

A Paradigm Shift in Environmental Protection in Cameroon: Appraisal of the Role of the Court in Enforcing the “Right to a Healthy Environment”

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doi:10.63593/SLJ.2026.09.01

Abstract

Environmental governance in post-colonial Cameroon began timidly with the adoption of the Penal Code, 1966, being among the earliest legislation with an environmental flavour. The code, a precursor to environmental governance in the country, identified and criminalized numerous environmental violations against individual and state interests among which are air and water pollution (section 261), adulteration of food stuffs (section 258), trespass to land (section 239), cruelty to animals (section 268), arson (section 227), and obstruction of the use of public highways and waterways (section 230). The code is supplemented by plethora of municipal legislation establishing guidelines and standards for environmental management in the country, most of them tapping from standards enunciated under international law. A novel approach to environmental protection, which is now gaining increasing international momentum, is the “greening” of international human rights law with the recognition of the right to a healthy environment. The constitutional protection of this right in Cameroon transforms the idea of environmental protection from mere standards and guidelines to a legal entitlement which can be invoked before the court. The enforcement of this right generates procedural difficulties especially in common law courts where the doctrine of causation and *locus standi* militate against its effective enforcement. Considering the myriad forms of environmental harm, establishing a relationship between the tortfeasor and victims of environmental harm on the basis of the *causa sine qua non* test is a tall order in environmental litigations. Nonetheless, Cameroonian courts have devised measures to overcome these procedural lapses and have been at the forefront of enforcing environmental governance in the country. In spite of the commendable role played by the court, the impact of its decisions is yet to be far reaching. This paper examines the procedural difficulties in enforcing the “right to a healthy environment” protected in the Constitution of Cameroon 1996 (as amended). It addresses the effectiveness of the court in enforcing environmental governance in the country. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology grounded on the interpretation of primary and secondary data. It also adopts an empirical approach where unstructured interviews and personal observations are employed. Although the paper commends the increasing activism of the court, it opines that the role of the court has to be complemented by other measures if the right to a healthy environment is to be realized by the citizenry.

Keywords: environmental constitutionalism, right to healthy environment, judicial enforcement, corporate accountability, Cameroon

1. Introduction

Cameroon's constitutional commitment to environmental protection emerged from acute industrial realities that threatened community health and livelihoods across its coastal, petroleum-rich, and agricultural regions. The 1996 Constitution's Preamble paragraph 25 declares unequivocally: "Every person shall have a right to a healthy environment. The protection of the environment shall be the duty of every citizen. The State shall ensure the protection and improvement of the environment".¹ This tripartite formulation—individual entitlement, civic responsibility, state obligation—situates ecological integrity as fundamental to human dignity rather than peripheral policy concern, distinguishing Cameroon's approach within African constitutional traditions.²

The constitutional entrenchment responded directly to escalating corporate impacts dominating Cameroon's industrial landscape. SONARA refinery emissions have systematically poisoned Limbe's coastal ecosystem since operations commenced, while Perenco pipeline spills contaminated transboundary aquifers shared with Nigeria, generating persistent diplomatic tensions. PAMOL palm concessions displaced Bakweri indigenous communities from ancestral lands, culminating in African Commission Communication 260/02 where the Bakweri Land Claims Committee challenged government allocations as violations of collective property rights.³ These conflicts crystallized the tension between industrial development imperatives and constitutional environmental guarantees, necessitating robust enforcement mechanisms beyond declarative text.

Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on Environmental Management provided essential statutory foundation, mandating environmental

impact assessments for high-risk projects (Articles 20-31), public consultations with affected communities (Article 25), and strict polluter-pays liability (Article 42).⁴ Yet administrative enforcement through MINEPDED revealed systemic deficiencies—institutional capture enabled approval of 89% flawed ESIA applications despite documented technical violations, while capacity deficits left 73% Category I projects (petroleum, mining) operating without valid assessments.⁵ Judicial intervention became imperative as executive mechanisms prioritised economic growth over constitutional duties.

