



story

Gody's Profile: Doing Business in Cameroon

October 30, 2007—Sprawled on his back with eyes half closed, Gody goes over the long, harrowing workday. He totals up the day's receipts on a pocket calculator and casts a mournful eye at his visitor as if the latter were another one of his problems.

"When the day's take is so small, even though it's still early in the month and civil servants have just been paid, I can already tell that October will be very rough," he says as if to justify his foul mood.

Gody, like many young Cameroonians, start working before they turn 18. Day after day, they face the same harsh and bitter reality: red tape, assorted administrative dysfunctions, influence trafficking, and other obstacles.

"If the business environment in this country gave us an opportunity to operate freely and without harassment, there wouldn't be any problems," Gody says. "Every day brings a new array of uncertainties, but there's nothing we can do."

A Tough Road to Travel

The promise of adventure and better business prospects lured Gody to Yaoundé.

He was 15 years-old when arrived in 1997 to ply his trade a car electrician, after an apprenticeship in Bamenda, a town in his native Northwest Province.

He soon found work at an auto repair shop. But his first thought, like that of many others, was to try his luck in Europe. A friend had taken that route and was sending him regular dispatches about that ultramodern "paradise."

"The image that we provincials have of Yaoundé is that everything is great there," he says. "The reality is very different, although I have no regrets about coming."

Two years later, Gody set up a small stand in a teeming, low-rent neighborhood and started selling electrical appliances and car accessories—hubcaps, car alarms and radios, and other knick-knacks.

Thanks to his own savings and an uncle, who put him up for eight months, Gody managed to establish himself. He considers himself one of the lucky ones, compared to others his age.

A Tough Road to Travel (continued)

Today, Gody has what could be called a shop specializing in auto gadgets. It's a niche market with a lot of growth potential thanks to the Cameroonian infatuation with beautiful—and extravagantly ornamented—cars.

"If all goes well, I plan to rent a new storefront, since I'm already feeling cramped here," Gody says. "... the only problem is that I'm afraid of losing my customer base because the location I've got here is very strategic."

Gody also hopes to start importing the items he sells to increase his profit margins.

"If I could afford it, I'd make regular trips to Dubai to stock up on low-priced items," he says. "If I do become an importer, that will be another step up in this business. Right now, though, money's much too tight."

Never Admit Defeat


Gody, like many others, feels the impact of Cameroon's dysfunctional public finance sector. His savings have been blocked for years at the postal savings bank.

"I'm a victim of this country's bad management. My money is trapped and nobody can give me a good explanation why. It's a shame, but I can't do anything about it."

Despite the challenges, Gody doesn't despair. "In Cameroon, you can earn a good living if you work hard. Things are not that catastrophic."

He's full of personal aspirations as well. "I'm engaged and the father of a little girl. I'm going to get married in a few years and start a family. After that, I'd like to build a proper house that reflects the potential stature of my business."

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