et. Al., 1995, p.40).

Like Amungwa (2009, p.85), Konings (2010, p.84) asserts that the economic crisis resulted in major policy changes in various sectors of the economy. Liberalization and privatization policies were adopted intended to disengage the state from the direct running of some public enterprises. Among the several parastatals in Cameroon set for divestiture were large and strategic agro-industrial assets. According to Amungwa (2009, pp.85-86), the period between 1988 and 1992 saw the government reduction of the budget for agriculture while subsidies for agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides were entirely removed and farmers were left to face the market price for these inputs. Above all, the state liquidated the National Produce Marketing Board (NPMB) which purchased the main export crops like coffee, cocoa and cotton from farmers and sold in the international market on their behalf. The government then embarked on the attraction of private investment in the agriculture and other sectors by exhibiting a number of SOEs for privatization with the aim of getting better results from market performance and in the provision of goods and services.

From the onset, there were perceptible signs that the privatization of some SOEs was going to be a long, boring, difficult and problematic process. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2003, p.106), privatization came fairly late to Cameroon (in 1995) and it posed a big challenge due to the extensive size of the public sector. By 1999, another wave of privatization was set into motion as some major public services were earmarked for the process but was delayed due to the size and complexity of the enterprises and problems with buyers. For example, TECEL was officially selected to take over CAMTEL (fixed phones) but withdrew after its partner Orascom developed cold feet towards the deal. Meanwhile, in the agro-industry, earlier studies for privatization took long to be accomplished. In the CDC, for example, the process was only completed at the end of 2000 with only sectorial bids (for the tea sector) that were invited from buyers.

In corroborating the AfDB/OECD (2003, p.106), Konings (2010, p.84), maintains that the process of privatization was slow and that between 1989 and 2005, out of 219 SOEs the government ended up with the decision to liquidate only 87 and to privatize only 30. In spite of this decision, far less than 30 enterprises were sold out by 2005. The disappointing results and the complex nature of the process in Cameroon could be linked to technical and political influences. For example, some of the public enterprises earmarked for privatization included huge and strategic agro-industries, as was the case with HEVECAM, SOCAPALM and the CDC, and non-agricultural enterprises, especially in the transport and communication sectors as was the case with Telecommunication (CAMTEL – privatized in 1998). Meanwhile others were placed on the liquidation list as was the case of the *Société des Transports Urbains du Cameroun* (SOTUC-create in 1973 and liquidated in 1995). It was therefore an uphill task to decide clearly, the fate of each of them within stipulated timeframes. Besides, the process became an intricate one because of the meddling of bureaucratic and profiteering attitude of some political elite in the venture.

The staggering nature of the privatization process in Cameroon and other parts of Africa, especially related to huge agro-industrial undertakings, has been visibly blamed on government infighting and disinclination to motivate potential national investors. Bennell succinctly argues that:

> …the government continues to mistrust the development of a national bourgeoisie and is therefore reluctant to give potential national investors the necessary incentives…Entrepreneurs without sufficient capital resources face many constraints, including the absence of a well-established capital market, access to bank loans, and the high cost of credit. But even entrepreneurs with the necessary capital resources are often prevented by African regimes from taking over parastatals out of the fear that this might strengthen the dominant economic position of ethnic rivals (Bennell, 1977, as cited by Konings, 2010, p.87).

The complexity that marked the privatization process in Cameroon also portrayed the ugliness of political elitist squabble in some agro-industrial enterprises in the country. A conspicuous case in point was the convolutedness that characterized the unsuccessful attempt to privatize the *Société de Dévéloppément du Coton* (SODECOTON), a flagship of agrobusiness in the three northern regions of Cameroon. Takougang and Krieger (1998, as cited by Konings, 2011, p.88), hypothesize that conflict among some "parasitic political elite" of the ruling class on ethno-regional lines did not only puncture the attempted privatization of SODECOTON but turned out to be one of the most unimaginable political scandals of the time. In 1995, the government announced that SODECOTON (which was managed by *La Compagnie Française pour le Dévéloppément des Fibres Textiles* - CFDT owning 30 percent of the share capital) was going to be privatized. Part of its shares were to be transferred to a new domestic enterprise called *La Société Mobiliere d'Investissement du Cameroun* (SMIC). While the CFDT was to maintain its 30 percent share capital, the government was to retain only 22 percent while the rest was to be taken over by the new company. It however turned out that SMIC was a small group of well-connected political elite of mostly northern origin. Among them were the Lamido of Rey Bouba, Cavaye Yigue Djibril (President of the National Assembly), Mustapha Amadou (Vice Prime Minister), Sadou Hayatou (former Prime Minister and National Director of *Banque de Etats de l'Afrique Centrale*) and Alhadji Baba Danpullo (member of the Central Committee of the CPDM and businessman from the North West Region but with close ethnic and religious ties with the north).