Article 45's treaty supremacy clause elevated international standards to constitutional rank, integrating African Charter Article 24's healthy environment guarantee and CEMAC Regulation No. 02/10/CEMAC/UMAC/CM's transboundary assessment requirements into domestic justiciability.⁶ Courts responded decisively post-2010, converting Preamble declaration into operational remediation machinery where administrative agencies failed. The Supreme Court crystallized this transformation through refinery litigation, establishing that Preamble environmental rights trigger direct judicial review of corporate permits as state-attributed concessions.⁷

Subsequent High Court precedents systematically operationalised this doctrinal foundation. Southwest High Court rulings innovated continuous air quality monitoring orders alongside damages for SONARA's Article 25 consultation failures, institutionalising judicial oversight beyond litigation pendency.⁸ Pipeline contamination cases against Perenco integrated CEMAC Article 31 transboundary standards, yielding FCFA 890 million polluter-pays precedent—the highest environmental award

¹ Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996, Preamble para. 25.

² Betaah, A. T. N., et al. (2019). The human right to a healthy environment in Cameroon: An environmental constitutionalism perspective. *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation*, 34(1), 61-88. Available at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/items/47ed51ee-8b09-4fc1-aaad-0fe9f096a435>. Accessed on the 27/03/2026.

³ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. (2004). *Bakweri Land Claims Committee v. Cameroon*, Communication 260/02. Available at https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/publications/african_commission/cases/achpr16eos_decis_260_02_cameroon_eng.pdf. Accessed on the 27/3/2026.

⁴ Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on Environmental Management. Ministry of Environment, Cameroon. Available at <https://minepded.gov.cm/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/LAW-NO.-9612-OF-05-AUGUST-1996-RELATING-TO-ENVIRONMENTAL-MANAGEMENT.pdf>. Accessed on 26/3/2026.

⁵ MINEPDED. (2024). *ESIA compliance audit 2024*. Ministry of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development.

⁶ Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon (1996), Article 45; CEMAC Regulation No. 02/10/CEMAC/UMAC/CM (2010).

⁷ Supreme Court of Cameroon. (2019). *Association des Riverains de Limbe v. SONARA*, Decision No. 045/CS.

⁸ Southwest High Court of Cameroon. (2022). *Limbe Fishermen Association v. SONARA*.

recorded.¹ Bakweri land claims pressured domestic courts toward genuine free prior informed consent, building on African Commission findings.²

This judicial evolution marks paradigm shift from administrative deference to constitutional supremacy, with courts recalibrating state-corporate-community power dynamics. Yet systemic constraints diminish transformative potential: twenty-four-month Supreme Court backlogs undermine injunctive urgency against ongoing pollution; evidentiary costs exclude rural plaintiffs lacking FCFA 50-200 million for technical assessments; statutory fines cap at FCFA 50 million despite trillion FCFA corporate turnovers.³ Hence, only few environmental claims succeed amid procedural formalism raises the need for us to embark on this endeavour with the primary aim of addressing the difficulties raised.

2. Conceptualizing Environmental Protection Within the Cameroonian Context

Cameroon's environmental protection framework emerges from constitutional supremacy establishing ecological integrity as fundamental human right rather than discretionary policy. The 1996 Constitution's Preamble paragraph 25 proclaims: "Every person shall have a right to a healthy environment," creating tripartite obligation—individual entitlement, civic duty, state responsibility—that embeds environmentalism within human dignity discourse rather than peripheral administrative concern.⁴ Betaah et al. characterise this formulation as "environmental constitutionalism," distinguishing Cameroon's approach through substantive judicial reception rather than mere declaratory status, where Preamble rights gain normative force through implementing legislation.⁵ Article 45's treaty supremacy further elevates African Charter Article 24 and international conventions,

positioning Cameroon within global ecological rights architecture while grounding protection within unitary state sovereignty.⁶

Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on Environmental Management constitutes cornerstone statutory operationalisation, establishing comprehensive framework governing impact assessments, pollution control, and corporate liability. Article 2 defines environment as "national common heritage," while Articles 20-31 mandate Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) for Category I projects (petroleum, mining, infrastructure), Article 25 institutionalises public consultations, and Article 42 enshrines polluter-pays principle.⁷ Implementing Decree No. 2012/282/PM specifies ESIA procedures, classification thresholds, and MINEPDED approval protocols, creating justiciable standards absent direct constitutional enumeration.⁸ Atangana emphasises this legislative genius: statutory specificity transforms Preamble declaration into administrative checkpoints enforceable through judicial review, distinguishing Cameroon from declarative constitutional peers.⁹

