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Energy & Environment



## NORTHERN CAMEROON'S WATER SHORTAGE

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By Ida Sophie Winter

Extreme water-related issues are nothing new for Cameroon, a country that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to form a peninsula jutting

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between Nigeria and Chad. Threatened by floods in the south, water shortages in the north, and plagued by cholera and inconsistent sanitation across the nation, water can either be dangerous or a life-saving grace. In 2006, 70 percent of Cameroonians had [access](#) to potable water, but this access varied dramatically between urban and rural areas, from 88 percent for city dwellers to 47 percent in the countryside.

Cameroonians rely heavily on rainfall, wells, and water tables deep underground. Residents in the south have a reliable water source thanks to an annual rainfall of up to 10,000 mm (394 inches). Those farther north, where rainfall averages 500 mm (19 inches), rely mostly on rivers and groundwater sources that can dry up if not managed appropriately. Encroaching desertification in the north is also thanks to climate change, and the water table is falling while permanent wells are beginning to run dry at certain times of the year.

According to a 2010 [study](#) by Ako and colleagues, the main barriers to better water management in Cameroon include lack of resource development and little political will. Journalist Eugene Nforngwa, [writing](#) in 2014, adds that while cities are growing rapidly, infrastructure has not kept up and entire neighborhoods in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital, are not on the water grid. He casts this as one of the reasons for the capital's 2014 water shortage and writes that the city can only access "about half" of what its population requires.

Amadou Ballo, 54, is an architect with the Cameroonian branch of the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. He works on water sanitization and collection projects to stabilize people's water supply throughout the North Region of Cameroon.

He spoke to the Moroccan-American nonprofit High Atlas Foundation about drinking water shortages in his city of Garoua during a water management conference organized by the Organization for Islamic

Cooperation and the Cameroonian Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training, and facilitated by the High Atlas Foundation.

In Garoua, says Ballo, people rely on the water table, rivers, and rainfall to meet their drinking and agricultural needs. Toward the end of the dry season, however, these sources can dry up and leave people, especially in more remote villages, without water if individuals do not conserve during the rest of the year.

Below, Ballo discusses water management in the north of Cameroon as well as the desert of Niger, and how best to encourage community-led development projects in Garoua and the surrounding areas. He is adamant that dam construction and agricultural self-sufficiency are key to Garoua's future success.

**High Atlas Foundation:** You mentioned that water management is difficult in Garoua because there isn't much water. How does a lack of water impact behavior?

**Amadou Ballo:** In Garoua, there are only four months of rain throughout the year. People rely on boreholes and streams during the rest of the year.

All people in the north, when you go, focus first on water. People do not waste their share, as there is not much. We understand how to conserve. We economize water. I see people wash quickly in a large basin outside, at their homes. Dishes with a tiny bit of water. The women of Garoua have a certain technique. They wash dishes with a tiny bit of water. They don't waste much.

**HAF:** However, not everyone is good at conservation. How do you react to people who waste or misuse water?

**AB:** We don't understand why [people in Yaoundé] use water like this, because we don't have a lot of water. And when you go, for example, to

Niger, it's even worse. I went with my professor to Tenere to research naphthology [the chemical study of oil]. We spent two weeks without bathing. No thought of bathing. The water there was designated for our upkeep: to eat, drink, and prepare food. If we wanted to bathe, we had to wait more than a week until the helicopter came with water.

**HAF:** How can we find solutions for the water situation in Garoua?

**AB:** It depends on the neighborhoods. I've gone to neighborhoods where there's a luxury of water. Water flows out of the tap. There are neighborhoods where there isn't any. There, what do people do? They take rain and groundwater. To secure resources, they create a [manual] pump that gathers the water. [Residents must manage water to avoid depleting the underground water table they rely on.]

We can't refuse water, whatever happens. I can refuse you food, but I can't refuse water. You can die of thirst, and I will have that on my conscience.

Right now, if there are pumps in the villages, communal pumps, there is someone who manages the water. You go; you pay 10 francs; you pump the water. If the pump is broken, the collected money is used to repair it. There is a whole infrastructure.

Right now, we must construct dams to collect the water.

**HAF:** Why hasn't this dam construction been done already?

**AB:** In a country, it's the government that decides. The population doesn't have the money to do it. The population doesn't know whom to contact. If the government doesn't make the effort—

**HAF:** But why doesn't the government make the effort?

**AB:** I don't know ... some could work, if it's [locally-focused], but at the national level. However, even if we were united, we would go to the province, the police. We would not make the decisions. It's the state that makes decisions. It's the state that has the money. Me, I have what? Nothing. If I said I wanted to construct a dam—I can't, because it's too expensive. I can't.

**HAF:** Is government action for water management in Garoua (i.e., constructing dams) a question of awareness of local water issues on the government's part, or money?

**AB:** It knows that in the south, rain damages houses, and that in the north, it's the sun that takes us. They know that. But do they have the resources to do [something]?

The first resource is the will. It's not money. They can give you [local authorities] \$1 billion. If you don't have the will, you will do nothing. But they can give you \$1000, and if you have the will, you'll do something.

**HAF:** You think maybe there's no will in Garoua?

**AB:** It's not only in Garoua. It's all of Cameroon, where there is no will to do anything.

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To help relieve Garoua's water issues, Ballo suggests dam construction and better management and storage of water resources. He says, though, that these projects must be pursued through partnership between those at the national level, who can allocate resources, and local partners, who must have the necessary motivation to pursue projects to their completion.

Government resources for water management may come to Garoua soon. In 2014, Cameroon [received](#) a \$28 million loan from Belgium's Belfius Bank to rehabilitate and further water supply networks in 11 Cameroonian cities, including Yaoundé and Garoua. This loan will aid the installment of 200,000 meters of water pipes and 15,000 new water source connections [beginning](#) in March 2016. Expanded water access could remove the need for dams and sustain greater agricultural production.

Ballo, in any case, is optimistic about continued water management in Cameroon due to the potential for development that he sees at the local level. [Speaking](#) at the conference, he shared his hopes for future community-led development throughout the country.

“We have seen something positive, and what we are capable of,” said Ballo. “Instead of being [treated in a condescending manner] as Africans, we know how to be prepared. We can access our own knowledge. No one will be lost in this system. No one.”

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