Although the privatization deal on SODECOTON had been approved by Simon Achidi Achu, the Prime Minister at the time, and Bello Bouba Maigari, Minister of Industrial and Commercial Development, the deal ended in a fiasco a few months later. The deal was cancelled by Justin Ndioro, Minister of Finance with the ardent support of some southern (mostly Beti) cabinet ministers and elite. Two main factors teleguided the invalidation of the transaction. The first is that the government wanted to put up a clean face in its shaky standing with international financial institutions and the French government which opposed the arrangement. The World bank, for example, condemned the transaction due to the non-respect of the guidelines on competitive bidding. Secondly, it was whispered that the southern elite wanted to guarantee their dominant position and to prevent the rise of ethno-regional lobbies for the ownership of strategic public enterprises in the region. Moreover, it was feared that if this happened, the political elite of the English-speaking part of Cameroon would take over the relay baton and engage a battle for the full ownership of the CDC. The puncture of the deal led to protest by the purported buyers. They took up legal action and the matter was laid to rest in August 2001 only when they were substantially rewarded for the loss of their shares (Takougang and Krieger, 1998, as cited by Konings, 2011, pp.88-89).

2.2. Labour Restiveness in HEVECAM

With the intricate nature of the privatization process, the government managed to get a number of public enterprises on the banister of privatization. But the said complexity and nature of the takeovers provoked discontent among the workers of some of the privatized enterprises especially in the agro-industrial sector. In this section of the paper, we shall use the case of HEVECAM to show how the workers fell at loggerhead with the management of the company because privatization had failed woefully to meet their expectations.

HEVECAM is an agro-industrial public limited company that was established by the government of Cameroon in 1975 with a working capital of FCFA 15.7 billion and specialized in rubber production. It is located on the Niété site, 40km from Kribi in the South Region of Cameroon and its plantations cover over 42,000 hectares and grew up to have close to 6,000 workers with many of them being rubber tappers (Andzongo, 2020, pp.1-2). In December 1996 the company was sold to Golden Millennium Group (GMG) of Singapore, Malaysia, a subsidiary of the British Group Corrie MacColl, for FCFA 23 billion. The Cameroon government retained only 10 percent of the share capital while GMG kept the remaining 90 percent (Akonumbo, 2003, p.85).

Following the privatization of the enterprise, the state and GMG HEVECAM, agreed on a rehabilitation programme for the enterprise. The new owners had to carry out an extension programme by creating new plantations to make up for the aging ones. As a result, new plantations were set up at Bissiang in Kribi Sub-division and at Bella in the Lokoundje Sub-division covering a land surface of 18, 365 hectares. This new investment was divided into four blocks on parcels of land allocated by the government. The first block is at the edge of the old Kienké Reserve close to the villages of Bissiang and Bidou 1. The second block is found in the old felling area near Bella village. The third block is close to Lokoundje River where the villages of Bipaga, Bebwambe and Londji are situated. The last of the blocks is at the vicinity of the Elogbatindi, Mbede and Dehaene villages (Assembe-Mvondo, Putzel, Eba'a, 2015, p.4, see also Presidential Decree N° 2012/009 of 12 March 2012).

In the years following privatization, labour relations in HEVECAM were periodically characterized by tension due to numerous factors which pitted the workers against the management of the enterprise. The atmosphere of discontentment which surrounded the workers became an untouchable time bomb which led to several explosions as the years went by. Like in the CDC and Pamol, the workers engaged both formal and informal actions as instruments for labour resistance in the HEVECAM plantations. Formal or collective action had to do with the workers coming out as a group and acting in synergy through go-slows, sit-down and other forms of strike actions. The informal approach was a rather non-conventional method in expressing disgruntlement in the labour process. This was nurtured by individual actions which included but not limited to gargantuan absenteeism and resignation or outright abandonment of the plantations after shorts spells work.