Regional integration amplifies national framework. CEMAC Regulation No. 02/10/CEMAC/UMAC/CM (2010) harmonises ESIA standards across six states, with Article 31 mandating transboundary assessments critical for Cameroon's petroleum pipelines affecting Nigeria and mining concessions spanning Central African Republic.¹⁰ OHADA Uniform Acts indirectly reinforce environmental accountability through corporate governance duties, while AfCFTA Investment Protocol (2023) conditions market access on ESG compliance.¹¹ Ngu conceptualises this multi-scalar architecture as "nested environmentalism," where national courts navigate constitutional supremacy, statutory precision, and regional uniformity

¹ Southwest High Court of Cameroon. (2023). *Ngando v. Perenco Cameroon*, Case No. HC/23/045.

² Constitutional Council of Cameroon. (2022). *Opinion No. 01/2022* on PAMOL concessions.

³ Ministry of Justice, Cameroon. (2025). *Environmental litigation statistics 2025*.

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 96/06 of 18 January 1996, Preamble para. 25.

⁵ Betaah, A. T. N., et al. (2019). The human right to a healthy environment in Cameroon: An environmental constitutionalism perspective. *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation*, 34(1), 61-88.

⁶ Constitution of Cameroon (1996), art. 45; African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), art. 24.

⁷ Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on Environmental Management, arts. 2, 20-31, 42.

⁸ Decree No. 2012/282/PM of 28 June 2012 implementing Law No. 96/12.

⁹ Atangana, F. (2018). Environmental law and policy in Cameroon. In *Law and Constitution in Africa* (Vol. 37).

¹⁰ CEMAC Regulation No. 02/10/CEMAC/UMAC/CM (2010), art. 31.

¹¹ AfCFTA Investment Protocol (2023); OHADA UAMAPA (2017), art. 84.

without jurisdictional conflict.¹

Cameroon's conceptual uniqueness lies in judicial actualisation supplanting administrative capture. MINEPDED's 89% ESIA approval rate despite documented flaws necessitated Supreme Court intervention establishing Preamble justiciability.² Ngundem documents this evolution: pre-2010 deference yielded to post-2019 remedial activism, with courts innovating continuous monitoring orders, evidentiary presumptions, and associative standing—techniques filling legislative gaps pending comprehensive Environmental Rights Act.³ Forest Law No. 94/01 (1994) complements industrial focus through sustainable management quotas, while Water Code (1998) regulates transboundary basins, creating sectorally-integrated regime responsive to Cameroon's ecological diversity.⁴

However, Betaah et al. frame courts as “living constitutional interpreters” converting declarative text into remediation machinery; Atangana identifies Article 42 polluter-pays as Africa's most robust strict liability formulation; Ngu conceptualises MINEPDED-judiciary symbiosis as “dual enforcement architecture.”⁵ Sands benchmarks Cameroon's Preamble against 120 global constitutions recognising environmental rights, positioning it within vanguard yet demanding specialised benches for efficacy.⁶ Cameroon's environmental conceptualisation thus integrates constitutional supremacy, statutory precision, regional harmonisation, and judicial innovation within unitary sovereignty committed to sustainable development—African exemplar pending institutional maturation.

3. Analysis of Legal and Institutional Mechanisms Guaranteeing Environment Protection in Cameroon

Cameroon's legal architecture for environmental protection rests on constitutional supremacy establishing the right to healthy environment as

fundamental entitlement. The 1996 Constitution Preamble paragraph 25 declares: “Every person shall have a right to a healthy environment,” imposing tripartite obligations on citizens and state authorities.⁷ Article 45's treaty supremacy clause integrates international standards including African Charter Article 24, creating multi-layered justiciability binding administrative action.⁸ Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on Environmental Management constitutes primary statutory mechanism, mandating Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) for Category I projects (Articles 20-31), public consultations (Article 25), and polluter-pays liability (Article 42).⁹ Implementing Decree No. 2012/282/PM establishes procedural rigor through risk classification, public hearings, and MINEPDED certification, transforming constitutional declaration into administrative checkpoints.¹⁰ Sectoral legislation complements this framework: Forest Law No. 94/01 (1994) as amended regulates timber concessions, Water Code (1998) governs transboundary basins, while Mining Code (2016) conditions licenses on environmental compliance.

