Some 10 years ago, the Cameroon government drew up an environmental strategy for the transport sector and adopted a sectoral programme with the overall objective of guaranteeing improved efficiency and sustainable development of road transport whilst contributing to economic growth, poverty reduction and environmental protection. Within the Public Works department, the general principles governing road-maintenance policies and the organisation, management and execution of such work were considerably modified, and in 1996 an Environmental Protection Office was also set up within the Roads Department of the Public Works Ministry. One year later, through this new body, the Public Works Ministry published its directives on the environmental impact of road maintenance.

These directives currently apply to all road maintenance and repair projects in Cameroon. The Office monitors application of the directives during implementation of projects by contracting companies. When work finishes, reports are prepared on the restoration of damaged sites to their previous condition, and these reports have to be signed. If no report is filed, the company that has carried out the work may be banned from tendering for at least three years. The Office is supported by the World Bank and the European Union.

Controlling the environmental impact of road construction

For some years now, an environmental unit within the Ministry of Works in Cameroon has been taking a lead role in the environmental and social management of road construction and road rehabilitation throughout the country. It is a unique and active unit, initiating new and practical measures and controls in road works, to better protect nature and people.

In this article, Jacques Ntep, deputy-directory of the unit, explains the background and how the unit works.
The World Bank has provided basic training in environment sciences for office managers, and has provided IT equipment. Support for these managers is ongoing, in the form of training at international level. European Union support takes the form of seminars for consultancy firms and companies active in the public works sector. The training courses offered relate essentially to the environmental management of road works.

Small measures, but wide-ranging effects

The Ministry’s directives contain a series of measures aimed at protecting both the environment and people during the execution of the works. Degraded sites have to be restored to their previous condition. Structures set up for the duration of the works, such as drainage ditches, concrete slabs for storing hazardous materials, or refuse pits, have to be demolished. Machinery and used parts (batteries, tyres, spark plugs, filters, etc.) are removed. Those areas that have supplied laterite and quarries are also rehabilitated, with consideration being given to their specific requirements in terms of rainfall and hydrography. In areas of heavy rainfall, natural run-off channels are reestablished. Conversely, in Sahelian areas, sites may be set up as water-retention points. If needed, large-scale replanting of appropriate species is organised, with existing flora and fauna being protected. Trees may not be felled unless absolutely necessary, and if it is impossible to avoid deforestation operations, tree trunks are sawn up and the wood is made available to local populations. Moreover, site-team base camps may not be set up in protected environments, such as reserves or parks. Rules governing life inside the camps also contain measures aimed at protecting the environment (a ban on poaching, exploitation of the forest, etc).

Two recurring problems linked with road infrastructure work are soil degradation and pollution. To limit these, the directives require servicing, toxic-material storage and site machinery washing areas to be concreted. Systematic sprinkling of roads, work areas and crushing sites also reduces the amount of airborne dust. To limit erosion risks, embankments, trenches and outfalls are strengthened.

Repair, maintenance or construction of road communication routes are also an opportunity to improve the way of life of the people living in the immediate neighbourhood - access routes to dwellings and water-supply points are improved, and parking or trading areas are created. Unskilled labour is recruited predominantly locally, from among the population affected by the works.

Finally, although not directly linked to the environment, sites are also preferred vectors for awareness-raising and prevention. In small camps, information on AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases is circulated at meetings and by means of poster campaigns. At large road-construction and repair sites, a specialist NGO takes care of prevention, training local organisers who will carry on its work in order to raise awareness among site employees and road users, and also among local populations in the project area. As is the case with environmental protection measures, the prevention campaign monitors the site throughout its lifetime in order to achieve maximum human benefit.