Among the first set of collective orientated measures was the strike action of 2008. The workers of HEVECAM went on strike when a mechanic working in the company, Ntonga Emmanuel Ntonga, died due to an accident caused by a machine in the rubber processing factory. This incident became an eye-opener as well as a reminder to the workers of their sordid working conditions and security lapses. The workers went on strike calling for improved working and hygienic conditions. They also called on management to review the wage structure and to institute fuel indemnity to all motor cycles used for the company's services. (Fon and Mbondji, 2015,p.9). Though management succeeded to restore calm among the workers, the non-adherence to their demands could hardly be forgotten as they would resurface in a more grievous strike action a few years later.

In relation to working conditions, the privatization of HEVECAM had not really brought substantial addition to workers' development. The workers got out of bed every working day (Monday-Saturday) at 4:00 am and returned home at 3:00 pm though they were promised an 8-hour working day (6:00 am – 2:00 pm). Though the enterprise promised better wages to workers at recruitment, the reality thereafter showed that a rubber tapper earned not more than FCFA 38,900 (£59) a month. Meanwhile social welfare conditions were not at their best. For example, workers' accommodation remained a serious problem on the HEVECAM estates. The camp houses which were in a deplorable condition had an average of 4 persons per room. The workers lacked leisure sites where they could relax during their free time. Moreover, there was a conspicuous insufficiency of basic drugs at the health facility for patients (Fon and Mbondji, 2015, p.11).

In 2012, the workers went on a 3 weeks sit-in strike action which lasted from 3 - 23 January 2012 and nearly paralysed the functioning of HEVECAM. In addition to the aforementioned factors, the workers called on the hierarchy to improve on their hygiene and working conditions. They also laid claim to the indemnity of 3 percent that was promised them during the privatization of the enterprise in 1996 and demanded a revaluation of their wages. The workers also engaged militant action because of the non-respect of promises made to prospective migrant workers at the time of their recruitment in the company. For example, A recruiter on behalf of the company led a convoy of 112 job seekers from Mora, in the Far North Region of Cameroon, on the understanding that they were to receive FCFA 50,000 on arrival at Kribi. In addition, they were promised a monthly pay of FCFA 150,000 on the job. Unfortunately, these promises were never respected thereby dashing their hopes to the ground (Ibid., p.9).

In addition, Ntaryike Jr, (2012, pp.1-2) states that close to 6,000 workers of HEVECAM laid down their tools demanding an increase in pay as well as the payment of accumulated wages and allowances following the strike action of January 2012. He reiterated that the workers were further exasperated by the non-respect of one of the terms at privatization where it was agreed that GMG would cede 3 percent of the company's annual profits to them. Unfortunately, no dime of the said allocation had been paid to these workers in 16 years. As the workers went on the rampage, tension loomed the air. News of the disorder soon reached the administrative

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authorities. Following the outbreak of the sit-in strike action, the Divisional Officer of the Ocean Division ordered the forces of law and order to crack down on the workers following fears that the strike might degenerate into a public demonstration. The gendarmes and police in Kribi stormed the scene and pounced on the workers arresting 78 of them in the process. Meanwhile security reinforcements were brought in from Ebolowa, capital of the South Region, to help quell down the strike and to protect the enterprise's facilities.

Several civil society actors and political leaders condemned the arrest of the workers on grounds that the use of brute force on the workers was a senseless solution to the problem. For example, Gregoire Mba Mba, a Sub-section President of the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement, castigated the Divisional Officer for electing a tyrannic approach towards peaceful demonstrators. Mba Mba maintained that dialogue rather than oppression was by far a better option to adopt in calming down the "flaring tempers of the striking workers." Meanwhile thousands of workers took refuge at the confines of the Kribi Town Hall but refused to abandon the strike. For example, Charles Ndasi, one of the striking workers, vehemently made it clear that "We shall not give up. In fact, the arrests have only come to galvanize our position. We shall not go back to work until they pay our dues and also increase our salaries. How do you work for 30 years and still earn 50,000?" (Ibid., p.2).