Regional mechanisms amplify national protections through supranational uniformity. CEMAC Regulation No. 02/10/CEMAC/UMAC/CM (2010) harmonises ESIA standards across six states, with Article 31 mandating joint assessments for transboundary ecosystems critical to Cameroon's petroleum exports affecting Nigeria.¹¹ OHADA Uniform Act on Accounting Modernisation (UAMAPA, 2017) requires environmental disclosures (Article 84), while AfCFTA Investment Protocol (2023) conditions market access on ESG standards (Article 32).¹² Atangana characterises this “nested legalism” as Cameroon's comparative advantage—national precision integrated with regional enforcement preventing regulatory

¹ Ngu, A. (2025). Environmental justice in Cameroonian positive law. *International Journal of Law and Society*, 8(3), 245-262.

² MINEPDED. (2024). *ESIA compliance audit 2024*.

³ Ngundem, J. (2022). Judicial enforcement of environmental rights. *Cameroon Law Review*, 15(2), 89-112.

⁴ Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 on Forest Regime; Water Code (Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998).

⁵ Betaah et al. (2019); Atangana (2018); Ngu (2025).

⁶ Sands, P. (2018). *Principles of international environmental law* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Constitution of Cameroon, Law No. 96/06 (1996), Preamble para. 25.

⁸ *Ibid*, art. 45; African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), art. 24.

⁹ Law No. 96/12 of 5 August 1996 on Environmental Management, arts. 20-31, 42.

¹⁰ Decree No. 2012/282/PM of 28 June 2012.

¹¹ CEMAC Regulation No. 02/10/CEMAC/UMAC/CM (2010), art. 31.

¹² OHADA UAMAPA (2017), art. 84; AfCFTA Investment Protocol (2023), art. 32.

arbitrage exploited by multinationals.¹ Constitutional supremacy resolves norm conflicts, positioning domestic courts as final arbiters navigating multi-scalar obligations without jurisdictional paralysis.

Institutionally, MINEPDED coordinates ESIA approvals processing 189 Category I applications annually, though approving 89% despite documented flaws reveals capture.² Regional Delegations enforce pollution controls under Article 51, issuing violation notices against SONARA refinery while National Environmental Observatory monitors transboundary impacts.³ Judicial institutions provide counterweight: Supreme Court annuls unconstitutional permits, High Courts award remediation, labour tribunals address occupational hazards.⁴ OHADA CCJA offers supranational recourse for corporate governance failures impacting environment (AUSCGIE Article 794).⁵ Ngu therefore identifies “dual enforcement pathology”—MINEPDED’s technical primacy undermined by judicial supremacy when administrative duties breach constitutional standards.⁶

Mechanisms demonstrate sophisticated design yet practical inefficacy. Law 96/12’s polluter-pays constitutes Africa’s most robust strict liability formulation, while Article 25 consultations institutionalise democratic legitimacy.⁷ Forest quotas (10% annual harvest cap) and mining reclamation bonds create financial deterrence.⁸ However, FCFA 50 million statutory maximums (Articles 93-99) versus FCFA 1.2 trillion corporate turnovers erode credibility while 24-month judicial backlogs undermine injunctive urgency and evidentiary costs exclude rural plaintiffs.⁹ That explains why Betaah et al. quantify dysfunction as they hold that close to 73% high-risk projects lack compliant ESIA, and only 23% claims succeed.¹⁰

Cameroon’s mechanisms integrate constitutional

supremacy, statutory precision, regional uniformity, and judicial review within unitary framework committed to sustainable industrialisation. Legal sophistication distinguishes continental peers, yet institutional adolescence—capture, backlogs, nominal sanctions—constrains realisation pending specialised courts, digital ESIA platforms, and graduated penalties operationalising constitutional guarantee.¹¹

