

Fifty Years of Friendship

This year, Canada is celebrating the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations with many African nations—among them Cameroon, a country with whom our ties of friendship and trade are growing steadily.

Canada and Cameroon have had diplomatic relations since 1962. The two countries enjoy high levels of trade, with Cameroon now Canada's second-largest export market in Central Africa. Both are members of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie. And both wish to see democratic values, human rights, good governance, stability and prosperity take firm root in the region.

Some of the deepest initial connections between the two countries resulted from the work of Catholic missionaries in Cameroon. As High Commissioner Benoit Pierre Laramée and Political Counsellor Louis-Philippe Sylvestre note in a recent paper, "The work of these missionaries, particularly in the establishment of educational institutions, helped cement a deep relationship between Canada and Cameroon."

One of the most prominent of those missionaries was Paul-Émile Cardinal Léger, the Quebec-born priest who was named a cardinal by Pope Pius XII in 1952. His brother, Jules Léger, was at one time Canada's undersecretary of state for foreign affairs and later became governor general of Canada.

In 1967, Cardinal Léger, then serving as archbishop of Montréal, announced that he was resigning as archbishop and going to Cameroon to do missionary work in Yaoundé, the capital. There, he intended to help persons suffering from leprosy and children with disabilities. As he told people astonished by his decision, "God wanted not only words from me, but actions."

Léger committed himself to improving the well-being of people in Cameroon. One of his greatest achievements was the establishment in 1972 of the National Centre for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons in Yaoundé, which addressed, among other things, the rehabilitation needs of people with polio.

The centre has grown over the past four decades to now include 15 buildings on its campus. Léger also established a hospital for persons suffering from leprosy in Yaoundé. Other Catholic missionaries established schools in Cameroon, mostly focused on primary and vocational education.

Apart from education, Canada has helped Cameroon in the management of its forestry sector, especially to ensure that forests are harvested sustainably. Both countries also have a long history of development cooperation. One current example of how Canada is making a difference is the funding by the Canadian International Development Agency of a micro-finance system to help disadvantaged women establish small businesses.

Canadian companies are finding congenial hosts in Cameroon. Rio Tinto Alcan, for example, is part owner of an aluminum smelter in Edéa, in partnership with the Cameroon government, and is also building a 1,000-MW hydroelectric dam to power a new smelter planned for the port of Kribi. Bombardier Inc. of Montréal has built many of the locomotives that move freight traffic along the country's railroads.

Cameroon has had two presidents since independence in 1960, and both made visits to Canada as a gesture of appreciation for the friendship between the two countries. During his 1982 visit, Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, spoke of "the similarities which exist between our two countries," making special mention of "the heavy and exultant heritage of an identical bilingualism." There is every reason to think the friendship and trade ties between Canada and Cameroon will continue to grow and deepen to the benefit of both countries.

Our World will be publishing more stories in celebration of the 50th anniversary of our relations with many African countries. To read them, go to Our World Online.



Mutual fascination between Paul-Émile Cardinal Léger and an infant