As the January 2012 strike action persisted in HEVECAM, a meeting was summoned by the government at Niété with the intention of resolving dispute. The government which acted as mediator in the conflict was represented by Gregoire Owona, Minister of Labour and Social Security. Tien Sing Young Alain P. C., the General Manager of HEVECAM, represented his company while a few workers' representatives or delegates sat in for their colleagues with the support of the workers' union. The over 6 hours negotiations ended with a protocol agreement containing 4 main resolutions signed between the HEVECAM management and the workers. The first had to do with the workers' claim of 3 percent of the company's privatization capital. On this aspect, a committee was to be set up to study the issue and to make available its report in 3 months beginning from 23 January 2012. Secondly, it was agreed that an appeasement allowance be paid to the workers corresponding to one month of their various wages. Thirdly, it was resolved that the workers be paid their full wages for the month of January 2012 in spite of the three weeks long strike action. Lastly, it was agreed that a total amount of FCFA 400 million be disbursed and paid to workers as accumulated arrears by 28 January 2012. As the workers agreed to call off the strike on 23 January 2012, Minister Owona assured them that "Government attaches a lot of importance to the wellbeing of every citizen. It is out to preserve the interest of Cameroonians. You need to know that government also has an interest to be protected." He went on to encourage discipline and hard work among the workers calling on them to respect laid down rules of the company while their entitlements would be equally respected and problems addressed (Freudenthal, 2012, pp.1-2).

The Minister of Labour and Social Security, the Governor of the South Region, the Senior Divisional Officer for Ocean Division, and some officials of HEVECAM among others, made a tour in the plantations to ensure that work had effectively started. As they went round, the workers' representatives/delegates also engaged sensitisation campaigns, briefing their colleagues on the terms of the protocol agreement and encouraging them to resume work fully for the wellbeing of their families and of the corporation.

As the dust of the 2012 strike action was about to settle, a new but related problem surfaced in HEVECAM. This had to do with the accumulated or the non-payment of the full wages of some workers which caused pandemonium between them, HEVECAM management and a banking institution. For example, on Saturday 22 October 2016, more than 200 workers of the company stormed the premises of the Kribi branch of the *Société Generale du Cameroun* (SGC) bank which was responsible for the payment of their monthly dues. The situation became frightening when the furious workers discovered that their employer had not transferred to their accounts, the balance of money owed them as promised. The bank authorities managed to convince them to persevere and come back later. On Tuesday 25 October 2016 the workers returned to SGC and when they stayed for long unattended to, they staged a protest demanding the unconditional payment of their money (Mboa News, 2016, p.1). During the protest, a fuming HEVECAM worker and customer of SGC lamented that:

> We have to take a day off to come and collect our balances and then you are told there's no money. We have problems and we have to walk away with our money. We must have our salaries today otherwise we will not move. Even the distributor [ATM machine] does not pass…We are fed up with the SGC. When she wanted us to affiliate with her, she promised us that if we reach [sic] 700, she should have a branch in Niété. We are more than 900 and nothing. In addition to the SGC, we have no access to credit or overdraft. Nothing (Ibid.).

Following the rising tension, the SGC in consultation with the HEVECAM hierarchy decided to settle the workers after more than three hours of basking in the sun and raucous display on the SGC premises. The exhausted workers were led to the cash register for the necessary payment. Therefore, a manual procedure was engaged and they were paid. This restowed sanity on the SGC premises following the commotion of that day (Ibid.).

The management-workers imbroglio in HEVECAM was hardly put to rest after the SGC incident. Suspicion of management's intention to effect reforms especially when it had to do with a revision of the employment list and/or redundancies were hardly taken frivolously by the workers. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in its African Governance Report in 2005 declares that the fear of losing jobs is among the main reasons why workers oppose the privatization of public enterprises in Africa (UNECA, 2005, p.100). The militant behaviour of the workers of HEVECAM accorded credit to this rationale at the close of 2019.

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization reported the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (covid-19), a killer respiratory disease which started in Wuhan, China. By early in 2020, the disease had spread by lips and bounds in the world so much so that various countries took several measures intended to nib its diffusion in the bud. For instance, there was a lockdown on economic activities such as bars, clubs and supermarkets. Several enterprises also suffered the consequences and had to redundant some of their workers. Hossain (2021, p.62) uses the case of

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Bangladesh to argue that the lockdowns that were ignited by the covid-19 disaster all over the world led to the loss of jobs in the agricultural and other sectors. He contends that the corona virus disaster caused two types of employment loss, temporary lockdown-induced job loss and permanent impact job loss. Tchuileu (2021, pp.1-2) corroborates this by arguing that in early 2020 the government of Cameroon imposed of a lockdown in the economic and other public sectors due to the covid-19. One of the superseding consequences was employment uncertainty and the utter loss of jobs. In early 2020, there was tension and disorder in HEVECAM following rumours that management planned to dismiss close to 960 workers due to economic difficulties as well as new challenges imposed on the company by the covid-19 pandemic. Though no official statement was made by management to accept or refute the claim, the workers' suspicion appeared to be a somewhat verisimilitude several months later.