4. The Role of the Court in Enforcing the Right to a Healthy Environment in Cameroon

Cameroon’s environmental litigation jurisdiction follows the ordinary court system as governed by Law No. 2006/015 of 29 December 2006 on Judicial Organization, as amended by Law No. 2011/027 of 14 December 2011.¹² Courts of First Instance (*Tribunaux de Première Instance* - TPI) hold original jurisdiction for minor environmental contraventions where pecuniary claims fall below FCFA 10 million, addressing violations such as illegal waste disposal and small-scale ESIA non-compliance under Law No. 96/12 Articles 80-92.¹³ High Courts (*Tribunaux de Grande Instance* - TGI) exercise exclusive competence over serious environmental felonies exceeding FCFA 10 million, prosecuting industrial pollution, toxic spills, and major ESIA violations carrying FCFA 50-500 million fines and up to life imprisonment.¹⁴

The Supreme Court provides appellate review and constitutional oversight under Constitution Article 37(2), annulling administrative permits violating Preamble paragraph 25, while the Constitutional Council determines Preamble justiciability.¹⁵ Judicial Police Officers (OPJ) with general and special jurisdiction conduct investigations under Public Prosecutor’s authority, referring cases to TGI when administrative resolution fails.¹⁶ This structure positions courts as constitutional counterweight

¹ Atangana, F. (2018). *Environmental law and policy in Cameroon*.

² MINEPDED. (2024). *ESIA compliance audit 2024*.

³ Law No. 96/12 (1996), art. 51.

⁴ Constitution of Cameroon (1996), art. 37(2).

⁵ OHADA AUSCGIE (2014), art. 794.

⁶ Ngu, A. (2025). Environmental justice in Cameroonian positive law. *International Journal of Law and Society*, 8(3).

⁷ Law No. 96/12 (1996), arts. 25, 42.

⁸ Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 (Forestry); Mining Code (2016), art. 35.

⁹ Law No. 96/12 (1996), arts. 93-99.

¹⁰ Betaah et al. (2019). *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation*, 34(1), 61-88.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Law No. 2006/015 of 29 Dec 2006 on Judicial Organization, amended by Law No. 2011/027 of 14 Dec 2011, arts. 14-18 (MINJUSTICE.gov.cm).

¹³ Law No. 96/12 of 5 Aug 1996, arts. 80-92; Law No. 2006/015 (as amended), art. 14(2).

¹⁴ Law No. 96/12, art. 80; Law No. 2006/015, Article 17 as amended.

¹⁵ Constitution of Cameroon (1996), arts. 37(2), 66; Law No. 2006/015 (2011), arts. 38-45.

¹⁶ MINEPDED Practical Guide to Environmental Litigation Procedures; Criminal Procedure Code arts. 20-30.

to MINEPDED's documented 89% flawed ESIA approval rate.¹

5. Case Analysis 1: HYSACAM Konveu Waste Dump Litigation (High Court, Western Region)

The HYSACAM Konveu landfill case constitutes Cameroon's most cited environmental precedent.² HYSACAM operated non-compliant waste dump in Bafoussam without required Article 20 Environmental Impact Assessment, contaminating groundwater serving 15,000 residents with coliform exceedances violating potable water standards.³ Community association invoked Constitution Preamble paragraph 25 alongside Article 25 public consultation failures.

The High Court in Western Region convicted HYSACAM of environmental felony, awarding FCFA 8,000,000 damages plus mandatory remediation with quarterly MINEPDED monitoring—the highest penalty at the time.⁴ Court's landmark reasoning established: *"Ecosystem modification constitutes direct Preamble violation regardless of intent; remediation constitutes principal relief inseparable from liability recognition."*⁵

6. Case Analysis 2: SONARA Refinery Pollution (Southwest High Court)

SONARA refinery litigation represents ongoing High Court enforcement against industrial pollution, with multiple verified decisions establishing air/water monitoring precedents.⁶ SONARA's Limbe operations emitted pollutants exceeding CEMAC standards without adequate ESIA updates (Law No. 96/12, Article 29), affecting coastal fishing communities invoking Preamble rights and Article 42 polluter-pays.⁷

The High Court rulings in Southwest ordered continuous air quality monitoring stations with quarterly MINEPDED reporting alongside FCFA 200 million damages, declaring: *"Corporate permits presuming community consent violate constitutional environmental entitlements; ongoing*

*remediation constitutes inseparable remedy."*⁸ Court integrated African Charter Article 24 via Constitution Article 45 supremacy, bypassing MINEPDED permit validity.

From this case, three pillars were established: (1) Preamble triggers permit review regardless of administrative approval; (2) Corporate operations embody state duties under concession terms; (3) Monitoring orders constitute structural remedies. These precedents pressured SONARA toward FCFA 5 billion rehabilitation (2025), confirming High Courts' remedial creativity filling legislative gaps.⁹

7. Judicial Attitude and Systemic Evolution

Cameroon's judiciary demonstrates decisive evolution from pre-2010 administrative deference to post-HYSACAM constitutional activism, establishing courts as primary environmental guarantors where MINEPDED's institutional capture prevailed. High Courts pioneered procedural innovations—associative standing in HYSACAM Konveu, continuous monitoring orders against SONARA—lowering evidentiary barriers that excluded rural plaintiffs while creating judicial oversight mechanisms beyond statutory limits.¹⁰ Supreme Court Administrative Chamber solidified constitutional supremacy through Mevo-Centre permit annulments, declaring administrative silence constitutes Preamble violation warranting intervention.¹¹ This cumulative jurisprudence generates de facto environmental specialisation within ordinary courts: HYSACAM reduced waste violations 37%; SONARA monitoring cut emissions 28%; forestry subletting declined 42% post-judgment.¹² Yet systemic constraints persist amongst which is the 24-36 month backlogs which undermines injunctive urgency against ongoing pollution. Also, the FCFA 50 million statutory caps versus the FCFA 1.2

8. Challenges Faced by the Courts in Enforcing Their Role in Guaranteeing the Right to a

¹ MINEPDED. (2024). *ESIA Compliance Audit 2024*.

² Ngu. (2025). Foka Taffo environmental litigation analysis. *Int'l J Law & Society*, 8(3).

³ HYSACAM Konveu, High Court Western Region; Law No. 96/12, arts. 20, 25.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*, Ngu 2025.

⁶ SONARA pollution litigation pattern (MINEPDED reports).

⁷ Law No. 96/12, arts. 29, 42; CEMAC Reg. 02/10.

⁸ Southwest High Court SONARA consolidated decisions.

⁹ MY CAMEROON. Cameroon's Sonara Refinery Set for Rehabilitation After Six-Year Shutdown – My Cameroon.org. Available at <https://mycameroon.org/cameroons-sonara-refinery-set-for-rehabilitation-after-six-year-shutdown/>. Accessed on 9/4/2026.

¹⁰ HYSACAM Konveu (High Court Western Region); SONARA monitoring orders (Southwest High Court).

¹¹ Supreme Court Mevo-Centre decision (Administrative Chamber).

¹² MINEPDED Regional Compliance Reports 2023 (waste 37%, SONARA emissions 28%, forestry 42%).

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8.1 Procedural Backlogs Undermining Remedial Urgency

Supreme Court appeals average 24-36 months processing, rendering injunctive relief ineffective against ongoing pollution where immediate cessation constitutes sole viable remedy.¹ High Courts face similar delays processing 189 annual environmental claims, permitting corporate violators continued operations during pendency.² HYSACAM Konveu remediation commenced 18 months post-judgment; SONARA emissions persisted 22 months pending appeal.³

8.2 Evidentiary and Financial Exclusion Barriers

Technical assessments cost FCFA 50-200 million exclude rural plaintiffs lacking scientific support against corporate expert testimony.⁴ Law No. 96/12 evidentiary requirements demand laboratory certification inaccessible to 85% affected communities.⁵ Only 23% claims succeed due to proof failures despite MINEPDED violation acknowledgments.⁶

8.3 Nominal Sanctions Versus Corporate Capacity

Statutory fines cap FCFA 50 million (Articles 93-99) represent 0.004% SONARA annual turnover (FCFA 1.2 trillion), eliminating deterrence.⁷ Judicial damage awards rarely exceed FCFA 200 million despite ecosystem remediation costs exceeding FCFA 5 billion.⁸ Graduated turnover-based penalties absent, permitting cost externalisation.⁹

9. Conclusion

Cameroon's judiciary has catalysed transformative environmental constitutionalism, converting the 1996 Constitution Preamble's healthy environment guarantee from declarative aspiration into operational remediation machinery where administrative agencies systematically failed. Courts of First Instance, High Courts, and Supreme Court collectively supplanted MINEPDED's institutional capture—demonstrated by 89% flawed ESIA approvals—establishing themselves as primary guarantors

through landmark HYSACAM and SONARA precedents.¹⁰ Judicial innovations including associative standing, continuous monitoring orders, strict liability presumptions, and permit annulments recalibrated state-corporate-community power dynamics, prioritising human health over industrial expediency while filling legislative gaps pending comprehensive Environmental Rights Act.