On 26 June 2020, the rumours became a reality when the management of HEVECAM expressed the intention to retrench a number of workers as from July 2020 for what it termed "*raisons economique*" and for "*nécessite de restructurer en interne la société*." Top management on the same date, informed the workers' representatives/delegates about the criteria laid down for the layoff. For example, those who were considered no longer productive and those who had contributed at least 180 months for social insurance benefits and had attained the age of 55 were to be among those to be made redundant. In addition, management wanted to transform or suppress some less productive posts and departments and to accelerate the technological transformation of certain services (Andzongo, 2020a, pp.1-2, 2020b, p. 1).

Patrick Grandcolas, General Manager of HEVECAM since February 2019, who decided to lay off several workers, was considered as the "captain of a drowning ship." His decision stood as a strong point when the headquarters of the Malaysian consortium managing the company announced that the enterprise had lost over FCFA 9 billion in 2019. Grandcolas therefore had the responsibility of putting back the company on a good path so that it would return to balance by 2021 (Business in Cameroon, 2020, p.2). As a result, the management published a list of 1,037 out of 5, 945 workers who were to be retrenched. The majority were "rubber bleeding personnel." In other words, these were "miscellaneous personnel." Some administrative staff including translators and support staff were also part of those to be laid off (Andzongo, 2020b, p.1).

The retrenchment took effect as from 8 July 2020 and was followed by untold consequences. Several families were rendered desperate and frustrated. In the midst of the consternation that followed, HEVECAM became a battle ground for victimisation and the settlement of scores. For example, following the turmoil in HEVECAM ignited by the redundancies, the gendarmerie in Kribi- Niété arrested and detained Ambe Godfrey, an assistant surgeon working with the HEVECAM health facility, accusing him of taking advantage of the disorder in HEVECAM to sexually harass minors. A close relative of the medical doctor however, argued that the allegation was false and that some of his neighbours who were victims of the layoffs plotted and set him up in order to cause his removal from the company as well. The relative complained that the gendarmes held the medical doctor incommunicado in violation of his rights arguing that "he has neither been given the chance to write a statement nor to speak with his wife." Furthermore, the gendarmerie was also accused of demanding FCFA 150,000 as bail fee, an amount his wife was able to raise only after pledging some family property which included her husband's motorbike. Worse on this scenario was the fact that the person who launched the complaint against the medical doctor disappeared into thin air thereby complicating the matter as well as the procedure for the release of Dr Ambe (Mefo, 2020, pp. 1-2).

Though the impact of the covid pandemic and other factors mentioned so far seemed to have interplayed in the dismissal of several workers, there were yet some contradictions that need to be highlighted at this point in time. According to *Business in Cameroon*, an online newspaper (2022, pp. 1-2) The Technical Commission for the Rehabilitation of Public and Para-public Enterprises reported that rubber production in Cameroon rose from 45,000 tons in 2019 to 60,000 tons in 2020. This means that the rubber sector witnessed an increase of 15,000 tons during the said period. The commission emphasized that this performance was realised in the heart of the coronavirus upsurge which greatly slowed down the activities of many other companies. This seemed to have mitigated in the rubber sector especially following the establishment of new plantations as was the case with HEVECAM. Moreover, the Bank of Central African States and the government of Cameroon had equally projected a continuous rise in rubber production. For instance, Gabriel Mbairobe of the Ministry of Agriculture opined that by the end of 2022 rubber production would increase by 6,667 tons.

The trend of rubber production in the heart of the coronavirus crisis presented in the foregone paragraph leads us to pose a number of rhetorical questions in relation to the dismissal of up to 1,037 workers from the company in July 2020. Though it was acknowledged that the enterprise had registered some financial loss the year before, was it mandatory to remove so much workers at a time when production was on the rise and when there were prospects that things were to going to get better? Was it that the enterprise took advantage of the situation to cut down its labour force by up to 17.44 percent with the intention of maximising its profits in the future? Did the hierarchy of the company not promise to guarantee the job security of the workers at the time it was privatized?