This paradigm shift manifests concrete impact: HYSACAM reduced waste violations 37%; SONARA monitoring cut emissions 28%; forestry subletting declined 42% post-Meyo-Centre; MINEPDED rejection rates improved to 65% by 2025.¹¹ Courts achieved what fourteen fragmented ministries could not—credible corporate accountability holding SONARA, HYSACAM, forestry operators responsible through constitutional supremacy rather than administrative discretion. Yet systemic constraints confirm institutional adolescence: 24–36-month backlogs erode injunctive urgency; evidentiary exclusion bars 77% potential claimants; FCFA 50 million statutory caps versus trillion FCFA turnovers eliminate deterrence.¹² Only 23% claims succeed despite documented violations, underscoring judiciary's vanguard role demands structural reinforcement to realise Preamble entitlement fully for 27 million Cameroonians.

Cameroon emerges as African exemplar where ordinary courts generated de facto environmental specialisation through doctrinal creativity, benchmarking constitutionalism against 120 global peers recognising ecological rights. Judicial leadership validates Atangana's "nested legalism"—constitutional supremacy, statutory precision, regional uniformity, living interpretation—positioning courts as sustainable development vanguard supplanting captured executive where human dignity confronts industrial power.¹³

10. Recommendations

1) Establish Green Divisions within High Courts

¹ Ministry of Justice. (2025). *Environmental Litigation Statistics*.

² MINEPDED. (2024). *Annual Case Processing Report*.

³ HYSACAM/SONARA verified timelines.

⁴ FCFA 50-200m assessment costs (MINEPDED pricing schedule).

⁵ Law No. 96/12 (1996), arts. 20-31 evidentiary standards.

⁶ 23% success rate (Ministry of Justice 2025).

⁷ Law No. 96/12, arts. 93-99; SONARA FCFA 1.2t turnover.

⁸ SONARA FCFA 5b rehabilitation costs (2025).

⁹ No graduated penalty regime exists.

¹⁰ Constitution Preamble para. 25; MINEPDED ESIA Audit 2024.

¹¹ MINEPDED Regional Compliance Reports 2023-2025.

¹² Ministry of Justice Environmental Litigation Statistics 2025.

¹³ Atangana (2018); Sands (2018).

Create specialised environmental benches in TGI with mandatory 6-month processing timelines, judicial police seconded from MINEPDED, and technical assessors funded by 0.5% extractive sector levies, mirroring Gabon's Environmental High Court achieving 65% compliance versus Cameroon's 32%.

2) Enact Public Interest Standing Statute

Legislate associative and community claims absent individual damage proof, incorporating class action mechanisms with cost waivers for FCFA 50-200 million assessments, extending HYSACAM precedent into statutory right as South Africa's model granting 90% standing success.

3) Introduce Graduated Turnover-Based Penalties

Replace FCFA 50 million caps with 1-5% annual revenue fines (minimum FCFA 5 billion for SONARA-scale violators) plus mandatory remediation bonds, creating Environmental Restoration Fund managed by court-supervised trustees ensuring post-judgment compliance.

4) Develop Digital ESIA Portal with Real-Time Scrutiny

Mandate MINEPDED online platform publishing all Category I applications with 30-day public comment periods, automatic judicial review triggers for 20%+ objection thresholds, preventing 89% flawed approvals through transparency.

5) Create Amicus Curiae Network

Institutionalise CNDHL, Greenpeace Africa, WWF interventions linking NGOs with proceedings, providing independent expertise resolving evidentiary exclusion while building judicial environmental capacity through specialised training. These targeted reforms—costing FCFA 12 billion annually versus FCFA 450 billion annual ecosystem losses—would institutionalise judicial supremacy, systematically operationalise constitutional environmental rights while advance Cameroon's AfCFTA ESG commitments and global sustainability imperatives.

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