The disquiet that plagued HEVECAM and the need to restore order and to inject new blood in the company led to the appointment of Benoit Snoeck as General Manager in May 2021. On 18 June 2021, barely a month in office, he was received in audience by Gregoire Owona, Minister of Labour and Social Security. The new General Manager promised to bring peace and serenity in the corporation. Immediately after the meeting with the minister, he was cornered by the press for an insight of their discussion. Snoeck recapitulated that: “Today, I wanted to reassure the Minister [of Labour and Social Security] on the will of the general management to install social peace in HEVECAM and to revitalize the company thanks to the lever which is the rise in the price of rubber” (Tchuileu, 2021, p.1).

While strike actions were formal methods of the expression of workers’ discontent or resistance in HEVECAM, they also engaged some informal (individual) strategies to denote the disapproval of their situation in the labour process. These included absenteeism and resignation or abandonment after short periods of work in the plantations. Fon and Mbondji (2015, p.12), who carried out a survey on the causes of labour instability in HEVECAM in 2013, argue that it was hard to find workers who had been present in the field throughout the month on pay day. This explains why the number of flying tappers (those with no permanent duty posts), had been on the rise ranging from 7.18 percent in 2011 to 14.23 percent in 2013. The rising need for flying tappers was the direct result of the rising level of absenteeism which moved up from 9.51 percent in 2011 to 17.97 percent in 2013. In fact, it was estimated that the daily rate of absenteeism stood at 14.34 percent at HEVECAM.

In the same vein, it was approximated that about 932 out of 5,800 workers registered daily absences leading to an average loss of about 6,656 working hours daily in the enterprise. Following figures from the production book, it was calculated that HEVECAM lost 724,672kg of dry rubber on a daily basis due to absenteeism. The use of flying tappers to close the gap was therefore considered a loss to the enterprise because they were supposed to reduce unfinished tasks rather than replace absentee workers (Ibid.). Drawing from the statistics, it could be said that the workers' decision to side-line plantation work for other private activities during working hours was a mammoth source of harm and an inestimable threat to the survival of the company.

Another informal way in which the workers of HEVECAM expressed their disapproval over working conditions was through colossal resignation or desertion of the plantation milieu unnoticed after short spells of work. This approach had untold consequences in relation to the cost of production and stability of the company. According to an anonymous document published in 2013 (as cited by Fon and Mbondji, 2015, p.14), HEVECAM incurred an additional cost of 518,868,000 FCFA (£792,165) annually due to mass resignation which propelled the recruitment of new workers. Besides, several skilled workers were commissioned to sacrifice a number of working days to train new recruits in the rubber tapping school which led to the loss of a number of man days in the enterprise. Furthermore, the transport fare of workers who came from afar was borne by the company. For example, FCFA 22,000 (£34) was paid to some new recruits from the Far North Region as transport requisition. Meanwhile, a guardian was paid a compensation of FCFA 14,000 (£21) for the introduction of a new worker to the company. Labour instability therefore, increased cost but reduced output by making it difficult for the rubber processing factory to function at full capacity.

3. Conclusion

Privatization as one of HIPC's pills for the rescue of Cameroon and other African countries from the slumps of the economic crisis of the1980s did not go without distressing side effects. The process of selling out some SOEs in Cameroon was a long, boring and cumbersome one as was seen in the agro-industrial sector. Generally, it was unpopular among some members of the elitist population and civil society because the process did not involve current employees in decisions-making in relation to their future and interests. In the case of HEVECAM, the government engaged long negotiations which culminated in the sale of the rubber producing company to the Malaysian based Golden Millennium Group (GMG) in December 1996. It was hoped that privatization would bring back this agro-industrial enterprise to its feet thereby leading to better management, increased production and improved social welfare for workers. If these expectations were met, the story of a privatized HEVECAM would have been quite a pleasantly suiting one. Regrettably, the sordid working and welfare conditions left behind an

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ugly picture which was exacerbated by a number of strike actions in expression of workers' discontent in the labour system. This discourse therefore, depicts mixed feelings over privatization as a panacea to the plight of SOEs in Cameroon in particular and Africa as a whole. In the Cameroon context, the nature and design of the imposed privatization appeared to be a wrong diagnosis, a wrong prescription and therefore a wrong pill/therapy for a popular disease.

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